

# On the Semiotic Elements and Signification Mechanism of City Promotion Films and the Impacts on Audience's Psychology

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## Abstract

With the rapid development of information technology, mass media has changed people's ways of learning and communicating. People, especially the younger generation, are becoming more inclined to visual resources to learn about the world, exchange ideas, and entertain themselves than ever before. A city promotion film plays a vital role in constructing a city's image and improving its reputation. Hangzhou has been making preparations for the 19th Asian Games, which is a good chance for this city to become more popular in the world and to get a favorable position in global competition. It is of great significance to study how the city promotion film helps Hangzhou successfully create its city image and in what ways it affects the audience's psychology. This paper selects "Hangzhou is not only a poem," a famous city promotion film of Hangzhou, as its study object, adopts the French Semiotician Roland Barthes' signification mode theory to study the signs used in this film and how they work together to signify and create the international image of Hangzhou. In addition, it tries to explore its impacts on the audience's psychology from the semiotic perspective. It is found that this promotional film mainly employs such visual signs as characters, landscapes, subtitles, and audio signs like background music and voice-over. Various signs are used jointly at three signification levels. At the first signification level, picture signs and musical signs work together to signify the images of Hangzhou as a city of ecological tourism, vitality & innovation, and happiness & civilization, respectively. At the second signification level, the three images of Hangzhou are juxtaposed to signify that Hangzhou is a city with favorable living and working environment. At the third signification level, the multi-dimensional image of Hangzhou as the signifier refers to the ultimate purpose of this film, which is to improve the fame and influence of Hangzhou. This city promotion film is of great significance to make Hangzhou more well-known and successfully satisfies the audience's psychological needs such as seeking information, being curious, entertaining, and so on.

## Keywords

City Promotion Films, Impacts on Audience's Psychology, Signification Mechanism, Signs

## 1. Introduction

Hangzhou, the capital of Zhejiang Province, is the core of Hangzhou metropolitan circle and one of the central cities of Yangtze River area. It ranked fifth in Forbes "2018 Best Cities to Live of China," and second in the list of "The Happiest Cities of China" in 2019. In 2020, it became the third new first-tier cities in the list of Business Charming Cities, winning "The Model City" title. G20 Summit held in 2016 brought Hangzhou to the world stage and the 19th Asian Games is another good chance for the world to

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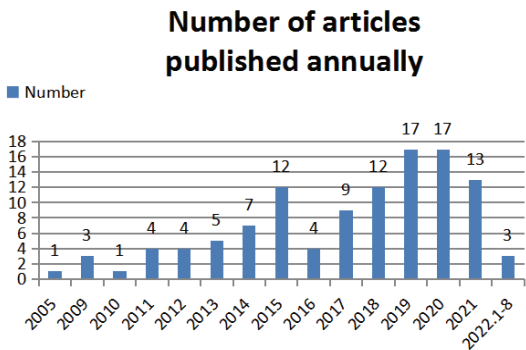
appreciate its charm. These important conferences and tournaments have brought strong vitality into the construction and development of Hangzhou. As an important channel for Hangzhou City to be known by the world, city promotion films employ abundant semiotic elements to publicize Hangzhou timely and dynamically [1–3], and they play important roles in promoting the development of Hangzhou.

Based on the multi-layered signification model proposed by the French semiotician and sociologist Roland Barthes, this paper studies the international city promotion film “Hangzhou is not only a poem,” analyzes signs used in it and the signification mode, and tries to answer the following questions:

- What signs are mainly used in this city promotion film?
- How do these signs work together to create the city image of Hangzhou?
- What kind of images of Hangzhou have been created and what psychological needs of the audience have been satisfied?

