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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## **The Study on the Multimodal Discourse Construction and Communication of Zhengzhou's National Central City Image**

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**| ABSTRACT**

Based on Kress and Van Leeuwen's visual grammar, this study takes the 2018 Zhengzhou city image promotional film "Zhengzhou, the Commercial Capital at the Heart of China" as the research object, and analyzes how the promotional film constructs the image of Zhengzhou as a national central city through the collaborative operation of multimodal resources. It was found that the promotional video effectively conveys the image of a modern, open, inclusive and dynamic national central city through multi-dimensional urban image shaping such as historical and cultural inheritance, trade and logistics, urban construction, and cultural environment. Additionally, it reinforces a sense of Zhengzhou's urban identity and influence among international and domestic cities, and shows its unique status as a commercial and cultural hub, as well as its strategic position and development potential as a national central city.

**| KEYWORDS**

Zhengzhou National Central City; visual grammar; multimodal resources; historical and cultural inheritance; a sense of urban identity

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### **1. Research background**

In December 2016, the 13th Five-Year Plan for Promoting the Rise of the Central Region issued by the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) clearly proposed for the first time to support Zhengzhou in building a national central city. In February 2017, the State Council officially approved the construction of Zhengzhou as a national central city, which brought new historical opportunities for Zhengzhou's urban positioning and development. This positioning indicates that Zhengzhou shoulders the dual mission of national strategy and regional development, and bears the great responsibility of leading the rise of the Central Plains, serving the whole country and radiating the world. Zhengzhou, as a national central city, not only needs to compete with other central cities at the regional level but also to establish its international status in the wave of globalization. In this context, giving full play to the function of a national central city and standing out in the fierce competition are all major challenges facing Zhengzhou.

In recent years, Zhengzhou has made remarkable achievements in infrastructure construction, economic growth and cultural construction. Especially relying on the Belt and Road Initiative and the strategy for the rise of Central China, Zhengzhou has increasingly gained international influence and competitiveness. In the context of globalization and regional economic integration, the image of cities has become one of the key elements of urban competitiveness. However, with the increasingly fierce competition between cities, national central cities should not only lead in economic strength, but also present distinct urban images in cultural, ecological and social aspects to attract more talents, capital and resources. As an intangible asset and soft power of a city, city image has a significant impact on the development of a city. A good city image can not only enhance its attractiveness but also reinforce the sense of belonging and pride of citizens, to provide soft power support for its sustainable development.

Therefore, effectively conveying the image of Zhengzhou as a national central city and enhancing Zhengzhou's international influence and regional radiation have become key issues in urban development.

The study of urban image has become a hot interdisciplinary field with urban communication, sociology, and geography. However, most existing studies focus on the connotation and influencing factors of urban image, and insufficient attention is paid to the multimodal characteristics of urban image discourse construction. In the context of informatization and digitalization, the construction and dissemination of urban images present multi-modal and multi-dimensional characteristics. That is, through the comprehensive use of language, image, sound, video and other symbol systems, richer and more three-dimensional urban images are constructed. As an emerging mode of communication, multimodal discourse can better construct and disseminate the city image through the coordination of various symbolic resources such as language, image, and sound, and provide a new perspective for the study of urban image.

Under the new situation of accelerating the construction of Zhengzhou as a national central city, multimodal discourse analysis can be employed to investigate the construction of Zhengzhou's urban image, which not only reveals the interactive relationship between different symbolic modes, but also promotes its regional coordinated development, and enhances its urban competitiveness and international influence. Additionally, it enhances the public's sense of urban identity and promotes their participation in urban construction and development.

## 2. Theoretical framework of multimodal discourse analysis

Multimodal discourse is a phenomenon that uses multiple senses such as hearing, and vision, and communicates through various means and symbolic resources such as language, images, sounds, and movements<sup>[1]</sup>. Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) is an analysis method that studies how discourse communicates meaning through multiple symbol systems (such as words, images, sounds, actions, etc.), which emphasizes the multimodality of discourse and believes that the construction of meaning not only depends on linguistic symbols, but also involves the integration of multiple non-verbal symbols.

