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Commodified language in Chinatown: A contextualized approach to linguistic landscape[1]

Jennifer Leeman and Gabriella Modan
George Mason University, Virginia and The Ohio State University

In Washington DC's newly gentrified Chinatown, recent commercial establishments, primarily non-Chinese owned chains, use Chinese-language signs as design features targeted towards people who neither read nor have ethnic ties to Chinese. Using this neighborhood as a case study, we advocate a contextualized, historicized and spatialized perspective on *linguistic landscape* which highlights that landscapes are not simply physical spaces but are instead ideologically charged constructions. Drawing from cultural geography and urban studies, we analyze how written language interacts with other features of the built environment to construct commodified urban places. Taking a contextually informed, qualitative approach, we link micro-level analysis of individual Chinese-language signs to the specific local socio-geographic processes of spatial commodification. Such a qualitative approach to linguistic landscape, which emphasizes the importance of sociohistorical context, and which includes analysis of signage use, function, and history, leads to a greater understanding of the larger sociopolitical meanings of linguistic landscapes.

KEYWORDS: Linguistic landscape, symbolic economy, commodification of language, Chinese

INTRODUCTION

Like other aspects of the built environment, material realizations of language are strategic tools that are wielded in local politics, power struggles, and competing claims to space. Instances of written language in the landscape are not only artifacts of negotiations over space, but they are also productive signs: they have important economic and social consequences, and can affect those who would visit, work, or live in a given neighborhood. Most linguistic landscape (LL) research is concerned with language planning and policy. As such, it does not address the other complex social and political histories and environmental (regional and urban) planning policies that have shaped language in the built environment. In this paper we adopt an interdisciplinary

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9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK, and 350 Main Street, Malden MA 02148, USA

approach, paying particular attention to urban planning policy. We argue that material manifestations of language are implicated in the micro-level social, political, and economic processes that have led to the current landscape of Washington DC's newly gentrified Chinatown. We propose a reworking of the LL framework, one in which landscape is conceived as a perspectivized, ideological representation of space. We use the case of Washington DC's Chinatown to demonstrate the benefits of such an approach.

Most LL research assumes a straightforward understanding of the concept of landscape such as that put forth by Landry and Bourhis (1997: 25) in their landmark article: '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.' Most LL researchers adopt this definition as their starting point; for instance, Backhaus (2005: 105) characterizes linguistic landscape as the 'linguistic outward appearance of a place.' We argue that linguistic landscapes, like other landscapes, are subjective representations rather than objective physical environment.

In order to analyze the specific role of language in Chinatown, we draw on cultural geography theories of landscape as well as research on symbolic economies, and the commodification of ethnicity. We expand on current LL research by attending to the linguistic and spatial contexts within which texts are located, as well as the historical contexts that have shaped their production. This approach allows us to elucidate how the state and private enterprise commodify language and thereby also turn Chinatown into a commodity, marketing it and the things in it for consumption.

LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE AND THE COMMERCIAL NATURE OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Gorter (2006: 2) states that LL researchers examine 'language in its written form in the public sphere,' specifically 'in the sense related to commercial signage and place names.' Similarly, Ben Rafael, Shohamy, Amara, and Trumper-Hecht (2006: 14) describe 'prolific LL areas' as those 'where the major commercial activity takes place and the principal public institutions are located,' and Cenoz and Gorter (2006) purposely chose commercial streets for their comparative study of Ljouwert/Leeuwarden and Donostia/San Sebastian. Thus, it is clear that LL researchers recognize the overwhelmingly commercial nature of material manifestations of language in the settings of their studies. We want to take this recognition a step further, highlighting the link between LL and the commercialization of the public sphere. Although in much of the world, more and more aspects of public life are being commercialized, we believe it is important to stress that consumption is not the totality of social and cultural life, but rather one particular domain. We show how language in the landscape helps to spatialize commercialization, thus defining the public sphere (following Habermas (1989),

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the sphere of public, democratic, social interaction that is in principle open to all)[2] as a commercial sphere.

The blurring of boundaries between the commercial and the public has implications for understanding the genesis of linguistic landscapes. Scholars have classified the elements of the LL as artifacts of state-driven processes or as produced by individuals or private establishments ('top down' or 'bottom up' in the words of Cenoz and Gorter). Huebner's (2006) work in Bangkok, where the Thai government offered tax breaks to businesses who used Thai on their signs, points to the importance of analyzing both the LL and the history of state policies that have influenced it. We argue that the distinction between top-down and bottom-up signage practices is untenable in an era in which public-private partnerships are the main vehicle of urban revitalization initiatives in urban centers in many parts of the world, and when government policies constrain private sector signage practices.

EXPANDING THE DISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES OF LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE

LL research emerged as a methodology for addressing macro-sociolinguistic questions about language vitality in multilingual settings. For example, Landry and Bourhis were interested in how relative frequencies of English and French in the LL reflected ethnolinguistic power relations in Canadian French communities outside of Quebec. Ben Rafael, Shohamy, Amara, and Trumper-Hecht examined differential uses of Hebrew, Arabic, and English in Jewish and Palestinian areas of Israel, and Backhaus (2005) examined layering of old and new street signs in Tokyo. Generally, this body of research reveals a primary concern with whether and how the LL reflects and/or informs language policy. Language policy is not the only type of planning that impacts the built environment, however. Particularly in cities, the linguistic environment is also shaped to an equal or greater extent by urban planning policies. In this article, we focus on the ways in which local planning policies and current planning philosophies circulating at a national level have impacted the linguistic landscape.

LL studies are generally characterized by a quantitative approach, in which researchers document every material manifestation of language and compare the percentages of texts in various languages. This research often draws a parallel between languages in the landscape and the ethnolinguistic background, linguistic competencies, and language attitudes of the actors who people that landscape, thus suggesting that the ratio of languages is indicative of the relative power of various ethnolinguistic groups. As Landry and Bourhis (1997: 27) explain:

> Having one's own language enshrined on most private and government signs should contribute to the feeling that the in-group language has value and status relative to other languages in the sociolinguistic setting.

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At the same time, a number of researchers have examined the use of languages not widely spoken by the local populace, noting in particular how the globalization of English has impacted various LLs. Huebner (2006) remarks, for example, that English in Thailand is as likely to be directed towards Thais as it is towards foreigners. Like Huebner, Ben Rafael et al. (2006) and Cenoz and Gorter (2006) found that English was used to signify modernity or cosmopolitanism.

