

Between Privilege and Precarity: Unpacking Language Ideologies of Chinese Students Learning Sinhalese

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Abstract

Language ideologies are dynamic and sometimes contradictory across time and space. ‘Small’ languages that used to be invisible, if not devalued, have been valorized as resource to empower individual success and promote nationalist project. This study examines the language ideologies of Chinese students who used to major in Sinhalese at an elite Chinese university and who have taken up various jobs in China and Sri Lanka. In the context of China’s active engagement with South Asian countries like Sri Lanka, learning Sinhalese has been discursively conceptualized as capital to fulfil China-oriented internationalization. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews which were conducted with eight Chinese graduates majoring in Sinhalese between July 2022 and September 2022. By adopting the concept of language ideologies as a theoretical framework, this study demonstrates that learning Sinhalese opened up new spatiotemporal imaginations for Chinese students to capitalize on their performance and enact their privileged identities. However, findings also indicate that the convertibility of learning Sinhalese language was not neutral but subordinated to multiple actors including English, gender, local and transnational markets, family status and working conditions. This study contributes to the understanding of embedded nature of learning ‘small’ languages in relation to China’s socioeconomic transformation and regional integration. The study can shed lights on how power relations between language learners and structural constraints get played out in non-Anglophone countries. The study is closed by offering relevant implications for maintaining the resilience of learning languages other than English in China and beyond.

Keywords: Sinhalese, language ideologies, Sri Lanka, China

1. Introduction

Sri Lanka is an island nation in the Indian Ocean, close to India (see Figure 1). It is strategically located on the core sea route of the India Ocean, which facilitates the transshipment of goods and the replenishment of ships in transit, so that it has significant regional advantages (Economic and Commercial Office of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, 2024). Sri Lanka’s thus geopolitical significance means a lot to China’s regional integration. Especially with the Belt and Road Initiative, China has active geo-economic engagement with Sri Lanka (Economic and Commercial Office of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, 2024). In 2023, China was Sri Lanka's second largest trading partner after India (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2024). Besides, China is an important source of foreign investment in Sri Lanka, and its investment projects in Sri Lanka mainly involve ports, shipping, logistics, urban construction, real estate, etc. (Economic and Commercial Office of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, 2024).

Trade and investment between China and Sri Lanka have not only led to economic growth, but also promoted learning Sinhalese in China. Sinhalese is one of the national languages of Sri Lanka, used by about 75% of the population, approximately 16 million people (Department of Statistics of Sri Lanka, 2024). In order to promote political, economic and cultural exchanges between China and Sri Lanka, China has made great efforts to develop Sinhalese education. At present, there are 5 Chinese universities offering Sinhalese undergraduate programs to train Sinhalese personnel. One of the universities is an elite university and its Sinhalese undergraduate program was established well before the others, with a well-developed curriculum, highly qualified faculty and capable students. Nowadays, there are lots of Sinhalese graduates from Chinese universities

working either in China or Sri Lanka and they contribute a lot to China-Sri Lanka exchanges.

In this context, the study of those Sinhalese graduates' experiences contributes to the understanding of embedded nature of learning 'small' languages in relation to China's socioeconomic transformation and regional integration, having practical significance. Moreover, since these Sinhalese graduates face several challenges due to multiple social factors, this study can shed lights on how power relations between language learners and structural constraints get played out in non-Anglophone countries. Additionally, there are abundant studies of foreign languages learning focus on English (e.g. Kanno & Kangas 2014; Li, Zheng & Yan, 2023; Wang & Chen, 2019), but less pay attention to 'small' languages. Though the situation has changed in recent years and some studies examine multiple aspects of 'small' languages learning (e.g. Lu, He & Shen, 2020; Lu & Shen, 2021; Yang & Tong, 2008), there is a lack of empirical study on educational and employment trajectories of students learning Sinhalese. In order to address this gap, this study investigates language ideologies of Chinese students learning Sinhalese through semi-structured interviews. The paper is closed by offering relevant implications for maintaining the resilience of learning languages other than English in China and beyond.



