

**Linguistic Landscape and Reflection of Chinese Cultural Elements:  
A Diachronic Study**

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the Chinese cultural elements reflected on the linguistic landscape in a multi-lingual community in a Federal Territory in Malaysia. The main aim of this paper is to examine the notions of linguistic landscape, language practice and Chinese cultural elements. This qualitative research applied linguistic landscape of Ben-Rafael (2009) to unveil the Chinese cultural elements reflected through naming the companies. Two sets of corpora data which were collected in the years of 2011 and 2017 with 212 and 233 brand names respectively. Comparison of Chinese lexis used on the brand names of companies showed the dialect related element is not reflected in the corpus data of 2017 and the additional Chinese cultural elements of concept of direction, numbers and concept of beauty are reflected. The Chinese cultural elements which showed in both data (2011 and 2017) are i) good wishes, ii) name of places, iii) surnames and names, iv) advocating Confucianism and v) dragon, phoenix and tiger.

*Keywords:* Chinese lexis, linguistic landscape, Chinese cultural elements, brand names

**Objectives**

Malaysia is a multilingual and multicultural country. The dominant languages practised in the country are Malay, English and Mandarin. There are languages practised by some indigenous groups in the two states on Borneo Island such as Kadazan-Dusun language (in the state of Sabah) and Iban language (in the state of Sarawak). Furthermore, in the business world which highlights the criteria of memorable, easy to pronounce and meaningful brand name, the cultural elements were also reflected through the process of naming the companies by the businessperson through the language (Soon, 2011).

Language expresses, embodies and symbolises culture reality (Kramsch, 1998, p. 3). Studying the features of a language is able to reflect the epitome of an era of the social life (Lin, 2000, p. 30). The Chinese lexis arbitrarily possess sound system, reflecting meaning and Chinese cultural elements (You, 2003, p. 238).

This study aimed to examine the notions of linguistic landscape, language practice and Chinese cultural elements by using the company signage in Labuan. The study attempts to address those research questions: i) will reflection of cultural elements through Chinese lexis on the brand name change over time in Malaysian context? ii) if changes occurred, what is/are the difference(s) of cultural elements reflected through the process of naming of company? And iii) what is/are the Chinese cultural element(s) reflected?

### Literature Review

There are languages displayed in spaces and places. These languages convey messages, meaning, purposes and contexts displayed and exposed in public spaces are needed to be studied and indeed to be deeply interpreted (Shonamy & Gorter, 2009, pp. 1-2). In addition, examining language in the public space provides different information about multilingualism and unveils the taking place of linguistic revolution - mixtures of language practices in linguistic procedures is displayed publicly.

### Linguistic landscape

Linguistic landscape (LL) is the sub-field of sociolinguistic and language policy which studies the public multilingual signage (Spolsky, 2009, p. 25). Linguistic landscape refers to linguistic objects that mark the public space – every space in the community or the society which is not private propriety (Ben-Rafael, 2009, pp. 40-41). The signage comprises public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings (Landry & Bourhis in Coulmas, 2009, p. 15).

LL analyses the language utilised, the relative saliency, syntactical and semantic aspects of the signage (Ben-Rafael, 2009, p. 40). Therefore, it can be referred as symbolic construction of the public space because it speaks out through languages and symbols evinces the landmarks of the space (Ben-Rafael, 2009, p. 41). LL is also the marketing and advertising arena of the corporations to exercise their influence and deliver messages. Therefore, the language in this domain is ‘real life’, authentic, dynamic and energetic used (Shohamy & Gorter, 2009, p. 3).

### Chinese language and culture

Curtin described language is closely tied to culture and it functions as a symbol of identity (Hewitt-Bradshaw, 2014, p. 160). Therefore linguistic landscape study is able to understand the culture.

Chinese language has inseparable relationship with the way of thinking, ideological and philosophical reasoning, patriarchal clan rule and regulations as well as trade (He et. al. in Liu, 2009, p. 27). A language is the symbols of culture. Culture encoded by language and the language reflects culture (Zheng, 2004, p. 149). Mandarin structure generated special forms of philosophy and shaped Chinese culture (Hansen in Liu, 2009, p. 33). And the Mandarin structure is characterised by a high degree of simplicity in representing the complexities of concrete objects, social and natural phenomena. Thus Chinese culture exhibits great simplicity (Wu in Liu, 2009, p. 33).

