The Linguistic Landscape of Los Angeles Chinatowns

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Abstract:

This paper presents a multi-level analysis of the signage in Los Angeles (LA) Chinatowns. Through a combined method of ethnographic observations, interviews and textual and visual analysis of language orthographies, the processes in which signage is designed, perceived, and interpreted are examined. A discussion of the range of interpretive readings of Chinese orthography and romanization is presented, with a focus on the relationship between the linguistic landscape and people's language perception, and the changing social indexicalities of different linguistic variables displayed in LA Chinatowns. The paper concludes that the linguistic landscape can be taken as a form of informal language input which impacts Chinese immigrants' language perception. Moreover, linguistic variables displayed on public signage not only contribute to the construction of the sociolinguistic context but also to the immigrants' identity transformation.

Keywords: Linguistic landscape, LA Chinatowns, ethnography, language perception, identity transformation

1. Introduction

Globalization, transnationalism, multilingualism, and minority representation in public domains have always been central concerns in Linguistic Landscape (LL) studies (Huebner, 2021). These central concerns of LL researchers come together in the study of Chinatowns LL. There is an extensive body of LL literature devoted to Chinatowns around the world (e.g., Ben Said & Ong, 2019; Guo & Vosters, 2020; Jazul & Bernardo, 2017; Lee & Lou, 2019; Li & Marshall, 2018; Sharma, 2021; Wang & Van der Velde, 2015; Wu & Techasan, 2016; Xu & Wang, 2021; Zhao, 2021). The most important issue discussed in these studies is the display of Chinese in relation to other languages, including linguistic features and different Chinese scripts, as well as the neighborhood's diversity of population (Gorter & Cenoz, 2024). Some studies examine how ideas of authenticity and identity relate to the character of a Chinatown as a tourist destination as well as processes of commodification and gentrification (e.g., Amos, 2016; Leeman & Modan, 2009; Wu, et al., 2020; Zhang, et al., 2023). However, one thing that is missing in these studies is the bidirectional relationship between the LL and the sociocultural context, or the carryover effect of the LL on language behavior (Gorter & Cenoz, 2024). Against this background, the present study sets out to describe the complexity of the Chinatown LL in the Los Angeles urban and suburban environments, with a focus on how the sign scripts reflect the macro sociohistorical context, and how the display of languages and scripts on the signs can impact speakers' language attitude as well as their language use.

The concept of LL has been used in different ways. In the literature it has frequently been used "in a general sense for the description and analysis of the language situation in a certain country, and for the presence and use of many languages in a larger geographic area" (Gorter, 2006: 1). Now, after about two decades of development, LL study has evolved as an interdisciplinary field of interest which overlaps with sociology, psychology, cultural geography, urban studies, and anthropology (Ben-Rafael *et al.*, 2010; Blommaert, 2013). The common interest of all is "the understanding that the LL is the scene where the public space is symbolically constructed" (Ben-Rafael *et al.*, 2010: xi), as it is hypothesized that LLs, like other landscapes, are not real physical settings but rather subjective representations of them (Leeman & Modan, 2019). LL researchers usually focus on the indexical link between LL and social structures, on the relationship between LL and its social, cultural, economic and political contexts (Lou, 2016). In examining micro-level production issues like "how language appears on the sign, the location of the sign, the size of the font used, the number of languages on the sign, the order of languages on multilingual signs, the relative importance of languages, [and] whether a text has been translated" (Gorter, 2006: 3), the researchers often develop understanding of the macro-level social, cultural and political structures inscribed in the LL. As such, linguistic landscape studies (LLS) can be turned into "a tool for dissecting the various forms of sociolinguistic complexity that characterize our contemporary societies" (Blommaert, 2013: 14). In other words, LLS provides us with a very useful method to describe the general sociolinguistic environment from which we can conduct more profound investigations into the linguistic issues.

LL researchers focus on different dimensions of the linguistic landscape. Trumper-Hecht (2010) suggests three interconnected dimensions----linguistic landscape practice, language policy, and residents' perception, and argues that LL as a sociolinguistic-spatial phenomenon should be studied by examining these three dimensions and the ways in which they are interrelated. The first dimension----LL practice, refers to the real distribution of languages on signs that can be seen and captured on camera. The second dimension----language policy refers to the political aspect of language, which is embodied in the opinions and beliefs of various policymakers. The third dimension is the experiential dimension of the LL as represented by inhabitants, which is the focus of the present study. Studying these three dimensions and how they are related to each other is required to develop a theoretical understanding of the LL. Similar to Trumper-Hecht's triad framework is a model proposed by Gorter and Cenoz (2024) which is called Multilingual Inequalities in Public Spaces (MIPS). MIPS offers a comprehensive framework that outlines every step involved in describing and analyzing multilingual environments. It starts by examining language policies, moves on to production processes, analysis of signs, and concludes by talking about language practices through the lens of how people interpret signals. The model's goal is to characterize and examine the cyclical sequence involved in the construction of LLs and how these processes and their outcomes impact social behavior, particularly language practices, and the experiences of social groups. For LLS the model suggests a new line of inquiry. It has five component parts, two of which are especially relevant to the present study. They deal with the effects on people who, as bystanders, observe and read the signs. Once they have read, interpreted, or made sense of the signs, they can react to or engage with the language(s), messages, information, or meanings on the signs, which can then have an impact on their behavior and language practices. In all, the model

can be used to discuss people's interpretations of the signs, and "how those connect to their linguistic and social background characteristics" (Gorter & Cenoz, 2024: 87).

