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Linking city branding to multi-level urban governance in Chinese mega-cities: A case study of Guangzhou

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the academic discussion on city branding as a form of multi-level urban governance, by investigating city branding tied to urban policies and state strategies in Chinese mega-cities, using Guangzhou as a case study. The findings illustrate that city branding is an integrated part of multi-level urban governance, highlights how city branding is interlinked with national, regional and local levels, and exemplifies how city branding strategies and practices are utilized to formulate and implement growth-driven urban policy in China, shedding light on multi-level perspectives in city branding, in China and more generally.

1. Introduction

In the globalization era, the branding of cities has become a vital tool to stimulate urban development around the world (Anttiroiko, 2015). Moreover, as cities play increasingly important roles – economically, socially and politically – governance of cities matters (Guo & Cheng, 2012). The (re)scaling of governance has meant shifts from power concentrated at national and state levels towards power concentrated at regional, metropolitan and city levels (e.g. Vogel, 2010). The experiences of different places however vary, and the neoliberal regime of institutional governance should, in the words of Ong (2007), be viewed as a constantly moving mobile technology.

In a Western context, the neoliberal turn in urban governance (Greenberg, 2008; Hackworth, 2007), the introduction of market-based reforms such as New Public Management (Eshuis, Braun, & Klijn, 2013), and the rise of 'the entrepreneurial city' (Hall & Hubbard, 1998) are all related to the growth of city branding. For decades now, city officials have 'looked to and adopted private-sector strategies, including marketing-led strategies of urban development' (Braun, Eshuis, & Klijn, 2014, p. 64).

City branding has been conceptualised as a form of urban governance in the sense that it can be used strategically to stimulate and direct urban development and growth; applied to manage perceptions about places, and utilized to formulate unique city identities (Eshuis & Edwards, 2012; Van Ham, 2008). Extant city branding literature, nevertheless, still has ample gaps with regards to the political and institutional aspects of city branding (Vuignier, 2015) and there has, for example, been calls for illustrations depicting connections between city branding and urban governance (Oguztimur & Akturan, 2016). There has also been calls for studies investigating city branding from a multi-level perspective (Syssner, 2010), and for research conceptualizing city branding as a form of urban governance strategy.

As a country with a centralized system of government and strong state interventions in urban policymaking, China represents a new ground for studying city branding and its relevance to urban governance. The Chinese experience diverges from the Anglo-American ideal-type of neoliberalism, with its unique combination of under-regulated markets and authoritarian state (Rossi & Vanolo, 2012), and current urban policymaking in China has been strongly tied to metropolitan and regional development, in response to the pressure of globalization and competition in the global economy (Ye, 2013, 2014). It is thus important to investigate how a rapidly urbanizing country like China utilizes city branding as a major urban governance strategy to stimulate urban development. This study aims at contributing to this discussion, and investigates city branding as a form of urban governance, from a multi-level perspective, in the context of Chinese mega-cities and using the city of Guangzhou as a case study.

The article is organized into the following parts. The first part develops the theoretical framework of this research and centres on city branding and multi-level governance. Materials and methods are then introduced, and the case study of Guangzhou is utilized to analyse a typical mega-city in China. The findings and discussion focus primarily on how city branding is manifested through multi-level urban governance, before conclusions are drawn.

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1.1. Theoretical perspectives: city branding and multi-level governance

The field of city branding, place branding and related areas of research and practice have grown considerably in the past three decades (Kavaratzis, 2004; Oguztimur & Akturan, 2016). Researchers have increasingly come to use the terms place branding and city branding rather than place marketing and city marketing (Gertner, 2011; Lucarelli & Berg, 2011). It has been claimed that marketing tied to places involves techniques of sales and promotion (Lucarelli & Berg, 2011), whereas branding in the context of places implies an emphasis on the communicative aspects of all marketing processes (Kavaratzis, 2004). There has also been a shift in city branding practices from a focus on promotional and marketing activities towards a state of more strategically oriented branding (Kavaratzis, 2007). Furthermore, branding tied to places has been described as a 'continuous process interlinked with all marketing efforts and with the whole planning exercise' (Kavaratzis, 2007, p. 704), a conceptualisation we concur with.

In the literature, place branding is commonly understood as an umbrella term encompassing the branding or marketing of nations, regions, cities and other places (Lucarelli & Berg, 2011), yet a degree of unclarity and lack of agreement regarding terminology and definitions is evident (Anholt, 2005). A comprehensive definition of place branding is proposed by Eshuis and Klijn (2012), who state that place branding is a very broad governance strategy that goes beyond managing image and perceptions alone (Braun et al., 2014).

In turn, city branding has been defined by Lucarelli and Berg (2011, p. 21) as the 'purposeful symbolic embodiment of all information connected to a city in order to create associations around it'. Kavaratzis (2004) outlined the 'city image communication framework', comprising three types of communication, namely primary, secondary and tertiary communication. 'Primary communication' is described as unintentional, meaning that the city's actions, such as the city landscape, infrastructure and city behaviour, have communicative effects even though communicative messages are not the main goal. 'Secondary communication' is described as the intentional communication that often takes place through established marketing practices, and 'tertiary communication' is related to word of mouth and to communication by the media (Kavaratzis, 2004). Following Kavaratzis, we interpret tertiary communication as closely tied to secondary and intentional communication, but also see it as much more uncontrollable by those who intentionally brand a place.