CODE AND COMMUNICATIVE FORCE

Given the primarily quantitative approach of most LL research, researchers generally have focused on the relative proportion of different languages in the landscape, without examining the content of messages in each language. Ben Rafael et al. (2006: 15) provide an important exception to this pattern by analyzing the 'areas of activity' to which particular signs relate, such as 'clothing and leisure, food, house-ware, and private offices.' However, this taxonomy does not capture the specific communicative force of the words and languages on individual signs. For example, a storefront marquee that announces the name of a restaurant such as 'Fish Cove' and a note on a menu posted in a window announcing a fish special would be lumped together. Similarly, Backhaus (2007) equates a bilingual Japanese/English subway sign to a French restaurant's French/Japanese sign without taking up the different functions of these signs. Whereas the English on the subway sign communicates ideational content ('subway' and '*Meiji-jingūmae sta[tion]*'), the French on the restaurant sign ('*Restaurant de Mireille*; *la cuisine française*') conveys distinction and a sense of authenticity. Backhaus examines which elements of Japanese on multilingual signs also appear in other languages and in this sense he does attend to ideational meaning, but he does not analyze potential connections between what a sign says and what language it's written in.

Also important to note is that many signs contain or consist of logos or product names, which are formulaic messages that often appear in a set graphic form. For example, it is debatable whether a single word ('Pepsi') which appears only as a logo in a photograph of the product should really be classified 'an English commercial sign' as Ben Rafael et al. (2006: 29) do in their analysis of a vending machine decorated with a photograph of a Pepsi can. Huebner (2006) touches on this issue, noting that the majority of signs with English orthography in two of the Bangkok neighborhoods he studied 'appear[ed] to have as their goal product name recognition.'

We advocate distinguishing between signs/texts made for a specific establishment and those made for more general distribution. In their analysis, Cenoz and Gorter (2006: 71) include 'very small texts such as those on the side of a sunshade or a safety-rack with the brand name which would hardly be noticed by someone passing by.' This conflates texts that presumably were produced outside the context being studied with store-specific signs. Like the failure to distinguish between logos and signs with more specific ideational content (such

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as store hours), the failure to distinguish between locally-produced signs and those that just happen to be found on the premises limits our understanding of what different elements of the LL communicate. Such conflations obscure the extent to which various social actors do, or do not, have agency.

A GEOGRAPHICALLY INFORMED NOTION OF LANDSCAPE

Whereas most research has considered LL as the sum of material manifestations of language in a bounded geographical space, Shohamy and Waksman (2008) suggest expanding the notion of LL to encompass all discourse, including oral discourse, that takes place within a given area. Following Lefebvre, they argue that public space is a dynamic and ever shifting construct, shaping, as well as shaped by, the discourse in or in relation to it (See also de Certeau 1984). Ben Rafael et al. (2006) also characterize LL as a social construction. They argue that LL should be understood in terms of the symbolic functions of language that allow people to use language to index identity and present a certain image of self, that support actors' rational self-interests in attracting clients, and that are borne out of power relations among different groups. Like these researchers, we stress that the symbolic functions of language help to shape geographical spaces into social spaces.

This emphasis on the importance of symbolic practices is consistent with geography scholarship on the social production/construction of space. Lefebvre (1991) argues that social space is produced through a triad consisting of *spatial practices* (the everyday practices that people carry out in a specific area), *representations of space* (dominant institutions' conceptions and evaluations of space), and *spaces of representation* (conceptions of space based on how it is lived by individuals 'on the ground'). In the field of urban studies, Lefebvre's work has served as a model for analyzing urban planning ideologies and technologies, the *sine qua non* of representations of space. By analyzing urban planning initiatives, we hope to illustrate not only the value of interdisciplinarity in understanding linguistic landscape, but also the utility of a linguistic approach for urban studies. (For a critique of the distinction between representations of space and spaces of representation from a sociolinguistic perspective, see Modan 2007.)

Low (1993: 75) remarks that

> Explaining built form in its relation to culture provides us with clues to meaning encoded in historically generated spatial forms. The built environment not only reflects sociocultural concerns but also shapes behavior and social action; thus, embedded in these design forms is a living history of cultural meanings and intentions.

We argue that this approach should be adopted in LL research, and that the kind of attention Low advocates paying to historical forces shaping the built environment should also be paid to the use of language in that environment. Further, attention must be paid to the micro-level context; as Scollon and

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Scollon (2003) assert, the emplacement of signs and their contexts of production contribute to their meanings.

We also propose that LL research would be well-served by a rethinking of the concept of landscape itself, based on the way the term is used in cultural geography. In this field, landscapes are characterized as representations of spaces that privilege particular subject positions and points of view. As Mitchell (2000: 100) explains:

> Landscape is both a place and a 'way of seeing' ... [It] is additionally a form of ideology. It is a way of carefully selecting and representing the world so as to give it a particular meaning. Landscape is thus an important ingredient in constructing consent and identity – in organizing a receptive audience – for the projects and desires of powerful social interests.

Spatial theorists typically use *landscape* in a way that derives from their analysis of European painting. Key to landscape painting is the Renaissance innovation of linear perspective, a technique that visually encodes the subjective perspective from which the painted scene is to be viewed. In other words, landscape painting using linear perspective necessarily represents space as viewed from one particular point of view.

As Cosgrove (1985) remarks in his classic article, the geometric technologies of landscape painting, as well as of garden landscaping, were similar to those used for surveying and cartography; thus Cosgrove posits that landscape is intimately bound up with these other forms of control over land. As he explains, 'the realist illusion of space which was revolutionized more by perspective than any other technique was, through perspective, aligned to the physical appropriation of space as property, or territory' (Cosgrove 1985: 55) through such technologies as surveyors' charts and cartographers' maps. Cosgrove continues that the representation of space in landscaping as an ordered and controlled entity 'very frequently complemented a very real power and control over fields and farms on the part of patrons and owners of landscape paintings' (1985: 55). Thus, the representation that is inherent in the concept of landscape both reflects and promotes not just particular perspectives, but material interests. In other words, the structuring of landscapes has material consequences. It is this notion that we seek to emphasize in the investigation of LLs.

SYMBOLIC ECONOMIES: COMMODIFICATION IN THE URBAN LANDSCAPE

In the post-Fordist era, cities in the U.S. and elsewhere are no longer able to sustain local economies based on manufacturing. Instead, cities depend in large measure on service and retail industries, industries that rely heavily on the symbolic economy, which Zukin (1995: 3) defines as 'the intertwining of cultural symbols and entrepreneurial capital.' In addition, the growth of the suburbs and suburban shopping malls since the 1950s has led to cities' loss of revenue as well as of residents. To combat this trend, urban planners and city leaders have

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sought to draw suburbanites back into the city by offering them shopping, dining and cultural experiences not available in the suburbs.

