

Harmony in Diversity: The Differentiated Discursive Construction of Tourism Destination Images in Zhejiang's Ancient Towns of the Rhetoric Academy

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Abstract

Zhejiang's ancient towns share the cultural foundation of "Jiangnan water towns" yet widely face the homogenization dilemma of "a thousand towns with one face". Existing studies have mainly approached this issue from spatial morphology, business structure, and governance models, while seldom asking how differentiation becomes possible through discursive construction. Taking Wuzhen, Nanxun, Nianbadu, and Qiantong as case studies. This paper uses comparative discourse analysis to examine how ancient towns build distinctive destination images on the shared symbolic foundation of "Jiangnan water towns" through resource selection, narrative encoding, symbolic assemblage, and multi-actor collaboration. The findings show that: (1) Differentiation superimposes individuality upon a shared rather than rejecting common symbols. (2) Successful practices follow the pathway logic of "resource distillation - value positioning - narrative encoding - full-scenario penetration - communication verification. (3) Resident and local cultural-elite participation is pivotal to preventing differentiation from becoming another form of standardization. This paper proposes a "harmony in diversity" analytical framework.

Keywords

Ancient town tourism, Tourism destination image, Discursive construction, Differentiation, Jiangnan water town



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Introduction

Zhejiang has one of China's densest clusters of ancient-town tourism resources, with Wuzhen emerging as a national benchmark. However, as development deepens, the homogenization problem of "a thousand towns with one face" has become prominent. Many towns feature

similar stone roads, red lanterns and awning boats. They also adopt the same "Jiangnan water town" narratives and identical commercial layouts, including bars, milk-tea shops, cultural and creative stores, and homestays. As a result, tourists end up with highly overlapping travel

experiences. Homogenization has attracted extensive research along three pathways: spatial morphology (convergent architectural styles and street patterns), business structure (homogenized commercial formats), and governance model (government dominance and capital-driven replication). Research on regional tourism growth also shows that spatial competition and knowledge spillovers drive convergence [1]. Yet most studies treat homogenization as a material-level outcome, rarely asking whether it first arises in “how the image is articulated”: When all towns are captured by the same “Jiangnan water town” discourse, physical homogenization is merely its material projection.

Practically, differentiated explorations have emerged: Wuzhen has built “Cultural Wuzhen” through “theater + conventions”. Nanxun promotes “a different Jiangnan” through “Chinese-Western integration + silk-merchant culture”. Nianbadu projects a border-town temperament through “the junction of three provinces + a kingdom of dialects”. Qiantong cultivates a niche identity through “Confucian heritage + craftsmanship”. But the discursive logic behind these efforts, and how local traits can be turned into communicable images, still lack systematic answers.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines how Zhejiang’s ancient towns achieve differentiated discursive construction of destination images on the shared foundation of “Jiangnan water towns”, and what generalizable pathways underlie their success. Its theoretical contribution is to shift ancient-town research from “homogenization critique” to “differentiated construction” and propose a “harmony in diversity” framework. Practically, it offers references for “one town, one brand” development.

Literature Review

Research on the homogenization of ancient town tourism

Domestic research on ancient-town homogenization

covers three strands. First, its manifestation and measurement: Towns gradually lose local character and become “standardized tourism consumer products”, with street-view studies showing high homogenization of commodity-oriented shops driven by planning, location, and capital. Second, its causes: capital’s pursuit of replicable profit models, performance-driven government motives, developer replication, and tourists’ standardized expectations. It was early argued that tourism commodification simplifies local character into mass-reproducible symbols [2]. Third, coping strategies - differentiated positioning, cultural depth, community participation, and format innovation - which remain largely principled and lack micro-mechanism analysis.

Internationally, “heritage-site convergence” is widely observed in cultural heritage tourism [3]. Scholars caution against reducing complex local culture into standardized products, as many historic towns lose distinctive identity after tourism development. Reviews note that homogenization under globalization is a global challenge requiring differentiated advantage through deep cultural excavation and creative transformation, and that sustainable heritage tourism depends on protecting local uniqueness rather than replicating successful models [4].

Overall, homogenization research has a strong critical orientation but pays insufficient attention to the implementation pathways of differentiation; its purpose should point toward constructive, rather than merely critical, directions.

Research on tourism destination image construction

Tourism destination image is a core tourism concept. Early research treated it as tourists’ cognitive and affective evaluations and emphasized measurement: a three-dimensional framework divided into attribute-holistic, functional-psychological, and common unique dimensions [5].

