

Wrestling between English and Pinyin: Language Politics and Ideologies of Coding Street Names in China

Abstract: This paper examines the code choice and contestations on street name signs in China to find out the dynamics of language politics and the language ideological debates. In China, Hanyu Pinyin and English compete for visibility on street signs, though only Pinyin is the legally-endorsed alphabetic form for place names. Spolsky's (2004, 2009) tripartite language policy model is adopted to analyse the management, practice and ideologies regarding the code choice on street name signs in China. It shows that Pinyin has been promulgated as domestic standard fused with national interests in the official discourse, while English win the favour of the general public and some international-oriented cities due to its pragmatic value and the symbolic capital associated with it. The resilient approach taken by the top authority suggests that the traditional model of language management relying on political authority and ideological hegemony is hard to work its way out nowadays.

Key Words: street names; public signs; language ideology; language politics; Pinyin; English

1. Introduction

Place names and naming are crucial issues in all societies owing to their tremendous historical, cultural, emotional and political affordances. According to the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN), place names as the most commonly used spatial references serve to “identify and reflect culture, heritage and landscape” (UNGEGN 2001). Among the various types of place names, street names in urban life have attracted much scholarship owing to their indexicalities of political dynamics, identity and/or history of memory (e.g. Gasque 2000; Neethling 2016; Rose-Redwood, Alderman & Azaryahu 2017). As city texts and urban discourse, street names symbolically construct the public space and shape the linguistic landscape (LL) of a city (Ben-Rafael 2009).

This study examines the language politics and language ideological debates (Blommaert, 1999) concerning the code choice on street¹ name signs in China². The linguistic inscription of street

¹ Street is hereby used as an umbrella concept for *road, street, lane, boulevard* or other similar terms.

² In this paper, the term China is used to represent mainland China, and Chinese government refers to the central government of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

names (or more broadly *place names*) have merited special legislation in China. As stipulated by relevant national standards and regulations, street signs shall inscribe street names in Chinese (simplified characters) on the top and Hanyu Pinyin (i.e., Romanized Chinese phonetic system, henceforth Pinyin) at the bottom. That is, Chinese-Pinyin bilingualism is the officially-mandated standard for street name representations. On the other hand, English has been increasingly pervasive on public and commercial signs in China's urban environments due to its symbolic associations of modernity, fashion, sophistication and internationalization (Li 2016). In such a context, presenting English on street signs is becoming a 'rational' choice, especially for international-oriented metropolitan cities. For pedestrians, passers-by and particularly international tourists, the profusion of linguistic inconsistencies for the same street have caused much confusion (e.g. Ding 2014; Liu 2015; Yan & Cao 2015). The following scenario is a typical challenging experience for foreigners visiting China:

James McGreen and his wife, Katherine, one of many backpacker couples making their first trip to Shanghai this summer, became totally confused when they tried to find "XIZANG ZHONGLU" with the help of a local street map. The road sign indicated "CENTRAL TIBET ROAD" while the billboard overhead reads "CENTRAL XI ZANG RD." (Ding 2004)

In a highly-regulated and politically-censorious society like China, the tension arising from the code choice between Pinyin and English on the government-controlled official signs is striking and deserves academic exploration. This paper seeks to examine the issues revolving around the two competing codes (i.e. Pinyin and English) widely visible in China's urban space. It specifically addresses the following three main research questions:

- (1) How are Pinyin and English used on street signs in China's urban space?
- (2) What measures have been taken by the authority to manage the languages on street signs?
- (3) What are the general public's attitudes towards the code choice on public signs?

Such an exploration can shed light on how the tension between political correctness and economic incentives will shape the language policy and planning, thus deepening our understanding of the language politics involved in code choice on street name signs.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First I give an account of the role of Pinyin and English in Chinese sociolinguistic dynamics. Then the theoretical framework for analysis is presented. Next, the practice, ideology and management of code choice on street name signs are discussed. The socio-political meanings of the Pinyin-English tension are then analysed, followed by a conclusion.

2 Pinyin and English in China's Language Repertoire

In China, Chinese is the officially designated standard language, which plays a predominant role in its sociolinguistic practice. Pinyin is the Chinese phonetic transcription system, rather than a new language or script. As an auxiliary writing system and pronunciation aid, Pinyin is mainly taught to primary school children “to facilitate the learning and use of characters, serving such functions as annotating the pronunciation of characters, transcriptions, indexing, etc.” (Chen 1999, 167). Pinyin is also commonly used as a tool for foreigners to learn Chinese pronunciation.

