

Translation and the Construction of Spatial Identity in Guangzhou's Linguistic Landscape

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Abstract

A city's spatial identity is not a static inheritance but a dynamic process continuously constructed through the accumulation and reinterpretation of historical layers over time. As a major port on the ancient Maritime Silk Road, a treaty port, and a core city of the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area, Guangzhou has developed multiple spatial identities across successive historical periods, which are symbolically (re)constructed through the linguistic landscape (LL) of its public spaces. Drawing on a corpus of 527 signs collected from three areas representing different historical strata, together with a reader-response survey and follow-up interviews, this paper examines how translation strategies transform historical and place-based resources into distinct spatial meanings and how these signs are interpreted by readers with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Across the three areas, code preference and code salience correspond closely with local historical positioning, projecting a multidimensional spatial identity that carries historical memory into contemporary urban space. Translation plays a central role in the (re)production of cultural symbols. Heritage meanings are reinterpreted through translation and incorporated into market-oriented discourses, through which the past is transformed into communicable and commercially valuable symbols that reshape spatial identity in contemporary urban environments. Reception patterns indicate that readers assess multilingual signage according to both communicative accessibility and its alignment with the identity of a place.

Keywords: Linguistic landscape, Spatial identity, Translation, Guangzhou

1. Introduction

Spatial identity refers to the ways in which individuals and social groups construct, perceive, and negotiate the meanings of particular places through shared experiences, memories, and

representations (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). Moving beyond the traditional view of space as a static and abstract container, modern scholarship conceptualises space as a dynamic social product shaped by interactions, practices, and relations of power (Lefebvre, 1991). The formation of spatial identity is accordingly a dual process, grounded both in the historical sedimentation, collective memory, and material traces of a location and in the ongoing social and discursive practices through which places are reimagined and redefined (Massey, 1994). In the contemporary urban environment, linguistic landscape (LL) functions as a visible and symbolic representation of public space, where institutional and vernacular actors inscribe meanings onto the urban landscape (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006). Through the selection of languages, scripts, and semiotic resources, LL reflects not only a city's historical trajectories and cultural affiliations but also the ways in which these resources are mobilised to construct contemporary identities and future-oriented visions of place, offering a window into how spatial identity is forged and continuously negotiated in changing urban contexts.

Guangzhou represents a productive site for examining the relationship between linguistic landscape and spatial identity. As a major port on the Maritime Silk Road, the city has developed a spatial identity that has evolved across historical periods while being continuously (re)constructed through its linguistic landscape. Since the Han and Tang dynasties, Guangzhou has served as a meeting place for merchants and a pivotal node connecting China with the wider world. The city's opening to foreign trade in the modern period introduced new linguistic and cultural influences that became intertwined with existing local practices, generating a distinctive multilingual configuration. Today, Mandarin, Cantonese, and a range of foreign languages coexist in Guangzhou's public spaces, forming a plural and mutually sustaining linguistic ecology.

This paper examines the LL of areas representing different historical periods in Guangzhou, exploring how spatial identity is constructed and negotiated through multilingual resources. It endeavours to address the following research questions: 1) How do the translation strategies visible on public signage rework historical and place-based resources into distinct spatial identities for each area? 2) How are these identity-projecting signs received and interpreted by readers of differing linguistic and cultural backgrounds?

2. Linguistic Landscape and the Construction of Identity

Linguistic landscape (LL) refers to the visibility and symbolic construction of language in public space, with objects of study typically including shop signs, billboards, road signs, and public signs on government buildings (Ben-Rafael et al, 2006; Landry & Bourhis, 1997). Since the concept was proposed, the field has rapidly become a focal area of sociolinguistics, and its emphasis has shifted from the visibility and distribution of codes toward the more complex relationships among language, space, cultural memory, and identity (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010). Language in public space carries not only an informational function but also a social indexicality, since it can reflect socio-cultural change, disclose community boundaries and hierarchical structures, and participate in the construction of identity (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006). Research in geosemiotics has further shown that a sign's meaning depends on its emplacement and on systematic choices of code preference, so that the very

material arrangement of codes indexes social relations (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). It is this indexical capacity that makes the LL a productive site for investigating identity.

