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To cite this article: Mingsheng Li, Stephen M Croucher & Lin Shen (03 Oct 2024): Language endangerment and the linguistic vitality of Miao in China: cultural shifts and revitalisation strategies, Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, DOI: [10.1080/01434632.2024.2411006](https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2024.2411006)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2024.2411006>



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Published online: 03 Oct 2024.



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# Language endangerment and the linguistic vitality of Miao in China: cultural shifts and revitalisation strategies

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## ABSTRACT

This study applies ethnolinguistic vitality (EV) theory to analyse the diminishing proficiency and usage of the Miao language among its speakers in Guizhou, China. Forty-five Miao participated in the semi-structured interviews for this project. The study identified the language's endangered status characterised by low vitality, Mandarin dominance, declining proficiency, and economic-cultural shifts. Media influence exacerbated these threats, while negative perceptions of Miao linguistic capital and inadequate educational resources further endanger the language. Integrating EV theory, this study informs targeted revitalisation efforts crucial for ensuring the sustainability of the Miao language amidst socio-economic pressures favouring Mandarin dominance in China.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 12 August 2024  
Accepted 25 September 2024

## KEYWORDS

Ethnolinguistic vitality (EV); Miao language; language endangerment; language shift; shifting attitudes

## Introduction

Language is integral to society; however, numerous languages on the brink of extinction (Grenoble 2011). There is a heightened awareness for the need to preserve endangered languages, given that 40% of the world's languages are endangered (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig 2022). UNESCO urges collaborative action to globally safeguard linguistic and cultural diversity (Moseley 2010). This study explore one such threatened language, Miao. The current article examines the ethnolinguistic vitality of the Miao language in China, exploring the challenges it faces in China, and proposes strategies for protection and revitalisation. With a population of about 11 million in China, the Miao people predominantly reside in Southwest China, particularly in Guizhou, where over one-third reside (The National Bureau of Statistics of China 2021). The Miao people once had a written script over a millennium ago, but it has been lost long ago. The Miao oral language has undergone Sini-cisation, losing its original form (Diamond 1995).

Sinicisation refers to the process by which non-Han ethnic groups in China adopt Han Chinese culture, language, and social practices (Cheng 2021). In the context of language, it involves the gradual replacement of a minority language with Mandarin, often driven by socio-political and economic pressures, as seen with the Miao language (Joniak-Luthi 2015). Sinicisation results in diminished linguistic and cultural diversity, as non-Han languages and traditions lose prominence or disappear entirely due to the dominance of Han culture and language in education, media, and governance (Wang 2022).

The Miao people are predominantly bilingual due to the influence of the dominant Han language (The State Council 2017). The Miao language has been classified as an endangered

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language (Bradley 2019). This study contributes to the broader discourse on preserving linguistic diversity, safeguarding endangered languages, and recognising their intrinsic value in sustaining cultural diversity.

### **Ethnolinguistic vitality theory**

Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor (1977) introduced ethnolinguistic vitality theory (EVT) as a theoretical framework to guide research in ethnic language vitality. Ethnolinguistic vitality (EV) is defined as ‘that which makes a group likely to behave as a distinctive and active collective entity in intergroup situations’ (Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor 1977, 308). It is a concept used to describe the strength and sustainability of a language spoken by a particular ethnic group within a specific community or region. The theory, which explores the understanding of language, ethnicity, and intergroup relations, has stimulated a range of research. For example, Aboh (2023) utilises ethnolinguistic vitality theory (EVT) to examine how the perceived status of Nigerian English varieties shapes student attitudes, suggesting varieties with stronger institutional backing and prestige receive more favourable evaluations. Clément and Norton (2021) apply EVT to analyze social context, identity, and intergroup relations, focusing on how demographic representation of linguistic groups affects communication and identity formation, linking these dynamics to language ideologies and power structures. Ravyse (2022) critiques traditional EVT measurement methods, addressing their limitations while exploring language, culture, and ethnicity in subcultural contexts, thus broadening EVT’s scope. Hidalgo (2001) employs EVT to study language shift reversal at the US-Mexico border, illustrating how demographic strength and cultural prestige influence the vitality of the Spanish-speaking community, highlighting the significance of bilingual education and intercultural exchanges. Lastly, Tsunoda (2006) analyzes language endangerment and revitalisation through EVT, emphasising how demographic factors, institutional support, and cultural prestige affect language survival.

EVT comprises two constructs: objective vitality and subjective vitality. Objective vitality refers to measurable and observable characteristics that indicate the strength and sustainability of a language within a community. According to Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor (1977), objective vitality is influenced by three main categories of factors: status factors, demographic factors, and institutional support factors. Status factors include socio-economic status, historical status, and language policies. The status of an ethnolinguistic group within a society plays a crucial role in its vitality (Filipović and Pütz 2016; Romaine 2010). Groups accorded higher prestige and recognition are more likely to thrive. Demographic factors involve the characteristics and behaviours of the population that speaks the language, including population size and distribution, birth rates and migration patterns and intermarriage. Institutional support factors pertain to the backing a language receives from formal organisations and institutions, such as education support, media presence, cultural activities and religious institutions (Bornman and Appelgryn 1997; Ravyse 2022).