In their quest to draw out-of-town visitors as well as affluent locals, cities often turn to public-private initiatives to promote various kinds of 'culture,' including museums, theaters, and galleries, as well as restaurants. Urban planners use combinations of public monies, tax incentives and zoning provisions for the construction of convention centers and sports arenas, as well as special arts and entertainment districts, or to create new shopping and dining destinations in historical buildings or areas. Culture is used both to frame public space and to legitimate the appropriation of that space by private and commercial interests (Zukin 1998). As cities and themed environments become sites of 'shopertainment' (Hannigan 1998), consumption becomes culture, and culture becomes consumption. As Crawford (1992) argues, the effects of blurring the boundaries between culture and consumption are bidirectional: not only do non-commodities enhance commodities, but cultural symbols also become part of the marketplace.

In the case of Washington DC's Chinatown, the state and private enterprise use symbols of Chinese ethnicity and culture, including language, graphics, and architectural forms, to turn Chinatown into a commodity, marketing it and the things in it for consumption. As we will show, material manifestations of Chinese language in Washington DC's Chinatown are an important tool in the symbolic economy.

SYMBOLIC ECONOMY IN WASHINGTON, DC

Although the District of Columbia (DC) has much in common with post-industrial cities seeking to remake and remarket themselves, it also differs from them in important ways. For one, as the national capital, the District has always played an important symbolic role. Rather than a pre-existing city that was chosen as the seat of government, DC was created as a capital city, and the plans for the city were purposefully designed to foster a new national identity connected to the new Federal Government; the original layout of the city was meant to embody the structure and ideology of the new political system, as well as to promote its acceptance by the national populace (Luria 2006). Another difference with other cities is that DC never had an industrial base, with the largest employer being the federal government. Nonetheless, DC found itself in competition for investment with post-industrial U.S. cities that were leveraging the symbolic economy in their struggles to remake themselves. Furthermore, DC faced the same disinvestment issues as these other cities due to the flight of middle-class residents and capital to the suburbs in the wake of 1968 riots.

The consequences of middle-class out-migration have been particularly acute in DC, given the District's unique political structure and lack of political representation in the U.S. Congress. Whereas other U.S. cities rely on their state governments to distribute resources across urban, suburban and rural

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areas, and to subsidize services for residents and commuters, DC is a city without a surrounding state, and thus it does not receive this type of economic support. Further, the U.S. Congress has repeatedly prohibited the District from charging income tax on people who work in DC but who live outside its borders. Thus, although commuters from the Maryland and Virginia suburbs increase the daytime population by 72 percent (Christie 2005) and take home two-thirds of all income earned in the District (O'Cleireacain and Rivlin 2002), they are not subject to DC income taxes. The inability to charge income taxes on these commuters results in US$1.38 billion in lost revenue, and is a major structural cause of the economic difficulties that continue to plague the District (O'Cleireacain and Rivlin 2002). In addition, due to the plethora of federal government agencies, NGOs, and other non-profit institutions in the city, 41 percent of the landbase is exempted from DC property taxes, further challenging DC's ability to raise revenue (O'Cleireacain 1997).

Given the restrictions on the District's ability to charge income taxes on suburban commuters, and the concomitant lack of benefits accruing to the District from middle-class job creation, many of DC's economic revitalization efforts have focused on luring affluent individuals to establish residence in the District, attracting non-residents to visit the city, and increasing the amount of money spent within DC by residents and non-residents alike. Although suburbanites do not pay tax on income earned in the District, non-residents *do* pay taxes on goods and services (5.75% sales tax, 10% food and beverage tax, and 14.5% hotel tax).

Like other cities, DC city leaders and urban planners have turned to the symbolic economy in their development efforts, aestheticizing and commodifying the urban environment in order to produce distinctive urban experiences that attract tourists and residents. As has been the case elsewhere, the District has sought to leverage historic preservation and culture in the production of landscapes of and for consumption. In the words of DC's Downtown Action Agenda, the city should strive to create a downtown that offers 'special cultural and retail experiences,' where, for example,

> [the] historic detailing ... the sidewalk widths, the undulating storefront bays ... and the vitality of the signage ... create the impression that 7th Street is a dynamic place where interesting things happen. (DC Office of Planning 2000: 26)

Since the 1970s, DC's economic revitalization strategy has included city support for construction of two different convention centers, a large sports arena, and a baseball stadium, as well as new hotels, new retail centers and upscale condominium projects. Chinatown's central location close to downtown offices as well as tourist destinations such as the White House and the national museums made it a logical location for redevelopment plans. In addition, DC's Chinatown, like those of other North American cities, was already linked to 'culture,' a key element in the symbolic economy, and it was already a restaurant destination, a key site of cultural consumption.

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Urciuoli (2003) has shown that ethnic diversity can be commodified in educational marketing initiatives as a conveyor of distinction in Bourdieu's terms, and Modan (2008) has similarly illustrated how developers and municipal governments alike use ethnic diversity to market cities and neighborhoods as vibrant and cosmopolitan places. Likewise, individual ethnicities and ethnic neighborhoods are often reconfigured and 'repurposed'; having once been enclaves resulting from racism and marginalization, especially since the 1980s they have been turned into vibrant tourist attractions offering 'authentic' experiences. These attractions are often targeted towards the middle class, and often exclude the very ethnic groups being represented and commodified. For example, in the case of Vancouver's Chinatown, Anderson (1988) explains how the city, after decades of neglecting and discriminating against Chinese residents, recognized the tourist benefit of Chinatown and instituted design guidelines for the built environment to promote Chinatown's 'unique ethnic and visual character,' at the very moment that residents of Chinatown were moving out of the neighborhood, and despite the fact that many residents of the neighborhood did not support it. A number of recent studies have examined the commodification of language in the marketing of minority cultures associated with heritage tourism (e.g. Heller 2003). Zukin (1995) notes that such commodification divorces cultural artifacts from their social context, and this leads to an erasure of the inequalities that the heterogeneity of city life so often entails (see also Pang and Rath 2007).

In the case of DC, defining and selling Chinatown as a unique neighborhood both international and ethnic has been part of a downtown redevelopment strategy designed to 'preserve the historic scale, character, and heritage' and 'make downtown pedestrian in scale, colorful, and lively' (DC Office of Planning 2000: 26). This strategy is part of a larger project to define DC as a city of neighborhoods, in order to encourage tourists to visit areas of the city beyond the monuments and museums located on the National Mall (cf. Cultural Tourism DC 2008). As in other cities, the built environment has been a key mode of visual communication in the production of this new urban space. In order to understand the making and marketing of Chinatown as an exciting 'around-the-clock' attraction, and the multiple meanings and messages inscribed on Chinatown's landscape, it is necessary to look at the history of the neighborhood.

