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A study of the commodification of multilingualism in four cafés in China

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Abstract: Space is constructed as a particular place by various agents and in a variety of ways, and languages play an important role in the semiotic construction of a space. This study adopts a linguistic landscape approach to explore how languages are commodified for consumption in sites of luxury, i.e., four cafés in Quanzhou, a southeastern city of China. The findings show some similarities and differences in terms of language choice for the four cafés. Despite the similarities and differences, the four shops' landscapes feature atmospheric multilingualism, where multiple languages and scripts move into a luxury register of late-modern consumption and create the affective regime of luxury and exclusivity. Atmospheric multilingualism is driven by commercial interests and characterized by the commodification of multilingualism and a division of labor among languages in four cafés. In this division, English, other foreign languages, and traditional Chinese characters are employed for their symbolic functions, indexing cosmopolitanism, distinction, luxury, and modernity. Simplified Chinese characters are linked to the interaction order and used in daily business as the main instrument of communication.

Keywords: atmospheric multilingualism; language choice; late-modern consumption; linguistic landscape

1 Introduction

In a world under the profound effects of consumer capitalism, the prevalence of oversupply intensifies the competition of saturated markets; as Leimgruber (2018: 194) points out, “increased competition brought about by material wealth and almost boundless choice requires business owners to constantly outperform one another to attract the clientele necessary for their economic survival.” At the same time, the relevance of national, regional, and ethnic identifications is decreasing, whereas the

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importance of consumer identities is growing. Late-modern identities are constructed in terms of sociolinguistic consumption (Stroud and Mpendukana 2010; Stroud and Wee 2007), which attaches great importance to the primacy of the symbolic or visual value of a language over its communicative value. This is typically reflected in language choice in the commercial linguistic landscape.

Despite the fact that the origin of linguistic landscape studies dates back over four decades (Backhaus 2007: 12–28), it is only during the last two decades that we have witnessed a rapid development of this field. The term “linguistic landscape” was originally coined by Landry and Bourhis (1997) as a barometer for measuring ethnolinguistic vitality in Canada. However, more recent studies tend to view linguistic landscape as the semiotic construction of a place. After more than two decades, linguistic landscape studies have established itself as an academic discipline, expanding the scope of analysis, employing different theories and methods, and covering various issues and themes (Gorter and Cenoz 2023). In the face of late-modern societies characterized by superdiversity, mobility, and complexity (Blommaert 2010), Blommaert (2013) calls for the use of ethnographic approaches for the description of seemingly complex and disordered multilingualism in different neighborhoods. This study applies ethnographic approaches to investigate how late-modern consumer identities are constructed in the linguistic landscapes of four coffee shops and how languages are commodified for customers’ consumption.

2 Consumerism, stratification, and coffee consumption in modern China

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, China became one of the most egalitarian developing countries in the world (Whyte and Parish 1984: 44). The people’s consumption at that time was uniform and highly regulated through the use of government quotas and ration coupons. Decades of egalitarian and restricted consumption was replaced by the consumer revolution after the implementation of the reform and opening-up in the late 1970s. With the transition of China from a society of shortage and a planned economy to a society of plenty and a market economy, China’s government policy has been putting much emphasis on the promotion of consumerism, which has produced profound effects on its people’s patterns of and sites for consumption (Croll 2006). Men and women are reconstructed as willing consumers whose capacity to consume rather than to produce defines their social status. Against such a background, consumption has emerged and taken root in China as “the single most important means of expressing social identity” (Elflick 2011: 206).

With China's rapid economic development in the last four decades, a middle-class consumer base has been gradually formed. Social stratification is of great importance in shaping and maintaining middle-class consumers' lifestyles and consumption patterns (Song et al. 2016). Heightened awareness of social class is reflected in people's consumption patterns, which in turn serve as indicators of social distinction and middle-class people's aspirations and status (Dong 2018; Gao 2019). In terms of consumption fashions, middle-class people tend to go shopping for designer brands overseas, drink Starbucks coffee, send their children to private schools or overseas, play golf, etc. (Garner 2005; Hulme 2014). During the past two decades, Western ways of consumption have spread at a staggeringly rapid speed in China, as evidenced by the emergence of shopping malls, coffee houses, fast-food outlets, etc. Nowadays in China's major cities, one may come across a variety of shopping centers, coffee shops, and fast-food restaurants, which are popular among urban professionals. This study focuses on one site of consumption, i.e., the café.

