

# Revitalizing Chinatown Into a Heterotopia

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## A Geosemiotic Analysis of Shop Signs in Washington, D.C.'s Chinatown

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*With the changing immigrant population and rising real-estate prices in downtown Washington, D.C., the number of Chinese residents and businesses in its Chinatown has declined in recent years. Meanwhile, non-Chinese stores and restaurants have marched into this thriving neighborhood. Foreseeing the threat of Chinatown's disappearance from the urban landscape, leaders of the local Chinese community have devised and administered a mandate for all businesses, Chinese and non-Chinese, in the area to carry Chinese shop signs. To understand how this mandate has reconstructed Chinatown's semiotic landscape, this article employs the theoretical framework of geosemiotics and the (post-)structuralist conception of the sign. Through an analysis of shop signs in their material contexts, it is argued that the local community's preservation effort has inadvertently rendered Chinatown into a heterotopia, where heterogeneous spaces are juxtaposed into one place.*

*Keywords: Chinatown, shop signs, geosemiotics, heterotopia, urban revitalization*

We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed.

—Michel Foucault (1967)

At the intersection of Seventh and H Streets in northwest Washington, D.C., stands the largest single-span Chinese archway in the world. This brightly colored four-story architecture (as shown in Figure 1) is decorated by 270 ceramic dragons in gold coating, and its peaked roof is covered by 7,000 glazed gold tiles. Alfred Liu, the architect

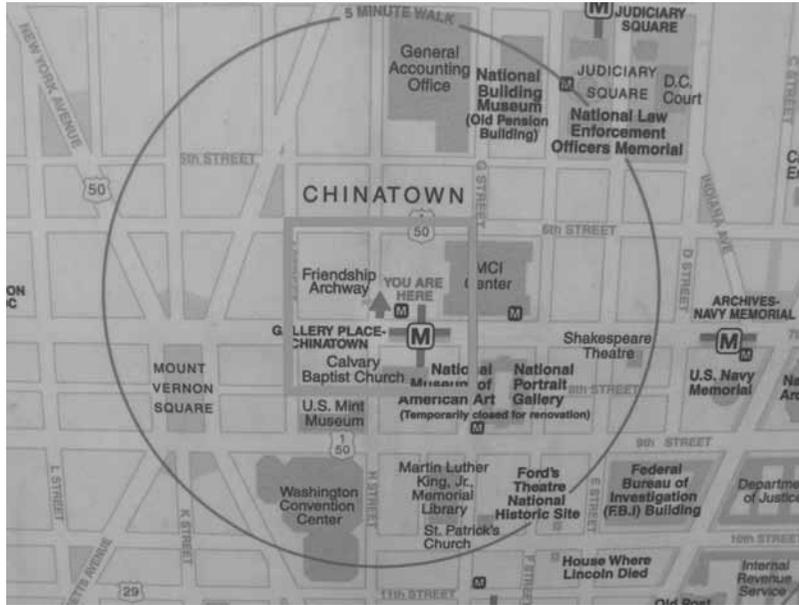


**Figure 1:** Friendship Archway, Chinatown, Washington, D.C.

who designed the arch, said the arch was representative of the architectural style of the Ming and Qing dynasties and pointed out that gold used to be the privilege of the emperor (Wheeler, 1986). This \$1 million project involving 16 artists from China was completed in 1986. The cost was copaid by the district government and the People's Republic of China. The arch was hailed by Marion Barry, D.C. mayor at the time of the construction, as "a visual symbol of the cultural and economic exchanges which will be part of our sister-city (Beijing and Washington, D.C.) agreement" (quoted in Wheeler, 1986, p. J01) and "a symbol of a living downtown" (quoted in Sherwood, 1986, p. C01).

Ironically, in the shadow of this grand archway, D.C.'s Chinatown is tiny compared with those in other North American cities such as Boston, New York, San Francisco, and Vancouver. Although it is impossible for any passer-by to miss the arch, they might neglect the actual existence of the miniature Chinatown. Reportedly an eight-block ethnic neighborhood in 1986 (Wheeler, 1986), D.C.'s Chinatown nowadays is virtually reduced to two blocks, with the crossroad of Seventh and H Streets as its center and G, I, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> Streets as its boundaries (Figure 2). Fewer than 500 Chinese people actually reside in downtown's Chinatown, most of who live in Wah Luck House, a low-income housing project built in 1982 (Wah Luck House, 2005). Many of the Washington metropolitan area's Chinese now live in the nearby suburbs in Virginia or Maryland (Knipp, 2005; Nicholls, 2003). At the same time that an increasing number of Chinese businesses closed down because of high real estate prices, a variety of American retail chains, such as Starbucks and Washington Sports Club, have moved into this booming downtown area with ample business opportunities (Moore, 2005; Sheridan, 2002).

Anticipating the threat of urban development on Chinatown's survival, the Chinatown Steering Committee, comprising community and business leaders, devised a plan to preserve the neighborhood's tradition and character by insisting that new businesses use Chinese characters and decoration (Pyatt, 1999). This mandate



**Figure 2:** Map of Chinatown, Washington, D.C.

produced a unique semiotic landscape (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996) that is not observed in Chinatowns elsewhere, that is, the spread of Chinese signage to non-Chinese businesses. These new shop signs have to some extent contributed to the booming appearance of the area, but some observers have also questioned whether this initial success is leading to the actual revitalization of Chinatown (Knipp, 2005; Moore, 2005). In this article, I address this problem by analyzing and comparing the shop signs of the Chinese and non-Chinese businesses.

