



Linguistic Landscape of China: A Case Study of Shop Signs in Beijing

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Abstract

This study, focusing on the shop signs of Beijing, is a new attempt to investigate the multilingual environment of China. Sign related studies have been attracting many scholars' and researchers' attention in China, many of which focus solely on the topic of translation of public signs. This research first puts forward possible approaches to studying signs in China, then attempts to analyze the multilingual signs found in the shops of Wangfujing Street, and indicates how the multilingual linguistic landscape is constructed under the current language policy of China.

Key words: Linguistic landscape; Shop signs; English; Translation; Multilingualism; China

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past 30 years or so, the investigation of public signs in the urban area has been of interest to many scholars worldwide, and it has developed to the survey on the linguistic landscape of certain areas at present. Many researchers also refer to linguistic landscape as "linguistic cityscape", because most studies tend to focus on signs in city centers, where more eye-catching signboards are found and keep changing, as a symbol to reflect the economic, social, historical, political and cultural

development of those areas, and possible influences from outside world. In recent years, this new area of study has developed as a field of interest and cooperation among applied linguists, sociolinguist, sociologists, psychologists, cultural geographers and several other disciplines. In China, however, the signs are analyzed merely as a subject of translation, which draw much attention from linguists in the past ten years. It is obvious that there is a gap in the studies between China and other countries. Based on the current state of sign research in China, this study will first explore new perspectives of studying signs in China by comparing the previous studies worldwide, and then take samples of shop signs of Beijing Wangfujing Street as a case study to illustrate the multilingual environment in the linguistic landscape of Beijing.

1. BRIEF REVIEW ON PUBLIC SIGN RESEARCH IN CHINA

Research on public signs has increased dramatically in the past ten years, and a survey has been done to investigate the numbers of published journal articles that focus on signs in China from 2002 to 2010. As Table 1 shows, it is based on China Academic Journal Network Publishing Database (ZOU, MAN & MENG, 2011), in which sign related articles could be found in 484 different journals. In 2002, Beijing International Studies University founded the "Public Sign C-E Translation Research Center", and this research center established the first website for sign translation, www.e-signs.info.com in 2003. In the summer of 2007, public sign corpus was added to this website and then modified into an on-line corpus of Chinese-English signs in July 2008, which can be accessed at http://www.bisu.edu.cn/Category_1065/Index.aspx. As an improved-version of the C-E public sign translation website, it functioned as a guideline and made preparation for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and 2010 Shanghai Exposition. Moreover, the first English sign translation

dictionary, *A Chinese-English Dictionary on Signs* (LÜ & SHAN, 2004), which can be regarded as a good reference book for doing sign translation was accomplished. The book, *Chinese-English Translation of Signs* (WANG & LÜ, 2007) is a symbol of opening a new field for applied translation. Besides, the achievement on sign research is not only indicated by the number of articles published, but also the mistake-finding and mistake-correcting in sign translation activities held in many big cities in China.

It is obvious that translation exclusively becomes the topic or approach for studying signs in China, and many Chinese scholars explore strategies in order to improve the quality of translations for the common goal of “building a good international image” and “strengthen international communication”. Although many studies have been conducted, the sign research is still limited and restricted in some aspects.

Table 1
Number of Journal Articles Published in China 2002-2010

Time	Number	Percentage
2002-2003	1	0.2
2004	1	0.2
2005	4	0.8
2006	37	7
2007	69	13
2008	115	21.8
2009	155	29.4
2010	145	27.6
Total	527	100

Source: Zou, Man & Meng, 2011

2. EXPLORING NEW PERSPECTIVES FOR SIGN RESEARCH IN CHINA

2.1 Languages Used in Signs

Initially, there is a gap in the interest of sign research between China and other countries. Many Chinese scholars study “signs” from the point of view of translation, unlike most international researchers. In China, a commonly quoted definition for “public sign”, “gongshiyu (公示语)” in Chinese, is from Lü Hefa, a professor of Beijing International Studies University, who has done much influential research on public signs in China. He (LÜ, 2005) indicates: “public sign is publicly displayed information in written or symbolic form, which is closely related to the public lives, works, and environment with directing, prompting, restricting or compelling functions.” This definition is more information or content oriented, based on which many studies focus on the topic of translation in China.