Contemporary identity research broadly emphasises the constructed nature of identity, foregrounding the process through which it is negotiated in discursive interaction and social practice. Research on place identity argues that place identity is a mental representation of “place” that an individual forms through interaction with a particular material environment, constituted by the memories, conceptions, emotions, attitudes, values, and meanings the individual associates with the space they inhabit (Proshansky et al., 1983). As a produced entity, space is simultaneously shaped by institutional planning and mainstream narratives, and continually invested with meaning through the everyday experiences, embodied practices, and cultural imaginaries of communities and individuals (Lefebvre, 1991). The construction of spatial identity is thus bound up with macro-level policy and planning while being deeply rooted in micro-level perceptual experience and social practice. As a space where institutional and vernacular sign-making converge in a shared visual field, LL offers a site for examining how these two levels interact and articulate with one another.

Spatial identity embodied in LL comprises multiple layers spanning national, collective, and individual dimensions. These layers may complement and reinforce one another or, conversely, constrain and contest one another, reflecting the diverse identity repertoire of a community. Identity in LL operates along two interconnected dimensions. On the one hand, it asserts the self by foregrounding what distinguishes an actor from other communities; on the other, it fosters collective identity by expressing an actor's sense of belonging and eliciting resonance among like-minded groups (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006). In multicultural societies, the spatial identity embodied in LL involves social, historical, cultural, regional, and ethnic factors, functioning as a linguistic marker through which communities construct inclusion and express differentiation (Scarvaglieri et al., 2016).

Under the influence of colonial expansion and globalisation, English has come to be widely used in LLs around the world, and its distribution, functions, and symbolic meanings have long been central concerns of LL research. Studies across different settings show that English serves both a cross-cultural communicative function and a range of symbolic functions associated with modernity, internationalisation, openness, and elite status (Backhaus, 2007; Hult, 2009). At the same time, through its engagement with local cultures, English is transformed as its norms are creatively reworked and subverted, and as it becomes intertwined with local cultural elements to serve as a linguistic resource for constructing local identities in the age of globalisation (Huebner, 2006). This symbolic economy of language has been theorised as commodification. Under late capitalism, linguistic resources, including heritage varieties and scripts, are increasingly valued not only for their communicative functions but also for the distinction, authenticity, and symbolic value they confer on goods and places (Heller, 2010). Leeman and Modan's (2009) study of Washington's Chinatown demonstrates how commodified language materialises ethnic and historical meanings in the built environment, a process that is directly relevant to the heritage-oriented areas examined in this study.

In Chinese cities, LL is similarly recognised as a vital instrument for representing cultural histories and shaping urban identities (Jin, 2020; Li, 2021). Existing research often explores the norms of sign translation and writing, alongside the demand for language services driven by urban internationalisation. Furthermore, scholars have probed the power relations, value orientations, and identity-construction mechanisms embedded in these landscapes. English consistently emerges as the principal foreign language in the LL of Chinese cities, carrying symbolic associations with internationalisation, modernisation, and cosmopolitanism (Liu, 2017). Additionally, these linguistic landscapes exhibit super-diversity, reflecting the varied ethnic, cultural, and identity dimensions of diverse urban actors (Tian & Zhang, 2014). Linguistic innovation represents another salient feature, as studies focusing on Suzhou, Shantou, Hong Kong, and Taipei demonstrate that English serves not only as a marker of global integration but also as a flexible linguistic resource. Sign creators frequently subvert established English norms, fusing the language with Chinese elements to creatively articulate unique urban identities (Curtin, 2009; Li, 2015; Luk, 2013).

While this body of work offers rich insights into the linguistic landscape, certain dimensions of the translation process invite further exploration. Translation is pervasive on Chinese urban signage, yet it has predominantly been evaluated through the lens of correctness or norm-conformity. Less attention has been directed toward translation as an active operation through which cultural discourse is reconstituted and spatial identity is reconfigured. By adopting translation as its analytical hinge, this paper seeks to build upon existing scholarship. Furthermore, LL research has traditionally been producer-centred; although scholars have long recognised the importance of attending to readers' responses (Garvin, 2010), how public signs are interpreted by their audiences remains a relatively underexplored area. The paper endeavours to address these gaps by treating the translation of public signage as an active spatial practice, and by incorporating a reception-oriented approach to capture how these landscapes are experienced. Specifically, the paper examines how translation strategies rework historical and place-based resources to construct distinct urban identities, while simultaneously investigating how readers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds interpret these spatial narratives.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Sites

