

“記念錯過的 DUET_T”: Negotiating translanguaging practices in the legitimate graffiti of a multilingual schoolscape in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT: Hong Kong’s higher education institutions, with their unique socio-political context and global reputation, have presented multiple and diverse schoolscape where multilingual students can collectively construct a shared repertoire to perform their desired identities and create specific meanings. Recognizing the semi-public whiteboards on a Hong Kong University library wall as a genre of schoolscape, this paper aims to explore the intricate ways in which students negotiate their varied linguistic and semiotic resources to create and engage with multilingual graffiti that is deemed legitimate on these whiteboards. Drawing upon the concept of translanguaging (W. Li, 2011, 2018), we employed a sociolinguistic ethnographic design and collected 151 photographs of graffiti. Through a semiotic and ethnography-informed analysis of the linguistic landscape data, we argue that these graffiti signs encourage students to establish the schoolscape as a collaborative translanguaging space by enabling them to collectively participate in translingual and transmodal practices for fun. The graffiti signs also invite students to perform translanguaging practices to substantiate their sense of affiliation with the institution and its people in the translanguaging space where their affective experiences can be constructed and shared. The study concludes by advocating for further ethnographic investigations to enhance our understanding of translingual practices within multilingual schoolscape environments.

KEYWORDS: translanguaging; space; linguistic landscape; schoolscape; Hong Kong

1. Introduction

Hong Kong, renowned as Asia’s global city, exhibits a multilingual cosmopolitanism that is intricately shaped by factors such as globalization, mass migration, and socio-political developments (e.g., the handover of Hong Kong to Mainland China in 1997). These complex sociolinguistic realities have sparked academic interest in Hong Kong official language policy of biliteracy (i.e., Chinese and English) and trilingualism (Cantonese, English, and Putonghua), and how the complex language policy shapes multilingual language learning and usage in Hong Kong society (e.g., Gibbons, 1987; D. C. S. Li, 2017; D. C. S. Li et al., 2016; D. C. S. Li and Elly, 2002). In order to gain a nuanced understanding of multilingual phenomena within the higher education context of Hong Kong, this study builds upon research on schoolscape, which investigates the production and presentation of linguistic and semiotic

signs in public educational spaces (Cormier, 2020; Dombrowski, 2011). Specifically, we focus on the semi-public whiteboards found in a university library wall in Hong Kong and recognize them as a genre of schoolscape. Our objective is to explore how Hong Kong University students engage in creative translanguaging practices to establish the public university library whiteboards as a shared collaborative space shaped by their affective experiences. Additionally, we aim to examine how these students negotiate their identities and affiliations with the space through their innovative utilization of multiple languages and semiotic resources. To achieve these goals, this study adopts W. Li's (2011) conceptualization of translanguaging and employs a sociolinguistic ethnographic design to unravel the intricate relationships between signs, space, and meaning within a multilingual schoolscape of Hong Kong.

2. Literature review

2.1. Translanguaging space as the analytical framework

The concept of translanguaging originated from bilingual classroom practices in Welsh, as observed by Williams (1996). García (2009, p. 45) expanded the concept by encompassing “multiple discursive practices in which bilinguals engage to comprehend their bilingual worlds”. W. Li (2011) further developed this concept by focusing on the process of languaging, which refers to using language as a medium to articulate one's thoughts. He made the case that translanguaging has evolved to describe speakers/writers' utilization of linguistic resources that are conventionally categorized as multiple and different languages, varieties, genres, registers, and styles. These multilingual practices are characterized by their multi-systemic, multi-modal, multi-identity, and multi-disciplinary nature (W. Li, 2018). As W. Li (2018) puts it, translanguaging collapses the boundaries of languages and modalities, which is different from the traditional understanding of multilingualism which speakers can only deal with one language at a time. Also noted is that translanguaging focuses on the entire repertoire of multilingual speakers and that multilingual learners can access resources from various language systems to make meaning and facilitate communication (Cormier, 2020; Gorter and Cenoz, 2015).