As has been mentioned above, Chinatowns' LLs in various cities around the world have been frequently investigated (Huebner, 2021). Regarding the American context, a few noteworthy studies need to be introduced. For instance, an analysis based on geosemiotics was applied to the LL of Washington, DC's Chinatown by Lou (2010, 2016) and Leeman and Modan (2009). A sociolinguistic ethnography of the linguistic environment of Chinatown in Washington, DC, is presented by Lou (2016). She discusses the different historical, social, and cultural elements that have shaped the region's changing LL. She also provides an in-depth examination of the creation and consumption of LL as a cultural text, drawing on geosemiotic analysis to trace the various historical trajectories of discourse that shaped the neighborhood's multilingual landscape. In the same Chinatown in Washington, DC, Leeman and Modan (2009) conducted a qualitative study to analyze how written language creates commodified urban spaces through interacting with other elements of the built environment. Through their emphasis on the significance of sociohistorical context which includes an analysis of the usage, purpose, and history of signage, a better understanding of the larger sociopolitical implications of LLs can be obtained. In the Chinatown of Philadelphia, Leung and Wu (2012) investigated linguistic conflicts and the language life of local Chinese inhabitants. They found the co-occurrence of traditional and simplified scripts in their resources, as well as features from Chinese language varieties employed in creative ways. The signs make assumptions about a multilingual audience and an imaginary Chinese community. Song (2022) reported the findings of an investigation into US Chinatowns in Houston, Los Angeles, New York, and San Francisco and Canadian Chinatowns in Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, and Vancouver. From the standpoint of translation studies, he offered a qualitative study of the signs and their multimodal components. His research demonstrates how multilingual signage and visual features contribute to Chinatowns' distinctive Chinese atmosphere "that is a mixture of exaggeration, stereotypes and imagination" (Song, 2022: 6). These studies are valuable and can be used for reference, but none of them is about the way people think and the actions they take after processing the information. None of them touches on the tensions between different Chinese varieties and how the display of Chinese varieties and features from these varieties tend to influence people's language attitudes which in turn shape their language practices and behaviors. These are important issues that call for a thorough investigation, particularly when considering that the promotion of Putonghua has almost led to the extinction of Chinese dialects.

In what follows we shall first go briefly into the sociolinguistic profile of the two LA Chinatowns and then move on to outline the methodology used in this study. After that we shall discuss signs collected in downtown and suburban LA Chinatowns, mainly dealing with aspects of competition and compromise between different Chinese orthographies, romanization systems, and vocabulary of Chinese dialects and varieties displayed on these signs. More importantly, we shall discuss how the display of features from Chinese dialects and varieties influences immigrants' language perception and language behavior.

2. LA Chinatowns

There are two Chinatowns in LA where Chinese immigrants have concentrated residence: the traditional downtown Chinatown (henceforth DTC, the red area in Figure 1), and the suburban Chinatown (henceforth SBC, the blue area in Figure 1) which consists of dozens of small cities scattered along the San Gabriel Valley in the eastern suburbs of LA. Over the years, 'San Gabriel' has almost come to be used as a synonym of 'Chinatown'. The area rose to fame in the 1980s and 1990s due to the influx of ethnic Chinese immigrants that transformed its residential and commercial landscapes (Cheng, 2013). As traditional immigrant and ethnic settlements are usually enclaves or ghettos, the majority of academic journals and mass media covering the San Gabriel Valley have referred to it as a suburban Chinatown in Los Angeles (Li, 2009).

Figure 1: The Downtown Chinatown versus the Suburban Chinatown[1]

The suburban Chinatown is largely different from the traditional downtown Chinatown in terms of residents' demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. DTC is mainly comprised of immigrants of Chinese descendants from mainland China and Southeast Asia (Li, 2009). The majority of ethnic Chinese who had previously formed DTC were Cantonese from the Pearl River Delta region. Southeast Asian refugees arrived in the United States after the Vietnam War which ended in the middle of the 1970s. A large number of them were ethnic Chinese who moved to the Chinatown neighborhood from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. With the influx of these newcomers, DTC's streetscapes, linguistic patterns, and demographic makeup underwent a transformation from a "primarily Cantonese-speaking community made up of immigrants from Guangdong Province, to a multilingual one speaking Cantonese, Mandarin, Vietnamese, and Cambodian" (Li, 2009: 72). By contrast, the SBC immigrants are mainly from the mainland and Taiwan. Monterey Park, a small city in the San Gabriel Valley, around 10 km east of DTC, known as "Little Taipei" and "the first suburban Chinatown in the US" can be taken as an example. During the 1970s, an effort was made to develop a suburban Chinese community in Monterey Park by advertising to the wealthy Chinese living in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

[1] See https://cn.bing.com/images/search?q=san+gabriel+valley+chinatown+map&qpvt=San+Gabriel+valley+Chinatown+map&form=IGRE&first=1&scenario=Image. Retrieved March 25, 2013.

Due to the political unpredictability brought on by global events in the 1970s and 1980s, a large number of people from Taiwan fled their home and immigrated to the US (Ok, 2008). Consequently, up until the 1990s, Taiwanese immigrants made up the majority of Chinese suburban inhabitants, and their influence is evident across the valley. Monterey Park was referred to as "Little Taipei" and "Mandarin Park" because of the significant number of immigrants from Taiwan who speak Mandarin (Horton, 1995). Beyond Monterey Park, in the nearby cities of Alhambra, Arcadia, San Marino, and Rosemead, the Chinese population is also growing. In fact, the visibility of Chinese elements in these cities is so high that "non-Chinese residents feel that they are being pushed out of their own backyards and that they are being un-Americanized" (Zhou & Kim, 2006: 247). Local residents refer to these Chinese enclaves with phrases such as 'the Valley Blvd', or 'the Valley' (Fong, 1996). Valley Blvd is also a professional and business center, with the presence of numerous Chinese stores, markets, banks, restaurants, and other service-oriented businesses. Chinese, rather than English, is the most commonly used language in the area. This is the reason for picking LA Chinatowns as the research site: it is one of the best places to explore the changing dynamics and complexities of the Chinese ethnolinguistic community. It is where most of our fieldwork was carried out.

