



# The Construction and Communication of Guangzhou's City Image: A Study of Fashion Image Communication from the Perspective of Semiotics

Jingwen Wang<sup>(✉)</sup>

School of Journalism and Communication, Guangzhou University, Guangzhou, China  
1280538273@qq.com

**Abstract.** Guangzhou, as an international city in China and also the core area of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, serves as the access for both the domestic and foreign public to know China as well as the Greater Bay Area. This research, based on in-depth analysis of “2020 Top Ten Charming Cases of Fashion Images Communication of Guangzhou”, aims to explore features, symbols and strategies of visual communication in constructing and communicating Guangzhou's city image. Findings show that the city promotion videos select unique city symbols and convey the cultural connotation of the city, which contributes to the construction and communication of Guangzhou's city image.

**Keywords:** city image · fashion image communication · semiotic analysis

## 1 Introduction

Nowadays, image communication has been the most popular form of communication, which not only enables communicators to share their perceptual experiences and aesthetic consciousness to the public through images, but also to communicate ideas through the realistic contexts marked by images. With the further development of digital technology, its impact on media and art has become more and more prominent in terms of its expressiveness, communication, interactivity and dissemination. In this sense, the new media, which undergo rapid changes in both the form and efficiency of communication, have become an important medium of constructing city's media image.

Under the conditions of global economic market-oriented environment, a good city image is a valuable intangible asset, which has generated profound impacts on attracting foreign capital and talents. In turn, the capital and talent have a significant impact on the sustainable economic development of a region. Moreover, image communication represented by fashion images contributes a great deal to spreading culture and enhancing identity. Guangzhou, as an international city in China and also the core area of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, serves as the access for both

the domestic and foreign public to know China as well as the Greater Bay Area. Therefore, how to promote Guangzhou's city image construction and global communication through the image communication has become an important research topic [1]. This research, based on in-depth analysis of "2020 Top Ten Charming Cases of Fashion Images Communication of Guangzhou", aims to explore characteristics, symbols and strategies of image communication in constructing and communicating Guangzhou's city image.

## 2 Literature Review

The concept of "city image" was first coined by Lynch (1960) [2], who defined "the image of a city" as a common mental image possessed by most people among city residents, including five physical elements: roads, boundaries, areas, nodes and landmarks. In the 21st century, economic globalization and information networking have entered a new stage of development, and there is an urgent need to improve the city image to enhance cities' competitiveness of attracting resources and talents. Entering the network era, with the diversified development of cities and the blurring of communication boundaries, the connotation of city image has been expanded to a comprehensive perception and evaluation of this city formed in the public mind. This perception and evaluation mainly comes from two sources: individual public perception and media communication. Through encoding and decoding the city's comprehensive information, the media form a mimetic environment and act on the individual perception of the public to form the city image. City image, capturing city culture, city spirit, and city development concept, can be identified through city visual symbol, city behavior, and city decision [3], and is characterized by distinctiveness, diversity and representativeness.

In recent years, the competition among cities has changed from pure economic competition to comprehensive competition for city image, since a good city image is not only a material image, but also a spiritual image and a cultural soft power [4]. On this basis, many developed cities in the world pay more attention to image publicity and development of the intangible asset of city image. Under the new media environment, the communication pattern is no longer limited to a single one, but a diversified and interactive communication pattern with the fixed flow direction. Communication modes are more complicated and diverse, whose high-quality publicity effect is the most obvious [5]. In the process of modern and contemporary artistic expression, the fashion images take optical media and electronic media as basic languages, combining the advantages of art and technology [6]. The image communication under the new media technology breaks through the multidimensional space-time limit and possesses multiple sensory experiences, creating an advanced model with universal significance for the city image [7]. In order to seek a higher level of city's politics, economy, and culture, the creation of a new and unique image of the city should be given priority.

Nowadays, the path of Guangzhou city image communication has evolved into the flexible output of cultural soft power, embedding Guangdong culture in the promotional videos. For instance, Guangzhou's city image has been condensed in multi-dimensional aspects such as prosperous business, classic Canton cuisine, architecture and culture with local characteristics, which have attracted widespread attention and promoted the

cohesion of Guangzhou's urban cultural centripetal force. The domestic academia's focus on Guangzhou's city image centers on the influence of economic strength [8], cityscape, service and corporate reputation [9], transportation, security, housing prices and air quality [10]. Moreover, scholars also conduct research on foreigners' perception and evaluation of Guangzhou's city image. Findings show that foreigners have a higher level of recognition of Guangzhou's overall image, especially for the food, shopping and the locals' inclusiveness toward guests. However, the level of recognition is lower for transportation and the level of recognition is highly related to the nationality of the interviewees, since Asians and Africans highly recognize Guangzhou's image, while Americans hold a lower level of recognition. In addition, factors such as gender, age and education backgrounds may influence tourists' perception of Guangzhou's city image.

### 3 Methodology

The symbolic expression of city image is presented through specific behaviors and scenes that reflect certain aspects of the city's achievements, which has a certain metaphorical character between the signifier and the signified. The application of semiotics in image analysis lies in the analysis of the image text, i.e., the analysis of the content of the image that contains a certain meaning using semiotic methods. A symbol is a combination of signifier and signified, the former being the form expressed as a sound, a word or an image, and the latter being the object represented by the sign. Symbols are perceptions that are thought to carry meaning; therefore, the use of symbols is to express meaning. The symbolic meaning of a city image film is conveyed through the language of the camera, and the communication between the symbol system and the audience is realized through the combination of sound and picture images, presenting a complete process of symbol selection, use and combination.

