

Semiotic Analysis of Linguistic Landscapes in Revolutionary Tourism: A Case Study in Hangzhou City

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Abstract: This study investigates the semiotic construction of linguistic landscapes (LL) in revolutionary tourism, using Hangzhou as a case study. Drawing on Peircean semiotics and the framework of tourist semiotic practice, it analyzes how signs in revolutionary heritage sites—such as monuments, relics, slogans, and commemorative plaques—function as cultural symbols shaping visitors’ perceptions and identity. Data were collected from Trip.com, including photographs and English-language reviews posted by travelers at five representative revolutionary sites. Through multimodal analysis, the study identifies how iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs operate in digital and spatial contexts. Iconic signs evoke a sense of historical presence; indexical signs anchor perceptions of authenticity through material and locational references; and symbolic signs communicate ideological values and collective memory through shared cultural codes. Compared with general cultural tourism landscapes, revolutionary LL demonstrate higher symbolic density and stronger ideological framing. The research contributes to semiotic scholarship by linking online tourist interpretation with Peircean sign typologies, and offers practical insights for balancing ideological representation and intercultural accessibility in the design and communication of heritage sites.

1. Introduction

In recent years, research on LL has expanded beyond its early focus on the visibility of languages in public space to encompass broader semiotic and multimodal dimensions[1][2]. Scholars increasingly view LL not only as indicators of language policy and social hierarchy but also as symbolic systems that reflect cultural identities, ideological discourses, and tourist experiences[3][4]. Within tourism studies, semiotic approaches have proven valuable in explaining how signs, images, and narratives construct place meanings and shape visitors’ perceptions of authenticity[5][6][7][8].

Revolutionary tourism in China provides a unique arena for such analysis. As a state-promoted form of cultural tourism, it combines heritage preservation with political education, transforming memorial sites, museums, and commemorative landscapes into carriers of ideological values. Unlike conventional cultural tourism, revolutionary tourism is characterized by a high density of political and symbolic signs—such as slogans, color schemes, and historical narratives—that

function simultaneously as heritage markers and ideological texts[9]. Yet, despite the growing popularity of revolutionary tourism, scholarly attention has primarily focused on its political economy and educational functions, with limited exploration of its semiotic dimensions, particularly within the framework of linguistic landscapes.

This study addresses this gap by examining the semiotic construction of LL in revolutionary tourism sites in Hangzhou, a city with both rich revolutionary heritage and strong cultural tourism appeal. Using Peircean semiotics as an analytical lens, it investigates how iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs embedded in revolutionary LL communicate cultural memory, ideological discourse, and professionalized heritage narratives. Furthermore, it explores how domestic and international visitors interpret these signs differently, highlighting the interplay between symbolic density, authenticity, and intercultural comprehensibility.

The present study aims to address three interrelated research questions grounded in Peircean semiotics and the framework of tourist semiotic practice.

(1) How are revolutionary tourism linguistic landscapes in Hangzhou constructed both spatially and digitally through the interaction of iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs across multiple heritage sites?

(2) How do these semiotic configurations shape visitors' perceptions of authenticity, memory, and identity?

(3) In what ways do revolutionary linguistic landscapes differ from those of general cultural tourism in terms of symbolic density, communicative mode, and cross-cultural accessibility?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Linguistic Landscape

Since its initial formulation by Landry and Bourhis[10], LL research has developed into a prominent approach for examining the visibility of written languages in public space. Early studies emphasized LL as an indicator of language policy, power relations, and social hierarchies[3][11]. More recent scholarship, however, has extended LL beyond the distribution of languages to encompass multimodal semiotic resources, including colors, images, and spatial arrangements, thereby conceptualizing LL as a symbolic system through which meaning is produced, circulated, and contested[12][13]. This semiotic turn situates LL within broader cultural, ideological, and identity-based discourses, making it highly relevant to the study of tourism landscapes.

2.2 Semiotics and Tourism

Tourism research has long drawn on semiotic perspectives to interpret how places are constructed and consumed symbolically. MacCannell[6] argued that tourism is structured through a “staged authenticity,” where signs, images, and rituals mediate between tourists and cultural reality. More recent work by Chen Gang[5] and Jiang Meng[14] highlights how tourism attractions are socially constructed as symbolic objects, with their meanings continuously reproduced through rituals such as photography, narration, and commemoration. Studies of cultural tourism symbols further demonstrate that attractions carry not only material attributes but also socially encoded symbolic meanings that reflect broader value orientations and collective identities. These perspectives underscore the value of semiotics in decoding the layered meanings embedded in tourism practices.

