

# **Perceptions of invisible Zhuang minority language in linguistic landscapes of the People's Republic of China and implications for language policy**

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## **Abstract**

The article presents data from a 2013-2019 ethnography of Zhuang language policy to support an analysis of implications for language policy research and scholarship of findings about the (in)visibility of publicly displayed Zhuang. The analysis challenges core assumptions of language policy-making, advocacy and scholarship and explicates the general implications of this challenge beyond China, particularly for minority languages. The most important assumption that this article interrogates is that a written language on display will be recognised *as that language* by its speakers. Further, it argues that literacy, script and other language policies impact on display policies and must work together; they do not in the Zhuang case. In making a case for language policy informed by ethnographic research, this article reviews the foundations of socially-situated analyses of linguistic landscapes. To galvanise further such research and articulate it to policy-makers, the article employs the term 'lived landscape approach'.

## **Keywords**

Language policy goals; ethnography; semiotic landscapes; critical turn in linguistic landscape approach; lived landscape approach; subjectivity.

## 1. Introduction

The article presents a case study from within a 2013-2019 ethnography of Zhuang language policy which demonstrated that the meanings of minority language-inclusive public texts are co-constructed. Zhuang is the language officially associated with the People's Republic of China's (China) most populous official minority group, the Zhuangzu, who have nominal autonomy to govern a provincial-level region called the Guangxi Zhuangzu Autonomous Region (GZAR) in South China. Written Standard Zhuang is Romanised, e.g.: *Gvangjih Bouxcuengh Swcigih* ('Guangxi Zhuangzu Autonomous Region').

This article shares linguistic landscape (LL) data collected in Nanning, the capital city of GZAR, to support the author's overall purpose, which is to examine the implications of the study's findings about the (in)visibility of publicly displayed Zhuang language for language policy research and policy-making. In doing so, this article reviews the foundations for socially-situated analyses of linguistic landscapes and argues that these foundations need to be built further upon, especially in LL studies about language policy (which are often also about minoritised languages). To galvanise research efforts in this regard and articulate them to policy-makers, the article proposes the name 'lived landscape approach' for the interaction- and subjectivity-foregrounding, ethnographically-informed approach that it encourages.

As a background to this article, this Introduction summarises the study's other relevant findings as to the sociolinguistic orders at play in Nanning. The Introduction then reviews research which is relevant in its findings, theories or methods (Subsections 1.1-1.2), before introducing the key language policy applicable in Nanning (subsection 1.3). These

introductory sections explain why a lived landscape approach entails not only ethnographically-oriented methods but a theoretical lens which focuses on intersubjectivity in analysing how people interact with language and other semiotic resources in the built environment.

Given this lived landscape approach, the analysis is not limited to identifying the authorship patterns and standard formats of signage and outlining their (in)consistency with the other LL norms; that is simply a starting point. This article presents this starting-point analysis, specifically for Nanning, in Section 2.1. From an intersubjective angle founded in Bourdieusian critical sociolinguistics, the study then combines that LL analysis with an examination of how signage which includes Zhuang was experienced and understood by participants, in this case as articulated in the author's walks with the participants past Zhuang-inclusive signage or in interviews in which they discussed their experiences of Zhuang-inclusive signage with the author (Section 2.2). The discussion in Section 3 focuses on the study's implications for language policy research and policy-making, and it closes in Section 4 by advocating for ethnographic research as important in making or reforming language policy, particularly policy directed at LL interventions.

### **1.1 Situating this article within the literature**

The broader study (Grey 2017, 2021a, 2021b, in press) found that Zhuang is lowly ranked in national and regional sociolinguistic orders, now displaced even in the areas where Zhuang originated by the national language (Putonghua, a standardised variety of Mandarin), Mandarin topolects, and English. This concept of a sociolinguistic order draws on Bourdieu's (1977, p. 665) 'linguistic order' and highlights the role of language practices

in organising social categories and hierarchies, that which Jaworski and Thurlow (2010, p. 6) call the ‘social order’. The roles of legal and material discourses in forming such orders are further explored in Grey (2021a, 2021b). Within China, this sociolinguistic order is spatialised in relation to the poorer, less urbanised and more ethnically diverse parts of the country, mainly around the national peripheries. These are the places where minority languages are still more commonly used and ideologically ‘in place’.

Zhuang language originated and remains primarily spoken in the southern periphery, where GZAR is. The centre and East of China are more economically developed, more urbanised, more standardised, and more integrated into both the nation and the world. Based on the broader study and a contemporaneous minority language study on the northern periphery, the author and Gegentuul Baioud and have argued not only that the national language is widely co-constructed with “East” China, but also that English is mapped onto this East, as part of its affluent, modernised and fundamentally urban image (Grey and Baioud, forthcoming). Moreover, Grey (2021a, p. 32) argues that in GZAR, ‘the presence of (Standard) Mandarin and English are linguascaping tools that produce urban-like places aligned with urban norms, which are themselves globalised’, even outside cities. The broader study and this article treat this sociolinguistic order in a Bourdieusian way as part of the *doxa*, i.e. a normative structure into which participants have been socialised, which theoretically then shapes their *habitus*, i.e. socialised disposition (see especially Bourdieu, 1977). The sociolinguistic order created or reproduced by LLs (and other discourses) thus affects the symbolism of Zhuang and other languages displayed in a landscape, but also – as this article will emphasise – the very visibility of languages in the LL.

The broader study also found that education for literacy in Zhuang is very inaccessible, although Zhuang remains a relatively widely-spoken language albeit with indications of significant cessation to intergenerational transmission underway, especially in cities (Grey, 2021b, pp. 32-62; Zhou 2000, 2001, and see Grey, 2021b, p. 35 for debate on whether Zhuang is an ‘endangered’ language). As this article reveals, this can result in Zhuang-speaking participants not being able to read written Zhuang in the LL. The problem of speakers not knowing how to read their language is known to exist, e.g. where ‘heritage scripts’ have been (re)introduced (Draper & Nilaiyaka, 2014, p. 219), but is not a large theme of LL research. Draper and Nilaiyaka’s study of new, trilingual campus signage in Khon Kaen, Thailand, found that students mistook one of the languages written on this signage as ‘modern Lao’ rather than ‘the Thai Lao language used in Northeast Thailand’, and those authors hypothesise reasons including that the *Tai Noi* orthography used on the signage was not widely known about because it involved the ‘revitalisation of a moribund alphabet’ (p. 208) and that *Tai Noi* looks similar to Lao orthography (p. 207). With its orientation towards how LLs are lived in, this study was able to look deeply into speakers of a particular language (Zhuang) not knowing that the language could be written and not being able to recognise its written form, *not only* being unable to read it.

