



# A Comparative Study of the Linguistic Landscapes in Religious Sites in China: Hong Kong and Guangzhou

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**Abstract.** This article presents a comparative study of the linguistic landscapes of religious sites in two Chinese cities: Hong Kong and Guangzhou. Six religious sites were selected, including a Taoist temple, a Buddhist temple and a Catholic church in Hong Kong, as well as a Taoist temple, a Buddhist temple and a Christian church in Guangzhou. All observable linguistic landscapes in the public space of these selected sites were recorded by a digital camera. By reviewing these two cities' demographic backgrounds and related policies and comparing the collected linguistic landscape samples through a mixed-method approach, this research found similarities in basic language patterns but some ideological differences existing in language diversity and the level of English usage in Hong Kong and Guangzhou.

**Keywords:** Hong Kong, Guangzhou, Linguistic Landscape, Religious Sites, Multilingualism

## 1 Introduction

In the past twenty years, the sociolinguistic field of linguistic landscapes (LL) garnered increasing attention from academics (Mulyawan et al., 2022) [11]. Language choices on LLs reflect the language attitudes in public spaces, representing the use of linguistic resources and indicating local issues of ideology, communicative practice and social process (Wong & Chan, 2018) [12]. This phenomenon occurs not only at the individual level but also at the social level. In addition, Coluzzi and Kitade (2015) state that LLs in religious sites can effectively manifest the levels of prestige enjoyed by different languages within a given territory [7]. Hence, the religious LL is an ideal entry point for investigating ideologies accepted in a particular area from a sociolinguistic perspective.

Hong Kong is a Chinese city that used to be governed by the British from 1842 to its return to PRC as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) in 1997. Due to the colonial history and PRC's One Country, Two Systems policy, there is an obvious difference in language ideologies between Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland. According to Liu (2018), Hong Kong has undertaken two language shifts since the British rule: the first one to English and the second one to Mandarin Chinese, leading to Hong Kong's complicated language situation [10]. Moreover, as a Chinese mainland city in the same

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C. Shen et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Language, Art and Cultural Exchange (ICLACE 2024)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 855,

[https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-265-1\\_30](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-265-1_30)

Cantonese-speaking and Mandarin-speaking Lingnan cultural circle as Hong Kong (Zhao et al., 2020), Guangzhou, the provincial capital of Guangdong Province, is an appropriate research object for comparing LLs between Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland [14].

## 2 Linguistic Landscape and Religious Sites

According to Landry and Bourhis (1997, p.25), the LL covers “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 linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration” [9]. Fundamentally, the LL has two fundamental functions: informational and symbolic. The former distinguishes the geographic territory of a given language community, while the latter enhances or establishes ethnolinguistic identities in language communities, especially bilingual or multilingual communities (Bourhis, 1992; Landry & Bourhis, 1997) [3][9]. Due to the significance of these two functions, the LL is critical in balancing the processes of language maintenance and shift, which can consolidate the vitality of an ethnolinguistic group’s own language in a multilingual context (Landry & Borhis, 1997) [9].

Religion is a special cultural phenomenon. Zhao et al. (2020) claim that religion is the basis of beliefs, which is critical for the social levels of the individual, family and country [14]. Additionally, according to Ardhian et al. (2021), the naming of a worship place is a symbol of social power, which is highly associated with the local history and ideology [1]. In an investigation of LLs from diverse religions in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and believers’ attitudes towards them, Coluzzi and Kitade (2015) explore the languages used in worship places and the levels of prestige enjoyed by these languages [7]. Their findings posit that in Kuala Lumpur, English enjoys high prestige and is regarded as modern and neutral; therefore, more than half of the examined LLs are displayed in English, while only twenty per cent of them are shown in Malay (Coluzzi & Kitade, 2015) [7]. Similarly, Mulyawan et al. (2022) investigate the LLs at Batuka Temple in Bali and claim that due to English’s high prestige and Bali’s national language policy, the indigenous language, Balinese, has been marginalised in public space [11]. These examples indicate that the religious LL can intuitively reflect a particular geographic territory’s related social ideologies.