2.3 Peircean Semiotics and Authenticity

Peirce's tripartite classification of signs—icons, indices, and symbols—has been increasingly adopted in tourism semiotics. Icons are signs resembling their referents, indices point to their objects through factual connections, and symbols convey meaning via cultural conventions. Applied to tourism, this framework helps unpack how authenticity is constructed and perceived. For instance, iconic signs such as murals or images evoke a sense of historical presence; indexical signs such as relics and monuments anchor perceptions of factual authenticity; and symbolic signs, such as slogans and color schemes, encode ideological values[9][15]. This approach enriches discussions on authenticity by demonstrating that tourists' sense of the “real” emerges through layered semiotic interactions rather than objective properties alone.

2.4 Revolutionary Tourism and Symbolic Landscapes

Revolutionary tourism in China represents a distinctive form of cultural tourism that intertwines heritage preservation with political education. Scholars emphasize that revolutionary tourism attractions are highly symbolized spaces where ideological discourse, collective memory, and cultural identity intersect[9]. Research has shown that the linguistic and visual landscapes of such sites frequently deploy politically charged symbols—red flags, party slogans, commemorative plaques—that serve as carriers of state ideology and markers of historical legitimacy[16][17]. However, while existing studies highlight the ideological functions of revolutionary tourism, relatively few have systematically analyzed its semiotic construction through the lens of LL. Moreover, the comparative perspective between revolutionary and general cultural tourism landscapes remains underexplored.

3. Methods

3.1 Study Area

The study was conducted in Hangzhou, a city that combines globally recognized cultural tourism with a rich repertoire of revolutionary heritage sites. Representative locations were selected to reflect diverse types of revolutionary tourism landscapes, including Zhejiang Memorial Hall of Revolutionary Martyrs, Qiantang River Bridge, Premier Zhou Enlai Memorial, Hangzhou Former Residence of Yu Dafu, and Ma Yinchu Memorial Hall. These sites were chosen for their symbolic density, historical relevance, and accessibility to both domestic and international visitors[18].

3.2 Data Collection

This study relied exclusively on digital data retrieved from Trip.com, one of the world's leading online travel platforms and China's largest provider of multilingual tourism information[19]. The website serves as an important interface between Chinese cultural destinations and international audiences, providing a corpus of user-generated content in the form of photographs, comments, and travel narratives. Given the research focus on semiotic representations and cross-cultural interpretation, Trip.com offers a suitable digital space where signs, symbols, and linguistic expressions about Chinese revolutionary tourism are reproduced and circulated globally.

For each site, both photographic and textual materials posted by visitors were collected. The dataset includes screenshots of tourist-uploaded images depicting the physical environment, signage, and commemorative symbols, as well as English-language reviews and captions accompanying these images. These user-generated texts and visuals constitute multimodal semiotic artifacts that

reveal how international tourists perceive, interpret, and represent revolutionary heritage through digital platforms. The selection of Trip.com was guided by its global accessibility, verified translation practices, and capacity to host authentic cross-cultural interactions. Its bilingual interface ensures that visual and verbal signs are mediated between local and global audiences, thereby allowing an analysis of how revolutionary tourism symbols are recontextualized in transnational discourse. In this study, all data were publicly available and anonymized prior to analysis to ensure ethical compliance.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The analysis applied Peircean semiotics, categorizing signs into icons (e.g., murals, images), indices (e.g., relics, original locations), and symbols (e.g., slogans, color schemes, emblems). Following Chen[5] and Jiang[14], the study further incorporated the concept of tourist semiotic practice, focusing on how tourists decode, authenticate, and re-enact meanings within tourism encounters. Data were coded thematically, with categories developed iteratively to capture both the semiotic functions of signs and the interpretive responses of visitors.

4. Results

4.1 Overview of Semiotic Patterns

The LL of Hangzhou's revolutionary tourism sites exhibited a high density of multimodal signs combining textual, visual, and color-based elements. Across all sampled sites, three Peircean sign categories—iconic, indexical, and symbolic—were consistently observed, though their relative prominence varied by context. Iconic signs provided visual resemblance to historical referents, indexical signs anchored authenticity through material presence, and symbolic signs communicated ideological values through culturally coded conventions. Together, these signs constructed a layered semiotic environment that framed both historical memory and political discourse.

The Trip.com corpus comprises 151 user-generated photographs and 72 English-language review snippets across five Hangzhou revolutionary tourism sites: Zhejiang Memorial Hall of Revolutionary Martyrs (29 photos/15posts), Qiantang River Bridge (56/15), Premier Zhou Enlai Memorial (25/12), Hangzhou Former Residence of Yu Dafu (31/15), and Ma Yinchu Memorial Hall (30/15). These materials offer a multimodal record of how visitors visualize and verbalize heritage meanings online, enabling a Peircean analysis of icons (resemblance), indices (material connection), and symbols (conventional codes).

