



## THE HANKOU CONCESSION AS A CULTURAL-GEOGRAPHIC FIELD: HISTORICAL VISUALIZATION PATHWAYS IN THE DOCUMENTARY THE ROAD TO HANKOU

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### Article History

Received; 15-08-2025; Revised;  
17-09-2026; Accepted; 17-09-2026  
<https://doi.org/10.14456/issc.2026.50>

### Keywords:

Hankou concession; cultural  
geography; documentary film;  
visual semiotics; urban memory

### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** This study examines the Hankou concession as a cultural-geographic field through visual semiotics, using the documentary The Road to Hankou as both research object and creative practice. Grounded in Lotman's semi sphere, it considers how architecture, public space, and everyday life encode cultural hybridity and how audiovisual narration can reactivate urban memory. **Objective:** (1) Decode the symbolic structures and cultural memory embedded in the concession's urban spaces. (2) Investigate how documentary media translate spatial and symbolic features into dynamic audiovisual narratives. (3) Examine how The Road to Hankou functions as a living archive that reconstructs spatial identity and collective remembrance. **Methods:** A mixed, practice-based design integrates literature and archival review, field investigation in six representative blocks of Wuhan's Jiang'an District, and interdisciplinary analysis across aesthetics, architecture, history, and sociology. Guided by cultural semiotics, the project develops and produces a 6–10-minute documentary, analyzing its script architecture, narrative strategies, image-sound design, and montage as semiotic units. **Results:** The concession emerges as a multilayered semi sphere in which buildings, street patterns, institutions, and daily rituals operate as visual signs of Chinese Western interaction. A triadic model "historical space–multivocal narrative visual symbolism" is identified as the documentary's core translation pathway, employing spatial juxtaposition of archives and present-day footage, re-photography, and spatial sound to visualize temporal layers. The film re-assembles dispersed signs into a coherent, affective memory field, reshaping perceptions of urban identity. **Conclusion:** By bridging cultural geography, film theory, and heritage practice, the study proposes a transferable methodological framework for visualizing urban memory and interpreting hybrid historical spaces through documentary. It demonstrates documentary's capacity to

serve as a living archive that revitalizes forgotten urban histories, informs cultural communication, and supports heritage renewal.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Hankou, located at the confluence of the Yangtze and Han rivers, emerged as a major political, commercial, and transportation center in Central China following its opening as a treaty port in 1861. With the establishment of British, Russian, French, German, and Japanese concessions along the Yangtze River, Western urban planning concepts, architectural styles, and cultural ideologies entered Hankou and coexisted with local traditions. This produced a complex and dynamic urban space marked by cultural hybridity. While the concessions exhibited a block-style layout based on systematic planning, the native Chinese areas retained organic alley-based structures shaped by commercial and residential needs. These divergent spatial patterns reflect the cultural and political tensions of Hankou's transformation into a modern city (Xu, 2024)<sup>[6]</sup>

The concession system not only altered the cityscape but also deeply influenced daily life. Western institutions such as banks, hospitals, churches, and cinemas introduced new forms of public life and reshaped local leisure and social interaction. The juxtaposition and eventual blending of concession and Chinese spaces propelled Hankou's urban modernization, serving as a spatial manifestation of China's broader encounter with global modernity (Zhao & Meng, 2022)<sup>[7]</sup> Today, the concession legacy stands as both a physical and symbolic repository of historical memory, bearing significance for heritage preservation, identity construction, and urban renewal.

In the era of digital media, documentary film has become a vital tool for representing urban history, promoting cultural identity, and constructing spatial memory. According to the National Radio and Television Administration, documentaries rank third in popularity among online video content, especially favored by educated and empathetic young audiences. This growing interest underscores the need for more meaningful, culturally grounded, and symbolically rich visual narratives of local spaces.

This study investigates the Hankou concession as a cultural-geographic field through the lens of visual language. Adopting Yuri Lotman's cultural semiotics as a theoretical framework, it treats documentary film as a multimodal system of information encoding where camera, sound, lighting, and montage function as symbolic units. By analyzing the script structure and symbolic strategies of the documentary film *The Road to Hankou*, this study explores how visual media can re-present historical urban space, decode cultural symbols, and evoke public recognition. The goal is not only to reconstruct the multicultural past of the concession but also to contribute a methodological approach to the production of regional cultural documentaries rooted in spatial theory and semiotic analysis.

