

Iconic Visions: Shaping Yinchuan's Future Tourism Business through Landmark Perceptions

Guangyao Ji^{1,2}, Mohd Shahrudin Abd Manan^{1*}

¹ Faculty of Design and Architecture, University Putra Malaysia, 43400, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

² Faculty of Fine Arts, Ningxia University, Yinchuan, 750021, Ningxia, China

*Corresponding Author: am_shahrudin@upm.edu.my

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Abstract: *With the advancement of today's technological image culture, the role of visual landmarks in shaping a city's appeal and enhancing its tourism business has become increasingly crucial. Visual landmarks serve not only as symbols of a city's identity but also as magnets that attract tourists and local residents alike, shaping their perceptions and experiences of the city. Against this backdrop, this article explores future design concepts for visual landmarks in Yinchuan city, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, China, with a focus on place branding. The exploration takes into account insights derived from a survey of 400 respondents, a diverse sample comprising both local residents and tourists. The survey investigation follows four methodological procedures: translation, coding, categorization, and thematization, aimed at understanding thematic patterns in the collected data. The thematic analysis reveals five key themes central to the consideration of the visual landmarks: historical and cultural elements, geocultural features, aesthetic considerations, urban infrastructure, and local specialties. These themes reflect not only the preferences and perceptions of the respondents but also their emotional connections and memorable experiences. As exploratory futurological research, this article emphasizes the significance of public perceptions and thematic design elements that can enhance a city's image and tourism brand. It paves the way for an expanded research agenda by integrating future imagination and fostering collaborative efforts to leverage tourism as a catalyst for broader socioeconomic development.*

Keywords: place branding, tourism development, visual landmarks, urban perception, thematic analysis, future imagination

1. Introduction

With economic development and global competition, many cities are experiencing heightened competition in sustaining residents while attracting tourists and businesses. Scholars like Dinnie (2010), Anttiroiko (2014), Herget 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. A well-branded city tends to be more functional, vibrant, and attractive. Effective place branding can showcase a city's unique characteristics and drive tourism development. As a result, place branding has become a significant topic for academics and urban designers (Hanna & Rowley, 2008; Foroudi et al., 2016; Mohamed, 2019; Ma et al., 2019).

According to Taecharungroj's (2019) study, the three important pillars of place branding are place physics, place practice, and place personality. Place physics refers to the physical appearance of the place, with architecture and landscape being key elements. Place practice pertains to the activities and behaviors of the people within the place. Place personality is the emotional characteristics associated with the place. Visual landmarks, which highlight the characteristics, history, and culture of the place, are crucial components of its physical appearance. With the advancement of today's technological image culture, visual landmarks play a crucial role in enhancing a city's appeal, making it a prominent avenue to promote tourism.

Against this backdrop, this study was conducted with specific reference to Yinchuan city, the capital of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region in China. In 2016, the government launched a national policy called 'All-for-One Tourism' (Feng, 2017), aimed at boosting tourist arrivals and stimulating local economic growth. Several less developed regions, including Ningxia, were selected as demonstration areas for the policy, alongside others such as Hainan, Shaanxi, Guizhou, Shandong, Hebei, and Zhejiang (Tian et al., 2018; Ji & Manan, 2023; Liu et al., 2023). Figure 1 illustrates the regions participating in the 'All-for-One Tourism' policy demonstration zones.

While existing research primarily assesses the current effectiveness of the 'All-for-One Tourism' policy, few studies explore its future potential in the involved regions. Bridging this knowledge gap, this study seeks to assess tourists' and residents' perceptions of Yinchuan's future visual landmarks, focusing on public perception, cognition, and memory of the city. It aims to identify key place branding elements to be considered in the future design of Yinchuan's new visual landmarks, with the goal of enhancing tourist interest and fostering residents' sense of belonging to the city.