Internationally, however, signs are often included in the study of the linguistic landscape of a certain place. Landry and Bourhis (1997, p. 23) states “linguistic landscape refers to the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region”. Their definition of linguistic landscape is much

more commonly used:

The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration. (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p. 25)

From the two definitions, it is obvious that these scholars have different perspectives when studying signs: Lü’s definition stresses on the “information” in the sign, but Landry and Bourhis put “language” at the first place. How signs in different languages are displayed in a country is subject of ongoing research. In China, although there are a large number of reports on signs across the whole country, the general situation of the linguistic construction of signs is still unclear. As more and more foreigners travel to China and settle down in China temporarily or permanently, special communities in which people are speaking different languages come to existence, and grow quickly in number. Therefore, a survey on the current linguistic landscape of China is an urgent task facing Chinese scholars. Moreover, it is also a way to document how China is developing and changing economically, socially, historically, politically and culturally.

2.2 Signs as a Whole

The understanding of “signs” plays an important role in deciding the sample selection. To a certain extent, sign research is conducted in a narrow sense in China, compared with studies conducted in other countries.

So far, the signs surveyed in China are almost “official signs” or “public signs” called by many Chinese scholars, and they rarely study “private signs” or “non-official sign”, whose meaning is not restricted to advertisements. Landry and Bourhis, in their seminal paper, make the following distinction between private and government signs:

Private signs include commercial signs on storefronts and business institutions (e.g., retail stores and banks), commercial advertising on billboards, and advertising signs displayed in public transport and on private vehicles. Government signs refer to public signs used by national, regional, or municipal governments in the following domains: road signs, place names, street names, and inscriptions on government buildings including ministries, hospitals, universities, town halls, schools, metro stations and public parks.

According to the above categorization, it is proper to conclude that the current focus of many studies conducted in China is “government signs” or “public signs”. Scenic spots, parks, bus or train stations, hospitals and so on are usually the places selected for data collection in China. In addition, there are some studies about advertisements, in particular their translations. In some studies, although signs on storefronts and business institutions have been analyzed from the perspective of correcting mistakes in translations, it is still unsystematic and incomplete understanding of signs in a place as a whole. Besides, advertising signs are usually excluded in most of the Chinese studies on

public signage. Internationally, sign research includes all possible elements you can find in a certain place, and the general landscape of signs is depicted. Concentrating on the theme of translation, signs of different types often scatter in different studies for the purpose of generating applicable translation rules, in which the purpose of these studies transfer from signs themselves to the theoretic establishment of translation method. Therefore, a more comprehensive and systematic data collection becomes a necessary way to study signs in China.

2.3 Multilingual Sign Matters

Chinese-English bilingual signs are usually the focus of study in China, but the increasing of multilingual signs calls for researchers' attention. So far, most of these studies discuss the Chinese-English translation of signs in China. It is common to see bilingual signs when one walks around anywhere in China, for example, a bus station, park, main street, downtown and so on. Although some scholars notice that many foreign languages have been used on signs, for example, Sun (2009) indicates, English, Japanese, Korean, Spanish and so on are more widely used in Wen Zhou, the multilingual signs, however, have rarely drawn any attention from Chinese scholar, or are valued as important research subject. Besides, Huang and Du (2009) even criticize the use of multilingual signs in the public places, because they think that those multilingual signs just show local people's desire to be internationalized. It is obvious that the multilingual signs are underappreciated or even neglected in the previous studies in China.

As a matter of fact, linguistic landscape has been used as a tool or a new approach to study multilingualism in a special issue of the *International Journal of Multilingualism*. For instance, Gorter (2006) collected the linguistic landscape of five different societies: Israel, Thailand, Japan, the Netherlands and Spain. The languages used in signs have been the research interest of many scholars all around the world; McArthur's (2000) seminal paper titled "Interanto: the global language of signs", referred to by many following studies, investigated languages used in street and store signs in Zurich and Uppsala; Schlick's (2002, 2003) survey on the English of shop signs in Europe; Macgregor's (2003) study on the language of shop signs in Tokyo; Dimova's (2007) analysis on the English shop signs in Macedonia. Considering that multilingual signs can also be found in the linguistic landscape of China, although not so common as in countries where several languages are spoken because of historical or political influences, it is worth trying to study those signs in China.