## 2. OBJECTIVES

1. To explore the symbolic structures and cultural memory embedded in the urban space of the Hankou concession through the lens of cultural semiotics, to analyze how architectural forms, spatial layouts, and everyday life practices visually construct a multilayered cultural semiosphere.

2. To investigate how visual media, particularly documentary film, can transform the spatial and symbolic features of historical urban sites into dynamic audiovisual narratives, by examining the narrative

framework and visual strategies used in the production of *The Road to Hankou*.

3. To examine how documentary films function as tools for constructing cultural memory and reproducing spatial identity, by analyzing how *The Road to Hankou* re-encodes historical imagery, emotional experiences, and public memory into a living audiovisual archive.

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 1. Studies on Urban Boundaries and Spatial Power in the Hankou Concession

Wang (2023)<sup>[5]</sup> Conducted an in-depth study on the spatial evolution of the boundary between the Chinese district and the foreign concession in Hankou. From the perspectives of spatial form, institutional arrangement, and everyday practices, she revealed that the boundary between these districts was not merely a physical demarcation but also a site of cultural and power negotiation. She emphasized that the Hankou concession was not a completely closed colonial space; instead, it was intertwined with the Chinese district through commuting, market flows, and cross-boundary interactions. The fluidity and permeability of this boundary laid the foundation for multicultural exchanges and contributed to the city's modern spatial construction. Her research provides a critical theoretical basis for understanding dynamic cultural interactions within concession spaces.

Guo and Huang (2013)<sup>[1]</sup> drawing on cultural geography and field theory, explored the mechanisms of multi-dimensional spatial production in heritage tourism sites. Although their case study focuses on Zhouzhuang, a Jiangnan water town, their analytical dimensions such as spatial reproduction, the transformation of cultural capital, and institutional embeddedness are highly applicable to the study of Hankou's concessions. The concession, shaped under foreign institutional power, not only reorganized material resources but also constructed a city image imbued with "otherness" through cultural activities and symbolic landscapes. This theoretical logic is particularly useful in analyzing the visual narrative design in the documentary *The Road to Hankou*.

#### 2. Research on Architecture and Heritage Reuse in Hankou Concessions

Li (2021)<sup>[2]</sup> Focused on the preservation and adaptive reuse of historical buildings within the French Concession of Hankou. She argued that the spatial value of the concession's heritage lies not only in its architectural forms but also in its deep connection with the city's collective memory. She warned that contemporary reuse practices often fall into the trap of commercialization, severing the historical narrative and weakening the role of concession heritage in shaping urban identity. Instead, she advocated for micro-scale interventions and narrative reconstructions that can reactivate these "sites of memory" within the urban fabric. This perspective provides important inspiration for how *The Road to Hankou* might curate and structure spatial representations of history.

Zhu (2014)<sup>[8]</sup> Using planning regulations as a starting point, systematically reviewed the construction regulations and administrative mechanisms of the Hankou concession. She found that each foreign concession implemented its planning principles based on the traditions of its home country for example, Britain favored axial symmetry and green space distribution, Germany emphasized industrial zoning, and

France preferred the block-style layout. These planning philosophies not only shaped the transformation of Hankou's urban form but also internalized symbolic meanings through architectural styles and street naming, influencing how residents understood their modern city. Her findings provide a basis for analyzing how the visual order of the concession is represented in documentary narratives.

### 3. Research on Visual Communication and Cultural Reception in the Concession

Lin and Bogong (2020)<sup>[3]</sup> highlighted that Hankou's concession became one of the earliest cinema markets in inland China during the early 20th century. Their study of theater distribution, film genres, and audience demographics revealed the cultural hierarchy and consumer patterns of that era. Foreign-language films mainly catered to expatriates, while local residents accessed Western visual culture through low-cost screenings. This hierarchical diffusion shaped local audiences' visual imagination and understanding of "modernity." The concession thus served as a key medium for cultural education and ideological influence. Their insights support the interpretation of *The Road to Hankou* as a visual site of cultural reproduction.