Comparison found that experience reshapes image

between potential, first-time, and repeat visitors [6]. A formative model linked stimulus and tourist factors to cognitive and affective image [7].

Since the 1990s, constructivist thought has shifted attention to image production and power: Image is not an objective reflection but constructed through texts, symbols, and discursive practices, and meaning is produced and negotiated through systems of representation [8]. Multiple actors - governments, developers, media, guides, and tourists - participate, with competition and contestation among their discourses.

In ancient-town image research, scholars find images often reduced to the stereotype of “small bridges, flowing water, and households”. The notion of “staged authenticity” holds that authenticity is constructed, and tourism authenticity is divided into objective, constructive, and existential types, with the constructive dominant today [9].

Image construction is also seen as “mythmaking”, turning local culture into symbolic narratives matching tourist expectations. Social media has transformed image construction: Analyses of online destination image show that online sources and user-generated content (UGC) strongly shape destination cognition [10]. Analyses of Macau websites reveal that official discourse emphasizes culture and history while commercial discourse emphasizes entertainment and consumption [11]. Russian tourism-image research finds systematic differences across information sources [12].

Yet existing studies focus on what image “is” and how it “is perceived”, not on how it “is differentially constructed”, a review of 142 image studies confirms that strategies and processes of construction remain under-researched.

Research on tourism discourse and destination branding

Discourse analysis treats discourse not as a transparent tool but as a practical system producing knowledge, subjects, and power. Tourism studies use it to examine

how promotional texts, guide scripts, travelogues, and policies construct meanings.

The Language of Tourism analyzes the rhetorical strategies through which promotional texts presuppose tourists’ ways of seeing, and the “tourist gaze” frames tourism as a socially organized way of viewing. The edited volume *Discourse, Communication and Tourism* systematically reviews the application of discourse analysis in tourism research, covering multiple domains such as tourism advertising, tour guide discourse, tourism writing, and tourism policy.

Destination branding offers a complementary perspective: City branding requires distinctive brand identity and associations [13]. Five guiding principles cover positioning, consistency, relationships, communication, and equity [14].

Surveys find destination organizations commonly suffer ambiguous positioning and inconsistent communication [15]. Branding is an active construction process while image is the audience’s perceptual outcome, with a complex interaction between them [16]. An identity-based model stresses coordinating official, resident, and tourist identities [17]. Domestic scholars have applied discourse analysis to the “Jiangnan water town” narrative, guide-script authenticity, and social-media presentation, but mostly as single-case description. These studies confirm discourse’s role but lack the systematic distillation of differentiated strategies from a multi-case comparative perspective.

Research gaps

Three gaps follow: (1) Ancient-town research stresses homogenization critique and lacks analysis of differentiation mechanisms. (2) Image research emphasizes measurement and perception over the differential construction process. (3) Discourse research emphasizes single cases over cross-case strategy distillation. This paper addresses these gaps through multi-case comparative discourse analysis of Zhejiang’s ancient towns.

Theoretical perspective and conceptual framework

Definition of core concepts

Tourism destination image is defined here as a system of meanings about a destination, produced and disseminated through discursive practices, encompassing cognition, affect, and symbols, and produced rather than reflected from objective reality. Differentiated discursive construction refers to a process. Through intentional discursive practice, a destination develops a recognizable and appealing image based on shared cultural and symbolic foundations.

It emphasizes individuality and translates locally distinctive resources via discourse. “Harmony in diversity” (he er bu tong) originates from *The Analects* and is borrowed here to describe the ideal state: While sharing the “Jiangnan water town” cultural foundation (harmony), each town manifests its own distinctive temperament (diversity), forming an image ecology of “harmony in diversity”.

Theoretical foundations

Representation theory holds that meaning is produced through systems of representation. An ancient town’s history, culture, and space are transformed into communicable meanings through representational practice. Differentiation therefore depends less on how different towns “are” than on whether practice can turn potential differences into perceptible meanings.

Place construction theory distinguishes “space” from meaning-endowed “place” and locates place uniqueness in relational intersections rather than an essentialized identity. Differentiation should thus rest on a town’s unique historical trajectories and cultural intersections, balancing local uniqueness with global intelligibility [18]. Semiotics and myth theory treat “Jiangnan water town” as a mythologized symbol: Concrete material features are emptied of historical specificity and sublimated into universalized imagery of “poetic Jiangnan”.

Differentiated discourse should re-inject local historical specificity upon this universalized symbol.

Brand positioning theory holds that brands must occupy a distinctive position and establish differentiated associations. Destination positioning distills a core value proposition and implants it through consistent communication across functional, affective, and symbolic attributes. Differentiation thus requires a clear value proposition, consistent full-scenario communication, and sustained equity accumulation.