2.4 Other Possibilities

Firstly, both scripts and images can be taken into sign research. Ben-Rafael (2009, p. 40) indicates that the notion of Linguistic Landscape refers to linguistic objects

that mark the public space and points out "it may refer to any written signs one find outside private home, from road signs to private names to names of streets, shops or school". However, Itagi and Singh (2002, p. xi) argue that "LL need not and should not be construed as having a bias towards written language". In the book *Linguistic Landscape: Expanding the Scenery*, Shohamy and Gorter opened a dialogue to expand the focus of the linguistic landscape beyond concrete inscriptions to include icons and images and other multimodal literacies present in the public sphere (Garvin, 2010). The use of language in its written form and images can both become the subject of future research.

Secondly, sign readers' perceptions and attitudes are also significant research subjects, and some researchers have taken them into their research: Aiestaran, Cenoz and Gorter (2010), focus on perceptions of languages on signs and the stated preferences of the local inhabitants of the city of Donostia-San Sebastian; Trumper-Hecht (2010) analyzes Jew's and Arabs' perceptions and attitudes toward the visibility of Arabic in mixed cities in Israel; Garvin (2010) studies the individual cognitive and emotional responses to the linguistic landscape in urban communities of Memphis, Tennessee. In China, a survey has been done by the *Research Center of Public Sign Translation of Beijing International Studies University* to investigate the degree of satisfaction of the foreign readers with the current state of public sign translated and provided in China in 2007, which is a large-scale and comparatively comprehensive survey across the country. However, the emphasis is still laid on translation, people's response to a multilingual city is a new field to explore.

Thirdly, multidisciplinary consciousness should be established. As Gorter (2006, p. 86) points out "multidisciplinary approach from linguistic, sociological or sociolinguistic perspectives are also relevant for a better understanding of the linguistic landscape". Moreover, for instance, certain perspectives in psychology and geography can give us more insight into possibilities for a deeper knowledge of multilingualism. Spolsky (2010, p. 25) also states that "Awkwardly but attractively labeled 'linguistic landscape', the study of public multilingual signage is developing into sub-field of sociolinguistics and of language policy". Previous studies provides us with some possible approaches to study signs in the public space, it will benefit the Chinese research on signs a lot if some of these can be applied into practice.

3. CASE STUDY: SHOP SIGNS OF WANGFUJING STREET

3.1 This Study

This study investigates the languages used in the names of shop signs of Wangfujing Street, and how the linguistic

landscape of Beijing is constructed under the current language policy of China. Wangfujing Street, starting from the east of Chang'an Avenue in the south and extending to National Art Museum of China in the north, is one of the Chinese capital's most famous shopping streets.

Commercial shop signs in Wangfujing Street are part of Beijing's linguistic landscape, alongside billboards, street names, road signs, place names and public signs (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). This study is a synchronic analysis of commercial shop signs of Wangfujing Street, in order to document the languages used in shop names and displays in the capital of China.

3.2 Methodology

Many previous studies select urban areas for sample collection, similarly, this research centering on Wangfujing Street, which can represent the most prosperous place in China, will work on 89 shop signs on this street. Wangfujing is a fairly long street, and a walk from end to end takes about 30 minutes without looking at any stores. The majority of the main shopping area is pedestrianized and is very popular for shopping for both tourists and residents of the capital. From Wangfujing all areas of Beijing are easily accessible. There have been commercial activities since the middle of the Ming Dynasty. Now, Wangfujing is considered as the center of Beijing, which expresses the fashion trend and vogue very fast. Hence it was assumed that foreign languages, especially English, given the current language policy of China, will constitute a large proportion of the shop signs. In addition, as one of the world's oldest civilizations, China has thousands of years of continuous history; hence, one more assumption was that Wangfujing street may be even more exposed to Chinese character, particularly, the traditional Chinese character.