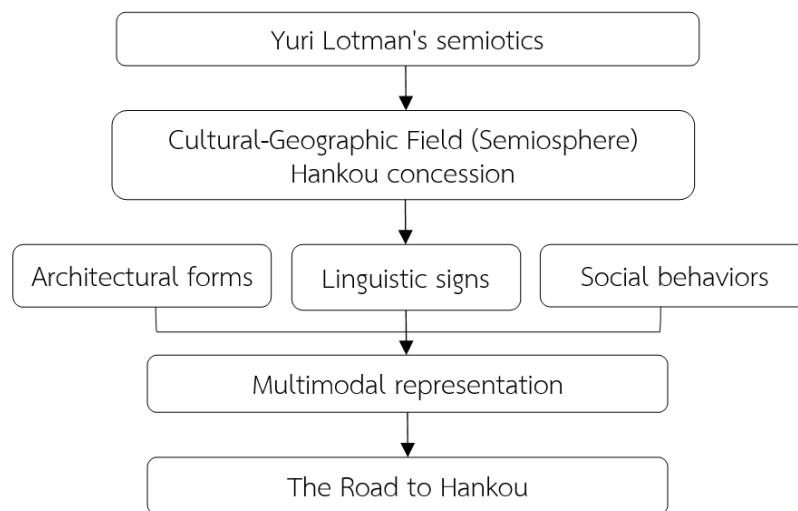
Wang (2016)<sup>[4]</sup> Examined the dissemination of early documentary films in Hankou between 1903 and 1935. She noted that numerous Western documentaries were introduced via the concession's film network, documenting exotic cultures while also projecting stereotypical views of China. At the same time, local audiences used these films to reflect on their own society. She emphasized that documentaries are often "recoded" during their circulation, becoming arenas of discursive negotiation between multiple cultural perspectives. Her analysis of this "dual reception mechanism" provides a valuable theoretical lens for understanding the mutual shaping of visual imagery and cultural interpretation in documentary production.

## 4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study is grounded in Yuri Lotman's concept of the semiosphere, which is used as the theoretical lens for interpreting the layered symbolic structures within cultural spaces. The Hankou concession, as a hybrid cultural zone shaped by Western colonialism and Chinese traditions, is understood as a semiosphere a dynamic semiotic environment constituted by architectural forms, linguistic signs, social behaviors, and historical narratives. Within this framework, the documentary explores how visual language can translate cultural symbols and spatial meanings into cinematic form (Figure 1).

Figure 1

*The theoretical framework of this study Constructed by researchers*



## 5. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a comprehensive methodology that integrates literature review, field investigation, and documentary production to reconstruct and visualize the cultural-geographic features of the Hankou concession. The methods employed serve both textual analysis and the creative process of the documentary *The Road to Hankou*.

### 1. Scope of the Study

**Content Scope:** The research focuses on decoding cultural symbols embedded in the urban fabric of the Hankou concession, aiming to examine their spatial organization and visual representation within a contemporary context.

**Temporal Scope:** The study spans approximately a century, from the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912 to the present day (2022), tracing the historical evolution and contemporary memory of the concession.

**Geographical Scope:** The research concentrates on six representative blocks in Wuhan's Jiang'an District: Zhongshan Avenue, Qingdao Road, the "87 Meeting" site, Yiyuan Road, Dazhi Road, and Liuhe Road.

**Creative Scope:** As a key research output, a 6–10-minute documentary short *The Road to Hankou* will be produced, employing visual anthropology methods to express the intersection of memory, space, and culture.

### 2. Literature Review

A variety of primary and secondary sources are collected, including local gazetteers, concession-era newspapers, building plans, and photographic archives. Special attention is given to archival materials from the Wuhan Jiang'an District State-Owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission, as well as to

visual artworks related to the concession by Professor Hu Chaoyang of Hubei Institute of Fine Arts. These sources help establish a historical narrative and trace visual-symbolic changes.

### 3. Field Investigation

Fieldwork is conducted with a cultural geography perspective, focusing on spatial observation, visual documentation, and interviews with local residents and experts. Key elements of investigation include the current condition of Western-Chinese architectural co-presence, remaining colonial signage, and the spatial distribution of memory markers. Interviews with officials in charge of cultural heritage and scholars such as Professor Hu provide multi-perspective interpretations.