The Pinyin Scheme was promulgated by the Chinese government as an official Romanization system in 1958. It was originally established as a phonographic scheme to ultimately supersede the logographic scripts, though this radical stance was abandoned later (Chappell 1980). In October 2001, the *Law of the People's Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language* (or the *National Common Language Law* in short) approved by the top legislature endows Pinyin a legal status for usage in certain realms. Among others, Article 18 of the Law stipulates that Pinyin “shall serve as the tool for spellings and phonetic notations in the standard spoken and written Chinese language” (see Wang 2016 for the English translated version of the law).

In contrast, English is the most important foreign language in China. According to Bolton and Graddol (2012), the number of English learners in China was estimated to be 400 million (around one third of its population) by 2010. English is seen by the Chinese government as an essential skill to access and connect with the outside world and attain modernization (Cortazzi & Jin 1996). For individuals, the proficiency of English has been accorded significant symbolic capital, e.g. better career prospects, social prestige, and opportunities to study abroad (Hu 2003; 2005). Thus, the highly-sought instrumental and pragmatic values of the English language have led to unprecedented popularity of English in China. The increasing currency of English is also

projected to urban life in China. Especially in the economically affluent areas, English is frequently seen on informational public signs and decorative shop signs.

The wrestling of the two codes in China's cityscape – Pinyin as national standard for place names and English as internationalization marker – has attracted much public attention. On street signs, Pinyin has been granted presence in legal terms by the Chinese national government. With regard to English, its status as a global language with preeminent symbolic values makes it a preferred code for some local governments aiming for urban internationalization. In Shanghai and Hangzhou, for example, displaying English on signs (including street names) has been stipulated as a regional standard to meet the so-called needs of internationalization³. Some other inner cities (such as Changsha and Wuhan) are following suit, inscribing English on street signs to show their international orientation. Pinyin and English vie for space on street signs, and the choice between them is an ideologically motivated act for sign managing agencies. This study will examine the governmental management of the language on street signs, the actual implementation of the relevant policies and the public's reactions with a purpose to unveil the contestations of language ideologies when faced by the choice between a domestic standard and a globalism marker.

3. The Tripartite Framework of Language Policy

The study of language policy, according to Spolsky (2009, 1), is aimed “to account for choices made by individual speakers on the basis of rule-governed patterns recognized by the speech community (or communities) of which they are members”. In order to make sense of the practice of language choices in particular sociolinguistic settings, Spolsky (2004, 2009) formulates a tripartite conceptualization of language policy, which has informed much research in language policy and planning (LPP) field. Rather than focusing on officially published documents, his framework is composed of three dynamically interrelated but distinct components: language management, language practice, and language belief.

Language management concerns the specific acts taken to intervene and manipulate others' language behaviours and/or language beliefs. These regulating endeavours are mainly initiated by people with authority power over other members to modify their language uses or attitudes (Spolsky 2012). Language management can take place at different planes ranging from

³ http://www.china.org.cn/learning_english/2009-09/16/content_18533579.htm

individuals to families to nation states. At the national level, the legislation for language uses in a society is an obvious example of language management.

Language practice refers to the community members' actual language uses and choices in a specific language environment. According to Spolsky (2012, 5), social members can be involved in a variety of language practices such as the choice of variety for certain communicative functions, the selection of different variants with various interlocutors, the handling of speech, silence and common topics, and strategies for expressing or concealing identity. Shaped by many linguistic or nonlinguistic factors, these activities may bring light to the *de facto* language policies (Shohamy 2006) enacting in the society, which might be at odds with the policies on paper.

Language belief or ideology refers to the deeply-rooted values, attitudes or assumptions held by members of a community regarding the language uses. The individuals' language ideologies are "derived from, rooted in, reflective of or responsive to the experiences or interests of a particular social position" (Woolard 1992), which allow them to construe particular instances of discourse in certain ways. Based on such beliefs, specific languages, their varieties and/or features can be credited with high or low values or statuses (Spolsky 2009, 4).

In general, Spolsky's tripartite framework provides an expanded view of LPP, and offers a model for the analysis of the interplay between language observable behaviours, authority's regulative mechanism and the stakeholders' language ideology. In the ensuing sections, this model is used as a framework for the analysis of the governance, practice and ideologies regarding the code choice on street signs in China.

4. Analysis

Since both Pinyin and English on street name signs are alphabetic forms, it is necessary to differentiate Pinyin names from English names before our analysis. Generally speaking, a street name constitutes two parts: a specific component (the identifier) and a generic component (e.g. *road* or *street*). As a common practice in relevant studies, the linguistic form of the generic component will be the determinant of the code type of a street name: *Lu/Jie* standing for Pinyin

form, while *Road/Street* for English form. That is, *Renmin Lu* is a Pinyin road name, while *Renmin Road* is an English road name⁴. This differentiation method is applied in this study.