To expand on the concept of translanguaging, W. Li (2011) introduces the notion of translanguaging space which refers to a social space that emerges through the multilingual practices of individuals. Translanguaging space also represents “the integration and orchestration of various semiotic systems” (Zhu et al., 2020, p. 1). The space itself is shaped by translanguaging and in turn, serves as a platform for translanguaging practices. Multilingual speakers may actively construct this space through their multilingual performances as a result of the negotiation of their “personal histories, experiences, beliefs, ideologies, cognitive and physical capacities” (W. Li, 2011, p. 1223). By doing so, the translanguaging space becomes a lived experience for multilingual speakers and also opens up possibilities where diverse identities, values, and practices converge, which gives rise to new identities, values, and practices. W. Li (2011) further highlights two core concepts associated with translanguaging space: creativity and criticality. Creativity refers to the capacity to negotiate the rules and boundaries governing language use, as well as to challenge and push the existing norms and conventions of language usage. Criticality, on the other hand, involves employing available linguistic resources to articulate sociocultural and linguistic phenomena, questioning established wisdom, and responding thoughtfully to the given situation (W. Li, 2011). The two dimensions, creativity and criticality, contribute to understanding the dynamic nature of translanguaging space, which enables multilingual speakers to engage with and enact their multilingual practices in an active and versatile way.

2.2. Linguistic landscape, schoolscape, and translanguaging

Linguistic landscapes (LL) provide insights into how linguistic and semiotic signs are employed to construct meaning within specific socio-geographic contexts, such as urban areas (Ben-Rafael et al., 2010; Shang and Zhou, 2020), underrepresented or marginalized regions (Liu, 2023; Liu and Ma, 2023). Schoolscape, a distinct category within LL, have garnered increasing scholarly attention. Brown (2012, p. 282) defines schoolscape as “the school-based environment where place and text, both written (graphic) and oral, constitute, reproduce, and transform language ideologies”. Research on schoolscape can be broadly categorized into two branches. One branch focuses on the pedagogical applications of schoolscape to create opportunities for language learning and language awareness enhancement (Amara, 2018; Niedt and Seals, 2020), while the other concentrates on how different languages are represented to make meaning within the geographical context of schools (Cormier, 2020; Gorter and Cenoz, 2015; Dressler, 2015). Notably, graffiti, as a visual or written form of expression existing outside official provisions, plays an integral role in the latter type of schoolscape, providing students with a means to express themselves (Dombrowski, 2011). The anonymity associated with graffiti creation may contribute to its popularity, as it offers students a relatively safe and comfortable space within a peer community (Cassar, 2007).

Recently, LL scholars have recognized the significance of translanguaging and have employed it as a powerful framework to understand the interplay between signs, meaning, and identity. This strand of research investigates how linguistic landscapes facilitate the mobilization and interaction of multilingual and multimodal resources to construct meaning and present affordances for identity construction in context (Gorter and Cenoz, 2015). For example, drawing on data from a Bangladeshi-owned corner shop, Pennycook (2017) integrated translanguaging into LL studies and provided a nuanced understanding of semiotic repertoire. He viewed language as intricately intertwined with real-time activities, considering time and place not merely as contextual factors but as integral components of the meaning-making process. On this ground, Pennycook (2017) proposed the notion of spatial repertoires which conceives languages as not only a social resource but also as a spatial resource. This view finds support in Cormier’s (2020, p. 87) study which made the case that the incorporation of the translanguaging approach in schoolscape studies may help researchers to examine the relationship between space and language holistically because “translanguaging practices occur not only within an individual but also within a particular space”. Cormier (2020, p. 92) also emphasized that students’ language repertoires can be represented in the schoolscape and that their linguistic repertoires even “make up the spatial repertoire of a particular space”.

