Nostalgia, Modernity and a Mediated Sense of Place in *Wanghong* Hotspots in China: A Multimodal Semiotic Analysis of *Guofeng* Markets in Hangzhou

Qu Yue

China Center for Language Planning and Policy Studies, Institute of Linguistics, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China.
lenayue2024@163.com

Abstract: In the era of digitization, social media has profoundly changed and enriched the way places are perceived and experienced and has introduced a more varied and novel concept of place: a mediated sense of place to understand the formation of human-place relationships. In the context of China, social media has given rise to many *wanghong* hotspots, greatly reshaping public perceptions of places. Adopting a multimodal semiotic analysis, this study investigates how social media constructs a sense of place for a new type of *wanghong* hotspot: the *guofeng* markets in China. By examining the digital representations of 6 *guofeng* markets in Hangzhou, this research reveals that multimodal semiotic systems produce and communicate a distinct sense of place that harmoniously intertwines with nostalgia and modernity. These semiotic mechanisms portray markets as internet-famous, "must-see" destinations characterized by dual identities: these places are simultaneously perceived as traditional and trendy. The combination of China's economic policies and the technological affordances of social media together transform unknown marketplaces into identifiable, valuable hotspots.

Keywords: Mediated Sense of Place; Multimodal Semiotic Analysis; Social Media; Creative Market.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the era of digitalization, many places "are more and more often designed, defined, navigated and experienced with digital data shared with platforms" (Rose, 2022). Digital technologies have profoundly changed the way people perceive, experience and construct their sense of place and have transformed traditional forms of space into virtual reality space (Brickfield, 1984; Ozkul & Gauntlett, 2013). The traditional underlying mechanism generating a sense of place primarily relies on nonmediated, direct and embodied experience, but media technology challenges these traditional ways of producing place narratives and offers a more inclusive and accessible framework for placemaking. With digital content and social media increasingly "interfering with the intellectual and emotive activity associated with the process of opinion formulation of notions of place" (Ioannou et al., 2021), the concept of a "mediated/digital sense of place"

(Bork-Hüffer, 2016; Relph, 2021) has been introduced in the scientific paradigm to understand this new type of human-place relationship. This evolving perspective calls for an exploration of how digital media alter and shape our sense of place and how this sense of place differs from a nonmediated sense of place. Social media, as "particular symbolic and affective coordinates for the experiencing of urban space" (Rose, 2022), has received considerable attention from researchers in recent years (Jovanovic & Van Leeuwen, 2018; Orsatti & Riemer, 2015; Poulsen & Kvåle, 2018). Various multimodal semiotic frameworks have been developed to analyse the potential meanings offered by social media technologies (Adami, 2015; Bateman, 2017; Mehmet & Clarke, 2016; Poulsen & Kvåle, 2018). Within the context of China, some researchers have explored how new media contribute to city branding (Thadani et al., 2020; Wang & Feng, 2023), tourist destination marketing (Cao et al., 2021; Wang & Han, 2022; Zhou & Li, 2023), rural urbanization (Li, 2020), and city renewal (Ma et al., 2023). These studies highlight the importance of digital narratives and visual storytelling on social media for China's urban transformation and city branding. Despite these findings, empirical studies are lacking on how social media turns "undifferentiated space" (Tuan, 1977) into identifiable and valuable places and defines "place" in the context of the rise of *Wanghong* culture in China. A wealth of research has demonstrated that multimodal and discourse analyses have been effectively applied in place studies, especially in studies of semiotic landscapes (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010; Stroud & Jegels, 2014), geosemiotics (Scollon, 2003), and linguistic landscapes (Shohamy & Gorter, 2009). Both verbal and nonverbal symbols have the power to shape our understanding and perception of place. As Lefebvre emphasized, personal experiences of place are "lived and understood through symbols, language and images" (Lefebvre, 2014). The present study develops an integrated multimodal semiotic framework to explore how the multimodal resources on social media construct a sense of place for a new type of *Wanghong* hotspots emerged on China's social media in recent years: the *Guofeng* markets. The concept of a "mediated sense of place" is introduced to analyse imaginations and perceptions of places generated by and circulated through social media. This study begins by discussing the paradigm shift from a nonmediated sense of place to a mediated sense of place, which offers new perspectives on place studies. We argue that a multimodal semiotic analysis approach could serve as a crucial framework for elucidating the mechanisms underlying the construction of a mediated sense of place. In the case studies section, we use an online ethnographic survey of 6 *Guofeng*

