

A Diachronic Analysis of the Linguistic Landscape of Chinese Time-Honored Brands: The Case of Guangzhou

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Abstract: Time-honored brands represent living cultural heritage and serve as a concentrated embodiment of commercial civilization's historical development. This study investigates the diachronic evolution and influencing factors of the linguistic landscape of time-honored brands in Guangzhou. A total of 261 historical and contemporary signage samples from 39 Chinese time-honored brands were collected through archival research and field surveys. The analysis reveals that the signage of these brands has undergone a gradual transformation from monolingual Chinese displays to multilingual forms. In terms of layout, the signs consistently exhibit a "coexistence of horizontal and vertical orientations," while the direction of text flow has shifted over time from the traditional "right-to-left" format to the modern "left-to-right" arrangement. The textual content of these signs is deeply embedded with cultural heritage and regional characteristics. A noticeable overlap of old and new signs, as well as messages from different periods, reflects both the impact of language policies on the linguistic landscape across different historical stages and the adaptive innovation of time-honored brands in response to policy shifts and social change. This study offers fresh insights into the dynamics of linguistic landscapes and provides valuable empirical references for the preservation and sustainable development of time-honored brands.

Keywords: Linguistic Landscape; Old Brand; Language Policy; Signs; Couplets.

1. Introduction

Old brands are the symbol of commercial brands and the carrier of urban history and culture (Zhao Jinjie, 2009). China's Ministry of Commerce defines China's old brands as brands with a long history, products, skills or services inherited from generation to generation, with a distinctive traditional cultural background of the Chinese nation and deep cultural heritage, which have achieved wide recognition in the society and formed a good reputation, and the brand has been established for more than 50 years (Ministry of Commerce. Circular of the Ministry of Commerce and Other 14 Departments on the Issuance of Several Opinions on Protecting and Promoting the Development of old brands. 2008-04-10. <http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/aarticle/h/redht/200804/20080405471081.html>). In recent years, various departments have issued a series of policies to strengthen the protection and development of old brands, and to promote the protection and innovation of the cultural heritage of old brands. 2006 saw the release of the Notice of the Ministry of Commerce on the Implementation of the "Revitalization of Time-honored Brand Project", and the revitalization project of old brands was put on the agenda. 2022 saw the release of the Opinions of the Ministry of Commerce and other 8 departments on promoting the innovation and development of time-honored brands, which re-emphasized the need to strengthen the discovery of historical and cultural resources of old brands and promote the use of historical and cultural resources of old brands. As an important linguistic and cultural resource, the language landscape of the old brands is in various forms, mainly including signs, fronts, billboards, etc., which contains information about the development history, brand story, product production process, etc. of the old brands, reflecting the spiritual identity of the enterprise and the connotation of Chinese civilization. Domestic academics have paid attention to old signs for a long time, mostly clustered in the fields of folklore, culture,

communication, calligraphy and art, and the research topics cover the brand marketing strategy of old brands, logo design and innovation, the value of plaques in calligraphy, and business communication mode. Gong Chao and Wang Ziyi (2018) deeply explored the academic, documentary, and archival values of plaque calligraphy of Beijing's old brands by conducting statistical and comparative analyses of the plaque calligraphy of Beijing's old brands list. With the arrival of the digital era, some scholars pay keen attention to the challenges and problems faced by old brands in the new era, and put forward practical and feasible brand communication and marketing innovation strategies for old brands, such as establishing a brand integration and promotion platform, expanding the brand culture media, precise advertisement, and upgrading and perfecting the construction of corporate websites (Jiang Yonghua, 2017; Yuan Xiaorui, 2018). Examining the linguistic landscape of old brands from a sociolinguistic perspective has unique research value. Since the concept of linguistic landscape was put forward, scholars at home and abroad have continuously enriched the theoretical construction of linguistic landscape from an interdisciplinary perspective, and the empirical research has become abundant, which has promoted the gradual flourishing of linguistic landscape as a field of sociolinguistics (Shang Guowen and Zhao Shouhui, 2014). However, so far, most of the existing studies are co-temporal empirical studies, and the number of ephemeral studies is limited (Zhao Yue and Pu Yidan, 2023), and the ephemeral studies that combine linguistic landscapes with urban business culture are especially rare, and the relevant perspectives need to be supplemented.

In view of this, this paper selects the Chinese old brands in Guangzhou as the research object, analyzes the changes of the language landscape of the old brands and its internal causes, clarifies the construction law of the language landscape of the old brands and its historical and cultural value, and provides references for the protection and development of the old

brands.

