

## **History, modernity, and city branding in China: A multimodal critical discourse analysis of Xi'an's promotional videos on social media**

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# **History, modernity, and city branding in China: A multimodal critical discourse analysis of Xi'an's promotional videos on social media**

Abstract: In the digital age, cities around the world are mobilizing various symbolic resources to rebrand their images through social media. Against this background, this study investigates how Xi'an, a second-tier developing city in China, constructs its digitalized urban imaginary using the popular social media platform of TikTok. A semiotic framework is developed to model Xi'an's urban imaginary as evaluative attributes and to elucidate how they are constructed through linguistic and visual resources in short videos on TikTok. The analysis of 294 videos shows that Xi'an highlights its dual identity as a modern metropolis and a historical city. The modern metropolis image is characterized by the personification of Xi'an as a stylish, young, popular, and international microcelebrity; the historical city image is constructed through recreating the Great Tang dynasty and revitalizing local folk art. The characteristics of city branding discourse reflect China's *wanghong* economy, urban policies and the affordances of social media.

Keywords: city branding; social media; multimodal critical discourse analysis; promotional videos; China; TikTok

## **Introduction**

In order to enhance their global competitiveness, cities all over the world have been engaged in branding practices to construct their distinctive images (Kaika 2010). Accordingly, studies on city branding have proliferated in a variety of disciplines in recent years, such as tourism management (Francesconi 2011; Rabbiosi 2015, Dickinson et al. 2017), urban policies (Löfgren 2014; Ye and Björne 2018), and marketing (Dinardi 2017; Kaika 2010; Zhao 2015). The majority of the studies are from the perspective of urban policy and planning, investigating the complexities of constructing sustainable cities (Dickinson et al. 2017), urban greening and gentrification (Rigolon, Stewart, and Gobster 2020), immigrant assimilation and

international labor migration (Miranda 2020), and urban cultural policies (Aiello and Thurlow 2006; Dinardi 2017; Rabbiosi 2015; Riza 2015).

In the particular context of China, which this study is concerned with, studies have investigated the evolutionary mechanism of China's urban network (Löfgren 2014; Zhou and Wang 2014), city agglomerations (Ye and Björner 2018), rural migration and land ownership (Liu and Zhang 2020), the globalizing image and urban entrepreneurialism (Cartier 2001; Zhu, Qian, and Gao 2011), and public-private partnerships in urban architectural revitalization (Zhao 2015). These studies have observed that similar to cities in developed countries, Chinese cities are increasingly imbued with distinctive business characteristics: risk-taking, inventive, promotional and profit motivated (Ye and Björne 2018). Meanwhile, different from western cities, city labels in China are more "embedded in a planning system, where national and provincial governments occupy higher positions than local governments" (Lu and De Jong 2019, 154). However, despite the studies, we still lack an empirical understanding of how Chinese cities brand their identities, particularly using social media. Addressing this need, the present study adopts a discourse analysis perspective and investigates the construction of city identities through systematic analysis of multi-semiotic resources in social media short videos.

Discourse and semiotic analysis have been effectively used to analyze the construction of city identities in various media, such as publicity films (e.g. Aiello and Thurlow 2006; Flowerdew 2004; Yao and Zhuo 2018), magazines (e.g. Greenberg 2000), and tourist advertisements/brochures (e.g. Caldas-Coulthard 2008; Francesconi 2011; Hiippala 2007). For example, Flowerdew (2004), drawing on critical discourse analysis, genre theory and branding, investigates how Hong Kong discursively builds itself as a world-class city. Lam (2018) examines the official

branding of Hong Kong using corpus linguistic analysis and finds that Hong Kong is constructed as a business-oriented city through using technical jargons.

While linguistic analysis is fundamental in the discourse approach to city identity research, many have also taken nonlinguistic resources into consideration (e.g. Francesconi 2011; Hiippala 2007; Jones and Silviya 2017). For example, Francesconi (2011) investigates how the Malta tourist brochures utilize both the visual and verbal resources to create the cultural meanings of Malta and finds that the promoted core values are always communicated through visual text in the first place, and then are confirmed by the accompanying verbal text. Jones and Silviya (2017) investigate how city identity is multimodally constructed through architecture by analyzing the material, visual and rhetorical sign systems grounded in the architectures of Barcelona and Boston.

The present study develops the multimodal study of city identity by looking at Chinese cities' digitalized branding practice through social media short videos. As noted by Powell et al. (2018, 579), short videos' dynamic visual flow can yield "a richer depiction of reality than static images". Despite the growing popularity of video-sharing social media platforms (e.g. TikTok, Snapchat Featured stories, Whatsapp's "moments" and Instagram's stories), to our knowledge, there has been no study that examines how the city branding discourse is shaped by the affordance of social media short video clips, let alone in the context of China.

Our study is premised on the notion of "symbolic economy" (Zukin et al. 1998), which identifies the nexus between urban policies and the material commodification of different aspects of culture. To map out the distinctive attributes that cities created on social media, we borrow the notion of "urban imaginary" proposed by Zukin et al. (1998) and Greenberg (2000), which refers to

a coherent, historically based ensemble of representations drawn from the architecture and street plans of the city, the art produced by its residents, and the images of and discourse on the city as seen, heard, or read in movies, on television, in magazines, and other forms of mass media (Greenberg 2000, 228).

