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The Role of Buddhism in the Language Ecology and Vitality of Tai Phake in Assam (India) and Wutun in Qinghai (China)

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Abstract: This study examines the role of Buddhism in the vitality of local languages as an asset of indigenous traditions, focusing on two geographically disconnected minority language communities: Tai Phake in the state of Assam, India, and Wutun (*Ngandehua*) in the Qinghai province of China. The investigation addresses various factors related to the ecology of speech communities discussed in connection with religion. The data are based on longitudinal observations from personal fieldwork in the respective locations over the past two decades. The descriptive and comparative analysis applies an ecology-based typology of minority language situations to assess the contribution of individual factors in three different domains (speakers, language, and setting) to the vitality of the Tai Phake and Wutun languages. The results reveal several areas in which Buddhism as a cultural authority has noticeably contributed to language preservation. The effects of Buddhism are considered significant in enhancing demographic stability, social setting, attitudes, awareness of historical legacy, education in monasteries, and sustainable economics. In contrast, religion does not account for the vitality of these local languages in situations where a low degree of dialectal variation does not complicate intergenerational transmission of language, the minority status of the speech community is unique, and space for language in the institutionalised domain of use is insufficiently provided.

Keywords: Buddhism; indigenous traditions; indigenous knowledge; language ecology; revitalisation; religion and linguistics

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1. Introduction

Religion has received increased attention from language researchers over the past few decades, serving as one of the significant variables and explanatory factors accounting for language use and variation (Omoniyi and Fishman 2006; Yaeger-Dror 2014). The role of religion in language maintenance has also been discussed in numerous regions, but more often in connection with the former European colonial territories within Asia, Africa, and the Americas (see, e.g., a collective volume on the sociology of language and religion in Pandharipande et al. 2019). In addition to a large number of individual case studies on religion and language maintenance among heritage language communities, there are also some works on indigenous and local languages, although these studies tend to focus on mid-sized and large-sized communities, such as those in the USA (Cantoni 1999), Indonesia (Musgrave and Ewing 2006), and South Africa (Kamwangamalu 2006). Our aim in the

current study is to draw scholarly attention to and advance discussion on religion and language in small communities with populations below 10,000 people, from contexts chronologically predating those related to European colonial history.

The present study discusses how Buddhism as a cultural authority has contributed to the language vitality of local communities and their traditions, focusing on language. The selected case studies examine the Tai Phake (ISO 639-3 phk) community, with approximately 5000 people living in the state of Assam in Northeast India, and the Wutun (ISO 639-3 wuh) community, with approximately 4000 people living in the Qinghai province in Northwest China. In the current study, we treat language and culture as assets of indigenous traditions but refrain from labelling the speech communities under investigation as "indigenous" due to varying conceptions of ethnic minorities in different states. For instance, Hinden's (2021) discussion on the existence of "indigenous peoples" in China remarks that traditional conceptions of identity and nationhood in China, in theory, differ from the ethnic confederate equality in the Soviet Union and the category of "indigeneity" in the Western tradition. However, the lack of recognition of indigenous groups in China, in practice, is not an indication that such groups do not exist, nor does it make them any less "indigenous". While acknowledging diverse ethnic minority policies and still maintaining our study's relevance to the theme of indigenous traditions in this special issue, we choose the politically more neutral label "local" to refer to our two speech communities for comparative purposes.

The two contexts have different origins and locations but share many common societal developments: (1) adopting Buddhism, respectively, in the Theravāda (Southern Indian) and Vajrayāna (Tibetan) sects in the early second millennium CE; (2) politically joining the kingdoms led by their ethnically related majority tribes, respectively, Ahom and Tibetan, during the mid-second millennium CE; and (3) culturally assimilating with dominant cultures in the regions, respectively, Assamese and Han Chinese, in recent centuries. Despite undergoing several transitions, the Tai Phake and Wutun traditions and languages have not been demoted to "critically endangered" status, as defined by UNESCO's criteria for language endangerment (Moseley 2010). Of these two languages, Wutun is in a more vulnerable position and is generally classified as "definitely endangered" or "threatened" (Yulha Lawa 2021; Cabras 2023), alongside other minority languages of Greater Tibet. According to a recent survey by Yulha Lawa (2021), the estimated number of minority languages in all Tibetan regions of China is 34. All these languages are threatened by the lack of recognition by the state and the broader Tibetan communities and pressures to assimilate into modern Chinese society, as well as the high prestige of spoken and written Tibetan, which often leads to negative language attitudes.

While we recognise the marginalisation of the small language communities under study, our working hypothesis is that Buddhism, adopted prior to recent cultural assimilation, has supported the maintenance of spaces where minority languages can still be practised and essentially serve communicative and identity-building needs. These include, for example, Buddhist rituals, art, and philosophy, which were cultivated and accommodated in these communities not only through the religious languages, respectively, Pāli and Tibetan, but also through local languages.

Greater attention has often been paid to discussing how culture and language are becoming extinct. In contrast, we present lesser-discussed examples of how they are successfully maintained, with supporting force from Buddhism. This focal aspect fits within Spolsky's (2006) framework for research on religion and language, addressing the dimension concerning the effects of religion on language, which essentially focuses on the influence of religion on language choice and maintenance. To ensure a critical analysis, this discussion also addresses scenarios where it is unlikely that religion, but rather other fac-

tors, contributed to the language vitality in local communities. The findings aim to engage readers from both religious and language studies, bridging these two aspects, which play important roles in shaping human civilisation and identity construction.

The data are based on first-hand observations from personal fieldwork in the respective regions and are analysed using a typology of minority language situations, addressing a significant research gap in cultural revitalisation research of small-sized communities (Section 2). Methodologically, the study's descriptive account details numerous elements and characteristics of the two Buddhist communities for understanding the situation of language in connection with the belief system (Sections 3 and 4). A typological analysis examines similarities and differences between comparative variables for assessing the role of Buddhism alongside other social factors (Section 5). The present study provides a scientific contribution to the increasing body of knowledge and empirical findings regarding indigenous traditions and local populations (Section 6).

2. Data and Methods

The data used in the present study are first-hand observations from fieldwork conducted between 2005 and 2018 in the state of Assam in Northeast India (Wongsathit 2018) and in the Qinghai province in Northwest China (Sandman 2016). The data are extracted from our descriptive research, which focuses on language and writing but also yields valuable information on the extralinguistic (i.e., non-structural) aspects of the speech communities as by-products. These aspects explain the surrounding social, political, and cultural environments, which are crucial for understanding language beyond its structure. Such elements related to language ecology are used as variables for the present comparative study.

Several studies have attempted to examine the language situation of endangered and minority languages within a typological framework. Our parameters for comparing the Tai Phake and Wutun communities and for assessing the role of Buddhism in their language ecology and vitality are rooted in the ecological approach introduced by Haugen (1972) and Haarmann (1986). Both case studies are described in Sections 3 and 4, following a questionnaire preliminarily designed by Edwards (1992). In answering the list of questions, the descriptive account addresses various micro-variables adapted from a typology by Grenoble and Whaley (1998), being an extended version of Edwards' (1992) model. The selected domains and variables used in the present study are provided in Table 1 and elaborated upon in the subsequent text.