In foregrounding a lived landscape approach to studies of language policy and the LL, this article contributes to LL studies’ efforts to no longer overlook viewers (Jaworski, 2014, p. 525; Stroud & Jegels, 2014, p. 180).

At the same time that scholars have broadened their inquiries from linguistic to all semiotic resources in landscapes, there has been a movement towards ethnographic approaches. This has built upon research into the attitudes and perspectives of people who co-construct the meaning of the linguistic and other semiotic resources in their environs. Draper and Nilaiyaka (2014, p. 217) call these people ‘image participants’, following Scollon and Scollon (2003). The literature establishes that such participants could also be other types of interactant, rather than *viewers of images*, depending on the media of the landscape under investigation: see e.g. Pennycook and Otsuji (2011) on the spatialised semiotics of ‘smellscapes’ and Hu (2018) on listeners in public soundscapes. This article therefore uses the general term ‘participants’ for those who participate in landscapes and participated in the study. Linguistic or semiotic landscape participants are embodied, emplaced subjects interacting with the spaces, signage, sounds, smells, scripts, languages, histories, changes, social norms and other people in their physical surrounds. Participants have not been the main focus of LL literature; signage has been (see e.g. Marten, Van Mensel & Gorter, 2012, pp. 3-4), often aligning with quantitative methods (Pütz & Mundt, 2018, p. 5). Nevertheless, the seeds of the newer ethnographically-oriented studies of participants’ interactions with linguistic and semiotic landscapes go right back to Lefebvre’s (1991) ‘lived space’ and the (non-ethnographic) survey of participants in Landry and Bourhis’ (1997) first LL study. Now, it is time for ‘lived landscape’ methods to bring greater ethnographic thickness into the literature. This is particularly important in Chinese LL research, within which the ethnographic turn is less developed and the connection between LLs and language policies less firmly established (see further Grey 2021b, pp. 5-16).

The term ‘lived landscape’ is one that others, too, have arrived at, in various fields. Vik (2017), for example, speaks of a ‘lived landscape democracy’, Lazzari (2011) of ‘lived landscapes’ in archaeology and Setten (2004) of a ‘lived landscape’ in a human geography study of agriculture. These other uses of ‘lived landscape’ are not well known within LL literature and are not the source of the phrase for this author. Nevertheless, these studies share something of the spirit which prompted this author to take a lived landscape approach to LL research, in that they are focused on participants, praxis and the dynamism of meaning. For instance, Lazzari (2011, p. 171) conceptualises preserving cultural artefacts as ‘a domain [which] constitutes a specific form of materiality...where social significance arises from a long process of entanglement of people with a lived landscape and the many transactions and durations that shaped it’; this resonates with this article and with the study’s materiality-focused analysis on transport and tourism LLs (Grey, 2021a). Setten’s (2004, p. 389 ) work, like this study, draws on Bourdieu and raises a question that could expand our analyses if adopted into LL and language policy studies, asking ‘how the landscape becomes a means to justify historical and contemporary “natural” practice’ (p. 391). Within LL literature, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 35) have likewise exhorted scholars to examine how landscapes naturalise their socially-situated production of power (see also Grey 2021a, p. 13).

In encouraging a ‘lived landscape’ approach in LL and language policy research, particularly through the walking interviews explained in the Methods (Section 1.2) below, this article is building upon important forays into lived experiences of LLs. Such forays were made by

Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, p. 13) in their theorising of the co-construction of the meanings of signage, and later by Malinowski (2009) and Papen (2015) in each of their studies of authors' views on the signage they have produced, as well as by Stroud and Jegels (2014) in their study of 'mobile narrations of place', and by Marten et al. (2012, p. 1) in collating research about how 'LL research clearly feeds into the study of minority language communities, especially [regarding] issues of power and resistance'. Moreover, Lou has recently explained that displaying language is 'a form of spatial representation' of culture, power and politics and that living amongst or experiencing these spatial representations therefore contributes to the formation of people's *habitus* (Lou, 2016, p. 10, following Bourdieu).

This lived landscape analysis are indicative of the broader trend towards ethnographically-oriented language policy studies. See, for example, the calls for situated studies of language ideologies and practices as part of an 'emic' approach to language rights building across McRae (1975, p. 52); Ricento and Hornberger (1996, p. 417); Freeland and Patrick (2004, p. 8) and Shohamy (2006, p. 52). Coupland (2010) modelled the integration of a LL study into an ethnographically-oriented language policy analysis when analysing policy 'from above' and 'from below' using landscape data. Occasionally, the insights of LL studies into participants' perspectives have also been made directly relevant to language policy reform. For example, Draper (2016) used questionnaires to investigate the public's desire for and expectations of new Isan language-inclusive public signage in one province of Thailand on behalf of local policy-makers. While this study was not commissioned by language-policy



makers, it seeks to conduct, and to encourage, critical, socially-situated LL research to inform language policy.

