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Normativity and innovativity:
Writing (nonstandard) Chinese in a globalising era

by

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Normativity and Innovativity: 
Writing (Nonstandard) Chinese in A Globalising Era

Xuan Wang

1. Introduction

In this paper I examine “the tyranny of writing”—the systemic conventionalisation, control, and modification inherent to writing as a set of social practices (cf. Coulmas 2013)—in relation to language and processes of globalisation in China, asking to what extent old and new sociolinguistic conditions may reorganise the regime of writing Chinese in a globalising era. Following the recent calls for a sociolinguistics of globalisation (Blommaert 2003, 2010; Coupland 2003a, 2010), particularly of globalisation in the margins (Pietikäinen & Kelly-Holmes 2013; Wang et al. 2014), I draw ethnographic attention to the novel, highly innovative and dynamic phenomenon of writing Chinese Fangyan - “local language” or “dialect”, i.e. nonstandard vernaculars, and thus invariably marginalised language resources of Chinese. Fangyan as a sociolinguistic margin, I shall argue, offers a vantage point for observing and delineating the constraints and opportunities, and the dynamic of normativity and innovativity surrounding writing in contemporary China.

While Chinese Fangyan and the normative obstacles attached to its writing (as well as speaking) need to be understood, of course, from within China’s complex history of linguistic diversity and monocentric normativity (a point crucial to any discussion on the writing of Chinese, cf. Chen 1993, 1996; Wang 2012; Liang 2015), the Fangyan inscriptions illustrating the shifting practices of writing in this study emerge from China’s current processes of globalisation. More precisely, I shall address public signage produced in Fangyan emerging from the local and peripheral uptake of the globalised new economy of heritage tourism. Such writing therefore belongs to the kind of semiotic maneuvers that are prompted by (and indexical of) the unprecedented mobility and complexity of language resources, their underlying structural changes, and their meaning-making potential as a result of globalisation—processes of the present stage of human history that are characterised by, among other things, the global expansion of (online and offline) capitalism and intensifying centre-periphery interactions (Blommaert 2010; Coupland 2010; Pennycook 2012; Heller 2013; Arnaut et al. 2016). China and Chinese are part of this scene, and
studies such as this one have to engage not only with the issues of writing as a sociolinguistic phenomenon within the context of China, but also with the key debates in the sociolinguistic theorisation of globalisation.

In what follows, I shall highlight three aspects from such interweaving perspectives. First, I shall discuss the overarching theoretical assumptions drawn from linguistic landscaping studies (henceforth LLS) for addressing public Fangyan signs on a heritage tourism site in this study; this then leads to two other issues. One, the normative ideology and practices that have shaped the writing practices of (nonstandard) Chinese today. Two, the imperative of “authenticity” in heritage tourism as a newly-emerged economic as well as identity and writing opportunity (also with normative constraints), operating in parallel with the established norms. Together, these aspects will elucidate the particular arguments about normativity and innovativity surrounding the “tyranny of writing” developed in this study.

Applied initially as a user-friendly tool to detect sociolinguistic diversity (e.g. Barni & Extra 2008; Shohamy & Gorter 2009; Barni & Bagna 2015), LLS’s potential as an ontological and methodological approach enabling the careful study of dynamic and complex sociolinguistic environments is progressively realised (Blommaert 2013; Soler-Carbonell 2016; see O’Connor & Zentz 2016 for a recent survey of debates). This potential is particularly promising when the synchronic “snapshot” quality of observation focusing on production of writing is combined with an analytical framework that draws on a historicizing ethnographic perspective, in which multimodal public signs are seen as “motivated” practices of writing in the sense of Kress (2010: 10): “based on […] the interest of the sign-maker; using […] culturally available resources”, and deployed in a non-neutral historical space (Blommaert 2013: 23), where they index specific social positions taken by their inscribers in public space. This public space is becoming increasingly complex as a field of contest due to the fact that the space-time compression in globalisation processes more than ever binds together the longue durée and present-day events, as well as economically, politically and culturally uneven power geometries such as the (relative) centers and peripheries of the World-System (Massey 2005; Blommaert 2010; Juffermans 2015). This is further complexified by internet technology, with “offline” social life increasingly interacting with what happens “online”, resulting in “communication in a field of power” wherein multiple and competing normative regimes representing different historicities and speeds of development can co-occur and create dynamic, multiscale synchronic “scapes” (Blommaert & Maly 2016: 199; see also Soler-Carbonell 2016). It is in this sense that LLS attempt to bring about a particular imagination of sociolinguistic reality
characterised as unstable, unfinished, complex and dynamic, an ontological orientation that marks LLS out as an ethnographically and historically grounded approach (Blommaert 2013; Blommaert & Maly 2016).