2. Research Methodology

This study selects 39 time-honored brands with physical stores from the list of Guangzhou Chinese time-honored brands (The Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China recognized and publicized the first batch of China’s old brands in 2006, and the list of China’s old brands has been continuously updated since then.) issued by the Ministry of Commerce from 2006 to 2024 as samples, and classifies them according to the latest *National Economic Industry Classification* promulgated in 2017. On this basis, we collect and organize the historical pictures of the above old-famous signs through various channels such as Guangzhou Digital Library, digital museum of old-famous brands, official website of the enterprises, news media, etc. Combined with the current pictures taken by the field research, a total of 261 valid sign samples were obtained.

In counting the corpus, this paper adopts Backhaus’s (2007) individual method, counting each sign with a separate border as a statistical unit, while coding the corpus with reference to the variables of signage register type, multilingual text type, salient register, and primary register proposed in Scollon & Scollon’s (2003) framework for place semiotics analysis. Among them, salient registers are the registers in signage that have a visual highlighting effect, determined by variables such as font size, text vector, and color. The primary codeword is determined based on the amount of information provided by the codeword: the one with the most information is the primary codeword; if the amount of information is equal, the primary codeword of the signage is the same as the salient codeword. In addition, in order to further clarify the status relationship of the codas, this paper classifies bilingual signage into duplicating, overlapping, complementary and fragmentary according to the type of multilingual information proposed by Reh (2004). Among them, duplicating multilingualism means that the two codes provide equal amount of information; overlapping multilingualism means that the information provided by the two codes is both overlapping and different; complementary multilingualism means that the two languages provide completely different information; fragmentary multilingualism means that one language provides all the information and the other language provides part of the information.

As a bridge between language policy planning and micro-language practices, the linguistic landscape is an important lens for gaining insight into social change (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). In view of the possible impact of language policy on linguistic landscape, this paper follows the historical staging

framework of language policy and planning development to categorize and organize the corpus. Based on the development of language policy in China, combined with the characteristics of language policy and planning development in the world summarized by Thomas Ricento (Ricento, 2000) and Weiyu’s (2020) study on the staging model of the interaction between social change and language policy in China, this paper divides the history of language policy and planning development in China into four phases: budding stage(1850-1949), normative stage (1949-1978), development stage (1978-2000), and innovation stage (2000-present). This paper is devoted to uncovering the temporal changes in the use of sign language codes and their influencing factors in different historical periods of Guangzhou’s old signs. The study follows the historical phasing of language policy and planning, and organizes and classifies the data according to the emergence time of the old signs, in order to understand the evolution of the linguistic landscape of the old signs more comprehensively.

In addition, in order to further explore the naming pattern of old names and their cultural connotations, this paper statistically analyzes the word characteristics of old names and the linguistic and sociological meanings behind them with the help of the corpus analysis software ROST CMC6 and AntConc4.2.4.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Industry Distribution

According to the latest Chinese Old Firm Directory updated by the Ministry of Commerce in 2023, there are 45 Chinese old brands in Guangzhou. Most of these old brands were founded in the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China, and have a deep historical background. Throughout the vicissitudes of life, some of them have burst into new vigor through unremitting innovation, while others have gradually declined due to poor management and other reasons. Existing Chinese old brands in Guangzhou cover a wide range of industries such as medicine, catering, accommodation, retail, clothing and jewelry, film and television culture, etc. The distribution of these old brands in different periods is shown in Table 1. Overall, the number of existing old Chinese brands and the number of old Chinese signs in each industry in Guangzhou has increased significantly during the innovation stage, while the change is not obvious in other periods. This indicates that as time goes by, commercial activities gradually prosper, old brands are accumulated and developed, and old outlets spring up, thus the number of old signs peaks in this period.

Table 1. Overall survey of old brands signs

sector	Historical period				(grand) total
	Budding stage	Normative stage	Development stage	Innovation stage	
Pharmaceutical industry	7	1	1	22	31
Catering industry	15	5	13	44	77
Lodging industry	3	5	7	22	37
Retail industry	9	8	9	29	55
Clothing and jewelry industry	4	2	5	20	31
film and television culture industry	5	3	4	18	30
(grand) total	43	24	39	155	261

As shown in Table 1, the number of signs in the catering industry has maintained a high level in all historical periods, especially in the innovation stage, when the number reached 44, which also reflects Guangzhou's status as a "gourmet capital". The number of labels in the pharmaceutical industry increased during the development and innovation phases, reflecting the fact that with the progress of society and the development of technology, the pharmaceutical industry has received more attention and investment, and long-established brands have been inherited and developed. The number of signs in the accommodation and retail industries has been more stable in all historical periods, indicating that the basic needs of these industries have always existed and that long-established brands have been able to sustain their operations. The significant growth in the number of labels in the clothing and jewelry industry and the film and culture industry during the innovation phase is related to the pursuit of personalization and cultural consumption in modern society. To summarize, from the perspective of industry distribution and historical period, the rise and fall of old brands are closely related to factors such as socio-economic development, technological progress, cultural inheritance and market demand. While maintaining their traditional characteristics,

Guangzhou's old brands are constantly innovating and developing to adapt to the changes in modern society. Creative transformation and innovative inheritance.