## 2. Literature Review

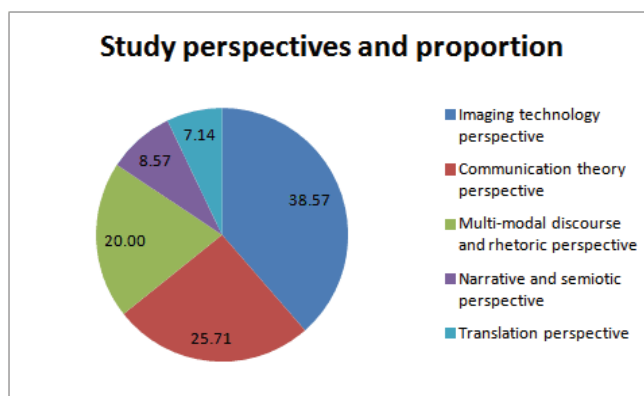
In order to get a favorable position in the global economic development, big cities at home and abroad attach great importance to the creation and promotion of their images. Chen and Zhang [4] said that the image of a city generally refers to the comprehensive impression and overall cultural feeling that a city gives to people. It is a symbolic illustration of the combination of history and culture, a cultural characteristic of a city integrating various elements of the city, and the summation of the city’s tradition and modern civilization. Today, with the rapid development of information technology, the media technologies, platforms and communication modes are constantly being updated and innovated, and people are becoming more inclined to visual resources to learn the world, exchange ideas and entertain themselves quickly. A city promotion film displays the local history, its culture, the regional character and the spirit of a city, and vividly constructs the city image with strong visual impacts and a shocking force [5–7]. Therefore, it can better cater to people’s current cognitive habits. Liu [8] said that city promotion films often cover a city’s history and culture, natural environment, economic construction, social customs, and so on. It is a multi-dimensional portrayal of a city’s development, shapes a city’s image and plays an important role in enhancing citizens’ sense of identification and in promoting the city’s reputation [9]. Therefore, a city promotion film of high quality can not only build the city brand, construct its image, but also promote its economic and social development. What’s more, it hopefully improve its popularity at home and abroad.



**Fig. 1.** Number of articles published annually.

In recent years, scholars and experts have paid much attention to the study of city promotion films, and related academic papers are constantly published. We searched on the topic “city promotion film” in the database and got 112 articles up to August, 2022. As can be seen from Fig. 1 which is about the number of annual publications, the previous researches from 2005 to 2014 on city promotion films developed slowly with relatively few articles published. With the development of media technology and communication modes, scholars have been paying much more attention to the visual communication since 2015. After that, the researches about city promotion films keep increasing and are conducted from various perspectives, with the quality being improved significantly.

The current researches about city promotion films are apparently interdisciplinary as shown by Fig. 2, which can be roughly divided into five groups: (1) studies about the creation, shooting techniques and constructions of city promotion films from the perspective of imaging technology; (2) studies about the text, target audience, communication strategies and effects from the angle of communication theory; (3) studies about the multi-modal discourse and rhetoric devices of city promotion films text from the linguistic perspective; (4) studies about the translation of city promotion films; and (5) semiotic and narrative studies of city promotion films. In addition, there are some researches aiming to study the overall development mode and creation strategies of city promotion films. Up to now, there are only two papers about city promotion films of Hangzhou, they are “Cognitive construction of multi-modal metaphor and metonymy in city publicity films: a case study of three Hangzhou City promo-videos” [10] and “On the cultural identity construction from the perspective of multi-modal discourse analysis: taking Hangzhou City promotion films as an example” [11]. In terms of research style, most of the current studies about city promotion films are very general, and few ones focus on the regional city promotion films. And most semiotic studies about city promotion films are only about the types of signs and the publicity effects. Consequently, the study of city promotion films guided by the semiotic theory, which aims to explore the semiotic elements and signification mode, is of great necessity and significance.

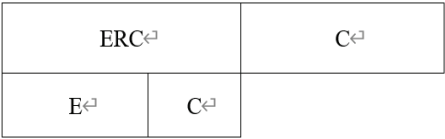


**Fig. 2.** Study perspectives and proportion.

### 3. Barthes' Multi-Layered Signification Mode

Semiotics is a study or science of signs of all kinds and their general role as vehicles for the transport of cultural meaning [12]. Before the modern semiotics took shape, scholars have conducted endless

