

**MINORITY LANGUAGE IN THE LINGUISTIC
LANDSCAPE OF LIJIANG, CHINA: A CASE
STUDY OF DONGBA SCRIPT**

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UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA

2025

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LANDSCAPE OF LIJIANG, CHINA: A CASE
STUDY OF DONGBA SCRIPT**

by

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**Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

August 2025

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my main supervisor, Associate Professor Dr. Manjet Kaur A/P Mehar Singh, for her invaluable guidance, support, and constant encouragement throughout my doctoral journey. Her expertise and thoughtful feedback have significantly shaped this research and helped me refine my academic approach. I also extend my sincere thanks to my discontinued supervisor, Professor Dr. Salasiah Che Lah, for her initial guidance and insights, which were essential in the early stages of my research.

I am truly grateful to Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) for providing the opportunity and academic environment to pursue this research. I also thank the Institute of Postgraduate Studies (IPS) and the School of Languages, Literacies and Translation for their consistent administrative support.

I extend my thanks to the members of my proposal defence and viva committees for their constructive critiques, which greatly enhanced the theoretical and methodological aspects of my work. My sincere appreciation also goes to the local communities and individuals in the Old Town of Lijiang for their cooperation, which enriched the empirical foundation of this research.

To my family, your love and encouragement have been a constant source of strength. To my parents, thank you for your sacrifices and belief in me. And to my husband, your patience, understanding, and unwavering support have sustained me through every challenge.

To all who have contributed to my academic and personal growth, I offer my heartfelt thanks.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

LL	Linguistic Landscape
PRC	People's Republic of China
UNESCO	the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
MOOC	Massive Open Online Course
WHC	World Heritage Committee
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations

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**BAHASA MINORITI DALAM LANDSKAP LINGUISTIK DI LIJIANG,
CHINA: SATU KAJIAN KES SKRIP DONGBA**

ABSTRAK

Tesis ini menyelidik keterlihatan tulisan Dongba dalam landskap linguistik (LL) di Bandar Lama Lijiang, China, dengan memberi tumpuan kepada keterlihatannya, fungsi simbolik yang disampaikan, serta faktor-faktor pengaruh yang dimainkan oleh pelbagai aktor LL dalam membentuk keterlihatannya. Dalam konteks masyarakat yang multibahasa dan multikultural, kajian ini meneroka bagaimana tulisan Dongba mencerminkan hubungan antara bahasa, identiti dan komersialisasi dalam dunia global. Kajian ini menggunakan reka bentuk penyelidikan yang dominan kualitatif dan disokong oleh data kuantitatif deskriptif, termasuk tinjauan fotografik terhadap 1,065 papan tanda, temu bual separa berstruktur dengan 20 aktor LL, dan analisis dokumen dasar sejak tahun 1986. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa tulisan Dongba dipaparkan secara menonjol dalam papan tanda awam yang dihasilkan secara bawah ke atas dan atas ke bawah, di mana ia berfungsi terutamanya sebagai simbol keaslian dan identiti budaya. Walaupun penduduk tempatan menganggap tulisan Dongba sebagai sebahagian penting daripada warisan mereka, pengabaian dalam komunikasi harian menimbulkan kebimbangan terhadap daya hidup dan kelangsungan bahasa minoriti ini. Kajian ini turut mengenal pasti pengaruh pelbagai aktor LL, termasuk perniagaan tempatan, agensi kerajaan, dan pelancong dalam menentukan keterlihatan tulisan Dongba. Walaupun usaha pengawalseliaan telah meningkatkan keterlihatannya pada papan tanda awam di tapak warisan budaya, langkah-langkah ini masih belum mencukupi untuk memastikan integrasinya secara fungsional dalam

kehidupan sehari-hari. Komodifikasi tulisan Dongba mencerminkan satu trend yang lebih luas di mana bahasa minoriti dibentuk oleh keperluan ekonomi, sering kali mengorbankan daya hidup linguistiknya. Sebagai kesimpulan, tesis ini menyeru pendekatan yang seimbang dalam representasi dan penggunaan tulisan Dongba dalam LL Bandar Lama Lijiang dengan memanfaatkan keterlihatannya secara lebih bermakna dan bukan sekadar simbolik. Dasar bahasa yang menyeluruh, inisiatif komuniti, dan strategi digital adalah penting untuk mempromosikan pemulihan dan daya hidup tulisan Dongba. Dengan mengintegrasikan tulisan Dongba secara lebih berkesan dalam ruang awam, pemeliharaannya sebagai komponen penting warisan Naxi dan identiti budaya Lijiang dapat dipastikan. Kajian ini menyumbang kepada wacana yang lebih luas mengenai pemulihan bahasa, hubungan antara bahasa dan komersialisme, serta pengaruh globalisasi terhadap budaya minoriti.

MINORITY LANGUAGE IN THE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE OF LIJIANG, CHINA: A CASE STUDY OF DONGBA SCRIPT

ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the visibility of Dongba script in the linguistic landscape (LL) of the Old Town of Lijiang, China, with a focus on its visibility, the symbolic functions it conveys, and the influential factors that various LL actors exert in shaping its visibility. Situated in a multilingual and multicultural context in a UNESCO world cultural heritage site in China, the study explores how Dongba script reflects the interplay between language, identity, and commercialization in a globalized world. Employing a qualitative-dominant research design complemented by descriptive quantitative data, including a photographic survey of 1,065 signs, semi-structured interviews with 20 LL actors, and document analysis of policies dating back to 1986, this study reveals that Dongba script is prominently displayed in both bottom-up and top-down public signage, where it primarily functions as a symbol of authenticity and cultural identity. While local residents view Dongba script as integral to their heritage, its marginalization in everyday communication highlights broader concerns about the vitality and survival of minority languages. The study further identifies the influence of various LL actors, including local businesses, government agencies, and tourists, in determining the visibility of Dongba script. Although regulatory efforts from the local governments have promoted its visibility on public signage in the cultural heritage site, these measures remain insufficient to ensure its functional integration into daily life. The commodification of Dongba script exemplifies a broader trend where minority languages are shaped by economic imperatives, often at the expense of their linguistic vitality. In conclusion, the thesis