3.2. Code Distribution and Multilingual Information Types

The analysis of 261 valid samples shows that Chinese monolingual signage accounts for 78.2 %, Chinese-English bilingual signage accounts for 21.1 %, and Chinese-English-Japanese trilingual signage accounts for only 0.8 %. In the embryonic stage, the proportion of Chinese monolingual signs is 100 %. After the three stages, the proportion of Chinese monolingual signs gradually decreases, and the proportion of Chinese-English bilingual signs gradually increases, showing a trend from single Chinese to multilingual. Whether it is from a single historical stage or the overall historical trend, Chinese has always been a significant code. In Chinese-English bilingual signs, Chinese has always maintained the dominant position of the main code and the dominant code, which is consistent with China's consistent language policy.

Table 2. Distribution of signs code types in different historical periods

Type of signage	Historical period				(grand) total (%)
	Budding stage (%) (N=43)	Normative stage (%) (N=24)	Development stage (%) (N=39)	Innovation stage (%) (N=155)	
Hanyu monolingual	100.0	87.5	82.1	69.7	78.2
Chinese-English bilingual	0.0	12.5	15.4	29.7	21.1
trilingual (Chinese, English and Japanese)	0.0	0.0	2.6	0.6	0.8

The General Language and Writing System Law of China clearly stipulates that the public service industry should use standardized Chinese characters as the basic service characters, and that signboards and advertisements should use the State's common language and writing system (Putonghua and planning Chinese characters) as the basic terminology. (*The Law of the People's Republic of China on National Common Language and Writing Systems*, promulgated in 2000, was the first special legislation on language and writing systems in China's history, and for the first time the status and use of Putonghua and standardized Chinese characters as the national common language and writing systems was clearly stipulated in the form of a law.) The use of Chinese characters in the commercial signage of the old brands not only conforms to the language policy of the State, but also highlights the local characteristics and cultural connotations of the old brands and strengthens the readability of the text of the signboards, which can better communicate with consumers and establish an emotional connection. The use of Chinese characters in commercial signage for old brands is not only in line with the national language policy, but also highlights the local characteristics and cultural heritage of old brands, enhances the readability of signage text, and enables

better communication and emotional connection with consumers.

Language choice in old signage. As can be seen from Table 3, the frequency of multilingual text in old signs is low from the germination stage to the development stage, but it has been greatly enhanced in the innovation stage. Overall, the types of multilingual messages in old signs are getting richer and richer, evolving from a single copy type to the coexistence of four types, while the types of multilingual messages are more concentrated, with the vast majority of them being fragmented and copied, with 41.7% of them being copied, and 45% being fragmented, which is a comparable proportion of the two. This can guarantee the main position of Chinese as a strong code to provide complete information, and also ensure the information function of other co-occurring codes to a certain extent. Under the premise that the status of Chinese as the main linguistic code remains unchanged, the decrease in the ratio of reproduced multilingual text explains to a certain extent that, as we can see, Chinese always occupies an absolutely dominant position in the old signs, while the trend of multilingualization development is also clearly visible.

Table 3. Distribution of multilingual information types in different historical periods

Multilingual information types	Historical period				(grand) total
	Budding stage(N=4)	Normative stage(N=3)	Developmental stage(N=6)	Innovation phase(N=47)	
replica	50.0%	66.7%	50.0%	38.3%	41.7%
fragmentary	50.0%	33.3%	16.7%	48.9%	45.0%
complementary	0.0%	0.0%	16.7%	4.3%	5.0%
overlapping	0.0%	0.0%	16.7%	8.5%	8.3%

The change from Chinese monolingualism to multilingualism is the result of a combination of factors, reflecting the language practice under the trend of socio-economic development, cultural diversity and globalization. In recent years, with the initial establishment of Guangzhou as an international communication center with strong influence in the world, the outline of Guangzhou's "14th Five-Year Plan" explicitly proposes to strengthen the construction of an internationalized environment, "cultivating an internationalized humanistic literacy, constructing an internationalized linguistic environment, perfecting an internationalized signage system, and creating a living atmosphere with internationalized standards." The 14th Five-Year Plan clearly proposes to strengthen the construction of an internationalized environment. Under the policy environment of building an international metropolis, the old brands follow the trend and retain some of their historical and cultural symbols while pursuing the diversification and maximization of information in the design of signs, with a view to achieving the purposes of attracting international customers, enhancing brand image, promoting cultural exchanges, etc., and further enhancing the competitiveness and attractiveness of the old brands.