4.2 Iconic Signs: Visualizing Industrial Modernity and Cultural Memory

At Qiantang River Bridge, image-text pairs emphasize sweeping panoramas, trains crossing, and night views—visuals repeatedly described as “magnificent,” “beautiful,” and “a special experience,” often coupled with references to watching the famous tidal bore (“imagine the spectacular Qiantang Tide”) and photographing a passing freight train (“it was good... very exciting”). These iconic framings make the bridge's modernity and scale immediately legible to non-specialists.

Iconic cues are similarly salient at the Zhejiang Memorial Hall of Revolutionary Martyrs (monumental statuary “realistic and a bit abstract” amidst pines and cypresses), where users post images of a towering obelisk and a red sandstone sculpture to stand in for revolutionary sacrifice. The landscape aesthetics (“solemn and majestic... and a beautiful park”) work in tandem with imagery to produce a dignified affect (See Table 1).

Table 1: Iconic Representations in Hangzhou Revolutionary Tourism

Site	Dominant Visual Elements	Typical User Descriptions	Semiotic Interpretation
Qiantang River Bridge	Panoramic views of bridge and river; trains crossing; night illumination; tidal bore scenery	“Magnificent,” “beautiful,” “a special experience,” “imagine the spectacular Qiantang Tide,” “luck was good... very exciting.”	Iconic imagery foregrounds industrial modernity and national progress, transforming infrastructure into a visually graspable heritage symbol.
Zhejiang Memorial Hall of Revolutionary Martyrs	Monumental statuary; obelisk; red sandstone sculpture set among pines and cypresses	“Realistic and a bit abstract,” “solemn and majestic,” “a beautiful park.”	Landscape aesthetics and monumental icons visualize collective sacrifice and dignified memory, blending natural beauty with revolutionary gravitas.

4.3 Indexical Signs: Anchoring Authenticity through Material Traces and Place

Indexicality is strongest where comments point to preserved rooms, relics, or original structures (See Table 2). At Ma Yinchu Memorial Hall, visitors mention the former residence location, study/bedroom displays, furniture and authored books, treating them as evidence of the economist’s life (“real exhibits... second floor study and bedroom”). Several posts also situate the villa in central Hangzhou, reinforcing site-specificity as an authenticity anchor.

Table 2: Indexical Representations in Hangzhou Revolutionary Tourism

Site	Material / Spatial Markers	Typical User Descriptions (Trip.com)	Semiotic Interpretation
Ma Yinchu Memorial Hall	Study and bedroom preserved with original furniture and books; central urban location and subway access	“Real exhibits,” “the actual desk used by Ma Yinchu,” “right in the city center and easy to find.”	Indexical authenticity is anchored through physical traces and urban situatedness, linking biographical facts to tangible space.
Premier Zhou Enlai Memorial	Original reception room of the brigade; protected cultural unit; two-storey wooden house	“Not very big... original reception room,” “you can finish it in half an hour,” “well preserved old house.”	Spatial continuity and preservation serve as indices of historical events, producing a sense of intimate authenticity.
Former Residence of Yu Dafu	Timber-brick Jiangnan architecture by the Fuchun River; looped audio guide in each room	“Understand Yu Dafu in all aspects,” “well-arranged rooms and stories,” “nice riverside view.”	Material layout and narrative soundscape index the writer’s life and historical context, merging place and memory.

At Meijiawu, the Premier Zhou Enlai Memorial Room is framed indexically as the original “reception room of the brigade,” a two-story wooden house now a protected unit; visitors highlight the site’s direct connection to Zhou’s five visits since 1957, using place-facts to validate its commemorative authority. Yu Dafu’s former residence is likewise grounded in material and spatial markers—Jiangnan timber-brick architecture on the Fuchun River, looped induction audio in each

room, and a small museum environment—allowing visitors to “understand the former residence and Yu Dafu in all aspects.”

4.4 Symbolic Signs: Communicating Ideology, Pedagogy, and Civic Affects

Symbolic density peaks at the Martyrs Memorial, where users repeatedly label it a “patriotism education base,” salute the fallen, and call the site “a must-go place for branch activities,” explicitly aligning the landscape with collective remembrance and party-civil pedagogy. On the bridge, symbolic language interweaves with technical heritage (“designed by Mao Yisheng... first double-deck railway and highway bridge”) and wartime narratives (damage and repair), elevating the structure from transport infrastructure to a sign of national resilience and twentieth-century modernization.

