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# Brand identity construction through the heritage of Chinese destination logos

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**Abstract:** This research investigates how multimodality is applied in logos to build a heritage brand identity for Chinese destinations. As a historical country, China is known for its huge reserves of cultural and natural heritage, which ideally offers abundant resources for developing its tourism industry. These can be taken advantage of in branding its destinations. Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar was adopted in this study to conduct a qualitative analysis of the images and words of destination logos collected from 34 provincial-level administrative regions in China. The findings indicate that pictorial and written elements are skillfully used in the logos through the manifestation of heritage, capturing features that convey significant connotations to promote a positive brand identity of the Chinese destinations. This research adds to the existing literature on destination branding through heritage commodification by embodying evocative multimodal features in destination logos, as well as promoting the semiotic approach as an effective tool in constructing the heritage brand identity of Chinese destinations.

**Keywords:** heritage; destination logos; visual identity; semiotics; branding

## 1 Introduction

Branding assumes supreme significance in developing a marketing plan for goods or services. The essential criteria to assess a successful branding activity rest in the recognizability of its brand. A well-known brand features a coherent and distinguishable brand identity. Brand identity is projected by organizations to promote themselves and exert positive impacts on viewers. Specifically, brand identity comprises a brand's core values, positioning and personality that are consistently presented to consumers for a favorable reputation (Harris and de Chernatony 2001). Hence, brand identity is crucial in distinguishing a product or service in the marketplace.

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Destinations can be branded in a similar way to products and services, such as through the creation of attractive logos to signify the respective destinations. Barisic and Blazevic (2014) asserted the significance of a visual identity for successful destination branding, in which the logo is a dominating element in marketing campaigns. Many studies underscore the essential role of logos in destination marketing, such as the indication of the logos' contribution to recognizing destinations (Wilson 2021), raising destination awareness (Tsaur et al. 2020), establishing destination identity (Li and Ma 2023), and fostering intent to visit destinations (Roy and Attri 2022).

The logo is one of the semiotic languages that are pervasively used in destination promotion. In the extensive mainstream scholarly works, semiotic language refers to verbal, visual, written, and audio resources or the ensembles of any of them, that contribute to communication by making meaning (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). In research carried out previously, logos are often considered a type of semiotic language because they comprise graphics, texts, or a combination of these two resources, for communicating meaning (Joshi 2018). These semiotic resources create meanings by performing particular actions, such as symbolic processes, in communication processes, which are called semiotic acts (Sonesson 2014). The symbolic process is a kind of action in which pictorial and verbal resources are used to express symbolic meaning (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). In this research, destination logos convey specific meanings through semiotic acts such as symbolic processes, to represent conceptual meanings using semiotic resources like graphic elements, Chinese character names and slogans as well as English letter names and slogans contained within this semiotic language. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) proposed the Visual Grammar framework for comprehending meanings created by semiotic languages in multimodal modalities within specific social, historical and cultural contexts, which is adopted in the present study for analyzing semiotic languages of tourism. Semiotic languages in tourism communication concern the use of words, signs, and images to create meaning in the tourism context (Tresidder 2011). This touristic language employs visuals and signs to introduce and promote destinations and delineate tourist experiences anticipated by potential tourists (Naghizadeh 2021). Much research has highlighted semiotic languages' function in describing attractions (Nofiyanti et al. 2018), representing tourist elements (Ansori and Taopan 2019), promoting tourism (Kristina 2018), affecting place identity (Zou et al. 2023), and understanding and constructing destination images (Matlovičová et al. 2019; Qi and Sorokina 2021). From these studies, it can be inferred that semiotic language plays an important role in tourism communication. Tourism is an industry that sells intangible products, which requires the correct use of markers to define these products. Based on the proper representation of products through semiotic language, destinations can create their respective brand identity,

which assists prospective tourists when choosing a destination they intend to visit. This study, therefore, applies Visual Grammar to explore the elements of semiotic languages that can benefit the creation of destination identity through logos to achieve a positive branding effect.

Destination branding is an interdisciplinary domain which relates to marketing, media, politics, economy, and culture. Long-term dissemination of tourism information via print and digital media such as travel brochures (Guedes and Jiménez 2016), tourism websites (Malenkina and Ivanov 2018), promotional videos (Wang and Zhang 2019) and other social media aids the spreading of destination brands and keep their consistency. Tourism authorities make selective investments and policies to engage in the process of destination branding. They initiate thematic campaigns to promote specific goods and services offered by tourist destinations. Social media also improves the success of destination commercializing campaigns and strengthens connections between tourists and brands. Tourists travel to destinations in quest of tangible and intangible heritage assets, like the food, history, architecture, and culture of the place.

Heritage tourism is currently gaining momentum with cultural tourism being a newly competitive niche market within the domestic and global tourism industry (Guedes and Jiménez 2016). Authentic and distinctive heritage elements are the primary guarantees for enhancing and differentiating tourists' experiences. These elements are made to good use to portray a distinct heritage tourism brand identity. With the gradual recognition of the heritage's contribution to the development of destinations, major initiatives including food, music and other cultural festivals are formed for commodifying heritage tourism destinations (Pirnar et al. 2019; Yang et al. 2020b). Nevertheless, there is still a dearth of analysis of branding destinations via destination logos from the heritage perspective.

Due to its abundance of scenic areas and cultural richness, China is regarded as one of the most alluring heritage tourist destinations in the world (Yang et al. 2010). As an ancient country with a long history, China has rich reserves of natural and cultural heritage, which have also been taken advantage of as tourism resources for tourism development. When branding a destination, substantial caution should be exercised in presenting the social, historical, and cultural features of destinations. Failure to highlight the typical destination features may lead to homogeneity of destinations. On the contrary, appropriate employment of destination features can establish a distinctive and appealing identity and, as a result, help distinguish a destination from its competitors. Chinese destinations need to form their identities through the use of heritage features to present their extraordinary characteristics and values. It is critical for them to achieve this purpose via the inventive application of multimodal elements in creating their destination logos. There are 34 provinces in China that have applied unique and customized logos as a branding strategy

to construct a positive brand identity of the destinations. Heritage elements are pervasively adopted in these logos to commercialize and promote such heritage-oriented destinations. Therefore, through a semiotic lens, this study investigates how pictorial and written elements are skillfully applied in 34 provincial-level destination logos in China to incorporate heritage elements into the logos, capturing multimodal features that convey the heritage connotations in promoting a positive brand identity of Chinese destinations.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Destination and branding

Destinations are regarded by tourists as places where they travel for leisure, with or without a clear purpose and plan, based on personal interests (Pearce and Schänzel 2013). They can also be identified as geographical areas that offer a variety of local goods, services, and experiences (Buhalis 2000). All over the world, with around two hundred nations vying for tourists' attention and expenditure, the destination market is extremely competitive. Under the circumstance that countries endeavor to attract tourists globally through the marketization of their destinations, homogeneity is a problem which is encountered by many destinations. To cope with competition and to differentiate themselves from many homogenous places, destinations need to adopt a more effective marketing strategy to promote themselves. Hence, the concept of destination branding is rising in the tourism industry.

Destination branding is about conveying the unique features of a destination to distinguish it from other competitors and provide tourist consumption values (Gnoth 2007). In addition, destination branding can establish a distinctive image to attract tourists, which allows the development and promotion of the offering of a specific place and its tourism. Due to the increasing number of destinations attempting to draw tourists in order to boost their economies, consumers are inundated with options that can be readily replaced. Effective branding ensures benefits for the destination because it enables the customer to associate the essential features with the destination, allowing the tourists' decision-making process easier (Pike 2012), enhances brand awareness in tourists' minds, and helps gain a market share. Given the importance of branding to destinations, destinations are now keen to gain a competitive edge by building a credible, distinctive, and appealing brand to bring in visitors and investment, thereby promoting economic growth and prosperity.

Destination branding is a field with an interdisciplinary nature. It is a process of applying marketing strategies to develop a place's economy, socio-politics, and

cultures. It may involve business, policy-making, media and communication, marketing and tourism. Media are important in communicating a destination's brand to the public, both traditionally and digitally. Travel brochures can realize the ideological constructs of destination images through lexical reiterations and richer semantic structures (Guedes and Jiménez 2016). Official tourism websites use persuasive linguistic strategies for marketing destinations (Malenkina and Ivanov 2018). Publicity films helped different cities convey their distinctive promotional values in order to commercialize them (Wang and Zhang 2019). Social media is increasingly influencing the representation of destinations on different platforms. It is beneficial to deliver a consistent destination brand to the general public.