As regards the socioeconomic characteristics of mainlanders, Taiwanese, and Hong Kongers, the three largest subgroups of ethnic Chinese population, Taiwan immigrants have a considerably higher personal income and a higher level of education, speak English better, and have a lower level of poverty (Zhou & Chiang, 2009). Similarly, Hong Kong immigrants are on average wealthier than mainland Chinese. The median income of households headed by Hong Kong immigrants is much higher, compared with households headed by Chinese mainlanders (Zong & Batalova, 2017). This gap in socioeconomic status, together with the fact that Taiwanese and Hong Kongers are earlier settlers than Chinese mainlanders has a subtle impact on Chinese immigrants' language attitude and language use. As sociolinguistic difference is strongly associated with speakers' social status, this gap in socioeconomic status between Taiwanese, Hong Kongers, and mainland Chinese has a great impact on the changing social indexicalities of linguistic resources from Cantonese and Taiwan Mandarin. This will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

3. Methodology

This study employs ethnographic linguistic landscape analysis (ELLA) to investigate the empirical differences between different social groups. In other words, how and why Chinese inhabitants in LA Chinatowns make use of languages and language variables on the signs and how the display of languages and language variables affects their behavior in various ways. ELLA was proposed by Blommaert and Maly (2016) who take public spaces as a "social arena—circumscriptions on which control, discipline, belonging, and membership operate and in which they are played out" (Blommaert & Maly, 2016: 211). ELLA adopts a qualitative, historical, and semiotic viewpoint in order to comprehend the LL as a social, cultural, and political area where language that enables humans to function as social beings is carefully explored (Gorter & Cenoz, 2024). It views ethnography as a strategy to investigate complex social phenomena in ontologically, methodologically, and epistemologically based ways rather than merely as a collection of research techniques like observation and interview (Maly, 2016). For this reason, ELLA fieldwork involves gathering pre-existing data as

well as analyzing and interpreting language use in relation to a larger sociocultural context. The present study will combine an ethnographic understanding of each individual sign with an overall picture of the vitalities of different Chinese varieties so that analyses from different perspectives can be woven into a deeper understanding of the social and historical indexicalities of languages and bits of language displayed on public signage.

From September 2013 to November 2014, the first author conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the two Chinatowns, focusing mainly on two 100-meter stretches of two streets (the most bustling areas of the two streets) – the North Broadway and the Valley Boulevard – which are respectively the business centers of DTC and SBC. DTC is primarily centered around North Broadway where there is a wide, main, busy street filled with small shops and restaurants. Valley Boulevard is a road along which the Asian communities cluster. It is a significant and expanding business and professional sector with numerous Asian marketplaces, restaurants, and other service-oriented enterprises. Wandering in these streets, we took pictures, talked with pedestrians, shopkeepers, restaurant waiters and waitresses, and gained ethnographic insights into how ordinary people understand, perceive, interpret, and interact with the LL in their neighborhood.

Altogether 158 pictures were collected, most of which are street signs, storefront signs, flyers, and advertisements. Classification of these signs is based on multiple criteria including the location of the photo shooting, writing systems displayed on the sign (traditional versus simplified Chinese characters), romanization systems displayed (Hanyu pinyin versus Wade-Giles, Cantonese "pinyin", or other kinds of "pinyin"), the use of mainland versus Hong Kong or Taiwan vocabulary, and languages displayed. Being more qualitative than quantitative, this study focuses on details and variables in order to describe each sign and to "bring out LL's full descriptive and explanatory potential" (Blommaert, 2013: 16), rather than using taxonomies to determine any pattern that can be found in the Chinatown LL (cf. Budarina, 2018). The details and variables include, for instance, the colors and the fonts used, the relative size and placement of different languages and language varieties, the information about the establishment where the sign was displayed, and the images and the impression of the place or sign. Finally, as the researcher's interpretation of the LL may differ from that of non-linguist residents, immigrants, visitors, and passersby, we combined photography with ethnographic observation and interviewing, hoping to acquire a comprehensive picture of the Chinatown LL.

Ten interviews with twelve individuals were conducted (three of them were interviewed together). Two were restaurant owners with whom we had casual conversations about the naming of their restaurants. Five were strangers whom we approached when wandering in the streets. Two of them happened to be first-generation Chinese immigrants, the other three were mainland tourists who talked with us about their experiences in, and feelings about LA Chinatowns. Apart from them, there were three business owners from the Chinese mainland whom we met at the 2013 Chinese Consulate's Lunar New Year Reception. At the reception, we also met and interviewed two consulate staff members. The two staff members were not, in any strict sense, members of the Chinese immigrant community. They were included in our interviewee list because we had two signs of the Chinese Consulate that display traditional Chinese characters. We were curious to know what the sign maker or designer thinks about traditional Chinese orthography. Moreover, the two staff members have lived in LA for four years (they told us so during the interview). Unlike Chinese mainlanders who have just arrived in LA and have no

idea about how local Chinese Americans think and speak, they were able to inform us a lot about the social and linguistic phenomena that we are interested in. The interviews range from fifteen minutes to an hour in length. They were all conducted in Chinese and represented in a research diary within a week after they were completed. All were unstructured, in-depth interviews conducted in a casual, informal manner.

Relevant ethnographic information about LA Chinatowns was also collected from websites (e.g., www.chineseinla.com,www.migrationpolicy.org,www.roc-taiwan.org/US, https://overseas.ocac.gov.tw), articles in *Los Angeles Times, Sing Tao Daily, The World Journal, China Press*(the three largest Chinese language newspapers in America). Through the systematic analysis of the signs and ethnographic data of interviews and observations, we turned this LL study into an ethnographic and historical endeavor that explores the identities, social practices, and social relationships that LA Chinese Americans have established to identify their existence in the American metropolis of Los Angeles.

