Chapter 4
From *de facto to de jure*? On Mandarin as an Official Language of Taiwan

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Abstract Mandarin in Taiwan has been the *de facto* official language for all intents and purposes since 1945. The announcement of the *DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL LANGUAGES ACT* in 2019, for the first time, bestowed the legal status and associated rights to all languages that fit the criteria, i.e., '"National language" as referred to in this Act shall mean the natural languages and sign languages used by the different ethnic groups in Taiwan [本法所稱國家語言，指臺灣各固有族群使用之自然語言及臺灣手語。].' Mandarin and 20 other languages allegedly fit the definition. Notably, the government repeatedly emphasized that national languages are *not* official languages and that Taiwan has no official languages. This begs the question, why not take this excellent opportunity to designate a *de jure* official language or languages? Interestingly, the issue was never brought up, let alone discussed or debated. In this article, I address these thorny and sensitive issues. Specifically, I demonstrate that Mandarin, in fact, is not qualified nor suitable to be a "national language" and argue why Taiwan should instead have Mandarin as a *de jure* official language.

When there's an elephant in the room, introduce him.
—Randy Pausch, The Last Lecture.[1]

[1] This talk by Randy Pausch is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ji5_MqicxSo

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4.1 Introduction

This chapter is written with the explicit intention to be a position paper on changing the well-established status of Mandarin as the only *de facto* official language of Taiwan to that of a *de jure* official language. It is thus crucial to note that this article does not argue *against* any other language; it simply argues *for* Mandarin as a *de jure* official language, but not necessarily the *only* one. The *de jure* status of an "official language" legally *requires* the government to use the language when interacting with its people and providing public services; a "national language", in contrast, is merely under legal protection with certain prescribed measures to promote its use (Lecomte, 2021, p. ii; Her & Chiang, 2022, p. 21). The crucial difference is that the use of official languages, but not necessarily national languages, in official communications is prescribed by law.

Many, if not most, citizens of Taiwan, a linguistically rich and diverse country whose offcial name sanctioned by the constitution is *Zhōnghuámínguó* [中華民國] Republic of China (ROC), naively assume that Mandarin, commonly known as *Guóyǔ* [國語], literally "national language", is the official language, unaware of the fact that Taiwan has never legally designated Mandarin or any other language as an *official* language. However, both in Taiwan and in China, or the People's Republic of China (PRC) to be legally accurate, the Mandarin language, known in China as *Pǔtōnghuà* [普通話], literally "common language", for all intents and purposes, functions as the official language, as China, interestingly, has likewise never legally sanctioned its official status.

Singapore, officially the Republic of Singapore, another country with the majority of its population being ethnic Chinese, is in stark contrast with Taiwan and China, as Mandarin, along with English, Malay, and Tamil, has always been a *de jure* official language since the nation's establishment in 1965. Yet, ironically, the dominant language in Singapore, politically, economically, and socially, is by now English, as the vitality of Mandarin has been on a steady decline for the last three decades. In the 2020 census, English has replaced Mandarin as the language most used at home (Lin, 2021).

If we borrow Kachru's (1985) three concentric circles model of English in the world and adopt it for Mandarin, then no doubt Taiwan and China are the only two members of the Inner Circle, while Singapore, Hong Kong, and Macao belong to the Outer Circle, with the rest of the world all in the Expanding Circle. However, while the facts mentioned above are all consistent with Mandarin as the sole *de facto* official language and also the most dominant language of Taiwan, none provides a strong motivation for changing its status quo to *de jure*. After all, only four of the Inner Circle countries of English, i.e., Canada, New Zealand, Ireland, and most recently, the US, have legally designated English as an official language; the UK and Australia have not. The central goal of the rest of the article is thus to offer rational arguments for changing the status quo of Mandarin in Taiwan to a *de jure* official language.

The organization of the article is as follows. Section 4.2 offers a brief description of Taiwan's linguistic history and its contemporary linguistic landscape. Core arguments for Mandarin to gain the *de jure* status as an official language are laid out in Sect. 4.3 In Sect. 4.4, I discuss the anticipated objections and concerns and defend the position advocated. Section 4.5 concludes the article with a brief summary and suggestions regarding concrete steps toward reaching a consensus among citizens and the subsequent legal implementation.

4.2 A Brief History of Taiwan's Languages

Taiwan's history of languages is a tapestry woven from threads of indigenous Austronesian languages, European languages such as Dutch and Spanish, Japanese, and Sintic languages, mainly Southern Min, Hakka, and Mandarin, but also other varieties. We offer a brief account in this section, outlining the key factors in historical development leading to Taiwan's linguistic landscape today.

4.2.1 Taiwan: The Austronesian Homeland

It is well-established that the expansion of the Austronesian language family, which consists of more than 1200 languages across Oceania and Island Southeast Asia, began in Taiwan (e.g., Gray et al., 2009). Among the most crucial evidence is that most of the indigenous Formosan languages are the oldest and most diverse languages that have existed for some 6000 years (Blust, 2013). Comparative perspectives on the origins and linguistic significance of Austronesian languages are discussed in Chap. 3. However, after some 400 years of colonial rule by various foreign powers, only 16 are still living and have been formally recognized by law: Amis, Atayal, Bunun, Kanakanavu, Kavalan, Paiwan, Puyuma, Rukai, Saaroa, Saisiyat, Sakizaya, Seediq, Thao, Truku, Tsou, Tao, while a few others are trying to regain vitality and formal recognition.

