



Linguistic Hierarchies under Sovereign Order: The Ecological Predicament of the Chinese Language at Suvarnabhumi Airport, Bangkokⁱ

Bin Lang, Kanokporn Numtong, and Nathakarn Thaveewatanaseth*

Faculty of Humanities, Kasetsart University, Thailand

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* Corresponding author

E-mail address:

kanokporn.n@ku.th

Abstract

This study examines Suvarnabhumi International Airport in Bangkok as an empirical site of linguistic landscape research, applying the functional matrix of linguistic landscape and the theory of geosemiotics to systematically analyze the functional embedding, visual presentation, and hierarchical distribution of the Chinese language under sovereign regulation. Based on 284 signage samples, the study identifies a tripartite language hierarchy within the airport: English dominates international communication, Thai maintains its role as a symbol of national sovereignty, and Chinese is largely confined to commercial zones, functioning as a consumption-oriented communicative tool. Chinese signage is visibly subordinate in both font size and spatial positioning, gaining prominence only in promotional displays. Legal frameworks such as Thailand's Signage Tax institutionalize the visual primacy of Thai, reinforcing its sovereign symbolism. Meanwhile, the strong purchasing power of Chinese tourists drives capital interests to increase the visibility of Chinese in commercial zones, often accompanied by semantic inaccuracies and a lack of regulatory support. The current ecology of Chinese signage faces structural vulnerabilities, including translation errors, service information gaps, and institutional absence, reflecting its economically dependent status. The study recommends establishing a zone-based multilingual signage classification system to balance sovereign regulation with service flexibility. Overall, this research reveals the deep-seated tensions between language policy, market logic, and symbolic governance in multilingual public spaces under globalization, offering insights for managing language visibility in globalized infrastructures.

1. Introduction

With the accelerating pace of globalization, international hub airports have emerged as key frontline sites for cross-border linguistic contact. Their linguistic landscapes serve as vital semiotic windows through which the interactions between national image, language policy, and economic strategy can be decoded. As spatial nexuses where global flows intersect with local identities, international airports increasingly function as hybridized urban spaces of globalization and localization (Li & Yang, 2022).

Although linguistic landscape studies have yielded substantial achievements in recent years, airport spaces, as crucial sites where multilingual policies intersect with linguistic power, have garnered significant attention from researchers in linguistic sociology and language policy (Kallen, 2010; Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015). However, existing scholarship predominantly focuses on Euro-American contexts (e.g., Cunningham & King's 2020 analysis of English hegemony in New Zealand airports) or remains confined to macro-level multilingual statistical surveys. Critically, scant attention has been paid to the composition and ecological configuration of Chinese linguistic landscapes in global-city international airports. More essentially, systematic investigations into the positional power of Chinese, code salience, and institutional safeguards within multilingual ecosystems remain markedly deficient.

As one of Southeast Asia's most critical aviation nodes, Suvarnabhumi International Airport (BKK) plays a central role in mediating global mobility. In 2024 alone, the airport received more than 48,434,608 international passengers (Airports of Thailand PLC [AOT], 2024, p. 22). During the Chinese Lunar New Year travel peak—from February 4 to 16, 2024—Suvarnabhumi Airport was projected to handle over 2,366,940 passengers (Liang, 2024). Against this backdrop of intense inbound flows from Chinese tourists, the visibility, function, and spatial positioning of Chinese-language signage within the airport raise urgent empirical and theoretical questions that demand closer scrutiny.

This study draws on the theoretical framework of social semiotics, integrating Landry and Bourhis's (1997) functional matrix of linguistic landscapes with Scollon and Scollon's (2003) geosemiotic theory of place. Through empirical fieldwork conducted at Suvarnabhumi International Airport, it examines the functional typology of Chinese signage, its code hierarchy in relation to Thai and English, and the sociopolitical and economic forces that drive its usage. By adopting a novel analytical lens, Chinese ecological perspective to multilingual signage power dynamics, this study critically explores how global economic pressures challenge traditional language hierarchies in international spaces, and how national regimes of sovereignty respond to such pressures through

visual and symbolic regulation. This perspective offers important theoretical insights into the paradoxes of language governance in emerging economies.

2. Literature Review

Linguistic landscape has emerged as a significant research focus in sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, and language policy studies, while also garnering increasing scholarly attention across related disciplines such as semiotics, political science, sociology, economics, psychology, and cultural geography. Broadly defined, linguistic landscape refers to the study of visible language use on signs in public spaces. In large metropolitan environments, signage in the form of street names, building names, traffic and directional signs, advertisements, shop names, public notices, warning signs, digital screens, and vehicle-mounted ads constitutes a dense and diverse visual field. The languages used in such signage vary widely, and the content and modes of display are multifaceted and dynamic. Although the linguistic landscape may appear chaotic on the surface, research has shown that it follows discernible patterns and ideological logics. The central aim of linguistic landscape research, as Blommaert (2013, p. 86) noted, is to uncover “order in apparent disorder” in polyphonic public spaces.

2.1 Theories of Linguistic Landscape Studies

One of the most influential theoretical models in the field is Spolsky's (2009) theory of language choice on public signage. According to Spolsky, three primary conditions generally shape the selection of language(s) used in public signage. First, signs are typically written in a language familiar to the creator. This condition explains why languages without a standardized written form are rarely seen on signage, and why signage produced in foreign languages often contains orthographic or grammatical errors. Second, signs are usually written in a language comprehensible to the intended readers. To fulfill communicative purposes, sign producers must consider the linguistic needs of their target audience. This accounts for the widespread presence of English-language signs in tourist zones and the use of bilingual signage incorporating minority languages in ethnolinguistically diverse areas. Third, sign creators may choose a language that expresses their identity or group affiliation. This condition is often driven by sociopolitical or psychological motivations, such as the desire to assert ethnic or cultural belonging in multilingual contexts. Among these, the first condition is considered necessary, while the latter two are regarded as typical, yet non-obligatory, and may not apply to all signage contexts.

Spolsky's model emphasizes a discourse-oriented understanding of signage, foregrounding communicative intent and sociolinguistic function. Building on this foundation, Kallen (2009) proposed

that linguistic landscape, as a form of communicative activity, involves multiple levels of choice. These include: (1) code choice—referring not only to language selection but also to representational modalities such as typography, color, and spatial placement; (2) pragmatic choice—addressing the communicative functions of the signage, including referential, cognitive, and descriptive dimensions; and (3) audience design—concerned with the anticipated or ideal readership of the signage. Furthermore, Kallen emphasized that language choice also entails decisions about the relationship between language and information: whether the same information is presented across different languages, whether translation is full or partial, and how linguistic asymmetries shape meaning. This model offers a refined framework for analyzing communicative strategies within multilingual signage discourse.