4. Findings

4.1 Competition and compromise between traditional and simplified Chinese orthographies

Mandarin Chinese can be written in two different sets of characters – traditional and simplified. Traditional characters are used as the official writing system of Taiwan, Macau and Hong Kong, as well as in overseas Chinese diasporas, while simplified Chinese characters are used in mainland China, Singapore, and Malaysia (Liu et al., 2016). Co-presence of both scripts can be easily seen on signage in both Chinatowns. But as an overseas Chinese community, DTC has a history of over a hundred years. With earlier immigrants being mainly Cantonese, the LL of DTC is predominated by traditional Chinese characters. SBC has a relatively shorter history (after the 1980s) with immigrants coming from different regions of China, the juxtaposition of simplified and traditional scripts (shown in Figure 2 where the writing on the window is in traditional characters and the sign above the door is in simplified script) rather than traditional script predominance is common.

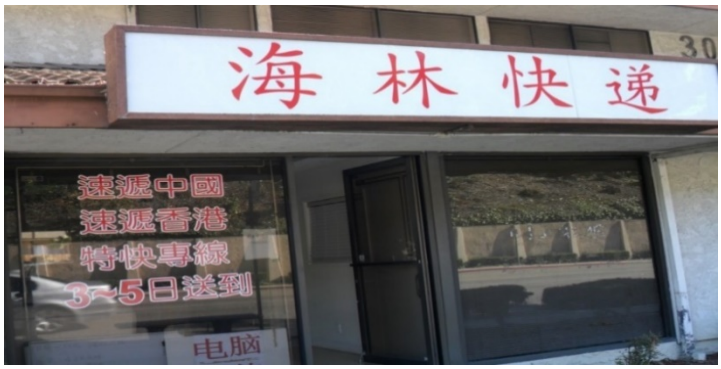

Figure 2: Hailin Courier Service (in Suburban Chinatown)

The overall tendency is that traditional orthography enjoys popularity in DTC more so than in SBC. In DTC, Cantonese with its traditional orthography was and is still popular. In SBC, traditional and simplified scripts enjoy equal popularity. According to our observations, traditional orthography is well alive throughout the whole LA area in advertisements, newspapers, signs, labels, Chinese websites, and even television subtitles. To accommodate Cantonese and Taiwan Mandarin-speaking parents, it is still taught and learned in some Chinese schools (Lai, 2004; Yuan, 2023). In the following pictures (Figures 3 and 4) taken near DTC, one can see that even the signs of the Consulate General of the PRC use traditional characters.

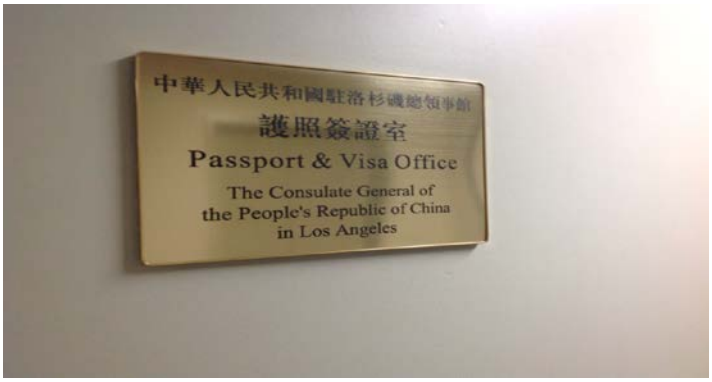

Figure 3: Name Plate PRC Passport & Visa Office

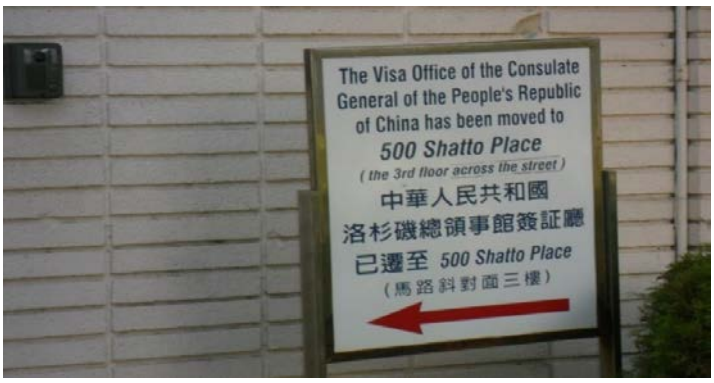

Figure 4: Notice Board PRC Visa Office

Usually, on such official signs of a governmental establishment, the pure use of simplified characters is expected because simplified characters have been the official standard in mainland China since 1956. But, on the sign of the Visa Office (Figure 3), and on a notice in front of the building (Figure 4) telling people the new address of the Visa Office, traditional characters are displayed. One cannot help wondering: why does a governmental agency like the Visa Office of the Chinese Consulate prefer to use the written form of Hong Kong and Taiwan?

Two of the consulate staff gave us the following answers in the interview: First, the signs have been there for a long time. The Chinese population in LA was mainly Taiwanese, Hong Kongers, Guangdongers, and other Chinese Southerners who like to identify themselves as Hong Kongers or Taiwanese. To cater to the needs of these people, the consulate accepted their writing habits. Second, traditional characters have become a default standard among Chinese residents in LA. Mainlanders

living in LA have gradually accepted the script and begun to use it in their everyday life. Third, traditional script is almost taken for granted in overseas contexts. Finally, traditional characters look more beautiful for decorative or aesthetic considerations. They are therefore more frequently used on signs.

