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Post-pandemic city branding: multimodal identity construction of Wuhan through a promotional video

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Abstract: Under globalization, city branding emerges as a strategic device to promote the dynamic development of cities in terms of economy, tourism, culture, and identity. Meanwhile, as multiple semiotics arise, a multimodal perspective adds a new dimension for city identity construction. This paper applies the multimodal identity construction framework to analyze Wuhan's city identity based on a promotional video of Hubei Province officially released in 2021. An analysis of 117 linguistic clauses and 354 sections of film footage reveals the construction of a dual identity of Wuhan in the post-pandemic era: the “heroic city” and the “reenergized city.” The former identity is built through attributes including cooperation and solidarity, sacrifice and selflessness, openness and receptivity, and responsibility and capacity, whereas a “reenergized city” is realized by labeling Wuhan as both healthy and globalized. In addition, the contextual reasons why these identities were established for Wuhan are explained in terms of three aspects: a drive for urban recovery, transmission of national spirit, and confrontation of stigmatization.

Keywords: city identity construction; multimodal discourse analysis; national spirit; post-pandemic era; stigmatization; urban recovery

1 Introduction

City branding has become an international trend since it was introduced as a research subject by Kavaratzis (2004), prompting countries around the world to improve their (inter)national images. It has emerged as a strategic instrument for achieving developmental goals, including enhancing global recognition and

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attracting financial investment. As the first city in the world to be struck by COVID-19 and subjected to “lock-down” policy, Wuhan has attracted scholarly attention, including for its efforts to reconstruct its identity in the post-pandemic era. The city faced complex challenges, including loss of life, economic stagnation, and global stigmatization, all of which complicated its process of recovery and renewal.

In the post-pandemic era, a specially designed promotional video with the title *Heroic Hubei: Reborn for New Glories* was presented at a global promotional event held at the Lanting Forum initiated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on April 12, 2021. Foreign ambassadors, representatives of international organizations, and both Chinese and international media reporters were invited with the aim of introducing a transformed Hubei, and in particular Wuhan city, to world audiences. This promotional video details Wuhan’s transformation, beginning with the onset of the epidemic and ending with the city’s recovery and revitalization.

Deriving from “social imaginary,” “urban imaginary” shapes the core of city branding, contributing to the improvement of a city’s reputation and publicity (Wang and Feng 2021). Once emotional bonds are established between the audience and the city image, the boundary between the real city and “a mythologized, but internalized, set of cultural” symbols (Zukin et al. 1998: 629) become blurred. Unlike commodity branding, whose audience is only the consumer, city branding is of greater complexity, with multi-type stakeholders including government, citizens, and tourists. A city is branded as a commodity with “selling points” (brands), showcasing its unique attributes to appeal to the “targeted consumer” (audiences).

Over the past four decades, academic research on city branding has developed steadily. Starting with Hunt’s (1975) clarification of the impact of tourism attraction on city image, relevant studies extended the scope to a variety of aspects such as tourism marketing (Jojic 2018), iconic architectures (El Messeidy 2019), urban development (Rehan 2014), green sustainability (Neidig et al. 2022), and city diplomacy (Zhang et al. 2021). In addition to this, Greenberg (2000) observed the changeability of city brands and concluded that a city’s salient traits alter in response to a changing global context, shifting the focus from branding methods to brand selection. Despite diverse brand choices, the selection of general and abstract (city) brands (e.g., “green city,” “global city,” and “golden city”) diminishes the prognosis for successful (city) branding due to the lack of originality. Culture, as a carrier of “local heritage,” defines the “unique and competitive edge” of cities (Zukin 1996: 2). This study focuses on Wuhan with the aim of examining how the city’s identity has been constructed through culture-driven attributes and its branding as an international city with distinct Chinese characteristics.

Through quantitative and qualitative analysis of the verbal texts and the visual design of the video promoting the city, this study adopts the theoretical framework of

multimodal identity construction to explore the post-pandemic identity of Wuhan as thus constructed. The following three research questions are to be answered:

- (1) What distinctive attributes of Wuhan are constructed in the post-pandemic era?
- (2) How is Wuhan's dual identity constructed through this promotional video?
- (3) Why are such identities constructed in the Chinese context?

2 Analytical framework: multimodal identity construction

This study adopts the framework of multimodal identity construction, in which both verbal texts and visual design are involved. Based on the framework proposed by Feng and his colleagues (e.g., Feng 2016; Wang and Feng 2020, 2021, 2022), the attributes of Wuhan city presented in the promotional video were broadly categorized into articulation (verbal texts) and embedding (visual depictions) (see Figure 1). Articulation embodies explicit and implicit expressions, basically according to Judgement in Martin and White's (2005) appraisal system. Drawing upon Feng (2016), four types of judgements were distinguished. Explicit articulation was subdivided into attitudinal lexes (e.g., "wisdom," "openness," "heroic") and metaphors. For instance, by saying "Lands apart, sky shared," a close connection and a sense of unity among different countries (*sky shared*) can be generated despite geographical distance (*Lands apart*). Implicit articulation includes eliciting condition and resultant actions. The former focuses on events that invoke corresponding judgements on the speaker from the audience. For example, by stating "he helps the elderly person to cross the road," an impression of kindness is left on the audience. When it comes to resultant actions (Wang and Feng 2020), the focus is on the speech meaning of instructions and commissives, for example, "We must work together to accomplish this task" or "I will never talk to you."