INVESTIGATING THE LANDSCAPE

The specific geographic space that we investigate in this article is the area that Washington DC's government has designated as a Special Treatment Area (STA) named Chinatown. In order to fully understand the story of the Chinatown landscape, we examined all municipal planning rules and regulations regarding Chinatown in effect at the time of the study, documents related to the redevelopment process that began in the 1970s, newspaper accounts of Chinatown over the past four decades, demographic data from the U.S. Census

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Bureau, and all signs in the STA. Our analysis of these documents helps to illuminate the role that representations of space – representations conceived of by dominant institutions – have played in the commodification of Chinese in Chinatown's landscape.

We visited the neighborhood in September 2006 and walked along both sides of every street, taking detailed notes on the material manifestations of language inside and outside of every establishment, as well as on street signs and flyers and advertisements posted on walls, poles, bus stops, and the like. We carefully recorded the languages used and the kinds of information conveyed in each language, as well as the relative size and placement of different languages. As a complement to our field notes, we took numerous photographs. We worked with four Chinese-reading informants who translated the Chinese language texts. We also gathered information about the establishments where language was displayed; for example, we kept track of whether they were public, private, or non-profit, whether businesses were individually-owned or part of a chain, and when they were established. Because most of the signs in Chinatown are on the neighborhood's two commercial corridors (Seventh Street NW and H Street NW), those streets were the source of the vast majority of our data. However, a small portion came from other public spaces. In addition to material manifestations of language, we also documented and photographed architectural and design elements of the built environment and streetscape, such as lampposts and banner brackets, sidewalk tile designs, door lintels, and stoop banisters.

After collecting and reviewing our data, we developed a classification system to categorize signs according the following criteria:

- language (Chinese or English);
- types of symbolic and ideational meanings communicated;
- time period that a business or institution was established (during the first or second wave of gentrification); and
- type of institution (business, non-profit, or government organization, Chinese-oriented goods/services or not, chain or independently owned).

The historicized and contextualized approach to the analysis of signs that we advocate enables a holistic understanding of how linguistic landscapes are embedded in larger sociopolitical processes. Such an understanding is difficult to achieve with more self-contained, synchronic approaches.[3]

DC'S CHINATOWN: THE SOCIOHISTORICAL CONTEXT

Located in the city's central core slightly less than one mile east of the Whitehouse, Washington DC's current Chinatown is an officially designated 9-square-block area (Fifth Street to Eighth Street between G Street and Massachusetts Avenue NW), occupying approximately three fourths of a square mile (just less than two square kilometers). The District's original Chinatown was located several blocks away, close to the U.S. Capitol. In the 1930s, the U.S.

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federal government decided to erect government office buildings in this central location, thus displacing Chinese residents. The On Leong Merchants Association helped arrange for the relocation of Chinese residents to the site of the present Chinatown, which had previously been a German and Jewish neighborhood (Chow 1996; Pang and Rath 2007). White property owners sought to keep the Chinese from relocating to the neighborhood, arguing that they would be bad for business as well as for housing values. When they were unable to stop the relocation, some real estate agents colluded with White residents to prevent buildings from being sold or rented to Chinese, thus limiting the growth of Chinatown (Chow 1996).

Not surprisingly, the displacement of Chinese and Chinese American people and the relocation of Chinatown to its current location around H and Seventh Streets NW coincided with material manifestations of Chinese appearing in the neighborhood. These included signs in Chinese as well as Chinese architectural elements, such as the tiles of the new On Leong Merchants Association (see Figure 1). Applying the LL framework as it has generally been utilized, at the

Figure 1: On Leong Merchants Association circa 1935. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Theodor Horydczak Collection (reproduction number LC-H813–2272-B)

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informational level, we might say that the newly reconfigured neighborhood landscape revealed the presence of Chinese-speaking people within the specific territory of Chinatown. At the symbolic level, the use of Chinese language and architectural elements can be seen as a claim to the territory, with the new Chinese and Chinese American residents and merchants inscribing the landscape with ethnic markers.

Through the 1950s, the District's Chinese American community grew only slowly, although the liberalizing of U.S. immigration policy resulted in the arrival of new Chinese immigrants beginning in the mid 1960s. While some new immigrants took up residence in Chinatown, professional and more highly educated Chinese immigrants often went to upscale neighborhoods within the city or to the suburbs, as did second and third generation Chinese Americans (Chow 1996). Nonetheless, Chinatown remained the symbolic and cultural heart of the Chinese American community, even for those who did not reside there. Chinese-owned stores and restaurants, often displaying Chinese language signs, served a clientele that included many Chinese-speaking patrons.

REDEVELOPING CHINATOWN: THE FIRST WAVE

The 1970s saw increased ethnoracial consciousness and activism among Chinese Americans, and growing interest among urban planners in the revitalization and development of downtown DC. Residents united in opposition to plans for the construction of a new convention center in the heart of Chinatown, part of a larger redevelopment plan that was also to include a sports arena, hotels, and government buildings. This opposition centered on concerns that Chinese residents would be forced out by demolitions and escalating prices, with opponents emphasizing a desire to preserve Chinatown's culture and community. Eventually, the DC Convention Center was built a few blocks away from where it was originally envisioned – it officially opened in 1983. Many of the one hundred displaced families moved to the Wah Luck House, a new federally-funded apartment building offering subsidized housing (Chow 1996). Designed by Albert Liu, a local Chinese American architect and developer with plans to build major commercial projects in the area, the Wah Luck House incorporates Chinese architectural elements such as the lines of balconies and it displays Chinese language writing on the façade (see Figure 2). This government-funded inscription of Chinese design elements, and Chinese language, onto the landscape was a harbinger of things to come.

Chinese community leaders and government planners eventually reached a compromise in the early phases of Chinatown's redevelopment in the 1970s and 1980s, and that compromise had a crucial role in the subsequent configuration of the landscape. In particular, participants agreed both that revitalization was desirable for the good of Chinatown and of the city, and that Chinatown was a unique cultural enclave worthy of protection and enhancement (Pang and Rath 2007). The agreement resulted in municipal regulations

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Figure 2: Wah Luck House (© Jennifer Leeman)

that sought to promote development, 'protect and enhance Chinatown as Downtown's only ethnic cultural area,' maintain ethnic-oriented businesses, and implement design guidelines and signage criteria promoting a Chinese-influenced streetscape (District of Columbia Municipal regulations, Title 11, 1705.1). Official recognition and preservation of Chinatown's cultural heritage was crucial for securing community leaders' consent for, and support of, redevelopment initiatives. Thus, a key goal of the municipal regulations requiring Chinese-inspired architectural elements seems to have been to assuage the fears of local residents concerned that redevelopment would mean the destruction of their neighborhood.

