

# Language Identity Crisis and Guidance Strategies Among Students in Sino-Thai Joint Education Programs

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines how students in Sino-Thai joint education programs experience language identity conflicts and the strategies that can support them. These programs, often taught in Chinese, place students between two linguistic and cultural worlds, which can create uncertainty about their self-perception. A qualitative systematic literature review was conducted, synthesizing recent studies on bilingual education and student experiences in Sino-foreign programs. The findings indicate that Thai learners frequently experience tension between Thai and Chinese identities, adapting by adopting Chinese in daily interactions while continuing to anchor themselves in their Thai cultural heritage. Communication style differences between the two cultures further intensify this tension. However, guidance strategies such as incorporating Thai cultural references, encouraging bilingual use, and promoting student agency can foster positive language identities. The study highlights the need for culturally responsive practices that affirm heritage while supporting integration into the host academic environment. Future research should further explore longitudinal impacts of identity negotiation and test targeted pedagogical interventions within Sino-Thai programs.

**Keywords:** Sino-Thai Joint Education, Language Identity Crisis, Bilingual Students, Guidance Strategies, Cross-Cultural Education.

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## INTRODUCTION

Joint education programs between Chinese and Thai institutions have grown rapidly in recent years. By 2018 there were over 1,000 Sino-foreign bachelor programs internationally, many of which involve China-Thailand collaborations [1]. China's Belt and Road Initiative and ASEAN partnerships have spurred Thai student exchanges: one study notes the number of Thais studying Chinese has tripled in three years [2]. Thailand now hosts the most Confucius Institutes in Southeast Asia (16 institutes plus 21 classrooms) as part of expanding Chinese-language education [3]. This growing trend reflects closer ties but also creates unique challenges. Thai students in Chinese-focused programs must juggle two languages and cultures at once. The contrasting language ideologies and teaching styles can lead to confusion or stress about their linguistic identity.

Bilingual and bicultural education research shows that learners often struggle to reconcile multiple identities. Immersion students have reported being in the midst of a language identity crisis, unable to find a place among either of the dominant monolingual groups [4]. In other words, feeling neither fully Thai speaker nor fully Chinese speaker can be disorienting. In the Sino-Thai context, such tensions may be amplified by differing expectations and communication norms [5]. Despite this, there is little published about how to support students through these conflicts, particularly in the Sino-Thai context where most existing studies focus on language acquisition outcomes or cultural adaptation in general, rather than on concrete guidance strategies to help learners navigate identity struggles. This study addresses that gap by reviewing qualitative findings on Thai learners' language experiences in China (and vice versa) and by identifying pedagogical strategies that educators can use to guide them. The purpose of this paper is to investigate how language identity issues manifest for students in Sino-Thai joint education programs and what guidance approaches can help.

## Research Objectives

1. To describe language identity challenges experienced by students in Sino-Thai joint education programs.
2. To identify factors (e.g. cultural norms, language policies, community attitudes) that contribute to these identity conflicts.
3. To explore guidance strategies and teaching practices that help bilingual students navigate their language identities.

## Research Questions

1. How do Thai and Chinese students involved in Sino-Thai programs perceive their linguistic and cultural identities?
2. What common difficulties or crises do they encounter as they adjust to a bilingual learning environment?
3. What educational or counseling strategies have been suggested to support students' bicultural and bilingual identity development?

## RELATED WORKS

### Sino-Thai Joint Education Context

Sino-Thai educational collaborations range from Chinese universities recruiting Thai students to Thailand-based programs taught partly in Chinese. Trends in student mobility highlight this shift. For instance, a recent analysis identified three phases in Chinese study abroad to Thailand: an initial focus on Thai-language instruction (1990 - 2010), a shift to more international programs (2010 - 2020), and now a strong move toward graduate study (2020 onward) [6]. Importantly, Thai universities have actively courted Chinese learners by expanding Chinese-language courses and partnerships [3]. At the same time, Thailand's own economy and demographics (e.g. declining workforce) make educating Chinese students a priority [7].