4.2.2 The European Influences

Though the historical name 'Formosa' for Taiwan is credited to the Portuguese explorers who reached the shores of Taiwan on their way to the Japanese islands and named it "Ilha Formosa", literally "beautiful island", the Portuguese did not settle in Taiwan. Rather, in 1624, the arrival of the Dutch East India Company in southern Taiwan marked the beginning of Taiwan's colonial history, which, arguably, did not fully end until Taiwan had its first presidential election by popular vote in 1996. During the colonization by the Dutch in the south of Taiwan from 1625–1662 and

the Spanish in the north from 1626–1642, the respective languages, Dutch and Spanish, did leave their marks in the Indigenous languages in the form of loanwords.

The influence of Dutch and Spanish as lingua francas was soon replaced by Southern Min, the native language of the founder Koxinga and the ruling class of the Kingdom of Tungning, which lasted only some 20 years, from 1662 to the Qing Dynasty's conquest in 1683. Taiwan was under Qing rule for more than two centuries, from 1683 to 1895. The Qing policy of Taiwan's Sinicization encouraged Han Chinese migration to Taiwan, which led to significant demographic, hence cultural and linguistic, changes. Most of the migrants were Southern Min speakers from Fijian, followed by Hakka speakers from Guangdong. The dominance of the Southern Min language continued until the arrival of the *KUOMINGTANG* (KMT), while Hakka also gained significant ground as the second most important language. Consequently, the indigenous Austronesian languages have been on a steady decline to this day, with many driven to extinction on the way.

4.2.3 *Fifty Years of Japanese Colonization*

In 1895, Taiwan was ceded to the Empire of Japan after the Qing Dynasty lost the First Sino-Japanese War, aka the War of Jiawu, and Japanese, surely a foreign language in spite of a partially shared lexicon, became the *de facto* official language for the next 50 years. The ultimate goal of the colonial government's National Language Policy was to integrate the colony into the Japanese homeland through the promotion of Japanese as an all-around superior language (Heylen, 2012, p. 33). The policy went through three stages with ever-increasing intensity: early experimentation (1895–1918), assimilation education (1919–1936), and finally, the Japanization Movement, which lasted from 1937 when Japan invaded China and started the Second Sino-Japanese War till losing Taiwan to KMT in 1945. During the war, more extreme measures under the language policy were implemented to enhance imperial loyalty, such as suppressing Taiwanese languages in publications and in public spaces while encouraging Taiwanese to adopt Japanese names and to use Japanese in public and at home.

In a 1915 census, 96% of the Southern Min population spoke Southern Min dialects (Yap, 2018). In a 1935 census, 79.75% of the population was of Southern Min origin, 14.88% Hakka, and 5.37% Indigenous (Wang, 1993). At the end of the 50-year rule, Japanese was primarily used in schools and government offices; elsewhere, in public or at home, its use was not widespread (Huang, 1993, p. 36), with around 30% of the population able to speak the language (Yap, 2018, p. 260). The dominant language in Taiwan before the KMT takeover was clearly still Taiwanese, not Japanese. Few people spoke Mandarin; however, due to the Mandarin Baihuawen Movement as a literary movement in Taiwan from 1923 to 1937, which promoted written Mandarin (Heylen, 2012, pp. 96, 175), many Taiwanese writers used written Mandarin as the primary medium (Chen, 1996, p. 448).

4.2.4 *After the Chinese Nationalist Takeover*

Compared with the Japanese colonial language policy, the KMT used the same policy name, National Language Policy, but much more aggressively promoted Mandarin as not only the official language but, in fact, the only language in public spaces prior to 1987 when martial law was finally lifted, marking Taiwan's transition from authoritarian rule to democracy. During this 40-year post-war era, cross-strait communication between Taiwan and Mainland China was completely cut off, and the baby boomers and their children unwittingly created a distinctive variety of Mandarin, dubbed "Taiwan Mandarin" by the professional linguistics community. In his 1993 monumental book on the sociology of language in Taiwan, Hsuan-Fan Huang declares:

> Over the past forty years, the Mandarin spoken in Taiwan has naturally evolved from the integration of different linguistic groups and developed distinct and unique characters. This is a language we should be proud of. [台灣地區不同的語族四十年來自然而然整合出來的國語已具有明顯而獨特的面貌。這個語言是我們應該自傲的語言。] (Huang, 1993, p. 5)

The KMT's policy had marginalized Japanese so effectively that by this time, Japanese practically ceased to be a functional language in Taiwanese society; local languages likewise suffered, though to a lesser degree. Meanwhile, voices and efforts to revitalize local languages began to surge. Nonetheless, it would take another 30 years for all the local languages to gain lawful status as Taiwan's national languages when, in 2018, the *DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL LANGUAGES ACT* (DNLA) was finally passed by the Legislative Yuan.

The success story of Taiwan Mandarin, where success is in the sense that it was able to emerge and then take such deep roots in merely two generations, is due to several significant sociolinguistic factors besides the effective and repressive top-down language policy. The first factor is obvious, i.e., Mandarin is a Sinitic language like Southern Min (now better known as Taiwanese, or Tâi-gí) and Hakka; the three Sinitic languages thus share many typological features. Furthermore, the three languages also share the same Chinese writing system and a very similar cultural tradition that goes back thousands of years. All this makes learning and acquiring Mandarin much easier for most Taiwanese than an entirely foreign language such as Japanese or English.

The second crucial factor, as pointed out by Her (2009), is the great diversity of languages spoken by the more than one million military personnel and civilians who moved to Taiwan after the war, an important fact often overlooked by commentators and researchers. Thus, contrary to the widespread and misguided stereotype, the greatest majority of the settlers from Mainland China were not native speakers of Beijing Mandarin or the so-called Standard Mandarin. Table 4.1 shows the native places of these settlers as recorded in the 1956 ROC census.