City branding is in the contemporary setting used by cities all over the world to stay competitive and relevant in the global market (Hospers, 2010). In China, cities have, in the past decades, increasingly engaged in city branding activities. This has for example been seen in the arrangement of mega-events (Björner, 2017), urban redevelopment (Ye, 2011), and spatial restructuring (Shin, 2014).

Cities are branded to communicate their competitive advantage, their quality, history, lifestyle and culture (Björner, 2013). Cities are moreover branded towards potential investors, tourists and 'creative class', and increasingly also with a focus on internal audiences such as residents (Govers, 2011; Insch & Florek, 2008). A central advice to city administrators has been to view city branding not only as a matter of image and perception, but also as an important phenomenon related to the impact it can have on the city and its surroundings, in terms of economic, cultural, social and political effects (Lucarelli, 2012), hinting at the inherent complexity of city branding. For instance, branding a city as an Olympic City can provide a city brand identity which differentiates a given city from other cities and fundamentally changes its spatial configuration and cultural values in a complex way, with modern planning in place, advanced infrastructure to be built, boosting strong cultural values and confidence (Zhang & Zhao, 2009).

Relatedly, city branding has been conceptualised as a complex and politicized activity that involves various internal and external stakeholders (Morgan, Pritchard, & Piggott, 2003). Different stakeholder groups and interests try to influence and control the city brand and the branding in certain directions, making the branding of cities an intrinsically political activity (Lucarelli, 2015). A central stakeholder group in the branding of places is local governments (Parkerson & Saunders, 2005), and city branding has been conceptualised as a power exercise imposed by political elites (Ashworth, Kavaratzis, & Warnaby, 2015; Molotch, 1976). What is more, city branding is closely intertwined with urban governance (Anholt, 2008), and is also becoming an increasingly popular governance practice (Eshuis et al., 2013). More studies are however needed in order to fully understand the institutions and practices of urban governance in relation to city branding (Zavattaro, 2014).

Links between city branding and urban governance has been conceptualised to some degree in the literature. Place branding has, for example, been conceptualised as a form of place development (Kavaratzis, 2005), and it has been argued that place branding provides strategic guidance for place development (Ashworth et al., 2015). It has also been suggested that strategies and branding in the context of cities can contribute with aesthetic, seductive features and a form of storytelling to development plans and policies which often include a high degree of technical details communicated in expert language (Kornberger & Clegg, 2011).

In the city branding domain, some studies tie branding to governance at the national level, in the form of nation branding, public diplomacy, soft power, etc. (e.g. Anholt, 2006; Nye, 2006; Olins, 2003; Van Ham, 2008), while other studies focus on branding and governance at the city level (e.g. Eshuis & Edwards, 2012; Hall & Hubbard, 1998; Harvey, 1989). However, with some exceptions (e.g. Syssner, 2010), limited research has investigated city branding as an integrated discipline – closely related to the way the nation is run – thus leaving room for additional work in this area. Syssner (2010) claims, rightly, we believe, that place branding needs to be understood from a multi-level perspective. Multi-level perspectives have, however, seldom been applied in branding research, yet is interesting to further explore in a Chinese context, partly because the urban governance system is characterized by strong leadership (Wu, 2000; Xu & Yeh, 2005), and since governance at multiple levels (e.g. national, regional, local) influence city branding practices.

Multi-level governance emerged as a concept in the context of EU studies, and emphasis has been put on the governance of society through a variety of processes and institutions (Bache & Flinders, 2004; Gamble, 2000). Multi-level governance has also been conceptualised as the spreading of authoritative decision-making across numerous territorial levels. Multi-level governance relates to (re)scaling of governance, which has occurred in the context of a reshuffled world order and national power, which has reconfigured urban governance systematically. Moreover, the multipolar world order has challenged traditional, regional integration and intergovernmental models based on the centrality of the nation state as a primary unit of analysis (Brenner, Peck, & Theodore, 2010; Gualini, 2006).

Hence, governing city regions transformed (*rescaled*) territory and politics, with evidence of a shift from national to regional and metropolitan levels (Brenner, 2002, 2003; Florida, Gulden, & Mellander, 2008; Scott & Stopper, 2003; Vogel, 2010). As Jessop (1994) argues, the nation state is now subject to various changes which result in its 'hollowing out'. While nation states remain politically important, more economic transactions and social interactions started to occur amongst the newly established urban networks around the world, which 'bypass central states and connect localities or regions in several nations' (Jessop, 1994, p. 264).

The Chinese context offers an intriguing ground in this regard due to the close interlinkage between the central and the local levels or, in other words, between the nation, its regions and its cities. The urban governance system in China is characterized by strong leadership (Wu, 2000; Xu & Yeh, 2005) involving multiple levels of governance (e.g. national, provincial and municipal). For example, it is noteworthy that in the last two decades, there was a sudden increase of strategic plans in

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