Complementing these perspectives is the geosemiotic framework developed by Scollon and Scollon (2003), which integrates insights from social psychology, visual semiotics, discourse analysis, and cultural geography. Geosemiotics investigates how discourse in real-world spatial environments constructs meaning and guides social behavior. It consists of three key components: interaction order, visual semiotics, and place semiotics. Of particular relevance to this study is the notion of place semiotics, a relatively open and flexible system for analyzing the semiotic resources of signs, including the materials, placement, orientation, and spatial relations of signage in context. Within this framework, three sub-systems are especially salient: code preference (e.g., which language is foregrounded), inscription (e.g., typography and visual form), and emplacement (e.g., physical positioning and visibility). These elements allow for a comprehensive reading of how linguistic signs are socially and spatially organized.

2.2 Linguistic Landscape and the Ecology of Language Power

As a symbolic system embedded in public space, the linguistic landscape visualizes the structure of language power. In multilingual societies, the choice, sequence, typography, and spatial positioning of languages on signs not only serve communicative functions but also reflect the relative social status and symbolic capital of each language and its speakers (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Spolsky, 2009). For minority language communities in particular, visibility within the linguistic landscape is closely tied to language vitality and the maintenance of group identity (Marten et al., 2012). Ben-Rafael et al. (2006), in their study of multilingual signage in Israel, observed that language choice and hierarchical ordering tend to reinforce dominant language groups while marginalizing others, even when all languages involved hold official status. Shohamy (2006) further emphasized the political nature of linguistic landscape construction. In East Jerusalem, for instance, the near

absence of Hebrew in Arab neighborhoods signals symbolic resistance to the dominant linguistic authority.

However, high visibility does not always equate to strong vitality. As Cenoz and Gorter (2006) demonstrate in the Basque region of Spain, minority languages may achieve symbolic prominence through top-down policy interventions, yet remain functionally limited in everyday usage. Similarly, Coupland and Garrett (2010) notes that the frequent appearance of Welsh in signage reflects official mandates rather than actual parity with English. Sebba (2010), in his study of the Isle of Man, found that while official signage often gives equal prominence to English and Manx, the latter is frequently marginalized or tokenized in non-official contexts. Muth (2014) showed that although Romanian is the official language of Moldova, Russian continues to dominate in unofficial signage, such as graffiti, leaflets, and advertisements, indicating its persistent informal power.

Within international airports—sites that mediate global mobility and national sovereignty—linguistic landscapes expose the tensions among state language policy, transnational communication, and market logic. Empirical research from Southeast Asian airports illustrates region-specific and user-driven configurations. Ngampramuan (2022), in a comparative study of Suvarnabhumi Airport signage from 2009 and 2021, found that the proportion of signs featuring Chinese increased from 5.7% to 22.1%, with trilingual Thai-English-Chinese signs rising to 11.7%. Despite this growth, Chinese remained subordinate to English, which continued to dominate most signage zones. Rastitiati (2023) identified seven language combinations at Bali's Ngurah Rai International Airport, including English-Chinese. Most users supported bilingual Indonesian-English signage and valued the symbolic presence of Balinese and Balinese script, though they prioritized clarity and accessibility over strict language ordering. Woo and Nora Riget (2020) reported that at Kuala Lumpur International Airport, Malay occupied the dominant position on all multilingual signs, followed by English, while Japanese, Arabic, and Chinese appeared side by side in equal typographic format. Some respondents also advocated for the inclusion of Tamil to better reflect Malaysia's multilingual population.

2.3 Linguistic Landscape Studies in Bangkok

In recent years, as multilingual societies become increasingly shaped by the forces of globalization, the scope of linguistic landscape research has progressively extended to Asian contexts. Among them, cities with high linguistic diversity and socio-cultural heterogeneity—such as Bangkok—have attracted growing scholarly attention. As the political and economic capital of Thailand, Bangkok also functions as a linguistic and cultural crossroads. Languages such as Thai, English, Chinese, Arabic, and Japanese are visibly present in different urban zones, reflecting both the linguistic

pluralism and the dynamic mobility of signs in the city's semiotic landscape. One of the earliest and most cited works in this area is Huebner (2006), who analyzed the co-occurrence of English and Thai on commercial signage in Bangkok's business and tourist districts. His findings suggest that bilingual signage is not only a response to communicative demands but also an artifact of deeper structural interactions between national language policy, economic globalization, and transnational flows of people and capital.

More recent studies have paid increasing attention to the social stratification of linguistic landscapes across distinct urban spaces. For example, Prapobratanakul (2016), in a study of English-language signage in Bangkok's Si Yan Market, found that lexical borrowings and language hybridization function as both indicators of English's global status and subconscious evidence of its pervasive influence on Thai. Compared with Western studies, which often focus on official signage and symbolic dominance, research in the Thai context has begun to explore the interplay between language and identity, particularly within Chinese diasporic communities. Wu and Techasan (2016), for instance, conducted a study on the linguistic landscape of Bangkok's Chinatown by analyzing the naming practices of Chinese-owned shops. Their findings revealed that although heritage languages such as Teochew and Cantonese had largely disappeared among second- and third-generation Chinese descendants, shop owners continued to maintain cultural identity through traditional Chinese characters, color schemes, spatial arrangements, and other symbolic markers on signage. The presence of Chinese elements was therefore less a reflection of communicative function and more an act of cultural preservation. At the same time, the rising visibility of English contributed to an increasingly complex multilingual environment in Chinatown.

Similarly, Lang and Numtong (2024) examined the linguistic composition of commercial signage in Bangkok's urban retail spaces. Their research focused on how shopping centers and neighborhood markets visually construct "Chinese New Year culture" and embed it within the emotional economy of consumption, thereby contributing to the semiotic formation of urban identity. In another case, Gu and Bhatt (2024) explored the linguistic landscape of Soi Arab, a central Bangkok enclave informally known as "Little Arabia." Their study highlighted how varying combinations of Arabic, Thai, and English in signage reflect not only patterns of cultural coexistence but also the underlying power dynamics and negotiations between Islamic and Buddhist civilizational elements. Together, these studies affirm that the linguistic landscape is not merely a static representation of multilingualism, but rather a dynamic arena in which social power structures.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a social semiotics-oriented approach to linguistic landscape analysis, combining systematic fieldwork, quantitative measurement, and qualitative interpretation to investigate the functional distribution, linguistic features, and symbolic meanings of Chinese-language signage at Suvarnabhumi International Airport, a major transnational aviation hub.

