



# The (un)making and (re)making of Guangzhou's 'Little Africa': Xiaobei's linguistic and semiotic landscape explored

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Received: 24 October 2023 / Accepted: 17 January 2024  
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## Abstract

Partly as a result of China's reform and opening-up and the broader trend of globalisation, Guangzhou in Southern China has risen to global prominence as a commercial and business hub. Strategically positioned as a centre of 'low-end globalisation', Guangzhou has attracted investors, traders and businessmen from Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. In particular, the city's Xiaobei area established itself as 'Little Africa' featuring (once thriving) ethnic economies with many halal restaurants and businesses oriented towards Muslim traders from various ethnolinguistic and sociocultural backgrounds. This enclave represents a transnational space and a typical example of superdiversity rarely seen in the rest of China. The presence of (legal and often illegal) Africans in Guangzhou (where inter-marriage with local Chinese women was not uncommon) was viewed as a problem and threat to the 'purity' of Chinese-ness and Chinese civilisation. This led to strict enforcement of immigration law around 2014, where many foreigners left Guangzhou. Various social and top-down language policy changes and more directly the strict Covid pandemic restrictions dealt further blows to the area. Drawing on data in 2013/2014 and 2023, this sociolinguistic study traces the transformations in Xiaobei's linguistic landscape from a contrastive/diachronic perspective over 10 years, thus shedding light on the (un)making, (re)making and the de-Arabization and Sinicization of Little Africa's LL in a context of socio-political and language policy changes. Then synchronic LL analysis in 2023 shows how various linguistic and multimodal elements combine to still give the area a unique identity.

**Keywords** Linguistic landscape · Guangzhou · Little Africa · Low-end globalisation · Superdiversity · Language policy · Sinicization

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## Introduction

While linguistic landscape can be understood in different ways (e.g. languages used in a particular place more generally), linguistic landscape (LL) in a more narrow sense concerns the visibility and salience of languages (Landry & Bourhis, 1997: 23) on a range of visible top-down and bottom-up signs within a certain locale. This study explores the linguistic landscape of an enclave called ‘Little Africa’ in Xiaobei in Guangzhou, southern China. Over the past two millennia, Guangzhou or Canton was one of China’s most important foreign-trade cities. Indeed, for some time, Guangzhou was the only port allowed to do business and trade with the West and the outside world. Since 1949, when the People’s Republic of China was founded, Guangzhou remained a leader in China’s economic development due to its favourable and strategic location in the Pearl River Delta and also its proximity to Hong Kong and Macau. Especially after China’s reform and opening-up, China started to pursue a more export-driven economy. Boasting many factories, relatively cheap labour and hard-working businessmen with can-do entrepreneurial spirit, Guangzhou and the Guangdong province in general have been an engine of China’s economic development and a magnet attracting foreign investments. Guangzhou is also an important business and commercial hub as part of the Belt and Road initiative (Yiwu in eastern China is another such business and commercial hub).

Precisely against such a backdrop of China’s reform and opening-up and the broader trend of globalisation and the increasingly frequent movement of people, many African, Middle Eastern and South Asian traders and businessmen started to come to Guangzhou, China’s 3rd largest city. More notably, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, many Sub-Saharan Africans who had previously already settled in places in Southeast Asia (e.g. Hong Kong, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta) decided to move to Guangzhou (Bredeloup, 2012), amongst other groups. Gradually, this has transformed Guangzhou into an African trading post (Bredeloup, 2012). Over time, a few small-scale ethnic enclaves and communities have come into being, where restaurants, hotels, stores, wholesale markets and shopping malls mostly catering for foreign businessmen and traders started to surface in Xiaobei, Sanyuanli and a few other clusters in Guangzhou. This gave rise to thriving ethnic economies (Gu 2023; Muniandy, 2015) and a unique transnational space (Li et al., 2009, 2012). Figure 1 gives some brief ideas about those businesses in Guangzhou in general. In Figure 1 (top left), a trilingual sign in English, Arabic and Chinese can be found, which is emplaced inside the LIUHUA FASHION WHOLESALE MARKET. In other signs in Figure 1, Arabic can also be found (e.g. children’s clothes market and wholesale market specializing in electronic products).

In particular, known as ‘Little Africa’, ‘Chocolate City’ or ‘Muslim district’, the area in and around Xiaobei is the main epicentre of action with a high concentration of halal restaurants and ethnic shops. As discussed later, despite the visibility of black Africans, ‘Little Africa’ is probably a misnomer, given the superdiverse nature of the area. In many ways, this area represents a most salient example



**Figure 1** Arabic featured in foreign-oriented businesses in Guangzhou in general

of a dynamic transnational space as part of a low-end globalisation (Mathews, 2008, 2011). These traders and businessmen in the so-called 'Little Africa' are speakers of Arabic, French, Portuguese, English, Hindi/Urdu, Swahili and Igbo in addition to many other languages. In terms of religion, a significant number of them are Muslims in the area. It is common to see prayer mats placed in trading malls where those Muslim traders pray and practice their religion. Arabic, to some extent, serves as an important lingua franca along with English, French, Portuguese, etc. That is, while those Muslim traders and businessmen may be speakers of different languages, Arabic represents an important religious, cultural and identity marker and Arabic words/phrases such as 'halal', 'mashallah', 'Ramadan Kareem' and 'Eid Mubarak' may serve some basic communication and



**Figure 2** Typical street views of Guangzhou neighbourhoods featuring Chinese-dominated bottom-up signage

bonding purposes. The existence of this (super)diverse enclave has effectively carved out a unique ethnolinguistic space from Guangzhou's existing linguistic landscape and language ecology dominated by Chinese (Cantonese). Please see Figure 2 for some general ideas of Guangzhou's typically Chinese-dominated linguistic landscape (where bright colours such as red and yellow are common).