advocates for a balanced approach to the representation and use of Dongba script in the LL of the Old Town of Lijiang by leveraging its visibility other than its symbolic placement. Comprehensive language policies, community-driven initiatives, and digital strategies are essential to promoting both the revitalization and vitality of Dongba script. By integrating Dongba script more effectively into public spaces, its preservation as a vital component of Naxi heritage and Lijiang's cultural identity can be ensured. This research contributes to the broader discourse on language revitalization, the intersection of language and commerce, and the globalization of minority cultures.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The current study investigates Dongba script in the linguistic landscape of the Old Town of Lijiang, which is a world heritage site in a multiethnic area in rural southeastern China. The introductory chapter introduces the research background, delineates the issues under investigation, and establishes the purpose of the study. It also articulates the research questions that guide the investigation, demonstrates the study's significance in contributing to the understanding of minority languages in multiethnic areas in China, and considers the limitations inherent in the research approach.

1.2 The Sociolinguistic Profile of the Study

1.2.1 An Overview of Minority Languages in China

China has always been a traditional and unitary multi-ethnic society with more than 100 languages and numerous dialects spoken throughout its vast territory (Maurer-Fazio & Hasmath, 2015). There are 56 officially recognized *minzu* (民族) in the People's Republic of China (PRC). The term '民族' (*minzu*) in Chinese, according to Mackerras (2003, p. 133), is better to be translated as 'ethnic group' in English to call Tibetans, Zhuang, Yi, Mongols, Manchu, and other minority groups within China. According to the Seventh National Population Census in China in 2021, the Han ethnic group makes up 91.11% of the total population in China (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021), and the remaining 55 ethnic groups are customarily regarded as China's ethnic minority groups for their relatively small proportions of population

(Jijiao, 2016). Ethnic minority, refers to ‘少数民族’ (*shaoshu minzu*) in Chinese, where the *shaoshu* denotes a group that is numerically smaller in comparison to the majority, and *minzu* signifies a collective of individuals who share a common language, culture, history, and community life, often residing in a specific location with historical or contemporary significance (Lai, 2016). Despite the considerable populations and geographical presence of various ethnic minorities in China, they have historically retained a subordinate status compared to the dominant Han majority (Maurer-Fazio & Hasmath, 2015).

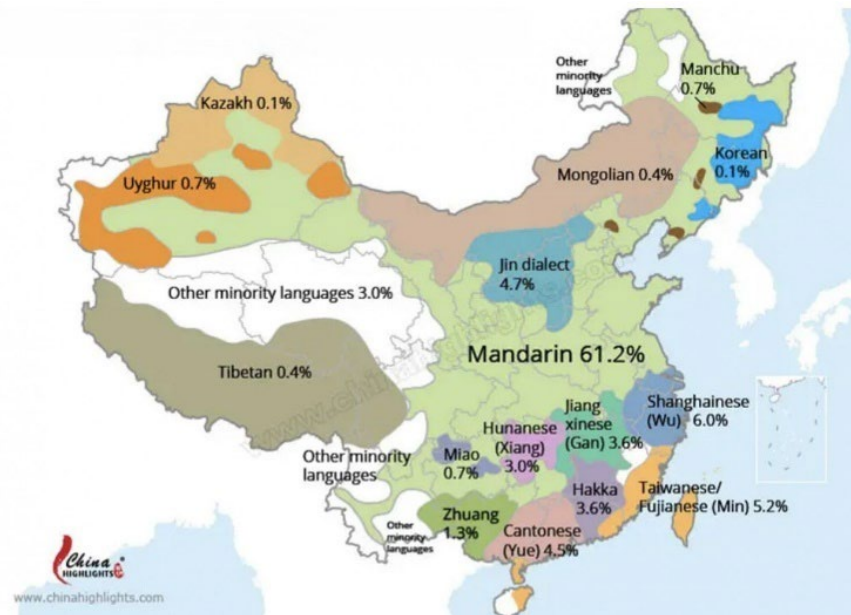


Figure 1.1 Map of Ethnic Minority Languages in China
(Source: China Highlights)

Although ethnic minority groups are smaller than the Han ethnic group in population, political, and economic power, they remain crucial to China’s ethnic makeup and the maintenance of peace and security (Lai, 2016). Geographically, they cover 5/8 of mainland China via two distribution patterns: autonomous or prefecture regions, and multiethnic areas. Multiethnic areas in China are typically scattered among rural areas in the southwest and southeast provinces, marked by the

cohabitation of two or more ethnic groups interacting and integrating with each other (Fei, 2017). Due to the diverse ethnic groups stretching the vast land in China, specific regions emerge as hubs of multi-ethnic areas where a rich blend of ethnic groups coexist with their distinct languages, cultures, and identities, proving a perfect stage to delve into the linguistic situation of studying minority languages, see in Figure 1.1.

