



Practicing and Managing Foreign Toponyms in China: Cultural Politics and Ideologies

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Abstract

This study examines the vogue of adopting foreign-origin place names in Chinese cities and the Chinese governments' endeavors to regulate the toponymic landscape. The place naming practices, management, and public attitudes concerning foreign toponyms are analyzed to reveal the cultural politics and ideologies of place naming in China's context. It is found that the foreign toponyms emplaced in urban space mostly have Western origins or roots, and their profusion is largely attributed to their associated symbolic capital, and the clientele's taste and class identity. In the rectification process, Chinese governments at different levels constructed themselves as protectors of traditional Chinese culture and guards against xenophilia, thus enhancing their symbolic power and governing legitimacy. The general public has resisted top-down toponymic planning via acts of citizenship to reclaim the rights of naming and owning public space. Our findings suggest that nowadays, even in highly regulated societies like China, it would be hard to achieve the expected planning goals when governments simply resort to hegemonic power to implement the place (re)naming policies.

Keywords: place names, toponymy, politics, cultural studies, xenophilia, China, linguistic landscape

Introduction

Place naming is a crucial issue for all societies in that place names (or toponyms) are not merely simple linguistic signs, but important symbols carrying historical, cultural, emotional and political connotations (e.g. Alderman 2008; Kostanski & Puzey 2016; Nyström 2016; Vuolteenaho & Berg 2009). Place names have performative power to shape the space (Rose-Redwood 2008a). Once established, a toponym becomes part of the culture, memory, and identity of the place, playing out emotive values for the inhabitants. Moreover, seemingly ordinary and mundane toponyms are oftentimes politically charged entities, promoting the ideologies of the governing authorities. Consequently, renaming places is often a complicated and contested act with considerable socio-political implications.

This study focuses on the foreign toponyms in China's urban space and local and national governments' interventions to regulate them in recent years. The notion of 'foreign toponyms' (or 洋地名 'foreign place names' in Chinese) is specifically used in this paper to refer to the place names of foreign origins or roots that are often given to residential compounds (i.e., gated communities) or commercial buildings to evoke a sense of distinction. Nowadays, Chinese cities, large or small, are dotted with housing properties or shopping malls with foreign-flavored names, such as *Florence Town*, *Oriental Switzerland*, *Victoria Garden*, *Vancouver Forest*, *Sunshine Milan*, and *Manhattan Square*. Li & Li's (2017) survey of the names of residential blocks, shopping malls, and office buildings in 15 major cities of China shows that Western place names such as Milan, Paris, California, Venice, Manhattan, Hawaii, Victoria, and Vienna are appropriated in at least 3160 real-estate projects. Apart from being named after foreign places, some buildings even replicate Western architectural styles to add more foreign flavor to the environment (Zheng & He 2019). Zhao, Huang & Sui's (2019) study of the residential community names in Beijing shows that among the 3200 residential projects developed after the year 2000, about 540 (or one-sixth) of them can be categorized as "copycat communities", with either foreign names and/or foreign architectural styles. The vogue of adopting foreign toponyms in the cityscape has received wide coverage in Chinese news and social media, and many people complain about or make fun of this constructed exoticism in urban spaces.

For Chinese governments, this use of foreign toponyms essentially signifies a blind worship of Western culture, an ideology completely incompatible with the core values promoted by the state. Thus, they must be removed. In the middle of 2019, many provincial governments launched massive campaigns against exaggerated, foreign, strange, and repetitive place names in city spaces. In the technocratic-administrative processes, the foreign toponyms were obviously the most notable and conspicuous part of the campaigns, which were often referred to as the "rectifying foreign toponyms campaigns" in the popular discourse (Lu 2019). The implementation of this toponymic rectification policy turned out to be an arduous task. The official release of "blacklisted" placenames, particularly the names of residential communities in major cities (e.g., Haikou, Xi'an, Hangzhou, & Guangzhou) soon became a hot social issue of the time and caused considerable public concerns and controversies (He 2019). For the local people, there were divergent attitudes toward the rectification

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campaigns. Some hailed the top-down planning endeavors, while others vehemently criticized the governmental interventions in the private sector affairs. Finally, the Ministry of Civil Affairs had to step to the front, urging the local governments to act prudently and appropriately in the rectification (Xinhua 2019). After that, the national-wide rectification campaigns gradually abated.