## **1.2 Method**

Consistent with the study's concern with ethnographic insights into contemporary Zhuang language policy, its methods included walk and talk interviews through various focal landscapes with many of the study's 43 participating Zhuang-background university students and 20 participating Zhuang community leaders, in 2014-2015. Most participants were Zhuang speakers who also spoke Mandarin. Interview data in this paper have been translated into English but the original Mandarin excerpts are available in Grey (2017). Other, triangulated data in the study included walk and talk interviews inside cultural institutions; seated group and individual interviews; mobile photographic documentation, audio recordings and collection of physical circulating texts from LLs by the author; online commentary about Zhuang language policy; official policies and laws from China about Zhuang and other languages; the author's interactive observations in and around universities where participants studied or worked; and fieldnotes. Focal locations were selected within four provinces/regions across China: GZAR and Yunnan Province in the south, and the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and Beijing in the north. These four were selected in order to take a wide view on how Zhuang is regulated, used and valued in an era of mobility. Zhuang-background university students and community leader participants were recruited in each location. With the four locations, multiple LLs were studied, primarily in cities, including urban universities campuses. Like cities, universities are 'mobile places', geographic and socio-economic stepping-stones and thus 'places of in-

between-ness' as theorised in the 'new mobilities paradigm' (Sheller, 2006, p. 209). Moreover, these universities are within urban areas, co-constructing such places as centres and as places of mobility. Specifically in GZAR, the LLs included downtown areas of Nanning City, Guilin City and Wuming, a satellite town under the Nanning Municipal Government, and the campuses of Guangxi University and Guangxi University for Nationalities, both in Nanning. The examination of downtown areas included transport nodes and extended to studying the landscapes of the inter-city rail network and the rural areas observable while travelling between the various sites. Within both GZAR and Beijing, additional LLs of cultural institutions and tourism destinations participating in the construction of 'Zhuang' as a social category were studied. In GZAR, these included the LL of public museums and the regional library in Nanning, and a tourism destination billed as 'Ping'An Zhuang Village'. This article is specifically about Nanning's public, urban and campus LLs.

This study's walk and talk interviews are consistent and contemporaneous with the trend they identify towards these participatory methods; Szabó and Troyer (2017) have recently reviewed walking and other multimodal, mobile methods in LL literature. In this case, the method was borrowed from the human geographer Qian (2014), with Stroud and Jegels (2014) bolstering the decision to use walking interviews. The main form was audio-recorded, small group walks in and around participants' campuses (where they also lived), on routes co-designed by the author and participants along the way. During a walk, a semi-structured interview was conducted, allowing for the author to ask certain pre-determined

questions (e.g. ‘Can you show me any signage on campus that includes the Zhuang language?’) but also allowing for impromptu, responsive follow-ups to signage and speech that we encountered or to comments and activities we engaged in. We took seated pauses from walking to talk further about the participants’ views and experiences relating to places we had just walked through and to the specific places in which we sat. As an alternative for participants who would/could not walk around the LL, seated interviews discussed participants’ experiences of recounted/ previously photographed Zhuang-inclusive signage.

### **1.3 Background on linguistic landscape policy in Nanning**

The broader study found that there are urban and commercial norms of excluding Zhuang from language display in Nanning’s landscapes and elsewhere in GZAR and China, although there is a limited amount of Zhuang displayed in Nanning and other urban centres in GZAR on certain types of government-authored toponymic signage. To illustrate, Figure 1 is a photograph of a downtown street in Nanning. No Zhuang is on display in this photograph.



*Figure 1. Downtown Nanning, GZAR, 2014 (author's photograph)*

However, the broader study revealed that Zhuang language policy interventions have been made in exactly this urban landscape. Ultimately, they stem from laws and policies higher up in the government framework, specifically, a constitutional ‘freedom to use and develop’ Zhuang and the other official minority languages of China (1982 *Constitution of the PRC*, Article 4: see further Grey 2021b, pp. 63-68). Localising that framework at the municipal level, a 2004 language policy in the form of binding rules was enacted in Nanning. The rules were called (in translation) the *Nanning Municipality Interim Provisions on the Public Usage of Graphemes*. The 2004 rules resulted in a roll-out, circa 2009, of new street-name signs that included written Standard Zhuang in addition to Putonghua. These signs had previously been monolingual in Putonghua. A contemporaneous news report (“独家”南宁路牌两种拼音[Nanning Street Signs Two Kinds of Pinyin],” 2009), offers an important insight into this bilingual signage roll-out. It affirms what readers might have already surmised from the coincident timing of Nanning’s

rules and the installation of the bilingual signage: that the same political climate produced both. The bilingual street-name signage roll-out is reported as being in direct response to Nanning's 2004 rules, although a close reading of those rules shows they place no direct obligation on the government, or other authors, to add Zhuang to existing monolingual signage (Grey, 2021b, pp. 244-252). It seems that the normative message conveyed by introducing these rules was not only that 'if you have bilingual signage it should be formatted this way' but 'because the government is anticipating and regulating bilingual signage, this suggests bilingual signage *should* be produced'. The 2004 rules were superseded in 2013 by rules called *Management Measures for Public Use of Zhuangwen in Nanning*, which continued to similarly regulate the LL.

The 2004 rules' stated purpose, which also reflects the 2013 rules' purpose, was:

These provisions are formulated in order to *strengthen the management* of the public usage of words, *promote the regularization and standardization* of public use of words, and *better serve economic development and social exchanges*, in accordance with the Law of the PRC on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language and relevant laws and regulations, combined with the city's actualities.

[my emphasis]

The point here is to identify the self-declared goals of government language policy intervening in the Nanning LL – as italicised – rather than to assess this policy's place within theoretical typologies of language policy. However, theoretical language policy

goals will enter the discussion in Section 3, in examining the implications of this study's findings for language policy-making and language policy research generally.

Article 6 of the 2004 rules is the most relevant to LL intervention, and the only one to explicitly mention Zhuang language. It is echoed in Article 10 of the 2013 rules. It stipulates that written Zhuang cannot be by itself on public texts but when it is included, it should be in the first-line position (on top in a horizontal text; on the right in a vertical text). In addition, there is a requirement of accuracy, i.e. displays of Zhuang must adhere to the standardised script and orthography. The study found that these rules were generally followed. Only occasionally during fieldwork in 2014-2015, did the author find monolingual street-name signs in Nanning that had not been replaced with bilingual signs.