The parameters introduced by Edwards (1992) concern 11 domains which are analysed from three perspectives: (1) speaker, (2) language, and (3) setting. Each factor in these three domains is described in detail, providing concrete examples and explanations of the language situation in the Tai Phake and Wutun communities (Sections 3 and 4). Unlike in the original model, the present examination does not treat religion as one of various independent factors but as a baseline against which other factors are discussed. As both communities have not been previously investigated in this framework, the information is primarily presented from our critical analysis and secondarily from the literature, where comparable information is available.

In the current investigation, particular attention is paid to how Buddhism, as the common religion of the two communities, also supports variables in the other 10 domains, justifying the role of religion (Section 5.1). Additionally, cases where religion cannot account for the vitality scenario are discussed, with explanations sought from other factors (Section 5.2). Several shared patterns are identified, providing empirical evidence and tentative generalisations as a model for assessing the role of Buddhism in future studies on other Buddhist speech communities.

Table 1. Parameters for assessing a minority language situation (Edwards 1992, p. 50).

Domain	Speaker	Language	Setting
1. Demography	Numbers and concentrations of speakers	Extent of the language	Rural–urban nature of the setting
2. Sociology	Socioeconomic status of speakers	Degree and type of language transmission	Nature of previous/current maintenance or revival efforts
3. Linguistics	Linguistic capabilities of speakers	Degree of language standardisation	Nature of in- and out-migration
4. Psychology	Language attitudes of speakers	Aspects of the language–identity relationship	Attitudes of the majority group towards the minority
5. History	History and background of the group	History of the language	History of the area in which the group now lives
6. Politics, law, and government	Rights and recognition of speakers	Degree and extent of official recognition of language	Degree of autonomy or "special status" of the area
7. Geography	Unique, non-unique, or local-only minority in the area	Adjoining or non-adjoining connection between speakers	Cohesive or non-cohesive spatial relationship among speakers
8. Education	Speakers' attitudes and involvement regarding education	Type of school support for language	State of education in the area
9. Religion	Religion of speakers	Type and strength of association between language and religion	Importance of religion in the area
10. Economics	Economic health of the speaker group	Association between language(s) and economic success/mobility	Economic health of the region
11. The media	Group representation in media	Language representation in media	General public awareness of the area

3. The Tai Phake Community

The Tai Phake community, also known as Phakial, is one of six Tai-speaking groups in Northeast India, alongside the Ahom, Khamti, Aiton, Khamyang, and Turung groups. The Phake language belongs to the southwestern branch of the Tai-Kadai language family, the group of Tai languages which is known for their typological deviation from the rest of the family, particularly in syntactic patterns (Morey 2008). Most notably, it exhibits verb–final syntactic structures transferred through the speaker's bilingualism in their native Tai language and the Indic or Tibeto-Burman contact languages of the region where they reside. The Tai Phake people are bilingual, speaking Phake at home and Assamese with outsiders. They use their own script, which is particularly preserved in the genre of religious texts. The Tai Phake script traces its origins to the Indic script family, evolving through the influence of Mon and Shan scripts from the areas of present-day Myanmar. In terms of form, it closely resembles the scripts used by the other four Tai groups in Northeast India—namely, the Khamti, Aiton, Khamyang, and Turung scripts (Morey 2014).

According to the description by Weingken (2004), the Tai Phake people embraced Theravāda Buddhism prior to their migration to Northeast India in 1775, likely adopting the religion in the 14th–15th centuries while residing in Myanmar. Today, all Tai ethnic groups in the region, except the Ahom, follow Theravāda Buddhism. The Namphake Buddhist Temple, established in 1850, has been a pivotal institution for maintaining and strengthening the role of Buddhism in the Tai Phake community. It has consequently be-

come a significant cultural and religious site, serving as a focal point for community gatherings, festivals, and rituals, which provide a space for the use of the Tai Phake language within the community (Wongsathit 2018, pp. 135–61).

Traditionally, Tai Phake parents name their children using Tai nomenclature, although newer generations increasingly adopt Indic names derived from Sanskrit or Pāli. For the Tai Phake, the most important annual festival is *Poi Sang Ken*, a native phonological adaptation from the Sanskrit term *Saṅkrānti* (the New Year festival), which is a common celebration among Theravāda Buddhists in South and Southeast Asia. Other major festivals also have their roots in Buddhist traditions, such as *Mai Ko Sum Fai* (Firewood Offering Ritual), *Poi Khau Wa* (Buddhist Lent Day), and *Poi Kathing* (Robe Presentation Ceremony), etymologically derived from the Pāli word *Kaṭhina*, which refers to the wooden frame used for measuring and cutting the robes of Buddhist monks (Buragohain 1999, p. 936; Wongsathit 2018, pp. 71–75). The generic term for festival, *Poi*, is a loanword from Burmese, *Pwai* [pwɛ́] 'feast, festival, entertainment, celebration', which has spread to Tai Phake and also across other surrounding Tai cultures, such as Shan, Tai Lü, and Northern Thai, all of which commonly pronounce it as [pɔ(:)j] in different tones. As Buddhism deeply influences their life-cycle practices, folklore, and language, many spiritual concepts are adopted from the Pāli language. Examples include the following:

- *ce*^{1} *ti*^{1} 'Stupa, Pagoda' ← Pāli *cetiya*
- *maŋ*^{4} *ka:*^{1} *la:*^{1} 'auspicious' ← Pāli *maṅgala*
- *sün*^{6} 'Buddhist precept' ← Pāli *sīla*
- *puk*^{4} *tha*^{4} *pha:*^{2} 'a Buddhist' ← Pāli *buddhasa*
- *puk*^{4} *cɔ*^{1} 'to worship' ← Pāli *pūjā*
- *lik*^{4} 'a book, a letter' ← Pāli *likh*
- *wa:*^{1} 'rains retreat' ← Pāli *wassā*.

An assessment of the language situation in the Tai Phake community is summarised in Table 2, followed by detailed descriptions for each variable in the subsequent sections.

Table 2. The language situation of the Tai Phake community.

Domain	Speaker	Language	Setting
1. Demography	5000 speakers	Nine villages	Rural
2. Sociology	Relatively high	Continuous intergenerational transmission, family domain	Grammar, archived language data, orthography development
3. Linguistics	Fluent in Phake, knowledge of Assamese and Hindi	Moderate, standardisation attempt by foreign scholars (→Religion not significant)	Stable population, intermarriage
4. Psychology	Fairly positive	Indian identity and Buddhism, both strong links between language and identity	High prestige, historical connection with the founder of the Ahom Kingdom
5. History	Recognition by Burmese, Shan, and Ahom elites, marriages among Tai groups	Contact with Shan and Ahom, intermarriage, bilingualism	Indo–Sino–Myanmar border, Indian expansion, Bangladeshi migration
6. Politics, law, government	Recognition as a "Scheduled Tribe"	Official recognition	One of six Tai races in Northeast India
7. Geography	Unique (→Religion not significant)	Adjoining connection between speakers of closely related Tai languages	Cohesive (→Religion not significant)

Table 2. *Cont.*

Domain	Speaker	Language	Setting
8. Education	Fairly positive, high degree of involvement	Support in monastery schools	Good opportunities, Assamese or English required in higher education, Buddhist education in monasteries, serving as a model for the revitalisation of Tai Ahom language
9. Economics	Good, profitable local economic activities	Relatively strong	Relatively middle-class, tribal tourism
10. The media	Some visibility, Buddhist tourism, social media	Almost non-existent, some unofficial use in social media (→Religion not significant)	Some visibility, Buddhist tourism, Tai tribal tourism