## Finding Chinatown

The definition of *Chinatown* is not an easy task. It is usually perceived as a Chinese quarter of any city outside China, “a self-contained urban enclave where nearly all Chinese people, their businesses, and their social institutions were confined” (Lai, 1988, p. xv). This common perception is poetically narrated in *Chinatown*, an illustrated book for children: “Chinatown. City within a city. Home to street cobblers and herbalists, tai chi masters and kung fu students, outdoor fish markets and lots and lots of restaurants” (Low, 1997, front flap). Indeed, the contemporary Chinatown in North America is not only characterized by the ethnicity of its residents but also the sheer abundance of restaurants and stores. Shop signs, therefore, are a conspicuous part of Chinatown’s landscape.

The streets of Chinatowns have fascinated outside observers (reviewed in Lee, 2001). For example, Arnold Genthe photographed San Francisco’s old Chinatown in the early 20th century (collected in Genthe & Tchen, 1984). Genthe’s photos provide contemporary researchers of Chinatown with invaluable historic records of old Chinatown and also with materials for critical examination. Lee (2001), for instance,

argued that most of those pictures in historical records are not representations but imaginations of Chinatowns in Western eyes (p. 8). He raised the question "What is the place of Chinatown?" beyond geographical boundary marking (p. 9).

In many North American cities, Chinatowns have not remained a confined urban enclave. In the past two decades, scholars have studied the changes that have happened in Chinatowns from socioeconomic, historical, and anthropological perspectives (Chen, 1992; Lai, 1988; Wong, 1982). Chen (1992), for instance, has noticed the emerging heterogeneous community structure of the Chinatown in Flushing, Queens, New York. Pertinent to the present discussion, Lai (1988), in a history of Chinatowns in Canada, presented a stage-development model that summarizes the historical development of Canadian Chinatowns into the four stages of budding, booming, withering, and reviving.

On this timeline of development, Washington, D.C.'s Chinatown nowadays could stand on the three stages of withering, booming, and reviving simultaneously. The area of Chinatown is undergoing a business boom while gradually more Chinese businesses cannot afford to stay (Weiss, 2005). What complicates the picture even more is the effort of the local Chinese community to preserve Chinatown's traditional character (Pyatt, 1999) and the support from the district government in revitalizing an ethnic urban neighborhood (Sheridan, 2002). As mentioned above, these conflicts and compromises in preservation and revitalization have resulted in an intriguingly homogeneous urban landscape where both Chinese and non-Chinese businesses carry Chinese signage. Thus, it calls for a contemporary observer to re-examine the appearance of Chinatown to better understand the processes and consequences of the preservation and revitalization effort.

## Sign and City, Language and Place

The relationship between sign and place has interested scholars working in urban semiotics who regard built environments, such as villages and cities, as signs in themselves (Gottdiener & Lagopoulos, 1986). They share with geosemioticians the emphasis on the "material processes of social production and reproduction" (Gottdiener & Lagopoulos, 1986, p. 19). According to Gottdiener and Lagopoulos (1986), "Material objects are the vehicles of significance, so that the symbolic act always involves some physical object as well as social discourse in it" (p. 3). Ideology is central in this field (see Herzfeld, 1988) and "acts as the system of connotation precedes the denotative system in urban space" (Gottdiener & Lagopoulos, 1986, p. 5).

However, signs are also resources for active meaning making (van Leeuwen, 2005). Van Leeuwen (2005) preferred the term *semiotic resource* to *sign*. He defined semiotic resources "as the actions and the artifacts we use to communicate" (p. 3). This functional perspective grew out of the poststructuralist conception of the sign not merely as a unit composed of the signifier and the signified (Saussure, 1959) but as a product of humankind's meaning-making activity (Barthes, 1964/1972; Baudrillard, 1994/2001; Debray, 1993).

Both views of the sign underlie recent discussions from both human geographers and discourse analysts on the dialectical relationship between language and place. For Yi-Fu Tuan (1991), a human geographer, language is central in the creation of place. He saw it as a problem that the economic and material forces in the making of place had been overly emphasized in human geography. In his view, the important role of language was neglected "even though without speech humans cannot even begin to

formulate ideas, discuss them, and translate them into actions that culminates in a built place” (p. 684). He argues:

Words alone, used in an appropriate situation, can have the power to render objects, formally invisible because unattended, visible, and impart to them a certain character: thus a mere rise on a flat surface becomes something far more—a place that promises to open up to other places—when it is named “Mount Prospect.” (p. 684)

Interestingly, on the other hand, for discourse analysts Ron and Suzie Scollon (2003), it was problematic that language had become too central in the study of meaning. For them, meaning is grounded in the material world. Hence, they have developed the theoretical framework *geosemiotics*, defined as “the study of the social meaning of the material placement of signs. By ‘signs’ we mean to include any semiotic system including language and discourse” (p. 110). In this view, the meaning of the sign prohibiting nude bathing, using their example, is not fixed until “it is actually posted firmly in place at the beach” (p. 1).