Adopting a critical multimodal discourse analysis method, we develop a semiotic framework to model Xi'an's digital image found in TikTok video clips as a set of evaluative attributes and to elucidate how they are constructed through verbal and visual resources. Our specific research questions include: 1) what are the distinctive urban imaginaries constructed in Xi'an's official TikTok videos, 2) how are the urban imaginaries realized through the use of linguistic and visual resources, and 3) what do the features of urban imaginaries reveal about urban policies in China and the influence of social media. In what follows, we will first introduce our theoretical basis of symbolic economy and city branding. We will then describe our data and analytical framework, which will be followed by an analysis of the urban imaginaries and their multimodal realization. Finally, the results will be discussed in relation to the current urban policies, affordances of social media, and implications for emerging second-tier cities' brands repositioning.

### **Symbolic economy, urban imaginary, and city branding in China**

With the shift from the manufacturing to the service-oriented economy, it is far from enough to satisfy consumers' functional needs; instead, promoters need to focus on the humanization of the products, that is to emphasize "the emotional and psychological linkages between scientifically calibrated consumer lifestyles and brand-name items" (Greenberg 2000, 229). As a result, very often there is "little apparent materiality to the 'products' bought and sold, and the exchange of capital hinges on the promotion of ideals, images and lifestyles in discourse" (Aiello and

Thurlow 2006, 149).

Like product branding, the “cultural turn” in urban studies has directed urban sociologists’ attention to the concept of “symbolic economy” (Zukin 1996), which points to the material commodification of cultural meanings that are attached to specific places. That is to say, the city landscape is not only produced in a material or geopolitical manner, but also through exploiting the cultural meaning potentials, where symbolic processes have become increasingly important for the urban experience (Hall, 2003). According to Zukin et al. (1998, 629), “the synthesis of symbolic and materialist analysis” is rooted in the “social imaginary”, which refers to “a mythologized, bot internalized, set of cultural meanings”.

An important concept derived from social imaginary and particularly useful for our study is “urban imaginary” (Zukin et al. 1998; Greenberg 2000, 2003). According to this concept, a city is essentially a space of cultural production and consumption, and ideal city brands are realized through the deliberate manipulation of the symbolic and emotional values (Zukin 1996; Aiello and Thurlow 2006). City promoters construct different urban imaginaries through the material commodification of fashion, food, music, and architectural designs (Zukin et al. 1998). They seek to forge emotional linkages between commodified cities and potential consumers (e.g., investors, corporate partners, tourists, and so on) in a way that “the name of the city alone will conjure up a whole series of images and emotions and with them an impression of value” (Greenberg 2000, 230). For example, Paris, being traditionally renowned for its fashion industry, is represented as a symbolic ideal for leisure consumption of pleasure (Rabbiosi 2015); Las Vegas through offering the promise of adventurous and spectacular, is symbolically viewed as a space full of the fantastic

(Zukin et al. 1998); Dubai, through using the rhetoric of super-eliteness, has become the marked space of luxury and prestige (Thurlow and Jaworski 2017).

In the context of China, city branding practice has transformed from functional material productions to symbolic cultural productions during the past few decades. Traditionally, the public could only learn about a city through advertisements made by local governments on television, magazines and other mass media platforms. As noted by Rothschild, Alon, and Fetscherin (2012, 97), at this stage, city promoters centered on cities' functional attributes (such as economic development, public services and infrastructure, and natural environment) rather than their emotional or symbolic values. Since the 2000s, with the digital transformation of the global economy, a chain of tourism websites and review microblogs (e.g., *Honeycomb*, *Fliggy*, and *Trip.com Group Ltd.*) have been established by commercial organizations or corporations to “create bottom-up social systems interested in sharing experiences, ideas and resources of different cities” (Dickinson et al. 2017, 163). In this business-sector-led phase, city elements whose “functions were considered as instrumental (use value) are being valorized through aesthetic concerns (sign value)” (Lloyd and Clark 2001, 371). In more recent years, with intensified competition among cities for tourists and investment, city governments have emphasized the central role of the cultural resources in their economies, and resorted to social media to present new brand images (Wang 2017). In a way, social media have become the game-changer in the urban landscape and allowed some second-tier or third-tier cities to construct their digitalized urban imaginaries. Some cities have

been particularly successful in mobilizing their cultural capitals and have become *wanghong*<sup>1</sup> cities on social media.

### **Data and methodology**

The city under investigation is Xi'an, which is chosen for its successful rebranding of its city image by deploying rich symbolic resources and leveraging on social media. As a traditional industrial city, Xi'an hit a bottleneck in the urban transformation process, and has been seeking new urban imaginaries in response to intensified inter-urban competition in the new millennium. In 2018, Xi'an Tourism Bureau began to modernize its city image and established a full-scale cooperation plan with TikTok, a leading social media platform for creating and sharing short videos in China. The collaboration, which resulted in effective exploitations of symbolic resources to transform its city image, made Xi'an "the most popular *wanghong* city" in China, surpassing tier-one cities like Beijing and Shanghai (Liu 2019). According to the *White paper of city image and short videos on social media*, up till December 2018, there were over 1.9 million TikTok videos related to the term "Xi'an" in hashtag, and the overall video views reached nearly 9 billion (Chinese Internet Data Centre 2018). The benefit of creating a *wanghong* image in the virtual world immediately manifested itself, with 50% increase of tourist revenue in 2018 (Li and Jiang 2018). This study collected all the 294 short videos Xi'an Tourism Bureau posted on TikTok from May 2018 to May 2019, which was the most critical period during which Xi'an gained the reputation of the most popular *wanghong* city.

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1 *Wanghong* is an online buzzword in China, originally referring to Chinese microcelebrities who gain fame on social media. Since 2016, the term has quickly seeped into institutional discourses and has become a new form of industry.