Given this context, this paper examines the practices of adopting foreign toponyms and the spatial governmentality mapped in the official rectification campaigns in order to reveal the cultural politics and ideologies of place naming in Chinese cities. The specific research questions to be addressed in the paper include:

- (1) How are the foreign toponyms represented in Chinese cityscapes and managed by local and national governments?
- (2) What cultural politics and ideologies are revealed in the management of toponymic landscape?

The answers to these questions can advance our understanding of the symbolic meanings of foreign toponyms as commodities and the political implications of toponymic management for China, a regime attaching great importance to ideological work.

The ensuing sections are organized as follows. We first introduce critical toponymies and linguistic landscape as the theoretical underpinnings to approach place naming. Then we present the methodology and research findings. In the Discussion, we explain the social norms and values in place naming, as well as spatial governmentality. The Conclusion gives a summary of the key finding of the study.

Critical Toponymies and Linguistic Landscape

This study is theoretically situated in the emerging critical toponymies approach to place names, which focuses on the critical analysis of the power relations and structures inherent in place naming (Vuolteenaho & Berg 2009; Rose-Redwood, Alderman & Azaryahu 2010). Toponymic research has experienced a major transformation over the past two decades, shifting its thematic concerns from the traditional linguistic analysis of toponyms as cultural indicators and artifacts to contested naming processes and spatial politics (Rose-Redwood, Alderman & Azaryahu 2017). Viewed through a critical lens, place names “represent deeper kinds of identity, act as objects of attachment and dependence, and reflect community mores and social customs, while functioning as powerful determinants of inclusion and exclusion” (Kostanski & Puzey 2016, xiii). The approach, highlighting the “power-laden character of naming places” (Vuolteenaho & Berg 2009, 2), is underpinned by an assumption that “attributing names to places is a way of embedding a particular set of political values into the urban landscape (Azaryahu 1996, 2009)” (Light & Young 2015, 436). In this line of research, place naming is taken as an enactment of authoritative power that inheres in the production and management of places (Wideman & Masuda 2018, 385), and the hegemonic and contested practices of place naming are scrutinized to understand the operations of toponymic inscriptions “as technologies of power inside and outside the context of formal political regimes, resistance movements, and people’s official and unofficial performances of identity” (Rose-Redwood et al. 2017, 7). Particularly, toponymic tensions and struggles in society can be examined to interrogate the hegemonic regime of power, the ideological conflicts, and the construction of symbolic identity. The top-down place renaming initiatives are a site of ideological contestations, and the exploration of the toponymic struggles and “the technocratic-administrative process to establish hegemonic toponymies” (Puzey 2011, 216) can reveal the dynamics of place and power in urban governance.

This research positioning makes it clear that place names are one of the central concerns in linguistic landscape studies as well (Landry & Bourhis 1997; Puzey 2011). According to Shohamy (2006), the deliberate display (or absence) of languages in the public space “communicates a message, intentional or not, conscious or not, that affects, manipulates or imposes de facto language policy and practice” (110–111). The place names on public signs are often employed as an instrument to “reinforce the hegemonic narratives of national toponymies” (Puzey 2016, 405). On that account, the linguistic landscape provides a window to observe the power hierarchies of different languages and the toponymic struggles that emerge in various forms “from organized re-naming campaigns to the spontaneous use of alternative names and pronunciations, grouses against the renditions of history in official toponymies, refusals to unlearn marginalized names, and so on” (Vuolteenaho & Berg 2009, 11). Consequently, Puzey (2011), in his endeavors to integrate linguistic landscape and toponomastics approach, argues that the linguistic landscape approach “offers considerable scope for the study of commercial and urban names” (219). Underpinned by these theoretical backdrops, this study examines the management of foreign toponyms in the linguistic landscape of Chinese cities as an enactment of authoritative power to advance desired cultural ideologies.