3.1. Demography of the Tai Phake Speaking Population

As reported by N. N. Gogoi (2019), the Tai Phake community consists of approximately 5000 people residing mainly in the state of Assam and parts of the state of Arunachal Pradesh. Distributed along the Buridihing River in the Tinsukia and Dibrugarh districts of Upper Assam, the Tai Phake community is predominantly concentrated in nine villages: Namphake, Tipam Phake, Borphake, Ningam Phake, Faneng, Mounglang, Man Mau, Man Long, and Nonglai. This contrasts sharply with the Ahom, the largest Tai ethnic group in the region, which consists of approximately 1.5 million people. Namphake is the largest village and cultural centre of the Tai Phake community, situated approximately 60 kilometres from Dibrugarh airport. The majority of the Tai Phake population follows the Theravāda Buddhist faith, unlike the dominant Assamese-speaking population, which, according to the 2011 Census, predominantly practises Hinduism (61.47%) and Islam (34.22%). Migration trends among younger community members often lead them to relocate to urban areas, where the use of Tai Phake diminishes due to the absence of an immediate linguistic community. Despite this, the relatively stable demography in Tai Phake villages over recent decades suggests that economic sustainability within the community mitigates large-scale out-migration. The agricultural economy, combined with a deeply rooted cultural identity, provides a stable foundation for those who remain, ensuring the continued use of Tai Phake in daily life and community interactions.

3.2. Social Situation of the Tai Phake Community

During the fieldwork, we observed that the Tai Phake community has remained linguistically and culturally vital despite the dominance of Assamese and Hindi speakers in the region. With a modest but sustainable socioeconomic status rooted in agriculture, the community maintains a close-knit and resilient way of life. While younger generations are also proficient in Assamese, Hindi, and English, Tai Phake remains a vital household language. This continued use is facilitated by the active efforts of community elders and native Buddhist monks, who play a crucial role in transmitting the language to younger generations through daily interactions as well as cultural and ceremonial activities. The community's Buddhist faith serves not only as a spiritual framework but also as a unifying cultural force, deeply intertwined with the use and perpetuation of the Tai Phake language (see A. Gogoi 2024 for a similar tendency observed across Buddhist communities in the state of Assam). Rituals, prayers, and religious texts are conducted in Tai Phake, ensuring that the language remains integral to the community's daily life and spiritual practice. Although Tai Phake lacks a standardised orthography, recent efforts to adapt scripts used in traditional religious texts, along with language documentation initiatives, are promising

steps towards formalising its written form and publishing language resources. These efforts further support the maintenance of the Tai Phake language. Such initiatives reflect the community's commitment to preserving their linguistic heritage, even as they navigate the demands of a multilingual society.

3.3. Linguistic Competence of Tai Phake Speakers

We observed in the Tai Phake community that the community members demonstrate a relatively high level of linguistic competence in their mother tongue, alongside bilingual fluency in Assamese, which serves as the regional lingua franca. This bilingualism reflects their integration into the broader Assamese-speaking sociolinguistic environment while maintaining their linguistic heritage. Younger generations are increasingly acquiring knowledge of Hindi and English, driven largely by formal education and the growing need for multilingual skills in modern Indian labour society. Tai Phake exhibits minimal internal dialectal variation, a factor which contributes to its linguistic cohesion and the ease of intergenerational transmission. In any case, interactions with neighbouring Tai-speaking groups along the India–Myanmar border region, such as the Tai Aiton and Tai Khamti, have introduced some linguistic influences on Tai Phake's lexicon and phonology. These interactions have likely fostered a sense of broader Tai identity while simultaneously reinforcing the distinctiveness of Tai Phake within this linguistic group. Despite these strengths, the influence of dominant languages such as Assamese, Hindi, and English poses challenges. Without formalised language teaching, the risk of language shift persists, even though some initiatives have been undertaken by foreign scholars.

3.4. Attitudes of Tai Phake Speakers Towards Their Language

It is our impression that the Tai Phake community holds strong positive attitudes towards their language, viewing it as a cornerstone of their cultural and spiritual identity. We assume that this is because Tai Phake is not merely a means of communication but a vital link to their shared ancestry and the broader Tai civilisation. This sense of pride is deeply rooted in historical narratives connecting the Tai Phake and other Tai groups in the state of Assam to the Ahom Kingdom. The community's pride in their linguistic identity is also closely intertwined with their Theravāda Buddhist faith, which serves as a unifying cultural and spiritual force. Rituals, texts, and ceremonies conducted in Tai Phake help preserve the language while reinforcing its sacred and cultural value. In any case, the community faces challenges as a minority group in a region dominated by Assamese speakers. Neighbouring communities often perceive Tai Phake as a low-prestige language, primarily due to its limited demographic and economic influence. Nevertheless, the Tai Phake draw strength from their rich cultural traditions, strong Buddhist faith, and close connections with other Tai-speaking groups. Beyond political borders, their Buddhist practices also foster close relationships with other Theravāda Buddhist groups and states, particularly Myanmar and Thailand. For instance, the 2009 visit of Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn of Thailand to Namphake village was a transformative event for the Tai Phake community, elevating the international profile of the Tai Phake people and highlighting their unique cultural and religious heritage (Wongsathit 2018, p. 137). It also sparked a renewed sense of pride and cultural awareness within the community, reaffirming their identity as part of the broader Tai and Buddhist world and traditions in the region. The aftermath of the royal visit saw significant support from both the Thai Embassy and the Assam state government.

3.5. Early and Modern History of the Tai Phake-Speaking Area

The Tai Phake-speaking area in Upper Assam is part of a region with a complex and layered historical narrative. Situated in the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra Valley, the area was historically shaped by the dominance of the Chutia Kingdom between the 12th

and 16th centuries before its assimilation with the Ahom Kingdom. According to historical accounts (see S. Gogoi 2018), the Ahom Kingdom was founded in 1228 by Sukaphaa (a.k.a. Siu-Ka-Pha), a Tai prince from Moung Mao in present-day Yunnan, China, who crossed the Patkai Hills to establish the kingdom. The kingdom thrived during 1228–1838, dominating the region's political and cultural landscape. The name Assam itself is derived from the Ahom Kingdom, with the sound change /h/ > /s/ in Assamese pronunciation. Tai groups, including the Tai Phake, view their connection to this historical legacy as the continuity of their shared history. The situation remained stable for nearly 600 years, as the Ahom resisted numerous Mughal invasions from the west and maintained their sovereignty, with notable expansion under Sue Hungmung in the 16th century after annexing the Chutia and parts of the Kachari kingdoms. As for the Tai Phake, their migration to Upper Assam occurred in 1755, fleeing conflict and instability in Myanmar. As part of the broader Tai ethnic community, the Ahom king welcomed them and granted them land for settlement. As they settled in the fertile valleys along the Burhidihing River, their agricultural practices thrived, and their community slowly integrated into Assam's Hinduism-dominant socio-political landscape while preserving their Theravāda Buddhist identity.