### 4. Interdisciplinary Approach

This study adopts an interdisciplinary framework that integrates aesthetics, architecture, history, and sociology. For example, methods from architectural history are employed to analyze heritage structures, while theories of social memory inform the study of cultural identity. Visual storytelling is guided by cinematic language theories, allowing for a creative yet analytical reconstruction of urban culture.

### 5. Practice-Based Research

The production of the documentary *The Road to Hankou* constitutes an integral part of the research methodology. From scriptwriting and storyboarding to filming and postproduction, every stage is informed by the goal of translating cultural-geographic symbols into visual narrative. Visual text analysis and production reflexivity are employed to examine the script structure, visual symbols, montage, and sound design, reflecting on how creative decisions shape cultural representation. The documentary uses both observational footage and symbolic montage to articulate the layered meanings of Hankou as a cultural-geographic field.

## 6. RESULTS

### Visualizing the Cultural Semiosphere of the Hankou Concession

#### 1. Multilayered Cultural Symbols in the Urban Landscape

In the historical evolution of Hankou's concession areas, architecture, social life, and commercial space formed a richly layered symbolic system that serves as a visual code of its multicultural past. Drawing from Lotman's semiotic theory, the built environment emerges not just as physical infrastructure, but as a sign system encoding interactions between Chinese and Western aesthetics. The “Hankou-style” buildings hybrid structures combining Western classical façades with Chinese spatial arrangements became visual anchors of foreign presence and local adaptation. Public buildings like customs houses and consulates, and private dwellings such as garden villas and apartment complexes, physically inscribed colonial hierarchies into urban space, while simultaneously offering frameworks for cultural negotiation (Figure 2).

Figure2

*Renji Hospital Photographed by the researcher*



Social symbols also abounded. The rise of coffeehouses, Western-style restaurants, and cinemas reshaped the rhythm and rituals of daily life. Western customs, such as dining with cutlery or socializing in cafés, slowly permeated Chinese lifestyles, while indigenous habits persisted in parallel. Dress codes evolved in visible patterns from traditional changpao and cheongsams to tailored Western suits and skirts signifying shifts in identity and modernity. In this semiotic space, visual culture became a site of hybridization, resistance, and cultural translation.

## 2. The Hankou Concession as a Cultural Text

Extending beyond symbolic fragments, the Hankou concession can be read as a holistic “cultural text,” a multi-dimensional narrative system constructed from language, customs, dress, architecture, and visual imagery. Each element, when visually documented or reconstructed, narrates a part of the concession’s entangled modernity. Architectural spaces roof gardens, racecourses, French classical gardens, and Japanese parks are not merely stylistic choices but narrative devices reflecting ideology and geopolitical agency. For instance, British racecourses embodied colonial leisure culture and exclusivity, while Japanese green spaces expressed both modernization and spiritual imprint through shrines and pruning techniques.

Visual imagery photographs, paintings, and documentary footage further enhances this textual reading. Historic postcards of Bund streets, promotional materials for cinemas, and images of theatrical performances reveal a layered performativity in how the concession was imagined and consumed. These fragments offer evidence for visual anthropology, tracing how the space constructed and projected a cosmopolitan identity that was both aspirational and contested.

## 3. Temporal Layers and the Evolution of the Semiosphere

Table 1

*Historical Layers and Visual Strategies of the Hankou Concession.*

| Historical Layer               | Visual Symbols                 | Visual Strategy     |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------|
| Colonial expansion             | Architecture and boundaries    | Historical maps     |
| Construction and hybridization | Churches, markets, and posters | Archival images     |
| Withdrawal and fragmentation   | Remaining cultural traces      | Present-day footage |

Table 1 illustrates the evolution of the Hankou concession through three historical stages. In *The Road to Hankou*, historical maps, archival images, and contemporary footage are combined to visualize changes in cultural symbols and spatial identity, presenting the concession as a living archive of urban memory.

## 2. Constructing Visual Translation Pathways Narrative Framework and Visual Strategies in the Documentary *the Road to Hankou*

The documentary *The Road to Hankou*, serving as a visual response to the cultural geography of the Hankou concession, transforms static textual analysis into dynamic audiovisual narratives. Building upon the semiotic and spatial analysis presented in the first section, this research identifies a triadic structure of “historical space – multicultural narrative – visual symbols” as the core of the documentary’s communication strategy, proposing a visual model that embodies both critical cultural interpretation and operational documentary practice.