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Methodology

In this study, we follow Spolsky's (2004, 2009) three-dimensional language policy model (including language practice, language management, and language beliefs) to examine the practices of using foreign toponyms, official management of place names, and the public attitudes toward both in order to address the research questions. Using “不规范地名清单” (list of irregular place names) and “整治不规范地名” (rectification of irregular place names) as keywords, we searched Google and Baidu (a search engine mainly used in China) for news and forum threads related to the nationwide place name rectifications in 2019. Based on the officially published lists in the news and posts, all the foreign toponyms that were ordered to be changed were noted down and counted. Other types of ‘irregular’ place names were not considered. In June 2021, altogether 360 foreign toponyms used in various provinces and cities across the country were collected for quantitative analysis. Among them, residential compound names and commercial building names account for 88.89 percent (N=320) and 11.11 percent (N=40) respectively. Moreover, the policy documents concerning foreign toponyms and online news reports on the place name rectification campaigns were collected and analyzed to show the top-down management strategies. In addition, Chinese netizens' comments posted on social media or online forums regarding the rectification campaigns in 2019 were collected and examined as a proxy for the general public's attitudes.

Findings

Place Naming Practices in Chinese Cities

In order to understand the vogue for foreign toponyms in China, we look into the semantic components of the foreign toponyms displayed in urban spaces. In view of the nature of the foreign elements in the names, the toponyms can be categorized into four broad types: foreign place names, foreign person names, transliteration of foreign words, and alphabetic scripts. The quantitative distribution of each type is shown in table 1 below.

Table 1: Quantitative Distribution of Enlisted Foreign Toponyms

Name Type	Freq.	%
Names of foreign places	259	71.94
Names of foreign persons	28	7.78
Transliteration of foreign words	38	10.56
Alphabetic scripts	35	9.72
Total	360	100.00

It can be seen in the table that the names of foreign places are by far the most popular for housing developers, accounting for nearly 72 percent. A close examination of the foreign place names shows that four categories can be identified: (1) Continent names (5.02 percent, n=13) [e.g., 欧洲城 ‘European Town’, 澳洲康都 ‘Australia Kangdu’]; (2) Country names—including their abbreviated forms (8.88 percent, n=23) [e.g., 东方西班牙 ‘Oriental Spain’, 英伦小镇 ‘England Town’ and 新加坡新村 ‘Singapore New Village’]; (3) City or state names (66.02 percent, n=171) [e.g., 罗马家园 ‘Rome Homeland’, 巴黎春天 ‘Paris Spring’ and 加州海岸 ‘California Coast’]; (4) Landmark tourist attractions (20.08 percent, n=52) [e.g., 塞纳河艺术酒店 ‘Seine River Art Hotel’, 爱丽舍 ‘Elysée’ and 阳光地中海 ‘Sunshine Mediterranean’]. Among them, renowned cities in Europe, North America, and Australia (e.g., Paris, Rome, Vienna, Hawaii, Victoria, and Sydney) or landmark tourist attractions (e.g., Champs-Élysées, Edinburgh Castle) are particularly favored in the naming practices. Such foreign place names are appropriated directly or tweaked slightly (by adding pre-modifiers or post-modifiers) as toponyms for residential compounds or commercial buildings to conjure up exotic images or assert the internationalization of the sites. The names of places in Asian and other continents are scant, with *Singapore* as an exception.

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Other types of foreign toponyms are relatively fewer in number. Examples of toponyms after foreign persons (7.78 percent, n=28) are 林肯公园 ‘Lincoln Park’ and 凯撒豪庭 ‘Caesar Luxury Residence’. There are also toponyms transliterated from Western concepts, cultural symbols, or even invented words (10.56 percent, n=38), such as 卡布奇诺小区 ‘Cappuccino Terrace’, 奥林匹克花园 ‘Olympic Garden’, and 乌托邦 ‘Utopia’. In some cases, though the exotic flavor of the transliterated words is prominent, their semantic meanings as toponyms are rather untransparent for most readers, such as 艾诗林根 and 玛斯兰德, which are presumably transliterations of the real or coined German/English names ‘Esslingen’ and ‘Masterland’ respectively. Finally, some toponyms combine Chinese and Latin scripts to make code-mixing names (9.72 percent, n=35), such as 富亿 neo 中心 ‘Fuyi neo Center’, 智汇 Park ‘Zhihui Park’, and E 阳国际 ‘E-yang International’.