According to *Ethnologue*, China has nearly 300 languages and dialects spoken by dozens of ethnic groups of at least nine different language families. Though accurate data is unavailable, the fact that these post-war settlers were from all across

Table 4.1 1956 Taiwan Census of *928,279* Mainlanders' Native Places (Her, 2009, p. 386)

本籍 Native Place	人數 No. of People	%	本籍 Native Place	人數 No. of People	%	本籍 Native Place	人數 No. of People	%
江蘇省 Jiangsu	95,836	*10.32*	陝西省 Shanxi	6389	*0.69*	南京市 Nanjing	12,491	*1.35*
浙江省 Zhejiang	114,830	*12.37*	甘肅省 Gansu	1358	*0.15*	上海市 Shanghai	16,179	*1.74*
安徽省 Anhui	44,533	*4.80*	寧夏省 Ningxia	88	*0.01*	北平市 Beiping	7850	*0.85*
江西省 Jiangxi	30,666	*3.30*	青海省 Qinghai	131	*0.01*	青島市 Qingdao	5777	*0.62*
湖北省 Hubei	36,184	*3.90*	綏遠省 Suiyuan	383	*0.04*	天津市 Tianjin	5293	*0.57*
湖南省 Hunan	54,154	*5.83*	察哈爾 Chahar	550	*0.06*	重慶市 Chongqing	994	*0.11*
四川省 Sichuan	36,369	*3.92*	熱河省 Rehe	789	*0.08*	大連市 Dalian	600	*0.06*
西康省 Xikang	313	*0.03*	遼寧省 Liaoning	11,220	*1.21*	哈爾濱 Harbin	490	*0.05*
福建省 Fujian	142,520	*15.35*	安東省 Andong	1623	*0.17*	漢口市 Hankou	1618	*0.17*
廣東省 Guangdong	92,507	*9.97*	遼北省 Liaobai	1773	*0.19*	廣州市 Guangzhou	924	*0.10*
廣西省 Guangxi	11,620	*1.25*	吉林省 Jilin	2060	*0.22*	西安市 Xi'an	115	*0.01*
雲南省 Yunnan	5716	*0.62*	松江省 Songjiang	387	*0.04*	瀋陽市 Shenyang	2264	*0.24*
貴州省 Guizhou	4545	*0.49*	合江省 Hejiang	192	*0.02*	海南 Hainan	1817	*0.20*
河北省 Hebei	36,124	*3.89*	黑龍江 Heilongjiang	556	*0.06*	西藏 Tibet	16	*0.00*
山東省 Shandong	90,068	*9.70*	嫩江省 Nenjiang	479	*0.05*	蒙古 Mongolia	338	*0.04*
河南省 Henan	41,674	*4.49*	興安省 Xing'an	98	*0.01*	未詳 Unknown	219	*0.02*
山西省 Shanxi	5282	*0.57*	新疆省 Xinjiang	277	*0.03*			

China indicates that they were native speakers of a great number of languages and speakers of Beijing Mandarin were a tiny minority. Thus, these first-generation Mainlanders and their Taiwanese counterparts are much alike in confronting Beijing Mandarin as a second language. Her (2009) thus contends that under KMT's intense policy, Mandarin in Taiwan first underwent massive pidginization, heavily influenced by local languages, especially Taiwanese, which led to an even more massive acquisition process similar to creolization among the baby boomers born after the

war and educated almost exclusively in the pidginized Mandarin. The boomers became the first-generation native speakers of Taiwan Mandarin.

4.2.5 *Taiwan's Linguistic Landscape Today*

After more than 70 years of linguistic development, Taiwan Mandarin, besides being the *de facto* official language, has been nativized in all linguistic dimensions and has become the most dominant language of the land (Her, 2010; Khoo & Her, 2025). More importantly, Taiwan Mandarin has also enregistered into a socially identifiable variety that marks a distinctive Taiwanese identity (Su, 2018).

Legally, according to the interpretation of the Ministry of Culture, Mandarin and other 20 local languages share equal status as national languages, sanctioned by the *DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL LANGUAGES ACT*; see Table 4.2.

As prescribed in the *CURRICULUM GUIDELINES OF 12-YEAR BASIC EDUCATION*, put forth by the Ministry of Education (MOE), eight foreign languages, as shown in Table 4.3, are formally recognized in Taiwan's 9-year compulsory education, in addition to the 21 national languages.

English is a required course, and the respective official languages of seven Southeast Asian countries are listed as options alongside the 20 non-Mandarin national languages. Students are required to select one of the 20 + 7 options of language courses. The inclusion and recognition of these seven languages are largely due to the significant number of recent immigrants from these countries and their offerings.

Mandarin thus stands out uniquely among national languages as the only language that students must take a course on throughout the 12-year basic education. On the linguistic landscape of Taiwan, it is also the only language that enjoys the *de facto* status as the nation's official language in public communications and basic

Table 4.2 Taiwan's National Languages

Taiwan's *de jure* National Languages	
Sign Languages (1)	Taiwan Sign Language
Austronesian languages (16)	Amis, Atayal, Bunun, Kanakanavu, Kavalan, Paiwan, Puyuma, Rukai, Saaroa, Saisiyat, Sakizaya, Seediq, Thao, Truku, Tsou, Tao
Sinitic languages (4)	Mandarin, Taiwanese (Southern Min) Hakka, Matsu (Eastern Min)

Table 4.3 Taiwan's Recognized Languages in Basic Education

Taiwan's Recognized Languages in Basic Education	
European Languages (1)	English
Southeast Asian Languages (7)	Burmese, Filipino, Indonesian, Khmer, Malay, Thai, Vietnamese

education. "When there's an elephant in the room, introduce him," as Randy Pausch famously said in *The Last Lecture*. Now that the elephant has been introduced as such, the next section argues for the formal recognition of it being an elephant.

