



**A PLACE BRANDING FRAMEWORK FOR TOURISM BASED ON VISUAL
URBAN PERCEPTION IN YINCHUAN CITY, NINGXIA HUI AUTONOMOUS
REGION, CHINA**

By

JI GUANGYAO

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to

*My beloved family,
My lovely daughter,
My rigorous and conscientious supervisors,
My enthusiastic friends*

With love, respect and a bunch of memories



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

A PLACE BRANDING FRAMEWORK FOR TOURISM BASED ON VISUAL URBAN PERCEPTION IN YINCHUAN CITY, NINGXIA HUI AUTONOMOUS REGION, CHINA

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May 2024

Chairman : Mohd Shahrudin bin Abd Manan, PhD
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This thesis investigates the development of tourism in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region of China, with a particular focus on its capital city, Yinchuan. It explores the specific relationships between city image, place branding, visual urban perception, and the 'All-for-One Tourism' policy in China. The literature review begins by emphasizing the critical role of city image and place branding in shaping tourism. It then delves into issues related to visual urban perception before examining the role of the 'All-for-One Tourism' policy on Ningxia's tourism development. As urbanization progresses, place branding has become a crucial tool for enhancing city competitiveness. With its natural beauty, architectural treasures, and cultural diversity, Ningxia has benefited from the Chinese government's 'All-for-One Tourism' policy, which aims to promote its tourism industry. Against this backdrop, the study introduces a novel approach by integrating visual urban perception into place branding to enhance tourism in Ningxia, particularly in Yinchuan city. The study outlines

three main research objectives: identifying unique local characteristics, integrating visual urban perception paradigms, and proposing a place branding framework. To address these objectives, the research methodology begins with a detailed research design and justification for focusing on Yinchuan as a case study. The methodology then discusses data collection methods, including expert interviews and a questionnaire survey. Expert interviews identify key elements of Yinchuan's place identity, such as visual landmarks, cultural connotations, media strategies, and potential improvements. These insights inform a subsequent questionnaire survey that explores the relationship between visual urban perception and place identity. A mixed-method approach is employed, combining expert interviews with 23 experts from various professional backgrounds and a random sampling questionnaire survey among 400 residents and tourists of Yinchuan. The survey results are analyzed quantitatively through statistical comparative analyses and qualitatively through thematic analysis. The results are structured around key analytical themes, revealing respondents' preferences and perceptions regarding Yinchuan's place branding elements, thereby contributing to a comprehensive understanding of visual urban perception and place identity. The findings from both expert interviews and public surveys inform the proposed place branding framework for Yinchuan based on five key attributes: visual landmarks, visual cultural connotations, visual media strategies, potential improvements, and future visual landmarks. This framework offers innovative perspectives and practical implications for Ningxia's tourism industry. From this perspective, the study leverages visual urban perception to construct a place branding framework that enhances tourism and significantly

contributes to the nationwide effort to boost the tourism economy. Furthermore, it serves as a catalyst for future research into innovative place branding frameworks for underdeveloped regions and lesser-known cities across mainland China.

Keywords: 'All-for-One Tourism' Policy, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, Place Branding, Visual Urban Perception, Yinchuan.

SDG: GOAL 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, GOAL 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
Sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**RANGKA KERJA PENJENAMAAN TEMPAT UNTUK PELANCONGAN
BERDASARKAN PERSEPSI BANDAR VISUAL DI BANDAR YINCHUAN,
WILAYAH AUTONOMI NINGXIA HUI, CHINA**

Oleh

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Tesis ini mengkaji perkembangan pelancongan di Wilayah Autonomi Ningxia Hui di China, dengan tumpuan khusus terhadap ibu kotanya, Yinchuan. Ia meneroka hubungan khusus antara imej bandar, penjenamaan tempat, persepsi visual bandar dan dasar 'Semua-untuk-Satu Pelancongan' di China. Kajian literatur bermula dengan menekankan peri penting peranan imej bandar dan penjenamaan tempat dalam kemajuan pelancongan. Ia kemudian menyelidiki isu berkaitan persepsi visual bandar sebelum mengkaji peranan dasar 'Semua-untuk-Satu Pelancongan' terhadap pembangunan pelancongan Ningxia. Apabila pembedaan berkembang, penjenamaan tempat telah menjadi alat penting untuk meningkatkan daya saing sesebuah bandar. Dengan keindahan alam semula jadi, khazanah seni bina dan kepelbagaian budaya, Ningxia telah mendapat manfaat daripada dasar 'Semua-untuk-Satu Pelancongan' kerajaan China, yang bertujuan untuk mempromosikan industri pelancongan. Berdasarkan latar belakang ini, kajian ini memperkenalkan

