

English in the Global Village



Tourism has been found to be beneficial for minority language maintenance in a number of contexts from around the world. For instance, [Anand Torrents Alcaraz](#) has recently shown here on [Language on the Move](#) that the growing tourism industry in the Pallars Sobirà region of the Spanish Pyrenees extends the range of uses of Pallarès, the local dialect of Catalan, beyond its traditional rural-agricultural domains. Similarly, PhD research by [Yang Hongyan](#) has demonstrated that the award of World Heritage status to the city of Lijiang in Yunnan province in China has provided a significant boost for the maintenance of the Naxi language ([Yang 2013](#)). However, it is not always the case that the local minority language benefits from the development of tourism in a minority area, as a fascinating case study of [West Street in Yangshuo Town in the Guilin district of Guangxi Province in China](#) demonstrates (Gao 2012).

Yangshuo was one of the first backpacker destinations to emerge in China and the frequency with which Yangshuo is featured in English-language travel reports is out of all proportion to its small size, as [Xiaoxiao Chen](#) found in her study of representations of Chinese people and languages in English-language newspaper travel writing ([Chen 2013](#)). Yangshuo is typically represented as “easy,” “accessible” and “English-speaking” to English-language audiences, as in the following example ([quoted in Chen 2013, p. 207](#)):

[Yangshuo] is the most accessible destination in China for independent foreign travelers, offering accommodation across all ranges, an eclectic array of restaurants with English menus and English-speaking tourism service providers.

However, catering to the international tourist market through the provision of English-language services is only one part of the success story of Yangshuo. Capitalising on its popularity with international tourists, Yangshuo began to strategically associate itself with English-speaking visitors in its marketing efforts directed at domestic tourists, as in the following strategy paper (quoted in Gao 2012, p. 343):

We should fully explore the opportunities of mixing Chinese with western cultures by strategically integrating more western elements into local Yangshuo culture.

As a consequence of this branding strategy, part of the attraction of Yangshuo for domestic tourists now is the presence of English in the linguistic landscape, as a tourism site points out (quoted in Gao 2012, p. 336f.):

Yangshuo has picturesque scenery and rich cultural heritage. The most famous is the ancient stone street, West Street, which has many craft shops, calligraphy and painting shops, hostels, cafés, bars, and Chinese kung fu houses. It is also the gathering place for the largest number of foreigners – more than twenty businesses are owned by foreigners. So the place is called the ‘Foreigner Street’. And since all the locals can speak foreign languages, it is also called the ‘Global Village’. Another attraction is the study and exchange of Chinese and foreign languages and cultures. Chinese people teach their foreign friends Chinese cultures including its language, calligraphy, taiji, cooking, chess; at the same time foreigners teach Chinese people their languages and cultures, so that both finish their ‘study abroad’ within a short time.

The presence of English in the local linguistic landscape is continuously stressed in marketing materials, such as this one from the Yangshuo Tourism Bureau (quoted in Gao 2012, p. 345f.):

Yangshuo is a good place to cure your ‘dumb English’ and ‘deaf English’. At West Street, you can always see West Street people talking in fluent English with western travelers for business or just having small talk. Even old grannies in their 70s or teenage kids can chat [Chinese original: 拉呱 *lā guǎ*] with ‘laowai’ [foreigners] in English. Many western travelers say they just feel no foreignness here. West Street is the largest ‘English Corner’ in China now.

One could assume that in this ‘culture- and language-rich’ tourist destination, local languages are also being strategically incorporated, particularly as Yangshuo is located in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, the home of [the Zhuang ethnic minority](#). However, this is not the case. In contrast to the ubiquitous focus on English, the local language, Zhuang, the local dialect of Chinese, and other local minority languages present in Yangshuo ([Yao](#), [Hui](#), [Miao](#), [Tibetan](#), [Dong](#) and others) are systematically erased: their existence is simply never even mentioned in tourism materials about the area.

Even if the local dialect is mentioned, as in this blog post by a visitor to Yangshuo (quoted in Gao 2012, p. 348f.), it is to be denigrated as **not** locally appropriate:

You must hold a CET-4 certificate, with relatively fluent spoken English, because at West Street, or just at countryside farmhouses of Yangshuo, even an old grandma or an egg-seller from a rural family could surprise you with their amazing English and at least another foreign language. Next of course you should know Cantonese, kind of an official language here, ‘cause more than half of the xiǎozī [=cool person; yuppie] are from Guangdong. The third comes Putonghua, better with Beijing accent. The local dialect just does not work there.

In contrast to Pallars Sobirà or Lijiang, in Yangshuo tourism has done nothing to improve the status of local minority languages. On the contrary, as English takes on the function of indexing not only the global but also the local identity of Yangshuo, it is English that becomes a marker of local authenticity in the global village.



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References

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