

# Why Signs?

The first question a reader may ask is: Why devote a whole book to Chinese signs? At least three reasons can perhaps be given:

1. Signs represent an important part of the Chinese linguistic landscape.
2. The ability to read signs is essential for surviving and thriving in the Chinese world.
3. Signs make for good materials for learning Chinese.

## Signs as Part of the Linguistic Landscape

Signs are seen anywhere in the world. But they seem more numerous in China, particularly if we consider the civic and political banners that are seen everywhere. With their omnipresence and easy access, signs provide an easy window into the world of Chinese language and society.

The contents of signs can reflect important social issues of the day, such as food safety, wastefulness, and environmental degradation. A glance at the current political banners will give you an inkling of what is going on in the country. There must be a reason why 文明 “civilization” is such a buzzword in signs. Signs are also barometers of changing times. The sightings of many foreign businesses such as KFC, Starbucks, Walmart, McDonalds, and Carrefour are concrete signs (pun intended) of the Reform and Opening up that started over four decades ago, while the recent plan to eliminate English translations in traffic signs once again reflects China’s vacillating attitude toward foreign influences.

The choices regarding language and form in signs also reflect language attitudes, and the cultural associations of these choices. What is official may not always be what is chosen. In Hong Kong, the author first saw Cantonese writing using the letter “D” in lieu of the Cantonese 啲 or the standard 点 to express the meaning “a bit” (Apart from the openness towards mixing scripts, “D” really sounds closer to the Cantonese word than 点 and is easier to type than 啲的). Many overseas scholars originally from the mainland have chosen to write in traditional characters, which cannot be solely attributed to conforming to local preference.

The existing literature on the Chinese linguistic landscape (for example Guo and Li 2017; Shang 2020; Wang 2013) mostly focuses on ethnolinguistic and socio-political issues such as ethnic identity, semi-otic functions, multilingualism, language choice, and language policy,

but devotes less attention to the formal features of signs themselves, including their very distinct stylistic and rhetorical characteristics. Also lacking is the use of signs for the learning of Chinese. To complement existing work, this book aims to focus on the following aspects of signs:

- The formal and written style
- Classical Chinese elements
- Special lexical and grammatical features
- Common rhetorical devices
- Dialectal and foreign words and how they are written
- Character styles and text orientation

The difference between the written and the spoken style in Chinese is so drastic that it is characterized as a “gulf” by Li and Thompson (1982). Signs are good examples of the written style, with its distinct lexical and syntactic characteristics. They are replete with classical Chinese elements. Even the sign for entrance 入口 contains the classical word 入. Signs can flaunt grammatical rules, in having more flexible syntactic function and word order. They often contain background-dependent “out of vocabulary” items such as aliases and abbreviations. Fleeting ad hoc abbreviations headed by numbers such as 五讲四美 are particularly opaque.

Signs accentuate rhetorical preferences deeply ingrained in the culture, such as the fondness for punning and the predilection for parallelism and symmetry. These rhetorical preferences are quite pervasive and are seen even in mundane contexts such as the warnings over urinals 贴近方便, 靠近文明 (see Chapter 17).

The cultural and regional diversity of China is inevitably reflected in signs, which can incorporate dialectal elements, especially from the more prominent Cantonese, Min, and Shanghai dialects.

More and more foreign elements are spotted on the Chinese linguistic landscape. The author experienced a shock when visiting a shopping mall in the coastal city of Ningbo a few years ago. In the whole shopping mall, not a single store had its name in Chinese characters, even though most of the stores were not foreign. Foreign-sounding names of businesses are also quite common.

Diversity is also seen in the choice of character style and text orientation. In mainland China, traditional characters are still occasionally used instead of simplified characters. It is not uncommon to see them on business cards, which convey the appearance of learnedness. Store signs sometimes also choose traditional characters to evoke a sense of nostalgia and of course tradition. Text orientation also varies, especially in places like Taiwan, where traditional vertical and right to left lines co-exist with the modern left-to-right orientation.

## The Ability to Read Signs Is a Practical Necessity

Signs serve real-world functions; and ability to decipher them is essential in navigating the Chinese world. But there has been an apparent paradox regarding the use of signs for language teaching: the ability to read public signs is unquestionably necessary for survival; at the same time, there is a glaring gap in the typical language curriculum: students are hardly exposed to signs at all, even at the advanced levels of studies. Books on reading Chinese signs have been few (Kubler 1993 is a notable exception).