pendekatan baru dengan menyepadukan persepsi bandar visual ke dalam penjenamaan tempat untuk meningkatkan pelancongan di Ningxia, khususnya di bandar Yinchuan. Kajian ini menggariskan tiga objektif penyelidikan utama: mengenal pasti ciri tempatan yang unik, menyepadukan paradigma persepsi bandar visual, dan mencadangkan rangka kerja penjenamaan tempat. Bagi mencapai objektif ini, metodologi penyelidikan bermula dengan reka bentuk penyelidikan terperinci dan justifikasi dalam memberi tumpuan kepada Yinchuan sebagai kajian kes. Metodologi kemudian membincangkan kaedah pengumpulan data, termasuk temu bual pakar dan tinjauan soal selidik. Temu bual pakar mengenal pasti elemen utama identiti tempat Yinchuan, seperti mercu tanda visual, konotasi budaya, strategi media dan potensi penambahbaikan. Kenal pasti pakar ini seterusnya memberi input kepada tinjauan soal selidik dalam meneroka hubungan antara persepsi bandar visual dan identiti tempat. Dalam hal ini, pendekatan kaedah kajian campuran digunakan, menggabungkan temu bual pakar dengan 23 pakar dari pelbagai latar belakang profesional dan tinjauan soal selidik pensampelan rawak di kalangan 400 penduduk dan pelancong di bandar Yinchuan. Hasil tinjauan dianalisis secara kuantitatif melalui analisis perbandingan statistik dan secara kualitatif melalui analisis tematik. Hasilnya disusun mengikut tema analisis utama, bagi mendedahkan keutamaan dan persepsi responden berkenaan elemen penjenamaan tempat bandar Yinchuan, sekali gus menyumbang kepada pemahaman menyeluruh tentang persepsi visual bandar dan identiti tempat. Penemuan daripada temu bual pakar dan tinjauan awam membawa kepada pembangunan rangka kerja penjenamaan tempat yang sesuai dicadangkan untuk bandar Yinchuan berdasarkan lima ciri utama: mercu

tanda visual, konotasi budaya visual, strategi media visual, potensi penambahbaikan, dan mercu tanda visual pada masa hadapan. Rangka kerja ini menawarkan perspektif inovatif dan implikasi praktikal terhadap industri pelancongan di wilayah Ningxia. Daripada perspektif ini, kajian yang dijalankan memanfaatkan persepsi visual bandar bagi membina rangka kerja penjenamaan tempat dalam meningkatkan pelancongan dan menyumbang secara signifikan terhadap usaha kerajaan untuk meningkatkan ekonomi pelancongan. Tambahan pula, ia berfungsi sebagai pemangkin kepada penyelidikan seterusnya di masa hadapan dalam membangunkan rangka kerja penjenamaan tempat yang inovatif bagi wilayah lain yang kurang membangun dan bandar yang kurang dikenali di tanah besar China.

Kata kunci: Dasar 'Semua-untuk-Satu Pelancongan', Wilayah Autonomi Ningxia Hui, Penjenamaan Tempat, Persepsi Visual Bandar, Yinchuan.

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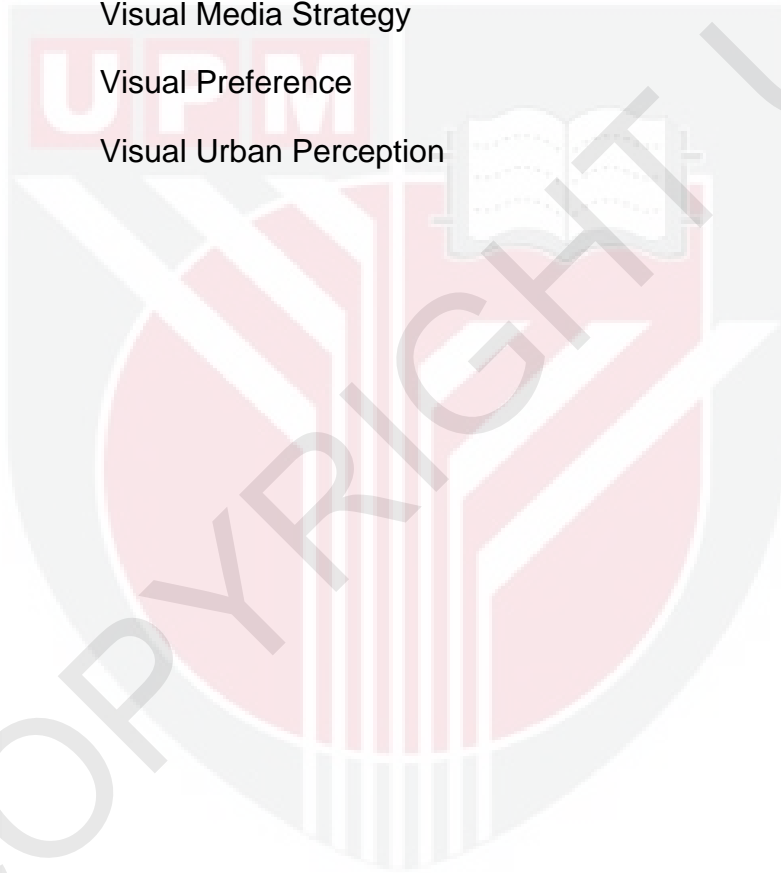
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

FVL	Future Visual Landmark
PB	Place Branding
PBF	Place Branding Framework
VCC	Visual Cultural Connotation
VL	Visual Landmark
VMS	Visual Media Strategy
VP	Visual Preference
VUP	Visual Urban Perception