The debate on traditional and simplified Chinese orthography has been a long-running issue. Because of "its implications of political ideology, it has stirred up heated discussions between supporters of both sides in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan" (Tabouret-Keller, 1997: 49). By using "implications of political ideology", it is meant that simplified characters are associated with communism and mainland China while traditional characters are associated with Taiwan, Hong Kong, and a national identity independent of mainland China. The comment of the consulate staff indicates that there exist multiple scale levels designating which form of characters should be used. In most cases, it is the political-ideological scale that is operating. But by "traditional characters look more beautiful", the consulate employee jumps to an aesthetic scale level on which traditional characters are preferred to simplified characters. This shows that human social environments are polycentric and stratified where people continuously need to observe norms that are connected to multiple centers of power (Blommaert, 2007).

However, nowadays, to target new arrivals from mainland China, the use of simplified characters is growing in LA. The connection between simplified characters and mainland China, and traditional characters and Taiwan is not as simple as it once was. Currently, we see that many simplified Chinese texts are published in LA. The number of people using simplified Chinese is on the increase. Both script systems exist in public signage and textbooks of Chinese schools. Meanwhile, people of different origins have become more tolerant toward the written system that belongs to others.

Figure 5 is a picture taken from the Chinese language newspaper *World Journal* about a press conference held by Chinese immigrants in Southern California to celebrate the PRC's anniversary.

Figure 5: Press Conference of Chinese Immigrants in Southern California

(Image from *World Journal, September 21, 2012*)

The newspaper headline is in traditional script while the characters on the red banner are the simplified version. This indicates that although the newspaper's editorial keeps the convention of traditional characters, the red banner speaks something different: simplified written form is considered

proper to be used on such a formal occasion. This also implies that Putonghua and simplified orthography are proper and normal for such a PRC event. One should be reminded that the newspaper *World Journal* is affiliated with the United Daily Group based in Taiwan, and is by far the largest and most influential Chinese language daily in the US. Because of this affiliation, it is "politically pro-Taiwan" and is associated with "anti-communism" (Zhou & Cai, 2002: 431). Thus, it naturally adopts traditional orthography as its written standard. This is why the headline and the text are in traditional script. But the juxtaposition of the traditional-character-headline and the simplified-character-banner has an interesting implication: the newspaper holds a "Taiwan stance" and keeps using traditional characters to report an event which nevertheless shows a "PRC stance". Therefore, the social indexical meaning of the image is that with the huge influx of mainland immigrants, simplified characters are gradually displacing their traditional counterparts. On important occasions such as the PRC's anniversary celebration, simplified characters are preferred over traditional ones. However, the power of traditional characters and the Taiwan and Hong Kong influence cannot be underestimated. After all, the largest Chinese daily, *World Journal* still keeps its traditional-character-convention and shows no sign of change in the near future.

4.2 Competition and compromise between Hanyu pinyin and other romanizations of Chinese

Hanyu pinyin and other romanizations of Chinese are the second most popular script displayed in the LL of LA Chinatowns. Hanyu pinyin is the standard romanization system of mainland China. Hong Kong and Taiwan have their own systems. The existence of different systems leads to the co-presence of various "pinyin" in the Chinatown LL (see Figures 6 to 7).

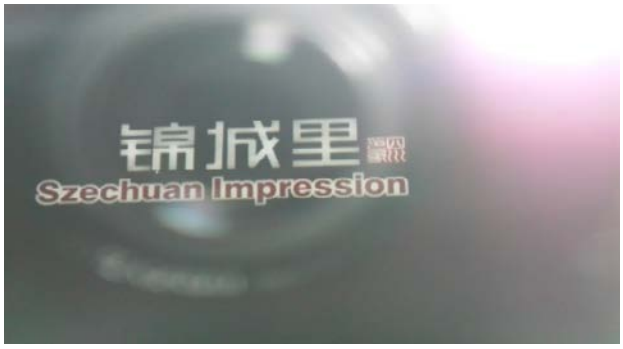

Figure 6: Szechuan Impression (in Suburban Chinatown)

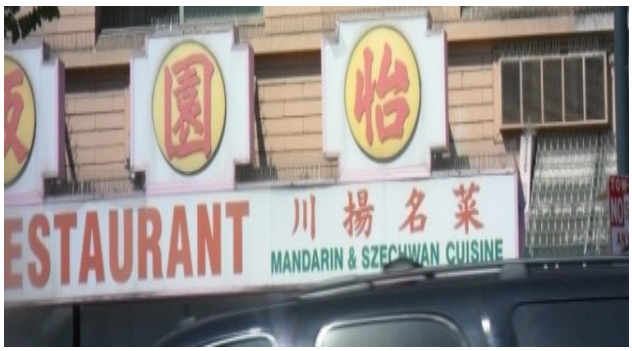

Figure 7: Mandarin and Szechwan Cuisine (in Downtown Chinatown)

'Szechwan' was previously known in the West by its postal map romanization which was based on Wade-Giles transcription and popular in the early twentieth century. Alternatively, it was represented as 'Szechuan' whereas Hanyu pinyin is 'Sichuan'. Due to the fame of Sichuan cuisine, Sichuan restaurants are abundant in Los Angeles. Some call themselves 'Sichuan Restaurant' while others 'Szechuan' or 'Szechwan Restaurant'. The following is what the manager of Szechuan Impression told us:

> 说到英文名，我还专门咨询了专家的意见。他们说逐字翻译不能体现我们饭店的四川特色。现在这个英文名我就觉得很好，很有灵感。我不懂英语，但就是觉得好。“印象”这个词多浪漫啊！还有“四川”的发音也很时尚，国际范儿。至于它为什么不是汉语拼音，可能老外说的“四川”就是这个样子吧。其实我也不知道这是什么拼音，不过他们说“四川”在国外都这么叫。
>
> (Translation: Actually we consulted some experts to translate 锦城里 into English. They said that word-for-word translation is not a good choice because it does not tell the customer the most important thing about our restaurant – Sichuan cuisine. The decision to call it "Szechuan Impression" occurred to me as very good and inspiring. Although I know little about English, I feel the name sounds very good. Besides, the word "impression" is so romantic, "Szechuan" sounds more fashionable and international than "Sichuan". I think maybe foreigners pronounce "Sichuan" like "Szechuan" or something. I don't know what kind of "pinyin" it is. They told me that Sichuan's English name is "Szechuan" and it is widely accepted in overseas countries.)