On the other hand, destination branding engages multiple stakeholders, whose outcomes depend largely on government, a process with a discerning political sense. Tourism authorities exert their impact on the industry with destination branding by making policies and investing capital in branding efforts. An example is Tamworth, a town in Australia, which built a successful image as a country music capital with the help of funding and politics (Gibson and Davidson 2004). Governments also launched specific campaigns to brand destinations, like sports and food festivals. Korea has successfully initiated a food campaign called Global Hansik to promote its cuisine as a selling point to draw tourists to the country (Williams et al. 2014). In addition, the holding of the Summer Olympic Games improved the destination image and brought tremendous economic benefits to the respective countries' local tourism industry (Ferreira et al. 2018). Except for efforts in official policies and campaigns, using heritage for marketing destinations is another approach, which may include culture, tradition, conventions, and creative industries.

The value and importance of heritage have now been recognized by governments in their efforts on redeveloping destinations. Heritage is significant for promoting cultural values and constructing the identity of destinations. Associating heritage branding with destination branding is not only a way of inheriting, regenerating and developing heritage, but can also bring considerable benefits in generating economic and cultural values. The difficulty lies in how to appropriately align one's heritage with the destination identity. For example, South Africa has achieved a competitive edge in the international tourism industry by harnessing brand management skills to link historical and political backdrops to specific geographical areas, consequently, fostering the growth of heritage tourism (Guedes and Jiménez 2016). A study on Iran's heritage destinations has revealed the inter-relatedness between heritage image and destination brand (Saeedi and Hanzae 2018). However, there is a lack of inroads of branding destinations through heritage elements in logos for identity construction in those previous studies related to heritage tourism branding. Hence, this study examines the adoption of heritage in

logos as a branding strategy for constructing a destination's brand identity through a semiotic approach.

## 2.2 Destination logos: a semiotic language of tourism

Semiotics was originally proposed by Saussure as the study of signs in society, which involves the investigation of laws that govern signs and their nature (De Saussure 1974). Halliday (1978) extended Saussure's foundational ideas by introducing social semiotics into linguistics. Social semiotics widens linguistics' restricted focus on written language by investigating how the codes of language and communication are shaped through the social process (Halliday 1978). Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) further expanded Halliday's insights by developing the Visual Grammar framework to explain how semiotic languages function in visual communication. The Visual Grammar framework is a multimodal discourse analysis approach to describing rules of visual communication regarding representational, interactive, and compositional meanings conveyed by semiotic languages. Specifically, representational meaning represents the ideas about the world through narrative representations and conceptual representations; interactive meaning describes relations between viewers, producers, and represented participants through contact, distance, perspective, and modality; compositional meaning explains how texts are produced by placing elements into a coherent and ordered whole through integration codes: information value, framing, and salience (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). As the actors that perform meaning-making acts to realize these meanings, semiotic languages refer to a single or any ensemble of resources in verbal, visual, written, and audio modes for communication (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). Certain acts performed by these semiotic resources to create meanings in a communication process are called semiotic acts (Sonesson 2014). According to Halliday (1994), languages are a network of systems or interrelated sets of choices for making meaning. Any act of meaning-creating involves choices available in any semiotic language (Halliday 1994). This study draws on Visual Grammar as a descriptive tool to provide a systemic account of the available semiotic options made for the communication of compositional and representational meanings of destination logos as well as the construction of the visual identity of destinations in tourism promotion.

Semiotics has been utilized in tourism marketing, for defining and promoting destinations, or for describing the experience desired by tourists (Naghizadeh 2021). Semiotic languages of tourism refer to the employment of words, signs, and images in the tourism context (Tresidder 2011). In tourism promotion, semiotic languages function as a sign system to construct, define, and convey particular travel experiences, which are expressed both verbally and visually (Dann 1996). Nofiyanti et al.

(2018) pointed out that verbal semiotic language in novels with a tourism background describes attractions and invites readers to imagine places depicted in the story and thus can be used for tourism promotion. Ansori and Taopan (2019) further claimed that verbal and visual semiotic languages construe meanings in promotional videos. They found that verbal semiotic languages contribute to promoting tourism and persuading tourists to visit destinations via ideational construction, while visual semiotic languages enable the realization of the representation of tourist elements like local people, culture or the natural beauty of places (Ansori and Taopan 2019). In addition, Kristina (2018) disclosed that verbal and visual semiotic languages set up a complementary semiotic system in online tourism promotional discourse to enhance the promotional function. The above studies have expounded that semiotic language in both verbal and visual modes functions in creating meaning potentials for tourism communication through different ways of construction. Nevertheless, these studies are devoid of delving into meaningful connotations behind semiotic languages which are “wider meanings that are dependent on certain cultural associations” (Stevenson 1995: 41). Useful connotations conveyed by semiotic languages make them meaningful rather than empty icons. Thus, it is significant to interpret the semiotic language of tourism in order to understand its connotations and use it appropriately in transferring messages to potential tourists. When interpreting texts, semiotics, both as a theory and a methodology, permits systematic analysis and interpretation of messages encoded in sign systems (Dunleavy 2020). Semiotics nudges a professional examination of how signs form meaning aesthetically, culturally, spiritually, and socially (Dunleavy 2020). In tourism promotion, Dann (1996) identified semiotics as the most suitable approach for analyzing tourism advertisements with culturally embedded connotations. The present research involves the interpretation of cultural connotations of heritage contained in destination logos as a semiotic language for tourism promotion. As Paraskevaidis and Weidenfeld (2021) declared, the underlying meaning of heritage attractions as signs can be identified through semiotics. The selection and arrangement of heritage elements are representative practices that serve a semiotic purpose influenced by the underlying social background (Zou et al. 2022). Hence, semiotics is employed in this study to provide an interpretation of cultural connotations embedded in the heritage of these logos within the given context.

The semiotics of tourism is regarded as one of the main branches of tourism studies (Crick 1989). As claimed by Barthes (1967: 41), “Once society exists, every usage is converted into a sign of this usage.” The pervasiveness of semiotics is also a typical practice in the tourism industry. Tourism is a heavily semiotic-reliant sector dedicated to creating, commercializing, and representing cultures and cultural diversity (Irimiea 2018). On the one hand, the tourism sector creates signs with specific cultural representations that tourists are interested in searching for. Places

with unique attributes are likely to become the destinations that tourists intend to visit. Since heritage elements of respective regions are mostly one-of-a-kind, their icons can be used to effectively represent a region and draw tourists (Alvarado-Sizzo 2023). Zou et al. (2023), in their research on the influence of tourists' perceptions of heritage on place identity, found that official symbolic narratives for historical, traditional, or regional significant heritage should be provided to satiate tourists' need for symbolic meaning and establish tourist loyalty to destinations. On the other hand, symbols designed by tourism practitioners reflect cultures and landscapes that can be read and interpreted by tourists (Culler 2007). Matlovičová et al.'s (2019) study showed that potential recipients understand the city brand image of Prague by deciphering the language of symbols. Furthermore, Qi and Sorokina's (2021) research on the official Beijing tourism website indicated that semiotic resources can be used to construct online city destination images. These studies have revealed the touristic value of semiotic languages in affecting place identity, understanding and constructing destination images. Nonetheless, more research needs to be carried out concerning the exploration of the touristic value of semiotic languages in building visual identity through destination logos.

Among the semiotic languages used to represent tourist destinations, a significant one is destination logos. The logos typically show what the destination has to offer travelers and convey information about the destination's history, tales, and people. Potential tourists can get a brief idea about a destination through its logo before they decide on taking a trip. Effective visual stimuli employed in destination logos can resonate with the audience and exert an impact on them, such as developing a favorable attitude towards a place (Roy and Attri 2022). Destination logos function as a critical impetus in accelerating marketing activities by increasing familiarity, recognition and visit intentions (Wilson 2021). A successful logo can evoke awareness of a destination and deliver the destination's features (Tsauro et al. 2020), thus helping generate destination identity and image (Li and Ma 2023). Destination logos contain essential multimodal elements for presenting tourism offered by the destinations, as well as conveying connotations for brand identity and image formation. Séraphin et al.'s (2016) research has indicated that the right choice of colors in logos can improve the image of a post-colonial, post-conflict, and post-disaster destination in marketing, reversing the uncertainty and insecurity impression of a destination in tourists' minds. Similarly, He et al.'s (2024) study has revealed that lightened logos foster a better evaluation of the destination by potential tourists, thereby the destination image could be improved through the adjustment of logo lightness. Against the background of globalization, some cities try to brand themselves through letter-based city logos to represent a powerful and distinctive identity of cities, so that they can benefit the global audience's needs (Järlehed 2021).



Nonetheless, it has been confirmed that visual devices in logos are useful constructs in destination branding (Joshi 2018).