Our analysis of the city's urban imaginaries draws upon the method of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (Machin and Mayr 2012; Machin 2013). We consider city image as a set of evaluative attributes that are realized by different semiotic resources on the one hand, and are shaped by the broader socio-cultural context on the other hand. We argue that cities' urban imaginaries are not "transparent" and do not "speak for themselves", rather, they are the result of complex signifying processes, and should be interpreted based on the systematic analysis of the multimodal discourse (cf. Van Dijk 2007). Drawing upon Feng (2016), we propose a systematic framework to map out the multimodal realization of Xi'an's attributes, which is illustrated in Figure 1. The framework first distinguishes between attributes that are verbally articulated, either in the form of video subtitles or as utterance from characters, and attributes that are embedded in the visual depiction of sceneries and characters. Articulation can be further categorized into explicit and implicit ones. Explicit articulation refers to the use of attitudinal lexis (e.g. "fashionable", "stylish", and "splendid"), while implicit articulation resorts to facts or events that lead to a certain evaluation. For example, to represent Xi'an's international status, a video may explicitly label it as "an internationalized metropolis" or may articulate the evaluation implicitly by referring to the numbers of multinational companies in Xi'an.

Xi'an urban imaginaries are also constructed by visual depictions, which can be divided into depictions of sceneries and characters. Sceneries refer to Xi'an's scenic spots, including historical sites and cultural relics. As for the depiction of characters, we distinguish between actional process and analytical process, drawing upon Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006). Actional process refers to what a character is doing in the videos, such as dancing, singing and playing musical instruments. Analytical process refers to parts that constitute a person as a whole, including a

character's facial features, clothing, accessories, and other items that he/she "possesses".

[Figure 1 near here]

The approach integrates the identification of attributes and the analysis of how they are discursively manifested, which makes the analysis more explicit and reliable (cf. Bateman and Schmidt 2012, 2). In the coding of the dataset, an attribute was counted each time when it is constructed through verbal text or visual image. When the same attribute is co-constructed by both verbal and visual resources in the same video, only one instance was recorded. There are also cases where different attributes are concurrently constructed in different semiotic modes. For example, in a video, the subtitle is about preserving Chinese cultural tradition (a traditional attribute), while a young girl dancing to some trendy music is represented visually (a modern attribute). As a result, the total number of attributes exceeds that of the videos collected. The two authors co-coded 20% of the videos independently and the results were compared. The agreement was above 80% and differences were resolved through discussion.

## **Analysis**

### ***Overall distribution of attributes***

Based on the detailed analysis of the 294 videos, we identified a clear set of attributes that Xi'an uses to construct its urban imaginaries. The imaginary includes the image of a modern metropolis and the image of a historical city, as shown in Table 1. The modern city image is created through using *wanghong* rhetorical strategies, which are propelled by the global attention economy (Marwick 2013). The city is personified as

a popular microcelebrity who uses TikTok to create a set of popular imaginaries, including stylishness, youthfulness, fantasy city, popularity, and internationalness. These imaginaries allow Xi'an to abandon its original boring functional attractions and to create a landscape of mass entertainment, tourism and investment. The historical city image is constructed by representing Xi'an as an ancient capital, which includes exploiting the cultural symbols of the Great Tang dynasty and local folk art. The Great Tang dynasty is recreated through the appreciation of the past history, culture and landscape of the past, and local folk art (e.g. shadow-puppets, paper-cutting, worship parade). By creating a series of nostalgia-oriented, traditional cultural symbols, the idealized urban imaginary of "Great Tang" is combined with utopian visions of Xi'an's future growth. In what follows, we will provide a detailed analysis of how these attributes are discursively constructed in the official TikTok videos.

[Table 1 near here]

### *Xi'an as a modern metropolis*

#### *Stylishness*

Stylishness refers to the practice of strategically commodifying Xi'an as a stylish place for leisure shopping and consumption. We observe the overlexicalization of internet language and trendy slogans that implicitly "catwalk the city in style" (Löfgren 2014, 195) in 43 videos. Buzzwords like "make a salient debut (C位出道)", "clock in (打卡)", "physical appearance (颜值)", "*wanghong* (网红)" and "high in mood (好嗨哟)" successfully personify Xi'an as a popular microcelebrity on TikTok. Such personification enables Xi'an to speak to its audience in a conversational style

as if it were a real microcelebrity and perform all sorts of promotional activities, such as sharing unique shopping experiences, selling high-end commodities, and recommending trendy urban service. In particular, the trendy expression “clock in (打卡)” is frequently used to promote leisure consumption in Xi’an. The term originally refers to the recording of working attendance on a machine, but has quickly seeped into online tourism discourse with a consumerist sense, meaning “must-eat/visit/buy”. Many places have become *wanghong* destinations in the pattern of [*wanghong* -X], which include *wanghong* restaurants, *wanghong* bars, *wanghong* shopping malls, and *wanghong* plazas. By frequently using this term, Xi’an is commodified as a city of an entrepreneurial “new urban middle class”, for whom identities are always defined around “consumer lifestyles” (Greenberg 2000, 231). For example, Text 1 demonstrates how these terms are used to persuade audience into patronizing a local bar. Being self-positioned as the lifestyle adviser to the emerging middle class, Xi’an Tourism Bureau promotes “a new notion of urban lifestyle based entirely in individual consumption habits” (Greenberg 2000, 247).

