

## REVIEW

# Languages and the Internationalization of Higher Education in China: A Review from a Sociolinguistic Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Language plays a central role in shaping the internationalization of higher education, particularly in non-Anglo-phone contexts such as China. This systematic review examines how language functions as both a medium and a symbol in China's evolving internationalization agenda, drawing on literature published between 2014 and 2024 from Scopus, Web of Science, and China National Knowledge Infrastructure. Guided by five thematic research questions, the review explores the role of English, the promotion of Mandarin as a global language, multilingual practices in internationalized universities, the influence of language policy on academic mobility, and the tension between linguistic nationalism and globalization. The findings reveal that while English remains the dominant language for academic communication and policy implementation, its effectiveness is often hindered by gaps between institutional goals and pedagogical realities. At the same time, Mandarin is strategically promoted as a vehicle of cultural diplomacy, contributing to China's soft power while complicating language planning for international students. Multilingual practices, though under-recognized, are prevalent in classrooms and informal interactions, indicating a need for more inclusive language policies. Language proficiency requirements serve as both enablers and barriers to academic mobility, depending on institutional support and policy alignment. The review concludes that sustainable internationalization in China requires a more balanced and context-sensitive language strategy that embraces linguistic diversity while supporting academic equity. Limitations and future research directions are also discussed.

**Keywords:** Internationalization; Higher Education; Language Policies; Sociolinguistics; China

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### ARTICLE INFO

Received: 1 April 2025 | Revised: 12 April 2025 | Accepted: 22 April 2025 | Published Online: 23 April 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i5.9309>

### CITATION

Tang, M., Maat, S.M., Azman, N., 2025. Languages and the Internationalization of Higher Education in China: A Review from a Sociolinguistic Perspective. *Forum for Linguistic Studies*. 7(5): 98–113. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i5.9309>

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# 1. Introduction

In the past two decades, China has positioned itself as a formidable force in the global higher education landscape. As part of its broader efforts to project soft power, attract international talent, and increase its global academic influence, the internationalization of higher education has become a national strategic priority<sup>[1]</sup>. This has been supported by top-down initiatives such as the *Double First-Class University Plan*, the expansion of transnational education programs, and the growing presence of Chinese universities in international rankings<sup>[2]</sup>. Central to these efforts is the role of language, which is not only instrumental in facilitating international engagement but also deeply symbolic of China's national identity, political ideology, and cultural outreach. In the context of internationalization, language operates as a sociopolitical and ideological medium<sup>[3,4]</sup>, shaping who can participate, how knowledge is accessed and communicated, and what values are projected outward.

Despite growing academic interest in China's global education strategy, the sociolinguistic dimensions of internationalization remain underexplored. Existing studies have often treated language policy as a functional or logistical matter—such as in curriculum design or student support<sup>[5–7]</sup>—without critically examining the broader sociolinguistic implications. Where language is studied, research tends to be fragmented, addressing specific issues such as the rise of English-Medium Instruction (EMI)<sup>[8,9]</sup> or the promotion of Mandarin in isolation<sup>[10,11]</sup>. There remains a lack of systematic, integrative reviews that examine how language policies, language ideologies, and multilingual practices intersect with and shape the process of internationalization in Chinese higher education.

To address this gap, this article presents a systematic review of the literature on language policies and the internationalization of higher education in China, informed by a sociolinguistic perspective. It focuses on five inter-related thematic areas, each selected for their conceptual and policy significance in understanding the language-internationalization nexus:

- The Role of English in Internationalization: English has become the dominant language of global academia, and its adoption in Chinese higher educa-

tion is central to internationalization strategies<sup>[12]</sup>. However, the increasing institutional reliance on English raises critical questions about linguistic hierarchies, academic access, and identity negotiation<sup>[13,14]</sup>. Reviewing this area is crucial for understanding the language ideologies embedded in China's pursuit of global academic prestige.

- Mandarin as a Global Language: While embracing English, China also seeks to elevate Mandarin as a language of global communication and scholarship<sup>[15]</sup>, particularly through Confucius Institutes, regional education partnerships, and Belt and Road education initiatives<sup>[16,17]</sup>. This dual-linguistic ambition reflects a unique case of linguistic dualism in internationalization<sup>[18]</sup>. Reviewing this area helps illuminate how language policy is linked to national identity, soft power, and cultural diplomacy.
- Multilingual Practices in Internationalized Universities: The increasing internationalization of Chinese universities has produced linguistically diverse academic environments. Yet institutional responses to this diversity vary, often lacking coherent multilingual policies<sup>[19,20]</sup>. A review of multilingual practices—especially in EMI and transnational classrooms<sup>[21]</sup>—can shed light on the everyday language strategies that students and faculty adopt, and on how institutions (in)formally support or constrain these practices.
- Language Policy and Academic Mobility: Language plays a decisive role in facilitating or constraining academic mobility for both inbound and outbound students and scholars<sup>[22]</sup>. Inadequate language support structures, restrictive linguistic requirements, and the privileging of certain languages over others can create linguistic barriers to participation<sup>[18,23]</sup>. Reviewing this area helps reveal how language policy affects the flows of people and knowledge in China's higher education system.
- Linguistic Nationalism vs. Globalization: China's simultaneous embrace of global academic norms and protection of national linguistic sovereignty<sup>[14]</sup> presents an ideological tension in language policy.

