

Analyzing the buzzword “city or not city”: exploring the latent social mirror behind it

Rui Qiu

Affiliation: Faculty of Humanities and Art Hunan International Economic University
Changsha, Hunan Province, 410200, China

Email: 203114qr@gmail.com

Abstract

The craze of “China Travel” has taken the world by storm, and under the environment of rapid development of the Internet and the era of fragmentation, Chinese buzzwords have also risen with it. The buzzword “city or not city” has also emerged under the environment of rapid development of the Internet and fragmentation era. The phrase “city or not city”, a mixture of Chinese and English, has appeared on various platforms and is popular among young people. The phrase “city or not city” originated from a foreign blogger named ‘BaoBaoXiong’ on a short-video platform, who liked to use the phrase “city or not city” during the filming of his trip to China. He likes to use “city or not city” during the filming of his trip to China, and after the video exploded in popularity, some netizens quickly used it and remade it, which made it a hot Internet terrain. The purpose of this research is to analyze the social phenomenon behind “city or not city” through the study of this buzzword, the rise of a network buzzword must have its own reasons for the rise, and can reflect social change.

Keywords: City or not city; Chinese Buzzword; Neologism; Social mentality; Social media linguistics

1. Semantic Characteristics and Causes of “city or not city”

1.1 Grammatical Structure and Pragmatic Function of “city or not city”

The word consists of the sentence pattern “X or not X” and the English word “city”. city is defined as “city” in Chinese, and in the Modern Chinese Dictionary, the word ‘city’ is interpreted as “an area with a concentrated population, well-developed industry and commerce, and a predominantly non-agricultural population, usually the political center of the surrounding area. In the modern Chinese dictionary, the word “city” is interpreted as “an area with a concentrated population, developed industry and commerce, and a predominantly non-agricultural population, and is usually the political, economic, and cultural center of the surrounding area”, which is then translated into colloquial expressions as “modernization”.

“X or not X” is a common sentence structure in modern Chinese, which is used to form positive and negative interrogative sentences, and in syntactic function, it can form repeated questions and declarative sentences. When “X or not X” forms a declarative sentence, it usually does not indicate a question but a choice between two phenomena when it serves as a subject, a determiner, or a sentence constituent in a subject-verb phrase. Obviously, “city or not city” constitutes a declarative sentence, giving the choice of ‘city’ or “not city”.

“city” is used as a noun lexeme, but from a grammatical point of view, it gives “city” a new grammatical function and lexical meaning by combining with the repetition of the noun in Chinese syntax ^[1], so that it appears in people's daily conversations as a form closer to an adjective. It can be used as a closer adjective in people's daily conversations, usually meaning “modern, urbanized, fashionable, foreign”. In addition to “city or not city”, short-video blogger BaoBaoXiong gives the answer ‘好 city’ at the end of the video, which makes the adjectival use of “city” more obvious, and has also been used by major media outlets and other organizations:

- (i) Guangzhou here is a good city! It's a city romance from morning to night (Xiaohongshu user Junjunjunjun'er_2025.2.16)
- (ii) #Culture China tour tour goodcity of China #Introduction: expand again! China's 144-hour visa-free transit policy applicable ports to 37 (People's Daily microblogging hot topic 2024.7.15)
- (iii) “Good City” Chongqing will become more and more “city” (Chongqing Evening News 2024.7.5)

(iv) #Laowai's Beijing spring tour wear good city ah #Introduction: into the lunar calendar in February, spring cold. People often say "February and August mess dress", people in the down jacket and a variety of other clothing in the "switch". The Summer Palace is a must-visit place for Chinese and foreign travelers, so poke the video and go there to find the answer! (Beijing News Weibo Hot Topic 2025.3.8)

(v) #Sisters goodcity way to fight aging# (microblogging user old memories of animation valley initiated topic 2024.8.7)

(vi) #This Chinese dress show on the streets of Paris is goodcity# Introduction: A Chinese dress show on the banks of the Seine River attracted the attention of all the people, being in a foreign land, they put on the national style dresses of different dynasties, showing the charm of traditional Chinese dress to the French people and other foreign tourists, showing the beauty of the national style (China Daily's microblogging Hot Topic 2024.7.25)

The above examples show that the wide use of "city" is not only limited to the description of cities, but also extended by netizens to the evaluation of attractions, behavioral patterns, ways and means, and appearance styles, which has the function of evaluation and teasing, as well as the function of social interaction and identity ^[1], and its wide usability and novel expression have made it one of the top ten buzzwords of the year 2024.

