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Intercultural Dilemmas and Coping Strategies in Chinese Language Teaching at Thai Primary Schools

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ABSTRACT

With the deepening of China–Thailand educational cooperation, Chinese has become one of the most widely taught foreign languages in Thai primary schools, and teachers from China, including government-sponsored teachers and international Chinese language education volunteers, constitute a major part of the teaching workforce. Adopting a qualitative approach based on documentary analysis and theoretical interpretation, this article examines the intercultural dilemmas that Chinese teachers encounter in Thai primary school classrooms. Drawing on Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory, research on Thai cultural values, and Byram’s model of intercultural communicative competence, the analysis identifies four interrelated dilemmas: a conflict between Chinese expressions of teacher authority and the Thai emphasis on enjoyable learning; a mismatch in pedagogical beliefs and assessment practices; a one-directional and insufficiently localized approach to cultural content; and structural constraints arising from high teacher turnover and the lack of a shared classroom language. In response, the article proposes coping strategies at four levels: developing teachers’ intercultural competence, localizing classroom management, making cultural teaching dialogic, and strengthening institutional support. The study aims to offer a reference for improving the quality of Chinese language teaching in Thai primary schools.

KEYWORDS intercultural teaching; Thai primary schools; international Chinese language education; Chinese teachers; teaching dilemmas

1. Introduction

Thailand is among the countries in Southeast Asia where Chinese language education has expanded most rapidly. Since the early 2000s, cooperation between China and Thailand in this field has steadily intensified, and large numbers of Chinese teachers and volunteers have been dispatched to Thai schools every year, a considerable proportion of whom work at the primary and secondary levels. Wu and Yang (2008) characterized the rapid spread of Chinese in Thailand as a distinctive “Thai model” of language dissemination, while also noting persistent difficulties in areas such as teacher supply and

teaching materials. Similarly, Wang (2008), in a survey of Chinese education in Thai primary and secondary schools, identified the instability of the teaching workforce and the limited suitability of teaching approaches as key factors constraining teaching quality.

Compared with secondary and tertiary settings, Chinese teaching in primary schools has several distinctive features. Learners are young, their attention spans are short, their motivation is driven largely by interest, and teachers and pupils often lack a common language. In this context, cultural difference is not merely a matter of the teacher's personal adjustment to life abroad; it directly shapes classroom organization, teacher-student interaction, and learning outcomes. Existing research, however, has tended to focus on Chinese teachers' sociocultural adaptation and culture shock, while comparatively little attention has been paid to how intercultural dilemmas arise within classroom teaching itself.

Understanding these dilemmas matters for several reasons. For teachers, a clearer picture of the cultural sources of classroom difficulties can reduce frustration and support more effective teaching. For sending institutions, it can inform the design of pre-service training and in-service support. For Thai schools, it can help create conditions in which Chinese teachers are able to contribute more fully. More broadly, the case of Thailand, where Chinese teaching has expanded on an unusually large scale at the primary level, offers insights relevant to international Chinese language education in other contexts where teachers and learners come from markedly different educational cultures.

This article therefore addresses two questions. First, what intercultural dilemmas do Chinese teachers face in teaching Chinese at Thai primary schools, and what are their cultural roots? Second, how can these dilemmas be addressed at the individual, classroom, and institutional levels? The study adopts a qualitative approach. Drawing on existing empirical studies, educational policy texts, and intercultural theory as its analytical materials, it uses induction, comparison, and interpretation to develop a theoretically grounded account of the problems and possible responses.

2. Theoretical Framework

The analysis draws on three bodies of theory. The first is Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory (Hofstede et al., 2010). Both China and Thailand score relatively high on power distance and collectivism. Yet the same dimension may be expressed very differently in the two countries' classrooms. This apparent similarity is precisely what leads many Chinese teachers to assume that Thai classrooms will resemble their own, and thus to overlook important differences.

The second is research on Thai cultural values. Komin (1990) identified a set of core Thai value orientations, including ego and face, smooth interpersonal relationships, flexibility and adjustment, and a fun-pleasure orientation. Mulder (2000) likewise emphasized that hierarchy and Buddhist ethics deeply inform everyday social interaction in Thailand. Hallinger and Kantamara (2000) further showed that change processes in Thai schools are strongly mediated by cultural norms of hierarchy and interpersonal harmony, so that reforms imported from other contexts are reshaped as they are implemented.

The third is Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence, which comprises knowledge, attitudes, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. Complementing this model, Kramsch's (1993) notion of a "third place" in language

education provides a theoretical basis for moving cultural teaching away from one-way transmission and toward dialogue between the learner's own culture and the target culture.

3. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive design based on documentary analysis. Rather than collecting new field data, it synthesizes and reinterprets existing materials in order to construct an analytical account of intercultural dilemmas in Thai primary Chinese classrooms. Three categories of material were examined: published empirical studies on Chinese language teaching in Thailand and on the adaptation of Chinese teachers and volunteers; research on Thai educational reform and Thai cultural values; and foundational works in intercultural communication and language education.

The analysis proceeded in three steps. First, recurring problems reported in the literature on Chinese teaching in Thailand were identified and grouped into thematic categories, such as classroom discipline, teaching methods, cultural content, and working conditions. Second, each category was interpreted in relation to the theoretical framework outlined above, with attention to the cultural values and educational assumptions underlying the observed difficulties. Third, the analysis moved from diagnosis to response, deriving coping strategies that correspond to each dilemma and to the levels at which it operates.

This design has clear limitations. Because it relies on secondary materials, it cannot capture the full diversity of individual teachers' experiences or variation across regions and types of schools. Its contribution lies instead in offering an integrated conceptual framework that connects scattered observations to their cultural roots and that can guide subsequent empirical research.

4. Intercultural Dilemmas in Thai Primary School Chinese Classrooms

4.1 Classroom Management: Shared Respect for Teachers, Different Expressions of Authority

Thai society holds teachers in high regard, as reflected in the annual wai khru ceremony in which students pay formal respect to their teachers. However, respect for teachers in Thailand does not translate into the quiet listening and strict discipline that many Chinese teachers expect. Thai primary classrooms are widely guided by the principle of *sanuk* (fun); pupils are lively and active, and the classroom atmosphere tends to be relaxed. Many Chinese teachers judge Thai classrooms by Chinese standards of discipline, conclude that students are "undisciplined" and "hard to manage," and respond by raising their voices or criticizing students publicly.

In Thai culture, however, the open display of anger is often regarded as a lack of self-control, and public criticism may cause a student to lose face and disrupt the smooth relationship between teacher and student (Komin, 1990). As a result, students may withdraw from the teacher and participate less, while the teacher finds that stricter control only produces more disorder. The root of the problem, therefore, is not a lack of respect on the part of Thai students, but differing cultural assumptions about how authority should be expressed and exercised in the classroom.

This dilemma is particularly instructive because it arises from an apparent cultural similarity. Both societies are characterized by relatively high power distance (Hofstede et al., 2010), and Chinese teachers may therefore expect Thai pupils to accept teacher authority in the same way as Chinese

pupils. In the Chinese classroom, however, authority is often expressed through explicit rules, direct correction, and visible control, whereas in the Thai classroom it tends to be expressed through warmth, emotional composure, and the maintenance of harmonious relationships. Authority in Thai schools is real, but it is relational rather than coercive. A teacher who appears calm, kind, and patient is more likely to be respected than one who appears strict.

4.2 Mismatched Pedagogical Beliefs and Assessment Practices

Most Chinese teachers were educated in a system that emphasizes foundational training and examination-based assessment. Accordingly, they tend to center their teaching on character writing, vocabulary memorization, and repeated drilling, and to evaluate learning through tests. In Thai primary schools, by contrast, Chinese classes are often allotted limited time, schools place greater value on pupils' interest and on performances and activities, assessment is comparatively lenient, and pupils generally experience little examination pressure.

Thailand's National Education Act of 1999 established learner-centered teaching as a central reform goal. Research has shown, however, that the reform was implemented largely from the top down and that its effects on everyday teaching and learning were limited, partly because of a cultural tendency to treat change as an event rather than a long-term process (Hallinger & Lee, 2011). Chinese teachers thus face a double gap. On the one hand, their drill-oriented methods do not match schools' expectations of enjoyable learning. On the other hand, schools' expectations regarding learning outcomes remain vague, leaving teachers without clear feedback or recognition of their work.

This mismatch also affects teachers' professional identity. Teachers who measure success by test results may feel that their efforts are wasted when pupils forget characters from one week to the next, while schools may view the same teachers as overly serious or demanding. Without a shared understanding of what counts as successful learning in a primary Chinese class, both sides may form negative judgments of each other. The issue, then, is not simply which method is better, but whether teachers and schools can negotiate a common set of expectations that balances enjoyment with meaningful progress.

4.3 One-Directional and Insufficiently Localized Cultural Content

In primary Chinese classrooms, cultural teaching typically centers on topics such as the Spring Festival, paper-cutting, Peking opera, and the Great Wall, presented mainly through teacher demonstration and student observation. Although this China-centered, one-way transmission is vivid and accessible, it seldom connects with pupils' own life experiences. Cultural teaching therefore risks becoming superficial and symbolic, producing familiarity with cultural icons rather than genuine intercultural understanding.

From Byram's (1997) perspective, the core of intercultural competence lies in relating and comparing one's own culture with the target culture. Thailand in fact possesses a rich Chinese–Thai cultural heritage, and many festival customs and food traditions share historical roots with those of China. Yet these local resources remain underused in teaching. In addition, some teaching materials depict situations that are distant from the everyday lives of Thai primary pupils, which further reinforces the sense that the cultural content does not “fit” the local context.

A further problem is that one-directional cultural presentation may unintentionally position Chinese culture as something to be admired rather than understood. Pupils are invited to watch and imitate, but seldom to ask questions, express their own views, or compare what they see with their own experiences. Such an approach may develop cultural knowledge in a narrow sense, but it does little to foster the attitudes of curiosity and openness, or the skills of interpreting and relating, that Byram (1997) places at the center of intercultural competence.

4.4 Structural Constraints: Teacher Turnover and the Absence of a Shared Language

Volunteer teachers usually serve relatively short terms in Thailand, which leads to frequent staff turnover. Teaching experience is therefore difficult to accumulate and transmit at the school level, and schools and pupils must repeatedly adjust to new teachers. Moreover, many Chinese teachers have limited Thai proficiency, while pupils' English and Chinese are not sufficient to understand complex classroom instructions. Without an effective medium of communication, classroom organization becomes inefficient, and teachers struggle to convey their intentions and emotions accurately.

Intercultural friction also extends beyond the classroom. In interactions with Thai colleagues and administrators, the cultural norm of *kreng jai*, a concern for not imposing on or upsetting others, often leads Thai interlocutors to avoid direct refusal or criticism, and Chinese teachers may misread polite indirectness as agreement. Furthermore, frequent sports days, religious festivals, and school events often disrupt teaching schedules. This reflects the Thai orientation toward flexibility and adjustment (Komin, 1990), whereas Chinese teachers accustomed to planning and predictability may experience anxiety and frustration.

Taken together, these structural factors mean that many intercultural difficulties are not resolved within a single teaching term. Each new cohort of teachers encounters similar problems, often without access to the experience of its predecessors, so that the same misunderstandings are repeated year after year. This suggests that the dilemmas described above should not be attributed solely to individual teachers' shortcomings; they are reproduced by the way teaching is organized.

Table 1 summarizes the four dilemmas, their main manifestations, and their underlying cultural or structural sources.

Table 1. Intercultural dilemmas in Thai primary school Chinese teaching

Dilemma	Main manifestations	Underlying sources
Classroom management	Perceived indiscipline; teacher raises voice or criticizes publicly; pupil withdrawal	Different expressions of authority; face; <i>sanuk</i> orientation
Pedagogy and assessment	Drill-oriented teaching versus activity-based expectations; vague learning goals	Examination-oriented versus learner-centered educational traditions
Cultural content	Symbolic, one-way presentation of Chinese culture; weak links to pupils' lives	China-centered materials; underuse of local Chinese–Thai heritage
Structural constraints	Frequent turnover; lack of a shared language; disrupted schedules; misread indirectness	Short terms of service; limited Thai proficiency; <i>kreng jai</i> ; flexibility orientation

5. Coping Strategies

5.1 Developing Teachers' Intercultural Competence

Pre-service training should go beyond general introductions to Thai culture by incorporating authentic cases from Thai primary classrooms. It should focus on the attitudinal dimension and on the skills of interpreting and relating, so that teachers learn to recognize and reflect on their own cultural assumptions. Training in basic Thai classroom language should also be strengthened. During the teaching term, reflective journals, peer exchange, and experience-sharing sessions can help teachers continuously develop their intercultural sensitivity.