Symbolic framings at Meijiawu cast Zhou as “premier respected by the people,” while posts at Yu Dafu’s site connect literary patriotism and anti-Japanese resistance to the riverside setting and curated texts—translating political-literary memory into accessible moral discourse (See Table 3).

Table 3: Symbolic Representations in Hangzhou Revolutionary Tourism

Site	Dominant Symbolic Elements	Typical User Descriptions (Trip.com)	Semiotic Interpretation
Zhejiang Memorial Hall of Revolutionary Martyrs	Red color schemes; party emblems; patriotic slogans; ritual poses in photos	“Patriotism education base,” “salute to the martyrs,” “a must-go place for branch activities.”	Symbolic codes translate ideology into ritualized practice, reinforcing collective identity and moral obligation.
Qiantang River Bridge	Historical plaques; narratives of wartime damage and repair; lighting and flag motifs	“Designed by Mao Yisheng,” “the first double-deck railway and highway bridge,” “symbol of Hangzhou.”	Technical achievement and resilience become national symbols of modernization and endurance.
Premier Zhou Enlai Memorial	Textual panels praising leadership ethos; commemorative inscriptions and floral offerings	“Premier respected by the people,” “patriotic education base,” “touching story.”	Leadership virtue is symbolized through moral language and ritual gesture, personalizing national ideology.
Former Residence of Yu Dafu	Exhibits on anti-Japanese literary activities; quotes and calligraphy	“Feel his patriotism,” “learn about China’s literary spirit.”	Cultural symbolism connects literary heritage with patriotic values, bridging aesthetic and political memory.

4.5 Cross-Site Contrasts

Comparatively, the Martyrs Memorial around monuments + commemorative slogans/activities; Qiantang River Bridge clusters around industrial-modern iconicity + indexical technical facts; Premier Zhou Enlai Memorial around small-scale indexicality (original room, village setting) + symbolic leadership narratives; Former Residence of Yu Dafu around literary heritage and riverscape; and Ma Yinchu Memorial Hall around scholarly artifacts and a Sino-Western villa.

These patterned clusters show how different revolutionary sites mobilize distinct semiotic repertoires to stage authenticity and meaning online (See Table 4).

Table 4: Cross-site semiotic clusters in Hangzhou revolutionary tourism

Site	Dominant semiotic mix	Representative cues (examples)
Zhejiang Memorial Hall of Revolutionary Martyrs	Monumental icons + civic-pedagogical symbols	Obelisk, statues, axial layout (iconic); commemorative plaques, memorial axis (indexical); “patriotism education base,” salutation/branch activities, red color scheme (symbolic)
Qiantang River Bridge	Industrial-modern iconicity + indexical technical facts (+ symbolic resilience)	Panoramas, night views, trains crossing (iconic); first double-deck railway-highway, wartime damage / repair (indexical); “city landmark / national resilience” storyline (symbolic)
Premier Zhou Enlai Memorial	Small-scale indexicality (original room, village setting) + leadership symbolism	Original reception room, protected unit status, two-storey wooden house (indexical); “Premier respected by the people,” vignette captions (symbolic)
Former Residence of Yu Dafu	Literary indexicals + patriotic symbolism	Timber-brick Jiangnan house, room-by-room displays, riverscape; looped audio guide (indexical); writer’s anti-Japanese narrative, heritage pride (symbolic)
Ma Yinchu Memorial Hall	Scholarly artifacts + urban centrality (as index) with restrained symbolic register	Study/bedroom, furniture and books, central-city location & subway access (indexical); concise biographical panels (symbolic, low-intensity)

5. Discussions

5.1 Layered Authenticity through the Peircean Triad

The corpus shows a systematic division of semiotic labor. Icons deliver instant recognizability and affect (bridge vistas; monumental statuary); indices stabilize truth-claims by pointing to material remains and original locales (study rooms, relics, protected buildings); symbols condense ideological values and civic scripts (patriotism base, leadership ethos). The Qiantang River Bridge case—where panoramic images, technical histories, and wartime repair narratives co-occur—illustrates how iconic spectacle, indexical facticity, and symbolic resilience jointly construct “industrial-modern” authenticity in the revolutionary register.

Applying Peirce’s semiotic framework clarifies how different categories of signs sustain distinct dimensions of authenticity. Iconic signs generate experiential authenticity by visually simulating historical scenes; indexical signs anchor object-based authenticity through their evidential connection to the past; and symbolic signs construct ideological authenticity by embedding national values into recognizable cultural codes. This layered configuration resonates with Wang’s[20] notion of “existential authenticity,” as visitors’ sense of the real is co-produced through interaction with multiple sign types. Revolutionary LL thus illustrate how authenticity in tourism is not a static property but an emergent effect of semiotic interaction.