The analysis above shows that the exoticism of the toponyms can be attributed to their (primarily) Western origins or roots of the specific names. The names of foreign places, persons, and cultural concepts, and even alphabetic scripts are all literacy devices to render a sense of foreignness to the named entities. For property developers and promoters, foreign toponyms are contrived as a branding and marketing strategy to gain economic profits. Zhao et al. (2019) found that the average prices of housing developments with foreign names were usually higher than those with non-foreign names. However, the overwhelming consumption of foreignness leads to the oversupply of foreign toponyms in the linguistic landscape, a reality that upsets the urban management authorities.

Management of Foreign Toponyms

The Civil Affairs Departments in the national and local governments are the top-down actors in charge of place name administration in China. As the chief state agency regulating place naming practices, the Ministry of Civil Affairs has been the top authority to provide toponymic regulations for the whole nation. Since residential communities, commercial buildings, and office towers are considered “geographical entities” in the official documents, their names and naming are within the jurisdiction of the laws and regulations on geographical names or place names. The national place naming policies of China are mainly represented in the regulations titled 地名管理条例 ‘Administrative Regulations on Geographical Names’ promulgated by the State Council in January 1986 and 地名管理条例实施细则 ‘The Detailed Rules for the Implementation of the Administrative Regulations for Geographical Names’ issued by the Ministry of Civil Affairs in June 1996. The national government asserts that the standardization of geographical names in China must follow these legislative documents. In the 1986 Regulations, it stipulates, *inter alia*, that “name giving should be conducive to the people’s unity and socialist modernization; respect the desires of the local people; and be based on consensus from all sides concerned”, and “those place names which are derogatory to the territorial sovereignty and national dignity of China, discriminatory against fraternal nationalities, detrimental to national unity, humiliating to the working people, or extremely vulgar, or against the general and specific policies of the country, must be changed” (China Division 1987). The updated Rules in 1996 adds that foreign place or person names shall not be used in the naming of places. These specific clauses were often cited by Chinese officials and news media as the legal basis against foreign toponyms.

Despite the policy ban for naming Chinese places after foreign elements, the local governments, for a long time, took a *laissez-faire* attitude to the place naming practices in the real estate market, without strictly implementing the toponymic regulations. The rapid urbanization and commercialization of the property markets, coupled with the loose management from the governing authorities, led to the expansion of foreign toponyms in the naming of real-estate projects. To counteract this tendency, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, with five other central agencies, issued an official notice in December 2018 to rectify the so-called “non-standard place names”. It requested local governments to survey the names of residential areas, large buildings, streets, roads, and bridges, and clean up four types of non-standard toponyms: exaggerated names, foreign names, weird names, and repetitive names. As the state-run Xinhua News Agency indicated, the clean-up and rectification mainly targeted “names that damage sovereignty and national dignity, names that violate the socialist core values and conventional morality and names that induce the most public complaints” (Xinhua 2016). As a major type of non-standard names, foreign toponyms were accused of xenophilia and toadying to foreign powers; therefore, the government called for their replacement with new names reflecting aspects of Chinese culture.

Mobilized by top authorities, the local governments launched massive rectification campaigns against irregular place names, ordering property owners to rename the relevant places. The campaigns came to a climax in June 2019 with the official release of toponyms for name change. Some local authorities took a one-size-fits-all approach to the rectification, listing all the seemingly suspicious toponyms within its jurisdiction (Bandurski

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2019; Huang 2019). The “blacklists” of place names sparked heated debates in Chinese social media. In Hainan Province, for instance, the Civil Affairs Bureau published on 12 June 2019, a list of 84 irregular place names, with 53 of them foreign place names. What was most striking on the list was the appearance of the *Vienna International Hotel* (维也纳国际酒店), a legally registered chain hotel trademark under the State Administration for Industry and Commerce. The order to rename this chain hotel caused a huge stir in social media. Separately, in Xi’an, the capital city of Shaanxi Province, the government initially published a list of 151 place names for rectification, which was somehow reduced to 98 names later. In this updated list, at least 47 names belonged to foreign toponyms.