The theoretical basis of MDA is mainly derived from systemic functional linguistics (SFL) and social semiotics. Halliday, the founder of systemic functional linguistics, proposed the study of language as a symbolic resource, arguing that language is merely one type of symbolic resource<sup>[2]</sup>. Systemic functional linguistics emphasizes the function of language in expressing ideas, establishing interpersonal relationships, and organizing information, including ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions. Social semiotics, on the other hand, is concerned with the meaning and role of symbols in a specific socio-cultural context. Jewitt pointed out that the study of social semiotics has made people pay attention to the choice of symbols of discourse designers and to the choices of designers in terms of layout, color, material, and design, and realize the need to develop from the grammatical study of a certain modality to the study of cross-modal sign rules<sup>[3]</sup>.

Kress and Van Leeuwen, on the other hand, combined the theoretical ideas of system functional grammar, Saussure's and Halliday's semiotics, and critical discourse analysis to develop social semiotics based on visual grammar, and incorporated other symbols beyond linguistic signs into their research perspective<sup>[4]</sup>.

Kress and Van Leeuwen skillfully extended the three meta-functions in Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to the visual field, and proposed three core concepts of representational, interactive and compositional meanings to analyze the meaning construction in visual texts (such as images, advertisements, films, etc.).

Representational meaning is concerned with how images represent real-world objects, events, and relationships. Kress and Van Leeuwen divide the meaning of representation into two categories: narrative representation and conceptual representation<sup>[5]</sup>. The former uses vectors to represent actions and events, such as the direction of a character's gaze and the direction of arrows, which includes the action process, reaction process, speech process, and psychological process<sup>[5]</sup>. The latter denotes the nature, structure, or meaning of the participants, including the processes of classification, analysis, and symbolism<sup>[5]</sup>. Interactive meaning explores how images construct the social relationship between the producer, the viewer, and the depicted object, including contact, social distance, and perspective<sup>[5]</sup>. "Contact" can be divided into direct gaze and indirect gaze, with the former establishing a direct connection with the viewer, the latter allowing the viewer to become a spectator, providing information<sup>[5]</sup>. Social distance expresses intimacy through the choice of far, medium, and close views. Perspective includes a horizontal perspective, which indicates engagement, and a vertical perspective, which indicates power relations.

Compositional meaning focuses on how the arrangement of image elements creates overall meaning and mainly includes three aspects: information value, salience, and framing<sup>[5]</sup>. Information value explores how the position of an element in an image determines its importance, e.g., the left and right structures represent known and new information, the upper and lower structures represent ideals and realities, and the center-edge structures represent the core and attachments<sup>[5]</sup>. Salience, which highlights certain elements through factors such as size, color contrast, foreground/background position, etc., guides the viewer's attention and interpretive path<sup>[5]</sup>. Framing creates a sense of coherence or separation by separating or connecting image elements through lines, blank spaces, etc.<sup>[5]</sup>.

## 3. Multimodal discourse interpretation of Zhengzhou's national central city image

This study attempts to interpret the selected corpus, the 2018 Zhengzhou City Image Promotional Film "Zhengzhou, the Commercial Capital at the Heart of China", from representational, interactive and compositional meanings. It aims to explore how

the promotional film conveys a positive image of Zhengzhou as a national central city to the outside world and enhances the public's sense of urban identity through the interactive relationship between various symbolic modes. This promotional video lasts for 7 minutes and 5 seconds, with "one mountain, one temple, one ancestor, one city, one river" as the main line, and tells the rich historical and cultural heritage of Zhengzhou and the development of the national central city by showing Shaolin Temple, Mount Song, the ancestral figure Emperor Huangdi (Yellow Emperor), the ancient city of Shangdu and Zhengdong New District, and the Yellow River.

### **3.1 Representational meaning**

In the promotional video, through the ever-changing time and space lens, the message is conveyed to the world: among the rising China, Zhengzhou, an ancient and young city in the Central Plains, is not only a young national central city, but also a city of commercial capitals that people exclaim "remarkable". The conceptual representation is presented to show Zhengzhou's rich history, culture and geographical advantage through Shaolin Temple, Mount Song, the Hometown of Emperor Xuanyuan, the Ancient City of Shangdu, the rushing Yellow River, and the ever-changing three-dimensional transportation development.

