The Hundred River Review

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Volume 8 | 2023 - 2024
The Writing Program
NYU Shanghai

海纳百川 有容乃大

The sea receives all rivers;
Its greatness lies in its capacity to accept.

The Hundred River Review is a journal of excellent student writing produced in our core writing courses here at NYU Shanghai. We celebrate essays that challenge our thinking, present us with new ways of seeing texts, build great arguments, and model the writing goals of our core courses.

We believe that students want to share their writing and read the work of their peers, and *The Hundred River Review* provides a space for this exchange.

All works cited as in the original text.

The Hundred River Review

Volume 8

Letter from the Editors

The 2023-2024 academic year during which this volume was compiled represents NYU Shanghai's first full academic year without pandemic restrictions since 2018-2019. As our university turns towards the post-pandemic era, we are delighted to publish *Hundred River Review Volume 8* as our first print edition since 2021. Our 8th edition truly showcases the diversity of outstanding work which students in NYU Shanghai's core writing programs are able to produce. Essays which we have selected this year reflect on the recent past, take advantage of loosening restrictions to explore our wider home of Shanghai, and consider in detail the interaction between East and West which NYU Shanghai is proud to foster.

Volume 8 opens with Li Jiasheng's piece on seniors and the Shanghai lockdown. Reflecting on lessons learned, Li challenges us to consider how the pandemic brought to light the "digital divide" between senior citizens and China's ever more technology-oriented younger population and government apparatus. As China's world of WeChat mini-apps and facial recognition purchasing is likely to continue expanding for the foreseeable future, Li offers a note of caution, reminding us that we "should learn from our elders" and avoid leaving

anyone behind during digitalization. Taking the opportunity to explore the city of Shanghai beyond our new Qiantan campus, Volume 8's second essay by Enkhijin Nerguibaatar scrutinizes the city's linguistic landscape. Focusing upon signage in the Jingting Plaza and Tianle Place of Korean Street (hanguojie 韩国街), Enkhijin's essay on Korean language use within this Korean cultural hotspot offers readers a window into one of the many diverse communities which call Shanghai home. Her work highlights how a diaspora makes 'home' in a new built environment, embedding a distinctive sense of place into the fabric of their everyday lives.

Moving beyond Shanghai's recent events and lived landscape, the second half of Volume 8 addresses the fields of film, literature, poetry, and philosophy. Our third essay is Julie Wu's "Weapons of the Weak." Wu artfully analyzes how notional 'submission' to Confucian patriarchal norms displayed in Ban Zhao's Eastern Han-era writings on etiquette and in the actions of the character Songlian in Zhang Yimou's *Raise the Red Lantern* can be represented as an attempt to seize female agency in a hostile world. While in Ban Zhao's case this attempt proved highly successful, safeguarding her political position as a key adviser to empress Deng Sui, Songlian's efforts resulted in tragedy. From subverting social norms within Chinese society, Volume 8 then moves

to a comparative study of norms between China and the West. Carefully analyzing the intersection between the Socratic attack on poetry with the ancient Chinese poetic tradition, Zhang Lanyue (Alice)'s essay offers an in-depth analysis of how *shi* (詩) evolved a distinct educational and political purpose that deflects the attack on poetry leveled by Socrates. Zhang's work is an example of the intellectual cross-pollination between China and the West which our core writing courses and NYU Shanghai more broadly are dedicated to fostering, and represents a worthy addition to our volume.

We are, as always, delighted to have received so many submissions to this volume, and are extremely proud of the masterful student work which we selected for our 2023-2024 edition. As we indicate in our journal's mission statement, "above all, the *Hundred River Review* publishes works that can serve as pedagogical models and provides a space for students to share their writing, read their peers' works, and engage in the exchange of ideas valued by NYU Shanghai." We strongly believe that this year's edition has fulfilled this promise.

Sincerely,
The Hundred River Review Editorial Board

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震旦
花旗集团

To Go Digital or Not to Go Digital: Learning from Senior Citizens' Shanghai Lockdown Experience

Li Jiasheng

Photo Credit: "Standing Guard" by Zhang Cheng

Faculty Introduction

Li Jiasheng's critique of the rapid migration of services necessary for everyday life to smartphone apps and miniprograms is not only thoughtful and measured in its analysis, but also passionate and compassionate in its motivation. The essay begins with a moment of "fury" at an elderly woman who cuts in line, fury that immediately resolves into empathy as Jiasheng, reflecting on an experience that all city dwellers know well, recognizes not only his grandfather's plight in the face of the digitization of everyday life but that of countless elderly citizens. The woman can't pay by smartphone app and must instead disrupt the efficient flow of data by counting out hard cash. And what if it were an emergency? What if she couldn't cut in line in front of a college student but *had* to use multiple apps to get food, water, medicine? Jiasheng's framing of his rigorous investigation with personal experience arises from his experience of the Spring 2022 zero-Covid Shanghai emergency lockdown when many seniors struggled with health codes, group buy apps for food, and confusing, overflowing chats.

In our "Walking as Inquiry" version of WAI, students explored the work of urban geographers, ethnographers, urbanists, great essayists like Eileen Chang,

and above all the “slow journalism” of visiting writer Paul Salopek and his *Out of Eden Walk*. They were challenged to use Shanghai as a site of inquiry, and in walking and sharpening their attention by slowing down, observing, describing and reflecting on specific moments, they developed final research projects that arose from their direct engagement with the city.

Jiasheng’s essay is exemplary. It begins with a specific everyday problem that matters to the writer then moves into strong analysis that draws on quality scholarly sources to make the reader both care and think hard about our overreliance on emerging digital technologies, especially during times of crisis and with regard to those most vulnerable among us.

David Perry
Clinical Professor in the Writing Program

To Go Digital or Not to Go Digital: Learning from Senior Citizens' Shanghai Lockdown Experience

Li Jiasheng

An old lady cut in line when I was about to pay the medical fee to treat my stomach ache. I glared at her but curbed my fury for the sake of her age. She took some red bills from her wallet after the cashier told her how much she should pay. It took me a few seconds to finally recognize these red bills as cash. I was shocked. Living in Shanghai where digitalization is highly promoted, I am so accustomed to digital payment platforms like Alipay that payments in cash have become eccentric to me. However, senior citizens who are not familiar with online services seem to still need non-digital options in the time of digitalization. This experience with the old lady in March of 2023 reminded me of how my grandfather struggled with digital technology during the "zero-Covid" Shanghai lockdown of 2022. He could not use the WeChat group-buying services and other smartphone mini-programs or apps to buy food or med-

icine because of his near blindness.[1] It was not until a few weeks into the lockdown period that the community workers told him that he could call them to help him get the supplies he needed. He told me afterward that he thought that senior citizens like him were casualties of digitalization and the inability to use digital services gave him a sense of being left out.

What does the need for offline alternatives to smartphone digital services and support for senior citizens in Shanghai during the pandemic, a time when almost everything was online, tell us about non-digital options? In their 2022 study of COVID-19 and smartphone use among urban Chinese seniors in 2020, Anqi Chen et al. note that in 2020 an estimated population of elderly people over 60 reached 260 million while only 110 million of them had access to the Internet at that time creating a large "digital divide" (1). During the pandemic, China developed a health code system with apps and

[1] Group-buying during the lockdown went beyond traditional delivery services such as Meituan, one of China's leading digital food delivery services. Community group-buying took off quickly through social media, mainly on WeChat, a platform that combines chat with many everyday functions, where "residents at the same address band[ed] together to bulk buy groceries or meals from suppliers or restaurants, placing single orders that could add up to thousands of dollars" and "once enough buyers sign[ed] up and [made] a payment, vendors [would] dispatch the order to the complex usually days later, and building security or volunteers [would] then drop off each order door-to-door" (Horwitz).

mini-programs that varied from city to city to restrict people's movement based on their health condition, travel history, and contact with infected patients all around the country (Chen et al. 1). This pushed the country to go almost entirely digital, especially during Shanghai's 2022 lockdown, which NYU Shanghai professor and global public health expert Brian J. Hall called "the largest known city-wide lockdown in the world":

> The entire population of Shanghai was issued stay-at-home orders, and most of the gates to residential compounds in the city were sealed, restricting mobility. [Because of] the rapid implementation of the lockdown and the length of the lockdown period, the city was not prepared to manage the logistic challenges ... residents were unable to leave their homes to purchase food in person, and few food deliveries were available. (Hall et. al 284)

Specifically in Shanghai, there was guidance and instructions for the seniors in advance to help them follow the trend of digitalization, but they still ended up needing assistance from offline options and alternatives (Chen et al. 1)—a powerful reminder that in an age of successive waves of technology optimism, from cryptocurrency to the metaverse and ChatGPT, it is crucial not to rely on everything going digital and to pro-

vide offline alternatives and non-digital options, which we can learn from experience of senior citizens who struggled to use digital technology in Shanghai during the pandemic.