These two seemingly converse views highlight the complex nature of the relationship between language and place, as noted in de Saint-Georges (2002):

On the one hand, discourse is bound to spaces of actions and interactions. There is no discourse, knowledge or social practice that stands outside of a social, historical and physical space. On the other hand, discourse is also “about” space. It can formulate it, appropriate it or participate in its transformation. (p. 1)

In short, words have the power to turn a space into a place (see also Blommaert, 2005; Johnstone, 2005; Lemke, 2005); place also has the power to fix the meaning of words and other signs. Drawing from both perspectives, I take a dialectical view of language and place in this article. Chinatown is viewed not just as a geographic location housing shops and their signs but as a semiotic aggregate, which is defined as “multiple semiotic systems in a dialogical interaction with each other” (Scollon & Scollon, 2003, p. 12), of which shop signs constitute a large part. Chinese shop signs are the products of certain discourses of preservation and urban revitalization; they, at the same time, reconstitute the meaning of Chinatown. Therefore, the question “What is the place of Chinatown?” is approached through a geosemiotic analysis of its shop signs.

Data for this project were collected using a digital camera. In total, 515 photos were produced, among which 245 pictures were taken in Washington, D.C., on two field trips, 22 months apart. Initially intended for a comparative study, 139 photos of Chinatown shop signs were also taken in Boston, 70 in Vancouver, and 61 in London. Still photographs were also used by students at San Francisco State University in a series of projects building photomaps of Chinatown (Collier, 1986). According to Collier (1986), photomaps simultaneously allow a broad view of the community, its visual characteristics, and also the design and content of displayed signs.

Based on the photographic data, the analysis is focused on three aspects of geosemiotics as developed in Scollon and Scollon (2003): language choice and code preference in the signs, inscription (in particular, text vectors and composition) of the signs, and the physical emplacement of the signs. In the analysis that follows, I first present the geosemiotic features of the signage used by Chinese businesses and then compare them with those adopted by non-Chinese businesses in Washington, D.C.’s Chinatown. Their similarities and differences reveal a heterotopia (Foucault, 1967), or a multilocal and multivocal place (Rodman, 1992), beneath the surface of a homotopia.<sup>2</sup>

## Geosemiotic Characteristics of Chinese Shop Signs

### LANGUAGE CHOICE

At an earlier stage of this project, bilingual shop signs were taken for granted because contemporary Chinatowns are essentially situated in largely English-speaking cities. Copresence of English and Chinese in shop signs seemed to be a natural index of the geographic location of overseas Chinatowns. However, a glance through a few available picture books of San Francisco's Chinatowns in the late 19th century and the early 20th century (Genthe & Tchen, 1984; Lee, 2001) led me to the surprising realization that bilingual signs were not at all common in Chinatown's history. Thus the issue of code choice and preference was brought back into close examination.

Language choice in shop signs has been the focus of a few recent linguistic studies (de Saint-Georges & Norris, 2000; Pan & Scollon, 2000) exploring the public display of language ideologies or "linguistic landscape" (Raphael, Shohamy, & Muhammad, 2002). For example, Pan and Scollon (2000) observed that monolingual Chinese shop signs index the store's geographic location in mainland China or Taiwan, whereas bilingual Chinese and English shop signs index Hong Kong, a postcolonial city.<sup>3</sup>

The CVS pharmacy pictured in Figure 3 provides an interesting comparison with photographs of Chinese herbal stores and pharmacies taken by Arnold Genthe sometime between 1895 and 1906 in San Francisco's Chinatown (Genthe & Tchen, 1984). In one of the historical photographs, the shop sign was written in traditional Chinese characters vertically carved on a wooden post at the corner of a building, advertising genuine medical herbs from Chinese provinces. As comparison, the photo in Figure 3 was taken in February 2004 at a street corner in Washington, D.C.'s Chinatown, next to the arch. The logo of the Western pharmacy chain, CVS, is placed in the vertical center of the sign, with the Chinese word for pharmacy 药房 (*yaofang*, meaning "pharmacy") on top, and the word for grocery 雜貨 (*zahuò*, literally meaning "all kinds of goods") at bottom. Intriguingly, the word for *pharmacy* is in simplified Chinese whereas the word for *grocery* is in traditional Chinese. I will turn to the social significance of simplified versus traditional writing systems later in this section.

Reflected through the language choice in these two cases is a change in interaction order in Chinatowns in the past century. The monolingual drug store sign, on one hand, excluded English speakers from its implied readers and positioned its owner as a businessman serving only the Chinese community. In fact, it was documented that "Chinese were generally barred from access to San Francisco's hospitals and were unfairly blamed for many of the plagues that affected the city" (Genthe & Tchen, 1984). Thus, the drug stores were sometimes also clinics that had Chinese doctors to serve the medical needs of this population.

In sharp contrast, today the CVS pharmacy's bilingual shop sign includes both Chinese- and English-speaking communities as its implied readers. First, the Chinese words above and below the logo explain the two primary functions of the store: pharmacy and grocery. Thus, Chinese readers who lack the necessary social-cultural knowledge, for example, tourists from mainland China or Taiwan, can interpret what kind of store CVS is. In addition, the abbreviated shop logo CVS is accessible to both. As Scollon and Scollon (1998) observed in mainland China and Hong Kong, initial letters of international brand names, such as *KFC* and *P&G*, are probably well integrated into the Chinese language despite what they stand for are often opaque to their Chinese readers. In brief, the implied readers of bilingual shop signs in contemporary



**Figure 3:** CVS pharmacy, Chinatown, Washington, D.C.

Chinatowns include both English-speaking and Chinese-speaking customers rather than serving the latter exclusively, as was the case about a hundred years ago.