The manager is right in associating the spelling 'Szechuan' with foreigners' pronunciation, but he knows little about the history of 'Szechuan'. It is in Wade-Giles and it was used in the early twentieth century when most place names in China were transliterated in this way and introduced to foreign countries. Once these place names were rendered into English, the written names tended to stick, even though it bears little relation to the modern name. In other words, the established name carries with it not only the association of being "fashionable and international", but also the load of culture and history. Perhaps it is exactly because of these cultural and historical implications, that the names are retained until nowadays and are still preferred in overseas countries, where there is no law or legislation mandating that Hanyu pinyin is to be used. Having more freedom in choosing the romanization system,

people tend to prefer the one that is used by the majority or the one that enjoys pleasant associations. In this case, Wade-Giles 'Szechuan' or 'Szechwan' wins in the competition.

As for the differences between DTC and SBC in terms of the choice of romanization systems, Hanyu pinyin is more visible in SBC than in DTC. Cantonese pinyin is the most popular in DTC but the least popular in SBC. Wade-Giles is prevalent in SBC, but rather marginal in DTC. This further testifies to the difference in population composition in the two Chinatowns: DTC's inhabitants are mainly old Cantonese or Southeast Asian refugees, whereas SBC's inhabitants are Taiwanese and new immigrants from mainland China.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, these different spellings of Chinese characters not only indicate the identity of the sign writer, the shop owner, and the selected audience, but also reflect the fact that there is not a single norm in language policy or legislation concerning the use of "pinyin" in public signage in overseas Chinese communities. The official language status of Putonghua in mainland China does not naturally carry over to the overseas diaspora (Yum, 2008). In other words, there are no explicit local top-down policies but there are local customs, traditions that people follow, which is shown not only in the semiotic landscape but also in the comments people give. Because of this lack of language policy or linguistic normativity, language users can only resort to their own judgments. As a consequence, bottom-up language practices tend to dominate top-down language policies (Johnson, 2013).

We also noticed another interesting phenomenon during our investigation: Some mainlanders believe that Cantonese and Wade-Giles are more fashionable and possess a kind of foreign flavor. They give up Hanyu pinyin and shift to Wade-Giles or Cantonese "pinyin" to spell their names. For instance, the surname 李 is spelled as 'Lee' instead of 'Li', 张 as 'Cheung' instead of 'Zhang', and 陈 as 'Chan' rather than 'Chen', etc. Of the 63 business cards (from mainlanders) that we have collected, 22 spell their names in non-Hanyu pinyin systems. When asked why, some (all are pseudonyms) answered as follows:

> Joe: 我觉得这样更美国化，因为你看啊，路上这么多标牌都不是汉语拼音。这也许是美国人拼写汉语名字的方式。不管怎么说，我想让自己显得不那么外来，所以就把名字改了。
>
> (Translation: I feel it's more Americanized, because you see, so many signs on the streets are not in Hanyu pinyin, I guess it's the American way of spelling Chinese names. Anyway, to make myself an insider rather than an outsider, I changed the spelling of my Chinese name.)
>
> Henry:我看那些名人的名字都是这么拼的，比如赵美心，周本立，江俊辉。还有一些品牌名也是这样。所以我就想这样的拼写可能更时髦，更洋气吧，然后就把我的姓拼成了"kao"。
>
> (Translation: I saw those celebrities like Judy Chu, Edwin Chau, and John Chiang, spell their names this way, and many Chinese brand names are translated in this way. So I began to think that this [non-Hanyu pinyin system; FT] may be more fashionable and international and changed my surname to "Kao".)

> Alex: 我就是觉得港台拼音更亲切，因为我喜欢港台电影，港台歌曲。在这里，你会发现标牌上，报纸上还有广告里好多都不用汉语拼音，入乡随俗吧，为什么要墨守陈规呢？
>
> (Translation: I simply feel closer to non-Hanyu pinyin romanizations because I love Taiwan and Hong Kong movies and songs. Here in America, I saw on signs, newspapers, and advertisements more examples of non-Hanyu pinyin, when in Rome do as the Romans do, why should we stubbornly stick to the old norm?)

Despite the kind of norms they use in their evaluation of different romanizations, the three interviewees agree that their opinions are influenced by signs and what they believe to be "common practice". This coincides with other researchers' findings. For instance, Louie (1998) stated that Chinese Americans' surnames are spelled differently due to the effect of the various pronunciations in multiple Chinese dialects like Minnan, Cantonese, Hakka, etc. Curtin (2009) found that various factors determine one's transliteration of their ethnic name, such as pronunciation, ideology, political connotation, etc. Leung (2011: 209) claims that the spelling change in one's surname is reflective of early efforts to assimilate, and "the seemingly innocuous changes in consonant or diphthong have the potential to distinguish not only language background but also approximate time of entry to the US." All these indicate that non-Hanyu pinyin romanizations are still prominent in public signage in LA Chinatowns and are so appealing to mainlanders that they will not vanish from the local LL context anytime soon.

4.3 Competition and compromise between Putonghua, Cantonese, and Taiwan Mandarin vocabulary

There are many synonymous or alternative words for the same thing in mainland Putonghua, Taiwan Mandarin, and Hong Kong Cantonese. For instance, 'Fangbian noodles' (方便面, instant noodles) on the Chinese mainland is called 'Gongzai noodles' (公仔面) or 'Jishi noodles' (即食面) in Hong Kong and 'Sushi noodles' (速食面) in Taiwan. In LA Chinatowns, words of different Chinese varieties mix together in the LL, implying a strong influence from Cantonese and Taiwanese cultures, suggesting the multi-source, multi-layered linguistic repertoire that local Chinese immigrants possess.