researches on the study of signs. What is a sign? Saussure, the father of modern linguistics, proposed that “a sign is a whole resulting from the association of the signifier and the signified” [13]. The signifier and the signified are different, but interdependent and work together to constitute a sign, which is different from both the signifier and the signified. On the basis of Saussure's distinction between the signifier and the signified of a linguistic sign, Louis Hjelmslev, the founder of the Copenhagen School of Semiotics, proposed a two-plane theory, which includes the “expression” plane and the “content” plane. They correspond to Saussure’s “the signifier” and “the signified,” respectively. Hjelmslev used “E” for the expression plane, “C” for the content plane, and “R” for the relationship between them. He proposed the formula “ERC” to represent the internal structure of a sign. In the mid-twentieth century, the French semiotician Barthes [14], in his study of nonverbal sign systems, found that a complete “ERC” structure often as a whole enters a larger signification system, either as its signifier or as its signified. When the “ERC” of the first signification system as a whole enters another larger signification system as its signifier, a new signification system of two levels is formed and these two signification different systems are closely connected. This new larger signification system is represented by “(ERC)RC.” Barthes named the first signification system “ERC” as “denotation” and the second signification system “(ERC)RC” as “connotation,” which is shown by Fig. 3.



**Fig. 3.** (ERC)RC signification system. The 2nd signification system means connotation; the 1st signification system, denotation.

The denotation level always contains the information of the connotation level. And the connotation level can naturalize the intended meaning of the denotation level. And this results in an ambiguity between the two meanings. The reference of the denotation level is closely related to culture, knowledge, and history, and it is through this path that the external world enters the signification system. The connotation signification theory becomes a powerful tool for Barthes to demythologize bourgeois ideology and culture.

When the first signification system “ERC” enters a larger signification system as its reference, a new signification system of two levels is formed, which can be shown by “ER(ERC),” to which all metalanguages belong. According to Barthes [15], a meta-language is a system whose content plane is itself constituted by a signification system (as shown in Fig. 4). Zhao [16] proposes that semiotics is a meta-language because, as a two-level system, it takes the linguistic symbol system at the first level as the object of study, which makes the linguistic system act as the signified in the meta-language system at the second level. However, a meta-language once formed can become a new object of study at any time, thus giving rise to another new meta-language, and in this way, meta-languages are transmissible by nature. In this way, Barthes proposes that the entire history of the humanities is a history of meta-languages, and that every discipline today will become the study object of a new discipline in the future, and will become a new meta-language later.

E↵	ERC↵	
	E↵	C↵

**Fig. 4.** ER(ERC) signification system. The 2nd signification system means metalanguage and the 1st signification system means denotation.

For the theories of denotation and of meta-language, the first signification level of the “ERC” system enters the second system in very different ways, but the two theories are not in opposition to each other. On the contrary, they often co-occur in some complex signification systems, which leads to a more complicated three-layered hierarchy in a sign. Mainly based on Hjelmslev’s “ERC” theory, Barthes developed two signification systems which are “(ERC)RC” and “ER(ERC),” respectively, and a three-layered signification system “[ER(ERC)]RC” (as shown in Fig. 5). Barthes applied this complicated three-layered signification system to the study of fashion.

Fashion magazine		The concept of popularity	
Clothes in reality	The linguistic description of popular clothes		
	Sound	Meaning	

**Fig. 5.** [ER(ERC)]RC signification system. The 3rd signification system means connotation; the 2nd signification system, meta-language; and the 1st signification system, denotation.

Fig. 5 shows the structure of the “[ER(ERC)]RC” three-layered signification system. At the level of denotation (the first level), the natural language is a system of signs formed by the signifier and the signified. It enters the real fashion system, in which its signifier is clothing in reality and acts as a signified at the meta-language level. Together with the real clothing system as the signifier, it constitutes the meta-language level (the second level). Then, meta-language system as a signifier enters the connotation level, together with its signified “popularity” to form the third signification system, which is connotation.

Barthes [17] holds the view that in complicated signification systems like literature and culture, the signifier (Expression) does not simply and directly refer to the signified (Content), and more complex multi-layered signification systems can be found. The multi-layered hierarchical structure of a sign proposed by Barthes enhances the explanatory power of Saussure’s signifier-signified theory, it expands the scope of application of Hjelmslev’s E-C theory, and also provides stronger theoretical support for the study of more complex social, cultural and literary sign systems. Culture is formed by signs and is an obvious target for semiotic studies [18–20]. Through the signified of connotation, literary, cultural, social, historical and ideological factors enter the field of semiotic research, which develops the closed, static study of linguistic semiotics conducted by Saussure into a historical, open and dynamic semiotic study.