With its origin in Africa, coffee has spread around the world (Pendergrast 2010). The history of coffee consumption and culture in China can be traced back to the late Qing dynasty. The written records of coffee imports to China appeared in 1863, and China's first coffee house opened in Shanghai in 1886 (Chen 2017). In the era of the Republic of China (1912–1949), drinking coffee in cafés became a cultural trend among middle-class people (Pang 2006), and cafés became a fashion symbol of a modern lifestyle. After 1949, China's coffee industry experienced severe contractions in the first three decades but gradually recovered with China's reform and opening-up in the late 1970s. With the rapid expansion of Starbucks and other foreign brands in China, more and more independent coffee shops appeared in competition with these foreign brands. Nowadays drinking coffee in China is often viewed as a symbol of an affluent and successful lifestyle. Such a view is supported by a study by ITC (2010) which shows that those frequenting cafés in China are typically urban young people who are wealthy and fashion conscious.

As a "third space" (Oldenburg 1989), cafés are informal gathering places between work and home where people meet and interact with each other. As "sites of luxury" (Stroud and Mpendukana 2009), cafés play an active role in the construction of cosmopolitan identities for middle-class customers (Bookman 2013). As spaces of consumption, cafés offer the conditions "for LL [linguistic landscaping] actors to make visual products for consumption, as well as sell services, and to experience alternative lifestyles that are authentic enough to reproduce local practices as global practices" (Williams and Lanza 2016: 237). Big name cafés in the West such as Starbucks and Second Cup pay special attention to the coordination of elements such as location, architecture, interior design, and atmosphere in order to invoke an aesthetic experience and produce a cosmopolitan space for consumption.

Most of the previous studies on Chinese people's coffee consumption focus on global coffee brands such as Starbucks as a lifestyle choice and a marker of social and cultural distinction (e.g., Henningsen 2012; Maguire and Hu 2013; Venkatraman and Nelson 2008), to the neglect of the efforts of local independent coffee houses in their semiotic construction of their cafés as a transcultural space for their consumers. Instead of choosing global coffee brands, this study focuses on four local cafés in China. Through a study of the similarities and differences in terms of language choice in the semiotic construction of the four coffee shops, it is hoped that this study could shed new light on the importance of language in late-modern societies.

3 Research design

3.1 Research site

This study focuses on four coffee houses opened in Goldfish Lane (金鱼巷, *Jinyu Xiang*), a 271-m lane in Quanzhou, which is a second-tier city located on the south-eastern coast of China. Goldfish Lane, once a run-down lane, became famous after its renovation and redevelopment by the local government in 2017. The lane hosts a complex linguistic landscape, including locally flavored signage as well as new signage marking the emergence of consumerist identities. There are four cafés in the small lane, i.e., peace piece, OH KAFE, Time Falls Café, and Teresa Book. The first three cafés started their business in 2018 and the last one in early 2019. The four cafés provide a site for us to explore the construction of late-modern consumer identities in China through the commodification of language in their linguistic landscape.

3.2 Research methods

This study adopted ethnographic approaches (Blommaert 2013). My research included several trips to the cafés from March to May 2019 to make observations and take photos of the interior and exterior landscapes of the shops with the permission of the café owners. Backhaus's (2006: 55) definition of a sign as "any piece of written text within a spatially definable frame" was adopted in the survey.

Recent linguistic landscape studies emphasize the importance of interviews to gain a better and deeper understanding of the agents and motives behind the linguistic landscape. Informal interviews were conducted with shop owners and workers for an emic view of the four shops' linguistic landscape. In addition, WeChat connections were established with the four shop owners for more information concerning the design of their shop names and their online marketing strategies.

After the data collection, a detailed analysis was conducted in terms of language choice and preference. According to Scollon and Scollon (2003: 120), the preferred code is usually placed at the top, on the left or in the center of the sign, while the marginalized code is placed at the bottom, on the right or in the margins.

4 Four case studies

4.1 Case study 1: peace piece

Figure 1 shows the shop front of a café called peace piece. This photo was taken in early April 2019, when visitors could not find the name of the café on the shop front, except for two lines of text in English: “eat more cake” and “keep it sweet and simple.” The name of the café (see Figure 2) was added on the shop front in late April 2019 when local authorities in charge of the renovation of the lane designed and provided the board.