The “harmony in diversity” conceptual framework

Synthesizing these theories, the paper builds a “harmony in diversity” framework of four interrelated dimensions. First, resource selection and value distillation - the starting point. From each town’s repository of architecture, figures, commerce, folklore, dialect, cuisine, and crafts, the most unique and communicable resources are distilled into a concise core value proposition, balancing local uniqueness with market attractiveness.

Second, narrative encoding and symbolic assemblage - the core. Core resources are turned into communicable story systems (protagonist, plot, emotional tone) and perceptible visual and linguistic symbols (architecture, artifacts, slogans, keywords), so that tourists perceive “this town is different” on first contact.

Third, the balance between commonality and individuality - the art. Common “Jiangnan” symbols provide the basic cognitive framework and expectations, while individual symbols create differential memory. Towns choose different balances according to their endowments and positioning.

Fourth, multi-actor collaboration and full-scenario penetration - the guarantee. Governments, operators, residents, cultural elites, and tourists play distinct roles, and differentiated discourse must penetrate official promotion, guiding, spatial arrangement, festivals, products, and social media consistently.

These four dimensions form a construction chain from “resources” to “image”, applied below to the four cases.

Research design

Case selection

Four towns in Zhejiang are selected for this study: Wuzhen, Nanxun, Nianbadu, and Qiantong. As a benchmark for ancient Chinese towns, Wuzhen (Tongxiang, Jiaxing) has evolved from positioning itself merely as a “Jiangnan water town” to “Cultural Wuzhen” and “Convention Wuzhen”. This transformation relies on the Wuzhen Theatre Festival and the World Internet Conference, representing a “cultural event-driven” development pathway. Nanxun (Huzhou) is known for “Chinese-Western integrated” architecture and “Jili-lake silk” merchant culture, embodied in Xiaolianzhuang, the Former Residence of Zhang Shiming, and the Liu Family Mansion - the “resource-unique” pathway. Nianbadu (Jiangshan, Quzhou), at the junction of Zhejiang, Fujian, and Jiangxi, is a “kingdom of dialects” and “ancient town of a hundred surnames”, once a military garrison and commercial post on the Xianxia Trail - the “geographically heterogeneous” pathway, with great potential but a late start. Qiantong (Ninghai, Ningbo), a Tong-clan settlement preserving clan rituals and traditional crafts, follows a “small but beautiful” route - the “cultural deep-cultivation” pathway, offering reference value for small and medium-sized towns.

The four cases span different pathways, development stages, and resource endowments, offering strong comparative value.

Data sources

The data combine three sources: (1) Textual data - official websites, WeChat and Weibo accounts, brochures, brand manuals, guide scripts, interpretation boards, and festival copy (2015-2025) - the core material for analyzing “what” towns say and “how”. (2) Interview data - semi-structured interviews with marketing managers, event planners, guides, residents, intangible-heritage inheritors, and local experts - revealing the “backstage” logic of discourse production. (3)

Participant observation - 3-5 field days per town, observing spatial presentation, tourist behavior, guiding, and events - verifying whether discourse matches on-site experience.

Research methods

The paper uses comparative discourse analysis in four steps: (1) Discourse actor analysis - mapping speaking authority and influence across governments, operators, guides, residents, media, and tourists. (2) Discourse strategy analysis - close reading of core brand texts to distill narrative, symbolic, and rhetorical formulas. (3) Horizontal comparison - contrasting resource logic, narrative encoding, commonality-individuality balance, and actor models. (4) Communication-effect analysis - checking whether differentiated discourse is actually perceived through UGC and observation. Together these steps yield a pathway model.

Discursive practices of differentiated tourism destination image construction in Zhejiang’s ancient towns

Resource selection and value distillation: The starting point of differentiation

Resource selection determines the direction of differentiation. The four towns follow distinct developmental logics. Wuzhen’s transformation moves from “water-town resources” toward “cultural resources”. At first, it marketed itself as a “Jiangnan water town”. Later, it introduced theatrical culture via the Theatre Festival and convention culture through the World Internet Conference. This move elevated its value proposition to “Cultural Wuzhen”, shifting its focus from “viewing the water town” to “experiencing culture”.

Nanxun adopts a “uniqueness priority” logic. At first, it marketed itself with the generic label of “Jiangnan water town”. Later, it selected “Chinese-Western integration” and “silk-merchant culture” as its core resources. It revised its slogan to “Nanxun, a different Jiangnan”.