4.1 Management of alphabetic writing on Street Signs

Chinese government has been passionately engaged in the planning of its languages (Spolsky 2014; Zhou 2001) through its two-layer legal mechanism. The first tier is the central government, which is also the top policymaking agency in China. Some ministries, commissions and offices are often tasked to draft national policies or standards for certain language-related issues. The second tier is the local governments in provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities. The governments at this level issue customized rules and regulations based on local needs and requirements in conformity with the constitution and laws from the first tier.

The Chinese central government institutionalized Pinyin as the legitimate alphabetic form for Chinese place names in 1978. Since then, Pinyin as the national standard for street names has been promulgated recurrently in the official notices, rules, standards and regulations mandated by the state-level governments. The following is a list of the important national standardization measures for the use of Pinyin on place name signs.

- On September 26, 1978, the State Council approved the Report on the Use of Pinyin as the Uniform Standard to Spell Chinese Person Names and Place Names drafted by four governmental organs. This was the first time that Pinyin was endorsed as the standard system for the Romanization of proper names.
- On January 23, 1986, the State Council issued the Administrative Regulations on Geographical Names, which required that the spelling of place names shall use Pinyin as the uniform standard. The detailed implementation rules were formulated by Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- On December 2, 1987, the Committee on Geographical Names, Ministry of Urban and Rural Construction and Environmental Protection, and the State Language Commission jointly issued a notice ban on the use of old spellings (such as Wade-Giles system) or English in the spelling of place names. It pointed out that the English translation of the

⁴ On road/street signs, English generic names often use abbreviated forms, such as *Rd* (or *Rd.*) for *Road*, *St* (or *St.*) for *Street*, and *Ave* for *Avenue*.

generic part of place names was in breach of the state regulations and caused confusion for standardization, thus must be rectified. It reiterated that Pinyin is the sole standard for place name Romanization.

- On July 1, 1988, the State Language Commission and State Education Commission jointly published the *Basic Rules for Hanyu Pinyin Orthography*, which detailed the rules for writing Pinyin for place names. On January 22, 1996, the Rules were approved by the State Bureau of Technology Supervision as a national standard (GB/T 16159-1996).
- On October 1, 1999, the national standard *Place Name Plates – Cities and Villages* (GB17733.1-1999) started to come into effect. It stipulates, among other things, the Pinyin spelling rules of place names on signs.
- On October 31, 2000, the National People's Congress (the top legislature of the state) approved the *National Common Language Law*, which stipulates that the Scheme for Chinese Phonetic Alphabet (i.e. Pinyin) is the unified norm for the Romanized spelling of the names of Chinese persons and place names (Article 18).
- In April 23, 2008, the national standard *Geographical Names-Signs* (GB17733-2008) was jointly issued by the General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine of the People's Republic of China (AQSIQ) and Standardization Administration of the People's Republic of China (SAC). In this national standard, picture samples are given for the design of street name signs, including the layout of Chinese characters and Pinyin.
- On June 29, 2012, *Basic Rules of the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet Orthography* (GB/T16159-2012) was issued by the AQSIQ and SAC. This new standard modified some Pinyin orthographic rules that were specified in the 1996 version of national standard.

The official argumentation for the use of Pinyin rather than other alphabetic forms on street signs is to assert sovereign authority and national identity. In the preface of the national standard *Place Name Plates – Towns and Villages* (GB17733.1-1999), for example, it states clearly that:

地名标志为法定的国家标志物，地名标志上的书写、拼写内容及形式具有严肃的政治性，涉及国家主权和尊严，涉及民族政策 “[P]lace names are the statutory symbol of the state, the spelling,

the content and the forms of the place name signs bear much political significance and may reflect national sovereign authority and national dignity” (translated by the author).

Since this official rhetoric sounds strong and entails national interests, it is often quoted by people who advocate Pinyin on street signs (e.g. Guo 2007; Sun 2005).

In brief, the Chinese top authority has made constant efforts to promulgate the use of Pinyin for place names, and mandated a series of regulations and standards to enforce its implementation. Particularly, the enactment and implementation of the *National Common Language Law* in China institutionalized the legal role of Pinyin for place names, which renders the use of other alphabetic codes (such as English) on street signs unauthorized and illegal.