Subjective vitality refers to the perception and feelings of individuals about the strength, significance, and future prospects of their ethnolinguistic group. Unlike objective vitality, which is based on measurable factors, subjective vitality pertains to the cognitive and affective perceptions of the status and value of a language in intergroup communication, reflecting the attitudes, beliefs, and motivations of individuals towards the language (Giles and Johnson 1987; Smith, Ehala, and Giles 2017).

Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor (1977) posited these structural variables, objective and subjective, ‘interact to provide the context for understanding the vitality of ethnolinguistic groups’ (309), especially linguistic minorities, and interrelationships among the constructs. Objective vitality measures the ingroup and outgroup vitality. Subjective vitality plays a more important role than objective measures in mediating group members’ perceptions, behaviour, attitudes, and intergroup relations (Bornman and Appelgryn 1997). While objective measures of vitality provide important data, they often fail to account for the complexities of individual and group identity. Subjective vitality plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions, behaviours, and intergroup dynamics (Giles,

Bonilla, and Speer 2012). Recognising and fostering subjective vitality can empower ethnolinguistic communities, enhancing their capacity to thrive amidst challenges (Ravise 2022).

High language vitality demonstrates the language actively spoken, used in various aspects and domains of daily activities both inside and outside the home by all generations, and low language vitality refers to the language facing decline, shift, loss, endangerment, and extinction (Smith, Ehala, and Giles 2017). The notion of EV is meant to predict the prospects of an ethnic language in an intergroup setting: ‘the more vitality an ethnolinguistic group has, the more probable that it will stay alive and flourish as a collective unit in the intergroup context’ (Harwood, Giles, and Bourhis 1994, 168). Conversely, an ethnolinguistic group that has low or little vitality may eventually cease to exist as a distinctive entity (Austin and Sallabank 2013; Tsunoda 2006). It has become an important theoretical framework to study language maintenance, language shift, and language endangerment (Hickey 2020). EVT offers a comprehensive framework for assessing the factors that influence the survival and well-being of ethnolinguistic groups.

In 2003 UNESCO established an ad hoc expert group on endangered languages introduced a language vitality scale that categorises languages into five levels of vitality: strong, threatened, endangered, moribund (on the brink of disappearing), and extinct (UNESCO 2003). This classification is determined based on nine specific factors that reflect the language’s usage and transmission within its community: (1) intergenerational transmission; (2) absolute number of speakers; (3) proportion of speakers within the total population; (4) trends in existing language domains; (5) response to new domains and media; (6) materials for language education and literacy; (7) governmental and institutional attitudes and policies, including official status and use; (8) community members’ attitudes toward their own language; and (9) amount and quality of documentation (UNESCO 2003). These criteria enhance EVT by providing specific, measurable factors that can comprehensively assess a language’s vitality. They align with and expand upon the components of status, demographic, and institutional support identified by Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor (1977), offering a detailed framework for evaluating and promoting ethnolinguistic vitality (Grenoble 2011).

These factors are utilised to evaluate a language’s vitality and degree of endangerment by analyzing the dynamics involved in a specific language shift scenario. Intergenerational language transmission is vital for a language’s survival, as it ensures that children learn and use the language (Sallabank and Austin 2023). Without young speakers, a language faces severe threats of extinction, losing its presence in daily life and cultural practices (Karan 2011). Intergenerational transmission is crucial; if children only learn the dominant language, the native language may not survive. The cessation of intergenerational transmission is frequently identified as a cause of language attrition and language shift (Sallabank 2014; Sallabank and Austin 2023).

The loss of language domains is another key factor in language endangerment and the decline of EV (Brenzinger 2007). A language’s vitality depends on its use across domains like home, school, workplace, religion, and media. When a language loses presence in these domains, it becomes endangered (Tsunoda 2006). As a general rule, a language with official status, used in government, education, and administration, tends to be more stable and safe, as its vitality is linked to its use across various domains (Grenoble 2011).

Community attitudes toward their language are pivotal in language vitality and endangerment (Bourhis et al. 2019). Positive attitudes bolster language vitality, while negative ones promote language shift (Brenzinger 2007). When minority language speakers internalise negative perceptions about their language, they may feel compelled to shift to the dominant language in hopes of improving social and economic standing, gaining greater social, political and economic prestige in the local or wider arena (Grenoble and Whaley 2006). External attitudes, especially of dominant cultures, influence language policies and resource allocation, impacting minority language survival (Austin and Sallabank 2013).

EV, the ability of a language community to sustain its language, is undermined often by imbalances in prestige, power, and socioeconomic status favouring dominant languages (Austin and Sallabank 2011). Educational opportunities, media presence, and cultural significance of dominant

languages influence language choices as communities seek upward mobility and social acceptance (Smith, Ehala, and Giles 2017). Dominant languages frequently serve as the primary medium of instruction, dominate the media landscape, and hold significant cultural prestige. As a result, speakers of minority languages often feel compelled to adopt these dominant languages (Grenoble 2011). Socioeconomic factors play a crucial role in language endangerment. The socioeconomic disparity between speakers of dominant and minority languages often drives migration. Economic migration to urban areas or regions where dominant languages are prevalent can result in language shift, as individuals adapt to new linguistic environments (Tsunoda 2006). The desire for social mobility drives people to adopt dominant languages, perceived as gateways to better socioeconomic status and integration into mainstream society (Walsh 2006). These factors collectively diminish the use and transmission of minority languages.