Figure 1. Map showing the location of Sri Lanka from Britannica

2. Language Ideologies and Language Practices

Language ideologies are defined as beliefs, feelings and conceptions about languages (Piller, 2015). They can be examined through language practices and language discourses (Han & Varghese, 2019). Moreover, language ideologies and language use influence each other (Sergeant, 2008). Language ideologies doesn't only relate to individuals (Wei, 2016), they link language and society (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994), as products of socio-political concerns (Sergeant, 2008), influencing social interactions (Blommaert, 2005). Since people use languages for ideological communication, various social evaluations intersect in languages, and language ideologies are always multiple (Voloshinov, 1986). For instance, ideologies of language purism (Kroskrity, 2004; Jaffe, 2007), standard language ideology (Lippi - Green, 2012) and mother tongue ideology (Weber & Horner, 2013) are common influential language ideologies. Because of the multiplicity nature and the fact that different language ideologies represent different interests, language ideologies are seen as a site of negotiation and contestation (Han & Varghese, 2019; Piller, 2015).

Early studies tend to focus on language ideologies and language practices in common languages, such as English and Putonghua (Li, Ai & Zhang, 2019; Li et al., 2023; Lønsmann, 2014; Xu, 2018). In recent years, researchers have also turned their attention to 'small' languages as ideological inquiry, showing that 'small' languages are valorized as individual empowerment for study and employment prospect (Li & De Costa, 2023; Li & Zheng, 2021). For instance, students valorize Myanmar for entrepreneurial opportunities and they speak Myanmar as a self-branding skill as well as for dreaming high (Li & Zheng, 2021). Moreover, as the status of 'small' languages rises, 'small' language teachers have positive emotions about their teaching career due to students' employability and distinct performance, plentiful teaching resources, being included in doing related researches and being able to contribute to community and national prosperity (Li & De Costa, 2023).

However, it is also demonstrated that the successful validation of language convertibility can be hindered by multiple social factors, such as English hegemony, nationality, market and family status (Li & Zheng, 2021; Li et al., 2023; Lu & Shen, 2021). English, as the world's lingua franca, is a requisite for 'small' language learners,

while ‘small’ language skill is just a plus when looking for a job (Lu & Shen, 2021). Even receiving EMI education, some Myanmar students face the lack of family financial support and governmental investment on university education and they are restricted by the low employment prospect in the local Myanmar market, which constraints EMI convertibility (Li et al., 2023). Besides, Myanmar students who have Chinese and Burmese proficiency, couldn’t have access to jobs commensurate with their educational qualifications in China due to their lack of Chinese citizenship (Li & Zheng, 2021).

Even though existing studies pay much attention to language ideologies of various languages, Sinhalese language ideologies remain poorly understood. In order to bridge this gap, we tend to explore opportunities and challenges of graduates majoring Sinhalese from an elite Chinese university in the context of China’s socioeconomic transformation and regional integration. In brief, the study seeks to answer two primary questions:

- 1) How do Chinese students perceive the values of learning Sinhalese?
- 2) What are the ideological factors that shape their perceptions?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Participants who were chosen in the study of language ideologies of Chinese students learning Sinhalese are graduates from an elite university. They have been working for several years and have plenty of perceptions in learning Sinhalese. There are 8 participants in total. Most of the participants are at young age and all of them are engaging in decent jobs. In this paper we use P1 to P8 to identify the participants anonymously and their basic information is as indicated in the Table 1 below.