4.2 Coding Practice on Street Signs in China

Code preference on street signs

Though Pinyin has been stipulated as the standard alphabetic form on street signs, English street names are frequently seen in the LL in many cities. In this section, the focus is find out which form, Pinyin or English is the preferred code on street signs in China’s major cities. Constrained by the geographical sizes and the multiplicity of cities, we took the provincial capital cities and municipalities as research sites and investigated the alphabetic writings on street signs. The language uses on the LL in these cities can be conceived of as cases par excellence, given the fact that they are political, economic and cultural centres in specific provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities. In the data collection process, ten major streets in the central area of each city were randomly selected, and one sign from each street was taken and counted in our statistics. This simple random sampling method was designed in order to ensure that the samples can extensively represent the composition and characteristics of the research sites (Yamane 1973; Kothari 2004). From January to December 2016, a group of student investigators were tasked to take photos during school break and holidays, and altogether 310 street name signs from 31 capital/municipality cities were selected to form the database. In order to ensure the typical representativeness of the samples, we only considered the mundane major streets in each city, without counting the street signs displayed in scenic spots, ethnic or foreign enclaves, or areas reserved for special purposes.

Our sampling statistics shows that bilingual representations are predominant for street name signs in city environments, with Chinese consistently presented as the most prominent street name. On such bilingual signs, it is found that signs with Pinyin (N=178) and English (N=60) account for 74.8% and 25.2% respectively, showing that Pinyin is the predominant alphabetic form on street signs over the country. English street names are mainly found in cities like Shanghai, Hangzhou, Changsha, Wuhan and Changchun. In these cities, the national standard of using Pinyin on street signs is abolished, and English names are local standard on street name signs.

In our data, we also found some trilingual signs presenting in the urban space of some non-ethnic minority regions⁵. For instance, in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province in southwest China, the street name signs present Chinese, English and Pinyin (Picture 1). This shows that the urban governors perceive Pinyin and English as two codes serving different functions on public signs.

Picture 1 A street sign with three codes in Kunming



Issues with alphabetic codes on street signs

Different from the Chinese street names represented straightforwardly and clearly on street signs, the street names in Pinyin or English forms have led to the mixed uses of alphabetic codes, and caused much confusion for sign readers (Ge & Ji 2006). Generally, the issues with Pinyin/English inscriptions on street signs are as follows.

⁵ Trilingual road/street signs are standard representations in the capital cities of autonomous regions, where ethnic language, Chinese and Pinyin are presented.

1) Coexistence of Pinyin name and English name for the same road. There are numerous cases where different coding systems are used to represent the same public entity in cities. For instance, signs with Pinyin name *WEN GUAN XIANG* and English name *Wenguan Lane* are placed to represent the same street in Hangzhou (Picture 2). Similarly, two signs with *Jintai Lu* and *Jintai Road* respectively were displayed next to each other at a road junction in Beijing, according to a newspaper report on *People's Daily*⁶ (Liu 2015).

Picture 2 Coexistence of English and Pinyin street names in Hangzhou



2) Different representation methods for similar names. For street names with similar lexical structures, the represented forms may vary greatly in practice. Especially for street names with orientation elements (such as east, west, north, south or middle), the treatments could be very different. For instance, the Chinese street names 紫荆花北路, 萍水西街 and 文二西路 have the same lexical structure. However, the English name on the three streets in Hangzhou have three variants: *Zijinghua North Rd.*, *West Pingshui St.*, and *Wener Rd. (W)*. On three different roads in Nanjing, the Pinyin names are represented in three forms: *Taiping Nanlu*, *You Fu Xi Jie*, and *Zhongshandong Lu* (meaning *Taiping South Road*, *Youfu West Street*, and *East Zhongshan Road* respectively). It turns out that where to put such orientation elements in alphabetic names is a big challenge for sign creators.

⁶ http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrhwb/html/2015-06/10/content_1575268.htm

3) Internal inconsistencies for the representation of street names. The street name on street signs, bus or metro station signs and online or paper maps may adopt different ways of alphabetic coding, causing inconsistencies on these systems (e.g. *Zhengxin Garden* for express bus station while *ZHENG XIN HUA YUAN* for ordinary bus stop, as shown in Picture 3). In the same administrative region, the coding policies may differ as well. For example, in Hunan province, English is presented on the street signs in the capital city of Changsha, while Pinyin street signs are displayed in other cities in the same province.