This theme addresses how language policies negotiate this tension <sup>[24]</sup>, and what it reveals about the broader values and priorities of Chinese higher education <sup>[4]</sup>. A review of this area contributes to understanding the interplay between global pressures and national agendas in language governance.

In light of these focal areas, the review is guided by the following research questions:

- How is English positioned in Chinese higher education policies related to internationalization, and what roles does it play?
- In what ways is Mandarin being promoted as a global language in higher education, and what are the policy rationales?
- What multilingual practices are emerging in internationalized Chinese universities, and how are they addressed (or not) in institutional language policies?
- How do language policies influence academic mobility to and from Chinese higher education institutions?
- How do China's language policies navigate the tension between linguistic nationalism and the imperatives of globalization?

By synthesizing existing literature along these five dimensions, this review aims to advance a more nuanced understanding of the sociolinguistic dynamics underlying the internationalization of Chinese higher education. It contributes to both theoretical debates on language and globalization, and practical discussions on policy development and institutional planning. In doing so, the review also identifies gaps in the literature and proposes directions for future research, especially in the under-theorized areas of multilingualism and ideological contestation in language policy.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. English Dominance and Multilingual Realities in Internationalized Higher Education

The internationalization of higher education has become a central agenda for universities worldwide, as

institutions strive to increase global engagement, attract international students and scholars, and enhance their visibility in international rankings <sup>[25]</sup>. Within this process, language occupies a central yet often under-theorized role, operating simultaneously as a medium of communication, a marker of identity, and a symbol of geopolitical power <sup>[26]</sup>. Language is not only a vehicle for knowledge transmission but also a gatekeeper that structures access to academic capital and participation in global knowledge economies. The most prominent linguistic feature of internationalization is the global rise of English as the dominant academic language, often institutionalized through EMI programs and English-language publication requirements <sup>[27]</sup>. For many higher education systems, particularly in non-Anglophone countries, adopting English is seen as a strategy to boost competitiveness, foster international collaboration, and attract foreign students <sup>[28]</sup>. Yet, scholars have raised concerns about the implications of English dominance, including the marginalization of local languages, the erosion of cultural identity, and the reproduction of global inequalities <sup>[29,30]</sup>. The adoption of EMI has also sparked debates about educational quality, student comprehension, and teacher preparedness <sup>[31]</sup>, especially when implementation lacks adequate linguistic and pedagogical support.

While English dominates academic globalization, there is increasing recognition of the multilingual realities of internationalized campuses. Researchers have documented how students and faculty engage in multilingual practices—including code-switching, translanguaging, and language accommodation strategies—as they navigate complex linguistic ecologies in classrooms and research environments <sup>[32,33]</sup>. However, institutional language policies often fail to reflect or support these practices, privileging monolingual ideologies that associate academic legitimacy with English-only instruction <sup>[34]</sup>. This disjuncture has prompted calls for more inclusive language policies that recognize the value of multilingual repertoires and culturally responsive pedagogies.

### 2.2. Language Policy, Mobility, and Power in Global Higher Education

Another line of scholarship has explored how language policies intersect with national strategies in global education. In some contexts, governments promote not

only the adoption of English but also the global diffusion of their national languages as part of academic diplomacy and soft power initiatives. Institutions such as Germany's DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) <sup>[35]</sup>, France's Alliance Française <sup>[36]</sup>, and China's Confucius Institutes <sup>[37]</sup> exemplify how language is leveraged for both cultural promotion and academic collaboration. These policies reflect broader tensions between embracing global norms and protecting national linguistic and cultural identities—what scholars term the “glocalization” of higher education <sup>[38]</sup>. Furthermore, the relationship between language and academic mobility has attracted scholarly attention. Language proficiency is a crucial determinant of international student flows, faculty migration, and the success of cross-border education programs <sup>[39,40]</sup>. While English proficiency facilitates access to globally dominant institutions, limited support for other languages may restrict mobility or produce linguistic hierarchies among international students. Scholars have also examined the impact of language demands on the quality of learning, equity of participation, and well-being of mobile academics and students <sup>[7,28]</sup>.

From a sociolinguistic standpoint, language policies in higher education are not merely administrative instruments but reflect ideological positions about what counts as legitimate knowledge, who is entitled to produce and access it, and how academic hierarchies are reproduced or challenged <sup>[41]</sup>. Theoretical frameworks such as linguistic capital <sup>[42]</sup>, language <sup>[43]</sup>, and critical language policy <sup>[44]</sup> have been instrumental in understanding the symbolic and political functions of language in the internationalization agenda. Despite these growing insights, there is still a need for more context-sensitive studies, particularly in regions such as Asia, Latin America, and Africa <sup>[45]</sup>, where global pressures intersect with unique historical, linguistic, and political conditions. While much attention has been paid to European and Anglophone settings, non-Western contexts offer important perspectives on how language policy mediates internationalization in diverse and sometimes conflicting ways.