2.3. Research on multilingual/translingual practices in Hong Kong

Recognizing English as the colonial language and Cantonese as the dominant language (Gu and Tong, 2012), the multilingual and translingual practices within Hong Kong’s complex sociolinguistic ecology have been extensively examined in numerous studies. For instance, Gibbons (1979, 1987), an early researcher on multilingual practices in Hong Kong, analyzed the discourse of University of Hong Kong students, referred to as “U-gay-wa.” This term exemplifies a translingual practice, combining “U” (short for university) and “gay-wa” from Cantonese, meaning university talks or more specifically, university students’ conversations. Gibbons described this discourse as predominantly Cantonese with occasional insertions of English words, typically academic terms related to students’ fields of study, owing to the use of English as the medium of instruction. He also noted that such language interactions would foster increased communication across languages, identities, and cultures.

There are also a large body of literature examining multilingual practices in Hong Kong through the lens of code-switching and code-mixing. According to Ritchie and Bhatia (2013), code-switching occurs when linguistic elements from two grammatical systems are used beyond the sentence level within a single speech event, while code-mixing involves the use of linguistic elements from two systems within a single clause. They also identify four factors influencing language choice and mixing in bilingualism: social roles and relationships, situational factors, language choice, and language attitudes. Luke (1998) suggests that convenience and the use of specific languages as identity markers are served as common purposes of code-switching. Building upon these works, D. C. S Li and his colleagues (D. C. S. Li, 2000; D. C. S. Li and Elly, 2002; D. C. S. Li et al., 2016) have explored the motivations behind code-mixing practices among university students in Hong Kong. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the terms code-switching and code-mixing may reflect the bounded structure of individual languages, which may be deficient to a certain degree. In contrast, translanguaging focuses on how language users shift between different linguistic repertoires and utilize resources from a unified repertoire to create meaning within situated practices (Pennycook, 2017). That said, to the best of our knowledge, there is a dearth of research investigating the adoption of a translanguaging perspective to examine how linguistic landscapes provide spaces for the representation of learners' integrated repertoires and the construction of meaning in the context of Hong Kong. Additionally, limited research exists on linguistic landscapes in semi-public spaces such as multilingual universities in the Hong Kong localized setting. To address this research gap, the present study aims to investigate the making of authorized graffiti in a schoolscape within a publicly-funded Hong Kong University, as well as explore how a shared and imagined space is negotiated through creative translanguaging practices. The main research question guiding this study is:

In what ways do Hong Kong University students engage in creative translanguaging practices within a multilingual schoolscape?

3. Context and data

This study employed a sociolinguistic ethnographic design to investigate the university public whiteboard as a specific type of schoolscape within a prestigious Hong Kong institution, the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). CUHK holds the distinction of being the first university in Hong Kong that allows Chinese as a medium of instruction and is renowned for its multilingual campus. A corpus of 151 whiteboard photos was collected from the Learning Garden (LP floor, University Library) and Learning Commons (6th floor, Wu Ho Man Yuen Building) using a smartphone camera. These public learning spaces house a total of 22 whiteboards (20 in the Learning Garden and 2 in the Learning Commons) dedicated to free collaborative creation and communication among students. The selection of graffiti as the focal LL signs was based on several factors: 1) the anonymity offered by graffiti creates a safe environment for students to express themselves casually; 2) this safe, comfortable, and relaxed setting reflects the natural state of student communication and serves as an authentic resource for their daily interactions.

Given the anonymous nature of most graffiti and the absence of clear boundaries between individual creations, defining a distinct "piece" of graffiti posed a challenge. Consequently, we treated each whiteboard as a separate entity, considering it the smallest unit for our photo collection. The data collection spanned from January to May 2022, and photos of all whiteboards were taken on a weekly basis. In instances where no new creations appeared on a whiteboard for consecutive weeks, only the earliest photo was included in the corpus until new creations emerged. Employing translanguaging as our analytical framework, we conducted a comprehensive semiotic analysis of each individual graffiti

sign, as well as clusters of graffiti, from perspectives of creativity and criticality (Pennycook, 2017; W. Li, 2011). This analysis entailed examining how various semiotic resources, such as different languages, paintings, and layouts, were utilized to create meaning and make sense of students' shared university experiences.