4.3 Arguments for Mandarin as a *de jure* Official Language

In Taiwan's "blue vs. green" partisan politics, the stereotypical public perception in terms of language ideology is that the blue camp led by the KMT is more pro-Mandarin, and the green camp led by the *DEMOCRATIC PROGRESSIVE PARTY* (DPP) is more protective and in favor of other local languages. Yet, we shall demonstrate that beneath the superficial stereotype, it is actually the DPP, when in power, that has explicitly and implicitly shown support for the idea that Mandarin should be made a *de jure* official language. The KMT, on the other hand, seems to have been content with Mandarin's *de facto* status, perhaps knowing that no challengers are anywhere in sight.

4.3.1 Language Policy Under the First DPP Government

In the year 2000, the DPP, led by Shui-Bian Chen [陳水扁], won the presidential election, ending 55 years of KMT dominance in Taiwanese politics since the end of World War II. His best-known language policy was put forth by the Executive Yuan in the 2002 document titled the *CHALLENGE 2008 NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN* (2002–2007), where it is clearly stated that "the government should elevate the status of English to that of a quasi-official language within six years", and concrete measures were laid out. Such a policy statement suggests in no uncertain terms that English would receive official recognition of sorts and hold a significant role in official communication and affairs and as expected, begs the question: what is Taiwan's official language now?

The then-Premier Si-Kun You [游錫堃] clearly stated publicly that though it was not legally sanctioned, undeniably Mandarin was already the official language in practice and function. More importantly, he further suggested that Taiwan should follow the 112 countries that had designated official languages in their constitutions and move toward making constitutional amendments in this regard (Shen, 2003). It is noteworthy that You's political inclination has never been pro-China; quite the contrary, he was one of the green politicians blacklisted by China as one of the 'stubborn' pro-Taiwan independence hardliners.[2]

[2]This news item is available at: https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-says-it-will-hold-supporters-taiwans-independence-criminally-responsible-2021-11-05/

4.3.2 *Language Policy Under the Second DPP Government*

Ching-te Lai [賴清德], the current President, also a pro-Taiwan independence hardliner, first promoted a policy to make English the second official language in the city of Tainan while he was the mayor. Given the unmistakable *de facto* official status of Mandarin in Tainan, the *first* official language that Lai had in mind, which logically must exist as a necessary condition for the promotion of a *second* official language, can thus only be Mandarin. Lai then brought this policy to the central government in 2017 when President Ying-Wen Tsai [蔡英文] appointed him the Premier. Subsequently, the policy, due to the bi-partisan opposition from legislators and serious concerns raised by scholars, had its name changed twice, first to *2030 BILINGUAL NATION* in 2018, then to *2030 BILINGUAL POLICY* in 2022. However, throughout President Tsai's second term, the implementation of the bilingual policy continued, and the goal of making English the second official language remained behind the scenes (Her, 2022a). In other words, it may have been pushed to the back burner, but certainly not off the table.

The Blueprint for Developing Taiwan into a *BILINGUAL NATION* by 2030 thus states, "The promotion of English as the second official language will be considered after 2030, based on the review of the implementation results of the bilingual policy." The official document titled *BILINGUAL 2030* further justifies the promotion of English based on the fact that 'Taiwan already has the advantage of using Mandarin.' Lai and Tsai's bilingual policy, whether purposely or unwittingly, thus explicitly solidifies that Mandarin is Taiwan's first and only *de facto* official language and implicitly promotes the changing of its status to *de jure* so that English can then follow suit. All this shows that even hardliners in the green camp are not only comfortable with the concept of Mandarin as a *de jure* official language but, in fact, have been promoting the idea either explicitly or implicitly.

4.3.3 *Arguments Provided by MOE's English Promotion Committee*

The best and most systematic arguments for Mandarin to be a *de jure* official language came rather unexpectedly from a 2019 research project report commissioned by the English Promotion Committee, a committee organized in October 2017 by the MOE upon the instruction of Premier Lai when he announced the national policy to promote English as the second official language. The PI of the project and the chief writer of the report, titled "Evaluation report on the policy of making English our nation's second official language," is a committee member Professor Vincent Wuchang Chang [張武昌]. His report lists nine precise conditions that countries with English as an official language have met, as shown in Table 4.4.

Needless to say, Chang's (2019) report is able to demonstrate convincingly that Taiwan does not meet any of the conditions. Note that the main content of the report

Table 4.4 Conditions for English to Be a Nation's Official Language

Conditions for English as a Nation's Official Language	
1	Colonial background in *English*
2	*English* and the national languages belong to the same language family
3	Established *English*-friendly environment
4	Existing official documents in *English*
5	*English* as a practical language, not merely a subject of study
6	Substantial financial investment in *English*
7	Promotion of *English* as an official language often based on considerations of the nation's survival and ethnic unity
8	Established cultural mindset and logical thinking for listening, speaking, reading, and writing in *English*
9	Foundations of *English* documents related to national operations and societal needs

was presented to the Premier as the MOE recommendation in late 2018 prior to its final submission as the project report. Perhaps sensing the Premier's resolve, the final report then made a concrete suggestion for the government to move toward its ultimate goal: "Establish a *NATIONAL BILINGUAL* and *BICULTURAL COMMITTEE* or a similar language promotion committee." This suggestion was taken so seriously by the Premier that the English Promotion Committee was subsequently dissolved, and the Executive Yuan quickly passed a draft bill *ACT FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE BILINGUAL NATION DEVELOPMENT CENTER* and sent it to the Legislative Yuan immediately. As mentioned, this policy met opposition from legislators of both camps and even stronger opposition from teachers' unions, student groups, and academics. The bill thus struggled in the Legislative Yuan from the very beginning and is now pending negotiations between the parties. See Her (2022a) and Liao et al. (2024) for a more detailed account.