Importantly, the goal of such training is not to replace Chinese teaching values with Thai ones, but to help teachers develop the flexibility to move between different cultural frames. A teacher who understands why Thai pupils respond poorly to public criticism, for instance, does not need to abandon high expectations; rather, the teacher can learn to pursue those expectations through culturally appropriate means.

5.2 Localizing Classroom Management

Teachers should build on the learning characteristics of Thai primary pupils by replacing public criticism with positive reinforcement and by turning *sanuk* into a source of learning motivation through games, songs, Total Physical Response activities, and team competitions. Classroom rules should be simple, visual, and consistently reinforced. Problem behavior is better addressed through private conversation, and teachers should actively involve Thai homeroom teachers or teaching assistants, thereby establishing their authority in ways that are culturally appropriate.

Localizing classroom management also involves rethinking the balance between enjoyment and learning. Fun activities should not be treated as a reward that follows serious study, but as a vehicle through which language is practiced. Well-designed games can include repeated listening and speaking practice, allowing pupils to consolidate language while experiencing the class as *sanuk*.

5.3 Making Cultural Teaching Dialogic

Cultural teaching should shift from “presenting China” to fostering a dialogue between Chinese and Thai cultures. For example, teachers can compare the Spring Festival with Songkran, or the Mid-Autumn Festival with Loy Krathong, guiding pupils to discover similarities and differences between the two traditions. Teachers can also draw on the cultural resources of local Thai Chinese communities, allowing pupils to understand Chinese culture through familiar contexts and creating in the classroom what Kramsch (1993) described as a “third place.”

Such dialogic cultural teaching need not be complex. Even simple tasks, such as asking pupils to compare how their families celebrate a festival with how a Chinese family might celebrate a similar occasion, can encourage pupils to observe, compare, and reflect. In this way, cultural teaching supports both language learning and the development of intercultural attitudes.

5.4 Strengthening Institutional Coordination and Support

Sending institutions and host schools should establish standardized handover procedures and shared archives of teaching resources to reduce the discontinuity caused by teacher turnover. Where possible,

terms of service could be extended, or co-teaching between Chinese teachers and local Thai teachers of Chinese could be promoted. At the school level, clearer curriculum goals and assessment standards for Chinese would give teachers a clearer sense of direction and the support they need.

Finally, institutional support should also address communication between Chinese teachers and Thai colleagues. Regular, low-pressure channels for feedback, such as informal meetings with a designated mentor teacher, can help overcome the indirectness associated with *kreng jai* and allow problems to be identified before they escalate.

6. Conclusion

The dilemmas of Chinese language teaching in Thai primary schools are, in essence, the product of an encounter between two educational cultures within the classroom. The problems Chinese teachers face stem not only from gaps in individual intercultural competence but also from differences in classroom culture, divergent pedagogical beliefs, and institutional arrangements. Effective responses should therefore not be limited to teachers' personal adjustment; they require coordinated action at the individual, classroom, and institutional levels, enabling a shift from mere cultural adaptation to genuinely intercultural teaching. As this study relies primarily on documentary analysis and theoretical interpretation, future research could employ in-depth interviews and classroom observation to examine these dilemmas and test the effectiveness of the proposed strategies empirically.

The study contributes to the literature in two ways. First, it shifts attention from teachers' personal adaptation to the classroom as the primary site where intercultural dilemmas emerge. Second, it shows that apparent cultural similarities between China and Thailand, such as respect for teachers and high power distance, can conceal significant differences in how these values are enacted in schools, and that such hidden differences may be a major source of misunderstanding.

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Living Longer, Ageing Together? A Qualitative Policy Analysis of Public Health Governance in Japan's Super-Aged Society

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ABSTRACT

Japan has the oldest population in the world, and its public health system has become a laboratory for how mature welfare states respond to demographic ageing. This article asks how Japanese public health policy has defined the problem of ageing between 2000 and 2026, and what tensions those definitions create. Using a qualitative, interpretive document analysis of national legislation, government white papers, ministry planning documents and secondary scholarship, the study traces four policy frames: the shift from longevity to “healthy longevity” in the Health Japan 21 programme; the socialisation of care through Long-Term Care Insurance; the construction of the local community as public health infrastructure under the Community-Based Integrated Care System; and a recent normative turn toward rights and inclusion, visible in the Basic Act on Dementia and the loneliness and isolation legislation. The analysis finds that Japanese policy has steadily moved responsibility for health in later life from hospitals and families toward individuals and neighbourhoods, while relabelling that move in the language of autonomy and mutual support. This approach has produced real gains in prevention and social participation, but it rests on assumptions about family availability, community capacity and care labour that demographic data increasingly contradict. The article concludes that the sustainability of Japan's model depends less on new programmes than on rebuilding the care workforce and addressing regional and social inequalities in healthy ageing.

KEYWORDS super-aged society; public health governance; community-based integrated care; long-term care insurance; dementia policy; Japan

1. Introduction

Population ageing is usually discussed as an economic or fiscal problem: shrinking labour forces, rising pension bills and pressure on health budgets. For public health, however, ageing raises a different and more fundamental question. When a society succeeds in extending life, what does it then owe its members in the extra years, and who is responsible for making those years healthy? Japan is the clearest case through which to examine this question. The finalised results of the 2025 census

show that people aged 65 and over make up a record 29.4 per cent of the population, while the total population, including foreign residents, fell by 3.17 million between 2020 and 2025 (Kyodo News, 2026). Japan crossed the threshold of a “super-aged society”, conventionally defined as one in which more than 21 per cent of the population is aged 65 or over, well before any other country.

Japan’s post-war public health record has been widely admired. Universal health insurance from 1961, falling stroke mortality and relatively equal access to care helped produce some of the longest life expectancies in the world (Ikeda et al., 2011). Since 2000, however, the policy agenda has moved away from extending life and toward governing the long final stage of it. Long-Term Care Insurance (LTCI), introduced in 2000, made care for frail older people a social rather than purely family obligation (Campbell & Ikegami, 2000). National health promotion plans set the extension of healthy life expectancy as their headline goal. In the 2010s the government promoted a Community-Based Integrated Care System to be in place by 2025, the year in which the post-war baby boom cohort would all reach 75 (Tsutsui, 2014). Most recently, the Basic Act on Dementia to Promote an Inclusive Society and new legislation on loneliness and isolation have introduced the language of rights, dignity and inclusion into ageing policy.

A large literature evaluates individual programmes, especially LTCI financing (Ikegami, 2019) and community interventions (Hikichi et al., 2015). Less attention has been paid to how these programmes fit together as a way of thinking about ageing, and to the assumptions they share. This article therefore asks two questions. First, how have Japanese public health policies framed the “problem” of ageing between 2000 and 2026? Second, what tensions and blind spots do these framings produce under current demographic conditions? The article argues that Japanese policy has progressively relocated responsibility for health in later life from hospitals and families to individuals and local communities, and that this relocation is now under strain because the social resources it depends on are themselves ageing and shrinking.

2. Analytical Framework and Methods

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive design based on document analysis. Document analysis treats official texts as social products that record how institutions define problems, assign responsibility and justify action (Bowen, 2009). It is appropriate here because the research questions concern policy meaning rather than measured outcomes, and because Japanese ageing policy is extensively documented in legislation, cabinet decisions and ministry explanatory materials. No primary data were collected from human participants.

The analysis is informed by a framing perspective on public policy. Policies do not simply respond to given problems; they define what the problem is, whose problem it is and what kinds of solution are thinkable. Following this perspective, the study reads policy texts for four elements: the way ageing is diagnosed, the actors held responsible, the instruments proposed, and the values invoked to justify them. The welfare-regime literature on East Asia, particularly work on the “care diamond” of state, market, family and community (Ochiai, 2009), provides a second lens for identifying how responsibility is distributed among these sectors.

The corpus was assembled purposively and comprises three groups of material. The first group consists of primary legal and policy texts: the Long-Term Care Insurance Act and its successive revisions, explanatory materials for Health Japan 21 (third term) (Ministry of Health, Labour and

Welfare [MHLW], 2023), the Basic Act on Dementia (Act No. 65 of 2023) and its outline translation, and the Act on the Promotion of Policy on Loneliness and Isolation. The second group consists of official statistics and white papers, including the Cabinet Office's Annual Report on the Ageing Society (2025), MHLW releases on healthy life expectancy and care workforce requirements, and National Police Agency data on solitary deaths. The third group consists of peer-reviewed scholarship and policy commentary in English, Japanese and Korean. Japanese-language sources were read in the original and translated by the author.

Analysis followed the reflexive thematic approach of Braun and Clarke (2006). Documents were read repeatedly, coded inductively for statements about problem definition and responsibility, and the codes were grouped into candidate themes that were then checked against the full corpus and against secondary scholarship. Four themes emerged and structure the findings below. The main limitation of the design is that policy texts express intentions and justifications rather than lived experience; the article therefore uses statistical and secondary evidence to test the claims made in policy documents, but it cannot capture how older people themselves interpret these policies.

3. Demographic and Epidemiological Context

Table 1 summarises the main indicators that frame the policy analysis. Three features stand out. First, ageing is now driven by the oldest age groups. People aged 75 and over numbered 20.78 million in 2024 and had overtaken those aged 65 to 74 (Cabinet Office, 2025). Because need for care and the prevalence of dementia rise steeply after 75, the composition of the older population matters as much as its size.

Table 1

Selected Indicators of Population Ageing and Health in Japan

Indicator	Value	Reference year and source
Population aged 65 and over (share of total)	29.4%	2025 Census, final results (Kyodo News, 2026)
Total population (incl. foreign residents)	122,972,528	Down 3.17 million from 2020 (Kyodo News, 2026)
Population aged 75 and over (share of total)	20.78 million (16.8%)	Cabinet Office (2025)
Healthy life expectancy, men / women	72.57 / 75.45 years	2022 values (MHLW, 2024a)
Years lived with activity limitation, men / women	8.49 / 11.63 years	2022 values (MHLW, 2024a)
Employment rate, aged 65 and over	25.7%	2024 (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2025)
Care workers employed / required by FY2040	2.13 million / 2.72 million	FY2023 and FY2040 (MHLW, 2024b; Japan News, 2025)
Persons living alone found dead at home (of whom 65+)	76,020 (58,044)	2024 (National Police Agency, 2025)

Note. MHLW = Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. FY = fiscal year.

Second, gains in healthy life expectancy have not outpaced gains in life expectancy. In 2022 healthy life expectancy was 72.57 years for men and 75.45 years for women, implying roughly 8.5 years for men and 11.6 years for women lived with limitations in daily activities (MHLW, 2024a). Since 2001, average and healthy life expectancy have moved almost in parallel, so the period of dependency has not substantially shortened (Nippon.com, 2025). The difference between the best- and worst-

performing prefectures in male healthy life expectancy widened slightly to 2.82 years, indicating persistent geographical inequality (MHLW, 2024a).

Third, the social foundations of care are changing. Older people increasingly live alone; the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research projects that the number of older single-person households will reach about 10.8 million by 2050. In 2024 the National Police Agency (2025) published annual national figures on solitary deaths for the first time: 76,020 people living alone were found dead at home, of whom 58,044 were aged 65 or over. At the same time, the long-term care workforce has begun to contract. The number of care workers fell to about 2.13 million in fiscal 2023, the first decline since LTCI began, whereas the government estimates that 2.72 million will be needed by fiscal 2040 (Japan News, 2025; MHLW, 2024b). These trends form the backdrop against which the four policy frames below must be assessed.