## 3 Religion and Language Backgrounds in Hong Kong and Guangzhou

As stated by Bouma and Singleton (2004), there is always a degree of religious diversity in Hong Kong, which has encountered a remarkable change in religious composition over the twentieth century [2]. In the thirty years after the Second World War, Hong Kong’s population grew from 600,000 to 5 million (Yang, 1981), contributing to the growth of the Christian and Islamic population to some extent [13]. During this period, other distinguishing changes that can be seen are the decline of Chinese folk religions

and the growth in the number of Buddhists (Cheng & Wong, 1997) [4]. Regardless of changes in Hong Kong's religious mosaic, present-day Hong Kong is a city with a high level of religious diversity, where adherents to all the world's major faiths can be found, such as Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, Islamism and Hinduism (Bouma & Singleton, 2004) [2].

One of the reasons for Hong Kong's religious diversity is religious management in this area. According to the Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong residents have the freedom of religious belief (Article 32); the government of Hong Kong SAR shall not restrict the freedom of religious belief, nor interfere in the internal affairs of religious organisations, nor restrict religious activities which do not contravene the laws of the Hong Kong SAR (Article 141). This more permissive policy regulatory environment contributes to today's religious diversity in Hong Kong, which is reflected in the LLs from the top down. Moreover, the Basic Law states that English, like Chinese, is the official language in Hong Kong, establishing its status in jurisprudence.

Similarly, Guangzhou has a long history of religion with five major religions: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism and Christianity. Since ancient times, Guangzhou has been the first choice for foreign religions to enter China by sea and therefore, it has been the frontier of religious and cultural exchanges between the East and the West (Guangzhou Bureau of Ethnic and Religious Affairs, 2023) [8]. As with Hong Kong, the Religious Affairs Ordinance of the PRC provides for the freedom of religious belief; however, the difference is that it regulates the state actively guiding religions to adapt to the PRC's socialist society, indicating that compared with Hong Kong, the Chinese mainland has more active participation in the management and supervision of religious affairs. Regarding language, the Law on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language of the People's Republic of China regulates that the state popularises the standard writing system of Chinese but allows traditional Chinese characters in some cases, such as historical relics, artworks and signboards. Therefore, it can be concluded that Hong Kong and Guangzhou share similar situations regarding Taoism, Buddhism and Catholicism, which are the three religions involved in this study. Meanwhile, differences in LLs between these two cities can be assumed due to the different language policies.

## 4 Method

This research applied a mixed method to compare the LLs of religious sites in Hong Kong and Guangzhou, as well as the ideological reasons behind them. In line with traditional LL research, a quantitative approach was applied to examine the language patterns of the LLs collected from these two cities' religious sites. Afterwards, some representative LL samples were analysed qualitatively to explore the ideological differences between them.

Specifically, 400 photos were collected as raw data through field photography using a digital camera. One place of worship from each of the three involved religions in Hong Kong and Guangzhou was selected for this study. The examined religious sites in Hong Kong are Wong Tai Sin Temple (Taoism), Chi Lin Nunnery (Buddhism) and

St. Andrew's Church (Catholicism), while those in Guangzhou are Canton Wong Tai Sin Temple (Taoism), Grand Buddha Temple (Buddhism) and Christ Church Shameen, Canton (Christianity). It was planned to collect data from Shishi Sacred Heart Cathedral, a Catholic cathedral in Guangzhou; however, due to the Easter activities, it was not open to the public. Consequently, this research turned to Christ Church Shameen, Canton, as an alternative. Photos of all LLs in those mentioned religious sites' public spaces were taken in March 2024. This research does not involve any photos of the inner areas of core worship halls and administrative offices, which is in line with the research of Coluzzi and Kitade (2015), avoiding the violation of religious taboos and being respectful of office workers' privacy [7].