The general neglect may be attributed to the blind spots that native curriculum developers likely suffer from. Indeed, it took a non-native scholar to point out the paradox: the most basic survival skill is not taught. The avoidance of signs may also be due to the belief that they are too difficult for learners. Signs typically employ classical Chinese lexical and grammatical features. The difficulty in reading signs may be due to another kind of blind spot, the aforementioned “out of vocabulary” items (items typically not found in dictionaries) such as aliases of place names, somewhat ad hoc abbreviations whose interpretation heavily depends on knowledge of current affairs.

## Signs Make Good Learning Materials

Even though they have not received sufficient attention in the standard curriculum, using signs as teaching material makes good pedagogical sense.

Signs are public, easily accessible, and thus provide free resources for learning about China and the Chinese language. Signs are authentic. They are not written by textbook writers, nor simplified in any way. They are more authentic than typical pedagogical materials in another way. To attract attention, many signs are rendered in artistically enhanced (cursive, outlined, or distorted) fonts, which may be harder to read than text in typical textbooks.

As the style of written Chinese is accentuated on signs, studying signs can heighten the sensitivity to stylistic difference between writing and speech. As they are replete with classical Chinese elements, signs can also serve as a more motivated and gentler introduction to classical Chinese, motivated by their practicality and made easier by the smaller dosage. In learning to read signs, students can acquire the most frequently used classical Chinese elements in modern contexts.

The practical nature of signs provides intrinsic motivation for learning them. Signs may be less daunting psychologically to learners, as they are typically short, often in fragment or phrasal form. They are also easier to remember as they are loaded with contextual information. Finally, bilingual signs and translation mistakes in them can accentuate the differences between the two languages.

## General Learning Objectives

When used as teaching material, the general learning objectives include:

1. Increasing awareness of the style of public writing
2. Acquiring common classical Chinese elements
3. Gaining familiarity with ‘out of vocabulary’ items such as aliases and abbreviations
4. To gaining familiarity with rhetorical devices such as punning and parallelism
5. Exposure to the great diversity in China’s linguistic landscape
6. Gaining familiarity with how dialect and foreign words are written in China.

## Intended Audience

With its wealth of authentic signs, the book can be used in a dedicated course on Chinese signage and for students and researchers interested in linguistic landscapes. The volume can also be used as a supplemental resource book for a course at any level in a Chinese curriculum. As the signs can differ in length and complexity, they can be selectively used with learners with a wide range of backgrounds and proficiency in Chinese. As the signs will be thoroughly annotated and explained in detail, they should be comprehensible to anyone, including travelers and tourists going to China. The practical aspect of this book should make it attractive to any potential student, who wants to be able to function in the real world of Chinese.

## Signs Included in This Volume

In this volume, the definition of public signage is interpreted in the broadest sense. Road signs, traffic signs, warning signs, ads, banners, couplets, and advertising billboards have all been sampled. In terms of length, they range from a few characters to multiple lines.

For many years now, the author has been collecting images of signs from personal trips to various locations in China, including Beijing, Shanghai, Xiamen, Quanzhou, Yunnan, Xi’an and Xinjiang. During the winter break of 2019–2020, the author undertook another signs-collecting expedition to China and took more than 1,000 photos of various signs. Noteworthy examples are selected for this book. Greater attention is given to signs that show special cultural, linguistic, and stylistic characteristics.

Signs from Taiwan and Hong Kong are also included, collected from past trips. This provides an interesting counterpoint to mainland signs, with lexical and orthographical differences.

Selected signs from the Chinese diaspora are also included. They are particularly important for the study of linguistic landscape, as they are relevant to issues such as linguistic choice, multilingualism, immigration history, ethnic identity, and political allegiance. Bilingual or multilingual diaspora signs also need to resolve the problem of how to cope with other languages. Only the signs that show differences particular to diaspora contexts are featured in Chapter 19. Some diaspora signs can also be found in other chapters. The diaspora signs in this volume are mostly from English-speaking regions. The author also collected some signs in Dungan (a Northwest Chinese dialect) written in the Cyrillic alphabet from his 2021–2022 Fulbright year in Kyrgyzstan.

It needs to be noted that the signs included in this volume are by no means exhaustive. They are limited by the author's personal experience and circumstances. An obvious lacuna is signs on sports and sports venues.