In addition, urbanisation, social and cultural dislocation contribute to language shift and endangerment, significantly impacting ethnolinguistic vitality (Sallabank and Austin 2023). Urbanisation drives language shift as people move from rural areas to urban centres, adopting dominant languages for better integration and economic opportunities, thus diminishing the use of minority languages (Grenoble and Osipov 2023). Social dislocation refers to the disruption of social structures due to migration, economic changes, or political instability, compelling individuals to adopt dominant languages for better opportunities and reducing the use of their original languages (McGrath, Erickson, and Mayes 2022). Cultural dislocation involves the erosion of cultural practices and values due to lifestyle changes, weakening cultural ties that support local languages and leading communities to abandon traditional linguistic practices in favour of those aligned with their new cultural identity (McGrath, Erickson, and Mayes 2022).

## The Miao language

Researchers unequivocally declare the Miao language as endangered, sounding a call for its preservation and revitalisation to prevent its disappearance along with the Miao culture, tradition, identity, unique history, and cultural knowledge passed down through generations (Chen, Lin, and Huang 2021; Li 2016; Long 2016; Qu 2013). The potential loss of the language not only jeopardises the Miao people's identity but also poses risks to social cohesion, cultural diversity, and the erosion of the community's values and beliefs (Chen and Yang 2019; Jiang 2021; Xiong 2010; Zhang and Dong 2020).

In-depth studies conducted in Miao villages in southwest China show low EV, with only a small percentage of Miao proficient in their mother tongue, and a significant proportion of younger children unable to speak it at all (Chen et al. 2021; Chen, Lin, and Huang 2021; Wu 2018). Various contributing factors elucidate the diminished vitality of the Miao language, encompassing language shift, media influence, perceived language status, weakening cultural identification, and the absence of a standardised writing system (Li 2016; Liu 2018).

Language shift, a gradual adoption of a different language at both individual and community levels, is expedited by Mandarin's status as the official language in China, particularly in education, government, and media (Liu 2018). Many young Miao, aspiring for success, consciously choose to shift from their native language to Mandarin (Shi and Jiang 2021; Wu 2018). This linguistic transition reflects conscious choices influenced by the perceived societal value associated with Mandarin in a multicultural context (Li 2016; Zhang and Zhang 2016).

The pervasive influence of new media, predominantly using Mandarin, further contributes to language shift among Miao youth, shaping their ways of life, values, and language choice (Jiang 2021; Qu 2013; Zhang and Zhang 2016). Miao youth, adapting swiftly to cultural and technological changes, increasingly prefer using Mandarin over the Miao language, reflecting the profound impact of media in shaping linguistic preferences (Campos 2015).

Miao youth's diminishing confidence in their mother tongue, attributed to its perceived lower status and limited practical use compared to Mandarin, is well-documented (Liu 2018). Jiang's

(2021) exploratory study highlights a notable decline in Miao families passing down their language to children, viewing it as insufficient for navigating modern complexities in education, business, and technology. The reluctance of youth to embrace and utilise their native language poses a critical threat to its survival (Li 2016; Qu 2012, 2013).

Cultural identification among the Miao is diminishing, particularly among younger generations who have abandoned their language, customs, rituals, and cultural practices (Jiang 2021; Shen, Wang, and Gao 2021). This erosion of cultural practices intensifies the challenges confronting the Miao language in terms of endangerment, affecting the Miao's sense of identity and heritage (Tsung 2014). Language and culture are closely intertwined, and the decline of cultural practices often mirrors similar challenges for the associated language (Shen, Wang, and Gao 2021).

Chen, Lin, and Huang (2021) highlighted a lack of a standardised writing system as a significant factor contributing to the endangerment of the Miao language. With the language primarily transmitted orally, the absence of a written system poses a challenge for Miao children to acquire their mother tongue and inherit their cultural heritage, particularly in a globalised world where ethnic boundaries are blurred (Chen, Lin, and Huang 2021; Lee 2020). The absence of a standardised writing system further impedes language transmission across generations (Shen, Wang, and Gao 2021). The lack of a standardised writing system is a significant challenge for the preservation and transmission of the Miao language (Yu and Karin 2022). A writing system plays a crucial role in language maintenance and revitalisation efforts, as it allows for the documentation of the language, its literature, and its cultural heritage (Grenoble and Whaley 2006). Without a writing system, the transmission of the language is reliant on oral communication, which is more vulnerable to the pressures of modernisation and globalisation (Michaud 2020).

The study of Miao language endangerment, EV, and revitalisation has evolved to embrace an ecological approach, emphasising the interconnectedness of language with broader sociocultural and environmental contexts (Grenoble 2011). Shen, Wang, and Gao (2021) advocated for an ecological approach, emphasising the importance of promoting language policies and practices. This approach, guided by EVT, evaluates Miao EV and endangerment across various factors. By understanding the intricate interplay of these factors, researchers and policymakers can develop targeted strategies for the preservation and revitalisation of the Miao language. Thus, the research questions guiding this study are:

RQ1: What are the key indicators of ethnolinguistic vitality that characterise the status of the Miao language in Southwest China?