The “digital divide” among senior citizens and other age groups had already been noticed before the pandemic based on the promotion and even imposition of digital tools in China. Even before the pandemic, many elderly people seemed “to be separated from society by an invisible wall” due to the significant inequality of access to digital technology between the elderly and younger age groups (Chen et al. 2). When studying digital disconnection among older citizens, Rutong Jiao noticed that China had released several policies related to seniors and the Internet, such as the “Internet + Pension” in the 2010s (2). In other words, China had attached the importance of dealing with obstacles to senior citizens’ use and accessibility of digital services and had taken action to try to bridge the gap, though with mixed results.

Incentives for the elderly to get access to and use digital services directly can be classified in two basic ways: age-appropriate versions and instruction tutorials. Many companies have been developing to offer seniors quality Internet services with enlarged words and a simplified user interface (Han). In addition, the

instruction tutorials include family support and community service (Chen et al. 6). Children of the seniors are often willing to teach the general functions of apps on mobile phones, and community volunteers set up classes for the elderly to learn how to use smartphones (Chen et al. 6). Ideally, such initiatives could pave the way for seniors to go digital from basic daily social media apps like WeChat.

However, elderly people still often struggle in the complex digital world for both physical and psychological reasons. Physiologically speaking, as people get older, their learning ability declines due to weakened neuron control and a decrease in brain activities (Jiao 1). This can lead to psychological escapism, diminishing the willingness of seniors to directly operate digital services (Chen et al. 6). Many are afraid of trying new things, of potential privacy leakages, and of being an outsider in the Internet community (Jiao 1). For these reasons and many others, the elderly continue to find it challenging to learn how to use apps even with age-appropriate versions tailored to their situations and assistance from younger generations.

For such reasons, we should not push seniors to go entirely digital, as the pandemic made painfully clear. For example, during the lockdown, while it was frustrating for me and many of my friends when platforms be-

came overloaded and unresponsive, such experiences were even more frustrating for older people. Factors like an unresponsive platform could exacerbate seniors' frustrations with reliance on app-based services, especially when they had other types of trouble with health codes and group-buying (Chen et al. 3). Even if they were fully aware of how to use smartphones, food security and delivery were often still a problem (Hall et al. 284).

Of course, the sources that I have access to do not necessarily reflect the full extent of the senior citizens' difficulties when it comes to digital access during the pandemic. During the pandemic, it was hard enough to gather direct support evidence due to political sensitivity, censorship in China, and the difficulties of authenticity validation of English-language sources, and in its wake, some previously available information has been removed. I chose news articles about offline services and support for seniors from SHINE, an English-language newspaper website under the Shanghai committee of the Chinese Communist Party, instead. The scenes mentioned did not apply to the whole picture of the situation during the pandemic in Shanghai, but they still contributed to easing a certain number of seniors to access digital services to some extent. Despite often poor-intensity information and censorship, we still can form a clear picture based on available sources of how

vulnerable seniors were because of the overreliance on the virtual and a lack of non-digital alternatives and offline assistance. The overreliance on digitalization is the focus. The pandemic simply shows how such overreliance can fail in many cases, and we can learn many valuable lessons from the experience of seniors during the Shanghai lockdown.

Given that the experience shows the challenges faced by senior citizens when using online services during the lockdown, the solution to bridging the digital divide should not be limited to digital assistance alone. Offline alternatives and non-digital assistance and options should be implemented as a choice. Fortunately, Shanghai community workers also recognized the inefficiency of online services and began to find offline solutions during the lockdown. First, seniors should get access to a similar experience of natively digital services with offline passes. The Shanghai version of the health code was called *suishenma* (随申码, Shanghai Health QR Code). To enter public spaces and do PCR tests, people had to show the code to get access (Chen et al. 1). When it was first launched, teenagers and senior citizens who didn't have smartphones could also use ID cards and hand write personal information to register their entrances and record their traces (Chen et al. 4). As the restriction got tighter during the lockdown, community service centers in Shanghai offered

printed “offline *suishenma*” for senior citizens to apply by their digital code or their ID card. They could also use the machines there to replace or report the loss of paper versions (Yang et al.). The service made the lives of senior citizens easier, avoiding embarrassing and exhausting operation problems such as Internet disconnection. In the end, senior citizens could go out without smartphones to visit public places as long as they took the offline code with them.

The adaptation of Shanghai health workers to the non-digital needs of the elderly indicates that offline options remain necessary to help the elderly, especially offline alternatives for natively digital applications like health codes. “Natively digital applications” refers to digital services that have no offline prototype. The health code is special because it originated from the online context. The logic of other commonly used digital services like car-hailing is actually translating people’s daily lives without Internet access to an online platform. But there was no non-digital version of the health code before it was launched. Therefore, offline alternatives should be created for natively digital applications to bridge the gap. Then, seniors don’t have to use smartphones to directly use the native digital applications but use offline alternatives instead to have a similar experience.

In addition, we should preserve offline assistance for seniors to use digital services. One of the examples during the pandemic is the “informal agents” including younger relatives or community workers. Often such agents were simply neighbors, family members, local business people, and sometimes simply a stranger in a position to help. Besides the offline alternatives mentioned above, children could attach seniors’ information and apply for a “family health code” on their phones if their parents don’t have smartphones (Chen et al. 4). During the lockdown in 2022, community workers used their own smartphones to register the information of the seniors to generate the health code if their children didn’t live with them (Yang). Therefore, rather than letting younger generations tutor them on how to use the smartphone, elderly people could appoint others as “informal agents” to access and use a digital service.

To meet the seniors halfway in bridging the digital gap, they could have some third party to assist them with the operations. For the health code, such “informal agents” served as the third party to let the seniors get their PCR tests. As a result, the elderly were still engaged in the utilization of digital services with the support of others. At the same time, they did not go digital themselves.

Furthermore, we should conserve the non-digital options for the older generation to have a stable

sense of life. During the lockdown, it would be much harder for the seniors to get the necessities like fresh food via apps and mini-programs and to join community group-buying so they severely needed volunteers to assist them (Hall et al. 284). In some communities, neighborhood community staff reached out to the nearby shops to bring food to the complex gate where the volunteers in COVID-19 protective suits assisted the shopping to relieve the pressure (Yang). Senior citizens who relied on community restaurants and delivery services could collect the food themselves at the gate (Yang). The group-buying at the gate and food delivery put some elderly people at ease for a few days. They did not need to trouble to figure out how to use group-buying apps to receive food. The restoration of patterns before digitalization went closer to the normal life of seniors, which liberated them from the transformation to online shopping.

The world was completely offline for centuries, and we should save some non-digital options when we transform everything digitally. Seniors had the chance to recreate the daily service partially. The group-buying system came to the real world as a market and the food delivery service stayed on track. Traditionally, we would advocate the digital transformation of the real economy. In these cases, however, we should do the reversed order, bringing back the real in-person interactions to

bridge the digital divide.

Therefore, digital services should be just one of several means of doing business. Offline alternatives reduce seniors' reliance on digital services with physical substitutes while non-digital options and assistance such as "informal agents" still let the seniors have an indirect attachment to digital services. What matters is not the form of the entrance to the service, but the products supplied. Seniors are here for what they can get from the digital service, not for the digital world itself.

Seniors should not be confined to going digital as the only method to narrow the digital divide between them and other age groups, and offline and non-digital alternatives should be offered. Admittedly, the deployment to encourage senior citizens to use smartphones is the easiest way to welcome them into the digital era. However, the world cannot be completely online for the accessibility and the capacity of digital services. From the senior citizen's perspective, they should always have the opportunity to quit the Internet. From the supplements introduced above, we should question the feasibility of the entire digital transformation. In the trends of moving to a digital world, we should translate the natively digital service to some offline alternatives. The priority of experience would be then promoted, turning the blind craving for online platforms upside down.

What's more, we should keep in mind the importance of leaving some non-digital options behind when we boost products and services to embrace e-commerce. After all, complete reliance on digitalization will only cause side effects, neglecting the essential care for seniors. Seniors should also keep an open mind and ask for help if possible when they encounter difficulties employing digital services. The goal is to get the service and make life easier for everyone.

Total reliance on digital technology is not as feasible as imagined, and additional non-digital support should be provided for seniors during digitalization. The pandemic, policies, and restrictions in Shanghai composed a hypothesis of extreme digitalization. We should learn from our elders.