## 4. Experimental Results

Nowadays, the society and culture are entering the visual era. City promotion films employ rich semiotic elements such as images, music and language to work jointly in a multi-layered signification mode, and so enjoy a unique advantage for shaping city image and promoting city brand [21,22]. “Hangzhou is not only a poem” is jointly launched by the Propaganda Department of Hangzhou Municipal Committee, the Foreign Propaganda Office of Hangzhou Municipal Committee and the Information Office of Hangzhou Municipal People’s Government. It selects water as the most representative sign to create a multi-dimensional image of Hangzhou including its long history, beautiful scenery, rich culture, scientific and technological innovation, harmony and tolerance [23].

The first part of the film shows the beautiful sceneries of Hangzhou in the four seasons, aiming to highlight the natural beauty and rich tourism resources of Hangzhou and to create the image of Hangzhou as a city of ecological civilization. The film starts with red plum blossoms in spring and uses the natural scene symbols like “Visiting Lingfeng for plum blossoms” (Fig. 6) and “Longjing Tea in rain” to show the beauty of Hangzhou in spring. Then it shifts to beautiful sceneries of Hangzhou in sunny and rainy summer days by using “Lotus in the breeze at crooked courtyard” (Fig. 7) and “Yunqi bamboo trail” to show the charm of Hangzhou in summer.



**Fig. 6.** Visiting Lingfeng for plum blossoms.



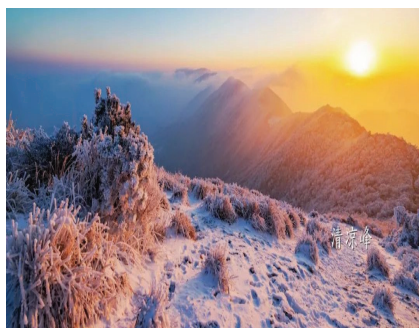
**Fig. 7.** Lotus in the breeze at crooked courtyard.

After that, from the scenes of “Snow-like reeds dancing in Xixi Wetland” (Fig. 8) to “Wangchen Pavillion” and to “Sunset at Leifeng Pagoda,” the film demonstrates the golden beauty of Hangzhou in autumn. Finally, with the camera moving to the snowy scene of “Lingyin Temple,” the film leads its audience into the quiet winter of Hangzhou, stressed by the walking monks in cotton robes, calm and resilient, and the white and quiet “Qingliang Peak” after the snow (Fig. 9). In the end, the film employs

linguistic symbols by the subtitle “West Lake, her eyes; Xianghu Lake, her charm; Great Canal, her heart; Qiantang River, her vigor” to put an end to the first part and create the image of Hangzhou as a city of ecological civilization. This section mainly uses natural scene signs, character signs, text signs and music signs.



**Fig. 8.** Snow-like reeds dancing in Xixi Wetland.



**Fig. 9.** Snow-covered Qingliang Peak.

In this section, the natural scene “Visiting Lingfeng for plum blossoms” is the signifier, which refers to Chinese culture like “red plum blossoms welcoming spring,” “spring returning to the world,” and “beauty of Hangzhou in spring.” Together with the aural signs like soft background music and the sound of dropping water, this cultural sign of Hangzhou’s beauty in spring is depicted vividly. “Lotus in the breeze at crooked courtyard” brings the audience the green leaves and pink flowers of countless lotus, and “Yunqi bamboo trail” presents the comfortable coolness from the bamboo forest. These two scenic signs are juxtaposed to manifest the beauty and coolness of Hangzhou in summer, as well as to Hangzhou’s image of the paradise on earth. The “snow-like reeds dancing in Xixi Wetland” in autumn and the magnificent and glorious “Leifeng Pagoda at sunset” depict the mature beauty of Hangzhou in autumn. And the snowy Lingyin Temple demonstrating the tranquility and peace of Hangzhou in winter also appears in the shot. The panoramic view of West Lake after the snow and the snow-covered Qingliang Peak creates the quiet and calm beauty of Hangzhou in winter vividly.