4. Findings: Four Frames of Ageing in Japanese Public Health Policy

4.1 From longevity to healthy longevity: Health promotion as lifelong self-management

The first frame redefines success. In national health promotion planning, long life is no longer the goal in itself; the target is the extension of healthy life expectancy and the narrowing of health disparities. This orientation was established in the second term of Health Japan 21 (2013–2023) and was carried forward in the third term, a twelve-year plan beginning in fiscal 2024. The third term adopts the slogan of health promotion that “leaves no one behind”, sets 51 targets, and introduces a life-course approach together with an emphasis on improving the social environment rather than only individual behaviour (MHLW, 2023; Nomura et al., 2022).

The texts reveal a double movement. On the one hand, the third term explicitly acknowledges the social determinants of health and promises environments in which people become healthy “naturally”, without needing exceptional motivation. On the other hand, most measurable targets still concern individual behaviours and biomarkers: diet, physical activity, smoking, oral health and the management of lifestyle-related diseases. Older people are addressed above all as subjects who should prevent frailty, maintain cognitive function and remain economically and socially active. The rising employment of older people supports this framing; 9.3 million people aged 65 and over were in work in 2024, an employment rate of 25.7 per cent (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2025).

This frame has clear strengths. It shifts public health attention toward function and quality of life rather than mortality alone, and it aligns with the epidemiological reality that non-communicable diseases dominate the burden of disease in later life (Nomura et al., 2017). Yet it also moralises ageing. Where healthy ageing is presented as an achievable personal project, dependency risks being read as a failure of self-management. The persistence of an eight- to twelve-year period of limitation, and the regional gap in healthy life expectancy, suggest that structural factors such as income, occupation and local service capacity are not being addressed by behavioural targets alone.

4.2 Socialising care: Long-Term Care Insurance and its limits

The second frame concerns who pays for and provides care. Before 2000, care for frail older people in Japan was overwhelmingly provided by families, especially daughters-in-law, with residual municipal welfare services and the widespread use of hospital beds for “social admissions” (Campbell & Ikegami,

2000). LTCI changed the definition of the problem: care became a universal social risk, financed by compulsory premiums from everyone aged 40 and over together with taxation, and delivered by a market of certified providers on the basis of standardised need assessment. Policy documents of the period describe this as the “socialisation of care”.

The analysis shows that this frame has been progressively qualified. Successive revisions since 2005 have emphasised prevention, raised co-payments for higher-income users, shifted lighter-need users toward municipal programmes and tightened eligibility for residential care (Ikegami, 2019). The justification has moved from social solidarity toward sustainability: the question is less what older people need than what the system can afford. In this sense, LTCI has evolved from a guarantee of care toward a framework for rationing and redirecting it.

The deeper limit of the frame is labour. LTCI turned care into publicly financed services but did not secure the people who provide them. Care work remains poorly paid relative to the national average, and the first decline in the care workforce in fiscal 2023 marks a turning point (Japan News, 2025). The government’s projected shortfall of roughly 570,000 care workers by fiscal 2040 (MHLW, 2024b) means that the formal right to care may not translate into actual services, particularly in rural areas. Recent responses, including expanded admission of foreign care workers and subsidies for care robotics, treat the shortage as a technical gap to be filled rather than as a question about the social value of care work.

4.3 The community as public health infrastructure

The third frame is the most distinctive feature of Japanese policy since the 2010s. The Community-Based Integrated Care System seeks to ensure that housing, medical care, long-term care, prevention and daily-life support are available within a roughly thirty-minute area, so that older people can continue living in familiar surroundings to the end of life (Tsutsui, 2014). Municipalities are designated as the main coordinators, and the policy vocabulary emphasises four forms of help: self-help (*jijo*), mutual help (*gojo*), social-insurance-based help (*kyojo*) and public help (*kojo*).

In this frame the local community becomes a form of public health infrastructure. Neighbourhood “places to gather” (*kayoi-no-ba*), volunteer-run exercise groups and watch-over networks are promoted as preventive interventions. There is credible evidence that such measures matter: the Japan Gerontological Evaluation Study (JAGES) has shown that social participation is associated with lower risks of functional disability, and an evaluation of community salons in Taketoyo town found that participation was associated with reduced incidence of disability (Hikichi et al., 2015; Kondo, 2016). The community frame thus has a stronger empirical basis than critics sometimes allow.

Nevertheless, the ordering of the four forms of help is revealing. Public help appears last, as a residual safety net. The model depends on neighbourhoods having enough active, healthy residents to provide mutual help, yet the same demographic trends that create need also erode that capacity. In depopulating rural municipalities, those expected to volunteer are often themselves in their seventies. The community frame therefore risks reproducing the older reliance on family care in a new form, shifting unpaid work from daughters-in-law to neighbours, most of whom are women and older people (Ochiai, 2009).

4.4 Rights, inclusion and isolation: A normative turn

The fourth frame is the most recent. The Basic Act on Dementia to Promote an Inclusive Society was enacted in June 2023 and took effect on 1 January 2024. It replaces an earlier administrative framework with a statutory basis and states that people with dementia should be able to live with dignity and hope, participate in all areas of society, and be involved in policy-making (Lim, 2024). The Basic Plan adopted under the Act in late 2024 explicitly rejects the assumption that a diagnosis of dementia means the loss of capacity. In parallel, the Act on the Promotion of Policy on Loneliness and Isolation, in force from April 2024, defines loneliness and isolation as social problems requiring public action rather than private misfortunes.

This turn matters because it introduces a rights-based vocabulary into a policy field previously dominated by cost and prevention. It reframes older people, including those with cognitive impairment, as citizens with entitlements to participation, rather than only as objects of care or targets of behavioural change. Civil society organisations have welcomed the inclusion of people with dementia in policy processes as a major change (Health and Global Policy Institute, 2024).

Yet the new frame is largely declaratory. The dementia legislation is a basic act, which sets principles and planning duties but creates few enforceable entitlements or dedicated budgets. The loneliness legislation likewise relies on local platforms and public awareness. The publication of national solitary death statistics makes the scale of isolation visible: in 2024 nearly one in ten such deaths among older people was discovered more than a month later (National Police Agency, 2025). Rights to inclusion are being declared at the moment when the material resources needed to realise them, namely care workers, local services and social networks, are becoming scarcer.

5. Discussion: Responsibility, Capacity and Inequality

Read together, the four frames show a consistent direction of travel. Over 25 years, Japanese public health policy has moved the centre of responsibility for later-life health away from hospitals, which were costly, and away from families, which were overburdened, toward individuals who are expected to manage their own health and toward communities that are expected to support one another. The state's role has shifted from provider to coordinator, standard-setter and promoter of norms. This pattern is consistent with earlier analyses that describe Japan's welfare state as relying heavily on non-state actors to deliver social protection (Estévez-Abe, 2008).

Three tensions follow from this direction. The first is a tension between responsibility and capacity. Each frame assigns responsibility to an actor whose capacity is declining: individuals who will spend about a decade with limitations, families that are becoming smaller and more often single-person households, communities that are depopulating, and a care workforce that has begun to shrink. Policy language that celebrates self-help and mutual help can obscure this mismatch. Precarity in Japanese society more broadly, including weakened workplace and family ties, compounds the problem (Allison, 2013).

The second tension concerns inequality. Health Japan 21 names the reduction of health disparities as a core goal, but the main instruments are universal behavioural targets, and community-based care depends on local resources that vary widely. The widening gap in male healthy life expectancy between prefectures, and the concentration of population in the Tokyo metropolitan area, suggest that

a model built on local capacity will tend to reproduce regional differences. A public health approach to ageing that is serious about equity would need to channel resources toward places and groups with the least capacity, rather than rely on them to mobilise their own.

The third tension lies between the normative and the material. The rights-based turn is significant, and it brings Japan closer to international frameworks such as the WHO's agenda for healthy ageing. But inclusion requires infrastructure: accessible transport, adapted housing, adequately staffed home care and trained professionals. Without investment in the care workforce, declarations of dignity risk remaining symbolic, and the burden of realising them will fall again on families and unpaid community members.

These findings carry lessons for other Asian societies that are ageing rapidly, including China, South Korea and Thailand. Japan shows that social insurance can successfully socialise the financing of care and that community participation can measurably delay disability. It also shows that financing and participation are insufficient if the labour of care is undervalued and if policy assumes community capacity that demographic change is eroding.

6. Conclusion

This article has used qualitative document analysis to examine how Japanese public health policy has framed population ageing from 2000 to 2026. It identified four frames: healthy longevity as personal and lifelong self-management; the socialisation and subsequent rationing of care through Long-Term Care Insurance; the community as public health infrastructure; and a recent turn toward rights, inclusion and the prevention of isolation. Together they reveal a steady relocation of responsibility toward individuals and neighbourhoods, framed in the language of autonomy and mutual support.

Japan's experience is neither a simple success nor a cautionary failure. Its policies have produced high levels of social participation among older people, a functioning universal care insurance scheme and a pioneering statutory commitment to people living with dementia. The central weakness is not a lack of ideas or programmes but a growing gap between what policy asks of individuals, families and communities and what they can realistically provide. Closing that gap will require treating care work as essential public health infrastructure, directing resources toward the regions and groups with the poorest healthy ageing outcomes, and giving enforceable substance to the rights now written into law. Future research should complement this documentary analysis with fieldwork on how older people, family carers and care workers experience these policies in practice, particularly in depopulating regions.

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Cross-Border Domestic Service for Chinese Families in Thailand: Demand, Bottlenecks, and the Grey Market of the "Imported Ayi"

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ABSTRACT

Since the late 2010s, Thailand has become a major destination for new Chinese migrants, including corporate employees, entrepreneurs, and middle-class families who relocate for their children's international education. This article examines why these households struggle to obtain domestic help, and why a growing number of them turn to agencies that recruit domestic workers ("ayi") from mainland China. Using qualitative documentary analysis of Thai and Chinese legal texts, labour and immigration regulations, official statistics, prior academic studies, and media and community sources, the article makes three arguments. First, demand is structural: household arrangements centred on an accompanying mother, the absence of grandparent support, and expectations about food, child-rearing, and homework supervision create a need for culturally specific care. Second, the local market cannot easily meet this need because of language barriers, divergent household norms, and low trust, even though Thai and neighbouring-country workers are available and, since 2024, better protected by Thai law. Third, the cross-border "imported ayi" solution sits in a legal grey zone. Thailand's work-permit system and occupational restrictions offer no routine route for a Chinese national to work as a domestic worker, while China's rules on overseas labour services prohibit sending workers abroad under tourist or other non-work pretexts. The result is a high-cost, broker-driven market that shifts legal, financial, and personal risks onto both families and workers. The article concludes with recommendations for families, agencies, and policymakers in both countries.

KEYWORDS new Chinese migrants; Thailand; domestic work; transnational families; migration brokerage; global care chains

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the profile of Chinese people in Thailand has changed. Alongside the long-established Thai-Chinese community, a new group of mainland migrants (xin yimin) has arrived: managers and engineers sent by Chinese firms, small-business owners, retirees, and families who move so that their children can attend international or bilingual schools. Siriphon and Banu (2021)

classify these newcomers into four groups and note that education migrants are often accompanied by a parent, usually the mother, known as a *peidu mama*. The scale of this movement is growing. By the end of November 2025, Chinese nationals held 56,202 Thai work permits, overtaking Japanese nationals as the largest group of foreign work-permit holders (The Nation, n.d.). Kasikorn Research Center (2025) estimated that the number of Chinese nationals working in Thailand grew by an average of 20.8% a year between 2021 and 2024, and that their children often enrol in international schools.

When these families set up homes in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Pattaya, or Phuket, one of the first practical problems they meet is household help. In mainland Chinese cities, many middle-class households rely on a live-in *ayi* or on grandparents for cooking, cleaning, and childcare. In Thailand, the grandparents are usually back in China, and the local domestic workers that families can hire, mostly Thai nationals or workers from Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos, rarely speak Chinese. Chinese-language community platforms in Thailand regularly carry advertisements for live-in helpers who can cook Chinese food (Thailand Chinese Network, n.d.). A visible response to this gap is the use of agencies that bring an *ayi* from mainland China. This option appears to solve the language and cultural problems, but it is expensive and, as this article will show, rarely compatible with Thai or Chinese law.