Therefore, the nine conditions and the final suggestion put forth in this report are highly instrumental to our issue regarding making Mandarin a *de jure* official language. All we need to do is replace all instances of "English" with "Mandarin" and examine the results; see Table 4.5.

All nine conditions quite straightforwardly reflect the reality in Taiwan and require no further explanation, except condition 7, which does need some justification. So, is Mandarin as an official language a consideration of Taiwan's survival and ethnic unity?

First, consider generative AI, a technological breakthrough likely to be as impactful as the industrial revolution, if not more. Yet, generative AI performs differently in different languages, as there are high-resource languages like English and low-resource languages like the indigenous languages in the developing world (e.g., Kshetri, 2024). Choudhury (2023) reports on a Microsoft study by Joshi et al. (2020) that languages of the world can be divided into six groups based on the amount of digital resources in that language available for use by generative AI. English and Mandarin are among the 25 languages in the top group dubbed

Table 4.5 Conditions for Mandarin to Be Taiwan's Official Language

	Conditions for Mandarin as Taiwan's Official Language
1	Colonial background in *Mandarin*
2	*Mandarin* and the national languages belong to the same language family
3	Established *Mandarin*-friendly environment
4	Existing official documents in *Mandarin*
5	*Mandarin* as a practical language, not merely a subject of study
6	Substantial financial investment in *Mandarin*
7	Promotion of *Mandarin* as an official language often based on considerations of the nation's survival and ethnic unity
8	Established cultural mindset and logical thinking for listening, speaking, reading, and writing in *Mandarin*
9	Foundations of *Mandarin* documents related to national operations and societal needs

Winners. Mandarin is thus a highly valuable asset for Taiwan to survive and thrive in the age of AI; losing that competitive edge would be an unthinkable disaster.

Second, consider Taiwan's 9-year compulsory education. Article 21 of the Constitution, which, incidentally, is written in Mandarin, states that "The people shall have the right and the duty of receiving citizens' education." Article 159 further states that "All citizens shall have equal opportunity to receive an education." Her (2022b, p. 15) argues that the equal opportunity protected by the Constitution is being violated in the 12-year compulsory basic education due to the promotion of English as an additional or alternative medium of instruction under the *2030 BILINGUAL POLICY*.

> In compulsory education, Mandarin as the language of instruction and learning instrument for non-English subjects has the least built-in advantages and disadvantages and is the language least likely to cause class inequality. Imagine that textbooks for non-English subjects in compulsory education, such as social studies textbooks, are presented in a mixed Mandarin and Taiwanese, mixed Mandarin and English, all Taiwanese or all English manner, which will immediately cause some students to have learning advantages and other students to have built-in advantages and disadvantages at the starting line. Such textbooks will inevitably be rejected by the Ministry of Education. However, what 'bilingual education' promotes is the use of English as the classroom language and learning tool for subjects, which is a policy that creates inequality in education opportunities. Previously, students who were weak in English only had a disadvantage in this single subject, but such a disadvantage is now replicated in all subjects [在國民教育中，華語文作為非語言科目的授課語文與學習工具，是最不具內建優劣勢、最不易造成階級複製的語文。試想，國民教育中非英語學科的教科書，例如社會課本，若以華文臺文夾雜、華文英文夾雜、全臺文或全英文的方式呈現學科內容，在起跑點上即造成部分學生的學習優勢與其他學生的先天劣勢，勢必遭教育部退審。但「雙語教育」所推動的正是以英語作為學科的課室語言與學習工具，正是一個製造不平等的政策。英語弱勢的學生原本僅在此單一學科的弱勢，立即複製於所有學科。]. (Her, 2022b, p. 15)

Having Mandarin as a *de jure* official language can effectively eliminate discrimination due to the choice of classroom language in the 12-year basic education.

Last but most certainly not least, consider national and ethnic unity. In the past 8 years, President Tsai often called for unity; likewise, President Lai has repeatedly

made the same appeal for unity after winning the election. To the best of my knowledge, all such appeals for unity by the two DPP presidents have always been made in Mandarin, and for good reasons, as politicians are surely the most sensitive and careful about language choice. An excellent example is that in the only televised presidential debate of the 2024 election, candidate Lai used Mandarin almost exclusively for the obvious reason to appeal to the widest range of voters. Yet, seven months later, President Lai, also the party chair of the DPP, used Taiwanese only throughout his address to the DPP National Party Congress, a language choice widely criticized by opposition parties (Lin & Chang, 2024). Clearly, no other language is better suited than Mandarin for Taiwan's national and ethnic unity.