3.3. Sign Direction and Text Vectors

Scollon & Scollon (2003) proposed the concept of geosemiotics and a framework for analyzing linguistic landscapes based on the visual semiotic theories of Kress and Loewen and a set of linguistic landscape analysis that

includes variables such as coding orientation, graphemes, text vectors, and color schemes. Among them, text vector refers to the reading order of text, which can be categorized as "left-to-right" or "right-to-left". Based on this analysis framework, this paper tries to propose and define "sign direction" as an additional variable for analysis: "sign direction" refers to the display direction of the signage itself, which is determined by the signage font size, text vector, color and so on. When the significant words of a sign are written horizontally in horizontal rows, the direction of the sign is horizontal; when the significant words of a sign are written vertically in vertical rows, the direction of the sign is vertical.

With the historical changes, the sign direction and text vector of the old commercial signage have changed significantly. As shown in Table 4 and Table 5, the proportion of horizontal signage in the budding stage is 73.8%, the text vector from right to left accounts for 88.2%, the vertical signage accounts for 26.2%, and the text vector from left to right accounts for 11.8%; in the innovation stage, the proportion of horizontal signage is 81.9%, the text vector from right to left accounts for 9.3%, the vertical signage accounts for 19.2%, and the text vector from left to right accounts for 90.7%. The proportion of both fluctuated and changed in the intermediate stages, but the overall trend was consistent. Generally speaking, the direction of the signs always maintains the situation of "horizontal and vertical coexistence", and the text vector generally shows a change from "from right to left" to "from left to right", but some signs still retain the order of "from right to left".

Table 4. Distribution of sign direction in different historical periods

Sign direction	Historical period				(grand) total
	Budding stage(N=42)	Normative stage(N=22)	Development stage(N=39)	Innovation phase(N=155)	
horizontal	73.8%	86.4%	66.7%	81.9%	78.7%
vertical	26.2%	13.6%	33.3%	18.1%	21.3%

Table 5. Distribution of sign text vectors in different historical periods

Text vector	Historical period				(grand) total
	Budding stage(N=43)	Normative stage(N=24)	Development stage(N=39)	Innovation stage(N=155)	
From right to left.	88.2%	53.3%	3.2%	9.3%	22.8%
From left to right.	11.8%	65.2%	96.8%	90.7%	77.2%

Figures 1 and 2 show the linguistic landscape of old brands in the Republic of China period, from which it is not difficult to find the distinctive features of early old brands' signage. Figure 1 is a vertical store name sign of the old brand "Chen Li Ji"(陈李济), with the distinctive language code "陳李濟"

written vertically and the brand trademark "杏和堂" written from right to left, while other signs such as "Ma Bai Liang"(馬百良), "Wei Yuan Tang"(位元堂), "Herbal Tea"(凉茶包), "Bird's Nest"(燕窩) and so on appeared in the same period, and these are mostly vertical signs from right to

left. This indicates that the early old signs were mainly vertical signs with the text vector “right to left”, which is in line with the writing habits of Chinese characters since ancient times. At the same time, the appearance of the horizontal signage of “Wanglaoji”(王老吉), which was written from right to left, may have been influenced by the “left-to-right horizontal writing” promoted by the New Culture Movement; Fig.2 is the shop name sign and couplet advertising sign of the time-honored brand “Taotaoju.”(陶陶居) The shop name sign on the top of the building is written vertically, and the horizontal sign above the building gate is written from right to left. Couplets are vertical signs written from right to left, which read “Although the values may vary in amount, they always possess a uniquely outstanding fragrant charm. The fame of Tingzhou Shrimp Noodles spreads far and wide across the world, and the acclaim of Jianzhai Vegetarian Noodles pervades Hong Kong (值雖多寡或殊，時綴芬芳獨擅。名馳寰宇 汀州蝦麵，譽遍香江簡齋素麵)”. This was a common form of commercial advertisement for Tao Tao Ju in the late Qing Dynasty, reflecting its status at that time. his suggests that in the early stages, the language landscape of time-honored brands was largely characterized by signage that featured both horizontal and vertical orientations, with a predominant text vector running from right to left. Under the influence of the New Culture Movement, time-honored brand signage began to experiment with horizontal layouts. However, at that time, the shift toward "left-to-right horizontal writing" remained more of a cultural advocacy and emerging social trend rather than a formally established language policy. As a result, during this budding stage, both horizontal and vertical signs of time-honored brands largely preserved the traditional right-to-left writing convention of Chinese characters, presenting a clear contrast to the signage practices observed in contemporary time-honored brands.



Figure 1. Chen Li Ji signage in the Republic of China



Figure 2. Tao Tao Ju signage in the Republic of China

Figures 3 and 4 show scenes from the opening celebrations of newly established Chen Liji Chenpi Wellness Tea Houses across Guangzhou in 2020. It is easy to observe that both the brand logo and the store name signage of this time-honored brand adopt a horizontal layout. On the right side of Figure 4, a vertical promotional sign reading “China Chenpi Signature Brand” can also be seen, with all text written from left to right. Combined with the statistical findings, it can be concluded that the signage of time-honored brands has, over time, evolved into a pattern predominantly featuring horizontal signs, while horizontal and vertical formats now coexist. Except for historically inherited plaques and couplets, the text direction in modern signage is uniformly from left to right.