However, city officials recognized that highlighting Chinatown's cultural heritage could also be good for business, a marked shift from the time of the relocation. Thus, in 1986, when DC and sister city Beijing cofunded the gigantic Friendship Arch spanning Seventh Street on which 'Chinatown' is inscribed in Chinese, it was not only a recognition of the neighborhood's history and culture, but it was also part of a concerted effort to enhance the visibility of Chinatown, and of the city, as well as to draw visitors. That same year, the word 'Chinatown' was added to the name of the local Metro station (originally called 'Gallery Place'), thus officializing the neighborhood's status as a place and inscribing the name of

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that place on the local landscape as well as on all the Metro maps all over the city. In addition, a 197-room hotel was being built a block away, part of the larger plan to attract commerce and tourism. As then-Mayor Marion Barry declared, the arch was 'a visual symbol of the cultural and economic exchanges which will be part of our sister-city agreement and part of my program to make the District a visible, world-class city' (Wheeler 1986a). Similarly, according to Alfred Liu, the influential local entrepreneurs on the Chinatown Steering Committee viewed the arch as 'a magnet which will draw people to Chinatown' (Wheeler 1986b).

The polysemy of the arch, and of the material manifestations of Chinese culture and language, underscores the impossibility of establishing one-to-one correspondences between form and meaning in the built environment at either the ideational or the symbolic level. Instead, understanding the multiple and competing meanings of Chinese writing in the neighborhood necessitates a contextualized and historicized approach to this linguistic landscape. This point is brought home by the controversy that surrounded the construction of the arch. Whereas some community members welcomed the erection of the Friendship Arch, other local residents, particularly some who had fled China after the 1949 revolution, objected vociferously to any cooperation with Mainland China. Opponents disparagingly referred to the proposed structure as the 'communist arch,' (Wheeler 1986a: E1) and saw its construction not as a recognition of the cultural heritage of the neighborhood, but instead as an unconscionable offense. One group of opponents mobilized to fundraise for a second 'Protest Arch,' but their plans never came to fruition. The opposition to the Friendship Arch highlights that the built environment has multiple, sometimes contradictory, meanings; the fact that the Protest Arch was never built underscores that all the meanings cannot be gleaned simply by analyzing the material elements, because crucial aspects of a community's history do not always leave material traces in the landscape.

In the early 1980s, the twin goals of development and preservation of the Chinese character of the neighborhood seemed to be compatible: many of the new businesses showcased Chinese architectural elements such as roofing and window and door ornamentation, and often also displayed bilingual Chinese-English signage. Importantly, much of the new investment sparked by the city's redevelopment initiatives were Chinese-owned businesses that specialized in Chinese products and services.

REDEVELOPING CHINATOWN: THE SECOND WAVE

By the 1990s, large-scale commercial redevelopment in DC's Chinatown was driving real estate prices up and making it difficult for small businesses to survive. The small-business investment trend in Chinatown came to an abrupt halt with the 1995 demolition of a 5-acre lot on G Street for the construction of the MCI (now Verizon) sports arena. The MCI/Verizon Center ushered in a second wave of redevelopment – corporate-based gentrification, with a public-private initiative

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Figure 3: Chinatown and the Friendship Arch (© Jennifer Leeman)

that overwhelmingly favored corporate investment over small businesses, and that included giving city-owned land to major developers (cf. STA description). It was in this new landscape that the city designated Chinatown an STA within the downtown Business Improvement District (BID). BIDs are spatially-based public-private non-profit organizations that levy fees on businesses to supplement public services such as street cleaning and security. For example, merchants are responsible for the maintenance of the paint on the new streetlights. Such arrangements are often particularly beneficial for large corporations, which get tax breaks and zoning exemptions, and for which paying for public improvements is less of a financial burden.

Typically, BIDs stress the importance of creating a unified look and feel in the built environment, as well as highlighting or creating a unique neighborhood identity or brand. As increasingly demanding consumers have grown tired of indistinguishable suburban shopping malls and cookie-cutter festival marketplaces (Crawford 1992; Hannigan 1998), city planners and developers have sought to highlight the authenticity of the city. In DC, the Office of Planning is part of this trend to capitalize on urban authenticity, with the Downtown Action Agenda asserting that: 'The visual richness, variety, and evocative quality of downtown's historic environment distinguish it from its suburban counterparts.' Together, this coherence, 'richness' and authenticity make a neighborhood what the DC government's Office of Development calls 'a special place' – a 'destination location' to draw consumers.

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While city planners felt a moral imperative to preserve the history and culture of Chinatown, they were also concerned with marketability. Because the marketability of DC's Chinatown was seen as dependent on its solidification as a place, the solidification of Chinatown's identity was intimately linked with local economics. As the city's Comprehensive Plan (1984/1999) explains:

> [Chinatown's] role as a major regional and tourist attraction should be strengthened by ... developing a stronger Chinese image in its building facades and street improvements, and by attracting new development to reinforce its economic viability. (Title 9 Section 900.27)

The public-private nature of Chinatown's redevelopment highlights the problems of drawing stark contrasts between the public and the private that we noted earlier. In cities across the globe, the state plays a major role in shaping multiple aspects of the landscape, particularly when public-private partnerships are the main vehicle of urban revitalization initiatives. Government policies on language, zoning, and historic districting constrain or promote particular signage practices for private-sector establishments. In addition, the demands of the symbolic economy mean that publicly-sponsored signs are equally likely to serve commercial purposes.

In order to preserve and promote the neighborhood's Chinese status, the DC Office of Planning commissioned an architectural study to develop specific design guidelines for new development in the neighborhood. The guidelines recommended using Chinese architectural elements on buildings and public furniture such as lampposts and ironwork – including elements inspired from contemporary postmodern architecture in China, Chinese signage, and Asian foliage such as Chinese Elm trees. Many of the study's recommendations became part of the requirements for new businesses in the STA. Of particular interest for scholars of LL are the guidelines concerning language:

> Signage and Chinese characters are important design elements. Liberal use of Chinese characters in signage and decoration will provide needed Chinese ambiance in Chinatown. (Section 6.91 Chinatown Design Guidelines 1989: 42)

In this quote language is discussed solely for its aesthetic value, and no mention whatsoever is made of any potential communicative value. This is clear evidence that language in the landscape is not always a question of ethnolinguistic vitality, or even of language use.