Adopting the LLS approach in this study will enable us to dissect the co-occurring old and new sociolinguistic conditions of writing in a globalising Chinese society, and to observe the public inscriptions of Fangyan with more nuance: as a specific set of language resources with specific, enregistered sociolinguistic features, capacities and connotations (i.e. nonstandard Chinese), deployed in a specific way and social arena (i.e. designed as public signs) for specific purposes in view of globalisation (i.e. to bespeak a sense of authenticity in the new economy of heritage tourism). I shall now turn briefly to the historical sociolinguistic conditions of writing Fangyan in China.

Writing (or speaking) nonstandard Chinese can be a highly politicised endeavour. This is because the language ecology in China is dominated by an institutionally sponsored ideology and policy of language standardisation (Dong 2011; Liang 2015), while also driven by complex language purist attitudes (Li 2004) and monocentric normativity enregistered over time (Wang et al. 2015). Such an ecology bestows superiority to the standard(ised) variety of Putonghua and its dialect basis of Northern Mandarin over Southern Mandarin and other nonstandard varieties. Moreover, the writing of Fangyan is problematised by the historical and sociopolitical development of ortho-graphy: a common Chinese writing system of characters (known as Hanzi) has evolved over millennia—regardless of the diverse speech varieties in China—to provide a basis for a shared historical and cultural knowledge, heritage and group imagination of “Chineseness”. This system was further consolidated and normalised by the state-led script reform and standardisation processes since the 1950s, giving rise to the underresourcedness and underdevelopment of Chinese Fangyan (Chen 1993, 1996). Hence, insofar as the writing system of Chinese is systematically mapped onto the phonological, lexical, grammatical and register norms of the standard variety, it deprives the nonstandard vernaculars of their own written representation and status of being “authentic” language. As Chen (1996: 226) laments, writing Fangyan borrowing the standardised ortho-graphy invariably causes confusion and misunderstanding, even for the few dialects with a literary tradition (such as Cantonese). Their writing is confined to highly specific cultural functions (e.g. folk art) and anything beyond may be considered “low in prestige, often appealing to dubious taste rather than being appropriate for more formal purposes”. In this study, the phenomenon of Fangyan
should be understood in the light of sociolinguistic stigma, i.e. lacking the physical-representational resources of writing while indexing peripherality and inauthenticity, as outlined here.

Meanwhile, globalisation (in this case, heritage tourism) is opening up new opportunities of writing (among other means of communication) and, through this, opportunities of (re)articulating identity processes (Giddens 1991; Castells 1997; Hobsbawm 2007). The upsurge of identity politics occurs at various scale levels, from the level of the reinvented “nation” to that of the self, and one common feature tying these different scales together is the development of elaborate discourses of authenticity (Coupland 2003b; Blommaert & Varis 2013; Lacoste et al. 2014). These discourses, as Wilce & Fenigsen (2015: 137) remind us, need to be offset against a “de-essentialized” reality of multiple and dynamic (i.e. changing) “authenticities” co-existing as a repertoire of identity performances.

In this study, as we shall see, to articulate a sense of fundamental uniqueness invoked by heritage—understood as the chronotope of the “timeless-here” that underlies essentialist conceptions of peoplehood and often involves language as a focal point (Woolard 2013)—the writing of Fanyan in public signs has become necessary (compelled by “authenticity”) and is made possible by way of linguistic innovation. This, however, only occurs at a particular scale-level generated by the local uptake of heritage tourism, and appears as one element (i.e. the semiotics of heritage authenticity) in a poly-normative and highly dynamic sociolinguistic environment. Furthermore, the authenticity presented in these Fanyang signs is connected to a broader process of “invention of tradition” in the Chinese periphery, spurred by perceived (and imposed) economic opportunities of domestic as well as global heritage tourism (Su & Teo 2009; Gao 2014; Wang 2015). In fact, many of the data presented in this paper can be seen as semiotic aspects of contemporary heritage-based “place branding”, and the linguistic landscapes are crucial instruments in that (Moore 2016; see also Abdelha et al. 2016). In this sense, rather than as a linear pointer to multilingual residential presence as in most work performed in LLS, these signs must be regarded as aspirational and innovational rather than documentary materials, and “motivated” (in Kress’ terms) by projected and evolving interests rather than by a sociopolitical status-quo.