Chinese is the language of the Han majority; its standard spoken form, Putonghua, also known as Mandarin or Standard Chinese, functions as the official working language throughout China (Zhang & Cai, 2021). In the current study, “Chinese” refers specifically to the written language that appears on public signage. Minority languages in China refer to languages other than Putonghua (Maurer-Fazio & Hasmath, 2015), and there are also minority scripts, such as the Dongba script. Furthermore, out of the 55 officially recognized ethnic minority groups, around 1/3 of them are bilingual in both Chinese and their own languages, such as Zhuang, Yi and Tibet; 6 of these ethnic minority groups have predominantly or completely switched to using Chinese (Manchu, Hui, She, Zhuang, Tujia, Miao), while the majority of individuals from the remaining 40 ethnic groups adopt Chinese as a second language (Ma, 2007). According to the statistics from the 2023 China Statistical Yearbook (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2023), 22 ethnic minority groups in China used a total of 28 languages by the end of 2022. There are only 5 out of 55 of China’s ethnic minority groups that have established their own written systems, namely, the Tibetans, Mongolians, Manchus, Yi, and Naxi people (Zang, 2016). As most of the ethnic minority groups in China did not have their own written languages, they adopted Chinese as their daily language, and a few other ethnic minority groups have chosen to employ commonly used scripts like Roman or Arabic as the written form of their oral languages (Lai, 2016). For instance, the Uighur and Kazakh use the Arabic script,

while the Zhuang employ both the Roman script and Chinese characters (Zang, 2016). The absence of written language posed difficulties for bilingual education in ethnic minority communities, resulting in Chinese becoming the prevailing language in schools (Yao, Pan, et al., 2022). To put it in a nutshell, minority languages in China are facing challenges and difficulties in maintenance and development, being a complex and sensitive political issue that is closely linked to cultural and linguistic identity (Zhao et al., 2021).

1.2.2 Dongba Script and the Old Town of Lijiang

Yunnan province (Figure 1.2) is the biggest multiethnic region in China, for it is home to a significant number of ethnic minority groups, inhabiting 25 ethnic minority groups, and 15 out of these 25 ethnic minority groups are exclusive to the province itself (Government of Yunnan Province, 2024). Yunnan Province, renowned for its cultural richness and ethnic diversity, hosts a significant proportion of China's ethnic minorities. Accounting for about one-third of the province's population, these minority groups are much more prevalent in Yunnan than in any other province (Gustafsson & Shi, 2003). The 2021 census identified 25 ethnic minorities residing in Yunnan, with 15 of these groups being unique to the province and not found elsewhere in China (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021). Historically, the ethnic composition in Yunnan has seen dramatic changes. Earlier census data from 1953 indicated a much larger diversity with 136 ethnic groups, although many of these groups had very small populations, with some comprising fewer than 100 individuals (Song & Cui, 1993). The recent statistics reveal the presence of larger ethnic communities, including the Yi, Bai, Hani, Zhuang, Dai, and Miao, each with populations exceeding one million. The Naxi ethnic minority group, numbering

approximately 326,464, stands as the eleventh largest group in Yunnan (Government of Yunnan Province, 2024).

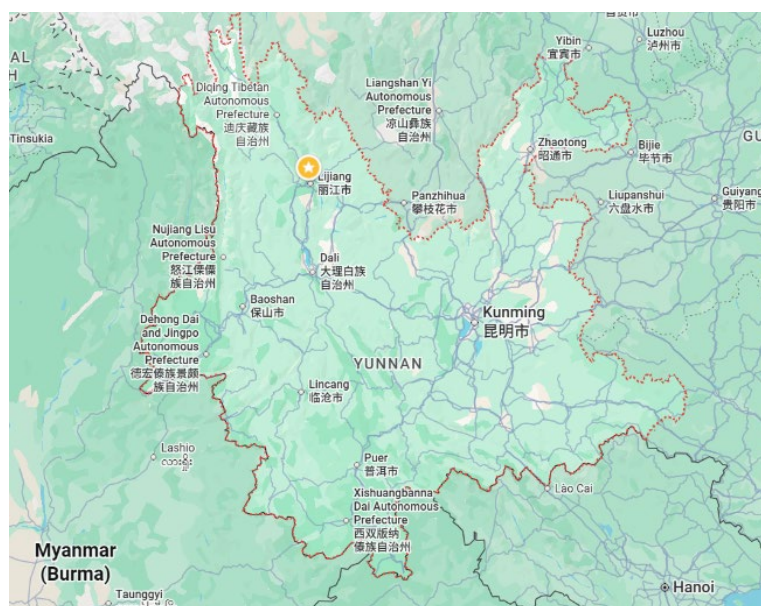


Figure 1.2 Map of Yunnan Province, China

(Source: Google Maps)

The linguistic, cultural, and lifestyle diversity in Yunnan Province is particularly remarkable, shaped significantly by its geography. Enclosed by steep mountains and separated by deep, isolated valleys, communities within the province have developed distinct languages, customs, and ways of living that vary not only from one area to another but also from one village to another (Chow, 2005). This geographic isolation has led to a diverse of cultural identities within close physical proximity, yet often, these groups remain linguistically and culturally distinct. The diversity is so pronounced that neighbouring ethnic groups, despite their geographical closeness, often have such different languages and customs that intercommunication without a common language is challenging.

In Yunnan Province, Chinese serves as the official language and is widely used throughout the region. The province hosts a multitude of languages including various dialects spoken by the Yi ethnic minority group, Tibetan in the northwestern areas,

and Burmese near the Myanmar border. Additionally, the Dai ethnic minority group predominantly speaks Tai Lu and Tai Nüa in Xishuangbanna and Dehong districts, while the Hmong and Yao ethnic minority groups speak Hmong and Mien, respectively, and ethnic minority groups in southern Yunnan primarily use languages such as Wa and Blang (Zou, 2019). The Naxi ethnic minority group, residing in the Lijiang area, speak the Naxi language, which is notable for its unique Dongba script, a form of writing that is both pictographic and ideographic (Yang, 2016). This array of languages enriches the cultural and LL of Yunnan, underscoring the region's cultural richness and the importance of preserving its diverse linguistic heritage.

The Naxi ethnic minority group, originating from the Di and Qiang tribes of ancient China more than 1,000 years ago (Lai, 2016), is a distinct ethnic minority group primarily residing in Yunnan Province. Distributing in the joint area of Yunnan Province, Sichuan Province and Tibet Autonomous Region, Naxi people primarily inhabit Lijiang City. Yulong Naxi Autonomous County is the only one autonomous county of Naxi in China. The language of Naxi is the Naxi language, with Geba syllabus as its spoken form, and Dongba pictographic script (hereinafter referred as Dongba script) as the written form used to write scriptures by the priests of the Naxi Dongba Religion about 800 years ago (Poupard, 2018).