Corporate commercial and residential redevelopment continued to intensify in the 1990s and into the 2000s. As Pang and Rath (2007) argue, the current look of DC's Chinatown can be directly traced to the city's design regulations for the area. Buildings are now decorated with Chinese banners, street lamps are rendered in Chinese style, and sidewalks contain visual references to Chinese culture. The MCI/Verizon arena was designed to give a nod to Chinese architectural styles, with the front entrance canopy showing what the *Washington Post* described as 'a curved dragon-wall style characteristic of

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Figure 4: Chinese banners along 7th Street NW (© Jennifer Leeman)

the neighborhood' (Fehr and Haggarty 1995), and the metro station entrance references postmodern Chinese architecture. Essentially all new businesses and residential construction display Chinese elements, with Chinese writing on everything from the Starbucks coffeeshop to the Bed, Bath and Beyond housewares store and the new luxury condominiums (see Figures 2–5).

While redevelopment in the 1980s (including larger projects as well as small businesses) was marked by Chinese-related businesses like Tony Cheng's Mongolian Restaurant, the national and international chains that have joined the neighborhood in the years since the construction of the MCI/Verizon Center have no particular Chinese or Chinese-American orientation. Newer neighborhood businesses such as Ann Taylor Loft clothing, Aveda cosmetics, and numerous chain restaurants (all of which display Chinese language signs on their storefronts) are targeted towards middle- and upper-middle-class consumers.

The increased use of Chinese architectural elements, and the more universal use of Chinese on storefronts, has coincided with drastic change in the racial and economic demographics of the neighborhood: Between 1990 and 2000 in the census tract that corresponds most closely to the official Chinatown[4], the total population almost doubled (from 787 to 1470), while the number of residents of Chinese birth or ancestry declined from 526 to 491, and 60 percent of those residents live in the block where the Wah Luck senior housing is located. In contrast, the White population grew from 91 to 741. (Black and Hispanic residency remained roughly constant.) Although per capita income rose drastically for all groups, so did the economic disparity between groups. While the income of Asians rose from $7,720 to $19,308, that of Blacks rose from $8,774 to $34,408, and that of Whites from $8,252 to $71,213 (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). Concurrent with this change in population came

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Figure 5: Starbucks (© Jennifer Leeman)

a decrease in Chinese businesses in the neighborhood. Chinese culture and language have been inscribed on the landscape just as much of the remaining Chinese population has moved to the suburbs, and affluent Whites have taken up residence.

LL IN CHINATOWN: IDEATIONAL AND SYMBOLIC USES OF CHINESE

In this section we discuss the distributional patterns of language, type of business, and era of establishment that our classification system revealed. In the following sections we will present and analyze examples representative of these patterns.

Analysis of the linguistic landscape in Chinatown reveals significant differences in signage practices between establishments from prior to or during the first wave of redevelopment, and those from the second wave. The earlier establishments – generally small, Chinese-owned businesses – tend to have Chinese signs both inside their buildings and on their facades. Further, the signs communicate many different kinds of information, including store name, help wanted signs, notifications of sales or specials, and menu items. These uses of Chinese generally appear as prominently as, or more prominently than, English. Lou (2007) notes additionally that Chinese establishments often display their

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names more prominently in Chinese than in English and they most commonly use green, red, and gold/yellow for their signage.

This pattern differs in key ways from second wave establishments, many of which are corporate-owned. Most noteworthy is that, while earlier establishments use Chinese writing in various locations and with various purposes, non-Chinese owned, second wave establishments display Chinese writing exclusively on their facades, generally next to their name, either as a (direct or loose) translation of their name or as a description of what they sell. This translation substitutes graphically for the name, and indeed several non-Chinese speaking DC residents have mentioned to us that they assume that the Chinese signs convey the name of the establishment. Further, corporate and other post-gentrification establishments use English more prominently than Chinese. Lou argues that the differences between signs in Chinese and non-Chinese owned establishments create a subtle polysemy in the neighborhood. We suggest that they also underscore different orientations to Chinese language that alternately stress its communicative or aesthetic qualities.

THE LL OF THE FIRST WAVE: CHINESE LANGUAGE LINKED TO CHINESENESS

Some establishments from the first wave of redevelopment do not specifically target a Chinese clientele or stock products marked as ethnically Chinese. These establishments tend to have signage exclusively in English, in the case of both individually owned business like Goods Deli (see Figure 6) and chains that established an early presence in the neighborhood like Radio Shack.

A second group of establishments uses Chinese to convey information about products and services to Chinese-reading clientele. Sometimes information provided in Chinese is not provided in English, as in the restaurant menus shown in Figure 7. The use of Chinese in these establishments is an example of language deployed to sell specifically Chinese goods, in this case cuisine and imported gifts (see Figure 8).

The Chinese signs in these establishments are closely connected to the interactional order that may take place within, as they provide information that contributes to service encounters and other interactions – ordering food, enquiring about a help wanted sign, etc. However, the signs also serve a symbolic function that is less connected to the specific information they convey. The symbolic function of Chinese writing in older establishments reveals an early commodification of ethnically defined places, which foreshadows the use of Chinese in second wave establishments. The phenomenon of non-Chinese people going to Chinatown to 'experience' exoticness and to acquire the cultural capital associated with an adventurous spirit and openness to other places and cultures is indicative of the current trend in themed environments. Nonetheless, the roots of this trend reach far back in time. For example, a 1931 *Washington Star* editorial defended Chinese residents who were under attack, arguing that they

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Figure 6: Goods Deli (© Jennifer Leeman)

'have lent picturesqueness to the city scenes [and] have done business with strangers desiring Eastern merchandise' (Knipp 2005).

Partly because businesses selling Chinese products target an ethnically mixed clientele, the extent to which the perlocutionary force of their signs is symbolic depends in part on the viewer: for Chinese readers (most of whom are ethnically Chinese) the signs provide information about the establishment and products or services available, and for those who don't read Chinese they add an air of ethnic authenticity. Of course, this symbolic meaning – as well as others, such as ethnic identification or claims to the neighborhood – is also available to readers of Chinese. The polysemy of these texts is reminiscent of the multiple meanings of the Friendship Arch, and again underscores the limitations of numeric calculations of the ratio of signs in one language to those in another, without attention to context or meaning.