In short, this study attempts to apply an ethnographically sensitive LLS reading of Fangyan writing in public space, which will shed light on the complex, layered and shifting dynamics of writing practices in (nonstandard) Chinese and, through writing, of constructing “authentic” forms of heritage-based identity in the margins of China—both, in themselves, effects of globalisation processes. In the next section, I shall zoom into the specific space of a heritage tourism site in China.
and examine in detail how the normative role of Fangyan in terms of language variety and script and the innovative ways in which Fangyan is written are played off in support of the local articulation of the heritage-based authenticity.

2. Writing Fangyan in Heritage Tourism

The locus of my study is a heritage tourist site located in Enshi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture1, a rural minority area in Central China that has only recently become absorbed into the nationwide (and global) development of heritage tourism. To this end, Enshi has joined the rites of passage, so to speak, searching for authenticity through the semiotic production of heritage (Wang 2015). However, like in many other tourist spots in China, the local Fangyan as a semiotic and cultural material rarely emerges amidst the great efforts in establishing and staging (certain aspects of) local history and traditions for consumption². This is chiefly because, as explained above, most nonstandard Chinese vernaculars are left with little literacy resources, and less legitimacy to be rendered in writing, even if there are rising political and scholarly concerns over the rapid shrinking and dismal future of the diverse dialects, often expressed in terms of language endangerment and loss of immaterial cultural heritage.

Another important reason for the absence of Fangyan is that, since Enshi is officially recognised as an ethnic minority area—based on its demographic statistics that the Tujia constitute the local majority population—the Tujia language as the indigenous language assumes a more “authentic” status than other language resources for representing the local ethnolinguistic identity and heritage. Here, however, lies the problem that Tujia is one of the severely endangered minority languages in the world, and one of the contributing factors of its irreversible endangerment is that it is a language without a script (Brassett & Brassett 2005). In view of this double invisibility of the local languages, at least as materially and visually manipulatable resources, the linguistic landscape of Enshi as a heritage tourism market is dominated by the standard Chinese script (with occasional

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¹Enshi Prefecture is in the southwest of Hubei Province. Tujia and Miao are two of the fifty-five officially classified ethnic minority groups in China. According to China’s 2010 census, 46% of the Enshi inhabitants are Tujia, 45% are Han (the Chinese majority), 6% are Miao, and the remaining 3% are made up of twenty-six other minority groups.

²Perhaps with the exception of a handful local folk songs, in the case of Enshi, represented by Dragon Boat Tune which was popularised through the national television when it was initially mistaken as a song native to the famous folk singer Song Zuying who came from the neighbouring Hunan Province.
addition of foreign languages). In this context, the appearance of the local dialect writing in Enshi seems all the more interesting and revealing of the changing dynamics of the sociolinguistic environment.

2.1 Tujia Girls Town as Public Space

The particular site where the Fangyan displays are found is Tujia GirlsTown (Tujia Nü’er Cheng), an artificial “ancient” town situated on the outskirts of the prefectural capital city, designed and built in traditional Tujia styles and offering various tourism and entertainment services. Its name originated from Tujia Girls Festival (Tujia Nü’er Hui), a heritage festival based on the old custom of annual market days when the local Tujia who live far apart in deep mountains gather for business; on these occasions, village girls get to date their suitors through hackling and exchanging love songs. While this custom is disappearing even in the villages where it was first recorded, Nü’er Hui has become an official festival with the establishment of Enshi as a minority autonomous prefecture in 1983. As Enshi began to gear itself explicitly towards the new economy of (ethnic) heritage tourism since 2007, Nü’er Hui was marketed as a tourist-cum-dating festival, labeled in global jargon as the “Oriental Valentine's Day” in which domestic and overseas tourists are attracted to experience the local Tujia heritage through a personal matchmaking and romance. Opened in 2013, Tujia Girls Town serves as a major infrastructure supporting Enshi's blooming tourism industry and the officially designated venue for showcasing Nü’er Hui and similar heritage events.