The language one speaks influences how one thinks therefore the formation of Chinese characters is so concrete and corporeal tends to lead to practical mind (Liu, 2009, p. 33). However the Chinese characters lay more emphasis on ideography and less on pronunciation. This attains stability beyond time and space and are not inclined to change with the development of language. Furthermore, Chinese writing system is hard to accept foreign words. The Chinese writing system is a key factor that shaped the cultural and social phenomenon. The trade guilds the rules and disciplines handed down from the old master and ideology of Confucian orthodoxy (He et al in Liu, 2009, p. 34). Liu (2009, p. 34) also described that the marketplace in China is as battlefield, and relating the Chinese character to a meaningful business implication is a strategic move of leading to half the work with twice result when a firm develops a Chinese brand. Therefore many multinationals have carefully and successfully chosen Chinese characters for their brands.

### Research Method

The diachronic sociolinguistic study aimed to examine the difference of Chinese

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cultural elements reflected through naming companies by the businessmen on an island by using two sets of corpora data.

### Corpora data

This diachronic study examined the notions of linguistic landscape, language practice and Chinese cultural elements by comparing corpora comprise 212 and 233 names of companies collected in the years of 2011 and 2017 respectively. Both linguistic corpora is collected in an island named Labuan. Labuan was declared as the second federal territory of Malaysia in the year 1984 and it becomes International Offshore Financial Center (IOFC) since 1990. This island has an area of 92 km<sup>2</sup> situated on the South Chinese Sea with estimated total population of 100,000 in the year of 2016 (Department of Statistics Malaysia). The majority of the Chinese ancestors of the island came from the provinces of Hokkien and Kwangtung in China.

The linguistic corpora is collected by applying purposeful sampling method. Photographs of multilingual company signage, specifically with lexis of Mandarin and other language(s) in the public place in the town of Labuan were collected and examined. Furthermore, the companies in the town area were focused because majority of the Chinese companies are located at the town of Labuan Federal Territory.

The company signage which were put up at the only shopping mall in Labuan, the Financial Park Complex was not targeted. This is because these companies are in a private premise and they are under the management of Financial Park Labuan. Therefore these companies are not fulfilling the definition of linguistic landscape - at the public space in the study.

### Data analysis

The corpora data of the study is analysed by using Content analysis method. This research method is used to analyse social life by interpreting words, images and media. The relationship between those aspects and the underlying culture is inferred (Crossman, 2017). In this study, the Mandarin lexis of the photographs is analysed to infer the reflection of Chinese culture. The comparison of data analysis of Chinese cultural elements reflected by the company signage of the two sets of data collected in the years of 2011 and 2017 are compared.

### Research Findings

Comparing to the data analysis of the year 2011, there are an additional of 21 companies put up their brand names with Mandarin lexis on the island in the year 2017. 140 out of 233 or 60.1 per cent of the company signage in Labuan reflect Chinese cultural elements by using Mandarin lexis. The analysis of corpora data collected in 2011 and 2017 is shown in Table 1.

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Table 1

Comparison of corpora data of 2011 and 2017

Year	Company signage reflect Chinese cultural elements		Company signage do not reflect Chinese cultural elements	
	No of companies	Percentage (%)	No of companies	Percentage (%)
2011	110	51.9	102	48.1
2017	140	60.1	93	39.9
Difference	+30	8.2	-9	-8.2

Furthermore, nine Chinese cultural elements were reflected through the naming of companies by the Chinese businessmen on the island in the year 2011 but 11 Chinese cultural elements were reflected in 2017. This showed the cultural elements reflected on the brand name changed over time in Labuan, Malaysian context. There were more Chinese cultural elements reflected in data 2017 than the data 2011.

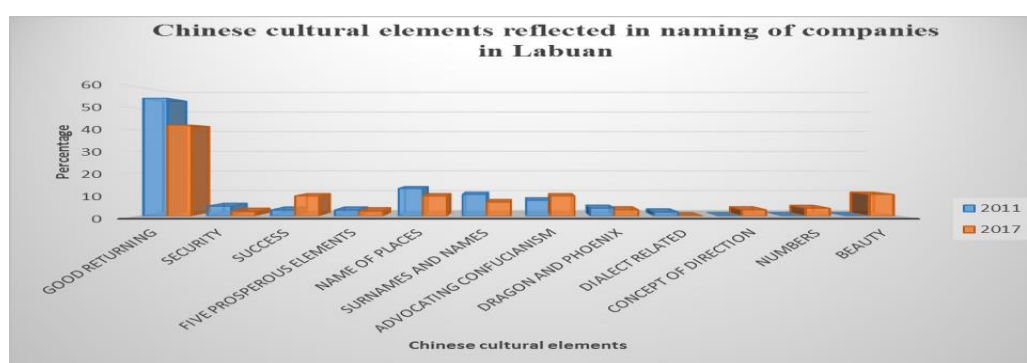


Figure 1. Chinese cultural elements reflected in naming of companies in Labuan

Nine Chinese elements reflected in naming companies in the year 2011 are good wishes which comprised of wishes of good returning, wishes of security, wishes to success and five prosperous elements; name of places; surnames and names; advocating Confucianism (ethics and moral values); dragon and phoenix and dialect related. However, the dialect related element is no more reflected in the corpus data of 2017. There are additional Chinese cultural elements reflected on the company signage: the concept of direction; numbers and concept of beauty.

