

Symbolic Functions in the Linguistic Landscape of Public Signs in Zhuji Ancient Alley

Muying Yu^{1*}, Veronica Petrus Atin², Priscilla Shak³

¹Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Jalan UMS, 88400 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia;

Guangzhou College of Technology and Business, No. 28, Nan Huan Road, Shiling, Huadu District, Guangzhou, Guangdong, 510800, China

Email: yu_muying_du22@iluv.ums.edu.my

²Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Jalan UMS, 88400 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia

Email: vpetrus@ums.edu.my

³Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Jalan UMS, 88400 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia

Email: pshak@ums.edu.my

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR (*):

Muying Yu

yu_muying_du22@iluv.ums.edu.my

KEYWORDS:

Historic Cultural District

Linguistic Landscap

Symbolic Function

Verbal Symbol

Visual Symbol

CITATION:

Yu, M., Veronica, P. A., & Priscilla, S. (2026).

Symbolic Functions in the Linguistic

Landscape of Public Signs in Zhuji Ancient

Alley. *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences*

and Humanities (MJSSH), 11(5), e003821.

<https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v11i5.3821>

ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of China's strong promotion of cultural and tourism integration, the study of linguistic landscapes in historic cultural districts has attracted increasing attention. However, empirical research on the symbolic functions of such linguistic landscapes remains relatively limited. This study focuses on Zhuji Ancient Alley and applies the three-dimensional framework of symbolic functions in tourism linguistic landscapes to examine how verbal and visual symbols on public signs construct historical and cultural identity and shape visitor experience. Fieldwork was conducted to collect data on public signs, which were analyzed using quantitative methods for verbal symbols and material carriers, and multimodal analysis for visual symbols. The results indicate that multilingual combinations, particularly the inclusion of Malay, which is rarely seen in Chinese tourist sites, convey a strong sense of hospitality to overseas Chinese visitors. In addition, the combination of traditional Chinese characters, wooden and stone materials, wok-ear wall shapes, lei patterns, and gold inscriptions generates a pronounced sense of exoticism and historical-cultural atmosphere. Despite these positive features, some deficiencies in the linguistic landscape were also observed, such as inconsistent language combinations and visual symbols, suggesting that professional guidance may enhance the symbolic functions of public signs. This study provides empirical insights for the design and planning of public signs in historic cultural districts and contributes to the applied study of symbolic functions in linguistic landscapes.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the limited literature on the symbolic functions of linguistic landscapes in Chinese historic cultural districts. Focusing on Zhuji Ancient Alley, it applies Shang's three-dimensional framework to document how verbal and visual symbols construct exoticism, historical-cultural identity, and hospitality, offering empirical insights for public sign design.

1. Introduction

In 2018, the Chinese government established the Ministry of Culture and Tourism by integrating the responsibilities of the former Ministry of Culture and the National Tourism Administration in order to coordinate the development of culture and tourism (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2018). This orientation was further reinforced in 2022, when the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China issued a notice on the establishment of national demonstration zones for the integrated development of cultural and tourism industries (Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China, 2022). According to official statistics published by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China (2026), domestic tourism of 2025 in China reached 6.522 billion trips, representing a 14.3% increase compared with the previous year, and domestic tourism expenditure totaled CNY 6.30 trillion, an increase of 21.4% year on year. Against this backdrop, historic districts, which inherently combine cultural preservation with tourism development, offer opportunities for place-based engagement, enabling visitors to interact with others' "lived space" and "everyday life" within specific contexts while also encountering sites of heritage value (Doganer & Dupont, 2013), thereby enhancing their competitiveness in the tourism market. Beyond architectural forms and humanistic elements, such place-based engagement also encompass the linguistic landscape manifested in signage within tourism spaces. As Shan et al. (2019) argue, the linguistic landscape constitutes a concentrated display of local linguistic-symbolic resources and serves as an effective medium for the inheritance and continuation of regional traditional culture.