This article asks three questions. What drives the demand for domestic services among new Chinese households in Thailand? What bottlenecks prevent the local market from meeting that demand? And what legal, financial, and ethical problems arise when families turn to cross-border recruitment of Chinese domestic workers? It contributes to research on new Chinese migration, which has focused on education, business, and lifestyle, by drawing attention to the domestic labour that makes these projects possible.

2. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

2.1 New Chinese migration and the accompanying-parent household

Research on new Chinese migrants in Thailand describes a population that is more transient than earlier generations of Chinese settlers. Siriphon and Banu (2021) argue that many newcomers do not intend to settle permanently, and they document the rapid growth of education migration to Chiang Mai, where roughly 2,000 Chinese children held student visas in 2019 and were accompanied by about 1,000 parents or other carers. Niu (2025), drawing on interviews with 38 families whose children attended 23 international schools in Chiang Mai, describes these families as "educational nomadic families" who relocate their households to meet their social reproduction needs. Siriphon and Li (2023) similarly show how middle-class Chinese parents use flexible, temporary migration to pursue their children's education in Thailand.

Studies of accompanying mothers highlight both their care burden and their precarious legal position. Huang and Yeoh's (2005) classic study of Chinese "study mothers" in Singapore showed that these women carry the full weight of daily care while facing restrictions on paid work. In Thailand, Zhu et al. (2024) examine the cultural constraints and social obstacles faced by Chinese guardian mothers, and Li (2025), using a survey of 151 respondents and 13 interviews, finds that many accompanying mothers earn income through informal activities, such as purchasing on behalf of others, private tour

guiding, or catering, that exist in a legal grey area because of visa restrictions. These studies focus on the mothers themselves. Less attention has been paid to the domestic workers whom these households employ, or wish to employ, to share the load.

2.2 Global care chains and domestic work

A second body of literature examines paid domestic work across borders. Hochschild (2000) coined the term "global care chains" to describe how care labour flows from poorer to richer households across national borders, often from women who leave their own families behind. Parreñas (2001) and Lan (2006) showed how Filipina and Indonesian domestic workers in Asia and beyond experience these chains, including dependence on employers, isolation, and legal vulnerability. Constable (2007) documented how Hong Kong's regulated foreign domestic helper scheme both protects and disciplines workers. Yan (2008) analysed the internal Chinese market for domestic workers, showing how rural women who migrate to cities to work as *ayi* are judged by urban employers through ideas of "quality" (*suzhi*), cleanliness, and trust.

The case examined here differs from the classic care chain in one important way: the employer and the worker share the same nationality, language, and broad cultural background, yet both are foreigners in the place where the work is done. This creates what may be called an intra-ethnic, cross-border care chain. Cultural closeness is precisely what families pay for, while the shared outsider status of employer and worker shapes the legal risks both face.

2.3 Migration infrastructure and brokerage

The third strand concerns the intermediaries who organise migration. Xiang and Lindquist (2014) define migration infrastructure as the interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that enable and condition mobility. They argue that labour migration in Asia has become intensively mediated, and that this mediation can become self-perpetuating, making migration both more accessible and more cumbersome. This concept helps explain why, when formal channels are closed or impractical, private brokers expand to fill the gap, and why the costs and risks of the resulting arrangements tend to grow rather than shrink.

3. Methodology

This is a qualitative study based on documentary analysis. No interviews, surveys, or other primary data were collected. The analysis draws on four types of material. The first is legal and regulatory texts, including Thailand's rules on foreign employment and prohibited occupations, Ministerial Regulation No. 15 (2024) on domestic work, the China–Thailand mutual visa exemption agreement, and China's Regulations on the Administration of Foreign Labour Service Cooperation (2012). The second is official statistics and statements from Thai government agencies and the Chinese Embassy in Thailand. The third is published academic research on new Chinese migrants, accompanying mothers, and domestic work in Asia. The fourth is media reports and publicly accessible community sources, such as recruitment notices on Chinese-language platforms in Thailand and Chinese news reports on comparable grey markets.

The materials were read and coded thematically, following the logic of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), around three themes that correspond to the research questions: sources of demand,

local bottlenecks, and the cross-border agency market. The study has clear limitations. Because the cross-border domestic labour market operates largely informally, no systematic data exist on the number of Chinese domestic workers in Thailand, the fees they pay or receive, or their working conditions. Where this article discusses fee structures and practices, it describes their general form rather than precise figures, and it relies on analogous, better-documented cases where necessary. Legal provisions are summarised from official and professional sources for analytical purposes and should not be read as legal advice; rules on work permits and visas change frequently and should be checked against current official guidance.

4. Sources of Demand

4.1 The reshaped household

The first source of demand is a change in household structure. In many mainland Chinese families, childcare and housework are shared among several adults, often including grandparents who live with or near the family. Migration to Thailand usually breaks this arrangement. In education-migration households, one parent, typically the mother, moves with the child while the other continues to work in China, creating what researchers describe as a living-apart-together family (Huang & Yeoh, 2005; Niu, 2025). Grandparents may visit, but they rarely stay long because of visa rules and their own health and family obligations.

The result is that tasks previously distributed across a family network fall on one adult. Zhu et al. (2024) and Li (2025) show that accompanying mothers face both a heavy care load and a desire, or financial need, to pursue their own economic activities. Paid domestic help is one of the few ways to reconcile these pressures.

4.2 Culturally specific care expectations

The second source of demand is the content of the care that families want. Chinese families often expect a domestic helper to do more than clean. Common expectations include cooking Chinese home-style food every day, caring for infants according to familiar practices, and, for school-age children, supervising homework and Chinese-language study. Some families also seek postpartum care (yuesao), a role that has no close equivalent in the Thai labour market. Recruitment notices posted by Chinese families in Thailand frequently specify that the helper must be able to cook Chinese meals and, in some cases, communicate in Chinese with a child (Thailand Chinese Network, n.d.).

These expectations are not simply preferences. For children who attend English-medium international schools, the home is often the main place where they use Chinese, and parents may see a Chinese-speaking carer as part of their strategy for maintaining the child's language and cultural identity. In this sense, the demand for a Chinese ayi is tied to the broader family project that motivated migration in the first place.

4.3 Trust and the management of the home

The third source of demand concerns trust. A domestic worker lives inside the family's private space, handles its property, and cares for its children. Yan (2008) shows that, even within China, employers judge domestic workers through complex ideas of reliability and moral character. Abroad, the ability

to talk directly with the worker, check references through Chinese networks, and share a common understanding of household rules makes employers feel more in control. Agencies that recruit from China actively market this sense of familiarity and safety.

5. Bottlenecks in the Local Market

5.1 Availability and the formal framework

It is important to note that Thailand does have a domestic labour market. Thai domestic workers can be employed without immigration formalities, and workers from Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos can be legally employed in domestic work through the bilateral memorandum of understanding (MOU) system and related registration schemes. Practitioner guides for foreigners living in Thailand describe live-in nannies earning from around 15,000 baht a month, with experienced workers paid considerably more (Thailand Starter Kit, n.d.). The legal protection of these workers has also improved. Under Ministerial Regulation No. 15, issued in April 2024, domestic workers became entitled to the minimum wage, an eight-hour working day with overtime pay, a weekly rest day, and maternity protections (ILO, 2024a, 2024b). The minimum wage for Bangkok rose to 400 baht per day in July 2025 (Tilleke & Gibbins, 2025). These rules apply to all employers, including foreign households, which raises the formal obligations that families must meet.

The bottleneck, therefore, is not an absolute shortage of workers. It is a mismatch between the workers who are available and the kind of care that new Chinese households want.

5.2 Language barriers

Language is the most frequently cited problem. Few Thai or neighbouring-country domestic workers speak Mandarin, and many new Chinese migrants, especially accompanying mothers who arrived recently, speak little Thai or English. Everyday management of a household depends on constant communication: explaining a recipe, giving instructions about a child's allergy, or resolving a misunderstanding about working hours. Communication problems also make it harder for employers to understand their legal obligations under Thai labour law, most information about which is published in Thai.

5.3 Cultural differences in household norms

The second bottleneck concerns household norms. Thai domestic work culture tends to define tasks clearly and to value politeness and indirect communication. Chinese employers, by contrast, may expect a single worker to perform a wide range of tasks, from cooking and cleaning to tutoring, and may communicate expectations more directly. Differences in diet, hygiene practices, and child-rearing (for example, attitudes towards discipline, clothing in hot weather, or how much a child should study) can create friction. Research on Chinese guardian mothers in Thailand notes that cultural constraints and limited local social networks shape how these mothers cope with daily life (Zhu et al., 2024).

5.4 Information asymmetry and weak intermediaries

The third bottleneck is the lack of trusted intermediaries who can bridge the two sides. New Chinese migrants often rely on WeChat groups and Chinese-language websites rather than Thai agencies. Few

Thai agencies offer Chinese-speaking coordinators, training for workers in Chinese cooking or communication, or clear explanations in Chinese of employers' legal duties. This information gap makes families more receptive to agencies that speak their language and promise a familiar solution, even when that solution is legally doubtful.

6. The "Imported Ayi" and Its Grey Zones

6.1 The legal mismatch in Thailand

Bringing a domestic worker from China runs into Thailand's system for regulating foreign employment. All foreigners need a work permit to work in Thailand, and a list of occupations is restricted for foreigners. The Ministry of Labour's 2020 notification on prohibited work lists 40 occupations: 27 closed to all foreigners and 13 open only under specific conditions. Among the conditional categories, general labour and shop assistance are available only to workers who enter through the MOU system with Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar (Winrock International, 2022). Domestic work for neighbouring-country nationals has historically been permitted through cabinet resolutions and the MOU framework rather than through the ordinary work-permit route (Winrock International, 2022).

For a Chinese national, there is no comparable routine pathway. Standard work permits are tied to a sponsoring employer, which in practice is usually a company that must meet requirements such as minimum registered capital and a ratio of Thai to foreign employees (ASEAN Briefing, n.d.). An individual household cannot normally meet these conditions. Practitioner guides consistently advise that nationals from countries outside the neighbouring-country schemes, such as the Philippines, generally cannot obtain a work permit to work as a maid or nanny in Thailand (Thailand Starter Kit, n.d.). Although the precise legal position should be confirmed with the Department of Employment, the documentary evidence indicates that most Chinese ayi working in Thai households are not working with a valid permit.

The penalties are significant. Foreign workers found working without a permit or outside its scope face fines of 5,000 to 50,000 baht and possible deportation, while employers face fines of 10,000 to 100,000 baht per worker (The Nation, 2025). Thai authorities have also stepped up enforcement. Between October 2024 and April 2025, the Department of Employment inspected 523,706 foreign workers, of whom 2,575 faced legal action, including 883 charged with working in occupations reserved for Thai nationals (The Nation, 2025). Raids on Chinese-run nominee businesses in Phuket and Bangkok in 2025 show that enforcement increasingly targets the wider Chinese migrant economy (Bangkok Post, 2025; Khaosod English, 2025).

6.2 Visa pathways and their misuse

Because a work-based route is unavailable, workers usually enter Thailand through other channels. Since 1 March 2024, Chinese passport holders have been able to enter Thailand without a visa for up to 30 days per visit, with a cumulative limit of 90 days in any 180-day period. The agreement explicitly requires those who intend to work to obtain the appropriate visa before entry (Beijing Municipal Government, 2024). In practice, visa-free entry and tourist visas make it easy for a worker to arrive, but not to work legally or to stay long-term. Arrangements therefore often involve repeated border

runs, overstaying, or presenting the worker as a relative or travelling companion of the family. Each option increases legal exposure. A precedent illustrates the pattern: in 2023, police in Phuket detained 28 Chinese nationals who had entered on tourist status and were working at a construction site, and the Chinese Embassy warned that Chinese citizens who enter Thailand on non-work visas may not be employed and risk detention, fines, and deportation (Thai PBS World, 2023; NetEase, 2023).