Decrease of reflection of Chinese cultural elements in wishes of good returning, wishes of security, five prosperous elements, name of places, surnames and names, dragon and phoenix and dialect related shown in the data analysis of 2017 compared to the data analysis of 2011. However, the Chinese cultural elements reflecting wishes of success, advocating Confucianism, concept of direction, numbers and concept of beauty are shown in data analysis of 2017.

### Good wishes

The Chinese cultural element of good wishes is sub-divided into the wishes of good returning, wishes of security, wishes to success and five prosperous elements.

**Wishes of good returning.** The ten lexis, ‘丰’(fēng), ‘兴’(xīng), ‘利’(lì), ‘昌’(chāng), ‘发’(fā), ‘旺’(wàng), ‘盛’(shèng), ‘佳’(jiā), ‘顺’(shùn) and ‘胜’(shèng) used by the businessmen to reflect their desire of good returning. The lexis of ‘昌’(chāng) is not used by the businessmen and the lexis of ‘隆’(lóng) is practised in corpus data of 2017. The lexis of ‘发’

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(fā) is the most frequently practised by the businessmen in the corpus data of 2017 followed by ‘兴’ (xīng) (the highest frequency in 2011), ‘丰’ (fēng), ‘顺’ (shùn) and ‘利’ (lì).



Figure 2. Company signage reflects wishes of good returning

These lexis symbolise the businessmen's wishes of smooth, abundant, luxurious, best or victory through their business (Soon, 2011, p. 337). The lexis of ‘丰’ (fēng) brings ‘the highest peak of success and power’ (De Mente, 2000, p. 85) and ‘顺’ (shùn) or gentleness epitomised the business proceeded like meandering stream with smooth-flowing water (De Mente, 2000, pp. 361-362).

**Wishes of security** The lexis of ‘安’ (ān), ‘和’ (hé) and ‘平’ (píng) are still used by the businessmen to reflect their eagerness for security. However, the reflection of this cultural element in naming companies has lessen in the corpus data of 2017 (Figure 1). ‘安’ (ān) denotes safety and peace of mind (De Mente, 2000, pp. 2-3); ‘和’ (hé) or harmony is not just committed to formalised behaviour, it is everything being right, balance and contributing to harmonious feeling (De Mente, 2000, pp. 148-150).



Figure 3. Company signage reflects wishes of security

**Wishes to success** More company names of the island reflect the cultural element of wishes to success in the data of 2017. The frequency of using the lexis of ‘成’ (chéng) and ‘达’ (dá) showed almost the same. These lexis signify success and achievement respectively. Naming the companies using these lexis deduced more businessmen wish to have a success and able to have some achievements in their business in data of 2017 (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Company signage reflects wishes to success

**Five prosperous elements** Out of the five prosperous elements of Chinese culture, ‘福’ (fú), ‘禄’ (lù), ‘寿’ (shòu), ‘喜’ (xǐ) and ‘财’ (cái), the elements of ‘福’ (fú) and ‘财’ (cái) are reflected in naming of companies on the island in the 2017 data comparing to only ‘福’ (fú) in the 2011 data.

The frequency of naming companies using the lexis of ‘福’ (fú) is higher than ‘财’ (cái). ‘福’ (fú) meaning happiness is one of the popular Chinese good luck charms. The

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Chinese used the symbols of a cultivated field and a mouth integrated with heaven to represent a full stomach that is ‘福’ (fú) or happiness (De Mente, 2000, pp. 95-96).



Figure 5. Company signage reflects five prosperous elements

### Name of places

Naming of companies by using the name of places in corpus data of 2017 showed a decrease in frequency (Figure 1). The phrase of ‘纳闽’ (Nàmín) – Labuan, is still the most frequently used name of places used by the businessmen to name their company as this study is conducted on the island of Labuan.

The businessmen named their companies after the name of place they are located – Labuan reflects this is the place they originated their business. Stressed on the place where one originated – the hometown, is one of the Chinese cultural elements.



Figure 6. Company signage reflects name of places

### Surnames and names

Adoring the ancestors is the one of the Chinese cultural elements (Chang, 2009, p. 220). The development of Chinese surnames is closely related to the historical culture of the Chinese society. A tribe usually was named after the surname in the ancient China (Chang, 2009, p. 212-213).

The businessmen named their companies by their name or their surname. There are four companies named after their full name and five after their surname in the corpus data of 2017. Four of the companies added the lexis of ‘氏’ (shì) after the surname in order to form a bi-syllable name of the companies.