3.1 Research Site

Suvarnabhumi International Airport in Bangkok was selected as a representative empirical site for the study of Chinese linguistic landscapes in global hub airports. To comprehensively capture the ecology of Chinese signage in this setting, the investigation adopts a dual-track perspective—examining both the departure and arrival flows of passenger movement—covering the full range of traveler circulation routes:

Departure Level (4th floor): Check-in area → Security screening → International departure lounges;

Arrival Level (2nd floor): Arrival corridor → Immigration/Customs (non-photographable area) → Baggage claim → Arrival hall;

Core Functional Zones: Duty-free commercial areas → Dining and food service areas.

3.2 Research Content and Objectives

This study focuses on Suvarnabhumi International Airport in Bangkok, a major aviation hub in Southeast Asia, and adopts an analytical framework that integrates social semiotics with linguistic landscape theory. The research aims to systematically examine the structural features and practical functions of Chinese in the airport's public signage system. Two dimensions guide the analysis. First, from a functional perspective, the study categorizes the primary types of Chinese signage, including directional signs, facility labels, institutional identifiers, regulatory notices, and commercial advertisements. This classification helps reveal the variations in visibility and pragmatic roles of Chinese across signage types. Second, from a power-structural perspective, the study investigates the symbolic representation of Chinese through two analytical lenses: code selection and code prominence. It examines the positioning of Chinese in multilingual combinations, including its order of appearance, font size, and spatial layout, in order to uncover the underlying power dynamics and communicative logic encoded in signage design.

Based on this framework, the study proposes four research objectives. First, to analyze the ecological characteristics of Chinese signage at Suvarnabhumi Airport, including its visibility, degree of salience, semantic adequacy, and the power position it reflects within the airport's linguistic

hierarchy. Second, to identify the motivating mechanisms behind the use of Chinese in the linguistic landscape, focusing on its functional allocation under the dual influence of institutional norms and market forces. Third, to examine the power configuration of Chinese within the multilingual ecosystem of the airport, especially its embedded or marginal status between the national language (Thai) and the global lingua franca (English). Fourth, to detect and classify translation deviations in signage content, and to explore how utilitarian language choices contribute to semantic ambiguities and norm violations, with the aim of proposing concrete recommendations for improving the visibility and quality of Chinese in the airport's linguistic landscape.

3.3 Data Collection and Inclusion Criteria

Data were collected between February and May 2025. Sampling design followed the “functional zone and flow segmentation method” proposed by Shohamy and Gorter (2009), dividing the airport into three major circulation lines and their respective functional zones (e.g., check-in areas, duty-free shopping zones, arrival corridors). Signage samples containing Chinese characters were photographed along main passenger movement routes. During data collection, standardized recording templates were used to log signage attributes, including spatial context (location, environment), physical properties (material, dimensions), and linguistic features (type of Chinese script, code configuration). A total of 284 valid signage samples were obtained. In commercial areas, photographs were taken only with verbal permission from store staff, and research ethics were maintained by avoiding images of faces or surveillance equipment. Inclusion criteria for Chinese signage were as follows: Fixed or digital signs containing textual content in Chinese (Simplified, Traditional, or Pinyin); Language configurations including monolingual (Thai, Chinese, English, or others), bilingual (e.g., Thai-English, Chinese-English), and multilingual signage (e.g., Thai-English-Chinese or other combinations); Exclusion of temporary handwritten notices, commercial logos without textual information, and private devices displaying language on personal screens.

To ensure the representativeness of the findings and maintain a focused analytical scope, this study established the following criteria for the selection and inclusion of signage data. First, only three primary codes—Thai, English, and Chinese—were included. These three languages constitute the most frequently occurring and widely distributed language combination at Suvarnabhumi International Airport. Together, they form the structural backbone of the airport's linguistic landscape and offer both analytical stability and contextual relevance. Second, languages with extremely low frequency and scattered spatial distribution, such as Japanese, Korean, and Arabic, were excluded from the core analysis to avoid peripheral “noise languages” from diluting the central research focus. However, the existence of these languages was acknowledged in the dataset and statistically

grouped under the category “Other Languages” to preserve the completeness of the quantitative overview. Third, the analytical emphasis was placed on the interaction between Chinese and the dominant codes of Thai and English, focusing on how Chinese functions within a multilingual hierarchy. Given that Thai represents the national official language and English serves as the global lingua franca, the patterns of co-occurrence, ordering, and visual salience of Chinese in relation to these two languages serve as critical indicators for analyzing the ecological positioning and power dynamics of Chinese within the signage system. Lastly, only signage with clear functional communicative value was included in the corpus. These include signs that convey information related to wayfinding, institutional regulations, commercial services, or public safety. Signs consisting purely of graphic symbols or pictograms with no textual content were excluded from analysis.

3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis involved calculating the total number of signs and the proportional distribution of different language codes across signage types. Visual representations (charts and graphs) were generated to illustrate patterns. The relative size of Chinese text compared to other languages was measured using Adobe Photoshop, allowing for analysis of code salience. The quantitative focus was on examining the comparative visual power of different language codes at Suvarnabhumi Airport.

Qualitative coding was conducted based on Landry and Bourhis’s (1997) functional classification matrix of linguistic landscape, which includes four major communicative functions: informational, regulatory/instructional, commercial/promotional, and symbolic/imagistic. The operationalization of symbolic power was informed by Scollon and Scollon’s (2003) geosemiotic framework, particularly in relation to spatial positioning and visual salience. Functional categorization was based on sign content and dominant communicative intent. Symbolic power analysis, on the other hand, focused on the relative spatial placement (e.g., top/bottom, left/right, center/margin), font size, information completeness, and symmetry of Chinese-language signage vis-à-vis Thai and English. Special attention was paid to whether Chinese text appeared for all the same information displayed in other languages, or only partially. The qualitative analysis aimed to reveal the distributional characteristics and hierarchical positioning of Chinese signage within the multilingual landscape of the airport.