Guangzhou has been an important node on the ancient Maritime Silk Road, a treaty port, and a core city of the Greater Bay Area. These historical layers remain embedded in the city's urban space and have given rise to areas with distinctive spatial and cultural characteristics. Drawing on the typological framework for classifying historical areas, which classifies urban areas according to their historical period and defining characteristics (Wang et al., 1999), this paper identifies three representative areas in Guangzhou: the Maritime Silk Road cultural area, the treaty-port area, and the contemporary commercial area, with Huangpu Port, Shamian, and Beijing Road selected as typical cases of the three areas.

Huangpu Port possesses rich historical and cultural resources and bears witness to the development of Guangzhou's maritime trade during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Shamian

was an important commercial port in modern Guangzhou. After the establishment of the British and French concessions in 1861, Shamian developed into a historical precinct with a distinctive built environment shaped by foreign architectural and cultural influences. Beijing Road was once the central axis of the old city and has, since the reform and opening-up, developed into a contemporary commercial area integrating civic display, dining and shopping, and tourist consumption. Together, the three areas constitute a spatial cross-section of Guangzhou's layered historical development.

3.2 Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through fieldwork conducted in 2024. Walking surveys were carried out along the main streets and public spaces of each study area, during which photographs were taken of shop signs, billboards, and other forms of LL using mobile phones. Following Backhaus (2007), the unit of analysis was defined as any piece of written text in a spatially definable frame. In total, 527 valid LL samples were collected, 229 in Huangpu Port, 105 in Shamian, and 193 in Beijing Road. Each sample was coded for the languages it displayed, the combination in which they appeared, and their relative salience.

To examine how these signs are received, a mixed-methods reader-response component accompanied the sign analysis. It comprised a questionnaire survey and a set of semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire included a set of general attitude items. These included respondents' views on the codes used in the linguistic landscape of the three areas, their attitudes toward bilingual and multilingual signage and toward signs bearing translation, their views on the reasons merchants adopt such signage, and their preferences among translation strategies for shop names, including literal translation, phonetic translation, and creative renderings that incorporate cultural meanings or the distinctive character of the shop. It then presented stimulus signs selected from the data, including monolingual Chinese signs, Chinese–English bilingual signs, and multilingual signs combining Chinese with English and/or other foreign languages. For each representative sign, respondents rated on five-point Likert scales their comprehension of the sign, their evaluation of its translation, and its perceived contribution to the character of the area, with an open comment field attached to each stimulus.

The questionnaire was completed by 274 valid respondents, drawn mainly from different dialect regions of China. Of the 274 questionnaire respondents, 61.67% were female and 38.33% were male, with ages ranging from 18 to 52. A substantial 79.93% were from Guangdong Province, primarily from the eastern Guangdong and Pearl River Delta regions. Those proficient in Cantonese formed the largest group, comprising 49.64% of the participants, while 20.80% were proficient in the Chaoshan dialect. In terms of self-rated English proficiency, the largest share of respondents (46.71%) placed themselves at the intermediate level, 26.64% above it, and the remainder reported low or no proficiency in English.

A subset of 27 respondents took part in semi-structured in-depth interviews. This subgroup comprised 12 men and 15 women. Twenty identified their cultural background as Chinese, with dialect backgrounds spanning Cantonese (9), Chaoshan (6), Hakka (2), and

Mandarin-dominant or other (3); the remaining 7 were of non-Chinese backgrounds. The interviews probed their code preferences and their views on multilingual signs. Interview data were analysed thematically and read against the questionnaire results.

4. Results

4.1 Language Patterns Across the Three Areas

Table 1 sets out the code usage of the linguistic landscape across the three areas. Overall, the distribution of codes is differentiated in a way that aligns with each area's positioning, refracting distinct pathways of spatial-identity construction.

