

## The Impact of China's Economic Power on the Diffusion of Chinese Language: A Case Study of the Malaysian Language Landscape

Choo Kim Fong

College of Literature, Capital Normal University

[kimfong87@yahoo.com](mailto:kimfong87@yahoo.com)

*Article history:*

*Received: 13 April 2023*

*Accepted: 21 May 2023*

*Published: 1 June 2023*

### Abstract

The Chinese language in Malaysia has been preserved and passed on through the persistent efforts of the local Chinese, and it has become one of the few immigrant groups that have still managed to retain a complete native language education system and national language development. Although it is still able to achieve steady development, but it also faces challenges in the context of the government's implementation of a unitary development of language and education policies. With the rise of China's economic power, Malaysia maintains close economic ties with China, which has been Malaysia's largest trading country for more than a decade. The influence of China's economic strength has given the Chinese language a higher market value. This is undoubtedly a major external boost to the sustainable development of the Chinese language and Chinese language education for the local Chinese community. In the context of this study, the Malaysian linguistic landscape is used as a framework to examine whether the government and the general public's attitudes towards Chinese language and the status of Chinese language have changed due to China's economic development. It was found that the official government signage implemented the government regulations which only uses Malay as the official language, but the bilingual road signs demonstrated the government's inclusiveness and openness. Private shop signs are multilingual, with bilingual and trilingual signs being the most common. Private signs tend to use common languages like Malay, English and Chinese. The languages chosen are mainly due to their commercial value. The findings also found that the use of Chinese language is mainly limited to Chinese businesses, while non-Chinese businesses subjectively recognize the commercial value of Mandarin; they do not actually use it. As a result, the status of Mandarin in Malaysia has not been significantly improved.

**Keywords:** *Linguistic landscape, Chinese, Mandarin status, shop signs, multilingual*

### Introduction

Since the implementation of economic reformation in 1989, China has developed from a large economic power to an economic powerhouse and has now officially become the second largest economy in the world. The rise of China's overall power has gradually given it a stronger voice in the world economic landscape. The strong economic development has also led to the development of other fields. As language is an important medium of communication, mastering Chinese language means mastering the key to enter the Chinese economic market, which has led to 'Chinese Learning Fever' around the world. Compared to other countries, Malaysia has a natural advantage in the use of Chinese language. Due to the commitment of local Chinese to preserve their own language and culture, the Chinese language is readily available in the Malaysian public domain. This has also made Malaysia a popular destination for Chinese overseas investment and further studies. China has been Malaysia's largest trading partner since year 2008. The number of Chinese-owned enterprises in Malaysia has grown to more than 160, with many projects and businesses undertaken independently or in partnership with local enterprises (China Entrepreneurs Association in Malaysia, 2021).

The booming economic dimension of Malaysia and China and the spread of China's economic influences have led to the objective of this paper which is the development of local Chinese language.

Road signs, shop signs, advertisements and posters in the public spaces are always a passive input of information. As an important part of the urban landscape, language choices, language tendencies, national customs, government policies, and the changing trends of globalization can be clearly seen. However, not much attention has been paid to these taken-for-granted carriers of information. The Malaysian linguistic landscape (LL) is heavily influenced by government regulations, in addition to the official spheres of parliament, government administration, the judicial system, and is 'semi-official' in nature. Despite the influence of government regulations in the choice of language use, with freedom is also visible in certain situations. Therefore, this paper uses LL as the framework to observe whether the government and the general public have changed their attitudes towards Chinese language as a result of China's economic development. It is also to examine whether the status of the Chinese language has been enhanced by using Chinese language in the Malaysian LL.

## **Literature review**

From the establishment of the theory to the construction of the overall framework, LL research is a relatively young branch of research in sociolinguistics for only about 40 years (Gorter, 2013). Year 1997 and 2007 are significant in the development of LL research. The former is the year when the concept of LL was clearly defined, while the latter is the year when the overall research framework of LL was constructed. There is also a more consistent view on this statement in the academic community (Xu, 2017).

The study of LL describes the functions, roles and effects of linguistic signs in public space. The conceptual definition proposed by Landry and Bourhis (1997: 25) in 1997 is commonly cited in the academic community, which is 'the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the LL of a given territory, region or urban agglomeration'. They further pointed out that linguistic signs in public space have two functions which are informative function and symbolic function. The informative function refers to the explicit information carried by language signs, as the LL provides information about the sociolinguistic situation of a linguistic group in a certain area, as well as the geographic boundaries and composition of the linguistic group and the characteristics of the language spoken in the area. The symbolic function on the other hand refers to the linguistic power and social identity and status mapped out by the LL, which contains the linguistic group's understanding of the value and status of language. It is considered as the implicit message.