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The Linguistic Landscape Analysis of the Jingting Plaza and Tianle Place of Korean Street (韩国街) in Shanghai, China

Enkhjin Nerguibaatar

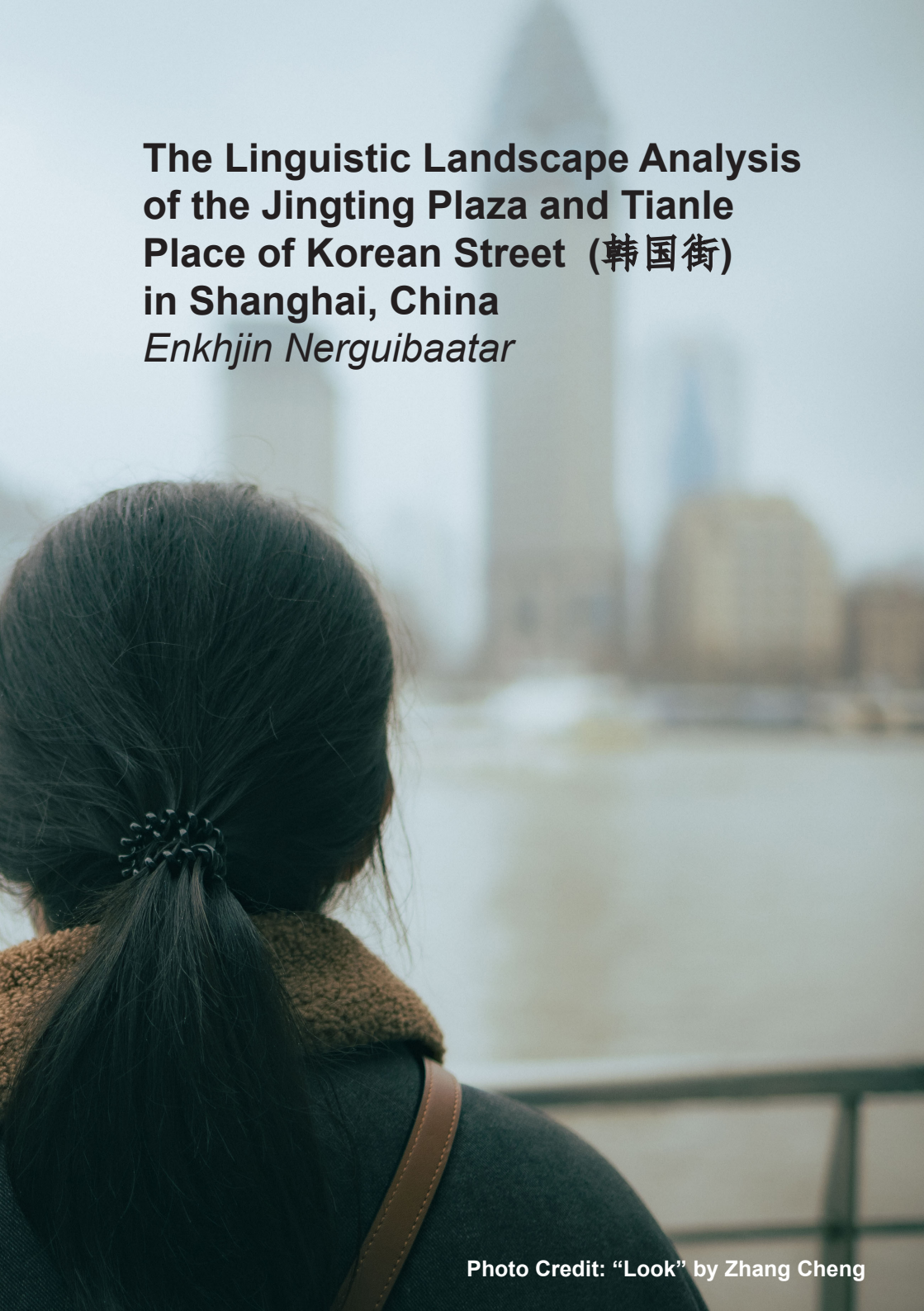

Photo Credit: “Look” by Zhang Cheng

Faculty Introduction

Great cities gather people from all over the world. In these dynamic centers, diverse cultures and languages mix and mingle. We hope that such contact avoids devolving into conflict and, instead, grows into an ethic of cosmopolitan openness. What are some concrete and material strategies that people use to navigate and negotiate linguistic differences in cosmopolitan cities like Shanghai, especially in public spaces? Studies of linguistic landscapes investigate some ways that written language found in street signs, shopfronts, and advertisements negotiate these differences.

Enkhjin's paper is an ambitious study of an area in Shanghai's Minhang District that's commonly known as Koreatown. Her research reveals how Korean immigrants and Chinese residents are negotiating linguistic differences in public spaces. She clearly defined her data set, thoroughly collected her evidence, and insightfully analyzed the signs. Enkhjin confirmed her hypothesis that the presence of Korean speakers in the area would affect the presentation of visible languages within the space. More importantly, she discovered specific strategies people use to negotiate linguistic and cultural differences in this Shanghai neighborhood. Enkhjin's study is original research, and it contributes

new knowledge to discussions of public spaces and sociolinguistics.

Mark Brantner
Clinical Associate Professor in the Writing Program

The Linguistic Landscape Analysis of the Jingting Plaza and Tianle Place of Korean Street (韩国街) in Shanghai, China

Enkhjin Nerguibaatar

Abstract

The identity of a specific region is defined by its semiotics, particularly its linguistic landscape, which represents the residents and culture. Using the evidence that Korean culture has been prominent around cosmopolitan cities like Shanghai, this study explores the Korean language representation in Korean Street (韩国街) located in the Minhang District in Shanghai, China, as Korean immigrants densely inhabit it. I hypothesize that the repetition of Korean language usage in signs can elucidate language predominance and the presence of Korean culture representation in Shanghai. By utilizing Scollon and Scollon's theory of semiotics as the main method of analysis (Scollon and Scollon 91), the linguistic landscape of Korean Street depicts predominance in the Korean language. The multilingual usage of commercial and noncommercial signs on buildings reflects the presence of Korean immigrants

and the representation of their culture by adopting both Korean and Chinese languages in the signage. Therefore, this study explores the diversity of signs on commercial buildings on Korean Street as an attempt to extend the understanding of multilingualism in a regional context by analyzing the linguistic landscape.

Introduction

In recent years, the focus of sociolinguistics research has shifted toward the linguistic landscape of urban areas. The written language on the sign transmits information to an "unspecified group of in public space" (Backhaus 8) and it can convey and represent meaning since it is permanent. The linguistic landscape study refers to the social environment where multiple languages are used, and the signs of large cosmopolitan cities are linguistically diverse and representative of local culture (Huebner 32). The linguistic landscape of cosmopolitan cities in China, Shanghai, and Guangzhou (An and Zhang 2), are currently being studied. Shanghai is considered the cosmopolitan capital of China with around 19 million people in an area of around 6,300 square kilometers. It is a "cosmopolitan, entrepreneurial metropolis" (Wang 87), also a global hub in East Asia (Ye and Jeon 2).

According to statistics released in 2018 by the Con-

sulate General of the Republic of Korea in Shanghai, there are a total of 32,000 Korean nationals residing in Shanghai, accounting for 15% of foreign residents. This study explores the multilingual landscape of Korean Street (韩国街) which is located in Minhang District, Hongquan Road, and it is one of the most concentrated international communities in Shanghai with 10,000 Korean people. The study of the linguistic landscape holds significant importance, particularly as it represents a public space where various aspects of social life are investigated (Ben-Rafael 41). Therefore, the linguistic landscape research of Korean Street provides insight into the understanding of the linguistic diversity of this region. First, by categorizing the language representation in signs based on their combinations, this study provides a general understanding of the linguistic landscape of Korean Street and its linguistic diversity. Second, by understanding the linguistic diversity of this region, this study explores the arrangement of visual semiotics of signs which can elucidate the relationship between multilingual signs and local cultural representations.

The significance of this study lies in its examination of the understudied linguistic landscape of Korean Street, a cultural landmark for the Korean community and a renowned tourist attraction. Through the categorization of sign language representation by combina-

tions, this study aims to offer insights into the linguistic diversity of Korean Street and provide a comprehensive overview of its linguistic landscape. As such, this study highlights the linguistic character of the Korean Street, particularly in metropolis cities like Shanghai, China.

The linguistic landscape is perceived as the representation of a certain region (Ben-Rafael 42) and visitors remember the characteristics and special elements of the specific area through its semiotics. The research questions that this study aims to address are:

1. How do the Korean-Chinese and Korean-English signs in Korean Street (韩国街) reflect the linguistic representation of the Korean community in Shanghai and contribute to the broader linguistic landscape?
2. What are the patterns of language use on signs in Korean Street?