As a tourism site, Tujia Girls Town (approximately 530,000 square meters in size) is a richly semiotised multilingual space where signs, images and texts—mostly in Chinese, and occasionally in English and Korean—are placed in every street corner and shop front (see Figure 1 below). It therefore constitutes a prominent site of linguistic landscaping, more specifically, of semiotic and cultural signification in a given space framed by heritage tourism. For the purpose of this study, rather than a comprehensive investigation of the site, I will focus on the display of the local dialect and elements of the site that are pertinent to our understanding of the rarely-spotted dialect writing.

Without delving into the linguistic details of the signs we can make a first and general observation: seeing Enshi Fangyan writing in Tujia GirlsTown indicates important sociolinguistic changes triggered by local processes of globalisation. Above all, it points to the fact that, in
exploring the economic benefit heritage tourism may offer, Enshi is aligning itself with the global imperative of authenticity operating through the dual mechanism of heritage and tourism and, for this purpose, seeking strategic ways of representing and commodifying the authentic local (e.g. Heller 2003; Coupland & Coupland 2014; Jaworski & Thurlow 2015). This logic of authenticity creates the need and room to (re)consider which particular cultural, discursive and semiotic resources can be deployed in the local repertoire and, importantly, how local signifiers such as Enshi Fangyan could come into play—by somehow addressing their (in)visibility. A niche market, like that of Tujia Girls Town, is thus opened up for the local dialect by heritage tourism. It is under such new conditions, on a deliberately constructed site of concentrated heritage representation and commodification, that the writing of Enshi Fangyan is practiced.

Secondly, while being integrated into the local repertoire of signifying authenticity, Enshi Fangyan has gained enormous upward mobility in the sociolinguistic hierarchy. It joins the same stage on which the globally and regionally much more upmarket resources, such as English and Korean, and of course, nationally, standard Chinese, are used alongside each other (even though the availability and uptake of these resources on the site are far from being even, see below). In this sense, Enshi Fangyan shifts from an “inauthentic” language with writing excluded from its repertoire, to a language with newly recognised indexical, symbolic and cultural values of authenticity that are associated with locality.
Thirdly, the encoding of Enshi Fangyan necessarily involves language innovation. Even if this is no easy task demanding careful coordination of the norms and the normative writing system (a point I shall return to later), to give Enshi Fangyan a previously non-existent (logo)graphic shape, i.e. designed materiality (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996/2006), is to break out of the norms and constraints set by the existing language regime. In so doing, it expands the sociolinguistic repertoire of Fangyan, and it belongs to the semiotic design of authenticity in late modernity (Wang 2012, 2015). Let us now take a closer look at the Fangyan displays in Enshi’s Tujia Girls Town.
2.2 Indexing Authenticity through Fangyan

There are twenty-eight dialect signs found in Tujia Girls Town along Nü’er Jie (Girls Street), the business street that occupies the centre of the site where all the buildings are constructed and decorated in distinct traditional-ethnic styles (see Figure 2 below). The signs are written with high-frequency items taken from the local vernacular, from nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs to other idiomatic expressions (see Appendix for a full list). These words and phrases are uniformly inscribed in golden-coloured simplified Hanzi in the classical font of Li (Clerical script), with component characters laid vertically on both sides of a black diamond-shaped board, and hanging from a straw rope roughly tied to a raw wooden lamppost. The lamps, which hang right next to each board, underneath a tiled canopy, replicate the style of old-fashioned oil lamps used in pre-electricity days and are lit at night.
On the one hand, judging by the location and positioning, it is clear that these Fangyan displays are strategically “emplaced” (in the sense of Scollon & Scollon 2003) on the site and presented as principal signifiers of authentic heritage. Their stately lineup in the centre of the site is clearly meant to be seen by all visitors, even when it is dark. In addition, their presentation is *stylised*, through colour, font, layout and the rustic-looking props surrounding them, in such a way that they emblematise and reinforce the ‘authentic’ atmosphere of traditional, local, ethnic, natural, pre-modern, etc. Together, these semiotic objects and resources form an “ensemble” (Kress 1010: 161; see also Kress & van Leeuwen 1996/2006) of authenticity that is spatially and temporally tied to a certain desired form of the local and its heritage.