THE LL OF THE SECOND WAVE: CORPORATE DEVELOPMENT AND PUBLIC DESIGN INNOVATIONS

In contrast to earlier establishments, non-Chinese-owned establishments of the second wave generally use Chinese only for their names, which are displayed

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Figure 7: Restaurant menus (© Jennifer Leeman)

next to or just below the English language name. The Chinese normally appears in smaller font than the English, with Chinese text less visually prominent (Lou 2007). In these establishments, Chinese is not linked to the interaction order. Indeed, any information that one would actually need in order to participate in a service encounter – store hours, menus, information about events – is provided only in English. Thus, English, and not Chinese, bears the functional load of ideational communication, while the main thrust of Chinese is symbolic. This is not to say that the Chinese in these signs is entirely devoid of ideational content – it encodes information such as an establishment's name (e.g. *Ann Taylor*), a description of what's sold (e.g. *hard liquor and beer* for Fado's Irish pub), or a translation of a slogan (e.g. *the spirit of flowers and wood, essence of art and science* for Aveda cosmetics). However, given the lack of connection to any information needed in a speech situation, it seems fair to say that the targeted clientele is English speaking.

The overwhelmingly symbolic force of the Chinese signage is especially clear in the case of Starbucks, a second wave business that translates its name directly into Chinese (see Figure 5). It is interesting to note the contrast of this Starbucks with the chain's retail outlets in China (see Figure 9). In China, where people are much more likely to read Chinese than English, many Starbucks facades

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Figure 8: Da Hsin Trading Company (© Jennifer Leeman)

display the company name only in English. The fact that Starbucks officials often don't use Chinese name signs in this context underscores that ideational considerations can be eclipsed by symbolic ones. This is also the case in DC's Chinatown where many people on the street do not read Chinese, and where there is less of a need to use Chinese ideationally than there is in China. In both locales, the language of name signs serves a primarily symbolic function.

The case of the CVS drugstore provides further evidence that the Chinese language in such signage is not targeted at people who speak Chinese. The windows of this establishment display a series of signs that purport to teach the meaning of isolated Chinese characters to people unfamiliar with them (see Figure 10).

COMMODIFICATION AND DETACHMENT OF ETHNICITY

New retailers' inclusion of Chinese translations of their names lends design coherence and adds to the sought-after feeling of a 'special place.' Although the intent of the Chinatown Steering Committee and the Office of Planning was to preserve and promote the neighborhood's Chinese status, the STA's implementation of design coherence has led to a branding of Chinatown as a vibrant urban landscape. This spatial branding, in turn, has led to the Chinese language becoming a floating signifier that can be used to signify, or to sell,

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Figure 9: A Starbucks in Hangzhou, China (© Gabriella Modan)

not just things Chinese but anything at all. This branding has resulted in a commodification of ethnicity as well as the delinking of Chinese writing from Chinese people, culture, or history. This is especially clear in the case of the ethnic (non-Chinese) restaurants that have recently opened in the neighborhood, such as La Tasca tapas restaurant (see Figure 11) and Matchstick Pizza.

In Bourdieuian style, restaurant patrons of ethnic restaurants often seek to acquire cultural capital by utilizing the symbolic economy to demonstrate their cosmopolitanism and sophistication. Capitalizing on this phenomenon, ethnic restaurants themselves – even those operated by large national or international chains – frequently employ discourses of authenticity in their marketing. For example, on their website La Tasca claims to offer a 'unique and genuine atmosphere so authentic that you won't find anything better in Spain.' Distinction can also be achieved by demonstrating the uniqueness of each individual restaurant in the chain and by using their locale as a selling point (e.g. Hard Rock Café London, HRC Bangkok, HRC Cairo.) The use of Chinese on La Tasca's sign ties it to its Chinatown locale and makes this specific Spanish tapas restaurant slightly different from the other La Tascas of this British chain. Of course the uniqueness and distinction of Chinatown applies to non-ethnic establishments as well; it rubs off on the experience of being

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Figure 10: A language lesson in the CVS drugstore window (© Jennifer Leeman)

served by scantily-clad waitresses at Hooters Restaurant, or on the cosmetics one might purchase at Aveda. It is just this distinction that is referenced in the Downtown Action Agenda's comparison of the city and the suburbs quoted earlier.

Our discussion of Chinese in post-gentrification businesses is not meant to suggest that there is no Chinese language directed towards Chinese readers. Although the resident Chinese population has shrunk, Chinese and Chinese Americans living elsewhere in the metropolitan area are still drawn to the local Chinese-oriented businesses, community associations, churches, and so on. People put up Chinese-language flyers offering housing throughout the metropolitan area (see Figure 12), and businesses post Chinese-language advertisements for herbal remedies and phone cards. Some new Chinese-owned businesses that cater to Chinese clientele have also opened, and there are several Chinese-run non-profit organizations that serve the local community.

We want to stress that the corporate presence and commodification of ethnicity in Chinatown are not the only forces promoting Chineseness in the neighborhood. Just as the first plans for redevelopment in the 1970s had input from members of the Chinese/Chinese American community as

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Figure 11: La Tasca restaurant (© Jennifer Leeman)

well as from business interests (both inside and outside Chinatown), the recent efforts to define the neighborhood as Chinese are supported by many within the community. Indeed, many Chinatown residents, members of the Chinatown Steering Committee, and City Planning Officials are invested in enhancing Chinatown as a cultural anchor for the area's Chinese/Chinese American community. One prominent example is the spacious Chinatown Community Cultural Center, a non-profit organization that 'seeks to preserve and promote Chinatown and celebrate Chinese culture, history, language, and heritage.' The Center offers a variety of classes, including Chinese language, ESL, martial arts, calligraphy, citizenship exam preparation and job training. Other events include poetry readings and a Young Asian Professional Happy Hour at an upscale bar. Importantly, the Center's treatment of Chinese language and culture contrasts with corporate businesses' approach. Whereas the latter use Chinese linguistic and architectural elements superficially (physically and metaphorically), the Center ties language and culture to social interaction and education.