## 2.3 Visual identity (VI)

Visual identity (VI) includes all of the symbols and graphics that convey the core of an organization (Alessandri et al. 2006). Specifically, VI covers components like logos, names, slogans, color, and typography. VI rarely appears by itself; instead, it is often seen alongside brands, corporations, or organizations. When connected with brands, it is called visual brand identity (VBI). Used as a synonymous term for VI, a primary idea of VBI is the overall visual style that distinguishes the brand (Phillips et al. 2014). An effective VI is linked to consistency and authenticity, which ensures better identification, quicker recall, and a stronger reputation (Gregersen and Johansen 2022). A consistent VI can boost sales, customer goodwill, consumers' familiarity and awareness, market share, and receptivity. An authentic VI is believed to convey a realistic image of the destination. Accordingly, destinations are encouraged to make significant investments in enhancing their VI.

Because the VI of tourist destinations is currently underexplored (Barisic and Blazevic 2014), the present research extends the study of VI to the destination context. Due to the rising rivalry for a market share among destinations on the global market, VI, as part of brand identity, is a crucial element in how a destination presents itself while attempting to get market recognition. It affects tourists' perception of a destination in that tourists rely more on VI than on the actual attributes of the destination before they pay a real visit to the destination. The content and format of VI are pivotal in the brand identity construction that strives to be produced in the minds of potential tourists (Tasci and Gartner 2007). As one of the most effective and common forms for building VI, logos assume a key role in creating a VI for branding a destination. The logo, together with typography and colors, constitutes the graphic part of VI for constructing a solid and lucid destination VI. Therefore, Chinese destinations create their VBIs by using distinctive visual elements in their logos.

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Data collection

Considering the essential role of developing the local economy, the tourism industry is highly valued by the local government. Government agencies invest a large amount of budget in destination branding and logo design to obtain a competitive

edge and market share. Each province in China now has its destination logo and they have evolved into a useful branding tool for local development. As an ancient country with a long history, China has profound cultural deposits and possesses a rich tangible and intangible, natural and cultural heritage. These heritages have been transformed into resources for the development of tourism, and they have also been reflected in the design of tourism logos. In order to explore how the Chinese destination logos use their respective heritage elements to brand themselves, we selected 34 provincial tourism logos in China as the main analytical corpus to discern their performance in constructing the destination's visual identity.

The investigated destination logos were collected from official tourism promotional videos on the internet, namely the official tourism webpages, and their officially authorized promotional social media. The internet is currently a popular channel for presenting destinations and logos as ways of communicating their brand identity. Digital technology has turned the cyber world into a boundaryless showcase of destination logos. Not only the internet and websites have become utilitarian tools for communicating destination logos, but social media such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and Microblog also offer a global stage for showcasing these logos. The official homepages of tourist destinations assume the role of presenting an authentic image of the destinations. Meanwhile, social media serves as a platform for sharing and accessing destination logos through uploaded promotional videos or images. Thus, the destination logos of the 34 provincial-level regions presented on officially endorsed online tourism promotional videos, homepages, and social media were collected as the corpus for this study.

### 3.2 Data analysis

In tourism research, there is an apparent growing trend of studies in visual data over the past decades. Currently, language is no longer the exclusive medium of expressing meanings in this advanced technology-bombarded age (Halliday 1994). Other visual resources, such as videos, pictures, shapes, colors, and multimedia production are also used to achieve the intended communicative purpose in social communication (Mitchell 2011). With the advent of multimedia, discourses are more multimodal rather than monomodal today. Practically, almost all discourses are multimodal now in the sense that there is a trend for realizing meaning production through a variety of semiotic systems (Baldry and Thibault 2005). Multimodal discourse integrates different semiotic resources to form an organized and complex whole (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001). As the pivot of brand identity, logos are composed of visual or typographic components, including attractive graphics or styled lettering, for creating their idiosyncratic and charming images (Foroudi 2019).

This suggests that logos also fall into the category of multimodal discourse. For analyzing multimodal discourses such as logos, various symbolic mediums should be considered for interpreting their meaning construction. Traditional discourse analysis methods that solely focus on textual data are inadequate for analyzing multimodal discourse. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) *Visual Grammar* is a social semiotic approach proposed for multimodal discourse analysis, which gives detailed attention to describing and explaining regularity and order in visual communication, thus adopted in this study to analyze logos from a social semiotic perspective. Multimodal discourse analysis looks into how different modalities are used to generate meaning within a social context. It gets through the limitation of linguistic analysis and promotes the natural fusion of traditional and monolingual modalities of communication with layouts, colors, fonts, and other visual cues (O'Halloran 2006). Since the symbolic meaning associated with destination logos is conveyed via complex semiotic resources, this study conducts a comprehensive multimodal analysis of the destination logo designs. The fundamental ideas of social semiotics, which emphasize the aspects of signification, connotation, and historical and cultural contexts (Aiello 2006), serve as the foundation of the analytical approach. Destination logos are designed in different colors and distinctive patterns. Some of them include names to identify the place and slogans to state the place's selling point. These different signs work together toward the symbolic branding of destinations. The brand identity of destination logos involves an ensemble of these signs to form a holistic whole. From a social semiotic perspective, the symbolic value of destination logos is the outcome of an intricate signifying process and should be interpreted not only on the textual level, but also on the basis of a systematic multimodal discourse analysis in a broader social context.

A logo consists of two aspects: form and content (Wu and Cheong 2021). Form is concerned with how these elements are designed, arranged, and combined to express themselves; content is about what the different elements represent and the concepts that are intended to be conveyed. In order to analyze logos' form and content comprehensively, *Visual Grammar* (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006) is adopted in this study. The two key concepts in *Visual Grammar* are namely, compositional meaning and representational meaning, which are applied to conduct a detailed interpretation of the destination logos' form and content accordingly. Compositional meaning addresses the arrangement of the visual information, and therefore is applied to analyze the arrangement of visual components in destination logos (i.e., form). Representational meaning is delivered by the represented participants to describe almost all semiotic acts on the portrayal of the sensory world, thus is used for analyzing how brand identity is constructed through visual participants in the destination logos (i.e., content). The analytical process consists of two stages: 1) compositional elements of destination logos are identified to clarify the logos'

arrangement and functions of the constituents; 2) conceptual representations of these components are further explored to see how specific brand identity is produced through the connotations of these elements under specific historical, social and cultural contexts.

## 4 Results and discussion

### 4.1 Generic features and compositional elements of destination logos

As indicated in Table 1, the total constituent elements of the 34 Chinese destinations' logos include graphic elements (hereafter GEs), Chinese character names (hereafter CCNs), English letter names (hereafter ELNs), Chinese character slogans (hereafter CCSs), English letter slogans (hereafter ELSSs), Uyghur names (hereafter UNs), and Tibetan names (hereafter TNs). According to the different components engaged in the logo, the logos under investigation can be divided into 17 groups and listed in ascending order, as shown in Figure 1. The results show that among all the 34 destinations' logos, 32 (94 %) destinations apply both pictorial and verbal elements to their logos, except for one destination adopting merely graphical symbols in the logo design (i.e., Sichuan) and one destination adopting a text only logo (i.e., Heilongjiang). This implies that the majority of destination logos possess multimodal characteristics and incorporate both linguistic features and graphic portrayals. The aim of designing logos for destinations is to brand, commercialize, and commodify these places. Thus, destination logos are identified as a promotional genre and function in identifying the service provided by the destinations.

#### 4.1.1 Slogan as the tool for branding

As a promotional genre, destination logos incorporate slogans in their design to convey themes for the purpose of branding. Slogans are merged into the logo design of 56 % of destinations (i.e., 19 destinations), as shown in Table 2. It is crucial for destination managers to strategically choose and use an influential slogan to reflect the destination's intended brand identity (Lee et al. 2006). As Naghizadeh (2021) indicated, slogans are tourist semiotic languages that deliver the core theme, through which destinations strategically position themselves. The theme communicated by the present corpus' destinations' slogans can be divided into three categories: sightseeing, experience tourism, and culture tourism. The themes vary because the selling propositions of the destinations are distinct. The selection and usage of

**Table 1:** Constituent elements of destination logos. GEs: graphic elements, CCNs: Chinese character names, ELNs: English letter names, CCSs: Chinese character slogans, ELSs: English letter slogans, UNs: Uyghur names, TNs: Tibetan names.