A clear conceptual definition has undoubtedly contributed greatly to the construction of research frameworks and research systems. The development of the discipline has been further improved by the pub-

lication of influential and comprehensive monographs and proceedings by Backhaus (2007), Gorter (2006), and Shohamy and Gorter (2009), which include research cases from around the world. Since then, in addition to linguists, the study of LL has also attracted scholars from other fields, such as semiotics (Scollon and Scollon, 2003; Jaworski and Thurlow, 2010), pedagogy (Cenoz and Gorter, 2008; Leung and Wu, 2012; Sayer, 2010), tourism (Marta, 2011), and environmental residual urban planning (Rebio 2016), which have gradually developed into interdisciplinary research fields. Nowadays, with the flourishing of technology, the study of LL is no longer limited to real-life public fields as the study of LL in online virtual worlds is gradually emerging (Ivkovic and Lotherington, 2009; Troyer 2012).

LL research is also a relatively new cross-disciplinary research discipline in Malaysia, but there have been a number of fruitful research findings. Ariffin and Husin (2013), Salleh and Abdullah (2017), Husin et al. (2019), McKiernan (2021) and Zaini et al. (2021) analyzed the language usage patterns and language usage tendencies of commercial sign in areas with high density of commercial and tourist attractions across the country, while Coluzzi and Kitade (2015) studied seven religious sites within the Kuala Lumpur region to analyze Malaysia's 'religious' LL.

Compared to other multi-ethnic and multi-lingual countries, language policy and planning in Malaysia has moved in a unitary direction, thus imposing a degree of constraint on the use of language in the public domain. Manan et al. (2015) explored the LL of five selected neighborhoods from the Malaysian capital, Kuala Lumpur, from a multidimensional perspective of politics, economy and ethno-linguistics. The study found that the underclass demonstrated defiance of official policies and was evident in the linguistic and semiotic manifestations of the signs. Manan and David (2016) also examined the patterns of language use on private and government signs in Petaling Jaya, Selangor, from the same perspective, examining the implementation of top-down language policies. The results showed that signboard users, while complying with official regulations, also display a defiant mindset and in turn use specific strategies to circumvent official policies. Beh's (2017) findings in George Town, Penang also reflected this. Selim and Teresa's (2019) study, on the other hand, showed that official policies are not often the absolute authority. When they investigated the implementation of legal policies in Penang by using the medium of LL, they found a number of bilingual or multilingual signs prepared by the state government, some signs that did not use Malay were not penalized as required. They see this as an inclusive attitude by the Penang government to reduce tensions between stakeholders and the community at large.

Apart from that, minority languages have been an important area of research in LL studies. Soon et al. (2017) studied the translation strategies used by Chinese businessmen on Labuan Island when romanizing their company sign from Mandarin to other languages and the language used for translation. The study found that phonetic translation strategies were mostly used and that English was used more frequently than Malay. Wang and Xu (2018) looked at the mismatch between language use and national language policy in

Chinese and Indian communities. Analyzing by language visibility, they found that the ranking of language visibility in Chinatown was Chinese, English, and Malay, while in Little India it was English, Malay, and Tamil. The causes of the mismatch between the two minority communities can be explained by the non-use value of identity expression, the use value of language communication, as well as the political and economic motivations of language policy.

### **The linguistic profile of Chinese community in Malaysia**

According to the 2022 National Census, the Chinese population accounts for 22.8% of the country's total population of 30.2 million, or approximately 6.88 million people (Current Population Estimates, Malaysia, 2022). Due to historical reasons, the majority of Chinese in Malaysia come from the Fujian (formerly known as 'Min') and Guangdong (formerly known as 'Yue') provinces of China, and therefore speak mainly southern dialects, including Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, Teochew, Hainanese (Hainan Min), Fuzhou dialect, Putian dialect, Guangxi dialect (Guangxi Cantonese), Xinghua dialect, and so on (Chen, 2003). According to the 2016 data from the Department of Statistics, the proportion of the dialect population was the largest in Hokkien (37.59%), followed by the Hakka population (20.33%), the Cantonese population ranked third (19.86%), the Teochew population ranked fourth (9.25%), the Fuzhou dialect population ranked fifth (4.68%), the Hainan population ranked sixth (2.26%) among the 7.41 million Chinese population at that time, and 6.03% in other dialect groups (Choo, 2021).

After Malaysia reached her independence, the barriers of dialect groups were broken down and Chinese education became more widespread. Mandarin was used more often and gradually replaced the many dialects in the household (Ang, 2010). Nonetheless, dialects still play an important role for everyday communication. One of the reasons for the continuity of Chinese dialects is the residential form of Chinese new villages. This form of settlement which made of clustered villages in a specific dialect group makes it easier to form community cohesion and plays a good role in preserving and protecting culture, customs, and language (Carstens, 2007; Ma, 2020). Today, the Chinese language use in Malaysia is dominated by three major dialects (Hokkien, Cantonese and Hakka) which are still trending. Outside the community, Malay and English are still spoken, and the Chinese benefit from their multilingualism but at the same time also face challenges to their linguistic viability with Malay and English as the dominant languages.