While the incoming Africans and other foreigners are welcomed by some with open arms (e.g. Arabic language translators and halal restaurant and other local business owners), such emotions are not universally shared in Guangzhou and China in general. Many foreigners in this area are on short-term tourist visas. They come to Guangzhou to purchase cheap clothes, products and other goods, sell them back home and then leave. However, some have been living in Guangzhou for an extended period of time, learnt Chinese, got married with local Chinese women and had babies in China (Mathews et al., 2017). It is also not uncommon to see some foreigners who overstay their visa and stay in the country illegally (to some extent, this area in Guangzhou has some resemblance to Chow Kit, Masjid India and adjacent areas in Kuala Lumpur, where many legal and illegal South Asians and Indonesians tend to gather). Some may also be on fake passports (Mathews et al., 2017). For example, a person from Gambia may be in

Guangzhou using a Nigerian passport. This along with occasional minor crimes committed by foreign traders, compounded by racism from locals, would lead to further misunderstandings, if not tensions and conflicts. In general, 'Little Africa' is considered a problem area by the Guangzhou locals and other Chinese people, if not a no-go zone at times. Various (perhaps exaggerated) figures were heard on Chinese and also English-language media outlets that at some point there were 300,000 or more black Africans in Guangzhou (Global Times, 2014 <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/879038.shtml>). Influenced by unfavourable media coverage, many Chinese people consider the Africans a threat to social stability and even a threat to ethnic 'purity' of the Chinese because of increasing inter-marriage. This has given rise to an upsurge in nationalism. In such a general context and more directly as a result of a few protests staged by Africans and clashes with the local police, the local authorities were adamant in more strictly enforcing immigration law. Due to stricter law enforcement, there started to be a gradual decline in the local African population in Guangzhou since 2014. Then, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many Africans and other foreigners left China (Liao & Chan, 2022). After China opened up again to the rest of the world in early 2023, some foreign traders and businessmen have returned to 'Little Africa' and Guangzhou in general. Overall, 'Little Africa' has lost its allure (Kuwonu, 2018) and now the number of foreigners in this once-thriving area is a far cry from what it used to be when the area was at its peak. Nevertheless, this area still possesses a unique ethnolinguistic and sociolinguistic identity that is different from the rest of Guangzhou and China in general.

Migrant areas/ethnic enclaves have been extensively explored around the world from different perspectives. This, for example, includes studies on Chinatowns in Europe and North America (Amos, 2016; Lou, 2016) and more recently on diverse communities in the Middle East (cf. Gu 2023; Karolak, 2022) and Southeast Asia (Muniandy, 2015). However, relatively speaking, there is a lack of systematic study of such areas in an East Asian context. This is particularly the case in China, which is generally assumed to be a more homogeneous country featuring less diversity. However, encouragingly, over the years, a small yet growing body of research has started to explore transnational urban spaces in the greater China region. For instance, Mathews (2008, 2011) has looked at Hong Kong's Chunking Mansions from an anthropological perspective. The sociolinguistic study by Guinto (2019) explores the linguistic landscape (LL) relating to the peripheral and disadvantaged Filipino domestic helpers in Central Hong Kong. The linguistic landscape studies by Gu (2022, 2024) examined Covid-related multilingual linguistic landscapes in Hong Kong concerning various ethnic languages (e.g. Urdu, Hindi, Nepali, Thai, Tagalog and Bahasa Indonesia).

Focusing on mainland Chinese city Guangzhou's 'Little Africa', Mathews et al. (2017), Li et al. (2009), Li et al. (2012), Jin et al. (2021), and Bredeloup (2012) have examined 'Little Africa' from a sociological, anthropological, geographical, business and economic perspective. However, despite the multilingual and multicultural nature of the locale, the area has been seldom explored from a sociolinguistic and multilingual perspective. So far, of the very limited number of sociolinguistic studies that examine 'Little Africa' or Xiaobei, Han (2013) examines individual grassroots

multilingualism and how individual migrants of African and Chinese backgrounds expand their multilingual repertoires in ‘Little Africa’. Also, Liao and Chan (2022) conducted a comparative study exploring the linguistic landscapes relating to the Southern Chinese city Guangzhou’s African and Korean neighbourhoods from the perspective of business and economic patterns. In addition, Wang (2022) explored the area ‘Little Africa’ from the lens of translation. These two recent studies have shed useful light on this area from a LL perspective.

However, these two very new studies tend to be synchronic in nature, only focusing on the recent couple of years. Any enclave is subject to change. This is particularly the case for the highly transient Xiaobei area with people and businesses coming and going. As recognised by Li et al. (2012), the dynamic relations between the transient global–local nexus, immigration regime, local geography and various other factors can affect the ebb and flow of the ‘Chocolate City’. In other words, the ethnic enclave is far from being static and non-changing, which is constantly responding to the dynamic and changing demands of globalization (Li et al., 2012) and other socio-political factors (e.g. the Covid-19 pandemic, nationalism, anti-African sentiments and changes in language policy). With this in mind, this empirical study aims to bridge this gap and explore this area from both a **diachronic and a synchronic perspective** to highlight the change and ‘difference’ in LL terms. That is, through a comparison between the linguistic landscape of the area in 2013/2014 and 2023, the study aims to highlight the (un)making and (re)making of the ‘Chocolate City’ over a span of around 10 years. Using this as a general context, more focused analysis will be conducted on the area’s LL in 2023 to shed light on how various linguistic and semiotic means are used to give the area a unique aura and identity different from the surrounding areas in Guangzhou. Fundamentally, this study promises to show the dynamic and constantly changing nature of an ethnic enclave’s LL that is jointly influenced and conditioned by top-down language policies (e.g. de-Arabization), the attitudes of people at large (e.g. nationalism), market forces and the enactment of religious and cultural identity at bottom-up levels, and the broader socio-political and economic context in a complex way.

### **‘Little Africa’ as a superdiverse transnational space and an exemplar of low-end globalisation**

Given the dynamic, fluid and transient nature of the Xiaobei or ‘Little Africa’ area with traders, tourists, and businesses coming and going, it is next to impossible to definitively say how many people live in the area and where they are from. However, in general, Chinese Muslims (e.g. from central and northwest China), Africans (e.g. from Guinea, Ghana, Mali, Nigeria, Gambia, Chad, Cameroon, Sudan, Benin, Congo, Tanzania, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Senegal), people from the Middle East and North Africa (e.g. Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Jordan, Egypt, Libya, Algeria), and the Indian subcontinent (e.g. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) can be found in the broader region to varying degrees (Mathews et al., 2017). As a matter of fact, before the arrival of Africans and other foreign businessmen, the area had

already been a Muslim community inhabited by Muslims from such provinces as Henan, Ningxia and Xinjiang in Central and Northwest China since 1980s. As a significant number of those traders from Africa, the Middle East and South Asia are Muslims,<sup>1</sup> this area with many Halal restaurants, meat shops and halal-friendly stores became an easy and obvious choice for them, given the shared faith and dietary habits. The existence of foreign Muslim traders and businessmen here in turn attracts more Chinese Muslims from Northwest China to the area to work as translators and in the catering industry.