In the colonial era, Upper Assam came under British control following the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826, which ended the First Anglo-Burmese War. The British introduced tea plantations in Assam, transforming the region's economy. Post-independence, Upper Assam has emerged as a key agricultural and industrial hub, with cities like Dibrugarh and Jorhat serving as urban centres of growth. The broader socio-political context of Assam has also influenced the Tai Phake-speaking area in the 20th century. Movements like the Assam Movement (1979–1985), aimed at protecting Assamese identity and addressing the influx of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, have reshaped the region's political climate. While the movement concluded with the Assam Accord in 1985, its impact on the region's ethnic groups, including the Tai Phake, underscores the complex interplay of identity and politics in the state of Assam (Boruah 2024). The region's sensitivity has also influenced mobility policies. Initially, Restricted Area Permits (RAP) and Protected Area Permits (PAP) were required for foreign visitors, particularly in border areas with insurgencies, but these requirements have been gradually relaxed to promote tourism and economic development, creating opportunities for cultural exchange while maintaining security measures.

3.6. Governmental Policies on the Tai Phake Community

Tai Phake is recognised as one of the endangered languages of India by the Ministry of Education, Government of India's Scheme for Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages (SPPEL 2016). The inclusion of Tai Phake in the Tribal and Folk Languages (TFL) framework also provides a formal platform for its promotion and preservation. Celebrations like *Matribhasha Diwas* (Mother Language Day on 21 February) further highlight the significance of linguistic diversity and inspire pride in the Tai Phake heritage. At the same time, the community is officially recognised as a "Scheduled Tribe" (ST) in India, granting them access to affirmative action programmes in education, employment, and other sectors. Such official classifications have a remarkable impact on ensuring social justice and economic welfare (Boruah 2024).

At the state level, India's Three-Language Policy aims to support linguistic diversity by promoting the use of mother tongues alongside regional and national languages in primary education, particularly up to the fifth grade. For Tai Phake students, this formula translates to learning Assamese as the state's official language, Tai Phake as their mother tongue, and English as a global language. However, in practice, smaller languages like Tai Phake often face neglect due to inadequate institutional resources, insufficient teacher training, and the prioritisation of dominant languages such as Assamese, Hindi, and En-

glish in society. This marginalisation poses significant challenges for integrating Tai Phake into formal educational systems and expanding its public use. Nevertheless, monasteries retain their crucial role as cultural centres, actively creating space for the use of the Tai Phake language through religious rituals, teachings, and community events.

3.7. Geographical Spread and Contact with Other Population Groups

The Tai Phake speakers, concentrated in compact villages in Upper Assam, regularly engage with neighbouring Assamese-speaking communities, leading to a significant amount of linguistic and cultural exchange. While this interaction is beneficial for social cohesion, it poses challenges for preserving the Tai Phake language, as younger generations may prioritise learning Assamese for broader communication and career opportunities. We noticed that the presence of other Tai-speaking Buddhist groups, such as the Tai Aiton and Tai Khamti, provides an adjoining network of linguistic and cultural solidarity. However, each group faces similar pressures due to the dominant use of Assamese and Bengali in the region, combined with the growing influence of Hindi, all of which create additional challenges for maintaining the Tai Phake language.

3.8. Quality of Education Among Tai Phake Speakers

Despite limited educational opportunities in many parts of Upper Assam, we got the impression that Tai Phake speakers demonstrate a strong commitment to education. While primary education typically takes place in local villages, secondary education often requires attending schools in Namphake village or urban areas. The primary language of instruction in schools is Assamese, with Hindi and English also taught as subjects in the curriculum. Formal education using Tai Phake as the language of instruction is currently lacking within the school system. Instead, Tai Phake speakers primarily learn to read and write at home and in the Namphake monastery. In this sense, we observed that the monastery plays a crucial role in language preservation and transmission, despite its teaching centre focusing on Pāli language instruction. A team of villagers, trained by a Buddhist monk, also assists in local language education. The community boasts a high literacy rate, with Namphake village claiming 100% literacy. According to the statistics presented in Buragohain (2019), the general literacy rate of the entire Tai Phake community stands at 93%, surpassing both the Assam state average (73%) and the national average (74%). The village has produced professionals in various fields, including medicine, engineering, and law. Established in 1910, a primary school exists in Namphake village, with a high school located nearby. Additionally, the Tai Phake alphabet, closely resembling those used by other Tai groups in India, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and China, is relatively easy to learn. Manuscripts written in the Tai Phake script hold significance in Buddhist ceremonies. The development of a Tai Phake computer font empowers younger generations to express their cultural identity publicly. Currently, the Tai Phake Unicode font is being developed by Stephen Morey (p.c.).

3.9. Economic Situation of the Tai Phake Community

The Tai Phake economy revolves around agriculture and traditional crafts. Festivals and ceremonies attract visitors and generate modest tourism income. Unlike many rural communities in India, the Tai Phake villages benefit from a sustainable economic structure that supports local livelihoods and reduces out-migration. In the survey by Buragohain (2019), the occupation of the Tai Phake community is primarily agricultural, with 68.9% engaged in farming. A further 17.8% work in government service, while 3.1% are employed in private service. Only 8.6% run their own businesses. A strong feature of the Tai Phake community is the private ownership of farms. This results in a per capita income rate of INR 60,280, which

is almost the same as the state average of INR 60,621. However, it is worth noting that the per capita income rate of the state of Assam is lower than the national average.

The Tai Phake community, with Theravāda Buddhism playing a central role in shaping their way of life, has the potential to become a unique destination for Buddhist pilgrims. The Namphake monastery, in particular, has attracted attention for its serene architecture, helping to promote tourism and raise international awareness of Tai Phake traditions. Its centre for Pāli language instruction and hub of religious activity could serve as a focal point for such pilgrimages. In their cultural and educational programme, pilgrims could participate in religious ceremonies, learn about Tai Phake Buddhist traditions, and gain insights into the community's unique blend of Theravāda Buddhism and local customs.

3.10. Presence of Tai Phake Language in the Media

The Tai Phake language is seldom represented in mainstream media, although aspects of their traditions occasionally appear in cultural programmes and documentaries. However, we noticed that the use of Tai Phake on social media is growing among younger community members, providing a promising platform for language promotion. YouTube, in particular, has emerged as a popular medium for showcasing the Tai Phake language and popular culture. The channel *TaiPhakeHeritage*, which currently has over 27,000 subscribers, has actively produced music videos for Tai Phake songs, including the song *Nik-Chaa*, which has received over 100,000 views. The growing popularity of the Tai Phake language in media is further supported by the development of a modern Tai Phake font. Additionally, the Namphake temple frequently appears in the media to promote tourism, further raising awareness of the community.

4. The Wutun Community

The Wutun community speaks a mixed language, known in academic research as Wutun or Wutunhua (五屯话). The community members refer to it as *Ngandehua* 'our language'. The Wutun language can be classified as a mixed language (Meakins 2013; Dede 2015; Sandman 2021), a language formed through the fusion of two identifiable contact languages, with a relatively clear split between the source languages for grammar and lexicon. While most of the Wutun basic vocabulary and grammatical markers come from Northwest Mandarin, its morphology and syntax are very un-Chinese and reflect contact influence from Tibetan. Following its emergence through the Chinese–Tibetan admixture, Wutun was also influenced later by Bonan, a Mongolic language spoken in the immediate vicinity of Wutun-speaking villages (Chen 1986; Sandman 2016).