Naxi Dongba cultural, usually addressed as Dongba culture is an important part of the Naxi culture, including Dongba script, Dongba scripture, Dongba painting, Dongba music and dancing, and different kinds of ceremonies (UNESCO, 2005; Winterbottom, 2012). The term Dongba pertains to the flamen or religious functionaries of the Naxi ethnic minority group inhabited in the Lijiang area of China, and it is translated literally as 'the wise' in Naxi language (Milnor, 2005, p. 25). The Dongba script derives its name from the Dongbas, who are credited with its creation,

usage, and inheritance within the language thousands of years ago. The Dongbas (see Figure 1.3), also referring to the Dongba priests, hold a significant position in the establishment and perpetuation of the Dongba culture, as they are forefathers and expertise in various domains such as vocal and choreographic arts, calligraphy and painting, medicinal practices, preaching, and ceremonial execution within the Naxi ethnic minority group (Poupard, 2020; Xie & Altman, 2015). The title of Dongba was passed from one generation to another through the paternal lineage in old times; however, there are more instances where a few apprentices from non-related families are accepted in modern times (Yang & Kang, 2018).



Figure 1.3 A Dongba at Work

(Source: the culture trip)

The Dongba culture and Naxi language have been experiencing endangerment, which can be attributed to historical migration patterns and contacts between the Naxi ethnic group and other ethnic groups (Zhu, 2012). It is highlighted that a mixed living pattern of many ethnic groups, dominated by the Naxi ethnic group around Lijiang, was found between 1368-1644 (Bingaman, 2012). When the Naxi ethnic group built the ancient Lijiang city about 600 years ago, the emperors of ancient China, dispatched

military forces and subjected them to oversee, manage, and cohabitate with the local Naxi population (Zou, 2019). Prior to the 1770s, the Naxi ethnic group was a tributary to the Ming Dynasty, however, the ancient Lijiang city was formally integrated into the Chinese emperor's domain during the Qing Dynasty (Mahadevan & Zhang, 2022; Su et al., 2021). Subsequently, the Dongba culture and Naxi language have encountered the impact of the dominant Chinese civilization.

The status of Dongba culture gradually decreased after the Han culture entered ancient Lijiang city in the Qing Dynasty in China, which is about 400 years ago (Bingaman, 2009). The decline of the Dongba religion since the late Qing Dynasty has exacerbated the endangered status of Dongba script, as the majority of its religious manuscripts were recorded exclusively with it (Poupard, 2018). Following the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the Dongba religion was deemed to be associated with sorcery and therefore considered superstitious and prohibited (Fäldt, 2012; Yang, 2015). In the 1950s, the government completely banned the Dongba religion, viewing it as a form of feudalism and superstition. As a result, Dongba culture disappeared in the prosperous towns and suburbs of the Naxi ethnic group and only existed in some remote places in the rural areas of southwest Yunnan province in China (Song, 2011).

The reform and opening up of China witnessed the revitalization of Dongba culture. The Dongba culture, after being subjected to extensive research by both local and international scholars during the 1980s and 1990s, was ultimately recognized and has since then been protected by the government (Yang, 2015). Since the 1980s, the integration of ancient Dongba culture with the demands of modern China has garnered significant public attention. This interest was further heightened in the 1990s with the rapid development of ethnic tourism in Lijiang, which prompted a re-examination and strategic utilization of Dongba culture as a significant cultural asset. Central to this

cultural revitalization is the Dongba script, which holds both cultural and aesthetic value. Its unique characteristics have been explored and adapted to meet the growing demands of tourists, serving as a bridge between preserving cultural heritage and fostering modern economic and social development (Poupard, 2018).

Dongba script is a documentation of the science, calendars, dance, music, religious rituals, and history of the Naxi ethnic group, known as the encyclopaedia of Naxi ancient society (Poupard, 2019). It is currently the sole extant pictographic writing system (Xu, 2022), involving creating a visual representation of an object, such as drawing a 𐄂 to symbolize the concept of ‘tree’ or 𐄂 to symbolize the concept of ‘stone’, as illustrated in Figure 1.4. In 2003, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) admitted the Naxi Dongba script into its *Memory of the World Register*, commenting that Dongba culture is becoming dispersed and is slowly dying out because of the impact of other powerful cultures (UNESCO, 2003).



Figure 1.4 Painted Naxi Panel

(Source: Wikipedia)

However, Dongba script remains endangered, whether measured by the evaluation standards of UNESCO or China (Friedrich, 2023). On the one hand, the number of the monolingual speakers of the Naxi ethnic minority language are

shrinking. The total population of the Naxi minority ethnic group witnessed a spur from 117,895 in 1953 to 328,839 in 2023, but the monolingual Naxi speakers dropped from nearly 60% in 1953 to about 1/3 of the total Naxi population (Friedrich, 2023; Yang, 2012). On the other hand, there are fewer and fewer Naxi experts who can read and write Dongba script. Dongba script has been mainly used for religious scripture writing, and it was only mastered by a few Dongbas (the wise men, or priests of the Dongba religion) before the 1950s (Poupard, 2020). According to a fieldwork on the life of Dongbas, there are approximately 60 Dongba priests who possess the ability to both read and write the Dongba script, and most of them are above the age of 70, with merely three Dongbas below the age of 30 (Liu, 2018). Although Naxi language endured for centuries, it is now critically endangered with a rather lower language vitality, as only 30% of Naxi primary students can speak Naxi language (Duan, 2022). Especially, Dongba script was absent from schools in all urban schools in the area of Lijiang, and over 90% of local youth now rely on Chinese (Yu, 2010). Alarming, researchers have projected that the Naxi language is likely to vanish within the next 20 to 50 years (Poupard, 2020; Winterbottom, 2012).