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

In an era of economic globalization, numerous cities are experiencing heightened competition on various fronts, including attracting tourists, residents, businesses, and bolstering their exports. Scholars like Dinnie (2011), Anttiroiko (2015), Hertget et al. (2015), and Li (2019) have extensively documented this trend. The ability of a city to establish a distinctive brand becomes crucial to distinguish itself from competitors. When a city successfully adopts the right tools and identity, it can enjoy several benefits, including increased opportunities for development, job creation, and an improved quality of life for its residents. A well-branded city tends to be more functional, vibrant, and attractive. Furthermore, effective place branding can also help showcase a city's unique characteristics and drive tourism development. Every city possesses its own unique traits, and the process of developing a place brand hinges on an exploration of these distinctive features. As highlighted by Min et al. (2020), one method for accomplishing this is through the use of visual urban perception (VUP). VUP involves studying people's preferences for specific environments and their aesthetic judgments of urban landscapes, including streets and buildings. This method, which was initially employed by Lynch to investigate urban imagery in earlier times, provides valuable insights into the visual aspects that shape a city's identity. It encompasses critical elements

such as visual landmarks (VL), visual cultural connotations (VCC), and visual media strategies (VMS), all of which can be leveraged in the development of a place branding framework. This framework aims to effectively capture the essence of a place, ultimately contributing to its distinctive and memorable brand.

In today's competitive landscape, where well-established Western cities like Paris, New York, and London have long held the spotlight, an increasing number of Asian cities are now investing in robust place branding strategies to boost their tourism development. According to a report published by the World Economic Forum, in 2017, ten cities stood out as major tourist destinations. Strikingly, six of these cities were in Asia, specifically Hong Kong, Bangkok, Singapore, Macau, Kuala Lumpur, and Shenzhen (as depicted in Figure 1.1). This highlights the growing prominence of Asian cities on the global tourism map. What stands out in this report is that each of these ten cities has meticulously developed its own unique place branding to showcase its distinct culture and spirit. Through effective place branding efforts, these cities have succeeded in embedding their images deep within the collective consciousness of the public. As a result, they continue to attract individuals who are eager to experience and explore these vibrant destinations firsthand.

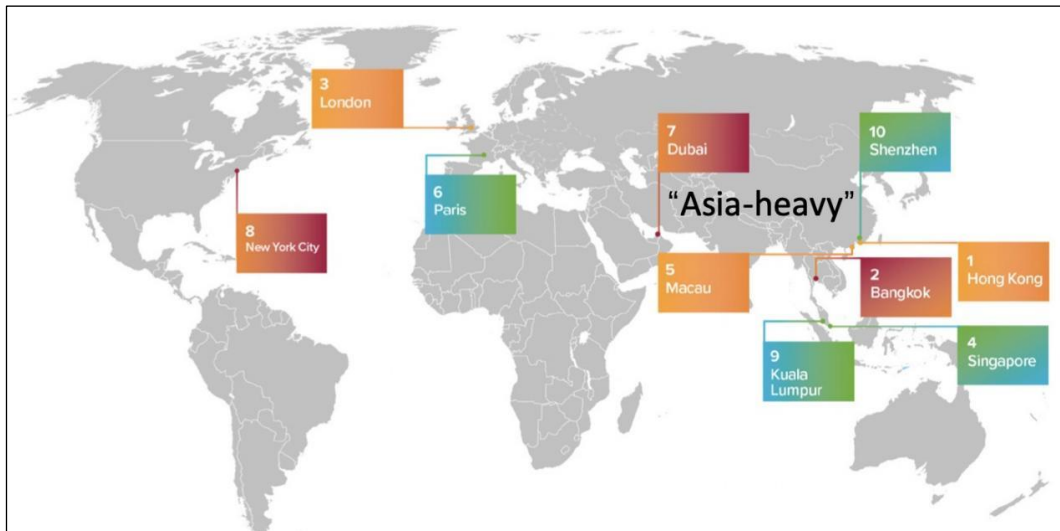


Figure 1.1: Top 10 Global City Destinations in 2017
 (Source: Euromonitor International, 2017)

To explore this aspect of tourism development in major cities, it is essential to emphasize the importance of visual landmarks. Kevin Lynch, in his influential book *“The Image of the City,”* originally published in 1960, introduced a fundamental concept in urban design. He identified five essential physical elements that constitute a city’s identity: landmarks, paths, edges, districts, and nodes. Among these elements, landmarks hold a particularly prominent role. Lynch’s theory has had a lasting impact on the field of urban design research and continues to inspire contemporary discussions in this domain.

A landmark stand as one of the most pivotal visual architectural elements contributing to a place’s branding image, serving as an iconic representation of the city. Beyond its role as a mere urban sign, a landmark building plays a crucial role as a prominent symbol that helps individuals identify and connect with the city. These landmarks possess intrinsic historical and societal significance, encompassing both historical and contemporary values. They

effectively fulfill the public's need for comprehending urban social and cultural aspects in a tangible form. Moreover, they serve as a quintessential embodiment of a place's unique branding image, style, and overall popularity.

Increasingly, major metropolitan cities are viewing landmark buildings as integral components of their place branding strategies. These structures go beyond showcasing architectural and technological prowess; they serve as powerful conveyors of a city's essence, aesthetics, and symbols, encapsulating the historical and cultural richness of the urban environment. This sentiment is reinforced by the work of Noaime et al. (2023), which underscores the pivotal role played by landmarks as symbolic objects in shaping urban identity and representing cultural values. As noted by Gao (2020), landmarks serve as essential mediums through which people can recognize and establish an emotional connection with the city. They serve as significant displays of the city's image and provide a unique embodiment of its historical evolution. Furthermore, Gao highlights that landmarks have the capacity to carry the city's collective memory and promote its enduring spirit, making them vital tools in the endeavor of place branding.