4. Research Findings

4.1 Functional Types of Chinese Signage in the Airport

As a key gateway to a globalized metropolis, the international airport serves as a crucial site for public communication. Within this space, signage performs essential functions by transmitting

information through various forms and establishing communicative links with diverse readerships. Most of these signs are created and installed by official institutions and functional departments, and their linguistic configurations reflect state-sanctioned language ideologies and preferences. Based on communicative purpose and semiotic structure, the most common types of signage in the public spaces of Suvarnabhumi International Airport can be classified into the following categories:

4.1.1 Informational Function I: Traffic Directional Signage

Directional signage is among the most typical and prevalent types of public signage at Suvarnabhumi International Airport. This category includes comprehensive guide boards, directional arrows, traffic advisory signs, and path-control notices. These signs generally integrate textual content with non-verbal symbols such as arrows and pictograms to assist with way finding and movement. Comprehensive guide boards are often placed at decision-making points—such as corners, intersections, or elevator exits—and are typically mounted on columns or walls. Both sides of the same sign often present mirrored information. Commonly, these signs indicate floor numbers and the functional areas located on each level (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Panoramic guideboard at Suvarnabhumi Airport



Directional road signs are large-format signs typically suspended overhead to indicate routes and vehicular directions. As shown in Figure 2, signage indicating exits such as “Airport Exit” or directions to affiliated airport hotels represents a classic example of traffic direction boards.

Figure 2*Directional signage at Suvarnabhumi Airport*

Other signs, such as the one illustrated in Figure 3, are traffic advisory boards, which provide estimated travel times or walking distances. An example includes a sign that states “5 minutes (walking),” informing travelers of the approximate time needed to reach the destination indicated by the sign.

Figure 3*Traffic advisory signage at Suvarnabhumi Airport*

4.1.2 Informational Function II: Facility Identification Signage

Facility identification signage refers to signs placed on or near public-use buildings, objects, or utilities within the airport environment. These signs are typically found in locations such as train stations, parking lots, public restrooms, garbage bins, metro entrances, and airport bus stops. As part of the airport's public service infrastructure, these signs offer users relevant information including spatial orientation, operating hours, and usage guidelines (see Figure 4). Given that public facility access is a core dimension of urban service, multilingual signage—most commonly in Thai, English, and Chinese—is frequently employed at Suvarnabhumi Airport. This linguistic practice reflects the airport's commitment to internationalization and inclusive service design for global travelers.

Figure 4

Facility signage at Suvarnabhumi Airport



4.1.3 Informational Function III: Institutional and Site Name Signage

Another common category of public signage includes institutional or site nameplates installed on buildings within the airport premises. These signs are typically mounted on the top of buildings or prominently displayed on street-facing facades, serving to indicate the names of institutions or facilities. The institutions referenced here are not directly tied to the airport's operational functions but instead represent semi-independent service units that provide auxiliary support to travelers. Typical examples include currency exchange counters (see Figure 5), ATMs operated by local banks, restaurants, and convenience stores. Such signage falls into the category of institutional identification and contributes to spatial legibility within the airport complex.

Figure 5

Institutional and site name signage at Suvarnabhumi Airport



4.1.4 Regulatory Function: Warning and Instructional Signage

Warning and instructional signs refer to signage that provides safety-related notices or informs travelers about behavioral guidelines. These are ubiquitous in airport spaces and are often strategically positioned in visible locations—such as near escalators, wet floor areas, or pedestrian intersections—to attract attention and reduce the likelihood of confusion, disruption, or safety incidents. Among the most common are traffic safety warnings placed along internal roads and pedestrian crossings. These signs may employ firm or cautionary language to emphasize the serious consequences of non-compliance with airport rules or traffic regulations. As shown in Figure 6, these warning signs are typically durable and affixed to the floor or near the base of public infrastructure (e.g., escalators), allowing them to continuously function as long-term risk mitigation devices.

Figure 6

Warning and instructional signage at Suvarnabhumi Airport



4.1.5 Commercial Function: Advertising and Promotional Signage

Among the most distinctive elements of the linguistic landscape in Bangkok Airport are advertising and promotional signs, which are notable for their concise phrasing and strong visual clarity. These signs form a visible and strategic part of the airport's semiotic space, serving to promote products, stimulate consumption, and contribute to the commercial atmosphere. Within the Suvarnabhumi International Airport, such signage appears in various formats, ranging from digital wall displays to freestanding ad boards (see Figure 7). Many advertising units operate through dynamic or temporary exhibition formats, allowing content to be updated in real time to match promotional needs. Other signs may be semi-permanent, mounted on columns, lampposts, or display panels in retail zones and passenger corridors.

Figure 7

Advertising and promotional signage at Suvarnabhumi Airport



4.1.6 Symbolic Function: Integrated Service and City Image

In addition to the categories above, Suvarnabhumi Airport also features signage that consolidates multiple types of public service information, reflecting a symbolic function tied to city branding and international hospitality. For example, multilingual service counters designated for international travelers represent a key form of integrated service signage (see Figure 8). These counters are designed to provide one-stop, multilingual consultation and assistance for global passengers, addressing a range of needs related to language mediation, transit guidance, and facility usage. By doing so, they significantly enhance the overall travel experience and operational efficiency. The implementation of such services underscores Bangkok's commitment to positioning itself as a world-class aviation hub. It also reflects an intentional strategy to project an image of openness, inclusivity, and professional excellence. These multilingual service platforms not only meet practical communication demands but also function as symbols of the city's readiness for global engagement. As noted by Bouchon (2014), this form of urban semiotic design enhances the international appeal and competitiveness of Bangkok as a premier destination for tourism and transit.

Figure 8

Integrated multilingual service signage at Suvarnabhumi Airport



4.2 Chinese Language Practices in Airport Signage

To understand the actual use of language in public signage within the spatial environment of Suvarnabhumi Airport, this study adopted a field-based walking methodology. The researcher systematically traversed the airport's main passenger pathways to collect as many signage samples as possible, including traffic directional signs, public facility markers, warning/instructional signs, promotional advertisements, and institutional nameplates. These “main roads” refer to routes designated by the airport for passenger movement and are the principal circulation lines for international and domestic travelers.

It must be acknowledged, however, that even along the primary passenger routes, the quantity of signage is vast. Comprehensive documentation and analysis of every sign would be practically unfeasible. For instance, in the case of promotional signage alone, flags, banners, spray-painted messages, murals, and posters appear on street lamps, building exteriors, corridor pillars, and shopfronts in great abundance—covering topics ranging from commerce to traffic safety and public awareness. Cataloguing this category of signage in its entirety would require a massive data collection effort.