This compliance does not mean the public supported the new rules or new signage. The 2009 news article cited above also reported that many citizens were so concerned that new bilingual signage at a major intersection in Nanning was wrong that they pushed the local government to investigate it. They believed the sign was wrong because they thought it was a monolingual but dual script Putonghua sign on which Romanised Putonghua did not match the sign's simplified characters. The investigation clarified that the sign was actually bilingual and the supposedly incorrect Romanised Putonghua was Zhuang, written in its own official and standardised script (called *Zhuangwen*), which is also Romanised. This reaction gives an indication of how little expectation people in Nanning had that Zhuang

would be written on public signage. It was this sort of reaction that prompted this investigation into how participants read and react to Zhuang on signage. One key reason that people might not anticipate it, the study found, is that the public LLs of Nanning and other places in GZAR are largely devoid of Zhuang, as the following section explains.

## **2. Results**

### **2.1 Authorship patterns and standard formats of Zhuang-inclusive signage**

One of Nanning's Zhuang-inclusive street-name signs is shown in Figure 2. This particular sign is located in the centre of Wuming, a satellite town on the fringes of Nanning City proper and still under the remit of the Nanning government. At the top of the street-name sign in the foreground, there is a line of Standard Zhuang, transliterating the name of this street as *YUNGJNINGZLU* ('Eternal Tranquillity Street'). Below that, there are two lines in Putonghua, in two different scripts, both larger than the Zhuang line. The central and largest line gives the same toponym in Putonghua written in simplified characters, the official script: 永宁路. The last line is the same Putonghua toponym but written in the Romanised auxiliary script (except without its diacritics): *YONGNING LU*. In the white panel at the bottom of this sign, simplified characters name two adjacent streets in Putonghua, with arrows and the simplified characters for West and East giving a deictic location.

This street-name sign is in a standard format. The study found that the Zhuang line on this and all other bilingual street-name signs in Nanning was in the top position, following

Nanning's rules about formatting. Likewise, all Nanning's bilingual street-name signs use Romanised Standard Zhuang, the script and orthography developed at the government's behest in the mid twentieth century. So do the few other public signs that include Zhuang: mainly, these are name signs on the front of public institutions such as museums.

Romanised Standard Zhuang, unlike Romanised Putonghua, does not mark tones with diacritics. It uses letters in word-terminal and syllable-terminal positions as tone markers (here, the J and Z in *YUNGJNINGZLU*). Moreover, Romanised Putonghua uses 25 of the 26 letters that English and Zhuang use (A-Z excluding V for Putonghua). This means that similar-looking text is produced for each of the languages on bilingual or trilingual Putonghua/Zhuang/English signage.



*Figure 2. Downtown Wuming bilingual street-name sign, Nanning Municipality, GZAR, 2015 (author's photograph)*



Figure 2 shows a bilingual street-name sign in situ within a downtown streetscape much like the streetscapes nearby in the same town and like streetscapes in downtown Nanning. This streetscape illustrates a key finding: urban and commercial norms of language display exclude Zhuang (Grey, 2021b, pp. 174-176). This was the pattern both in Nanning and elsewhere in GZAR, and in the fieldwork sites elsewhere in China.

Written Putonghua dominated both within each street-name sign and along the streets. The study found that Zhuang was not only smaller in font and carrying less informational content compared to Putonghua on each bilingual street-name sign in Nanning Municipality, but also that the genres of sign in which Zhuang was included were limited to certain kinds of non-commercial, largely toponymic, government-authored signage. Many other government-authored signs (bus-stop signage, road directions, public safety notices, commemorative plaques, parking rules, government slogans etc) did not include any Zhuang. Commercial signage, whether for private businesses or government-owned/operated commercial ventures, did not include Zhuang. Moreover, Zhuang was never on signage by itself but rather always accompanied by Putonghua and occasionally also by English, e.g. on some university entrance gates in Nanning. For instance, the shop front awnings in Figure 2 (and beyond the photograph along Eternal Tranquillity Street) each bear a shop-name in large simplified characters, with smaller lines on the awnings mainly in characters too, or sometimes in Romanised Putonghua. Likewise, the tray of the utility vehicle to the right in the photograph and its canopy both display Putonghua in simplified characters. While the bilingual street-name signage manifesting Nanning's

language policy contrasted with this general pattern of excluding Zhuang, each street's many displayed texts (and other semiotic displays) would nevertheless be experienced together by a person on the street, i.e. as a 'semiotic aggregate' (Scollon & Scollon, 2003, p. 23). In the aggregate of Eternal Tranquillity Street in Figure 2, the little line of Zhuang on the street-name sign is a whisper.

The study likewise found that written Zhuang was visually marginal in LLs elsewhere in GZAR and indeed elsewhere in China. The focus for this article is how the regulated, Zhuang-inclusive signage was experienced, and so we turn now to a different kind of data: commented walk and interview data revealing the perspective of people living in these landscapes.

## **2.2 Intersubjective interactions with Zhuang-inclusive signage**

In analysing the data about personal and everyday ways of seeing public displays of written Zhuang, of which Nanning's street-name signs were the mainstay, four themes emerged. The displayed Zhuang was misrecognised, not read despite being recognised, evaluated as tokenistic, or evaluated as a contribution to preserving Zhuang linguistic-cultural heritage. These four common perceptions were often interrelated or overlapping, and perceptions of a widespread lack of access to literacy in Zhuang were interwoven through them, producing varied critical and co-textual readings of the signage in reference to the signage author's (i.e. the government's) education policies. Here, the author uses 'tokenism' to describe an

idea reemergent in the data and contrasting with substantive state support, and thus not necessarily invoking Arnstein's (1969) well-known theory of tokenism as a low-order form of citizen participation. This section will first provide and briefly analyse four excerpts from the data to elaborate on two of these four themes of perception (misrecognition and not reading), then four excerpts about the perceptions of tokenism and heritage maintenance, and finally two about perceptions of literacy (further extracts are analysed in Grey, 2017, 2021b). All participant names are pseudonyms.

Zhuang texts in LLs were often misrecognised by the participants as either Putonghua in its Romanised auxiliary script, or English. They reported that their peers made the same mistakes. In Excerpt 1, we have an example of the perspective that written Zhuang looks like English from a conversation with two Zhuang-speaking students majoring in southwestern minority languages and literature.