On the other hand, these signs are eye-catching because of their novel writing: mostly improvised, non-normative Fangyan writing that may well be familiar visually (as they are encoded in the official orthography), but not readily transparent in linguistic and cultural meanings (due to their local embeddedness). For example, the word shown in Figure 2 is made of three characters, 矮 (āi, short) 打 (dǎ, to hit) and 柄 (chē, pestle); each is an ortho-graphic unit in the standard Chinese speech and literacy. As individual graphs at the phoneme-morphemic level they are intelligible to most Chinese speakers, however, their combination (meaning “a shortie or midget”) may not offer the same comprehensibility because it does not correspond to a fixed morphosyntactic structure in the standard writing. Even for those who know this vernacular term (which comes from the name of a small T-shape wooden tool for supporting weight from the lower behind when the locals climb mountains while bearing a heavy load on their backs), they do not always know how to write it or even recognise it when it is put in writing. The (un)intelligibility of the dialect writing is at stake not only for non-local speakers and tourists, but for the locals too, most of whom see (some of) these items written down for the first time. For instance, and here we turn to the online support structures of heritage tourism, on one of the local virtual forums where images of these Fangyan signs are shared, the administrator comments on the obscurity of these dialect signs:

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Fig 2: Enshi Fangyan displays in Girls Street © Xuan Wang 2015

Have those who have been to Enshi Tujia Girls Town noticed the “dialect” hanging there? Some attentive internet friends have taken photographs of them and posted them in our New Enshi Forum. Surprisingly a few of them are not understandable even to the administrator [myself]. Come and identify them for yourself.

(Translated by the author)

This riddle-like effect—whether true or played out by the locals just to poke fun (it is not so difficult for the local dialect speakers to work out these written forms since they are high-frequency expressions)—is arguably characteristic of the designed semiotics of difference that creates a sense of place-myth, thus, adding to the indexical potency of these signs in terms of authenticity. In this same spirit, writings in these signs are sometimes even labelled as “Tujia dialect”—instead of Enshi Fangyan, as seen in one of the popular blogs reflecting on these signs⁴:

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...The author believes that today's Enshi Girls Town is a place where the horizon is broad, the environment is charming, the buildings are traditional and elegant, the sceneries are beautiful and the climate pleasant, a perfect place where people gather to dine, drink, relax, tour and shop. The most enjoyable thing is the rich cultural atmosphere here. In addition to the Tujia cultural style buildings and all kinds of performing arts that reflect the Tujia people, there is also the feast for the eyes provided by the Tujia dialect (Tujia language) street (see the pictures). Although we have here only [a collection of] twenty odd vividly illustrated Tujia dialect (in fact Tujia dialect is far more than these), they indirectly enable people to intuitively feel the deep, vast and charming Tujia culture. Each time I am there, I take a look at them and appreciate them, and capture them with my camera as a permanent memory. (See the 'Tujia Fangyan Classification' below the images for the translation of each Fangyan).

(Translated by the author)

To augment the point that the "deep, vast and charming Tujia culture" the small number of Fangyan signs in Tujia Girl's Town can already reveal, the blogger goes on to offer six lists of similar "Tujia dialect" expressions. Very few people would seriously dispute the blurring of boundaries between Enshi Fangyan and Tujia dialect. Based on my ethnographic observation and my own understanding as a native of Enshi, the two, if they had pre-existed as separate entities, have more or less bundled together and hybridised through "local languaging" over time (to borrow from Juffermans 2015). To the locals, it is neither necessary nor straightforward to draw a clear line between the two, especially when there is hardly any dialectological or Tujia language research to
systematically record and map out either. This “merger”, for both heritage tourism and self-
experience of the local ethnolinguistic practices, provides another token of authenticity.

Thus, even if the dialect displays in Tujia GirlsTown are small in number, they are by no
means trivial in presence or function, for their strategic spatial emplacement, semiotic design and
sociolinguistic intermixing with Tujia—the local minority and hence “authentic” language—have
enabled these signs to produce considerable effects of authenticity through “homeopathic” doses of
features (Blommaert & Varis 2013: 148). Notwithstanding that the primary function of such
displays of dialect writing is, as some might argue, “for emblematic, decorative and authenticating
purposes” and “deprived of the communication function of the language” (Gao 2014: 49), their
materialisation through writing does in itself uncover much of the extent to which globalisation
processes on the ground level afford a minoritised variety certain opportunities for language
revitalisation and innovation through writing. Such opportunities, as we have seen, go hand in hand
with constraints brought upon by normativity, and I shall unravel this further by looking into how
these Fangyan signs are actually written in the local space.