In response to the controversies arising in the course of policy implementation, the Ministry of Civil Affairs later made a statement, instructing local authorities to act prudently and appropriately in the campaigns against improper place names. It emphasized that the campaigns should mainly target improper names of newly built residential areas and major projects that had negative social effects and caused strong public reactions. The Ministry also urged local authorities to regulate their work procedures, solicit public and expert opinions, and produce a list of proposed name corrections cautiously (Xinhua 2019). The rectification campaigns came to an end, with negligible follow-up coverage on the fate of the listed foreign names. It should be noted that after the campaigns, foreign toponyms are still prevalent in China’s urban landscape today, suggesting that these top-down interventions against foreign names were not successful.

Attitudes of the General Public

Chinese city residents, as the main users of foreign toponyms in the public space and primary social actors in place naming, responded very actively and voiced divergent views on social media and online platforms regarding the rectification campaigns across the country. The pro-rectification camp emphasized the negative impact of the plethora of foreign toponyms, arguing that it was imperative for the governing agencies to get rid of the unrelated toponyms and turn around the Western-worshipping social norms and values. For the anti-rectification camp, the toponymic rectification policy per se and its actual implementation were problematic. The removal and renaming of previously approved foreign toponyms would incur a financial burden and cause endless practical problems for the denizens in their social life. Moreover, the rectification was mere tokenism with the purpose of boosting cultural confidence. Our examination of the online comments under the relevant news in June 2019 shows that the comments against the rectification campaigns were far more than those in favor of the rectification.

State-run news portals administered online surveys in June 2019 to measure public attitudes towards the rectification campaigns. For instance, the survey conducted by the state-owned news media *China Daily* (published on June 25, 2019) showed that among the 5,319 participants, 53 percent (n=2,819) of them objected to the rectification of foreign toponyms, in contrast to 36.74 percent (n=1,954) supporting the rectification, and 10.27 percent (n=546) staying neutral (cf. Lu 2019). In another survey conducted and published by *Guancha.cn*, a similar tendency was revealed: among the 13,937 participants, those against the rectification campaigns and those supporting the campaigns account for 40.1 percent (n=5,589) and 27.5 percent (n=3,832) respectively (*Guancha.cn* 2019). The results make it clear that the anti-rectification stance was predominant among the populace during the campaigns.

Discussion

Foreign Toponyms, Symbolic Capital and Identity Construction

Place names are significant geographical representations “for grounding local senses of place, identity, belonging and memory” (Light & Young 2015, 448). In the commercial real-estate market, the names of housing developments are an outcome of careful deliberation, as the names alone can be a powerful appeal for the potential customers due to their evoked associations and imaginations. Many scholars argue that place names can represent a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986) that is strongly associated with prestige, taste, and distinction (Alderman 2008; Light & Young 2015; Rose-Redwood 2008b). The use of renowned and prestigious foreign locations as toponyms may also evoke a fantasy of quality life characterized by glamour, sophistication,

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and exclusivity. Such cultural or symbolic capital is desirable for consumers. As a result, foreign names are commodified and appropriated in the property markets as symbols indexical of positive living concepts. The craze for foreign names reflects the social psychology of Chinese society for many decades. After China opened its door to the global world in the late 1970s, the economic prosperity and high living standards in Western developed countries left a deep impression on Chinese people who kept struggling for a well-off life. In the official and popular discourses, Western (or roughly foreign) culture and cultural artifacts gradually came to convey connotations such as modernness, prosperity, internationalization, sophistication, and fashion. Therefore, the display of foreign toponyms became a branding and marketing strategy employed by real-estate developers and promoters to gain economic profits. Some foreign toponyms were contrived by property developers, while others were adapted from the registered names approved by the authoritative agencies. Governments tacitly consented to these practices, meaning that the *de facto* liberal toponymic policy sustained the vogue for foreign toponyms.