Likewise, in terms of visual analysis, embedding entails depiction of characters (Wang and Feng 2021: 5) and sites. For characters, actional process and analytical process can be distinguished in terms of "What does one do?" and "What does one look like?" Other than material actions with body movements and facial expressions (e.g., smile, exclamation, cry), gestures (e.g., making a fist, shaking hands, waving) were also included. In addition, following on from the quantitative and detailed analysis conducted on this corpus, site design was added to this framework and subdivided into three main types, i.e., natural sceneries (i.e., local landmarks and natural views), everyday places (e.g., residential buildings, restaurants, shopping malls, and streets), and specialized sites (i.e., pandemic-related and development-oriented places).

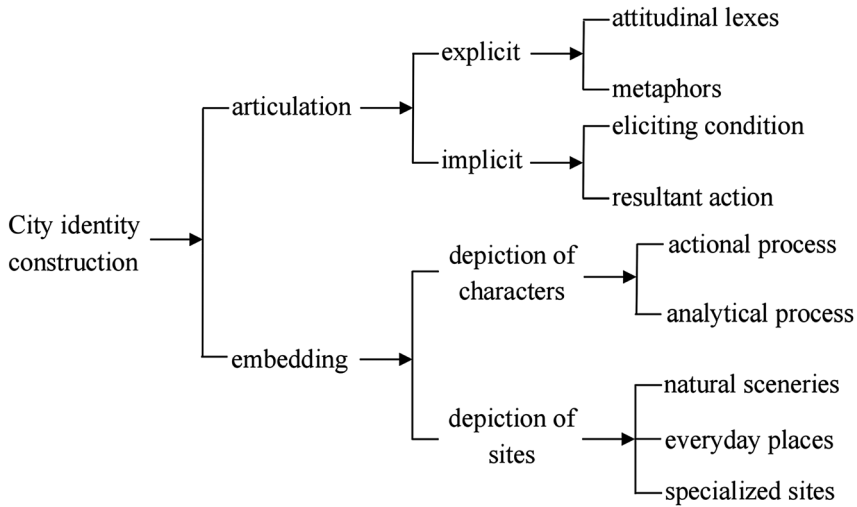


Figure 1: Analytical framework of multimodal construction of city identity.

3 Data and methodology

The corpus was built from the elements of a promotional video (10:30 in length) jointly produced by official sources, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Hubei Provincial People's Government. It was widely reported on by official media, including *People's Daily Online*, *Xinhua Net*, and *China Daily*. The broad coverage achieved a wider global visibility and public approval, allowing nations across the globe to witness Wuhan's new identity after the battle against COVID-19.

Table 1 displays the number of linguistic clauses (verbal text) and sections of film footage (visual design) in this video, clearly presenting the names of cities in Hubei. It illustrates that Wuhan is the only city mentioned verbally, and nearly 80 % of the visual coverage is dedicated to it. Aside from being a location marker as the capital city of Hubei, Wuhan appears mostly in pandemic-related scenes, closely echoing the video's theme. Since Wuhan features so prominently in the corpus, coupled with COVID-19 as a distinctive marker, we can assume that the current dual identity of Wuhan has been shaped through the events depicted in this video.

This study utilized the analytical software ELAN, a linguistic annotation tool developed for creating text annotations for audio and video recordings of language use. Upon analysis in ELAN, annotations were able to be marked on multiple layers of semiotic resources, including speaker utterances, intonation, and gestures.

Table 1: Distribution of cities featured.

	Verbal text	Visual design
Wuhan	7 (100 %)	61 (78.2 %)
Others	0	17 (21.8 %)
Ezhou	0	7 (9.1 %)
Shiyan	0	2 (2.6 %)
Huanggang	0	2 (2.6 %)
Jingzhou	0	1 (1.3 %)
Huangshi	0	1 (1.3 %)
Enshi	0	1 (1.3 %)
Macheng	0	1 (1.3 %)
Xianning	0	1 (1.3 %)
Zhuzhou	0	1 (1.3 %)

The analytical procedure consisted of three steps. Verbal texts and visual design were analyzed and annotated respectively. In the text analysis, 117 linguistic clauses were recorded from the transcribed English subtitles and labeled in terms of articulation (see Figure 1). For the visual analysis, the video was subdivided into 354 sections of continuous footage based on change in camera shot. With regards to embedding (see Figure 1), the footage was analyzed in terms of character depiction and site design. Together with a parallel analysis of the verbal and the visual, six attributes of high convergence were shared to construct Wuhan's identity, both as a "heroic city" (4 attributes) and a "reenergized city" (2 attributes) (see Tables 2 and 3).

One point to note is that the sample images from this video contain subtitles in three forms:

- (1) Chinese narration is shown with English subtitles;
- (2) English narration is shown with Chinese subtitles;¹
- (3) English and Chinese subtitles are both provided for audios in languages other than Chinese, such as Japanese and French.

4 Results and discussion: multimodal identity construction of Wuhan

This section presents the findings derived from the corpus analysis and offers an in-depth discussion on how Wuhan's dual identity is multimodally constructed. Firstly,

¹ The entire manuscript has been uniformly modified: actual speech is placed in first position, followed by the corresponding subtitle.

Table 2: Distribution of attributes in verbal text.