Text 1: It is heard that all the coolest guys gather in this *wanghong* bar. Are you sure you don’t want to clock in? (听说最潮的小伙伴都在这家网红酒吧。你确定不来打卡?) (10-01-2019)

### *Youthfulness*

Youthfulness refers to the representation of young people as ambassadors for the city’s urban imaginary. The youthful attributes are embedded in the depiction of characters, including both the analytical process and the actional process. In terms of the analytical process, the youngsters’ unique wardrobe choices (e.g. jeans, mini-skirts, and sneakers) speak for their casual and youthful lifestyle (Machin 2007). For

example, as illustrated in Figure 2, by featuring a young girl in a chic outfit – a beret, a checked t-shirt, shorts, and ankle boots, the official video is transformed into a popular street-style vlog, further constructing the young spirit of Xi'an. In terms of the actional process, young people often demonstrate their special talents against the background of Xi'an's landmarks (e.g. dancing, skateboarding, showcasing football skills). In doing so, what is foregrounded is not just the grandeur of the historical landmark, but the individuality and vibrancy of young generations. For example, Figure 2 foregrounds the dancing girl in the medium shot and gives her great salience, while *Huaqing* Palace, a famous scenic spot, is in the background, serving as a setting for her performance. By promoting a youth-oriented urban imagery to the locals as well as investors and tourists, these videos attempt to erase the old urban imaginary of being an under-developed and outdated mid-western industrial city.

[Figure 2 near here]

### *Fantasy city*

The fantasy city image is the most distinctive feature of Xi'an's commodified modern cultural symbol. It uses the trendy concept of "time travel" in popular culture, where characters are represented as traveling through time to the past or the future, to construct a fantastic urban imaginary. These TikTok videos are featured by the combination of factual accounts and fictional narratives. Such mixture is what Halliday (2013, 65) characterizes as "the current fashion for fake histories", where "fictional stories woven around real people and events, blurring the distinction between chronicle and fantasy".

The videos on the theme of time travel can be divided into two types. First, 9 videos depict modern characters suddenly finding themselves in ancient China upon

waking up. Such backward time travel is seldom articulated verbally; rather, it is signaled clearly in the character depiction through their physical features (analytical process) and actions (actional process). In terms of the analytical process, backward time travel is represented through the sudden change of characters' clothing from modern attire to traditional *Hanfu*<sup>2</sup>. For example, all the characters in Figure 3 are dressed up in the style of the Tang dynasty, including their clothing, hairstyle, and accessories, which foregrounds elements that symbolize ancient Chinese. As for the actional process, characters' modern activities (e.g. going window shopping and eating out) are replaced with ancient ones (e.g. performing Tang dance and playing court music with traditional musical instruments).

[Figure 3 near here]

Aside from modern people traveling back to the past, 28 videos feature cartoonized historical or legend characters (e.g. ancient warriors, door guardians, and the first emperor of the Qin dynasty) traveling through time to the modern world. In this way, the consciously manipulated images of traditional characters with rich cultural connotation are commodified and form an important element in the city's symbolic economy. The most popular one is *Qin-style Boy*, a cartoon character inspired by China's famous Terracotta Warriors<sup>3</sup>. The modernization of the dully gray sculpture can be analyzed in terms of both analytical and actional processes. In terms

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2 Hanfu, literally “dress of the Han dynasty”, refers to ancient Chinese clothing. Due to its embedded cultural values, Hanfu is regarded as a traditional Chinese symbol.

3 Praised as the “Eighth Wonder of the World”, the scenic spot of the Terracotta Army of the First Emperor of Qin is a popular landmark in Xi’an, attracting global tourists every year.

of the analytical process, *Qin-style Boy* shows various micro facial expressions such as casting a wry glance and raising eyebrows, which connote coolness (see Figure 4). To further increase the visual salience and signify the character's passionate personality, *Qin-style Boy*'s armor is artistically designed with rich and saturated colors. As for the actional process, serving as Xi'an's mascot, he is always depicted as playing trendy sports (e.g. skateboarding) or dancing to trendy music against the background of famous landmarks in Xi'an. For example, Figure 4 depicts *Qin-style Boy* performing Michael Jackson's Dangerous Routine. As shown above, the "time travel" concept enables Xi'an to integrate its local intangible heritage into TikTok videos, which invites the audience to see beyond its ancient city' image and pay attention to its accessible and cultural-creative city image.

[Figure 4 near here]

### *Popularity*

In today's digital economy, social media traffic metrics such as page views, clicks, and likes can be monetized to generate profits and create values (Marwick 2013). As a new feature of symbolic economy in the social media context, attention seeking has become an important means for Xi'an's brand creation. To stand out in the attention economy, the videos mainly adopt two strategies on TikTok, namely, leveraging trending topics on the internet and featuring celebrities.

First, 13 TikTok videos rely on the use of #hashtags to cover the hottest topics on the internet, such as "#Peppa Pig", "#the song of *Handclap*", and "#Paying tribute to Michael Jackson". This form of textual resource enables the videos to become searchable on TikTok, further creating a persuasive rhetoric to attract the audience's attention. Apart from the #hashtag, trending topics are sometimes introduced or

referred to in the form of directives (8 TikTok videos). Text 2 is a typical example which manages to integrate the trending topic “#Peppa Pig” into the video description by urging viewers to forget about the cartoon character and focus on what is more important, that is, Chinese New Year celebrations in Xi’an.