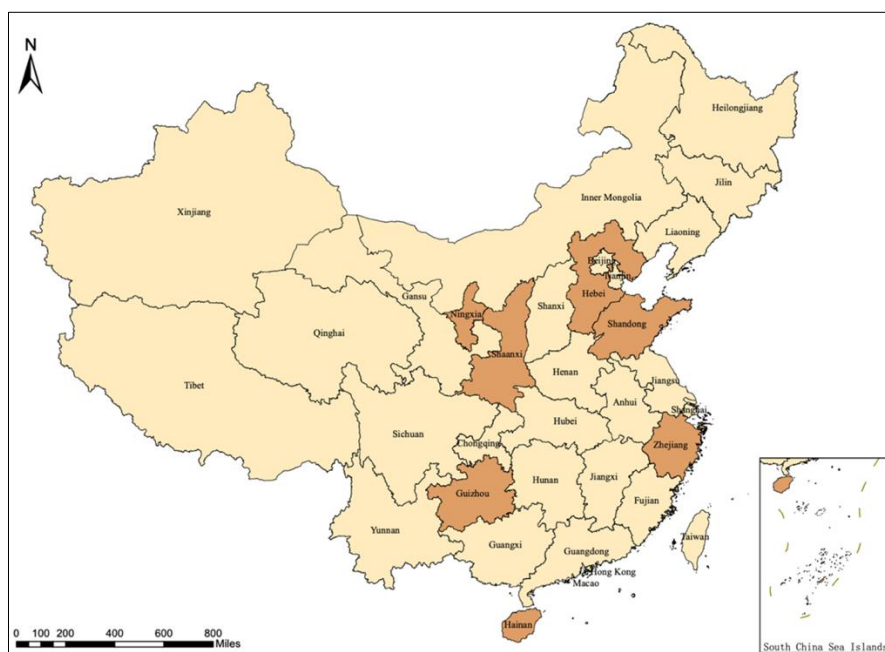


Figure 1: The regions involved in the provincial-level 'All-for-One Tourism' policy demonstration zones. (Liu et al., 2023)

2. Place Branding, Visual Landmarks and Future Imagination

The concept of place branding, introduced by the American marketing guru Philip Kotler in the 1990s, has significantly influenced city strategies, leading to the integration of ‘Brand City’ concepts into urban literature. Rooted in place marketing, which cities have employed for decades, place branding has emerged as a growing academic field and widespread practice (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Eraydin, 2014). Depending on the perspective, place branding can hold various meanings and is considered a marketing approach within the broader field of business (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005; Kaplan et al., 2010; Vuignier, 2016; Vollrath, 2019). It effectively highlights unique city characteristics and is crucial for competitiveness in urban globalization (Ashworth, 2009; Maheshwari et al., 2011).

Today, place branding is a multidisciplinary field attracting both theoretical and practical attention, playing a vital role in future urban development strategies (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2007; Maheshwari et al., 2011; Vuignier, 2016; Lu et al., 2020). Beyond attracting tourists and business investors, it contributes to economic, social, and physical development, enhancing a city’s global visibility and competitiveness (Mirmoini & Azari, 2018). It accelerates urban growth and promotes tourism development domestically and internationally while underscoring its societal significance (Dudek-Mańkowska & Grochowski, 2019).

Each city requires specific branding that goes beyond logos and slogans, aiming to create uniqueness and a competitive advantage (Ashworth, 2009). Kevin Lynch’s seminal theory, outlined in *The Image of the City* (1960), identifies landmarks as crucial elements of urban identity, alongside paths, edges, districts, and nodes. Landmarks serve as pivotal architectural elements, embodying a city’s history, culture, and symbolism, and facilitating public connection and recognition (Lynch, 1960).

Major cities increasingly use landmark buildings as integral components of their place branding strategies, not merely for architectural prowess but as symbols of cultural and historical richness (Noaime et al., 2023; Gao, 2020). These visual landmarks carry collective memory, evoke emotional connections, and symbolize a city’s identity and aspirations, crucial for successful place branding efforts that blend past legacies with future visions.