Through onsite enquiries with the shop workers and WeChat contact with the shop keeper, I was told that there is no special meaning and purpose behind the shop name. However, for visitors with some knowledge of Western music, the shop name “peace piece” may remind them of the jazz piece recorded by Bill Evans, indicating the café owner’s good education and cultural taste. It seems that the shop owner or

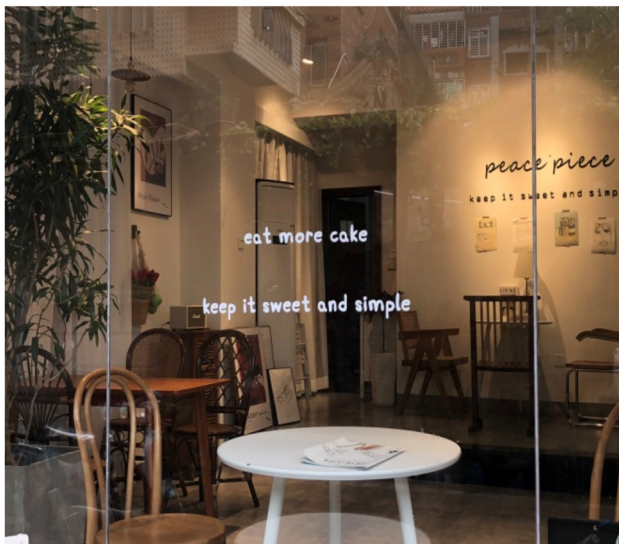


Figure 1: The window front of peace piece (April 2019).



Figure 2: The sign for peace piece (May 2019).

designer markets the café by referencing globally recognized pop culture, similar to the creative mixture of pop music and marketing through the use of English by a food shop named “2PAC STORE” found by Higgins (2009) in a suburban area of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The use of English as symbolic capital in peace piece performs an act of scale jumping (Blommaert 2010), connoting the good quality of its goods and services, projecting a modern and fashionable image of the café, and bestowing a Western elite lifestyle for its targeted customers.

Through the shopfront windows one may notice the name of the café “peace piece” inscribed on the interior wall, with the slogan “keep it sweet and simple” printed below. The slogan is a popular variant of the KISS principle (i.e., keep it simple, stupid), a design principle promoted by the U.S. Navy in 1960 (Dalzell and Victor 2008: 384). According to this principle, simplicity should be a key goal in design, and unnecessary complexity should be avoided. However, the slogan itself seems ambiguous because in this context “it” can refer to cake, life, or both. The ambiguous use of the pronoun in the slogan may be viewed as a case of a localized product of vernacular globalization, suggesting the designer’s creative appropriation of the KISS principle.

Figure 3 is a sign placed in front of the café showing the business hours of the café. The name of the café is offered uppermost, followed by the slogan “Have a Sweet



Figure 3: A printed sign stating peace piece's business hours (April 2019).

Day in peace piece Shop” and a list of products provided in the shop. The business hours are shown at the center, followed with a Quick Response Code. The shop owner regularly posts pictures of cakes produced by the shop in their WeChat Moments. In spite of the varying designs of these cakes, one common feature of the pictures is the placement of an English newspaper or magazine beside the cake (see Figure 4).

In addition to English, French is also used in the interior design of the shop. Figure 5 shows a picture hung on the wall of the café. As can be seen in the image, the name of a famous French painter (Henri Matisse) is printed below a print of one of his artworks. A magazine (see Figure 6) with a French and English name is placed on table. It is not certain whether customers can appreciate the picture or read the magazine, but the deployment of French, together with English, creates a fashionable image for the café and an elite lifestyle for its customers.

It is interesting to note that although online pictures of the shop's cakes are shown in combination with English newspapers or magazines, the captions are written in Chinese (Figure 4). There is a temporary sign (Figure 7) behind the front window of the shop. A comparison of Figures 3 and 7 shows that except for the café's name and the business hours, which are written in English, most of the information is written in Chinese (i.e., simplified Chinese characters), such as the invitation to customers to add the café owner's contact through WeChat since the café requires customers to preorder the products through WeChat. Figure 8 is the menu of the café.



Figure 4: A screenshot of the shop owner’s WeChat moments (April 2019).



Figure 5: A picture on the wall of peace piece (April 2019).



Figure 6: A French–English magazine on a table at peace piece (April 2019).



Figure 7: A handwritten sign showing peace piece’s business hours (April 2019).

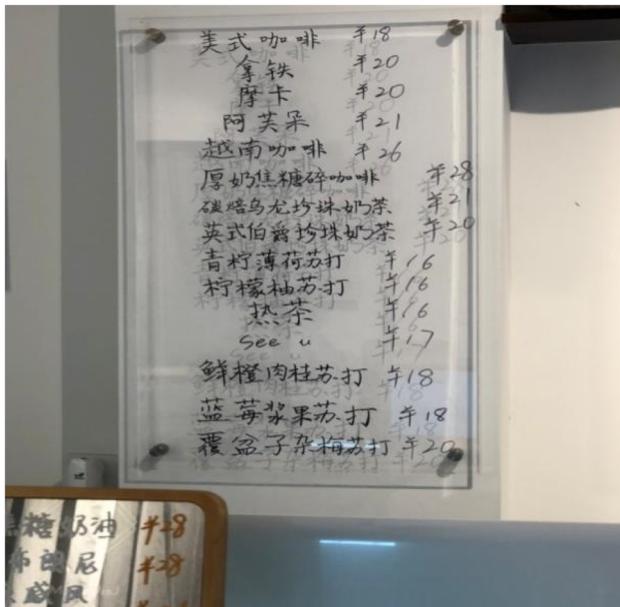


Figure 8: The menu of peace piece (April 2019).