The adoption of Buddhism among the Wutun community took place in the late 14th century when the language was formed due to intermarriage between local Tibetans and Chinese soldiers sent from elsewhere (Cabras 2020, p. 115). At that time, the area was already inhabited by Buddhist Tibetans, and the newly formed bilingual families adopted Buddhism due to cultural contact with Tibetans. Today, the members of the Wutun community practise the Dge-lugs-pa (Gelukpa) sect of Tibetan Buddhism, and Buddhism plays an important role in every aspect of their lives, including both the everyday spiritual practices of the lay people and the more institutionalised religion. The two principal Wutun villages, Upper Wutun and Lower Wutun, have important temple complexes and monasteries, where local men are ordained as monks. During the time of the fieldwork in 2005, there were 310 monks in local monasteries. The history of the Upper Wutun and Lower Wutun monasteries dates back to the 16th century, allegedly to 1534 (Janhunen et al. 2008). Additionally, the Rong bo (Longwu) monastery, a famous centre of Tibetan Buddhism and learning, was established in the 14th century and is located about five kilometres from the Wutun villages.

The Wutun people have Tibetan names, and although they were previously classified as part of the Tu nationality, many of them today are also officially recognised as Tibetans on their identity cards. This highlights an issue with the system of ethnic classification in China, which arbitrarily recognises 55 official minority "nationalities", thus not corresponding to actual linguistic or religious boundaries or people's self-identification. For example, the Tu "nationality," to which the Wutun people were previously classified, in fact comprises speakers of several distinct Mongolic languages.

The villages hold several Tibetan celebrations, the most important of which are *Lo gsar* (Tibetan New Year Festival) and *Glu rol* (a festival dedicated to local deities held during the sixth month of the Chinese lunar calendar) (Cabras 2019, p. 31). The Wutun community is famous for producing *thang ka*, Tibetan religious paintings, which play an important role in the local economy. Additionally, Buddhism has had a significant influence on local life-cycle practices, oral folklore, and the Wutun language itself.

Most of the spiritually significant concepts in Wutun have their roots in Buddhism and are always expressed using Tibetan-based vocabulary. Some examples include the following:

- *lha* [ɬa] 'Buddhist deity'
- *suanzzhai* [suɛnʈ͡ʂe] 'spirit'
- *ghangga* [ɣaŋka] 'destiny'
- *lhakang* [ɬakaŋ] 'temple'
- *gguanba* [guanpa] 'monastery'
- *zhawa* [ʈ͡ʂawa] 'novice'
- *tangka* [t^haŋk^ha] 'Tibetan Buddhist religious painting'.

The language situation of the Wutun community is assessed in connection with various variables in Table 3, followed by detailed descriptions in the subsections.

Table 3. The language situation of the Wutun community.

Domain	Speaker	Language	Setting
1. Demography	4000 speakers	3 villages	Rural
2. Sociology	Relatively high	Continuous intergenerational transmission, family domain	Grammar, archived language data, orthography development
3. Linguistics	Fluent in Wutun, knowledge of Amdo Tibetan, Northwest Mandarin, Lhasa Tibetan, Classical Tibetan, and Standard Mandarin	Very low (→Religion not significant)	Stable population, intermarriage
4. Psychology	Fairly positive	Tibetan identity and Buddhism, with both strong and weak links between language and identity	Low prestige, "not correct Tibetan" (→Religion not significant)
5. History	Tibetan, Chinese, Ming colonisation, mixed marriages	Tibetan, Chinese, mixed marriages, bilingualism	Sino–Tibetan border, Tibetan expansion, Chinese migration
6. Politics, law, government	No recognition as a separate group (→Religion not significant)	No official recognition (→Religion not significant)	Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture
7. Geography	Unique (→Religion not significant)	Not applicable (→Religion not significant)	Cohesive (→Religion not significant)
8. Education	Fairly positive, high degree of involvement	No school support (→Religion not significant)	Limited opportunities, Tibetan in lower grades, Mandarin required in higher education, Buddhist education in monasteries
9. Economics	Good, profitable local economic activities	Relatively strong	Relatively poor, tourism to the Buddhist sites
10. The media	Some visibility, Buddhist art	Almost non-existent, some unofficial use in social media (→Religion not significant)	Some visibility, Buddhist art, tourism

4.1. Demography of the Wutun-Speaking Population

The Wutun (in Tibetan, *Seng ge gshong*, 'lion valley') linguistic community consists of approximately 4000 people living in Wutun (五屯), a rural locality comprising the three villages of Upper Wutun (*Wutun Shangzhuang* 五屯上庄), Lower Wutun (*Wutun Xiazhuang* 五屯下庄), and Jiacangma (加仓吗), located in Tongren County, Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province, People's Republic of China (Sandman 2016, p. 6). The Wutun villages are located about five kilometres from *Rong bo* (in Chinese, *Longwu*, 龙务) town, the county seat of *Reb gong* (in Chinese, *Tongren*, 同仁). At a similar distance, there are four villages inhabited by the speakers of Bonan, a Mongolic language. The three administrative villages inhabited by the Wutun speakers are divided into a total of eight "natural villages", which function as the basic units of administration. Lower Wutun is the largest administrative village with four natural villages, while the number of natural villages is three in Upper Wutun and one in Jiacangma. The population growth has been rapid since the 1980s; in the early 1980s, the population of the community was approximately 2000 (Chen 1986). Due to rapid growth in the last four decades, the population is also overwhelmingly young. The Wutun villages are linguistically rather homogenous, and the population figure of 4000 roughly corresponds to the number of speakers of the Wutun language. Only Jiacangma is inhabited by both Wutun-speaking and Tibetan-speaking families, and some of its residents are losing their language due to a language shift to Amdo Tibetan, while the two principal Wutun villages together form a compact area where Wutun is used as a community language for local inhabitants of all ages.

4.2. Social Situation of the Wutun Community

Due to the economic opportunities provided by the production of Tibetan religious paintings, the socioeconomic status of the Wutun speakers is relatively high. This has had a favourable effect on language maintenance in the local community. Even though Wutun lacks official recognition and school support and cannot be used in institutionalised settings, the language is still actively used in the family domain. Wutun maintains its position as a community language spoken by all generations among family members, other relatives, neighbours, and friends. Additionally, intergenerational transmission remains uninterrupted, and children in the community learn Wutun as their first language before attending school and learning Amdo Tibetan and Standard Mandarin. Language documentation efforts include a reference grammar (Sandman 2016) and archived data in language archives (see Acuo 2008). Wutun has no standardised orthography and is usually characterised as an unwritten language. Several orthographies based on the Tibetan alphabet have been suggested (Janhunen 2009; Renqing Zhuoma and Acuo 2014), but so far, they are not widely used in the community. However, educated Wutun speakers are also able to write their language by adopting informal writing practices based on the Tibetan alphabet, Chinese Phonetic Alphabet (Pinyin Romanisation), and Chinese characters, which they have learnt at school (Sandman 2024).