4. Results

4.1. Creative and playful translingual and transmodal practices for fun

As previously mentioned, creativity plays a central role in the concept of translanguaging, which involves defying language conventions and breaking down barriers between languages and modes of communication. Within the collected data, numerous practices exhibited exceptional creativity in their utilization of different language systems, particularly English, Chinese characters, and Hanyu Pinyin¹. For instance, **Figure 1** portrays a brief discussion on the MBTI (Myers-Briggs Type Indicator) in one corner of a whiteboard. The MBTI, developed to test and assess individuals' personalities, usually uses a four-letter combination to summarize the major dimensions of one's personality and has gained popularity among younger individuals as a tool for social interaction.

During the discussion shown in **Figure 1**, one individual sought out others with the same MBTI type, which prompted several responses indicating their four-letter MBTI designations. Notably, one response reads “有 IMSB” (There is an “IMSB”). While adhering to the four-letter format of MBTI personalities, this combination does not actually exist within the MBTI system. Instead, “IMSB” represents a transfer from Mandarin Chinese to English, where it can be interpreted as “I'm 傻逼” (I'm a fool). The abbreviation “SB” corresponds to the Mandarin Chinese term 傻逼 in *Hanyu Pinyin* (shǎ bī). This expression assumes that monolingual English or Cantonese speakers may not fully grasp the meaning of this linguistic transference involving English, Chinese, and Chinese Pinyin, as it draws creatively from resources across these three systems.



Figure 1. Discussion about MBTI.

¹ Concepts related to the Chinese language (Putonghua, Mandarin, Hanyu Pinyin, Cantonese, JyuPing) in Hong Kong. *Putonghua* (普通話) refers to the spoken standardized national language, Modern Standard Chinese; *Mandarin* refers to one of the major Han Chinese dialect groups which is mainly spoken in the northern part of China; *Hanyu Pinyin* (漢語拼音) refers to the Roman alphabet-based system to support literacy acquisition as well as transcribing Putonghua-based Chinese characters into the Roman alphabet system; *Cantonese* (粵語/廣東話) refers to the vernacular spoken by the majority of Hongkongers and a vibrant regional lingua franca in the Pearl River Delta; *JyuPing* (粵拼) refers to the system used to transcribe Cantonese into the Roman alphabet, promoted by the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong (LSHK) (D. C. S. Li, 2017).

Figure 2 exemplifies another collaborative creation that showcases playful translingual practices. In this instance, a student initially composed the sign as “IQ 題 點解賭錢唔可以見到人啲個樣” (IQ test, why shouldn't people see each other's faces when gambling?). Subsequently, someone responded below with “因為賭勿 see 人” (賭 dou2/dǔ, 勿 mat6/wù, 人 jan4/rén; Cantonese/Putonghua), which can be considered a homophone with the Chinese idiom “睹物思人” (dou2 mat6 si1 jan4 in Cantonese/dǔ wù sī rén in Putonghua). To comprehend this creative and playful pun, sign-readers must possess proficiency in both English and Chinese, particularly in the pronunciation of these Chinese characters and the English word “see” which shares a similar pronunciation with the Chinese character “思” (sī). Without such bilingual competence, individuals would be unable to grasp the embedded homophonic pun within this joke. Given that academic-related communications and discussions on these whiteboards often consume substantial time and may become monotonous, these creative LL signs as bilingual puns can serve as a means for students to relax amidst prolonged periods of study or stressful final exam periods and are thus established as a very popular type of schoolscape signs in the present context.

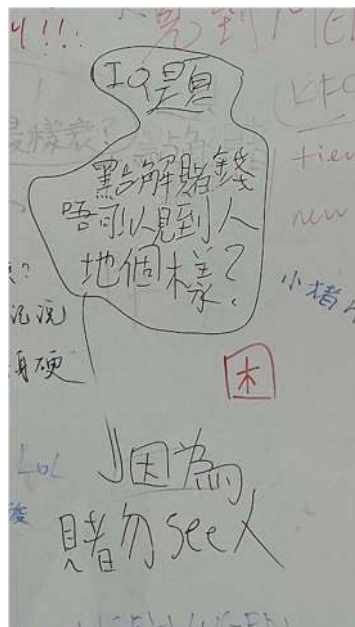


Figure 2. 賭勿 see 人 (Literal meaning: People shouldn't see each other's faces when gambling).