Table 1. Basic information of Participants

Anonymous participants	Gender	Age at the time of interview	Degree	Employment	Workplace
P1	Female	26	Bachelor	University teacher	China
P2	Female	26	Master	University teacher	China
P3	Female	25	Master	University teacher	China
P4	Female	26	Bachelor	University teacher	China
P5	Male	30	Master	University teacher	China
P6	Female	26	Bachelor	Administrator at a state-owned construction enterprise	Sri Lanka
P7	Male	40	Bachelor	Country manager of a state-owned telecommunication enterprise	Sri Lanka
P8	Female	26	Bachelor	Reporter at a national media institution	China

3.2 Data Collection and Data Analysis

To explore language ideologies of Chinese students learning Sinhalese, semi-structured interviews were conducted between July 2022 and September 2022. Since author 1 maintains a long-term friendly relationship with the participants, the interviews were conducted by author 1. The interview duration for each participant varies depending on their individual situation, ranging from 30 minutes to 90 minutes. For the participants to talk more freely, the interview language was Putonghua, namely Mandarin. In order to ensure the completeness and accuracy of the data, with the consent of the participants, all interview conversations were audio recorded and transcribed into simplified Chinese characters. After reconfirming the content with the participants, all interview transcripts were translated into English. Except for participants’ basic information, the main interview questions are as follows:

- 1) What do you think of learning Sinhalese, and why?
- 2) What are the benefits of learning Sinhalese?
- 3) What challenges or difficulties did you encounter?

Consistent with ethnographic methodology, the researchers adopted content analysis (Krippendorff & Bock, 2009) to discover emerging 'patterns, themes and categories' (Patton, 2002, p. 454) when conducting inductive analysis. We recognized recurring outstanding patterns related to language ideologies of learning Sinhalese based on frequency of occurrence. Emerging patterns are as follow: 'a good job', 'postgraduate program', 'communicating with local people', 'English', 'drinking culture', 'verbal sexual harassment', 'market', 'family commitment', 'work challenges' and so on. Then we identified categories concerning the interconnection between Sinhalese learning, privilege, precarity, and structural constraints. These categories include 'taking up decent occupations or desirable academic trajectory', 'acting as a diplomatic, cultural, academic or business broker for China and Sri Lanka', 'English hegemony as communication barrier for Chinese learners', 'troubled by drinking culture and verbal sexual harassment', 'constrained by local and transnational markets', 'unfulfilled family commitment and filial piety', and 'restricted by working conditions'. With reference to language ideologies, we further grouped the categories under the following themes: 'learning Sinhalese for profitable employment prospect and advanced education', and 'convertibility of learning Sinhalese mediated by multiple factors'. Below we will discuss how the two themes disclose participants' perceptions of learning Sinhalese and the interplay between learning Sinhalese and the structural constraints they experienced.

4. Findings

4.1 Learning Sinhalese for Profitable Employment Prospect and Advanced Education

4.1.1 Taking up Decent Occupations or Desirable Academic Trajectory

All of the participants are taking up decent occupations either in China or Sri Lanka. Their jobs are stable and participants working abroad usually have high salaries. Moreover, some of the participants obtained master's or doctoral degrees. Especially P3 and P5, the 2 participants did postgraduate studies in world-renowned universities.

P1 and P4 were recruited by their universities to teach Sinhalese with a Bachelor's degrees only. However, generally speaking, a doctoral degree is a requirement for entry into a teaching post at a Chinese university. Learning Sinhalese has lowered the 'threshold' for them to enter universities.

Sinhalese is a 'small' language and very few people study it compared to other subjects, let alone those who have advanced degrees. Therefore, even with only a Bachelor's degree, I could be recruited to teach Sinhalese at the university where I am currently working. (Interview with P1, 20/7/2022)

Since there were fewer Sinhalese graduates in China at that time, I went through a special recruitment channel, where I directly went into contract signing after an interview, without a written test. It was much easier compared to be a university teacher of other subjects. (Interview with P4, 5/8/2022)

From P1 and P4's perspectives we can see the urgent need for Sinhalese teachers at Chinese universities to the extent of lowering the recruitment requirements and subtracting recruitment steps. What this actually reflects is that China is making great efforts to train Sinhalese personnel in order to facilitate exchanges between China and Sri Lanka and fulfil China-oriented internationalization.

P7's job is enviable because of its high pay. P7 has been working in Sri Lanka for many years and he had become a country manager for a Chinese state-owned company at the time of the interview, earning more than 70,000 US dollars a year.