Table 1. Language patterns in the LL of three areas in Guangzhou

Code combination		Huangpu	%	Shamian	%	Beijing Rd	%	Total	%
Monolingual	Chinese (simpl.)	151	65.94	34	32.38	56	29.02	241	45.73
	Chinese (trad.)	19	8.30	6	5.71	19	9.84	44	8.35
	English	0	0	10	9.52	9	4.66	19	3.61
Bi-/multilingual	Chinese (simpl.)/English	47	20.52	38	36.19	88	45.60	173	32.83
	Chinese (trad.)/English	9	3.93	15	14.29	16	8.29	40	7.59
	Chinese (trad.)/French	0	0	1	0.95	0	0	1	0.19
	Chinese (simpl.)/Italian	0	0	0	0	1	0.52	1	0.19
	Chinese (trad.)/Korean	0	0	0	0	1	0.52	1	0.19
	Chinese (simpl.)/English/Italian	0	0	0	0	1	0.52	1	0.19
	Chinese (simpl.)/English/Korean	3	1.31	1	0.95	0	0	4	0.76
	Chinese (simpl.)/English/Japanese	0	0	0	0	1	0.52	1	0.19
	Chinese (trad.)/English/Thai	0	0	0	0	1	0.52	1	0.19
	Total	229	100	105	100	193	100	527	100

In Huangpu Port, Chinese monolingual signs account for the largest proportion (74.24%), with simplified characters predominating, although traditional characters also constitute a substantial presence. Chinese–English bilingual signs account for a further 24.45%, among which the combination of traditional characters and English represents a notable proportion. The incorporation of English extends the communicative reach of the LL, while the recurrent

use of traditional characters across both monolingual and bilingual signs functions as a visual index of historical continuity, reinforcing the semiotic association between the port's contemporary landscape and its maritime heritage.

Compared with Huangpu Port, Shamian and Beijing Road display markedly higher proportions of bilingual and multilingual signage. Shamian has the highest proportion of traditional Chinese–English combinations (14.29%). This code combination, to some extent, recalls the coexistence of traditional script and Western languages characteristic of the treaty-port period. In Shamian's LL, the historical associations conveyed by traditional characters and the cosmopolitan meanings attached to English coexist in the same semiotic space, contributing to a distinctive spatial narrative of East–West encounters and the interplay between past and present.

Among the three areas, Beijing Road exhibits the greatest diversity of linguistic codes. More than half of its signs are Chinese–English bilingual, while additional languages, including Italian, Korean, Japanese, and Thai, also appear. This multilingual orientation reflects the cultural diversity and semiotic hybridity associated with a contemporary commercial district, projecting an image of an open, inclusive, and globally connected urban space. These aggregate patterns provide the quantitative context for the subsequent qualitative analysis of translation strategies.

4.2 Translation Strategies and Spatial Identity

To examine more closely how LL contributes to the construction of Guangzhou's spatial identity, this section analyses representative signs from the three areas, exploring how they mobilise historical memory, local resources, and cross-cultural symbols to construct distinctive spatial imaginaries and cultural identities. Translation emerges as a key semiotic process through which these resources are recontextualised and reconfigured.

4.2.1 Huangpu Port

Huangpu Port has maintained close connections with overseas trade since the Southern Song period. In 1757, the Qing government implemented the “single-port trade” policy, under which all foreign merchant ships carrying overseas goods into China were required to anchor at Huangpu, making the port a key node in China's foreign trade network. Owing to this distinctive historical position, Huangpu Port retains a relatively well-preserved historical and cultural landscape. However, local historical memory is not produced solely through official narratives. Under the influence of commercial imperatives, historical resources are selectively reinterpreted and mobilised for place branding. The LL of Huangpu thus functions both as a medium through which history is represented and as a symbolic space where historical resources are reconfigured for contemporary consumption.

Figure 1 presents the name of a restaurant in Huangpu Port. The Chinese sign reads 古港冰室 (Ancient Port Ice Room), while the English rendering is “GUANGZHOU Authentic Hong Kong Famous ice room.” The term “Authentic” invokes the historical associations attached to the ancient port while simultaneously constructing a sense of authenticity in the tourist discourse and a promise of genuineness in the commercial discourse. In the sign,

“GUANGZHOU” is capitalised and positioned above the Chinese shop name, foregrounding regional affiliation, whereas “Hong Kong Famous ice room” enhances the brand’s appeal by drawing on the symbolic capital of Hong Kong-style culinary culture. Through the superimposition of three semiotic resources—ancient-port historical imagery, Guangzhou regional identification, and Hong Kong culinary culture—the sign constructs a plural spatial identity that intertwines local heritage with external cultural references.