Landry and Bourhis (1997) identified two principal functions of the LL: an informational function and a symbolic function. Signage in historical and cultural districts serves, on the one hand, an informational function by providing visitors from both domestic and international contexts with guidance, orientation, and interpretive information about tourist attractions. On the other hand, as Shang (2023) notes, the tourism linguistic landscape embodies three major symbolic functions: the construction of a sense of exoticism, a sense of historical culture, and a sense of hospitality.

Although many scholars have explored the construction of linguistic landscapes in historical and cultural districts from various perspectives, empirical studies on the symbolic functions of linguistic landscapes in such contexts remain relatively limited. This study focuses on official signs—specifically, public signs—in Zhuji Ancient Alley, a historical and cultural district in Shaoguan, Guangdong Province, China. By analyzing the verbal and visual features of the public signs, the study aims to explore their symbolic functions within the historical and cultural context. Moreover, it identifies existing issues in the construction of public signs and proposes corresponding improvement measures, with the goal of providing practical guidance for the planning and implementation of public signs in Chinese historical and cultural districts from an applied linguistics perspective.

2. Literature Review

Previous research on the linguistic landscape of historical and cultural districts in China can be summarized into three main areas. First, studies on the interaction between the linguistic landscape and its participants. Specifically, some studies have employed questionnaires or interviews to examine visitors' perceptions and attitudes toward the linguistic landscape in historical districts, as well as the intentions of governmental agencies or sign makers in creating the linguistic landscape, in order to explore the factors that shape its patterns (Sheng & Buchanan, 2019; Sheng & Buchanan, 2022; Liu, 2024).

Second, studies on the normative construction of signage in the linguistic landscape. For instance, Liu & Wu (2023) investigated the traditional blocks in Wudianshi, Fujian, and identified issues such as inconsistent use of traditional and simplified characters, translation errors in multilingual signs, damaged or outdated signage, and insufficient signage quantity, while also proposing corresponding improvement measures. Similarly, Zhang (2025) examined the Daobashi historical district in Anqing, noting problems including a low proportion of multilingual signs, blurred or missing fonts, and inconsistent textual content on signs.

Third, studies on the functional aspects of linguistic landscapes in historical districts. Zhang (2024), drawing on sociolinguistic theory, argues that under the context of globalization, Wuzhen has reshaped its public spaces through various symbolic practices, constructing multiple identities that integrate traditional, modern, and international characteristics. Lu et al. (2021), based on the theory of language service, examined the linguistic landscape in Dali Ancient City and highlighted its informational, interactive, and cultural display functions. Although these studies analyze the functions of linguistic landscapes from a theoretical perspective, including both informational and symbolic functions, they tend to focus on macro-level descriptions and do not provide an in-depth analysis of the symbolic functions of signage within the specific context of historical and cultural districts.

In summary, research on the symbolic functions of the linguistic landscape in Chinese historical and cultural districts remains limited. Building on this, the present study draws on Shang's (2023) three-dimensional framework of symbolic functions in tourism linguistic landscapes to explore the current state of linguistic landscapes in Zhuji Ancient Alley in terms of constructing a sense of exoticism, historical-cultural identity, and hospitality.

3. Research Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design. Data were collected through fieldwork in the Zhuji Ancient Alley Historical and Cultural District. Although the data collection process was primarily qualitative in nature, the data analysis involved both quantitative and qualitative methods. The verbal symbols on the signs were analysed quantitatively, while the visual symbols were examined qualitatively through multimodal analysis. A mixed-methods design was therefore considered appropriate, as it allows for a more comprehensive investigation of the multimodal features of public signs.

3.2. Research Site

The research site of this study is the Zhuji Ancient Alley Historical and Cultural District, located in Shaoguan, Guangdong Province, China. The district is designated as a national-level 4A tourist attraction and is widely recognized as an important historical and cultural site in southern China. Historically, Zhuji Ancient Alley served as a major postal station along the Ancient Post Road of Southern Guangdong and played a significant role in population migration, information transmission, and cultural exchange. It is also regarded as the ancestral homeland of tens of millions of Cantonese people and overseas Chinese, giving it strong historical and identity significance.

