

## A Study of Language Usage in the Old Town of Lijiang

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### ABSTRACT

*The utilization of languages spoken by minority groups is a frequently observed topic in the field of linguistic landscape research. Based on empirical data, this paper examines the linguistic landscapes of two historic towns, Dayan and Shuhe, in Lijiang's Old Town to delve into the language use situation, especially the status of ethnic minority languages in a multi-ethnic area in China. The two old towns constitute the major administrative area in the Old Town of Lijiang, a renowned World Heritage Cultural site and a 5A-level tourism spot in China. The research concentrates on the languages displayed in the public signs in the selected areas to unveil the languages used and their relative weights in top-down and bottom-up flows. A quantitative method was applied by collecting digital photos to calculate the proportions and percentages of the languages used, and observations were done to recognize the preferred language in bilingual and multilingual signs. It is found that Dayan Old Town exhibits a greater degree of multilingualism than that of Shuhe Old Town with a more extensive use of multiple languages. The analysis of the linguistic landscape shows that Chinese enjoy absolute visibility among all the languages used, and Dongba scripts function as a cultural icon for eye-catching by featuring it at the top of the order of appearance among other languages in bottom-up signs, albeit not as prominently as Chinese. Besides, the appearance of English as a global language is prevalent in regional linguistic environments as it is encouraged to be seen in the top-down multilingual signs. The language use situation in the selected streets will shed light on future research on the linguistic landscape in multi-ethnic areas in rural China, especially the cities suspended by tourism avenues.*

*Keywords: Dongba script; linguistic landscape; minority language; the old Town of Lijiang*

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## INTRODUCTION

Ethnic tourism, as a unique sector within the tourism industry, plays a significant role in propelling the growth of the local economy, society, and cultural landscape (Lonardi, 2022). Located in the southwest of China, the tourism industry in Lijiang can be classified as a form of ethnic tourism that integrates natural landscapes with cultural attributes, with the old towns of Lijiang being a globally recognized cultural heritage site that draws a significant number of both local and international visitors (Xu & Ye, 2018). As tourism is a major factor in the languages used in the Old Town of Lijiang, there is growing attention attached to the power relations, social status and mechanism among the displayed languages in the public signs, which is the scope of the research on linguistic landscape. Linguistic landscape (hereinafter referred to as LL), depicted as the study of all the public signs in a given territory, is static and non-active (Landry & Bourhis, 1997), but it was further proved to be a dynamic process in which the social surroundings affected the language use situation and the LL is shaped by the environment vice versa (Gilinger et al., 2012; Kallen, 2010; Lou, 2007). Most of the studies concerning LL have been done in European countries, which is the core of cultural conflict and racial collision (Gorter, 2013; Lonardi, 2022), little attention has been paid to the rural multi-ethnic areas in developing countries like China.

As the cultural icon in the east western parts of China, Dongba culture shines as the pearl of Naxi minority people. Therefore, a pool of research concentrated on the effects of Dongba culture on local tourism in the area of Lijiang (Liu, 2018; Nie & Yao, 2022; Wu & Zeng, 2019; Xie & Altman, 2015), but scant attention has been made to the linguistic landscape in the tourism sites, especially the focusing on Dongba scripts as the minority ethnic language. Thus, this paper is going to investigate the linguistic landscape in the Old Town of Lijiang, a multi-ethnic area in China, to delve into the language used and their distribution on public signs, as well as the position that Dongba scripts hold in the LL. All in all, the present study aims to break new ground in the visibility of Dongba script in the LL of the Lijiang area by exploring the language displayed on public signs and their distributions in different authorships.

## MINORITY LANGUAGES IN THE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE

Studying languages used in public settings provides an important way to investigate how minority languages survive and thrive, how they interact with dominant national and global languages in contexts where multiple languages are spoken, and how language policies are implemented. According to Barakos (2016), minority languages are often seen as community languages that are more localized and tied to specific territories. As a result, they can provide tourists with a more enriching and valuable experience, as noted by Greathouse-Amador (2005) and Whitney-Squire (2016). They serve as a valuable addition to the tourism industry and attract visitors to destinations by showcasing the contrasting aspects between central and peripheral areas. Moreover, they can embody the essence of local culture and traditions (Brennan, 2018; Heller et al., 2014). As such, the linguistic landscape in rural multi-ethnic areas provides a perfect lens to explore the language use situation and social status of ethnic minority languages.