Figure 1. Gugang Bingshi (Ancient Port Ice Room)

Figure 2 shows the sign of a pastry shop in Huangpu, whose Chinese name is 御手信. In Cantonese culture the term 手信 (*shouxin*) usually denotes a small gift brought back from travels, while the character 御 (imperial) carries a historical colouring that lends the brand an air of antiquity and nobility. Its English name is “The Royal Bakery”. “Royal” corresponds semantically to 御, while “Bakery” transposes the local *shouxin* custom into the more globally recognisable culture of baking. This transposition draws on the currently fashionable Western baking-and-dining culture to enhance the brand’s appeal and, through the symbolic association of “Royal” with Western monarchy, endows the brand with cross-cultural symbolic value. Here the historical imagery and local culture borne by the Chinese name are reinterpreted in translation and converted into an instrument for empowering commodity value in a global context, while injecting plural dimensions of identity into the field the shop occupies.



Figure 2. Yu Shouxin (The Royal Bakery)

Through the mobilisation of transregional and cross-cultural symbolic resources, the LL of Huangpu Port participates in the representation and reconstruction of historical memory in a contemporary commercial context. In the semiotic construction of public space, history becomes an interpretable cultural resource that is recontextualised as a communicative symbol carrying both commercial value and cross-cultural meanings. The spatial identity projected by Huangpu thus embodies a composite character in which historical continuity coexists with consumer culture.

4.2.2 Shamian

In 1861, the establishment of the British and French concessions on Shamian Island marked the incorporation of the area into Guangzhou's treaty-port landscape and contributed to the reshaping of the city's spatial configuration by foreign powers. It subsequently developed into a concentration of foreign trade establishments, consular buildings, and international financial institutions. Its LL preserves traces of this historical encounter with foreign modernity and functions as a symbolic testimony to Guangzhou's opening to international trade.

Figure 3 presents the façade sign of the Shamian branch of the Bank of Taiwan. Constructed in the thirty-third year of the Guangxu reign (1907), the building housed a financial institution established in Guangzhou during Japan's colonial rule over Taiwan. Above the entrance, the pediment bears the traditional Chinese characters 臺灣銀行 (Bank of Taiwan), arranged from right to left according to traditional writing conventions, with the English inscription "BANK OF TAIWAN LTD" placed below. The incorporation of English, the corporate designation "LTD," and the building's Western architectural style work together to evoke the imagery of modern commercial institutions and colonial capital in the urban landscape. This sign not only indexes Shamian's political and economic history but also, in the contemporary urban context, contributes to the rearticulation of foreign modernity as a heritage resource, supporting the conservation of Shamian's historic landscape and the development of heritage tourism.



Figure 3. Bank of Taiwan

Figure 4 shows a sign on a historical building in Shamian. The building was formerly the premises of the French mission and now serves as the offices of Wah Yang Lane Cultural Industry Co. The company name, 華洋里, is written in traditional characters, and the English reads “WAH YANG LANE,” beneath which is marked “since 1862.” The company was founded in 2022 and specialises in the revitalisation of historical buildings. Its use of traditional characters heightens the sense of history and cultural weight of the corporate image, while the phrase “since 1862” connects the enterprise to the historical narrative of the building itself, drawing on the history of the building to endorse the brand. The English name “WAH YANG LANE” combines the Cantonese transliteration of 華洋 with the English term “Lane,” creating a hybrid linguistic form that indexes the enterprise’s local embeddedness in Cantonese culture while reflecting Shamian’s historical character as a site of intercultural encounter.



Figure 4. Wah Yang Lane

Figure 5 presents the frontage of a restaurant on Macau Street. As an important trading centre in modern Guangzhou, Shamian maintained frequent commercial exchanges with ports such as Macau, from which the street derives its name. The restaurant’s Chinese name, 澳门街风味餐厅, appears on the awning above the entrance, while the English name “Macau Street Restaurant” is displayed in larger raised lettering in a prominent position on the façade. By drawing on the historically resonant place name “Macau Street,” the restaurant situates itself in Shamian’s narrative of maritime trade and treaty-port history. Through LL, this historical association is recontextualised and mobilised, giving Shamian’s historical identity a contemporary expression while transforming heritage meanings into a resource for commercial place-making.