As is shown in public signs, Hong Kong words, Taiwan words, and mainland Putonghua words sometimes appear side by side. Some however may not be within a Mandarin speaker's linguistic repertoire (see Figure 8).

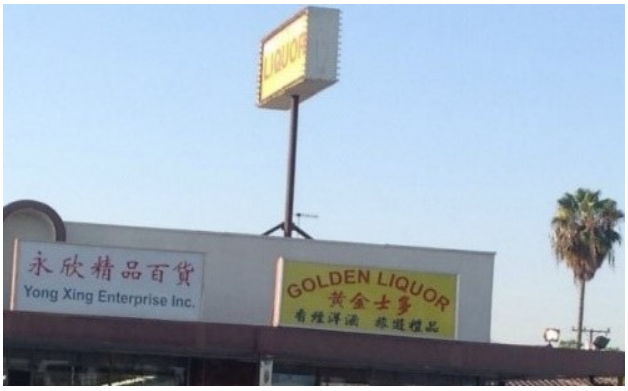

Figure 8: Golden Liquor (in Suburban Chinatown)

The sign in Figure 8 shows a small shop selling liquor and other daily materials in suburban Chinatown. Traditional characters and English are the displayed languages. The Chinese characters 黃金士多 have an ambiguous meaning: (1) a store of golden jewelry and (2) a store named 'gold'. The English version 'GOLDEN LIQUOR' tells the audience that it is not a store of golden jewelry but of liquor named 'gold'. The most important thing is that customers who can really understand the meaning should be bilinguals in English and Chinese, and most probably, be familiar with the vocabulary of Cantonese, as the word 士多 ('shi duo') is a Cantonese transliteration of the English word 'store' which is seldom used by mainlanders. For this reason, one can make informed guesses about the sign writer and the selected audience: the sign writer or the shop owner may be a Cantonese or Hong Konger who also speaks English and who welcomes customers or intends readers to be the same as himself, or at least have some knowledge of Cantonese vocabulary.

As regards the differences between the LL of DTC and SBC, the two Chinatowns show no apparent difference: both have signs displaying Hong Kong and Taiwan words (39 percent for DTC and 41 percent for SBC), suggesting that Hong Kong Cantonese and Taiwan Mandarin linguistic resources still have a high vitality in LA Chinese diasporic community, and Hong Kong and Taiwan vocabulary may have penetrated immigrants' linguistic repertoire, becoming important building blocks which are playing important roles in their daily meaning-making process. More examples are given in Figures 9 to 11.

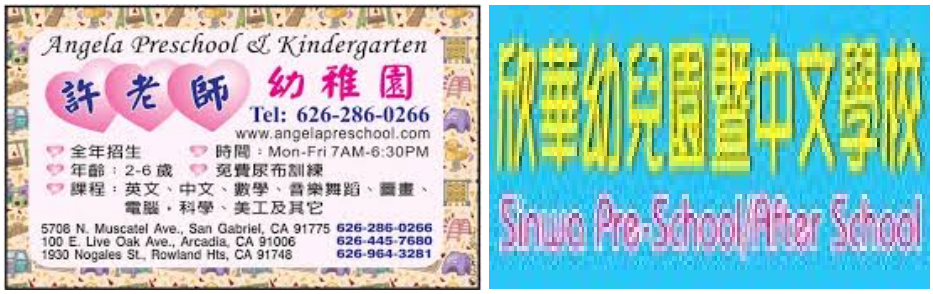

Figure 9: Kindergarten as 'youeryuan' vs. 'youzhiyuan' (in Suburban Chinatown)

Figure 10: Dental Clinic as 'yake' vs. 'chike' (in Suburban Chinatown)

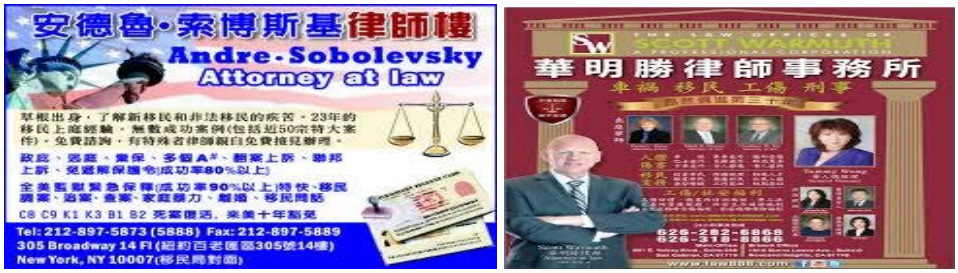

Figure 11: Law Firm as 'lüshishiwusuo' vs. 'lüshilou' (in Downtown Chinatown)

幼稚园 ('you zhi yuan', kindergarten), 齿科 ('chi ke') and 律师楼 ('lü shi lou') are Hong Kong or Taiwan words.[2] Although the existence of these equivalent words and their mainland counterparts does not pose much difficulty for communication between people of different origins, their co-occurrence in the LL of LA Chinatowns does affect people's language use. During interviews, we found that mainlanders, especially those who have frequent contact with Taiwanese or Hong Kongers, prefer Hong Kong or Taiwan words when having to make a choice. One of the interviewees (a pedestrian and first-generation Chinese immigrant from mainland China) said:

> 既然你已经到了美国，就有必要变一变说话腔调，因为你不是那种一辈子呆在一个地方不动也不需要做任何改变的人。在这儿，讲英语当然最好了，但和中国人交流，带点台湾味儿显然更流行， 因为我感觉这里铺天盖地的港台味儿，你看那些路牌、标语、报纸甚至电视节目都是台湾腔。
>
> (Translation: Now that you are in America, the language or the way you speak should be changed to show that you are no longer the guy who stays in one place all his life and has no need to change anything. Here in LA, speaking English is the best, but when communicating with Chinese, speaking with a Taiwan accent seems to be more popular and fashionable, because I feel that Hong Kong and Taiwan flavors are overwhelming here. Just look at the signs, slogans, newspapers, and even TV programs, you'll see they all have Taiwanese accents.)