5.2 Place-Scaled Sign Ecologies and Visitor Uptake

Semiotic ecologies differ with site scale and typology. Large, outdoorsy complexes (Martyrs Memorial) privilege monumental icons and public pedagogy; intimate house-museums (Ma Yinchu, Yu Dafu) foreground room-level indexicality and narrative captions. Comments at Premier Zhou Enlai Memorial —“not very big... original reception room... cultural relic protection unit”—show how smallness and authenticity can co-produce a “hidden gem” vibe that invites reflective, slow looking rather than mass spectacle.

5.3 Digital LL: Remediation and Re-Circulation

Trip.com functions as a digital LL, where user photos and micro-reviews remediate on-site signs and circulate them transnationally. Posts that label the Martyrs Memorial a “patriotism education base,” or that frame the bridge via night-view shots and “freight train passing,” enact vernacular translation of official meanings into affective, shareable tokens. This user-side encoding amplifies pedagogical and heritage discourses but also filters them through platform aesthetics (vistas, selfies, listicles), shaping what becomes visible to global audiences.

5.4 Accessibility and Intercultural Comprehension

Evidence of accessibility strategies appears in house-museums (e.g., Yu Dafu’s “induction interpreter... automatically play in a loop”), which lower interpretive barriers for non-locals by sequencing rooms and audio content. Conversely, several reviews note limited opening times or low visibility at Premier Zhou Enlai Memorial (“not many people... easy to pass by”), indicating that availability and wayfinding can constrain meaning-making even when indexical authenticity is strong. These findings support a design principle: pair high-value indexical assets with reliable access, bilingual captions, and QR-linked narratives to enhance cross-cultural uptake.

5.5 Implications for Revolutionary Tourism

Theoretically, the study extends LL scholarship by integrating Peircean semiotics with the concept of tourist semiotic practice, demonstrating that meaning-making in revolutionary tourism is co-constructed by sign systems and visitor interpretation. It also contributes to debates on authenticity by showing how different semiotic modes sustain multiple layers of the “real,” ranging from sensory presence to ideological conviction. Practically, the findings suggest that heritage managers should design LL with attention to both domestic resonance and intercultural accessibility. While symbolic signs effectively mobilize national pride among Chinese audiences, greater emphasis on bilingual captions, visual clarity, and contextualization of historical narratives could enhance comprehension for international visitors.

6. Conclusion

Using a Trip.com corpus of photographs and English-language reviews for five Hangzhou revolutionary heritage sites, this study showed that revolutionary LL operate online as layered semiotic systems rather than neutral labels. Across cases, meaning is assembled through a Peircean triad: icons make the scene immediately legible and affective, indices stabilize truth-claims via material traces and original locales, and symbols condense ideological values into recognizable codes. Visitor uptake in the corpus also diverges systematically. Domestic reviewers adopt symbolic idioms (e.g., “patriotism education base”), aligning photos and captions with civic scripts;

international reviewers lean on iconic vistas and indexical objects (rooms, relics, plaques) to construct understanding, praising clarity, audio guides, and access. In all cases, posting, captioning, and sharing re-mediate on-site signs into a digital LL, translating official meanings into platform-native, affectively salient tokens (night-view shots of the bridge; ritual poses at monuments; room-by-room vignettes in house museums).

Practically, these findings suggest tailoring interpretation to each site's semiotic strengths. For the bridge, curate vantage-point photo spots (icon), concise engineering and wartime plaques (index), and a compact storyline of construction–damage–repair (symbol). For the memorial park, pair monumental vistas with multilingual “why-it-matters” panels and low-threshold participatory rituals that preserve solemnity while improving intercultural legibility. For the house museums, foreground room-level objects and spatial continuity (index) with bilingual labels, looped audio, reliable opening hours, wayfinding, and QR-linked narratives (symbolic narration) to convert intimacy into accessible meaning for global audiences.

The study is limited by its exclusive reliance on user-generated online materials (platform selection effects, language bias, time-bounded posts) and the absence of on-site observation. Future work should triangulate with field ethnography, extend to additional platforms and cities, and test interpretive interventions (e.g., redesigned plaques, QR content, multilingual captions) through longitudinal designs. Situated within these constraints, the analysis demonstrates how revolutionary LL—both on-site and online—function as symbolic arenas where national memory, civic pedagogy, and intercultural comprehension are co-produced.

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