Figure 3. Chen Li Ji Tea House (Zhujiang New City)



Figure 4. Chen Li Ji Tea House (Baiyun)

The changing characteristics of the typographic direction of old signs are closely related to the phenomenon of lamination, and old signs usually add new signs on the basis of preserving the original old signs (usually plaques and couplets). Changes in the text vectors of old signs are deeply influenced by the national language policy. Since ancient times, Chinese characters have been written in straight rows arranged from right to left. After the Opium War in 1840, influenced by Western cultural and scientific ideas, the Chinese cultural sector put forward the initiative of writing Chinese characters horizontally in horizontal rows from left to right, which was also practiced in the publishing sector (Huang Hsing 2015). In 1955, the National Conference on Script Reform explicitly pointed out that it was “recommended that the Ministry of Culture of the People’s Republic of China and the relevant departments to further promote horizontal rows in newspapers, magazines, and books. It is recommended that state organs, troops, schools, and people’s organizations promote horizontal rows and horizontal writing for official documents.” On November 21 of the same year, the Ministry of Education, in the *Notice on the Promotion of Simplified Characters in Schools at All Levels*, requested that while promoting the use of simplified characters, they should gradually be horizontally arranged and horizontally written. By the end of the year, more than 80% of the national periodicals were horizontally typed. After 1956, horizontal typing of Chinese characters was fully implemented throughout the country. On February 27, 1981, the General Office of the State Council issued the *Interim Measures for Handling of Official Documents of the State Administration*, which stipulated in Chapter 3, Article 6, Paragraph 8, that: “All the characters in official documents of the State Administration are written horizontally and horizontally typed from left to right.” Since then, horizontal writing and horizontal rows have become the official legal

format for writing and printing (Daobu, 1998; Wei Dan, 2005). The data in Table 4 show that since the standardization stage, the number of old signs with text vectors from right to left has gradually decreased, and the development and innovation stages have even decreased significantly. This trend coincides with the implementation of the “horizontal writing and typography” language policy in China and the characteristics of the stage.

3.4. Cultural Heritage

Plaques and couplets are an important part of the linguistic landscape of old shops, reflecting the enterprises’ respect for traditional culture and pursuit of commercial heritage. As the main carriers of commercial advertisements in ancient China, plaques and couplets are usually hung on the lintel of stores or buildings, with the functions of marking, sending messages and decoration.

The plaque is a banner-type sign, usually hung on the lintel of the building, can also be hung on the front of the building or store entrance, the function is mainly to identify the store, publicize the brand, and at the same time convey the brand name, the founding time and other commercial information. Old plaques are not only commercial signs, but also a kind of artistic display. The name plaques of many old shops are either handwritten by princes and ministers or written by literati (Zhao Jinjie, 2009), which give unique cultural connotations and artistic values to the old shops and make the plaques more recognizable. Figure 5 is a replica of a Qing Dynasty Taotaoju plaque. Taotaoju was founded in 1880, and its gold lacquer plaque was handwritten by Kang Youwei, a famous scholar of the Qing Dynasty, in the style of “Shi men inscription (Shimen Inscription (Chinese: 石门铭) is an important stone inscription carved into a cliff face in the Shimen (Stone Gate) area of Shaanxi Province, China. The inscription was created in AD 148 during the Eastern Han Dynasty by 郗鉴 (Chi Jian), a local official, and is widely regarded as a significant historical and calligraphic artifact.”), with a strong and bold font, which means “Come here to sip tea, and be happy in Taotao”; Figure 6 shows a replica of the Qing Dynasty signboard of Lian Xiang Lou (Lotus Fragrance House). The original gold-lacquered plaque featured the three large characters “莲香楼” (Lian Xiang Lou), handwritten by Chen Ruyue, a Hanlin scholar. After the original signboard was destroyed, the shop reproduced a new plaque based on Chen’s original calligraphy. According to historical records, after tasting Lian Xiang Lou’s lotus seed paste pastries, Chen Ruyue suggested changing the store’s original name “莲香楼” (Lian Xiang Lou — “Continuous Fragrance House”) to “莲香楼” (Lotus Fragrance House) in order to highlight its signature recipe and artisanal craftsmanship. He personally inscribed the store name for the signboard.



Figure 5. Replica of Taotaoju sign



Figure 6. Replica of Lianxianglou sign

Couplets are not only an expressive form of traditional Chinese culture but also a visual element that integrates cultural heritage, brand promotion, and decorative functions. In the context of time-honored brands, couplets help to establish brand identity and convey core corporate values. Typically, the couplets used by these heritage businesses are structured in paired, parallel sentences, which are displayed symmetrically on both sides of the shop’s entrance. Their functions are multifaceted: they express cultural significance, embody emotional resonance, communicate the brand’s operational philosophy, and also serve a decorative role.