RQ2: What are effective strategies to enhance vitality of the Miao language?

RQ1 investigates the EV of the Miao language in Southwest China through key indicators: (1) Language proficiency underscoring Miao's fluency and competence; (2) Intergenerational transmission demonstrating language continuity within families; (3) Dominance of Mandarin impacting Miao language use; (4) Shifting attitudes toward the Miao language assessing changes in perceptions and values; and (5) Dominance of Mandarin in media and communication technology showing Miao language representation in the media. RQ2 examines how the Miao community and external stakeholders can collaborate to revitalise the endangered Miao language, involving elevating status, supporting demographics, boosting institutional backing, fostering positive attitudes, and utilising digital platforms for wider dissemination and engagement.

## Method

### Site

The research project was conducted in Guizhou province, in the southwestern part of China, renowned for being home to the Miao ethnic minority. This region's cultural heritage and diverse ethnic landscape are influenced by the Miao community, one of 56 recognised ethnic groups in

China. It is ideal for studying Miao EV for several reasons. It hosts the largest concentration of Miao people in China, providing a diverse sample for research. The region is a cultural hub where traditional practices and customs are actively maintained, offering a rich context for studying language use and transmission. Additionally, many Miao in rural Guizhou maintain traditional lifestyles, offering a unique perspective on language maintenance amid modernisation. Finally, Guizhou exemplifies broader issues faced by endangered languages, making it a valuable case for global language preservation strategies.

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited through a snowball technique, ensuring a diverse representation of the Miao community. We focused on population distribution regarding educational attainment and occupational diversity to capture a comprehensive perspective. A total of 45 ethnic Miao participated in the study, predominantly from Guiyang City and Kali Prefecture. The group comprised 30 males and 15 females, showcasing a range of educational backgrounds: 5 individuals had completed junior high school, 17 had graduated from senior high school, 16 held bachelor's degrees, and 7 had obtained master's degrees. Participants also came from various occupations, including 2 farmers, 10 teachers, 21 students, 9 government employees, and 3 self-employed individuals. This varied educational landscape reflects the community's diverse experiences and insights, enriching the qualitative data collected.

### **Interviews**

This study adopted a qualitative approach, involving interviews with 45 Miao individuals, primarily from Guiyang City and Kali Prefecture in the Guizhou province. Each interview lasted 30–60 minutes. The goal was to have an in-depth understanding of the participants' views, attitudes, and perceptions about the Miao language, its status, and future. The interviews focus on the near extinction of the Miao language and its family inheritance, aiming to understand the current state of the language and explore protection strategies. Participants provided background information, including their Miao and Mandarin proficiency, age, and educational background. Questions investigated the frequency of Miao usage in various contexts, personal experiences in learning the language, and attitudes towards cultural traditions. The interviews also addressed the reasons for the language's endangerment and discussed the importance of protection efforts, including the availability of Miao language classes and the role of media. Participants shared their views on government support and future strategies for revitalisation.

Interviews with individuals of different age groups within the Miao community could shed light on intergenerational language transmission, identifying trends and challenges. At the same time, interviewing could help the researchers explore new directions for the Miao language. The interviews in Mandarin were digitally recorded with the consent of the participants, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English.

### **Data analysis**

The interviews were subjected to thematic analysis to identify key themes and patterns related to the current status and EV of the Miao language. This involved coding the data to categorise responses into meaningful themes, such as language proficiency, intergenerational transmission, the impact from Mandarin dominance, media and technology, and shifting attitudes. These themes were then analysed to understand the factors influencing Miao language maintenance and endangerment. The analysis provided a comprehensive assessment of the Miao language's EV, offering insights into the strengths and weaknesses in its current state and informing strategies for its preservation and revitalisation.

## Results

The research highlights a decline in Miao language proficiency. This trend underscores weak inter-generational transmission and the impact of Mandarin dominance in education, public life, and socio-economic spheres, leading to Miao marginalisation. Shifting attitudes towards Mandarin and Han culture further diminish Miao's relevance. The lack of Miao representation in media, including television, broadcasting, and online content, exacerbates this issue, impacting the language's preservation and intergenerational transmission.

### *Low language proficiency*

The study underscores a marked decline in proficiency levels of the Miao language among its speakers. According to self-reported assessments, where interviewees rated their Miao language proficiency from 0-100%, 92% indicated they never spoke Miao. This alarming statistic underscores the erosion of linguistic skills, pointing to a broader trend of language shift. For the minority who still spoke Miao, it was primarily used at home due to familial convenience and inadequate Mandarin promotion in remote areas. Participant 2 stated, 'Miao is the primary language of communication at home but not in school and the community.' Participants 9 and 10 noted Miao was rarely spoken at home, in schools, or in the community. Participant 11 said, 'In terms of ethnic categorisation, we are genuine Miao, but as we can no longer speak our native language, we are unauthentic Miao.' Participant 15 claimed, 'My mother tongue is Mandarin, not Miao. I live in an environment where Mandarin language dominates communication in schools and all public settings.'