### **Research sites**

Cenoz and Gorter (2008, p. 43, as cited in Manan et al., 2015, p. 36) have the following description of the choice of research site:

*It may also be important to select localities, which represent the different ethnocultural communities in the same country or city so as to see their differences.*

Based on the above framework, two study areas located in urban areas and two on the urban fringe were selected in Selangor by taking into account the differences between urban and rural areas, the settlement patterns of local Chinese new villages and mixed settlements.

### **Research sites in urban areas**

For urban areas, Seri Kembangan (formerly known as Serdang) and Pusat Bandar Klang had been selected as research sites where the Chinese population is relatively concentrated. The former being a Chinese new village inhabited by Hakka community, and the latter being the ancient imperial capital (until the British colonial government moved the administrative centre to Kuala Lumpur). The resident population of Seri Kembangan was about 20,000 (counting the outlying population of about 30,000), 98% of whom were Hakka Chinese (Ma and Fan, 2020). As the new village expanded outward with long-term development and immigration, the non-Chinese population gradually rose with Malay, Indian, other ethnic minority and foreign households reaching more than a hundred at present from a few dozen. The strong and prominent local dialect here is Hakka.

The population of Pusat Bandar Klang is 240,016, of which the three major ethnic groups, Chinese, Malay and Indian, account for 37.1%, 35.1% and 17.6% respectively, while ethnic minorities and foreigners also account for 2.8% and 7.4% respectively (Population distribution by local authority and mukims 2010). Klang is one of the earliest settlements of Chinese in Selangor, and the dialect group is predominantly Hokkien, making so the strong local dialect Hokkien as well. These two locations are excellent places to observe because they share the same ethnic proportion structure, are economically developed areas, and have the same single Chinese dialect as the dominant language in the area.

### **Research sites in urban fringe**

For the LL sample collection in the urban fringe area, Pekan Batu 13 and 14 Hulu Langat (uniformly abbreviated as Pekan Hulu Langat) and Pekan Semenyih in the semi-suburban district of Ulu Langat, Selangor have been selected. Both have approximately the same economic development background and ethnic demographic structure. Both towns are peripheral townships in economically developed urban areas, with populations growing from 413,900 in 1991 to 1,400,461 in 2020 (Current Population Estimates, Malaysia, 2020), adjacent to major thoroughfares and highways leading to the city. These two areas are gradually gaining development opportunities due to the government's commitment to address urban population pressure in recent years. The population structure is predominantly Malay, but there are Chinese new villages in the vi-

cinity, thus constituting a majority Malay population, followed by Chinese, with the least number of Indians, orang asli and foreign workers.

## **Data collection and analysis**

Backhaus (2007, p. 66) defines sample of LL studies as 'any piece of text within a spatially definable frame'. Using this definition as guide, this paper focuses on official signs set up by government agencies (including public road signs, street names, place names, and government building signs) and private store signs and noticeboards, while others such as wall stickers, posters, leaflets, and spray-painted fonts are not included in the sample. Data were collected by camera photography to obtain a sample of sign, and by interviewing businesses to request for additional information to obtain first-hand materials. A total of 392 sign samples were collected for the two urban locations and 465 for the two urban fringe locations, for a total of 857 samples across the four locations.

## **Government signs**

Malaysia's language policy has evolved in the direction of a unitary Malay-only language. Article 152 (1) of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia stipulates that the national language of Malaysia is Malay, and in 1967, the Federal Constitution of Malaysia declared Malay as the sole national and official language. In 1972, introduction of an ordinance for sign (Shang, 2016) was implemented for signs such as billboards, road signs and store signs in public places. It is instructed that the Malay language must be grammatically correct and prominent. The Malaysian government requires signs such as billboards, road signs and shop signs in public places must be in grammatically correct and eye-catching Malay, and if there are multiple languages, the Malay language must be listed in the first row and the font size must be at least 30% larger than other languages. Failure to comply with these regulations is punishable by a fine of up to RM2,000 or imprisonment of up to one year or both (Malaysian subsidiaries of the Local Council by-laws Subang Jaya, 2007). Both official and private signs are unified under the jurisdiction of the respective state government municipal councils.