3. Research Methodology

Employing the relationship between place branding, visual landmarks, and future imagination, this study focuses on the case of Yinchuan City in Ningxia, China. The research adopts a questionnaire survey method featuring an open-ended speculative question designed to prompt respondents’ visions for the city’s future landmark for tourism business. The questionnaire was developed based on inputs from prior interviews with experts, including academicians and practitioners in the tourism industry in Yinchuan. To ensure the methodological reliability, Cochran’s formula (1977) is utilized to determine the sample size. With a confidence level of 95% and a 5% error rate, accounting for Yinchuan’s population size, the study calculates a necessary sample of 384 individuals. To mitigate potential data loss, 400 questionnaires are distributed among local residents and tourists within Yinchuan. This surplus ensures that even with incomplete responses, the study retains a sufficient number of valid data points.

In place branding studies, simple random sampling is commonly employed, ensuring each population member has an equal chance of selection (Singh & Masuku, 2014; Taherdoost, 2016). This approach helps ensure that insights from questionnaire responses represent

Yinchuan's diverse population, enabling meaningful conclusions about the city. Questionnaires were distributed in popular local and tourist areas using simple random sampling, ensuring a diverse participant pool. This methodological approach aims to provide an unbiased sample that accurately reflects the broader population and facilitates comprehensive insights into Yinchuan city.

Table 1 illustrates the demographic characteristics of the survey, which encompasses a total of 400 respondents. Predominantly, 78.25% of respondents identify as local residents of Yinchuan (313 individuals), contrasting with 21.75% who identify as tourists (87 participants). Gender distribution reveals a higher female participation rate, constituting 58.5% of respondents compared to 41.5% male. The age distribution highlights a primary cohort aged 18-30 years, comprising 48% of participants, followed by those aged 31-40 years (31.25%) and 41-50 years (13%). Participants over 51 years constitute the smallest segment at less than 8%.

Regarding education levels, the majority of respondents obtained college or undergraduate degrees (43.25%). This is followed by those with education from technical secondary schools and technical schools (28.25%). Respondents with high school education or below make up 16.75%, while 11.75% hold postgraduate degrees. Occupationally, corporate employees or workers represent the largest group at 34%, followed by students (18.75%). Less prevalent occupations include education technicians, government sector employees, farmers, self-employed individuals, and retirees. Monthly income distributions reveal that 32% of respondents earn between USD 310 (¥2,000) and USD 620 (¥4,000). Income brackets below USD 310 (¥2,000) per month account for 17.5%, while 27% earn between USD 620 (¥4,000) and USD 930 (¥6,000), and 23.5% earn USD 930 (¥6,000) and above. The respondents' residency duration in Yinchuan varies, with a majority (53%) residing for more than 10 years, followed by 18.5% for 1-5 years, 17.5% for less than a year, and 11% for 6-10 years.

Overall, the tabulated data indicates a predominantly local, educated, and young adult population with a significant representation of corporate employees and students. The income levels and residency durations also suggest a stable and established community in Yinchuan. The respondents' demographics provide a reliable reference for investigating future insights about the city.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the respondents. (Author, 2023)

Item	Category	Frequency (N=400)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	166	41.50
	Female	234	58.50
Age (years)	18-30	192	48.00
	31-40	125	31.25
	41-50	52	13.00
	>51	31	7.75
Education level	High school and below	67	16.75
	Technical secondary school and technical school	113	28.25
	College and undergraduate	173	43.25
	Postgraduate and above	47	11.75
Occupation	Government sector	29	7.25
	Corporate employee or worker	136	34.00
	Education Technician	69	17.25
	Student	75	18.75