According to participant 14, 'In school, communication among classmates and teachers is conducted in Mandarin. There are very few opportunities to use the Miao language. Most of our Miao people have been assimilated, and fewer and fewer people speak the Miao language.' Participants 7 and 8 noted the infrequent use of the Miao language in daily life and the younger generation's lack of awareness regarding the importance of language preservation. In their view, this low frequency of use not only reduces fluency but also diminishes the cultural significance attached to the language. The younger generation, often more focused on integrating into the mainstream culture, did not fully appreciate the value of their linguistic heritage, leading to an overall decline in efforts to maintain and revitalise the Miao language. The restriction of Miao to these niche environments suggests a shrinking linguistic domain, where the language is not integrated into daily interactions, further reducing opportunities for its transmission to younger generations.

### *Weak intergenerational transmission*

Some of those who could speak Miao reported they learned the language naturally from a young age by hearing their parents, grandparents, and elders speak it. For some, Miao was their first language, taught at home and reinforced through daily use, leading to fluency. For example, Participant 37 said, 'Born into a Miao family, I naturally picked up the language through immersion. However, after starting school, I began to interact more with Han Chinese people, becoming exposed to Han culture, and Mandarin became my dominant language.'

The deficiency in transmitting the Miao language within families is a pressing concern, primarily stemming from parents' reluctance to teach it to their children. Despite an awareness of the significance language holds, many parents opt for Mandarin as the predominant mode of communication, believing it could provide better opportunities for their children's future. Participant 2 pointed to the critical issue parents were reluctant to teach Miao language, leading to a generational gap, 'Most parents are unwilling to teach their children to learn the Miao language; instead, they predominantly use Mandarin for communication. Almost all children born after 2010 cannot communicate in Miao.' Participant 36 emphasised the insufficient inheritance and low appeal of Miao language,

and the diminishing language use within families, contributing to the broader issue of language shift. Another contributing factor to weak intergenerational transmission is migration. Participant 3 highlighted that ‘As many Miao individuals move to urban areas for work, education, and better opportunities, their children follow, reducing the use of Miao.’ In Participant 11’s observation, ‘In the broader context, there is almost no space for the survival of the Miao language. In some more developed cities, the usage rate of Miao language is nearly zero.’ Participant 12 agreed, ‘I believe that today, most Miao people have moved away from their original language environment, resulting in the younger generation almost not understanding Miao’. This shift is indicative of a broader trend where Mandarin is seen as a vital tool for communication and integration into mainstream society.

### ***Mandarin dominance***

The study has shown that the impact of Mandarin dominance on the Miao language is profound across educational, public, and socio-economic spheres. In education, Mandarin’s prevalence marginalises Miao language proficiency among youth, emphasising practicality over cultural preservation. In public life, Mandarin’s ascendance in urban areas diminishes Miao language use significantly, reflecting broader socio-economic changes. Socially and economically, Mandarin’s utility in urban settings supersedes Miao.

#### ***Impact of Mandarin dominance in education***

The study reveals Mandarin’s dominance in education has significantly impacted the Miao language, leading to a decline in proficiency among younger generations. Interviewees highlighted Mandarin’s pervasive influence in schools, causing Miao children to lose fluency in their native language. Participant 41 noted Mandarin’s use as the primary medium of instruction marginalised the Miao language, leading children to avoid speaking it at home or in public. Participant 36 observed that prioritising Mandarin in communication deprived Miao children of opportunities to learn their native language, accelerating a shift away from Miao. Participant 13 echoed this, suggesting Mandarin’s adoption in education accelerates assimilation among Miao children, posing a threat to the language’s survival.

#### ***Impact of Mandarin dominance in public life and socio-economic spheres***

This study highlights the profound impact of Mandarin dominance on the usage and preservation of the Miao language, particularly in urban areas where Sinicisation has significantly reduced its presence. Participants consistently noted the rapid decline of Miao usage in these settings, attributing this trend to pervasive Sinicisation. For instance, Participant 11 described the critical situation, reporting near-zero Miao language use in urban environments, which underscores the immense challenge of maintaining linguistic diversity.

In community settings such as villages, schools, and markets, Miao language usage remains minimal. Participants 8, 9, and 10 observed that Mandarin is the predominant language in public domains, overshadowing Miao. This trend is further exemplified by Participants 15, 16, and 39, who identified Mandarin as their primary mode of communication both at home and in public, illustrating the pervasive use of Mandarin in daily life.

The impact of Mandarin dominance extends beyond public life into social and economic spheres, leading to a pronounced linguistic shift, especially among younger generations. Participant 13 noted the inevitability of Sinicisation, highlighting the diminishing opportunities for young Miao individuals to engage with their native language. As Miao people migrate to urban areas for better economic prospects, Mandarin becomes their primary means of communication, disrupting traditional language environments, as discussed by Participants 3 and 44.

Moreover, socio-economic disparities in minority regions compel Miao individuals to seek opportunities elsewhere, posing challenges to the continuity of their language (Participants 1, 3, 5, 6, 12, 17). Economic disparities and migration further complicate preservation efforts

(Participants 29, 31, 32). Participants 19 and 20 noted a prevailing negative perception of the Miao language within socio-cultural and political contexts dominated by Mandarin, discouraging its learning and maintenance. This shift reflects broader socio-economic trends that favour Mandarin for its perceived advantages in Chinese society, further endangering the survival of the Miao language.