Figure 7. Company signage reflects surnames and names

### Advocating Confucianism

Confucius (551B.C. – 479B.C.) or *Kung Fu-Zi* is one of the most important philosophers in China.

*“If we were to characterise in one word the Chinese way of life for the last two thousand years, the word would be ‘Confucian’. No other individual in Chinese history has so deeply influence the life and thought of his people, as a transmitter, teachers, and creative interpreter of the ancient culture and literature, and as a molder of the Chinese mind and character.”*

(Bary, Chan & Watson in Liu, 2009, p. 37)



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The businessmen used the lexis of ethics and moral values to name their companies. The lexis of ‘忠’ (zhōng), ‘良’ (liáng), ‘仁’ (rén), ‘爱’ (ài), ‘信’ (xìn), ‘德’ (dé) and ‘光’ (guāng) were used in the corpus data of 2017 (Chang 2009: 220). ‘德’ (dé) and ‘光’ (guāng) have the highest frequency, followed by ‘仁’ (rén) and ‘爱’ (ài).



Figure 8. Company signage reflects advocating Confucianism

‘德’ (dé) or the power of virtue, is the ultimate force in shaping human being’s behaviour. The Chinese respect the virtuous and having goodwill people (De Mente 2000: 58-59).

### Dragon, Phoenix and Tiger

During the ancient time, the Dragon was the adored totem of Chinese. Dragon denoted holy and auspicious, it symbolised the emperor during the feudal time (Chang, 2009, p. 95); the phoenix was believed to be the holy bird in the myth. It symbolised the empresses (Chang 2009: 98-99) and the tiger was the king of animals.

The lion, ‘狮’ (shī) was offered by the king of Parsi (now Iran) to China. However, the tigers were originated in China. Though the Chinese were scared of lion, they were more scared of tiger and they esteemed tiger. In Chinese culture, tiger symbolised braveness and dignity (Chang, 2009, p. 100).

The lexis of ‘龙’ (lóng) and ‘凤’ (fèng) were used by the businessmen in both data of 2011 and 2017; the lexis of ‘虎’ (hǔ) is used in data of 2017 to reflect Chinese cultural elements.



Figure 9. Company signage reflects dragon, phoenix and tiger

### Concept of direction

The lexis of directions are the unique element in Mandarin. These lexis are not only describing the directions, they symbolised the ancient Chinese’s cognition of natural (Zheng, 2004, p. 33). The Chinese have the belief that the east and south are honour; and the west and north are inferior (Chang, 2009, p. 30).

Some of the businessmen in the island used only the positive directions of ‘东方’ (dōngfang) – eastern and ‘南方’ (nánfang) – southern for naming of their company because the direction of east is the direction of sunrise and south is ‘阳’ (yáng) (Chang, 2009, p. 30). This symbolises the starting point and bright future.



Figure 10. Company signage reflects concept of direction

### Numbers

The concept of numbers occurred among the Chinese since Yangshao Culture (5000B.C. – 3000 B.C.) through using symbols.

The number of two is the first even number. The Chinese primitive believe and Taoism held in high regard of this number. They believed that this is a lucky number (Chang, 2009, p. 193). In the corpus data of 2017, the businessmen of Labuan use the lexis of ‘双’ (shuāng) and ‘复’ (fù) which semantically means two.

This deduced the businessmen wish the meaning of two in naming their companies which is a lucky number may bring them good luck.



Figure 11. Company signage reflects numbers

### Concept of beauty

The lexis of ‘美’ (měi) is used to reflect the Chinese cultural element, the concept of beauty. This cultural element showed the second highest frequency in the data of 2017 that is after the concept of wishes of good returning (Figure 1).

The Chinese believe ‘美’ (měi) based on the order and beauty of the universe; the human mind and will to the harmony of the heavens (De Mente, 2000, p. 269-271). This reflected the wish of the businessmen to achieve harmony through nature.



Figure 11. Company signage reflects concept of beauty

### Conclusion

The finding showed an increase of ten per cent of company signage reflecting the Chinese cultural elements in the 2017 data compared to the 2011 data.

Most of the company signage used Chinese lexis to reflect the Chinese cultural element of good wishes: wishes of good returning, wishes of security, wishes to success and the five prosperous elements in both corpora data. The businessmen in the island had delivered the implicit message of wishing good returning, security, success and the five prosperous elements by reflecting through naming of their companies in the business domain.

The finding supported He's description of the function of Mandarin (in Liu, 2009, p. 27; Zheng, 2004, p. 149). The finding showed the language practice of the Chinese businessmen in the public space in the multilingual island not only used Mandarin lexis to



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reflect the Chinese identity, the naming of their companies reflected the Chinese culture and showing their way of thinking i.e. good wishing in the business domain.

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