In addition to the choice of languages, the making of a shop sign in Chinatown also involves the choice between simplified and traditional writing systems, or both as we have seen in the CVS shop sign in Washington, D.C. (Figure 3, above). The simplified Chinese writing system is the predominant system used in mainland China as well as Singapore, while Hong Kong and Taiwan retain the use of traditional Chinese characters. The current simplified writing system is the culmination of a series of reforms in writing systems in mainland China since 1949. Along with the promotion of a standard spoken language (*Putonghua*) and the romanization system (*Pinyin*), the simplification of Chinese characters was regarded by modern-minded scholars and the Chinese Communist Party as a critical step in modernizing the Chinese language to

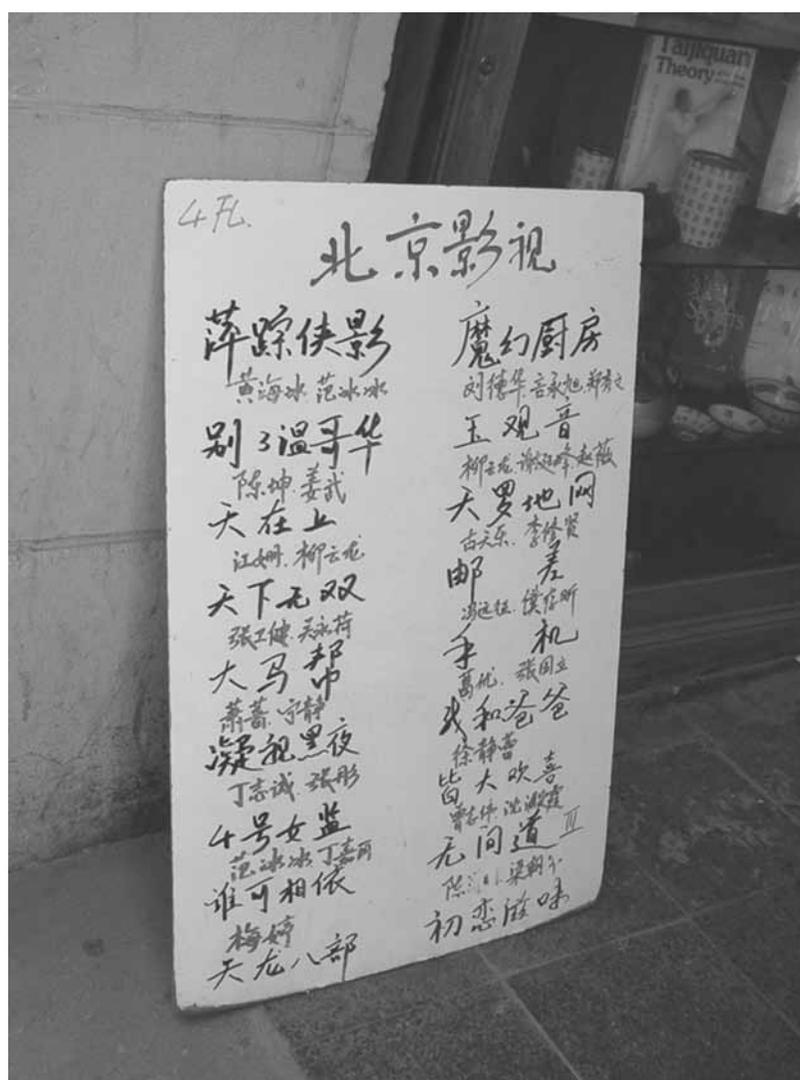


Figure 4: Beijing Video, Chinatown, Boston, Massachusetts

meet the challenges of the modern world as well as reducing the rate of illiteracy in the country (Norman, 1988; Rohsenow, 2001; Zhou & Ross, 2004).

Considering the history behind the writing system, the pervasive use of simplified Chinese characters in signage in mainland China is a consequence of these nationwide language reforms (Scollon & Scollon, 1998, 2003). Hong Kong's persistence in the use of the traditional Chinese writing systems in public discourses is thus seen as positioning the region away from this revolutionary discourse.

Given that many of the older Chinese immigrants left mainland China before 1949 (that is, before the language reforms), traditional Chinese characters are still the dominant code in shop signs in Washington, D.C.'s Chinatown. In contrast, in Boston's Chinatown, shop signs written in simplified Chinese characters are as common as those in traditional characters (see the Beijing video sign in Figure 4 for an example).

This difference suggests that the newer wave of Chinese immigrants from mainland

China has not affected the Chinatown in downtown Washington, D.C., as much as in Boston. In fact, more recent immigrants from China have chosen to live in the suburbs of the Washington metropolitan area, including nearby towns in Maryland and Virginia, where they can own bigger houses and send their children to better schools. Notably according to the 2000 Census, the Asian population in Rockville, Maryland, has increased by 60.5% since 1990 (Nicholls, 2003). As observed by a noodle shop owner in Rockville, “In old Chinatowns people live and work in one neighborhood, one small area. Here we drive from store to store. But that’s okay. The new immigrants all have their own vehicles” (Nicholls, 2003, p. F1). The absence of simplified Chinese shop signs of Chinatown’s Chinese stores is indicative of this changing socioeconomic status and lifestyle of Chinese immigrants.