The Office of Planning must walk a thin line between creating a future for the neighborhood as a cultural anchor that facilitates the creation of community and meets community needs, and a Disneyfied landscape that simply promotes

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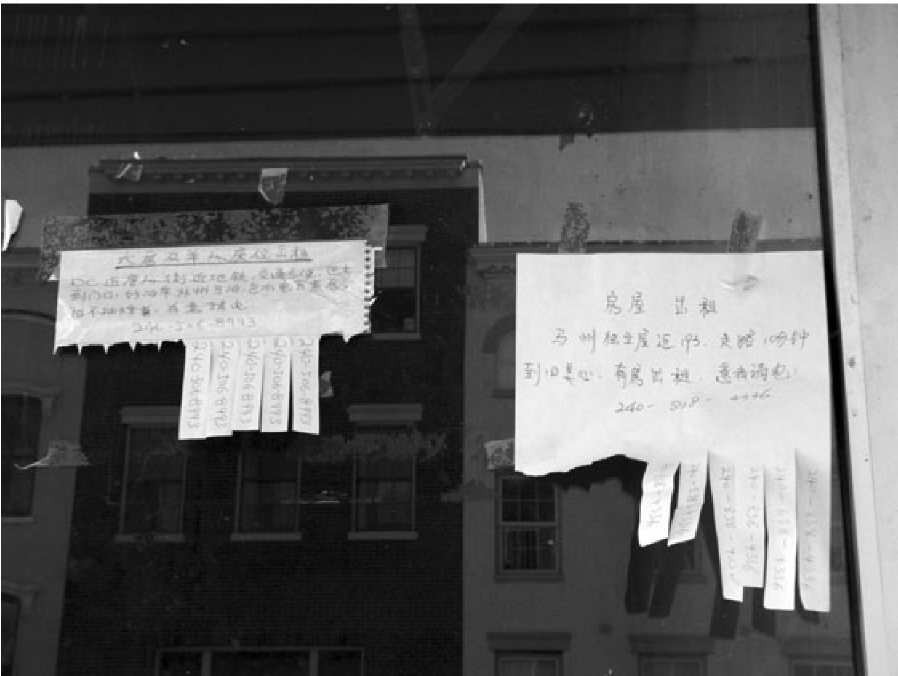

Figure 12: Flyer for housing in suburban Maryland (© Jennifer Leeman)

consumerism. Linguistic guidelines that focus solely on the aesthetic value of written language without engaging creative and useful ways to promote Chinese as a vehicle of communication – for example, by assessing the residents' need or desire for Chinese-speaking staff at various neighborhood establishments, and developing policies to promote the hiring of multilingual staff – unfortunately work against the creation or strengthening of a community feeling in the neighborhood's public spaces. New initiatives currently underway signal a more holistic and inclusive approach to redevelopment; the new Chinatown Cultural Development Strategy brings the Office of Planning together with the Mayor's Office on Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs and other professionals in the areas of urban design and planning, economic development, and cultural development, as well as members of the local community.

CONCLUSION

With the redevelopment initiatives beginning in the 1970s, DC locked the trope of ethnicity into Chinatown's landscape via the Friendship Arch, the name of the metro station, and the Wah Luck House. Since the 1990s, the city has required private and non-profit establishments to do the same on

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their facades. While the redevelopment initiatives have indeed brought about busy streets and attracted investment and consumer dollars, the government policies that favored corporate development with little protection for small business owners have led to a landscape in which few of the stories, struggles, and successes of Chinatown's previous and present inhabitants are invoked in the built environment. Speakers of minority languages who move out of a neighborhood may leave material traces of those languages behind. However, this is not the case in DC's Chinatown where written Chinese is largely an artifact of current ethnic commodification that reflects the politics of the symbolic economy.

State policies stipulating the use of minority languages in the built environment generally are designed either to promote the use of that language or to provide access for minority language speakers to information and resources. In contrast, language revitalization, substantive multilingualism, and empowerment of language minorities are not the goals of the Chinatown language policies. These policies provide no opportunities or encouragement for using Chinese as a means of communication. They do not portray Chinese language as a valuable cultural element worthy of preservation in its own right, nor do they construct it as a tool to empower language minorities or promote interaction and community building – as would be the case with a city-funded bilingual school or a policy encouraging business owners to hire Chinese-speaking employees. With the Office of Planning's turn to the Cultural Development Strategy, however, the situation may change.

As in our earlier discussion of landscape painting, the use of Chinese in the current landscape promotes an exotified landscape that appeals to an outsider's perspective. Chinese writing on Chinatown's streets is also indicative of the geographically informed concept of landscape in that the force of such writing is overwhelmingly aesthetic; thus, it works to privilege the visual. As Cosgrove (1985: 55) notes, landscape

> offers us the illusion of a world in which we may participate subjectively by entering the picture frame along the perspectival axis. But this is an aesthetic entrance, not an active engagement with nature or space that has its own life. Implicit in the landscape idea is a visual ideology which was extended from painting to our relationship with the real world . . . .

In our analysis we have expanded on the predominant framework of linguistic landscape by taking a qualitative and historicized approach, one which is sensitive to context and function. We have also emphasized the importance of attending to the increasingly commercial nature of the contemporary public sphere in the U.S. urban context (a phenomenon present in many other urban settings) and we have shown that, in such settings, a top-down/bottom-up distinction cannot easily be maintained. Our approach allows a deeper understanding of the ideological and material processes of gentrification, as well as the ways that commodification is part and parcel of these processes.

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Much linguistic landscape scholarship is concerned with power relationships among ethnolinguistic groups. Using the concept of landscape as ideological representation has led us to consider how the symbolic economy of DC's Chinatown – of which language is a critical part – influences interaction in the public sphere. In this way, linguistic landscape research can be a useful tool for understanding larger social processes. Our approach has enabled us to draw attention to the forces both inside and outside the neighborhood that have encoded a specific image of ethnicity. Chineseness works as spectacle, on display largely for the benefit of outgroup individuals and the linguistic landscape is a key site of this commodified display of ethnicity. The promotion of Chinese on everything from Starbucks to the MCI/Verizon Center has largely divorced the language from a community of Chinese speakers. In DC's Chinatown, Chinese writing has become less and less a means of communication and social interaction, and more and more a symbolic design element, an ornament in the commodified landscape.

NOTES

1. This article has benefitted from our discussions with Jia Lou, and the comments of the anonymous reviewers. We would also like to thank Xu Huafang, Ben Kao, Hai Zhang, and Weili Zhao for their Chinese to English translations.
2. For critiques of the accessibility of the public sphere see Fraser 1993; McElhinny 1997.
3. The role of spaces of representation (i.e. representations as lived experience) is an important area for further research that might be fruitfully investigated through ethnographic interviews of people in Chinatown. This issue is beyond the scope of the present study, but see Lou (forthcoming).
4. The census tract includes the entire Chinatown Special Treatment Area, as well as a few blocks of the adjacent Penn Quarter, another gentrifying neighborhood. Unfortunately, differences in the Census Bureau's data reporting make it impossible to compare the 1990 and 2000 populations in a smaller area.

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Address correspondence to:

Jennifer Leeman
Department of Modern and Classical Languages
Mailstop 3E5
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA 22030
U.S.A.

jleeman@gmu.edu

Gabriella Modan
Department of English
The Ohio State University
421 Denney Hall
164 W. 17th Avenue
Columbus, OH 43210
U.S.A.

modan.1@osu.edu

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