4.3. Linguistic Competence of Wutun Speakers

From observations during the fieldwork, it is evident that the Wutun community members are generally fluent in Wutun, and almost all of them are bilingual in the local lingua franca, Amdo Tibetan, and Northwest Mandarin. Knowledge of Standard Mandarin is also common among middle-aged and young people, especially those who have received a university education in Xining or other cities, while the grandparent generation generally does not speak Standard Mandarin. Cabras (2023, p. 46) notes that many educated speakers also read books in modern literary Tibetan and watch TV programs in Lhasa Tibetan. In addition, community members who have been ordained as monks know

Classical Tibetan, which is taught at Buddhist monasteries. Due to the lack of official status and standardised orthography, there have been no efforts to standardise the Wutun language. However, due to the compact geographic area and the small population size of the Wutun community, there seems to be no significant dialectal variation. Some in- and out-migration takes place due to mixed marriages with neighbouring groups (notably with Tibetans, and to some extent the Mongolic-speaking Tu), but the population in the villages has remained rather stable in recent decades. One possible explanation for this is that the economic situation in the villages is sustainable, and the community members are not forced to move outside to earn their living. This has had a positive impact on language vitality, since mobility and migration often lead to language endangerment in small communities.

4.4. Attitudes of Wutun Speakers Towards Their Language

According to the observations and interviews conducted during fieldwork, the Wutun language has a relatively low prestige among the Tibetan majority in the region. When referring to Wutun, Tibetans sometimes use the terms *rgya mi bod*, 'not Chinese, not Tibetan', and *dordo*, 'Mongolic speaker', both of which are viewed as derogatory terms. These discriminatory attitudes are also common in the broader context of linguistic minorities of Tibet, which are often marginalised due to solidarity among Tibetans and the prestige of Standard Tibetan language and writing (Tunzhi 2017; Yulha Lawa 2021; Roche 2024). Together with the lack of official recognition and linguistic rights, as well as assimilatory pressures from modern Chinese society, this constitutes one of the factors that create pressures for linguistic assimilation. However, despite the low prestige of the language in a broader context, the fieldwork provides some evidence of positive attitudes towards the language among community members. Wutun is seen as a language that has important social and communicative functions in the local villages.

While the Wutun language guides are aware of the mixed Chinese and Tibetan features of their language, they tend to emphasise the importance of Tibetan origins and Buddhism for their ethnogenesis and identity construction. Speaking a different language is not seen as an obstacle to identifying oneself as Tibetan, a prestigious majority group in the area. In a text titled "Wutun village" recorded during the fieldwork in 2006, a male speaker in his forties comments on the Wutun language and the origin of the Wutun people, as quoted below:

> *"It is not like Tibetan, it is not like Chinese; our own Wutun language, with its own nature and characteristics changed like that and came to have many elements of its own. Therefore, nowadays there are quite many people doing research on it. In any case, the origin of these people is truly Tibetan."*

Cabras (2019, p. 34) draws attention to very similar views about the Wutun language and the origin of the community in an interview recorded in 2002, where elderly women talk about their language and identity in the following manner:

> *"There is a little bit of Tibetan, Chinese, Mongolian in our language, including the parts that belong to us. It is said that there are no languages like ours in the world […]. Unlike ours, languages such as Tibetan and Chinese are spoken independently […]. As regards the language spoken before, many more changes have occurred. There are many Tibetan and Chinese words in our language.* ***Whether it's Tibetan or Chinese, what we have in our hearts is Buddhism*** *[…]."* (Cited from Cabras (2019, pp. 34–35), emphasis added).

In contrast to these narratives, Cabras (2019, p. 42) notes that some members of the community see the language itself as a crucial element of their identification as Tibetans

rather than Chinese. Contrary to what is known from historical sources that link the formation of the community to the migration of Chinese military to the area during the early Ming Dynasty, many Wutun people identify themselves as descendants of the Tibetan soldiers who arrived in the area in the 7th century, and this narrative is extremely common in local folktales. These speakers have drawn special attention to the lexical differences between Wutun and Amdo Tibetan, for example, the pronunciation of the syllable *ba* [pa], which is similar in Wutun and Lhasa Tibetan and differs from the Amdo Tibetan pronunciation *wa* [wa] (Cabras 2023, p. 50). They use these differences as evidence of the Central Tibetan origin of the Wutun language. While the sporadic lexical similarities cannot be used to draw conclusions about the origins of languages in historical linguistics, they nevertheless pose significant meaning for language ideologies and identity construction for the community.

4.5. Early and Modern History of the Wutun-Speaking Area

The initial long-term inhabitants of today's Qinghai area were Tibetan people, who arrived in the 7th century as the Tibetan Empire expanded northeastward, subsuming the Tuyuhun Kingdom. The Tuyuhun population was composed mainly of Mongolic and Turkic tribes from the Xianbei confederation, and due to the Tibetan expansion, they were either displaced or assimilated (for an overview, see Szeto 2019, pp. 37–39; Szeto 2021). Later, in the 13th and 14th centuries, the Mongol Empire's military expansion brought Mongolic and Turkic-speaking groups to the region; their descendants form the various present-day groups of Mongolic and Turkic-speaking populations, such as the Tu and Salar people. After the Mongol Empire's fall in the late 14th century, the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) colonised the area, and during the Ming era, Han Chinese people and Chinese languages spread to the region (Dede 2003).

The history of the Wutun community and language, as well as the adoption of Buddhism among the Wutun, can be traced back to the late 14th century during the Ming Dynasty, when the Ming government sent Chinese troops to the present-day Tongren area to defend against neighbouring Tibetans (Janhunen et al. 2008). The Chinese speakers intermarried with local Tibetans, who were much larger in number than the Chinese-speaking newcomers and assimilated into the local Tibetan linguistic and cultural environment. Both Wutun and Bonan-speaking villages served as hereditary border guard units during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, which gave rise to the Chinese name Wutun, literally meaning 'five garrisons'. Mixed language varieties with both Chinese and Tibetan features were formed in bilingual families, and the bilingual families adopted Tibetan Buddhism (Chen 1982).

4.6. Governmental Policies' Impacts on the Wutun Community

Despite language-planning policies being important macro-variables affecting the vitality of minority languages, in the case of Wutun, the state language policy does not support language maintenance. The Wutun community is not recognised as a separate population group in China, and the language has no official status. Wutun cannot be used in institutionalised contexts, such as in the education system. All official business is conducted in Amdo Tibetan or Mandarin Chinese, and knowledge of Mandarin Chinese is compulsory for accessing higher education. While the Huangnan Prefecture has a special status due to the large number of Tibetan populations, the last three decades have seen increasing economic and political pressures to conform to the Chinese-speaking norms of the Han Chinese population, and the situation has been characterised by political tension and restrictions on the rights of the minority groups. Therefore, the current

vitality of Wutun is due to community-based micro-level factors rather than governmental macro-level policies.

4.7. Geographical Spread and Contact with Other Population Groups Surrounding Wutun

In today's Huangnan Prefecture, Tibetans are the major ethnic group, comprising almost two-thirds of the total population (Cabras 2019). Other ethnic groups in the area include the Mongolic-speaking Tu, Turkic-speaking Salar, as well as the Hui, who speak Northwest Mandarin. Amdo Tibetan continues to be an important lingua franca in the area and is generally used for intercultural communication among other groups, including Wutun. The two main religions in the area are Buddhism and Islam. The Tibetan, Wutun, and Tu people are Buddhists, while Islam is the religion of the Salar and Hui people. Before the second half of the 20th century, there were very few Han Chinese in the region, but the Han Chinese population has increased due to political campaigns of the Chinese government, including the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and various economic development campaigns in the Qinghai province since 2000 (Janhunen et al. 2008). Due to the growing influence of the Chinese, the knowledge of both Northwest Mandarin and Standard Mandarin has become increasingly common among all the ethnic groups in the area during the last two decades.