While this place is routinely known as 'Little Africa' or 'Chocolate City' in Guangzhou and China, such terms are essentially inaccurate and misleading and thus need to be problematised here. Actually, the names 'Little Africa' and 'Chocolate City' are misnomers. That is, while black Africans are highly visible, they do not exclusively live there. Other Chinese people and businessmen and traders from many other places in the world (e.g. people from the Middle East and North Africa, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) can also be found in the area. Even amongst black Africans themselves, there is a high degree of diversity, with people from various ethnolinguistic, cultural, religious and economic backgrounds who are in Guangzhou for a range of different reasons and purposes. As such, given the actual complexity, diversity and ethnolinguistic profile of the place on the ground, this area may be seen as a transnational space in southern China and a case of (super)diversity (cf. Arnaut et al., 2016; Blommaert, 2013; Vertovec, 2007). The concept of 'superdiversity' may be understood as some current levels of population diversity that are significantly higher than previously (cf. Vertovec, 2007 for his initial definition and understanding of the concept). Also, more specifically, as mentioned elsewhere in the article, since many of the foreign businessmen and traders are Muslims, this superdiverse area is more of a Muslim enclave with Islam being a dominant (yet not the only) uniting factor. Since the terms 'Little Africa' or 'Chocolate City' (Li et al., 2012) are so widely used, understood and taken for granted, I will not avoid using the terms in this article for easier communication, despite their inaccurate nature. While it is superdiverse (cf. Blommaert, 2013), this area may be viewed as a multilingual island, which is very much dwarfed in the broader environment in Guangzhou that is dominated by various varieties of Chinese (e.g. Mandarin and Cantonese). The great significance of this area is that it in many ways represents a testing ground in terms of whether multiculturalism is for China and, if so, how multiculturalism may work in this relatively homogeneous and increasingly aging East Asian country.

As alluded to earlier, the existence of the Xiaobei enclave was mainly due to the development of Sino-Africa business ties and also the efforts of local entrepreneurs (Li et al., 2012) against a historical context of China's reform and opening-up as well as the broader backdrop of globalisation (Mathews et al., 2017) and rapid advancement in technology and transportation. In many ways, we are living in an interconnected and even 'borderless' world. The increasingly frequent movement of people

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<sup>1</sup> It is estimated that about half of those Africans in Guangzhou are Muslims. Statistically, this is also in line with the general situation in the African continent, where approximately 40% of the total population of Africa are Muslims (especially in the northern half of the continent).

and the rapid development of transnational trade have given rise to a wide range of grassroots cross-border business and commercial activities. This leads to low-end globalisation (Mathews, 2008, 2011; Mathews et al., 2017) or ‘globalisation from below’ (Portes, 1996; Smith, 2001). Positioned as opposed to the more glamorous and sophisticated high-end globalisation (e.g. Tesla, Facebook, Amazon, Louis Vuitton, Morgan Stanley, Apple, Coca-Cola, Starbucks, Balenciaga, Chanel, Google and Samsung), low-end globalisation is the transnational flow of people, trade and business at the grass-roots level that is less formal and glamorous (Mathews, 2008). Such low-end globalisation usually involves the wholesale and trading of relatively cheap products and goods (e.g. inexpensive shoes, socks, clothes, carpets, bags, food, toys, watches, digital cameras, phones, and various home appliances). Hong Kong’s Chungking Mansions and World-Wide Plaza, Singapore’s Peninsula Plaza, Bangkok’s MBK Centre, Soi Arab and Indra Square, Yiwu’s wholesale market and Dubai’s Dragon Mart (cf. Gu 2023) are also vivid exemplars of low-end globalisation, representing hubs of transnational trade at a more grass-roots scale. In mainland China, Guangzhou represents a typical example of such low-end globalisation (Mathews et al., 2017) in the twenty-first century. The dynamic and superdiverse nature of this transnational urban space makes it interesting to explore from a linguistic landscape (LL) perspective.

### **Linguistic and semiotic landscape: a window to understanding linguistic and social change in action**

Linguistic and semiotic landscapes, alongside man-made architectural and natural landscapes etc., make up our increasingly diverse, complex, multi-faceted and multi-dimensional world. Linguistic landscape (LL), according to one of the classic definitions, concerns the visibility and salience of languages (Landry & Bourhis, 1997: 23) on a range of visible signs within a certain locale. Signage can be categorised in different ways. There are, for instance, top-down and bottom-up signs in a place’s LL. Top-down signage concerns those official signs enacted by the government and other bodies and institutions, whereas bottom-up signage is related to those non-official signs emplaced by private businesses and by individuals and the general public at a grass-roots level in our (urban) spaces (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006). Also, while many signs may be more informational in nature, other signs can act as symbolic markers in indexing ethnolinguistic, social, cultural and religious identities and certain socio-political realities (Huebner, 2006; Mooney & Evans, 2015; Spolsky & Cooper, 1991). Signs emplaced in a place can have important place-making functions (Blommaert, 2013; Gorter, 2006; Scollon & Scollon, 2003; Spolsky & Cooper, 1991), serving to define space, mark boundaries and give a place meaning and identity (Rubdy & Said, 2015). From this perspective, a locale’s LL can tell a fascinating story about the place’s past, present and future (Gu 2023). In many ways, a locale’s LL may be seen as a kind of discourse (Fairclough, 1989) that is both socially shaped and socially shaping (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001).

Linguistic landscape, as a relatively new and interdisciplinary line of research, can be investigated from (socio)linguistic, political, institutional, religious, cultural, historical, commercial, educational, ideological, and hegemonic perspectives. A close examination of a place's LL can shed light on such topics and issues as ethnic enclave, globalisation, ethnolinguistic diversity and vitality, superdiversity, multilingualism, language policy and planning, language maintenance, language contact, the dominance of English, and public health and pandemic communication (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006; Buckingham, 2015; Coluzzi, 2017; Gorter, 2006; Huebner, 2006; Lanza & Woldemariam, 2014; Lee & Lou, 2019; Rubdy & Said, 2015) in both developed and developing countries (Alomoush, 2023; Fedorova & Nam, 2023; Gu and Almanna, 2023; Gu and Manan 2024; Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Lee 2022; Lees, 2022; Song, 2022; Matwick & Matwick., 2019).

Over time, however, there is increasing recognition that the linguistic elements are only part of the picture. And meaning-making is achieved through linguistic as well as a range of various other visual, sensory and spatial components. Gradually, scholars have started to argue that our urban space should be understood as a 'gestalt' (Ben-Rafael, 2009) or an assemblage or ensemble that consists of various semiotic modes and discursive modalities (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010; Pennycook, 2017; Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015), which can include language, colour, design, objects, smell, sound and spatial arrangement in the built environment. This more extended understanding attentive to the whole range of linguistic, multimodal and semiotic elements and resources permits us to better understand a space/place in a more vivid, dynamic, multidimensional and systematic way (Pennycook, 2017). In this study, I will focus on both the linguistic components and the other multimodal and semiotic elements to help understand the (un)making and (re)making of Guangzhou's Little Africa area over time in a more holistic and comprehensive manner.