As can be seen from this figure, all the products except for one (i.e., see u) are written in Chinese. It seems that those people with some basic knowledge of English can understand the English used for the name and the business hours of the café, but more essential information concerning the procedure of making an order and the kinds of products provided is written in Chinese, given the fact that most customers are Chinese with varying degrees of English proficiency.

To sum up, to stage the front of peace piece (i.e., its shop front) English is used exclusively for its emblematic functions. The deployment of English conveys the values of Western culture and a Western lifestyle, thus projecting a fashionable image for the shop and having a strong power of attraction for individuals and clients. When it comes to backstage, simplified Chinese characters are used to express factual informational content and serve as the true instrument of communication.

4.2 Case study 2: OH KAFE

OH KAFE is located at the western end of the lane. Figure 9 shows the sign of the café, which was also designed and provided by local authorities according to the original



Figure 9: The sign of OH KAFE designed by local authorities (April 2019).

name of the café. As can be seen from Figure 9, alphabetic letters, all capitalized, are used in the café name. Those with some knowledge of English may easily identify this commercial establishment as a café. Through onsite chats with the owner, Sam, I was told that *kafe* was a word from Africa and sounded the same as the English word *café*. In addition, the initial letters of the two words OH KAFE could be combined together to form *OK*. An online search shows that *kafe* comes from Haiti Creole, meaning coffee. It is also used in Norwegian and Swedish to refer to café. The combined use of English and another foreign language in the shop name did produce some desired effects. According to Sam, some foreigners visited her café and expressed interest in her creative naming practice. When asked about the reason for not choosing Chinese for her café name, Sam said that it was difficult to choose a Chinese name.

It is necessary to point out that despite Sam's claim that *kafe* is not an English word, the use of the Roman script is indexical of the English language. Seargeant (2012: 189) argues that "the issue of what counts as English for different people in different contexts manifest itself in the way that people regulate and respond to the language." In Japan, the use of the Roman script indexes the English language and evokes positive associations of English. Seargeant's view also applies in the context of China, where the use of alphabetic letters is viewed by most of the Chinese people as an example of English no matter what is written in the script.

Figure 10 shows an English sign on the café's kitchen curtain. As can be seen from this figure, below the café's name there are some seemingly ungrammatical English expressions "SAW KITCHEN SOU WHAT" on the sign. When the researcher asked Sam about the meaning of the English sign, the researcher was informed that Saw is her previous English name and Sou the English name of her sister. "SAW KITCHEN" means her kitchen, and "SOU WHAT" sounds like "so what." The sign indexes Sam's creative language play with English, creating a relaxing atmosphere for her customers.

Like peace piece, OH KAFE also has books and magazines placed on its tables (see Figure 11). Different from peace piece, which features English and French bilingual magazines, OH KAFE mainly uses Chinese books and magazines. One finds many books on the bookshelf. Most of them are written in Chinese. Take the magazine in Figure 11 for example. Although there are some English words on its cover, the content is written in Chinese.

A glance through Sam's WeChat Moments (see Figure 12) shows that Sam likes to put an English logo, OH KITCHEN, a variation of her café name, on her products. The initial letters of the two words OH KITCHEN can also be combined to form *OK*. It is interesting to point out that Sam likes to write her captions in traditional Chinese characters. In the Chinese mainland, traditional Chinese characters were the



Figure 10: An English sign on OH KAFE's kitchen curtain (April 2019).



Figure 11: A Chinese magazine on a table at OH KAFE (April 2019).



Figure 12: A screenshot of the shop owner's WeChat moments (April 2019).

dominant script before the founding of the People's Republic of China, but were gradually replaced by simplified Chinese characters. Nowadays, most people write using simplified Chinese characters. However, the function of code choice on WeChat enables people to write traditional Chinese characters. During chats with Sam, Sam said that she preferred to use traditional Chinese characters on her WeChat Moments.