Destination	GEs	CCNs	ELNs	CCSs	ELsS	UNs	TNs
Beijing	✓	✓	✓				
Tianjin	✓	✓	✓				
Shanghai	✓	✓	✓				
Chongqing	✓	✓					
Hebei	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Shanxi	✓		✓	✓	✓		
Inner Mongolia	✓	✓	✓				
Heilongjiang				✓			
Jilin	✓	✓	✓				
Liaoning	✓		✓	✓			
Shaanxi	✓	✓	✓				
Gansu	✓			✓	✓		
Qinghai	✓			✓	✓		
Xinjiang	✓	✓	✓			✓	
Zhejiang	✓			✓	✓		
Anhui	✓	✓	✓				
Jiangxi	✓			✓	✓		
Ningxia	✓	✓	✓				
Shandong	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Henan	✓			✓			
Jiangsu	✓	✓		✓	✓		
Fujian	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Hubei	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Hunan	✓	✓	✓				
Guangdong	✓		✓	✓	✓		
Guangxi	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Hainan	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Sichuan	✓						
Yunnan	✓	✓		✓	✓		
Guizhou	✓	✓			✓		
Tibet	✓	✓	✓				✓
Macau	✓		✓				
Hong Kong	✓	✓	✓				
Taiwan	✓		✓		✓		
Frequency	33	22	23	16	15	1	1
Proportion	97 %	65 %	68 %	47 %	44 %	3 %	3 %



**Figure 1:** Destination logos of 34 provincial-level regions in China. Constituent elements: (a) GEs; (b) CCSS; (c) GEs, CCNs; (d) GEs, CCSS; (e) GEs, ELNs; (f) GEs, CCNs, ELNs; (g) GEs, ELNs, CCSS; (h) GEs, CCNs, ELNs; (i) GEs, ELNs, ELNs; (j) GEs, CCSS, ELNs; (k) GEs, CCNs, ELNs, UNs; (l) GEs, CCNs, ELNs, TNs; (m) GEs, CCNs, ELNs, ELNs; (n) GEs, CCNs, ELNs, CCSS; (o) GEs, ELNs, CCSS, ELNs; (p) GEs, CCNs, CCSS, ELNs; (q) GEs, CCNs, ELNs, CCSS, ELNs.

slogans indicate different brand positions of different destinations through the reflection of their respective features. Among these themes, historical and cultural senses are reflected in eight destinations (42 %). For instance, Henan (Figure 1d) is historically referred to as Zhongyuan where ancient Chinese civilization is originated from, designs its slogan as “中原，老家河南” (*Zhōngyuán, lǎojiā hénán*), denoting that Henan is the Central Plains where China began and indicating its identity as the cradle of the glorious Chinese civilization. As a successful slogan can catch customers’ attention and act as a brand reminder so that the brand identity is reinforced (Plog 2004), this laconic slogan reflects a profound historical sense of the destination for promoting heritage tourism. This agrees with Naghizadeh’s (2021) point that slogans present catchy and compelling messages.

In order to better deliver marketing themes for promoting tourism, various lexico-syntactical tools and rhetorical devices are resorted to in the investigated slogans to create catchy impacts. Being simple, understandable, and memorable are obvious features of a catchy slogan (Bhavsar 2023). Firstly, to make the slogans simple

**Table 2:** Themes implied by slogans in destination logos. Rhyming syllables or words are marked in boldface type.

Destinations	CCSs	ELSs	Themes
Fujian	清新福建 ( <i>Qīngxīn Fújiàn</i> )	Refreshing Fujian.	Experience tourism
Gansu	绚丽甘肃 ( <i>Xuànlì Gānsù</i> )	Splendid Gansu.	Sightseeing
Guangdong	活力广东, 心悅之旅 ( <i>Huólì Guǎng-dōng, xīnyuè zhīlǚ</i> )	Truly enjoy Guangdong.	Experience tourism
Guangxi	秀甲天下, 壮美广西 ( <i>Xiùjiǎ tiānxià, Zhuàngměi Guǎngxī</i> )	(Not available)	Sightseeing
Guizhou	(Not available)	Intoxicated with the beauty of Guizhou.	Sightseeing
Hainan	(Not available)	All the <b>sun</b> , all the <b>fun</b> .	Experience tourism
Hebei	京畿福地, 乐享河北 ( <i>Jīngjī fúdi, lèxiǎng Héběi</i> )	Enjoy Hebei.	Experience tourism
Heilongjiang	北国好风光, 尽在黑龙江 ( <i>Běiguó hǎofēngguāng, jìnzài Heilóngjiāng</i> )	(Not available)	Sightseeing
Henan	中原, 老家河南 ( <i>Zhōngyuán, lǎojiā hénán</i> )	(Not available)	Cultural tourism
Hubei	灵秀湖北 ( <i>Língxiù Húběi</i> )	Hubei, home to wonders.	Cultural tourism
Jiangsu	水韵江苏, 有你会更美 ( <i>Shuǐyùn jiāngsū, yǒunǐ huìgèngměi</i> )	Charm of Jiangsu, more beautiful with you.	Cultural tourism
Jiangxi	江西风景独好 ( <i>Jiāngxī fēngjǐng dúhǎo</i> )	Unique landscape in Jiangxi.	Sightseeing
Liaoning	乐游辽宁, 不虚此行 ( <i>Lèyóu Liáon-ing, bùxū cǐxíng</i> )	(Not available)	Experience tourism
Qinghai	大美青海 ( <i>Dàměi Qīnghǎi</i> )	The magnificent Qinghai.	Sightseeing
Shanxi	华夏古文明, 山西好风光 ( <i>Huáxià gǔwénmíng, Shānxī hǎofēngguāng</i> )	<b>Ancient</b> civilization and excellent scenery.	Cultural tourism and sightseeing
Shandong	好客山东 ( <i>Hàokè Shāndōng</i> )	Friendly Shandong.	Cultural tourism
Taiwan	(Not available)	The heart of Asia.	Cultural tourism
Yunnan	七彩云南, 旅游天堂 ( <i>Qīcǎi Yúnnán, lǚyóu tiāntáng</i> )	Colorful Yunnan of <b>China</b> , tourism paradise of the <b>world</b> .	Cultural tourism
Zhejiang	诗画浙江 ( <i>Shīhuà Zhèjiāng</i> )	Picturesque Zhejiang.	Cultural tourism

and understandable, the number of characters or words is limited to keep them within an appropriate length. Length is a widely used measure of text complexity (DuBay 2004). It means that the fewer words in a sentence, the simpler and more understandable it is (DuBay 2004). Based on Miller and Toman’s (2015) corpus research, an English slogan has an average length of five words, which suggests that shorter slogans would have less than five words. In contrast, according to Liu and Ngok’s (2023) empirical study on Chinese slogans, the average number of characters

found in slogans is 15, with the majority measuring 14 Chinese characters. Therefore, the length of a shorter slogan is considered within a maximum of 5 words in the English context or 14 characters in the Chinese context (Liu and Ngok 2023; Miller and Toman 2015). As illustrated in Table 3, among all the 16 CCSs and 15 ELSs, 13 destinations (i.e., 82 %) have a 4-character, 6-character, or 8-character CCS and 10 (i.e., 66 %) destinations use 2-word, 3-word, or 4-word ELSs. The maximum word count is merely 10 characters in CCSs and 9 words in ELSs. This implies that most of the analyzed slogans can be characterized as simple and brief. As indicated by the cognitive cost model, customers have limited cognitive capacity, which influences their decision-making and emotional reaction to stimuli (Todd and Benbasat 1992). Accordingly, their preferences for the information will decrease if the cognitive load required for processing information increases (Payne 1982). In this context, it is anticipated that the length of slogans may add to their overall complexity and negatively impact their likeability and acceptance (Dass et al. 2014). For this reason, a shorter slogan that is simple and brief is considered more suitable for delivering essential themes of a destination.

Such simplicity and brevity are also reflected in the syntactic structure through the pervading use of noun phrases to promote certain destinations. Noun phrases are the simplest means to make a direct appeal to the good or service that is the focus of the advertising slogan and denote some abstract ideas related to the product (Savchuk 2019). As displayed in Table 4, most of the slogans (i.e., 15 or 94 % CCSs and 13 or 87 % ELSs) are composed of short noun phrases to craft a concise promotional message, like “*Refreshing Fujian*” and “*Splendid Gansu*.” Such syntactical simplicity eases the difficulty of understanding. Additionally, positive adjectives are frequently seen (i.e., 14 or 88 % CCSs and 9 or 60 % ELSs) to be combined with nouns to form two-member noun phrases to deliver positive attributes of destinations. For example, in the ELS of Zhejiang, “*Picturesque Zhejiang*,” the word “picturesque”

**Table 3:** Number of Chinese characters or English words contained in slogans.

Chinese characters in CCSs	Frequency	Proportion	English words in ELSs	Frequency	Proportion
4	6	38 %	2	5	33 %
6	2	12 %	3	2	13 %
8	5	32 %	4	3	20 %
9	1	6 %	5	1	7 %
10	2	12 %	6	2	13 %
			7	1	7 %
			9	1	7 %



**Table 4:** Lexical tools and rhetorical devices used in slogans. N/A: not available.

Destination	Noun phrase		Adjective		Rhyme		Parallelism	
	CCSs	ELSs	CCSs	ELSs	CCSs	ELSs	CCSs	ELSs
Fujian	✓	✓	✓	✓				
Gansu	✓	✓	✓	✓				
Guangdong	✓		✓			✓	✓	
Guangxi	✓	(N/A)	✓	(N/A)	✓	(N/A)	✓	(N/A)
Guizhou	(N/A)	✓	(N/A)		(N/A)		(N/A)	
Hainan	(N/A)	✓	(N/A)		(N/A)	✓	(N/A)	✓
Hebei	✓		✓				✓	
Heilongjiang	✓	(N/A)	✓	(N/A)		(N/A)	✓	(N/A)
Henan	✓	(N/A)		(N/A)		(N/A)		(N/A)
Hubei	✓	✓	✓					
Jiangsu	✓	✓	✓	✓				
Jiangxi	✓	✓	✓	✓				
Liaoning		(N/A)		(N/A)	✓	(N/A)	✓	(N/A)
Qinghai	✓	✓	✓	✓				
Shanxi	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Shandong	✓	✓	✓	✓				
Taiwan	(N/A)	✓	(N/A)		(N/A)		(N/A)	
Yunnan	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Zhejiang	✓	✓	✓	✓				
Frequency	15	13	14	9	3	4	7	3
Proportion	94 %	87 %	88 %	60 %	19 %	27 %	44 %	20 %

vividly portrays a beautiful and appealing image of Zhejiang. This aligns with Vojnović’s (2020) finding that tourist language usually favors simple short phrases to promote cultural identity in a highly positive light.