Moreover, a significant number of the observed signs are highly repetitive, particularly those used for traffic guidance. Identical or nearly identical signs—such as road names, direction indicators, bus stop markers, and advertising slogans—are often installed at multiple locations along a single route. To ensure that the data collected remained operationally manageable and analytically comparable, the study adopted three corpus processing principles: only signage from the most frequently traveled passenger routes was included, rather than attempting exhaustive coverage; within each street or corridor, sample collection prioritized diversity in sign type and content; Identical signs of the same type along the same route—those with fully identical text and design—were recorded only once for statistical purposes.

Although this approach sacrifices absolute precision in quantity, it provides a more representative view of the distributional trends in code choice across the public signage of Suvarnabhumi Airport. Based on the collected corpus, signage at Suvarnabhumi Airport can be categorized into monolingual signs (containing one language) and multilingual signs (containing two or more languages or codes). The distribution of code types is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1*Code Distribution of Public Signage at Suvarnabhumi Airport*

Code Type		Language Configuration						Subtotal
Monolingual	Thai	13 (18.06%)	English	52 (72.22%)	Chinese	5 (6.94%)	Other	2 (2.78%)
								72 (25.35%)
Bilingual	Thai–English	116 (76.82%)	English–Chinese	25 (16.56%)	Other	10 (6.62%)		151 (53.17%)
Trilingual	Thai–English–Chinese	49 (80.33%)	Other	12 (19.67%)				61 (21.48%)
Total								284 (100%)

4.2.1 Code Choice

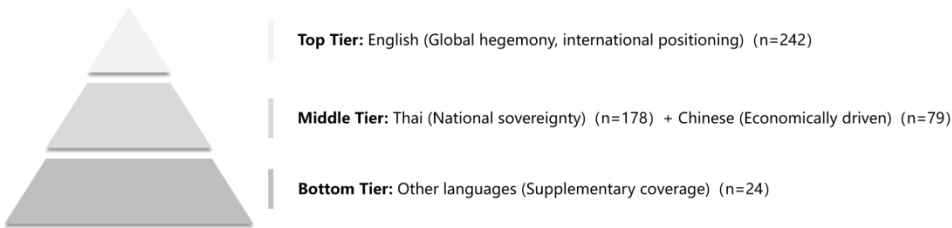
1) *Macro-Level Code Choice Analysis*

The linguistic landscape of Suvarnabhumi International Airport presents a highly stratified “three-tiered structure,” reflecting Thailand’s strategic language allocation under the pressures of globalization. Overall, bilingual signage constitutes the majority (53.17%) of all signs, forming the foundational framework of the airport’s multilingual system. Monolingual (25.35%) and trilingual signage (21.48%) serve more targeted, context-specific communicative functions. Notably, English is used as the sole language on 72.22% of monolingual signs—far surpassing Thai (18.06%)—demonstrating English’s hegemonic status as the *de facto* language of international aviation (Phillipson, 1992). English dominates critical domains such as flight information displays, emergency notices, and security instructions, consolidating its role as the default communicative medium for international passengers.

In contrast, monolingual Thai signage is typically confined to domestic flight areas or staff-only zones, serving as a symbolic assertion of national linguistic sovereignty. This pattern reveals a pragmatic trade-off in which Thailand prioritizes service efficiency for international travelers through English-dominant signage, while selectively preserving Thai in lower-contact or institutionally protected areas. The overall distribution indicates a pronounced linguistic power hierarchy, as shown in Figure 9. A total of 242 signs include English, compared to 178 signs featuring Thai and 79 containing Chinese. English thus appears 1.36 times more frequently than Thai and 3.06 times more frequently than Chinese, occupying the apex of the signage power pyramid. English signage overwhelmingly populates high-contact zones such as departure gates and security checkpoints. Thai signage is largely paired with English, particularly in bilingual configurations (e.g., Thai–English),

which dominate core functional zones like boarding areas and baggage claim, ensuring communicative accessibility while retaining national identity. Chinese appears primarily in bilingual (English–Chinese) or trilingual (Thai–English–Chinese) signage, reflecting its growing relevance as a service language tailored to the airport’s core Chinese-speaking customer base. Chinese-language signs are especially concentrated in commercial contexts (e.g., duty-free shops, advertisements), underscoring its role as an economically driven, market-responsive code.

Figure 9
Linguistic Power Hierarchy of Public Signage at Suvarnabhumi Airport



2) Meso-Level Code Choice Analysis

The distribution of linguistic codes within the airport’s signage is closely tied to its functional zoning. Different language combinations serve distinct communicative purposes based on the operational demands of each spatial context. Drawing from the functional categorization of Chinese signage, this study analyzes the distribution of Chinese-inclusive signs across Suvarnabhumi Airport. Among the 79 Chinese-language signs recorded (see Table 2), non-commercial signage accounts for 30.38% (n = 24), while commercial signage constitutes the majority at 69.62% (n = 55). Notably, all five Chinese-only signs appear within commercial zones.

Table 2
Functional Distribution of Chinese-Language Signage at Suvarnabhumi Airport

Functional Category		Count	Percentage
Non-commercial signage	Traffic guidance	12	30.38% (n = 24)
	Facility signage	3	
	Institutional nameplates	5	
	Warning/Instructional	4	
Commercial signage	Advertising	28	69.62% (n = 55)
	Payment prompts	10	
	Promotional content	17	

Bilingual signage reflects a dynamic equilibrium between operational efficiency and national sovereignty. Thai–English bilingual signs (76.82%) dominate high-functionality areas such as security checkpoints and boarding gates. This pairing—Thai (symbolic authority) + English (global lingua franca)—satisfies both regulatory requirements and the practical need for international intelligibility. In contrast, English–Chinese bilingual signs (16.56%) are primarily concentrated in tax refund counters and duty-free retail areas (see Figure 10). These signs bypass Thai entirely, directly targeting Chinese consumers through a market-driven language combination. This reflects the influence of economic logic in shaping linguistic decisions, where commercial interest overrides symbolic or policy-driven considerations.

Figure 10

Chinese–English signage in duty-free retail spaces at Suvarnabhumi Airport



Trilingual signage demonstrates a form of multi-layered identity negotiation. Thai–English–Chinese signs (80.33%) are commonly found at terminal entrances, transportation hubs, and other integrative nodes. These signs attempt to construct a triple identity: local affiliation (Thai), international standardization (English), and market priority (Chinese). Such configurations mitigate the risks of perceived linguistic hegemony while strategically affirming China’s position as Thailand’s primary inbound tourist market. Other trilingual signs, which incorporate less common language combinations, serve niche communities and further reinforce the airport’s image as a “global hub.”