Attributes	Verbal text			
	Explicit		Implicit	
	Attitudinal lexes	Metaphors	Eliciting condition	Resultant actions
Heroic city (4)	4 (26.7 %)	4 (80 %)	42 (48.8 %)	19 (70.4 %)
Cooperation and solidarity	1 (6.7 %)	1 (20 %)	15 (17.4 %)	13 (48.2 %)
Sacrifice and selflessness	1 (6.7 %)	0	6 (7.0 %)	1 (3.7 %)
Openness and receptivity	1 (6.7 %)	3 (60 %)	5 (5.8 %)	2 (7.4 %)
Responsibility and capacity	1 (6.7 %)	0	16 (18.6 %)	3 (11.1 %)
Reenergized city (2)	11 (73.3 %)	1 (20 %)	44 (51.2 %)	8 (29.6 %)
Recovery as a healthy city	5 (33.3 %)	1 (20 %)	26 (30.2 %)	2 (7.4 %)
Positioning as a global city	6 (40 %)	0	18 (20.9 %)	6 (22.2 %)
<i>International transportation hub</i>	3 (20 %)	0	2 (2.3 %)	0
<i>World-class business agglomeration center</i>	3 (20 %)	0	16 (18.6 %)	6 (22.2 %)

The data displayed in bold indicate their leading status as the “identity”-related data, which emphasizes they are the sum of the data of all attributes below each identity in each column.

Table 3: Distribution of attributes in visual design.

Attributes	Visual design				
	Character		Sites		
	Actional process	Analytical process	Natural scenery	Daily places	Specialized sites
Heroic city (4)	76 (53.9 %)	94 (72.9 %)	1 (16.7 %)	45 (37.5 %)	80 (46.5 %)
Cooperation and solidarity	39 (27.7 %)	28 (21.7 %)	1 (16.7 %)	23 (19.2 %)	33 (19.2 %)
Sacrifice and selflessness	27 (19.1 %)	51 (39.5 %)	0	1 (0.8 %)	16 (9.3 %)
Openness and receptivity	8 (5.7 %)	6 (4.7 %)	0	9 (7.5 %)	12 (7.0 %)
Responsibility and capacity	2 (1.4 %)	9 (7.0 %)	0	12 (10.0 %)	19 (11.0 %)
Reenergized city (2)	65 (46.1 %)	35 (27.1 %)	5 (83.3 %)	75 (62.5 %)	92 (53.5 %)
Recovery as a healthy city	44 (31.2 %)	20 (15.5 %)	5 (83.3 %)	51 (42.5 %)	25 (14.5 %)
Positioning as a global city	21 (14.9 %)	15 (11.6 %)	0	24 (20.0 %)	67 (39.0 %)
<i>International trans- portation hub</i>	0	3 (2.3 %)	0	9 (7.5 %)	12 (7.0 %)
<i>World-class business agglomeration center</i>	21 (14.9 %)	12 (9.3 %)	0	15 (12.5 %)	55 (32.0 %)

The data displayed in bold indicate their leading status as the “identity”-related data, which emphasizes they are the sum of the data of all attributes below each identity in each column.

the overall attribute distribution based on corpus analysis is presented, serving as the empirical foundation for the subsequent discussion. Upon this, the two distinctive new identities of Wuhan emerging from the analysis are delineated, thereby addressing the central research question of the study.

4.1 Overall distribution of attributes

City image alludes to the views, thoughts, and perceptions that people hold collectively toward a city (Kotler 1997), which are further exemplified by the considerable actions of local residents in this promotional video. Tables 2 and 3 provide a holistic view of the attribute distribution in the both verbal text and the visual design. In the sections below, *n* (number) stands for the raw volume of clauses/sections of film footage, and *p* (percentage) is shown when comparisons are necessary.

Firstly, in terms of text analysis, the most prominent contrast lies in the proportion of the implicit expressions (*n* = 113) and the explicit expressions (*n* = 20). An 85 % percentage of implicit expressions mirrors a culture-based principle within the Chinese context that being *Hanxu* (含蓄 ‘implicit’) conforms with the Chinese ideology of a collectivist group (Gao 1998).

Secondly, for implicit expressions, the eliciting condition makes up an average proportion of 70 % (*n* = 86), while resultant actions only constitute 30 % (*n* = 27). This uneven distribution of “doing” and “saying” aligns with the traditional Chinese value of *Xing Sheng Yu Yan* (行胜于言 ‘actions speak louder than words’), demonstrating China’s action philosophy of practicality, which has also been incorporated into the implementation of Chinese government policy (Z. Zhao et al. 2019).

Thirdly, concerning the visual analysis (see Table 3), the identity construction of the “heroic city” and the “reenergized city” demonstrate an opposite proportional distribution in character depiction and site design. Possibly due to different inherent properties, character depiction predominates in “heroic” attributes (originally human-specific), whereas those of “reenergized” such as “global city” and “international transportation hub” were originally non-human, in which case site design is preferred.

4.2 Wuhan as a heroic city

The dictionary definition of “heroic” is “relating to courageous people or the mythological or legendary figures of antiquity” (Merriam-Webster n.d.). When characterized as heroic, a city embodies a “brand’s personality” (Plummer 2000: 80). Wuhan’s set of human attributes are further examined in terms of cooperation and

solidarity, sacrifice and selflessness, openness and receptivity, and finally responsibility and capacity.