2.3 Writing with Normativity and Innovativity

Two issues are noteworthy in the writing process in which normativity is seen at play: the ortho-
graphic dependency in inscribing the dialect words, and the spatial (re)stratification in which their
inscription is inserted. I shall begin with the first issue, which points back to the scale-level of
repositioning within China: the tyranny of writing Chinese in which Fangyan are understood as
diverse language varieties without their own legitimate writing resources. It is therefore inevitable
that dialect writing has to rely on borrowing resources from the ortho-graphic system of the
standard Chinese. Put differently, the linguistic materialisation of Fangyan is an effort that engages
simultaneously with (recent, emerging) innovativity and (older, enregistered) normativity of
writing. But how does this dimension of normativity work?
Table 1 offers a breakdown of how orthographs—the constituent Chinese characters of the *ortho-graphic* writing system that revolves around Putonghua and its basis of Northern Mandarin—are used in writing the twenty-eight dialect words found in Tujia Girls Town. In this table, we see that the writing falls into two groups, with Group 1 having a high level of intelligibility to speakers of Putonghua and/or Northern Mandarin as well as speakers of Enshi Fangyan and/or Southern Mandarin, whereas Group 2 is more intelligible to speakers of Enshi Fangyan and/or Southern Mandarin but less so or even unintelligible to others. This differentiation in intelligibility has to do with the degree to which the written realisation of the dialect can conform to the ortho-graphic norms. In the first group, four of the dialect words (Row 1) are identical to their ortho-graphic counterparts in form and meaning, so much so that one may even argue that they are standardised words *de facto*; three more (Row 2) are words from the southern dialects (such as Engshi Fangyan) but have already been integrated into Northern Mandarin and ortho-graphised, therefore they can also be regarded as standardised words of sorts, but with a register pointing to the southern vernaculars; and two other lexical items (Row 3) are also words identical to their northern alternatives, albeit are written here non-ortho-graphically (“失隔” instead of “失格”, “合式”)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1: units also exist as lexical or orthographic combinations in Putonghua and/or its basis of Northern Mandarin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 2: units exist mainly in Enshi Fangyan and/or its basis of Southern Mandarin</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1: Ortho-graphic norms and intelligibility in the writing of Enshi Fangyan**
instead of “合适”) which are either ortho-graphic errors or deliberate “accents” to make these words look dialectal.

In the second group, the situation becomes more complicated as the writing struggles to keep in line with the ortho-graphic norms which hold the key to intelligibility. The first six words in this category (Row 4) are written in ortho-graphs, but are not fully recognisable to non-speakers of Enshi Fangyan and/or Southern Mandarin since the combinations they form do not readily correspond to any meaningful, commonly-used linguistic units in the standard variety, even if they may (ortho-)graphically look so. They are dialect lexical items. The next three items (Row 5) again have limited intelligibility because part of the ortho-graphs in them are written non-ortho-graphically to indicate certain nonstandard features of pronunciation (“门 namen” instead of “么 name”, “哒扑趴 dapupa” instead of “跌扑爬 diepupa”, “一哈哈儿 yihaha’er” instead of “一下下儿 yixiaxia’er”), namely, to (hetero)graphically mark out the salient phonological difference between the local dialect and the standard variety. The following two words (Row 6) bear similar non-ortho-graphic features as they, too, are “transliteration”, borrowing somewhat random ortho-graphs, since the possible corresponding ortho-graphs are rarely in use or used for such expressions, which makes their writing semantically and culturally incomprehensible even to some local speakers. The final eight words (Row 7) are deep local dialect expressions completely written in random ortho-graphs (better called hetero-graphs), because no ortho-graphic resources are available for their writing; therefore they offer the lowest intelligibility.

Admittedly, the categorisation and analysis based on Table 1 is by no means absolute or exhaustive; one could regard these as “folk linguistics” of sorts (Preston & Niedzielski 2000). The purpose is to illuminate that, on the one hand, in designing visible materiality for these Enshi Fangyan words, ortho-graphic writing resources and the norms of standardised Chinese play a critical role. They provide a form-sound-meaning axis which works as the overriding reference point towards which Fangyan writing orient. They also provide concrete resources for Fangyan writing that, as we saw in the table, can be exploited graphically, phonologically, semantically and culturally, albeit to various degrees. On the other hand, the writing of Enshi Fangyan words appears to involve rather mixed and heterographic practices which (as shown in Column 4) shift progressively away from the ortho-graphic writing, from being entirely or almost identical to the
standard variety, to partially ortho-graphic and partially heterographic in order to either be faithful to the phonological features of the dialect or compensate for the lack of (ortho-)graphic resources, to fully heterographic writing. In this sense, Fangyan writing demonstrates substantial adaptability, creativity and improvisationality. Even if its display requires little real communicative function, the designing of its materiality involves complex and laborious semiotic processes of design.