markets in Hangzhou to investigate how these markets' multimodal digital representations construct and communicate an intertwined sense of nostalgia and modernity. We further examine the socioeconomic and technological forces that have turned these markets into internet-famous hotspots in the context of China.

1.1 From Sense of Place to Mediated Sense of Place

The concept of "sense of place" originates from phenomenology and cultural geography, which views place "not just as physically constructed but as socially produced and culturally framed" (Papen, 2015). A sense of place is a subjective perception and experience of the material world (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977). Research has been conducted on different dimensions of this complex and multifaceted concept, including place attachment (Moore & Scott, 2003; Williams & Vaske, 2003), place dependence (Eich, 1995; White et al., 2008), place identity (Breakwell, 1992; De Bres & Davis, 2001), agency commitment (Kyle & Mowen, 2005; Pritchard et al., 1999), place image (Gustafson, 2001; Lawson & BAUD, 1977) and placelessness and nonplacelessness (Auge, 1996; Relph, 1976). While these studies have significantly enriched our understanding of sense of place, most of them "focus on the experience of non-mediated place in their conceptualisation of sense of place" (Bork-Hüffer, 2016), and questions of how social media influences and reshapes sense of place have received limited attention. As mobile social network is reshaping offline social geography (Saker & Evans, 2016), the role of social media in shaping the perceptions and subjective experiences of places is growing in prominence. Meyrowitz argued that because of the arrival of electronic media, the world has been homogenized and become "placeless" (Meyrowitz, 1986). According to Relph, electronic and digital media affect our sense of place, leading to "digital disorientation" (Relph, 2021). In contrast to this view, Moores, as noted by Brown, contends that "electronic media can pluralise a person's sense of place" (Brown, 2014). Bork-Hüffer suggests that the virtual mobility of new informational technologies reinforce our sense of place (Bork-Hüffer, 2016), whereby a place can be experienced without physical presence and they stimulate imaginary mobility and an imaginary sensing of place. According to McLuhan, "all media extend human senses in space and time, carrying them further than voice and memory alone" (McLuhan, 1994). Zook et al. argued that "the technology of [the] internet … offers new possibilities for participation (Zook et al., 2004), interaction and exploitation based on existing historical and cultural attributes". These perspectives suggest that the complex

relationships among people, their sense of place, and the digital world they inhabit necessitate additional empirical studies for a more comprehensive understanding.