1.2 Analysis of the Causes of "city or not city"

From the perspectives of politics, economy, culture, education, communication and linguistics, there are several analyses of the causes of "city or not city":

(i) From a political point of view, foreign tourists' evaluation of China's "good city" is based on the deepening of China's urbanization strategy, reflecting China's policy orientation and vision of urban development. China has long pursued an urbanization strategy in which large cities, especially first-tier and new-tier cities, have been given a central role in leading innovation and enhancing international competitiveness. At the same time, however, the phenomenon of unbalanced urban-rural development is also reflected. The exclamation of "good city" made by foreign tourists in the first-tier and new first-tier cities also reflects the judgment of "city or not city" for the cities that have not yet been developed.

(ii) From an economic point of view, with the development and changes of the times, China's economy is developing and transforming into a tertiary industry, and more and more foreign nationals advocate "China Travel". It is because of China's "cityzation" that foreign tourists in China have shifted their consumption from "sweeping shopping" to cultural and technological experiences, and have become more and more "internationalized", "technological" and "internationalized". Abstract concepts such as "internationalization", "sense of technology" and "cultural taste" are transformed into consumable symbols, and "city" is gradually transformed into a high-quality modernized lifestyle.

(iii) From a cultural point of view, the birth of the term "city or not city" reflects the fusion of globalization and localization. Firstly, there is the collision of values and identity. In the past, China was given pejorative terms such as "backward", "outdated" and "traditional and old-fashioned", which corresponded to the term "city or not city". "no-city", while "good-city", as its opposite, is interpreted as "modern", "international", "fashionable" and "modern". As its opposite, "good city" is interpreted as "modern", "international", "fashionable", etc., reflecting the fact that in the process of modernization in China, people's lifestyles and aesthetic standards for the old and the new are also advancing with the times. At the same time, claiming that something is "very city" or "not city" is a way of dividing users into groups, which is related to the cultural circle that an individual or a group wants to be classified into, implying a sense of cultural superiority and reflecting a profound social identity.

(iv) From the perspective of education, it reflects language change and value guidance. Firstly, the popularization of English and the normalization of language mixing. The popularization of English education in China over a long period of time has made the mixing of English words in Chinese common and accepted in daily expressions. In addition, the traditional examination-based education in China, which has been inherited for thousands of years, has unconsciously conveyed a single "path to success" and "quality of life" standard, and people generally aspire to the "big city" and "quality of life". People generally aspire to "big cities" and "high-end life", and these urban high-quality life that people aspire to are coincidentally labeled as "city".

(v) From the perspective of communication, based on the fact that some Western media do not conform to the current reality of China and are biased against China, most of the Western public still believe that China is still in the old society, and only after coming to China will they exclaim "city is not city". According to research statistics, the British mainstream media, such as the BBC, The Guardian and other media reports on China accounted for more than 90% of the negative content, and often use the "Cold War framework" to analogize China to the Soviet Union, and selectively ignore the social

development and improvement of people's livelihoods and other issues, resulting in the formation of the Western public, "China's backwardness, closed" information cocoon^[2]. This has led to the formation of a "backward and closed" information cocoon for the Western public.

(vi) From a linguistic point of view, "city or not city" is a communication strategy of implicit euphemism in terms of pragmatic function. Internet language prioritizes pragmatism, and the English word "city" is more accessible and communicative than the Chinese words 'urbanization' and "modernization" in daily conversations. It can also avoid value criticism. For example, "this kind of dress is not too city" is more euphemistic than "this kind of dress is very earthy", which is derived from the English word to weaken the sharpness of accusation.

2. the reasons for the popularity of "city or not city" and the way of dissemination

2.1 The reasons for the popularity of "city or not city".

(i) From the video itself, the language is catchy and the video content is humorous. In today's fragmented era, videos with short duration, "brainwashing" content, and in line with current trends are more likely to become popular and gain the attention of netizens.

(ii) The use of Chinese social media platforms by foreign tourists to express their love and recognition of China has greatly enhanced national cultural confidence. At the regular press conference of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on July 4, 2024, the spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mao Ning, made a positive response of "China is here, and everyone is welcome to come", from the affirmation of foreign tourists to China to the positive response of the spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which made the nationals feel the development of China.