Certainly, iconic landmarks play a significant role in representing the essence and values of their respective cities. Take, for instance, the Statue of Liberty in New York, as depicted in Figure 1.2. This monument is not only a symbol of freedom but also a designated UNESCO World Heritage site. Beyond its physical presence, the Statue of Liberty embodies profound ideals such as freedom, peace, human rights, democracy, and opportunity, sparking

intellectual discourse and contemplation (Bisland, 2005). Similarly, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, shown in Figure 1.3, is renowned worldwide for its architectural splendor. It stands as a quintessential French cultural symbol and serves as one of Paris's most iconic landmarks. Over the course of more than a century, the Eiffel Tower has evolved from being a marvel of technology to an artistic masterpiece and ultimately into a potent symbol. Today, it stands as a testament to the harmonious fusion of technology and art, representing a humanistic symbol that captivates the world's imagination (Bisland, 2005).

In Australia, the Sydney Opera House, as seen in Figure 1.4, holds a place of paramount importance. It serves not only as the epicenter of Sydney's artistic and cultural endeavors but also as the very embodiment of Australian identity. Recognized as one of the ten wonders of the 20th century world, it stands as the most instantly recognizable architectural gem in Sydney. Tourists from across the globe flock to visit and capture its beauty in photographs daily (Colbert, 2003). Meanwhile, in Kuala Lumpur, the Petronas Twin Towers, shown in Figure 1.5, claim the title of the world's tallest twin towers and rank as the fifth tallest buildings globally. These towers symbolize Malaysia's thriving economy and encapsulate the youthful, moderate, and contemporary urban character of Kuala Lumpur. They are a testament to iconic architectural design and the pursuit of uniqueness in urban landscapes (Petroski, 1996).



Figure 1.2: Statue of Liberty, Manhattan, New York
(Source: William Warby, 2007)



Figure 1.3: Eiffel Tower, Paris
(Source: Copyright 2008, 2010)



Figure 1.4: Sydney Opera House
(Source: Bernard Gagnon, 2015)



Figure 1.5: Petronas Twin Towers
(Source: Morio, 2010)

In China, visual landmarks are prevalent in many cities, particularly in metropolitan areas. These landmarks are not limited to cities with rich historical and cultural legacies like Beijing, Xi'an, and Nanjing; even the trendy and modern emerging cultural hubs such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen boast their own iconic landmarks that embody their unique cultures.

For instance, Beijing is home to the Forbidden City, also known as the Imperial Palace of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, as depicted in Figure 1.6. This architectural marvel is one of the world's largest and best-preserved ancient wooden structures (Qin et al., 2021). It stands as a renowned cultural heritage site and a sought-after tourist destination, holding the prestigious title of a UNESCO World Heritage Site (Eck et al., 2023). The Forbidden City bears immense symbolic significance as a representative of Chinese cultural heritage, imparting profound cultural and historical meaning to those who visit and admire it.



Figure 1.6: Forbidden City, Beijing
(Source: The Forbidden City, 2023)

Xi'an Bell Tower, situated in Xi'an City, Shaanxi Province, holds a significant place in China's historical architectural heritage. Bu et al. (2022) highlight its role as a representative of China's historical architecture, emphasizing that it is not only the largest but also the oldest and best-preserved among China's existing bell towers, as depicted in Figure 1.7. Serving as a prominent symbol of Xi'an, it functions as a vital landmark encapsulating the city's rich historical and cultural legacy, shaping its distinctive image, and serving as a captivating business card for the city.



Figure 1.7: Bell Tower, Xi'an
(Source: Bu et al., 2022)

Nanjing's Confucius Temple, as detailed by Tang et al. (2019), holds a special place as China's first national highest institution and is recognized as one of the country's four largest Confucian temples, as illustrated in Figure 1.8. This revered temple complex serves as a central hub for ancient Chinese culture, where the rich history and humanities of Jinling come together. Over the

centuries, it has borne witness to the economic and cultural prosperity of the Sui, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. Furthermore, it holds the distinction of being China's earliest historically and culturally significant district, an open testament to the nation's heritage (Wu & Chen, 2021).



Figure 1.8: Confucius Temple, Nanjing
(Source: Confucius Temple, 2011)

Indeed, as China has rapidly developed, modern cities like Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen have witnessed the emergence of numerous iconic landmarks that contribute to the nation's global identity. The Oriental Pearl Radio & TV Tower, showcased in Figure 1.9, stands as one of Shanghai's most distinctive cultural landmarks. Its unique and futuristic design has transformed it into a symbol of Shanghai, effectively serving as the city's business card (Zhao et al., 2022). This landmark not only signifies the rapid progress of Shanghai but also symbolizes the city's elevated status, both in terms of growth and its physical height. It is a testament to Shanghai's dynamic development and its position as a global metropolis.