Moreover, the use of Dongba script is also threatened and challenged by the rise of Chinese, even though language policy in China remains supportive of the language rights of minority peoples (Yao, Turner, et al., 2022). Chinese was established as the main working language in public domains such as service sectors, education, broadcasting, advertisement, TV programs, political and foreign affairs statements, and notices in public (Zhang & Cai, 2021). Meanwhile, Article 119 of *the Constitution of the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China* in 2004 (hereinafter referred to as the Constitution) states that “all nationalities have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages”. The overall

policy towards minority groups heavily influences the official stance on ethnic minority languages, which alternates between accommodating minority languages and promoting the Chinese language. Between 1958 and 1977, there was a stringent policy that prioritized the promotion of the Chinese language over ethnic languages, while there has been a shift towards accommodation after the opening and reformation period, although the strong emphasis on modernization has resulted in a preference for the use of the Chinese language over minority languages (Yao, Turner, et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, the situation of Dongba script presents a distinct dynamic in the Old Town of Lijiang, a multi-ethnic area in Yunnan Province. Following the site's designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the inscription of Dongba script on UNESCO's Memory of the World Register, the local government actively promoted Dongba culture as a key tourism asset. According to the report from the local government, it received approximately 80.64 million visitors in 2024, generating USD 19.77 billion in tourism revenue (Lijiang Municipal Bureau of Statistics, 2025). Dongba script now appears extensively in public spaces in the heritage site of the Old Town of Lijiang as an assertion of authenticity, drawing tourists and boosting the local economy (Su et al., 2021). Its cultural significance has been firmly established as a pillar of heritage tourism in the Old Town of Lijiang. Yet, despite this prominent display, the visibility of Dongba script within the linguistic landscape of the Old Town of Lijiang remains under-investigated, as LL is agreed as a lens to investigate the written form of a language in the public spaces (Gorter & Cenoz, 2023; Spolsky, 2020). Therefore, the present study will take the Old Town of Lijiang as a case to reveal the visibility of Dongba script in the tourism manifested central heritage context.

The Old Town of Lijiang is situated in contemporary Lijiang City, Yunnan Province, China. Lijiang City is divided into two distinct areas: the inner area and buffer area of the World Heritage Sites of the Old Town of Lijiang, as well as the Yulong Naxi Autonomous County. The Old Town of Lijiang, covering 3.8 km², draws both local and international visitors with its striking natural scenery and rich cultural heritage. Also called Dayan or Lijiang Ancient Town, it earned its name in the Ming Dynasty for its layout's resemblance to a traditional Chinese inkstone (砚台). The Old Town of Lijiang was originally constructed mostly during the Song and Yuan Dynasties in the 13th Century, and it was designated as a World Cultural Heritage site in 1997 due to its distinctive Dongba culture, traditional ancient Chinese architecture complex, and Dongba script manuscripts (UNESCO, 1997).

The Old Town of Lijiang has always been the cradle of Dongba culture and Dongba script. It has a rich Naxi history spanning over 800 years, and it was a significant stop on the Ancient Tea Horse Road, facilitating trade between China, Tibet, and India (Mahadevan & Zhang, 2022). The Old Town of Lijiang was granted as the first World Heritage Site in China by the UNESCO in 1997 for its longstanding Dongba culture, Naxi architecture, and Dongba script. It has emerged as a typical multi-ethnic area with the urbanization and migration of ethnic minority populations in the past decades because of the rapid development of economics and tourism (Jijiao, 2016).

The Old Town of Lijiang is distinguished by a substantial representation of multiple ethnic minorities, as shown in Figure 1.5. The primary ethnic minority groups, the Yi and Naxi, constitute approximately 20% of the total population respectively, together with the Suli representing nearly 9% of the population and a small portion (11%) of other ethnic minority groups, such as Bai, Dai, Miao, Pumi and Tibetan

(Government of Lijiang, 2023). Primarily moulded by the Dongba culture and history, while also being impacted by other ethnic minority groups and the growing number of tourists and Han Chinese attracted to its status as a tourist destination and UNESCO World Heritage site (Opschoor & Tang, 2011), the Old Town of Lijiang formed a unique linguistic landscape.

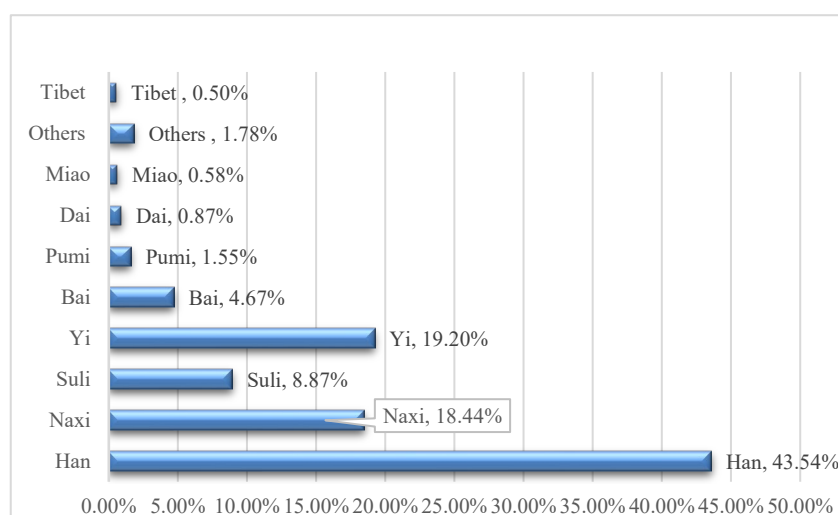


Figure 1.5 Proportions of Local Population in Lijiang City
(Source: Government Report of Lijiang, 2003)

1.3 Research Background

Given the status of Dongba script and its significance to the sustainable development of the Old Town of Lijiang as a World Heritage Site, growing attention has been paid to the presentation of Dongba script on the public signs. Dongba script, as the culture card of the Old Town of Lijiang, has been an integral part of the heritage tourism industry (Xu, 2018; Xu & Ye, 2018). It is not only a peculiar resource for local ethnic tourism but also a prominent component in the linguistic landscape in the Old Town of Lijiang.