Linguistic Landscape Studies

The study on Tokyo conducted by Backhaus (Backhaus 53) indicates the historical significance of the language around the signs in Tokyo, analyzing the geographical correlation between semiotics and multilingualism by emphasizing the accessibility of the languages. Also, the comparative approach to exploring the diversity of Tokyo's linguistic landscape in different neighborhoods

and defining the identity of the environment. Backhaus's analysis can reflect geographical correlation and how the region intends to be represented, specifically on Korean Street, where Korean and Chinese languages are commonly used. Since the signs of Korean Street have linguistic variations, the accessible language can be established by the language and representation of the Korean community in Shanghai.

According to the sociological study of the linguistic landscape by Eliezer Ben-Rafael, the linguistic landscape qualifies as a "social fact" and the elements in the linguistic landscape provide information about the particular place, thus it is a *gestalt* (Ben-Rafael 43). The individual multilingual signs with different variations of languages are studied by observing the languages on the signs, which are Korean-Chinese, Korean-English, and monolingual signs. As such, the variety of languages and elucidation of the predominant language in those signs illustrate the "whole" identity of the region where the signs have been studied. Therefore, the whole identity of Korean Street can be elucidated by the linguistic environment and the relationship between signs and languages.

The "symbolic value condition," which reflects the preference for the language written on signs and other public displays, illustrates the intention of how a specific

sign wants to be identified. Thus, the language choice of multilingual signs in the study area can be identified using this “symbolic value condition” (Spolsky 33). In some cases, monolingual usage of signs demonstrates that it is following local regulations of signs, thus it represents the governmental signs. For example, a sign with only the Korean language is either a copy of the original brand advertisement or targeted toward the Korean audience. Therefore, the language preference among the multilingual variations provides information about the context and what the sign is indexing. The patterns of commercial signs on Korean Street can indicate the identification of the environment and the intention of how Korean signs want to be conveyed. As such, Korean cultural representations and language prominence in Korean Street can be recognized by the condition of the sign.

In their research on Bangkok’s linguistic landscape, Huebner examines the linguistic landscapes with a specific emphasis on the presence of environmental print and the use of contact languages (Huebner 48), including Thai, English, and Chinese, in public areas. The author contends that these linguistic features signify the evolution of language and the emergence of a more all-encompassing Thai identity that acknowledges linguistic diversity (Huebner 50). The linguistic diversity of Korean Street reflects the interaction between Korean

and Chinese languages and how this language contact contributes to the status of languages in the study area.

Methodology

For the analysis of Korean Street, photographs of signs were collected and analyzed. Over 80 pictures of the signs were taken, including shop signs, road signs, and other signs within the visible scope of the study area. The variation of languages and linguistic contact of the signs were considered. The linguistic variations on the signs included Korean-only, Korean-Chinese, Korean-English, and Korean-Chinese-English trilingual signs.

The overall study area considered Jingting Building as the main point since it has been established as the central section of Korean Street (YICAI 2020). The perimeter of the study took commercial buildings for analysis because the commercial area (Figure 1) is bordered by the Jinxiu Jiangnan residential area which is 300 meters east of the Jingting Plaza. Therefore, commercial buildings in proximity to the Jingting Building have been taken into consideration such that mostly commercial signs are taken into account in this study.

Photographs were taken of the signs located on the Jingting Building, situated on Hongquan Road to the east, and Tianle Place, situated on Yinting Road

to the north. Moreover, a total of 6 buildings were covered and analyzed in the study area. Jingting Plaza and Tianle Plaza were taken into consideration because these buildings are the market hub and the main tourist attraction of this area, the remaining buildings are hotels and other commercial buildings that are less crucial than the market hubs.

The study analyzed the signs on the exterior side of Jingting Plaza, also known as Jingting Seoul Plaza, located at Hongquan Road. The interior signs also represent the environmental print of Jingting Plaza; however, the signs on the exterior side of buildings were chosen as a “social fact,” to convey the direct visual perception of the visitors and demonstrate the language used on public display. The east side of the Jingting Plaza is where Shanghai Fortune Hotel is located, and it is a Chinese hotel with multiple multilingual signs which suggests the significance of the Korean language as the identity or essential element of this region.

Tianle Place is located at Yinting Road, and it is a square-shaped building with a myriad of restaurants and stores, which indicates the end of Korean Street because the buildings beyond this area are apartment complexes and other government buildings. The photographs of the signs were collected, and the collected data match the variety of languages on Korean Street.

Fig. 1 The study area

The Variation of Languages on the Signs of Korean Street

The determination of language prominence in multilingual signs is distinguished by the placement and composition of the sign (Huebner 35), and the composition of the sign plays an essential role in signifying the variation of languages. Moreover, the language mixing was observed in the name of the sign and lexical borrowing of the Korean language was also discerned. The variation of languages reveals the identity of the region, as such the Korean language is abundant in this area compared to the other areas in Shanghai, which use Chinese as the main language. Though the predominant use of the Chinese language can be seen in surrounding areas, the Korean also co-exists with other parts of Shanghai and does not elicit such bilingual scenarios. The Korean "한글" (hangeul) and Chinese "汉字" (hanzi) characters are predominantly used in signs and brochures on Korean Street. The variations are (a) Korean-Chinese signs, (b) Korean-English signs, (c) Korean-Chinese-English signs, and (d) Korean-only signs.

Korean-Chinese Signs

The prominent language in the multilingual signs is analyzed by Scollon and Scollon's theory on the com-

position and modality of visual semiotics. In Figure 2, “제주식당” (je ju sik dang) in Korean and “济州食堂” (ji zhou shi tang) in Chinese are written on this sign, and then the Korean name is repeated at the bottom right corner. The Korean letters are color differentiated, and written in a bigger font, and their prominence is determined as the text is placed above the Chinese characters. According to the composition diagram by Kress and van Leeuwen (Scollon and Scollon 91), the bottom right corner indicates “real and new” information while the placement of the main idea or logo tends to be placed at the bottom right corner. Therefore, the main language of the sign in Figure 2 is Korean.

Moreover, in Figure 3, the characters of both languages are placed adjacent to each other in such a manner that prominence is determined by the sign’s modality. “날마다쏘맥” (nal ma da so maek) is positioned at the central part of the sign and is reiterated in the logo. “실내포차” (sil nae po cha) and “室内大排档” (shinei da pai dang) hold the same meaning in both languages and are positioned on either side of the Korean text. Additionally, “sil nae” and “shinei” convey the same meaning in Korean and Chinese, suggesting potential lexical borrowing from either language. “哈啤哈烧” (ha pi ha shao) is placed on the right side of the logo, and the Korean text exhibits color modality and different character placement to establish its prom-

inence. Therefore, the Korean language is the main language of this sign.

Fig. 2 A restaurant on Jingting Plaza

Fig. 3 A restaurant on Tianle Place

However, the prominent language in Figure 4 is Chinese because of the position and modality of the text. “厨房用品” (chufang yongpin) in Chinese is at the top of “남영주방” (nam yeong ju bang) in Korean, and the Chinese text is written in bold which suggests that it is the prominent language of this sign. Also, other Chinese texts are placed on the right side of the sign which are “厨房用品” (chufang yongpin) and “生活用品” (shenghuo yongpin) is “new information” (Scollon and Scollon 92) which supports and adds a new idea to the central Chinese text. As such, the Chinese text gives more information than the Korean text so one could argue that Chinese is the prominent language in this sign.

Fig. 4 A kitchen appliances store on a building beside Tianle Place, Yinting Road

Korean-English Signs

Fig. 5 A laundry sign on Jingting Plaza

The use of English in Korean-prominent signs is scarce in this region. In Figure 5, “세탁소” (sae tak so) in Korean is written on top of “Urban Laundry” in English which clearly shows that the main language of this sign is Korean. Also, “Urban Laundry” is the direct translation of “세탁소” (sae tak so), and the texts are accompanied by an icon of clothing, which further conveys the main point of this sign. In Figure 6, a hot-dog place sign is displayed, and its main purpose and meaning are expressed through its icon, color modal-

ity, composition, and language use. In this case, the Korean language is the main language here because the text “썽스핫도그” (sseong seu hat do geu) has been written twice, and the Korean text is highlighted. “Hotdog,” “Hotdog & Coffee,” and “Since 2013” serve as additional information about this sign because of their placements, and color differentiation which the English text is uniformly colored. Also, “hat do geu” and “hot-dog” show Korean lexical borrowing from the English language.