### **Excerpt 1: Student Participants**

Laurel: Because it [signage] is pinyin [Romanised] script, no one pays it any regard, they can't read it. In the recent past, people even thought it was English or [Putonghua] pinyin, something of that nature, but it is not [Putonghua] pinyin, so they could not conceive of it being Zhuang script.

Author: Right.

Zeina: To look at, it looks the same as English, I think.

Here we also get a comment from Laurel, a Zhuang-speaking university student, about metalinguistic awareness: people cannot conceive of written Zhuang on public signage. We will come back to this after the excerpts, examining why people would not consider written Zhuang an option at all when they see these signs.

Excerpt 2 gives an insight into what it feels like to read these bilingual signs for two Zhuang-speaking students majoring in English. Hope, another Zhuang-speaking university student, says it is like watching television with subtitles, for which she thinks the common reading habit is to only read the language you already know. Whether or not this is a common habit, this is Hope's own reading habit, and her classmate, Liz, affirms it too, in the same excerpt. They can break this habit with effort by self-consciously reading the other language to better learn it.

### **Excerpt 2: Student Participants**

Author: Now then, I have a question, have you seen on the street; each street's name sign has Zhuang script, then Putonghua characters, then Putonghua Pinyin-Hanyu Pinyin – those three languages. When you see them how do you feel?

Hope: Generally, I really only look at the Putonghua.

Liz: Yes ...

Hope: So it's like watching American TV [with subtitles], sometimes where there are two languages we will really only look at the Putonghua. If we are practicing English, sometimes we listen and do some 'Listening Strengthening' also.

This television analogy may remind researchers that street-name signs are often experienced as temporary rather than fixed, permanent texts, like subtitles which change during a show, the theoretical implications of which are briefly discussed in Section 3.

Moreover, bilingual signage can be read not only for content, or actually not read for content in practice, as the data show, but also read for a symbolic meaning. The data show that the symbolic readings of Zhuang-inclusive bilingual signage are diverse and situated. In Excerpt 3, we get a perspective on symbolic reading: an alternative reading of the symbolic meaning of the bilingual signage is articulated by 'Hoz', a Zhuang-speaking student of political science.

### **Excerpt 3: Student Participant**

Hoz: This Zhuang writing, frankly, this grammar is in my view a really erroneous usage... it's completely Hanified Zhuang language...Our Zhuang script must have as its goal opposing that, Guangxi's so-called Standard Zhuang which is not endorsed [by Zhuang speakers]; one reason is that it mixes in too much Han Language

[Mandarin], including from the grammar aspect, it doesn't stick to the grammar of our mother tongue, so we feel relatively disgusted.

This student rejects an affiliation between standardised, written Zhuang and a Zhuang identity and so, to him, these Zhuang-inclusive signs are not a symbol of the inclusion of Zhuang speakers in Nanning. This is not only about the signs' usage of Romanised Zhuang script but about the standardised way of speaking and writing that is reflected in the toponyms on the signs. These ways of using Zhuang are seen to be at odds with the grammar of Zhuang as it is actually used, and, even more problematically for this kind of reader, Standard Zhuang has been co-opted towards the majority language, Putonghua. To illustrate this, the Zhuang street name in Figure 2 is a Putonghua toponym transliterated into Zhuang, not a historic Zhuang toponym.

However, others read the symbolism of Zhuang-inclusive signage as conveying a positive meaning, specifically a gesture towards preserving Zhuang heritage. Nevertheless, the problems they and (in their estimation) others have reading the Zhuang on such signage caused them to doubt the impact on heritage maintenance of the positive gesture of erecting bilingual signage. For example, the author asked 'Dora', a Zhuang-speaking Chinese Literature major, how it made her feel to see Zhuang writing in public. She replied:

**Excerpt 4: Student Participant**

Dora: I think sometimes it's really good, but I think it has no use, there are not that many people who can read it. They don't even know Zhuang script exists as a thing.

Inquiring further into this tension between a viewer perceiving Zhuang-medium signage as both positive and useless, the author asked how Dora would feel if she knew a sign was in Zhuang although she could not completely read its meaning. She reaffirmed her positive evaluation, giving a specific example of a Putonghua-Zhuang gateway sign at her university: ‘I think that’s really good, like on our campus’ East Gate).

There are degrees of feeling in relation to this mixed symbolism across the data. For others, they felt a positive reaction to public displays of written Zhuang but could not reconcile this as readily as Dora did with the awareness that few people can read any Zhuang on public signs. For example, in Excerpt 5, Liz, a Zhuang-speaking student of English from whom we heard in Excerpt 2, doubts her own positive evaluation of bilingual Zhuang-inclusive signage and suggests it does little for preserving cultural heritage.

**Excerpt 5: Student Participant**

Liz: I think it [Zhuang on signs] still has value, it’s to protect our Zhuangzu culture. But maybe because we are relatively --, we all don’t understand that well, don’t read, so maybe we think it’s a good symbol yet also “whatever”, like that.

A more negative reconciliation between the symbolism of the inclusion of Zhuang on signage and the expected lack of a readership for that signage came in the form of some

participants reading Zhuang-inclusive government signage as symbolically communicating the government's lackadaisical attitude to Zhuang language. Such people saw the signage as an offensive reminder that 'no-one' has been taught to read Zhuang well enough to check whether the signage is even correctly written. This symbolic meaning is likely not predicted by policy-makers, because this is a reading of the symbolism of inclusion of Zhuang on public texts *not* as a challenge to Putonghua-dominant co-texts but rather reading the symbolism in the context of other language policy. An example is offered by 'Mr Brown' in Excerpt 6; he is a Zhuang-speaking, adult, community leader participant.

**Excerpt 6: Language Leader Participant**

Author: But I've heard it's often written wrongly.