[2] Given the wide influence of Taiwan Mandarin, "幼稚园", "齿科", and "速食面" are also used in mainland Putonghua, but they are still Taiwan words native to Taiwan according to *A Comprehensive Dictionary of Global Huayu* (Li, 2016).

The motivation behind such an attitude can be explained by the fact that the relationship between the LL and the sociocultural context is reciprocal or bidirectional: on the one hand, the LL reflects the relative power and the status of the different languages in a specific sociolinguistic context. On the other hand, the LL also "contributes to the construction of the sociocultural context through shaping people's perception of different languages and influencing their linguistic behavior" (Cenoz & Gorter, 2006: 67-68). It is also reminiscent of the suggestion from Landry and Bourhis (1997) about the carryover effect of the LL on language behavior. In our case, the LL plays an important role in the formation of language attitude that guides people's language use. As many of our interviewees mentioned, they saw Taiwan words, Wade-Giles and Cantonese Pinyin on signs and guessed this might be the norm in LA, so they began to make changes to their own language style.

5. Conclusion

The LL of the two LA Chinatowns under investigation mirrors the linguistic and cultural diversity of the local Chinese community. This is exemplified through unfolding the social indexicalities of different inscriptions in the LL. The coexistence of simplified and traditional Chinese orthographies, the employment of different systems of romanization, the lexical variation, and the existence of multiple minority languages on display suggest not only linguistic diversity but also diversity reflected in the tensions between norms on different levels of language – pronunciation, lexicon, and orthography. People of different origins have different traditions, norms and norm expectations that they consider as central. Mainland Mandarin, Cantonese, and Taiwan Mandarin are three centers. Within each center, there are norms governing the use of language on different levels. These multiple norms constitute the diverse language ecology of LA Chinatowns as well as the polycentric linguistic repertoire each Chinatown inhabitant possesses. Our study demonstrates that, as a consequence of mobility, in the multi-layered Chinese community of LA, a variety of semiotic signs appear in traditional and simplified Chinese characters, in Mandarin, Cantonese, and Taiwanese Mandarin. These characters and varieties are made by people influenced by tradition, by the script and variety they were used to before they arrived in LA, and by current preferences (e.g., looking more integrated into the local Chinese immigrant society). This shows the people's agency, their bottom-up policies, and how the LL, as a form of "practiced language policies" (Bonacina-Pugh 2012, as cited in Phan & Starks, 2020: 112) impacts language users' perceptions and behavior. Being promoted in implicit ways, the scripts in public signage unconsciously shape or change immigrants' attitudes regarding different Chinese varieties and influence their language behavior. This is seen most obviously in mainland immigrants' changing the spelling of their names to Wade-Giles or Cantonese "pinyin", and in mainland interviewees' preference for speaking Chinese with a Taiwan flavor. This shows that "the LL is never a neutral context. It is always a point of reference for self-positioning. Accordingly, there is always some form of psychological response to the LL" (Garvin, 2010: 266).

Furthermore, if the LL can be taken as a form of language input, it is closely related to the process of immigrants' identity construction. The preference for one romanization, script, or expression over the other might be the result of careful planning related to identities (Leung & Wu, 2012). First-generation Chinese immigrants in particular, in order to integrate into the American as well as the Chinese American society, go through a process of identity transformation from mainlanders, Hong

Kongers or Taiwanese to Chinese Americans or Chinese Los Angelesians. During this process, a sense of Los Angelesness supersedes the sense of Chineseness. More specifically, a sense of 'Los Angeles Chineseness' dominates in their identity construction. As a mainland interviewee said: "When communicating with Chinese people here in LA, speaking with a Taiwan flavor seems to be more popular and fashionable." Among the things that constitute 'the sense of Los Angeles Chineseness', language is a very important one. Features of Hong Kong Cantonese and Taiwan Mandarin play essential roles. Briefly, linguistic variables displayed in the LL of LA Chinatowns not only contribute to the construction of the sociolinguistic context but also to the process of immigrants' identity transformation. This may also suggest that a mixture of Taiwan Mandarin and mainland Mandarin rather than pure mainland Mandarin is more relevant in the LA Chinese diaspora. Most probably, the merging of the two, or the process of accommodation occasioned by contact and convergence between the two may give rise to a new vernacular – an LA Chinese variety, a non-standard form of Mandarin that has incorporated localized dialectal features and has become the lingua franca for immigrants of different linguistic backgrounds (see Tian, 2023).

By including interviews of the sign reader, this study adds more "complex layers of interpretation to the analysis of the sociolinguistic community and moves beyond an etic description of street signs" (Ben Said, 2011: 68) to an emic explanation of linguistic perceptions and practices, more importantly, emic explanation of language and culture change in action in a confrontation of different traditions, of people with different backgrounds, languages, and perspectives. The limitation of this study is that we only collected 158 pictures in two very limited areas of the two Chinatowns, conducted 10 interviews without considering Southeast Asian immigrants who are also a major subgroup of ethnic Chinese in the LA context, because our data are not meant to give an overall representative impression of the two Chinatowns, but as a demonstration of the linguistic diversity (cf. Gorter, 2006). A further investigation examining the LL of more expanded areas of the two Chinatowns and incorporating Southeast Asian Chinese in the interviewee list may produce interesting findings concerning the Chinatown heterogeneity.

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The authors declare there is no conflict of interest.

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