Fig. 6 A hotdog place at Shanghai Fortune Hotel

In Figure 7, the prominent language of this sign is English because both “Ksports” and “Those who play badminton well take decisions quickly” are emphasized, with the central text being in English. The Korean text, “배드민턴 용품점” (bae deu min teon yong pum jeom), is placed under the English text, and its pronunciation also suggests the lexical borrowing from the English language. However, signs on Figure 5 and Figure 6 are the only Korean-English signs in the study area which implies the scarcity of English language use in the linguistic landscape of Korean Street.

Fig. 7 A badminton place at a building beside Tianle Place, Yinting Road

Korean-Chinese-English Signs

The Korean language has been influenced by the globalization of English, which has led to the formation of 'Konglish'. Konglish is a form of language that has evolved from borrowing lexical elements from English. Korean signs are typically mass-produced and written in English, often incorporating a combination of Chinese and Korean characters, and it transparently showcases the linguistic landscape of Korean streets (Malinowski 201).

Fig. 8 A sign of milk tea stand on Jingting Plaza

A sign displayed in Figure 8 conveys the same meaning in three different languages: "市井婆豆腐牛乳" (shijing po doufu niuru) in Chinese, "팥고물우유" (pat go mul woo yoo) in Korean, and "Grandma Bean Paste Milk" in English. The characters "市井婆" are emphasized to express that the bean paste milk is "grandma's" or "grandma's special." In terms of color saturation, composition, and color modality, the prominent language of this sign is Chinese, and the central idea is "bean paste milk" and "grandma's" highlighted on the

left part of “豆腐牛乳.” However, in the Korean characters, the word “grandma” is not mentioned, which alludes to bean-paste milk being the significant component of this sign.

Fig. 9 A sign of karaoke on Tianle Place

Korean-only Signs

Korean characters dominate the monolingual signs displayed on the upper level of every building on Korean Street, such as the one in Figure 9 located on the 4th floor of Tianle Place. The sign’s composition and color differentiation are notable features, with Scollon and Scollon’s visual semiotics theory explaining that the narrative of the sign is conveyed through the symbols “superstar” and “microphone.” These symbols index “수퍼스타” (shyu po seu ta), which is dialectically similar to the English word “superstar,” and “가족노래방” (ga jok no rae bang), which translates to family karaoke in English. The Korean character on the sign effectively highlights the importance of the Korean language, while the symbols provide context for the sign’s meaning. The

phone number on the sign is located in the lower-right corner, which according to Scollon and Scollon (2003), signifies “real news” information. The main symbol of the sign, the superstar, is prominently displayed in the center with saturated color and a different font from the setting. The use of bold Korean text and the superstar logo highlight the sign’s color modality.

Fig. 10 A sign in Korean on Jingting Plaza

Figure 10 is an example of a monolingual sign on Korean Street where the meaning of the sign is targeted toward a specific audience. For instance, in Figure 10, “담배가게 아가씨” (tam bae ga ge a ga ssi) and “아카펠라 엑시트” (a ka pel la eg si teu) means “tobacco girl” and “acapella exit” in English, and it suggests that this sign is aimed for particular groups of people who understand the context of this sign.

Fig. 11 A sign of karaoke on Jingting Plaza

In Figure 11, “옛날 노래방” means “a long ago karaoke,” and it is an example of a monolingual sign. The monolingual signs were not as abundant as multilingual signs in this region, and it could be speculated that the target audience of this sign would be Korean speakers.

Conclusion

The linguistic landscape of Korean Street in Minhang District, Shanghai, is representative of Korean immigrants living in Shanghai, reflecting the local Korean culture and identity. Through the analysis of commercial and noncommercial signage on buildings in the study area, this research has explored the region's linguistic diversity, highlighting the significant use of Korean language signs in this area. The arrangement of visual semiotics of signs has also been examined, further expanding on the portrayal of multilingualism in signs by using Scollon and Scollon's theory of visual semiotics. The findings of this study indicate that the Korean language is the main language and represents the identity and origin of residents in this region. Aside from the Korean language, Chinese and English languages were present among the signs. The multilingual use of Korean and Chinese languages was more prominent among other signs, and such signs were not as abundant as they are on Korean Street. However, Korean and English language use on the signs might be related to Korean linguistic derivation from some English words. Furthermore, the position of texts among the signs was analyzed using the visual semiotics theory by counting the visually significant language as the prevailing language of the sign. Further study could explore the sociolinguistic dynamics influencing the prevalence and

distribution of multilingual signage in this area.

This study aimed to portray Korean cultural representation through the linguistic landscape of Korean Street. However, the location of commercial buildings was sparse, and the perimeter of the study needed to fully include every commercial building on Korean Street. Additionally, Korean Street itself has no defined perimeter as it is surrounded by residential and other secluded buildings that do not include any signs. Potential setbacks include a lack of local Chinese sources and in-depth research on Korean immigrants in Shanghai, specifically those surrounding Korean Street. Though additional questionnaires were conducted with locals, the result did not contribute to the main claim since local residents were unaware of the exact statistics and history of this region. Furthermore, historical data and numerical data in terms of the population and migration of Korean people in this region need to be studied. Moreover, old signs were abundant in this area, so there was a limitation in terms of counting every sign accurately, further elaborating on accurate numerical data. Future studies could employ ethnographic approaches or engage with the Korean community on Korean Street to gain an understanding of linguistic practices and cultural dynamics within this region.

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Weapons of the Weak: How Women's Apparent Submissiveness Undermines Confucian Patriarchy's Pervasive Control in *Lessons for Women* and *Raise the Red Lantern*

Julie Wu

Photo Credit: "NA" by Annie Church

Faculty Introduction

Julie Wu, in her final PoH research essay "Weapons of the Weak," confronts Zhang Yimou's twentieth-century masterpiece *Raise the Red Lantern* with Ban Zhao's second-century BCE *Lessons for Women*, with illuminating results. She adroitly harnesses the essay's broad guidelines—put two course texts "into meaningful conversation"—to serve her specific critical interest: the exploration of Chinese women's "apparent obedience" to Confucian patriarchy, one nonetheless riddled by "paradoxical" motives and consequences. In doing so, Julie expertly fulfills our PoH's fundamental essay-writing "musts": thesis statement is driven by tension and conflict, even "danger"; essay organization unfolds in a tightly knit line of reasoning such that no paragraph may be moved; paragraph main claims all line up sequentially to form the essay's "spine"; and the conclusion meaningfully addresses the significance—the "So what?"—of the essay's key insight.

Julie wisely, if ambitiously, chose two texts in which she perceived a consequential, not tangential, relationship, though nearly two thousand years separate them. Even, her essay's analysis comes to give explicit, even painful, relevance to that wide historical spread, laudably avoiding the ever-present fault line in simplistic

“compare and contrast” essays: a mere enumeration of similarities and differences. Instead, aggravated by her sense of paradox in the words and actions of the women in her study—Ban Zhao and Songlian—and their outcomes, Julie plunges into the dark realm of Chinese gender oppression and its costly compromise at once psychological, social and, ultimately, political.

The result is highly original, even daring. Julie’s tight organization and the interconnected, intense unfolding of her argument—each sequential paragraph rooted in meticulous, probing analysis and highly relevant evidence—powerfully anchor the courage and strength of her essay’s closing insight. Extending beyond a historically contingent analysis of gender, Julie finds the “omnipresent Confucianism that Ban and Songlian submit to sneakily [expressed] in contemporary China, encroaching upon everyone.” Arriving at this conclusion, I exclaimed “Wow!” And thoroughly expect many who read Julie Wu’s essay will too.

Amy Goldman
Clinical Professor in the Writing Program

Weapons of the Weak: How Women's Apparent Submissiveness Undermines Confucian Patriarchy's Pervasive Control in *Lessons for Women* and *Raise the Red Lantern*

Julie Wu

In his widely celebrated film *Raise the Red Lantern*, Zhang Yimou portrays the withering of concubines in their toxic competition for the master's sexual favor in early twentieth-century China, lamenting over patriarchy's ferocious enslavement of women's sexuality. Among all the victims mired in endless torment, the fourth mistress Songlian, an assertive former college student, bizarrely complies with sexually exploitative rituals in the traditional Chinese courtyard (Zhang). However, beneath Songlian's façade of everyday subservience lies her agenda to seize control of the household through the master's sexual partiality. The ambivalent power dynamics underlying women's ostensible submissiveness also occur in *Lessons for Women* composed by Ban Zhao, the most influential female scholar in the Eastern Han dynasty. In this behavior manual for young wives, Ban pedagogically appeals to her female descendants to abide by oppressive Confucian

norms in the household. Yet, her simultaneous advocacy of education for women substantially challenges the then-Confucian doctrine. A close examination of Songlian and Ban Zhao's seemingly paradoxical deeds reveals that women's apparent obedience in Confucian patriarchy not only helps them reconcile their existence but also empowers them to subtly undermine the omnipresent oppressive forces.