This research will adopt the semiotic analysis method to analyze various symbols of fashion images related to Guangzhou and their function in the construction and communication of the city image of Guangzhou. The samples will be set as the "2020 Top Ten Charming Cases of Fashion Images Communication of Guangzhou", including *15-min CPC building service circle on Beijing Street*, *40 faces for 40 days!*, *Guangzhou's bridge occupies a full page of People's Daily*, *China-Africa anti-epidemic special program | African brothers volunteer life*, *Tonight, a thousand UAV occupy the night sky of Guangzhou!*, *[First-line practice] Guangzhou: enterprise employees transformed into anchors to help the Canton Fair cloud sales*, *View Guangzhou at the height of 600,000 m: the secret of future development is here!*, *The world looks at China*, *Guangzhou takes the "door" and "window"*, *Nansha Free Trade Zone: see "big changes" through "small window"*, *New youth of the Greater Bay Area*, *these five years of the Greater Bay Area*.

### 4 Findings

#### (1) The element, formation, signifier and signified of symbols

Through analyzing and sorting out the content of promotional videos of the Guangzhou city mentioned above, the symbolic elements appearing in the videos can

be roughly divided into five categories: images of people, natural landscape, historical and cultural architecture, modern facilities, and customs, history and culture (see Table 1). These symbols, as the signifier, ultimately points to the signified in the process of symbolic representation.

**Table 1.** The Elements of Symbols

	<b>Theme</b>
15-min CPC building service circle on Beijing Street	The improvement in CPC building service's efficiency
40 faces for 40 days!	Guangdong's medical assistance to Hubei
Guangzhou's bridge occupies a full page of <i>People's Daily</i>	Guangdong's medical assistance
China-Africa anti-epidemic special program   African brothers volunteer life	China and Africa's mutual assistance
Tonight, a thousand UAV occupy the night sky of Guangzhou!	National Day light show theme activities
[First-line practice] Guangzhou: enterprise employees transformed into anchors to help the Canton Fair cloud sales	The online sales of the "Guangzhou Export Commodities Fair"
View Guangzhou at the height of 600,000 m	Guangzhou Artificial Intelligence and Digital Economy Pilot Zone, Pazhou Core Area
The world looks at China, Guangzhou takes the "door" and "window"	Let the world see China's footsteps in expanding openness to promote globalization through Guangzhou
Nansha Free Trade Zone: see "big changes" through "small window"	Nansha Free Trade Zone as experimental field of reform and opening up
New youth of the Greater Bay Area, these five years of the Greater Bay Area	The Guangdong's critical role in the development of the Greater Bay Area
<b>Image of People</b>	<b>Natural Landscape</b>
Female citizens, the secretary of the Party branch	None
Guangdong's medical voluntary group	None
Voluntary heroes in harm's way	None
African volunteers in Guangzhou, African hostess	None
Tourists	The Pearl River
Female salesperson	None
None	None
The participants of The Guangzhou UCLG 2020 World Council, chief director of CNBC, Department leader of Journalism and Communications	None
Female entrepreneurs, Chief of Development Section	None

The elements mentioned above appear frequently and convey the city spirit to the audience. The symbolic elements used in the city promotional video correspond to different relationships between the signifier and signified.

## (2) The signifier and signified

The Beijing Street, Canton Tower, the Pearl River and Haizhu Square, as the landmark symbol, point to the city of Guangzhou. The traditional historical and cultural architecture arouse the older generation's memories, while the modern facilities signify the tremendous development of Guangzhou in recent years. For instance, the city scene around Canton tower in the promotional video has the connotation of Guangzhou's vitality and prosperity, while the skyscrapers, e-commerce companies and Guangzhou Conference Center emphasize Guangzhou's openness, inclusiveness and internationalization.

As a whole, the city images become an independent signifier and corresponds to the new signified so that the symbolic meaning develops from the surface to the deeper level. At this level, there is a unification of images of person and images of object as well as various comparisons. On one hand, the images of persons represented by tourists integrate with object images like Canton Tower to co-construct the festival image of Guangzhou. On the other, in most of the videos, the stress on a certain image inevitably leads to the absence of another. For example, the videos with the persons involving volunteers, entrepreneurs, students as the subject tend to ignore the presentation of object symbols, including natural, historical, cultural and modern landscape. Furthermore, there is also a comparison between traditional landscape and the modern facilities.

The third level of symbolic meaning is that the encoders and decoders of symbols need to share a common historical, ideological and cultural background and subjective consciousness in the process of symbolic generation. For instance, the Greater Bay Area, which are precisely the audience's identification with the area of Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao as a whole. Moreover, the frequent presentation of female images also arouses the female audience's empathy and attention due to the same identity. The audience, as the decoders, share the same collective memory, and the intercommunication of the symbolic meaning in the promotional film succeeded in transferring the memory into a deeper-level value identity.

In addition to the symbol itself, the narrator also serves as the bridge to combine various symbols in an organic way. When the African hostess and the foreign businessman narrate the stories of Guangzhou in English, driven by the proximity, the foreign audience will pay more attention to the content, which benefits the global communication of Guangzhou's city image.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper interprets the element, formation, signifier and signified of symbol and expression meaning of Guangzhou's fashion image communication from three levels. On one hand, the city promotion film succeeds in expanding its influence with the help of narration in English, Chinese mandarin and Cantonese that enhance the communication Guangzhou's city image, and letting the world witness China's efforts to promote globalization and ambition to build a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind through

Guangzhou. On the other, the symbols contained in the city promotion film are relatively simple, such as the lack of natural landscape, historical and cultural architecture and modern facilities, which possess more soft power. Therefore, the production of Guangzhou's fashion image communication should put more emphasis on creating consensus to better attract both domestic and foreign audience.

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