Picture 3 Different alphabetic names on different traffic systems in Hangzhou



The causes for such chaos or confusions are manifold. First, bureaucratic complexity in China is common. The naming of streets, signs creation and placement, and signs management are often administered by different governmental sectors. The lack of coordination among these sectors leads to coding problems. Second, there is a lack of professional support. The numerous street name regulations involve many nuanced details, which require considerable linguistic knowledge to decode them accurately. Third, negligent work exists and effective supervision is lacking. The common practice for signs production is to outsource them to plates manufacture companies, and such companies may not latch onto the language mandates, which is coupled by the sloppy management of the place name watchdogs.

Overall, presenting Pinyin name on street signs is the dominant trend, though English street names are increasingly represented on street signs. Especially in international-oriented

metropolitan cities, English is becoming the preferred code on street signs. The inconsistencies of alphabetic names on street signs have caused much confusion for non-Chinese sign readers.

4.3 Language Beliefs on Street Name Signs

According to Blommaert (2005, 14), in order to gain insight into the dynamics of language in society, linguistic analysis must attach importance to “what language use means to its users”. In this section, how the ordinary Chinese people perceive the use of Pinyin or English on street signs is examined.

Attitudes from Chinese scholars

In academic circles, the Pinyin-English contestation on street signs has attracted widespread attention from Chinese scholars, mostly linguists and language teachers/researchers. Conflicting views have been expressed about the Pinyin or English representations on street name signs. Those who advocate Pinyin hold that using Pinyin on street name signs is adequate on legal, theoretical, emotional and practical aspects (Guo 2007; Sun 2005; Xing 2013). One of the central arguments is that since Pinyin has been stipulated as national and international standards for China’s geographical names, the local governments must act in strict accordance. Among them, some scholars take a tough stand, arguing that the code choice on place name signs has political connotations, and placing English on street name signs jeopardies state sovereignty and national dignity (Guo 2007; Sun 2005). This position is in line with the national ideology on the socio-political status of Pinyin in China.

In contrast, those who support English on street name signs argue that Pinyin serves little purpose for targeted readers (i.e. foreigners in China), and it does not meet the needs of urban internationalization. Ge (2009) contends that using English to translate street names (the generic term in street names) has long been a tradition, and is still widely practiced in most major cities in China. Using Pinyin to transliterate street names is hard to win the favour of language experts and translation practitioners. Ye and Shen (2013) argue that Pinyin transcription for street names is not successful simply because it has distorted the original intention of the international standardization of geographical names and violated the basic translation principles.

The contestation between the two camps is unlikely to be resolved any time soon, which leads to bewilderment for many scholars, who urge the authorities to find ways to resolve the confusions entirely (e.g. Ge & Ji 2006).

Public attitudes as projected in social media

In our study, “路牌标识 英语 拼音” (street signs English or Pinyin) was used as key words in online search (mainly google and baidu, the major search engine in China), which led to hundreds of reports and comments on newspapers and social media attending to the inconsistencies and confusions regarding alphabetic inscriptions on street signs. In the continuous discussions and debates, both Pinyin and English have their proponents. Those who subscribe to Pinyin on street signs tend to emphasize its legal status. Moreover, some argue that Pinyin inscription has obvious advantages in comparison to the placement of English names⁷. One argument is that Pinyin is more apt to achieve communicative purposes in China’s city context. As one netizen in Zhihu (an important Question-Answer platform in China) argues, when the foreigners get lost in a Chinese city, using Pinyin names to ask for directions would be easier for them to get help from local Chinese. Moreover, using Pinyin is an effective way to circumvent translation mistakes and achieve formal equivalence with the Chinese street names. Especially for the many different types of streets (e.g. road with ordinal numbers, inner street, branch road, lane, boulevard), English translation mistakes can be easily avoided.

English advocates tend to justify their position by the symbolic and pragmatic value of English for modern cities. In their opinion, the influx of international tourists, expatriate workers and residents in Chinese cities, and the constant branding of the identity of international cities (Berg & Björner 2014) have given English a sound footing for presence in China’s urban space. Representing English street names is thus geared to the needs of the social and economic developments of the cities, as some local officials claimed (see Yan & Cao 2015).

Public attitudes emerged in a survey

In order to find out the general trend of the code preference, we administered a short online questionnaire survey concerning people’s attitudes towards Pinyin and English on street signs.

⁷ See Zhihu, a popular Chinese interactive platform for many discussions relevant to the code choice on street signs (e.g. <https://www.zhihu.com/question/24499599>).

More specifically, the participants were inquired about the main purpose of placing alphabetic forms on street signs, the most appropriate alphabetic form to choose, their attitudes towards the legal status of Pinyin for place names, and the main principle of setting alphabetic names on street signs. From December 2016 to November 2017, altogether 715 valid survey responses were collected from major cities in Eastern and Southern China such as Shanghai, Hangzhou, Ningbo and Guangzhou. The majority of the respondents (N=648) are college students, and the rest (N=67) include people from a wide range of occupations such as teachers, lawyers, journalists, professionals, civic servants, sales, etc. In our analysis, the participants are broadly divided into two groups: students and working personnel.