Monolingual signage reveals the tension between communicative functionality and symbolic identity. The overwhelming dominance of English monolingual signs (72.22%) exposes the relatively weak position of the Thai language in globalized operational settings. Even within its own sovereign territory, Thai often yields spatial and semiotic visibility in favor of facilitating seamless movement for international travelers. Conversely, the extremely low proportion of Chinese monolingual signs (6.94%) underscores its utilitarian role: these signs are mostly confined to Chinese airline counters

or temporary promotional campaigns, serving immediate commercial objectives rather than long-term cultural representation.

3) Micro-Level Code Choice Analysis

At the micro level, the use of Chinese within the linguistic landscape of Suvarnabhumi Airport reveals a distinct utilitarian orientation. Chinese monolingual signage appears almost exclusively in commercial service zones and is characterized by the frequent use of high-impact lexical items geared toward consumption. Visually, these signs often adopt conspicuous red backgrounds—a color strongly associated with Chinese culture—to enhance visibility and cultural targeting. This pattern of visual presentation underscores the strategic embedding of Chinese under commercial imperatives.

Chinese-language signage is heavily concentrated in consumer-oriented contexts, particularly in duty-free retail spaces (e.g., King Power) and tax refund counters. The predominant linguistic content consists of promotional directives, such as “Up to 50% Off” or “Alipay Accepted,” which reduce Chinese to a transactional medium for consumption—essentially functioning as linguistic instruments for economic extraction (see Figure 11).

Figure 11

Promotional signage in duty-free shops at Suvarnabhumi Airport (e.g., “Grab Now – Up to 50% Off”)

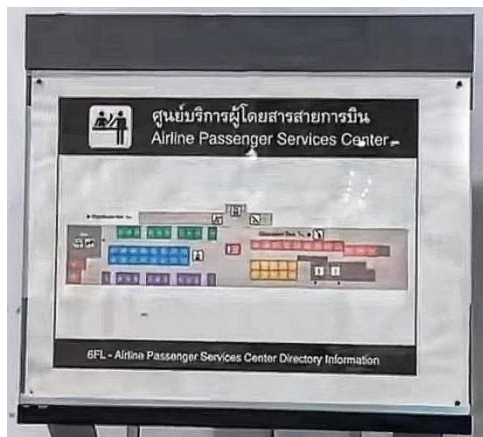


This language use strategy reflects a clear economic rationale. The high purchasing power of Chinese tourists brings tangible financial benefits to Thailand, and linguistic accommodation has thus become a strategic lever for stimulating spending. However, this utilitarian allocation comes with noticeable omissions. In critical safety-related domains—such as airport security screening,

immigration, and passenger control—Chinese is often absent. For example, Figure 12 illustrates the lack of Chinese-language information in a key passenger service zone.

Figure 12

Passenger service center at Suvarnabhumi Airport with missing Chinese-language information



This “commerce-first, safety-second” configuration exposes the structural limitations of Chinese-language provision. Chinese is treated as a value-added service to enhance the consumption experience, rather than as a fundamental communicative infrastructure necessary for equitable access and passenger protection.

In addition, translation quality and spatial coherence are inconsistent. Field observations reveal several instances of mistranslation or nonstandard expressions. For example, Figure 13 illustrates one sign translates “Airport Rail Link” as “入城铁” (literally, “city-entry rail”), which is problematic on multiple fronts: First, it obscures the crucial point of origin—the airport. The term “入城铁” fails to clarify that the service begins at the airport, which may confuse non-local Chinese travelers. Second, the translation lacks terminological standardization. The phrase is not commonly used in Chinese-speaking regions. In major Chinese cities such as Beijing or Shanghai, more conventional terms include “机场快线” (airport express line) or “机场专线” (airport connection line), which better reflect formal transportation usage. These cases point to a broader low-cost, high-efficiency language service model, where translation serves commercial functionality rather than communicative accuracy or cultural nuance. Such practices risk alienating target audiences and reducing the overall accessibility and inclusiveness of the linguistic environment.

Apart from the mistranslation of “Airport Rail Link” as “入城铁”, fieldwork also revealed other instances of translation inaccuracy. For example, the term “停车楼” (Figure 13 middle)

appears to be a direct translation from the English “Car Park.” While “楼” denotes a building structure in Chinese, it is not conventionally used in airport signage, where the term “停车场” (“parking lot”) is more standard. Although understandable, the expression deviates from native linguistic norms. Another example is the phrase “登机门” (bottom of Fig. 13), which directly translates “Gates.” While grammatically acceptable, the term “登机口” is the widely recognized standard in Chinese airport contexts. These cases illustrate that although basic comprehension is maintained, the translations prioritize usability over normativity, echoing Piller’s (2011) critique of utilitarian tendencies in commercialized language practices under globalization. In contrast, signage in commercial zones—such as “Alipay accepted” or “50% off”—is rendered in highly accurate and idiomatic Chinese. This discrepancy reflects a clear economic prioritization, where linguistic resources are concentrated on promotional rather than informational content. Such asymmetry indicates a market-driven allocation bias, in which service-oriented Chinese signage receives greater attention and investment than information-oriented Chinese signage.

Figure 13

Example of mistranslated or nonstandard Chinese signage at Suvarnabhumi Airport



4.2.2 Dominant Language Codes

As previously discussed, Chinese appears in only a limited subset of public signage at Suvarnabhumi Airport—79 out of 284 total signs—indicating a functionally subordinate role driven by commercial considerations rather than institutional primacy. This raises a critical question: In the signs that do include Chinese, does it ever assume visual priority?

One of the key assumptions in this study is that the visually dominant language code—either in terms of font size or the spatial area occupied by characters (as measured using Adobe Photoshop)—is the one most prioritized by the sign producers. Drawing on the theoretical framework of place semiotics (Scollon & Scollon, 2003), the following spatial conventions are used to infer code priority: In vertical arrangements, the language placed on top is considered dominant; In horizontal arrangements, the language placed on the left is considered dominant; In circular or enclosing arrangements, the central language is prioritized.