Text 2: Stop asking who is #Peppa Pig/ The most important thing right now is to celebrate the Chinese New Year! **#Xi’an’s New Year, the most distinctly Chinese** Leading the fashion of new year celebrations (别问啥是#佩琦了, 眼下最重要的是过年 #西安年最中国 引领新年时尚) (18-01-2019)

Another strategy for Xi’an to create its popular urban imaginary is via celebrity branding, which is constantly used in institutional discourse to establish “credential and prestige” (Xiong 2012, 327). Chinese popular singers, movie stars, and comedians are featured in 20 official TikTok videos. These videos are characterized by a sense of authenticity, with celebrities displaying spontaneous performance. Different from the typical “powerful elite” image constructed in the mainstream media, these celebrities are depicted as coming close to the general public (e.g. singing, dancing and taking selfies with fans). For example, Figure 5 features Wowkie Zhang, a well-known Chinese singer, giving an impromptu concert with his fans at the foot of Xi’an Nanmen. The fans’ singing and waving arms creates a sense of affection, fun and energy in the video (Machin and Mayr 2012).

[Figure 5 near here]

### *Internationalness*

According to Zhu, Qian and Gao (2011, 221), internationalization has already become a key strategy through which “Chinese cities adjust and reshape their economic, social, political and cultural structures”. To highlight its growing internationalness,



Xi'an constructs its urban imaginary as a global hub of enterprise on the one hand, and a world center for arts and heritage on the other.

First, Xi'an typically recounts three types of information to implicitly construct its urban imaginary as an international entrepreneurial city, namely, the range of state-of-the-art economic development zones and high-tech industrial precincts, collaborations with transnational corporations, and the organization of international conferences. A striking rhetorical feature of these videos is the predominant use of neoliberal buzzwords such as "innovative industry", "knowledge economy", and "global trend". By consciously manipulating the "empty rhetoric of corporate-speak" (Machin and Mayr 2012, 33) and emphasizing on progress-related symbolic values, these videos represent Xi'an as an important center for global business. Aside from buzzwords, 11 TikTok videos use the sign "@" to initiate dialogues with different business stakeholders, further creating a strong business image for the city. For example, Text 3 uses the sign to direct the content to *Trip.com Group Ltd.* (a popular online tourism corporation) and invite interaction, which creates "a sense of business-like activity and drive" (Machin and Mayr 2012, 34).

**Text 3: The 2018 World Culture and Tourism Forum**-Local and international big names in the field of cultural tourism gather together in Xi'an on 9 October to discuss new trends of cultural tourism@ *Trip.com Group Ltd* (2018 世界文化旅游大会峰会-海内外文旅大咖 10月9日相约西安, 共话文旅产业新兴之路@携程旅游) (08-10-2018)

The second way of highlighting Xi'an's global status is to report international sporting and cultural events (e.g. marathons, beauty pageants, folk art exhibitions and lectures) held in Xi'an (26 videos). The representation of this aspect of internationalness relies on two types of resources, namely, verbal intensification and

visual depictions. First, 18 TikTok posts are featured by the extensive use of motivational tones, positive wording and superlatives to entice potential investors. This is realized by degree adjectives, such as “a complete success”, “a great contribution to the world heritage”, “what a splendid event”, “in full bloom”, “the newest equipment”, and “the latest technology”, all denoting high intensity of evaluation (Martin and White 2005). These important offline events fit well in the theme of globalization, and become “semioticized” in the branding videos (Aiello and Thurlow 2006, 149). Second, visual images are often used to depict high-profile ambassadors, overseas students, foreign tourists and music bands having fun in Xi’an (15 videos). These visual depictions are featured by a sense of frenetic enthusiasm, which use “the very rapid cutting from one image to the next and the simultaneous restless movement of the camera during many of the shots” (Flowerdew 2004, 595).

### *Xi’an as a historical city*

#### *Recreating the Great Tang dynasty*

Highlighting historical heritage and lineage associations is an essential branding strategy for many cities to attract tourists (Zhao 2015). Chinese people are all aware of Xi’an’s glorious past as ancient Chang’an<sup>4</sup> in the Tang dynasty, and it is precisely such an aura of grandeur that the city government tries to capitalize on. An idealized history of the “ancient Chang’an” was reinvented by the conscious manipulation of traditional cultural symbols. The process of mediatization and commodification of

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4 As the grand capital of 13 dynasties, Chang’an reached its apogee during the Tang dynasty.

It was not only the largest city in the world, but also the political, economic and administrative nexus, marking the gateway to the Silk Road.

Xi'an's utopian historical visions allows the audience to re-interpret the past into the future and re-envision the city's status in China. This strategy involves recounting the profound history and splendid culture of the Tang dynasty, and recreating the Chang'an landscape.

The history of the Tang dynasty is represented in 19 videos surrounding different themes such as military forces, fashion, urbanization, and natural science development. Instead of overtly stating its historic status, the videos implicitly construct it by comparing the social development of Chang'an with that of overseas cities during the Tang dynasty. This strategy can be explained by Machin and Mayr's (2012, 19) concept of structural oppositions: "texts often use different referential choices or actional lexis to imply opposites, to make events and issues appear simplified in order to control their meaning". For example, in Text 4, different word choices are used to make comparisons. As far as referential terms are concerned, while overseas cities and countries are referred to neutrally as "Nara in Japan" and "European countries", Chang'an is described as "a world-class empire", "a fashion capital" and "an international hub". These referential terms function to evoke the grandeur of Chang'an and the pride among Chinese people. The opposing patterns can also be identified in the actional lexis. Actions associated with Chang'an include the popularization of dyed garments, the compilation of *Taien Calendar*, the measurement of the length of the meridian arc, and the establishment of a full-time university, which all suggests civilization, professionalization, and organization. In contrast, foreign cities are described as "prohibited the general public from wearing dyed clothes", foreign countries as "had just recovered from wars and chaos", and foreign kids as "could only study religious texts", which all suggest disorganization, uncivilization, and incompetence.