This site was selected for three main reasons. First, as a historic cultural district with rich heritage resources, Zhuji Ancient Alley provides a representative context for examining the symbolic functions of linguistic landscapes. Second, with the recent development of cultural tourism, a dense and diverse system of public signs has emerged in the district, including informational, directional, regulatory, and commemorative signs. Third, the concentration of historical heritage and public signage in the area makes it particularly suitable for analysing how public signs construct historical-cultural identity, exoticism, and hospitality.

The historical and cultural district covers a total area of approximately 58.75 hectares, of which 16 hectares form the core conservation area. Given the high concentration of heritage elements and public signs in this area, the present study confines its analysis to the core conservation area.

3.3. Data Collection

3.3.1. Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through fieldwork in the Zhuji Ancient Alley Historical and Cultural District. On 2 January 2026, the researcher conducted an on-site visit to the core conservation area of the Zhuji Ancient Alley Historical and Cultural District as a visitor and systematically photographed public signs within the area. During the fieldwork, efforts were made to ensure that each sign was fully documented, including its textual content, visual design, and material form. All collected images were subsequently organised and assigned identification numbers to facilitate data management and subsequent analysis.

3.3.2. Sampling Method and Sample Size

This study did not employ a sampling technique; instead, a census approach was adopted. Within the clearly defined research area—the core conservation area of the Zhuji Ancient Alley Historical and Cultural District—all identifiable public signs were systematically photographed and documented in order to present the linguistic landscape of the area as comprehensively as possible. In total, 46 public signs were collected. All signs were located within the core conservation area and were included in the subsequent analysis of verbal and visual symbols.

3.4. Data Analysis

This study employs a quantitative analytical approach to examine the verbal symbols of public signs, including language combinations, Chinese character forms, and material carriers. Descriptive statistics were used to identify the distribution patterns of these features. In contrast, the visual symbols were analysed using qualitative multimodal analysis to interpret their symbolic meanings in the context of the historic cultural district. The combination of these methods enables a systematic examination of how linguistic and visual elements jointly contribute to the symbolic functions of the linguistic landscape.

4. Results

4.1. Distribution of Public Signs by Content Theme

A total of 46 public signs were collected within the Zhuji Ancient Alley. As shown in Table 1, the signs were categorized according to their content theme types. The 46 signs can be classified into interpretive, directional, service, warning, and guide categories. Among them, interpretive signs constitute the largest proportion, mainly serving the purposes of scenic spot introductions and cultural heritage interpretation. In contrast, guide signs represent the smallest category, with only one visitor guide sign located at the entrance of the scenic area.

Table 1: Distribution of Public Signs by Content Theme

Types of Public Signs	Frequency
Interpretive	26
Directional	15
Service	2
Warning	2
Guide	1

4.2. Language Combination Types of Public Signs

As shown in Table 2, the 46 public signs display four languages: Chinese, English, Japanese, and Malay. With the continuous advancement of China's internationalization, the inclusion of foreign-language translations in public signs at tourist sites has become a relatively common linguistic practice. This practice aims to meet the practical needs of visitors from diverse linguistic backgrounds and to enhance the accessibility of public services. Within the existing signage system, English and Japanese, as commonly used foreign languages in international communication and regional tourism, occur with relatively high frequency. In contrast, compared with English and Japanese, the presence of Malay on public signs remains relatively limited.

In terms of language combination types, the public signs in the scenic area exhibits considerable diversity. Chinese-only signs account for the largest proportion, representing 43.5% of the total sample. This indicates that Chinese continues to occupy a dominant position in public spaces within the scenic area, primarily serving an informational function for local visitors. Among multilingual signs, those featuring a quadrilingual combination of Chinese, English, Japanese, and Malay constitute 34.8% of the sample. This reflects the scenic area's efforts to address the needs of international

visitors through multilingual presentation and demonstrates an emerging orientation toward the internationalization of public information dissemination. By comparison, Chinese-English bilingual signs account for the smallest proportion, at only 21.7%.