In summary, language choice in shop signs indexes simultaneously the new and old kinds of interactional order in Washington, D.C.’s Chinatown. It is new because, as indicated by the bilingual signage, it is more integrated into the surrounding neighborhoods of the city than Chinatowns were at the beginning of the past century; it is also old because, as gleaned from the pervasive use of traditional Chinese shop signs, D.C.’s Chinatown has not absorbed the vitality of the more recent and younger immigrants from China. It is a Chinatown of the present as well as from the past. In addition to the socio-historical information conveyed by language choice, the next section addresses the subtle linguistic and ethnic priority revealed through the examination of code preference.

#### CODE PREFERENCE

Building on Kress and van Leeuwen’s (1996) visual grammar, Scollon and Scollon (2003) have extended the discussion of language choice to include code preference, “the relationship between two or more languages in bilingual (multilingual) signs and pictures” (p. 209). A code placed above another code is considered to be preferred as well as the code that appears in the center position.

In D.C.’s Chinatown, the shop signs of most Chinese stores have Chinese characters in visually prominent positions, either in the center or above the English store names (see the seafood restaurant sign in Figure 5 for an example). In some cases, when the Chinese name is in a less preferred position, it is still highlighted by a brighter color. As shown in Figure 6, the Taishan restaurant’s storefront has two parts. The English name of the restaurant is on the red awning, and its Chinese name in bright yellow color is fixed on the red-colored wall.

In contrast, as will be shown in the second part of the analysis, although the non-Chinese stores display Chinese characters as required by the mandate, their Chinese signs are often de-emphasized through various means.

#### TEXT VECTORS

In addition to language choice and code preference, text vector is the other geosemiotic feature of Chinese shop signs that has changed over time. *Text vector* refers to “the normal or conventional reading direction of text in a language” (Scollon & Scollon, 2003, p. 216). Scollon and Scollon (2003) noted,

Because Chinese has the possibility of both left to right and right to left text vectors, the text vectors themselves are exploited to situate the sign in relationship to the geosemiotic world. Generally speaking, and with very few exceptions in our data, the base of the text



**Figure 5:** Kam Fong Seafood Restaurant, Chinatown, Washington, D.C.

vector, that is the point from where the reading starts, is located at the most salient point. These “salient points” consist of doorways, corners of building. (p. 153)

Some cases of deviation from their observation are noted in Chinatown’s shop signs. Whereas the top-down text vector is still commonly used, the right-to-left vector is reserved for places that perhaps have existed for at least half a century, for example, the guesthouse in Washington, D.C.’s Chinatown shown in Figure 7.

The left-to-right text vector in contemporary Chinese writing is a result of the *Baihuawen Yundong* (“vernacular writing style movement”) in the early 1900s, which sought to modernize the Chinese language as a means to promote modern ways of thinking. Western-educated Chinese individuals leading the movement pushed written Chinese closer to the style of modern Romance languages in many ways, including reversing the traditional right-to-left text vector (Norman, 1988). Nowadays, the right-to-left



**Figure 6:** Tai Shan Restaurant, Chinatown, Washington, D.C.

vector is reserved for symbolic use of traditional Chinese culture, as is often seen on the center banner of Chinatown's arches.

In most circumstances, the left-to-right text vector is the default. As illustrated in the storefront of the Eat First restaurant (Figure 8), even when there is a salient point available (i.e., the red center sign) both the horizontal English and Chinese signs are inscribed from left to right rather than emanating from the center.

#### SYMMETRICAL COMPOSITION

As the reader may have already noticed from the above examples, many of the shop signs are symmetrical in composition, with a horizontal plate placed on top and two vertical plates at the sides. Similar to the right-to-left text vector, symmetry is associated with traditional Chinese culture. Nowadays in China, it can be most easily found



**Figure 7:** Zhao Lun Guest House, Chinatown, Washington, D.C.

in couplets on household doors during Spring Festival or in the couplets inscribed on the pillars of any hall in a temple or palace.

This preference for symmetrical composition is pervasive in Chinese shop signs in D.C.'s Chinatown. One of the means to achieve symmetrical composition is to split the Chinese name and put the English name in the center, as shown on the awning of Taishan Restaurant in Figure 6. Other ways to achieve symmetrical layout include repetition, as we have already seen in the shop sign of the restaurant Eat First in Figure 8.

#### EMPLACEMENT

Similar to symmetrical composition, the manner in which a Chinese shop sign is physically mounted indicates continuity from traditional Chinese culture.



**Figure 8:** Eat First, Chinatown, Washington, D.C.

*Transgressive emplacement* refers to any placement of a sign in the “wrong” place (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). It is important to note that judgment regarding transgression is contingent on the reader and also the community to which she or he belongs. Thus, a noodle shop sign fixed outside the arcade of an elegant building in postcolonial Shanghai is perhaps only transgressive to researchers who have the knowledge of the Western aesthetic function of the arcade but not to someone who grew up in Shanghai and is hence familiar with this kind of semiotic practice.