Figure 13 is a handwritten sign on the café front. At the top of the sign is the café's name, OH KAFE. In the middle is a string of prayers of the same design, written in four simplified Chinese characters. At the bottom is a list of products served in the café, written in simplified Chinese characters. Figure 14 is a menu of the café. One can notice that both Chinese (simplified Chinese characters) and foreign languages (Italian and English) are used in the menu, with Chinese being on the left and foreign languages on the right. There is a sign beside the menu, informing customers of the methods of payment. Except for the café name and various Quick Response Codes, the main information is written in simplified Chinese characters. Similarly, beside the kitchen curtain there is a small handwritten sign saying "Staff Only," which is written in simplified Chinese characters (see Figure 10).

To sum up, English is creatively appropriated in the interior and exterior landscapes of OH KAFE. Despite the English-dominant landscape of the café and its

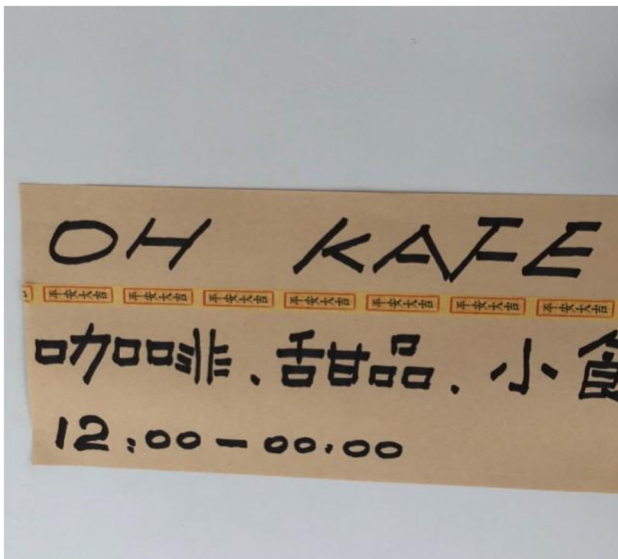


Figure 13: A handwritten sign on the café front (April 2019).



Figure 14: The menu of OH KAFE (April 2019).

multilingual menu, it seems that the main instrument of written communication is simplified Chinese characters, which is similar to the practice of peace piece.

4.3 Case study 3: Time Falls Café

At the eastern end of the lane there is a two-floor café called Time Falls Café, several steps away from peace piece. Figure 15 shows the sign of the café. As can be seen from this sign, two simplified Chinese characters 时落 (*shi luo* ‘time falls’) are placed in a larger size above the English (TIME FALLS CAFE), with the image of a leaf between the two characters. The café owner told me that the café name meant that the experience of solitude and tranquility in the café is like the falling of leaves in autumn. It seems that her inspiration is grounded in traditional Chinese culture, where the image of falling leaves in autumn evokes feelings of being alone and serene. When asked the reason for using English on the sign, she replied that coffee was an imported product from abroad.

There are some variations in the exterior linguistic landscape of Time Falls in terms of language choice. Near the entrance to the café hangs a wooden plate (see Figure 16) showing that the café is open. The information is written in Japanese kana



Figure 15: The sign for Time Falls Café (April 2019).



Figure 16: Japanese signs at Time Falls Café (May 2019).



Figure 17: A handwritten sign showing the business hours of Time Falls Café (May 2019).

characters いらっしゃいませ ‘welcome’ and placed above Japanese kanji 営業中 ‘open,’ which look like traditional Chinese characters at first sight. Beside the plate hang two curtains on which one can notice the use of Japanese kana characters いらっしゃいませ ‘welcome.’ Figure 17 is a handwritten sign behind the shop window. It is written in simplified Chinese characters, informing passersby of the business hours of the café.

Customers entering the café can easily recognize the multilingual landscape inside the café. On the counter lie two magazines on design (see Figure 18) which feature English and Japanese texts. Figure 19 is a sack beside the door of the café, on which some English words are quite prominent. On the second floor of the café there is a paper sack by *Le sac en papier* (a brand popular in the Chinese mainland), on which French is written (see Figure 20).

Figure 21 shows the menu of the café. As can be seen in the image, Chinese, English, and Italian are used in the first two columns. The first line of the two columns introduces two main types of coffee served in the café. It is written in English or Italian first, followed by Chinese, giving prominence to the foreign languages rather than Chinese. However, the following lines reverse the order, with Chinese on the left or top and in a larger font than English and Italian. The third column also lists some products served in the café. Unlike the first two columns, five lines in the third column are written exclusively in Chinese. It is interesting to note



Figure 18: Japanese magazines on the counter of Time Falls Café (April 2019).



Figure 19: An English sign on the second floor of Time Falls Café (April 2019).



Figure 20: A French sign on the second floor of Time Falls Café (April 2019).



Figure 21: The menu of Time Falls Café (April 2019).