### 2.1 Visual Reconstruction of Historical Space and Symbolic Reframing

The documentary adopts a strategy of “spatial juxtaposition and temporal regression” to layer modern urban imagery with historical photographs, architectural plans, and archival materials. This technique creates a symbolic tension between past and present, allowing for a visually immersive understanding of the evolution of Hankou's concession area. For instance, drone footage of contemporary concession streets is intercut with CGI reconstructions of early 20th-century scenes to highlight the spatial continuity and transformation of the area (Figure 3).

Figure3

*Aerial scenes from The Road to Hankou Photographed by the researcher*



In this visual grammar, architecture becomes a medium of cultural memory. Its structure, materials, and decorative features function as non-verbal narrative elements, enabling viewers to perceive the cultural texture of space through audiovisual representation. This approach offers new empirical evidence for cultural geography and urban studies from a cinematic perspective.

## 2.2 Multicultural Narrative Strategy in Visual Storytelling

Departing from linear historical narration, *The Road to Hankou* employs an intertwined narrative model integrating characters, events, and spatial references. Through interviews, archival readings, and re-enacted scenes, the documentary features missionaries, Chinese entrepreneurs, and local intellectuals as carriers of cultural memory, presenting the concession as a site of intersecting identities and lived experiences. the film combines archival footage, excerpts from early Chinese cinema, and theatrical staging to create a hybrid mode of historical dramatization. This method avoids the rigidity of conventional documentary listing and fosters a multisensory immersion that encourages critical engagement with the concession's cultural hybridity.

## 2.3 Re-encoding of Visual Symbols and Cultural Translation

A significant aspect of the documentary lies in its use of symbolic imagery flags, clothing, maps, architectural motifs as tools of visual storytelling. These elements are recontextualized through editing techniques that synchronize image, voiceover, and musical cues, ensuring their function as vehicles of cultural meaning rather than mere visual decor. the film also employs “spatial sound” as a cultural marker, embedding ambient sounds (e.g., church bells, steamboat whistles, street vendor cries) to recreate an auditory landscape of historical Hankou. This multisensory strategy enriches the documentary's immersive quality and reinforces the spatial-cultural identity of the concession.

## 3. Historical Memory Construction and Cultural Spatial Reproduction in Audiovisual Narrative

### 3.1 Framing Memory through the Documentary Lens

Documentary is not merely a medium of recording but a powerful apparatus for constructing historical memory. In *The Road to Hankou*, the lens acts as a cultural interpreter that selects, arranges, and re-contextualizes historical materials photographs, newspapers, architectural footage, and oral testimonies to re-present the multicultural landscape of the Hankou concession. Rather than adopting a linear historical chronology, the film interweaves layers of visual text and sound narration to produce a “temporal montage,” in which past and present, East and West, colonizer and native voices echo and contradict one another. This narrative strategy enables viewers to perceive Hankou not only as a physical site but also as a palimpsest of memory, emotion, and ideology. the visual strategies include the rephotographing of old images in present-day locations, juxtaposition of historical maps with contemporary urban footage, and voiceover accounts by historians and local residents. These techniques bring spatial memory to life and situate historical trauma, colonial displacement, and urban transformation into a participatory cultural memory framework. In doing so, the documentary becomes a living archive, inviting reflection and dialog rather than mere reception.

### 3.2 The Spatial Poetics of Reproduction

Visual reproduction of historical urban space in the documentary is not just representational but also performative. By reconstructing the aesthetic, architectural, and social textures of the Hankou concession its embankments, arcades, boulevards, foreign clubs, and racecourses the film offers a spatial narrative that bridges cultural heritage and contemporary civic imagination. Specific cinematic techniques such as aerial tracking shots of the Yangtze riverside, time-lapse sequences of modern Hankou skylines overlayed with colonial-era blueprints, and dramatized reenactments based on archival testimonies, effectively transform the city into a “visual text.” The visual grammar of the documentary echoes Lotman’s theory of culture as a semiotic mechanism, wherein space becomes a repository of symbols, values, and historical inscriptions. Moreover, the film’s deliberate inclusion of neglected or erased sites—such as demolished race tracks, repurposed churches, or defaced colonial buildings—challenges the dominant narratives of progress. It foregrounds the layered nature of memory and how cultural geography, when visualized, becomes a space of negotiation between preservation, erasure, and re-signification (Figure 4).