These collected photos were categorised according to the types and numbers of languages displayed on each LL, such as monolingual, bilingual and multilingual. Taking the actual situation of Hong Kong and Guangzhou into account, the written script forms of Chinese are specified into simplified and traditional Chinese. Plural identical LLs are counted as only one single unit for analysis. For partial bilingual and multilingual LLs, for instance, even though there is merely an English translation of the title and the whole text is Chinese, they are regarded as bilingual.

After preprocessing, such as deleting duplicate photos and separating overlapping LLs from each other, there were 446 pieces of LL data in total. Despite 9 LLs from Shishi Sacred Heart Cathedral, 437 LLs were analysed to compare the LLs in Hong Kong and Guangzhou.

## 5 Results

### 5.1 Findings of Three Religious Sites' LLs in Hong Kong

According to Table 1, Chinese and English are frequently used languages in these three involved Hong Kong religious sites. Additionally, there are rare instances of Japanese, Korean and Sanskrit; however, they are almost bilingual or multilingual LLs involving Chinese or English. It can be seen that the mainstream language pattern is Chinese-English bilingual, which has the most significant percentage in all these LLs. As for the monolingual situations, they vary significantly from religion to religion. It should be noted that the "Chinese" used in Hong Kong LLs refers to traditional Chinese by default.

**Table 1.** Languages used in the three Hong Kong religious sites' LLs

Religious Sites	Chinese	English	Chin. & Eng.	Chin., Eng. & Japanese	Chin., Eng., Japanese & Korean	Chin. & Sanskrit	Total
Wong Tai Sin Temple (Taoism)	53 (46.5%)	2 (1.8%)	57 (50.0%)	1 (0.9%)	1 (0.9%)	0	114

Chi Lin Nunnery (Buddhism)	14 (15.2%)	0	77 (83.7%)	0	0	1 (1.1%)	92
St. Andrew's Church (Catholicism)	1 (3.0%)	16 (48.5%)	16 (48.5%)	0	0	0	33

Wong Tai Sin Temple is a famous Taoist temple located in Kowloon. As a temple dedicated to a native Chinese immortal, it has the highest percentage (46.5%) of Chinese monolingual LLs in the three samples from Hong Kong.



Fig. 1. Multilingual LLs in Wong Tai Sin Temple in Hong Kong

Drawing fortune sticks is Wong Tai Sin Temple’s special service. Due to the significant influence of Taoism in East Asia, there are Japanese and Korean instructions at the fortune stick receiving and dispatch office, as shown in the left side of Figure 1. Additionally, simplified Chinese instructions are displayed, welcoming visitors from the Chinese mainland; however, the juxtaposition of simplified and traditional Chinese LLs implicitly defaults to the ideological difference between these two ethnolinguistic groups. All the LLs presented in Figure 1 fulfil the function of providing necessary instructions for drawing and returning fortune sticks. The salient LL at the top of Figure 1 is displayed in a traditional Chinese handwritten script, which plays a symbolic function by creating a sense of archaism to meet visitors’ expectations for an ancient Taoist temple. According to the sizes of the trilingual instructions displayed in the middle of Figure 1, traditional Chinese enjoys the highest degree of recognition, while simplified

Chinese and English share equal positions. Different from the printed LLs in those three mentioned language scripts, Japanese and Korean LLs are handwritten, as shown on the left of Figure 1, which seems provisional and informal. Such differences indicate the demographic composition of Wong Tai Sin Temple's visitors to some extent.

Another prominent feature of Wong Tai Sin Temple is the large number of shops interpreting fortune sticks. Inside the attraction, the researcher found that there were 161 storefronts under the supervision of the temple, twelve of which were empty and not putting up signs.