Figure 5. Macau Street Restaurant

A significant proportion of Shamian's LL evokes the historical memory of the treaty-port era, making associations with foreign modernity an important element of its spatial imaginary. As a symbolic medium through which history is represented and interpreted, LL contributes to the area's distinctive cultural positioning. At the same time, commercial actors mobilise historically resonant linguistic resources to recontextualise historical narratives in contemporary settings and enhance the area's cultural appeal. Through the interplay between the materiality of historical remains and contemporary commercial practices, Shamian's spatial identity is dynamically constructed, simultaneously preserving memories of its opening to international trade and reflecting the ongoing negotiation between heritage conservation and heritage revitalisation in the modern city.

4.2.3 Beijing Road

As Guangzhou's core contemporary commercial area, Beijing Road presents a particularly diverse range of spatial-identity dimensions through its LL, encompassing traditional Chinese culture, regional cultural identities associated with Cantonese, Chaoshan, and Hakka communities, as well as linguistic resources drawn from English, Italian, Japanese, Korean, and Thai. The presence of foreign languages in Beijing Road's LL does not necessarily index foreign cultures. Rather, such resources are often appropriated to represent local cultural meanings, translating traditions and place-based identities into communicative forms accessible to broader audiences.

Figure 6 presents the sign of a silk-clothing store. The Chinese name 丝路芳华, together with the scrolling captions below (National Intangible Cultural Heritage, Treasure of Lingnan), situates the store's brand identity in narratives of national cultural heritage and Silk Road history. The English name "SILKROAD OF FLOWERY" draws on the contemporary symbolic value of the "Silk Road" and the global communicative reach of English, recontextualising traditional cultural narratives into an outward-oriented commercial discourse.



Figure 6. Silu Fanghua

Figure 7 shows the sign of a beverage shop. The character 茉 on the right of the sign embeds a jasmine-flower image in the grass radical, using a multimodal visual presentation to reinforce the shop's brand identity, keyed to traditional aesthetics. In the English name "MORE YOGURT," the word "MORE" can be read both as a transliteration of 茉 and, through the semantics of English, as a pun. This creative transliteration preserves the source-language pronunciation while drawing on the semantics of the target text to layer a double meaning onto the brand, reflecting the process by which local culture mobilises linguistic resources through translation to construct meaning.



Figure 7. Mo Suannai (More Yogurt)

Figure 8 shows the sign of a restaurant on Beijing Road, named 沙胆彪炭炉牛杂煲. The term 沙胆 is Cantonese for "bold" or "daring." In the English translation, 沙胆 is rendered "Brave," while the remainder is transcribed in Cantonese-style Romanisation as "Biu Tann Lou Ngau Zaap Bou." By presenting Cantonese dialect in Romanised form, the sign gives a visual display of Cantonese cultural resources, folding Cantonese culture more concretely into the urban consumption landscape. The words 广府老挡 (Old Cantonese Stall) on the left of the sign further specify its regional identity. Moreover, the juxtaposition of the English word "Brave" with Cantonese Romanisation exemplifies translanguaging practices (Wei, 2018), whereby multiple linguistic resources are mobilised to construct meaning.



Figure 8. Sha Dan Biao Tanlu Niuza Bao

Figure 9 shows the sign design of a Chaoshan gongfu-tea shop. The character 山 (“mountain”) in its name is rendered in seal script, forming a visual symbol with the imagery of a mountain, enriching the sign’s visual expressiveness and demonstrating the multimodal participation of graphic form in meaning construction. The English sign “Chaoshan of Tea” at the top echoes the two characters 潮汕 (Chaoshan) on the base of the sign, clearly indicating the brand’s regional-cultural affiliation. The Chinese and English signs jointly construct the identity connotations of Chaoshan culture through their intertextual relationship. The word “COX” at the very top is an acronym of “Chaoshan of Tea,” with the “X” standing for the manifold possibilities of reconstructing traditional Chaoshan flavour in modern tea-drinking culture. This multilingual expression creates a fashionable and contemporary brand image by combining local linguistic resources with global cultural references, reflecting the ongoing negotiation between local cultural identity and urban modernity.