By identifying the relationship between the minority language and the geographic area where it is used as a fundamental criterion, two main categories of language and linguistics studies were categorized. One includes studies that focus on the existence of native minority languages or

regional minority languages (Gorter, 2013), such as Friulian (Coluzzi, 2009), Milanese (Puzey, 2009), or Sámi (Salo, 2012), which usually coexist with dominant local or international languages in the same area. Conversely, there is research which centers on the languages of migrant minorities, which are classified as minority languages as well (Taylor-Leech, 2010).

A few major ethnic minority languages in China have been tackled in major ethnic assembling areas under the scope of linguistic landscape, such as Tibet in Tibet Autonomous Prefectural Area (Roche, 2018; Wang, Shi & Gao, 2021), Zhuang in Zhuang Autonomous Prefectural Area (Grey, 2021), Yi in the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefectural area (Yao, Yan, & Liu, 2020), Kashgar in Uru Autonomous Area (Yao, Pan, Zhang & Nie, 2022). With the rising importance of LL as a useful tool to promote local tourism, authorities of regional and local governments attached growing importance to the maintenance and preservation of Dongba culture in the area of Lijiang, where ethnic tourism functions as the pillar of the local economy (Bai & Ran, 2022; Xu & Ye, 2018). Dongba scripts, being the written form of the Naxi language, is the only pictograph still in use in the world, and an endangering minority language locally visualized in the Lijiang area, is winning more attention (Nie & Yao, 2022; Poupard, 2019; Wu & Zeng, 2019).

Dozens of researches have proven the positive effects of Dongba scripts on the local tourism industry (Duan, 2022; Xu & Ren, 2015), but few LL related studies have been conducted on the heritage sites in the Old Town of Lijiang, let alone to deplore the actual status of Dongba scripts. Thus, this paper is going to delve into the presence of Dongba scripts by exploring languages displayed in the LL, aiming to reveal the social status, power relations and mechanisms of different languages displayed in the multilingual environment in rural multi-ethnic tourism resorts, where minority language competes with the official language and foreign language. As such, the following research questions are posed:

- 1) What are the languages used and their distributions in the linguistic landscape of the Lijiang Old Town?
- 2) What is the presence of Dongba script in the linguistic landscape of the Old Town of Lijiang?

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### RESEARCH SETTING

Three old town preservation areas constitute the major parts of the Lijiang Old Town. Dayan old town is the most mature historical and commercial resort as the main heritage preservation area. Shuhe old town, about 4 Km northeast of Dayan old town, is the newly set tourism spot developed and promoted by the local government in 2005. Research of the Linguistic landscape in these two old towns is supposed to fully consider the development of the tourism industry in different stages. When analysing linguistic landscapes, it is crucial to determine the particular geographical regions to concentrate on, such as commercial or residential zones (Backhaus, 2007). This paper chose Qinglong Street in Shuhe old town and Qiyi Street in Dayan old town, respectively, to document the linguistic landscape illustrated in Figure 1.

#### **Figure 1**

*A Google map of the surveying areas*



Chinese and Dongba scripts are the languages required for public signs in the Old Town of Lijiang. According to the *Law on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language of the People's Republic of China* (2016), Standard Chinese, as the official language, is designated as the first language in mainland China, and it is required to be shown on the top of other languages in the public signs. Provincial and local instructions and regulations in Yunnan province and Lijiang city all encourage the use of Dongba scripts on signs concerning commercial trade in the *Regulations for the Literacy of Minority Languages in Yunnan Province* (2018). As for the criteria for building national 5A-level tourism sites, at least one foreign language should be used to cater for the needs of international tourists, and English is usually the priority choice (Yang, 2012). In this linguistic environment, Chinese, Dongba scripts and English share the space on the Old Town of Lijiang signs.

#### DATA COLLECTION

The current study took an equal length counting by steps in the two streets starting from the traffic lights, running about 0.9 Km. Qiyi Street is the main avenue that goes across the Dayan Old Town, belonging to one of the best-preserved and most prosperous streets. Qinglong Street connects the east and west banks of the Shuhe River, making it the most popular tourist destination in Shuhe Old Town. A quantitative approach was employed to calculate the numbers and percentages of language distribution, as quantitative analysis of linguistic signage served as the basis for further qualitative research and visualization (Fabiszak et al., 2021).

Linguistic landscape objects in the current study encompass a wide range of visual displays, such as street signs, business signs, posters, notices, billboards, signs on government buildings, notices affixed to utility poles and alphabetical doormats, and signs with the same content only calculated once. A comprehensive collection of photographs depicting the signage exhibited in the Dayan and Shuhe old towns was amassed. The majority, if not the entirety, of the visual content was captured through a camera. This study counted Chinese characters and Pinyin as Chinese, representing the written form and phonetic system.