6.3 Fees and the cost structure

The cross-border model is costly. Although reliable price data are not available, the cost structure can be described. Families typically pay an agency fee for recruitment and "matching", airfares, visa-related or border-run expenses, accommodation and food for a live-in worker, and a monthly wage that must be high enough to attract a worker away from China's own large domestic service market. Because the worker cannot be legally employed, many of these payments are made informally, without written contracts that would be enforceable in Thai courts. If the worker leaves, is deported, or proves unsuitable, the family may lose the agency fee with no recourse.

A close parallel can be seen in mainland China's market for Filipino domestic workers. Because Chinese law does not permit foreign nationals to work as domestic helpers, agencies bring Filipino workers in on tourist, family-visit, or business visas, charging employers agency fees reported at 20,000 to 40,000 yuan (China News, 2017). Chinese prosecutors have described these contracts as unenforceable, and employers who hire foreigners illegally face fines of 10,000 yuan per person, up to 100,000 yuan, under China's Exit and Entry Administration Law (Zhejiang Provincial People's Procuratorate, 2025). The Thailand case reproduces this structure in reverse: Chinese families abroad now face the same legal gap that wealthy families in China face when hiring foreign helpers at home.

6.4 Non-compliance on the Chinese side

The problem does not lie only on the Thai side. China's Regulations on the Administration of Foreign Labour Service Cooperation require any business that sends workers abroad to hold a licence from the commerce authorities, to meet capital requirements, and to maintain a risk reserve fund. Article 8 prohibits any organisation or individual from sending workers abroad under the pretext of business, tourism, or study (State Council of the PRC, 2012). Informal agencies that recruit *ayi* in China for families in Thailand, and send them on tourist travel, therefore appear to violate Chinese rules as well. Because these agencies are usually unlicensed, workers lose access to the protections that the licensing system is designed to provide, such as contract review, insurance, and emergency assistance.

6.5 Who bears the risk?

The "imported *ayi*" solution redistributes risk in uneven ways. For workers, the risks are the most serious. Without legal status, they cannot claim the rights granted under Thailand's 2024 domestic work regulation, cannot easily seek help from Thai authorities, and depend heavily on their employer and agent. Their isolation in a foreign country, combined with language barriers, makes them vulnerable to excessive working hours, withheld wages, or confiscation of documents, problems well documented in other domestic worker migration systems (Constable, 2007; Parreñas, 2001). For families, the risks include fines, loss of fees, and the disruption caused if a worker is arrested or must leave suddenly. Table 1 compares the three main options available to new Chinese households.

Table 1

Comparison of domestic help options for new Chinese households in Thailand

	Local Thai worker	Neighbouring-country worker (MOU)	Chinese ayi via informal agency
Legal status	Legal; no immigration formalities	Legal through MOU or registration schemes	No routine work-permit route; usually visa-free or tourist entry
Language	Thai; little or no Mandarin	Burmese, Khmer or Lao; some Thai; little Mandarin	Mandarin; shared dialects possible
Cultural fit	Low to moderate; needs training	Low to moderate; needs training	High (Chinese cooking, child-rearing norms)
Cost	Thai wage rates; minimum wage applies	Wages plus registration costs	Agency fee, airfares, border runs, higher wage
Worker protection	Covered by Ministerial Regulation No. 15 (2024)	Covered by Ministerial Regulation No. 15 (2024)	Effectively unprotected
Main risks	Communication problems	Communication problems; paperwork	Fines, deportation, unenforceable contracts, worker exploitation

Note. Compiled by the author from the sources discussed in Sections 5 and 6.

7. Discussion

The analysis suggests that the "imported ayi" market is best understood not as individual rule-breaking but as a predictable outcome of structural conditions. Three features stand out.

First, the market is a clear example of migration infrastructure at work. Where demand is strong but legal channels are closed, brokers create their own channels, combining visa-free travel, WeChat-based recruitment, and informal payment. As Xiang and Lindquist (2014) argue, such infrastructure can become self-perpetuating: the more families rely on brokers, the more brokers become the default solution, and the less pressure there is to develop legal alternatives. The high fees partly reflect the cost of managing illegality itself.

Second, the case extends the idea of global care chains. In the classic model, care flows from a poorer country to a richer one, and employer and worker are separated by nationality and class. Here, care flows from China's domestic service sector, which itself relies largely on rural women, to Chinese middle-class families living abroad. Employer and worker share a language and culture, but the worker remains in a weaker legal and economic position. Cultural closeness does not remove inequality; it may even make informal arrangements seem more acceptable.

Third, the case shows how gendered care burdens travel with migration. Studies of accompanying mothers show that they shoulder most of the work of family life abroad while facing restrictions on their own employment (Huang & Yeoh, 2005; Li, 2025). The decision to hire an ayi is often an attempt to reduce this burden. Yet the solution relies on another woman, the ayi, who takes on care work in an even more precarious position. In this sense, the care problem of one group of women is solved by shifting risk onto another.

Finally, the case reveals a gap between Thailand's progress on domestic workers' rights and the realities of a segmented labour market. The 2024 regulation brings Thai law closer to international standards, but its protections reach only workers who are legally employed. Workers in the grey market remain outside its reach. As the ILO (2024a) notes, enforcement in private homes is difficult

even for legally employed workers; it is even harder for those whose status employers and agents have an interest in hiding.

8. Recommendations

For Chinese families in Thailand, the first recommendation is to treat compliance as part of the cost of migration. Hiring a Thai or legally registered neighbouring-country worker, paying the minimum wage, and following the 2024 regulation reduces legal risk. Families can invest in bridging the cultural gap, for example by paying for basic Chinese cooking or language training for a local worker, or by sharing a bilingual helper among several households for specific tasks.

For the domestic service industry, there is a clear market opportunity for licensed Thai agencies that employ Chinese-speaking coordinators, offer workers training in Chinese household practices, and provide employers with bilingual contracts and information on Thai labour law.

For the Thai government, publishing Chinese-language guidance on employing domestic workers, including the 2024 regulation, would help new migrant employers comply. Thai authorities could also review whether limited, regulated pathways for specialised care roles are appropriate, for example by setting clear criteria, skills requirements, and caps, rather than leaving the demand to be met informally.

For the Chinese government and consular services, the existing rules on overseas labour services could be communicated more clearly to both workers and families, including warnings on recruitment platforms about the risks of informal overseas domestic work. Cooperation between Chinese and Thai authorities against unlicensed recruitment networks would protect workers who might otherwise be drawn into these arrangements.

9. Conclusion

New Chinese households in Thailand face a real and growing need for domestic help. This need arises from the way migration reshapes family life, especially in education-migration households centred on an accompanying mother, and from specific expectations about food, childcare, and language. The local market offers workers and, since 2024, stronger legal protections, but language barriers, divergent household norms, and weak intermediaries limit its appeal. The cross-border recruitment of Chinese *ayi* fills this gap at a high price and in a legal grey zone created by Thailand's restrictions on foreign employment and China's rules on overseas labour services.

The article has argued that this grey market is a structural product of strong demand meeting closed legal channels, and that its costs fall most heavily on workers. A more sustainable path lies in strengthening legal, culturally competent local services rather than in expanding informal cross-border recruitment. Because this study relies on documentary sources, future research should use interviews and fieldwork with families, agencies, and domestic workers, carried out with careful attention to research ethics and worker safety, to measure the scale of this market and to understand the experiences of the workers at its centre.

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The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Primary School Chinese Language Teaching: An Analysis from Teachers' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has entered Chinese primary education faster than curricula, assessment systems and teacher preparation have adapted to it. While a growing body of Chinese scholarship explores how GenAI can “empower” yuwen (Chinese language) teaching, considerably less attention has been paid to the disruptive effects that frontline teachers must absorb in daily practice. This article offers a qualitative, interpretive analysis of how AI affects primary school Chinese language teaching when viewed from the teacher’s position. Rather than collecting new empirical data, it analyses three bodies of material: national and international policy documents on GenAI in schools, Chinese and international research on AI in language and primary education, and published expert commentary on Chinese language education in the AI era. Read through the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework, the analysis identifies four interrelated areas of impact: the erosion of foundational literacy practices such as character writing and sustained reading; a crisis of authorship in writing instruction, in which teachers are pushed from cultivating expression towards verifying authenticity; the reconfiguration of teachers’ professional roles and identities; and institutional ambiguity arising from gaps between national policy, school practice, assessment and home use. The article argues that the central difficulty is not technological access but a misalignment between AI-saturated learning environments and product-oriented teaching and assessment traditions. Implications are drawn for process-oriented writing pedagogy, assessment reform, teacher professional development and home–school collaboration.

KEYWORDS generative artificial intelligence; primary school Chinese; yuwen teaching; teacher perspective; writing instruction; educational policy

1. Introduction

Since the public release of ChatGPT in late 2022, generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools capable of producing fluent text, images and speech on demand have spread rapidly through society. In China, domestic large language models and AI-enabled learning devices marketed to families have brought

these capabilities into children's homes as well as classrooms. For primary school Chinese language education (yuwen), the implications are unusually direct. The subject's core tasks—learning to recognise and write characters, reading texts closely and at length, and composing original written work—overlap closely with what GenAI does best: recognising and producing language.

Policy makers have responded. In May 2025, the Ministry of Education's Steering Committee on Basic Education and Instruction issued the Guide to Using Generative Artificial Intelligence in Primary and Secondary Schools (2025 Edition), which bars primary pupils from using open-ended content generation on their own, permits teachers to use GenAI in class as an aid, forbids teachers from treating it as a substitute teaching agent, and cautions against using AI-generated content to evaluate students (MOE Steering Committee, 2025a). A companion guide on AI general education sets out a staged AI curriculum beginning in primary school (MOE Steering Committee, 2025b). Internationally, UNESCO has called for a human-centred approach and an age limit for independent use of GenAI platforms (Miao & Holmes, 2023). These documents draw boundaries, but whether those boundaries hold in practice depends largely on teachers.

The stakes are particularly high in primary school. Chinese is the subject with the largest share of instructional time in the primary curriculum, primary Chinese teachers frequently serve as head teachers responsible for pupils' moral and social development, and the subject is the main site where children first learn to read and write. Habits formed at this stage shape later learning across all subjects. If AI changes how children acquire literacy, the consequences extend well beyond a single subject, and the primary Chinese teacher is the professional most directly placed to notice, interpret and respond to those changes.

Yet teachers' experience of this change remains under-examined in Chinese scholarship. Much recent work on primary yuwen adopts an "empowerment" framing, proposing how GenAI can enrich reading or poetry teaching (Geng & Tian, 2026; Zhang, 2026). Critical commentators, by contrast, warn that the humanistic core of the subject may be diluted by instrumental rationality (Wang, 2025) and that the place of knowledge in Chinese language education is being unsettled (Cheng, 2025). Between optimistic design proposals and broad cultural critique, the practical position of the classroom teacher—who must teach, assess and protect children within an AI-saturated environment—receives comparatively little systematic attention.

This article addresses that gap through an analytical, rather than empirical, approach. It asks three questions: (1) In what areas does AI affect primary school Chinese language teaching when viewed from the teacher's position? (2) What tensions and dilemmas do these effects create for teachers? (3) What conditions are needed for teachers to respond constructively? The article proceeds by reviewing relevant literature, explaining its analytical approach, presenting four areas of impact, and discussing their implications for policy and practice.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Generative AI in Education: Debates and Policy

Early Chinese responses to ChatGPT framed the question in stark terms. Jiao (2023) asked whether ChatGPT is a friend or an enemy of school education, concluding that schools cannot simply ban the technology and must instead rethink teaching and assessment. Zhou and Wang (2023) argued that

GenAI challenges education to move away from standardised knowledge transmission towards helping each learner develop as an individual. Miao (2023) examined the technical principles of GenAI and questioned its educational suitability, emphasising that statistically generated text is not equivalent to understanding and must be validated before classroom use. Chen et al. (2023) analysed teachers' coping strategies in response to ChatGPT, showing that teachers' reactions ranged from resistance to adaptive integration.

At the policy level, UNESCO's guidance stresses human agency, data protection and age-appropriate design (Miao & Holmes, 2023). China's 2025 guides translate similar concerns into stage-specific rules: primary schools are expected to keep GenAI under teacher supervision, while students are told not to copy generated content into assignments or use it in tests (MOE Steering Committee, 2025a). These rules matter for this analysis because they place teachers in the role of gatekeepers, without specifying how that role is to be resourced.