Perhaps notably only to concerned linguists, throughout the DPP government's campaign for its Mandarin-English bilingual movement, there have been sporadic voices from the deep green end of the political spectrum, e.g., the Taiwan Statebuilding Party (TSP), that expressed objection to Mandarin as the presumed first official language and tried to make the case for Taiwanese and other local languages instead (Taiwan Statebuilding, 2020).[3] Such faint voices have fallen on deaf ears among leaders in the green camp itself, let alone elsewhere. The decline and marginalization of the TSP in the 2024 election and the fact that Lai and his running mate used Mandarin far more than their two KMT opponents in televised policy presentations and debates are all meaningful indicators of Mandarin, or Taiwan Mandarin, to be accurate, as a language of national unity.

Finally, recall the report's suggestion for the government to set up a "National Bilingual and Bicultural Committee". That is exactly what the KMT government did as part of the efforts to promote Mandarin in Taiwan. We are, of course, referring to the National Language Promotion Committee, which operated under the MOE and was eventually dissolved in 2013 for the obvious reason that it had so successfully and completely fulfilled its mission (Khoo & Her, 2025).

4.3.4 Interim Summary

All arguments presented above converge on the most obvious fact that Mandarin is deeply entrenched as the *de facto* official language, and it is time to formally acknowledge this reality. A good analogy is a couple that have been living in a *de facto* marriage for decades. Families, friends, and the society at large treat them as a married couple, many unaware they are not legally married. Compared with a prototypical legally married couple, the only difference is that the former is without

[3] There are three inescapable ironies in this short article by Taiwan Statebuilding. First, the entire article is written in Mandarin Chinese, the very language that the article is fiercely opposed to. Second, there are at least 20 other local languages, yet the article calls for a 'bilingual' nation still, thus reducing the 20 local languages to merely one. Third, the article insists that 'The Mandarin language system is a fundamental obstacle to internationalization', completely oblivious to Mandarin's high-resource reality in the AI era.

a marriage license, which understandably may cause some inconveniences and misunderstandings at times. The most sensible once-and-for-all solution is surely to get a marriage license, in spite of the small number of families and friends that have been against the couple's relationship from the beginning. Ignoring the reality would not change the reality and may, in fact, enhance the reality instead. Mandarin in Taiwan is such a case.

More than 20 years ago, the then-Premier Si-Kun You urged Taiwan to follow the 112 countries that had designated official languages.[4] The current DPP government should seriously consider their faithful old comrade's advice, especially given the government and the President's implicit presumption that Mandarin is Taiwan's first official language in their language policy.

4.4 Expected Concerns and Objections

If the reader is convinced by the rational arguments given so far and thus considers changing Mandarin's status quo a straightforward matter, they would be much mistaken. There are good reasons why this issue was deliberately shunned by the MOC when promoting the legislation of national languages and why it was never formally proposed by any other political party. Anyone familiar with the politics and sociology of language in Taiwan would know that this is bound to be an emotionally charged issue. Some of those who still consider Mandarin the Chinese oppressor of the local languages would probably see this as rubbing salt in their never-ending wound and see such a proposal indignantly as the final straw.

Against that backdrop, as merely an individual scholar and a citizen, I shall, to the best of my ability, address the anticipated concerns and objections with rational arguments and must leave the mending of the wounded hearts to those with the necessary power and tools.

4.4.1 Mandarin Already a National Language

The most likely objection is due to the presumed equal legal status of Mandarin and all other local languages as national languages under the *DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL LANGUAGES ACT* (DNLA). In other words, why is it necessary to single out Mandarin and assign it an additional or different status as an official language? The immediate answer is that, as stated earlier repeatedly, Mandarin has been Taiwan's only *de facto* official language for decades already; no other national

[4]According to Wikipedia (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Official_language), the number of such countries is now 178.

languages have this status. More importantly, Mandarin's status as a national language is, in fact, questionable and should be challenged.

First, we must acknowledge the fact that the DNLA does not specify a list of national languages; instead, it only gives a definition of national languages. That Mandarin fits the definition is only an informal interpretation of the Ministry of Culture (MOC) in its 2022 *DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL LANGUAGE REPORT*.[5] Article 3 of the DNLA states, '"National language" as referred to in this Act shall mean the natural languages and sign languages used by the different ethnic groups in Taiwan.'

Note that the official English translation quoted above is sadly not accurate at all. First of all, the sign language (singular, not plural) referred to is specifically Taiwan Sign Language. In addition, the ethnic groups referred to must be Taiwan's *gùyǒu zúqún* [固有族群], hence only those ethnic groups that have *historically* or *traditionally* been living in Taiwan. The Southeast Asian ethnic groups that have immigrated to Taiwan in recent decades are thus not included. A more fitting translation is thus "native ethnic groups." While Taiwan Mandarin is indeed by now a localized or nativized variety of Mandarin, can we then deduce that the Chinese settlers after the war and their offspring constitute a native ethnic group? Here is the rationale given in the MOC report: "Its current population size and the number of generations can already be seen as the critical point for native groups." Yet, it can be easily argued otherwise, as population size is never a consideration, for some Indigenous groups, e.g., Hla'alua and Kanakanavu, have less than a thousand people,[6] and three to four generations in some 75 years can hardly be seen as native. Mandarin is thus a debatable borderline case at best in terms of the ethnic group it is associated with.

More importantly, having Mandarin as a national language dilutes the spirit of the DNLA. To start with, unlike other national languages, Mandarin needs no further protection, revitalization, or documentation. It is thus meaningless to have it as a national language. Furthermore, Article 4 of the DNLA states, "All national languages are equal, and citizens shall not be discriminated against or restricted in their use of national languages." If this equal status is to be taken seriously, and legally, there is no reason not to, then all 21 national languages immediately obtain the status as *de facto* languages, just like Mandarin. In the process of legislating the DNLA, Li-chiun Cheng [鄭麗君], the then-Minister of MOC, more than once stated emphatically to the public that the aim of this law was *not* to establish them as official languages for government use. The fact that no other languages have such a *de facto* status and are not likely to in the near future means all national languages are not equal, thus violating the law as long as Mandarin is regarded as a national language.