From the perspective of the relationship between the functional types of public signs and their language combinations, interpretive signs are predominantly presented in Chinese only. Directional signs mainly adopt a quadrilingual combination of Chinese, English, Japanese, and Malay. Service signs display a relatively balanced language choice, appearing in both Chinese-English bilingual and quadrilingual forms. In contrast, all warning signs are monolingual Chinese. Guide signs, meanwhile, are presented in a Chinese-English bilingual format.

Table 2: Language Combination Types of Public Signs

Types of Public Signs	Chinese	Chinese-English	Chinese-English-Japanese-Malay	Total
Interpretive	14	6	6	26
Directional	4	2	9	15
Service	0	1	1	2
Warning	2	0	0	2
Guide	0	1	0	1
Total	20	10	16	46

4.3. Chinese Character Forms on Public Signs

Regarding the Chinese Character Forms, there is a noticeable difference in quantity. As shown in Table 3, 87% of the signs are written in simplified characters, while only 13% use traditional characters. Simplified characters are mainly found in signs with strong informational functions, emphasizing clarity and readability. In contrast, traditional characters are more often used in texts with cultural and symbolic significance, including family instructions, introductions to ancient banyan trees, inscriptions on steles, and dedications.

Table 3: Distribution of Public Signs by Chinese Character Forms

Chinese Character Forms	Frequency
Simplified	40
Traditional	6

4.4 Material Carriers of Public Signs

As shown in Table 4, in terms of the material carriers of the signs, public signs in the scenic area mainly employs two types of materials: wooden plaques and stone inscriptions. Among them, wooden signs account for the largest proportion, representing 68% of the total, while stone signs constitute 32%.

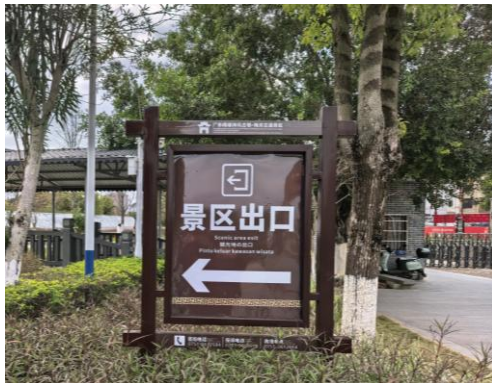
Table 4: Distribution of Public Signs by Material Carriers

Types of material carrier	Frequency
Wooden Plaque	31
Stone Carving	15

Specifically, wooden plaques are often used for directional signs, as shown in Figure 1, as well as interpretive signs introducing scenic spots, as illustrated in Figure 2. In contrast, stone carvings are frequently employed for interpretive signs presenting cultural relics, as seen in Figures 3.

Figure2 : Wooden Plaques Signs Used for Interpretive Signs

Figure 1: Wooden Plaques Used for Directional Signs



Source: Photograph taken by the author



Source: Photograph taken by the author

Figure 3: Stone Carvings for Interpretive Signs of Cultural Relics



Source: Photograph taken by the author

4.5. Visual Symbols of Public Signs

In addition to verbal symbols, the public signs in this scenic area also displays distinctive features in terms of visual symbols. One prominent aspect is the shape design of the material carriers. As shown in Figure 4, some wooden signboards are designed in the form of wok-ear walls (huo'erqiang). The wok-ear wall is a highly representative architectural form in traditional Lingnan dwellings. Characterized by walls resembling the shape of "wok ears," this architectural style is widely found in Guangdong Province, particularly in ancestral halls and large residential buildings in the Guangfu region.

In addition, regarding the color scheme of the texts, as shown in Figures 1, 2, 4, and 5, all inscriptions on wooden plaques in the scenic areas use white characters, whereas in Figures 3, most of the inscriptions on stone carvings in the scenic areas are in gold. In traditional Chinese culture, the color gold is commonly used in important buildings and cultural relics, such as palaces, temples, ancestral halls, and steles, symbolizing solemnity, sanctity, and reverence.