Confucian discourse permeated the social fabric of the Eastern Han dynasty, the time when mainstream scholars established women's subordination to men as both natural and fundamental to the "ordering of society," as Lin-Lee Lee insightfully describes in "Inventing Familial Agency from Powerlessness: Ban Zhao's Lessons for Women" (L. Lee 52). Ban's narrative in *Lessons for Women* echoes this suppressive trend in her justification of the wife's unconditional submission to the husband. In chapters two and three, Ban compares the relationship between the husband and the wife to that between "yang and yin," two antithetical yet interrelated principles regulating the natural world in Chinese culture (Swann 180). As she claims, the quality of yin that women represent in the male-female relationship is inherently "yielding" (Swann 181). Here, Ban delineates submissiveness as women's intrinsic attributes by adopting the "essentialist gender definitions" that Jana Rošker observes in "Confucian Humanism and

the Importance of Female Education: The Controversial Role of Ban Zhao" (Rošker 25). This narrative helps Ban rationalize the wife's absolute subordination to the husband, as she argues that the "natural order" of the family would be disrupted if the wife fails to "serve her husband" (Swann 181). In short, in *Lessons for Women*, Ban not only complies with but also staunchly supports the dominant Confucian discourse by advocating for women's subservience in domesticity.

However, a close examination of Ban's life trajectory reveals her compliance as a strategy to terms with the social pressure imposed on her special identity. With a prestigious family background and profound knowledge of Confucian classics, Ban ascended to great political power as a lead royal consultant for Empress Deng (Rošker 26). At that time, considering the Confucian zeitgeist's reluctance to women's involvement in "traditionally masculine activities" (L. Lee 52)—for example, Ban's political clout in her alliances with Empress Deng could easily provoke male politicians' antagonism (Rošker 27). Facing the imminent threat to her political career, Ban's "public acknowledgment" of women's secondary status in society outwardly expresses her "loyalty towards the patriarchal state," as Rošker analyzes in her discussion of Ban's obedience to Confucian rules (Rošker 27). Hence, Ban's allegiance to patriarchal values on the surface conceals the subversive

aspect of her participation in politics, shielding herself from social restrictions.

Concurrently, not only driven by her personal interest, Ban's apparent submission deliberately undermines Confucianism's hegemonic constraints on women's education. *The Book of Rites*, the accoladed orthodox Confucian classics in ancient China, explicitly states that "only male children should be educated" (qtd. in Rošker 27). To chisel away this rigorous principle without provoking a widespread backlash, Ban capitalizes on the Confucian scholars' emphasis on the indispensability of a stable marriage in maintaining social order. In *Lessons for Women*, Ban states that education for girls equips them with "proper customs for married women" (Swann 179). Without knowledge of regulated rituals, as she claims, the wife would not know how to "serve her husband," thus destroying the "harmony and intimacy" of the marriage (Swann 184). Here, Ban argues that education helps foster "a submissive wife, and an ideal member of her marital family" (L. Lee 55), whose virtue would contribute to a harmonious family and thus consolidate the stability of the society. Hence, leveraging the importance of women's education to the ritual-regulated Confucian household and society, Ban subtly undermines a pillar of gender subordination during the Eastern Han period.

The Eastern Han dynasty marked the near-total subjugation of women, requiring them to exert immense effort to attain any semblance of agency. Almost two thousand years after, as the 1911 revolution toppled the Qing dynasty, marking the end of Chinese monarchy, the 1920s witnessed unprecedented progress for women's liberation, especially in education. As Lianfen Yang documents in "New Ethics and Old Roles: The Identity Dilemma of May Fourth New Women," the May Fourth movement played a pivotal role in promoting nationwide "co-education [of men and women] at college and social intercourse between sexes" (74). Despite the emergence and thriving of "equality" and "freedom" discourses in urban areas, the vestige of Confucian value still prevailed in traditional Chinese courtyards, mandating women's "three obedience [to husband, father and son] and four virtues" (Yang 75). Through Songlian's story, the film *Raise the Red Lantern* manifests the tension between Confucian social practices and burgeoning revolutionary values that women grappled with in 1920s China. As a former college student forced to become a concubine for a landlord, Songlian gets inundated with these patriarchal values the moment she enters the Chen compound.

Zhang portrays Songlian's gradual submission to the sexually exploitative norms in Chen's compound through his directorial emphasis on the shift of her fa-

cial expressions. In Chen's family, foot massage serves to arouse mistresses' sexual desire by stimulating their sensitive and private body parts, preparing them to "better serve their man" on the bed (Zhang). Here, women's sexuality simply constitutes a tool to satisfy the master's desire, implying the asymmetrical sexual relationship between the master and the mistresses. In both foot massage scenes, Zhang juxtaposes close-up shots of Songlian's face with the resonating tinkling sound of the massage tools in the background. The change in Songlian's facial expression thus becomes the sole distinctive element in the two scenes. In Songlian's first foot massage, she almost imperceptibly frowns her eyebrows with the corners of her mouth turning down, indicating her discomfort (Zhang). Her micro-expressions ground in her aversion to this custom that abruptly stimulates her sensitive parts in front of other people. As Songlian accustoms herself to this exploitative ritual in the household and realizes the sexual privilege this custom embodies, her facial expression experiences a drastic change. The second time Songlian receives the foot massage, she fully closes her eyes with her shoulder relaxed, slowly and deeply inhaling (Zhang). Songlian's compliance with and even enjoyment of the foot massage implies her "passive demeanor," as Joann Lee observes in "Zhang Yimou's Raise the Red Lantern: Contextual Analysis of Film

Through a Confucian/Feminist Matrix" (122). The shift in Songlian's reaction to the foot message thus marks her acceptance of the sexually exploitative norms operating in the courtyard's arrangement of concubines' life.

By submitting to sexual exploitation and catering to the master's sexual appetite, Songlian seems to transform into a soulless puppet manipulated by oppressive norms in Chen's household. Yet, in essence, she strategically uses submission to cope with the conflicts between her past freedom as a college student and her present imprisonment as a concubine. Songlian's dilemma culminates in her interactions with Feipu, the master's son with the privilege to attend college. In their first encounter, Feipu directly addresses Songlian by her name when all other people in the courtyard call her fourth mistress. Surprised by Feipu's recognition of her individuality, Songlian directly stares at him in the face with reserved joy (Zhang). Here, the conversation drags Songlian out of the competition for the master's sexual favor, reminding her of her past autonomy. Yet, the sparkle immediately extinguishes as Songlian says: "you should not call me by my name," with her eyes drifting away in melancholy and embarrassment (Zhang). In this scene, Songlian's sorrow originates in the Confucian household's relentless annihilation of her freedom: after the transient sense of escape from reality, eternal enslavement awaits. The camera's occasional

shift from the medium close-up shot of Songlian and Feipu to the long shot of the enclosed courtyard they are situated in, along with the low-key lighting, echoes this reality. By reminding Feipu of her status, Songlian submits to her irrevocable and suffocating marital bond with the master, accepting her identity as the fourth mistress. Hence, Songlian chooses submission as a coping mechanism to subdue her longingness for college life and freedom.

Behind Songlian's apparent submission also lies her attempt to break away from the ever-present constraint inflicted upon her in the household. In the Confucian household, the male master not only plays the role of the husband but also "the patronizing father" whom "all the power" in the household derives from (J. Lee 121-123). In this specific cultural background, from a psychoanalytic perspective, "power is male, is phallus" (J. Lee 123). Then, in this case, only through alliances with male power can Songlian seize agency amidst patriarchy's pervasive control. In the film, Songlian temporarily succeeds by tricking the master with her feigned pregnancy (Zhang). With patriarchy's obsession with reproduction, Songlian's "pregnancy" indicates that she has the master's "seeds" in her, helping her generate much stronger power than simply catering to the master's sexual appetite (J. Lee 123). Thus, she could enjoy a foot massage whenever desired, humiliate her maid,

have her lanterns lit all day long, and order the second mistress to massage her like a servant (Zhang). By "enforcing these customs and rules on other less powerful women in the household," Songlian receives privileges from the source of male (J. Lee 121). In short, Songlian retains temporary release from the suffocating oppression of the Confucian household through the manipulation of patriarchal rules and alliances with male power.