Using these criteria, this section analyzes the visual salience of Chinese on bilingual and trilingual signs (n = 212). The findings are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

Visual Prominence of Language Codes on Multilingual Signage at Suvarnabhumi Airport

Font Size				Total
Thai Larger	English Larger	Chinese Larger	Other	212
169 (79.72%)	31 (14.62%)	9 (4.24%)	3 (1.42%)	(100%)
Vertical Placement				177
Thai on Top	English on Top	Chinese on Top	Other	(83.49%)
131 (74.01%)	38 (21.47%)	5 (2.83%)	3 (1.69%)	212
Horizontal Placement				35
Thai on Left	English on Left	Chinese on Left	Other	(16.51%)
25 (71.42%)	6 (17.14%)	2 (5.72%)	2 (5.72%)	

The data in Table 3 clearly indicate that Thai is visually prioritized on the vast majority of multilingual signs. Thai is most frequently rendered in a larger font size (79.72%) and is placed in the uppermost position on vertically arranged signs (74.01%). This design choice reinforces Thai's status as the primary sovereign language and reflects its privileged position in the state's semiotic order. English and Chinese, in contrast, are typically placed beneath or to the right of Thai, indicating their non-dominant, auxiliary roles in the visual hierarchy.

Nonetheless, a small number of signs do feature visually dominant Chinese, with larger Chinese fonts (4.24%, n = 9), Chinese on top (2.83%, n = 5), or Chinese on the left (5.72%, n = 2). These exceptions are not randomly distributed; rather, they are concentrated in commercial zones, particularly in locations such as foreign exchange counters and duty-free retail signage. As noted earlier (see Figure 11), Chinese achieves visual primacy only in contexts directly tied to consumption. In such cases, Chinese functions as a market-driven linguistic proxy, or a form of linguistic concession zone (Lou, 2017).

The visual configuration of language codes at Suvarnabhumi Airport exemplifies how Thai secures symbolic dominance through typographic size and spatial prominence, constructing a form of visual sovereignty that remains largely unchallenged. English and Chinese, by contrast, are relegated to instrumental roles—with English serving communicative functionality and Chinese acting as a commercial accent that supports specific economic agendas rather than broader linguistic inclusion.

4.2.3 Use of Chinese

1) Utilitarian Distribution of Chinese: Commercially Oriented Instrumentality

The deployment of Chinese signage at Suvarnabhumi International Airport exhibits a clear pattern of functional stratification. Although Chinese appears more frequently on bilingual and trilingual signs compared to monolingual signage, it remains subordinate both in absolute quantity and visual prominence. Among monolingual signs, Chinese is almost exclusively concentrated in commercial and consumption-oriented contexts—including duty-free promotions, payment prompts (e.g., “WeChat Pay,” “Alipay Accepted”), and tax refund counters. These signs are characterized by a highly instrumental language style, with a primary goal of directly triggering purchasing behavior. In contrast, Chinese is largely absent from high-authority contexts such as safety warnings and emergency medical services, where Thai and English dominate. This distributional asymmetry underscores the utilitarian essence of Chinese signage at the airport: its presence is not rooted in principles of linguistic equity or passenger rights, but rather in its economic utility, which is dependent on the spending power of Chinese tourists.

2) Chinese within the Visual Hierarchy: Limited Visibility under Sovereign Regulation

The visibility of Chinese signage is systematically constrained by Thailand’s language policy regime. At the level of font size, Chinese is prioritized in only 16 multilingual signs, mostly confined to commercial advertising. In contrast, Thai enjoys absolute visual dominance, appearing as the largest script in 325 signs—solidifying its status as the visual sovereign language. The spatial politics of code placement further reinforce this hierarchy. Among vertically arranged signs, Thai occupies the top position in 74.01% of cases ($n = 169$), whereas Chinese appears on top in only 2.83% ($n = 5$)—primarily in hanging advertisements designed to be read from below. In horizontally arranged signage, Chinese appears on the left in fewer than 6% of instances ($n = 2$), often visually isolated or “boxed in” by Thai signage on both sides. This dual mechanism of vertical suppression and horizontal marginalization restricts the semiotic space available to Chinese, limiting its visibility strictly to commercial zones and preventing it from symbolically challenging

the authority of Thai as the sovereign code (Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015). In this system, Chinese is permitted to appear only when it is economically useful, not politically symbolic.

3) Drivers of Chinese Signage: Tensions between Regulatory Rigidity and Capital Flexibility

The presence of Chinese signs in the airport shows the tension between Thailand's national policies and market demands. On one hand, Thailand enforces linguistic sovereignty through legal regulations that mandate the font size and hierarchical order of Thai on public signs. For instance, the Signboard Tax Act explicitly stipulates that all Thai characters in multilingual signage must appear at the top, strictly prohibiting foreign languages from occupying the primary visual position (Srisawat, 2021). On the other hand, the economic contribution of Chinese tourists empowers capital forces to enact design encroachment, whereby spatial and linguistic resources are strategically rearranged for economic gain (Lou, 2017). Within a framework of legal compliance, Chinese is selectively highlighted through means such as high-saturation colors (e.g., red backgrounds in Figure 11) and dynamic display on LED screens.

4) Contradictions and Challenges: The Vulnerability of Chinese Linguistic Ecology

The current ecology of Chinese signage at Suvarnabhumi Airport reveals a series of interrelated structural contradictions that underscore its fragile status within the multilingual environment. First, a crisis of semantic quality is evident in the presence of mistranslations, such as the rendering of Airport Rail Link as “入城铁,” which compromises both the accuracy of information and the credibility of communication. These linguistic errors not only hinder comprehension but also diminish the functional reliability of the signage system as a whole (see Figure 13). Second, there exists a notable gap in service information. While commercial zones such as duty-free shops and restaurants are densely saturated with Chinese-language signage, critical functional areas—particularly transit corridors, emergency infrastructure points, and visa processing zones—remain significantly underserved. This imbalance results in navigational confusion, forced backtracking, and an overall fragmented user experience for Chinese-speaking travelers. Third, the functional deployment of Chinese remains narrowly focused on commercial purposes. Although the number of Chinese signs has increased, their presence is largely concentrated in promotional and retail contexts. Monolingual Chinese signs and Chinese-prominent multilingual signage serve primarily to stimulate short-term consumption rather than to provide sustained, inclusive, or rights-based language support. Collectively, these contradictions reveal that Chinese signage at Suvarnabhumi Airport functions less as a pillar of multilingual inclusivity and more as a market-responsive tool, heavily reliant on economic motivations and lacking in institutional support.

