Language, economy, and inequalities

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Shop names in Tibetan areas in China

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Introduction

As urbanization in China expands, public signage plays a significant role in shaping the visual identity of emerging urban spaces. Located in the Rebgong (Chinese: Tongren) Tibetan Autonomous County in the Rma lho (Chinese: Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Rongwo is undergoing rapid urbanization and migration. The town has a population of approximately 50,000, with Tibetans constituting the majority ethnic group; it also hosts Han, Hui (Chinese-speaking Muslims), and the Turkic Salar ethnic groups.

In Tibetan autonomous areas in China, the use of Tibetan in public signs is legally mandated and regulated by specific guidelines. Tibetan script must be placed at the top or on the left side, occupying at least one-third of the surface area.

Research and Methods

My research focuses in particular on the content of bilingual signs and translation choices (Reh 2008; Gu and Almanna 2023) and what they reveal about language hierarchies, language commodification and models of development. In this study, I demonstrate how variation in language, content, lexical choices, and visual design across these signs reflect the products or services offered, which, in turn, highlight the different commercial trends shaping the town's economic development. The study is based on visual data collected since 2020, ethnographic fieldwork, and on conversations conducted in 2024 through the help of photographic prompts with eight local Tibetan. This poster focuses in particular on two naming strategies in shop names, Tibetanised Chinese and Sinified Tibetan, and provides two examples.

Shop names in Sinified Tibetan

In the Sinified Tibetan rendering strategy (Figure 1), the Tibetan script often conceals a transliteration of the original Chinese, reflecting only a semblance of blilingualism. This naming practice reflects a broader model of urban development dominated by Chinese franchising. In such cases, the Tibetan content conveys less information or is less engaging from a communicative point of view.

Shop names in Tibetanised Chinese

Tibetanised Chinese (Figure 2) names are typically found in a small category of shops, generally owned by Tibetans, that sell food and drinks, clothing, books, Tibetan religious art, and ritual objects. In these businesses, not only is the source language often Tibetan, but culturally specific vocabulary is also frequently used.

Credit: Dorji Dolma (used with permission)

1.A sign from the Chinese ice cream and iced tea chain Honey Snow Iced City (蜜雪冰城, Mixue Bingcheng). The Tibetan version features a transliteration of the Chinese name: སུས་ཞུའེ་ (mus zhu'e) [mi ɕuɛ]. The Tibetan content includes the caption 'sweet frozen drinks', providing a descriptive explanation of the shop's products. In contrast, the Chinese name employs more evocative and imaginative expressions like 'honey snow' and 'iced city'. Moreover, the font reflects language hierarchies: it's creatively designed for Chinese, incorporating elements like water drop shapes, and remains relatively plain for Tibetan.

Local Tibetans I spoke with have varying opinions regarding the content and lexical choices of these signs. For some, a catchy and creative presentation is not important; what matters most is a clear description of the product or service offered. For others, the Tibetan content is seen as too lengthy, complex, and unattractive.

Credit: Dorji Dolma (used with permission)

2.The name of this business is Light of Kailash (རི་སེའི་འོད་ di se'i 'od in Tibetan). Kailash refers to a well-known mountain on the Tibetan Plateau. At the center of the sign, the Chinese name reads 低斯澳 (disi 'ao), a transliteration of the Tibetan di se'i 'od.

The font for Tibetan reproduces the Tibetan calligraphic style dbu med, which is often regarded as elegant.

Local Tibetans I spoke with expressed positive opinions about shop names connected to Tibetan heritage and emphasized the growth of local Tibetan entrepreneurship in sectors such as accommodation, Tibetan food, clothing, art, and Buddhist items.

Discussion

The linguistic landscape of Rongwo reflects contrasting models of commercial development. One model is driven by Chinese brands, rendering towns in Tibetan areas nearly indistinguishable from cities in inland or coastal China. In this context, Tibetan typically appears as a transliteration of Chinese brand names, lacking the communicative appeal commonly expected in commercial signage. The other model is rooted in local Tibetan entrepreneurship, where the Tibetan language and cultural references actively shape business identities and enhance their market appeal. In this case, the Tibetan language can be seen as a form of linguistic capital, serving the dual purposes of 'pride and profit' (Duchêne and Heller, 2012): it emphasizes a sense of belonging to the ethnic group while also bringing economic benefits.

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