

# Symbol and Communication: Study on the Relationship Between Exhibition Activities and City Image and Its Application Taking Hangzhou City as an Example

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## ABSTRACT

Taking Hangzhou City, Zhejiang Province as an example, this paper studies the communication characteristics in the process of city image formation from the perspective of urban exhibition activities. By investigating the core words of the city image of Hangzhou, the paper finds that during the historical evolution of the city image of Hangzhou from "food paradise" to "exhibition capital", exhibition activities have played an important role in the promotion process and become the builder of city image symbols. From the perspective of communication, exhibition activities have symbolic characteristics. The exhibitions, marketing, performances and other forms are transformed into visual and auditory symbols, and the city image is constructed through the symbols and index. The exhibition itself has media attribute. Through the recreation and reproduction in the activity, it has formed a unique scene, feeling and atmosphere. Therefore, as the urban medium, exhibition activities have the function of encoding the field of urban value, morality and aesthetic significance, play the signifier and signified role of symbols, and affect the public's psychological acceptance. Hangzhou City should seize the opportunity of hosting the Asian Games in 2022, and develop new connotations of the city image from the perspective of concrete, abstract and ritualized symbol communication.

**Keywords:** *symbol, exhibition activities, city image, communication*

## I. INTRODUCTION

City image refers to the general appearance and characteristics of a city in public psychology. It is often condensed into language symbols, visual symbols, abstract symbols, etc. And it has the functions of transmitting core value, obtaining comprehensive evaluation and leading the development of the city.

## II. THE SYMBOLIC ESSENCE OF CITY IMAGE

If a city is regarded as the cultural text, there are not only materialized images of buildings, streets and monuments, but also virtual images of

literature, advertising, film and television, popular culture and so on. The public accepts these images by the symbol of "city image", which is put forward by Kevin Lynch in his book "City Image". [1] According to Ferdinand de Saussure, a symbol is composed of two closely connected parts: signifier and signified. Signifier refers to the object or sounds itself, and has the material form; signified refers to the image, and is the concept represented by symbol. [2] Roland Barthes wrote "Semiotics and the city" on this basis, pointing out that many fundamental social ideologies and values are not obvious, but embedded in cultural products and concrete practices. These are "mythical rhetoric" in daily life [3].

Exhibition activities refer to regular or irregular social gathering activities, and they are formed in certain groups of people in a certain space. The main forms include festivals, exhibitions, conferences, performances, competitions, etc. From the perspective of semiotics, it is not difficult to

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find that the huge cultural public space created by the exhibition activities, strengthened full participation and concentrated media bombing have transformed the activities into visual and auditory symbols. It is to recreate and reproduce combined with art exhibition, marketing, performance and other forms, forming a unique scene, feeling, taste and atmosphere. In a word, exhibition activities can code the city into a symbolic field of value, morality and aesthetics, and have a great function in shaping the city image.

### **III. RESEARCH FROM CONCRETIZATION TO SIGNIFIER: THE FORMATION OF THE CORE SYMBOL OF HANGZHOU CITY IMAGE**

In the new century, Hangzhou puts forward the core expressions of city image, such as "food paradise (2000)", "city of love (2001)", "city of leisure (2002)", "city of animation (2005)", "city of quality of life (2007)", "Hangzhou as the tea city (2012)" and "Exhibition City (2016)".

It is not difficult to find that the exhibition industry has played an important role in the construction of Hangzhou city image symbols. "The impact of large-scale urban activities on the city image is all-round and profound. Once it is included in the policy agenda of a city, it will have an impact on public policy for more than ten years." [4] The signifier of Hangzhou city image symbols formed from the concrete activities of exhibition can be summarized into two modes.

#### *A. The index of city image symbol*

In Peirce's opinions, there is a real corresponding relationship between the symbol form and the indicated symbol object, so that the symbol form can indicate or index the symbol object, which is the indicative way of index. [5]

In 2000, Hangzhou held the "Chinese food festival" for the first time. Through the selection of famous restaurants, catering development forum, Hangzhou top 30 catering and other activities, the symbol of "food paradise" was set. After that, Hangzhou's "food festival" continued to expand to Nanjing, Xi'an, Taipei and other cities. In 2008, Hangzhou and the permanent mission of China to the United Nations jointly held the "China (Hangzhou) Food Festival" at the United Nations, bringing Hangzhou's image of "food paradise" to the world. Afterwards, Hangzhou food festival has spread to Singapore, the United States and other countries. In 2019, the food festival along "the Belt and Road" was held. So far, Hangzhou and delicious food are deeply rooted in the hearts of the people.