Figure 9. Cha Yue Shan

Figure 10 presents the sign of a Thai restaurant. The name 穎豐泰國菜 is written in traditional characters, resonating with the continued use of traditional script in Southeast Asian Chinese communities. The English name “The Lime” evokes, through its gustatory association, the fresh flavours associated with Thai cuisine, reinforcing the restaurant’s regional positioning. The Thai script “อาหารไทย” (Thai food), incorporated into the sign and juxtaposed with an image of a pagoda, further enhances its Thai cultural associations. At the bottom of the sign, the greeting “Welcome” appears in Chinese, English, and Thai, improving

the sign's accessibility to diverse tourist groups while semiotically indexing Beijing Road's identity as a multicultural commercial space.



Figure 10. Ying Feng Thai Restaurant

The spatial identity constructed through Beijing Road's LL is characterised by a multilayered nature. Traditional cultural elements evoke historical continuity, while the regional identities associated with Canton and Chaoshan contribute distinctive local meanings, producing a cultural landscape with a strong sense of place. At the same time, the incorporation of Japanese, Korean, Thai, and other transnational cultural resources introduces further plurality into the space, projecting an image of urban openness and diversity. In this multilingual and semiotically layered landscape, English often functions as a linguistic resource for representing local meanings, extending their communicative reach through creative translation and reinterpretation, and mediating between tradition and modernity, the local and the global. The spatial identity projected by Beijing Road thus reflects the openness and global orientation of contemporary urban space while revealing the ongoing negotiation and production of urban meanings amid mobility, hybridity, and consumer-oriented practices.

4.3 Reader Response

The reader-response data shift the analytical focus from the production of LL to its reception, examining the extent to which the identities projected through the landscape are recognised and negotiated by readers. Questionnaire responses indicate generally positive, albeit differentiated, attitudes towards multilingual signage. A large majority of respondents (81.51%) expressed a neutral stance on the use of bilingual and multilingual shop signs, while most regarded such signage as facilitating international visitors' understanding of businesses, enhancing commercial image, and projecting a sense of modernity. However, disaggregating the data by English proficiency reveals a clear pattern. Respondents with advanced English proficiency consistently viewed multilingual signage as non-essential but desirable, whereas more than half of those with basic proficiency either remained neutral or considered it unnecessary. These findings suggest that responses to multilingual LL are closely associated with readers' linguistic competence and their ability to interpret multilingual signs. The greater their capacity to engage with the linguistic resources displayed, the more likely they are to interpret multilingual signage as indexing urban openness and internationalisation and to perceive it as facilitating international visitors' access to the city.

Respondents were also asked their views on the functions of bilingual and multilingual signage, and they attributed it predominantly to image-related and informational motives. The most frequently selected reason, chosen by 84.04%, was that such signage enhances a shop's image, making it more contemporary, fashionable, and international. The next most common, at 67.75%, was that it conveys information, helping international visitors understand what a shop sells. A substantial share (63.14%) attributed it to the merchant's personal preference, while external factors such as government requirement were rarely selected. Respondents thus overwhelmingly located the impetus for multilingual signage in personal or internal considerations rather than external mandate. This is consistent with the view that signage functions chiefly to transmit information and to project image, and that multilingual choices are made to strengthen these functions.

On the question of how shop names should be translated, preferences were equally clear. A majority (57.33%) wished signs to convey both the sound of the Chinese name and its deeper cultural connotations, while 43.32% wished merchants to devise creative translations attuned to the distinctive character of the shop. Literal and purely phonetic renderings attracted comparatively little support. The questionnaire thus sketches a readership that tolerates multilingual signage readily, understands its commercial motives, and asks of translation something more than denotational accuracy.

The interviews provide essential qualitative context for interpreting the questionnaire findings. Interviewees from Chinese backgrounds explained their evaluations in terms of the meanings associated with particular scripts and linguistic codes, describing, for example, traditional characters as conveying authenticity, Cantonese Romanisation as creating a sense of familiarity and playfulness, and English-only signage as appearing fashionable yet socially distant. Throughout the interviews, they consistently regarded an area's signage as an integral part of its place identity. In their view, when merchants foreground regional characteristics and distinctive shop identities, they contribute to the transmission of local culture and deepen visitors' understanding and appreciation of the area.

