Explaining city branding practices in China’s three mega-city regions: The role of ecological modernization

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ABSTRACT

As global cities, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Beijing operate in international economic networks; however, they are also each firmly embedded within a regional context and are surrounded by less populous and less internationally recognized neighbors. Together they form so-called mega-city regions referred to as the Greater Pearl River Delta, the Yangtze River Delta, and the Bohai Rim, each encompassing a dozen or so cities. In the wake of staggering economic growth and threatening pollution, these cities are compelled to respond to the challenge of ecological modernization (EM): aim for higher economic value added at lower environmental cost. Cities have particular industrial and regional profiles; consequently they follow different developmental pathways. In order to attract coveted investors, green and high-tech corporations, well-endowed residents and talented workforce, these cities engage in city branding practices. In this contribution, a typology of EM developmental pathways is presented and the 41 cities in the three Chinese mega-city regions are analyzed in terms of their respective pathways and city branding practices. We argue that different industrial and regional profiles allow for different developmental pathways making different city branding strategies likely. Most cities brand themselves in conformity with what their pathway would lead us to predict, except cities with a strongly manufacturing oriented profile; the brands of the latter type deviate markedly from their current reality. Cities adopting branding strategies that contrast sharply with their historical legacy and current profile risk promoting themselves in ways that the outside world is likely to perceive as lacking in credibility.

1. Introduction

In the quest for favorable global city rankings, Chinese cities have fared well in the last three decades. While Hong Kong acquired the status of leading global city some time ago (Bie et al., 2015), more recently Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen have been among the fastest growing cities within the global city network (Derudder et al., 2010, 2013; Taylor et al., 2012; Timberlake et al., 2014; Zhao et al., 2015). As such, they have all responded to the perceived imperative, in the post Fordism era, to develop ‘neoliberal spatial policies’ in the face of intensifying global competition for advanced producer services, investors and talented workforce, by becoming more entrepreneurial and strategically repositioning themselves (Jessop and Sum, 2000; Logan, 2002). They have done so not only by creating high-quality urban settings to accommodate new economic activity, but also by organizing eye-catching events and buildings – such as Olympic Games, Expos, planning exhibition halls and convention centers – to demonstrate technological and organizational prowess to the outside world, and by otherwise promoting themselves through increasingly sophisticated branding strategies (Chen, 2014; Fan, 2015; Herstein and Berger, 2013). For instance, several studies have demonstrated the effects of such strategic repositioning efforts in the case of Hong
Kong, Guangzhou and Shenzhen in the Greater Pearl River Delta (Xu and Yeh, 2005; Xu, 2008; Xu and Chung, 2014; Xu, 2015; De Jong et al., 2017).

While the performance of global cities is typically compared with, and benchmarked against, other global cities, at the same time these cities also operate within a regional context: in the present study, this relates to the Bohai Rim (also known as Jing-Jin-Ji with Beijing and Tianjin as their core cities), the Yangtze River Delta (including Shanghai, Nanjing and Hangzhou), and the Greater Pearl River Delta (the highly urbanized part of Guangdong and its major cities Guangzhou and Shenzhen plus the Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong and Macau), respectively. These regions have been described in the literature variably as ‘global city regions’ (Scott, 2001), ‘mega-city regions’ (Florida et al., 2008), ‘polycentric urban regions’ (Meijers, 2008), and ‘polynuclear regions’ (Hall and Pain, 2004). Within this regional context, owing to their proximity and accessibility, cities co-located with their neighboring global cities are responsible for a growing, substantial share of regional economic activity, as demonstrated by the city of Kunshan situated next to Shanghai (Wu, 2015). While these cities clearly do not have the same international reach as Beijing, Shanghai or Hong Kong, they nevertheless occupy a vital national or regional function, underpinned by their own industrial transitions and the quest for an improved city profile and position. They differ markedly from their global city neighbors in terms of their industrial legacies and phase of urban economic development. Some remain strongly rooted in material extraction such as mining, fishing and agriculture (primary sector); others focus on material processing and product manufacturing (secondary sector); still others increasingly shift towards consumer goods and services such as retail, banking, entertainment and ICT (tertiary sector).