With regard to the main purpose of placing alphabetic code on street signs, nearly 60% of the students (N=385) believe that it is meant to provide convenience for foreigners, while 34% (N=220) hold that it is mainly a symbolic representation of the city's image of internationalization. Similarly, around 90% the working personnel (N=60) are of the opinion that serving the needs of foreigners and symbolic construction of internationalization are the principal purposes of using non-Chinese codes on street signs. Only about 7% (N=48) of the students and 10% of the working personnel (N=7) state that setting alphabetic code on street signs is to fulfil the need of national strategy or for other purposes.

When asked about the most appropriate alphabetic form for the Chinese street sign 西藏东路, more than 95% of the students (N=620) advocate an English translation (*East Tibetan Road*, *Xizang Road (E)*, or *East Xizang Road*), whereas only 4.3% (N=28) of them prefer the Pinyin form (i.e., *Xizang Donglu*). For the working group, those voting for English and Pinyin forms account for 88.1% and 11.9% respectively, showing that presenting English names on street signs is considered to be more appropriate. The respondents' overwhelming preference for English over Pinyin on street name signs echoes the view that the alphabetic forms on street signs is conceived of as a language service for foreigners in China.

As for the status of Pinyin as national standard for alphabetic street names, the participants' responses are diversified. Nearly 45% of the student participants (N=289) hold that this stipulation is far-fetched, as the readers' need should be taken into account. In contrast, about 42% (N=270) of the students deem it reasonable in that it may show the special need or strategy of the state. The rest (13.4%, N=87) take no sides. For the working personnel, the positive, neutral and

negative views have a largely even distribution, accounting for 31.3%, 35.8% and 32.8% respectively. The results come as no surprise, as Chinese people have always been indoctrinated to obey the laws. Therefore, when they are informed that Pinyin is the legitimate form on street signs, many of them tend to give a second thought to the rationality of using Pinyin.

Finally, regarding the overarching principles of setting alphabetic street names, about 40% of the students (N=259) and 60% of the working personnel (N=40) vote for the formal consistency on different signs. The other important principles include the intelligibility for foreign readers (students 38.1% versus working personnel 19.4%) and accuracy of translation (students 20.4% versus working personnel 20.9%). Those who advocate for self-standard are very rare.

In summary, there has been conflicting views regarding the Pinyin-English choice on street name signs. The general public tend to assume that the alphabetic code on street name signs serves to provide information for foreigners or serve as a symbol of city image. English is a proper choice to such an end. Pinyin inscription, on the other hand, is the government-sanctioned national standard, and compliance to the uniform standard is vital. Here it has to be admitted that the language attitudes presented here are mainly from students, working people, and professionals, yet the opinions from other groups (e.g., the illiterate people, non-English readers, pupils) are not included in this investigation.

5. Discussion

5.1 The Crux of Pinyin-English Contestations on Street Name Signs

Pinyin and English compete for space on street signs in Chinese urban space, and the contestation for the either-or choice shows no signs of abating. Overall, the crux of the code choice controversies lies in three aspects: the role of alphabetic code on street signs, the imposition of the code placement regulations, and the scope where English can function in urban space.

Alphabetic code: Translation or phonetic annotation

One aspect of the Pinyin-English contestation is the role of the alphabetic code on street signs. The majority of the public, as suggested in our survey, tend to believe that the alphabetic code on street signs serves to translate the Chinese street names and bring accessible information for sign readers without Chinese literacy, particularly foreigners. In this sense, Pinyin is not an optical

choice for translation purpose. It should be noted that in the official documents, the term 拼写 *pinxie* (literally “to spell”) is used to define the mirroring relationship between the Chinese names and Pinyin names on the street signs. That is, the alphabetic code on street signs is to ‘spell’ or transliterate the Chinese street names. It is emphasized in various official documents that Pinyin (rather than English) is the sole authorized form to “spell” the corresponding Chinese street names. However, the meaning of *pinxie* in this context is rather vague for Chinese speakers. For most people, providing Pinyin ‘spelling’ is more of emblematic significance than pragmatic values.