Linguistic landscape (LL) is commonly defined as “the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and

public signs on government buildings combines to form the LL of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration” (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p. 25). According to Backhaus (2006a), every cityscape is filled with a variety of written messages incorporating multiple languages and scripts, forming the LL of a given place. LL studies is primarily concerned with the depiction of language (or languages) in public spaces, with a focus on ‘signs’, which refer to visible written manifestations of language and the ways in which individuals, both readers and makers, engage with these signages (Cenoz & Gorter, 2006). Adopted from Lefebvre’s (1991) space model, Trumper-Hecht (2010) holds the opinion that LL study in space is a combination of the distribution of languages in the physical dimension, the symbolic or embedded meanings of the LL in the political dimension, and the experiential dimension, which focuses on the people involved in the LL. Therefore, the current study on Dongba script in the LL in the Old Town of Lijiang were conducted through the visibility of Dongba script in the physical dimension, its symbolic functions in the political dimension, as well as LL actors in the experiential dimension.

The visual display of one or more designated languages on general “public multilingual signage” is the visibility of languages in the LL (Spolsky, 2009, p.66). The absence or presence of a language in the LL can offer empirical evidence regarding the visibility of a language or script in the public place; it can unveil how changes in the public realm can be attributed to shifts in language policy and power relationships by analysing the geographical aspects of this presence (Van Mensel et al., 2012). The visibility of a language in the LL provides insights into the position of languages within a specific context, as the dominance of one language on public signs compared to others can indicate the relative power and status of competing language groups (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p. 26). While analysing the visibility of minority

languages in the LL can aid in understanding the perceptions of linguistic minorities by the linguistic majority, as well as how these minorities view their membership and identity within a particular language group.

The local government of Lijiang had encouraged the use of Dongba script in public places in the heritage site to enable it to meet the yearly evaluation requirements set by UNESCO (Opschoor & Tang, 2011), which is to increase the visibility of Dongba script in the LL in the public space directly. As a result, Dongba script, though classified as a minority writing system, now appears extensively on public signage, religious artefacts, and cultural landmarks throughout the Old Town of Lijiang (Nie & Yao, 2024; Poupard, 2019). Despite this notable prominence, systematic studies of Dongba script's visibility patterns in the LL of the Old Town of Lijiang remain scarce. This gap underscores an urgent need to investigate the symbolic functions that drive its public display, thereby illuminating the script's cultural, historical, and socio-political significance amid rapid modernization.

The concept of language visibility in the LL encompasses the ways in which languages are publicly displayed and interpreted as markers of social status, identity, and power relations. According to Landry and Bourhis (1997), visibility is manifested through the mere presence of linguistic signs in public spaces, where the frequency and prominence of a given language signal its symbolic weight within a community. Shohamy (2005, p. 110) further emphasizes that high visibility does not simply denote communicative function, but actively convey messages about a language's perceived importance and legitimacy. In this respect, the LL reflects and reinforces existing power dynamics.

Du Plessis (2011, p. 264) goes further by defining language visibility as the public display of geographical names on road traffic signs, buildings, and maps, as

well as other means of emphasizing the critical role of language visibility through seemingly ordinary objects in reflecting a country's language priorities. When a language occupies a prominent place on signs, storefronts, and official documents, it acquires an aura of authority that extends beyond its communicative role. Nevertheless, empirical research by Shibliyev (2014) has shown that high visibility not only legitimizes a language in the eyes of its speakers but also shapes their language choices and usage patterns, as individuals are more inclined to adopt and maintain the languages they perceive to be institutionally endorsed and socially valued. Consequently, visibility in the LL functions both as a reflection of sociolinguistic hierarchies and as an influence on future language practices.

In the unique setting of the Old Town of Lijiang, Dongba script has benefited from the district's UNESCO World Heritage designation, which has prompted local authorities and heritage management offices to incorporate Dongba cultural elements into public signage. This institutional emphasis on cultural preservation has significantly increased the presence of Dongba script signs throughout the streets, lanes and historic sites of the Old Town of Lijiang. Yet, the visibility of Dongba script in the Old Town of Lijiang is mediated by the dominance of two other scripts, Chinese, as the sole and only official language of in mainland China, maintains a pervasive presence on administrative and commercial signage. Concurrently, English is deployed extensively to accommodate international tourism, reflecting globalizing pressures on this heritage site (Xia & Li, 2016). This dual emphasis on Chinese and English in the LL underscores the complex interplay between the promotion of minority cultural heritage and the demands of a globalized and administratively unified linguistic framework.

This visibility of minority language is crucial in fostering a sense of identity and pride within minority communities and plays a significant role in the intergenerational transmission of language, which is essential for its sustainability (Jenjekwa, 2022). However, the visibility patterns of minority languages are supposed to be very different with the official languages and the international lingua franca considering their relative weights and proportions in distributions concerning with authorship and functions in the LL (Yao & Nie, 2024). Considering the Old Town of Lijiang suited in a multi ethnic area within a UNESCO World Culture Heritage Site driven by tourism, a systematic description of the visibility patterns of Dongba script would reveal how a minority language negotiates space alongside dominant language and English, and how it contributes to both local cultural resilience and external perceptions of Naxi identity.