(iii) The popularity of "city or not city" is also the result of language dissemination and cultural interaction in the context of globalization. In recent years, there has been a "Chinese tide" abroad, and a large number of foreign young people have followed the trend of learning Chinese, and "city or not city" reflects the application of Chinese by foreign tourists. For example, the phenomenon of "TikTok Refugees" (referring to the large number of TikTok users who flocked to Xiaohongshu after TikTok was restricted and blocked by the US government under the pretext of "data security") from December 2024 to January 2025, and the "Chinese Wave" in July 2023, which is an example of how foreign tourists use Chinese. The "Twitter Refugee" incident in July 2023 (referring to Marx's policy of limiting traffic on its social media platform X, where users had to pay to view more content, leading to a large number of netizens flocking to Weibo)^[3] Both Xiaohongshu and Weibo use Chinese as their main language, and foreign netizens have begun to learn Chinese in order to integrate into China's social media platforms. Chinese, for example, TrashyLuv, a Xiaohongshu user from the United States, posted in January 2025, "I wish I had Chinese friends to teach me Mandarin so I don't have to use a translator". In the case of TikTok refugees on Xiaohongshu, Chinese netizens greeted this group of "uninvited guests" with a friendly attitude, and did not stick to Chinese or English to communicate with foreign netizens.

(iv) The popularity of "city or not city" has a certain news value for the media, which is not only a "new style" on the social platform, but also reflects the progress of China's internationalization. As the eyes and ears of the Party and the State, the new mainstream media report the positive impact of the word's popularity, promote correct value orientation, and inspire the people's patriotic fervor and cultural self-confidence; at the same time, the word is in line with the current popularity trend, which is a new trend that netizens are happy to see, and the media caters to the preferences of the audience, using the word in the report to write, and to win the flow of traffic.

(v) "City is not city" has gradually become a commercial label, and merchants have gradually materialized the "sense of city" of their products in order to make profits. The service industry and tourism industry have shifted the traditional consumption mode to immersive experience, and enterprises have taken the initiative to incorporate "modern design + Chinese culture" into the design of storefronts, product packaging design, and cultural and creative products at attractions, etc., so that the "sense of city" has gradually become a high-quality consumption symbol, driving the growth of sales. The "sense of city" has gradually become a high-quality consumer symbol, driving sales growth.

(vi) The popularity of "city or not city" has become an opportunity to change the stereotypical image of China as poor and backward. As foreign tourists traveling to China post the actual situation in China and express their own feelings after traveling to China on TikTok, Instagram and other online social platforms, the craze of "China Travel" has been set off abroad. At the same time, Chinese traditional culture has also been seen by the world, foreign netizens are attracted by the costumes and culture of Chinese dynasties and have come to China to experience them. This is not only a simple new Internet terrain popularity, but also a cultural symbol of China's development on the world stage.

2.2 Mode of dissemination

In terms of the mode of dissemination, the following four aspects are analyzed from the author who created the term itself, individual to individual, individual to group, and group to group.

(i) According to statistics, during the period when the term “city or not city” exploded in popularity (May 31-August 8, 2024), the short video blogger BaoBaoBaoXiong posted nearly 70 videos using the topic of “city or not city” in Jieyin, with the highest number of likes up to 2.631 million and retweets up to 2.631 million. The highest number of likes was 2.631 million, and the number of retweets was 2.16 million. The blogger successfully attracted the algorithm's continuous recommendation by using the topic with high intensity and continuity, which provided the core initial traffic power for the topic's continuous fermentation.

(ii) In terms of person-to-person dissemination methods, there are two situations. First, the oral transmission between people in real life, in the community of acquaintances such as students, colleagues, friends, family members, etc., the word has become the talk of the day and the buzzword after meals, and the penetration has been accomplished in the unconscious daily communication; second, the one-to-one network dissemination, for example, after brushing to the video with the topic of “city is not city” and forwarding it to a friend who may be interested in the topic, it has become the most important topic of the conversation, which is the most important topic of the conversation in China. For example, after swiping a video with the topic “city or not city” and forwarding it to a friend or group chat that may be interested in it, this kind of sharing based on a strong relationship is more trustworthy, and it also enables the receiver to understand the context and usage of the word more directly.

(iii) In terms of individual-to-group dissemination, there are also two cases. One is the active imitation and secondary creation by bloggers on various online social platforms, who have keenly captured this traffic hotspot and have filmed related videos to “rub the heat” and thus gain attention, which greatly enriches the content ecology of the term; the second is the massive application and play of the term by ordinary netizens in the comment section, and the massive interaction of the comments not only enhances the activity of the video, but also itself enhances the content ecology of the word. Secondly, a large number of ordinary netizens apply and play with the word in the comment section, and the massive comments and interactions not only enhance the activity of the video, but also constitute new content, making the topic seen and participated by more people, forming the cycle of “the more comments, the hotter the fire”.

