

The exotic Chinese language

Chinese: What does the Chinese language mean to Western tourists visiting China?

Ingrid's blog post "[Character challenge](#)" has set me thinking about Chinese language learning these days. I have found her observation about learning Chinese characters as "the most intriguing pastime" particularly impressive, especially when I look again at the data I analyzed for my thesis. There I looked (inter alia) at the ways in which English-language travel writers describe their communicative encounters in China.

In my corpus, only few writers seem to have made any attempt to learn Chinese before they traveled to China. However, they usually have a lot to say about the English deficiencies they observe in Chinese locals ([as is also the case in hotel reviews](#)).

How does Chinese figure in English-language travel writing? Mostly as an absence. My corpus consists of travelogues from the *New York Times* and *China Daily*. Despite their different origins from outside and within China, both newspapers have little to say about any communication occurring in Chinese.

To begin with, Chinese languages tend to be lumped into one single variety, "Chinese." Regional dialects and ethnic minority languages are generally rendered invisible.

Second, Chinese words or phrases are sometimes used as iconic tokens to refer to local cultural specifics and to signify authenticity. Examples include place names for which a conventional English translation exists such as *Changjiang* instead of "Yangtze River" and names of Chinese dishes such as *xiao long bao* (soup dumpling) or *baochaoyahua* (fried pig kidney). Other Chinese terms that I've found in my corpus included *Qipao* (a type of clothing), *Xiangqi* (a game similar to chess), *baijiu* (an alcoholic drink), *pipa* (loquat) or *shanzha* (hawthorn). Instead of serving any communicative function, these snippets of Chinese languages act as "linguistic decorations." They serve to inject some local flavor authenticating the writers' touristic experiences and thus contribute to linguascaping the exotic in China.

Third, Chinese languages are also exoticized in meta-comments that make judgments about or express attitudes toward local linguistic practices, serving the purpose of drawing social boundaries and reinforcing similarities and differences between the Self and the Other. For instance, the Guilin accent is described as "fairly different" from Mandarin, Cantonese is labeled as "bird language" or the Jinan dialect is compared to Putonghua spoken by foreigners who cannot grasp the four tones. By recursive logic, such linguistic differentiation is transposed onto the differentiation of destinations and local people. Thus, Guilin is constructed as a peripheral destination; Cantonese speakers are rendered sub-human as their language is compared to animal sounds; and Jinan speakers are made to look foreign and non-belonging.

Finally, some travel writers playfully cross into Chinese languages to enact an elite identity of sophisticated travelers belonging to a global community of tourists. For example, in a travelogue about Yunnan, the travel journalist describes himself as greeting some pilgrims by saying "*Tashi delek*" (Tibetan greeting). By crossing into Tibetan, the writer momentarily embraces the identities of the Tibetan pilgrims but also maintains his

identity as an American tourist. This instance of language crossing presents the travel writer as knowledgeable and well-travelled but not a cultural/linguistic imperialist.

So, what do Chinese languages mean to English-speaking tourists? It's easy to say what they are not: languages that have any communicative value. Firmly assigned to the Other and lacking any intrinsic interest, they are reduced to commodified snippets serving to affirm touristic identities. One could almost conclude that travel to China is not about China but about the 'me' of the tourist.

Publications based on my research are forthcoming. In the meantime, I would refer readers to Jaworski et al. (2003) for further reading.



Jaworski, A., Thurlow, C., Lawson, S., & Ylänne-McEwen, V. (2003). The Uses and Representations of Local Languages in Tourist Destinations: A View from British TV Holiday Programmes *Language Awareness*, 12 (1), 5-29 DOI: [10.1080/09658410308667063](https://doi.org/10.1080/09658410308667063)