Within this dynamic, language plays a central role. Thai institutions offer extensive Chinese programs: Thailand hosts China's largest network of Confucius Institutes in Southeast Asia [8]. Over 10,000 Chinese volunteer teachers taught in Thai schools between 2003 - 2018 [9]. In response, Thai policymakers publicly emphasize Chinese proficiency as an economic asset, encouraging Thailand's ethnic Chinese population to leverage bilingual ability [10]. These efforts have created a Sino-Thai bilingual space but also sparked debate. Some Thai citizens worry about excessive foreign influence, leading at times to official calls for assimilation of Chinese heritage [11]. Students in joint programs thus enter a charged context where Chinese language is both valued and politicized.

### Language Identity in Bilingual Education

Language identity refers to how individuals see themselves in relation to language - as speakers of one language, multiple languages, or somewhere in between. In bilingual settings, identity becomes complex. [12] emphasize that language and cultural identity are inseparable, and that bilingual education ideally incorporate elements of students' cultural backgrounds to build belonging. When instruction connects to students' heritage, learners gain a sense of empowerment and engagement. Conversely, a neglect of cultural context can leave learners adrift. A case study of French-immersion students in Canada, for example, noted that such bilingual learners frequently report feeling caught between cultures, unable to fully identify with either native group [13].

In the Sino-Thai context, recent qualitative work illustrates these dynamics. Teng and Bui (2020) interviewed nine Thai undergraduates studying in China. Many expected to join a community of fellow foreign learners and saw themselves as cross-cultural mediators or dedicated language learners. However, once on-site they encountered reality: interacting mainly with Chinese peers and instructors, they had to learn cultural norms and language skills quickly. The mismatch between the imagined community and the host community created predicaments in their identity negotiation.

Similarly, [14] found that Thai students in a Chinese-medium university rapidly adapted to Chinese in practice. Students began using Chinese as the campus lingua franca - for example, we speak in Chinese and greet the cafeteria auntie - and described themselves more as Chinese-language users than as learners (Wang & Xu, 2024). Yet none considered themselves native; they still saw Thai as mother tongue. These pragmatic shifts highlight how students reshuffle their linguistic identity on the fly. Indeed, broader bilingualism research suggests that such tension emerges when community expectations are unrealistic. As one commentator observed, when

children are held to monolingual-like standards in both languages, it creates insecurity and language [15].

### Cross Cultural and Communicative Challenges

Cultural differences between China and Thailand also contribute to identity tensions. Language extends beyond vocabulary and grammar as it embodies cultural norms and patterns of communication. For instance, Lan et al. (2022) studied Chinese students learning Thai online in a Sino-Thai program. They noted that both Chinese and Thai interlocutors tend to use a high-context style: preserving harmony and respecting hierarchy. Chinese students in this program, however, were generally more accustomed to indirect communication. They often avoided stating problems directly, instead using nonverbal cues or context (Lan et al., 2022). Thai instructors, in contrast, expected more explicit feedback. This mismatch led to misunderstandings: Chinese students' silence or subtle frowns were misread as inattentive or even disrespectful.

The same study found differences in time orientation and authority. Chinese students tended to follow strict schedules (monochronic time) and a formal teacher-student hierarchy, whereas Thai teachers and classmates were more flexible with time and encouraged student input. These gaps meant Chinese learners sometimes felt frustrated or hesitant (e.g. afraid to object or ask questions) (Lan et al., 2022). Over time, repeated culture clashes could exacerbate a sense of not fully belonging. Thai students in China face a mirror version of this: they may be more relaxed in interaction and fluent in Thai customs, which can confuse Chinese teachers or students used to their own norms. In short, cross-cultural adaptation stresses can intensify any language identity uncertainty. For instance, a Thai student studying in China might hesitate to openly question a professor's lecture, fearing it would be seen as disrespectful, while Chinese peers expect such engagement as a sign of academic seriousness.

### Educational Support and Pedagogical Guidance

Given these challenges, educators and counselors have proposed various support strategies. A common theme is cultural affirmation: explicitly connecting language learning to the students' heritage and values. As Lucido et al. (2024) note, bilingual programs that weave in students' own history and traditions help them feel a sense of belonging and confidence. For Sino-Thai learners, this might involve comparisons between Chinese and Thai cultural concepts, or projects on Thai Chinese communities. Instructors can also allow translanguaging - e.g. encouraging students to express an idea partly in Thai and partly in Chinese - to validate both sides of their identity.