Moreover, as shown in Figure 5, most of the wooden plaques in the scenic areas feature a lei pattern adorning the bottom edge. The lei pattern originated in Chinese bronze culture and is composed of continuous zigzag or spiral lines, representing an ancient decorative motif.

Figure 4: Wooden Signboards in the Form of Wok-ear Walls



Source: Photograph taken by the author

Figure 5 : Lei pattern on the bottom of the Signboard



Source: Photograph taken by the author

5. Discussion

5.1. Multimodal Linguistic Landscape: Constructing a Sense of Exoticism and Historical Culture through Verbal and Visual Symbols

According to the theory of Intersemiotic Complementarity, verbal and visual semiotic modes do not exist in isolation; rather, they interact and complement each other through their respective linguistic and visual resources, achieving coherence at the text's visual-linguistic level and enriching both the dimensionality and depth of meaning (Royce, 2013). In Zhuji Ancient Alley, the combination of textual and visual symbols in a dual-modal linguistic landscape goes beyond mere informational functions, carrying symbolic significance in constructing a sense of exoticism and historical cultural identity.

For interpretive signage on cultural relics, natural, unprocessed stone is used as the material, with traditional Chinese characters engraved in gold, which significantly enhances the historical texture and cultural weight of the signage. This design reinforces Zhuji Ancient Alley's cultural narrative as the "Hometown of the Cantonese" and a "Chinese Post Station", aligning closely with the site's historical connotations. In

addition, some wooden plaques are crafted in the style of Guangdong wok-ear walls and adorned with lei-pattern decorations, which not only evoke a sense of historical culture but also highlight local characteristics, providing visitors from other regions with a visually mediated experience of Cantonese cultural distinctiveness.

5.2. Multilingual Signs Conveying a Sense of Hospitality

The use of multilingual combinations on public signs not only facilitates spatial orientation and information transmission but also carries symbolic significance, reflecting openness and a hospitable attitude (Shang, 2023). Among the 46 public signs collected in Zhuji Ancient Alley, approximately 57% included English translations or combinations of Chinese, English, Japanese, and Malay, with directional signs being particularly prominent—around 73% of directional signs were accompanied by foreign-language translations. Such a multilingual linguistic landscape helps reduce the time and cognitive costs associated with reliance on machine translation, enhancing information accessibility while also creating a sense of being respected and welcomed for visitors.

Notably, the choice of languages also specifically considers the needs of Malaysian Chinese tourists, with Malay translations provided—a feature relatively uncommon in other scenic areas in China. Historically, many ancestors of Malaysian Chinese migrated from Zhuji Ancient Alley to Southeast Asia, making this site an important cultural space for Malaysian Chinese to trace their roots and honor their ancestors. Every year, groups of Malaysian visitors come here to explore their family origins, reconstruct collective memory, and preserve Chinese cultural heritage. Therefore, the presence of Malay in the scenic area's linguistic landscape not only serves a practical function but also reflects the site's cultural recognition of and emotional engagement with a specific visitor community.

6. Conclusion

This study applied Shang's (2023) three-dimensional framework of symbolic functions in tourism linguistic landscapes. It quantitatively analyzed the verbal symbols and examined the visual symbols using multimodal analysis on public signs in Zhuji Ancient Alley. The findings show that the ancient alley effectively employs a multilingual linguistic landscape, using historically evocative materials, carefully chosen text colors and scripts, decorative patterns, and locally distinctive forms. Together, these multimodal elements successfully convey the symbolic functions of the linguistic landscape, including exoticism, historical and cultural depth, and a sense of hospitality.

Nevertheless, the linguistic landscape exhibits certain limitations. As shown in Table 2, the combination of languages across signs is not fully consistent. In addition, certain visual elements, such as the lei pattern, are not applied uniformly to all wooden plaques. This inconsistency may give foreign visitors an impression of arbitrariness and partially hinder the full realization of the linguistic landscape's symbolic functions. To address this, it is recommended that the design of textual symbols on public signs be entrusted to professional organizations or experienced designers to enhance the coherence and effectiveness of symbolic expression.