Figure 1.9: Oriental Pearl Radio & TV Tower, Shanghai
(Source: Oriental Pearl Radio & TV Tower, 2023)

Guangzhou's Canton Tower, also referred to as Guangzhou New TV Tower and affectionately nicknamed "Xiaomanyao", stands as a modern landmark and a fresh representation of Guangzhou, as presented in Figure 1.10. This architectural marvel reflects the advancements in contemporary architectural technology, showcasing the seamless integration of cutting-edge technological innovation (Guo et al., 2023). Additionally, it serves as a testament to the level of cultural facilities and sophistication achieved in Guangzhou, emphasizing the city's commitment to both modernity and cultural progress (Gong et al., 2022). The Canton Tower has become an emblem of Guangzhou's forward-looking approach to development and its position as a thriving cultural and technological hub.



Figure 1.10: Canton Tower, Guangzhou
(Source: Canton Tower, 2023)

KingKey100, situated as a new landmark in Shenzhen, holds the status of a global financial symbol, as indicated by Wang (2016), as depicted in Figure 1.11. It is poised to serve as Shenzhen's gateway to the world and a prominent window for international engagement. This monumental structure is strategically positioned to be the premier platform for global entities seeking to establish a presence in China (Qu, 2020). KingKey100 embodies Shenzhen's ambitions as a global financial and economic hub, signifying its openness to the world and its pivotal role in facilitating international interactions and partnerships.



Figure 1.11: KingKey100, Shenzhen
(Source: KingKey100, 2023)

The discussion highlights the fundamental essence of landmark buildings as evocative symbols that can conjure memories with simplicity and minimal strokes. Landmark buildings serve as a city's business card, encapsulating a vivid representation of the city's brand image. Traditional landmarks are a testament to a city's rich history and cultural heritage, while modern landmarks endorse a city's contemporary style, modernity, and technological prowess.

One significant impact of place branding is its role in advancing the goals of the tourism industry (Kavaratzis, 2004; Foroudi et al., 2016). In today's globalized world, where travel is increasingly accessible, tourism destinations are engaged in intense competition to attract tourists, businesses, and investments to their regions. A city equipped with a strong place branding strategy is better positioned to establish widespread recognition, imbue meaning, and radiate allure. The more appealing a city becomes, the more visitors it can entice, thereby stimulating the growth of its tourism sector. Simultaneously, tourism development can fuel economic and social progress,

enhancing the quality of life and satisfaction levels among its residents. Given these dynamics, many countries and regions are actively seeking to attract tourists and bolster their tourism industries by cultivating distinctive place branding strategies. These efforts not only enhance their global visibility but also drive economic growth, enrich societal well-being, and elevate the overall attractiveness of their locales.

The 'All-for-One Tourism' national policy, introduced by the Chinese government in 2016, is a strategic initiative designed to harness the immense growth potential of mainland China's tourism sector. This multifaceted policy not only aims to stimulate economic growth but also seeks to enhance the visibility and appeal of various regions throughout the country. Among the regions targeted by this policy is the picturesque Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, nestled in the northwestern heartland of mainland China.

Table 1.1, presented below, provides an overview of the focus of the 'All-for-One Tourism' policy at the provincial level in China. It outlines the rationale behind the policy and the anticipated years for its implementation in specific provinces. The table underscores the importance of Ningxia province within the broader framework of this policy, emphasizing its role in contributing to the objectives set forth by 'All-for-One Tourism'.

Table 1.1: The Focus of ‘All-for-One Tourism’ based on Provincial-level in China

Provincial level	Reason	Proposed Year
Hainan Province	Implement “spot-line-scale” ‘All-for-One Tourism’ space development strategy	Jan, 2016
Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region	Promote a four-aspects-integrated ‘All-for-One Tourism’ development model called “all scenery, entire industries, 24 hours, all citizens”	Sep, 2016
Shaanxi Province	Establish the road of ‘All-for-One Tourism’ called “Synchronous advancement between improvement of public toilet and comprehensive improvement of urban and rural environment”	Aug, 2017
Guizhou Province	Construct mountain tourism destination to practice ‘All-for-One Tourism’	Aug, 2017
Shandong Province	Carry out ‘All-for-One Tourism’ through a collaboration of departments	Aug, 2017
Hebei Province	Implement ‘All-for-One Tourism’ by promoting “coordination among government sectors, co-operation among different areas, involvement of all citizens”	Aug, 2017
Zhejiang Province	Implement ‘All-for-One Tourism’ development model through investigating and constructing featured towns	Aug, 2017

(Source: Author, 2023. Modified from China National Tourism Administration)

The concept of ‘All-for-One Tourism’ emerged officially in 2016 and was introduced as a novel planning concept by Chinese tourism management practitioners. Xiaoxu Feng (2017) provides a definition for ‘All-for-One Tourism’, which highlights its role in guiding the transformation and advancement of tourist destinations. This planning concept was devised in response to the evolving landscape of the tourism industry. It is designed to facilitate the transformation and enhancement of tourist destinations, recognizing that the level of development achieved through ‘All-for-One Tourism’ reflects the maturity of regional tourism industries. Since its introduction in 2016, China has actively undertaken efforts to promote and implement ‘All-for-One Tourism’ to drive tourism development and elevate the quality of tourist experiences (Feng, 2017). This strategic approach seeks to not only attract visitors but also

enhance the overall appeal and sustainability of tourism destinations, aligning with the broader goals of regional development and economic growth.