2.2 AI and Chinese Language Teaching

The Compulsory Education Chinese Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition) define Chinese language core competencies in terms of cultural confidence, language use, thinking ability and aesthetic creativity, and call for information technology to extend learning (Ministry of Education, 2022). Recent studies draw on this mandate to propose AI-supported designs. Geng and Tian (2026) diagnose primary reading instruction as suffering from homogenised teaching, static texts and experience-based assessment, and propose GenAI-driven personalised and multimodal pathways. Zhang (2026) designs an AI-supported lesson on a Grade 3 classical poem, while acknowledging that the effectiveness of such designs remains unverified, that the digital divide limits their reach, and that technology dependence must be guarded against.

Critical voices address what such designs may overlook. Wang (2025) argues that when essay marking focuses on structural completeness and text interpretation relies on AI-generated answers, the humanistic nature of Chinese language education risks being thinned out. Guo Changbao, interviewed by Cheng (2025), observes that AI already holds far more knowledge than teachers can transmit, that much formulaic writing can be delegated to machines, and that schools cannot effectively prohibit student use. At a 2025 national forum on reading literacy in the AI era, Wen Rumin urged teachers to keep human judgement central and to guard against fragmented thinking and shallow reading (Peking University School of Education, 2025).

2.3 Teachers' Perspectives in International Research

International qualitative studies provide useful points of comparison. Akçin et al. (2026), interviewing 45 Turkish teachers, found strong concern about academic integrity, over-reliance and inadequate training alongside appreciation of time savings and personalisation; a Turkish language teacher in their study worried specifically about assessing students' real writing ability. Dangol et al. (2025) showed that 22 U.S. teachers negotiated personal boundaries for GenAI use shaped by district policy, professional norms and relationships with students. Verkade (2025) found that Dutch primary teachers' trust in GenAI depended on their ethical awareness, and Hastomo et al. (2026) reported that Indonesian primary teachers valued efficiency in material design but lacked pedagogical training. Across contexts, teachers are neither simple adopters nor resisters; they mediate between technology, policy and children.

2.4 Research Gap and Analytical Framework

Two gaps emerge. First, Chinese research on primary yuwen and AI is dominated by design proposals, while the burden placed on teachers is rarely the focus. Second, international studies of teachers' views seldom address a first-language literacy subject in which the target skills themselves—writing and reading—are what the technology performs.

This article uses the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework (Mishra & Koehler, 2006) as its analytical lens. TPACK holds that effective teaching with technology depends on the integration of technological, pedagogical and content knowledge rather than on any one alone. Its relevance here is distinctive: GenAI does not merely add a new tool (T) to existing practice, it unsettles content knowledge (C) itself by raising the question of which language skills remain worth teaching, and it destabilises pedagogical knowledge (P) by undermining established ways of assigning and assessing work.

3. Analytical Approach

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive design based on document and literature analysis rather than fieldwork. Qualitative inquiry seeks to understand meanings and situations in depth rather than to measure them (Chen, 2000), and document analysis allows a researcher to examine how a problem is constructed across texts produced by different actors. No interviews, surveys or classroom data were collected; the analysis relies entirely on published sources.

Three categories of material were analysed. The first comprises policy documents: the Chinese curriculum standards (Ministry of Education, 2022), the two 2025 national AI guides (MOE Steering Committee, 2025a, 2025b) and UNESCO's guidance (Miao & Holmes, 2023). The second comprises academic research on GenAI in education, in Chinese language teaching and in primary schools internationally, selected for relevance to teachers' practice. The third comprises published expert commentary on Chinese language education in the AI era (Cheng, 2025; Peking University School of Education, 2025; Wang, 2025).

Analysis followed the logic of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), adapted to documentary sources. Materials were read repeatedly; passages bearing on teachers' work were coded (for example, "detecting AI-written work", "handwriting decline", "policy without resources"); codes were grouped into candidate themes; and themes were reviewed against the material and against the TPACK framework. To reflect a teacher's perspective, each theme was examined by asking what a given policy requirement, research proposal or expert claim would demand of a primary Chinese teacher in an ordinary classroom.

The approach has clear limits. Findings are interpretive syntheses, not empirical evidence of how particular teachers think or act. Their trustworthiness rests on transparent sourcing and on consistency across different kinds of material (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and they are best read as a framework to be tested by future fieldwork.

4. Findings: Four Areas of Impact

The analysis identified four interrelated areas in which AI affects primary Chinese teaching from the teacher's position. Table 1 summarises each area, its main manifestations, the dilemma it creates for teachers, and the TPACK domain most directly affected. The sections that follow discuss each in turn.

Table 1

Four Areas of AI Impact on Primary Chinese Teaching from Teachers' Perspectives

Area of impact	Main manifestations	Dilemma for teachers	TPACK domain most affected
Foundational literacy	Voice input and predictive text; AI summaries replacing whole-book reading; weaker character recall	Defending effortful practices against effortless tools; scaffolding vs. substitution	Content knowledge
Authorship in writing	AI-generated compositions; temptation of automated marking; template-based assessment exposed	Shift from cultivating expression to verifying authenticity; risk of false suspicion	Pedagogical knowledge
Teacher roles and identity	Faster preparation; weakened authority as knowledge source; new guiding role	Identity change without change in workload or accountability	Pedagogical content knowledge
Institutional ambiguity	Home use beyond school control; unchanged assessment; tool-focused training; digital divide	Responsibility for enforcing policy without local guidelines or resources	Integrated TPACK and context

4.1 The Erosion of Foundational Literacy Practices

Primary Chinese teaching rests on slow, embodied practices: copying characters stroke by stroke, reading texts aloud and returning to them, and building vocabulary through repeated use. AI-enabled tools compress or bypass these practices. Voice input and predictive text allow children to produce written Chinese without recalling character forms; AI summaries can replace the reading of whole books; and instant explanations can substitute for the effort of working out a difficult passage. The familiar phenomenon of recognising characters but being unable to write them (*tibi wangzi*) is thereby likely to begin earlier in a child's schooling.

From the teacher's position, the difficulty is that these practices are deliberately effortful. Their value lies in the cognitive and motor work they demand, which is precisely what AI removes. Wen Rumin's warning about fragmented thinking and shallow reading (Peking University School of Education, 2025) captures the stake. The "empowerment" literature is not blind to this: Zhang (2026) explicitly cautions against technological dependence. But design proposals that add AI-generated images, dialogues and summaries to lessons can unintentionally reinforce a pattern of fast, effortless input. Teachers must therefore defend practices whose benefits are slow and invisible against tools whose benefits are immediate and visible—a contest in which they often lack support from parents and students alike.

The 2022 curriculum standards give particular weight to whole-book reading, which requires sustained attention, tolerance of difficulty and personal response over weeks rather than minutes (Ministry of Education, 2022). This is precisely the kind of reading most easily short-circuited by summaries and question-answering tools. At the same time, the picture is not one-sided. For pupils

who struggle with decoding or vocabulary, AI-generated explanations and read-aloud functions can provide genuine scaffolding, as design-oriented studies point out (Geng & Tian, 2026). The teacher's task is therefore not simply to exclude AI but to distinguish scaffolding, which supports a child towards independent performance, from substitution, which performs the task in the child's place. Making that distinction requires close knowledge of each pupil, which is difficult to sustain in large classes.

In TPACK terms, the impact falls on content knowledge. Teachers must decide which foundational skills remain non-negotiable and justify that decision to pupils and families who can see that a machine performs the same task instantly.

4.2 A Crisis of Authorship in Writing Instruction

Writing is where the impact is sharpest. Primary composition (xizuo) aims to help children express their own experience and feelings in coherent language. GenAI can now produce a grade-appropriate composition in seconds. International teachers already identify academic integrity as their primary concern (Akçin et al., 2026), and the 2025 Chinese guide explicitly tells students not to copy generated content or use AI to complete personal and creative tasks (MOE Steering Committee, 2025a).

For teachers, this produces a shift in role. Marking a composition has traditionally meant responding to a child's expression; it now also involves judging whether the child wrote it. Suspected AI texts tend to be fluent but generic, with vocabulary and structure beyond the child's usual level and little of the concrete, idiosyncratic detail that marks genuine childhood writing. Yet such judgements are uncertain. Guo Changbao notes that AI-generated assignments are usually unremarkable and may go unnoticed by a teacher who is not paying close attention (Cheng, 2025). A teacher who wrongly suspects a pupil may damage trust and motivation; a teacher who never suspects may reward work the child did not do. Since primary pupils are forbidden from using open-ended generation independently, any such use is likely to happen at home, further beyond the teacher's view.

The deeper problem is that AI exposes a long-standing weakness of writing pedagogy. Guo argues that school writing has been oriented towards exam formats, producing formulaic prose that machines now replicate easily (Cheng, 2025). Where instruction and assessment reward a polished final product built from templates, AI is simply a more efficient route to that product. The crisis of authorship is therefore not only a matter of cheating; it reveals that much assessed writing did not require authentic authorship in the first place.

The temptation to outsource is not limited to pupils. Automated essay marking and AI-generated feedback promise to relieve one of the heaviest parts of a Chinese teacher's workload. Yet the national guide warns against using AI-generated content to evaluate students (MOE Steering Committee, 2025a), and Wang (2025) cautions that machine marking privileges measurable features such as structure and keyword coverage over feeling and individuality. Teachers thus face a mirror image of their pupils' dilemma: the same technology that would save them time may erode the attentive, personal response that gives primary writing instruction its value. The more constructive responses visible in the literature involve redesigning tasks rather than detecting misuse—writing in class, keeping learning journals, linking prompts to shared class experiences, and asking pupils to talk about their drafts—so that the process of writing becomes visible and valued.

4.3 The Reconfiguration of Teachers' Roles and Identities

AI also reshapes how teachers see themselves. On the one hand, it offers practical relief: lesson planning, resource preparation and differentiated exercises become faster, as research on poetry and reading instruction demonstrates (Geng & Tian, 2026; Zhang, 2026) and as teachers elsewhere report (Hastomo et al., 2026). On the other hand, it challenges the teacher's authority as a source of knowledge. If AI knows more than any teacher can transmit (Cheng, 2025), the knowledgeable *yuwen* teacher who explains texts and corrects errors loses part of their professional distinctiveness.

The policy response—that teachers must not let AI replace them as a teaching agent (MOE Steering Committee, 2025a)—protects the teacher's position formally, but it does not define what the teacher's distinctive contribution now is. Expert commentary suggests an answer: the teacher becomes a guide to critical judgement, aesthetic experience and cultural meaning rather than a transmitter of information (Peking University School of Education, 2025; Wang, 2025). This is an attractive vision, but it asks teachers to shift professional identity while their daily workload, assessment duties and accountability measures remain largely unchanged. Dangol et al. (2025) describe teachers negotiating personal boundaries between relief and displacement; Chinese primary teachers are likely to face a similar ambivalence, intensified by heavy marking loads and parental expectations.

Role change may also be uneven across the profession. Teachers who are comfortable with digital tools may adopt AI quickly for preparation but have less experience in judging its pedagogical limits, while experienced teachers may possess strong pedagogical judgement but feel less confident with the technology. TPACK suggests that neither group alone holds the integrated knowledge required (Mishra & Koehler, 2006), which points to the value of collaborative school-based teaching research rather than individual adaptation. Moreover, the primary Chinese teacher's role has always included moral and emotional education. Responding to a child's writing about family, friendship or loss is a relational act that AI cannot perform, and it is in this relational dimension that teachers' professional identity may find its firmest ground.

4.4 Institutional Ambiguity

The final area concerns the institutional environment. National guidance is now relatively clear in principle, but several gaps remain between policy and the classroom. First, the guide's stage-specific rules assume that pupil use can be supervised, yet much use occurs at home through parents' phones or learning devices, beyond school control. Second, assessment has not changed in step: if examinations and homework continue to reward standardised answers and model compositions, teachers are asked to discourage AI use while working within a system that values what AI produces. Third, professional development tends to focus on operating tools rather than on pedagogical and ethical judgement, a gap noted across international studies (Akçin et al., 2026; Hastomo et al., 2026). Fourth, the digital divide means that rural and urban schools, and families with different resources, experience AI very differently, a limitation acknowledged even by proponents of AI-supported design (Zhang, 2026).