The public signs installed by the Selangor State Government undoubtedly follow the official language and sign regulations. 76 government signs show a predominantly monolingual Malay language with a small number of bilingual signs (see Table 1). Bilingual signs were recorded in Seri Kembangan with 44.44% (N = 4) of Malay-Chinese road signs, and in Pusat Bandar Klang and Pekan Hulu Langat with 37.50% (N = 6) and 8.57% (N = 3) of Malay-Jawi road signs respectively of the Malay-Jawi road signs (see Table 2). Bilingual sign is more of a human factor. For example, according to the State Assembly member, Ean Yong Hian Wah, Chinese road signs in Seri Kembangan are meant to preserve the names of roads that

have been in the spoken language of local residents for a long time. Although the inclusion of Chinese in official road signs is considered by some to be a challenge to Malay culture and has led to some controversy, the state government has not abolished all Chinese road signs, but only removed bilingual road signs containing Chinese in controversial areas, which undoubtedly demonstrates the government’s tolerance and open-mindedness.

Table 1: Monolingual and bilingual in government signs

Sign	Seri Kem-bangan	Pusat Ban-dar Klang	Pekan Hu-lu Langat	Pekan Se-menyih	Total
Monolingual	5 (55.56%)	10 (62.50%)	32 91.43%)	16 (100%)	63 (82.89%)
Bilingual	4 (44.44%)	6 (37.50%)	3 (8.57%)	-	13 (17.11%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>9 (100%)</b>	<b>16 (100%)</b>	<b>35 (100%)</b>	<b>16 (100%)</b>	<b>76 (100%)</b>

Table 2: Pattern of bilingual use in government signs

Sign	Seri Kem-bangan	Pusat Ban-dar Klang	Pekan Hulu Langat	Pekan Se-menyih
Malay + Chinese	4 (44.44%)	-	-	-
Malay + Jawi	-	6 (37.50%)	3 (8.57%)	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>4 (44.44%)</b>	<b>6 (37.50%)</b>	<b>3 (8.57%)</b>	<b>-</b>

### Private signs

Language use in private signs showed a more multilingual pattern than in government signs. The data show (see Table 3) that bilingualism has the highest percentage of use at 54.93% (N = 429), followed by trilingualism at 26.89% (N = 210) and monolingualism at 16.77% (N = 131); quadrilingualism, five languages, and other language forms (e.g., acronym) have very low use, with only 0.90% (N = 7), 0.13% (N = 1) and 0.38% (N = 3). According to the surveyed merchants’ feedback, merchants have to set the most important and desired message to their customers on a limited sign area, thus preferring common business terms and the language of groups with purchasing power when choosing language. This statement validates Cenoz and Gorter’s (2009) argument that in many cases LL is related to economic value. Spolsky (2009) also states that an important principle in sign language selection is to choose a language that the reader understands.

Moreover, in order to incorporate more languages in a limited space, it is necessary to give up excessive visual design. Mohsin and Hameed (2018) argue that as an economic tool, signs play an attractive role and landscapes with only textual materials are considered more boring than those with attractive images. The actual sample design and number also reflect the above statement, with the exception of those using five languages which are notice boards, the four language advertising signs recorded have the simplicity of de-

sign in common. It can be argued that businesses are incorporating four languages at the expense of eye-catching design. The samples also show that bilingual and trilingual signs are most economically valuable.

Table 3: Monolingual and multilingual in private signs

Sign	Seri Kem- bangan	Pusat Ban- dar Klang	Pekan Hu- lu Langat	Pekan Se- menyih	Total
Monolingual	8 (5.00%)	42 (20.29%)	47 (24.23%)	34 (15.45%)	131 (16.77%)
Bilingual	74 (46.25%)	110 (53.14%)	118 (60.82%)	127 (57.73%)	429 (54.93%)
Trilingual	75 (46.88%)	50 (24.15%)	28 (14.43%)	57 (25.91%)	210 (26.89%)
Quadrilingual	2 (1.25%)	2 (0.97%)	1 (0.52%)	2 (0.91%)	7 (0.90%)
Five languages	-	1 (0.48%)	-	-	1 (0.13%)
Others	1 (0.63%)	2 (0.97%)	-	-	3 (0.38%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>160 (100%)</b>	<b>207 (100%)</b>	<b>194 (100%)</b>	<b>220 (100%)</b>	<b>781 (100%)</b>

The language used in signage is a direct reflection of the language's strength and status in the social context. Guo (2005) divides the predominantly spoken languages in Malaysia into three classes, with the higher order languages being Malay and English, the middle order languages being Mandarin and Tamil, and the lower order languages being Chinese dialects and other minority languages. The tendency of private signage to use higher and middle-order languages basically matches the linguistic pattern of Malaysia, where strong Malay and English dominate. Malay was used on 92.45% (N = 722) of the 781 private sign sample; English, a unipolar presence in the world, was also used 64.92% (N = 507) of the time; Chinese and Tamil are weaker than the two stronger languages, with Chinese being used 45.71% (N = 357) of the time compared to Tamil's 3.84% (N = 30) of the time for the same middle-order language.