Another approach is to build student agency and identity explicitly. Manosuthikit's [16] work with Thai graduate students found that classroom activities emphasizing student choice and voice can strengthen learner identity. In practice, this could mean letting students pick topics related to Thailand or their personal interests, involving them in co-creating class norms, or using pedagogies (like presentation or project-based learning) that highlight students' unique bilingual background. According to the TESOL Journal case study, when Thai students took initiative in designing their TED-style presentations, teachers observed those students developing positive identities as active, independent learners [16].

Institutional guidance is also important. Orientations and counseling can prepare students for cultural adjustment - for example, brief seminars on communication norms in the host country. Counselors might address identity directly, reassuring students that bilingual fluency grows over time and that feeling in-between is normal [17]. Educators should avoid unrealistic expectations (e.g. monolingual-level proficiency in both languages) that exacerbate doubt. Mentorship programs pairing new arrivals with more experienced bilingual students can also provide role models for successful identity negotiation. Finally, curriculum planning should be mindful: balancing language demands (avoiding curriculum entirely in Chinese for Thai beginners, at least initially) and including reflection activities on culture and self can help students integrate both identities [18].

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This is a qualitative study, using a systematic literature review guided by the PRISMA framework. The aim of this study is to synthesize research conducted on language identity crises and guidance strategies among students in Sino-Thai joint education programs. By applying a systematic and transparent review process, the study ensures that the most relevant literature is comprehensively analysed to answer the research questions [19].

### PRISMA Framework

The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework was employed to identify, screen, and select studies in a structured way. By using this method, the review achieved greater credibility and consistency in replication [20]. **Figure 1** outlines the inclusion and exclusion criteria

applied in this review, ensuring that only relevant, high-quality studies on language identity and guidance in Sino-Thai or comparable joint programs were analysed.

| Criteria         | Inclusion  | Exclusion   |
|------------------|--|---|
| Publication Year | Studies published between 2015 and 2025  | Studies published before 2015   |
| Focus Area       | Research on language identity, bilingual education, and guidance in Sino-Thai or comparable joint programs | Studies unrelated to language identity or without focus on bilingual/joint programs |
| Study Type       | Peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, dissertations   | Grey literature, opinion pieces, editorials   |
| Language         | Articles published in English  | Articles published in other languages without translation                           |
| Relevance        | Studies addressing identity crisis, bilingual adjustment, or guidance strategies                           | Studies not addressing student identity or language guidance                        |

**Figure 1.** Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

### Data Sources

The following academic databases were searched to retrieve relevant studies:

- Scopus
- Web of Science
- ERIC
- Google Scholar

### Study Selection Process

1. Search Query: Keywords such as “Sino-Thai joint education,” “language identity crisis,” “bilingual identity,” “student guidance strategies” were used, yielding 45 initial studies.
2. Screening: Titles and abstracts were reviewed based on inclusion and exclusion criteria, narrowing the pool to 18 studies.
3. Eligibility Assessment: Full texts of the 18 shortlisted studies were examined for methodological rigor and contextual relevance.
4. Final Selection: After detailed review, 8 studies were finalized for thematic analysis, as they directly addressed the issues of language identity and support strategies in bilingual or joint education settings. The other 10 studies were excluded because they lacked methodological rigor, provided only descriptive accounts, or did not directly address identity-related guidance strategies in the Sino-Thai context.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To provide a clearer overview of the evidence base, **Figure 2** summarizes the eight selected studies analysed in this review. These works collectively highlight how students in Sino-Thai joint programs experience linguistic anxiety, shifting bilingual identities, and cultural dissonance. They also show how translanguaging and supportive pedagogical practices can help mitigate such crises. By mapping the focus areas and key findings side by side, the **Figure 2** illustrates both the recurring challenges faced by learners and the range of strategies proposed across different contexts.