In addition to lexical tools, rhetorical devices are tactically used in slogans to increase their expressiveness and memorability. Slogans are recognized not only by the message they convey, but also by the modality it is conveyed (Dass et al. 2014). The use of rhetorical devices can affect the modality of delivery, which further generates decorative and artistic language that helps to increase appreciation and elaboration (Toncar and Munch 2001). As shown in Table 4, some of the commonly used rhetorical devices in the analyzed slogans include rhyme and parallelism. Rhyme is realized through the repetition of similar or identical sounds in syllables of two or more words (Wesling 2021). Take Hainan’s ELS, “*All the sun, all the fun,*” as an example. The repetition of the “*un*” sound in “*sun*” and “*fun*” creates a rhyming effect. Furthermore, the syntactic and verbal parallelism of the slogan establishes a

relationship of similarity and contributes to building the rhythm (Prasad and Nagendra 2017; Skračić and Kosović 2016). Sound techniques such as rhyme and rhythm are mnemonic strategies that aid in the memorability of a slogan (Skračić and Kosović 2016). These rhetorical devices ensure a remarkable euphonic and mnemonic effect, which makes a slogan flow gracefully with the aesthetics of rhythm and rhyme.

According to Cook (1992), influential slogans should be simple, memorable, and catchy. Through careful and tactical utilization of verbal tools, the adopted slogans attempt to achieve these linguistic features in order to be more influential in communicating themes about the destination to build their respective destination identity. Lourenção et al.'s (2020) research on semiotic signs also proved that slogans help draw travelers' attention to destination advertisements, thus travel organizations could create slogans with induced communication to get better responses from travelers.

#### **4.1.2 Name as the carrier of heritage**

Language is a significant sign system for idea expression (Yang and Li 2020), including communicating cultures. Every nation has its language and language is the carrier of their heritage. The name and slogan of destination logos reflect the use of language in manifesting one nation's cultural heritage.

The name is the most crucial indicator for identifying a destination as it appears in the logo of 97 % of the Chinese destinations (i.e., 33 destinations). As a means of representing the brand of tourist destinations, the importance of the destinations' names is no less than that of companies selling commercial goods (Konecnik and Gartner 2007). Eighteen destinations adopted both CCNs and ELNs in their logos, with Xinjiang, as well as Tibet, even having their names displayed in three languages. Besides Chinese characters and English letters, Uyghur and Tibetan names are applied by Xinjiang and Tibet respectively, which manifests their local linguistic specialty and unique ethnic culture. Adding names written in minority languages in destination logos is a practical way of showcasing their unique ethnic identity. Nevertheless, names designed in Chinese exhibited in the destination logos assume tremendous importance in stressing a destination's national identity in getting a domestic market share. In addition, with the exception of Sichuan, Heilongjiang, Henan, and Chongqing, the presence of ELNs can be found in the rest of the 30 destinations (i.e., 88 %), either in the form of an independent name or joined in the slogan of the logo. The prevalence of ELNs in destination logos indicates that there is an ever-growing need to gain the international market and form a competitive advantage among overseas competitors. Statistics show that in 2019, the tourist income generated from the overseas market reached 131 billion dollars, which

accounts for 14 % of the total tourist income (i.e., RMB6,638 billion) for China (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2020). In order to increase their global reputation, destinations are working hard to establish their international brand identities through the presentation of ELNs due to the rising competition in the global market. The conceptualization of multiple identities of a destination under different cultural contexts is achieved by presenting its name in various languages in the logo. As revealed by Sang (2021), the destination name represents the authentic culture of a place and signifies its identity, which is regarded as a symbolic process for expressing its social roles. In this study, the cultural identities of destinations are established by embedding diverse cultures in the names of multiple languages, thus reflecting their multifold social functions, and branding destinations through this symbolic process.

#### 4.1.3 Framing

In terms of framing, most destinations that comprise more than one constituent element deployed space as a method to naturally set one element apart from the other (i.e., 26 destinations), while Macau (Figure 1e) realizes the demarcation of graphics and names through the manipulation of different colors. However, Inner Mongolia (Figure 1f[ix]), Ningxia (Figure 1f[x]), Xinjiang (Figure 1k), and Tibet (Figure 1l) selected frame lines which form two concentric circles as the outer and inner frames of their logos, making their logos shape like a circular badge, with pictorials in the inner circle and names within the margin of the outer circle. The circle is an important sign in ancient Chinese literature, which contains rich humanistic connotations that are bonded with the thinking pattern of the Chinese nation formed during its long history. In Chinese literary practice, this cultural sign is typically represented through the image of the moon and the finale of the reunion (Duan 2007). The full moon is round in appearance, conveying a sense of harmony, thus serving as a spiritual sustenance for Chinese people (Duan 2007). Their worship of the moon dates back more than 3,000 years in China's Shang Dynasty (1600–1046 BC; Lei 2015). They celebrate the Moon Festival, also known as the Mid-Autumn Festival, an occasion for families to get together, eat mooncakes, and enjoy the bright and round moon (Lei 2015). When the moon hangs high in the sky with the bright moonlight shining on the earth, the desire for reunion and happiness will arise in Chinese people's hearts. The worship of the moon and the strong yearning for reunion contain a deep instinctive power, which makes the moon a unique image settled deep in the hearts of the Chinese people, and externalizes it into a national character that always longs for reunion (Duan 2007). Chinese people attach great importance to family ties. The moon is full when it turns into a circle, and a family is integral when family members get together. Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Xinjiang,

and Tibet are inhabited by Mongolians, the Hui nationality, the Uyghur people, and the Tibetan nationality, respectively. As a member of the big family of the Chinese nation, these ethnic people are closely bound to their motherland and other ethnic groups who inhabit this land. The design of their destination logos in a circular shape symbolizes that they are an integral part of their homeland and they highly value the unity of nationalities as well as the reunion of families, which is a reflection of cultural tradition and spiritual heritage of the Chinese nation. This concurs with Hsun and Jie (2022) that, a unique shape symbolizes a distinctive theme, which is the core of the destination image, serving as a bridge between the integrated development of a society and visual and spiritual communication for the public.

## **4.2 Conceptual representations of heritage in destination logos**

The compositional elements of destination logos, such as GEs, CCNs, ELNs, CCSs, and ELs, are considered participants in these logos. It is found that a variety of heritage concepts are employed in designing destination logos to represent rich conceptual meanings. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), conceptual representations express a more universal, consistent, and enduring nature of participants. The symbolic process is one of the semiotic acts used by conceptual representations to present the meaning or identity of a participant (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). Visual aesthetics are essential in creating a strong destination identity. A total of 33 (97 %) destinations' logos involve the usage of diverse pictorial symbols that serve to reflect the values, features, and identity of destinations. Cultural heritage is prevalently seen in these visual symbols, which may result from a growing raft of cultural practices in the tourism industry.

### **4.2.1 Calligraphy and traditional Chinese characters**

It has been discovered that traditional Chinese cultural heritage has a significant impact on China's destinations' logo design. Chinese calligraphy, as an ancient writing art of Chinese characters, pervasively appears in the investigated destination logos. Twenty six destinations (76 %) apply Chinese calligraphy either in the names or slogans of their logos. As a cultural heritage, Chinese calligraphy is an artistic practice that uses variations of brush strokes in writing the Chinese characters, infusing connotations of nature, society and life, to express the writer's thoughts, spirit, and personality (Bachner 2014). The application of Chinese calligraphy in destination logos, such as the use of seal script, clerical script, regular script, running script, and cursive script, exemplifies distinctive features of the destination logos

through different sorts of calligraphic styles, which carry forward the deep-seated Chinese cultural meanings.