Figure 22: The signs about payment in Time Falls Café (April 2019).

that some images are used in the third column to replace Chinese characters. For example, in the fourth line, an image of a cup of coffee is used to replace the Chinese characters 咖啡 (*kāfēi* 'coffee'). This design may be based on the considerations of limited space and symmetrical design. On the counter there are two signs regarding payment (see Figure 22). Similar to the signs in OH KAFE (see Figure 14), instructions on the two signs are written in simplified Chinese characters. The prominence of Chinese on the menu and the signs about payment suggests that simplified Chinese characters perform the transactional function in daily written communication.

4.4 Case study 4: Teresa Book

Located in the middle of the lane, Teresa Book started business in early 2019. Figure 23 is a sign showing its shop name. As this figure shows, there is an image of a traditional Chinese woman drinking coffee. Traditional Chinese characters and English are used in the shop's name, with traditional Chinese characters occupying a more prominent place than English. Onsite enquiries with the shop owner, Miss Qi, revealed that the name of the café was designed by a professional designer. Teresa is the shop owner's English



Figure 23: The sign for Teresa Book (April 2019).

name, and 德兰 (*delan*) is one version of an English translation of Teresa. When asked about the reason for the choice of traditional Chinese characters, she replied that traditional Chinese characters had an image-like character even though she wrote simplified Chinese characters in daily life. It seems that the image of a traditional Chinese woman drinking coffee and the choice of traditional Chinese characters and English construct the café as simultaneously a space of tradition and modernity.

Figure 24 shows a sign listing the café's menu. As can be seen from the sign, Chinese, English, and Italian are used in the menu. The English word *Menu* at the top is written in a larger font, and the products are written in Chinese, followed by their English and Italian translations. In other words, Chinese dominates the signs both visually and functionally. One may notice the inconsistent use of Chinese scripts, as is evidenced by traditional Chinese characters together with some simplified Chinese characters. For example, a traditional Chinese character 熱 (*re* 'hot') instead of its simplified form 热 is used on the menu, but one product named 云南水洗 (*Yunan shuixi* 'Yunan washed') is written in simplified rather than traditional Chinese characters 雲南水洗. In addition, there is a misspelling (i.e., washeded) in the English translation of 云南水洗, which may suggest the error was made by the designer or a production worker. In addition to Chinese, English, and Italian, a French sign on the wall (see Figure 25) is quite prominent. Although Miss Qi said that she checked the meaning of the French sign, she could not remember it during the interview.



Figure 24: The menu of Teresa Book (May 2019).



Figure 25: A French sign on the wall of Teresa Book (May 2019).

According to Miss Qi, café culture includes reading and art culture in addition to coffee culture. She includes “Book” in her café name to show the association between coffee and book. Figure 26 shows one of the café’s bookshelves, with both Chinese and English books on it. There is a row of artworks displayed in the café, showing Quanzhou’s local scenic spots. Figure 27 shows one tourist attraction, Luoyang Bridge. As can be seen from the picture, apart from the image of the bridge, simplified Chinese characters are used together with English to introduce the scenic spot. The following text providing information about coffee is written in simplified Chinese characters. There are also some pictures hanging on the café’s wall (see Figure 28). These pictures are taken from *The scent of a dream: Travels in the world of coffee*, a book about world coffee culture by Sebastiao Salgado, a famous Brazilian photographer. As can be seen from Figure 28, at the bottom right corner of the picture is the name of the book and its author, all in simplified Chinese characters. These pictures suggest that the shop owner highly values knowledge about coffee, which can be viewed as a marketing strategy. It seems that the café owner is trying to construct the café as both global and local through the use of the artworks.

To sum up, the visual prominence of Chinese on the menu suggests that Chinese bears the functional load of ideational communication while other languages and



Figure 26: One of the bookshelves at Teresa Book (April 2019).



Figure 27: One of the artworks displayed in Teresa Book (May 2019).

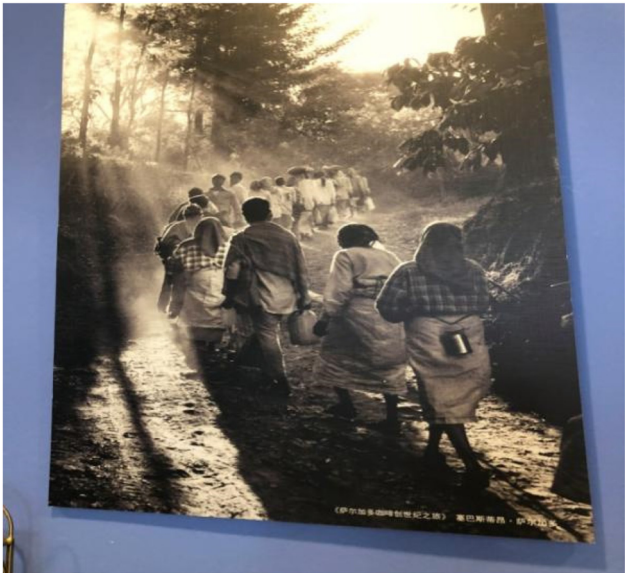


Figure 28: A picture on the wall of Teresa Book (May 2019).

scripts such as English, French, Italian, and traditional Chinese characters act as symbolic and ornamental elements in the café’s landscape.