Figure 7 presents a century-old plaque and couplet preserved at the Chen Liji Traditional Chinese Medicine Museum. The plaque, a single-language Chinese sign, features gold characters on a red vertical board. The store name “陳李濟” (Chen Li Ji) is rendered in regular script (楷书), characterized by its upright and powerful strokes, symbolizing the company’s founding philosophy: “Chen and Li united in purpose, harmoniously benefiting the world.” Above the store name is the inscription “杏和堂” (Xing He Tang), which was historically used as the trademark of Chen Li Ji. During the Qing Dynasty, the shop successfully treated Emperor Tongzhi’s illness with its signature product, “Chasing Wind Suhe Pills” (追风苏合丸), for which the emperor conferred the honorary hall name “杏和堂.”

The couplet reads:

上联 (right scroll) : 火兼文武调元手 —

下联 (left scroll) : 药辨君臣济世心 —

both written vertically from top to bottom.

In the upper line, the words “文” (literally “civil”) and “武” (literally “military”) are metaphors for “gentle heat” and “intense heat,” highlighting the critical role of temperature control in the preparation of traditional medicines. In the lower line, “君” (sovereign) and “臣” (minister) refer to the hierarchical roles of medicinal ingredients, emphasizing the precision of herbal formula compatibility. This couplet not only encapsulates Chen Li Ji’s brand philosophy but also reflects its enduring ethical commitment to traditional Chinese medical craftsmanship.



Figure 7. Chen Li Ji Centennial Plaque and Couplets

The extensive use of plaques and couplets in the linguistic landscape of time-honored brands highlights a distinctive phenomenon of cultural nostalgia and retro aesthetics. As important symbolic elements, plaques and couplets embody the cultural and historical depth of “laozihao” (time-honored brands) and visually reinforce their brand identity. These traditional components not only align with the century-long heritage of the enterprises but also elevate their cultural value and enhance public recognition of their brand ethos.

In this process, contemporary time-honored stores often deliberately preserve retro and nostalgic elements, embedding historical streetscapes and local cultural symbols into their spatial design, including aspects such as interior layouts, lighting, and materials. Architecturally, the exterior façades of these stores tend to retain their original styles and structural characteristics, maintaining a strong sense of continuity with the past

In Guangzhou, time-honored brands are predominantly concentrated in the Yuexiu and Liwan districts, especially in traditional commercial areas such as Beijing Road, Changti Road, and Dishifu Road. Following the proposals of the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee (2020), which first introduced the concept of “urban renewal” into the national development agenda, *the 2022 Report on the Work of the Government* further identified “the orderly promotion of urban renewal” as a key annual task.

Under the guidance of this policy framework, many time-honored brands have actively embraced this opportunity to systematically renovate and upgrade their retail spaces, thereby stimulating innovative design transformations within their linguistic landscapes..

3.5. Characteristics of the Words Used in Store Names and Naming Patterns

In the contemporary commercial environment, the construction of shop names not only fulfills the function of brand identification but also reflects a combination of cultural, geographical, and socio-economic characteristics.

As shown in Table 6, the ten most frequently occurring characters in the names of time-honored brands are predominantly nouns or adjectives. Among them, the character with the highest frequency is “店” (shop), which appears 9 times, while the most frequent adjective is “大” (big), appearing 8 times. The high-frequency nouns include place-related terms such as “店” (shop), “馆” (hall), and “院” (court), which typically indicate the spatial attributes or scale of the business. Other common nouns, such as “酒” (liquor), “戏” (opera), and “表” (watch), directly reflect the product types and business scope of the time-honored brands. Notably, adjectives such as “大” (big) and “新” (new) carry a strong positive connotation, emphasizing the scale, modernization, and ongoing vitality of these enterprises. Their presence in store names suggests an intentional effort to convey an image of growth, renewal, and adaptability, which helps strengthen the attractiveness and competitiveness of time-honored brands in the modern marketplace.

In summary, the naming patterns of time-honored brands show that nouns denoting location and business scope occur most frequently, followed by adjectives that express positive meanings, highlighting both the stability and evolving dynamism of these long-established enterprises.