Similar transgressive emplacement of shop signs is observed in Washington, D.C.’s Chinatown. As shown in Figure 9, the shop sign of the Chopsticks Restaurant is vertically fixated on the whitewashed brick wall and extends outwards into the space above the sidewalk.

This type of fixture would be considered transgressive were it to occur in shop fronts attached to colonial style brick townhouses elsewhere in Washington, D.C. As



**Figure 9:** Chopsticks Restaurant, Chinatown, Washington, D.C.

Scollon and Scollon (2003) pointed out, “There was and to some extent still is within European and Western aesthetics of urban design a preference for urban surfaces without signs as an expression of high levels of elegance” (p. 149). However, the transgression of emplacement of shop signs is legitimate because it is situated in Chinatowns. Even non-Chinese business enterprises, such as the Starbucks in Chinatown, have adopted this transgressive use of semiotic space. This phenomenon of geosemiotic features commonly associated with Chinese stores’ shop signs spreading to non-Chinese stores is the final finding to which I will turn next.

To summarize, the geosemiotic features of Chinese stores’ shop signs present Washington, D.C.’s Chinatown as simultaneously traditional and contemporary. First, with the increasing integration of Chinatown into the urban environment in which it



**Figure 10:** MCI Center, Chinatown, Washington, D.C.

is situated, bilingual and multilingual signs are used instead of monolingual Chinese signs as was common in the early 20th century. On the other hand, the predominant presence of traditional Chinese characters in the shop signs is indicative of the absence of newer Chinese immigrants from the urban scene of downtown Chinatown. Second, in the bilingual Chinese–English signage, the Chinese store names tend to be placed in a preferred position in the shop signs of Chinese stores, which is different from the Chinese signs of non-Chinese stores. Third, the prevalent left-to-right text vector in shop signs positions the D.C. Chinatown after the 1920s on the timeline of history because the Baihuawen Yudong successfully changed the traditional right-to-left text vector in mainland China around the turn of the 20th century. Finally, the symmetrical composition and transgressive emplacement of the signs show to some degree Chinatown’s connection with traditional Chinese aesthetics and conception of space.

The second part of this article will show the similarities and differences between the Chinese signage of non-Chinese businesses and those of Chinese stores as discussed before.

## Non-Chinese Businesses' Adoption of Chinese Signage

Within the two blocks of Washington, D.C.'s Chinatown, at least half of the stores are part of some American or international retail chain, for example, Washington Sports Club, Starbucks, United Colors of Benetton, and Urban Outfitters. As required by the mandate issued by the Chinatown Steering Committee (Pyatt, 1999), most of them carry Chinese signage. These Chinese shop signs are similar to those of Chinese stores in language choice, text vector, symmetrical composition, and transgressive emplacement; however, they differ in code preference, content, and color.

### SIMILARITIES WITH CHINESE STORES' SHOP SIGNS

The first similarity of shop signs between non-Chinese and Chinese stores is, quite evidently, the use of bilingual Chinese–English shop signs. The photo in Figure 10 shows one sign of the MCI sports center, a 20,000-seat arena. Its Chinese name 體育中心 (*tiyu zhongxin*, “sports center”) is written in traditional Chinese characters in calligraphic style. This translation is generic about the primary function of the arena—that is, hosting sports events, although the MCI Center also hosts nonsports events, such as concerts. Interestingly, the Chinese side of the sign of the MCI Center (Figure 10) faces inward to the center of Chinatown. The other side of the same sign, saying “MCI,” faces away from the center of Chinatown. As the building of the MCI Center sits on the edge of Chinatown, the directionality of this code separation clearly marks a semiotic boundary.

Similar to the MCI Center, a number of non-Chinese stores have adopted the vertical text vector in their signage. As illustrated in the banner of the Goethe Institute located in the Chinatown area (see Figure 11), the vertical text vector assumes the bottom-up direction. Although this inverted text vector is not uncommon nowadays in mainland China, it is the top-to-bottom text vector that is more frequently used and associated with traditional Chinese writing.

Another example of a vertical text vector is Starbucks in Figure 12, which also serves as an illustration of transgressive emplacement. Its Chinese name 星巴克咖啡 (*Xingbake Kafei*, “Starbucks Coffee”) is inscribed in Chinese characters in modern sans-serif font.<sup>4</sup> A green circle surrounds each character. Six such circles are vertically ordered and fixed by black steel shafts to the elegant maroon brick siding of the colonial-style townhouse. Such placement of shop signs would be considered to be transgressive in other parts of Washington, D.C., but it seems to become legitimized when situated in Chinatown. As previously shown, not only Chinese restaurants such as Eat First (Figure 8) but non-Chinese business such as the MCI Center (Figure 10) have adopted this practice.

Finally, it is noticeable that many non-Chinese stores have used symmetrical layout in their Chinese shop signs. In this example of Ruby Tuesday's shop sign (Figure 13), the four characters of its Chinese name are split into two parts flanking its English name to achieve symmetry, which is similar to the strategy we saw above in the shop sign of Tai Shan Restaurant (Figure 6). In the shop sign for Subway (Figure 14), a sandwich franchise, its Chinese name—a clever transliteration—賽百味 (*Saibaiwei*,



**Figure 11:** Goethe Institute, Washington, D.C.

literally means “better than a hundred delicacies”) is repeated two times once on the left and once on the right of its English name for the shop sign to be symmetrical in layout.