However, having been exposed to the taste of true freedom during her short stay at the university, Songlian's strategy is doomed to fail. Approaching the end of the film, Songlian accidentally blurts out the secret that Meishan, the third mistress, has been cheating on the master, directly leading to the cruel execution of Meishan (Zhang). Witnessing the horrendous death of Meishan, Songlian realizes the impossibility of reaching substantial agency as a female subordinate in the Confucian compound. Her rage against the brutal patriarchal system coupled with her lifelong incarceration ultimately drives Songlian to hysteria. As she becomes the "walking ghost" (J. Lee 126) aimlessly pacing back and forth in the courtyard with her student outfit on and braids, her lunacy helps her escape the cruel reality, bringing her mind back to college life. Zhang's intensive use of red in these scenes signifies both the madness of Songlian and the relentless and devouring nature of Confucian patriarchy. Hence, even through her strate-

gies of submission to and manipulation of patriarchal norms, Songlian still fails to reconcile her existence in the courtyard and claim autonomy of her life.

A juxtaposition of *Lessons for Women* and *Raise the Red Lantern* unveils that while submission helps women living in absolute subordination partially seek some rights within the system, what they have gained still contains limitations. In *Lessons for Women*, Ban strategically appeases the dominant Confucian scholars who may vehemently oppose the education of women with her obedient tone. Strictly adhering to the patriarchal principle of women's subordination to men, Ban successfully calls for the education of women. Ban's subservience helps chisel away an important pillar of the suppression of women in the Eastern Han dynasty. However, concerning the restrictions imposed by the rigorous patriarchal order at that time, Ban's agency remains within the patriarchal system, failing to step further. Almost two thousand years later, despite the all-around advancement of society, Confucian patriarchy still reigned in the household. Songlian in *Raise the Red Lantern* adopts the same strategy as Ban to reconcile her desire for freedom with the oppression in real life. Yet, she attempts in vain to manipulate the patriarchal rules for her own interests, which the failure of her feigned pregnancy and her ultimate madness exemplify (Zhang).

Women's persevering yet bitter struggle for the limited agency that *Lessons for Women* and *Raise the Red Lantern* portray seems to be far away from the contemporary world: women are no longer prohibited from entering the public sphere or considered as absolute subordinates to men in China. However, the analysis here entails implications stretching beyond gender inequality to conformism embedded in the Chinese context. As Hsiu-Chuang Deppman analyzes in "Body, Space, and Power: Reading the Cultural Images of Concubines in the Works of Su Tong and Zhang Yimou," in *Raise the Red Lantern*, Zhang uses a "critical-realist approach" to delineate people's everyday life in the current society (126). In this sense, the overwhelming and omnipresent Confucianism that Ban and Songlian submit to sneakily finds new expression in contemporary China, encroaching upon everyone. Society can create a perfect illusion that true egalitarianism would be achieved as long as people temporarily sacrifice their own interest and submit to its order, beguiling every individual into unconditional conformity. Perhaps, what Zhang attempts to warn us in the movie is that: conformism might grant us temporary agency, but what we cede to the subjugator may in turn empower it to ferociously devour us.

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What Protected Early Chinese Poetry from Socratic Criticism?

Zhang Lanyue (Alice)

Photo Credit: “A Myriad of Books” by Zhang Cheng

Faculty Introduction

Lanyue's essay is the second of three major essays required of all students in my PoH course on the concept of literature. The course's objectives are undeniably ambitious. It aims for students not only to deeply understand the concept of literature by probing its cultural origins, particularly its intricate relationship with the classical Greek notion of poetry and its entanglement with modern conceptions of art, but also to foster a fruitful dialogue with the literary culture and tradition from which the majority of my students originate. Aware of the intellectual challenges inherent in such cross-cultural comparisons, I ensured that the goals for the second essay assignment were modest. Students were expected to draw directly from what they learned in class as well as the provided readings to write a minimum 1000-word response to one of two questions concerning the conceptualization and/or internal reception of the *shi* in ancient China as compared to ancient Greek "poetry." No external research was necessary.

Lanyue went above and beyond the set expectations. Her essay not only exceeds the minimum required length by more than double, but also incorporates excellent ideas from external scholarly sources found through her own research. Although, as she

sanely and humbly acknowledged in the conclusion of the essay, the breadth of her chosen topic cannot be fully addressed within the confines of a short response paper, she explicates the distinctiveness of classical Chinese poetic genres and relevant key concepts with remarkable clarity and effectiveness. The essay's introduction adeptly sets the stage by introducing key claims and ideas; these are then logically and rigorously developed in the main body; the sources and quotations used are all carefully selected and effectively integrated into the text. Undoubtedly, readers unfamiliar with the subject matter will find much to gain from the wealth of information and insights woven into the essay. I commend Lanyue for both her thoughtfulness and her writerly success.

Chen Lin
Clinical Associate Professor in the Writing Program

What Protected Early Chinese Poetry from Socratic Criticism?

Zhang Lanyue (Alice)

In *The Republic*, Socrates famously criticised the role and function of poetry in a just and ideal city and concluded that he "acted properly" when he gave it the sentence of exile (Plato 607b). However, around the same time as Socrates, in ancient China, the native counterpart of poetry, *shi* (詩), did not face a similar start during this sprouting period of literary criticism. Instead, these short Chinese verses that originated with music were held in high regard both by Confucius as an essential multi-purpose textbook, and by the "Great Preface," the most authoritative statement on *shi* in traditional China since the Han Dynasty (Owen 37), as what reflected the governance and moral status of the time. Naturally, this distinct contrast brings out the question of what caused such differences. What protected early Chinese poetry, or *shi*, from Socrates' criticisms and the sentence of exile?

Socrates criticized poetry from mainly three aspects: 1) misrepresentation of gods, 2) lack of truth and knowledge, and 3) corruption of the reasoning mind. He accused all poets of lying as the tales they told included

unjust and evil deeds done by gods; a straightforward falsity in a religious context for it directly contradicts the very conception of a god, who is good and "the author only of good things" (Plato 380c). Thus, accepting poetry, which at the time was considered stories of the past, already poses negative influences on one's capacity to distinguish reality and unreality (382b). Socrates went on to argue that poetry is thrice removed from the truth and contains no knowledge (597e). For he believed that poetry only imitates the appearances of the living world, a world that only consists of replicas of the transcendental, incomprehensible truth. He also believed that these illusions only appeal to emotions and desires, the irrational and inferior part of the mind (605a). It arouses strong emotional responses such as fear, sorrow and pity and impulsive desires like passion and love. Being surrounded by poetry corrupts the superior and rational part of the mind, only leading to a more miserable life.

The reason why *shi* did not receive such criticism has at least two layers. On the one hand, *shi* has distinct characteristics that differentiate itself from being the complete equivalence of poetry. The content of *shi*, its non-narrative nature and how the images connect to the mind diminish its potential to represent any figure, divine or mortal. On the other hand, such characteristics, combined with other historical and cultural factors,

determined how *shi* was regarded by the earliest social elites, thinkers, and literati who existed even before the emergence of literary criticism, whose view on *shi* constituted the very basis of its status in the Chinese literary tradition. *Shi* came into being without much emphasis on its nature, meaning or values, then it was used as educational materials by the Confucians who first viewed it as a text worth analysis, and its emotional effects were recognised as appropriate and beneficial. In this sense, all three aspects of Socrates' criticism already did not apply when *shi* became the foundation of the traditional Chinese literary tradition.

Shi and its Characteristics

Similar to how the concept of poetry has changed from epics, dramas and lyrics in the ancient Greek context to what we understand today as a subcategory of literature, *shi* has gone through similar semantic developments over time, such as adopting the role as the Chinese translation for "poetry" in the face of western influences. Even though these changes in concepts and the growth of related literary traditions can all be traced back to the original meaning and the earliest perceptions that are based on such meaning, for the sake of clarity and the purpose of this essay, hereon, the definition of *shi* will be limited to solely its initial form, i.e., the *Book of Songs* (*shi jing* 詩

經), the earliest anonymous Chinese poetry collection and the foundation of traditional Chinese poetics.

From the start, the first point of Socrates' criticism does not apply to *shi* as *shi* does not involve any representation or depiction of deities. The "Great Preface" describes the nature of the three sections of *shi*: the first section *feng* (風) records the affairs and social climate of a state and is connected to the experience of individuals; the second section *ya* (雅) talks about the affairs of the whole world (according to the recognition of the people at the time) and common customs; the last sections *song* (頌) praises the manifestation of full virtue and communicates these great deeds to the divine (Owen 48-49). There is no involvement of gods in the first two sections which are about the affairs and customs across the world in ancient Chinese's eyes as their focus is on the earthly. In the only exception *song*, there is the existence of a non-anthropomorphous and mostly non-anthropomorphic god Heaven (*tian* 天), which inherently would have required a different system of representation compared to the much personified ancient Greek gods and their very active and involved presence in the epics. However, Heaven is never the direct object of praise in *song*. Instead, those hymns chant about the first kings' virtues and the flourishing of the state under their reigns, only mentioning that their legitimacy is from Heaven (for example, see "Shi mai"

時邁 and "Chang fa" 長發). This divine presence only plays the role of appointing the first kings and beginning their legacy. It is the first and supposedly great kings whose names and deeds *song* praises.