### 3. Methodology

This systematic review adopts the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework to ensure methodological transpar-

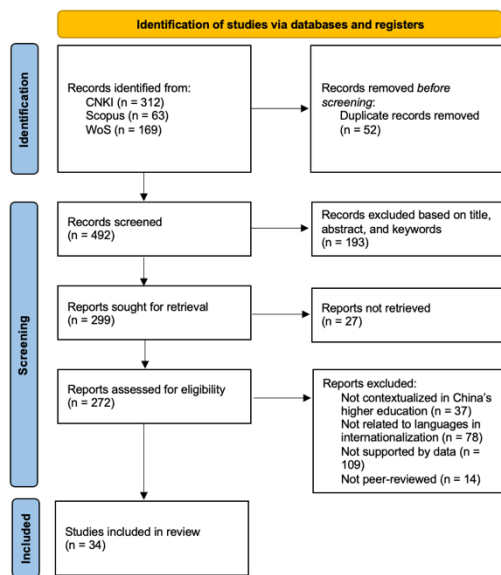
ency and comprehensiveness in identifying, screening, and synthesizing relevant studies. The review aims to critically examine the role of language in the internationalization of higher education in China from a sociolinguistic perspective, focusing on five interrelated research questions. These include how English is positioned in higher education policies, how Mandarin is promoted globally, what multilingual practices exist in internationalized universities, how language policies influence academic mobility, and how language planning navigates tensions between nationalism and globalization.

To gather relevant literature, the review employed a systematic search strategy across three major databases: CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), Scopus, and Web of Science (WoS). These databases were selected to ensure the inclusion of both Chinese-language and international scholarly perspectives, thus enabling a comprehensive and balanced synthesis. CNKI is the largest and most authoritative academic database in China and provides access to journal articles, dissertations, and conference proceedings published in Chinese. Scopus and WoS, on the other hand, are globally recognized for their extensive coverage of peer-reviewed literature in the humanities, social sciences, and education, which are essential for capturing international scholarship, including critical, theoretical, and comparative studies related to language policy and higher education internationalization.

The search was limited to literature published between 2014 and 2024 to capture developments over the past decade, a period that coincides with China's intensification of internationalization efforts through initiatives such as the *Belt and Road* education framework and the *Double First-Class University Plan* <sup>[18]</sup>. To ensure the search was broad enough to include all potentially relevant literature, a combination of keywords and Boolean operators was used, with the search strings, both in English and the Chinese counterparts, including: “internationalization” AND “higher education” AND “China” AND (“language” OR “language policy”). Consequently, as shown in **Figure 1**, 312 records were retrieved from CNKI, 63 from Scopus, and 169 from Web of Science, resulting in a total of 544 records. After removing 52 duplicates, 492 records remained for further screening.

These records were first screened by reviewing their

titles, abstracts, and keywords to determine whether they broadly addressed the intersection of language and the internationalization of higher education in China. As a result, 193 records were excluded for not meeting the basic inclusion criteria, such as focusing on unrelated education levels, language acquisition without policy implications, or internationalization without reference to language issues. Subsequently, the remaining 299 records were retrieved. Of these, 27 full-text articles could not be retrieved, leaving 272 records to be assessed for eligibility.



**Figure 1.** Identification of Studies based on PRISMA.

The following inclusion criteria were adopted: (1) the study must be situated within the context of Chinese higher education, either at the national policy level or within specific institutional settings; (2) it must explicitly address language-related themes within the broader framework of internationalization; (3) it must be a research article supported by either empirical data or secondary data; and (4) it must be a peer-reviewed journal article, book chapter, or formal academic report. Studies that did not meet these criteria—such as those focused solely on classroom language teaching without institutional or policy relevance, or those discussing general internationalization issues without engaging with language—were excluded from the final synthesis. Consequently, 37 records were excluded for not focusing on Chinese higher education, 78 for not addressing language-related issues, 109 for lacking empirical or secondary data, and 14 for being non-peer-reviewed grey

literature.

The remaining 34 records underwent a quality assurance check, during which the research team assessed whether each study demonstrated sufficient academic rigor. Particular attention was paid to whether the articles presented clearly articulated research objectives and whether the findings were scientifically derived through appropriate methodological procedures. Studies were evaluated based on the coherence between their stated aims, data sources, analytical strategies, and conclusions. Following this review, all the records were believed to be high-quality and were retained for thematic analysis, which was done as per the foci of the review. A matrix that summarizes the basic information of the selected articles is provided in **Table A1**.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. The Role of English in Internationalization

The literature reveals that English plays a pivotal and multifaceted role in the internationalization of higher education in China. One consistent finding is that English has become the *de facto* lingua franca in academic contexts, serving not only as a medium of instruction but also as a benchmark for academic quality and international credibility. EMI is widely promoted as a strategic tool to enhance institutional global competitiveness, facilitate international research collaborations, and attract both inbound and outbound student mobility<sup>[46–49]</sup>. Scholars highlight that EMI policies in China are structured to support bidirectional internationalization—preparing Chinese students for participation in global academic and professional arenas while simultaneously catering to the expectations of international students entering Chinese institutions<sup>[50,51]</sup>. However, while EMI is conceptually aligned with China's global aspirations<sup>[52]</sup>, its practical implementation remains uneven and fraught with challenges. Several studies identify a persistent gap between policy intentions and classroom realities. On the surface, EMI is associated with increased academic rigor and global communication readiness; yet in practice, issues such as limited access to qualified English-proficient instructors, inconsistencies in course quality, and inadequate pedagogical adaptation to multilingual classrooms often undermine its effectiveness<sup>[46,52,53]</sup>. In many cases,



content teachers struggle to balance subject knowledge delivery with language demands, leading to compromised instructional clarity and student engagement.