Translanguaging, as discussed by Pennycook (2017), extends beyond surpassing the boundaries between different language systems; it also encompasses transcending the boundaries between various modalities. A prime example illustrating this understanding is the selected piece in **Figure 3**, titled “記念錯過的 DueT_T” (memorial of the missed due date). This piece incorporates not only elements of Chinese and English languages but also incorporates emojis and vectors to contribute to the creation of meaning. The term “due” serves as an abbreviated form for “due date”. Furthermore, a crying emoji symbolizes the creator's feelings of sadness. The vectors involved in this sign disclose additional details by indicating that the emoji represents crying (哭) and signifying that the consequence of missing the due date is receiving a grade of zero (成績→0). The LL sign depicted in **Figure 4** also exemplifies interactions between modalities. In the final line of the sign, “你唔会係我對手, 因為我對手係到” (you won't be my competitor, because my competitor is here), a drawing of a pair of hands accompanies the text. In this context, the Chinese term “對手” functions as a homonym, possessing two distinct interpretations. Firstly, it can be understood as an entity, referring to a “competitor”. Secondly, when each character is considered

individually, “對” means “pair” and “手” means “hands”. With the inclusion of the drawing, the homophonic pun transcends modality and cannot be fully comprehended based on the text alone. The visual element of the pair of hands adds an additional layer of meaning and further enhances the playful and creative nature of the sign.

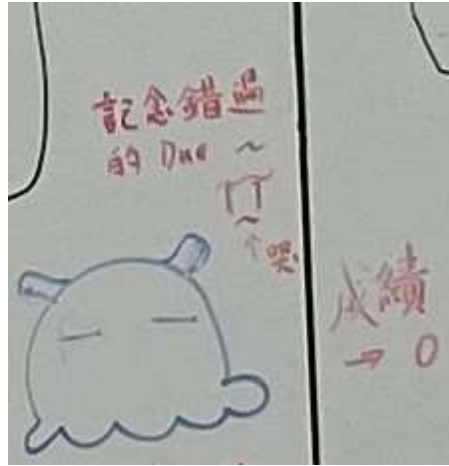


Figure 3. 記念錯過的 Due (memorial of the missed due date).

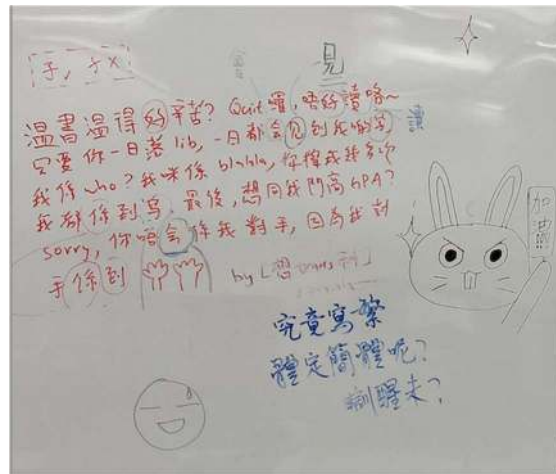


Figure 4. Traditional vs. simplified.

4.2. Constructing a translanguaging space for affective experiences expression and sharing

The whiteboard serves not only as a canvas for students to engage in creative translanguaging and transmodal practices to play with words and modalities but also as a space for expressing and communicating their collective affective experiences within the university setting. Analysis of the LL signs created to share their university experiences reveals the prominent presence of English elements, primarily associated with academic life. These elements included subject or course names (“pharm 人加油²”, “Gejc 一生之敵³”), references to assignments (“我恨 financial reporting⁴”), and terms denoting different periods of the semester (e.g., “sem” as the clipping of semester in sem 頭⁵, sem 尾⁶, 開 sem⁷,

² Pharmacy people fighting.

³ Gejc enemy of my life.

⁴ I hate financial reporting.