Mr Brown: That's right, it's often written wrong. [...] but no matter how erroneously those sorts of things are written there is no-one who can pick that out, because Guangxi people have no opportunity to receive a Zhuang script education; who can read and understand? Guangxi has however many primary schools, making a pretense of teaching Zhuang script, teaching it for two or three years then stop teaching it altogether, Guangxi's primary schools have ten to twenty thousand people who are able to receive bilingual education. But with a minzu population of twenty million, only having twenty thousand people who can use Zhuang script, it's no better than having "altogether non-existent literacy". It equates to the government's "door-front work" [i.e. superficial work]; [but] in society there isn't anybody who can read Zhuang script, so there is nobody to point out their errors.

[...]



Author: So when you see those signs [on government institutions in GZAR], what do you think?

Mr Brown: It's simply a joke, to use Chinese it's "to hang up a sheep's head and sell it as dog meat" [Idiom: false pretences], so it's on the façade, but in their hearts there is no respect.

In fact, literacy was often made relevant by the participants, as it is by Mr Brown in Excerpt 6 and in other excerpts above, to their perceptions that: (a) Zhuang-inclusive signage is sometimes not literally read, nor even noticed, because Zhuang is not recognisable as Zhuang, let alone readable; and (b) where Zhuang is recognised on signage, it is symbolically read critically and co-textually in reference to other language policies, especially standardisation policies and language education policies which have failed to support Zhuang literacy. Excerpt 6 shows this particularly clearly. This problematisation of Zhuang literacy by participants starts to answer the question posed above: why would people not consider that a text could be in Zhuang? The answer relates to literacy in Zhuang.

We can anticipate that if people are not comfortable reading Zhuang but comfortable reading Putonghua, they will likely pay attention to the Putonghua on a bilingual sign and not the Zhuang. This is not only an experience attested to by Hope and Liz in Excerpt 2. This uneven bi-literacy was the situation for almost all participants in the study. The study's review of other literature indicates that uneven bi-literacy is also the common

situation amongst Zhuang speakers. Putonghua literacy is thoroughly taught at school, whereas Zhuang literacy is not. Before the 1950s, Zhuang was not written in a Romanised way. In the 1950s, Zhuang's first Romanisation occurred, but not with the same script or orthography that is used officially today because, in the 1980s, that first Romanisation was reformed. Thus, the currency of any literacy learnt mid-century may have expired. And in any case, not much Zhuang literacy was learnt mid-century or after the second Romanisation; throughout the twentieth century, as Chinese language policy expert Minglang Zhou reports, schooling in Zhuang was largely not available: the Zhuang are an archetypal group 'hav[ing] had limited or no bilingual education since [1949]' Zhou (2001, p. 56) writes (see also, Feng & Sunuodula, 2009, pp. 690-693; Zhou, 2000, p. 129). The author's own calculations using more recent national sample survey data found that less than 1 percent of school-aged children from the Zhuang minority group have access to bilingual Putonghua-Zhuang schooling (Grey, 2017, p. 88). The lived experience of Zhuang illiteracy, including personal experiences of Zhuang illiteracy and anticipating it in others, comes through in the data.

Furthermore, participants made clear to me that it is not easy to read Romanised Zhuang without ever learning how. In Excerpt 7, 'Sunny', a Zhuang-speaking Accounting major, recalls the role of explicit instruction in making written Zhuang readable for her.

**Excerpt 7: Student Participant**

Sunny: So to speak if you don't come to understand that Zhuang script, that this

Zhuang script also has pinyin-- If you don't understand that Zhuang script, like before

when I had just come [to university] I saw written on the side of Guangxi University [East Gate] “GVANGJSIH DAYOZ”, that’s written in Zhuang script, so at that time I used English to sound it out, but it can’t be sounded out like that. If it were English it would be “GUANGXI UNIVERSITY”, but if it were written in big alphabetic letters it wouldn’t come out like that, so I was -- Then I entered that [Zhuang students’] association and studied that pinyin a bit, Zhuang Pinyin, then I went to take a look: “Oh, all along it was read out like this”.

The role of explicit instruction in making Zhuang signage readable, and the dearth of that instruction, was reflected in other ways in the data, too. In Figure 3, the author has captured in a photograph an impromptu Zhuang literacy lesson with the community leader participant, ‘Mr Black’, who is a committed Zhuang activist who has taken pains to learn to read and write Romanised Zhuang. Here, Mr Black is giving a lesson in the basics of Zhuang reading to an interested staff member in the Zhuang culture and history exhibition at the regional museum in Nanning. This arose during a walk through public cultural institutions in Nanning led by Mr Black. He started explaining Zhuang orthography to the author using these trilingual curations signs, and his explication quickly gathered an audience of staff and other museum-goers. This staff member explained that she had never had an opportunity to learn to read these trilingual signs in her workplace.



*Figure 3. Walk and talk interview with 'Mr Black', GZAR Regional Museum, 2015 (author's photograph)*

These data reveal the challenge created for viewers of Zhuang-inclusive signage by their own low Zhuang literacy. However, the challenge also relates to their habitus of literacy. Written Zhuang is rarely taught and marginal in public displays, even more so before Nanning's street-name signs went up in the last decade or so. As such, some Zhuang speakers do not know that Zhuang can be written. The realisation that Zhuang could be written was a moment in life that a number of participants remembered vividly and which had prompted a new desire to formally study Zhuang. For 'Yana', the Zhuang-speaking

student speaking in the following excerpt, this realisation had come too late to change her undergraduate course as she had already enrolled in a Chinese Literature degree, but the new knowledge had nevertheless changed her outlook.

**Excerpt 8: Student Participant**

Yana: After I started university I came to know of such a thing as Zhuang writing... Had I known before, I would have picked their [Zhuang Studies] major... After, I wanted to get onto it, I want to teach myself, but I'm looking for books, where to start? Like when we learn English we have phonetics and such... I myself can speak Zhuang language, but I can't write. Later, I hope with my self-study, one day I may speak and also write.

Young people like Yana therefore develop a habitus of not anticipating Zhuang as a written language, whether written in schoolbooks or in public texts. With that disposition, not only is a passer-by unlikely to attempt to read Zhuang street names but, more significantly, is not likely to see them *as Zhuang*. This takes us back to Excerpt 1 and the theme of misrecognition: this article argues that Zhuang is mistaken for Putonghua or English not only because viewers do not know how to read Zhuang, but because they – even Zhuang speakers – do not expect that the writing could be read as Zhuang at all.