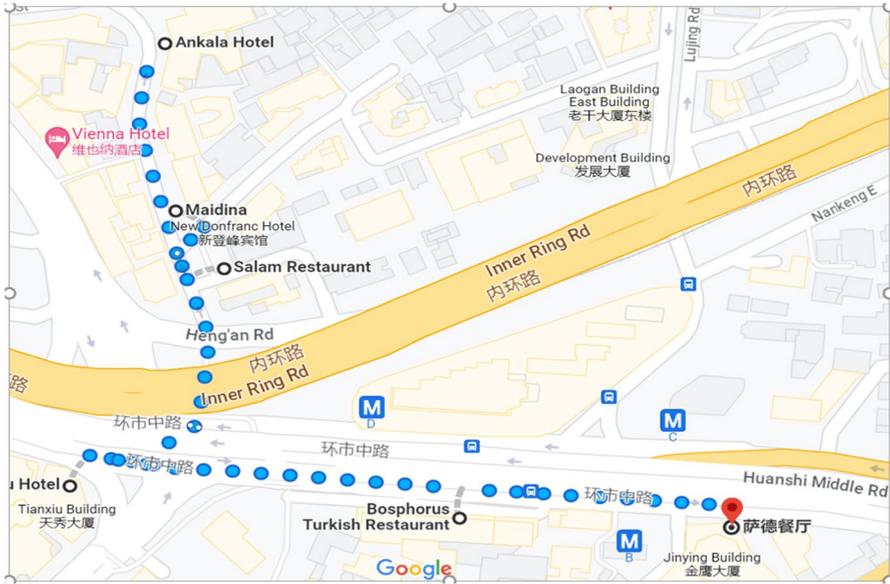
### **Dialogized heteroglossia in linguistic and semiotic landscape: negotiating a dynamic equilibrium between the centripetal and centrifugal**

In this section, Bakhtin's (1981) concept of 'dialogized heteroglossia' is incorporated into a linguistic landscape framework. As discussed earlier, a place's linguistic and semiotic landscape is often jointly shaped by various top-down and bottom-up forces in a dynamic way. The inherently complex interplay between the official top-down forces (e.g. official language policy and ideology prescribing monolingualism) and the bottom-up forces at a grass-roots level (e.g. voices advocating multilingualism and the protection and maintenance of minority languages and ethnolinguistic identity) is commonly found in different societies. As such, Bakhtin's (1981) notion of 'dialogized heteroglossia' is particularly relevant in fruitfully conceptualising such a dynamic, ongoing and negotiated process. That is, for Bakhtin (1981), centripetal force(s) and centrifugal force(s) often co-exist in language. Similarly, by extension, centripetal force(s) and centrifugal force(s) are also visible in language planning and policy-making and the resulting linguistic and semiotic landscape in many ways. Centripetal forces tend to gravitate towards the centre and the official, which often correspond to the more authoritative language ideologies and official

prescriptive discourses (striving for order and unity and regulating and controlling what languages are allowed and how they should be used in a top-down manner). In the presence of such seemingly fixed, inflexible and powerful regulating forces, there often exist more bottom-up voices at a grass-roots level. These voices may be viewed as centrifugal forces which pull away from the centre, the official and the prescriptive. This may lead to diversity and fragmentation, thus potentially posing a challenge to the centripetal forces. The co-existence of the centripetal and the centrifugal inherent in most societies can result in a constantly negotiated process (Gu 2023) or a dynamic ‘tug-of-war’ (Gu 2019) between different bodies, stakeholders, agents and actors in the society. From this perspective, Bakhtin’s (1981) concept ‘dialogized heteroglossia’ permits a more dynamic and thorough understanding of the making, unmaking and (re)making of a locale’s linguistic landscape as an ongoing and constantly changing process and also as a negotiated space with many forces simultaneously at work. Such a dialogic conceptualisation of language and linguistic landscape represents a useful addition to existing and more generic LL frameworks, promising to shed light upon the possible grass-roots coping strategies and linguistic creativity and better account for a locale’s LL as a result of such dynamic negotiated processes. As such, where relevant, Bakhtin’s (1981) concept will be employed to help describe and explain the language use and linguistic practices evidenced on Xiaobei area’s LL against a constantly changing socio-political and economic background.

## Methodology and data

A common approach for data collection (cf. Karolak, 2022; Song, 2022) was followed in the LL study. Using good-quality mobile phones, the researcher collected linguistic landscape data in the broader Xiaobei area multiple times in 2013 and 2014, which resulted in 145 photographs. Then, after approximately a 10-year hiatus, 238 photos were taken in autumn/winter 2023 in the form of several trips. Given the partially comparative nature of the study, the data collected from the two points permit a useful analysis of the transformation and change of Guangzhou’s ‘Little Africa’ or ‘Chocolate City’ from a diachronic perspective against a changing socio-political context (cf. Blommaert, 2013 for a diachronic perspective advocated by him in LL research). That is, 2013/2014 represents a major watershed for the area. Due to the strict crackdown on (illegal) Africans in 2013/2014, the area started to gradually decline from its heyday. The downward trend was then further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Liao & Chan, 2022) between 2020 and 2023. As such, 2013/2014 represented a ‘high point’ for the area and 2023 represented a ‘low point’, where the area was slowly bouncing back from rock bottom after the pandemic was over and international travel to China became possible again. The 10-year period has witnessed the dramatic ebb and flow of the transnational space. Such a reasonably long 10-year interval affords us a useful point of contrast, thus permitting the researcher to gain in-depth insights into the making, unmaking and possibly (re)making of the enclave. In both phrases, data were mostly collected from Huanshi Middle



**Figure 3** The location of the 'Little Africa' area

Road and Bao Han Zhi Jie (a slightly curly street which literally means 'Baohan straight street'). These two streets form the main core of 'Little Africa', where most signs related to the Muslim communities and foreign-oriented businesses can be found (cf. Figure 3 for the approximate location of the enclave). If relevant, other sporadic signs in the adjacent areas are also added to the data. Apart from signs photographed outside at a street level, a number of signs related to those foreign traders/businessmen were also taken indoors (e.g. inside trading malls, ethnic restaurants and markets). Given the limited space and the nature of the study, extensive statistical/quantitative analysis will not be my main focus. Some synchronic statistics about Little Africa have been provided in Liao and Chan (2022) and Wang (2022), which are from recent couple of years. Given the partially diachronic nature of the current study, we will focus on tracking and highlighting the visible transformations between 2013/2014 and 2023 through a comparative account, before identifying some of the salient trends in the area's LL in 2023 in some detail.

### Data analysis

The data analysis here is presented first from a diachronic perspective to trace any major changes over a span of 10 years and then from a synchronic perspective to focus on the area's LL in 2023.



Figure 4 The once pervasive presence of Arabic in Xiaobei's LL (shopfronts)

### From Arabized LL to de-Arabization and Sinicization: a diachronic perspective

As discussed earlier, despite being a superdiverse and multilingual area, most businessmen and traders from Africa, the Middle East and South Asia are Muslims. Arabic is therefore an important religious identity marker and possesses some basic communication function as a *lingua franca* in 'Little Africa'. Arabic was also extensively used as a marketing tool. Figure 4 shows how pervasive Arabic once was in the area.