1.2 A Newly Emerging *Wanghong* Hotspot in China's Social Media

New media leveraged its ability to attract traffic and strong social interaction and produced many *wanghong* hotspots on Chinese social media. As Wang and Feng noted,"many places have become *wanghong* destinations in the pattern of [wanghong -X], which include wanghong restaurants, wanghong bars, wanghong shopping malls, and wanghong plazas" (Wang & Feng, 2023). Among these destinations, the *guofeng* markets, a new type of creative market that emerged across China's major cities after the pandemic, have rapidly gained popularity and become new internet trends on Chinese social media. *Guofeng* markets refer to traditional Chinese-style markets akin to the creative markets found globally, characterized by their national traditional elements. *Guofeng* denotes an art form or lifestyle rooted in traditional Chinese culture and imbued with numerous Chinese elements also adapt to global fashion trends and modern aesthetics. Since *guofeng* markets emerged on social media, they have rapidly gained significant online viewership and attention, and the appealing multimedia narratives of *guofeng* markets have attracted numerous visitors to *clock in*. More than 110,000 topics and posts related to *guofeng* markets have already appeared on the Chinese social media platform "Xiaohongshu", while on "Douyin", the Chinese version of TikTok, short videos tagged with "*guofeng* markets" have received as many as 420,000 likes. Online popularity has driven considerable traffic to offline consumption, yielding significant cultural tourism revenue for local governments. This phenomenon echoes Marwick's (2013) argument that in today's digital economy, social media traffic metrics such as page views, clicks, and likes can be monetized to generate profits and create value. The research area for this study is Hangzhou, a newly emerging second-tier city known as the capital of the internet in China. According to the "Research Report on the Development of Cultural and Tourism Markets (2020)" published by NEOWIT (a research and consulting organization in China), Zhejiang Province, the provincial capital where Hangzhou is located, ranked first in terms of the number of organized creative markets in 2022 in China. The profound historical and cultural resources during the Song Dynasty served as the most available semiotic resources for Hangzhou to construct a local sense of place. The imitation of Song Dynasty's urban planning style and the convergence of historical and cultural legacies offer valuable resources for

digital storytelling in the modern context. By utilizing internet marketing strategies, organizers of these markets attracted more than 118,000 visitors and stimulated an impressive level of consumption at approximately 30.08 million yuan.

2. DATA AND METHODS

Our research gathered data from one of the most popular social platforms in China, Xiaohongshu, the largest lifestyle-sharing community in China. The data collected for this study were derived from two primary sources. The first included promotional short videos, posts and images shared by both market organizers and private stall owners. The second source consisted of personal, remediated content, including individuals' experiences and perceptions shared online, which are often based on their embodied participation offline. This dual-source approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the intricate interplay of online digital perceptions and offline physical experiences and offered a holistic and integrative perspective to examine the formation of a mediated sense of place. The digital LLs of *guofeng* markets are identified as promising semiotic resources for our research. Our data was retrieved during 2022 and 2023 by searching for topics and hashtags related to keywords, such as Hangzhou markets, *guofeng* markets, and Song-style markets in Hangzhou. The mediated sense of place imbued in *guofeng* markets is interpreted through an integrated multimodal semiotic framework developed based on Wang and Feng's multimodal analysis and Scollon and Scollon's framework for place semiotics (Table 1) (Wang & Feng, 2023). Within this integrated framework, the semiotic systems of *guofeng* markets are categorized into three principal types: linguistic resources, physical scenes and characters. Linguistic resources include not only trending topics, hashtags, posts and comments related to *guofeng* markets but also textual information on LLs identified in short videos and images. Following Wang and Feng's dichotomous methodology, we define explicit linguistic resources as written texts that directly articulate personal experiences and feelings about a place (Wang & Feng, 2023), while implicit linguistic resources refer to the metaphorical expressions and phrases that indirectly communicate emotions and perceptions about a place. The physical scenes pertain to the architectural layout and decorative elements of market stalls as well as the physical attributes of LLs such as size, colour, fonts, writing systems, and text vectors. For "characters", we adopt Wang and Feng's framework to

differentiate between actional and analytical processes (Wang & Feng, 2023). The analytical process involves the positions, gestures and clothing of characters, while the actional process involves sociocultural practices, such as performing acrobatics, playing shadow puppets, brewing tea, or playing musical instruments.

Table 1: The integrated framework for multimodal analysis of the *guofeng* markets.

Framework for the Multimodal Analysis of *Guofeng* Markets		
Linguistic Resources	physical scenes	character
Trending Topics, Hashtags, Posts, and Comments	architectural layout, and decorative elements	analytical process
Text Messages About Linguistic Landscapes	physical manifestation of language landscapes (size, fonts, colour, writing systems, text vectors etc.)	actional process

3. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

We identified and analysed 6 *guofeng* markets. The assembled database comprised 378 images, 42 blog posts, and 12 short videos, including 365 observations on LLs. Through a detailed multimodal semiotic analysis of their digital representation, it is observed that the diverse semiotic systems, which constitute a "semiotic aggregate" (Scollon, 2003), produce and construct an interwined sense of nostalgia and modernity mediated by digital symbols. This mediated sense of place is constructed through hashtags, trending topics and posts alongside the digital language landscapes of these markets. These symbols portray *guofeng* markets as internet-famous places characterized by dual identities: they are simultaneously traditional and trendy. The sense of nostalgia emanates from the mediated portrayal of an imagined familiar marketplace in the Song Dynasty and the digital revitalization of traditional market folk customs through nostalgia-oriented, local historical symbols. The sense of modernity is embedded in the digital representation of *guofeng* markets as digitalized, international and trendy places that embody modern lifestyles and attitudes.

3.1 The Intertwined Sense of Nostalgia and Modernity

Offering unique digital encounters with the past and the present through hashtags, and trending topics and posts

The intertwined sense of nostalgia and modernity embedded in the

guofeng markets in Hangzhou is directly identified through hashtags, trending topics, posts and comments. By condensing the sense of place into simple and searchable phrases, these digital labels and tags can quickly achieve online exposure and audience attention, thus forging a digital identity and influencing the collective imagination and perception of a place. As Rightler-McDaniels and Hendrickson articulated, hashtags and trending topics serve as collaborative tagging discourses that amalgamate individual posts into a socially constructed corpus (Rightler-McDaniels & Hendrickson, 2014). The choice of words for hashtags and trending topics facilitates the construction of *guofeng* markets as both traditional and modern places. It is observed that hashtags and trending topics related to the *guofeng* markets are paired with tags and topics from two thematic domains: the urban leisure lifestyle and local history and cultural traditions. Tags and topics that emphasize the urban leisure lifestyle include texts such as "#生活美学" (aesthetic of daily life), "#杭州探店" (exploring stalls and shops in Hangzhou), "#杭州旅游" (tourism in Hangzhou) and "#杭州拍照" (photography in Hangzhou), "#杭州周末去哪儿" (where to go in Hangzhou on weekends), "#杭州攻略" (Hangzhou tips"), "#这个地方超适合拍照" (this is a great place to take pictures), and "周末打卡地" (weekend hotspots to *clock in*). These tags and topics portray *guofeng* markets as places for modern leisure activities and urban exploration. The narratives of modern urban lifestyles, as observed by Giddens, are central to this modernity (Giddens, 2023). The local history and traditional facets of *guofeng* markets are constructed with hashtags and topics that have local historical and traditional elements, such as "#汉服" (traditional Chinese clothing"), "#古风" (traditional Chinese style), "#非遗" (intangible cultural heritage), "#宋韵" (Song Dynasty culture) and "#古琴" (ancient Chinese musical instrument). These hashtags and topics demarcate *guofeng* markets as places for appreciating and experiencing local history and traditional culture. Posts, messages and comments also contribute to the production of the intertwined sense of nostalgia and modernity. These texts articulate unique feelings and experiences from exploring digital content on *guofeng* markets, creating a sense of journeying through the fluid dynamics of time and space within a compacted continuum. We identified a variety of explicit and implicit language resources that convey a sense of disorientation in time and space. Explicit language resources include sentences and phrases that directly convey personal emotions and

impressions about time-space travel, such as "梦回南宋临安都城" (dreamlike backing to the capital of the Southern Song Dynasty); "太好逛了,如置身于千年中华" (great for strolling, feeling as if in ancient China a thousand years earlier); "南宋街头体验穿越古今的浪漫" (experiencing the romance of crossing the past and present on the streets of the Southern Song Dynasty); and "梦回江南市集" (dreaming back to the marketplaces of Jiangnan). Implicit linguistic resources utilize metaphorical phrases to evoke a digital journey back to the Song Dynasty, including phrases such as "宋高宗看了都要爬起来" (even Emperor Gaozong of the Song Dynasty would want to get up and see it), "每一个铺子都犹如从清明上河图里穿越而来" (each stall appears as though it has travelled from the painting "Along the River During the Qingming Festival painting"), "宋代的春天应该就是这样吧" (this is probably how spring was in the Song Dynasty), and "发现杭州越来越临安了" (it is discovered that Hangzhou is becoming more like *Lin'an*). Through these verbal texts, *guofeng* markets are described as special places that offer unique digital encounters with the past and the present.