Meanwhile, it redefined its positioning as “the integrated Chinese-Western lifestyle of wealthy Jiangnan mansions”.

Nianbadu faces “rich uniqueness but weak communicability”: Its border-junction, dialect-kingdom, hundred-surname, and garrison resources are abstract and hard to visualize, leading it to oscillate among options. Its value proposition remains unstable and exploratory.

Qiantong follows “small but refined”: lacking Wuzhen’s scale or Nanxun’s architecture. It concentrates on “Confucian clan culture” and crafts, building “a living Confucian settlement” with the proposition “Confucian heritage, craftsmanship Qiantong”.

Two types emerge: The “resource-driven type” (Nanxun, Qiantong), distilling value from existing unique resources, and the “culture-introducing type” (Wuzhen), creating new resources by introducing cultural elements. Nianbadu lies between them. The key is whether potential uniqueness can become a concise, communicable proposition.

Narrative encoding and symbolic assemblage: The core of differentiation

Wuzhen encodes around “cultural events”: The Theatre Festival stages tradition and modernity on the ancient water-town space, while the Internet Conference frames it as a platform where history meets the future, jointly constructing “Cultural Wuzhen”. Visual symbols expand to “theater + water town” and “technology + water town”, and the slogan “Once you come, you never leave” gains cultural depth.

Nanxun encodes around “silk merchant families” (“four elephants, eight oxen, and seventy-two golden dogs”), telling of merchants who built integrated Chinese-Western mansions through the Jili-lake silk trade. Its visual symbols are the Chinese-Western buildings of Xiaolianzhuang, Zhang Shiming’s Former Residence, and the Liu Family Mansion. The slogan “a different Jiangnan” uses “different” as a keyword.

Nianbadu encodes around “border culture”, narrating an

immigrant settlement of garrisons and posts with a dozen dialects, tri-province architecture, and hybrid cuisine - a “hybridity” that is its greatest resource. Its symbols (three-province border architecture, dialect markers) and slogans (“a dream lost in the mountains”) aim at mystery, yet the narrative lacks a unifying thread.

Qiantong builds its narrative around “Confucian life”. It tells the story of the Tong clan’s Confucian ideals through its patterned village layout, ancestral halls, academies, and Deer Mountain. Slogans such as “a living Confucian settlement” communicate its positioning. This positioning remains highly consistent across promotional materials, physical spaces, and guided interpretations.

Successful differentiation needs a clear protagonist and story thread, highly recognizable core symbols, and consistent visual and linguistic systems. Wuzhen, Nanxun, and Qiantong achieved this. Nianbadu’s border narrative has potential but needs focus and integration.

The balance between commonality and individuality: The art of differentiation

Wuzhen balances “commonality as foundation, individuality as upgrade”: It preserves the standard Jiangnan water-town experience (bridges, flowing water) and overlays theater and conventions, satisfying basic expectations while creating differential memory.

Nanxun balances “commonality as surface, individuality as essence”: Its exterior remains a Jiangnan water town, while interiors reveal Western gatehouses, French ballrooms, and Roman columns - a “discovery” effect as tourists uncover Jiangnan’s Chinese-Western side.

Nianbadu pursues “weak commonality, strong individuality”: Far from typical Jiangnan, it directly emphasizes its non-Jiangnan border traits, achieving high distinctiveness but incurring higher cognitive and communication costs.

Qiantong integrates commonality into an individual narrative: Water alleys and bridges become elements of clan planning rather than independent scenery, supporting rather than distracting from the “Confucian

settlement" image.

Three principles are summarized as follows. First, common symbols constitute the basic cognitive framework. They should not be discarded unless a destination moves beyond this framework, as illustrated by Nianbadu. Second, individual symbols require recognizability and consistency. Third, the relationship between commonality and individuality may adopt three modes: "foundation-upgrade", "surface-essence", and "integration-dominance". The selection of modes depends on local endowments and destination positioning.

Multi-actor collaboration: The organizational guarantee of differentiation

Wuzhen's model is "government-led, enterprise-operated, professional team-executed": Strong execution and brand consistency, but relatively low resident participation.

Nanxun's model is "government-guided, state-owned enterprise-operated, cultural consultant-supported": Strong academic grounding and historical support, but limited market flexibility and communication creativity.

Nianbadu's model is "government-led, community-participated, expert-assisted": High community participation and living cultural inheritance, but constrained finances and limited professional brand planning.

Qiantong's model is "village collective-led, residents broadly participated, scholars deeply involved": Deep community roots and strong resident cultural consciousness, but limited scale and communication coverage.