### ***Shifting attitudes of the Miao people toward their language***

This study has revealed a significant shift among the Miao towards Mandarin, driven by its dominance in social and public life and education, essential for social and economic mobility. This shift diminishes the relevance of the Miao language, encouraging cultural assimilation with Han customs for job prospects and educational opportunities, reflecting a broader trend of prioritising Mandarin over traditional languages for socio-economic advancement.

### ***Shifting attitudes toward Mandarin***

The Miao people have increasingly adopted Mandarin over their native language, driven by its dominance in social, public life, and education. Interviewees stressed Mandarin's crucial role in social and economic mobility, as it serves as the primary instructional language in schools (Participants 18, 19, 42, 43). Consequently, the Miao language is perceived as less relevant, contributing to its gradual decline (Participants 36, 38). Participant 13 noted that even in village settings, Mandarin has become prevalent in schools and homes, emphasising its importance for future prospects.

Many Miao individuals view Mandarin as essential for success in modern China, (Participants 17, 18, 36). This shift is not merely pragmatic but also about achieving social acceptance and integration (Participants 29, 33, 37). Participant 19 shared, 'I noticed that when I spoke Mandarin, people treated me with more respect. It's like they see me as more educated and part of the larger community.'

### ***Shifting attitudes toward Han culture***

The study revealed a dual shift among the Miao: towards Mandarin and Han culture, with Mandarin's dominance influencing cultural identity. Participants noted the adoption of Han customs, festivals, and lifestyles over traditional Miao practices (Participants 41, 43, 44). Participant 21 lamented the waning of Miao traditions in favour of Han celebrations, while Participant 31 highlighted a preference among Miao youth for modern Han styles over traditional Miao clothing and music.

This cultural assimilation is driven by perceived social and economic benefits, exacerbating the decline of Miao language and traditions (Participant 18, 27). Participants emphasised Mandarin's necessity for job opportunities and social integration (Participants 37, 42), with Participant 25 noting its requirement in urban job markets. Participants viewed Mandarin fluency as vital for future generations' success, balancing cultural preservation with economic aspirations (Participants 28, 19). This underscores the complex decisions Miao families face in navigating their heritage within a predominantly Han society.

### ***Perceived lack of cultural capital value of the Miao language***

The study found the perceived lack of cultural capital in the Miao language contributes to its decline. In a society prioritising Mandarin, Miao is often seen as having limited utility and prestige, diminishing its value to the younger generation (Participants 42, 43). Participant 33 lamented, 'Young people don't see the point in learning Miao. They think it's old-fashioned and won't help them in the future.' This reflects a broader trend where traditional languages are overshadowed by those deemed more beneficial for socio-economic mobility. Participant 36 noted, 'It's a tough choice. We want to preserve our heritage, but we need to be practical. Mandarin opens doors

that Miao can't.' Educational pressures further reinforce this perception, as Participant 22 added, 'In school, everything is in Mandarin. If you don't master it, you fall behind.'

This diminished presence reinforces the belief that maintaining the Miao language offers little benefit. Participant 29 stated, 'Why spend time on something that society doesn't value?' Consequently, younger Miao increasingly prioritise skills seen as having greater cultural and practical value in a Mandarin-speaking society.

### ***Dominance of Mandarin in media and communication technology***

The decline of the Miao language is significantly influenced by the dominance of Mandarin in media and communication technology. Various forms of media, such as social media platforms, news outlets, television, and broadcasting, predominantly use Mandarin, making it the primary language of communication and information dissemination. This overwhelming presence of Mandarin in these mediums has profound implications for the vitality of the Miao language.

### ***Lack of Miao representation in social media and online communication***

The study highlights how Mandarin's predominance in media and communication technologies shapes the linguistic landscape for the Miao community. Participants noted how this dominance affects their daily lives and the vitality of the Miao language. Participant 25 for example emphasised, 'Social media platforms like WeChat are essential for staying connected. Everything happens in Mandarin, so we adapt to using Mandarin for everything.' This underscores how social media reinforces Mandarin as the default language, reducing opportunities for the Miao to thrive in digital spaces. Participant 19 noted, 'Even online, Mandarin dominates. Websites, forums, and online communities are predominantly in Mandarin. It's easier to find information and engage in discussions if you use Mandarin.' This reality highlights how Mandarin's prevalence online shapes access to information, disadvantaging Miao language speakers. Participant 33 expressed concern, 'Young people today grow up with Mandarin everywhere – on social media, in movies, and online. It's natural for them to see Mandarin as more useful and modern, while our Miao language feels outdated.' This sentiment underscores the generational shift influenced by media dominance, where Mandarin is perceived as essential for social integration and professional success.

### ***Lack of Miao representation in news media and print media***

News and print media, including newspapers, are critical sources of information and cultural content. The near-exclusive use of Mandarin in these outlets means the Miao people consume news primarily in Mandarin, reinforcing its dominance and limiting Miao cultural content. This lack of representation marginalises the Miao language, making it seem irrelevant in modern life (Participants 36, 38, 41). Participant 1 reported, 'Young Miao people watch TV and go online using Mandarin. There are almost no programs in Miao.' This generational shift is due to Mandarin's presence in all media forms. Participant 32 stated, 'The media rarely covers our stories. Even when there are reports, they are in Mandarin, and no one can see us telling our stories in Miao.'