Moreover, the use of foreign toponyms in the names of housing developments aligns with consumers' tastes and class identity construction through consumption. Nowadays, Chinese people are living in a consumer society increasingly characterized by symbolic consumption, that is, consumers purchase goods and services not only for their intrinsic value but also for their symbolization of social status and identity (Baudrillard 2016). Thus, consumption has a function to define and position them in the social classification and differentiation processes (Baudrillard 2016). As Fussell (1983) indicates, taste, values, living styles, and behaviors are important indicators of class identity. The expanding middle-class in Chinese society is clearly the main consumer of foreign-named properties (Zhang 2010). For these middle-class Chinese, home ownership is a symbol of social status. Foreign toponyms can give a veneer of prestige and distinction to the communities, and both this and an aura of poetic associations (Bourdieu 2005, 23–24) fit well with their tastes and values. That is, the aspirational consumption of middle-class consumers constructs a class identity distinct from other groups.

In general, the vogue for foreign toponyms in Chinese naming practices is closely related to consumption patterns in the historical and social-economic development of Chinese society. Due to their associated symbolic capital, foreign toponyms create a space for symbolic consumption which can yield economic profits for the developers of foreign-named properties. Foreign toponyms, as signifiers or cultural icons of 'advanced' Western society and an upscale lifestyle, have strong resonance with potential clientele longing for quality life and class identity construction through consumption. In addition, governments' liberal naming policies in the housing market have also contributed to the unbridled expansion of foreign toponyms in urban space.

One might note that marketing exotic names in housing estates occurs in many cultures. As one reviewer of this paper mentioned, in the English-speaking world especially the US, UK, Canada, and Australia, names such as 'Tahitian Sands', 'Bella Vista', 'Cote d'Azur', amongst others, are commonly used. Here, the foreign references often evoke tropical locales or well-known tourist destinations in the Mediterranean. In other words, the adoption of foreign toponyms as a naming practice and real-estate marketing strategy is not limited to Chinese culture alone. This might also help disambiguate the idea of 'foreign' in a political sense from a general 'exotic' meaning of places associated with tourism, natural beauty, and sophistication.

Foreign Toponyms and Spatial Governmentality

Spatial governmentality, based on Foucault's conceptualization of the art and rationality of governance (Foucault 1991), concerns how urban social orders are produced through the governance of space (Merry 2001). For governments, toponyms are an important aspect of urban management to ensure that appropriate names (through renaming if necessary) are inscribed to transmit desirable norms and values to the readers (Clark 2009). The rectification of foreign toponyms reflects the strategies of the Chinese authorities to establish symbolic order in the toponymic landscape. The Chinese government's rectification endeavors are arguably intended to achieve two goals. First, the campaigns were initiated by the national government as a measure to change the meanings associated with places, reaffirm traditional Chinese values, and strengthen people's confidence in the national culture. Ideologically constructed as culturally 'Other' (van Dijk 1998), foreign toponymic inscriptions were criticized for their inauthentic representations of cultural identities or undesirable public imaginaries of the places in question. The effacement of foreign toponyms was thus taken as a tool of cultural empowerment, allowing more space for the traditional Chinese cultural norms to function in place naming. By battling against the foreign place names on China's terrain, the governments intended to construct themselves as guardians of Chinese cultural values, thus enhancing their symbolic power and governing legitimacy. Second, in times of intensified friction between China and the Western world (particularly the US), the rectification campaigns served to inculcate nationalist ideologies in the populace. For the Chinese

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government, foreign toponyms implied an acknowledgement of the superiority of Western culture, and such place names on display could perpetuate inequalities between the national culture and the foreign cultures. Therefore, the rectification was probably a political maneuver to enhance nationalist ideologies against external influence and oppression.