Beyond logistical issues, deeper ideological tensions are embedded in EMI policies. Research indicates that the dominance of English as the default academic language often leads to the marginalization of Mandarin and other local linguistic resources <sup>[46,54]</sup>. This monolingual orientation may reinforce linguistic hierarchies, positioning English as the sole gateway to global knowledge while sidelining the value of linguistic diversity <sup>[55]</sup>. Such ideological assumptions can have consequences not only for classroom interaction but also for broader academic identity construction among both faculty and students, particularly in institutions where bilingual or multilingual realities are common.

Moreover, English language proficiency is considered a critical determinant of student success in transnational and EMI-based programs, with research indicating a positive relationship between students' English proficiency and their academic achievement, suggesting that insufficient language readiness can act as a barrier to full academic participation <sup>[54,56–58]</sup>. These findings have prompted calls for a more integrated approach to language and content learning, emphasizing the need for pre-sessional English support, in-course language scaffolding, and professional development for EMI instructors. However, some scholars caution against treating EMI as a universal solution for internationalization. They argue that the adoption of EMI should be context-sensitive and pedagogically sound, rather than driven solely by the desire for institutional prestige or global rankings <sup>[59,60]</sup>. There is growing recognition that EMI policies must be supported by a coherent institutional language strategy that includes both language policy planning and the development of inclusive, multilingual pedagogies. Without such support, EMI risks becoming a symbolic gesture of internationalization rather than a meaningful facilitator of global academic integration.

## 4.2. The Rising Role of Mandarin

The findings indicate that Mandarin is increasingly being positioned as a global language within China's higher education internationalization strategy. Rather than solely relying on English as the medium of global academic exchange, Chinese policymakers and university admin-

istrators are actively promoting Mandarin to enhance the nation's cultural influence and soft power <sup>[61]</sup>. Several studies highlight that initiatives such as the establishment of Confucius Institutes abroad <sup>[62]</sup>, the expansion of Chinese-medium instruction programs <sup>[63]</sup>, and curriculum reforms that foreground Chinese cultural content <sup>[48,60,64]</sup> are central to this effort. These measures are not merely linguistic adjustments, but broader ideological instruments intended to create an academic environment that affirms China's civilizational heritage, differentiates its higher education system, and consolidates its soft power strategy. By offering Mandarin as both a language of instruction and an academic subject, institutions aim to attract international students who are not only seeking educational advancement, but also cultural immersion.

Research reveals that the promotion of Mandarin in academic settings contributes to the construction of a distinct educational brand, which positions Chinese higher education as both globally competitive and culturally unique. For instance, while many international students are initially drawn to Chinese universities through EMI programs <sup>[46,50,52]</sup>, a significant number gradually engage with Mandarin—either formally through coursework or informally through social integration. There is a growing shift, particularly in social sciences and humanities programs, towards incorporating Mandarin-based courses that emphasize Chinese history, philosophy, political thought, and contemporary society <sup>[48,51,65,66]</sup>. These courses not only support China's agenda of cultural diplomacy but also shape international students' perceptions of China as an intellectual and cultural authority in its own right.

This dual-language approach, where EMI and CMI coexist, allows Chinese institutions to balance the pragmatic need for international academic communication with the desire to preserve and project indigenous linguistic and cultural values. Furthermore, this coexistence supports bilingual or multilingual competence among students, contributing to more inclusive and diverse academic exchanges <sup>[57]</sup>. Findings suggest that integrating Mandarin into internationalized curricula enhances students' intercultural competence, deepens their understanding of local contexts, and fosters greater engagement with Chinese society <sup>[60,63,67]</sup>. In particular, international students who study in Mandarin—or alongside Chinese peers in bilingual pro-

grams—report stronger social integration, more meaningful cross-cultural interaction, and a richer overall academic experience.

However, the implementation of Mandarin as a global academic language also faces notable challenges. One major concern is the lack of standardization in Mandarin instruction across institutions and programs. Variations in course design, teaching quality, and language expectations create inconsistencies that affect learning outcomes for international students<sup>[54,68]</sup>. Moreover, many teaching materials remain rooted in domestic pedagogical norms and are not always appropriately adapted for diverse international learners<sup>[61,69,70]</sup>. In addition, the ideological positioning of Mandarin as a global language is not always fully aligned with students' motivations or expectations<sup>[47]</sup>. Some international students still prioritize English as the language of global mobility and academic prestige<sup>[60,71]</sup>, which can lead to tensions between institutional language policy and student demand. This mismatch suggests a need for more nuanced and flexible language planning that accommodates diverse linguistic goals while still advancing China's soft power agenda.

### 4.3. Multilingual Practices in Internationalized Universities

The findings indicate that multilingual practices are emerging as a distinctive feature in internationalized Chinese universities, reflecting both institutional policies and everyday communicative dynamics. Research shows that, despite the dominant emphasis on EMI for global engagement, a variety of languages—including Mandarin and, increasingly, additional languages—are used in classroom interactions, extracurricular activities, and informal communication<sup>[50,53,60,66,72]</sup>. This multilingual landscape is marked by frequent code-switching and translanguaging practices<sup>[56,65,73]</sup>, where students and faculty fluidly move between languages to negotiate meaning, express identity, and facilitate learning.