Nevertheless, while the homeopathic dose of language demonstrates innovativity in writing Fangyan, the processes evidently cause considerable inconsistency, volatility and instability on the part of Fangyan in terms of the written outcomes and their communicability, with their form, sound and meaning on the whole only partially transcribable and accessible, and therefore still largely excluded from the literary world pragmatically and culturally. This type of grassroots writing, therefore, is extremely limited in its sociolinguistic capacity in terms of generalisability and function, a pattern that is equally reflected, as we shall see next, in the way these Fangyan signs are positioned spatially.

2.4 The Emplacement of Fangyan

As mentioned earlier, Tujia GirlsTown is a multilingual multi-script space where the (omni)presence of standard Chinese writing is accompanied by a small number of signs inscribed in the local dialect as well as in much more upmarket language resources from English and Korean. The obvious imbalance in quantity is indexical of the structural inequality: the fact that Enshi is a sociolinguistic margin in which the “bigger” varieties in the sociolinguistic hierarchy, e.g. English and Korean, are scarce in availability, thus, are highly desirable and prestigious resources, while the ‘smaller’ varieties, such as the local dialect, have limited visibility due to their deficiency in writing and their lower status compared to the others. This unevenness is mirrored in the way these languages are spatially organised in Tujia GirlsTown. I shall illustrate this point by comparing Figures 3 and 4.

Figure 3 is a typical example of a multilingual sign, which has the street name “Snack Street” written in Chinese, English and Korean, in white colour against brown background. In Tujia Girls Town, English and Korean words are almost exclusively used in street signs, route maps and notices. Very few locals can read these words, or need to; they are intended for non-Chinese speaking visitors, who are however still few and far between in Enshi. The real relevance of them, then, lies in the foreign (-looking) scripts in which they are inscribed: these (non-logo)graphic
images bespeak an aspiration for modernity and globality, and symbolically recontextualise and reorganise the space they are in as such, while emblematically indexing another layer of authenticity, one on a higher, more global scale.

3: A multilingual sign © Xuan Wang 2015

More importantly, like the Fangyan signs, they do so without necessarily involving the linguistic-communicative function. It is their *visuality* that is needed. We can see this in Figure 3 from the way the three types of scripts are laid out in the sign. The Chinese writing is emboldened, in a large font size and positioned vertically occupying an ample section in the top-left, whereas the English and the Korean writing is smaller and nonbold, kept in one narrow line, with English sideway up above Korean, in the lower-right of the board. The contrast in size, typeface and layout of the three languages indicates the locally (re)organised indexical order in which Chinese seems of greater significance than the "bigger" languages, with the latter two making the sign appear more international and officialised. (Note also the adoption of brown, an internationally conventionalised
colour for tourist signage). Correspondingly, the space surrounding the sign is also organised and used in such a way—as witnessed in Figure 3, an open, clean, well-maintained and respectable space is demarcated and reserved for the sign.

By contrast, Figure 4 shows tensions in the use of space surrounding a Fangyan display. Here we see the encroachment of the space around one of the signs “一哈哈儿” by the dense presence of commercial signs: the red and green banners which advertise a local fete and a cafe/household business respectively. These commercial signs are much larger, in much more vibrant colours and a much more commanding positioning (recursive at the eye level). All the Fangyan signs in Tujia GirlsTown were put in place as part of the original construction before it opened its door to business and tourism activities. As the space gets increasingly utilised and consumed, more and more semiotic and material objects and other human interventions enter the same space, impacting on its “geosemiotic” order (Scollon & Scollon 2003: 19). In such a
competing, polycentric environment, Fangyan signs (arguably, mere emblems and decorators) are sometimes left to one side and ignored.