3.2 Connecting Tradition and Modernity by Linguistic Landscapes

The LLs of *guofeng* markets contribute significantly to the construction of the intertwined sense of nostalgia and modernity. These LLs predominantly consist of stall signs, billboards, promotional posters and product packaging, forming a rich semiotic linguistic repertoire of digital landscapes for *guofeng* markets. The choice of writing systems for LLs in *guofeng* markets is the most prominent semiotic system for conveying the intertwined sense of nostalgia and modernity (see Figures 1-3). We observed 365 LLs in images, of which 209 employed simplified Chinese characters and 156 utilized traditional Chinese characters. The traditional Chinese characters, as the old written system that was used before the Chinese character simplification campaign in 1956, was closely associated with Chinese tradition. The simplification of Chinese characters was regarded as a critical step in modernizing the Chinese language to meet the challenges of the modern world as well as reducing the rate of illiteracy in the country (Jia, 2007). Thus, simplified Chinese characters are generally perceived as an embodiment of modernity, while traditional Chinese characters reflect premodern traditional Chinese society. The visual

copresence of simplified and traditional characters in public space symbolizes the evolution of Chinese characters and reflects dual discourse narratives of cultural heritage preservation and adaptation to modern social life. In modern urban settings, the interplay of these characters connects the past (traditional) with the present (simplified) to and shape a continuous and balanced dialogue between maintaining traditional values and embracing modern lifestyles.

Figure 1: Language Landscapes at "The Great Song Brocade Court" Market, Held July 22-23, 2022

Figure 2: Language Landscapes at the "Yanyu" Market, Held September 9-14, 2022

Figure 3: Language Landscapes at "Spring Festival", Held March 17-19, 2023

In terms of text vectors, we encoded 187 stall signs with text written from left to right, 119 from right to left, and 163 with vertical text reading from top to bottom in our database. Moreover, some signs combined left-to-right or right-to-left text vectors with top-to-bottom vectors. The right-to-left and top-to-bottom text vectors are traditional writing forms in ancient China, while the right-to-left text vector is a modern form of writing that follows international practice. These text vectors, which coexist in a given public space, visually represent the changes in language and scripts in China over time and simultaneously evoke a sense of nostalgia for the past and an acknowledgement of modern linguistic practices.

Textual information about LLs and their physical manifestations also conveys the intertwined sense of nostalgia and modernity. The nostalgic discourse is predominantly embedded in the physical manifestations (including fonts, material qualities and colour modes) of LLs, while modern discourse is communicated by text information. A total of 93% of the LLs in our database employed calligraphic fonts written in black ink with a white background and a font size that occupies most of the writing space, implying a sense of minimalism and traditionalism. In contrast to standard printed fonts, calligraphy aligns with traditional Chinese aesthetic preferences and visual sensibilities and serves as a unique cultural symbol to evoke associations with the past. In terms of physical materials, the LLs

in *guofeng* markets predominantly favour natural materials such as cloth, paper, bamboo, or fan surfaces, showing a clear divergence from globally prevalent, stylistically ambiguous, and minimalistic materials such as acrylic, PVC, and digitally printed fabrics. This distinct material choice in *guofeng* markets marks a departure from the global norm, highlights the traditional Eastern aesthetics and values of simplicity and antiquity, and indexes to a premodern agrarian society. The colours of stall signs typically feature high brightness and low saturation to convey the unique beauty of traditional Chinese aesthetics, which are characterized by simplicity, serenity, elegance, and comfort.