4.8. Quality of Education Among Wutun Speakers

Today, we can observe a high degree of involvement in education among the Wutun speakers, even though educational opportunities in many parts of the Qinghai province are generally limited. In the current system, most Wutun speakers receive their primary education in the local villages, while middle school is completed either at Lower Wutun Middle School or in Longwu Town. The language of instruction is Amdo Tibetan in local schools and Standard Mandarin in the middle school in Longwu Town. Standard Mandarin is also studied as a compulsory subject in all schools and is required for pursuing higher education. The Wutun language is used in the lowest grades in local primary schools to facilitate the acquisition of Amdo Tibetan, but otherwise, Wutun lacks any school support.

The lack of school support and the prestigious role of Tibetan writing are significant factors in the marginalisation of Wutun and the other minority languages of Tibet. However, we also observe that even though there is no institutional school support for Wutun and the Wutun speakers learn to read and write Tibetan, not Wutun, the knowledge of Tibetan writing facilitates language documentation and conservation efforts. The Tibetan alphabet can easily be adapted for writing Wutun; Tibetan-based orthographies have been suggested by linguists, and educated speakers are able to create informal writing practices for Wutun even without formal training. Studying in local primary schools with Tibetan as the language of instruction also supports the coherence of the community and the continuity of ethnolinguistic identity, despite the lack of support for the Wutun language itself. In addition to the official state education, monasteries both in Huangnan and in other parts of Qinghai province offer education in Buddhism.

4.9. Economic Situation of the Wutun Community

We observe that Buddhism has had a profound effect on the economic situation of the Wutun community. Producing and selling *thang ka*, the Tibetan Buddhist paintings, is the most important economic activity in the villages apart from agriculture. *Thang kas* are painted by both laypeople and monks. Previously, this profession was restricted to the male population, but today women also participate in the *thang ka* painting business. *Thang ka* painting is also taught at local schools. According to Cabras (2023, p. 44), several families in the community have their own studios, where they train both local and external students in *thang ka* painting. The language of instruction is Wutun for local students and Amdo

Tibetan for external students. Therefore, the *thang ka* painting business provides a domain for Wutun language use in a professional context. This form of local painting enhances a sustainable means of livelihood for the local villages. Because of the economic stability of the community, people do not need to move away from Wutun-speaking villages in search of work, and this supports the continuity of the local community, as well as helps to maintain the domains for language use. The favourable economic situation and the possibility to use the language in the local environment and occupation can also contribute to positive attitudes towards the Wutun language, and *thang ka* painting itself is a source of pride for the community. Additionally, Buddhist sites, paintings, and festivals also attract tourists who use local services and contribute to the growth of the local economy of the region, which is located in one of the least economically advantaged provinces of China.

4.10. Presence of Wutun Language in the Media

The presence of the Wutun community and language in the media is still rather marginal; however, the Buddhist sites and paintings have provided some visibility for the community and contributed to public awareness of the area (Punzi 2015). The use of the Wutun language itself in the media is minimal, except for some unofficial and informal messaging on social media. While text messaging in digital media is generally carried out in Tibetan or Chinese, Wutun is used in sending audio messages (Cabras 2023, p. 42).

5. Discussion

The descriptions of the Tai Phake and Wutun communities in Section 4 present numerous similarities between the two Buddhist societies, despite their geographical disconnection. In this section, we will focus on how the two communities differ across various factors. As we have highlighted the role of Buddhism in supporting and reinforcing other macro-variables, the effects of Buddhism will be discussed first in Section 5.1. A discussion of cases where Buddhism does not contribute to the vitality of the two language communities will follow in Section 5.2.

5.1. Contribution of Religion to Language Vitality

Our analysis highlights that, while macro-level language policies of the governments provide little to no support for the Tai Phake and Wutun languages, Buddhism within the two communities has compensated for these shortcomings and enhanced the situation of these local languages. As an institution independent of the state, Buddhism has acted as a cultural authority and counterforce to an unfavourable administrative setting by significantly bolstering these languages' status in key micro-level domains. In Edwards' (1992) model of minority language situations, the positive effects of Buddhism are particularly evident in the domains of demography, sociology, psychology, history, education, economics, and media.

In both communities, Buddhism has been integral to their history and the construction of their cultural identities. The communities' strong identification with Buddhist culture and language ideologies reinforces the perception of language as a vital link which connects them with other ethnic groups, fostering a strong bond among Buddhist believers in the surrounding areas beyond ethnolinguistic ties. For example, Tai Phake speakers can find ideological commonality with other Tai groups in India and beyond, while the Wutun language community connects with Central Tibet. This solidarity, built around shared religious values, contributes to positive language attitudes towards Tai Phake and Wutun, even though these languages may not enjoy high prestige among other linguistic groups. These cases parallel the Jewish community's success in building on a long tradition of Hebrew education, transforming Hebrew from a religious language to a vital vernacular

language, i.e., "revernacularising" the language (Walsh 2005, p. 306). However, it should be noted that in the case of Wutun, the high position of Tibetan language in the prestige hierarchy of local languages also creates and maintains discriminatory attitudes towards non-Tibetan minority languages. This is observed throughout all Tibetan areas of China (Yulha Lawa 2021).

Engagement in culturally meaningful and economically viable activities in the two communities has also positively influenced critical micro-variables for language maintenance. In particular, we draw special attention to the significance of Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhist painting for the economy and identity of the Wutun community. Profitable and culturally significant economic activities in the villages have had a favourable effect on various micro-variables essential for language maintenance, such as the demography of the villages, stability in domains of language use, and restricted out-migration of the population. At the same time, Buddhism has brought local communities to the media's attention through the promotion of cultural and tribal tourism (Punzi 2015). These micro-variables have, to some extent, compensated for other variables which create language endangerment, such as assimilatory government policies, the lack of a standardised writing system, minimal school support, and low prestige of the language in a broader context. Similar observations are made by Cabras (2023), who concludes that Wutun presents both elements of language endangerment (a limited number of speakers in a limited area and assimilatory government policies) and language vitality (important communicative function and an ideological role in the local community). We therefore adhere to Mufwene's (2001) view that low prestige and a lack of literary practices alone do not always determine vitality or endangerment of a language. Instead, the key factors are its social and communicative functions in the community.

From the perspective of education, Buddhism has played a pivotal role in fostering the development and dissemination of written works in the region, alongside the central role of monasteries as intellectual centres for these speech communities. In the Tai Phake community, these literary productions can further be seamlessly adapted for modern life and recreation purposes, such as composing local songs. The Tai Phake script serves as a vital tool for promoting literacy, particularly in local primary schools, where it provides a foundational learning resource for Tai Phake-speaking children. Similarly, Buddhism in the Wutun community has contributed to the spread of Tibetan writing in the region. Like spoken Tibetan, written Tibetan enjoys high prestige in the region, which partially contributes to overlooking linguistic diversity and the role of non-Tibetan minority languages among the communities who identify themselves as Tibetans. However, the Tibetan alphabet could also be readily adapted for writing Wutun. Both the Tai Phake and Tibetan scripts have become essential tools and resources in local primary schools for new generations of language speakers. Although Tai Phake and Wutun are not formally taught in schools, the development of Tai Phake Unicode fonts for computers has greatly facilitated informal writing practices, while the Tibetan alphabet serves as a basis for informal personal communication and proposals for prospective standardised orthographies.