Fieldwork was conducted in line with the above-mentioned criteria in the summer of 2022 by the author, and 534 effective signs were collected in total, with 326 in Dayan old town and 208 in Shuhe Old Town. The following angles were adopted as criteria in analyzing these signs: 1) language(s) or language combination displayed; 2) code preference, referring to the priority position of languages according to the western reading pattern, identifying by left over right, top over bottom and centre over periphery (Scollon & Scollon, 2003); 3) authorships, divided by top-

down and bottom-up (Ben-Rafael et al, 2006); and 4) the appearance of Dongba scripts as the preferred language and mono-language on signs.

## FINDINGS

### LANGUAGE(S) DISPLAYED

The linguistic landscape in the Old Town of Lijiang is a multilinguistic setting of more than 7 languages and as many as 11 language(s)/language combinations based on a corpus of 534 signs. As shown in Table 1, the number of signs in the Dayan old town (n=326) is more than that of the Shuhe old town (n=208) in the same length of the surveying streets. However, the proportion of bottom-up and top-down signs in the two old towns is nearly the same, accounting for almost two-thirds of the total number of signs, with Shuhe old town (37.5%) slightly higher than Dayan old town (32.3%). Table 2 provides an overall distribution of the language(s)/language combinations respectively in the two old towns and the total number of the signs in the LL in selected areas.

**Table 1**

*Top-down Vs bottom-up signs in the LL*

	Dayan		Shuhe		In total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Top-down	105	32.2%	76	37.5%	181	34%
Bottom-up	221	67.8%	132	63.5%	353	66%
sum	326	100.0%	208	100%	534	100%

**Table 2**

*Language(s)/language combinations displayed in the LL*

language(s) and languages combination	Dayan		Shuhe		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
mono Chinese	71	21.8%	65	31.3%	136	25.5%
mono Dongba scripts	56	17.2%	40	19.2%	96	18.0%
mono English	7	2.1%	5	2.4%	12	2.2%
Chinese + Dongba scripts	42	12.9%	29	13.9%	71	13.3%
Chinese + English	36	11.0%	17	8.2%	53	9.9%
Chinese+Japanese	1	0.3%	2	1.0%	3	0.6%
Chinese+Tibet	3	0.9%	8	3.8%	11	2.1%
Chinese+Dongba scripts+English	104	31.9%	39	18.8%	143	26.8%
Chinese+Dongba scripts+English+Tibet	1	0.3%	3	1.4%	4	0.7%
Chinese+Dongba scripts+English+Korean	3	0.9%	/	/	3	0.6%

Chinese+Dongba script+English+Korean+Japanese	2	0.6%	/	/	2	0.4%
Sum	326	100.0%	208	100.0%	534	100.0%

**Figure 3**

*A multilingual top-down sign in Dayan Old Town*



As it can be perceived, mono Chinese signs (25.5%), the combination of Chinese and Dongba scripts (13.3%), and the combination of Chinese, Dongba script and English (26.8) rank the highest among the monolingual, bilingual and multilingual signs respectively of all the signs collected. The combination of Chinese, Dongba scripts and English accounts for about one-third (31.9%) in Dayan Old Town, while mono Chinese signs take a similar proportion (31.3%) in Shuhe Old Town. It is worth noticing that the number of mono Chinese and mono-Dongba script signs in Shuhe Old Town is higher, with mono Chinese signs nearly 10% higher than in Dayan Old Town. Generally, Dayan Old Town appears to have more language diversity than Shuhe Old Town, for the former witnessed the appearance of Korea and Japan.

#### CODE PREFERENCE

Chinese, Dongba scripts and English are the three preferred languages in the LL of the Old Town of Lijiang, as observed. Based on the data presented in Table 3, it is evident that Chinese tops the other two languages as the preferred language either in Dayan Old Town (57.2%) or Shuhe Old Town (65.4%). The percentage of Dongba scripts as the preferred language is almost the same in the two towns, whilst English is more preferred in Dayan Old Town (11.7%) than in Shuhe Old Town. Dongba scripts, the initial minority language in the linguistic terrain of the two regions, constituted approximately 31.1% and 32.2% correspondingly, and both numerical values exceeded more than one-third of the total number of symbols. The respective percentages for English as a preferred language on multilingual signs were 2.4% and 11.7%, with Dayan Old Town exceeding approximately 3 times more than Shuhe Old Town. In total, Chinese and Dongba scripts take over 90% of the code preference in the LL, leaving English as the only foreign language as the preferred language, with merely 7.7%.