Text 4: A brief history of the Tang dynasty: a world-class empire

Chang'an was an invincible power in the world during the Great Tang dynasty. While the Great Tang Empire was on the rise, European countries had just recovered from wars and chaos. As a fashion capital, Tang's Chang'an saw the vogue of the pomegranate colored skirt, while at the same time Nara in Japan prohibited the general public from wearing dyed clothes due to a lack of resources. Monk Yixing compiled the *Taien calendar* to guide agricultural production, and was the world's first scientist to measure the length of meridian arc. As an international hub, Chang'an established the first full-time university [in the world], while at the same period, kids in Europe could only study religious texts in churches. (中国简史之唐朝：世界性的帝国 处于盛唐时期的长安，在世界上的强势地位可谓是无后来者，而在大唐帝国崛起的同时，欧洲大陆的国家才刚刚从混乱中回归稳定。作为时尚之都，石榴裙在唐朝盛行，与此同时日本的奈良却因为资源匮乏禁止平民穿染色的衣服。高僧一行编写大衍历，指导农业生产，是世界上第一个实测子午线的科学家。作为国际化大都市，长安建立第一所全日制大学，而同时期欧洲的孩子只能在修道院学神学。) (20-08-2018)

The cultural heritage of the Tang dynasty is often represented through quotes from Tang poems and visual images. First, 21 videos either quote Tang poems or draw on the rhyming parallel structure to remind readers of Xi'an's rich literary heritage from the Tang dynasty. For example, Text 5 refers to a well-known poem to describe the beautiful scenery of the Great Tang Hibiscus Garden, a grand Tang dynasty theme park. Second, 38 videos visually highlight the cultural appeal of the Tang dynasty, most often via the depiction of characters. To construct a hegemonic attitude towards Chinese cultural heritage, local residents dressed in their normal clothes are depicted as practising Chinese calligraphy, traditional paintings, Tang poems, and other generic traditional cultural symbols of Tang dynasty in their daily lives. These repetitively used cultural symbols form "legitimate symbolic capital" (Aiello and Thurlow 2006, 160) for the construction of Tang Dynasty.

Text 5: “Tined cloudlets are likened unto her raiment.

And the flowers unto her mien.

Spring zephyrs along the balustrade

Gently brush the crystal dew’s sheen.”<sup>5</sup>

Come have a chance encounter with @Lady in the Great Tang Hibiscus Garden

(“云想衣裳花想容，春风拂槛露华浓”。快来和@大唐芙蓉园的仕女小姐姐

偶遇吧！)(13-11-2018)

Recreating the Chang’an landscape refers to the visual blurring of the image of modern Xi’an and that of ancient Chang’an. This most significantly relies on the scenery depiction. 32 videos include panoramic shots of Xi’an’s scenic spots and architectures, which are usually accompanied by the title “Once..., Xi’an transforms into Chang’an”. In this way, Xi’an’s identity is historically embedded in its architectures, which constitutes a memory form, allowing us to re-interpret the past into the future (Jones and Silviya 2017). The represented idealized version of “Chang’an landscape” on TikTok can be regarded as a combination between the material and symbolic values: on the one hand, Xi’an’s scenic spots and architectures serve as material referents, which enable people to read and locate themselves within the city; on the other hand, their photographic images are stylized as a symbolic referents, constructing the urban imaginary of Xi’an. Two types of “Chang’an landscape” can be identified in our data, namely snowy Chang’an and bustling Chang’an.

First, 9 videos feature the city’s snowy scenes under the title “Once it snows, Xi’an transforms into Chang’an”. This scenery depiction is characterized by the

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<sup>5</sup> This is a quote from *For Qing-ping Tunes* by Li Bai, who is regarded as the most prominent Chinese poet in the Tang dynasty. The translation is made by Zhao (2019, p.92) in her book *English translation of Tang poetry*.

predominance of inky white with different tones. As illustrated in Figure 6, with vivid colors being drained out by white snow, the monochromatic landscape has a similar effect of traditional Chinese painting, which connotes a sense of “timelessness” (Machin 2007). In contrast, 23 videos make use of rich and saturated colors to compare bustling scenes in modern Xi’an to the prosperity of ancient Chang’an under the title of “Once the light is on, Xi’an transforms into Chang’an”. These videos feature a panoramic view of a neon light show lighting up famous tourist spots, with the enhanced level of brightness. This increased saturation of colors gives the audience a highly sensuous experience, and is typically used to enhance the “emotional engagement of products” (Machin 2007, 56). For example, in Figure 7, with the help of bright lighting effects enabled by the modern technology, the iconic 600-year-old architecture is revived in the night scenery. As a unique cultural symbol that encapsulates the city’s historical memory, these artificially illuminated images of Xi’an’s landscape invoke a commodified, distinctive traditional city identity.

[Figure 6 near here]

[Figure 7 near here]

### *Revitalizing folk culture*

Apart from evoking the grandeur of the Tang capital, Xi’an’s “historical city” image is also constructed through the revival of local folk culture, which is “not a recent Chinese branding experience, but a historical and worldwide phenomenon” (Wu 2008, 23). Given Xi’an’s rich folk cultural resources, 47 videos depict people participating in folk art exhibitions or activities in Xi’an’s scenic spots. Symbols of diverse folk art practices, through the process of commodification and mediatization,

have regained popularity among the younger generation. In particular, under the slogan “#Xi’an’s New Year, the most distinctly Chinese”, 35 TikTok videos rebrand the ritual of Xi’an’s new year celebrations as a unique experience for all people.