	Farmer	7	1.75
	Self-employed	39	9.75
	Retired	7	1.75
	Other	38	9.50
Period of staying in Yinchuan	Less than 1 year	70	17.50
	1-5 years	74	18.50
	6-10 years	44	11.00
	More than 10 years	212	53.00
Monthly income	Less than USD310 (¥2,000) per month	70	17.50
	Between USD310 (¥2,000) to USD620 (¥4,000) per month	128	32.00
	Between USD620 (¥4,000) to USD930 (¥6,000) per month	108	27.00
	USD930 (¥6,000) and above per month	94	23.50
Role in Yinchuan	As tourist	87	21.75
	As local resident	313	78.25

4. Results and Discussion

Based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) seminal work on thematic analysis, they proposed a comprehensive six-phase process. It begins with familiarizing oneself with the data, which involves immersing in the material to gain a deep understanding. Next, researchers generate initial codes to label and organize meaningful segments of data. Subsequently, potential themes are identified by clustering related codes that reflect patterns or ideas within the dataset. The themes undergo a rigorous review process to ensure they accurately represent the data before being defined and named to encapsulate their essence. Finally, the analytical report is produced, synthesizing findings into a coherent narrative that interprets the themes within the broader context of the research subject. Similarly, Delahunt (2017) advocates for this structured method, emphasizing its clarity and practicality in social science research. According to Delahunt, following such a structured approach not only enhances the rigor of analysis but also provides a clear path for researchers to follow in interpreting qualitative data.

Based on these phases, Figure 2 illustrates a methodological diagram outlining the process of conducting thematic analysis. It visually represents the procedure from transcribing speculative responses, where data collection begins, through the systematic process of thematization, culminating in the extraction and interpretation of meaningful themes that emerge from the data.

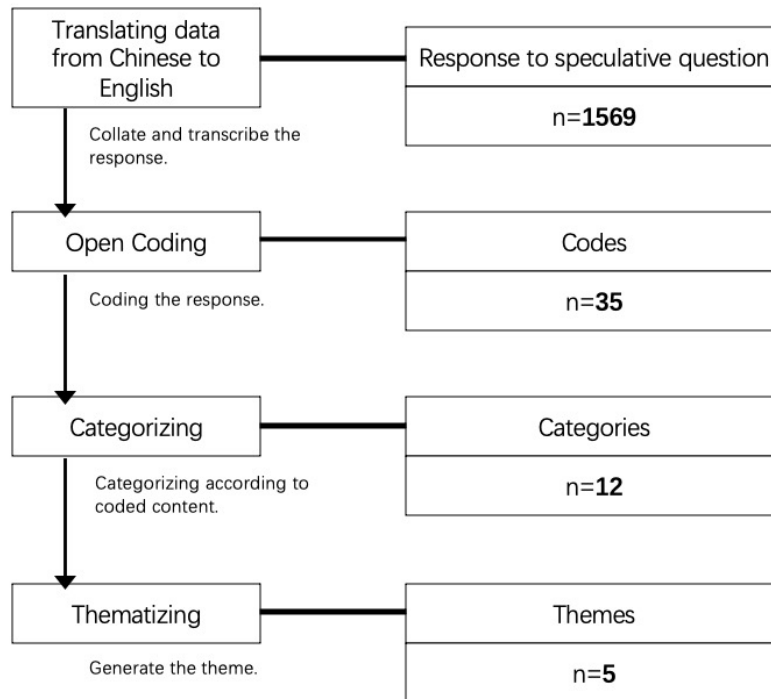


Figure 2: Flowchart of thematic analysis. (Author, 2023)

As the survey for this study was conducted in Chinese, four procedural steps were taken to understand the obtained data patterns. The first step, conducted prior to the thematic analysis, involved translating the responses into English, resulting in a total of 1,569 text responses ($n=1,569$). The second step was to import the translated text into NVivo12© to perform open coding, which produced 35 codes ($n=35$). The third step involved categorizing these codes into 12 categories ($n=12$). Following categorization, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify 5 related themes ($n=5$).