**Table 2.** Languages used on fortune stick interpreting shop signs in Wong Tai Sin Temple in Hong Kong

Language Type	Chinese	Chin. & English	Chin. Eng. & Japanese	Total
Number	141 (94.6%)	7 (4.7%)	1 (0.7%)	149

From Table 2, it can be concluded that monolingual Chinese heavily dominates the shop signs, while other languages appear rarely. The basic form of these shop signs is the handwritten script of the shop name, fulfilling both informational and symbolic functions. Compared to the percentage (50.0%) of Chinese-English bilingual LLs within the temple (seen in Table 1), that (4.7%) of these shops is notably low, as displayed in Table 2. Different from this temple's official LLs that need to serve visitors from all kinds of countries, such shop signs are put up by these self-employed shops, reflecting a bottom-up language ideology; that is, the LL is serving to generate profits.

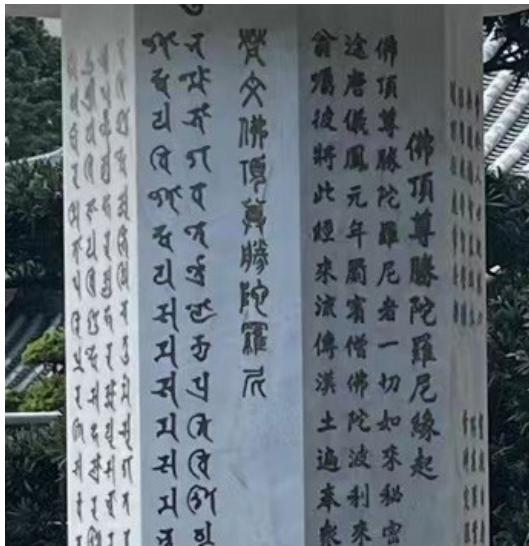


**Fig. 2.** The shop sign of Yanjing in Wong Tai Sin Temple in Hong Kong

One special case of these shops is Yanjing. As shown in Figure 2, there are four languages displayed on this sign: English, Mandarin, Japanese and Cantonese; the languages chosen for target customer groups. On this sign, English is first and Cantonese is last, indicating that this shop mainly serves customers from outside Hong Kong, in

particular, those from English-speaking areas. That corresponds to the status of English in Hong Kong. “國語” (Mandarin Chinese) on this sign is presented in traditional Chinese, which means this shop serves Mandarin-speaking customers but keeps its cultural identity. Such a phenomenon frequently occurs among Hong Kong’s commercial shops. As for English and Japanese, these two languages indicate that this shop is supposed to serve foreign visitors, which aligns with Hong Kong’s status as an international metropolitan city.

Chi Lin Nunnery is a Buddhist temple located in Diamond Hill. Within this attraction, Chinese-English bilingual LLs make up the largest percentage (83.7%), as presented in Table 1, which is the highest of the three Hong Kong religious sites. As an area with a balance of religious, retirement and educational functions (Chi Lin Nunnery, 2024), the situation of Chi Lin Nunnery’s LLs is the simplest and most life-like, which are more connected to everyday life scenarios than spiritual ones [5]. Almost all Chinese monolingual and Chinese-English bilingual LLs fulfil the function of providing information, such as safety warnings and introducing Buddhist deities. Among the fourteen Chinese monolingual LLs, twelve pieces are reminders and warnings, such as “watch out for falling water” and “no climbing”; the other two are donation boxes and exits. It should be noted that there is a stone pillar engraved with scriptures in Chinese and Sanskrit versions, as presented in Figure 3. It has been used in the past to record scriptures, fulfilling the function of giving information; however, at present, it realises the symbolic functions more as a Buddhist symbol because its viewers are largely incapable of understanding Sanskrit.



**Fig. 3.** A stone pillar with Chinese and Sanskrit scriptures in Chi Lin Nunnery in Hong Kong

St. Andrew’s Church is a Catholic church in Kowloon. Based on Table 1, compared to the other two sites, it puts up the least total LLs (N=33) but has the largest percentage (48.5%) of English monolingual LLs. There are seven landmarks collected, such as

monuments for the completion of the buildings, which make up the majority of the English monolingual LLs (38.9%). Furthermore, St. Andrew's Church is the only site where formal English monolingual non-religious reminder signs are found, as shown in Figure 4. This phenomenon supports the quantitative result mentioned above, which is that this church has the highest level of English usage among the three Hong Kong religious sites, possibly due to the strong connection between Christianity and the English language.