4.2.1 Cooperation and solidarity

For hard-hit Wuhan, unity was the first step to finding a way out. Cooperation refers to the collaborative acts performed by all-level personnel and departments, and solidarity pertains to the moral support beyond actions. The 93 % proportion of implicit expressions ($n = 28$) in Table 2 is mitigated by a relatively equal distribution of visual design, approximately half each in character depiction ($n = 67$) and site design ($n = 57$) (see Table 3). Cooperation is evident in dress codes, such as red volunteer undershirts, blue and white protective clothing, camouflage-patterned military uniforms, and varied codes of dress for medical personnel. Solidarity is typically demonstrated in group efforts (e.g., rescuing patients, maintaining traffic order, and delivering supplies) and intimate physical contact (e.g., holding hands, huddling, and hugging). For example, as Figure 2 shows, people in different forms of dress (analytical process) are picking, sorting, and carrying fresh vegetables (actional process) to ensure sufficient food provision for residents in home quarantine in Jiangxinyuan Community. The mutual help between “community workers” and “residents” forges an overall unity among citizens, which the film demonstrates and reinforces by use of the word “都” ‘all’ in Text 1.

Text 1: By ensuring daily supplies at stable prices, and delivery to the doorstep by community workers, Hubei provided **all** residents in home quarantine with fresh foods to meet their essential living needs.

‘保供稳价, 小区配送, 服务上门, 让所有居家隔离的人都能够吃到新鲜的食物, 全力保障基本生活不受影响。’ (3:52–3:57)

In addition, this attribute can be revealed from a social viewpoint through 33 sections of film footage depicting specialized site design in terms of healthcare (surgery operation), transport (delivery convoys), the public (home quarantine), etc. The city’s holistic vision is frequently delineated with long sections of footage showing everyday places ($n = 23$). As presented in Figure 3, in a residential community at night (everyday places), a spirit of co-encouragement to fellow Wuhan citizens is expressed through words, such as “Stay strong, Wuhan!” (see Text 2), voicing an integral sense of support. Capturing images of extensive group work develops Wuhan’s image as a city of solidarity with a sense of humanity.

Text 2: Stay strong, Wuhan!

‘武汉加油!’ (4:06–4:08)



Figure 2: Food delivery by volunteers (3:52).



Figure 3: A residential community at night. (4:08).

4.2.2 Sacrifice and selflessness

The attribute of sacrifice emphasizes the efforts from medical personnel and local citizens. This attribute is largely realized through 78 sections of film that meet the criteria of character depiction ($p = 82.1\%$) (see Table 3), in conformity with 6 eliciting condition utterances ($p = 75\%$) (see Table 2). For example, in Figure 4, all the medical personnel are wearing uniform protective clothing, goggles, and disposable gloves (analytical process) to “focus on treatment” (actional process) (see Text 3). Shown with

their backs to the audience, these people are hailed as “heroes in harm’s way” or “selfless heroes” (逆行者 *nǐ xíng yě* ‘one who goes against the flow,’ indicating someone who walks toward danger, rather than away from it, to save others), because they put their duty before their own lives and suffer hardship to battle the pandemic (Zhang and Barr 2021: 397). This also inscribes the urban imaginary of Wuhan with the same quality.

Text 3: Taking science-based and targeted measures with a **focus on treatment** and containment, Hubei implemented full-scale screening, access control in residential communities and management of public areas.

‘科学防治, 精准施策, 湖北紧紧围绕救治和阻隔, 全面实施筛查甄别, 小区封闭管理, 公共区域管控。’ (3:14–3:28)

Apart from this, local citizens in Wuhan are depicted obeying the “lock-down policy” to prevent the virus from further spreading, bearing the risk of falling victim in the hardest-hit area. Figure 5, depicting a male resident who is frowning, raising his clenched fists (analytical process), and making no eye-contact with the viewer, conveys a sense of detachment in the form of an “offering” image, using Halliday’s (1985) terminology. Providing a symbol of detachment, this resident delivers a refusal to involve others in the circumstance which Text 4 refers to as “the demon,” revealing the spirit of sacrifice and selflessness of ordinary people out of loyal fellowship. Thus, Wuhan is constructed as a city of this spirit, with all its citizens conducting deeds of sacrifice and selflessness as mentioned above.

Text 4: 我们把这个魔鬼关在我们自己家里, 因为门外头也是我们的兄弟。



Figure 4: Medical workers rushing in protective clothing (3:20).



Figure 5: A Wuhan citizen taking interviews indoors (1:08).

‘We lock the **demon** in our homes so that it won’t get to our brothers and sisters outside.’
(1:07–1:09)

4.2.3 Openness and receptivity

During the epidemic, Wuhan played a role in connecting China with the outside world. The attribute of openness and receptivity refers to Wuhan welcoming the material and manpower support from the international community amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

International assistance meant that medical materials and human resources were replenished in a timely manner. For example, the global community shows great care by “lend[ing] a helping hand” (attitudinal lexes) in Text 5, revealing Wuhan’s openness to the world. Also, as Figure 6 shows, the “people of Islamic Republic of Pakistan” call the Chinese people their “Chinese friends,” with the motivating words of “中国加油” ‘Stay strong, China’ expressly written in Chinese to demonstrate concern abroad. Additionally, a group of volunteers comprised of people of different skin colors (see Figure 7) raise their clenched fists and cross their arms in solidarity (analytical process) against a background composed of different national flags (specialized site), manifesting their commitment to win together with Wuhan in this fight.