The colours are further complemented by bright yellow and vermilion, symbolizing celebration and auspiciousness in Chinese tradition and a connection to the past. Although the physical manifestations of LLs construct nostalgic narratives, the textual information inscribed upon them communicates a sense of modernity. This modern discourse is evident in textual information inscribe on LLs, which references current trends and urban youth culture. We identified many LLs in *guofeng* markets whose text information conveys the inner narratives of modern urban youth in China, which are characterized by "self-healing", "self-mockery" and a "desire for a slow-paced lifestyle". For instance, Figure 4 presents a visual feast of LLs at the "*Guofeng* Festival" market. Although the physical manifestations of product packaging are designed in traditional Chinese style, their text information embodies secular and humorous urban discourses that resonate with modern youth, who suffer from social problems such as an "increasingly polarized society, widening rich-poor disparity, economic stagnation, ruthless job market competition, and diminishing opportunities for upward mobility" (Su, 2023).

Through these texts such as "我好贪财" (I'm money hungry); "向钱跑" (running towards money); "贪财好色" (greedy for money and lust), "仙女的事你少管" (staying out of the fairy's business), "不务正业" (not focused on work), "日进斗金" (making money every day), "人生苦短, 咖啡倒满" (life is short, pouring the coffee), "无所谓" (it doesn't matter), and "保命要紧" (save life first), *guofeng* markets are constructed as places that offer "liberatory, hedonistic, and narcissistic possibilities—keys to self-realization, happiness, and fulfilment" (Scanlon, 2000).

Figure 4: A Stall at the "Guofeng Festival" Market, Held June 22-24, 2023

4. SENSE OF NOSTALGIA

4.1 Representing Familiar Marketplaces in the Song Dynasty

A sense of nostalgia is prominently constructed through the physical scenes of *guofeng* markets. The visual scences of the *guofeng* markets digitally represent the idealized and familiar markets in the Song Dynasty. Figure 5 illustrates the physical scene at the *Yanyu* market, a long-term market located at the *Yongjin* Gate near West Lake. The visual scene at the market stall is a deliberate duplication of the basic layout of market stalls in ancient China, featuring bamboo sheds erected by the roadside constructed from bamboo or wooden frames and typically sheltered by a large parasol. As depicted in Figure 5, the stall consists of bamboo frames adorned with plain-coloured curtains with a yellow bamboo lantern-shaped stall sign suspended from protruding shelves. The stall signs and signboards are the main decorative elements of the stall and are made of white cloth with black calligraphic characters hung above the stalls or draped over the table. In terms of colour, these stalls deviate from the prevalent use of highly saturated and vibrant colours, such as neon lighting, which are characteristic of contemporary commercial settings. Instead, as previously mentioned, the colour palette employed in the market is generated using natural materials such as bamboo, wood, and cloth. The predominant colour scheme features white, black, and the natural tones of wood enhanced by auspicious traditional Chinese colours such as yellow and red,

offering a refined contrast to the technologically driven aesthetics of modern marketplaces. These visual narratives digitally represent the imagined, idealized and familiar markets in the collective memories of Chinese people and evoke a sense of nostalgia towards these places.

Figure 5: A Stall at "Yanyu" Market, Held September 9-14, 2022

4.2 Revitalizing Traditional Market Folk Customs

The sense of nostalgia is also enriched by the actional and analytical processes of the characters at markets. We observed some characters dressed in "*Hanfu*" (traditional Chinese clothing) and ancient hairstyles in short videos and images. Figure 4 illustrates two vendors dressed in traditional Chinese clothing and hairstyles. The textures, patterns, materials and designs of their clothing represent the traditional attire of market vendors in ancient time. In social media, characters that embody traditions through their physical features can profoundly evoke a sense of nostalgia, as in digital information flow, the sense of nostalgia triggered by traditional elements can be greatly amplified and idealized. The sense of nostalgia embedded in *guofeng* markets is also cultivated through the actional process like ritual performances. As Urry highlighted that "a profound sense of loss of one's home, the collective memory of which is reinforced by various enacted ritual performances (Urry, 2002), can articulate a strong sense of nostalgia for that place". Our observations reveal a range of ritual performances that resonate with the market folk customs of the Song

Dynasty, including performing shadow puppetry, playing traditional Chinese musical instruments, playing pitch-pot games, guessing riddles, blowing candies, brewing tea, and making and burning incense. For instance, Figure 6 illustrates a traditional tea brewing ritual in the Song Dynasty known as "Dian cha".