However, a diachronic analysis of the enclave's LL reveals a clear and pronounced trend of de-Arabization, which has given way to Sinicization (cf. Bhatt, 2023). For comparative purposes, let us look at a stretch of street that is known by some as the 'Arab Row' (cf. Mathews et al., 2017), a street with a concentration of middle eastern restaurants and ethnic businesses. Clearly, in 2013/2014 (cf. Figure 5), many bottom-up signs (e.g. restaurants and other businesses) tended to be in Chinese (the local and national language), English (the global *lingua franca*



Figure 5 Arabised LL in 'Arab Row' in 2013/2014

and also to some extent lingua franca in the area) and notably Arabic (a major language and also a lingua franca understood by many Muslims from the Middle East and Africa to varying degrees). Such trilingualism (also illustrated in Figure 4) can help facilitate understanding and meet those foreign traders and businessmen's communication needs in many scenarios. Clearly, Arabic was widely used as a marketing tool to reach out to potential customers. Given the unique script used and the cursive style(s), the elements in Arabic appeared to be particularly prominent and salient, which stood out in a country that overall features Chinese monolingualism in many/most places' written LL (cf. Figure 2 for an idea of Chinese-dominated LL in most places in Guangzhou and also China). The existence of Arabic here gave this area a unique ethnolinguistic identity. Particularly, the presence of words such as 'Andalus', 'halal', 'Hadramout', 'Shami', 'Bosphorus' and 'Turkish' evoked a sense of far-away lands. For example, 'Al-Andalus' refers to most parts of the Iberian Peninsula (e.g. current-day Spain and Portugal) that were under Muslim rule for centuries and 'Shami' denotes the broader region where current-day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine are located. Similarly, 'Hadramout' is an ancient name, which refers to a broader region in South Arabia (including parts of current-day Yemen, Oman and Saudi Arabia). Overall, the Arabic script and the repeated mentioning of historical and culture-specific names on those signs constructed an exotic image and a sense of foreign-ness that this was a diverse and ethnic area dissimilar to the rest of the city and the rest of China. This therefore carved out a fascinating transnational space as far as LL is concerned.



**Figure 6** De-Arabised LL in ‘Arab Row’ in 2023

In stark contrast, after roughly a 10-year hiatus, the linguistic landscape has changed significantly in roughly the same area (cf. Figure 6). While some businesses are still running, clearly, almost all the Arabic elements have been eliminated as far as street-level LL is concerned (shopfronts and restaurants facades). As such, the common trilingual structure seen around 10 years ago (Figure 5) has effectively become bilingualism in English and Chinese only. While this still communicates a kind of international atmosphere, the image conveyed is no longer the same. Notably, *حلال* or ‘halal’ means ‘permissible’ in Arabic and in Islam it is strictly prescribed in terms of what can or cannot be consumed. Clearly, ‘halal’ was frequently mentioned and even emphasised and foregrounded in 2013/2014 (Figure 5). However, in the linguistic landscape in 2023 (Figure 6), explicit mentions of ‘halal’ are more or less absent/less visible.

The drastic transition from a more Arabized LL to a proportionally more Sinicized LL may be as a result of a complex interplay of factors. The de-Arabization/Sinicization (cf. Bhatt, 2023) is directly to do with the top-down language policy-making made in China concerning the indigenization of foreign religions in China (a centripetal force). In view of the (sometimes violent) episodes of ethnic and religious tensions domestically (e.g. in Western China) and also as a result of the changing situation internationally (e.g. religious extremism and radicalisation), in recent years, there has been a drive at top-down levels to Sinicise (cf. Bhatt, 2023) imported foreign religions in China (notably including Islam) and to reinforce a broader national and Chinese identity and restore unity and stability. According to a



**Figure 7** The same trading mall in 2013/2014 and 2023

media report by Global Times (2019), the aim of the policy is not about “changing the beliefs, habits or ideology of Islam but to make them compatible with socialist society” (<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/201901/1134757.shtml>). As a result of such a policy, it is not uncommon to see that in certain areas (not all) in China explicit displays of religious symbols and words (e.g. in Arabic) are not permitted (Bhatt, 2023). Arabic, as the language of Islam, is viewed as a threat with suspicion. The de-Arabised LL in Xiaobei is a direct result and concrete linguistic evidence of such broader socio-political developments and language policy changes.

Such de-Arabization is also markedly visible in Figure 7. This shows a major trading mall (Yueyang Trading Mall) in the broader Little Africa area. A before-after comparison clearly reveals that the Arabic elements have been taken down in the revised/corrected sign in 2023 to meet the top-down regulations and requirements. Interestingly, some traces of Arabic are still visible in the 2023 sign. This is a scenario similar to what is discussed in Bhatt (2023).

A similar trend can be found in Figure 8. As indicated in Figure 8 left, in 2013/2014, in those halal restaurants, Arabic words and expressions such as طعام المسلمين [taeaam almuslimiin] or ‘Muslim food’ and حلال [halal] were clearly visible. These Arabic words and expressions served as identity markers and provided direct guidance/information that these were restaurants for Muslims to eat in. Yet, in Figure 8 right, it is evident that Arabic expressions are absent and the symbol ‘halal’ has been written in Chinese as 清真 (qing zhen). This is a common situation not just in the Xiaobei area but more or less in Guangzhou as a whole. For example, Figure 9 features a halal restaurant in 2023 away from Xiaobei, which specialises in Pakistani, Indian, African and Chinese food. The texts are only available in English and Chinese (with English being more prominent



Figure 8 Xiaobei's LL in 2013/2014 (left) and 2023 (right)



Figure 9 A halal restaurant featuring English and Chinese in 2023



**Figure 10** The visibility of Arabic and religious symbols in restaurant and business signs in Foshan

in terms of colour and font size). However, interestingly, Arabic<sup>2</sup> used to be figured prominently on this restaurant sign about 10 years ago. These signs in 2023 are salient examples of how Islam, as a foreign and external religion, can be indigenised and (re)contextualised in the local environments in Guangzhou based on official top-down regulations.

Notably, the de-Arabization and the backgrounding of religious symbols are marked in Guangzhou and some other places in China. Interestingly, some places in China are seemingly less affected/unaffected. In another city Foshan, just about 50–60 minutes' subway ride away from Guangzhou's Xiaobei, there is also a small concentration of Halal restaurants serving Arab, Turkish, Indian and Pakistani food in a portion of Le Cong Avenue (Le Cong Da Dao). Despite the similar nature of the area, Arabic and religious symbols are still very much

<sup>2</sup> This is in contrast to photos in Figure 1 which are also taken in 2023. The use of Arabic is allowed in Figure 1 presumably because many of these are indoor space, rather than a shop front or restaurant façade in a public space visible at a street level. In other words, Arabic is still allowed in indoor spaces in Guangzhou. Also, unlike many of the businesses run by Muslims (e.g. halal restaurants in Xiaobei), those businesses (seen in Figure 1) are run by non-Muslim Chinese business owners and Arabic is used not for religious or symbolic purposes but to communicate certain information to foreign traders and businessmen. Arguably, those non-Muslim Chinese run businesses have been less targeted in the enforcement of relevant policies and regulations, compared with Xiaobei as a high-profile Muslim area and ethnic enclave.