Empirical studies reveal that international students, particularly those from non-English speaking backgrounds, often adapt by incorporating Mandarin as a means of better integration into the host community<sup>[61,63,65]</sup>. At the same time, domestic students and faculty are engaging in hybrid linguistic practices that blend English and Mandarin<sup>[46,53,72]</sup>,

highlighting a tension between official language policies and the lived realities of multilingual communication. Although universities have instituted EMI policies to standardize instruction for internationalization, the spontaneous multilingual practices observed in classrooms<sup>[49,55]</sup> underscore the necessity of rethinking these policies to accommodate linguistic diversity. Thus, these findings suggest that multilingual practices in Chinese higher education are not only a response to global academic pressures but also an avenue for fostering intercultural competence. They underscore the need for further research and policy innovation to support effective multilingual pedagogy, ensuring that the benefits of internationalization are accessible to all participants in these diverse educational settings.

### 4.4. Language Policy and Academic Mobility

The findings reveal that language policy is a critical and multifaceted driver of academic mobility in the internationalization of China's higher education. On one hand, policies that emphasize EMI<sup>[46,50,52]</sup> and high English proficiency standards<sup>[54,56,58]</sup> are designed to position Chinese institutions within global academic networks. These policies not only attract international students by signaling high-quality, globally competitive education but also prepare domestic students for outbound mobility by equipping them with the language skills needed to compete internationally. Empirical studies demonstrate that stringent language proficiency requirements function as both a pull factor and a gatekeeping mechanism. For international students, robust EMI programs serve as a major incentive to enroll<sup>[46,52]</sup>, as they provide access to courses taught in a widely recognized academic language. However, these same policies can also become a barrier for prospective students who may possess strong academic credentials but lack sufficient English proficiency<sup>[74]</sup>, thus limiting the diversity of the student body and potentially reinforcing existing inequalities.

Furthermore, the literature underscores significant discrepancies in how language policies are implemented across different institutions. Some universities offer comprehensive language support services—such as preparatory courses, tutoring, and integrated language development programs<sup>[55,68]</sup>—that facilitate smoother academic transitions for both international and domestic students. In con-

trast, institutions with less robust support tend to report higher rates of academic challenges and lower levels of student satisfaction among mobile populations<sup>[73]</sup>. This inconsistency often leads to varied experiences for students, impacting not only their academic performance but also their overall integration into the campus community.

Moreover, language policies in China's higher education are frequently caught in a tension between global competitiveness and the preservation of local linguistic identities. While the drive toward EMI is intended to foster internationalization, it sometimes sidelines domestic languages and cultural expressions<sup>[75]</sup>, which can diminish the educational experience and restrict opportunities for those who excel in bilingual or multilingual contexts<sup>[56,57]</sup>. As a result, some scholars argue for a more balanced approach<sup>[59,71,76]</sup>—one that leverages the advantages of global language skills while simultaneously nurturing domestic linguistic competencies and cultural heritage. Thus, effective language policy is essential for promoting equitable academic mobility. A well-structured language policy should not only establish high proficiency standards to ensure academic success in international settings but also incorporate supportive measures that bridge the gap between policy intent and practical implementation. By doing so, institutions can enhance both inbound and outbound mobility, foster inclusive internationalization, and ultimately strengthen China's position in the global higher education landscape.

#### 4.5. Linguistic Nationalism vs. Globalization

The literature indicates that the tension between linguistic nationalism and globalization in China's higher education internationalization is both complex and multifaceted. On one side, there is a deliberate, strategic promotion of Mandarin as an instrument of cultural soft power and national identity. Chinese policymakers and educational institutions actively emphasize Mandarin and the incorporation of Chinese cultural content in curricula—to assert a distinct national narrative and enhance global cultural influence<sup>[59,71]</sup>. These initiatives are intended to create a uniquely Chinese academic environment that not only attracts international students seeking exposure to Chinese language and culture<sup>[66]</sup> but also reinforces domestic cultural pride and continuity<sup>[77]</sup>. Conversely, globalization demands that Chinese institutions conform to international

standards by adopting EMI and other globally recognized educational practices. EMI is deployed as a practical tool for integrating into global academic networks, enhancing research visibility, and ensuring that graduates are competitive in an increasingly interconnected world<sup>[46]</sup>. However, the simultaneous promotion of EMI alongside Mandarin-oriented initiatives has led to a dual-track system<sup>[57,78]</sup>. This system reflects an ongoing ideological struggle where the push for global engagement sometimes overshadows efforts to preserve local linguistic and cultural values, and vice versa.

Empirical studies reveal that this duality is experienced differently by various stakeholders. Domestic students often face conflicting expectations: on one hand, they are encouraged to develop strong English proficiency to compete internationally; on the other, they are expected to embrace and uphold Chinese cultural heritage<sup>[59,79]</sup>. International students, meanwhile, encounter a curriculum and campus environment that oscillates between global standards and intense national cultural orientation<sup>[47,61]</sup>. This can lead to identity ambiguities, as these students navigate between the demands of an EMI-dominated academic program and the pervasive presence of Chinese linguistic and cultural elements in both formal and informal settings.