As per Landry and Bourhis (1997), the LL serves both an informative and symbolic function, with the former to convey specific information regarding the linguistic features, boundaries, and geographical scope of a sociolinguistic group; while the symbolic function, on the other hand, indexes the collective identity, demographic weight, and strengths and weaknesses of minority ethnic group competencies, social status, and so on (p. 128). Furthermore, Scollon and Scollon (2003) clarified the symbolic meanings of languages appearing on signs as “when a sign makes its meaning by representing something else that is not present or that is ideal or metaphorical, we call that process symbolization” (p. 133). The symbolic functions of a language in the LL in a place can be observed through the positions, fonts of words, colour, lettering system, material of the signs, and so on (Purnanto, 2021; Scollon & Scollon, 2003). It was the symbolic functions of language that add symbolic values to a language used in the LL (Njemanze, 2020).

Symbolic function in the LL is frequently associated with minority languages in tourist settings (Hornsby & Vigers, 2012; Ronan, 2021), which can lead to the emergence of new contexts where Dongba script is used in contemporary language settings, thereby enhancing its value and arouse public attentions. Dongba script has long been used to attract tourists who seek alienation or ethnic experience (Su & Teo, 2009), and it is propagandised as the culture card of the Old Town of Lijiang, contributing to the image formation of the world heritage site (Zhu, 2012). Thus, Dongba script on the public signs in the Old Town of Lijiang generate significance in social, economic, and cultural aspects. The physical space where various signs appear, was previously perceived as a delineation of a physical area or, subsequently, as a social location characterised by diverse symbolic and material activities (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009; Trumper-Hecht, 2010). Once, the physical spaces were filled with sociocultural significance, they were transformed into ‘places’ through symbolic construction (Hult, 2014). In essence, physical LLs are converted into disputed social spaces by the visibility of languages and other semiotic resources employed for diverse objectives. The concept of interpreting the visibility of languages on signs as symbols becomes particularly intriguing when applied to Dongba script, because the anticipated readers or consumers, as well as the supposed sign makers, are likely to share specific values or ideologies based on their ethnic and/or linguistic background.

The sign makers, consumers, as well as the potential readers in the LL constitute what Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) referred to as LL actors, who “concretely participate in the shaping of LL by ordering from others or building by themselves LL elements according to preferential tendencies, deliberate choices or policies” (p. 27). Various studies have confirmed that LL actors from different backgrounds and social

groups, including collectives and individuals, public and private institutions, are one of the focuses of the symbolic construction of a particular public place (Kircher et al., 2023; Puzey, 2008; Vuorsola, 2020). Each social activity performed by an individual actor in the LL, such as writing a word on a sign, is influenced by both physical tools like a pen or a computer, and abstract elements like views about writing, signage, or the attitude towards a language code itself (Bagna & Bellinzona, 2023; Wu et al., 2020). Interpreting the ‘behaviour and choices’ behind the LL actors should explain the dynamic relationship between the visibility of language codes because they ‘enjoy autonomy of action within legal limits’ (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006, p. 10).

LL actors in the Old Town of Lijiang have always encouraged the visibility of Dongba script on public signs to sell and promote the Naxi ethnic tourism (Mahadevan & Zhang, 2022; Su et al., 2021). As a result, the visibility of Dongba script in the context of ethnic tourism in the Old Town of Lijiang produces more and richer symbolic functions. In addition, LL actors like tourists flooded to the Old Town of Lijiang, bringing exchanges from language to currency to the city of Lijiang, affecting the visibility of languages and the symbolic construction of the space. Therefore, the current study examines the visibility of Dongba script in the LL compared to other languages presented on public signs, the symbolic functions behind its visibility, as well as influences from local LL actors on the visibility of Dongba script in the LL in the Old Town of Lijiang.

1.4 Statement of the Problem

The study of LL has garnered considerable attention on minority languages in different places in recent years, providing insights into the socio-cultural dynamics of minority languages in public spaces (Greathouse - Amador, 2005; Kircher et al., 2023;

Maksimovtsova, 2022; Pavlenko, 2012; Yao, Turner, et al., 2022). Given the significance of China's rich linguistic diversity and the coexistence of numerous ethnic groups within multiethnic regions, growing attention has been paid to the ethnic minority languages in the LL in multiethnic areas in China. By using Dongba script in the Old Town of Lijiang as a case study, this research addresses critical gaps on the understanding of its visibility patterns, symbolic functions, and the factors that shape its visibility in the LL. Specifically, it examines what are the visibility patterns of Dongba script as displayed in the LL, explores its symbolic functions as reflected on public signage, and investigates the influential factors from LL actors on its visibility within the Old Town of Lijiang. This comprehensive approach aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the factors that contribute to the script's representation and its broader cultural significance.

China provides a fertile arena for such inquiry, given the significance of China's rich linguistic diversity and the coexistence of numerous ethnic groups within multiethnic regions. The visibility of Dongba script in the LL has not been adequately addressed, despite a growing number of studies have been conducted on several major ethnic minority languages in China, such as Tibetan (Poupard, 2020; Roche, 2019), Yi (Yao et al., 2023), and Zhuang (Grey & Baioud, 2021; Wu et al., 2023). Comparing with the Dongba script, the Tibetan, Yi, and Zhuang ethnic minority languages are in a much sounder and safer language status in China, because they are widely used in bilingual education in their autonomous regions and have rather large monolingual speakers (Maurer-Fazio & Hasmath, 2015).

Realising the endangerment of Dongba script, various studies have been conducted to explore its documentation, preservation, digitalization, transliteration, and its vitality within the Naxi ethnic minority group (Huang et al., 2022; Xu, 2022;

Yang & Kang, 2021). However, these efforts have largely focused on the script as a cultural artifact or linguistic system, often neglecting its visibility in public spaces. Cultural heritage tourism studies concerning with the Old Town of Lijiang further confirms the roles of Dongba script in tourism brand-making, image-building and promoting tourism experiences (Mahadevan & Zhang, 2022; Opschoor & Tang, 2011; Zhu, 2016). Several works also highlight its contribution to the visual and symbolic construction of the site's identity as a heritage destination (Su, 2010a; Xu & Ye, 2016, 2018). However, these studies predominantly frame Dongba script within the scope of tourism development, with limited attention to its broader sociolinguistic significance or its visibility as a minority language in everyday public spaces. Besides, the visibility patterns of Dongba script in the LL remains insufficiently examined in the Old Town of Lijiang, especially considering the script is at risk of extinction.