Tian and colleagues (2018) expanded upon this idea, describing 'All-for-One Tourism' as a concept aimed at facilitating the enhancement and progress of tourist destinations. This involves improvements in ecological environments, public services, institutional frameworks, policies, regulations, and the cultivation of civilized qualities, along with collaborative efforts in society. The goal is to harmonize economic growth and social development simultaneously.

China, in its proactive efforts to advance tourism infrastructure throughout the nation, has implemented a range of policies aimed at fostering the growth and progress of the tourism sector. During the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, tourism development was granted an all-encompassing strategic perspective, underscoring its status as a comprehensive industry and a pivotal driver of economic advancement. In essence, tourism's significance has been elevated to a level of national strategic importance, as noted by Tian and colleagues in 2018.

The Fifth Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee introduced the principles of "innovation, coordination, green, openness, and sharing." Building upon these five core concepts, the National Tourism Working Conference promptly introduced the notion of 'All-for-One Tourism development.' Essentially, these five concepts serve as the central guiding principles and the core essence driving the advancement of 'All-for-One Tourism'. 'All-for-One

Tourism', in turn, serves as the concrete strategic approach for the tourism industry to put these five concepts into practice.

The 'All-for-One Tourism' initiative, also known as the 'National Region-Based Tourism Destination' as mentioned in China Daily (2016), represents an innovative strategy for advancing tourism. This policy fundamentally acknowledges mainland China's regions as holistic tourism destinations where all key players, including government entities, businesses, and local residents, collaborate to create exceptional travel experiences for visitors. Its core aim is to cultivate top-notch travel experiences, prioritizing quality over sheer tourist numbers.

1.2 Problem Statement

According to Foroudi et al. (2016), place branding is a strategic approach to promoting tourism destinations, aiming to create a unique image and identity for a place, thereby attracting tourists and boosting the local economy. The development of city image and place branding can demonstrate local identity and effectively promote tourism; moreover, a city with a good brand is more functional and attractive. Developing a place branding framework for a city that incorporates local characteristics can help to differentiate it from other cities and regions, making it more attractive to potential tourists.

Visual urban perception is a multidisciplinary field involving the study of people's preferences for specific environments and their aesthetic judgements of the urban landscape, including streets and buildings, an approach that

provides valuable insights into how individuals perceive and interact with their surroundings and plays a key role in developing effective place branding strategies. By examining people's preferences and aesthetic judgements, it is possible to highlight their distinctive visual characteristics when developing place branding and identities, creating urban spaces that are more attractive, functional and memorable. Using insights into what is visually pleasing and engaging to people, cities can create compelling brand identities that resonate with residents and visitors, attract tourists and support local economic growth. This involves not only highlighting a city's unique visual characteristics, but also ensuring that urban design and planning efforts are aligned with these preferences.

Visual urban perception as an effective method for exploring important visual elements for building place branding. This study attempts to develop a place branding framework by incorporating visual city perception as an effective method for exploring important visual elements for establishing place branding. Incorporating visual urban perception into place branding strategies can significantly enhance the attractiveness of a city.

By combing through the literature, it can be found that various studies over the years have shown that place branding research is mostly focused on how it can impact and bolster markets and economies. Furthermore, research on local brands has predominantly concentrated on well-known major cities, such as the capitals of various countries. Up to this point, however, there has been a notable absence of dedicated research on place branding and the city image of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. The existing theories on place

branding design cannot be directly transposed onto Ningxia, failing to capture its distinctive urban culture. Moreover, current research exhibits shortcomings in both content and methodology, including the lack of exploration into the relationship between place branding and visual communication, as well as place branding and tourism development. Additionally, there is a dearth of studies employing a mixed-method approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Moreover, a significant portion of studies on visual urban perception tend to concentrate on the physical aesthetics of the urban environment and the sentiments and judgments of urban residents, including aspects like safety, attractiveness, and affluence. Despite the inherently multidisciplinary nature of visual urban perception, very few investigations delve into the interplay between visual urban perception and place branding or explore how to leverage visual urban perception in crafting a place branding strategy for tourism.

Hence, the advancement and expansion of tourism in both China and Ningxia necessitate an examination of place branding and city image in contemporary times, which serves as the driving force behind this study. Through a blend of theoretical and practical research on place branding and city image, we aim to catalyze the growth of the tourism sector. Additionally, this endeavor will contribute to the city's economic progress and facilitate a more comprehensive dissemination of its rich history and culture.

The preceding discussions underscore the significance of place branding and visual urban perception in the realm of tourism development, both on a global and local scale, and research gaps in related areas derived from the literature review. Specifically for this study, the recent government-driven 'All-for-One Tourism' initiative introduces fresh perspectives for exploring the potential of lesser-known Chinese provinces as noteworthy tourist destinations. As the nation's sole Hui Autonomous Region, Ningxia holds a historically strategic position along the Silk Road Economic Belt (Yang & Yang, 2019). Besides, Ningxia has earned the distinction of being the second region, following Hainan province, to be designated as a state-level tourism demonstration zone, as illustrated in Table 1.1. However, despite the considerable potential of Ningxia's tourism sector, there has been a dearth of research focused on the development of this autonomous region. Given this backdrop, it is opportune to direct our attention toward research on tourism development within the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. The standardization of urban development is an unavoidable challenge in the rapid growth of modern cities. To address this issue, intervention through place branding research, as advocated by Ashworth (2009), is essential to foster distinctiveness and differentiation.