Text 5: The international community **lends a helping hand**. 77 countries and 12 international organizations sent much-needed supplies. International friends and foreign students volunteered to join the battle against the virus.

‘国际社会纷纷**伸出援手**, 77个国家和12个国际组织雪中送炭, 在华外国友人, 留学生, 主动请战。’ (2:00–2:18)



Figure 6: Material supplies from Pakistan (2:08).



Figure 7: Manpower supplies by foreign students (2:15).

As observed in a collection of case studies in *City branding: theory and cases* (Dinnie 2011), a city slogan proves helpful in constituting an identity whose meaning is disseminated among people with a similar social background (e.g., history, class, and culture), and it influences social areas such as tourism, education, and city identity. Within the promotional video under examination here, people of all nations embrace the same situation under COVID-19, resulting in slogans of encouragement displayed in varying contexts such as on building facades, fundraising banners, decorative strips, etc. Slogans in different languages from all over the world (e.g., Tokyo, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Tehran, New York, Melbourne, etc.) repeat words saying



Figure 8: Outdoor slogans (3:08).

“武汉加油” (Come on, Wuhan) in the streets (everyday place), as Figure 8 shows, appearing in Chinese characters against a red backdrop to deliver “support,” “good wishes,” “love,” and “warmth,” and also in English for wider dissemination.

Text 6: Messages of **support and good wishes** came from all over the world, bringing **love and warmth**.

‘世界各地送上**支持与祝福**, 传递**爱心与温暖**。’ (3:04–3:10)

4.2.4 Responsibility and capacity

As a stakeholder of city branding, local government plays an essential role in Wuhan’s image construction in policy planning, implementation, and marketing (Braun 2011). During the pandemic, the Wuhan government played a pivotal role in allocating social labor and carrying out reaction plans.

Responsibility, largely reflected in implicit expressions, focused on the government’s high regard for people’s safety. Early on in the epidemic, Wuhan was in a state of uncertainty, with people’s lives at risk. The Wuhan government promised to “put the people and life above everything else” in Text 7 (resultant action), illustrating the top-down mentality of the Chinese government, i.e., placing the people’s well-being as the top priority (Chen 2009). In Figure 9, President Xi Jinping, as a representative of central government, is shown to the audience with other officials and soldiers behind him, against the backdrop of a press conference (specialized site). The conviction is delivered in Text 8 that the government is actively engaged in “an all-out people’s war” and is always there to protect the people, thereby reinforcing an image of the government’s sense of responsibility and progressively shaping the identity of the city.

Text 7: A novel coronavirus caught us all unprepared at the end of 2019. The Chinese government **puts the people and life² above everything else**. No cost is too high to protect people's lives.

‘2019年岁末,新冠肺炎疫情突如其来。**人民至上,生命至上**。为了保护人民生命安全,我们什么都可以豁得出来。(00:33–00:50)

Text 8: Under the personal command and direction of President Xi Jinping, the whole country was mobilized in **an all-out people's war** against the virus.

‘习近平主席亲自指挥,亲自部署,一场**举国动员的人民战争**,总体战,狙击战,全面打响。’(1:24–1:39)

Equally shown in implicit expressions, capacity refers to the high working efficiency of local government for policy implementation and personnel mobilization. Directly confronted with the COVID-19 outbreak, China's central government actualizes timely response strategies, most notably the “lock-down policy,” entailing mandatory isolation to prevent further inflection. Enacting this policy was, in fact, an experimental move but proved to be an effective one for controlling the spread within two months, and Wuhan is thereby viewed as a “model example” in epidemic control (Zhao and Chen 2020: 12). Explicit expressions only appear once when relating to



Figure 9: A mobilization speech delivered by President Xi Jinping (1:25).

² Here “life” is a fixed translation for “生命” in a Chinese political translation context.

government's capacity (see Table 2) yet offering the reader an integral assessment as “no mean feat (壮举)” (attitudinal lexes) in Text 9, a comment of recognition from Philippe Klein, a French doctor who personally joined the front line of the battle.

Text 9: China has been able to put the epidemic under control by outdoing itself to ensure a better future for its people. This is **no mean feat** given China's large population and vast territory.

‘中国超越自我，成功遏制疫情，让中国人民拥有更好的未来。这样的**壮举**在一个人口众多，幅员辽阔的国家实属不易。’ (2:19–2:37)

4.3 Wuhan as a reenergized city

After a transitional period of tackling and adjusting, Wuhan ushered in a new turnaround. Another “reenergized city” brand of positivity is constructed on Wuhan. A reenergized Wuhan regains public attention with restoration of work and normalization of life, advancing in fields of transportation and commerce.

4.3.1 Recovering as a healthy city

Maintaining health is a prerequisite for a city to make any advancement. Following Duhl's (1986) criteria, the health status of a city can be assessed by its capacity to provide basic needs, its modification capability, civil expectation, and the availability of education, all of which were able to be holistically achieved by restorative practices in Wuhan.