For the individual teacher, these gaps translate into responsibility without clear tools. Teachers are expected to implement national principles, interpret them at school level, communicate them to parents, and enforce them in assessment, often without school-specific guidelines or time allocated for

redesigning tasks. Verkade (2025) found that ethical awareness was a prerequisite for teachers' trust in GenAI; without institutional support for building that awareness, teachers are left to improvise.

Families form a further layer of this ambiguity. AI-enabled learning devices and homework apps are marketed to parents as tools for raising achievement, and parents anxious about results may welcome tools that produce better-looking homework. Teachers are therefore asked to communicate a policy that may run against parents' immediate interests, often through informal channels such as class messaging groups. Without shared school-level messaging, individual teachers bear the social cost of explaining why a polished AI-assisted composition is less valuable than a child's imperfect but genuine one.

5. Discussion

Taken together, the four areas suggest that AI's impact on primary Chinese teaching is not primarily a technical problem. The most serious difficulties arise where AI meets existing weaknesses: product-oriented writing assessment, an emphasis on standard answers, limited time for process-based teaching, and weak home-school coordination. In this sense, AI acts less as the cause of a new crisis than as an amplifier of older tensions, a point that echoes both Guo's critique of formulaic writing (Cheng, 2025) and international findings that integrity concerns reflect the need to rethink assessment (Akçin et al., 2026).

This interpretation also cautions against two opposite reactions. Prohibition alone is unlikely to work: expert commentary notes that bans are hard to enforce (Cheng, 2025), and much use occurs outside school. Uncritical adoption, however, risks accelerating the very problems identified above. A more defensible position, consistent with both the national guide and UNESCO's human-centred approach (Miao & Holmes, 2023), treats AI as a supervised aid whose use is justified by specific learning purposes. Under this position, AI may legitimately reduce teachers' preparation time, generate differentiated practice, or offer pupils models to analyse critically, while the core literacy acts of writing, sustained reading and personal response remain the child's own.

Read through TPACK, the analysis suggests that GenAI disturbs all three knowledge domains at once. Technological knowledge is the least difficult to acquire; the harder questions concern content (which literacy skills remain essential, and why) and pedagogy (how to design tasks that make thinking and authorship visible). Professional development that concentrates on tools therefore addresses the smallest part of the problem.

Several implications follow. First, writing instruction should become more process-oriented: drafting in class, oral rehearsal before writing, staged feedback on drafts, and prompts rooted in pupils' lived experience make authorship visible and reduce the value of outsourced products. Second, assessment should reward process and personal voice rather than polished templates, consistent with the policy instruction not to rely on AI to evaluate students (MOE Steering Committee, 2025a). Third, schools need local guidelines that translate national principles into concrete expectations for homework, classroom use and parent communication. Fourth, teacher development should prioritise pedagogical and ethical reasoning, including how to discuss AI openly with children rather than only police it. Finally, the humanistic core of *yuwen*—cultural transmission, emotional expression and aesthetic experience (Wang, 2025)—should be made explicit as the rationale for practices AI cannot replace.

These implications return the focus to teachers. The national guides rightly position teachers as the guardians of appropriate use; the analysis here suggests that this role can be sustained only if teachers receive the time, assessment structures and institutional backing that make it workable.

6. Conclusion

This article has analysed, from teachers' perspectives, how artificial intelligence affects primary school Chinese language teaching. Drawing on policy documents, research literature and expert commentary, it identified four areas of impact: the erosion of foundational literacy practices, a crisis of authorship in writing instruction, the reconfiguration of teachers' roles and identities, and institutional ambiguity. It argued that these impacts are intensified by existing product-oriented practices and that responses should focus on pedagogy, assessment and institutional support rather than on technology alone.

From a teacher's perspective, the central question raised by AI is not whether machines can read and write, but what children still need to learn to do themselves, and why. Answering that question requires teachers to articulate the value of their subject more explicitly than before. In this sense, the disruption brought by AI also offers an opportunity: to renew primary Chinese education around authentic expression, deep reading and cultural understanding rather than around reproducible products.

The study has limitations. Because it relies on secondary sources rather than empirical data, its claims about teachers' experience are inferences rather than observations, and the available Chinese literature on primary yuwen and AI is still small and weighted towards design proposals. Future research should test this framework through interviews and classroom observation with primary Chinese teachers across regions, examine pupils' and parents' perspectives, and follow how schools implement the 2025 national guides over time. Such work would help ensure that the integration of AI into primary Chinese education is shaped by those who teach it.

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Beyond the Words: Cross-Cultural Misunderstanding and the Construction of Cultural Understanding among Foreign Learners of Thai

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ABSTRACT

Learning Thai requires foreign learners to master far more than tones, script, and vocabulary. Many of the most persistent difficulties arise where the literal meaning of an utterance diverges from what it accomplishes socially. This article examines how cross-cultural differences shape the ways foreign learners interpret, and misinterpret, Thai language use, and how such misunderstandings can become a resource for deeper cultural understanding. Adopting a qualitative, interpretive design, the study analyses published research on Thai pragmatics and cultural values, reference grammars of Thai, and documented patterns of learner difficulty, using Hall's distinction between high- and low-context communication, Komin's account of Thai value orientations, Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, and Thomas's typology of pragmatic failure as analytic lenses. Four domains of non-literal meaning are identified: the encoding of social hierarchy in pronouns, kinship terms, and particles; kreng jai and the preference for indirectness; mâi pen rai and the cultivation of emotional composure; and phatic routines tied to face. The analysis shows that learners' misunderstandings are rarely linguistic errors in a narrow sense; they arise from transferring first-language assumptions about sincerity, directness, and equality onto Thai forms whose meaning is relational. The article argues that Thai language teaching should treat pragmatic meaning as explicit content, use misunderstanding episodes as reflective material, and frame cultural knowledge as interpretive competence rather than a list of etiquette rules.

KEYWORDS Thai as a foreign language; cross-cultural pragmatics; intercultural communicative competence; kreng jai; pragmatic failure; cultural understanding

1. Introduction

Interest in learning Thai has grown alongside Thailand's role as a destination for tourism, international education, regional business, and long-term residence. Foreign learners now include

exchange students, expatriate professionals, migrant spouses, missionaries, diplomats, and academics in Thai studies. Many of them report a similar trajectory: after the initial hurdles of five lexical tones and an unfamiliar script, they reach a stage at which they can construct correct sentences yet still feel that something important escapes them. They are told *mâi pen rai* ('never mind') when they sense that something does matter; they receive a cheerful 'yes' that is never acted upon; they are addressed as *phii* ('older sibling') by strangers and are unsure how to respond.

These experiences point to a familiar insight in applied linguistics: communicative competence includes knowing what an utterance does in a particular social and cultural context, not only what it says (Kramsch, 1993). Thai is often described as a language in which much meaning is carried by relationship, situation, and shared values rather than by explicit propositional content. For learners socialised in cultures that value directness and explicitness, this produces a gap between surface meaning and intended meaning which grammar instruction alone cannot close.

This article addresses three questions. First, what kinds of non-literal, culturally embedded meaning in Thai most commonly cause difficulty for foreign learners? Second, how can the resulting misunderstandings be explained with reference to underlying cultural differences? Third, what do these findings imply for the teaching and learning of Thai as a foreign language? The article contributes to a literature that has examined Thai politeness and pragmatics in depth (Intachakra, 2004, 2012; Ukosakul, 2005) but has more often focused on Thai speakers of English than on foreigners learning Thai.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Language, Culture, and Meaning beyond Words

The idea that language and culture are inseparable has been central to language education since at least the 1990s. Kramsch (1993) argued that culture is not a fifth skill added to listening, speaking, reading, and writing, but the context within which all language use becomes meaningful. Agar (1994) coined the term 'languaculture' to capture the way grammar and vocabulary are bound up with local ways of seeing the world, and suggested that the most valuable learning moments are 'rich points', when an outsider's expectations break down and a different cultural logic becomes visible.

Hall's (1976) distinction between high-context and low-context communication offers a broad framework for this gap. In low-context communication, most of the information is carried in the explicit code; in high-context communication, much of it is located in the physical setting, the relationship, and shared background knowledge. Thailand is commonly placed toward the high-context end, while many Western learners come from more low-context traditions. Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010) similarly characterise Thai society as relatively collectivist and relatively high in power distance, dimensions that shape how requests, refusals, and disagreements are expressed.

Pragmatic theory provides more precise tools. Brown and Levinson (1987) model politeness as strategic attention to 'face', the public self-image that interactants seek to protect. Their framework has been criticised for its individualist assumptions, and scholars of Asian languages have stressed that politeness in many societies is as much about recognising one's place in a social order as about strategic choice (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Wierzbicka (2003) further argues that speech acts such as

thanking, apologising, or refusing carry culture-specific semantic content, so that apparently equivalent expressions across languages often differ in what they presuppose.

Thomas (1983) distinguishes two kinds of 'pragmatic failure'. Pragmalinguistic failure occurs when a learner uses or interprets a linguistic form with a pragmatic force different from that assigned by native speakers. Sociopragmatic failure occurs when the learner misjudges the social conditions on language use, such as relative status, the size of an imposition, or what may be talked about. Thomas notes that such failures are often judged more harshly than grammatical errors, because listeners attribute them to personality rather than to language level. This distinction is central to the analysis below.

2.2 Thai Cultural Values Relevant to Language Use

Komin's (1990) large-scale survey of Thai value orientations remains a key reference. She identified a cluster of 'ego' and 'grateful relationship' values, including face-saving, avoidance of open criticism, *kreng jai*, and *bunkhun* (indebtedness for kindness received), alongside a value placed on smooth interpersonal relations and on *sanùk* (enjoyment). Mulder (2000) describes Thai everyday life as structured by hierarchical relationships in which the senior party offers protection and the junior offers deference. Holmes and Tangtongtavy (1995), writing for foreign professionals, highlight the same values as recurrent sources of misunderstanding in the workplace.

Within Thai pragmatics, Intachakra (2012) argues that Thai politeness is motivated by an orientation toward the feelings of others, captured in the many compound expressions built on *jai* ('heart, mind'), together with a 'binary' sensitivity to whether a relationship is one of hierarchy or intimacy. Ukosakul (2005) shows, through the rich system of idioms involving *nâa* ('face'), that face in Thai is closely linked to shame and to one's standing in the eyes of others. These works suggest that Thai utterances frequently index relationships and feelings more than they convey information, a point with direct consequences for learners.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive design based on documentary and conceptual analysis. No new interview or survey data were collected. Instead, the analysis draws on three bodies of material: (a) published research on Thai pragmatics, politeness, and cultural values, including studies conducted by Thai scholars; (b) descriptive reference grammars of Thai, which document the forms of pronouns, particles, and address terms (Cooke, 1968; Iwasaki & Ingkaphirom Horie, 2005); and (c) documented patterns of difficulty reported in the literature on second-language pragmatics and on intercultural adjustment in Thailand (Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1995; Kasper & Rose, 2002).

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, recurrent expressions and interactional routines that the literature identifies as problematic for outsiders were collected. Second, these were grouped thematically according to the type of cultural meaning they carry. Third, each theme was interpreted through the frameworks introduced above, with attention to the specific assumptions a learner might transfer from a first language. Short illustrative exchanges are used in Section 4 to make the analysis concrete; they are composite examples constructed from patterns described in the cited literature, not transcripts of recorded interaction. The study therefore offers an analytical synthesis rather than an

empirical test, and its conclusions should be read as propositions that future classroom and ethnographic research can examine.

4. Analysis: Domains of Non-Literal Meaning in Thai

Four domains emerged from the analysis. Table 1 summarises representative expressions, their literal glosses, the culturally embedded meanings they carry, and the misreadings commonly attributed to learners.