**Figure 11** Some of the only cases of Arabic found in 2023 (at street level)

visible in 2023 (cf. Figure 10 for a rough idea). This shows that language policy and the level of enforcement may be different in different places, even in neighbouring areas/cities.

### **The linguistic and semiotic landscape of Xiaobei in 2023: a synchronic perspective**

Having approached the area's LL from a comparative and diachronic perspective, let us now take a more synchronic perspective and explore the place's LL in 2023. Despite the drastic changes in the area's LL, the 'Little Africa' is still unique in its own way and possesses something different and 'extra' in Guangzhou's overall Chinese-dominated linguistic ecology. This section therefore aims to delve deeper into this 'extra' and shed light on how various linguistic and multimodal practices have combined to contribute to place-making and give this area Xiaobei identity as a transnational space in 2023. In other words, if explicit written Arabic texts and religious symbols are often not possible (cf. Bhatt, 2023) in shopfronts and business facades at a street level, then how does the enclave have its identity and uniqueness? There are multiple dimensions and facets to the LL data. Given the limited space, only the most salient macro-level trends, features and observations are presented, similar to the approach taken in Sharma (2021). The discussion shows how the area has been (un)made (e.g. through de-Arabization and increasingly Sinicization) and, more importantly, (re)made through various discursive



Figure 12 Some of the only cases of Arabic found in 2023 (at street level)

and semiotic means in identity making (a more nuanced and indigenized Muslim identity that is concerned with harmony and national unity). This theoretically also highlights the fact that identity can be constructed not just linguistically but also multimodally/semiotically. That is, the construction of identity is a dynamic, non-linear and negotiated process that may operate within various constraints and limitations, using whatever resources at language users and agents' disposal. In the process, some degree of creativity may be found.

### Backgrounded Arabic, visibility of monolingual Chinese, and the presence of English

As a result of the de-Arabisation and the indigenization process (Bhatt, 2023), Arabic is significantly backgrounded in the area's LL in 2023. Actually, in 2023, only a small number of signs featuring Arabic can be found in this previously highly Arabised area on a street level (Arabic can still to varying degrees be found in some indoor spaces such as restaurants, hotels and wholesale malls). As seen in Figure 11 (top), a clothes shop features a bilingual sign in English and Arabic ملابس للرجال المسلمين (malaabis lilrijaal almuslimiin or literally 'clothes for Muslim men') is found. Notably, this sign as well as a few other signs are detachable or removable signs that can be easily taken down in no time. Based on my brief interview with the shop owner, the situation now seems a bit relaxed. He said that it might still be a problem and the sign may be taken down again if the enforcement were to become stricter. In Figure 11 (middle), the Arabic expression 'Eid Mubarak' ('blessed feast/festival') is visible in the cursive calligraphy style in a Muslim restaurant. The presence of this



Figure 13 Arabic on restaurant menus

sign may be because this is more temporary and non-permanent in nature since the expression is only used during Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha for short periods of time only. Also, it may be because this sign is emplaced somewhat inside the business (yet visible from outside), rather than being written on the restaurant façade at a street level. The strategic use of removable signage is also visible in Figure 11 (bottom) seen in front of a hotel. The sign featuring Arabic says that Sim cards and foreign currencies are available.

Similarly, Figure 12 indicates 2 more bottom-up signs featuring Arabic that are visible at a street level. The sign on the left is a multimodal sign featuring the national flags of African countries and the English and Arabic words for ‘flag order’. Rather than appearing on the store front, this is again a removable sign that can be taken inside easily. The sign on the right is a non-permanent multimodal poster about a business specializing in Islamic dress and hijab. The poster is pasted onto a wall in the public domain (which presumably does not belong to any business). These seemingly show the creativity of those businesses in getting around the rules and regulations. While Arabic has all but disappeared on shopfronts and is significantly less visible on a street level, Arabic is still used indoors (e.g. restaurant menus). The signs in Figure 13 are examples of this.

The backgrounded Arabic has seen monolingual Chinese signs being more visible and foregrounded proportionally. This is illustrated in Figure 14. This shows how Islam and the related ways of life become indigenised, sinicised and (re)contextualised in the local context. Notably, the Chinese word 清真 (*qing*



Figure 14 Monolingual Chinese-only signs in Xiaobei's LL



Figure 15 Presence of English in Xiaobei's LL

zhen) for 'halal' is used instead of the Arabic or English versions. While Arabic is more or less backgrounded through top-down efforts, the global *lingua franca* English is still relatively visible in the area (Figure 15) to meet the linguistic needs of the diverse population there, appearing in the form of monolingual,



**Figure 16** Uyghur signs in a few businesses

bilingual and even multilingual signs. English to some extent fills the vacuum left by Arabic. Such bottom-up (socio)linguistic practice of using English shows the importance of the language in the making of low-end globalisation (Mathews, 2008, 2011), which is also seen in other places globally (Gu & Manan 2024).

### Presence of Uyghur signs

Uyghur is the language of Uyghur Muslims, an ethnic minority group largely found in Northwestern China's Xinjiang region. Uyghur, a Turkic language, uses an adapted version of the Arabic script for writing. While Arabic is viewed as a threat, Uyghur signs are found in several businesses. For example, in the first sign in Figure 16, the Uyghur text describes the ice cream available. The other Uyghur signs refer to the restaurants' names. It is not exactly clear why this is allowed. Probably the justification is that Uyghur is a recognised language of an ethnic group in China. As such, it is not a foreign language like Arabic. Or maybe these signs are allowed because the texts in Uyghur are more informational in nature and are not religious symbols, despite the same/similar script used as Arabic. These are also supported by



Figure 17 Pervasiveness of green in Xiaobei's linguistic and semiotic landscape

my conversations with several shop and business owners in the area. This seemingly points to a differentiated approach in the implementation of the policy.