Finally, such a dilemma already presented itself in the MOE curriculum committee when deliberating the required language courses in the *CURRICULUM GUIDELINES OF 12-YEAR BASIC EDUCATION* (Lin, 2020). Article 4, item 2, of

[5] See https://www.moc.gov.tw/News_Content.aspx?n=167&s=95744

[6] See https://www.cip.gov.tw/en/index.html#tab_16

the DNLA states, "The central supervisory agency for education shall implement mandatory classes in national languages at all stages of compulsory education." The Guidelines already have Mandarin as a required course; thus, given Mandarin as a national language, no more courses on other national languages need to be offered to be compliant with the law. The fact that, in practice, upon further interpretation by the MOC, both Mandarin and at least another national language are required in basic education again reflects the reality that Mandarin sticks out like a sore thumb among national languages.

What I am suggesting here is thus something similar to the Canadian model, where English and French were legislated as official languages in the 1960s, based on the fact they already had the *de facto* status, and the adoption of the *INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES ACT* in 2019 implicitly confers the status of national languages on Indigenous languages (Hudon, 2023). Taiwan already has the DNLA formally recognizing national languages, additionally it also has the *INDEGENOUS LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT ACT* of 2017 for Indigenous languages (as discussed previously in Chap. 1). The next logical step is to confer the formal status of an official language to Mandarin, the *de facto* official language.

4.4.2 Mandarin: Language-as-Problem

A more substantial and more easily understandable concern is due to a long-standing view that sees Mandarin as a problem, an invasion, or an enemy even, to all other local languages (e.g., Ang, 2023; Tiu[n], 2020). A problem is to be corrected or resolved, and an enemy is to be pushed back or put down. To bestow Mandarin an official status seems to further strengthen its power and would make it more of a problem or an even more powerful force against the survival and revitalization of all other local languages.

In the field of language policy and planning (LPP), one of the most influential models is Ruiz's (1984) framework of three-way orientations: language-as-problem, language-as-rights, and language-as-resource and its recent extensions (e.g., Kaveh, 2023). As pointed out by Chang and Her (2024), in the DPP government's language policies, the role of Mandarin is ambivalent, with all three orientations gently stated. It is characterized as a resource like English in the *BILINGUAL POLICY*; its rights are protected by the DNLA as a national language, but it is considered a problem in promoting the use of other national languages. Mandarin is, indeed, rightfully all three.

Under our proposal for Mandarin as an official language, its rights, especially in basic education, are protected, and its resources, especially in the AI arena, will be enhanced. So, the only issue left to consider is whether it will become more of a problem or less. It is also possible that it will be uneventful and thus unimpactful; after all, the change is merely formal, not substantial, given that the language is and has been practically the official language. But this is highly improbable as there will

be reactions, huge reactions. I shall thus venture to argue that such a change may in fact make Mandarin less of a problem.

First, consider the DNLA, the most important law that guarantees the maintenance, revival, and development of all national languages. Logically and legally, Mandarin can either be or not be a national language. A choice must be made. Unfortunately, the MOC took the easy but dishonest way, which renders the concept of national languages vacuous. A robust elephant and a tiny river trout are lumped together for protection. This creates an effect that both can be ignored: if you must pretend not to see the elephant, you can certainly only pretend to see the trout. This is precisely what happened under the *2030 BILINGUAL NATION POLICY*, a policy fundamentally contradictory to the policy of national languages (e.g., Her, 2022a).

For Taiwan to be a *bilingual* nation by 2030, by definition, it will have two dominant languages of equal status: English and Mandarin in this case; yet, Taiwan, defined in accordance with the DNLA, is *multilingual* with at least 21 languages. Adding to this irony is the timing of the two: the legislation of the DNLA and the planning of the 2030 Bilingual Nation occurred simultaneously in early 2019 as if completely oblivious to one another. Under the same government, given two contradictory policies, if one is serious and real, the other can only be mere lip service at best (Chang & Her, 2024). The implementation of Mandarin-English bilingual education and English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) has been so aggressive that news related to this policy has dominated all other educational issues since 2019 till this day. The situation was so bad that the Taiwan Languages and Literature Society (TLLS) launched a public petition with four objections and two recommendations.[7]

TLLS' Four Objections to the *2030 BILINGUAL POLICY*

1. "Bilingual Nation" runs counter to the spirit of the Development of National Languages Act and disregards the reality of Taiwan as a multilingual society [「雙語國家」與「國家語言發展法」的精神背道而馳，嚴重忽視台灣是多元語言社會的事實].
2. "Bilingual Nation" is language planning with misguided values that surely threatens Taiwan's identity and undermines its linguistic ecology [「雙語國家」是價值錯亂的語言規劃，必然危及台灣的主體意識，破壞台灣的語言生態].
3. The planning of "Bilingual Nation" in the education system is unfeasible and destined to fail [「雙語國家」在教育體系中的規劃缺乏可行性，將會徒勞無功].
4. The "Bilingual Nation" policy breeds social injustice and language discrimination [「雙語國家」政策中的社會不公平及語言歧視問題].