From this vantage point, this thesis is undertaken with the goal of crafting a place branding strategy that mirrors the historical and cultural attributes of Ningxia's tourism. The objective is to set Ningxia apart from other Chinese cities and counteract the trend of uniform urban development, particularly within mainland China.

1.3 Research Questions

To address the evident research gap, this study seeks to bridge it by delving into the realm of place branding and visual urban perception within the context of tourism development in Ningxia province. To streamline the focus of the research, Yinchuan city, the capital of Ningxia, has been chosen as the primary case study area. In this context, the central research question (RQ) is delineated as follows: How can a place branding framework for tourism development be crafted through an evaluation of the visual urban perception of Yinchuan city in the Ningxia region, particularly among local residents, tourists, and industrial leaders?

In support of the primary research question (RQ), three sub-research questions (sub-RQs) are delineated as follows:

Sub-RQ 1:

What are the distinctive local elements in Yinchuan city that are well-suited for the development of a place branding framework?

Sub-RQ 2:

How can visual urban perception be effectively employed as an approach to design a place branding framework that incorporates local characteristic elements?

Sub-RQ 3:

How can we apply the place branding framework to enhance tourism development in Yinchuan city, located in Ningxia?

1.4 Research Objectives

The overarching goal of this study is to create a place branding framework that can facilitate tourism development in Yinchuan city, Ningxia, by evaluating visual urban perception. In line with the aforementioned research questions, the following research objectives (RO) are put forward:

RO 1:

To investigate the unique local attributes of Yinchuan city as a foundation for constructing a place branding framework.

RO 2:

To identify methods that incorporate visual urban perception and local distinctive features into the formulation of a place branding framework.

RO 3:

To develop a place branding framework as a means of promoting tourism development in Yinchuan city, Ningxia.

1.5 Research Hypothesis

In alignment with the research objective mentioned previously, a set of 12 hypotheses has been constructed, derived from Sub-RO2, and will undergo empirical validation. Table 1.2 below outlines these individual hypotheses:

Table 1.2: Null Hypothesis

Null Hypothesis (HO)
HO1: There is no statistically significant difference in the preference for Yinchuan city's visual landmarks (VL) between younger and older generations.
HO2: There is no statistically significant difference in preference for the visual cultural connotations (VCC) of Yinchuan city between younger and older generations.
HO3: There is no statistically significant difference in preferences for the visual media strategies (VMS) of Yinchuan city between younger and older generations.
HO4: There is no statistically significant difference in preference for the improvement of Yinchuan city between younger and older generations.
HO5: There is no statistically significant difference in preference for Yinchuan city's visual landmarks (VL) between respondents with longer and shorter stay periods.
HO6: There is no statistically significant difference in preference for the visual cultural connotations (VCC) of Yinchuan city between respondents with longer and shorter stay periods.
HO7: There is no statistically significant difference in preferences for the visual media strategies (VMS) of Yinchuan city between respondents with longer and shorter stay periods.
HO8: There is no statistically significant difference in preference for the improvement of Yinchuan city between respondents with longer and shorter stay periods.
HO9: There is no statistically significant difference in preference for Yinchuan city's visual landmarks (VL) between residents and tourists.
HO10: There is no statistically significant difference in preference for the visual cultural connotations (VCC) of Yinchuan city between residents and tourists.
HO11: There is no statistically significant difference in preferences for the visual media strategies (VMS) of Yinchuan city between residents and tourists.
HO12: There is no statistically significant difference in preference for the improvement of Yinchuan city between residents and tourists.

(Source: Author, 2023)

The creation and verification of the aforementioned hypotheses are pivotal stages in the subsequent establishment of the place branding framework within the context of Yinchuan city in Ningxia.

1.6 Research Scopes and Limitations

As previously mentioned, this study is limited to Yinchuan city, the capital of Ningxia Province. While this constraint is essential for conducting a focused case study, it also provides a valuable opportunity to test the implementation of the 'All-for-One Tourism' policy, a recent government initiative. As a result, this research has the potential to serve as a benchmark, offering insights and inspiration for the wider adoption of its findings in other cities and regions across mainland China.

It's worth emphasizing that this study primarily explores the unique cultural aspects of Yinchuan city to derive design principles. The research emphasizes the investigation of Yinchuan city's regional characteristics with a specific focus on the urban environment, while rural areas are not a primary focus. Essentially, this study revolves around the development of a place branding framework using a visual urban perception approach, allowing for future research to delve into the framework's evaluation and its broader applications.

1.7 Significance of the Study

This research integrates various disciplines, including the 'All-for-One Tourism' policy, place branding, visual urban perception, and city image design, among others. Its overarching goal is to create a place branding framework for advancing tourism development in Ningxia by evaluating visual urban perception. This study takes an exploratory approach and can potentially serve as a reference or model for branding other cities in Ningxia.

As a relatively recent investigation, this research contributes novel insights to our understanding of tourism development issues in Ningxia. It also adds depth to existing studies on place branding (PB) and visual urban perception (VUP).

Furthermore, this research explores ways to benefit various stakeholders, including enhancing the quality of the tourist experience, increasing tourism's value, and driving industrial and economic growth through the development of a place branding framework.