Most of the signs collected are the nameplates of the shops along each side of Wangfujing Street. Usually, individual store (also called boutique) put the nameplate on top their buildings, but for some big department buildings, in which each store is struggling to get a place for their names, the nameplates are hanged on the wall of the department store in order to inform the passers-by or advertise themselves. The main research questions of this article are: How languages are used in the shop names? Do the languages used in shop signs depend on the type of shop? And have the current language policies influenced the formation of the linguistic landscape of Wangfujing Street?

The signs were divided into four groups: Chinese, Chinese-English, other languages and images. Although the images or trademarks used in shop signs are not included in this study at the beginning, a brief analysis will also be provided, because some shops only use

trademarks as their names (see Figure 1). The types of businesses include (but are not limited to) souvenir stores, boutiques, bars, banks, restaurants, teahouses, travel agencies, pharmacies, jewelry shops, hotels, bookshops and gift supermarkets.

3.3 Results

This research found that in total 7 languages were used in the shop signs, and they are: Chinese, English, Japanese, French, Spanish, German, and Arabic. Of the businesses, 27%, had Chinese-only names, 45% were Chinese-English bilingual signs, 22% were in other foreign languages, for example, Japanese, Spanish, and so on, and 5.6% were images. Table 2 concludes these findings.

Table 2
Languages Used in the Shop Signs of Wangfujing Street (n = 89)

Unilingual		44 (49%)		Bilingual		40
Chinese	24 (27%)	German	1 (1%)	Chinese+English		45%
English	6 (6.7%)	Spanish	1 (1%)			
Japanese	5 (5.6%)	Arabic	1 (1%)	Images		5
French	4 (4.5%)	Others	2 (2%)			(5.6%)

The results showed that of the 89 shop signs, 64 (72%) were using Chinese characters (Chinese unilingual & Chinese-English bilingual), but, in contrast to my initial assumption, traditional Chinese character were not widely used, only several shops, like 步瀛斋 懋隆 四联美发, adopted the traditional writing style. Among the 89 shop signs, 46 (52%) are English-related signs (English unilingual & Chinese-English bilingual), which confirmed the assumption that English would have a significant presence in shop signs in Wangfujing Street.

The languages used in the different types of business are listed in Table 3, Table 4, Table 5, Table 6 and Figure 2. Among the Chinese-only signs (see Table 3), the shops were almost exclusively local business, and the types of shops were not clearly divided, so visitors can find a diversity of shops using Chinese for their the storefront signs. In Table 4, it is showed that the service-providing businesses, for example, banks, hotels, restaurants, and travel agencies, prefer to use Chinese-English bilingual signs. The presence of English-only signs in the boutique shops (100%) is congruent with earlier research that even if English elements are incomprehensible for some, they can be attractive because of the prestige and wealth associated with them (Crystal, 1997). This is true of other foreign languages used in the shop signs of the luxury businesses in Wangfujing Street (see Figure 4). Of the 7 signs using French, German, and Spanish, 5 are for world famous watch companies, which show that Wangfujing Street is a globalized place, leading the trend and is accompanied by a certain enthusiasm for both "Western"

ideas and luxury.

Table 3
Chinese-Only Signs by Business Type

Name	Business type
华女内衣	Underwear
御食园	Food Specialty
步瀛斋	Boutique (shoes shop)
好友世界商场	Mall
老北京布鞋	Boutique (shoes shop)
北京景泰蓝	Jewelry
北京市百货大楼	Mall
王府井百货	Mall
懋隆	Jewelry
乐天银泰百货	Mall
乐安市场	Market
亨得利	Boutique
王府井手机电脑广场	Cell phones & Computer
中国照相馆	Photo
王府井食品商场	Food Mall
四联美发	Barber
建华皮货服装公司	Boutique
北京旅游工艺品商店	Art and Craft goods
亦购特惠商场	Mall
美食广场	Food Mall
中国工艺美术第一店	Art and Craft goods
特大型手机广场	Cell phones
动感地带品牌店	Cell phones
上品折扣	Boutique