### Religion, ethnic and culture-specific colours, patterns and themes

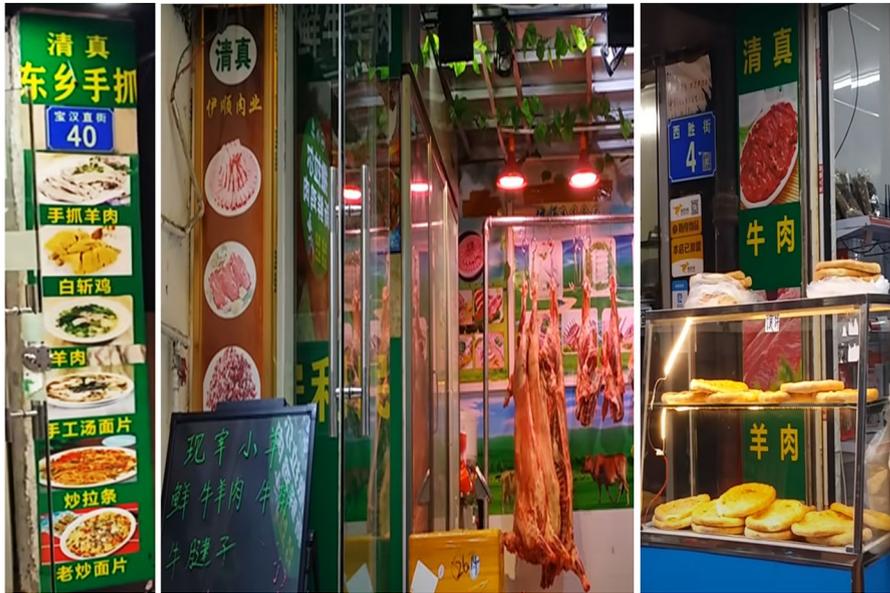
Having explored the more linguistic and textual elements, it is worth noting that other multimodal and semiotic elements are also instrumental to place-making of the area. A unique feature of this area is the use of colour. Unlike the rest of Guangzhou (where colours such as red and yellow are common), green and blue are figured prominently in this area. Green and blue are common and preferred colours used in Islam. Figures 17 and 18 are some examples of the pervasiveness of green and blue in the enclave. Since Arabic cannot be used on those business facades, the widespread use of these colours gives this area an exotic flavour and a unique identity.



Figure 18 Pervasiveness of blue in Xiaobei's linguistic and semiotic landscape



Figure 19 Images and various visual elements



**Figure 20** Images, objects and various visual elements

Additionally, identity is also constructed through font style. In Figure 18 (top), the Chinese words 雅古布兰州牛肉面 are designed in a stylish way with exotic-looking font style. The words are also designed against a backdrop of white clouds and blue sky. This gives an image of vast grassland in Western China. Also, the unique design of certain objects and items can also contribute to place-making. In Figure 18 (bottom), a blue cupboard is visible inside a restaurant. The blue colour is the preferred colour of certain ethnic minority groups in Western China. The cupboard also features stylish and elaborate Islamic patterns in gold colour. This accentuates the nature of the halal restaurant that is run by ethnic minority group in China.

### Images and various visual elements

Images on signs also play a crucial role in the multimodal construction of a place in addition to language and colour, etc. For example, in Figure 19, the two shop fronts feature highly visible multimodal elements, where images of different items (e.g. bags, shirts, robes and sandals) can be found. Occupying at least 50% of the space, several men of non-Chinese ancestries (e.g. Africans and Middle Easterners) are portrayed. Since these shops target foreign customers and countries in the Middle East and Africa, the portrayal of non-Chinese men makes sense. The various visual, textual and multimodal elements together form an assemblage (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010; Pennycook, 2017; Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015), making these shops stand out. Interestingly, in Figure 19 (bottom), three parts of the sign have been covered, which respectively are the Chinese and English word for 'Muslim' and a depiction



**Figure 21** Look-alikes for star and crescent symbol

of a mosque. These are covered presumably because of their religious connotations (similar trends can also be found elsewhere in the area).

Similarly, visual images and objects are figured prominently in Figure 20. Clearly, many ‘exotic’ halal and Muslim dishes are illustrated in the two vertical posters featuring green background. ‘Exotic’ dishes such as 手抓 are available. 手抓 (*shou zhua*) is the Chinese name of a popular dish widely consumed in Western China, central Asia, South Asia and the middle east. In English, it is spelled as pilau, pilav, pilau, pilaf or pulao. Despite the different alternative spellings/names, it is basically a rice dish similar to biriyani and paella. Photographs of those dishes, along with naans, halal meat hung in the halal butcher shop, the overall green colour, music from Northwest China, Central Asia and beyond, give the area a unique ‘foreign’ identity and ‘exotic’ image rarely seen in other non-Islamic parts of Guangzhou. These multimodal elements and objects also give a strong sense of authenticity (cf. Matwick & Matwick., 2019).

The strategic and interesting use of multimodal elements is also illustrated in Figure 21. The star and crescent is generally used as a symbol of Islam. The symbol is seen on the flags of Pakistan, Turkey, Malaysia, Tunisia, Mauritania, Algeria, Libya, Azerbaijan, etc. However, given its religious and potentially sensitive nature, in the LL of ‘Little Africa’ in 2023, the once visible star and crescent symbol per se is absent presumably due to top-down regulation.



Figure 22 Top-down signs emphasising national harmony and unity in Xiaobei

Interestingly, however, in a number of shopfronts, while the symbol is not technically used, these businesses have provided images that look like a star and crescent. In the first sign in Figure 21, seemingly a leaf is represented instead of a star. The leaf is placed alongside a crescent. In the 2nd and 3rd sign, arguably a crescent is expressly designed in a way that looks like a red chili pepper. This therefore shows the creativity and agency enjoyed by the sign-makers to construct identity and convey meaning multimodally in an innovative manner. This points to the fact that sometimes makers of bottom-up signs at a grass-roots level may have some leeway to work around the seemingly fixed regulations and inflexible rules (or a centripetal force for Bakhtin, 1981) and can dynamically



**Figure 23** Bottom-up sign (top) and mural in English (bottom) emphasising national unity in Xiaobei

negotiate an alternative/solution in a creative way. In other words, in this case, there is a dynamic equilibrium between the **centripetal force** (top-down prescriptive language policies and ideology to Sinicise the area's LL) and the bottom-up **centrifugal force** (e.g. the wish of community members to inject and enact an ethnic, religious and cultural identity relating to Islam and use Arabic for marketing/advertising purposes).

### **We are united as one**

Another salient feature emerging from the area is the visibility of unity and harmony themed signs and posters, calling for a strong sense of Chinese-ness. Given the ethnically diverse nature of 'Little Africa' with many Muslims from China and other countries, the area is seen as a potentially divisible force, which may prevent integration and national harmony and unity. Against such a backdrop, official top-down signs and posters are highly prominent in the area. This is illustrated in Figure 22. Clearly, red is the predominant colour (which is the traditional colour of Chinese culture and the colour of China's national flag). In these multimodal signs, the 56 ethnic groups in China, the silhouette of a Chinese city's modern skyline with

tall skyscrapers, and symbols of Chinese culture (e.g. Chinese paper-cutting art) are respectively portrayed. These top-down signs construct an image of China being strong, developed, harmonious and united discursively. These are further strengthened by the written texts, where such words as 一家亲 (close as one family), 中国梦 (Chinese dream), and 和谐 (harmony) are foregrounded.