Differentiated construction needs governments, operators, residents, and cultural elites, but towns combine them differently. Wuzhen and Nanxun execute strongly yet should deepen resident participation. Nianbadu and Qiantong have cultural depth yet need stronger professional planning. Regardless of model, deep resident and elite participation is pivotal to keeping

differentiation from becoming "another form of standardization".

Communication effects and tourist perceptions of differentiated discourse

The ultimate test is whether tourists perceive the difference. Combining UGC and observation yields a preliminary assessment.

Wuzhen shows the strongest effects: Keywords like "Wuzhen Theatre Festival", "Internet Conference", and "Muxin Art Museum" recur frequently, and tourists repeatedly say "Wuzhen is different". Its symbols are intuitive and topical, full-scenario consistency is strong, and mature brand investment sustains equity.

Nanxun's effects are emerging: "Chinese-Western architecture", "Zhang Shiming's Former Residence", and "Jili silk" appear, yet many travelogues still lead with generic "Jiangnan water town". Its distinctive architecture requires entering to discover, investment is relatively limited, and the connotation of "different" remains unfocused.

Nianbadu's effects are unsatisfactory: Little UGC, with "niche", "quiet", and "pristine" outnumbering "border junction" and "dialect kingdom". Some even call it "another Jiangnan town". Remote location, abstract resources, and limited topical events explain the gap, despite great potential.

Qiantong is "small but refined": Limited UGC volume, but most content captures "Confucian heritage", "clan culture", and "carving" with strong recognition among deep cultural tourists but low mass awareness - consistent with its niche positioning.

Two conclusions follow: Communication effects hinge on the intuitiveness, topicality, and full-scenario consistency of symbols (as Wuzhen shows). A differentiated image requires sustained brand investment, explaining Nanxun's and Nianbadu's partial shortcomings. Differentiation is a long-term, cumulative process rather than a one-off.

Conclusion

Main research findings

Drawing on the four cases, four main findings emerge. First, differentiation superimposes individuality upon the shared “Jiangnan” foundation rather than rejecting it: Common symbols establish basic cognition and expectations, while unique individual symbols create differential memory, yielding “foundation-upgrade”, “surface-essence”, “weak-strong”, and “integration-dominance” balancing modes.

Second, successful practices follow this path: resource distillation, value positioning, narrative encoding, full-scenario penetration, and communication verification. Practitioners select communicable resources. They distill a concise value proposition. Then they encode this proposition into stories and symbols. Next, they embed it across all scenarios. Finally, they verify its effect through tourist perception.

Third, multi-actor collaboration - governments, operators, residents, and cultural elites - is the organizational guarantee. Across models, deep resident and elite participation prevents differentiation from hardening into a new stereotype.

Fourth, effects track the intuitiveness, topicality, and consistency of symbols: Wuzhen’s theatrical and convention symbols perform best. Nanxun’s and Nianbadu’s are less intuitive or focused, and Qiantong’s image is strong in a niche but limited in coverage.

Theoretical contributions

Theoretical contributions are threefold. First, the paper shifts ancient-town research from “homogenization critique” to “differentiated construction”, addressing how towns achieve “harmony in diversity” through discourse. Second, it proposes a four-dimensional “harmony in diversity” framework synthesizing representation, place, semiotic, and brand-positioning theory, applicable to other destination types. Third, it distills the five-stage pathway model, systematizing

scattered brand experience into a communicable theory that responds to research’s critique-versus-pathway imbalance.

Practical implications

Practically, four implications follow. First, positioning should build on locally unique resources yet may introduce aligned cultural elements (as Wuzhen did), anchored by a clear core proposition rather than trying to say everything. Second, narrative and symbolic encoding must be consistent at visual and linguistic levels, superimposing individuality on a preserved common “Jiangnan” foundation.

Third, multi-actor collaboration must deepen resident and elite participation, turning residents from bystanders into participants and beneficiaries so images do not become hollow.

Fourth, communication should emphasize intuitive, topical symbols and full-scenario consistency, lowering cognitive thresholds and stimulating spontaneous sharing.

Research limitations and future research

This paper has limitations: Only four Zhejiang cases constrain generalizability. It relies mainly on qualitative discourse analysis without quantitative measurement of communication effects, and its interview and observation base limits insight into the backstage decision-making process.

Future work may apply the framework to other destination types (ancient villages, historic districts, industrial heritage), conduct longitudinal studies of brand upgrading, and explore how short video, live streaming, and virtual reality reshape the production and communication of ancient-town images.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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