The language usage trends for all private signage are shown in Table 4. Seri Kembangan found that Malay-English-Chinese signage was used the most (45.62% (N = 73), followed by 30.00% (N = 48) of Malay-Chinese signage. With 28.02% (N = 58), Pusat Bandar Klang had the most Malay-English signage, followed by Malay-Chinese (21.26%, N = 44) and Malay-English-Chinese (20.77%, N = 43) signs. Both Pekan Hulu Langat and Pekan Semenyih merchants tend to use the Malay-English sign, recording 47.94% (N = 93) and 36.82% (N = 81) respectively. In the second highest frequency, Pekan Hulu Langat recorded 19.07% (N = 37) of Malay signs while Pekan Semenyih recorded 21.82% (N = 48) of Malay-English-Chinese signs.



Table 4: Pattern of language use in four research locations

Language pattern	Seri Kem- bangan	Pusat Bandar Klang	Pekan Hu- lu Langat	Pekan Semenyih
Malay	3 (1.88%)	34 (16.42%)	37 (19.07%)	26 (11.82%)
English	2 (1.26%)	6 (2.90%)	10 (5.15%)	8 (3.64%)
Chinese	3 (1.88%)	2 (0.97%)	-	-
Malay + English	20 (12.50%)	58 (28.02%)	93 (47.94%)	81 (36.82%)
Malay + Chinese	48 (30.00%)	44 (21.26%)	7 (3.61%)	24 (10.90%)
Malay + Jawi	-	4 (1.93%)	10 (5.15%)	9 (4.09%)
Malay + Tamil	-	-	2 (1.03%)	4 (1.82%)
English + Chinese	6 (3.76%)	3 (1.45%)	3 (1.55%)	7 (3.18%)
English + Jawi	-	1 (0.48%)	2 (1.03%)	-
English + Tamil	-	-	-	2 (0.90%)
English + Japanese	-	-	1 (0.52%)	-
Malay + English + Chinese	73 (45.62%)	43 (20.77%)	25 (12.88%)	48 (21.82%)
Malay + English + Jawi	1 (0.62%)	-	2 (1.03%)	1 (0.46%)
Malay + English + Japanese	-	-	1 (0.52%)	-
Malay + English + Tamil	-	-	-	2 (0.90%)
Malay + Chinese + Tamil	1 (0.62%)	7 (3.38%)	-	5 (2.27%)
Malay + Jawi + Tamil	-	-	-	1 (0.46%)
Malay + English + Chinese + Tamil	1 (0.62%)	2 (0.97%)	1 (0.52%)	1 (0.46%)
Malay + English + Chinese + Korean	1 (0.62%)	-	-	1 (0.46%)
Malay + English + Chinese + Unknow + Tamil	-	1 (0.48%)	-	-
Others	1 (0.62%)	2 (0.97%)	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>160</b> <b>(100%)</b>	<b>207</b> <b>(100%)</b>	<b>194</b> <b>(100%)</b>	<b>220</b> <b>(100%)</b>

### The use of Chinese in LL

The data in Table 5 shows that 45.71% of the total signage sample contain Chinese language. These signs were mainly installed in Seri Kembangan and Pusat Bandar Klang, followed by Pekan Semenyih, while Pekan Hulu Langat recorded the least (see Table 5). The data obtained is basically consistent with the local ethnic demographics where the denser the Chinese population, the higher the number of signs containing Chinese language will be installed. Ariffin and Husin (2013) also reached the same result in their study in

the small town of Cheng, Melaka, where the high frequency of Chinese language use in commercial sign was attributed to the significant Chinese population in the area.

Table 5: Chinese sign in four research locations

Chinese use in	Seri Kem- bangan	Pusat Ban- dar Klang	Pekan Hu- lu Langat	Pekan Semenyih	Total
Monolingual sign	3 (2.26%)	2 (1.96%)	-	-	5 (1.40%)
Bilingual sign	54 (40.60%)	47 (46.08%)	10 (27.78%)	31 (36.05%)	142 (39.78%)
Trilingual sign	74 (55.64%)	50 (49.02%)	25 (69.44%)	53 (61.63%)	202 (56.58%)
Quadrilingual	2 (1.5%)	2 (1.96%)	1 (2.78%)	2 (2.32%)	7 (1.96%)
Five languages	-	1 (0.98%)	-	-	1 (0.28%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>133 (100%)</b>	<b>102 (100%)</b>	<b>36 (100%)</b>	<b>86 (100%)</b>	<b>357 (100%)</b>

The sample collected shows that all signs using Chinese are owned by Chinese businesses, and no non-Chinese businesses have signs containing Chinese, most of which are in the most economically valuable bilingual and trilingual signs. From Table 4, Malay-Chinese is the most frequently used bilingual sign, while the trilingual sign is Malay-English-Chinese.