Finally, as this study focused exclusively on Zhuji Ancient Alley, its generalizability is limited. Future research should expand to multiple historical and cultural districts to

provide a more comprehensive understanding of how linguistic landscapes convey symbolic functions in Chinese heritage contexts.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

As this study was based solely on photographs of signs collected by the researcher in the field and did not involve human participants, formal ethics approval and informed consent were not required.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and editors for their valuable comments and suggestions.

Funding

This study received no funding.

Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

References

- Doganer, S., & Dupont, W. (2013). Cultural heritage tourism and authenticity: San Antonio Missions Historic District. *WIT Transactions on The Built Environment*, 131, 15–27. <https://doi.org/10.2495/STR130021>
- Landry, R., & Bourhis, R. Y. (1997). Linguistic landscape and ethnolinguistic vitality: An empirical study. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 16(1), 23-49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X970161002>
- Liu, F. (2024). Multimodal linguistic landscape and interaction in the historical and cultural district of Enning Road, Guangzhou [广州恩宁路历史文化街区多模态语言景观与互动]. *Journal of Guangzhou City Vocational College*, 18(3), 66–70. (In Chinese)
- Liu, T., & Wu, Y. (2023). The linguistic landscape of traditional blocks in Wudianshi China. *European Online Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*, 12(1), 220–229.
- Lu, X., Sudipa, I. N., Artawa, K., & Suastra, I. M. (2021). On Linguistic Landscape in Language Service at Da Li Ancient City, China. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 12(6), 1000-1009. <https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1206.16>
- Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China. (2022, December 23). Notice on establishing national demonstration zones for the integrated development of cultural and tourism industries [关于开展国家文化产业和旅游产业融合发展示范区建设工作的通知]. https://zwgk.mct.gov.cn/zfxxgkml/zcfg/zcid/202212/t20221223_938244.html(In Chinese)

- Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China. (2026, January 26). 2025 domestic residents' tourism statistics. https://zwgk.mct.gov.cn/zfxxgkml/tjxx/202601/t20260126_964367.html(In Chinese)
- Royce, T. D. (2013). Intersemiotic complementarity: A framework for multimodal discourse analysis. In T. D. Royce & W. Bowcher (Eds.), *New directions in the analysis of multimodal discourse* (pp. 63–109). Routledge.
- Shan, F., Adamson, B., & Liu, C. (2019). Linguistic landscape and social equality in an ethnic tourism village in Guizhou, China. In S. G. McCafferty, A. K. Mathew, & P. Mohanty (Eds.), *Education, ethnicity and equity in the multilingual Asian context* (pp. 51–67). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-3125-1_4
- Shang, G. W. (2023). *The theory and practice of linguistic landscape research* [语言景观研究的理论与实践]. Beijing: Commercial Press. (In Chinese)
- Sheng, R., & Buchanan, J. (2019). The linguistic landscape of China: A field-based study of an ancient town's historical precinct. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 19(1), 79–89. <https://doi.org/10.3968/11172>
- Sheng, R., & Buchanan, J. (2022). Traditional visual language: A geographical semiotic analysis of indigenous linguistic landscape of ancient waterfront towns in China. *SAGE Open*, 12(1), Article 21582440211068503. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211068503>
- State Council of the People's Republic of China. (2018, March 14). Explanation of the institutional reform plan of the State Council [关于国务院机构改革方案的说明]. https://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2018-03/14/content_5273856.htm (In Chinese)
- Zhang, T. (2024). Linguistic landscape as a way to construct multiple identities in the context of globalization: the case of an ancient town in China. *Social Semiotics*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2024.2405511>
- Zhang, Y. (2025). Historical cultural district language landscape survey research: A case study of the Dao Ba Shi historic cultural district [历史文化街区语言景观调查研究——以倒扒狮历史文化街区为例]. *Journal of West Anhui University*, 41(4), 122–127. (In Chinese)