The action process is reflected through historical representation, modern displays, and depictions of nature to demonstrate Zhengzhou's comprehensive strength. Oracle Bone Inscriptions Writing in the Shang Dynasty, the burning flames, and the establishment of the Chinese capital city represent the historical scenes of Zhengzhou, showing a profound sense of the historical depth of Zhengzhou as an important birthplace of Chinese civilization. Additionally, Shaolin warrior monks practice training in Kung Fu at the ancestral grounds of Chan Buddhism, showcasing the essence of Shaolin Kung Fu through powerful, precise, and smooth movements. This shot symbolizes Zhengzhou's profound historical and cultural heritage and reflects its cultural self-confidence. What's more, the dynamic process is displayed through cross-border trade and the logistics and transportation screens related to the Air Silk Road, reflecting the role of Zhengzhou as a key hub of the Belt and Road Initiative in promoting global trade and cultural exchanges and the convenience and efficiency of cross-border E-trade. Meanwhile, frequent interaction between cross-border personnel also reflects the trend of increasingly close international cooperation. These processes run through the core concepts of "tradition and modernity", "culture and commerce", and "local and global", making Zhengzhou not only a famous historical and cultural city in China but also a modern commercial center to the world.

The reaction process is mainly reflected through the perspective of two businessmen, demonstrating the blueprint of Zhengzhou's future in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, cross-border E-trade, and the Air Silk Road. Their gaze between them constitutes the reaction vector, forming the reaction process, in which the map is the phenomenon and two of them are responders. At the Zhongda Gate Bonded Direct Purchase Experience Center, the two ladies' eyes constitute a vector forming a reaction process, in which the ladies are the responders and the wine is the phenomenon. In front of the model diagram of the Zhengzhou-Europe Railway Express, the eyes of the two men constitute a vector, forming the reaction process, in which the two men are the responders, and the Zheng-Europe Railway Express model is the phenomenon. In front of the Henan Commercial Visualization Platform, the visitor's gaze constitutes a reaction vector, forming the reaction process, in which the visitor is the responder, and the display of buying and selling the world is the phenomenon. These phenomena fully demonstrate Zhengzhou's ability to radiate across the country, connect with the world, and serve the globe. They also present the broad prospects and unlimited potential of Zhengzhou as a modern commercial capital.

The speech and psychological processes are not reflected in this promotional video, especially since there is no verbal communication from beginning to end.

### **3.2 Interactive Meaning**

(1) Contact. There are some characters in the video, i.e., participants in the image, but there is no eye contact with the viewer, so it belongs to an 'offer' image. From an observer's perspective, the audience can experience the power and grace of Shaolin Kung Fu, and the two ladies' pleasant shopping experience. These scenes show the characteristics of Zhengzhou's integration of traditional culture and modern life, highlighting Zhengzhou's unique charm as a cultural and commercial exchange center.

As the characters sketch out the blueprint of the Belt and Road Initiative in front of the world map, the viewer's eyes will then turn to the map to focus on Zhengzhou's increasingly important position in cross-border e-commerce and global trade, engaging the audience to experience the commercial atmosphere of Zhengzhou.

To sum up, although the characters do not look directly at the audience, the vitality and commercial charm of Zhengzhou are reflected through the actions, locations and environments of the characters, and the audience can feel the busy rhythm and vigorous vitality of Zhengzhou through the combination with the scenes.