Furthermore, research underscores that the ideological underpinnings of linguistic nationalism are not merely defensive but are also proactively employed to reshape global perceptions of China's academic and cultural prowess. The strategic promotion of Mandarin is seen as a way to counterbalance the dominance of English in global academia<sup>[76]</sup> and to offer an alternative, indigenous perspective on knowledge production and cultural expression<sup>[48,61]</sup>. Yet, the practical challenges of harmonizing these two imperatives—global competitiveness and cultural preservation—remain significant. Inconsistencies in policy implementation and gaps between top-down directives and classroom realities often hinder the achievement of a fully integrated language environment<sup>[55]</sup>. Therefore, the findings suggest that addressing the tension between linguistic nationalism and globalization is critical for the sustainable internationalization of Chinese higher education<sup>[59]</sup>. A balanced language policy should leverage the advantages of global English proficiency while simultaneously nurturing and projecting the intrinsic value of Mandarin and Chinese



cultural heritage. Achieving this balance is essential not only for enhancing the global appeal and competitiveness of Chinese institutions but also for fostering an inclusive academic environment that honors both international standards and national identity.

#### 4.6. Synthesis

The findings across the preceding sections reveal that language plays a profoundly strategic, ideological, and pedagogical role in the internationalization of China's higher education. English continues to dominate as the language of academic mobility, global prestige, and instructional practice through EMI. However, the implementation of EMI policies often suffers from practical limitations, including teacher readiness, language proficiency gaps, and a lack of institutional support, raising questions about equity and effectiveness. At the same time, Mandarin is increasingly promoted as a global language, not only to preserve national identity but also to project China's soft power and cultivate a culturally distinctive academic brand.

Yet, rather than operating in isolation, English and Mandarin coexist in a complex dual-track system. Multilingual practices—including translanguaging and code-switching—are organically emerging within classrooms and campuses, reflecting both institutional realities and students' adaptive strategies. These practices demonstrate the inadequacy of monolingual language policies and the need for more inclusive, flexible approaches that recognize the pedagogical value of linguistic diversity.

Language policy also plays a crucial role in shaping academic mobility. While English proficiency is a gatekeeper for global engagement, inconsistencies in language support services across institutions may reinforce existing inequalities. Simultaneously, an overemphasis on EMI can marginalize local languages and cultural knowledge, whereas the strong promotion of Mandarin may not always align with international students' goals. This ideological tension—between linguistic nationalism and the imperatives of globalization—underpins much of the current policy landscape. It manifests in contradictory practices that attempt to balance global competitiveness with national cultural promotion, often leaving both students and teachers navigating ambiguous expectations. Addressing this tension requires not only clearer and more coherent

institutional language strategies but also empirical research that informs context-sensitive, equitable, and pedagogically sound language policy development.

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this review illuminate the central, yet complex, role of language in the internationalization of higher education in China. As Chinese higher education providers continue to scale up their global engagement, language policies and practices emerge not merely as operational tools but as key mediators of educational equity, cultural identity, and institutional transformation. The synthesis of literature across five interrelated themes—English in internationalization, Mandarin as a global language, multilingual practices, language policy and academic mobility, and the tension between linguistic nationalism and globalization—reveals both convergence and contradictions in how language shapes China's global academic ambitions.

First, the role of English as the dominant academic language reflects broader global trends in higher education. In China, EMI is positioned as a gateway to global academic legitimacy<sup>[46]</sup>, serving institutional goals of competitiveness, research visibility, and international mobility<sup>[50,52]</sup>. However, the gap between policy rhetoric and classroom realities remains wide. Despite efforts to implement EMI broadly, many institutions struggle with resource constraints, unprepared faculty, and inconsistent pedagogical quality<sup>[51,54,58]</sup>. These implementation gaps suggest that EMI, while symbolically powerful, can fall short of delivering inclusive or effective education without adequate support structures. Moreover, the monolingual orientation of EMI risks sidelining local linguistic resources, contributing to the erosion of linguistic diversity within Chinese universities<sup>[57]</sup>. This finding aligns with global concerns over English linguistic imperialism<sup>[30,31]</sup> and calls for more context-sensitive EMI practices that are responsive to local needs and multilingual realities.

Simultaneously, the promotion of Mandarin as a global academic language<sup>[61,63,65]</sup> reveals China's strategic attempt to rebalance the linguistic order of international education. Mandarin's growing role—through Chinese-medium instruction, Confucius Institutes, and culturally embedded curricula—positions Chinese higher education

as a culturally distinctive and self-assertive force in global academia. This reflects a clear departure from the Western-centric model of internationalization and advances China's soft power objectives <sup>[55,76]</sup>. However, this strategy is not without challenges. The lack of standardization in Mandarin instruction <sup>[65]</sup>, the inadequacy of culturally adapted materials <sup>[66]</sup>, and the divergence between institutional priorities and international student expectations <sup>[47]</sup> all point to the fragility of Mandarin's global linguistic project. For Mandarin to gain wider traction, institutions must invest in pedagogical innovation, intercultural training, and curriculum design that aligns with international learners' diverse linguistic profiles and motivations.

The findings on multilingual practices expose the vibrant yet under-recognized linguistic diversity in internationalized Chinese campuses. While EMI policies dominate official discourse, in practice, students and faculty engage in dynamic multilingual communication <sup>[49,65,72,73]</sup>—switching between Mandarin, English, and other languages to co-construct meaning and foster inclusion. These practices challenge monolingual policy assumptions and highlight the necessity for institutional recognition and support of translanguaging and hybrid language use. As multilingualism becomes the norm rather than the exception in international education <sup>[25,34]</sup>, China's higher education institutions are at a crossroads: whether to reinforce rigid language hierarchies or to embrace multilingual pedagogies that validate diverse linguistic repertoires and promote intercultural competence.