5 Discussion

With the rapid economic development in China and the formation of a middle-class consumer base, various bars, pubs, and coffee houses have been emerging to cater to people’s needs. This study focuses on coffee houses, which are spaces of consumption where “the visual representation of linguistic diversity and voice as much as multilingualism and culture are staged for the moving world to see, often in unexpected ways” (Williams and Lanza 2016: 237). At the same time, affective regimes are established in coffee houses to create the affect of luxury and exclusivity for socioeconomic elites and that of desire and emulation for those below the socioeconomic elites (Wee and Goh 2020: 128). Previous studies of the linguistic landscape of coffee shops show different patterns of language choice. For example, Selvi (2016) finds cafés in Turkey were prone to the use of English. In marked contrast, Lawrence (2012) and Lee (2019) report coffee shops in Insadong in South Korea prefer to use Korean. With a focus on linguistic landscape of four independent cafés in a small lane in a southeastern city of China, this study offers a situated account of the four cafés in terms of their online and offline language choices.

Table 1 provides a summary of the languages and scripts used for the shop names and inside the shops. As can be seen from the table, English is the common language used in the names of the four shops, appearing alone (peace piece) or in combination with other languages and scripts (OH KAFE, Time Falls Café, and Teresa Books). When it comes to the interior linguistic landscape of the individual cafés, various languages are employed, such as English, Italian, French, Japanese, etc. Despite these

Table 1: A summary of languages and scripts used in the four cafés.

Cafés	Languages and scripts used in the shop name	Languages and scripts used inside the shop
peace piece	English	English, French, simplified Chinese characters
OH KAFE	English and an African language	English, Italian, Japanese, simplified Chinese characters
Time Falls Café	Simplified Chinese characters and English	English, Japanese, French, Italian, simplified Chinese characters
Teresa Book	Traditional Chinese characters and English	English, French, Italian, simplified and traditional Chinese characters

variations, simplified Chinese characters function as the dominant script in the menus of the four cafés.

The omnipresence of English in late-modern societies is “one of the most obvious markers of the process of globalization” (Cenoz and Gorter 2009: 57). In this study, English is appropriated in the names of the four cafés either alone or in combination with other languages and scripts. English appears without translation in the signs of peace piece and OH KAFE. In addition, the owners of the two shops even include English on their WeChat Moments (e.g., English newspapers, English slogan). It seems that the use of English by the four cafés clearly flouts Spolsky and Cooper’s (1991: 94) second condition, i.e., “prefer to write signs in the language or languages that intended readers are assumed to read.” However, the use of English indexes positive associations with cosmopolitanism, globalization, modernity, prestige, style, luxury, and wealth. Nowadays English is frequently used to bestow on various goods and services symbolic capital associated with globalization, internationalization, modernity, sophistication, etc. (Cheshire and Moser 1994; Haarman 1989; Kelly-Holmes 2005; Piller 2001). Although some expressions of English used by the cafés look ungrammatical and ambiguous, their use of English, a form of lookalike language (Blommaert 2012; Wang 2018), can be viewed as playful and purposeful appropriation of English for its associations with taste, distinction, class, and wealth.

Glocalization is the preferred branding strategy by some coffee houses where Chinese and English are employed. For Time Falls Café, simplified Chinese characters are placed in a more prominent position than English. For Teresa Book Coffee, traditional Chinese characters are inscribed in a larger font than English. The placement of Chinese above English highlights the local context where the coffee houses are located and their target customers. At the same time, the use of English indexes their global orientations and can be projected as identity claims for cosmopolitanism onto the cafés and their customers.

In addition to the deployment of English in the interior, exterior, online, and offline landscapes of the four coffee houses for its universal associations with globalization, prestige, and modernity, other foreign languages such as French, Japanese, and Italian are also employed in the interior landscapes of some cafés, for example, on French pictures and sacks, multilingual newspapers and magazines, and Italian menus. The presence of English can be expected since English has become the international language *per excellence* and made its way into linguistic landscapes around the world. However, it seems surprising to find other foreign languages such as French, Italian, and Japanese in the linguistic landscapes of the four cafés, since these languages do not have any historical link with the city. The presence of these foreign languages is merely semiotic; as Kelly-Holmes (2000: 67) posits, “it is unimportant whether the advertisee understands the foreign words in an advertisement

so long as it calls up the cultural stereotypes of the country which the language is associated.”