(2) Social distance. At the beginning of the promotional video, Du Ling Fangding is used as a close-up shot, as if leading the audience through 5,000 years of history, to the oldest capital and to the center of civilization. This scene helps the audience witness the important moment when the Shang King established dominance in the Central Plains, which shortens the distance between the viewer and the image participants. The promotional video adopts a combination of long shots and close-ups, which makes it full of dynamics. When filming at the stargazing platform, the sculptures of the Yan and Huang Emperors, Mount Song, Shaolin Temple, the Yellow River Scenic Area, and Qianxi Square, the long shots are used to highlight the unique cultural tourism resources contained in Zhengzhou as a new national central city, showing the integration of Zhengzhou's ancient civilization and

modern development. In addition, close-ups are adopted to shorten the distance between the participants and the audience, and increase the interaction between the two sides, as if the bronze Shangding, Pei Ligang culture, Dahe Village culture, Shaolin Kung Fu, business negotiations, and cross-border shopping unfolded right before the audience's eyes, creating an immersive feeling. At the same time, it allows the audience to taste the cultural heritage of the ancient capital Zhengzhou, and the infinite charm of the commercial capital Zhengzhou in multiple dimensions.

(3) Perspective. There are many scenes in the promotional video that adopt a top-down perspective to fully show the majestic Mount Song, the spectacular Shaolin Temple, the mysterious first capital city of China, the surging Yellow River, and the three-dimensional transportation network, so that the viewer can feel the cultural charm and geographic advantages of Zhengzhou. Some shots use upward perspectives, such as establishing a strong presence in the Central Plains, the statue of Xuanyuan Yellow Emperor, the group sculptures of the two emperors of Yan and Huang, the sculpture of Dayu to control the water, and the Qianxi Square, these sculptures and buildings set off the historical sense of the Central Plains culture, highlighting the important position of the Central Plains culture in Chinese civilization, thereby deepening the audience's sense of identity with the Central Plains culture. Additionally, these scenes also convey Zhengzhou's urban development achievements and modernization, creating a grand and solemn atmosphere, thereby inspiring admiration and national pride in the audience.

### **3.3 Compositional meaning**

(1) Information value. At the beginning of the promotional video, the word 'Zhong' appears in the central position of many images. The continuously switching scenes, brings visual impact to the audience, and also conforms to the idea of the promotional film—from multiple dimensions and directions to present its infinite charm and unlimited potential in China. The promotional film adopts the mode of complementary pictures and texts, and the text is under the image, so the whole promotional film mainly highlights the urban image of Zhengzhou through visual display, and the text plays a supplementary role. In addition, the fonts are black with white characters, creating a striking visual contrast with the two-color design to convey important elements and characteristics of the city of Zhengzhou.

(2) Frame. This promotional film presents the unique landscape of the city. It mainly selects typical representative tourist attractions, such as, Duling Fangding, Stargazing Platform, Shaolin Temple, Erqi Memorial Tower, etc., to convey to the audience that Zhengzhou, as one of China's eight ancient capitals, contains a rich culture. In addition, there are also bustling scenes of modern commercial capitals, such as a well-connected network of railways, highways, and air routes, the fluctuating numbers at Zhengzhou Commodity Exchange, and the wide array of products at Zhengzhou Zhongdamen Bonded Direct Purchase Experience Center, allowing viewers to clearly see the unlimited potential of Zhengzhou, the commercial capital under the new situation. In short, the promotional video shows the charm of Zhengzhou in many aspects, such as nature, humanity, and location.

(3) Salience. The promotional film shows the characters and landscapes from different angles through switching lenses to achieve its salience. Taking Qianxi Square as an example, Qianxi Square is one of the most iconic buildings in Zhengzhou, the tallest building in the Central Plains. From this viewpoint, the audience can see the panoramic view of Zhengzhou and the mighty flow of the Yellow River. The creator uses a variety of shooting angles such as long shots, close shots, close-up shots, background blurring, etc., to present new information in a continuous sequence while displaying its overall structure and appearance in front of the audience in an all-round way. With this background, Zhengzhou can be highlighted as a national central city, an international hub city, a city of Chinese civilization, the engine leading the development of the Central Plains, and the glorious future of the rise of the Central Plains.