Table 6. Word Frequency Distribution of Old Brands Shop Names

arrange in order	writing style	frequency
1	店(shop)	9
2	大(big)	8
3	酒(liquor)	6
4	新(new)	6
5	馆(hall)	4
6	华(China)	4
7	家(House)	4
8	戏(opera)	3
9	院(court)	3
10	表(watch)	2

Based on the results of word frequency analysis, this study summarizes six major categories of high-frequency nouns commonly found in the names of time-honored brands, as shown in Table 7. These categories include general nouns, product-related nouns, directional nouns, locational nouns, cultural nouns, and place-related nouns. The interpretation of these nouns within brand names often requires consideration of their historical background, cultural context, and brand narrative. Among these categories, place-related nouns appear with the highest frequency, highlighting their strong universality and practical relevance in the naming conventions of time-honored businesses. Specifically, suffixes such as *馆 (hall) and *楼 (building) are frequently associated with the catering industry, while *堂 (hall) is commonly used in the field of traditional medicine. The suffix *店 (shop) demonstrates a broader application, covering various industries; for example, it can refer to “药店” (pharmacy) or “商店” (store). When combined with appropriate modifiers, this term can flexibly denote businesses across different sectors..

Table 7. High-frequency nouns in old store names

Type of noun	hidden meaning	typical example
common noun (grammar)	Veteran Business Philosophy	Friendship, Kemin, etc.
Product Nouns	Veteran Business Scope	Shoes, hats, clocks, etc.
noun of locality (linguistics)	Region in which the old brands are located	South, East, etc.
place noun (grammar)	Location of old brands	Guangzhou, Scholar’s Square, etc.
cultural noun (grammar)	Cultural Connotation of old brands	Tsurumi, Santo, etc.
noun for a place	Types of Veteran Industries	*pavilion, *church, *building, *store, *family, etc.

The study of the structural composition of time-honored brand names not only deepens the understanding of the underlying meanings behind naming practices but also offers valuable insights into language usage, cultural inheritance, brand development, and broader social change. As shown in Table 8, the composition patterns of old brand names are diverse. Among them, the most common structure is the

“Noun + Noun” combination. In addition, mixed structures such as “Noun + Adjective + Noun” and “Adjective + Noun + Noun” also appear frequently, which echoes the distribution trends observed in the word frequency analysis. Overall, the majority of time-honored brand names consist of nouns that convey information about the business philosophy, service

scope, regional characteristics, geographical location, and cultural connotations, combined with place-related nouns that indicate the industry type (such as 馆 [hall], 堂 [hall], 楼 [building], 店 [shop], 家 [house], etc.).

Table 8. Compositional structure of old store names

Matching Type	frequency	typical example
personal name+ place noun	22	惠如楼 (Huiru Building)
Proper nouns+ Nouns of place		白宫酒店 (White House Hotel)
Cultural Nouns+ Place Nouns		三多轩 (San Duo Xuan)
Common Nouns+ Place Nouns		健民药店 (Healthy People Pharmacy)
Azimuth Nouns+ Place Nouns		东方宾馆 (Oriental Hotel)
Nouns of place+ Nouns of place		广州酒家 (Guangzhou Restaurant)
Place Nouns+ Common Nouns+ Place Nouns		广州友谊商店 (Guangzhou Friendship Store)
Common nouns+ Product nouns+ Place nouns	5	南信牛奶甜品专家 (Nanxin Milk Dessert Specialist)
Cultural Terms+ Product Terms+ Place Terms		鹤鸣鞋帽商店 (Crane Shoes & Hats Shop)
Common nouns+ Product nouns+ Place nouns		亨得利钟表眼镜行 (Hengdeli Watch & Optical Co.)
People+ Product Nouns+ Place Nouns		李占记钟表商行 (Li Zhan Ji Watch & Clock Co.)
Proper Nouns+ Adjectives+ Place Nouns		新华大酒店 (Xinhua Hotel)
Common Nouns+ Adjectives+ Place Nouns	5	平安大剧院 (Peace Theater)
Place Nouns+ Adjectives+ Place Nouns		海珠大戏院 (Haizhu Grand Theater)
Adjectives+ Common Nouns+ Common Nouns		新大新百货 (Xin Da Xin Department Store)
Adjectives+ Product nouns+ Place nouns	2	趣香饼家 (Qu Xiang Bing Jia)
semantic indentation		采芝林(Caizhilin), 宝生园 (Baoshengyuan)
	5	

Specifically, the “Personal Name + Place Noun” structure, as exemplified by Hui Ru Building (惠如楼), combines the founder's name — Chen Huiru — with a location-related term, highlighting the close connection between personal identity and commercial entity. This naming convention, commonly seen in traditional business culture, not only conveys a sense of trust and historical continuity but also serves as a tribute to the founder or the individual after whom the brand is named. The “Proper Noun + Place Noun” structure, as in White House Hotel (白宫酒店), integrates a proper noun with cultural or historical significance into the business name, paired with a place noun. This strategy often captures customer attention while constructing a distinctive brand image.