Figure 3 illustrates the final themes, categories, and codes. Based on the thematic analysis results, five themes were identified: historical and cultural elements, geocultural elements, aesthetic elements, urban infrastructure elements, and local specialties features. These themes provide insights into the different aspects that shape the understanding and interpretation of future visual landmarks for Yinchuan city. Figure 4 presents a Sankey diagram depicting the visual correlation mapping of the identified codes into the five themes. The following sub-sections explain each theme in detail.



Figure 3: Codes, categories, and themes. (Author, 2023)

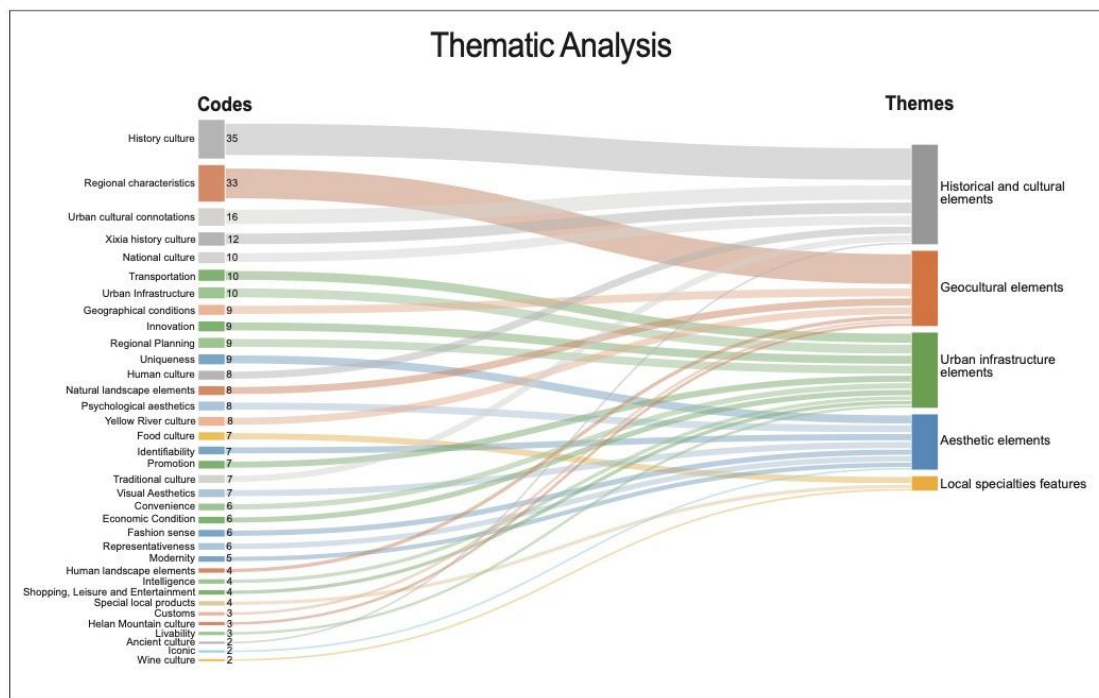


Figure 4: A Sankey diagram visualizing the correlation mapping between the codes and the identified themes. (Author, 2023)

4.1 Theme 1: Historical and cultural elements

The thematic analysis reveals that historical and cultural elements are of utmost concern among the respondents for the future design of Yinchuan city, with a frequency of 101 ($f=101$), the highest among the other four themes. This finding emphasizes the critical importance of integrating historical and cultural factors into future visual landmarks. Historical features received a frequency of 70, while cultural features garnered 31, highlighting their central roles in conveying the essence and ethos of the city. This underscores the substantial influence of tradition and cultural memory in shaping urban perception and identity.

The finding augments Subbotin's study, in which he argues that historical and cultural elements hold a unique attraction as historical memory (Subbotin, 2020). According to Subbotin, these

elements should play a significant role in the interaction of modern cultural processes and phenomena with regional characteristics and traditions. He asserts that municipal architecture and urban planning authorities should prioritize cultural and historical potential when organizing city spaces. By doing so, they can create vibrant, comfortable urban environments that enhance both place identity and artistic expression.