At the end of the first part, the film employs both visual and linguistic signs to highlight rich water-related signs of Hangzhou and portray Hangzhou as a city of ecological civilization. In addition, the soft and quiet background music mixing with the sounds of dropping water, birds and rain is adopted to prove that Hangzhou is a city of rich natural scenery. Those signs with their respective signifier refer to their



signified and perform their signification functions at different levels. At the first level, the most representative natural or humanistic landscapes of Hangzhou in different seasons used as signifiers refer to the vibrant spring, the cool and rainy summer, the ripe and golden autumn, and the quiet and calm winter of Hangzhou as their respective signified. At the second level, these four signs juxtapose to serve as the signifier, referring to its signified that is the image of Hangzhou as a city of beautiful scenery and ecological civilization.

The second part of the film works on the theme that “water brings inspiration, and dreams are awakened here.” It shows the booming development of technology, e-commerce, animation and Alibaba and Hikvision of Hangzhou, aiming to create its image as a city of innovation and vitality. In this part, Hangzhou’s cuisine is juxtaposed with the Asian Games events. From cooking “Fried shrimps with Longjing tea” (Fig. 10), to the martial arts movements (Fig. 11), to opening a fan and to the basketball shooting, all demonstrate the close relation between Hangzhou’s delicious dishes and sports events. From the international business scenes at Hangzhou International Expo Center, to the athlete’ surfing in Qiantang River, and then to the convenience of Alipay’s face swipe technology, the overlapping use of various character signs such as animation designers, model designers, Ali staff, engineers from Hikvision, energetic athletes and competent business people depict that Hangzhou spares no efforts to build a city of innovation and vitality.

Various signs of cooking, sports, business and cultural scenes are jointly used to create the image of Hangzhou as a vibrant innovation-driven city. For auditory signs, the second part of the film adopts fast-paced and dynamic modern music. Besides, sounds of waves, applauding and cheering, together with the animation industry, automobile industry, Alibaba, Hikvision and Dream Town, highlight the robust economic development of Hangzhou, especially its innovative and dynamic e-commerce.



**Fig. 10.** Fried shrimps with Longjing tea.



**Fig. 11.** Martial arts movements.



Briefly, this part mainly uses humanistic scene signs, action signs and linguistic signs. At the first signification level, various characters and objective scenes are the signifiers, such as animation designers, car modelers, employees of Alibaba and staff of Hikvision. They refer to the signified Hangzhou is a big stage for people striving to realize dreams. The second group of signs include those of delicious food and passionate sport events. Some highly similar scenes of these two groups of signs are used spontaneously, such as the striving swimming athletes and rolling vegetables in the boiling soup, chefs skillfully cooking “Longjing shrimp” and some flexible martial actions, athletes’ surfing with the tide of Qiantang River and the convenience of Alipay’s face recognition technology, all make people easily associate the city with the image of a constant stream of innovative energy. At the second level, these two groups of signs respectively serve as a new signifier, referring to a larger signified that Hangzhou, dynamic and innovative, is a big stage for people to chase their life dream.

The third part of the promo film expresses the spirit of water which moist everything on earth and strive to become stronger, it shows the development of Hangzhou will move from the “West Lake Era” to the “QianTang River Era” (Fig. 12), and it aims to shape the image of Hangzhou as a quickly-developing, harmonious and happy city (Fig. 13).



**Fig. 12.** QianTang River Era.



**Fig. 13.** Practicing Tai Chi.

Through the lens of the camera which records the new city of Hangzhou, the ending part leads the audience to the future of Hangzhou. Signs of Qiantang River New City and Qianjiang Century City (Fig. 12) are used to reflect the fast development of the new city of Hangzhou. With the theme that “Being born and raised here, we enjoy our lives,” it employs children as the main character signs. By using pictures of children visiting the low-carbon science and technology museum and the umbrella museum, the promo film shows the spirit of learning and passing the local traditional culture from one generation

to another. In addition, social scenes that drivers' patiently wait for pedestrians crossing the road are used to show that Hangzhou is a civilized and harmonious city. Foreign tourists ride around the West Lake and greet local people friendly, people dressing up as the Monkey King play with children in the subway, and a kind grandpa and his grandson take water from the Hupao Spring. All these vivid scenes of daily life work together to create Hangzhou's image as a city of tolerance, harmony and livability.