Fig. 4. Two samples of English monolingual reminders in St. Andrew's Church

## 5.2 Findings of Three Religious Sites' LLs in Guangzhou

Guangzhou's three selected religious sites have very different LL situations from those of Hong Kong. According to Table 3, it is obvious that Chinese monolingual LLs make up a large proportion of the LL samples of Guangzhou, whose percentage of each religion's places is sharply higher than that of Hong Kong. Although LLs involving languages besides Chinese and English are also rare in Hong Kong, LLs collected from Guangzhou's sites show less diversity, which contains two fewer types of language than those of Hong Kong. Additionally, the Chinese on the LLs in Guangzhou default to simplified Chinese. Cases involving traditional Chinese are specifically noted.

Table 3. Languages used in the three Guangzhou religious sites' LLs

Religious Sites	Chinese	English	Chin. & Eng.	Chin., Eng. & Japanese	Chin., Eng., Japanese & Korean	Chin. & Sanskrit	Total
Canton Wong Tai Sin Temple (Taoism)	67 (75.3%)	0	22 (24.7%)	0	0	0	89
Grand Buddha	52 (simplified 43)	0	24 (31.2%)	1 (1.3%)	0	0	77



Temple (Buddhism)	+ traditional 9 (67.5%)						
Christ Church Shameen, Canton (Christianity)	10 (31.3%)	4 (12.5%)	18 (56.3%)	0	0	0	32

Canton Wong Tai Sin Temple worships the same Taoist god as Hong Kong’s Wong Tai Sin Temple, located in the Fangcun District. Among all three Guangzhou sites, this attraction has the highest rate of Chinese monolingual LLs (seen in Table 3). Specifically, it includes eleven government-required LLs, such as propaganda for socialism with Chinese characteristics and city government heritage conservation notices, as shown in Figure 5. It should be noted that government-required LLs are not exclusive to Canton Wong Tai Sin Temple. The other two selected Guangzhou religious sites also exhibit several of government-mandated LLs, indicating the Chinese government’s unified top-down management of religious sites within the Chinese mainland. In contrast, no apparent political propaganda is spotted in Hong Kong’s selected sites.



Fig. 5. Government-required LL samples in Canton Wong Tai Sin Temple

Canton Wong Tai Sin Temple’s Chinese monolingual LL rate (75.3%) significantly exceeds that (46.5%) of Hong Kong’s Wong Tai Sin Temple. Moreover, there are three Chinese-English bilingual LLs, including warning signs, transformer cases and fire extinguisher boxes, which are factory assembly products and cannot represent the temple’s language ideology entirely. From these phenomena, it can be found that the usage level of Chinese in Cantong Wong Tai Sin Temple greatly surpasses that in Hong Kong.

Grand Buddha Temple is located in the central area of the Yuexiu District, which presents a language situation that is very similar to that of Canton Wong Tai Sin Temple. A noteworthy distinguishing feature of this site is the mixed-use of simplified and traditional Chinese. There are nine LLs involving traditional Chinese within the temple, which account for 17.3% of the Chinese monolingual LLs. The traditional LLs are almost all Buddhist terms, as shown in Figure 6 (a) and (b), which are not frequently used in ordinary people’s daily lives. Figure 6 (c) represents another type in which these LLs function as signboards of special workshops, where simplified Chinese introductions

and instructions are also attached. These traditional Chinese-related LLs primarily realise symbolic functions, such as building solid connections with Buddhism and creating a sense of solemnity. However, it does not mean that they are not linked to informational functions. In some instances, realising their informational functions needs certain preconditions, such as a basic understanding of the religion. Generally speaking, their symbolic function is much more critical than the informational function in this context. As for the simplified Chinese LLs, they function solely to provide information.