Figure 4

*Aerial scenes from The Road to Hankou Photographed by the researcher*



### 3.3 Cultural Space as Emotional Cartography

The Hankou concession, as presented in *The Road to Hankou*, is not only a historical stage but a sentimental map of cultural identity, loss, and hybridization. Through slow pans, intimate interviews, and ambient sound design, the documentary constructs a tone of reflective nostalgia that resists simplification. Personal memories from elderly residents intersect with public archives, crafting a collective remembrance that is rooted in place yet open to interpretation. this affective spatiality elevates the documentary beyond informational history-telling into cultural reenactment. The viewer is not merely informed but emotionally involved, positioned within a multi-sensory experience of Hankou’s past. This immersive aesthetic provides not only cultural insight but political agency, as viewers are subtly prompted to rethink urban memory politics, spatial justice, and the ethics of visual historiography.

## 7. DISCUSSIONS

This study demonstrates that the visual representation of Hankou's former concession area is not a mere reproduction of historical facts, but a symbolic narrative process embedded within a cultural-geographic framework. Through the decoding of urban landscapes, architectural styles, public spaces, and historical images, the documentary *The Road to Hankou* constructs a multilayered visual structure that reactivates cultural memory and reshapes the viewer's perception of urban identity.

In the context of visual cultural geography, scholars have long emphasized the symbolic function of urban space. Guo and Huang (2013)<sup>[1]</sup> for instance, highlighted that urban heritage functions not only as a spatial legacy but also as a mechanism for cultural capital reproduction. Though their study focused on the spatial production of Jiangnan water towns, the underlying logic of space as a medium for power, identity, and memory applies equally to Hankou's historical concession. This paper extends their view into the domain of visual media, arguing that film serves as a re-encoding system, translating space into symbolic meaning through sensory immersion and narrative structure. Compared to earlier research emphasizing documentary as a tool for cultural dissemination, such as the work of Wang (2016)<sup>[4]</sup> on early documentary film in Hankou, this study shifts the focus to symbolic reconstruction and spatial narrative logic within the creative process. Wang's research illustrated how early 20<sup>th</sup>-century documentaries mediated between Western colonial discourse and Chinese audience reception. In contrast, *The Road to Hankou* introduces a third narrative model: a creator-driven reimagination of urban memory that intertwines visual poetics, emotional mapping, and historical consciousness. It signifies a methodological transition from passive visual preservation to active cultural construction.

The first key finding of this study is that Hankou's concession space can be understood as a multilayered symbolic domain. By adopting Lotman's concept of the "cultural text," the research interprets spatial structures and historical residues as signifying systems with evolving symbolic functions. These include architectural forms, street patterns, and social practices embedded in the urban fabric, which together form a semiotic constellation unique to Hankou.

The second finding concerns the visual strategy of the documentary itself. The study identifies a triadic model "historical space–multivocal narrative–visual symbolism" as the core framework for transforming physical space into narrative imagery. Rather than relying solely on archival footage or architectural preservation, this strategy uses visual coding, temporal montage, and voiceover layering to reconstruct space in both symbolic and affective dimensions.

The third finding focuses on the function of the documentary as a "living archive." It highlights how *The Road to Hankou* embodies emotional resonance and cultural reflection through the interweaving of subjective storytelling and collective memory. The film moves beyond informational display to establish a performative space in which history is not only viewed but emotionally engaged, inviting audiences to reinterpret spatial identity and historical experience.

Together, these findings underscore the evolving role of documentary in urban cultural expression. In rapidly transforming cities like Wuhan, many historic districts face physical erasure and memory rupture.

In this context, visual storytelling becomes a powerful tool for reclaiming spatial meaning and sustaining cultural identity. The symbolic reconstruction of the Hankou concession through documentary film offers an alternative pathway to heritage preservation one grounded in affective narrative, visual semiotics, and spatial imagination.