1.8 The Structure of Thesis

The thesis comprises six chapters, each with its own structure:

Chapter 1: In this chapter, we introduce the research background and address the overarching issues of the study. We outline the study's goals, research aims, and objectives considering the specific research questions. Additionally, we discuss the significance of the study, its scope, limitations, and provide an overview of the thesis's organization.

Chapter 2: This section is dedicated to in-depth literature reviews focusing on the 'All-for-One Tourism' initiative, place branding, and visual urban perception. We explore their connections with tourism development in mainland China. Moreover, we examine how place branding can effectively contribute to the growth of the tourism economy.

Chapter 3: Here, we delineate our research methodology, encompassing research design, the research process, and strategies used to collect pertinent data that will help answer our research questions. Furthermore, this chapter delves into the specifics of data collection and the analysis of pilot studies.

Chapter 4: This chapter presents the findings of our research, primarily derived from expert interviews. These findings serve as the foundation for the subsequent development of a questionnaire survey.

Chapter 5: We conduct an extensive discussion of the results obtained from the questionnaire survey's data analysis. These results inform the creation of a place branding framework tailored to Yinchuan city, Ningxia.

Chapter 6: This final chapter comprises an overarching discussion of the research findings, followed by concluding remarks and recommendations for future research directions.

Figure 1.12: The figure below provides a condensed overview of Chapter 1, summarizing key aspects such as the research background, problem statement, research gap, research questions, research objectives, and specified hypotheses.

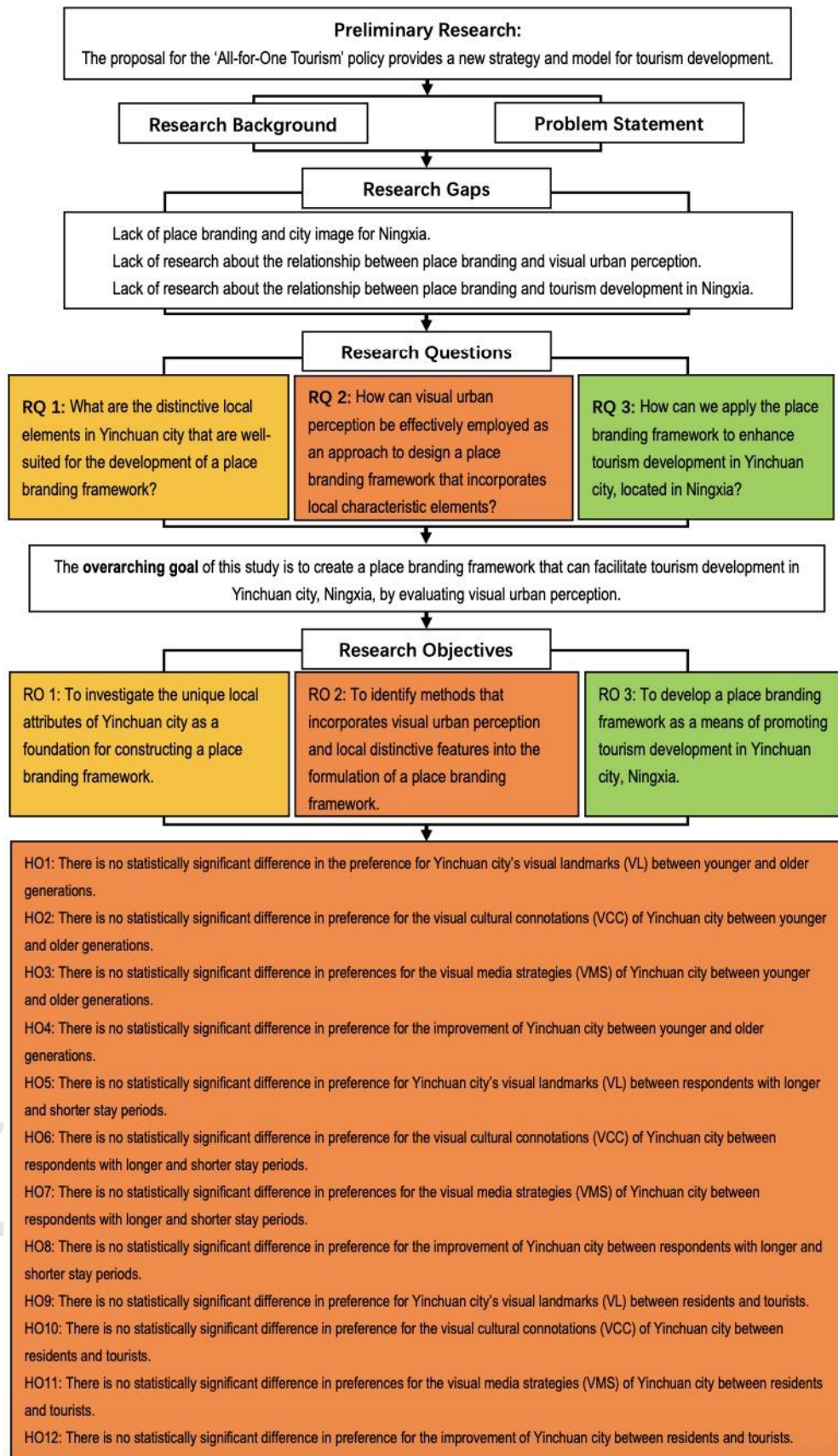


Figure 1.12: Main Content of Chapter 1
(Source: Author 2023)

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