The respondents' emphasis on historical and cultural elements indicates their desire for future visual landmarks to serve as representatives of a city's connotation and spirit. By incorporating historical features, future visual landmarks can bridge the past and present, honoring the city's heritage and providing a sense of rootedness. Alternatively, cultural features can infuse future visual landmarks with the liveliness, creativity, and diversity of the local culture, making them vibrant and engaging spaces.

Incorporating historical and cultural elements into the design of future visual landmarks not only preserves and promotes the city's identity but also enriches the experience of residents and tourists. It allows for a deeper understanding and appreciation of the city's history, culture, and values, fostering a stronger sense of pride and connection with the place. Planners and designers can utilize this insight to integrate historical and cultural features thoughtfully and meaningfully, ensuring that future visual landmarks become enduring symbols of the city's heritage and spirit.

4.2 Theme 2: Geocultural elements

The issue of geocultural elements ranks as the second highest concern for respondents regarding the future design of Yinchuan city. Often referred to as geocultural landscape elements in urban design, these elements are defined by Tsipra and Drinia (2022) as the distinct products of interaction between a human community with specific cultural preferences and a location rich in natural and geological resources of interest. With Yinchuan's rich natural beauty and mountainous landscapes, such as the Yellow River and Helan Mountain cultures, respondents recognize the strong and distinctive identity that geocultural elements can bring.

The findings reveal that geocultural elements received significant attention, as evidenced by a frequency count of 68 ($f=68$). Respondents highlighted the importance of both geographical features and visual landscape factors. They suggest that integrating geocultural elements is crucial, as these elements contribute to the uniqueness of Yinchuan. This perspective aligns with Hirtle's (2007) assertion that visual landmarks should embody local characteristics. By incorporating geocultural elements, the distinctiveness of the city is reinforced, enhancing its sense of place and cultural identity.

By considering the specific aspects of geocultural elements, planners and designers can ensure that future visual landmarks truly embody the unique qualities and context of Yinchuan. Integrating regional characteristics, geographical conditions, aspects of Yellow River culture, Helan Mountain culture, and natural landscape elements can foster a strong sense of belonging. This approach allows for the incorporation of local heritage, natural beauty, and cultural identity into the visual landscape, offering residents and tourists an authentic and meaningful experience.

4.3 Theme 3: Aesthetic elements

Aesthetic elements rank as the third-highest concern for the future design of Yinchuan city, highlighted by a frequency count of 59 ($f=59$). According to Sadeghi et al. (2014), environmental aesthetic elements in urban design can be categorized into visual-formal quality

and cognitive-semantic quality. In urban design, aesthetic elements encompass visual and sensory qualities that define the overall look, feel, and character of a city or urban space. The elements are crucial for creating an eye-pleasing, culturally resonant, and functional environment for its inhabitants. Aesthetic considerations in urban design go beyond mere appearance; they encompass a place's values and history, shaping how people experience and interact with their surrounding spaces.

The emphasis on aesthetic elements underscores their importance in respondents' perceptions of future visual landmarks, indicating that the visual appeal and artistic qualities of landmarks significantly shape perceptions. Based on the results, two categories emerged: "iconic features" and "elements of fashion innovation." These aspects encompass visual aesthetics, psychological aesthetics, uniqueness, representativeness, iconicity, identifiability, fashion sense, stylishness, and modernity, reflecting the respondents' visions. The emphasis on "innovation" suggests that technological advancements are a trend in future architectural design.

Understanding the specific codes of aesthetic elements enables planners and designers to focus on incorporating technological innovation and psychological aesthetics into the design process of future visual landmarks. This approach aims to create visually striking landmarks that stand out, inspire, and positively impact tourists' perceptions and experiences.