In addition, the “Cultural Noun + Place Noun” structure, such as San Duo Xuan (三多轩), incorporates terms with deep cultural connotations. The phrase “San Duo” references the Song Dynasty scholar Ouyang Xiu’s maxim of “writing more, thinking more, and discussing more” (做多、想多、商量多). Such naming practices not only enrich the brand with cultural depth but also evoke specific cultural associations, fostering stronger emotional and cultural identification among consumers. A more straightforward and widespread naming model can be observed in the “Common/Directional/Locational Noun + Place Noun” structure. Examples include Jianmin Pharmacy (健民药店), Oriental Hotel (东方宾馆), and Guangzhou Restaurant (广州酒家). These names are clear and easy to remember while directly conveying the business's primary

services or geographical location.

Moreover, brand names featuring rhetorical or compound structures are relatively complex and often communicate additional layers of meaning. For example, the “Adjective + Product Noun + Place Noun” structure, as in Qu Xiang Bing Jia (趣香饼家), uses the character “Qu” (趣) — which, in Cantonese pronunciation, is phonetically similar to “cui” (脆, meaning “crispy”) — alongside “Bing” (饼, meaning “pastry”) to suggest the shop’s signature products are both crispy and aromatic. This explicit descriptive approach helps clarify the business’s specialty and market positioning, offering a competitive advantage. Similarly, the structure “Adjective + Common Noun + Common Noun,” as illustrated by Xin Da Xin Department Store (新大新百货), reflects both linguistic creativity and brand continuity. The name “Da Xin” is derived from the transliteration of the English word The Sun, while the prefix “Xin” (新, meaning “new”) implies both inheritance and innovation. The rhythmic and catchy name enhances both its memorability and appeal.

It is also worth noting that some store names employ semantic condensation, producing concise yet meaningful expressions. For instance, Caizhilin (采芝林) implies “picking Ganoderma in the forest,” while Baoshengyuan (宝生园) suggests “a garden of precious life.” Such names reflect creativity and distinctiveness, forming strong brand identities with lasting impressions. Previous research (Lu Taihong, 2004) has noted that trisyllabic names are most common among China’s time-honored brands, and words carrying auspicious or culturally rich meanings occur with

high frequency. The same pattern can be observed in the old brand names of Guangzhou, although local characteristics and Cantonese flavor are particularly pronounced.

Time-honored brand names in the region often incorporate local cultural elements such as historical figures, geographical markers, and folk legends. This practice not only highlights regional characteristics but also enhances the cultural richness and narrative depth of the brand. Examples include the reference to historical figures in names like Hui Ru Lou (惠如楼) and Chen Li Ji (陳李濟), or the inclusion of geographical references in Zhuang Yuan Fang Costume Factory (状元坊戏服厂) and Haizhu Grand Theatre (海珠大戏院). Additionally, many old brand names employ puns, symbolic meanings, and metaphorical references rooted in Cantonese dialect. These strategies both communicate the store's business philosophy and appeal to the local community's sense of cultural familiarity and identity. For example, in Qu Xiang Bing Jia (趣香饼家), "Qu" resonates with the Cantonese pronunciation of "crispy," suggesting flavorful and crunchy pastries. Similarly, in Shun Kee Ice Room (顺记冰室), the term "Ice Room" directly reflects a specific aspect of the region's food culture and everyday lifestyle.

In summary, the lexical choices and naming conventions of time-honored brand names not only reflect the basic attributes of the businesses but also embed a wealth of cultural and social information. Analyzing the structure and semantics of these names provides valuable insights into the linguistic and sociocultural dimensions underlying the naming practices of time-honored brands.

4. Summary

This study systematically analyzes the diachronic evolution of the linguistic landscape of Guangzhou's time-honored brands, highlighting the historical characteristics of their signage and demonstrating the significant role that language policy and planning have played in shaping this landscape. The findings reveal that, while Chinese has maintained an overwhelmingly dominant position in the signage of time-honored brands, there is an observable shift from monolingual Chinese to multilingual signage over time. In terms of sign orientation and text directionality, the transformation from traditional vertical layouts with right-to-left text flow to modern horizontal arrangements with left-to-right text flow clearly illustrates the diachronic stages of linguistic landscape development. These changes also reflect the brands' capacity for innovation and adaptation in response to social transitions, as well as the influence of multiculturalism and globalization on their evolution. Moreover, the distinctive linguistic landscape elements of time-honored brands—such as inscribed plaques and antithetical couplets—not only embody profound cultural heritage but also reflect the unique charm and historical continuity of traditional Chinese commercial culture. In addition, the lexical choices and structural composition of brand names exhibit clear regional and cultural characteristics, further emphasizing the integration of local identity within the urban linguistic landscape.

By integrating diachronic perspectives on language policy with corpus-based analysis tools, this study offers a new approach to the historical study of linguistic landscapes. Using time-honored Chinese brands as the research focus, the paper provides valuable insights that may contribute to the

construction of a localized theoretical framework for linguistic landscape research in China. Future studies could extend this work by conducting cross-regional comparative research, offering further opportunities for exploration and deepening our understanding of the relationship between language, space, and cultural heritage.

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