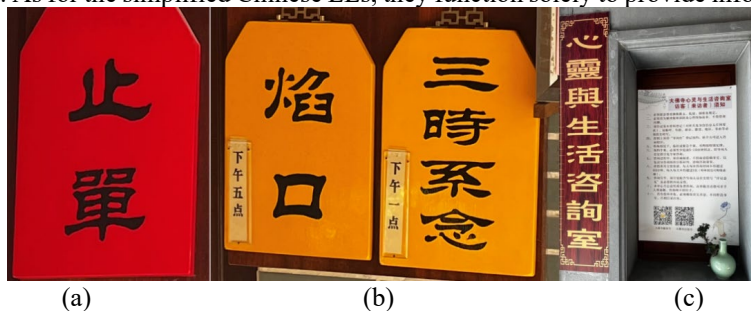


Fig. 6. LL samples involving traditional Chinese in the Grand Buddha Temple in Guangzhou

The last religious site involved in this study is Christ Church Shameen, Canton, which has the highest rates of English monolingual (31.3%) and Chinese-English bilingual LLs (56.3%) among the three Guangzhou sites, as shown in Table 3. In this church, these two types of LLs perform informational and symbolic functions, different from the other two sites' English-related LLs, which realise the informational function only. For instance, this church's landmark contains a crucifix, which is a visible religious symbol, as presented in Figure 7. Consistent with the situation in Hong Kong, as a Christian religious site, this church shows the highest usage level of English. Even so, Chinese monolingual LLs are also spotted, such as introductions of the corresponding religion and this site, as well as holiday blessings. Additionally, government-required LLs mentioned earlier occur as well.



Fig. 7. An English monolingual LL in Christ Church Shameen, Canton, in Guangzhou

### 5.3 Summary

In summary, as two cities of the PRC, Hong Kong and Guangzhou show similar language patterns in the LLs of the selected representative religious sites, with Chinese-English bilingual and Chinese monolingual predominating. Generally, Hong Kong's involved sites have more frequent usage of English, which can be reflected in the higher rates of English monolingual and Chinese-English bilingual LLs. As mentioned earlier, some possible reasons for Hong Kong's affinity for English are Britain's colonial past and the city's current status as a cosmopolitan area, which profoundly influences not only the Hong Kong government and policymakers but also the public. Moreover, the PRC government's tolerant attitude and lenient policy towards religious and linguistic issues, as mentioned in section 3, are also critical for maintaining Hong Kong's present sociolinguistic mosaic.

In contrast, Guangzhou has stricter regulations on the LLs of religious sites, which can be reflected in the political propaganda and related laws on language. Additionally, specific LL language use on the premises of particular religious sites is highly associated with the religion professed. In both cities, the Buddhist and Taoist temples are similar in terms of the frequent usage of Chinese, while the Protestant and Catholic churches use English much more frequently. Overall, the LLs in religious sites universally realise the function of providing information. According to Coluzzi and Kitade (2015), language carries its user group's values; consistent with this statement, this research found that the Chinese-related LLs collected from the six religious sites realise the symbolic functions more than those English-related, especially accurately expressing the local ethnolinguistic group's values [7].

## 6 Conclusion

This research explored the LLs from the six representative religious sites of Hong Kong and Guangzhou and found that, although Chinese is still the dominant language, English has shown its status as an interlanguage that can be universally recognised by people from different ethnolinguistic groups, which is consistent with Coluzzi (2012)'s notion of English as a language super-partes [6]. Due to some historical reasons, Hong Kong shows more linguistic diversity than Guangzhou and a higher usage level of English. Meanwhile, the use of traditional Chinese is a symbol of keeping Hong Kong's cultural identity, which is not so popular in the Chinese mainland. Although two different ideological systems were implemented, Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland shared the same cultural origin and flourished with a certain degree of cultural diversity. In the context of globalisation, balancing the acceptance of foreign cultures and the preservation of the native language identity is a problem faced by one cultural community, for which LL studies can provide a unique way of approaching.

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