It is true for "the city of love". In October 1991, 152 couples were invited to the first wedding

ceremony "Love at the West Lake", which became a social hot spot. In addition to the annual rose wedding ceremony, a variety of wedding activities such as traditional weddings, weddings on the lake, golden and silver weddings, were also created. With the development of "Hangzhou International Marriage and Tourism Festival" in 2012, the first "Qixi Cultural Festival" in 2014, the "love train" on Metro Line 1, and the honeymoon revisit in 2015, Hangzhou's reputation as "the city of love" has expanded rapidly.

Hangzhou plans a series of exhibition activities about food and love, which makes its symbol object always a certain event related to the region, that is, the event is equal to the symbol.

#### *B. The symbolization of city image symbols*

The construction of city images of Hangzhou, such as "city of animation" and "city of leisure", originates from the development of a series of exhibition activities such as Hangzhou International Animation Festival and World Leisure Expo. In other words, the naming of exhibition activities is conducive to the construction of the city image symbols. Taking "the city of animation" as an example, Hangzhou has held 15 international animation festivals. With the development of a series of supporting activities such as "the animation expo", "golden monkey award" and "animation forum", the internal connection between Hangzhou and animation has been deeply rooted in the hearts of people with the continuous promotion of the festival. Peirce thinks that although there is no iconicity between the symbol form and the symbol object, the representation way is to strengthen the indication function and develop the habit socially agreed through artificial creation. [5] In 2007, Hangzhou proposed "city of quality of life", which was followed by a large number of forum, experience, evaluation and other activities. In 2016, Hangzhou proposed the "city of exhibition" due to the G20 Summit. The relationship between exhibition activities and city image symbols in Hangzhou coincides with Roland Barthes' research on urban semiotics. City, as a symbol system of signifier, is a logical structure and relationship that can be clearly described. The generation and representation of a city implied is realized through various practices, phenomena and activities as an ideographic system. [3]

Starting from the exhibition activities in a city, the construction of the relationship between activity practice (concrete image) and image symbol (signifier) is the first meaning of city image construction, and the symbol also has the second meaning, namely, the spiritual value (signified). Symbol is not the content of the objects in the material world, but belongs to the part of human subjective interpretation of the world. In the sense

of communication, symbol is not a simple information carrier or communication tool, but a collection of human spiritual world.

#### **IV. THE MEDIA SIGNIFICANCE OF EXHIBITION ACTIVITIES AS CITY IMAGE COMMUNICATION**

##### *A. The media attribute of exhibition activities*

The essence of exhibition activities is the medium or carrier of the exchanges among the material, spirit and information. [6] Therefore, from the perspective of communication, exhibition is the carrier of information exchange. "Communication is an activity in which human beings exchange information through symbols and media with a view to corresponding changes." [7] One of the cores of communication is information exchange, which is also the core attribute of exhibition. Exhibition is a kind of media with communication attribute in specific time and space. The participants of exhibition exchange information in exhibition activities, which has the characteristics of two-way interactive communication, such as presence, openness and interaction.

Harold Lasswell's "5W mode" (Who, Says What, In Which Channel, To Whom and With What Effect) is known as the classic communication mode. Using this communication mode to investigate the information dissemination process of the exhibition, it is found that the exhibition activities fully conform to the "5W mode": who (organizers, exhibitors) — say what (products, service content, etc.) — in which channel (site, media, flyers, etc.) — to whom (visitors, audience) — with what effect (trade, cognition, etc.).

##### *B. Unique ways of exhibition activities to spread the city image*

Communication media can be divided into narrow sense and broad sense. The media in narrow sense includes radio, television, magazines, Internet, etc.; and the media in a broad sense refers to all information dissemination carriers. From the perspective of communication, symbols exist in the whole process of communication, involving the interaction among all participants such as the communicator and the receiver. This paper takes the G20 Summit (Hangzhou) as an example. The summit is actually a media field in a broad sense, which is full of media with different attributes, such as mass media, supporting activities of the summit, and the real object of G20 Summit (Hangzhou) carrying urban culture. The supporting activities of G20 Summit (Hangzhou) mainly include various conferences and forums, artistic performances, dinners, folk activities, etc. The objects of G20

Summit (Hangzhou) mainly include all kinds of publicity materials and exhibits at the venue, such as the panoramic mural of West Lake in the state banquet hall, the program list and menu with silk elements, Wang Xingji fan and Changhua bloodstone. It is not difficult to find that the symbolic significance of the summit is obvious, namely, the symbol with the Chinese cultural spirit is the core. When human beings use symbols to produce meaning, the process of using symbols is the process of meaning transmission. With the media role of G20 Summit, Hangzhou integrates the city concept and characteristics into various symbols and services of the summit, which is a centralized and interactive communication of Hangzhou city image.