The Buddhist practices in these minority groups do not compel community members to separate their language from the sacred religious languages. Therefore, these local languages can coexist with religious languages, Pāli and Tibetan in these cases, without conflict. They can be used equally well for religious and ceremonial purposes as for daily communication. This vitality-favouring setting provides a counterexample to the case of Ladakhi, a Tibetic language which encountered strong opposition from Tibetan elites in its community's attempts to develop their own orthography, viewed by conservative Tibetan elites as treachery to the greater Tibetan tradition (Zeisler 2006, p. 180). The coexistence of Tai Phake and Wutun with religious languages potentially also helps these communi-

ties avoid situations where local languages are perceived as serving primarily ritual and ceremonial functions rather than daily communication needs, a concern expressed by language activists in some other societies, such as Maori speakers (Karetu 2002; Walsh 2005, p. 307).

5.2. Explanation by Factors Other Than Religion

In Edwards' (1992) framework for assessing minority language situations, more than two-thirds of the variables can be linked to the contribution of Buddhism in preserving language within the two communities. Specifically, in the domains of psychology and history, positive attitudes and pride toward their own language, history, and culture are deeply rooted in the Buddhist identities of both communities. Moreover, the economic sustainability maintained by Buddhist lifestyles and unique craftsmanship compensates for the lack of macro-level administrative support, as discussed in Section 5.1. However, based on the comparisons in Tables 2 and 3, the overall role of Buddhism appears to be greater in the Tai Phake community than in the Wutun community. This section explores three areas where specific micro-variables can be explained without the contribution of religion.

The first case concerns the linguistic domain in connection with the lack of extensive language standardisation in both communities. In the case of Wutun, there is no language standard, leading to variations in vernacular writing among educated speakers. This variability includes the use of the Tibetan alphabet, the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet, and Chinese characters in a single text, which can differ from one individual to another (see Section 4.2). By contrast, efforts to standardise the Tai Phake language have been undertaken by foreign scholars involved in revitalisation programmes to some extent (see Section 3.2). Despite the absence of formal standardisation, both Tai Phake and Wutun exhibit very little dialectal variation, and such minimal differences across speakers and communities likely compensate for the lack of a standardised language, posing no significant challenge to intergenerational language transmission within the communities.

The second variable is geography at the speaker level, which is mutually unaffected by religion in both communities. Historically, both speech communities have remained cohesive minority groups within their respective states, the Ahom Kingdom and the Tibetan Kingdom, up to the present day in India and China (see Sections 3.5 and 4.5). Even in the presence of religions other than Buddhism or the absence of structured belief systems, the minority status of these two communities in their respective political territories would remain largely unchanged. At the same time, there is a notable difference in the geographical and linguistic connections between speakers across state borders. Tai Phake shares a relatively low degree of linguistic variation with Tai Khamti, a closely related Tai language spoken in Myanmar, and the two Tai communities maintain close ties, not only due to their linguistic affinity but also their shared Buddhist faith (see Sections 3.3 and 3.5). In contrast, the Wutun community has no comparable linguistic counterpart outside Qinghai province, as its unique form of Chinese language is heavily influenced by Tibetan linguistic elements (as introduced in Section 4). Even the related Chinese languages spoken in adjacent areas in Qinghai and Gansu provinces are typologically distinct from Wutun (Yurayong et al. 2024). Furthermore, the awareness of genealogical relationships between Wutun and these languages is not rooted in shared religion but in linguistic affinity (Dede 2003), unlike the solidarity between Tai Phake and Tai Khamti.

The third shared area is the low degree of media presence for both languages. Tai Phake and Wutun are primarily used for personal communication, with no official usage observed in government communications by local authorities. While new technologies have marginally increased the visibility of these languages, such as the dissemination of cultural content online for Tai Phake (see Section 3.10) or personal communication for Wu-

tun (see Section 4.10), their absence in mainstream media cannot be directly linked to Buddhism. Instead, it can be attributed to the lack of macro-level support for language policies and standardisation, which could otherwise facilitate broader and institutionalised domains of language use.

Beyond these three shared domains, the key difference between the Tai Phake and Wutun communities lies in the varying degree of external support. As described in Sections 3 and 4, the Tai Phake community benefits from greater recognition and support from local and state authorities compared to the Wutun community, which mostly continues its cultural practices and traditions independently, without governmental support in education or policy. Tai Phake is officially recognised as an endangered language by local Indian authorities, whereas the Wutun people and their language have historically been classified as subordinate to the Tu nationality and, more recently, to the Tibetan nationality. This difference has led to varying degrees of educational support. Tai Phake is included in India's Three-Language Policy, which supports local languages in education, whereas Wutun lacks a similar scheme, as formal education in the Wutun community is overshadowed by Mandarin Chinese and Tibetan. The lack of formally recognised linguistic rights and school support, together with the small number of speakers, makes the Wutun language more vulnerable than the Tai Phake language.

Despite these disparities in external support, both communities have more or less successfully maintained sustainable livelihoods through Buddhist self-sufficient economies. They have also effectively positioned their native languages in competition with socially and regionally dominant languages within multilingual societies of Northeast India and Northwest China.

6. Conclusions

The present study has demonstrated that the contribution of Buddhism to the vitality of the Tai Phake and Wutun speech communities is remarkable. By applying Edwards' (1992) typology of minority language situations to analyse the data, we have identified specific areas where Buddhism as a cultural authority has enhanced and reinforced other factors in the ecology of these speech communities, multiplying the vitality-preserving force.

As a general implication of the present investigation, the effects of religion in the case studies conducted are considered significant in enhancing demographic stability, social settings, attitudes, awareness of historical legacy, education in monasteries, and sustainable economics. In the attitude domain, Buddhism has enhanced the positive cultural and spiritual identity of the Tai Phake community, while in the case of Wutun, religion has reinforced both positive self-identification of the community and negative attitudes from the local Tibetans. In contrast, religion cannot account for the vitality of these local languages in situations where the low degree of dialectal variation does not complicate the intergenerational transmission of language (a linguistic factor), the minority status of the speech community is unique (a geographical factor), or where space for language in institutionalised domains of use is insufficiently provided (a media factor). Altogether, the described and discussed language situations, with Buddhism as an essential element, have positively favoured the vitality of the two local communities under focus to the extent that their languages have not fallen into critical endangerment, as defined by UNESCO's criteria for language endangerment (Moseley 2010).

The methodological model of identifying significant and supportive factors for linguistic and cultural preservation can be concretely applied to language revitalisation programmes, informing language planners about various relevant factors to ensure the effectiveness of implementations within actual local communities. Such know-how, based on an understanding of the mechanisms through which major religions have been accommo-

dated by local communities, can maximise the outcomes of revitalisation efforts of language as part of indigenous traditions. At the same time, the framework provides analytical tools for systematically investigating the dynamics of religion and a potential hybridisation scenario when belief systems are introduced and transferred from majority to minority communities. Such advancement improves our understanding of the processes concerning the formation and evolution of indigenous knowledge in varying conditions and sociohistorical settings.

At a more general level, the increasing knowledge of indigenous traditions in local communities enhances the appreciation of diverse, unique vernacular practices of religions, not only in European contexts but also in the lesser-studied local and regional histories of Asia, as has been demonstrated in the present study.

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