The results of the interviews with all Chinese businesses show that, first, the use of Malay in signage is not only to comply with government regulations, but also to demonstrate a deeper sense of localization and identity for the nation. Second, Chinese pay close attention to their language and cultural heritage, and are able to retain their 'roots' even in foreign countries with their strong cohesion. In Malaya during the British colonial period, the immigrant Chinese adapted and changed to a very different local environment and embraced and coexisted with the political, economic and cultural conditions of the time while retaining their own traditions, realizing the localization of their ethnic heritage. This awareness is reflected in the multilingual signs of the time. The most commonly used multilingual signs is the Chinese-English signs, where Chinese characters are written bigger than English. Among the sample collected, four Chinese businesses that started operating between 1944 and 1950 still retain their bilingual signs. According to the interview feedback from these four businesses, English, the dominant language of administration and commerce, was used to fit in with the social climate of the time. After Malaysia's independence, the Chinese changed their sense of national indigenization to national identity due to the change in their nationality status. The Malaysian Constitution spells out that Malay is the only official language, while Islam is the state religion and the national culture is dominated by traditional Malay culture, but each ethnic group still retains the freedom to use other languages, practice other religions and pass on their own ethnic culture. With this change in the na-

tional context, Malay, the national language, has replaced English as the dominant language. Hence, the Malay-Chinese signage became the most popular bilingual signage used by Chinese businesses in Malaysia after independence.

Figure 1: Bilingual signs in pre-independence Malaysia



Nevertheless, the status of English has not diminished in response to the changing political situation in the country. On the one hand, the linguistic influence left from the British colonial period continues to play a role. On the other hand, the dominance of the international financial system by advanced countries such as Europe and the United States has led to the development of English as an important international language, dominating the private business and professional sectors. Chinese businesses continue to use English on their signage in recognition of the economic value of English as an international language and the ability to project a high-end image of their stores.

The use of the Chinese language is primarily a result of ethnicity, a manifestation of Chinese identity, and a contribution to the preservation and transmission of the language to the nation. The key to the continuity and transmission of the language is its vitality, and the way to enhance that vitality is to make the language widely available. Although Chinese language education has been integrated into the Malaysian public education system, it still faces the challenge of language competition from a multilingual environment. However, the economic rise of China has given Chinese language the most tangible 'language market value' (Guo, 2005), contributing to its motivation to be used. The national cause of Chinese language transmission in Malaysia has gained an external force for sustainability through the spillover effect of China's economic boom. By using Chinese language on signs, Chinese merchants are able to attract both local Chinese customers who share the same sense of identity and foreign customers who feel a sense of affinity by reading the Chinese signs, thus bringing economic benefits. By combining the meanings behind the three languages, the Malay-English-Chinese sign has become the most common trilingual sign used by Chinese businesses.

Today, signs in Malaysia are typically read from top to bottom, left to right, with the language of importance being put in the first column's highest left position. Figure 2 shows a government-compliant sign that visually identifies the Malay language first and directly to the reader. Chinese businesses are at odds with government regulations, both in terms of compliance and deliberate attempts to circumvent them. According to data, of the 647 bilingual and multilingual private signs, 64.30% were not compliant, while only 35.70% were compliant (see Table 6). There are several circumvention strategies used by Chinese businesses: 1. Malay font is at least 30% larger than Chinese font, but use colour and bold font to make Chinese more prominent; 2. Set Malay in the first column of the top left corner as the priority position, but the font size is not compliant with Chinese occupies 90% of the space with prominent colour; 3. Set Malay in the first column of the top left corner as the priority position but the font size of Chinese is almost equal to that of Malay; 4. Malay and Chinese are placed side by side in the same position with almost equal font size and prominent colour used for Chinese; 5. Chinese is set in the first column and the font size is larger than that of Malay. Due to the lack of strict enforcement by the government, non-compliant private signs have become the default existence, creating a bottom-up attitude of disregard and even contempt for government regulations.

Figure 2: Government-compliant trilingual sign



Figure 3: Non government-compliant trilingual sign



Table 6: Most prominent language and language pattern in bilingual and multilingual signs

<b>Language / language pattern</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Malay	231	35.70%
English	286	44.20%
Chinese	49	7.57%
Jawi	3	0.46%
Tamil	1	0.15%
Japanese	1	0.15%
Malay and English are almost equal	35	5.41%
Malay and Chinese are almost equal	21	3.25%
English and Chinese are almost equal	8	1.24%
Malay and Tamil are almost equal	1	0.15%
Malay, English and Chinese are almost equal	3	0.46%
All languages in quadrilingual and five language signs are almost equal	8	1.24%
<b>Total</b>	<b>647</b>	<b>100%</b>

