Cities 49 (2015) 106–112

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Cities

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/cities

‘China’s leading historical and cultural city’: Branding Dali City through public–private partnerships in Bai architecture revitalization

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 24 January 2015
Received in revised form 20 July 2015
Accepted 26 July 2015
Available online 3 August 2015

Keywords:
City branding
Public–private partnership
Heritage revitalization
Bai culture
Dali City
China

ABSTRACT

Competing with other Chinese cities for investment and tourism, various governmental bodies with jurisdiction in Dali City have begun to make use of local historical and cultural assets in order to brand the city. This paper aims to reveal how partnerships between the public and private sectors in heritage management have functioned as an approach to city branding, and how local people perceive and are influenced by these partnerships. Applying perspectives from the scholarly literature on city branding and public–private partnerships, this paper examines two cases in Dali City – Zhang’s Garden and the Linden Center – to detail how local government and elite entrepreneurs have partnerned in support of Bai architecture revitalization with tourism in mind. This paper also considers opinions from the local general public regarding these partnerships, and investigates the complex relationships among local government, elite entrepreneurs, and the public.

1. Introduction

Dali City, located in Yunnan Province, Southwest China, was the capital of both the Nanzhao Kingdom (738–902) and the Dali Kingdom (937–1254), both of which connected ancient China to South and Southeast Asia. It is the home of the ethnic minority Bai, which constitutes approximately 68 per cent of the city’s total population (C. Wang, 2013). As early as the New Stone Age, ancestors of the Bai and Yi ethnic groups, along with as many as 23 others, began residing in what is now Dali City, forming a city of remarkable diversity (Dali Municipal Government, 2011). The city has been designated as a ‘National Scenic Area’ and a ‘National Nature Reserve’ by the State Council, and was designated ‘China’s Excellent Touristic City’ by the National Tourism Administration. The City was also listed as one of ‘China’s Ten Most Attractive Cities’ by China Central Television, competing with nearly 100 other Chinese cities (Dali Municipal Government, 2011; Yang, 2014).

These honorary titles have been used, along with slogans[1] proposed by the municipal government, to market Dali City and propel the development of tourism in the city. Arguably, the title that has played the most significant role in attracting tourism is ‘China’s leading historical and cultural city’, which was awarded to Dali City by the State Council in 1982. The municipal government has made explicit efforts to live up to this title by maintaining the city’s historical and cultural heritage. Namely, the Protection Regulation on Historical and Cultural Dali was enacted on July 1, 2007, laying the legal ground for local heritage preservation (Wu, 2010). Three years later, Dali City’s Cultural Heritage Bureau was established to work specifically on heritage management (*ibid.*).

In Dali City, many Bai architecture revitalization projects are carried out on a public–private cooperative basis. This paper aims to reveal how such partnerships in heritage management have functioned to brand Dali City as a leading historical and cultural city in China, and how this branding is perceived by local people and influences their lives. The paper draws upon existing literature on city branding and public–private partnerships (PPPs), especially their applications in heritage management and city branding. Specifically examining the two cases of Zhang’s Garden and the Linden Center, this paper details how local governments[2] and the private sector work in partnership, either in the typical form of

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[1] Slogans include: “Dali, a place everyone must visit in his or her lifetime” and “Dali’s beautiful scenery should be shared by people all over the world”.

[2] ‘Local governments’ in this paper refers to the municipal government and the prefectural government together. In Dali City, some officials who work in the municipal government have positions in the prefectural government, which is said to facilitate decision flows between the two levels of government. These two levels of government often work together on affairs related to Dali City. Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish decisions originally made at the municipal level from those made at the prefectural level. In such complex circumstances, ‘local governments’ is used with intended ambiguity.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2015.07.009
0264-2751/

PPP or other forms, to support Bai architecture revitalization projects. Considering the voices and opinions of local people, this paper investigates the complex relationships among local governments, elite entrepreneurs, and the general public.

2. City branding

Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) contend that cities "have long felt a need to differentiate themselves from each other, to assert their individuality in pursuit of various economic, political or socio-psychological objectives" (p. 506). In the era of globalization, where cities compete for attention, influence, markets, investment, businesses, and visitors with growing intensity (Zhang & Zhao, 2009), city branding has become common practice (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005; Zenker, 2009). City branding refers to the process of applying product branding practices to cities, aiming at integrating and highlighting a city's competitive advantages through persistent imaged identities, or brands (Kavaratzis, 2007; Zhang & Zhao, 2009). Chinese cities began branding themselves in the 1980s, which has since yielded both positive and negative outcomes. In one instance, branding projects in Xuyi County brought market value to the city and facilitated the building up of a cross-boundary economic network (Luo, Wang, Zhang, & Hu, 2013). Conversely, branding Hong Kong as 'Asia's world city' has in a way led to the loss of Hong Kong's integral uniqueness by hybridizing the local culture with a generic globalism (Chu, 2011). Or, distinctively, branding Shanghai via the Expo can be seen as an exercise in regime branding (rather than city branding) that legitimizes the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (Dynon, 2011). However, while much research on city branding in China has focused on economic or political centers like Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong (e.g. Chu, 2011; Dynon, 2011; Lui, 2008; Zhang & Zhao, 2009), third-tier cities such as Dali City have received significantly less attention.

Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) argue that city branding is more difficult than product branding and marketing, owing to the complex nature of cities. A city is simultaneously a place of residence, a place of work, a destination to visit, and a place of investment opportunity. A city's brand, therefore, has to accommodate all stakeholders' demands in order to strengthen the city's overall competitiveness (*ibid.*). Researchers have come up with a variety of strategies for branding, including the following: associating a city's identity with its history, demography, economy, politics, and policies (Zhang & Zhao, 2009); emphasizing relatedness to a national brand and inheriting the benefits of national image (Olins, 2004); forming positive images through the use of slogans or logos (Gammack & Donald, 2006); initiating prominent flagship projects that are globally visible (Yeoh, 2005); and making use of existing positive associations with particular locations, international events, organizations, prestigious forums, companies, and so on (Björner, 2013). All in all, a good city brand has to incorporate a city's resource endowment (Luo et al., 2013) and distinctive characteristics (Zhang & Zhao, 2009).

Recently, researchers have increasingly begun to recognize the critical role of local people in city branding. It is argued that city branding has to take local people's identity and core values into consideration (Ahn, Hyun, & Kim, 2015; Khirfan & Momani, 2013) and be accepted by local people (Lui, 2008; Zhang & Zhao, 2009). City branding that corresponds to local people's identities appears authentic and fosters social sustainability (Greenop & Darchen, 2015). Positive local attitudes toward city branding strengthens the public's sense of connection to the brand, which motivates individuals to advocate for the brand and perform other duties that uphold its image (Kemp, Childers, & Williams, 2012). Given the importance of involving local people in the process of city branding, this paper examines how local people perceive and are influenced by PPPs in city branding in Dali City, a third-tier city in China.

3. Public–private partnership

Webb and Pulle (2002) define public–private partnerships (PPPs) as partnerships "between the public sector and the private sector for the purposes of designing, planning, financing, constructing and/or operating projects which would be regarded traditionally as part of the public sector" (p. 1). The term was first applied to social public projects like schools, hospitals and prisons in the United Kingdom, Australia and United States, and its use was later expanded to other places and to a wide range of contexts (Adams, Young, & Wu, 2006; Engel, Fischer, & Galetovic, 2010; Ke, 2014). In a typical PPP arrangement, the private sector funds the construction of a project, maintains and operates it for a long period of time, after which it is transferred to the public sector – the government (Tieva & Junnonen, 2009). Since China's economic reforms in 1978, PPP has become a popular modality of funding projects in China (Ke, 2014; Zhang, Gao, Feng, & Sun, 2014). PPP was applied in China first in industrial development; later, it was adopted as a strategy to finance infrastructure during China's rapid urbanization process (M. Wang, 2013; Zhang et al., 2014). Wang (2004) describes three distinct types of PPP that predominate in China: outsourcing, concession, and divestiture. Outsourcing refers to partnerships where the public sector signs service contracts, management contracts, or turnkey contracts with private sector actors. Among Wang's three types of PPP, outsourcing partnerships pose the smallest risk for the private sector. Concession refers to situations in which the private sector has to invest in projects, sharing risk with the public sector. Divestiture, the most risky type of partnership for the private sector, involves private sector ownership of projects that operate under the public sector's supervision (*ibid.*). Rather than a true representation of public will, however, the public sector in China is often understood to consist of government officials who make decisions based on their own judgements or preference, while the private sector consists of private companies (Adams et al., 2006; Ke, 2014; Ke, Wang, & Chan, 2012). Within this understanding, PPP in China is in other words a government-private company nexus that the general public do not have access to.

As an alternative form of public funding, PPP is intended to benefit all partners in joint investments and long-term relationships. Partners can achieve their own objectives and at the same time produce synergies that could not be achieved through independent action alone (Brewer & Hayllar, 2005). In regards to society as a whole, PPP reduces the burden on taxpayers in the delivery of both capital and services by relying on private capital, expertise, and business practices (Adams et al., 2006). The provision of public goods via the private sector can have higher levels of efficiency and effectiveness when the public sector is hindered by bureaucratic, mechanistic, and politicized methods of operation (*ibid.*). In China, however, the outcomes of PPPs vary from case to case due to the lack of a legal framework for implementation, the lack of transparency and public participation, unclear risk allocations, weak supervision, inconsistency in policy, and disagreements between the central government and local governments (Adams et al., 2006; Ke, 2014).

In recent decades, many governments have used PPP for heritage management (Cheung & Chan, 2012; de Vries, 2007; Dubini, Leone, & Forti, 2012; Klimpke & Kammeier, 2006). Private sector engagement with the public sector in heritage management activities is governed by clear definitions of responsibility and allocation criteria for time and resources among partners (Dubini et al.,