In relation to academic mobility, language policy serves as both a facilitator and a barrier. High English proficiency requirements <sup>[51,56,58]</sup>, while signaling academic quality, can exclude otherwise qualified international students and limit access for less privileged learners. Conversely, the lack of adequate language support for inbound and outbound students can impede academic integration and success <sup>[46,50,58]</sup>. These findings point to a fundamental paradox: language policies intended to promote internationalization may inadvertently reinforce inequality unless paired with inclusive pedagogical frameworks. Effective language policy must, therefore, strike a balance between maintaining rigorous standards and ensuring equitable access to international educational opportunities. Moreover, the ideological tension between linguistic nationalism

and globalization emerges as a defining feature of China's internationalization agenda. On one hand, the strategic elevation of Mandarin embodies a nationalist discourse of cultural sovereignty and epistemic independence <sup>[61,63,65]</sup>. On the other, the widespread adoption of EMI reflects a pragmatic adaptation to global academic norms <sup>[46,50,52]</sup>. The coexistence of these parallel logics—asserting national identity while seeking global integration—creates a dual-track system that is both empowering and conflicted. This mirrors broader global debates about the role of language in constructing national imaginaries within an increasingly transnational academic landscape <sup>[44]</sup>. To navigate this tension, China's higher education system must develop integrated language policies that promote multilingual competence, respect linguistic diversity, and align with both local values and global standards.

Overall, language plays an indispensable role in mediating China's internationalization of higher education. Yet its function is far from neutral or uniform. The findings underscore the need for a more nuanced and inclusive approach to language policy in China's higher education internationalization. While EMI continues to serve as a key tool for global engagement, its effectiveness hinges on pedagogical quality, contextual adaptation, and institutional support <sup>[30,46]</sup>. Policymakers and university leaders should avoid treating EMI as a universal solution and instead invest in capacity-building initiatives such as pre-sessional language support, multilingual teacher training, and in-course scaffolding. Simultaneously, the promotion of Mandarin as a global academic language presents opportunities for China to shape a culturally distinctive model of internationalization. To realize this potential, institutions must ensure the standardization of Mandarin instruction, enhance intercultural accessibility, and develop curricula that speak to both domestic values and global academic expectations.

Equally important is the recognition of multilingual practices that are organically emerging in internationalized campuses. These practices, including translanguaging and hybrid language use <sup>[54,73]</sup>, reflect the complex linguistic realities of students and faculty navigating between global and local modes of communication. Institutions should respond by fostering multilingual pedagogies and building language-inclusive environments that validate diverse lin-

guistic repertoires. A more balanced language strategy<sup>[57]</sup>—one that integrates English, Mandarin, and other languages—will not only promote equitable academic mobility but also support sustainable internationalization rooted in cultural sensitivity and global competence. Ultimately, China's success in higher education internationalization depends on embracing language not just as a means of instruction, but as a central axis of identity, inclusion, and institutional innovation.

## 6. Conclusions

This review has explored the role of language in the internationalization of higher education in China by synthesizing literature across five key themes: the dominance of English, the strategic promotion of Mandarin, the emergence of multilingual practices, the impact of language policy on academic mobility, and the tension between linguistic nationalism and globalization. The findings highlight that while English remains the primary medium for international engagement, its implementation often faces practical and ideological challenges. At the same time, Mandarin is being positioned as a global academic language, serving both cultural and political functions within China's soft power strategy. The review also underscores the rise of informal multilingual practices on internationalized campuses, the dual role of language policy in facilitating or hindering mobility, and the competing pressures of global conformity and national identity shaping language policy decisions.

However, this review is subject to several limitations that may have influenced the scope and depth of its findings. First, the literature search was restricted to CNKI, Scopus, and Web of Science, which—while reputable—do not cover all relevant Chinese and international sources. Key platforms such as Google Scholar and Wanfang Data were excluded, potentially omitting practitioner-oriented studies, policy commentaries, or emerging scholarship not indexed in these databases. Second, the review focused exclusively on peer-reviewed academic publications, thereby excluding valuable grey literature such as institutional strategic plans, university-level language policy documents, and Ministry of Education guidelines—materials that often provide critical insights into how policies are formulated and implemented in practice. Third, most of the included

studies adopt top-down or macro-level perspectives, with relatively few capturing the on-the-ground experiences of those directly affected by language policy shifts.

To address these gaps, future research should incorporate institutional case studies that analyse internal language policy documents and their alignment—or misalignment—with national directives. Ethnographic or interview-based research involving international students, faculty members, and university administrators could provide rich insight into how language policies are interpreted, negotiated, and resisted in everyday academic life. Additionally, studies comparing Chinese institutions with those in other non-Anglophone contexts would illuminate how different systems manage the balance between English dominance and national language promotion. Finally, longitudinal research tracking the implementation and outcomes of bilingual or multilingual policies over time could offer deeper understanding of their long-term implications for equity, identity, and international engagement.

## Author Contributions

Conceptualization, M.T.; methodology, M.T.; software, M.T.; validation, S.M.M. and N.A.; formal analysis, M.T.; investigation, M.T.; resources, M.T.; data curation, M.T.; writing—original draft preparation, M.T.; writing—review and editing, S.M.M. and N.A.; visualization, M.T.; supervision, S.M.M. and N.A.; project administration, S.M.M. and N.A.. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

## Funding

This work received no external funding.

## Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

## Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

## Data Availability Statement

No new data were generated.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

## Appendix A

**Table A1.** Summary of Reviewed Studies.

Source	Index	Key Themes
[46]	Scopus	Provides an in-depth analysis of EMI programmes in China, discussing language ideologies, policy implications, and challenges in implementing English-medium instruction amid internationalization.
[47]	WoS/ Scopus	Investigates African international students' lived experiences in monolingual Chinese higher education, emphasizing initial language challenges, adaptation processes, and eventual agency in language use.
[48]	CNKI	Investigates the international communication pathways for Chinese language and literature majors, highlighting strategies for enhancing international communication in language disciplines.
[49]	WoS	Explores how the internationalization of higher education has enlightened foreign language education, suggesting that global educational trends can drive reforms in language teaching.
[50]	WoS/ Scopus	Analyzes EMI policies in China by examining language ideology, management, and practices, and highlighting the challenges and implications of using English as the medium of instruction in internationalization efforts.
[51]	CNKI	Studies the teaching of Wushu in English, illustrating an innovative integration of cultural content and language instruction in higher education internationalization.
[52]	CNKI	Reviews the evolution of EMI in European higher education as a comparative lens, offering insights that can inform the development of EMI policies in China.
[53]	CNKI	Provides a comparative interpretation of the foreign language education model in American universities, offering implications for the internationalization discourse in Chinese higher education.
[54]	Scopus	Investigates challenges in developing ESP courses for Sino-foreign cooperative programs, highlighting issues in language curriculum design and teaching quality.
[55]	CNKI	Discusses the concept of "local internationalization" in higher education, with insights into how regional language practices can support internationalization.

**Table A1.** *Cont.*

Source	Index	Key Themes
[56]	WoS/ Scopus	Empirically examines the impact of English language proficiency and prior knowledge on student success in an international accounting program, underscoring language proficiency as a key factor in academic performance.
[57]	CNKI	Examines the transition from traditional college English teaching to bilingual teaching, identifying effective strategies and challenges in implementing bilingual education amid internationalization.
[58]	CNKI	Investigates countermeasures for promoting internationalization through reforms in college English teaching, suggesting language policy adjustments to improve global competitiveness.
[59]	CNKI	Discusses "internationalization at home" and its implications for China, highlighting curriculum internationalization and the integration of language teaching with global perspectives.
[60]	CNKI	Discusses the dilemma of Westernization in Chinese higher education internationalization and proposes breakthroughs to balance global standards with local identity, emphasizing language policy reforms.
[61]	WoS/ Scopus	Analyzes the discrepancy between political rhetoric and classroom realities in teaching Chinese to international students, revealing tensions in language ideologies and practical implementation.
[62]	CNKI	Explores how the Belt and Road Initiative has transformed higher education internationalization in China, including reforms in language curriculum and instructional approaches.
[63]	WoS/ Scopus	Examines international students' experiences and identity construction in Chinese-medium instruction (CMI) programs, revealing the gap between policy intentions and classroom practices.
[64]	CNKI	Uses Xi'an Eurasia University as a case to explore international development strategies in higher education, with implications for language policy and cross-cultural communication.
[65]	WoS	Explores difficulties and strategies in communicating Chinese traditional culture in foreign language universities, highlighting the role of language in cultural exchange and internationalization.
[66]	WoS	Evaluates the interaction between Chinese traditional philosophical culture and modern higher education ideas, providing insights into how cultural heritage influences language policies in internationalization.
[67]	WoS/ Scopus	Analyzes trends in Argentinean student mobility to China, providing development lessons from Chinese mobilities and discussing implications for international talent cultivation.

Table A1. *Cont.*

Source	Index	Key Themes
[68]	WoS	Focuses on accelerating internationalization in private vocational education, indirectly addressing language challenges and the need for improved language policies.
[69]	WoS/ Scopus	Presents a case study from Beijing Normal University from the international students' perspective, identifying language barriers and other challenges in an internationalized campus environment.
[70]	CNKI	Investigates countermeasures to enhance the internationalization capacity of higher education from teachers' and students' perspectives, with attention to language barriers and policy improvements.
[71]	CNKI	Investigates internationalization development in Western higher education under the "One Belt, One Road" Initiative, providing comparative insights on language policy adaptations.
[72]	WoS	Examines foreign language education in universities amid internationalization, discussing curriculum reforms and teaching models to enhance global competence.
[73]	CNKI	Analyzes the development of foreign languages and literatures as academic subjects in the context of internationalization, using Shanghai Jiao Tong University as a case study.
[74]	CNKI	Examines countermeasures for the internationalization of higher education under the Belt and Road background, emphasizing the need to adapt language-related strategies for global engagement.
[75]	Scopus	Explores the cultivation of international talents under the Belt and Road Initiative, emphasizing the role of international curricula and language training in talent development.
[76]	Scopus	Uses deep learning NLP (BERT) to analyze trends in Chinese-foreign undergraduate programs, offering data-driven insights into program evolution and language integration.
[77]	Scopus	Investigates the development path of foreign language education in Xinjiang universities within the Belt and Road context, emphasizing policy initiatives and strategic language education reforms.
[78]	WoS/ Scopus	Analyzes challenges and complexities in the internationalization process between China and Spain, with a focus on language issues and the role of communication in cross-border education.
[79]	WoS/ Scopus	Reviews intercultural adaptability development models for internationalization-at-home programs in China and Korea, emphasizing language learning and cultural adaptation strategies.

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