From the perspective of language competition, the scope and competitiveness of Chinese in the Malaysian LL is significantly lower than that of Malay and English, which are spoken by the same community and across communities. When non-Chinese businesses were asked about their attitudes towards Chinese, all of them agreed that Chinese would be an important language based on the economic power of China but did not want to use Chinese in their sign. The reason for this is twofold. Firstly, the Chinese language is rather foreign to them. Non-Chinese businesses tend to feel inferior in using the language as they are worried any mistakes made would result in embarrassment. Furthermore, the lack of resources to access accurate and free translation services would incur unnecessary translation costs for their businesses. Secondly, if Chinese is used, it is only for the Chinese to read, but the Chinese generally know Malay and English, and they are restricted by government regulations, so there is no need to include Chinese in the sign. This shows that the non-Chinese community has indeed changed their attitude towards Chinese subjectively because of the influence of China, but this change has not translated into the motivation to use Chinese. On the other hand, the ability of the local Chinese to master multilingualism has rather bizarrely, become a hindrance to the spread of the Chinese language to non-Chinese groups.

The LL in Malaysia as a whole has not fundamentally changed due to the influence of China’s economic development, with Mandarin in the third place behind Malay and English. With the current change in the subjective perception of non-Chinese attitudes towards the Chinese language, it is possible that Chinese will gain further status.

## Conclusion

The analysis of the combined 857 sign samples shows that the composition of the LL is roughly the same between urban and rural areas. However, there is a significant difference in the frequency of Chinese language use, with higher usage in urban areas than in rural areas, one reason being the relative concentration of the Chinese population in urban areas. Almost all the private stores and businesses in urban and rural areas run by Chinese use trilingual signs with Chinese as a symbol of their national language and identity. At the same time, it also shows the Chinese businesses' compliance with national regulations and their recognition of the commercial value of English. Comparing the use of Malay and English, the use of Chinese shows an overall third place in the data, indicating that the competitiveness of Chinese language in business use is still below both. The influence generated by China's strong economy has led to the subjective mindset of the non-Chinese community to place more and more value on the Chinese language, which has helped to raise the status of the language. However, it will still take some time before Mandarin can be raised to a position where it can compete with Malay and English.

## References

- Ang, L. H. 2010. The change in the family language of the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia. *Southeast Asian Studies*, 3, 73-78.
- Ariffin, K., and Husin, M. 2013. Pattern of language use in shop signs in Malaysian Town. *Researchers World*, 4(3), 12-20.
- Backhaus, P. 2007. *Linguistic landscape: A comparative study of urban multilingualism in Tokyo*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- China Entrepreneurs Association in Malaysia. (n.d.). Objectives. Retrieved April 10, 2021, from [http://www.pucm.my/index.php?ws=pages&pages\\_id=8190](http://www.pucm.my/index.php?ws=pages&pages_id=8190)
- Beh, Y. J. 2017. Language policy as reflected in the linguistic landscape in George Town, Penang. Masters thesis of University of Malaya.
- Carstens, S. A. 2007. The spiritual world of a Hakka village. *Taiwan Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 4(1), 29-64.
- Cenoz, J., and Gorter, D. 2008. The linguistic landscape as an additional source of input in second language acquisition. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 46(3), 267-287.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2009. Language economy and linguistic landscape. In Shohamy, E., and Gorter, D (eds.), *Linguistic landscape: Expanding the scenery*, New York: Routledge, 55-69.
- Chen, X. J. 2003. *Malaixiya de san ge Hanyu fangyan [The three Chinese dialects in Malaysia]*. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press.

- Choo, K. F. 2021. *Duo yu geju xia de Malaixiya Huayu diwei ji xiangguan wenti yanjiu* [The status of Chinese language in Malaysia in a multilingual context and related issues]. Ph.D dissertation of Capital Normal University.
- Coluzzi, P., and Kitade, R. 2015. The languages of places of worship in the Kuala Lumpur area: A study on the 'religion' linguistic landscape in Malaysia. *Linguistic Landscape*, 1(3), 243-267.
- Current Population Estimates, Malaysia, 2020. Retrieved from [https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemeByCat&cat=155&bul\\_id=OVByWjg5YkQ3MWFZRTN5bDJiaEVhZz09&menu\\_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVSZklWdzQ4TlhUUT09](https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemeByCat&cat=155&bul_id=OVByWjg5YkQ3MWFZRTN5bDJiaEVhZz09&menu_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVSZklWdzQ4TlhUUT09)
- Current Population Estimates, Malaysia, 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/pdfPrev&id=dTZXanV6UUdyUEQ0SHNWOVhpSXNMUT09#:~:text=The%20total%20population%20of%20Malaysia,growth%20rate%20of%200.2%20percent>
- Gorter, D. (ed.). 2006. *Linguistic landscape: A new approach to multilingualism*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2013. Linguistic landscape in a multilingual world. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 33, 190-212.
- Guo, X. 2005. Official language promotion vs. Chinese prospect: A case study of Malaysia. *Journal of Jinan University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, 27(3) , 87-94.
- Husin, M. S., Ariffin, K., Mello, G., Omar, N. H., and Anuardin, A. A. S. 2019. Mapping the linguistic landscape of Kuala Lumpur. *International Journal of Modern Languages and Applied Linguistics*, 3(4), 1-9.
- Ivkovic, D., and Lotherington, H. 2009. Multilingualism in cyberspace: Conceptualizing the virtual linguistic landscape. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 6(1), 17-36.
- Jaworski, A., and Thurlow, C. 2010. *Semiotic landscapes: Language, image, space*. London: Continuum.
- Landry, R., and R. Y. Bourhis. 1997. Linguistics landscape and ethnolinguistic vitality: an empirical study. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 16(1), 23-49.
- Leung, G. Y., and Wu, M. H. 2012. Linguistic landscape and heritage language literacy education: A case study of linguistic rescaling in Philadelphia Chinatown. *Written Language and Literacy*, 15(11), 114-140.
- Ma, Y. 2020. *Dialect group identity and relations in multilingual Malaysia: A case study on the Seri Kembangan Hakka New Village*. Ph.D dissertation of University of Malaya.
- Ma, Y., and Fan, P. S. 2020. Investigation on the status quo of Seri Kembangan Hakka New Village in Malaysia. *Malaysian Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 9(1), 1-26.