4.4 Theme 4: Urban infrastructure elements

Alongside previous aesthetic considerations, urban infrastructure also ranks as the third most significant concern highlighted by respondents regarding the future design of Yinchuan city, cited 59 times ($f=59$). Urban infrastructure is integral to urban design, encompassing various physical elements and systems essential for the efficient functioning of a city. According to Shilova (2021), urban infrastructure comprises a complex network of engineering and architectural components crucial for the city's dynamism and the well-being of its inhabitants. These elements serve diverse purposes, supporting industrial facilities, residential areas, commerce, leisure, and cultural activities.

The thematic findings emphasize how urban infrastructure, including regional planning, transportation networks, livability enhancements, and various construction sectors, plays a crucial role in shaping economic and tourism promotion strategies. Respondents consistently stressed the importance of factors like location and accessibility in the development of future urban landmarks. These elements are seen as critical for ensuring convenience, ease of access, and operational efficiency, particularly for activities such as shopping, leisure, and entertainment.

The prominence of these urban infrastructure elements underscores their interconnectedness with transportation systems and economic planning within urban development frameworks. Further analysis and exploration of this theme promise to yield valuable insights into the dynamic evolution of future visual landmarks in Yinchuan, highlighting the integral roles of construction, logistics, and effective promotional strategies in attracting a diverse tourist demographic.

4.5 Theme 5: Local specialties features

The thematic findings indicate that local specialties are of least concern among respondents regarding the future design of Yinchuan city. Local specialties in urban design refer to unique cultural elements or products that make a city distinctive. These features are often integrated

into urban design to reflect the place's identity and character. Every city has its own unique food and special products, which often attract tourists. Therefore, some respondents believe these elements should be included in the design of future visual landmarks in Yinchuan, leading to the theme of local specialties (f=13).

Incorporating local specialties into visual landmarks can significantly enhance a city's unique cultural and gastronomic assets, attracting tourists and fostering a strong sense of community among residents. The approach highlights the city's distinctiveness, setting it apart from others and drawing attention. Such landmarks serve as visually appealing gateways to local culture and traditions, making them memorable and engaging for both residents and tourists. This aligns with Winfield-Pfefferkorn's (2005) assertion that cultural landmarks are crucial in defining a city's character and strengthening its brand. Distinctive monuments rooted in cultural significance shape the city's image and positively influence the well-being and satisfaction of both residents and tourists.

Figure 5 presents a tree map that visually represents the frequency of occurrences for all five major themes discussed in the study. Each theme is further broken down into specific sub-categories, allowing for a more detailed representation. Within each sub-category, the number of individual coding items is displayed, highlighting the specific aspects or elements identified and coded during the analysis. This hierarchical structure not only illustrates the overall distribution and prominence of each theme but also offers insights into the nuances of the data.