In the rectification campaigns, local governments imposed “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu 1991; Kramsch 2021) to place name creators and users in order to promote their political and ideological objectives. Through these efforts at ‘toponymic cleansing’ (Rose-Redwood et al. 2010, 460), the authorities attempted to curb the influence of the external symbolic culture and replace it “with ‘a new one better suited to its ends’ as a means of controlling the physical and social space” (Horsman 2006). The governments wielded their authoritative power to claim the place naming rights and establish toponymic hegemony in the urban landscape. The boundaries between public and private sectors in urban governance were often obscure in that residential community and commercial building names, conventionally belonging to the bottom-up linguistic landscape, were subject to authoritative management. However, the old-fashioned styles of spatial governmentality, i.e. using administrative orders to mandate urban policies and interfere in private sphere affairs, were bound to encounter strong resistance.

Cultural Ideologies and Acts of Citizenship in Toponymic Rectifications

The public articulation of opinions on toponymic contestations can be seen as the residents’ “acts of citizenship” in social affairs. The term “acts of citizenship” refers to “those deeds by which actors constitute themselves (and others) as subjects of rights”, or alternatively, that the actors enact “the right to claim rights” (Isin 2009, 371). According to Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech (2020), policy formulation is dialogic in nature, involving various actors’ exercising their agency and articulating multiple voices. In the process of policy formation, apart from governments, communities, social groups, and individuals are also important agents to shape final policy products. Without adequate negotiation and consultations of the actors at different socio-political levels, the policy process is less likely to achieve full success. Although China is developing into a superpower in the international arena, it is evident that many local governments are still used to the traditional authoritative techniques to manage urban space, paying lip service to democratic negotiations and dialogues with the public in policymaking. In the rectification of foreign toponyms, the authorities initially presented univocal statements on rectifying irregular placenames, without reference to the voices of residents. The role of the public as a key social agent or actor in the decision-making process was not recognized, and the rectification essentially disenfranchised the residents of their rights to name their own living environments. This was clearly an “infringement on the right of ordinary people to participate in the production of space” (Alderman & Inwood 2013, 224). The online comments against the rectification policies were thus residents’ acts to reclaim their rights as citizens in the naming and owning the lived space. Their acts of citizenship finally boycotted the rectification campaigns, showing that bottom-up forces could play a significant role in charting the course of place (re)naming.

Conclusion

Critical research on place names takes particular interest in “how the politics of naming places asserts and reproduces the supremacy of specific ideologies and identities” (Azaryahu 2012, 388). Situated in the critical toponymies and linguistic landscape approach, this paper analyses the practice and management of foreign place names in China’s cityscapes to examine the cultural politics and ideologies in place (re)naming. It was found that foreign toponyms in the linguistic landscape are characterized by the appropriation of Western place names, person names, cultural concepts, and/or Latin scripts. The symbolic capitals of foreign elements can bring economic profits for property developers and promoters, and cater to potential consumers’ taste and class identity construction, as foreign toponyms can confer distinction and status to consumers of or in those spaces. For governments, place names are ideologically charged cultural objects, and foreign toponyms were seen in China to pose a danger to the political and cultural hegemony, as they implied the superiority of foreign culture over Chinese national culture. Under the aegis of cultural confidence and national dignity, the authorities stigmatized foreign toponyms as xenophilic and launched massive campaigns to rectify them. Such endeavors could be seen as “a statement about official identity politics” (Eriksen 2012, 79). By modifying the toponymic

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landscape, the local and governments not only declared their hegemonic power in place naming but also constructed themselves as guardians of Chinese cultural values, thus enhancing their symbolic power and governing legitimacy. However, the administrative-technocratic process of dispelling foreign presences and silencing other cultures was ultimately ineffective as an exercise of spatial governmentality. Netizens' resistance to the implementation of rectification policies can be seen as acts of citizenship to reclaim their rights in naming and owning the private space. The setbacks experienced in the implementation of the rectification policy show that nowadays, even in highly regulated societies like China, it is difficult for place renaming to achieve intended goals if it is implemented merely through top-down, hegemonic power.

Finally, it should be noted that the findings above are based on the analysis of data collected online. In the future, more on-site ethnographic studies and personal interviews on foreign toponyms could be conducted to gain more insights into the practice, management, and ideologies of toponymic choices.

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