⁵ Beginning of a semester.

⁶ End of a semester.

⁷ Begin a semester.

完 sem⁸, see **Figure 5**). Similar patterns were observed in expressions related to various university activities, such as “quit 莊⁹”, “quit 宿¹⁰”, and “賴 tee” (**Figure 6**). For example, “賴 tee” refers to T-shirts created by student associations featuring their names and slogans, which have become part of students’ daily attire, representing university culture. All these subtopics closely relate to students’ everyday lives at the university.

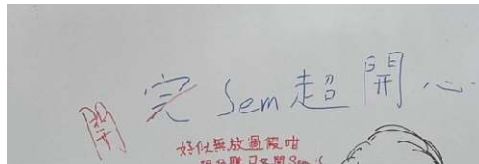


Figure 5. 完/開 sem 超開心 (It’s so happy that a semester ends/begins).

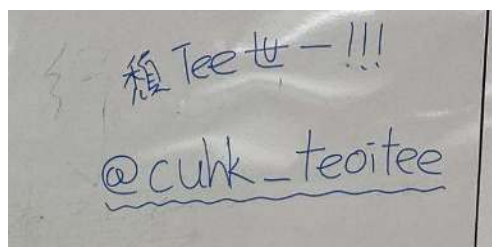


Figure 6. 賴 Tee 世一 (Those self-made T-shirts are the best in the world).

Given that CUHK has a multilingual campus, with English being one of the primary languages, these academic-related terms are often discussed in English within public discourse, such as emails and student handbooks. W. Li (2011) referred to this phenomenon as the “medium-of-learning effect” (MOLE), whereby technical concepts and academic jargon encountered in English tend to be cognitively mediated by English, leading to increased familiarity with English terms among students. These creative multilingual expressions transcend the boundaries between Chinese and English and have gradually solidified into established collocations for these activities. Over time, these expressions have become closed discourses exclusive to university students, interpreted and understood within the community of sign readers who share similar affective and lived experiences.

Collaborative graffiti emerged as a means of expressing shared experiences and resonating among students. Handwriting, as a distinct mode of written language, proved more engaging and readily adopted for the co-construction of the whiteboard as a communal public space over time. **Figure 5** serves as an illustration where someone scratched out the word “完” (end) and replaced it with “開” (begin), indicating that the photo was taken at the start of the second semester in January following a short winter break. This alteration demonstrates the dynamic nature of the whiteboard as it evolves with the progression of time. Another cluster of graffiti (**Figure 7**) also showcases collaborative student efforts. Most of the writings on this whiteboard pertain to final exams and expressions of not dedicating sufficient effort to their studies. Notably, an individual drew a Pikachu, a well-known animated character, and another person replicated it below with a lower level of artistic quality. Subsequently, someone added descriptions to these two drawings, labeling the better one as “sem 頭” (beginning of a semester) and the lesser one as “sem 尾” (end of a semester). This vividly reflects the toll of fatigue and stress experienced by students during final exams or at the end of the semester. Collectively, these graffiti instances on the

⁸ Finish a semester.

⁹ Quit from cabinet election of student organizations.

¹⁰ Checkout from the dormitory.

whiteboard capture the collaborative spirit and shared emotions among students by conveying their experiences and struggles throughout the academic journey.