Meanwhile, the traditional Chinese cultural heritage, namely, traditional Chinese character, is adopted in the manifestation of 8 destination logos' CCNs and 2 destination logos' CCSs, adding a Chinese-characterized cultural tone to these 10 destinations (29 %). Traditional Chinese characters have a history of more than two thousand years since handwritten characters were used by people in China. It contains rich cultural meanings as well as carries history and heritage. The evolution process of Chinese characters is interrelated with the formation of Chinese culture (Seman 2002). Traditional Chinese characters are the fundamental carriers of Chinese culture and have been vital as a means of idea dissemination and exchange in China's long history (Seman 2002). The adoption of calligraphy and traditional Chinese characters in designing the destination logos not only enhances the artistic feeling and the Chinese identity of destination logos, but also illustrates the heritage and development of traditional Chinese culture. As Yang et al. (2020a) highlighted, Chinese calligraphy and characters are symbols of national identity expression in a tourism context. The Chinese sign system inscribes the continuity of cultural transmission (Xu et al. 2020) while internalizing the cultural identity in semiotic embellishment.

#### 4.2.2 Chinese seal

The Chinese seal, applied in logos of 11 destinations (32 %), is another traditional Chinese cultural heritage with a long cultural history deployed for symbolizing the Chinese identity of destinations. Chinese destinations employ Chinese seals to signify names, communicate key selling points, or identify services. In the logo of Shandong (Figure 1q[iii]), the Chinese characters “好客” (*hàokè*, ‘hospitable’) are engraved on the seal. Shandong is the hometown of Confucius, the founder of Confucianism, who once expressed his hospitality by saying “What a joy it is to have friends coming from afar” (Confucius 2016: 1). The inheritance of the Confucian way of hospitality in Shandong's logo by inscribing his tenet in the Chinese seal not only conveys deep cultural connotations but also creates a hospitable image. As Lingling and Ghani (2023) mentioned, the expression of contemporary value and rich cultural past can be realized by incorporating traditional seals into the design, to capture the essence and reflect the charisma of a place. Featured as a sculpture art of China, Chinese seals are treated as a marker of identity and as a cultural artefact, incorporating calligraphy and seal-cutting techniques in one small seal while implying profound artistic and cultural connotations (Sun 2004). When used in destinations' logos, this delicate art adds a sense of grace to logos and enhances the destinations' historical profundity.

#### 4.2.3 Chinese landscape painting

Chinese landscape painting is also a traditional cultural heritage element employed in destination identity formation through logos. This ancient art is also known as *shanshui* ('mountain and water'), with the two prototypes of nature, *shan* ('mountain') and *shui* ('water') being its subjects and implying unique references in Chinese philosophy (Law 2011). References to *shan* and *shui* can be found in the ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius's proclamation that "the benevolent find joy in mountains; the wise find joy in water," implying that sages found the truth of nature in mountains and water (Lau 1992: 53). Hence, *shanshui* not only aims to evince visual appreciation but also promote spiritual contemplation. On the one hand, the aesthetic beauty and calmness of natural scenery are brought to people by this art, as depicted in Figure 1j(iii) of Zhejiang's logo, where typical motifs of mountains and water are presented in the form of Chinese ink painting. Adopting the freehand brushwork painting technique, the poetic and graceful atmosphere of Zhejiang is expressed through several overlapping peaks and meandering waters. The overall hues of green and blue render the fresh and delightful landscape of Zhejiang, which elicits a poetic and picturesque identity of Zhejiang. Hence, Zhejiang illustrates the natural beauty and distinctive atmosphere of the Jiangnan region through the traditional ink painting style in its symbol (Song and Fan 2023). On the other hand, such rendering creates a sense of "harmony and the perfect integration of man and nature," which is the expression of traditional Chinese perception of nature (Law 2011). The application of *shanshui* in logo design reflects its aesthetic and brings potential tourists into a spiritual space where they can contemplate and be inundated by nature.

#### 4.2.4 Classical Chinese ornamentation

The design of classical Chinese ornamentations is mostly inspired by nature and endowed with spiritual connotations. Meaning potentials of nature-related patterns embody cultural messages and show the spirit of the Chinese nation. Shanghai's logo (Figure 1f[iv]) exhibits the classical blue Chinese ornamentation of seawater, echoing the second character of Shanghai's Chinese name (i.e., 海 [hǎi], 'ocean'). As the Chinese saying goes, "All rivers run into the sea," denoting that acceptance and embrace lead to greatness, which agrees with Shanghai's cultural tradition of being open (Lu 2019). Embracing a large population from other provinces and countries as well as their diverse cultures, Shanghai aims to construct itself as a metropolis with the urban character of openness, innovation, and inclusiveness to better inherit the essence of traditional Chinese culture and absorb the world's cultural merits (Liu 2021). In accordance with the city's culture of openness and receptiveness, the

seawater patterns in the logo represent the inclusive humanistic spirit of Shanghai. As argued by Li and Yang (2023), semiotic resources are used to create an inclusive and open city in semioscaping Shanghai, claiming Shanghai to be a multicultural and ethnically diverse metropolis. As manifested in Figure 1p(ii), Yunnan pictures the first character of its Chinese name (i.e., 云 [yún], ‘cloud’) into a colorful auspicious cloud. Clouds are referred to as 云 (yún) in Chinese, a homophone for 运 (yùn), which means good fortune. The five-colored cloud is a representative of a Chinese cultural symbol that signifies good luck and jubilation (Welch 2013). Adopted in Yunnan’s logo, the cloud’s five colors reflect the province’s colorful ethnic cultures. This province boasts the largest variety of ethnic minorities in China, and the region’s varied ethnic cultures have emerged as a point of distinction for developing Yunnan’s tourism (Dong 2023). The colorful cloud in the logo symbolizes the diverse ethnic cultures in Yunnan and implies a joyous tourist experience. It can be seen that the classical Chinese patterns have their roots in the natural world, from which they gain their beauty (Xu et al. 2020). These patterns reflect an era’s aesthetic preferences and values, inevitably bearing the imprint of the era’s culture, which is intelligently utilized for brand construction (Xu et al. 2020).

#### 4.2.5 Ancient building

Chinese ancient buildings have mystic and deep spiritual implications. They are not only a representation of Chinese traditional architectural art, but also a carrier of the traditional Chinese cultural heritage. A distinctive architecture contributes to discerning a place and drawing crowds of tourists (Scerri et al. 2016). A total of 7 destinations demonstrate their cultural glamour by revealing their specific buildings in the logo, most of which are historical sites in respective regions. Beijing (Figure 1f[i]) puts the Temple of Heaven in its logo to replace the position of the letter “B” in the destination’s ELN, because of the morphological resemblance between the architecture and the letter. The Temple of Heaven was built for purposes of praying for wealth and peace during the Ming and Qing Dynasties (AD 1368–1912), with its circular hall and square foundation symbolizing heaven is round and earth is square (Zhang et al. 2021). This cosmic symbolism in the ancient world of China and the wish for a wealthy and peaceful life is reflected through the adoption of the Temple of Heaven in Beijing’s logo. As an ancient capital, Beijing enlarges the visual image of the Temple of Heaven in its logo to mark its thick historical and cultural atmosphere. The province of Shaanxi (Figure 1f[vi]) depicts the Great Wild Goose Pagoda in its logo. Constructed in the Tang Dynasty (AD 618–907), this pagoda was built to preserve the Buddhist sutras brought back by a monk Xuanzang via the ancient Silk Road, which witnessed the gradual dissemination of Buddhism in China, and has become a significant symbol

synonymous of Shaanxi's culture (Hui and Zeng 2017). The infusion of Buddhism into Chinese culture is embodied by depicting this Buddhist pagoda in Shaanxi's logo.