**Table 3**

*Code preference in the LL*

Preferred language	Dayan		Shuhe		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%

Chinese	188	57.2%	136	65.4%	324	60.2%
Dongba scripts	101	31.1%	67	32.2%	168	41.1%
English	37	11.7%	5	2.4%	44	7.7%
Sum	326	100%	208	100%	534	100.0%

APPEARANCE OF DONGBA SCRIPT

The present study focused on three levels of analysis of Dongba script to position its appearance in the LL, as code preference in multilingual and monolingual signs show the autonomy of a certain language over others in the LL (Shibliyev, 2014). The total number of the appearance of Dongba script as the preferred language on various signs and the mono-Dongba script signs in the LL of the chosen area were analyzed in Table 4. It can be seen that the Dongba script appears on one in two signs in the total number of signs collected (54.1%), albeit it only accounts for one-fourth as the preferred language (24.5%) or the monolingual signs (22.8%). In Dayan Old Town, Dongba script possesses higher visibility (63.8%) than it is in Shuhe Old Town (53.4%), while it is the opposite of code preference (32.2%) and monolingual signs (22.8%), with the percentage of Shuhe Old Town beyond the former.

**Table 4**

*Appearance of Dongba script*

language	Dayan		Shuhe		Total	
	n=326	%	n=208	%	n=534	%
Dongba scripts on signs	208	63.8%	111	53.4%	289	54.1%
Dongba scripts as the preferred language on bilingual and multilingual signs	81	24.8%	67	32.2%	131	24.5%
Mono-Dongba script signs	56	17.2%	40	19.2%	122	22.8%

**Figure 4**

*Dongba scripts as the preferred language in a bottom-up sign*



**Figure 5**

*A mono-Dongba script sign*





All in all, the figures of the three levels of the appearance of Dongba script in the two towns share the same tendency, and it is a decline from the total number of appearances to mono-Dongba script signs.

## DISCUSSION

### LANGUAGE(S)/LANGUAGE COMBINATIONS DISTRIBUTIONS

According to the survey results, the proportion of Chinese usage in the language landscape of Lijiang ancient town is the highest (31.4%). Chinese is the most prominent among monolingual and multilingual language signs, demonstrating the remarkable effect of the national implementation of standardized Chinese characters and the strong dominant position of Chinese in minority language areas. Detailed information about the language distribution is shown in Table 5, involving the classification of LL as bottom-up and top-down authorship signs. As it has stated, top-down signs are the signs made by government-related establishments, while bottom-up signs refer to private signs including commercial signs and advertisements for business institutions (Ben-Rafael et al. 2006).

**Table 5**

*Language(s)/language combinations in top-down Vs bottom-up signs*

	Top-down		Bottom-up		Top-down		Bottom-up		Top-down		Bottom-up	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
mono Chinese	18	17.1	53	24.1	7	9.2	58	43.9	25	13.8	111	31.4
mono Dongba scripts	20	19.1	36	16.3	23	30.3	17	12.9	43	23.8	53	15
mono English	/	/	7	3.1	/	/	5	3.8	/	/	12	3.4
Chinese + Dongba scripts	7	6.7	35	15.8	16	21.1	13	9.	23	12.7	48	13.6
Chinese + English	9	8.5	27	12.2	5	6.	12	9.1	14	7.7	39	11.0
Chinese+Japanese	/	/	1	0.5	/	/	2	1.5	/	/	3	0.8
Chinese+Tibet	/	/	3	1.4	/	/	8	6.1	/	/	11	3.1
Chinese+Dongba scripts+English	51	48.5	53	24.0	25	32	14	10.6	76	42.0	67	19
Chinese+Dongba scripts+English+Tibet	/	/	1	0.5	/	/	3	2.3	/	/	4	1.1
Chinese+Dongba +English+Korean	/	/	3	1.4	/	/	/	/	/	/	3	0.8

Chinese+Dongba script+English+Korean+Japanese	/	2	0.1	/	/	/	/	/	/	2	0.6	
Sum	105	100	221	100	76	100	132	100	181	100	353	100

The top-down signs differ from bottom-up signs in the distribution of language(s)/language combinations. Firstly, the mono use of Chinese appears more in bottom-up signs than the bottom-up signs in both towns, but the weight of the Dongba script in top-down signs is higher than in bottom-up signs. Especially in Shuhe Old Town, the proportion of mono Dongba script on top-down signs (30.3%) is nearly double that of bottom-up signs (12.9%). Distinctively, English is scantily seen as the only language on top-down signs in the two sites, and the use of mono English signs in bottom-up signs is limited. Besides, English was used more widely in the LL of the Old Town of Lijiang than other foreign languages such as Japanese and Korean, indicating its status as an international lingua franca. Japanese and Korean in the public signs were only found on public signs in this survey; the same is true for Tibet in Shuhe Old (3.2%) Town on multilingual signs (Figure 6).