The interviews with non-Chinese participants further corroborate the questionnaire findings from the perspective of reception. When asked which shop they would choose if product quality were identical, all seven preferred Chinese–English bilingual signage to monolingual Chinese, monolingual English, or Chinese accompanied by *pinyin* (the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet). They explained that the English element helps international visitors understand what a shop offers and makes the space feel more welcoming and accessible. This preference, however, was not unconditional. One interviewee observed that the appropriateness of English depends on the type of establishment and its surrounding context. A long-established shop in a historic alley, serving primarily local residents in a traditional streetscape, gains little from English and may even lose some of its local character, whereas a Western-style café or restaurant acquires a more professional image through its use. These responses suggest that readers evaluate LL not only in terms of linguistic accessibility but also according to the perceived congruence between code choice, business identity, and the character of the place.

5. Discussion

A comparison of the three areas reveals the key forces shaping the production of LL. A sign is not merely an inert label but a site where social, historical, and semiotic dynamics converge. The first is an area's inherited historical and cultural resources, reflected in the distribution of linguistic codes across the three areas, from the recurrent use of traditional characters in Huangpu Port and Shamian to the dense multilingualism of Beijing Road. The second is market-oriented considerations, through which historical resources are selectively mobilised and recontextualised in contemporary branding. Questionnaire responses further show that readers recognise this strategic orientation, with 84.04% associating multilingual signage with image enhancement and 67.75% with information provision. The third is the city's multilingual ecology, in which simplified and traditional characters, Cantonese Romanisation, English, and other languages provide symbolic resources for interpreting and reimagining space. Through the interaction of these forces, LL becomes a site where historical memory is selectively activated and transformed into circulating meanings. Earlier spatial narratives are continuously reinterpreted and reconfigured in changing economic, cultural, and communicative contexts. In Lefebvre's (1991) terms, the LL of Guangzhou lies at the intersection of conceived and lived space, where spatial identity is continuously negotiated.

Translation functions as the semiotic mechanism through which these forces are materialised in LL, operating through at least three interrelated modes. The first involves the cross-cultural reinterpretation of heritage, whereby historical images and narratives are recontextualised into forms of value that are accessible in global commercial discourse. The second involves preservation through juxtaposition, whereby existing historical codes and visual forms are retained and placed alongside newer semiotic resources, allowing earlier spatial meanings to persist rather than disappear. The third involves creative translanguaging, whereby local linguistic resources are combined with global codes to construct hybrid expressions that communicate place-based identities to wider audiences. Across these modes, translation performs a dual function. On the one hand, it transforms locally embedded narratives into publicly circulating texts and symbols, extending spatial identity beyond internal recognition toward external communication. On the other hand, it reshapes cultural meanings at the semiotic level by reconfiguring historical narratives and local resources into communicable and marketable forms. Translation therefore mediates the tensions among authenticity, commercialisation, locality, and internationalisation. It operates simultaneously as a means of making heritage intelligible across cultural boundaries and as a process through which heritage is commodified for contemporary consumption. It is in this mediating process that urban spatial identity is continuously negotiated between continuity and transformation, preservation and reconstruction.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined the construction of spatial identity in Guangzhou's LL across three areas that capture the city's different historical periods, exploring how translation reworks historical and place-based resources into distinct spatial identities and how the resulting signs are received by differently positioned readers. The analysis of translation strategies reveals

that Guangzhou's spatial identity is continuously negotiated as the city's history is reinterpreted and creatively repurposed for broader communication. The analysis of readers' responses to Guangzhou's LL further indicates that readers assess multilingual signage according to both communicative accessibility and its alignment with the meanings associated with a place. These findings are interpreted in relation to the wider processes that shape LL production, including historical legacies, commercial practices, and the city's multilingual ecology. Spatial identity emerges as an ongoing process through which meanings of place are constructed and negotiated, with translation mediating between historical continuity, contemporary reinterpretation, and communication across audiences. These findings point toward linguistic landscape planning that is attentive to the plural readerships through whom urban spatial identity is ultimately realised.

Given its focus on three representative districts in Guangzhou, this paper offers a situated account of the relationship between translation, LL, and spatial identity. While this comparative design enables a close examination of how distinct temporal and spatial resources are mobilized in the LL, the findings may not be directly generalizable to other cities with different historical trajectories and linguistic ecologies. Future research could extend the analysis to other Chinese cities with distinct historical trajectories and linguistic ecologies, examining how local histories, urban development patterns, institutional practices, and language practices shape the negotiation of spatial identity through LL.

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