Firstly, the top priority which scientific control pursues is restoration of normalized life. For COVID-19 control, 25 sections of film containing pandemic-related activities were counted in total (see Table 3). Under epidemic prevention rules like temperature measurement, code scanning, and nucleic acid testing (actional process) in public places such as residential communities, airports, and railway stations (everyday places), the epidemic was effectively brought under control, providing the city with a population basis for future development in all aspects. As shown in Figure 10, a close-up section of footage of Wuhan's cherry blossoms (natural scenery) symbolizes “vitality returns to the city,” as stated in Text 10.

Text 10: As spring comes, **vitality returns to the city.**

‘大地春回，生机无限。’ (4:54–4:59)



Figure 10: Wuhan's cherry trees in full bloom (4:57).

Secondly, with depictions of everyday places constituting 62.9 % ($n = 51$) in the site design of a “healthy city” (see Table 3), the health status of Wuhan counts most in its capacity to meet civil expectation for accommodation, clothing, food, transportation, education, and entertainment, which is primarily presented through day-to-day activities (actional process) in everyday places (site design). As illustrated in Figure 11, a wide-angle view of people bustling across an open public space (actional process) is depicted against the background of a business district called “Big Hankou” (everyday place), conveying the transformation from static epidemic stagnation to normal dynamic life.

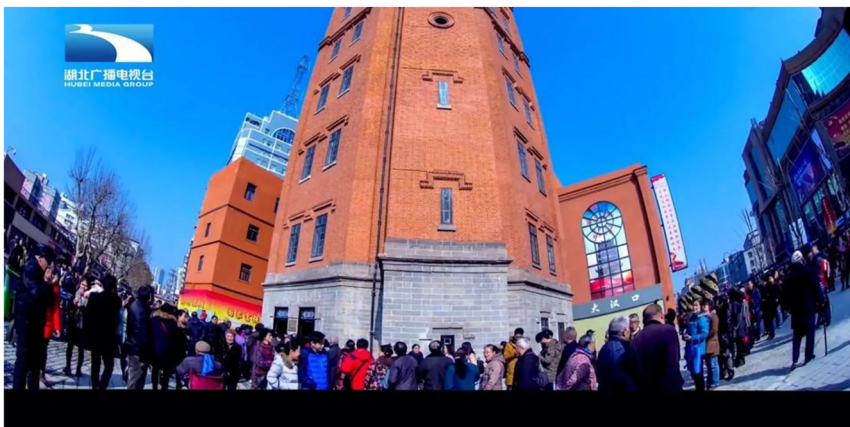


Figure 11: Bustling streets crowded with pedestrians (6:08).

Moreover, for a tight connection between economic rise and employment growth within a city (Hu 2004), promotion of employment is the key to economic recovery. Unemployment due to the lock-down is being reduced with the resumption of work and production. The Wuhan government helped the unemployed “return to [their] jobs” by implementing favorable policies (see Text 11). When people’s daily life is largely restored to a normal state, this reestablishes the city’s healthy image. In Figure 12, a man at the foreground is wearing a chef’s uniform and hat (analytical process) and is surrounded by staff, tables, and customers (everyday place), demonstrating that more restaurant staff had been “added” after the pandemic (see Text 12).

Text 11: 让大家更健康地, 平安地回到自己的工作岗位上。

‘We will make sure that you can **return to your jobs** safe and sound.’ (5:45–5:49)

Text 12: 今天我们上班的厨师又增加了两个。

‘We **added** two more chefs to today’s shift.’ (6:13–6:14)

4.3.2 Positioning as a global city

Putting a city in a well-defined position is an intermediate step of city branding (Kavaratzis 2004). Titling as a “global city” is a common choice in city branding amid the inevitable trend toward globalization (Lim 2020). Thus, after resumption of work



Figure 12: A reopened restaurant crowded with reemployed staff and customers (6:14).

life, Wuhan was branded with attributes such as “international transportation hub” and “world-class business agglomeration center” in an effort to enhance its global image.

4.3.2.1 An international transportation hub

Firstly, a favorable transport system constitutes a key prerequisite for regional economic growth in order to feasibility realize city development (Cidell 2006). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, Wuhan has served as an international transport hub with a mixed transport system by sea, land, and air, all of which have been fully developed to enhance global transport capacity (see text 13). Taking water transportation as an example, the Han River – the major tributary of the Yangtze River passing through Wuhan – has assumed a major role for its multilateral linkage with other nations. In Figure 13, a cargo ship of the Chinese shipping company “COSCO Shipping Lines (中远海运)” bearing the identity-signifier “CHINA SHIPPING (中国海运)” advances through the water, which resonates with “逆势” ‘despite global turndown’ in Text 14 and marking Wuhan’s rise from the unfavorable circumstance under the epidemic.

Text 13: With 9 high-speed railway lines, 70% of Chinese cities can be reached from Wuhan under four hours. The city is also linked to 28 countries by the Yangtze River waterways and connected to the world by 64 international and regional air routes.

‘九条高铁4小时可达70%的中国城市，长江水路直通28个国家，64条国际和地区航线连接全球。’ (7:18–7:22)



Figure 13: Foreign trade using water transportation (6:26).

Text 14: Hubei's GDP in 2020 recovered to 95% of the previous year. Foreign trade increased despite global turndown.