**Figure 6**

*Tibet in a bottom-up sign in Shuhe Old Town*



APPEARANCE OF DONGBA SCRIPT

The investigation also found that Dongba script in the LL enjoys a high presence in the total volume (35.6%), but it is marginalized in the monolingual signs as the sole and only language in use. Moreover, the distributions of Dongba script in different authorships in Table 6 again confirm the findings in Table 5 by showing that the appearance of Dongba script in top-down signs of any type is sharply over than the bottom-up signs (74.3% and 84.2%). Shuhe Old Town surpasses Dayan Old Town in the total number of Dongba script signs (84.2%), Dongba script as the preferred language (68.4%) and mono-Dongba script signs (23.8%), respectively.

**Table 6**

*The appearance of Dongba script in top-down Vs bottom-up signs*

	<i>Dayan</i>				<i>Shuhe</i>			
	Top-down		Bottom-up		Top-down		Bottom-up	
	n=10 5	%	n=22 1	%	n=76	%	n=132	%
<i>Dongba scripts on signs</i>	78	74.3%	130	58.80%	64	84.2%	47	35.6%
<i>Dongba scripts as the preferred language on bilingual and multilingual signs</i>	65	61.9%	36	16.30%	52	68.4%	15	11.4%
<i>Monolingual Dongba script signs</i>	20	19.1%	36	16.30%	23	23.8%	17	12.9%

It can be deduced that although Dongba script is heavily used, the script itself is used only in restricted situations because it is used along with other languages, mainly Chinese, on multilingual signs. Moreover, the heavy use of Dongba script in general in a city where ethnic tourism is the pillar industry illustrated the symbolic aspects of Dongba script. On the one hand, Dongba scripts are presented in public space as a kind of commercialized cultural symbol for tourism or local culture, which can attract domestic and foreign tourists and bring economic benefits to local governments and businesses (Cenoz & Gorter 2006; Moriarty, 2014). On the other hand, the high visibility of Dongba scripts and the low appearance of monolingual signs indicate that the Old Towns LL is an outcome of cultural and economic negotiations. Language setting in the language landscape is not an arbitrary choice but is often based on profound political and economic considerations (Karpava, 2022).

## CONCLUSION

The current study takes two streets in Dayan Old Town and Shuhe Old Town to delve into the preference and the presence of Dongba script in different situations. It is found that the Chinese occupy a dominant position in the linguistic landscape, with the highest proportion of usage and salience. While Dongba script, the written language of the Naxi ethnic group, is not as prominent as the official language, although it is highly visible in the public signs. Dongba script is mainly used as a cultural symbol and an effective tool to propagate local ethnic tourism, clinging to its fame as a world heritage site. Lastly, the status of English as an international language is still unshakable, as it appears to be the most frequently used among all foreign languages, higher than Japanese and Korean, indicating the popularity and influence of English in the era of globalization. The Dongba script, listed on the World Cultural Heritage List is the most frequent among the minority languages, and it also appears in the top-down signs in mono language, which is enough to show that the local government attaches great importance to the Dongba script. The degree to which ethnic languages are shown in public settings might indicate the sign owners' acknowledgement of the respective ethnolinguistic populations (Nie & Reha, 2017). It is supposed that the appearance of Dongba script will promote preserving and maintaining Dongba culture while attributing it to tourism and commercial activities.

The study was limited in one way, lacking diachronic investigations of the LL in the Old Towns and without considering the sign readers' perceptions in the other way. The local traditional Naxi people have gradually moved out of the Old Town area (Zhu, 2018), leaving only a small number of them doing business in the preservation areas, and the future study will examine them more closely. Due to the limited time and energy, the important research subjects were not integrated into the data in this study, for they possibly provided some different attitudes to the linguistic landscape of the two streets. Finally, of the research data, the phenomenon of language contact appears only for one time. Hence, it was not discussed in a wide range.

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