| Authors                   | Year | Focus Area   | Key Findings   |
|---------------------------|------|--|--|
| Ning & Tananuraksakul     | 2024 | Thai undergraduates' Chinese learning anxiety and coping strategies  | Found that learners often feel "not native enough"; anxiety strongly shapes identity negotiation.    |
| Lo-Philip & Park          | 2015 | Diversity of bilingual identity among students in bilingual programs | Showed bilingual identity is fluid; students shift between identities depending on context.          |
| Duangmanee & Waluyo       | 2024 | Chinese teaching and learning in Thai schools                        | Highlighted culture shock for Chinese students in Thai classrooms with informal dynamics.            |
| Prakaianurat & Kangkun    | 2024 | Thai learners' identity in ELF academic encounters                   | Found that unfamiliar cultural practices trigger feelings of alienation and "in-between" identities. |
| Zhang & Chinokul          | 2023 | Motivation and self-efficacy in Chinese learning among Thai students | Revealed gaps between expectations and reality; overreliance on Chinese heightened stress.           |
| Malave                    | 2024 | Mandarin immersion and cultural identity                             | Immersion fosters language competence but also amplifies miscommunication across cultural styles.    |
| Thongwichit, Ulla & Parba | 2025 | Translanguaging for social justice in Thai multilingual classrooms   | Demonstrated that translanguaging empowers students and validates dual identities.                   |
| Sholihah, Imelda & Annas  | 2024 | Breaking through language barriers in globalized learning            | Emphasized the importance of supportive bilingual practices to reduce barriers and build confidence. |

**Figure 2.** Overview of Selected Studies

### Bilingual Identity Tensions

Students in Sino-Thai joint programs often feel caught between languages and cultures, unsure which language identity to embrace. Chinese students in Thai universities and Thai students in Chinese universities both struggle with not fully belonging to either their home or host language community. Many initially imagine themselves as cultural bridges or enthusiastic language learners, but mismatched expectations and language insecurities – like feeling not native enough – can erode their confidence. As Ning and Tananuraksakul [21] point out, Thai learners often experience a “high level of Chinese speaking anxiety” and describe a “fear of making mistakes” as central to their struggles. In essence, they undergo a complex identity negotiation as they reconcile their home identity with an emerging bilingual self. Lo-Philip and Park [22] similarly note that learners abroad frequently “struggle when trying to reconcile multiple identities, values, and practices,” highlighting the conflicted nature of bilingual identity formation.

### Cultural Adjustment Challenges

Adjusting to unfamiliar social norms and academic practices is another major challenge. Chinese students in Thailand may struggle with informal classroom dynamics, while Thai students in China often face rigid academic culture and direct communication. Duangmanee and Waluyo [23] explain that local teachers manage Chinese language instruction through “curricular considerations, collaboration through knowledge-sharing platforms and cultural events, teaching methodologies with teacher preparation and native-speaking instructors”, which help mitigate cultural gaps. These differences leave many feeling in between – excited yet anxious. Prakaianurat and Kangkun [24] add that learners “adopted native-like speech styles” to claim global identity but shifted to Thai-accented English to project a more local identity.

### Communication Struggles in a Multilingual Setting

Language barriers often compound identity struggles, as students juggle two or three languages, leading to fatigue and misunderstandings. Thai learners in Chinese-medium courses may expect English support but find

Chinese dominates, while Chinese students in Thailand rely on Thai for daily life. Zhang and Chinokul [25] stress that teachers should “establish a relaxed classroom atmosphere and help students build self-confidence” to ease anxiety. Miscommunication also arises from cultural style differences. Malave [26] notes that immersion “provided an opportunity... to gain cross-cultural understanding,” yet until such support develops, students rely on translanguaging, which both helps and blurs identity.

### **Supportive Strategies and Guidance**

Strong support systems are vital to help students thrive. Pre-departure orientations, language training, and intercultural workshops prepare learners with realistic expectations. Thongwichit, Ulla, and Parba [27] emphasize that teachers should “prioritise learning and understanding over an exclusive focus on English usage,” creating translanguaging spaces that validate bilingual identities. On campus, mentorship and language partners foster friendships and practice. Sholihah, Imelda, and Annas [28] similarly note that foreign language learning requires overcoming “cultural barriers” and limited exposure. With guidance from empathetic faculty, students begin to view bilingualism as an asset, transforming identity crises into opportunities for growth.

## **CONCLUSION**

Students in Sino-Thai joint education programs often straddle Thai and Chinese worlds without feeling fully at home in either, leading to a language identity crisis. Similar challenges are reported among bilingual learners globally. With proper guidance, however, schools can turn this tension into growth. Validating heritage, embedding culturally relevant materials, and empowering student voice help learners integrate both identities. Training teachers to recognize cultural communication styles also eases misunderstandings. In conclusion, promoting student agency and celebrating dual backgrounds are essential. When seen as legitimate bilingual individuals rather than incomplete speakers, students thrive and can become bridges in Sino-Thai relations. Future research and policy should focus on inclusive curricula and sustained guidance that frame biculturalism as a strength.

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