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

Martin de Jong a, b, Yawei Chen c, Simon Joss d,*, Haiyan Lu a, Miaoxi Zhao e, Qihui Yang a, f, Chaoning Zhang a

a Delft University of Technology, Faculty of Technology, Policy and Management, Mekelweg 2, 2628, CD Delft, The Netherlands
b Fudan University, School of International Relations and Public Affairs, 220 Handan Road, Yangpu District, Shanghai, PR China
c Delft University of Technology, Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, Mekelweg 2, 2628, CD Delft, The Netherlands
d University of Westminster, Department of Politics and International Relations, 32-38, Wells Street, London, W1T 3JU, United Kingdom
e South China University of Technology, School of Architecture, 381 Wushan Road, Tianhe District, Guangzhou, PR China
f Kansas State University, Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, Manhattan, KS 66506, USA

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

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: W.M.DeJong@tudelft.nl (M. de Jong), Y.Chen@tudelft.nl (Y. Chen), josss@westminster.ac.uk (S. Joss), arzhao@scut.edu.cn (M. Zhao), qihui@ksu.edu (Q. Yang).
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, unimpinged by their own industrial transition, 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 emerging 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 Huisingh, 2015; Goess et al., 2016). This requires GDP growth to be coupled with decreases in resource input or emissions output, to be realized through more effective policy instrument and regulation and trade measures to fill the emerging 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 Huisingh, 2015; Goess et al., 2016). This requires GDP growth to be coupled with decreases in resource input or emissions output, to be realized 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 emerging 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 environ-

mental 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 Huisingh, 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 and promote 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 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.
دریافت فوری

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