‘2020年湖北完成上半年GDP的95.6%，外贸进出口**逆势**增长。’ (6:17–6:27)

4.3.2.2 A world-class business agglomeration center

Meanwhile, another attribute of being “global” demands post-pandemic Wuhan to achieve a fair degree of integration, reflecting city agglomeration at a country level or business agglomeration at a city level (De Jong et al. 2018: 536). Subsequently, together with its upgraded transport system, Wuhan emerges as a business agglomeration center with sci-tech innovations and a business-friendly environment. For one thing, city branding acts as a strategy to motivate talent attraction and investment assets (Dinnie 2011), fostering the construction of a “creative city.” A “creative center” is shaped by the founding of research and development bases, attracting “creative classes” (high-educated talent) and exerting a strong radiating effect on neighboring cities (Florida 2003). As depicted in Figure 14, the new-model Hubei Laboratory and Optics Valley Science and Technology Corridor traverses such cities as Ezhou, Huangshi, and Huanggang, with the core functions concentrated in Wuhan. This corridor constitutes an economic zone specializing in innovation and appealing to talent from “higher learning institutions” (see Text 15).

Text 15: Today's Hubei is boosting innovation through institutional reform. The new-model Hubei Laboratory and Optics Valley Science and Technology Corridor with the East Lake Science City as its central layer are making all-round progress. The province is home to 129 **higher learning institutions**, 29 national key laboratories, over 3,600 research institutions and 10,000 plus high-tech companies.

‘今天的湖北，制度变革激发创新活力。全新模式的湖北实验室，以东湖科学城为核心区的光谷科创大走廊建设立体推进。129所**高等院校**，29个国家重点实验室，3600多家科研机构，1万多家高新技术企业共同发力。’ (8:10–8:24)

Additionally, given a favorable technical basis, an optimal business environment is a key factor in attracting foreign investors (Snieska and Zykiene 2015). To strengthen Wuhan's pro-business image, government initiatives play a crucial role in endowing Wuhan with the attributes of a “world-class business environment” (see Text 16). In regard to promoting Wuhan outwardly as an investment destination, business activities, notably trade fairs (specialized site), are frequently mentioned in 55 sections of film (see Table 3). In Figure 15, a conference named “Hubei 2021 Cherry Blossom Viewing: Business Cooperation and Fortune 500 Dialogue with Hubei” was held in Wuhan, functioning as a two-way channel for high-quality companies abroad to witness Wuhan's economic viability. In a supportive business context, positive

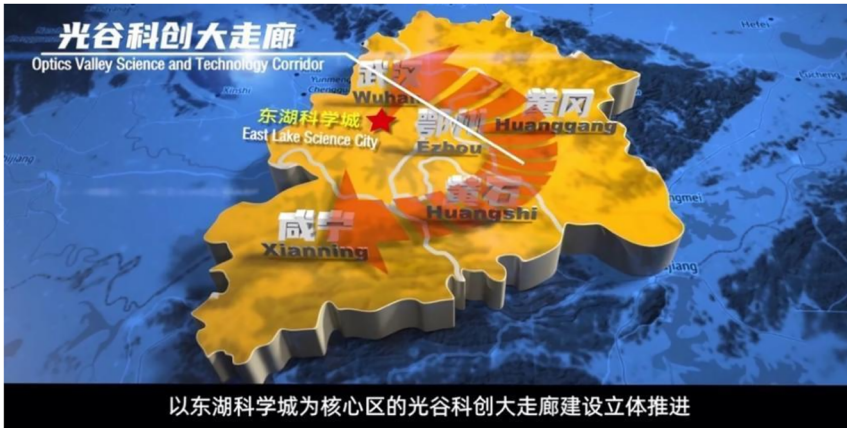


Figure 14: A map of scientific and technological agglomeration centered in Wuhan (8:10).

outcomes including new investments and settlements have taken place in Wuhan, rebuilding its city image as a world-class business agglomeration center.

Text 16: Hubei is fostering a **world-class business environment**. Putting firms' needs first, the government sees itself as a **service provider**, always ready to help but not interfere.

‘今天的湖北，营商环境对标国际一流。以企业评价为第一评价，政府当好服务企业的“店小二”，有求必应，无事不扰。’ (8:28–8:41)



Figure 15: A business conference held in Wuhan (8:33).

5 Contextual consideration

All the discussions above present a new Wuhan with a dual identity of both “heroic” and “reenergized” to the audience. Beneath this image construction, cultural elements serve as the decisive trigger. In this section, why these two identities were constructed in the post-pandemic context is answered from three perspectives, i.e., the drive for urban recovery, transmission of a Chinese ethos, and confrontation of stigmatization against China.

5.1 The drive for urban recovery

Typically, city brands are assumed to be tightly correlated with urban planning in the cities’ “goals and objectives” (Bonakdar and Audirac 2020: 150). For post-pandemic Wuhan, boosting urban recovery was the primary task, which could be accelerated via positive city brands.

The “heroic” brand distinguished Wuhan as a “*wanghong* (网红) city,” a term referring to a metropolis that achieves viral popularity and cultural prominence through distinct social events or phenomena. This “heroic” feature carried both region-bound and epidemic-related cultural attributes, which were increasingly valued indicators for potential investors (Vanolo 2008). Together with Wuhan’s local tourist attractions shown in the promotional video (e.g., Hankou Customs House, Heptachord Terrace, Site of the 1911 Revolution, China–Russia Ten-thousand-mile Tea Road, Wuhan Yangtze River Bridge, Yellow Crane Tower), a newly-branded heroic Wuhan would be more capable of drawing flows of visitors to “check in” (打卡).