## Presentation Format

The signs are all from original photos taken by the author, albeit cropped to save space and eliminate distracting elements. Annotations include the following information:

Chinese text will be typed out. Simplified characters and left-to-right and horizontal orientation will be uniformly used, even when the original signs are in traditional format and characters. This provides an opportunity for comparison.

Pronunciation is indicated in pinyin. The usual convention regarding the marking of tone changes has been adopted. Tone changes of third-tone syllables are not marked; the tone change rule should be applied when read. The changed tone of 不 and 一 are given. Neutral tones are marked.

Meaning gloss. Meaning glosses are separated from pinyin by a vertical bar “|”. Unlike typical vocabulary lists, which only gloss whole words, the glossing of meaning in this book is done in three different ways, depending on which is more appropriate for the item in question:

1. When the meaning of the whole word is predictable from the meanings of its parts, only meanings of the component characters will be given. Glossing the component characters can make the meaning of compound words more transparent and more relatable to other words sharing the same components. For example, 轻食 “light meal” will be glossed as 轻 “light” and 食 “food”, which can be related to and contrasted with compounds such as 熟食 “cooked food”. To save space and avoid duplication, glosses for the whole words will also be omitted, when the signs are bilingual with good English translations. Character-by-character gloss may be done selectively.

## General Characteristics

2. Character-by-character gloss sometimes is not possible with words whose meanings do not seem derivable from the meanings of their components in a transparent manner. An example is 经济 “economy”, the meanings of whose components are quite opaque (the classical etymological explanation 经世济民 notwithstanding.) Then only the whole compound word is glossed.
3. Sometimes, the meanings of the whole words are relatable to the meanings of their component morphemes, but there is enough difference between the two. In such cases, both meanings of the component characters and those of the whole words are given. The component characters are glossed because the meanings of the component characters obviously contribute to the meaning of the whole words. The whole words are glossed too because their meanings are not quite the same as the sum of the meaning of the component characters. For example, in addition to glossing 美食 as “gourmet food”, its components are individually glossed as beautiful (美) and food (食). The meaning of the whole compound word is given for accuracy, while the meanings of the components are given to help with understanding and retention. It may happen that even in the same sign, some words are translated component by component, while others are translated by the whole word. To distinguish between glosses on component morphemes and those on whole words, the latter will be enclosed in parentheses.

Also provided are notes about other noteworthy characteristics, including:

- grammatical particularities
- classical elements
- rhetorical devices used
- contextual and background information
- style and stylistic alternatives

## Learning Outcomes

To accentuate the main foci, some learning outcomes are given at the end of each chapter before the suggested learning activities.

## Suggested Learning Activities

Some learning activities will be suggested at the end of each chapter. They include the following:

- Using suggested key terms, search online for similar signs as presented in the chapter.
- Using alternative character style to search for signs of the same kind from other regions.

- Type out the text of the found signs.
- Translate signs, to check comprehension and note the differences between languages.
- Identify classical Chinese elements, aliases, and abbreviations in found signs.
- Paraphrase written style in spoken style.
- Identify foreign and dialectal elements.
- Identify puns, parallelism, and other rhetorical devices.
- Analyze translation strategies in bilingual signs.
- Analyze mistakes in translation and correct them.
- Ordering from the restaurant menus provided.
- Use signs in a narrative on a related topic (e.g. a train journey.)
- Design a sign by following models, with stylistically appropriate words.
- Using a corpus ([bcc.blcu.edu.cn/](http://bcc.blcu.edu.cn/)) to check the frequency and time of certain terms.
- Using (part of) a line from a couplet, search online for the matching line.

## Organization of the Book

The twenty-one chapters of the volume are divided into three parts.

The first part (Chapters 1–4) is a general introduction to the main linguistic, rhetorical, and formal characteristics of Chinese signs.

The second part (Chapters 5–15) presents essential and practical signs.

The third part (Chapters 16–20) will cover more advanced signs, such as ads, civic and political banners, and signs with dialectal and foreign elements. Chapter 19 is devoted to the Chinese diaspora; Chapter 20 covers foreign elements.

There is a supplemental chapter (Chapter 21) on translation mistakes in bilingual signs, which will be categorized and analyzed.

An alphabetically sorted index and an index of signs with Chinese and English keywords.