This branding practice relies most heavily on the depiction of characters, including both local people and tourists. It is remarkable that both tourists and local residents are homogenized as a collective group engaging in the same cultural projects, making similar gestures, and performing similar actions (cf. the attribute of youthfulness is constructed via the depiction of individual young people). As active agents, people in the videos are always represented in actional process related to Chinese (in)tangible cultural heritage, e.g. making shadow-puppets, paper-cutting, and participating in worship parades. For example, Figure 8 depicts a group of smiling tourists breaking rice wine bowls for good fortune, a traditional new-year ritual. By representing how tourists enjoy local folk art, this branding practice creates a geographic identity or a “pan-Xi’an identity” among all people who love local folk culture. Such cultural practice builds an inclusive image of Xi’an, legitimizing it as a center of public recreation for everyone. By incorporating the “gorgeous mosaic” of new faces into visual representations of the city, it serves to attract the tourist gaze, “producing a spill-over effect between online and offline engagement” (Vissers and Stolle 2014, 27) and contributing to the niche market of “tourist-oriented cultural entrepreneurialism” (Dinardi 2017, 88).

[Figure 8 near here]

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The above analysis shows that Xi’an uses TikTok videos to construct a digitalized urban imaginary which includes attributes of both a modern metropolis and a

historical city. These attributes are realized through the deployment of various linguistic and visual resources in multimodal videos. In this section, we will discuss the new branding strategies and discursive features in relation to the broader socio-cultural and socio-technical contexts in contemporary China.

As demonstrated in the analysis of the metropolis image, Xi'an Tourism Bureau rebrands itself as a rising microcelebrity on TikTok through a series of *wanghong* rhetorical strategies, such as recommending leisure items (Stylishness), interacting with young people (Youthfulness), depicting "time travel" fantasies (Fantasy city), featuring celebrities and trending topics (Popularity), and reporting high-profile events (Internationalness). These modern aspects of urban imaginary commodified Xi'an as a landscape of mass entertainment, tourism and investment. Apart from utilizing *wanghong* cultural symbols, the videos also highlight traditional cultural symbols by recreating the Tang dynasty and reviving folk culture. Through the careful manipulation of traditional symbolic images (such as the Chinese calligraphy, traditional paintings, Tang poem, and "Chang'an landscape"), the historical sense of the "proto-Xi'an" as the thriving world center has come to be equated with contemporary appeals of the "pan-Xi'an" identity. By resemiotizing the contemporary and traditional cultural symbols on various material artifacts, Xi'an's modern and historical urban imaginaries have become a "structured reality" (Thurlow and Jaworski 2017, 553), which discursively contribute to the development of symbolic economy. In other words, the constructed urban imaginaries created a ripple effect from online to offline engagement, attracting tourism and investment. Such a visible-invisible staging of Xi'an's unique cultural images reflects what Thurlow and Jaworski (2017, 553) call the "synaesthetic rhetorics", which "toggle constantly between the material and symbolic, between the tangible and intangible".



The unique features of Xi'an's digitalized urban imaginary are shaped by China's urban policies and the affordances of TikTok. In terms of the urban policies, the videos reveal the city government's exploitation of symbolic resources in branding Xi'an on social media. Through highlighting the intertwined dispositions of different cultural symbols in urban policies, the city government intends to "pursue distinction" (Bourdieu 1985, 730), gaining an advantage in the current attention economy. To create a distinctive symbolic system, the Xi'an government capitalizes on the *wanghong* phenomenon for its creation of a youth-oriented urban imaginary. As noted by Han (2020, 1), *wanghong* in contemporary China has "gone through a rapid process of professionalization and institutionalisation", and is often represented as something more akin to consumer lifestyle choices (than real microcelebrities). According to the Xinhua News Agency (2018), to follow the current *wanghong* economic model, Xi'an Tourism Bureau has adopted an entrepreneurial approach and stipulated four principles in its urban image repositioning policy, that is, utilizing the cultural narratives as a branding device, customizing Xi'an themed challenges on social media, inviting KOL (key opinion leaders) to record video-logging in Xi'an, and producing personalized, glamorous short-videos related to Xi'an (Li and Jiang 2018). These four principles reflect the institutional emphasis on symbolic values in rebranding the city's image. By integrating the popular *wanghong* economic model into its urban policy, Xi'an government has successfully transformed its city image from an under-developed industrial city to a trendy and popular one.

Meanwhile, the promotional videos reflect the city government's systematic exploitation and promotion of traditional Chinese cultural symbols in its urban imaginary. This can be regarded as the Party-state's attempt to redevelop "a comprehensive national cultural identity that integrates traditional values with

contemporary life” (Cao 2014, 27). As a vital part of China’s soft power building strategy, cultural rejuvenation has become increasingly highlighted in contemporary cyberspace (Wang 2017). To re-connect with the glorious past of the Tang Dynasty, Xi’an Tourism Bureau privileges the cultural symbols or “mythologies” about the ancient past of Chang’an. Such “mesmerizing new aesthetic mode of nostalgia” (Keblińska 2017, 129) can provide a “giddy escape” from reality and invoke the audience’s appreciation for Xi’an’s contemporary urban imaginary (Zukin et al. 1998).