In brief, the examples in this section show the similarities between the shop signs of non-Chinese businesses and those of Chinese businesses. In the following section, I discuss how they differ.

#### DIFFERENCES FROM CHINESE STORES' SHOP SIGNS

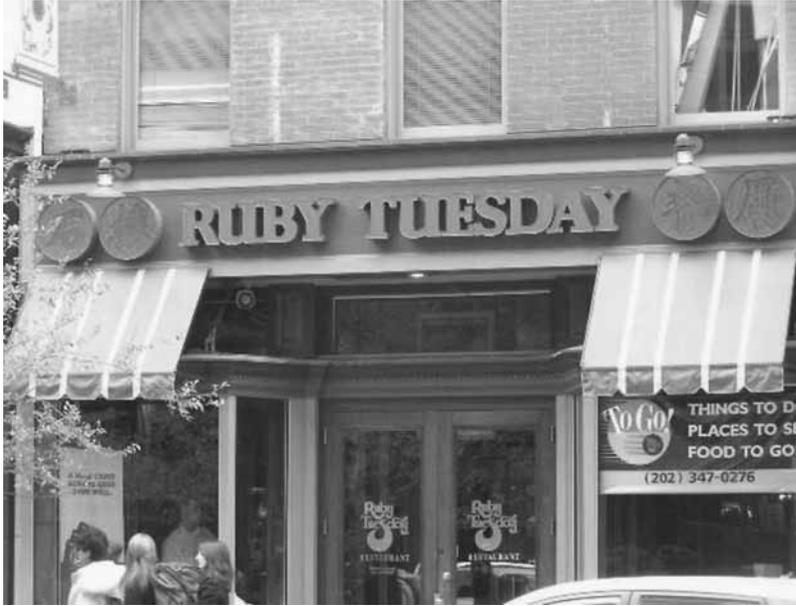
Non-Chinese stores comply with the mandate to adopt Chinese signage but they diverge in three subtle yet significant ways, specifically in code preference, content, and color scheme.



**Figure 12:** Starbucks, Chinatown, Washington, D.C.

First, in contrast to the visual prominence given to Chinese in the shop signs of Chinese stores, non-Chinese stores often place English in a more visible position. Both Ruby Tuesday (Figure 13) and Subway (Figure 14) have their English store name in the center of the sign. On the storefront of some other retail businesses, the Chinese sign is not only in a less preferred position but is also de-emphasized through other visual means.

In Figure 15, on the storefront of Urban Outfitters, an international fashion chain, the Chinese phrase on the left says 男女服装 (*nannü fuzhuang*, “men and women’s clothes”) and the one on the right says 家庭用品 (*jiating yongpin*, “household goods”), which describe the types of goods sold in the store. The Chinese components of the sign are posted flatly against the wall in an add-on manner. In fact, they would hardly be noticed were it not for the 10-times optical zoom of the digital camera used



**Figure 13:** Ruby Tuesday, Chinatown, Washington, D.C.

for the project. In stark contrast, the English store name *URBAN OUTFITTERS* is inscribed in a specially designed typeface, in all capital letters, and on large three-dimensional plastic blocks.

Also illustrated in this example is the difference in the content of shop signs adopted by non-Chinese businesses. A few stores such as Urban Outfitters as shown above, an Irish bar, and another sandwich chain do not have translated Chinese names like Saibaiwei for Subway. The Chinese signage on these stores display the kinds of commodities sold at the store. In contrast, all Chinese businesses have Chinese store names.

The last subtle difference lies in the color scheme. Non-Chinese businesses in the Chinatown area maintain corporate identities by using the same color scheme in the English and Chinese components of their shop signs. To name a few examples, the Chinese sign of the Goethe Institute is printed in white characters against a background of their institutional light green (Figure 11), the characters in the Starbucks shop sign are placed inside green circle just as their mermaid logo (Figure 12), and the Chinese words on Urban Outfitters's storefront share the same blue color with its English name (Figure 15). By comparison, the color of Chinese stores' shop signs are not chosen specifically for the display of individual corporate identity. Green, red, and gold or yellow is the color scheme used consistently across Chinese-run restaurants and stores, as exemplified in the shop sign and also exterior decoration of the restaurant Chinatown Garden in Figure 16. Below the roof, their Chinese store name is inscribed in gold color with each character inside a green circle, the frames of the windows and door are painted red, and the decorative roof over the extension on the first floor is covered with green tiles.

In summary, similarities and differences are revealed through a comparison of the geosemiotic features of Chinese and non-Chinese stores' shop signs. On the surface, it



Figure 14: Subway, Chinatown, Washington, D.C.



Figure 15: Urban Outfitters, Chinatown, Washington, D.C.

seems that the mandate administered by the Chinatown Steering Committee has effectively produced a homogeneous Chinese appearance of Chinatown by requiring all businesses to adopt Chinese signage; beneath the surface, nuances exist in the semiotic practices, especially in terms of code preference, content, and color schemes that reveal heterogeneity.