### **3.4 Modal integration**

The promotional video begins with uplifting background music, accompanied by the narrator's commentary, presenting the audience with the long history and rich culture of Zhengzhou. In the introduction of the history of Zhengzhou, especially the introduction of "Zhengzhou is the place where the capital system originated", dramatic and powerful background music with a slightly stronger rhythm is chosen, accompanied by the male narrator's voice with a varied and rhythmic intonation, which can bring the audience to instantly integrate into it, and deeply feel that Zhengzhou is the place where Chinese civilization began and is the root of the Chinese nation. When the shot switches to the roaring Yellow River, the background music also becomes more solemn and expansive, and with the narrator's powerful and emphatic commentary, the audience is also excited at the moment, appreciating the long and profound historical and cultural heritage such as Shangdu culture and Yanhuang culture nurtured by the Yellow River.

When the shot switches to "Mount Song", the background music becomes deep and powerful, with the narrator's deep and resonant voice, which makes the audience feel as if they are in the majestic Mount Song. When the shot turns to the "Shaolin Temple", the narrator's voice becomes strong and resonant, with the melodious background sound, followed by the majestic roar of the Shaolin monks, all of which shorten the distance with the audience and make them feel as if watching the Shaolin Kung Fu. When the shot turns to "Xuanyuan Yellow Emperor's Hometown", accompanied by magnificent music, together with the narrator's proud commentary, the audience is shocked and truly realizes that the hometown of the Yellow Emperor is the spiritual home of the Chinese people.

When Zhengzhou's cross-border e-commerce and national comprehensive transportation hub are introduced, the rhythm of the music intensifies, and the narrator's voice becomes even deeper and more powerful, all of which convey to the audience the extraordinary journey of relentless progress over the years. Meanwhile, the audience seems to witness the construction speed of Zhengzhou, a thousand-year-old ancient capital and a remarkable national central city, and realize that Zhengzhou's international business environment has become the lifeline of Zhengzhou's high-quality construction of the national central city, all of which shows that Zhengzhou stands at a new historical starting point and is leading regional development and rising to the global stage. At the end of the video, the background music reaches a climax, allowing the audience to feel that Zhengzhou, is not only a young national central city, but also a commercial city that people exclaim "remarkable".

#### **4. Conclusion**

Through the multimodal interpretation of the 2018 Zhengzhou city image promotional film "Zhengzhou, the Commercial Capital at the Heart of China", this study reveals Zhengzhou's multiple efforts in building the image of a national central city. First of all, through the synergy of multi-modal symbols, including visual historical scenes, historical monuments and the use of cultural symbols, the promotional video perfectly integrates Zhengzhou's historical heritage and modern development and successfully builds a city image that is not only historical and cultural, but also full of modern vitality. Secondly, by showcasing the rapid development of urban infrastructure, technological innovation and modern lifestyle, the promotional video successfully portrays Zhengzhou as an important transportation hub and economic center in central China, a modern metropolis with an international vision and an open attitude, further strengthening its positioning as a national central city. Finally, the selection of background music, concise and powerful commentary, and constant switching shots enhance the audience's emotional resonance and sense of identity, so that the audience can not only intuitively feel the speed of Zhengzhou's urban development and achievements, but also further enhance the audience's awareness and recognition of Zhengzhou as a national central city.

Based on the results of this study, several important implications can be drawn: First, Zhengzhou's urban image communication strategy effectively integrates historical and cultural elements with modern urban development, and enhances the public's sense of identity and belonging to Zhengzhou. Secondly, the communication strategy not only emphasizes local characteristics, but also highlights the international perspective, which strengthens the public's recognition of Zhengzhou's status as a national central city. However, in order to create a strong and influential image of Zhengzhou as a national central city, there is a need to build upon the historical and rich cultural legacy of the City of Commerce and infuse it with new meanings for the modern era and strengthen Zhengzhou's function as a national central city to highlight its regional leading role. At the same time, it is necessary to establish a multilingual communication system to adapt to audiences with different cultural backgrounds. In addition, Zhengzhou should be placed in the unified context of the Yellow River culture to construct the urban image of Zhengzhou as the main landmark of the Yellow River history and culture[6].

In the future, with the continuous advancement of the construction of a national central city, Zhengzhou should continue to strengthen its multimodal communication strategy, focusing on how to create a more competitive city brand image through multimodal means in the context of globalization, especially for international audiences, so as to further enhance its global influence and urban identity, and promote its radiation on the international stage.

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