In addition, traditional Chinese characters are used by some shops, such as Teresa Books, for symbolic purposes. Nowadays traditional Chinese characters are still used in Taiwan and Hong Kong. In Shang and Guo's view (2017: 197), “Since the politics using traditional Chinese characters were economically more developed than Mainland China, traditional characters procured symbolic values like modernity and internationality.” The multiple languages and scripts are chosen for their symbolic function, projecting a fashionable image onto the cafés and creating an imagined cosmopolitan lifestyle for their customers. In a word, the owners of the four shops attempt to upscale their shops to a higher level through the employment of multiple languages and scripts.

Despite the similarities and differences in terms of the language choice of the four shops, these shops' linguistic landscapes feature atmospheric multilingualism, where an atmosphere of aesthetic cosmopolitanism is created to satisfy consumers' aspirations and desires of consuming difference via the consumption of a multilingual landscape. *Atmospheric multilingualism* is a term coined by Cook (2013) to highlight the characteristics of the signs in two inner city streets in Newcastle upon Tyne. In the case of atmospheric multilingualism, customers are not necessarily expected to understand the exact meaning of the sign. With the use of foreign languages, atmospheric multilingualism focuses on the impact of an exotic environment on the creation of an atmosphere of aesthetic cosmopolitanism for customers. Atmospheric multilingualism also confers distinction on the shops, satisfying the desire of their owners to mark out the establishments as cosmopolitan businesses.

In late-modern societies, the symbolic value of languages has been identified variously as “language display” (Eastman and Stein 1993), “linguistic fetish” (Kelly-Holmes 2005), or “impersonal multilingualism” (Haarmann 1989). Underlying these various labels is the commodification of language in late-modern societies, where symbolic considerations override informational concerns. Although most of customers may not understand the message conveyed by languages such as English, French, Italian, and Japanese in the cafés' linguistic landscapes, these languages and scripts evoke cultural stereotypes and the values associated with them. Such findings are consistent with the emblematic and symbolic display created by the sign of “Beauty Island” for a beauty parlor found by Scollon and Scollon (2003) in China and the shop name “Nina's Derrière” found by Blommaert (2010) in Japan.

However, the presence and prominence of simplified Chinese characters on the four cafés' menus and in their WeChat captions reminds people of the location of the four cafés in the context of China. The information that is real and more down-to-earth appears in Chinese. Chinese is linked to the interaction order, performing the

ideational function and serving as the major instrument of written communication. In other words, there is a division of labor between English, foreign languages, and traditional Chinese characters for their symbolic and decorational values on the one hand and simplified Chinese characters for their informational purposes on the other.

6 Conclusions

Pietikäinen et al. (2016: 112) point out that “with increasing commodification and saturation of many markets, there is an even greater need for products and companies to create niche markets for themselves and distinguish themselves from their competition.” This study focused on four coffee shops located in a small lane of a southeastern city of China. Faced with severe competition with each other and the demands of a symbolic economy, the four cafés rely on various marketing strategies to produce distinction and attract potential customers. With the application of ethnographic approaches (Blommaert 2013), the analysis shows that many languages and scripts move into the luxury register of late-modern consumption (Appadurai 1986) and create the affective regime of luxury and exclusivity (Wee and Goh 2020). In addition, it is the indexicality that foreign languages and traditional Chinese characters afford, in combination with other semiotic resources such as Western music, fashion books, newspapers, and magazines, that makes the aesthetic experience of a cosmopolitan atmosphere possible.

As Duchêne and Heller (2012: 381) point out, language choice within the new economy “corresponds closely to market interests.” The four cafés’ linguistic landscape is driven by commercial interests for the gaze of customers. At the same time, not all languages and scripts can move into the luxury register. As Coluzzi (2017: 120) points out, the exotic choice of language for the creation of cosmopolitan atmosphere is mainly confined to “the national languages of economically successful countries like Japan and Korea in Asia and basically all Western-European nations.” Applying De Swaan’s (2001) global-language-system pyramid, only hypercentral language (i.e., English) and supercentral languages such as French and Japanese can enter the luxury register.

It is also necessary to add that the cosmopolitan atmosphere is rather superficial due to customers’ superficial encounters and fleeting relationships with multilingualism in the cafés and their limited multilingual competence. In other words, the symbolic fashioning of identities in cafés only produces narrow and transient cosmopolitanism, similar to the case of tourism that does not involve a deep engagement with cultural and linguistic differences (Jaworski and Thurlow 2010; Thurlow and Jaworski 2010).

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