**Figure 16:** Chinatown Garden, Chinatown, Washington, D.C.

### Chinatown as Heterotopia

The mandate issued and administered by the Chinatown Steering Committee produced, on the surface, a homogeneous semiotic landscape (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996) in Washington, D.C.'s Chinatown, where Chinese and non-Chinese businesses are required to carry Chinese signage in addition to English shop signs (Pyatt, 1999). However, a geosemiotic analysis (Scollon & Scollon, 2003) of the shop signs as presented in this article uncovers the nuances between the Chinese signage adopted by the non-Chinese stores and those of the Chinese stores. Although the intention of the stakeholders behind the mandate is to preserve the traditional characters of the area (Pyatt, 1999), the subtle divergences in the non-Chinese businesses' semiotic practices suggest that the preservation effort has unwittingly turned Chinatown into a heterotopia (Foucault, 1967).

Heterotopias are "real places, . . . a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault, 1967, p. 3). The semiotic aggregate (Scollon & Scollon, 2003) of D.C.'s Chinatown has become such a heterogeneous place, and the geosemiotic features of its shop signs epitomize the principles that Foucault envisioned of heterotopias.

Comparing the language choice, text vector, symmetrical composition, and physical emplacement of shop signs in contemporary Chinatown with those in Chinatowns at the beginning of the 20th century has revealed a Chinatown that is simultaneously old and new. Similar to other heterotopias discussed by Foucault (1967), it is "linked to slices in time—which is to say that they open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, heterochronies" (p. 5). Chinatown has evolved over time in the pervasive use of bilingual or multilingual signage but it has also retained history and tradition by using traditional Chinese characters as well as a symmetrical layout.

This comparison has shown a downtown Chinatown that is set against the recent settlement of newer Chinese immigrants in the suburbs. With elevated socioeconomic status and changing lifestyle, fewer and fewer Chinese immigrants would choose to live downtown (Knipp, 2005). For many of them, the downtown Chinatown becomes a symbolic existence where their heart belongs (Ly, 2001). In this way, Chinatown possesses the last trait of heterotopia in its “role to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned” (Foucault, 1967, p. 6).

Furthermore, contrasting shop signs used by Chinese stores with those adopted by non-Chinese stores shows that the latter, in compliance with the mandate, exhibit some similar geosemiotic features to the former—namely, bilingual signage, symmetrical layout, text vector, and transgressive emplacement—they diverge in a subtle yet meaningful way in terms of code preference, content of sign, and color scheme. These nuances present D.C.’s Chinatown as “a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable” (Foucault, 1967, p. 6). Indeed, the administration of the mandate is an effort to preserve the boundary of an ethnic area and at the same time a compromise made by the Chinese community in the cruel competition for expensive downtown commercial space. On the other hand, non-Chinese businesses’ compliance with the mandate is a deal they made with the community to gain entry into this area. Yet some of them have also employed various semiotic means to visually minimize the Chinese components of their outdoor signage. In this way, Chinese signage becomes a key to penetrating the semiotically enclosed system.

Finally, all the above discussions position Chinatown as “a single real place” where “several sites that are in themselves incompatible” are juxtaposed (Foucault, 1967, p. 5). Distilled in these subtle differences are the competing discourses of preservation, development, and revitalization. As a heterotopia, it contrasts and mirrors its past, its contemporary, and its opposition. A close examination of the geosemiotic forms of the shop signs enables an understanding of the multiple facets of this place of Chinatown in relation to other spaces.

If I can say the Chinatown studied in this article is dying, it is also being born. What has emerged is a place that resembles no other place but at the same time can only exist in relation to many other places.

## Conclusion

Rodman (1992) called for anthropologists to recognize “the complex reality of the places” (p. 652). She argued, “These places are not simply settings for social action, nor are they mere reflections of society” (p. 652). They are “socially contested, dynamic construction” (p. 652).

In this article, I use the theoretical framework of geosemiotics (Scollon & Scollon 2003) to examine the dialectic construction of the Chinatown in Washington, D.C., as a semiotic aggregate. Through diachronic comparison with historic photographs of Chinatowns more than a century ago and synchronic comparison between Chinese and non-Chinese stores, their nuances as well as similarities can be discerned. These findings present D.C.’s Chinatown as a polyvocal place, a heterotopia (Foucault, 1967).

Fortunately, the social inequality beneath the glossy surface of the Chinatown in this study is not as harsh as that of Baltimore as described by Harvey (2000), where the revival and development of some urban areas prevent people from seeing the other parts of the city filled with deserted houses. After all, newer waves of Chinese immigrants have in

general found better dwelling places in the more affluent suburbs, and their possession of cars enables them to shop for Chinese food and products in Asian supermarkets dispersed across the suburbs of the Washington metropolitan area. Nonetheless, it is hoped that this critical semiotic analysis of Chinatown's shop signs will alert the involved parties as well as observers of the complexity involved in urban revitalization programs. The emergence of the heterotopic Chinatown is probably inevitable and beyond the intentions of those who devised the mandate. However, it is better to recognize its heterogeneous nature than to take it as a lucrative program of urban revitalization without also recognizing the conflicts and compromises made.

## Notes

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2. I am grateful to one anonymous reviewer for suggesting the term *homotopia*.
3. On a recent trip, I noticed that shop signs in mainland Chinese cities were increasingly multilingual. The same phenomenon was also observed in rural mountain villages, which host Western travelers regularly.
4. In this case, Starbuck's Chinese name 星巴克咖啡 is the same in simplified and traditional Chinese characters.

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