Figure 6: Experiencing "Dian Cha" at the Grand Canal Temple Market, Held March 17-19, 2023

5. SENSE OF MODERNITY

5.1 The Market as a Digitalized Place

The perception of *guofeng* markets as digitalized places is shaped by digital signs such as QR codes and public accounts, which can be found in images and short videos. As depicted in Figure 4, QR codes are positioned at the centre of tables and serve as modern replacements for traditional cash transactions. Digital payments are a testament to the digital revolution and mark the significant transition from traditional cash transactions to digital platforms. Currently, digital payments are a defining feature of modern life in China. Unlike traditional texts, narratives about places related to QR codes and public accounts can be read only by means of digital communication devices such as smartphones. As a result of advances in information technology, these signs imbue markets with digital properties.

5.2 The Market as an International Place

The international appeal of *guofeng* markets is largely shaped by bilingual

signage and the diverse international cuisine sold in the market. Although most LLs in *guofeng* markets are in Chinese, there is a noticeable, though less prominent, inclusion of English, which obvisouly works "as a symbolic resource and marker of modernity, internationalism and globalization" (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010). Additionally, the local government also offers English pamphlets and guide maps to accommodate international visitors. The international attributes of *guofeng* markets are also constructed through the digital representation of various international cuisines sold in the markets. In addition to traditional Chinese folk snacks, *guofeng* markets offer a wide variety of global delicacies, such as tiramisu, Mexican tacos, Korean topokki, and cocktails. By demonstrating diverse delicacies on social media, *guofeng* markets are recognized as diverse and globalized spaces where people can experience a variety of international flavours and feel a global connection.

5.3 The Market as a Trendy Place

The trendy attribute of *guofeng* markets is constructed through the extensive use of internet buzzwords and the incorporation of "China-chic" elements into the visual design of sold products. We captured many internet buzzwords to promote and recommend trendy images of *guofeng* markets, as demonstrated by the following texts:

Text 1: 绝美古风市集，带上你的**拍照搭子一起来体**验吧！(Come experience the stunningly beautiful ancient-style market with your photography buddy!)

Text 2: **杭州大运河**庙会，**来凿啦！** (Hangzhou Grand Canal Temple Fair is here - don't miss it!)

Text 3: **活**动路线，友友们**抓住尾巴**哟～ (Activity route, friends, catch the tail!)

Text 4: …**也是打卡拍照好去**处，布置了很多宋韵场景，千万不要错过！(It's also a great spot to clock in and take photography, with many Song Dynasty-themed settings arranged. Don't miss out!)

Text 5: 这个宋韵市集有的吃有的玩有的喝，让你**刷爆朋友圈！** (The Song-style market has food, entertainment, and drinks, allowing you to flood your WeChat moments.) These online buzzwords create a mechanism of communication with their target users "in a conversational style" (Wang & Feng, 2023). Their frequent use and sharing have the