**3. Discussion: how subjective invisibility disturbs assumptions underpinning language policy**

This article presented one lived landscape approach, centring on data from commented walks in Nanning's LLs embedded within other forms of data. There will, I hope, be

increasingly numerous and diverse lived landscape methods in the LL and language policy literature. This section will briefly discuss this study's implications for research in relation to the intersubjective views on the fixity of LL texts, and then focus on the implications for research and policy-making of intersubjective views on the visibility of LL texts.

The analogy made between reading bilingual signage and reading television subtitles in Excerpt 2 shows street-name signs can be experienced as temporary texts, like subtitles which change during a show. Street-name signs and other fixed signage may be static and permanent in their material form but as lived texts they are seen by people walking or driving past, which creates only a temporary, moving moment in which to see and read them. In this lived way, a circulating text and a fixed text may be similarly impactful, or similarly of low impact despite the material change that the fixed text makes to the LL being more durable than the change the circulating text makes. Indeed a circulating text may be encountered more frequently than a fixed sign, if it is reproduced on many buses, for example, or interacted with for longer than a fixed sign when the person keeps a circulating text like a flyer on their fridge or keeps a phone map in a hand while out walking. This dynamic and subjective understanding of mobility contrasts with the prevailing understanding in the literature of fixity and mobility as objective and opposed material properties of landscape texts. This has implications for research design, especially regarding the power or importance researchers attribute to fixed signs over temporary or circulating signs, and raises questions as to what participants actually do with landscape texts. For example, how much of a bilingual street-name sign can and do people attend to in

actual experiences? For want of space, this theme is not further pursued here (but see Grey, 2021, pp. 294-295).

Even more importantly for the purposes of this article, the examination of lived experiences of language policy interventions in Nanning's LLs revealed that many participants view these LLs with a habitus that reflects the Putonghua-dominant public language and literacy norms of this city and of China. To an extent, the misrecognition of Zhuang as English also reflects ideologies of global English which have become manifest in urban China and Chinese public education. The misrecognition and overlooking of public Zhuang writing affirms Jaworski's (2014, p. 528) argument that reception of a linguistic display begins with noticing or not noticing, and that noticing, in itself, is socially situated. I argue that a habitus disposing viewers to *not* anticipate Zhuang in a written form (or any form) is constraining their noticing of Zhuang in the LL, rather than merely a lack of Zhuang literacy skills inhibiting Zhuang signage being read. The many Zhuang-minimal LLs examined in the study reaffirm for participants who experience them a viewing habitus which can affect not only the symbolic meanings that they ascribe to Zhuang-inclusive signage but even the very visibility of Zhuang on public signage.

The study thus calls into question two assumptions that are often made about minority language display policy, by governments and but perhaps also by academics.

- 1) By displaying a minority language, there is a more minority language visible in the LL than before.
- 2) That including a written minority language symbolically includes that language's speakers and maybe also its non-speakers, the people Rampton and Charalambous (2010, p. 10) call "'notional inheritors'" of a language.

These are foundational assumptions in LL/language policy research. For example, Puzey (2012, p. 143) argues that, 'For the promotion of minority languages, in particular, greater visibility through the appropriation of new spaces or increased prominence within the LL is a fundamental step towards greater recognition.' Similarly, Marten et al. (2012, p. 1) argue that, 'Being visible may be as important for minority languages as being heard ... [but] the visibility of minority languages in public space has received too little attention in traditional minority language research'. These are also foundational assumption in language policy-making. For instance, Pütz and Mundt (2018, p. 8) cite the *Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights* (1996), Article 50.1 (an international instrument of language policy), which 'gives any language the right to be *visible* in the LL' (their emphasis).

Let us discussion assumption (1) first. Objectively, yes, the amount of written Zhuang in Nanning has increased because there are now bilingual street names and there were not before. However, the lived landscape approach to investigating this bilingual signage and the policy behind clarifies that is a question of *visibility*: the *ability* to be seen, not simply of Zhuang's material presence in the LL. The ability to be seen entails the ability of viewers to see this language *as Zhuang*. This is akin to the difference between being language being



written and being *readable*: the Zhuang street names are written texts, so they can in theory be read, but the lived landscape data and other literacy data in the study tell us that an ability to read these signs does not exist for most people participating in these LLs, including most Zhuang speakers. If people do not know that Zhuang can be written at all, or do not know how to recognise then read written Zhuang, then there is *not* more Zhuang in their lived LL than before; it is, subjectively, invisible.

Thus, this article offers a partial answer to Marten et al's (2012, p. 7) question, 'Does visibility of a language really help to sustain a [minority] language [...or] increase the value or does it help to gain functions and prestige?'. The answer is: not if that language is subjectively invisible despite being on public display. The extent to which a minoritised language is visible depends not only on language policy about displaying that language, but on language policy about writing and teaching that language, on the discursive and material social construction of where and for what the language is in place, and on the individual dispositions towards seeing or overlooking that language which these other factors engender.

Yet, as this article contends, policy-making tends to assume that displaying a minority language increases the public presence of that language. Moreover, this intended increase in public presence is often an integral first step in a broader policy aiming to symbolically raise the status of that language and to include or locate its speakers, captured in

assumption (2), above. Even the Nanning rules' self-proclaimed purpose (extracted in 1.3), is to 'promote the regularisation and standardisation' of Zhuang. This goal would seem to rely on people noticing the regular and standardised Zhuang street-names on display *as Zhuang and then reading them* so that these people could then attend to learning something from the signs and apply the lessons to their own Zhuang usage. That is, this policy anticipates people will know which public texts are in Zhuang and be able to read them.

This close up of Nanning's language policy interventions in the LL therefore reveals a disconnection between language policy as an instrument to directly force change to the specific practices of a target group of authors or producers of language – here, changing the government and commercial public authors' sign-writing practices – and language policy as an instrument to indirectly encourage change to a wider circle of people's language practices and beliefs about language. Often, this indirect change is planned to arise from the direct change; a new language norm is supposed to be promoted by the direct changes to public language displays.