Over the last decade, the challenge of ‘ecological modernization’ (henceforth, EM) has been added to Chinese cities’ repositioning efforts, affecting especially locational choices at the regional scale. Not only different industries took the initiatives to improve technological measures in carbon emission, energy consumption, but also Chinese government enforced carbon emissions reduction through more effective policy instrument and regulation and trade mechanism within the framework of Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement to (Wang et al., 2016; Jiang et al., 2016; Su et al., 2016; Zeng et al., 2017). While industry seeks to shift manufacturing locations to the interior of the country where labor costs are lower, cities around the East Coast face an important restructuring task to fill the emptying void. What is more, increasingly wealthy, highly educated and demanding citizens seek out cleaner, greener and more attractive places in which to work and live, with investors and high-value added service industries following in their wake. This entices cities to phase out heavy, polluting industries and replace them with light manufacturing and high-tech services (Wu and Gaubatz, 2011; de Jong et al., 2013). The embrace of environmental considerations in urban repositioning, using an EM discourse, is a consequence of China’s imperative not to forgo ecological preservation in pursuit of economic growth; accordingly, the impetus is to produce higher economic value with fewer ecological resources and, thus, to increase eco-efficiency in the industrial production chain (Hajer, 1995; Mol et al., 2009; Bayulken and Huisingsh, 2015; Goess et al., 2016). This requires GDP growth to be coupled with decreases in resource input or emissions output, to be realized – in the era of information society – through the effective utilization of intangible assets including knowledge, skills and innovation potential (Jiang et al., 2016; Zeng et al., 2017; Su et al., 2016). However, this highly desirable transition from a production-based manufacturing industry to a knowledge-intensive, service-oriented one is far from automatic: it is one that involves fierce competition among Chinese cities, resulting in individual cities going to great lengths to strengthen their public profiles.

Cities like Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Macau are thus attuned to advertising their reputation and position through targeted discourses and images (Olds, 2001; Lai, 2006; Zhang and Zhao, 2009; Caprotti, 2014; Xu and Chung, 2014; Xu, 2015; Lu et al., 2017). Such branding practices are aimed at increasing their attractiveness to investors, major companies and young urban professionals (Jessop and Sum, 2000; Wu et al., 2007: 222; Kavaratzis, 2007; Braun et al., 2014; de Jong et al., 2015). Recent research into city branding has focused mainly on ‘subjective’ aspects, such as city identity and city image, the historical evolution of city branding, branding strategies and tactics and the importance of stakeholder engagement. What, however, has not been explicitly addressed to date, and what consequently this article seeks to examine in detail are two relevant factors for city branding: (1) cities’ stage of urban economic development; and (2) their regional positioning. We hypothesize that these two factors interact in ways to form distinctive pathways of ecological modernization and that, in turn, these pathways influence cities’ branding strategies and practices.

As cities feel increasingly compelled to respond to requirements for EM, they often end up reflecting this imperative in their branding practices. Hence, we argue that the specific combination of individual cities’ stage of urban economic development and their regional position produce particular developmental possibilities and limitations, which in turn co-determine the bandwidth for the branding choices available to them. Although we can certainly neither deterministically predict nor narrowly prescribe which city brand is most suitable for which city based on development stages and geographic positions alone, we nevertheless expect these two factors to co-determine cities’ response to EM and to see this reflected in their city branding practices. For instance, it seems unlikely that regional agriculture-dominated cities can realistically aim at once to become high-tech innovation cities; on their part, national-level cities where manufacturing dominates may not realistically claim a role as a hub for global financial services; and again, international high-tech cities are unlikely to choose to cast themselves as eco-tourism resorts.

In our causal framework, the urban economic development stage and regional position are the independent variables, the mode of EM is the intermediary variable, and predicted city branding practices the dependent variable. This analytical framework is applied to the three Chinese mega-city regions: the Bohai Rim, also known as Jing-Jin-Ji (JJJ); the Yangtze River Delta (YRD); and the Greater Pearl River Delta (GPRD). Overall, the key research contribution of this article, therefore, is to analyze EM in different pathways and correlate these to branding practices observed in cities within these three major Chinese regions.

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 clarifies our approach to city branding and outlines the conceptual framework and methodology. The conceptual framework maps out five distinct urban development pathways, based on EM, and their expected branding strategies. Section 3 profiles the three mega-city regions in question and the cities located therein, highlighting key demographic, geographic and industrial features. This data is used to allocate individual cities to one of the five development pathways and related expected branding strategies. Section 4 then presents the findings on the actually adopted branding strategies, verifies to what extent cities are on a given pathway and discusses how deviations from the predictions may be explained. Finally, Section 5 offers overarching conclusions and considers the implications for future research.
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