Table 1. Selected Thai expressions: surface meaning, cultural meaning, and common misreadings

Expression	Literal / surface gloss	Culturally embedded meaning	Typical learner misreading
<i>mâi pen rai</i> (ไม่เป็นไร)	'It is nothing'	Restores harmony; releases the other from obligation; signals emotional composure	Indifference, or that the matter is truly closed
<i>kreng jai</i> (เกรงใจ)	'Fear-heart'	Reluctance to impose on or inconvenience others, especially superiors	Shyness, lack of initiative, or dishonesty
<i>kh râp / khâ</i> (ครับ / ค่ะ)	'Yes' (polite particle)	Acknowledgement of having heard and of the relationship, not necessarily agreement	Assent or commitment to act
<i>kin khâaw rǎu yang</i> (กินข้าวหรือยัง)	'Have you eaten rice yet?'	Phatic greeting expressing care and inclusion	Literal question or an invitation to a meal
<i>phîi / nǒng</i> (พี่ / น้อง)	'Older / younger sibling'	Address terms placing speakers in a relative-age hierarchy with mutual duties	Over-familiarity, or an inquiry into one's age
<i>khǎw khít duu kǎwng</i> (ขอคิดก่อน)	'Let me think about it first'	Conventional soft refusal that avoids loss of face	Genuine deferral; expecting a later answer

Note. Romanisation broadly follows Iwasaki and Ingkaphirom Horie (2005). Glosses are compiled from the sources discussed in Section 4.

4.1 Hierarchy Encoded in Grammar: Pronouns, Kinship Terms, and Particles

The first difficulty learners face is that Thai offers no socially neutral way to say 'I' or 'you'. Cooke (1968) documented an extensive system of personal reference in which the choice of form depends on the speaker's sex, the relative age and status of the participants, and their degree of intimacy. In everyday speech, Thais frequently avoid pronouns altogether and refer to themselves and others using names, nicknames, occupational titles such as *khruu* ('teacher') or *mǎw* ('doctor'), or kinship terms such as *phîi* ('older sibling') and *nǒng* ('younger sibling') (Iwasaki & Ingkaphirom Horie, 2005).

For learners from languages where 'I' and 'you' are universal and largely neutral, this system creates both a grammatical and a conceptual challenge. A learner who consistently uses the textbook pronoun *khun* ('you') with everyone may sound correct but distant; one who calls a market vendor *phîi* may be surprised that this is warmly received rather than considered presumptuous. Conversely, being asked one's age soon after meeting is often read by foreigners as intrusive, when its function is to establish

who is *phii* and who is *nóng*, and therefore how both parties should speak. In Thomas's (1983) terms, this is a sociopragmatic issue: the learner lacks the social knowledge that makes the question relevant.

Sentence-final particles present a parallel case. The polite particles *kháp* (male speaker) and *khâ* (female speaker) mark deference and courtesy, while particles such as *ná* soften requests or seek affiliation. Because *kháp* and *khâ* also serve as response tokens, learners often hear them as 'yes'. Yet in many contexts they mean 'I have heard you and I respect you', not 'I agree' or 'I will do it'. The misreading becomes consequential in workplaces, where a foreign manager may treat a subordinate's repeated *kháp* as a commitment (Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1995). The error is pragmalinguistic: a form is assigned the force it would carry in the learner's first language.

4.2 Kreng Jai and the Preference for Indirectness

Perhaps no concept is more frequently cited as difficult for foreigners than *kreng jai*. The term combines *kreng* ('to fear, to be in awe of') and *jai* ('heart, mind'), and refers to a disposition to avoid imposing on others, causing them inconvenience, or placing them in an awkward position, particularly when they are senior or not intimate (Komin, 1990). It shapes how Thai speakers make requests, decline offers, express disagreement, and ask questions.

Consider a composite exchange. A foreign teacher asks a Thai colleague whether she could take over a class the following week. The colleague smiles and says, *khǎw khít duu kòon ná khá* ('let me think about it first'). The teacher waits several days for an answer that never comes, then raises the matter again and senses discomfort. From a Thai perspective, the first response was already a refusal, phrased so that neither party would lose face. From the teacher's perspective, the colleague was indecisive or evasive. Neither interpretation is linguistically mistaken; they rest on different assumptions about how refusals should be expressed.

The same disposition shapes classroom behaviour. Learners teaching or studying alongside Thais sometimes interpret silence, reluctance to ask questions, or reluctance to correct a superior as lack of interest or initiative. Within a *kreng jai* framework, these behaviours can express respect and a wish not to burden others. Hall's (1976) high-context model helps explain the pattern: the refusal or disagreement is present, but it resides in the context, the hesitation, and the relationship rather than in the words. For learners, the challenge is to notice that something has been communicated when nothing explicit has been said.

Kreng jai also highlights a deeper cultural difference concerning sincerity. Many learners hold an implicit belief that honest communication is direct communication, and that indirectness is a form of concealment. In Thai interaction, however, consideration for the other person's feelings is itself a form of sincerity (Intachakra, 2012). Learners who judge indirect Thai speakers as 'not telling the truth' are therefore applying a moral framework, not merely a linguistic one.

4.3 Mâi Pen Rai and the Value of Emotional Composure

Mâi pen rai, often translated as 'never mind' or 'it doesn't matter', is among the first expressions foreigners learn and among the last they fully understand. It is used to accept apologies, to decline thanks, to reassure, and to bring a potentially tense moment to a close. Intachakra's (2004) contrastive study of apologies and thanks in English and Thai shows that Thai speakers frequently

respond in ways that minimise the significance of the event, rather than explicitly accepting thanks or acknowledging an offence as English speakers often do.

Learners tend to read *mâi pen rai* in one of two misleading ways. Some take it as indifference: the speaker does not care. Others take it as a literal statement that the matter is resolved and need not be revisited. In practice, the expression often signals that the speaker is choosing composure over the display of negative emotion, in line with the high value placed on *jai yen* ('cool heart') and the avoidance of open conflict (Komin, 1990). A Thai host who says *mâi pen rai* after a guest has broken a dish may genuinely wish to put the guest at ease; whether the matter is 'nothing' is another question. For learners, the important point is that the expression protects the relationship rather than evaluating the event.

This domain also illustrates how a culturally embedded expression can be over-generalised. Learners who adopt *mâi pen rai* enthusiastically may use it in situations where it sounds dismissive, for example in response to a colleague's report of a serious problem, or as their own reply when they have caused an inconvenience. Here the learner has acquired a form and a broad function but not the conditions under which it is appropriate.

4.4 Phatic Routines, Face, and Social Inclusion

Thai greetings and small talk contain several routines whose literal meaning misleads learners. *Kin khâaw rǎu yang* ('have you eaten rice yet?') and *pay nǎy* ('where are you going?') function primarily as expressions of attention and care. Answering them in informational detail, or treating them as intrusive, misreads their phatic function. Comments about appearance, weight, or skin colour can likewise strike foreigners as personal, while within Thai conversational norms they are frequently routine forms of noticing and inclusion.

Face, or *nâa*, is closely bound up with these routines. Ukosakul (2005) shows that Thai has a dense vocabulary of face idioms, including expressions for losing face (*sǎa nâa*) and for giving face to others, which reflects how public standing is negotiated in everyday talk. Behaviours that may be acceptable in some learners' home cultures, such as openly correcting a colleague in a meeting, raising one's voice to resolve a problem, or praising oneself directly, can cause loss of face for both parties. Learners may experience the consequences without understanding the cause: a relationship cools, or cooperation becomes slower, without any explicit complaint.

4.5 Patterns of Misunderstanding

Across these domains, three patterns of misunderstanding stand out. The first is literal decoding: learners assign the literal, dictionary meaning to expressions whose primary function is relational, as with *kh râp*, *mâi pen rai*, and phatic greetings. The second is value transfer: learners interpret Thai behaviour through first-language assumptions about sincerity, equality, and efficiency, so that indirectness appears evasive and deference appears passive. The third is partial acquisition: learners acquire a form and its general function but not its conditions of use, and consequently over-generalise or misapply it.

These patterns map onto Thomas's (1983) categories. Literal decoding is primarily pragmalinguistic; value transfer is primarily sociopragmatic; partial acquisition combines both. The distinction matters because the two types call for different responses. Pragmalinguistic problems can often be addressed

through explicit teaching of forms and their functions. Sociopragmatic problems touch on learners' values and identities and therefore require reflection, not only information. Importantly, misunderstanding is not a one-way process. Thai interlocutors may also misread foreign learners, interpreting directness as rudeness or a failure to use particles as arrogance. Intercultural understanding involves both parties.

5. Discussion: From Misunderstanding to Cultural Understanding

The analysis suggests that the most significant obstacles for advanced learners of Thai are interpretive rather than structural. Learners often know the words but do not yet share the frame within which the words make sense. This conclusion supports Kramsch's (1993) view that cultural understanding cannot be reduced to factual knowledge about a society. It requires the capacity to recognise that one's own interpretations are culturally shaped, and to consider how the same utterance might be heard from another position.

Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence is useful here. Alongside knowledge and skills, Byram emphasises attitudes of curiosity and openness, the ability to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own, and critical cultural awareness. Deardorff (2006), synthesising expert opinion, likewise places attitudes such as respect and tolerance of ambiguity at the foundation of intercultural competence. In the Thai context, a learner who can say, 'When my colleague said she would think about it, I assumed she meant later, but she may have been declining politely', is demonstrating precisely this kind of competence.

Misunderstanding episodes can thus be reframed as Agar's (1994) 'rich points': moments that reveal cultural logic and offer opportunities for learning. Research in second-language pragmatics suggests that learners benefit from consciously noticing pragmatic features rather than encountering them only implicitly (Schmidt, 1990; Kasper & Rose, 2002). Several implications for Thai language teaching follow.

First, pragmatic meaning should be taught as explicit content from the early stages. Lessons on pronouns and particles can present them not only as grammatical forms but as tools for positioning oneself in relationships. Expressions such as *mâi pen rai*, *kreng jai*, and *khǎw khít duu kòon* can be introduced with the contexts that give them their force, and with examples of how they may be misread.

Second, learners' own misunderstandings can serve as course material. Reflective journals, critical incident analysis, and guided discussion of puzzling encounters allow learners to articulate their assumptions and compare them with Thai perspectives. This approach is consistent with intercultural language teaching frameworks that treat learning as a process of noticing, comparing, reflecting, and interacting (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

Third, cultural knowledge should be presented as interpretive resources rather than fixed rules. Lists of 'dos and don'ts' about Thai etiquette risk producing stereotyped expectations, ignoring generational, regional, and social variation, and reducing Thai speakers to cultural types. Values such as *kreng jai* are not uniform behavioural laws but resources that Thai speakers draw on differently according to context and relationship (Intachakra, 2012). Teaching should help learners ask, 'What might this mean here, between these people?' rather than, 'What does this always mean?'

Fourth, Thai teachers and Thai interlocutors can play an active role. Teachers who make their own cultural assumptions explicit, and who explain the reasoning behind routines that seem natural to them, provide learners with the background knowledge that high-context communication otherwise leaves implicit. Such explanation also invites a dialogue in which learners' cultures become objects of comparison, reinforcing that intercultural understanding is mutual.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined the cross-cultural dimension of learning Thai as a foreign language, focusing on meanings that lie beneath the surface of the words. Four domains were identified as particularly significant: the encoding of hierarchy in pronouns, kinship terms, and particles; *kreng jai* and indirectness; *mâi pen rai* and emotional composure; and phatic routines associated with face. Across these domains, learners' misunderstandings were found to arise less from linguistic deficiency than from literal decoding, the transfer of first-language values, and partial acquisition of forms and their conditions of use.

The central argument is that learning Thai well involves learning to read relationships and feelings as carriers of meaning. Misunderstanding is therefore not merely an obstacle to be eliminated, but a point of entry into another way of organising social life. Language teaching that makes pragmatic meaning explicit, uses learners' experiences reflectively, and treats culture as interpretive competence is better placed to support this development.

As a conceptual and documentary study, this article has limitations. Its illustrative exchanges are composites drawn from the literature, and the patterns identified require empirical verification. Future research could use interviews, classroom observation, and discourse completion tasks to compare learners from different linguistic backgrounds, to examine how pragmatic competence in Thai develops over time, and to investigate how Thai speakers themselves perceive and accommodate foreign learners. Such work would deepen understanding of how cross-cultural meaning is negotiated in a language that is growing in regional and international importance.

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