(iv) From the perspective of group-to-group communication, there is a phenomenon of authoritative integration and mainstreaming. This is a sign that popular symbols are eventually upgraded to social phenomena.^[4] When authoritative media, governmental organizations, etc. notice the craze, they also take the initiative to adopt and use the topic in order to fit the young audience, publicize developmental achievements, or conduct city promotion. For example, official accounts of culture and tourism use the term to publicize new landmarks in cities, and mainstream media use the term to report on the new appearance of Chinese cities. This kind of “adoption” behavior, on the one hand, gives the word a more positive meaning, and on the other hand, it completely breaks through the circle and enters the widest public vision.

3. “city or not city” behind the latent social mirror

(i) The explosion of “city or not city” reflects the people's leap from “survival” to ‘life’. With the rapid development of China's economy, the people's living standard has been greatly improved, which provides a material basis for the rise of “city” lifestyle. Firstly, the leap in economic capacity and upgrading of consumption, the people no longer limit their consumption to “firewood, rice, oil and salt” to satisfy their basic needs, but have the ability and willingness to pay for high-quality commodities and services; at the same time, the improvement of productivity allows people to devote their experience to recreation and self-improvement, and to pay close attention to changes in the world; and finally, the improvement of people's cultural literacy and conception of “life”. The improvement of people's cultural literacy and openness to ideas. With the general increase in the level of education for all, it has fostered a group of citizens with a more international outlook, higher aesthetic taste and stronger cultural confidence, which makes it easier for them to accept the new and upgraded things and already look at groups of different cultural backgrounds with a more equal and tolerant mindset.

(ii) Secondly, from the point of view of social development, the exclamation of “city is not city” originates from the strong visual and psychological impact brought by the speed of social development and construction achievements in China, which has reversed the stereotypical impression that the Western masses have long had of China. Once upon a time, China's waste is still emerging, backward level of science and technology, people's cultural literacy is not high, the foreign media

has been seized with the former face of China reported. With the leapfrog development of comprehensive national strength, today's China has developed into the world's second largest economy with strong scientific and technological strength and advanced infrastructure, and the level of science and technology is greatly ahead of the level of urbanization has increased, and the problem of unbalanced and insufficient development of urban and rural areas has been improved, and various regions have shown the face of "city", and foreign nationals have experienced the convenience and safety of China's cities. When foreign citizens experience the convenience, safety, efficiency and vitality of Chinese cities, their preconceived stereotypes based on past reports are instantly shattered. The shock generated by this "cognitive upheaval" is the most direct source of the exclamation "city is not city", and also vividly indicates that China is moving towards the center of the world stage, and harvesting the world's aspirations and recognition with its brand-new modernized image.

(iii) China's cultural communication has demonstrated the paradigm innovation from "one-way output" to "two-way interaction". Cultural communication has gone beyond the traditional, unilateral "narration", innovatively attracting international friends to come to China for personal experience through visa-free policies and social media platforms, etc. Visitors and content creators from all over the world have spontaneously become the narrators of "China's story" through short videos, vlogs and other forms of self-media. "The Chinese story is told by tourists and content creators from all over the world through short videos, vlogs and other forms of self-media."^[5] At the same time, this is also a concrete expression of cultural confidence and soft power, which means that we no longer blindly follow the modernization standards defined by the West, but begin to define and judge our own life and development with new standards that integrate local elements and have their own characteristics.

(iv) It embodies the "modal communication"^[6] in communication science, which refers to the change of information on its own basis in the process of communication, and reflects the sociological perspective of the construction of youth identity from this phenomenon. Modal theory, proposed by Richard Dawkins, analogizes cultural information units to genes in biology, emphasizing their replication, mutation and selective retention mechanisms in the process of transmission^[7]. "The structure of "city or not city" has high replicability, low mutability and strong adaptability, and its sentence pattern of "X or not X" can be easily imitated and replaced, thus spreading like a virus in social media. Lawyer not Lawyer" and "Tsinghua not Tsinghua" are examples of how netizens build their own sense of belonging to a group by creating a second creation when they pay attention to new trends on the Internet. This phenomenon is common among the youth, and the use and dissemination of the new stems has become a unique way for them to differentiate themselves from the general public, proclaiming that they belong to a more cutting-edge, fashionable, and popularized group. This phenomenon is common among the youth, and the use and spreading of the new terrain has become a unique way for them to differentiate themselves from the general public, proclaiming that they belong to a group that is more cutting-edge, more fashionable, and more international in outlook, and constructing a unique youth identity^[8].

4. Conclusion

This paper summarizes the social mirror image of "city or not city" by combining its semantic characteristics, reasons for its creation, causes of its popularity, and ways of dissemination, and conducts an in-depth study from the aspects of communication, journalism, linguistics as well as politics, economy, culture and so on. The value of the word as a hot Internet terrier is not only for entertainment purpose, but also for social value, which has become a positive trend on the Internet.

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