But that alone does not guarantee that *shi* is completely free from being criticized as misrepresenting, for it could still be misrepresenting mortal figures like the past kings and nobilities, which is also condemning in the feudalist society of the time that practices ancestor worship. *Shi*'s potential associations with the idea of it representing any specific figures are further severed by other characteristics. First of all, compared to epics and dramas, *shi* is generally non-narrative. "*Shi* articulates what is on the mind (*zhi* 志)," thus stated in the *Book of Documents* (*Shang shu* 尚書), records of words of kings and important ministers of the ancient past. It is the canonical statement on the nature of *shi*, almost as authoritative as if God had defined poetry in *Genesis* (Owen 26, 27). *Shi* is the manifestation of *zhi*; it is not a product of imitation made by a poet, nor tales about the ancient past. *Zhi* is a state of mind, a relation to certain things, occurrences, or possibilities in the physical world (Owen 28). It is often stirred by the encounter with an object or sight, hence many poems in *shi* begin with a description of natural phenomena. *Zhi* is involuntary in the sense that it is not under the control of one's will (Owen 27), thus *shi*, the articulation of it is devoid

of the same potential for artistic deliberation and narration that are essential for building a representation of a certain figure.

There is also no definitive mapping between images and their meanings in *shi*, which is shown in the three "modes of presentation" (Owen 45): *fu* (賦), *bi* (比), and *xing* (興). *Fu* is any unfigured sequence that directly expresses and explains *zhi*; *bi* indicates the images that play the role of metaphors and similes; *xing* refers to the image that stirs a kind of mood, or rather, *zhi* (Owen 46). The existence of any images in *shi* is associated with the articulation of *zhi*; moreover, the relationship between images and what they could indicate or evoke is not definitive nor specific. The objects described in the poems and the human situations they express are viewed as "belonging to the same category of events" (Yu 399). An image of the physical world can be compared to or naturally awaken any state of mind. Nevertheless, what kind of *zhi* it is trying to stir is not a consensus shared by the poet and the reader. Those links are not created or manufactured by anyone's will (Yu 399). Thus, the images in *shi* essentially lack representational power, they only serve as something that speaks to the mind.

How *Shi* Is Regarded

The origins of *shi* started with court music. It was first collected and edited by the ministers of music as a part of the rites and music system (*liyue zhidu* 禮樂制度) in the Zhou Dynasty that helped maintain social order, emotional bonds and harmony (Hong 1). This initial role as the verses for ritualistic music in court already separated the poems themselves from the contexts and intentions behind their creation to an extent, transforming them into a relatively more neutral and flexible medium that served the *zhi* of who uses them, rather than of who created them.

From the records in *Zuo zhuan* (左傳), during the late Zhou Dynasty when both feudalism and the rites and music system were collapsing, *shi* had become independent from music and developed into a social language and diplomatic discourse among the ruling class and social elites through the form of quoting (Hong 49). "Unless you study the Odes [*shi*] you will be ill-equipped to speak" (Lau *Confucius* 16.13). Excerpts from *shi* were so frequently quoted without contexts as a vessel to express the mind of the speakers to the point that to communicate without *shi* would be viewed as some sort of social deficit among the higher classes. What it indicates is that around this seedling period of traditional Chinese poetics, any original values and meanings

carried by *shi* itself were not of great concern, if any at all. What mattered was the literal meaning of each line and, more importantly, how it could be connected to the *zhi* of the speaker. When the verses became the *shi* we recognize, they already did not involve any concerns for truth and knowledge or its influences on people, for it was generally regarded as a tool and medium to articulate the *zhi* of the speaker. In that sense, *shi* was already free from the more epistemological aspect of Socrates' criticism before traditional Chinese poetics even began to emerge.

Then came the earliest Confucians who first started to regard *shi* as a text worth analysis on its own and set the major tone for classical Chinese literary traditions. Similar to Socrates, the Confucians acknowledged the emotional and irrational impacts of *shi*, but to them, it was not worthless or damaging to one's rationality. Confucius commented on the first poem of *shi*, "Guan ju" (關雎) and called the emotions it expressed "joy without wantonness, and sorrow without self-injury" (Lau *Confucius* 3.20). The potential negative and destructive effects emotions and desires have on people were also recognized by Confucius, yet poems like "Guan ju" were deemed as only expressing moderate and appropriate emotions, which then instead were beneficial for cultivating good morality and virtues, hence also why *shi* as a whole to him never "swerving from the right

path" (Lau *Confucius* 2.3).

To the Confucians, the stirring of emotions and desires intertwined deeply with the sprouting and cultivation of compassion. When asked about how to govern like a true king, Mencius suggested the king try and understand the needs of his people by generalizing his own fondness for materials and desires to them (Lau *Mencius* 1B5). The seed of benevolence lies within the very universal feelings of compassion, as basic as not being able to bear witness to the suffering of an infant (Lau *Mencius* 2A6). Emotions and desires are the original, natural motivations for a person to genuinely empathize with and care about others, and such actions are the core of a benevolent man and a humane king. The emotional effects *shi* has on people were not seen as corruptive and did not face similar accusations raised by Socrates; instead, it even gained some educational values because of such effects as it can serve as a natural guidance to cultivate better qualities.

Thus, from a Confucian perspective, emotions and desires do not innately contradict the concept of a better man; they are the soil for virtues, which requires proper guidance through education which *shi* is an important part of. One must be stimulated by *shi*, and then learn and perfect themselves through rites and music (Lau *Confucius* 8.8). To Confucius, aside from *xing*, *shi*

can also “show one’s breeding, to smooth over difficulties in a group and to give expression to complaints”; it can serve the fathers and the lords and teach a wide knowledge about the living world (Lau *Confucius* 17.9). It is an educational material that can help cultivate virtues, practice social and diplomatic skills, and learn about the literary (Hong 70). Mencius frequently referenced *shi* to advise and educate the kings on the Confucian and humane way of ruling as *shi* praised the past deeds of virtuous lords and conveyed knowledge about benevolence. Verses describing the influences of setting a good example communicate the compassionate methodology of governance: “to take this very heart here and apply it to what is over there” (Lau *Mencius* 1A7). Lines praising the virtues of ancient kings by depicting universal submission represent the idea that people will submit willingly and sincerely to the influence of morality, but not to force (Lau *Mencius* 2A3). Just like this, justified by the good old days, the harmonious reigns of virtuous kings of the past, *shi* became a textbook about the correct paths and virtues valued by early Confucians. When such a tradition passed down to the Western Han Dynasty, the government appointed *shi* to be one of the official subjects with scholars and officials dedicated to the study of *shi*. Around the period, the “Great Preface” established its values and purposes in traditional Chinese poetics and became

the starting point for every student of *shi* from Eastern Han to Song Dynasty (Owen 37). By the time when the foundation of traditional Chinese poetics was built around *shi*, it already played an essential role in social, moral, and public education through its expression of moderate emotions and desires as well as virtues from the ancient past. Such an understanding and application of *shi* also protect it from similar criticism of lacking knowledge or containing destructive emotional effects.

Conclusion

Many internal and external factors played into why *shi* did not face the similar criticism that poetry faced in its earliest period before its initial status was established in the respective literary traditions. It is not a question that can be comprehensively answered in one single essay. Many related questions are worthy of further explorations to better explain this interesting phenomenon between the two literary traditions, such as why *shi* did not take the form of narrative poetry that is commonly found in many oral traditions like the ancient Greek epics, why the court would want to collect them for rituals, why no one before Mencius thought about the *zhi* of the unknown authors, etc. Each section of the final complex explanation should hopefully present itself in the clear form of causes and effects, but the chain between cer-

tain aspects might as well be arbitrary, just happened to be the way it is, and the relevant questions might never be answered.

Nevertheless, the fact that *shi* is distinctively different from poetry contributes to the drastically different roles they played in the earliest social and political life of each culture. The characteristics of *shi* and how it was regarded originally interact with each other; both helped protect *shi* from criticisms similar to what was raised by Socrates around the time it became an object of study, influencing how it would develop after the foundation of a literary tradition was established.

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