Additionally, the “reenergized” brand matched well with China’s national development strategies for boosting Wuhan in previous two decades (e.g., the Belt and Road Initiative, the Yangtze River Economic Belt, Strategy for the Rise of Central China, eComprehensive Innovation Reform Pilot Zone). In 2002, the concept of the Wuhan Metropolitan Area was proposed, with Wuhan as the hub and embracing eight nearby cities (i.e., Huangshi, Ezhou, Xiaogan, Huanggang, Xianning, Xiantao, Tianmen, and Qianjiang) to form a city cluster. Likewise, Wuhan acts as a core area in terms of science innovation and transportation, radiating its revitalization to surrounding cities within Hubei Province in the wake of the epidemic. Given its strategic position during the epidemic and its geographic location in central China, Wuhan’s urban recovery had a significant influence on how quickly Hubei Province and the whole nation would recover generally.

5.2 Transmission of Chinese ethos

As culture enables “the privatization of public areas” and is a “powerful means of controlling cities” (Zukin 1996: 1), it is culture that provides the impetus and direction in city identity construction. Chinese traditional culture offers a predestined context for the connotation of the newly-constructed Wuhan, particularly in terms of its selection of brands.

If being “global” means following the trend of internalization, then the “heroic” label is a novel brand for localization. For Wuhan, the “heroic” brand has its own historical ground. For example, the Wuchang Uprising (which began in the subordinate district of Wuhan in 1911), which led to the overthrow of the Qing government, was the first and most important step in creating New China. During the War of Resistance against Japan, Wuhan became the battle center and was dubbed “the Madrid of China.” Therefore, there has never been a lack of heroic deeds in Wuhan. In the current globalized context, Wuhan’s well-established heroic temperament needs to be extracted and amplified to achieve an impressive outcome.

Similarly, the national spirit of *Zi Qiang Bu Xi* (自强不息 ‘constantly striving to strengthen oneself’) has driven Wuhan to be built as “reenergized” in the face of adversity. In historic terms, Hanyang Iron Factory (located in a district of Wuhan), founded in 1890 as the first state-owned steel enterprise in Modern China, was dubbed “the cradle of China’s iron and steel industry.” Later in 1958, China’s liquid iron was first produced by the Wuhan Iron and Steel (Group) Company (currently a subsidiary of China Baowu Steel Group Corporation Limited), marking a major industrial advance in New China. Currently, post-epidemic Wuhan is shifting its focus from “the City of Iron” to “China’s Optics Valley,” sustaining the spirit of ongoing self-breakthrough in scientific innovation.

5.3 A combat to stigmatization against China

Goffman (2009: 12) defines stigma as a kind of “spoiled identity” diminishing the social standing and public perception of the stigmatized object (people, event, place, city, nation). During the pandemic, stigmatization against Wuhan raised an underlying risk of causing public terror, psychological distress (Zhou 2022), and racial attacks (Koller et al. 2021). Moreover, stigmatization of Wuhan damaged China’s (national) image, raising this stigmatization from moral condemnation to a political issue (Cho et al. 2020). In order to defend China’s national identity and convey the true Chinese philosophy, the Chinese government adopted city branding as a response approach to combat stigmatization associated with the outbreak of the

pandemic (exemplified in labels such as “Wuhan virus,” “Chinese plague,” “rich man’s disease”) (Adiukwu et al. 2020: 571).

Through a city promotional video, the Chinese government displayed to the world what the situation had been like in reality and how “heroic” and “reenergized” Wuhan had become. The promotional video depicts the intertwined nature of the doctor–patient relationship and the tight collaboration among citizens. It focuses people’s attention on nation-wide solidarity, presenting a positive national image as opposed to stigmatization. After presenting an overview of the status quo, the video constructed Wuhan as a city of openness and receptivity, creating connection between China and the global community, and obtaining recognition for China’s efforts. Additionally, through the combined efforts of the people and the government, Wuhan gradually regained its status as a healthy, well-developed city, with advancements being made in transport, industry development, and business investments. All of these actions universally construct the image of a city of heroism and revival. The city’s branding as “heroic” and “reenergized” was largely able to mitigate the stigmatization of Wuhan and, by extension, of China.

6 Conclusions

From a theoretical standpoint, this study refines the multimodal identity construction framework by integrating site design as a crucial semiotic resource. This refinement provides a more fine-grained approach to analyzing how the materiality of semiotic entities (i.e., the spatial arrangement and compositional choices of semiotic resources in digital media) actively participates in the process of identity construction, thereby advancing the methodological tools for multimodal discourse analysis. Specifically, the identification of Wuhan’s dual identity (“heroic” and “reenergized”) demonstrates how multiple city identities are semiotically constructed and integrated within a single branding discourse. This work contributes to a broader semiotic inquiry by illustrating the dynamic power of multimodal semiotics in constructing a coherent collective identity and managing public perception in a post-crisis environment.

In a globalized era, excavating a city’s unique identity is the key to effective city branding practices. For Wuhan, its city brands have strong cultural associations that are jointly endorsed by local administration, residents, and investors. This study highlights cultural factors as a starting point and hopes to inspire extensive research into other cultural aspects or through other social media channels – including, for instance, newspapers, advocacy banners, TV ads, and music videos – in an effort to examine varied semiotic materials.

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