I was offered the job because I can speak Sinhalese and I'm familiar with Sri Lanka. It's a job that brings not only a good salary, but also flexible working time and a sense of control over my work. (Interview with P7, 18/8/2022)

When it comes to getting an advanced education, P3 had a desirable experience. She went to the University of Oxford to pursue a master's degree in linguistics. As she illustrated, learning Sinhalese is helpful for her Master's program study.

The Master's program in Linguistics at Oxford requires bilingualism or multilingualism, so learning Sinhalese definitely helped me to apply for the program. And since Sinhalese is similar to Sanskrit, it helped me with my Sanskrit elective as well. (Interview with P3, 03/8/2022)

In line with P3's experience, learning Sinhalese promoted P5 to higher education. P5 was successfully admitted to Tsinghua University's (one of China's top universities) doctoral degree program.

My Sinhalese education background was a factor that could not be ignored when I was able to stand out from over 200 competitors. Since the program focuses on country-regional studies, being able to speak and read the local language was an advantage. (Interview with P5, 09/9/2022)

4.1.2 Acting as a Diplomatic, Cultural, Academic or Business Broker for China and Sri Lanka

Due to P7's excellent Sinhalese proficiency, he is well known in Chinese community in Sri Lanka. And he's a frequent attendee at China-Sri Lanka diplomatic and cultural exchanges.

I have interpreted for Chinese ambassador and Sri Lankan national leaders, and have participated in the promotion of major projects between the two countries, which brought me a great sense of achievement. (Interview with P7, 18/8/2022)

I have been a Chinese-Sinhalese host at many Chinese cultural events in Sri Lanka. I also created a Wechat Official Account to provide an information platform for Chinese people living in Sri Lanka to get helpful information about Sri Lanka, such as the date, time and customs of Sinhalese New Year. Since such information from websites or newspaper is in Sinhalese or English and most of Chinese people couldn't understand, so I translate and put them on my platform for their convenience. Now there are 2000-3000 readers every day! (Interview with P7, 18/8/2022)

According to P7's experience, whether as a broker of China-Sri Lanka diplomacy or culture, Sinhalese is at the center of his skill set. P5 is an academic broker in his own field likewise. He demonstrated Sinhalese helped his researches.

I have conducted fieldwork in Sri Lanka. Communicating with the locals in Sinhalese is more intimate, easier to impress them and easier to make an emotional connection. If talking in English, it is like being an outsider, the 'other'. (Interview with P5, 09/9/2022)

Sometimes I could obtain information in Sinhalese that is not available in the English world. For instance, the same Sri Lankan news story is not reported in detail in the English language newspapers as it is in the Sinhalese language newspapers. (Interview with P5, 09/9/2022)

From P5's words we can recognize that although English is a lingua franca, it is not as effective as the local language, namely Sinhalese, when conducting ethnography in Sri Lanka. Apart from diplomatic, cultural or academic brokers, we have P6 working as a business broker. She works for a Chinese state-owned enterprise in Sri Lanka and is mainly responsible for coordinating administrative matters. Communicating with local staff in Sinhalese makes her work much more efficient as she illustrated:

Communicating in Sinhalese brings me closer to my local colleagues, which helps my administrative work. What's more, I can use my knowledge of Sri Lankan customs to plan events, such as a group wedding, to unite Chinese and Sri Lankan staff and create a good image for my company. (Interview with P6, 13/8/2022)

In accord with P5's experience, in addition to illuminating the advantage of using Sinhalese in communicating with the locals, P6 indicated learning Sinhalese does not only mean learning language skills, but also gaining a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of Sri Lanka, which helps her to be more competent in her work.

Although our participants perceive that learning Sinhalese would lead to profitable employment prospect and advanced education, the convertibility of learning Sinhalese was not neutral but subordinated to multiple factors as described in the following section.