Finally, the digitalized urban imaginary is shaped by the technological affordances of TikTok, which make it different from branding discourse in traditional media. Informed by previous studies (e.g. Feng 2019; Treem and Leonardi 2013) and the present data, we summarize four central affordances of TikTok, namely editability, portability, connectivity, and multimodality. Editability refers to TikTok’s affordance of allowing users to create, modify and revise their short videos, which can “allow for more purposeful communication” than traditional documents (Treem and Leonardi 2013, 160). With a higher level of editorial control, Xi’an Tourism Bureau can tailor their contents accordingly, with specific label choices targeting at specific stakeholders (e.g. the label of “internalization” for investors, and the “revival of folk-art” for tourists). Portability refers to TikTok’s affordance of allowing users to read the branding videos anytime and anywhere. This makes it necessary to create appealing videos and engage viewers’ attention. Therefore, the official videos adopt a casual expression style, draw on the currently fashionable concept of “time travel”, feature celebrities and trending topics. Connectivity refers to the convenience of building connections between individuals (via the sign “@”), and between an individual and a topic (via hashtags#). Such connectivity can “supplement existing

relationships and create a greater sense of community” (Treem and Leonardi 2013, 164). Multimodality refers to TikTok’s affordance of allowing users to manipulate multimodal resources such as visual depictions of characters (e.g. youngsters, celebrities, local people, and tourists) and scenes (e.g. “snowy Chang’an” and “bustling Chang’an”) in TikTok.

The socio-technological transformation of Xi’an’s branding practice can shed light on the construction of urban imaginaries for emerging second-tier cities in China and other countries which are seeking transformation from a functional to a symbolic economy. First, with the development of modern technologies and global consumerism, differentials in city’s “representational and promotional power have widened” (Greenberg 2000, 229), and it is important to draw on appropriate branding tactics to promote cities. To distinguish themselves from highly urbanized megacities with well-established brand images, second-ranked cities need to create their unique local cultural symbols and avoid reproducing similar images (such as the use of homogeneous skyscrapers and bustling traffic to highlight economic prosperity). Second, Xi’an provides a successful example of collaborating with social media platforms. In the digital age, social media can be a game-changer in the urban landscape and cities need to make effective use of social media to build their urban imaginaries. Third, on a more critical note, despite the benefits of symbolic economy, it should be noted that the multimodal representation of Xi’an’s urban imaginary is regulated by an authoritatively constituted knowledge that limits the range of available resources (cf. Foucault 1980). To some extent, it reflects Bourdieu’s (2001) notion of symbolic violence, in which “the symbolic economy further constrains non-hegemonic groups” (Schwarz 2016, 2). As demonstrated in the analysis, the constructed imaginaries are always middle-class and young generation oriented,

which may make other social groups, in particular, the minority or disadvantaged groups feel unwelcomed or excluded. A more inclusive approach might be needed in the creation of promotional materials to appeal to a wider range of audience.

To conclude, this study provides new understandings of digitalized city branding practice in the socio-cultural context of contemporary China. Adopting a multimodal critical discourse analysis approach, it explicates how Xi'an's city branding discourse is shaped by the city's urban policies and the affordances of social media on the one hand, and how it is realized through the deployment of linguistic and visual resources on the other hand. Xi'an's tourist-oriented urban imaginary, which is characterized by the effective hybridization of attributes of a modern metropolis and a historical city, reveals an unmistakable orientation towards symbolic economy. Xi'an's successful transformation into a *wanghong* city through social media provides useful references for other cities which are striving to develop their symbolic economy. Methodologically, it develops an explicit semiotic framework for systematically describing the realization of urban imaginaries through language and images in multimodal videos. The framework can be applied to analyzing the multimodal construction of corporate identities, institutional identities and so on beyond the Chinese context. In the digital age where the internet, and social media in particular, has transformed how we communicate and consume, new forms of institutional discourse are emerging rapidly. Multi-disciplinary and contextualized theoretical accounts are needed to understand their new meanings and the complex semiotic resources for realizing the meanings. This study is a modest step towards such an understanding and it is hoped that it can inspire further semiotic studies on various forms of digitalized institutional discourse in new contexts.

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Table 1. The distribution of modern and historical attributes

Figure 1. The multimodal construction of attributes

Figure 2. Young people's self-expression (30-11-2018)

Figure 3. 'Time travel' theme (22-11-2018)

Figure 4. Cartoon character inspired by Terracotta Warriors (06-08-2018)

Figure 5. An impromptu concert (18-10-2018)

Figure 6. Snowy Chang'an (27-12-2018)

Figure 7. Bustling Chang'an (30-01-2019)

Figure 8. Support and commitment from tourists (15-02-2019)

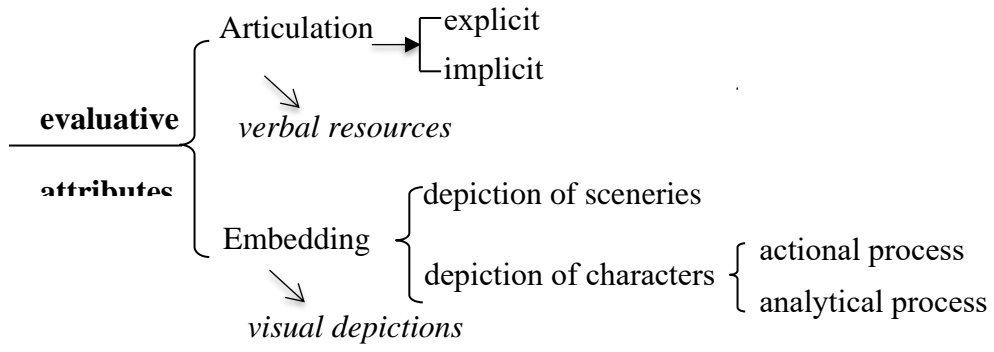


Figure 1. The multimodal construction of attributes



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

Table 1. The distribution of modern and historical attributes

Modern metropolis (197)	Historical city (136)
Stylishness (43)	Recreating the Tang dynasty (89)
Youthfulness (39)	
Fantasy city (37)	Revitalizing folk art (47)
Popularity (33)	
Internationalness (45)	