TLLS' Two Recommendations on Language Planning

1. Adopt "Multilingual Taiwan, English-Friendly" as the goal and abandon the "English Nation" fantasy [以「多語臺灣，英語友善」為目標，摒棄「英語國家」的幻想].
2. Plan for a "Multilingual Nation" that puts indigenous languages first to achieve a sustainable linguistic ecology [規劃本土語言優先的「多語言國家」，達成生態永續的正面語言規劃].

[7] More than 1700 citizens endorsed the petition; among them, more than 400 are academics and teachers. See http://www.twlls.org.tw/NEWS_20220221.php

Dishonesty breeds dishonesty, the *2030 BILINGUAL NATION* policy is evidence of that. The DNLA can be and should be an honest progressive language policy, but the ill-advised inclusion of Mandarin impairs its spirit and undermines its seriousness. The position advocated here requires honesty, and honesty is the best policy. Removing Mandarin from the DNLA's protection would streamline the law's implementation and enforcement and thus benefit all legitimate national languages. An honest language policy also means that Taiwan recognizes Mandarin as a *de jure* official language.

4.4.3 *The Mathew Effect or the Catfish Effect?*

If history can tell us anything, it is that the linguistic dynamic in a multilingual society like Taiwan is continually changing. The DNLA and the *2030 BILINGUAL POLICY* are the best examples. This article proposes another change. If this change does materialize, some will worry about the possible consequent Matthew effect: "For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath." (Matthew 25:29, King James version). The concern is that Mandarin may thus become even more detrimental to other Taiwanese languages.

However, as I have argued above, the consequence may more likely be the opposite, for removing Mandarin from national languages frees up the DNLA and allows it to exert its full legal potential. As stated at the beginning of the article, though Mandarin has been the only *de facto* official language, we only argue for it to be *an* official language and have no intention to argue against any other language. Proponents of any other language may do the same and put forth their arguments for the people and government to consider. Thus, there may well be a Catfish effect instead.

> In Norway, live sardines are several times more expensive than frozen ones, and are valued for better texture and flavor. It was said that only one ship could bring live sardines home, and the shipmaster kept his method a secret. After he died, people found that there was one catfish in the tank. The catfish keeps swimming, and the sardines try to avoid this predator. This increased level of activity keeps the sardines active instead of becoming sedentary, according to Vince from the *Catfish* film. (Catfish effect, Wikipedia)

I am of the view that the animosity and bitterness some of my fellow citizens, academics, and politicians hold against Mandarin will never go away unless the respective roles of Taiwan Mandarin and Taiwanese are reversed.[8] Yet, such sentiments and views are often hidden beneath the surface, away from the public eye. My

[8] Some extremists characterize Taiwan Mandarin as a Chinese language by calling it *Zhongguoyu* (中國語) or *Zhongyu* (中語) for short, literally 'Chinese language'. Some even call it *Zhinayu* (支那語) or *Zhiyu* (支語) for short, purposely using the derogatory term *Zhina* (支那), a term used by the Japanese when it ravaged China and massacred tens of millions of Chinese during the Second Sino-Japanese War.

proposal, if stirring the pot enough, will at least generate discussions and debates, where different views, moderate or extreme, can all be presented for public scrutiny. That in itself is a healthy sign of a vibrant democracy. Should the proposal be legally adopted, it will also set a concrete path for other languages to strive for.

4.5 Suggestions and Conclusions

This article proposes that Taiwan should change the *de facto* status of Mandarin as an official language to that of *de jure*. I have presented various arguments for the proposal and also attempted to answer the likely objections. The conclusion after deliberations is that honesty is the best policy, and the honest thing to do is to have Mandarin as an official language, not a national language, so that other local languages can be properly protected as national languages under the *DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL LANGUAGES ACT*.

Legally, there are two options for implementation if Mandarin is to be a *de jure* official language, either by a constitutional amendment or by a special law. Again, I recommend the Canadian model to legislate a special law similar to its *OFFICIAL LANGUAGES ACT* (Hudon, 2023), but a crucial feature of the law should be room for additional official languages. Surely, a lot of things need to happen prior to legislation.

In the Legislative Yuan, a draft bill of the *OFFICIAL LANGUAGES ACT* needs to be proposed by the executive branch of the government, a legislative party caucus, or an individual legislator with endorsement by at least 14 other legislators. The final route is via a national referendum, which, in my view, is the ideal venue, but it is also understandably the most challenging. Hence, I suggest the most pragmatic approach: a proposal by either a party caucus or an individual legislator with enough endorsements. Either way, intense lobbying and clear signs of support from academia and public opinion in the media are needed prior to the proposal and afterward.

To raise public awareness and foster consensus, concerned parties should hold conferences or panel discussions on this issue. The most appropriate professional organizations are the two most important societies of linguists: Taiwan Languages and Literature Society (TLLS) and the Linguistic Society of Taiwan (LST). It is crucial for language experts to find common ground first before the public and the politicians can get on board.

To gain national exposure and support from the government, I suggest that the best public forum for this discussion to happen is the *DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL LANGUAGES CONVENTION*, which, according to the DNLA and its Enforcement Rules shall in principle be held every 2 years and ad hoc meetings must be convened if needed. Six years have passed since the announcement of the DNLA on January 9, 2019, and the first convention was held in 2021 and the second

one in 2024.[9] It would be ideal to have a special session devoted to the legal status of Mandarin, the elephant, in the next meeting.

To conclude, after all that has been said regarding the proposal to change Mandarin's legal status quo, knowing the politics of language in Taiwan and the perpetual hypocrisy behind the language policies and the politically correct fancy rhetoric, my only humble wish is that this article can generate some honest discussions and hopefully also healthy, rational debates.

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