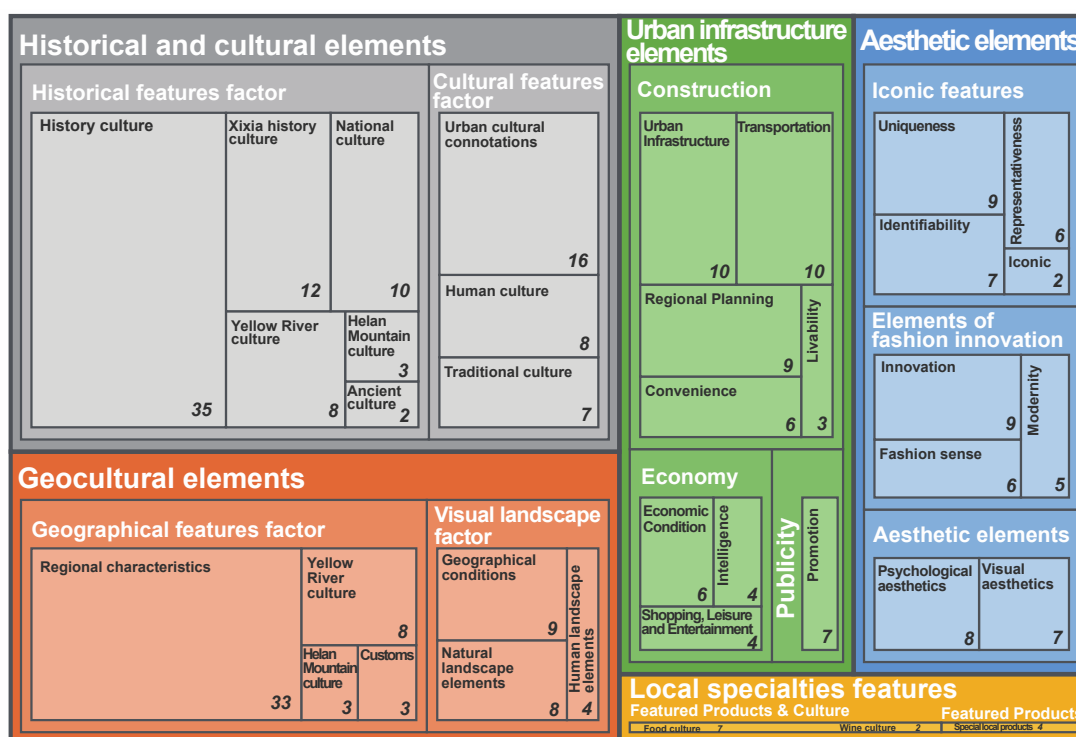


Figure 5: A tree map depicting the five themes in relation to the specified categories and codes. (Author, 2023)

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This article explores future design concepts for visual landmarks in Yinchuan city, based on a survey of 400 respondents from diverse demographic backgrounds, consisting of both local residents and tourists. Through thematic analysis of the survey, five key themes emerged that

shape the understanding and interpretation of the future visual landmarks: historical and cultural elements, geocultural elements, aesthetic elements, urban infrastructure elements, and local specialties features.

Historical and cultural elements were identified as the primary concern among respondents, emphasizing the integration of historical and cultural factors to preserve and promote the city's identity. Geocultural features ranked second, highlighting the importance of incorporating regional characteristics and natural landscapes to enhance Yinchuan's unique qualities. Aesthetic considerations, ranked third, underscore the role of visual and sensory qualities in defining the city's ambiance, suggesting the incorporation of technological innovation and psychological aesthetics in future designs. Urban infrastructure emerged as another critical concern, emphasizing the role of efficient and accessible infrastructure in shaping the city's economic and tourism strategies. Lastly, while less emphasized, local specialties also play a vital role in enriching Yinchuan's cultural and gastronomic assets.

As an exploratory futurological research, this article seeks to extrapolate potential scenarios for how the identified themes could manifest in the physical landscape of Yinchuan. By projecting forward from current trends and preferences, it aims to envision innovative design solutions that not only respect the city's rich historical and cultural heritage but also leverage its natural and urban assets to create iconic visual landmarks.

This study is limited by several factors, including its exclusive focus on the capital city of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region as a case study and its qualitative research approach. While valuable insights have been gained from this focused approach, future research endeavors aim to enhance the study's applicability and generalizability. This includes broadening the scope to encompass a diverse range of cities across mainland China, spanning both developed and less-developed regions. Particularly, there is a need to investigate cities aligned with the national 'All-for-One Tourism' agenda, which promotes inclusive and sustainable tourism development.

Incorporating quantitative analysis alongside qualitative methods in future research could significantly enhance the study's depth and quality. By systematically exploring diverse variables, the study can provide a more comprehensive understanding of tourism dynamics in different urban contexts. Moreover, building upon this preliminary study, there is an opportunity to develop a comprehensive tourism framework. Such a framework could offer practical guidelines not only for Yinchuan's business community and local authorities but also for policymakers across China. This collaborative effort aims to further the economic agenda of Yinchuan and other cities, fostering sustainable growth and leveraging tourism as a catalyst for broader socioeconomic development.

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