This article explains that the disjunction arises because people do not necessarily recognise the direct changes as they are assumed to. Consider for a moment the policy goals in Table 1. The left-hand column lists goals identified in a leading work as generic language policy goals (Hornberger, 2006, p. 29). The right-hand column lists additional goals identified through this author's boarder study. Any of these goals will be hard to achieve

through the common language policy ‘mechanism’ (Shohamy, 2006, p. 57) of public language display if that language is not recognised for what it is but is, instead, mistaken for a different language. Misrecognising a minority or minoritised language that is being displayed as a majority language is particularly undermining, and language policies that encourage or fail to widely avert such misrecognition achieve own-goals rather than language policy goals. For instance, if the script of the displayed language is not visually distinct and/or people are not taught to read this language, as is illustrated in this article, then for many viewers there will be no prompt to recognise and learn now-displayed, standardised phrases or to notice the use of the language for new functions, nor to ‘see themselves’ in the display of the language.

*Table 1. Language Policy Goals*

<b>Hornberger (2006)</b>	<b>Grey (2017)</b>
Officialisation	Heritagisation
Standardisation (of status or corpus)	Place-making; emplacing visual distinction
Modernisation/new functions	Political representation
Maintenance; Re-acquisition	Localising a government’s identity
Proscription (e.g. of other scripts)	Creating affinity with a market
Lexical goals	
Interlingual communication	

Jaworski’s (2014, p. 528) argument that noticing landscape texts is socially-situated, which launched the discussion above, then proceeds:

the noticing (or not) and reading of the poster (its uptake) is thus dependent on the knowledge, experiences, skills, capacities, and goals that social actors bring into

their encounter with this particular instance of discourse in place, their historical bodies.

In the varied, and oftentimes negative, symbolic readings of Zhuang-inclusive public signage in this study, we see this argument playing out empirically: these social actors clearly have uptakes of public texts that differ from each other and most likely differ from the Chinese government's expected uptake (particularly the critical and cynical uptakes). While the decision-makers in Nanning who supported the 2004 and 2013 rules and/or directed that bilingual signage be erected were not accessible for interviews, we can assume that irritating viewers of signage and creating negative affect amongst the public were not their policy goals. This study thus reminds us, and can be used to remind policy-makers, that public manifestations of language policy, like all LL texts, offer identity affordances for subjective interaction rather than for pre-determined reactions. This identity work was done through discourse, e.g. when the participants constructed their stance towards the bilingual signage and commented on public Zhuang meta-linguistically, but also through their embodied practices of reading or not reading the Zhuang displayed in the LLs. For instance, being able to read public displays of Zhuang, and thus able to critique erroneous signs, was mobilised in the study to construct an authoritative Zhuang identity as one who has overcome the barriers to Zhuang literacy. The study thus empirically supports the theory that LLs provide resources to be 'activated' (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010, p. 5) in various ways for the construction of identity. Policy interventions in LLs, therefore, are best understood as creating public resources and may nudge behaviour but do not control public behaviour.

#### 4. Conclusions

This article's discussion of subjective invisibility and subjective use of public LL resources is worth noting explicitly as being relevant beyond China, for the world's many marginalised and minoritised languages. One general implication is that policy makers and policy advocates need to be careful when designing LL policy to identify assumptions which, if unfounded, will mean the policy does not achieve its purpose. This includes the assumption that if speakers recognise their language on display, they will be heartened to see it. It also includes the prior assumption, which the earlier part of this discussion debunked, that a written language on display will be recognised as that language by its speakers. Another implication from this study is that language polices need to work together to achieve policy goals. In this case study, literacy policy and script policy undermined the efficacy of the LL policy, because they contributed to making Zhuang language displays invisible. Those policies undermined the Zhuang display policy all the more because they opened this LL intervention up to criticisms in which bilingual signage, being regulated and authored by the government, became a symbol of the government's other language policy shortcomings.

Finally, this study offers a springboard for thinking about that which ethnographically-oriented approaches can offer language policy research and policy-making. The suggestion is certainly not that government and others simply never display minority languages.

Rather, this case study illustrates how important socially-situated empirical research is in designing and refining or reforming language policy. Specifically, lived landscape research would enrich LL policy. It is important to find out about the community members' subjective interactions with the changes that a policy is producing or will produce (here, the addition of some Putonghua-Zhuang bilingual signage to LLs otherwise largely devoid of Zhuang). Thus, this article advocates the kind of researcher-government-community collaboration that is rare, Draper (2016) offering one of the rare examples of such collaboration so far. Ethnographic research is especially well-suited to inquiries into how people react to, or interact with, LL changes and indeed with other implementations of language policy.

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独家]南宁路牌两种拼音 上为壮语下为汉语（图） [(Exclusive) Nanning Street Signs

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### **L'abstrait**

L'article présente les données d'une ethnographie 2013-2019 de la politique linguistique Zhuang qui incluent un résultat remarquable : la (in)visibilité de la langue Zhuang, même de la Zhuang qui est affichée publiquement. Il présente ces données à l'appui d'une analyse des implications pour les recherches sur les politiques linguistiques. L'analyse remet en question les hypothèses fondamentales de l'élaboration des politiques linguistiques, du plaidoyer et des recherches. L'analyse explicite les implications générales de ce défi au-delà de la Chine, en particulier pour les langues minoritaires. L'hypothèse la plus importante que cet article interroge est qu'une langue écrite et exposée en public sera reconnue comme *cette langue-ci* par ses locuteurs. En outre, elle fait valoir que la politique quant à l'alphabétisation, au script et d'autres politiques linguistiques ont une incidence sur les politiques d'affichage et doivent travailler ensemble; ils ne travaillent pas ensemble dans l'affaire Zhuang. En faisant un cas pour la politique linguistique informé par la recherche ethnographique, cet article passe en revue les fondements des analyses socialement situées des Linguistic Landscapes (« paysages linguistiques »). Pour galvaniser davantage ces recherches et les articuler aux décideurs politiques, l'article utilise le terme "Lived Landscape Approach" (« approche du paysage vécu »).

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