In addition, a similar message emphasizing national unity is seen in a bottom-up sign emplaced in a halal restaurant (cf. Figure 23 top). Although the main background is green/blue, the actual text is the same as the one in the first sign in Figure 22. It is not clear what the reasons are behind this. Presumably, the business owner does not want to ruffle any feathers and wants to (pre-emptively) show good alignment with and adherence to the official message/ideology so that it can be construed as a good gesture and be seen in a favourable way that it is a patriotic restaurant. This way, the business owner can have an easier life and the business can run smoothly. A mural featuring English words 'NATIONAL UNITY' can also be found in the Little Africa area (cf. Figure 23 bottom), where Chinese imageries (trees, river, red lantern) are portrayed. Based on the researcher's observation, China's national flag is also pervasive in the area in 2023 compared with about a decade ago. The red flag is placed in front of many, if not all, businesses in 2023 seemingly as part of a coordinated effort (cf. Figure 6). This conveys a sense of nationalism and national unity. In total, these point to a (re)making of the area's linguistic and semiotic landscape and (re)shaping of the area's identity against a context of change.

## Discussions and conclusion

As a result of globalisation and the development of Sino-African relations, Xiaobei or Little Africa represents a barometer of China-foreign trade. Essentially a multilingual, multicultural and inter-ethnic interface in Guangzhou in the world's factory China, Xiaobei has been a unique transnational space, which is a particularly fitting place for linguistic landscape analysis. In the midst of Guangzhou's glittering skyscrapers, a kind of low-end globalisation is taking place. Since the (socio) linguistic aspects of (low-end) globalisation remain little explored, this empirical study investigated the (un)making and remaking of the enclave from the perspective of LL against a backdrop of socio-political, ideological, attitudinal and language policy changes. As recognised by Li et al. (2012), the dynamic relations between the transient global-local nexus, immigration regime, local geography and various other factors can affect the ebb and flow of the 'Chocolate City'. In other words, the ethnic enclave is far from being static and non-changing, which is constantly responding to the dynamic and changing situations of the global and the local (Li et al., 2012). A locale's changing linguistic landscape is in many ways a history book which documents the broader socio-political, cultural and ideological dimensions of the place beyond just signs themselves.

Through a comparative and diachronic analysis of the area's LL in 2013/2014 and 2023, a clear trend of de-Arabization (Bhatt, 2023) is found, where Arabic is backgrounded and religious symbols in Arabic are not allowed. This is the result of



**Figure 24** The multimodal and multidimensional nature of Xiaobei with static objects and non-static actors

a larger top-down effort to Sinicise<sup>3</sup> and domesticate imported foreign religions (e.g. Islam). In view of the episodes of ethnic and religious issues emerging in recent years, religious symbols (e.g. in Arabic) are viewed as a destabilizing force that may be linked to fundamentalism and extremism. This therefore begs the question as to how identity is constructed in the Muslim enclave, if Arabic and religious symbols are not permitted. The backgrounding of Arabic gave rise to Chinese being (proportionally) more visible. English, as the global *lingua franca*, continues to be visible in signs in the area to facilitate inter-ethnic and intercultural communication.

In addition to language, other discursive modalities and semiotic elements (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010) often dynamically combine to help give a sense of a place. These include the extensive use of green and blue colours, various ethnic and culture-specific motifs, patterns, features and themes, images of exotic halal food items

<sup>3</sup> It is beyond the scope of this article to trivialise this and comment over-simplistically on whether the measures are appropriate or not. Clearly, such action needs to be contextualised within a larger picture concerning the (changing) perceptions of and attitude towards Islam and Muslims over the years and understood against the broader backdrop of shifting Muslim-Nonmuslim relations and a clash of civilisations (cf. Huntington 1993). For example, some countries in the West (e.g. France) have rightly or wrongly expressed worry and concern over certain migrant communities and religious groups. Actually, in France, a somewhat controversial law in 2004 bans wearing clothes and/or symbols that reveal a person's religion in educational settings (which includes religious symbols relating to Islam).

such as pilau and portrayals of African and middle eastern men. These together with ethnic minority street vendors, Muslim butchers, local customers, curious tourists and passers-by, African, Middle East and South Asian traders, beggars, Muslim men wearing white caps, Hijab-wearing women, aromatic naans, Uyghur ice cream, Northwest Chinese, central Asian and middle eastern music, and interestingly signs, posters and murals emphasizing harmony, national unity and Chinese-ness all contribute to place-making in the broader built environment. Please see Figure 24 for a more concrete idea of how various linguistic and semiotic elements, the dynamic interactions and movements of people from different backgrounds, the ethnic food etc. may interweave and still give this area a distinct image even without extensively using Arabic. Such interweaving of various inseparable elements and modalities therefore gives Xiaobei or 'Little Africa' a unique and hybridised identity that is different from the rest of Guangzhou, thus ultimately leading to a (re)making of the once highly Arabised enclave. This more holistic multimodal, multidimensional and multisensory understanding involving both the linguistic and semiotic landscape (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010; Pennycook, 2017; Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015) promises to provide a more accurate and comprehensive account of this superdiverse, dynamic and transnational urban space that is where the local meets the global.

Overall, this sociolinguistic study points to the common tension between centripetal forces (top-down prescriptivist language policy) and centrifugal forces (bottom-up linguistic practices on the ground that attempt to enact certain religious and sociocultural identities and achieve certain advertising and marketing goals) that exists in many societies. In the presence of the seemingly powerful regulations and inflexible rules, individual businesses at a grass-roots level may be in a weak position. However, some kind of agency and creativity still can be found and meaning can be constructed through other means using the businesses' multimodal repertoires. This highlights the dynamic and constantly negotiated nature of meaning-making in linguistic landscape and communication in general. Fundamentally, this empirical study also illustrates how a locale's LL is jointly influenced and conditioned by top-down policy-making, bottom-up market forces, and the attitudes of people in a society at large within a broader socio-political, economic and historical context. This highlights the sometimes transitory and unstable nature of such transnational spaces. This study adds to a growing corpus of scholarship on ethnic enclaves and diaspora communities in Asia and beyond (Amos, 2016; Gu, 2023; Guinto, 2019; Izadi & Parvaresh, 2016; Karolak, 2022; Lee & Lou, 2019; Lou, 2016; Wang, 2022; Woldemariam & Lanza, 2015; Wu et al., 2020; Yao, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023).

**Funding** Open access funding provided by The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Funding was provided by Hong Kong Polytechnic University Start-up fund.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** This research has no conflict of interest to declare.

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