Therefore, the current study endeavoured to fill this critical gap by examining the visibility patterns of Dongba script through the lens of LL, thus contributing to the understanding of sociolinguistic dynamics in multi-ethnic regions and supporting linguistic diversity and cultural preservation initiatives. To guide this analysis, the present study adopts the three-stage visibility framework proposed by Barni and Bagna (2008), which evaluates the visibility of languages in public space in terms of presence, dominance, and autonomy. While this model has been applied in European multilingual contexts, it has not yet been employed to examine minority scripts like Dongba script in Asian heritage settings, thereby underscoring the innovative of this study.

Dongba script in the Old Town of Lijiang has primarily evolved within specific ethnographic and tourism contexts (Wu & Zeng, 2019), and Dongba script and Dongba culture have been compromised by excessive commercialization in tourism, affecting

the traditional lifestyle of the local Naxi minority group residents (Liu, 2018; Nie & Yao, 2024). Thousands of non-Naxi speakers have immigrated to the Old Town of Lijiang to reside or conduct business speaking their own languages, while many Naxi local residents have rented their houses and gone to nearby suburbs (Zhu, 2012). Consequently, Dongba script in the tourism context in the LL of the Old Town of Lijiang has been reduced to a culture icon of the local ethnic tourism, providing a richer context for investigating the symbolic functions of minority languages in the LL. Research has established that minority languages often serve symbolic rather than informative purposes in tourism-driven LLs (Carr et al., 2016; Lonardi, 2022; Poort et al., 2021). However, the specific symbolic values attached to Dongba script can vary significantly depending on the location, type of signage, and socio-political dynamics. Therefore, this study explored how symbolic functions of Dongba script presented within the LL of the Old Town of Lijiang via geosemiotic analysis (Scollon & Scollon, 2003), endeavouring to understand its symbolic functions behind its visibility patterns in physical public spaces.

As per Backhaus (2006a, p. 57), one of the core elements of informing LL study is 'LL by whom' and 'LL for whom', which, referring to as the actors in the LL, exert influences on the visibility of languages in public places (Du Plessis, 2011; Jenjekwa, 2022; Loth & Du Plessis, 2017; Ritchie, 2014). The visibility of minority languages, on the other hand, can reflect the language policies and the attitudes of LL actors (Ndebele, 2022). Governments at municipal level in the Old Town of Lijiang are the main body to plan and manage the preservation of Dongba script, and regulations and policies have been made to guarantee the proper visibility of Dongba script on the public signs in the Old Town of Lijiang (Su, 2010b; Su & Teo, 2008). However, actual signage practices are also shaped by bottom-up LL actors such as

shop owners, artisans, and tourists, whose decisions may not always align with official guidelines. This makes it necessary to examine their influences on the visibility of Dongba script.

A pool of studies has been conducted to explore the perceptions and attitudes of residents, tourists, and shop owners towards Dongba ethnic tourism and heritage preservation in the Old Town of Lijiang (Li et al., 2022; Li et al., 2021; Nie, 2024; Su & Teo, 2009). Findings suggest that tourists generally express satisfaction with the presence of Dongba elements due to their perceived cultural value and visual appeal (Nie, 2024); however, many also express a desire for more authentic representations of local Naxi culture (Mahadevan & Zhang, 2022). In contrast, local residents often view the overuse of Dongba culture and script as a form of cultural commodification that risks diluting their indigenous heritage (Li et al., 2022). Despite this growing body of research on perceptions, how these LL actors in the Old Town of Lijiang, whether collective or individual, influence the visibility of Dongba script in the LL remains untapped.

Therefore, the current study incorporates LL actors into the analysis of Dongba script visibility through the thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews, aiming to understand how their perceptions, motivations, and practices shape the use and display of Dongba script in Lijiang's Old Town. In addition, a set of official language policy documents at national, provincial, and municipal levels was collected and analysed as secondary data. These documents provide insight into how Dongba script and minority languages are represented in institutional discourse and help contextualize top-down motivations for language display. By foregrounding the voices of those involved in the production and interpretation of the LL, this study seeks to reveal the sociopolitical and cultural forces that influence the visibility of Dongba script. In doing so, it aims

to offer insights into the broader sustainability of endangered ethnic minority languages in China's rapidly commercializing and heritage-driven environments.

To address the multifaceted nature of language visibility and symbolic functions in public space, this study also draws upon Trumper-Hecht's (2010) three-dimensional theory, which conceptualizes the LL as shaped by the interaction of physical, political, and experiential dimensions. This framework enables a more nuanced analysis of Dongba script in the Old Town of Lijiang, not only in terms of its spatial distribution and material emplacement, but also in relation to the sociopolitical forces that influence signage practices and the lived experiences of those who engage with them. By applying this model, the study aims to uncover how Dongba script operates within broader processes of ethnic representation, cultural tourism, and language policy, and how these dimensions collectively affect the sustainability of endangered minority languages in contemporary China.

1.5 Research Objectives

1. To analyse visibility patterns of Dongba script as presented in the LL of the Old Town of Lijiang;
2. To investigate the symbolic functions of Dongba script as presented in the LL of the Old Town of Lijiang;
3. To examine the influences of LL actors on the visibility of Dongba script in the LL in the Old Town of Lijiang.

1.6 Research Questions

1. What are the patterns of visibility of Dongba script as presented in the LL of the Old Town of Lijiang?
2. How are the symbolic functions of Dongba script as presented in the LL of the