5. Discussion

The linguistic landscape of Suvarnabhumi International Airport reflects the structural tensions inherent in the intersection of globalization and state sovereignty. Specifically, the use of Chinese signage illustrates a contradiction between market-driven functional inclusion and the continued regulation of linguistic hierarchy by institutional power. The high visibility of Chinese in commercial spaces is largely a result of economic forces. According to a survey by the Tourism Authority of Thailand, Chinese tourists allocate 41% of their travel budget to shopping, with 63% spent on food and snacks, and 62% on gifts and souvenirs (Tungsirisurp & Athigapanich, 2017). As a result, commercial areas of the airport—such as tax refund counters and luxury boutiques—frequently display bilingual signs in English and Chinese. In some cases, signs even bypass Thai entirely, using phrases like “WeChat Pay” and “50% off” to target Chinese consumers. This trend exemplifies what Piller (2011) terms the commodification of language in globalized contexts, where visibility is increasingly determined by economic utility rather than linguistic heritage or official status. In contrast to this market-driven visibility, Thai national sovereignty manifests through the deliberate regulation of Chinese visibility in high-control institutional zones. In immigration, security screening, and medical service areas, signage overwhelmingly prioritizes Thai and English. Thai characters dominate visually, occupying the largest font sizes in 79.72% of cases, and appear in the top position in 74.01% of vertically arranged signs. Even in contexts with clear need for multilingual accessibility, Chinese is often relegated to a secondary role or omitted entirely. This pattern exemplifies what Edelman and Gorter (2010) describe as a “sovereignty-oriented model of language governance,” in which visual strategies uphold the primacy of the national language.

The institutional marginalization of Chinese in the airport’s multilingual ecology manifests in three core problems. First is a crisis of semantic trust. Literal translations such as “Airport Rail Link” rendered as “入城铁”, or “gate” as “登机门”, and “parking” as “停车楼”, while technically understandable, deviate from idiomatic norms in Chinese and may lead to confusion or reduced comprehension efficiency. Second is a functional imbalance. Chinese signage is overrepresented in commercial zones, yet underrepresented in safety and procedural areas, revealing an uneven allocation of linguistic resources. Third, there is an absence of institutional mechanisms. Most Chinese signs are initiated by private businesses, lacking centralized standards or quality control, resulting in a fragmented and inconsistent signage environment.

In light of these findings, this study proposes the following recommendations: First, at the level of institutional design, the Airports of Thailand (AOT) should develop a Regulatory Framework for Multilingual Signage in International Airports, defining language priorities and code configurations

by functional zone. Thai should remain mandatory in sovereign control areas (e.g., immigration, security), while mixed-use zones (e.g., terminals, wayfinding systems) should standardize trilingual signage (Thai-English-Chinese). In commercial zones, more flexible, market-oriented language display may be allowed, but must meet minimum standards for semantic accuracy and translation quality, ensuring a balance between normative regulation and service flexibility. Second, to safeguard translation quality, a three-tiered mechanism should be adopted, combining (1) a multilingual terminology database co-developed by Thai and Chinese academic institutions, (2) pre-publication native-speaker proofreading, and (3) periodic translation audits. Signage containing high-risk information (e.g., emergency procedures, medical notices) should be reviewed by certified professional translation providers on a contractual basis. Third, in terms of language ecology management, a context-sensitive code allocation model should be implemented. Digital signage systems should enable dynamic language switching based on flight schedules and passenger demographics. Signage content should be aligned with its communicative purpose—ensuring clarity and accessibility in regulatory domains, while permitting greater linguistic diversity in service or promotional contexts. This would help avoid cognitive overload and miscommunication arising from inappropriate code hierarchy. Fourth, a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework should be introduced. Language service performance should be integrated into airport service quality assessments, with measurable indicators such as a “language satisfaction index” and “translation accuracy score.” Regular multilingual service quality reports should be issued, informed by user surveys and anonymous feedback mechanisms. A public language feedback platform should also be established to allow travelers to report signage errors or inconsistencies, thereby enhancing institutional transparency and participatory governance in language planning.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the Chinese linguistic landscape at Suvarnabhumi Airport constitutes a paradigmatic site for examining how emerging economies negotiate language sovereignty, economic rationality, and international service provision under globalization. Chinese is embedded into the airport’s visual space through a logic of commercial instrumentalization: while highly visible in retail contexts designed to stimulate spending, it remains largely absent in core functional areas such as safety, navigation, and procedure. This dual structure—economically driven yet sovereignty-constrained—partially satisfies the rising demands of Chinese tourists and contributes to the airport’s international image. Yet it also reveals deep-seated contradictions in language service design. The semantic quality crisis, functional segmentation, and limited institutional

guarantees reflect a disconnect between short-term commercial imperatives and the need for systematic language planning.

At a broader level, the case of Suvarnabhumi Airport exemplifies the linguistic symptoms of governance asymmetry in emerging economies. Chinese gains limited access through its economic value, but remains ecologically vulnerable due to sovereign constraints and institutional neglect. This imbalance reflects Thailand's strategy of dependent development, wherein language sovereignty is partially relinquished to secure tourism revenue, yet no robust framework is established for equal, dialogic cultural representation (Lacher & Nepal, 2010). Addressing this tension remains a critical challenge not only for Thailand, but for all global nodes navigating the intersection of multilingualism, mobility, and market logic.

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Appendix: Functional Typology of Chinese Signage at Suvarnabhumi International Airport

No.	Signage Type	Example Image No.	Primary Function Description	Common Code Combination	Visual Characteristics
1	Directional Signage	Fig. 1, 2, 3	Directing passengers to boarding gates, transfer systems (e.g., metro, shuttle), exits, etc.	Thai-English-Chinese	Typically trilingual with Thai in the primary position and largest font; Chinese is smaller in size
2	Facility Signage	Fig. 4	Indicating locations of toilets, nursing rooms, accessible facilities, and information desks	Thai-English-Chinese	Presented with pictograms and text; Thai is visually dominant; Chinese uses concise expressions
3	Institutional Signage	Fig. 5	Identifying functional areas such as boarding zones, security, immigration, medical stations	Thai-English / Thai-English-Chinese	Thai is the primary code; Chinese often appears below or beside; some signs lack Chinese completely
4	Regulatory Warnings	Fig. 6	Providing safety notices, prohibited items, queuing rules, and security procedures	Thai-English / Thai-English-Chinese	Often presented with yellow warning background; Thai-English are visually prominent; Chinese is concise
5	Promotional Signage	Fig. 7, 11	Communicating brand promotions, payment options, holiday campaigns	English-Chinese / Chinese-English	Chinese is prominently featured, often in large fonts and central positions; red/yellow or Chinese-style formats appear
6	General Information	Fig. 8	Covering flight information displays (FIDS), terminal maps, service indexes, multilingual greetings	Thai-English-Chinese / Multilingual	Located at designated info counters; equipped with multilingual staff; Chinese is visible but inconsistently ordered