This competition for space comes from not only linguistic but also non-linguistic objects. In Figure 4 we see that, in addition to the somewhat aggressive commercial advertising, the sign in question is physically invaded and pushed up from below by the roof of a street market gazebo, with its view totally obstructed on one side and difficult to see on the other. The erratic, disorganised and unmannerly use of space surrounding the Fangyan sign is not an unusual sight when one walks along Girls’ Street. It suggests the unwitting banalisation of Fangyan in local mundane life regardless of its potential as an index of authenticity for in local heritage tourism, thus, ultimately, placing it back to the lower end of the language (re)stratification.

3. Conclusion

I hope that, through the above analysis of a case of nonstandard Chinese writing, I have sufficiently demonstrated the “tyranny of writing” as a highly complex and dynamic sociolinguistic process. Such processes, as we have seen, are simultaneously tied to normativity and innovativeness in relation to language and identity manoeuvring, triggered by new patterns of economic and cultural development in globalisation, in which a previously severely underprivileged and marginalised resource such as Enshi Fangyan has been socially repositioned and semiotically revamped so as to create a sense of heritage-based authenticity. For people in Enshi, writing tourism signs in their local Fangyan is particularly important given that the indigenous Tujia language has no written script and is more or less extinct. It is through rendering Enshi Fangyan in writing and making it publicly visible in the heritage tourism market that they get a small chance to rearticulate a hitherto suppressed ethnolinguistic authenticity, even though, as we have seen, the products are not always stable, intelligible, or meaningful to every user of the space in which they are emplaced.

Thus, what we also witness in Enshi is that most of the features of authenticity (1) need to be created and designed; (2) in a complex and careful calibration of multiple layers of normative constraints—global, national, regional and local. The process of inventing a scripted local language is charged with historical and contemporary sensitivities, many of which are beyond the control of the local people, and in a multilingual scenery and template of global heritage tourism with finely grained hierarchical distinctions between the languages used — Chinese, Korean, English etc.. As Wilce & Fenigsen (2015: 140) confirm, “[a]uthenticities are not about being, they are about
becoming”, and such processes of becoming are not always spontaneous or organic. There are “orders of authenticities” (Wang 2012: 159), the criteria of which can be overlapping, paradoxical and mutually conflicting, and the ideal point of completion which can sometimes be practically unachievable. What we have seen are attempts and unfinished processes, with outcomes that both cancel and emphasise the existing stigma of (previously unwritten) Fanyang varieties.

Coulmas (2013: 104) states that “[w]ritten language is an attribute of power, writing potentially a means of empowerment”. To be more specific: written language inevitably finds itself in a *power struggle*, with highly conflicting forces pulling from every side and with inconclusive outcomes. The instruments deployed in this struggle are historically enregistered normative codes for writing, tying specific language varieties to specific forms of script, and allowing evaluative distinctions between “standard” and “accent”. In the case of Enshi—the rural periphery of China—local attempts at “writing with an accent” (Hillewaert 2015) are mandatory from within a globalised script of heritage tourism, in which precisely the accent is the marketing tool that might grant Enshi a place of global prominence. The same accent, however, re-emphasises and confirms the peripheral position of the region vis-à-vis the “centers” in China.
References


Appendix: Fangyan Signs in Enshi Tujia GirlsTown

Group 1: nouns

1) 二黄腔: a simpleton, someone who speaks nonsense
2) 细娃儿: child(ren), kid(s)
3) 高头: the above
4) 矮打杵: a shortie, a midget

Group 2: verbs

5) 失隔: to overstep the rules; to lose face
6) 合式: to suit, to fit
7) 答白: to respond
8) 打平伙: to pool resources among the group
9) 躲猫猫: to play hide and seek
10) 打董董: to go naked (in upper body)
11) 哒扑趴: to fall over
12) 对爪: to partner up with another contender in a game
13) 挨哈着: to put it aside for now, to give it more time, to delay
14) 嘎式: to start
Group 3: adjectives

15) 醒世: mature, grown up
16) 差火: disappointing, below standards
17) 火色: unhopeful; powerful, difficult to deal with
18) 日古子: unreliable, rubbish
19) 殃疲: tired, low-spirited
20) 奈逮: dirty, sloppy
21) 摩疲: slow, prolonging
22) 溜唰: quick, swift
23) 殃酸: deliberately ambiguous or unsocial; sarcastic, sour

Group 4: adverbs

24) 低噶儿: a little, a tiny bit
25) 那门: so; in that way

Group 5: idiomatic phrases

26) 搞拐哒: Oh my god!
27) 哈咯咂: Unbelievable! The son of a bitch!
28) 一哈哈儿: in a moment