Nevertheless, this study is not without limitations. As a creator-centered inquiry, it inevitably reflects the subjectivity of the filmmaker, from spatial selection to symbolic interpretation. The absence of empirical audience feedback and spatial impact assessment limits its broader generalizability. Future research should address these gaps by incorporating audience reception studies, digital spatial mapping, and comparative analysis across other concession-based urban spaces in China or beyond.

In conclusion, this study proposes a new visual paradigm for interpreting urban cultural geography, one that combines symbolic decoding, narrative construction, and cultural critique. *The Road to Hankou* exemplifies how documentary film can function as a critical medium of memory-making, offering an operational model for cultural communication and heritage intervention in the postmodern urban condition. As visual media continues to reshape the interface between history and space, such interdisciplinary approaches hold promise for enriching our understanding of city, memory, and identity.

## 8. ORIGINALITY AND BODY OF KNOWLEDGE

This study's originality lies in reconceiving the Hankou concession not as a static "historic district" but as a dynamic semiosphere in which architecture, institutions, street patterns, and everyday rituals operate as interacting sign-systems. Positioning the documentary *The Road to Hankou* as both research object and research instrument, it advances a practice-based semiotic method that treats camera position, montage, and spatial sound as analyzable units rather than neutral recorders. The study formalizes a transferable translation pathway historical space to multivocal narrative to visual symbolism operationalized through temporal regression (archival overlays, re-photography at original camera stations) and spatial juxtaposition of past/present footage to surface layered urban time. The contribution to knowledge is fourfold: theoretically, it integrates cultural geography with film/semiotics to articulate the concession as an evolving "urban cultural text"; methodologically, it offers a replicable workflow that links archival/literature review, field observation across six Jiang'an District blocks, and production analytics (script architecture, motif coding, continuity cues) with clear evaluation criteria (symbolic density, narrative polyphony, spatial legibility); empirically, it maps recurrent hybrid forms ("Hankou-style" façades with local spatial logics) and identifies stable visual signs and soundmarks that structure collective remembrance; and practically, it frames documentary as a living archive for heritage communication, suggesting micro-interventions and community voices over commodified reuse while outlining pathways to cross-media applications (interactive exhibits, VR reconstructions) and city branding. The framework is portable to other hybrid historical spaces and sets an agenda for reception studies and spatial analytics to quantify how audiovisual strategies shape cultural memory and spatial identity.

## 9. RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Deepen the study of multidimensional visual translation mechanisms of cultural space Future research should further develop a theoretical framework that integrates "visual encoding – narrative construction – public reception" to explore how documentary imagery embodies the complexity of cultural symbols. Beyond historical representation, documentary creation should analyze how visual language carries meaning, especially in hybrid spaces like concessions marked by colonial, local, and postmodern identities. Integrating theories from visual communication, cultural memory, and audience studies will help clarify how visual discourse, modes of viewing, and cultural reinterpretation interrelate.

2. Expand practical pathways for audiovisual expression of urban heritage The “space–character–symbol” narrative model demonstrated in *The Road to Hankou* offers a valuable reference for future urban cultural documentaries. It is recommended that communication practices employ cross-media formats such as interactive films, VR reconstructions, and immersive exhibitions to transform historical space into multisensory cultural experience zones. Moreover, encouraging local community participation and including marginalized voices can counterbalance dominant historical narratives, building inclusive and pluralistic urban memory fields.

3. Strategically position visual media in urban cultural dissemination In the digital age, documentary should be treated as a strategic medium for city branding and cultural identity construction. Municipal governments, cultural institutions, and academic creators should collaborate on producing place-based documentary content that extends beyond historical record-keeping to engage in cultural regeneration and global dialogue. Targeted short-form documentaries for younger audiences with dynamic pacing and intercultural storytelling should be disseminated through social media platforms in serial, interactive formats to increase impact and accessibility.

In conclusion, the creation and analysis of *The Road to Hankou* offer a unique perspective on the cultural significance of the Hankou concession and demonstrate how documentary can serve as a powerful tool for cultural reproduction. In today’s evolving media landscape, continued exploration of the balance between cultural depth and communication breadth is essential for advancing visual storytelling in the service of urban narrative and cultural construction.

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