potential to transform a place's traditional or mundane characteristics into symbols of fashion and trendiness, thereby positioning the market as a place for those who pursue novel experiences and fashionable lifestyles. For example, Text 5 implies that *clocking in* to this market can establish one's status as a trendsetter in the online social domain.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our analysis indicates that social media constructs and communicates an intertwined sense of nostalgia and modernity for *guofeng* markets, transforming places into internet-famous, "must-see" destinations characterized by dual identities: they are simultaneously perceived as traditional and trendy. The combination of China＇s economic policies and the technological affordances of social media together transform unknown marketplaces into identifiable, valuable hotspots. In recent decades, under the traditional Chinese model of urban management, markets have disappeared in Chinese cities. Local authorities shut down roadside stalls due to concerns about food safety, road contamination, disorganized trading and other issues. However, in 2020, a significant policy shift occurred as the Chinese government introduced policies to invigorate the street stall economy. The policy allows for the establishment of temporary roadside stalls, enables the execution of roadside promotions and removes street markets and mobile vendors from civilized city assessment criteria. With the transformation of national economic policy, the mobile and small-scale street markets have experienced a revival in major Chinese cities. The policy transformation further contributed to the availability of material resources for the market business. With the government's abolition of roadside business regulations, private stall owners have gained access to public space to establish legitimate stalls. Municipal administrators also offer basic facilities and material supplies of uniform size, dimensions, colour, and style for stall owners to maintain a favourable visual landscape. Our participatory offline observation at the *Yanyu* market revealed details about this phenomenon. A stall owner informed us that he paid a monthly fee of 500 RMB for a stall, which included materials such as tables, chairs and parasols. He added that the process of applying for a stall involved submitting a detailed form outlining the stall's layout and displaying props, products for sale, and their distinctive features and craftsmanship. Products related to local culture, such as traditional handicrafts, intangible cultural heritage items, and

ancient-style goods, were given priority consideration. Therefore, the unique sense of place in *guofeng* markets, characterized by the coexistence of nostalgia and modernity, aligns with the intermediate objectives of local authorities, who are keen to brand urban imagery by promoting traditional culture in a modern urban context. In addition, the technological affordances of social media contribute significantly to the construction of this intertwined sense of nostalgia and modernity. Studies on new media communication have thoroughly discussed the multifaceted affordances of social media (Boyd, 2010; Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Treem & Leonardi, 2013), including but not limited to persistence, replicability, scalability, searchability, visibility, editability, portability, connectivity, and multimodality. Social media leverage technological affordances such as editability and searchability to evoke a sense of nostalgia. Platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Instagram utilize hashtags and trending topics to generate content related to historical tradition or nostalgic narratives. The multimodality and high visibility of these platforms support diverse types of content, such as texts, images and short videos, which can amplify users' perceptions and emotions and intensify their sense of presence within past experiences. As articulated by Kress and Van Leeuwen, different modes of communication can create more dynamic and engaging narratives (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). These features of social media' affordances allow for both individual and collective memory work that includes textual and visual elements, making the process of remembering more visible and tangible, as discussed by Bartoletti (Bartoletti, 2011). The technological possibilities of social media can also enable a variety of modern and futuristic experiences. The connectivity provided by internet technology can help users worldwide navigate places without physical participation and serves as a defining feature of modern social life. The scalability, replicability and portability of social media allow users to share their experiences, perceptions and impressions of places through various formats, such as comments, retweets and likes. Media algorithms personalize user experiences and deliver customized content based on individual interests. All of these factors are important manifestations of the advancement of modern technology. Therefore, the technological affordances of social media support the convergence of traditional and modern narratives and enable users not only to revisit the past but also to integrate contemporary modes of communication, resulting in a multifaceted and dynamic sense of place. In conclusion, this study provides a new understanding of the generative mechanism producing a mediated sense of place in the socioeconomic context of China. By employing a

multimodal semiotic analysis, this study revealed how social media turns unknown, small-scale markets into identifiable, *wanghong* places and how the technological affordances of social media and China's economic policy facilitate the revitalization of place narratives. The success of the *guofeng* markets has provided a proven placemaking model for other Chinese cities that are in urgent need of a sustainable, eco-friendly, and effective strategy to navigate the challenges to their economic and urban transformation. The multimodal semiotic framework developed in this study can be applied to analyse other places under the *wanghong* pattern, such as *wanghong* bars, restaurants, streets and grocery stores, even beyond the Chinese context. In digital contexts, studies on the sense of place call for further interdisciplinary exploration. This study offers new insights into the formation of human‑place relationships in the context of China, and we hope it can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how a sense of place is generated within digital discourse.

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