Moreover, the targeted readership for Pinyin is unclear. Since English is a widely-recognized lingua franca in the world, presence of English on signs would accommodate the “semiotic needs” (Kallen 2009) of non-Chinese readers. Chinese people will usually read the Chinese street name rather than the Pinyin name. In this regard, the question of “for whom” (Cooper 1989) for Pinyin inscription policy would be unanswered. Just as one city resident commented, “who do you expect to read Pinyin? The Chinese people will definitely read Chinese characters; if the targeted readers of alphabetic inscriptions are foreigners, it would be absurd to present Pinyin to them” (Hui 2010).

Mandatory or recommendatory policies

With regard to the numerous standards and regulations about Pinyin use on street signs, the degree of imposition is also a point of debate for policy practitioners. Some official documents issued by the top authority are recommendatory national standards, while other standards and regulations are stipulated as mandatory. The stipulation of using Pinyin on street signs appears in both types of official documents. The coding practice shows that most local governments comply with the code regulations, yet some city authorities choose to perceive Pinyin policy on street signs as recommendatory, and they have right to decide whether to adopt it on the basis of their urban planning objectives. In effect, there seem to be no penalties for such cities for practicing otherwise.

The functional domains of English on public signs

The state-level authorities seek to make Pinyin inscriptions a normative standard for street name signs only. On the other hand, they promote the use of English on other public signs to show an

open stance to the international world. In fact, the governments at all levels literally advocate the use of English on public and commercial signs to cater to the needs of global mobility. In order to provide more accessible information for English readers, the national standard entitled *Guidelines for the Use of English in Public Service Areas* (GB/T30240) was published in 2017 to ensure the accuracy of English on signs/menus and provide better services to English speakers⁸. Here English use on public signs is clearly encouraged. The paradox of promoting English on public signs and banning English use on street name signs (one typical public sign) makes the Pinyin policy for street signs less convincing.

5.2 The Ideological Debates regarding the Code Choice

All language planning endeavours are set out to achieve certain goals (Nahir 2003), and the products of the planning are ideological-imbedded policies. As discussed earlier, representing Pinyin on street signs has been taken as a symbol of national identity and dignity (see also Guo 2007; Sun 2005). The legitimate rationality of Pinyin on street signs was often attributed to the resolution from the UNGEGN, a subordinate agency of the United Nations (UN). The PRC government was founded by the Communist Party in 1949 after the victory of a civil war. For a long time, the new government strived hard to win the recognition from the international community. In October, 1971, the PRC government was restored the position in the UN according to the Resolution 2758. In August 1977, the representatives of the PRC government was for the first time invited to participate in the UN's conference on standardization of geographical names. One purpose of the conference was to promote a single romanization for non-alphabetic languages in the spelling of geographical names (e.g. *Peking* vs. *Beijing*, *Canton* vs. *Guangdong*). According to UNGEGN, the use of place names in a consistent and accurate manner is "an essential element of effective communication worldwide and supports socio-economic development, conservation and national infrastructure" (UNGEKN 2001). Chinese government's proposal of adopting Pinyin system as the single romanization of Chinese geographical names was finally approved. Given the fact that many romanization systems of Chinese languages (such as Wade-Giles and Postal Romanization) were invented by western scholarship, the adoption of Pinyin for romanization of Chinese characters attested to Chinese national wisdom. More importantly, since Pinyin system was a language-planning product

⁸ http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-06/20/content_29820114.htm

initiated by the PRC government, the adoption of Pinyin as international standard was deemed by the government as an international recognition of the new political regime and its sovereignty. Therefore, using Pinyin for place names has been endowed with political connotations, and its association with state sovereignty and national dignity is often emphasized in Chinese official discourse. Despite the confusions caused for the public, the national dignity argument remains a mantra for using Pinyin on street signs.

In fact, the UNGEGN did not stipulate or recommend the placement of Pinyin on street signs in China. The Chinese government's deliberate decision to place Pinyin on street signs could be a status-planning measure to assert the symbolic significance of Pinyin for China and Chinese society. Moreover, Pinyin on street signs could be a promulgation of the domestic romanization standard, the country's own coding conventions for street names. As an official in charge of place names in the Ministry of Civil Affairs argued, street sign written in own language is a universal practice in the international world, whereas displaying English on public signs is not (Chinanews.cn 2006). He spoke in a rhetorical tone, "Vienna is an international city, but all the road signs there are written in German, and all the road names in Paris are put in French, too. Why can't China's place names speak their native language?" (Chinanews.cn 2006).

For local governments, however, English is more instrumental than Pinyin for urban development purposes. Particularly in the era of globalization and consumer society (Baudrillard 2018), displaying English on street signs is conceived of as compatible with the internationalized orientations of metropolitan cities. As one official in Shanghai in charge of language uses on signs claimed in an interview, "the language use (English) on Shanghai's street signs is, strictly speaking, against the national law. However, the choice is made in light of Shanghai's actual needs" (Yan & Cao 2015). For the city management authorities, the politically-charged rhetoric for using Pinyin on public signage is pronouncedly true in certain contexts, yet it seems less relevant for metropolitan cities in the current tide of economic globalization.