Table 4
Chinese-English Bilingual Signs by Business Type

Name	Business type
祥虹瑞 SILK & COTTON SHOP	Boutique
盛锡福 Sheng Xi Fu Hat Store	Boutique
东来顺饭店 DONG LAI SHUN MUSLIM RESTAURANT	Restaurant
交通银行 BANK OF COMMUNICATIONS	Bank
工美大厦 ARTS & CRAFTS EMPORIUM	Mall
王府井书店 WANGFUJING BOOKSTORE	Bookstore
东方新天地 THE MALLS AT ORIENTAL PLAZA	Mall
晨曦百货 SUNLIGHT	Mall
麦当劳 McDonald's	Restaurant
北京市安华城大酒店 BEIJING CITY ANHUACHENG RESTAURANT	Restaurant
北京银行 BANK OF BEIJING	Bank
佐丹奴 GIORDANO	Boutique
森马 Semir	Boutique
韵泓筷子店 YUNHONG CHOPSTICKS SHOP	Boutique
鸿星尔克 ERKE	Boutique
好友田园茶馆 Good Friend Field Teahouse	Teahouse
北京旅游咨询 Beijing Tourist Information	Travel
福瑞天星珠宝 STAR TALENT JEWELRY	Boutique
北京王府井医药商店有限责任公司 BEIJING WANGFUJING PHARMACEUTICAL STORE CO., LTD	Pharmacy
肯德基 KFC	Restaurant
永安堂 Beijing Yong An Tang Pharmacy Chain Store Co., Ltd.	Pharmacy
亮视点 LENS CRAFTERS	Glasses
玉石林 JADE GARDEN Jewelry	Boutique
如家酒店 HOME INN	Hotel
中国工商银行 ICBC	Bank
北京外文书店 BEIJING FOREIGN LANGUAGES BOOKSTORE	Bookstore
王府井珠宝礼品超市 WANGFUJING JEWELRY GIFT SUPERMARKET	Boutique
卡西欧手表中国旗舰店 G-SHOCK	Boutique
淘汇新天 SPOT on WFJ	Mall
乐天银泰百货 IN TIME LOTTE	Mall
中国银行 BANK OF CHINA	Bank
新鸿基地产 Sun Hung Kai Properties	Real Estate

To be continued

Continued

Name	Business type
光明视力眼镜 GUANG MING SHI LI OPTICAL	Glasses
新中国儿童用品商店 New China Children's Store	Boutique
丹耀大厦 DAN YAO BUILDING	Mall
天福茗茶 TenFu'S TEA	Teahouse
全聚德烤鸭店 QUANJUEDE ROAST DUCK RESTAURANT	Restaurant
天津狗不理包子 Tianjin Gobelieve Steamed Stuffed Bun	Restaurant
北京特产御食园 BEIJING SPECIALTY YU SHI YUAN	Food Sepcialty
吴裕泰 WU YU TAI TEA SHOP	Teahouse

Table 5
English-Only Signs by Business Type

Name	Business type
Longines	Boutique
dunhill	Boutique
ME & CITY	Boutique
Meters/bonwe	Boutique
Gap	Boutique

Table 6
Japanese Signs by Business Type

Name	Business
UNIQLO	Boutique
板長寿司 ITACHO SISHI	Restaurant
东芝 TOSHIBA	Computer
吉野家	Restaurant
無印良品 MUJI	Boutique

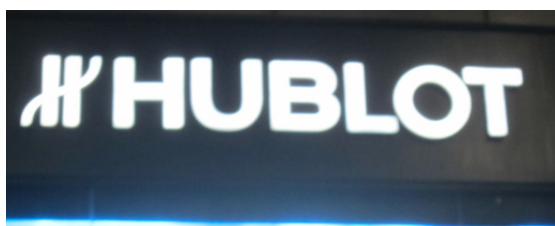
Figure 1
Images Used as Shop Names



3.4 Discussion

Based on the survey results of the languages used in the shop signs of Wangfujing Street, this section will discuss how the linguistic landscapes of Beijing Wangfujing Street is constructed under the language policy of China. China is a multilingual and multidialectal country, and the majority language groups are the Han Chinese. In addition, among the 55 ethnic minorities, over 80 languages are used (State Language Commission, 1995, p. 159). As the report of Lilama indicates, however, 64 languages are spoken by a population of less than 10,000 people. According to *The Law of the People's Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language*, adopted at the 18th Meeting of the Standing