Many participants underscored the lack of Miao representation in media, which diminishes the visibility of Miao culture. Participant 45 noted, 'Without sufficient exposure to the Miao language, Miao students are less likely to develop literacy in their native language, further endangering its survival.' Participant 37 observed, 'Even when there is content about our Miao culture, it's often presented through a Mandarin lens, which isn't truly representative.' This leads to a loss of authenticity in portraying Miao culture.

### ***Lack of Miao representation in television and broadcasting***

Television and broadcasting are powerful tools for cultural transmission and education. The lack of Miao representation in these mediums significantly marginalises the Miao language and culture. The dominance of Mandarin limits Miao speakers' exposure to their native language, impacting

its intergenerational transmission. Participant 21 highlighted the pervasive presence of Mandarin on TV: ‘When I turn on the TV, I hardly ever see anything in Miao. Everything is in Mandarin. Our children grow up watching these programs and start to forget our own language.’ This exposure predominantly to Mandarin can lead to a gradual loss of their native language. Participant 13 added: ‘All the educational programs are in Mandarin. There are no shows that teach our children the Miao language or about our culture.’ This gap means children are not learning about their heritage through TV. Participant 9 lamented the lack of representation of Miao history and traditions in broadcasting: ‘We have a rich cultural heritage, but you wouldn’t know it from watching TV.’ This lack of relevant content contributes to the invisibility of Miao culture, further marginalising the language.

### ***Lack of Miao representation on webpages and online content***

Webpages and online content are crucial for information and cultural expression. Participant 7 highlighted the difficulty in finding online resources in Miao, which hampers learning and sharing information about their heritage: ‘When I search online for information about our history or traditions, most of the content is in Mandarin. There are very few websites in Miao.’ Participant 16 discussed the challenges: ‘We have many talented writers in the Miao community, but there are few platforms where they can publish their work in Miao.’ Participant 21 emphasised the scarcity of educational materials in Miao online: ‘Educational resources in Miao are almost non-existent online. Our children have to rely on Mandarin resources.’

## **Discussion**

The vitality of the Miao language is significantly affected by Mandarin’s high prestige and socio-economic dominance, leading younger speakers to shift towards Mandarin for better opportunities. Migration to urban areas disrupts traditional language transmission, fragmenting linguistic communities. Minimal institutional support and lack of representation in education and media further marginalise Miao. Urbanisation, social dislocation, and cultural dislocation also contribute to language shift as people adopt Mandarin for better integration and economic prospects, weakening cultural ties and traditional practices. Negative perceptions of Miao’s cultural and economic value discourage its use, while assimilation pressures exacerbate its decline. By examining both objective and subjective vitality, we can gain deeper insights into the challenges faced by the Miao language and potential strategies for its revitalisation.

### ***Objective vitality***

#### ***Status factors***

Objective vitality, focusing on status factors, examines how Mandarin’s dominant position in China impacts the Miao language. Mandarin’s socio-economic and historical importance, backed by national language policies, diminishes Miao’s prestige and utility. Mandarin’s hegemony, supported by policies in education, media, and public administration (Grenoble and Whaley 2006), elevates its status while marginalising minority languages like Miao (Sallabank 2014). Proficiency in Mandarin is crucial for socio-economic advancement (Baker 2011) reinforcing its role in governance and national unity at the expense of minority languages (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000).

#### ***Demographic factors***

The demographic characteristics of the Miao-speaking population also contribute to the language’s vitality. Migration to urban areas for better economic prospects disrupts traditional language transmission patterns (Wang 2022). This movement dilutes the concentration of Miao speakers in rural areas, leading to a fragmented linguistic community. The study’s findings of limited

intergenerational transmission and low proficiency among younger speakers highlight the demographic shifts that undermine the Miao language's sustainability (Zhang and Ma 2012).

### ***Institutional support factors***

Institutional support for the Miao language is minimal, as evidenced by the lack of representation in education, media, and public life. The dominance of Mandarin in these domains marginalises the Miao language, limiting its institutional support and public visibility (Wu 2018). This lack of support hampers efforts to integrate Miao into formal education, media, and other cultural activities, crucial for maintaining and promoting language vitality (Shen, Wang, and Gao 2021).

### ***Urbanisation, social dislocation, and cultural dislocation***

Urbanisation, social dislocation, and cultural dislocation significantly contribute to the shift and endangerment of the Miao language, impacting its ethnolinguistic vitality (Sallabank and Austin 2023). Urbanisation drives language shift as people move to urban centres, adopting dominant languages like Mandarin for better opportunities, thus diminishing the use of minority languages like Miao (Grenoble and Osipov 2023). Social dislocation, due to migration and economic changes, compels Miao individuals to adopt Mandarin, reducing the use of their original language (McGrath, Erickson, and Mayes 2022). Cultural dislocation weakens cultural ties, leading Miao to abandonment of traditional linguistic practices (McGrath, Erickson, and Mayes 2022).