- Malaysian subsidiaries of the Local Council by-laws Subang Jaya, 2007. Retrieved from [https://ocps.mpsj.gov.my/cms/documentstorage/com.tms.cms.document.Document\\_168a3c31-a020f414-12146260-ea202e30/Undang-Undang%20Kecil%20IKLAN.pdf](https://ocps.mpsj.gov.my/cms/documentstorage/com.tms.cms.document.Document_168a3c31-a020f414-12146260-ea202e30/Undang-Undang%20Kecil%20IKLAN.pdf)
- Manan, S., David, M., Dumanig, F. P., and Naqeebullah, K. 2015. Politics, economics and identity: Mapping the linguistic landscape of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 12(1), 31-50.
- Manan, S., and David, M. 2016. Language ideology and the linguistic landscape: A study in Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia. *Linguistics and the Human Sciences*, 11(1), 51-66.
- Marta, G-D. 2011. Making tourists feel at home: Linguistic landscape of Hodmezovarhel. *Agricultural Management*, 13(4), 31-38.
- McKiernan, T. 2021. The linguistic landscape of a Malaysian border town: How English language is allowed to thrive outside of the law. *English Today*, 37(4), 224-235.
- Mohsin, M., and Hameed, S. 2018. Economy in linguistic landscape: A study of public signboards. *Language in India*, 18(11), 157-166.
- Population distribution by local authority and mukims 2010. Retrieved from <https://www.mycensus.gov.my/index.php/census-product/publication/census-2010/681-population-distribution-by-local-authority-and-mukims-2010>
- Rebio, D. C. 2016. Ambient text and the becoming space of writing. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 34(4), 637-654.
- Salleh, S., and Abdullah, N. 2017. Observation on signboard photographs in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah as indicator of change towards global business. *Journal of Global Business and Social Entrepreneurship*, 1(4), 35-44.
- Sayer, P. 2010. Using the linguistic landscape as a pedagogical resource. *English Language Teachers Journal*, 64(2), 143-154.
- Scollon, R., and W. Scollon. 2003. *Discourses in place: Language in the material world*. London: Routledge.
- Selim, B. S., and Teresa, W. S. O. 2019. Tracing linguistic changes on shop signs in Malaysia: A diachronic examination of George Town, Penang. *Socjolingwistyka*, 33(1), 209-230.
- Shang, G. 2016. An economics approach to linguistic landscape: Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand as a case. *Chinese Journal of Language Policy and Planning*, 1(4), 83-91.
- Shohamy, E., and Gorter, D. (ed.). 2009. *Linguistic landscape: Expanding the scenery*. New York: Routledge.
- Soon, C. T., Ramli, S. A., and Sapan, N.S. 2017. Linguistic landscape of a multilingual community in Malaysia. 8<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Language, Education, Humanities and Innovation, 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> November, 2017.



- Spolsky, B. 2009. *Language management*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Troyer, R. A. 2012. English in the Thai linguistic netscape. *World Englishes*, 31(1), 93-112.
- Wang, X., and Xu, D. 2018. The mismatches between minority language practices and national language policy in Malaysia: A linguistic landscape approach. *Kajian Malaysia*, 36(1), 105-125.
- Xu, M. 2017. An overview of linguistic studies: history, trend and implications. *Chinese Journal of Language Policy and Planning*, 2(2), 57-64.
- Zaini, M. H., Razali, A., Sahidol, J. N. M., and Ariffin, K. 2021. Preferred language in business: An analysis of shop signs in Kuantan City, Malaysia. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 11(10), 939-948.