##### *C. Exhibition activities promote the "embedded" communication of city image*

As an "embedded" event, G20 Summit (Hangzhou) has brought Hangzhou a new image of "city of exhibition" and "summit". On the one hand, summit is a hot political event, and the main body of its communication is composed of different types of subjects, such as the government, the public, enterprises, media and so on. There is no doubt that the main body of communication of national political events is the government. However, the G20 Summit (Hangzhou) has broken through the government-led, media-assisted and public-watching mode. The main body of urban communication has "shifted". Hangzhou is the only city in China to hold G20 international conferences. It fills in the gap and the audience's desire for communication is enhanced, naturally attracting the attention of the whole country.

On the other hand, the summit gathered a large number of media in China and foreign countries, forming the agglomeration effect. In particular, the mainstream media highlighted Hangzhou's image of being suitable for business, living, traveling and learning, perfectly integrating modern and traditional culture, and establishing a more comprehensive and three-dimensional city image.

#### **V. ANALYSIS ON THE STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING THE CITY IMAGE THROUGH EXHIBITION ACTIVITIES**

The 2022 Asian Games (Hangzhou) is a large-scale city exhibition activity after the G20 Summit (Hangzhou). And it is also a good opportunity for the new construction and deep communication of the city image.

*A. The culture of Asian Games and the concrete communication of Hangzhou city image symbols*

As an intercontinental event, the cultural concept of the Asian Games has the characteristics of crossing different languages, nationalities, skin colors and beliefs. The dissemination of urban spirit and cultural image of Hangzhou City should be combined with the culture of Asian Games. The Asian Games are the exhibition stage of diverse cultures. As the host, Hangzhou must hold the communication concept of respecting the diversity of cultures of various countries in the world, which is naturally consistent with the "inclusiveness" and "openness" of Hangzhou city spirit. Therefore, the inclusive and open image in the construction of international city image of Hangzhou should be consistent with the diversity embodied in international events.

Against the background of lasting peace, common prosperity and harmonious Asia, the 2022 Asian Games (Hangzhou) put forward the concepts of being "green", "intelligent", "thrifty" and "civilized". Hangzhou should use the Asian Games to transform these ideas into real "Hangzhou samples". And then, the world will remember that Hangzhou is the symbol of these ideas. In addition to low-carbon, environmental protection and other concepts, green image should be transformed into a construction sample of "beautiful China" with Chinese poetry and painting realm. And these ideas are visualized to form a unique symbol communication effect. There are two types of symbolic transmission images: one is the concrete type, and the other is the abstract type. Concrete symbolic images are mainly expressed in the visual arts of architecture, painting, sculpture, etc., while the abstract image is perceptible, but there is no appropriate natural object to describe its form, and it can only use abstract concepts and terms to express it.

*B. Sports spirit and abstract communication of Hangzhou city image symbols*

Being higher, farther and stronger is the classic generalization of sports spirit. Hangzhou has gone from the era of beautiful West Lake to the era of Qiantangjiang River. During these times, Hangzhou has not only changed the urban spatial pattern, but also changed the urban spirit, such as from being "beautiful beauty" to being "Qiantang seaman". The West Lake is delicate, comfortable and leisurely, while Qiantangjiang River is surging and struggling, which coincides with the spirit of sports. Hangzhou should make full use of the Asian Games as a sports event to stimulate the vitality and passion of Hangzhou. The charm of an international city lies in its continuous power and inclusive energy. The heroic and passionate side of Hangzhou's international city image should

integrate with the Asian Games and the culture of Qiantangjiang River.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The exhibition activity is ritualistic, and the cultural field is filled with the meaning of various symbols. The common ritual symbol in human history doesn't mean an activity, but a sacred ceremony with mythical nature. People participate in the ceremony not for material objects, but for the concept being narrated continuously in the ritual procedure. Asian Games (Hangzhou) should pay attention to the concentrated display process of "cultural field". Through the process of producing, communicating and strengthening symbols, the history, the present and the future can be connected. Through the common emotional experience, the audience will be in the "meaning carnival". Then, a new "Paradise Hangzhou" can be constructed, and the cultural power of this city will be built.

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