On the first level of signification, the film presents pictures of the modern Qianjiang New City as a signifier referring to the signified of the bright future of Hangzhou. The character signs used in this section are Hangzhou citizens and children, referring to the signified that Hangzhou is a happy society. For example, the harmonious coexistence of foreigners and Hangzhou citizens signifies Hangzhou is an inclusive city (Fig. 13). These signs, as the new signifier, work together to refer to its signified that Hangzhou is a smart choice for working and living. The third part starts with soft and heavy background music, which better matches the signs of civilization, culture and education in the daily scenes and aims to the profound natural resources and humanistic heritage of Hangzhou. Finally, the music shifts to a majestic style to stress the rapid development and the bright future of Hangzhou.

The whole promo film ends with a piece of huge calligraphy work of two Chinese characters of "Hangzhou." The first stroke of the Chinese character "Hang" is transformed into the shape of Broken Bridge lining with weeping willows in spring, then the lotus pond with endless green leaves in summer, and finally the happy smiling faces of an elderly couple who sit beside the West Lake watching sunset. After that, the panoramic view of Leifeng Pagoda and West Lake appear to show the long history, rich cultural and natural beauty of Hangzhou in the "West Lake Era." Closely following that, the film returns to the writing of the Chinese character "Zhou" and different signs are employed like Qianjiang New City, magnificent bridges arching over the Qiantang River, the modern and well-equipped stadium and the brightly lit night scene of Qiantang River. These visual signs work together with the subtitle that is "From West Lake era to the Qiantang River era" to show the development of Hangzhou in the near future. So far, the film has fully portrayed the multi-dimensional images of Hangzhou as a city of ecological civilization, innovation and vitality, and civilization and happiness.

In *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Barthes [24] said that photography has the ability to convey information without resorting to discontinuous signs and transformation rules, and its denotation is generated entirely through the mechanical process of image reproduction. Its connotation, on the other hand, is the result of human intervention, such as framing, distance, light and dark, reality and fiction, and so on. "Hangzhou is not only a poem" creates various images of Hangzhou by using rich visual signs of its past, of the present and of the future, and signs of nature, of civilized society and of daily life. At the same time, auditory signs that go with various themes of different sections are added to more effectively portray a vivid and full image of Hangzhou.

## 5. Conclusion and Suggestion

By analyzing the city promotion film "Hangzhou is not only a poem," this paper finds that it mainly employs the visual signs including those of nature, social life, characters and subtitles and such auditory signs like the background music and the off-screen sound. Various signs are used jointly at different signification levels. At the first signification level, picture signs and musical signs work together bringing the images of Hangzhou as a city of ecological tourism, one of vitality and innovation and one of

happiness and civilization. At the second signification level, the three types of images of Hangzhou are juxtaposed to signify them that Hangzhou is a city with favorable living and working environment. At the third signification level, the multi-dimensional image of Hangzhou as the signifier refers to the ultimate purpose of this promo film is to improve the fame and influence of Hangzhou which is the signified.

City promotion films, compared with the traditional media channels, bring the audience stronger visual and audio experience sense and better satisfy their psychological needs like seeking information and entertaining. From the above analysis, it can be seen that rich and diverse signs are employed in this film and they work to signify at three levels to create the overall image of Hangzhou, thus finally the ultimate purpose of publicizing Hangzhou is achieved. The film employs most famous signs of Hangzhou, such as the West Lake, the Grand Canal and the Qiantang River, and most representative social signs like Alibaba, Hikvision and other business scene symbols, which strongly reflects the unique e-commercial advantage of Hangzhou. In order to achieve better publicity effects, the unnecessary repetition of symbolic elements should be avoided. For example, the sign of West Lake is repeatedly used in the first and the third sections. The third section which aims to introduce the future of Hangzhou seems to be ambiguous and illogical, because too many signs are included. In addition, with the popularity of multimedia and self-media technology, the mainstream media can actively explore the cooperation with more information dissemination channels, so as to achieve better publicity effects.

## Conflict of Interest

The author declare that they have no competing interests.

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