4.2 Convertibility of Learning Sinhalese Mediated by Multiple Factors

4.2.1 English Hegemony as Communication Barrier for Chinese Learners

Even though Sri Lanka gained independence from British colonization in 1948, as a result of colonial culture and globalization, English hegemony is penetrating across almost all of the social domains in Sri Lanka (Tong, 2015). As a consequence, for Chinese learners, who used to specialize in Sinhalese have to subject to English power. They have to use English more often than Sinhalese while staying in Sri Lanka. Whenever they want to apply for a better job, they have to prove their English proficiency as a must.

P1 worked for a Chinese-owned company in Sri Lanka before teaching Sinhalese at university. Recalling her time working in Sri Lanka she mentioned:

When I was working in Sri Lanka, I didn't communicate much in Sinhalese. I talked in English with local people. I was very afraid of losing my Sinhalese language skill, which was one of the reasons I quit my job in Sri Lanka and came back to China to become a Sinhalese teacher. (Interview with P1, 20/7/2022)

If you want to go to Sri Lanka to work, your English proficiency is very important. After all, English is the 'main force' in the work of communication in Sri Lanka. Graduates of my university are good at English, and most of us passed the Test for English Majors-Band 8, even though some, like me, were not English

majors. I think English proficiency was an important competitive advantage in my job search. (Interview with P6, 13/8/2022)

4.2.2 Troubled by 'Drinking' Culture and Verbal Sexual Harassment

Though staying in Sri Lanka, some of our participants suffered from gender troubles because of the indulgence of traditional Chinese culture towards males. Participants have to put up with 'wine' culture, dining and 'dirty' jokes, which some Chinese men are accustomed to do.

There were more male colleagues in our (Chinese) company. When it came to get-togethers, the male colleagues would drink, and the smell of alcohol filled the room, which made me feel uncomfortable. They also toasted each other and said something, pretending to be close, which I didn't really like. (Interview with P1, 20/7/2022)

On the surface, it shows that P1 disliked the 'drinking' culture, but what she revealed deeply is that it was Chinese men who practicing and promoting the 'drinking' culture, which made females uncomfortable. Another person who also suffered from gender trouble is P2, who studied and interned in Sri Lanka.

A (Chinese) man working in Sri Lanka once told me a 'dirty joke'. I was so shocked and offended that I didn't know what to say. But he just thought he was making a common joke to show his sense of humor and didn't think anything was wrong. (Interview with P2, 23/7/2022)

Despite P1 and P2's experiences took place in Sri Lanka, they still show the indulgence of traditional Chinese culture towards men, and the men's failure to recognize women's discomfort and aversion towards their behaviors.

4.2.3 Constrained by Local and Transnational Markets

The job opportunities in Sri Lanka for Sinhalese learners are greatly influenced by local and transnational markets, which are beyond individual control. In the terms of local market, Sri Lanka's economic and social crises in 2022 have had a profound impact.

Sri Lanka declared bankruptcy last month. Its bankruptcy and the resulting political turmoil seriously affected Chinese companies' projects in Sri Lanka, especially those like ours that have co-operation with Sri Lankan government. It's difficult to carry out projects when Sri Lankan government has no money or when there are frequent changes in Sri Lankan national leadership. Since projects are struggling to move forward, the demand for Sinhalese learners dropped drastically. (Interview with P6, 13/8/2022)

From P6's perspective, we see how the local market shapes Sinhalese students' employment prospect. When it turns to transnational market, the regional power beyond China-Sri Lanka relationship comes to the fore, as demonstrated by P2:

A few years ago, Sri Lanka's new president came to power and halted what was then the largest Chinese investment project in Sri Lanka. Although Sri Lankan officials demonstrated that was due to environmental concerns, Chinese scholars analyzed the situation as a result of Indian pressure on Sri Lanka and the new president's policy of 'balanced diplomacy'. China's largest project in Sri Lanka was in a bad condition, and other projects waited to see what would happen next, which inevitably reduced the job opportunities for those Sinhalese graduates who mainly working for Chinese companies' projects in Sri Lanka. (Interview with P2, 23/7/2022)

4.2.4 Unfulfilled Family Commitment and Filial Piety

Working in Sri Lanka means being away from home. P6 is married, she and her husband have to be separated because she works in Sri Lanka while her husband works in China, and she can only return home once or twice a year.