The analysis above shows that the street sign space for alphabetic code in China is a contentious arena for language ideologies. The state-level authorities appropriate street signs as a locus for articulation of its politically-charged ideology, thus the symbolic values of Pinyin has been asserted. Some local governments and a large portion of the general public tend to value the instrumental function of alphabetic codes on street signs, believing that English on such public

signs is more pertinent to the branding of metropolitan cities. Therefore, the language ideology debates are essentially concerned about the wrestling of value rationality and instrumental rationality for the language use in the new socioeconomic situations.

5.3 Resilience Approach in Language Management

Although the Chinese government reiterates the use of Pinyin as a uniformed standard on street signs, it has granted some tolerance to the deliberate transgressions in some major cities. In the past, the Chinese central government impose top-down policies through its political dominance. However, in an era characterized by neoliberalism and diversification, the actual language problems and needs may render the coercive language planning inappropriate (Liddicoat & Baldauf 2008). The administration of street names is within the purview of Commission of Geographical Names, a state-level agency that has no power to govern the policy implementation. The state-level government as the principal policymaker may have realized that the Pinyin policy for street signs cannot be implemented through its normative power, thus they have taken a resilient strategy and tacitly consented to the local governments' urban language practice (i.e. inscribing English instead of Pinyin on street name signs). However, the Pinyin policy is still the central government's mantra. In a sense, the top authority's *de facto* resilient policy has accommodated the various needs, but risks to render the national standards less effective.

However, it is interesting to note that the street sign policy will be tightened when there are international mega-events (e.g., G-20 Summits, APEC conference) which are often taken as ideal opportunities to wage campaigns against deviational forms in urban environments. In such occasions, Pinyin tends to be restored on certain street signs because of its political correctness. The practice in Hangzhou can be a case in point. As the host city for G-20 Summit in 2016, Hangzhou chose to alternate the use of English and Pinyin on some major streets' public signs in preparation for the grand event. We noticed that on some streets near the convention site, the alphabetic code displayed on street signs before the Summit was English (e.g. *Beishan St.*, *Lingyin Rd.*), which was changed to Pinyin forms (*Beishan Jie*, *Lingyin Lu*) during the Summit. After the event, the street name was reverted to the original English forms. This code-changing operation was presumably a result of political interventions. It suggests that the Pinyin on street sign is not a means of communication, but a politicalized tool with symbolic power to rule,

control, assimilate or cultivate the readers (Foucault 1980). This resilient strategy in language management is striking in China, a polity renowned for its power-mediated governing.

6. Conclusion

In the public sphere of urban streetscape, the language practice on street signs provides a window to discern the conflicting ideologies regarding the values of different codes/languages in sociolinguistic dynamics. This study examines the language politics and ideology contestations revolving the code choice between Pinyin and English in China's urban context. Chinese government value the political significance of Pinyin on street name signs, and bonds the use of Pinyin with national interests. The constant planning endeavours to institutionalize Pinyin as the single legitimate alphabetic form on street name signs spell out the national ideology to uphold domestic standard in certain official domains. However, in the era of economic globalization, the symbolic capital of English is becoming a challenge to the political-correctness position of Pinyin on public spheres. Some local governments as well as the general public with English proficiency are in favour of English over Pinyin on street signs due to its pragmatic utility and its role for international branding. The wrestle between Pinyin and English on the public sphere is a reflection of the ideological conflicts between instrumental rationality and value rationality at the governmental level. In actual practice, the Chinese central government takes a resilient approach to manage the contestations, tacitly granting the "transgressive" uses of English street names in some cities, though reiterating the unswerving status of Pinyin for street names. The code choice contestation on China's urban space suggests that globalisation and English imperialism have brought about immense challenge for top-down language planning. Even for highly centrally-governed polity like China, language policy cannot be implemented via the traditional model of political authority and ideological hegemony.

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About the author: Guowen Shang is an Associate Professor in the Department of Foreign Languages at the University of Bergen, Norway. His research interests include language policy and planning, sociolinguistics, and Chinese linguistics. His publications appear in international journals such as *Language and Linguistics*, *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, *International Journal of Multilingualism*, *English Today*, *Current Issues in Language Planning*, *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, etc. Orcid ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8025-0506>; Email address: guowen.shang@uib.no.