Similarly, Gansu province (Figure 1j[ii]), as the central hub on the ancient Silk Road, portrays the Mogao Grottoes or Caves of the Thousand Buddhas in its logo. The Mogao Grottoes comprises 750 caves on five levels carved into a desert cliff, holding countless murals, sculptures, and scrolls, offering a glimpse into the once flourishing multicultural society (Kenderdine 2013). This logo constructs a historical image of the multicultural civilizations reflected by these peerless treasures preserved in the Mogao Grottoes. Figure 1f(iii) displays Anhui's logo in which the distinctive Hui style architecture is presented to denote its regional customs and lifestyle. The contrastive black roof tiles and whitewashed walls form the major tone of the Huizhou architectural complex, indicating the unique flavor of Huizhou architectural heritage (He 2020). Macau's logo (Figure 1e), with a silhouette of the Ruins of St. Paul's, reveals a heterogeneous sense. Due to the Portuguese colonial expansion of Macau from 1557 to 1999, the city's architectural heritage manifests an amalgam of Portuguese and Chinese fabric (Wieczorek 2020). St. Paul's, which has been officiated as Macau's representative landmark, illustrates the blending of cultural influences and historical transformations of Macau as well as marks Macau's complex cultural identity (Wieczorek 2020). As depicted in Figure 1i, Taiwan's logo showcases the Taipei Palace Museum, highlighting the long-standing traditional cultural bond with mainland China through the museum collections. Taipei Palace Museum was built to preserve Chinese national cultural heritage that was transported from the Beijing Palace Museum to Taiwan in 1949 (Ju 2007). The Palace collection is the representation of Chinese art, culture, and the shared national identity of the Chinese people (Ju 2007). Displaying the Taipei Palace Museum in the logo identifies the Chinese roots of the people in Taiwan and highlights their cultural identity. Hebei (Figure 1q[ii]) incorporates the majestic Great Wall into its logo. The Great Wall, is a territorial border of walls constructed in ancient China from the Warring States period (481–221 BC) to the Ming Dynasty (AD 1368–1644) as a defensive structure to protect the nation, which functions as territorial, ethnic, and historical boundaries, and symbolizes national unity (Rojas 2011). It stretches across thousands of kilometers of northern China, demonstrating its sublimity and boundlessness. Extending thousands of years into China's history, the Wall serves to grant the internal coherence of the nation and is perceived as a symbol of the strength and resilience of the Chinese civilization (Rojas 2011). The national identity of China is embodied through the existence of this cultural landscape in Hebei's logo.

The ancient landscape architecture keeps historical knowledge, cultural memory, artistic creation and old ways of life alive, in which inherited traditional Chinese customary culture can be seen in concrete form (Li and Kluensuwan 2024).



As Bonarou (2021) pointed out, the semiotic analysis of folk architecture helps uncover the numerous cultural elements that have come to be recognized as markers of national characteristics. The aforementioned 7 destination logos have traced traditional Chinese belief systems and core values incorporated in local historic buildings as the symbol of folk culture, which showcases the unbreakable bond between Chinese tradition and the evolution of architecture that has emerged as an essential component in establishing unique identities.

#### 4.2.6 Traditional skill

Viewed as a living history, heritage is deeply rooted in history and tradition-related knowledge and skills (Park 2013). In Guangdong's logo (Figure 10[i]), a fine dragon boat is presented to demonstrate the Dragon Boat Race held annually during the traditional Dragon Boat Festival, embodying the cultural legacy and the enterprising sporting spirit. Dragon boating was originally held to commemorate the patriotic poet Qu Yuan in the 4th Century BC (Sofield and Sivan 2003). Before the race, locals in Chinese fishing villages perform Taoist religious rituals to express their dedication to the goddess of the sea (McCartney and Osti 2007). Nonetheless, in the last decade, it has evolved from a traditional ceremony to a sporting event (Sofield and Sivan 2003). The historical and religious past of dragon boat races has become a unique promotional attribute to develop sports tourism (McCartney and Osti 2007). Placed in the logo of Guangdong, the dragon boat accentuates the folk tradition and forms a lively identity of Guangdong. As portrayed in Figure 1h, the image of Guizhou's logo is its pictographic Chinese character name, in which the first Chinese character resembles a bronze wine vessel. Guizhou has a distinct liquor culture formed in its long history of brewing. The typical representation of liquor, *Maotai* which is a distilled Chinese liquor made in the town of Maotai, is one of the better-known liquors in the province (Oakes 2000). As a cultural carrier, historic liquor distilling and drinking customs are well-preserved by Guizhou's ethnic minorities as the living relics of ancient China (Oakes 2000). The design of Guizhou's logo reflects its unique liquor heritage. Another destination that exhibits local traditional skills in its logo is Inner Mongolia (Figure 1f[ix]), which depicts an indigenous Mongolian riding a horse on the grassland. The Mongols are known as the people on horseback. Horses have always been a part of their pastoral life (Nakamura 2010). As equestrians, they take great pride in their horses (Nakamura 2010). In the logo, the dynamic galloping horse with a rider on its back manifests a high degree of horse-riding skills. The presence of horses symbolizes the identity of the Mongolians as horseback riders (Nakamura 2010). As Zhang and Sheng (2017) mentioned, semiotics is utilized in tourism studies to characterize or delineate how particular objects, like cultural phenomena (festivals, craftsmanship, and skills) are symbolically represented as tourist attractions.

Regional conventional skills have been made good use of in logo design to address representative pictures of Chinese destinations and their images.

#### 4.2.7 Other tangible and intangible cultural heritage

A cultural sense can also be conveyed through a materialized object, which reflects old traditions and cultural heritage. Nostalgia can exert a significant influence on the increasingly popular heritage tourism (S  raphin et al. 2018). In Hong Kong's logo (Figure 1f[viii]), the sailing vessel, known as *Duk Ling*, is displayed as Hong Kong's icon, which is a heritage in relation to the colonial history of the city. As a classic Chinese-style sailboat operating in Hong Kong's Victoria Harbor, the antique *Duk Ling* brings a nostalgic memory of the colonial era to tourists by offering cruise rides on the harbor (Tang 2009). The harbor tour transfers people back to the old times and guides people to discover Hong Kong through heritages. Likewise, as indicated in Figure 1j(i) in the logo of Qinghai, a long piece of blue silk scarf, *khata*, which is a traditional ceremonial scarf widely used in Tibetan Buddhism, is presented to signify the characteristic etiquette culture of the Tibetan nationality and the Mongol nationality living in this province. The presentation of *khata* is a popular custom that remains a widely practiced ritual in Tibetan and Mongolian society for greetings (Roddy 2018). This ritual greeting realized through offering *khata* contains ethnic, religious, and cultural meanings and embodies Qinghai's friendly image.

Heritage can be tangible or intangible. As illustrated in Figure 1n in the logo of Guangxi, bronze drums, hydrangea balls, and Huashan rock paintings are artistic forms for explicating the customs, history, and religious beliefs of the Zhuang nationality. They are embedded in the letters "G," "a," and "x" in Guangxi's logo, respectively. Hydrangea balls have long been a typical cultural symbol for the Zhuang people, which symbolizes a pledge of love for the Zhuang men and women in love (Lan and Ling 2018). Bronze drums are the Zhuang people's traditional musical instruments and ritual vessels which have been found in use in burials, warfare, and other ceremonial rites (Lan and Ling 2018; Qian 2013). It can be seen from the logo that the letter "x" is designed to resemble a human motif of the Huashan rock art site. The painted motif is in striking likeness with the frog dance, a ritual dance performed with the frog posture for animism and ancestor worship (Qian 2013). Because of this, the painting is considered to represent the ancestral Zhuang people's religious beliefs (Qian 2013). Similarly, Hainan (Figure 1m) portrays the representative frog-man image in the second letter "A" of its logo to signify the Li nationality's frog adoration. The frog is regarded as a totem by the Li nationality for resting the hope of reproduction and continuity of their people (Zhang and Wu 2010). As such, the sense of place is interpreted by the tangible and intangible values of local heritage under a

semiotic perspective, which forms a combination of destination attributes, to constitute memorable tourist experiences and define uniqueness in tourist products (Efsthathiou 2020). The brand value of tangible and intangible heritage is thus enhanced by demonstrating symbols of cultural resources in destination logos as identity and image conveyors.

#### 4.2.8 Natural heritage

Apart from the cultural heritage elements discussed thus far, nature-based heritage components are the second most common symbols employed in the visual identity construction of China's destinations. Natural heritage is part of human heritage. As illustrated in Figure 1f(iii), the logo of Anhui includes the botanical heritage of Mount Huang, the guest-welcoming pine. Pine trees in Mount Huang are endemic and an essential component of this reserve's designation as a natural world heritage site (Li 2008). Many trees are known for their antiquity, bizarre shape, or precariously steep position, and over 100 famous trees have unique names, such as guest-welcoming pine (Sofield and Li 2007). The guest-welcoming pine gets its name from the way its branches stretch out like hosts' open arms to invite guests into their homes (Sofield and Li 2007). Thus, the presence of the guest-welcoming pine in the logo signifies Anhui's warm welcome for tourists. Similarly, Jilin (Figure 1f(v)) showcases its endemic *pinus sylvestriformis* in its logo. The *pinus sylvestriformis*, also referred to as Changbai pine, is a tree species that grows exclusively in the Changbai Mountains (Zhan et al. 1986). The pine is evergreen and resists the harshness of frost and snowstorms throughout the winter, therefore the most significant quality embodied by the pine in Chinese culture is spiritual fortitude (Sun and Rybakov 2021). The pine tree can withstand the rigor of a long winter, representing "tenacious vitality" in Chinese culture (Chen and Liu 2019: 366), hence is used to represent a vibrant Jilin.