My husband and I don't spend much time together and long periods of separation would have a bad effect on our relationship. In addition, I'm at childbearing age, but I have no idea when I am going to have a baby. Even if I do have a baby, I am not sure if I will bring my baby to Sri Lanka. That's the kind of problem you face when you work abroad. And, over here (Sri Lanka), I can't take care of my parents. (Interview with P6, 13/8/2022)

Not only did P6 expressed great concerns about her families, but P7 also felt helpless deeply about not being able to take care of his parents. He is the only child in his family, and he has to leave his elderly parents behind because he works and lives in Sri Lanka.

During the Covid 19 epidemic, it was inconvenient for me to go back to China, to my home, so I could only

hope that my parents would take care of themselves. (Interview with P7, 18/8/2022)

Chinese culture puts much significance on filial piety, of which taking care of parents is important. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand the helplessness and guilt of being unable to fulfil their filial duties when P6 and P7 are far away from home.

4.2.5 Restricted by Working Conditions

Almost every participant in this study talked about the challenges of their jobs and disclosed that they are tired of completing their job appraisals. P8 works at a media institution and is required to achieve a certain number of fan interactions on social media platforms every month. If not achieved, she will fail the monthly assessment. P7, on the other hand, revealed that his sales tasks of the first three years, where each year had to double from the previous year, were difficult to meet.

For participants serving at Chinese universities, there are some commonalities in their challenges. Although P4 is only a teaching assistant with only a bachelor's degree, and her research ability is not yet sufficient, she still has to do some research to achieve a certain number of research marks each year, or else she would fail the assessment. So she has to find a way to join someone else's project team and try to gain as many research marks as possible. Even though P5 has earned a doctorate and has some research experience, the university he works for is very demanding and adopts an 'up-or-out' system, meaning that if he doesn't achieve a certain title within a certain number of years, he won't be reappointed. P4 and P6 feel very stressful to their job appraisals.

P1 and P2 work at the same university and they don't have much pressure on their personal research assessment at present, but they face other type of pressure in terms of assessment. The Sinhalese program of their university they work for is a new one, and the program construction is not yet perfect, so the grade of their Sinhalese program in the provincial assessment is not high. If several rounds of assessment down their program is still in the last grade, it would be revoked and they would have to transfer to other job position or leave.

Moreover, these participants working at universities usually have a heavy workload. There are only 2 or 3 teachers in a department, but they have to teach more than a dozen specialized courses, many of which do not have textbooks, so the teachers have a heavy workload in preparing courses. In addition, the teachers have multiple tasks, and many of the participants had or are doing administrative work for their schools.

When I worked part-time as an administrator, I felt that I was taking time off to prepare lessons and attend classes, and my main time and energy were spent on administrative tasks. I had no time to think about how to improve my research ability. (Interview with P2, 23/7/2022)

The words of P2 show her helplessness and demonstrate the complexity of the work of teachers at universities.

The teachers also found that they were lack of legitimate participation compared to English and other subjects, e.g. applying for PhD study and standing for universities competing for different teaching contests. With the exception of P5, none of the participants working at universities has a doctoral degree, and they still need to pursue a PhD study. But their path to PhD education is not that easy. P3 depicted that her university doesn't allow teachers to leave campus to study, so she is limited in the majors or directions she can choose to study for a PhD. Besides, there is no Sinhalese doctoral program in China, so if Sinhalese learners want to do a PhD in China, they have to do interdisciplinary study, which is difficult for participants like P2, who learned Sinhalese language skills and Sri Lankan basic information only. Moreover, it is also not a feasible thing for them to try to promote their titles by participating in teaching competitions, as there are no Sinhalese teaching competitions in China, which is very different from English subject.