### ***Subjective vitality***

#### ***Perceptions and attitudes***

The subjective vitality of the Miao language is heavily influenced by community perceptions and attitudes, with many speakers viewing it as having low cultural and economic capital value (Zhang and Zhang 2016). This perception discourages younger generations from learning and using Miao, as they prioritise Mandarin for its practical benefits. Negative attitudes toward Miao contribute to a troubling cycle, where the language's lack of prestige fosters disinterest in its use. Societal pressures favouring Mandarin reinforce the belief that Miao is of lesser value, leaving many young speakers feeling disconnected from their cultural heritage. As a result, they often choose Mandarin for social integration and economic opportunities, further diminishing Miao's vitality (Tsung 2014). This situation underscores the urgent need for community initiatives aimed at revaluing the Miao language and promoting its use among youth. Addressing these negative attitudes is crucial to fostering renewed interest in Miao and ensuring its survival for future generations.

#### ***Intergroup relations***

The interactions between Miao speakers and the dominant Han Chinese culture also play a role in subjective vitality. The pressure to conform to the dominant culture and language leads to assimilation, where Miao speakers adopt Mandarin to gain social acceptance and economic advancement (Lee 2020). This dynamic exacerbates the decline of the Miao language as speakers internalise negative perceptions about their linguistic heritage (Chen and Yang 2019; Liu 2018).

#### ***Re-vitalisation initiatives***

Urgent initiatives are needed to revitalise the Miao language and preserve its cultural heritage. To address these challenges, strategies need to focus on enhancing both objective and subjective vitality. First, policies and initiatives that raise the status of the Miao language can help improve its vitality. This includes official recognition, incorporation into educational curricula, and promoting its use in public and media domains. Second, encouraging community cohesion and reversing urban migration trends through economic incentives in rural areas can help maintain a stable population

of Miao speakers. Community programmes that promote the use of Miao in various domains can also support demographic vitality. Third, institutional backing through education, media representation, and cultural activities is crucial. Creating Miao-language media content, educational materials, and cultural events can enhance the language's presence in public life and foster a positive linguistic environment. Fourth, changing perceptions about the Miao language involves community engagement and education about its cultural value. Highlighting successful bilingual individuals and promoting the benefits of maintaining linguistic diversity can help shift attitudes and encourage younger generations to learn and use Miao. Fifth, utilising digital platforms to create and disseminate Miao-language content can reach a broader audience and engage younger speakers. Social media, online education tools, and digital archives can play a significant role in revitalising the Miao language.

By integrating the findings of the study with EVT, we gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to the decline of the Miao language. Addressing both objective and subjective vitality through targeted strategies can help revitalise the language and preserve its cultural heritage. Policymakers, community leaders, and educators must collaborate to develop and implement initiatives that support the Miao language, ensuring its sustainability for future generations.

### ***Convergence and divergence with previous work***

Many studies on endangered languages underscore the crucial role of socio-economic factors in language decline, particularly the perceived lack of economic benefits associated with maintaining a minority language. Fishman (1991) posits that language shift often occurs when a community perceives that the dominant language offers greater socio-economic opportunities, leading to a gradual abandonment of the minority language. The findings of this study align with this established body of research, particularly in the context of the Miao community. The shift towards Han culture among the Miao is largely driven by economic incentives, such as better job prospects and access to higher education, which are perceived to be more attainable through proficiency in Mandarin. This mirrors patterns observed in other minority language communities, where economic factors act as a catalyst for language shift, often resulting in the erosion of traditional linguistic practices (Grenoble and Whaley 2006).

Where this study diverges from existing literature is in its focus on the specific cultural and historical context of the Miao people. While external socio-economic pressures are significant, this research uncovers an equally important internal dynamic: the shifting cultural values within the Miao community itself. Unlike the predominantly external focus of much previous research, which often attributes language loss to outside influences (e.g. economic globalisation, state policies), this study highlights how internal shifts in the community's perception of its own cultural capital are driving language decline. This internal dynamic is particularly evident in how younger generations of Miao view their heritage language. As Bourdieu (1986) theorises, cultural capital is deeply intertwined with social mobility and power dynamics. In the case of the Miao, the younger generation increasingly perceives the Miao language as lacking in cultural capital relative to Mandarin, which is associated with modernity, economic success, and social prestige. This shift in perception is not merely a reaction to external pressures but reflects a deeper, community-driven process of reevaluating the value of their linguistic heritage.

Our original contribution lies in uncovering this internal mechanism, illustrating how language loss can be a self-reinforcing process within a community. This perspective adds a new dimension to the discourse on language endangerment by demonstrating that language decline is not only a result of external pressures but can also stem from internalised beliefs and values that devalue the minority language (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994). This finding suggests that efforts to revitalise endangered languages must address these internal dynamics, in addition to external socio-economic factors, to be truly effective.

## Conclusion

The study vividly captures the declining trajectory of the Miao language, primarily driven by Mandarin's dominance across educational, social, and economic domains. The weakened intergenerational transmission, coupled with shifting attitudes among the Miao people towards Mandarin and Han culture, exacerbates the language's marginalisation. The pervasive absence of Miao representation in media further diminishes its relevance, particularly among younger generations who increasingly view Mandarin as a tool for socio-economic advancement. This shift reflects broader trends of cultural assimilation and the perceived lack of value in maintaining the Miao language. To counter this decline, revitalisation initiatives are urgently needed. These must focus on enhancing both the objective and subjective vitality of the Miao language, including policy reforms, educational integration, and media representation, to preserve its cultural heritage and ensure its continuity for future generations.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by Education New Zealand.

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