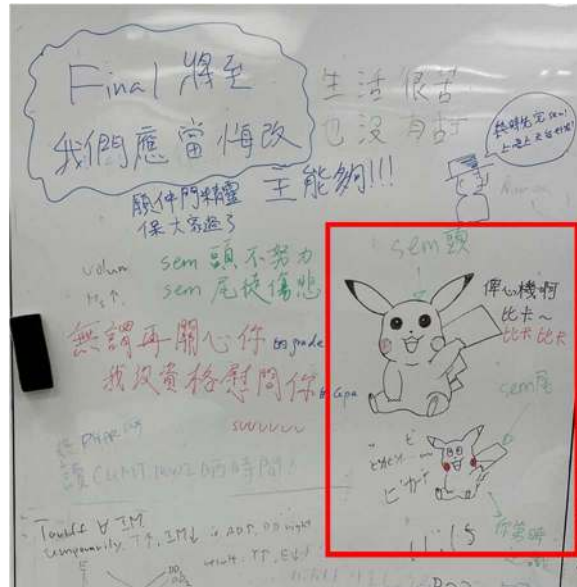


Figure 7. Pikachu.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This study adopts a translanguaging perspective (W. Li, 2011) to investigate the emerging multilingual practices in the daily interactions of Hong Kong University students in a multilingual schoolscape. Legitimized graffiti found on public whiteboards in a university library wall was selected as the data source. Building upon prior research on multilingual practices in Hong Kong (D. C. S. Li, 2000; D. C. S. Li and Elly, 2002; D. C. S. Li et al., 2016; D. C. S. Li, 2017), this study highlights the creative translingual and transmodal practices employed by multilingual students in shaping the schoolscape where their voices and experiences can be expressed and amplified.

Furthermore, the study contributes to the field of LL by revealing how LL creates spaces where individuals can express and communicate their shared affective experiences over time through translanguaging practices. The collected graffiti exhibits a plethora of creative expressions utilizing diverse semiotic resources. Notably, the presence of “corrections” and comments (see **Figure 4**) featuring a mix of traditional and simplified Chinese characters reflects not only students’ language ideologies but also the complex language situation in Hong Kong due to its unique historical and socio-political background. CUHK students also demonstrate a repertoire predominantly consisting of Chinese (Cantonese and Mandarin) and English resources by creatively employing elements from these languages to convey meaning in their translanguaging practices. Additionally, the data reveals that students not only engage with multiple languages but also various modalities in their daily interactions. This repertoire is constructed based on their daily lives and academic experiences, tightly connected to activities within the university context. For individuals lacking proficiency in Cantonese, Mandarin, and English, as well as unfamiliar with university life in Hong Kong, comprehending the actual meanings of these creative expressions can be challenging. These whiteboards, opening up a translanguaging space, reflect the complex language situation in Hong Kong and represent a distinctive facet of the hybrid culture within this multilingual society. Through the creative use of languages, the people of Hong Kong construct shared spaces, negotiate their complex identities, and engage in multilingual social practices.

Differing from the majority of previous studies that focus on schools in primary and secondary schools (e.g., Cormier, 2020; Niedt and Seals, 2021), this study examines university schools, which possess a more intricate potential for meaning (Jocuns, 2021). On this ground, it offers a novel resource for studying linguistic landscapes in semi-public spaces. Unlike the predominantly informational and instructional signs analyzed in prior studies, the legitimized graffiti collected from whiteboards in public campus spaces primarily serves as a means for students to express their emotions and share their experiences with peers. The anonymity and controlled student community create a safe environment that fosters self-expression and, to some extent, ensures the authenticity of these resources. Consequently, the spontaneous creations observed in this study may inspire further research on linguistic landscapes in semi-public spaces.

This study has limitations that should be acknowledged. Data collection occurred during the pandemic outbreak in Hong Kong, which presented unforeseen challenges and resulted in a relatively small number of graffiti signs. To enhance future research, a larger dataset is needed to establish robust evidence of creative translanguaging practices and thoroughly explore whiteboards as shared public spaces in schoolscape studies. Additionally, while the anonymity of the graffiti adds authenticity, it hinders tracing the creative process. Conducting ethnographic work, such as audience interviews, can illuminate these translanguaging practices. Importantly, understanding the superdiverse and complex realities of multilingual schools, shaped by global mobility, is a significant challenge within a limited timeframe. Therefore, we advocate for longitudinal and ethnographic research, offering an insider's perspective to negotiate positionality and gain deeper insights into the contextual factors influencing the creation of signs in translanguaging practices.

Author contributions

Conceptualization, RL and GL; methodology, RL and GL; validation, RL and GL; formal analysis, RL; data curation, RL; writing—original draft preparation, RL; writing—review and editing, GL; visualization, RL; supervision, GL. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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