5. Discussion

Consistent with the findings of previous many literatures on 'small' languages (e.g. Chen, Zhao & Tao, 2020; Li & De Costa, 2023; Li & Zheng, 2021), this study identifies learning Sinhalese embodies profitable employment prospect and advanced education. Chinese students who used to major in Sinhalese are taking up decent occupations such as university teachers and employees of Chinese state-owned enterprises or Chinese national institution. And some of them made big money. Moreover, some students managed to get into famous universities in the world, namely University of Oxford and Tsinghua University, to get advanced education due to their Sinhalese competence. What's more, they act as a diplomatic, cultural, academic or business broker for China and Sri Lanka, some interpreting for Chinese ambassador and Sri Lankan national leaders, being host at Chinese cultural events, translating and spreading Sri Lankan information, conducting ethnography with Sri Lankans and communicating between Chinese company and local people in Sri Lanka.

Besides, this study also complicates the convertibility of learning Sinhalese across various social scales, including English hegemony, gender, local and transnational markets, family status and working conditions. Our

findings confirm that English hegemony hinders communication for ‘small’ language learners (Chen et al., 2020; Lu & Shen, 2021), noting that English is used more frequently than Sinhalese in Sri Lanka and English proficiency is a must to work in Sri Lanka. Lu et al., (2020) unpacked the influence of gender and market on language convertibility, in that there were few opportunities for female Persian graduates in China’s employment market and fewer jobs for ‘small’ language students. Echoing this research, on the one hand, our study enriches the influence of gender factor and uncovers even though being abroad, women were troubled by ‘drinking’ culture and verbal sexual harassment due to the indulgence of men in traditional Chinese culture; on the other hand, our study reveals that Sri Lanka's bankruptcy, political turmoil as well as regional power, such local and transnational market factors affected the demand for Sinhalese graduates. Li & Zheng (2021) and Li et al. (2023) also demonstrated that the lack of financial capital, which indicates family status, would shape language learners’ trajectories. Also indicating family status, the findings of our study point out that being away from home and leaving families behind made Sinhalese learners unfulfilled family commitment and filial piety. As to working conditions, in line with previous studies (Kang, Shen & Zheng, 2022; Li & De Costa, 2023), this study discloses the challenges faced by university teachers, such as performance evaluation, overloaded work, and lack of legitimate participation compared to English and other subjects.

6. Conclusion

This study contributes a nuanced understanding of the language ideologies of Chinese graduates learning Sinhalese, highlighting how they perceive the values of learning Sinhalese and what ideological factors shape their perceptions. Our findings demonstrate that learning Sinhalese opened up new spatiotemporal imaginations for Chinese students to capitalize on their performance and enact their privileged identities. However, findings also indicate that the convertibility of learning Sinhalese language was not neutral but subordinated to multiple actors including English, gender, local and transnational markets, family status and working conditions. In order to help ‘small’ language learners in China and beyond better realize their individual empowerment we have 3 implications. Pedagogically, there is a need for a more socially-oriented curriculum for ‘small’ language programs to equip learners with the knowledge and skills required by market. Culturally, ‘small’ language programs should offer some skills or some basic knowledge to promote the social awareness for gender equity, at the same time cultivating female learners coping skills to protect themselves. Linguistically, it is essential to overcome English hegemony and to create a ‘new’ paradigm for ‘international’ communication that is more inclusive and diverse.

Our study, grounded in language ideologies, has broadened the understanding of learning ‘small’ languages by appropriating Chinese students’ voices and practices as legitimate construct and unpacking the interplay of the multiple social forces shaping the trajectories of Chinese students who used to major in Sinhalese.

This study only focuses on the voices of students from an elite Chinese university, and the perceptions in learning Sinhalese of students from other universities that are not as well-known as the one selected for this study are yet to be seen. Further research is essential to comprehensively understand the relationship between learning Sinhalese and individual empowerment, China’s socioeconomic transformation and regional integration.

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