Animals belong to the natural heritage and connect people with nature. Through an animal-based tourism, people can experience nature. As the hometown of giant pandas, Sichuan (Figure 1a) places an adorable giant panda in the center of its logo. The giant panda in half cool-toned green and half warm-toned red forms two contrastive forces, which resemble the insignia of Tai Chi, a Chinese martial art. The basic concepts of Tai Chi originated from the Taoist ideas of Yin-Yang, which expresses a philosophical ideology that describes the balance of opposite but inter-connected forces in nature (Kuo 2004). This logo looks like a giant panda performing Tai Chi, expounding the foundational principles of Tai Chi. Additionally, a flying bird is presented in Qinghai's logo, as indicated in Figure 1j(i). Qinghai Lake, spanning 4,392 km<sup>2</sup> in Qinghai province, is the biggest saltwater lake in China and a crucial location for waterbirds to breed and stopover in the Central Asia-India Flyway

(Zhang and Yang 1997). During the breeding season every year, countless flocks of migratory birds breed on islands around Qinghai Lake, rendering this place a paradise for waterbirds. Thus, the logo depicts a flying bird as a representation of the favorable biological resources in Qinghai. In Taiwan's logo (Figure 1i), the incorporation of fauna and flora motifs, such as butterflies, birds, and flowers indicate Taiwan's biodiversity. Butterflies carry deep connotations in Chinese culture. The ancient Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu once dreamed he was a free butterfly, conveying his philosophical pursuit of interfusion with nature (Gaskins 1998). This reflects the fundamental philosophy in China that humans are infused with nature, illustrating a harmonious relationship between humans and nature. In the case of Xinjiang's logo, as displayed in Figure 1k, a camel is standing in the desert under the blue sky. In Xinjiang, an area that mostly consists of desert, semi-desert, and grassland, the camel serves as the best vehicle for carrying and riding due to its remarkable adaptability to severe desert environments (Liu and Jiang 2020). Camel caravans carried out long-distance trade along the Silk Road for centuries, passing through Xinjiang and connecting the Orient with the Middle East and Europe (Dana 1998). They have created a bridge for communication between eastern and western civilizations, and brought abundant wealth and opportunity (Liu and Jiang 2020). In addition to their symbolic significance of the Silk Road, camels also perform the crucial role of transportation in daily life, known as "the ship of the desert" (Liu and Jiang 2020: 124). The camel has irreplaceable value and status in Xinjiang and thereby is used as a representative cultural symbol in Xinjiang's logo. Another example is illustrated in Ningxia (Figure 1f[x]), which transforms its characteristic Tan sheep into an anthropomorphic image in the logo. Tan sheep is a unique sheep breed domesticated in northwest China, including Ningxia, for producing high-quality pelt (Ma 2019). The Hui nationality in Ningxia has a long history of traditional fur craft, which highlights their distinctive artistic creativity (Ma 2019). Hence, the Tan sheep is displayed in the logo to demonstrate the folk art of the Hui nationality. Likewise, a yak is depicted in Tibet's logo (Figure 1l) to carry the yak culture in Tibetan society. The yak is a unique species native to the Tibet Plateau, a cattle Tibetans rely on for survival. For thousands of years, Tibetans have used yaks as the major means of transportation, a food source, and material for making other articles of daily use (Rhode et al. 2007). In the spiritual realm, the wild yak is revered as a totem for Tibetan society and the avatar of the spiritual force of Tibet (Rhode et al. 2007). Regarding the importance of yak for traditional Tibetan society, this animal is adopted in Tibet's logo to manifest its crucial status in Tibetan culture. It is found that representations of natural heritage in iconic logos allude to conventional Chinese value frameworks and culture that have been passed down. As Fayzullaev et al. (2018) described, semiotic images for representing destinations often paint regional heritage, whether cultural or natural, with allusions to long-standing cultural traditions.

The qualitative analysis above suggests that Chinese destinations are inclined to present cultural and natural heritage elements through the usage of graphic and linguistic resources in the destination logos. These heritage elements are believed to project the destinations as culturally exuberant and naturally appealing to attract potential tourists. Among the images employed, representations of cultural heritage are given more prominence compared to natural heritage concepts. As suggested in Table 5, the traditional Chinese cultural heritage elements dominate the overall style in designing destination logos through the embodiment of calligraphy in the majority of logos (76 %), with traditional Chinese characters (29 %), Chinese seals (32 %), Chinese landscape painting (3 %), and classical Chinese ornamentation (6 %) complementing a vintage flavor of Chinese cultural identity. It can be inferred that national culture plays a crucial role in the symbolic narrative of destination identity. Meanwhile, Chinese destinations also pay great attention to conveying other cultural values denoted by ancient buildings (21 %), traditional skills (9 %), and other tangible and intangible cultural heritage (12 %) in their destinations’ logos. Nonetheless, there are still some nature-related heritage elements in their logos, which is indicated by the existence of botany (6 %) and animal (18 %) representations to present a natural philosophy of the places. In general, cultural and natural heritage elements are represented in the Chinese destination logos to convey the traditional, historical, cultural and spiritual connotations and brand them as offering a heritage tourism. As Bonarou (2021) stated, semiotic resources function as powerful narratives of cultural representations and national identities through disseminating specific concepts. It justifies the meaningful texts and visual images to assume the role of information

**Table 5:** Conceptual representations of heritage in destination logos.

Conceptual symbol	Frequency	Proportion
<i>Cultural heritage</i>		
Calligraphy	26	76 %
Traditional Chinese character	10	29 %
Chinese seal	11	32 %
Chinese landscape painting	1	3 %
Classical Chinese ornamentation	2	6 %
Ancient building	7	21 %
Traditional skill	3	9 %
Other tangible and intangible cultural heritage	4	12 %
<i>Natural heritage</i>		
Botany	2	6 %
Animal	6	18 %

carriers to reflect the destinations' heritage values in distinctive styles as practical means of constructing those destinations' visual identities.

## 5 Conclusions

This study has revealed that textual and graphic elements are ingeniously used in logos by Chinese destinations to communicate heritage values through their designs. An in-depth semiotic analysis was conducted on the logos of 34 Chinese destinations to study their creative compositions and connotations conveyed for heritage tourism promotion. The findings show that the heritage representations are indicated through the use of multimodal semiotic resources as an effective approach for destinations to construct their brand identities and draw potential holidaymakers.

The results show that heritage factors influencing the design of Chinese destinations' logos range from the predominant national culture to alternative local heritage resources. These factors influence the visual representations and their particular connotative meanings of the logos, which are reflected in the symbolic expression of the cultural heritage concepts (i.e., calligraphy, traditional Chinese character, Chinese seal, Chinese landscape painting, classical Chinese ornamentation, ancient buildings, traditional skill, and other tangible and intangible cultural heritage) and natural heritage elements (i.e., botany and animal). It is worth noting that the symbolic features of the iconic logos are closely associated with the heritage, cultural backdrop, and social context of the destinations. These symbolic features are essential to devise a recognizable and distinguishing brand identity with the hope of identifying and differentiating them from other competitors.

Language is given a role in carrying the heritage concept and branding the destinations in these logos. Names and slogans in Chinese characters appear in the logos to portray the destinations as an image with their own historical and cultural roots. Meanwhile, ethnic languages are also adopted in the logos to display the unique ethnic culture and minority languages' heritage. Some of the Chinese destinations' logos also carry English names and slogans to attract international visitors and promote their brands to overseas markets. This study found that promoting destinations by highlighting the heritage elements in the destination logos is a core feature of Chinese destinations' branding strategies. The selection of heritage related to visual and verbal elements according to the destinations' respective features helps create a distinctive identity of the destinations. Hence, destination logos can remind target audiences of the cultures, traditions, and histories concerned with these meaningful logos. In this internet era, taking advantage of logos to deepen the cultural identity of a country's destinations to attract tourists is of vital importance in the competitive tourism market.

Chinese destinations use iconic logos to form their brand identity and promote cultural values through the manifestation of their respective heritage components. A multifaceted brand identity of Chinese destinations is established through the usage of pictorial and textual expressions with a reflection of their traditional cultural characteristics, in terms of the local cultural and natural heritage. Three kinds of tourism, namely cultural tourism, sightseeing, and experience are promoted via tactically created slogans. Moreover, the graphical and textual elements interplay to enhance a culturally appealing and positive brand identity of those Chinese destinations. These semiotic elements not only portray the Chinese destination as a tourist destination that provides a variety of heritage tourism for visitors, but also as an ancient land with a long history, splendid culture, magnificent scenery and rich humanistic connotations.

This study contributes to the understanding of portraying the visual identity of Chinese destinations through heritage elements in logo design as a branding strategy. The analytical results disclose a symbolic way of branding destinations by commodifying heritage in order to create a distinctive brand identity for Chinese destinations according to their social contexts and cultural attributes through the embodiment of multimodal elements. Therefore, this paper gives implications to cope with issues related to effective destination brand identity construction and destination branding in the tourism industry.

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