Figure 2
Signs in Other Foreign Languages



Committee of the Ninth National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China in 2000 and promulgated in 2001, in Chapter I General Provisions, Article 8 indicates that "All the nationalities shall have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages"; Article 3 points out that the State popularizes Putonghua and the standardized Chinese characters. This Article indicates that the official language in China is Chinese, and the standard Chinese dialect is Putonghua. As the capital of China, Beijing, is a representative to obey the law, and the results shows that the multilingual background of China does not influence the role of standard Chinese as the official language of China.

Moreover, in Chapter II: Use of the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language, Article 13 provides information about the language used in signs: "the standardized Chinese characters shall be used as the basic characters in the service trade where both a foreign language and the Chinese language are used in signboards, advertisements, bulletins, signs, etc., as is needed by the trade, the standardized Chinese characters shall be used as far as the Chinese language is concerned." This article does not restrict the use of foreign languages in signs, which allows the presence of many foreign scripts,

especially English, on the signboard of Wangfujing Street. In the background of globalization, English is playing an increasingly important role in China as a lingua franca for matters as business, information, international travel and so on. In fact, English has been taught as the most important foreign language in China. Since its establishment, the People's Republic has implemented three main language policies:

1. The standardization of Chinese
2. The propagation of English
3. The development of minority languages

English language education has been viewed by the Chinese leadership as having a vital role in national modernization and development. In the last quarter century, English language education has been a subject of paramount importance in China, and proficiency in English has been widely regarded as a national as well as personal asset (HU, 2005). The teaching of English as a second language in China has become a nationwide endeavor pursued at all academic levels, from kindergarten to university (NIU & Wolff, 2003). As mentioned in section 1, the enthusiasm towards Chinese-English translation of public signs in China reflects the influence of English on Chinese citizen. On the basis of

a large quantity of studies on translation practice, many translators and scholars call for the legislation to improve and guarantee the quality of public sign translations. Beijing, the capital, as a pioneer, first compiled the General Specification on English Translation of public signs in 2006, which is a starting point for accelerating the normalization of public sign translation. Shenzhen City followed, and published the Chinese-English Dictionary of Public Signs in Shenzhen in 2010, which is supported by the Shenzhen government and the Translators Association of Shenzhen. Therefore, a harmonious linguistic environment was presented in Wangfujing Street, where different foreign elements were combined with Chinese flavor, as Wang, Juffermans and Du (2012) indicates Harmony and language policy go hand in hand in China. Although some researchers hold that there is no necessity to study signs in foreign languages except English (SUN, 2009), as the world is changing, the city is changing, the linguistic environment is changing, taking the multilingual signs into research is irresistible.

CONCLUSION

This study is an attempt to look at the signs in the linguistic landscape of China from the perspective of multilingualism, which finds that languages used shop signs contribute to the richness of the linguistic landscape of the city. This is a first survey to document the language situation in the downtown of Beijing, and it shows the incidence of English in the shop signs is extensive. The English and bilingual signs are as common as in other big cities, e.g. Tokyo and Ljubljana (MacGregor, 2003; Schlick, 2003). The existence of McDonalds and KFC marks the extensive presence of western consumerism. The survey suggests that English is the most dominant foreign language in shop signs in Wangfujing Street in terms of English unilingual and Chinese-English bilingual signs.

Finally, it is crucial to point out that a limitation of this study is that the findings concluded from the data in Wangfujing Street could not represent the general situation of the linguistic landscape of all the big cities in China. This research aimed to provide new ways other than translation to study signs in the public area, and call for researchers' attention on the multilingual environment in China, as in some places of big cities, signs in different languages have been displayed, for example, Arabic used in the signs of Shenzhen City and Korean sign used in Wudaokou Street in Beijing. Will the different language communities affect the language policy of China? Will the harmony in language policy and in actual practice be kept all the time? Documenting the changes at each state of the linguistic situation is of great importance to the research

of linguistic landscape in the future.

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