



Original Article

A new China: Media portrayal of Chinese mega-cities

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ABSTRACT During the last two decades, China has started to leave its closed-door policies in the international arena behind, and has shown signs of participating in the global economy. Politically and economically, China has been developing further relations with the rest of the world. The country points to its mega-cities in its official 5-year plans to facilitate and execute the outreach attempts. In this article, we analyze the media representations of two of these mega-cities – Beijing and Shenzhen – with the objective of understanding how their brand images are portrayed and whether these portrayals are in line with the Chinese objectives. We focus on the media representations by arguing that international print media is a crucial platform that has the potential to influence the brand reception of audiences. Consequently, we analyze the volume and subject of Beijing and Shenzhen in English language Chinese and international print media outlets. We evaluate the coverage through a place branding framework. The findings of this research suggest the low-level and narrow coverage of the print media hinders the potential of these cities to become world-renowned centers and help facilitate Chinese interaction with the rest of the world.

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INTRODUCTION

The Chinese government uses various public diplomacy and communication tools – such as exchange projects, social

media, publications, events and celebrity endorsements – to promote China's image (Dinnie and Lio, 2010). Since the early 2000s, high-ranking Chinese politicians –

including former President Hu Jintao and former Prime Minister Wen Jiabao – have become more active in the international arena (Kurlantzick, 2007). China has also engaged in a global expansion of media outlets and invested considerably in establishing a global network of Confucius Institutes, with the purpose of enhancing its national image internationally (Wang and Hallquist, 2011).

In addition to the aforementioned practices that are widely shared by other countries, the Chinese case of international communication has an almost unique identity: its rapidly growing and newly created mega-cities.¹ Chinese cities are increasingly engaging in branding practices with one purpose being to increase their visibility in the world (Wu, 2000; Wen and Sui, 2014). Many Chinese cities have been encouraged to adopt a series of innovative strategies in order to increase their competitiveness and recognition in the international arena (Xu and Yeh, 2005). Chinese regions and cities have as a consequence been actively implementing policies in order to promote global city formation and attract foreign investments, resulting in an increased competition over resources and opportunities (Wei *et al.*, 2006).

In the contemporary setting, places – let it be cities, regions, or nations – all over the world engage in constructing images and representations of their locations in order to compete and collaborate with other places on a global market (Sassen, 2006; Jensen, 2007). The branding of places in the global competition has become a part of urban strategies, and an increasingly necessary part of a place's agenda of ambition (Kong, 2012). Various techniques are used to build image, promote interests abroad, and attract the attention of various audiences (for example, investors, visitors, and residents), and Chinese cities are no exceptions (Kjærgaard *et al.*, 2012; Xue *et al.*, 2012).

Yet, do China and Chinese cities receive the media coverage appropriate to their development and branding attempts? This research analyzes the content and volume of international and Chinese print media coverage

of two mega-cities – Beijing and Shenzhen – to assess whether their media portrayal are in line with their branding attempts. Moreover, the media coverage is evaluated within the framework of place branding in order to better explain the projected brand image.

This research is likely to contribute to the place branding literature through its findings, methodology, and case selection. Our findings shed light on the possibility of using city brands to enhance nation brands. Our methodology connects media portrayals with place branding studies. Moreover, we introduce a relatively understudied region – China – to the field of place branding.

The rest of the article is composed of five parts. First, we establish our theoretical framework in understanding and evaluating place brands within the Chinese context. Second, we explore the link between media portrayals and city brands. Third, we outline the research methodology. Fourth, we present the analysis of our data. We conclude the article by discussing how Chinese cities are portrayed in print media and argue that their current portrayal posits that mega-cities do not fulfill their potential.

BRANDING, PLACES, AND MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

The images, representations, and values of cities can be seen as a negotiation process between local, national, and global audiences (Sevin, 2011). Hankinson (2004) has claimed that it often is organic communication – including the media – that has the most extensive impact on the image of a destination. Kavaratzis (2004) has also pointed to the importance of communication by media as a distinctive type of communication, included within what he calls *secondary communication*. Given the fact that most of the world is still out of sight and out of touch for individuals (Lippmann, 1922), we rely on mediated messages to get informed about foreign countries. Consequently, media portrayals become one of the most – if not the most – influential factor in determining how place brands are built. This section discusses the

role of communication in place branding, starting with a specific focus on the Chinese practice.

Place branding in the Chinese context

Chinese cities play an important role in the globalization of China, given the facts that they are given tasks and roles from the central Chinese government, and that they are impacted through policies and plans as well as ideology. Wei and Yu (2006) argue that the Chinese state plays a central role when it comes to influencing the development paths of Chinese cities. Vogel *et al* (2010) similarly state that China decides which cities and city regions emerge and what role they play in the world economy through the central party directives. The Chinese Communist Party has an interest in the promotion of Chinese cities, partly because it can benefit the promotion and branding of China as a nation (Wu, 2000). In other words, China wants to communicate the idea that it does not pose a threat to other nations, putting emphasis on its peaceful economic and technological development in its outreach to foreign publics. As countries, territories and cities in Asia and China gain more influence in global politics and economy, they are increasingly aware of their image and reputation. Their attempts to create identities on the global scene are moreover catching increasing attention, domestically and internationally (Wang, 2008). In China, closer incorporation into global markets as well as rapid economic growth has had the impact that numerous Chinese cities are competing for a place in the international city roster, and that city branding has become strategically important for Chinese cities (Zhang and Zhao, 2009).

Since city marketing was introduced in China it has attracted plenty attention (Zheng *et al*, 2005). In order to compete and promote city brands, different levels of Chinese governments have started to integrate multiple marketing tactics to promote cities (Zhou and Wang, 2014). Some Chinese cities have built famous city brands in the

process of city marketing and have, as a consequence, strengthened their competitiveness (Zheng *et al*, 2005). Mega-events, such as the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008, the Shanghai World Expo in 2010, and the Shenzhen Universiade in 2011, have been central elements in city branding of Chinese cities, with the aim to improve the image of Chinese cities and China (Wen and Sui, 2014).

Understanding city brands

A city brand is by Zenker and Braun (in Zenker, 2011, p. 42) defined as ‘a network of associations in the consumers’ mind based on the visual, verbal and behavioral expression of a place, which is embodied through the aims, communication, values, and the general culture of the place’s stakeholders, and the overall place design. Similar to corporate brands, a city brand exists in the minds of the audiences. The ‘real’ aspect of a brand, in other words the concrete characteristics – including but not limited to its landmarks, services, and geography – presents only a partial picture. Similarly, the promotional activities carried out by a city and the messages created do not necessarily have to correspond with the associations in the minds of the audiences.

Zenker (2011) maintains that a place brand is almost impossible to capture completely, and asks which elements should be used to understand the most imperative elements (categories) of a place brand. Zenker (2011) discusses different categories – proposed by, for example, Anholt in 2006 (place, pulse, people, potential, prerequisites and presence), Grabow *et al* in 1995 (spatial, cultural, business and historic picture) and Zenker in 2009 (nature and recreation, urban and diversity, job chances, and cost efficiency) – coming up with the *combined place categories* made up of six categories, namely place characteristics, place inhabitants, place business, place quality, place familiarity and place history. Therefore, a place can be known with six aggregate aspects. It is possible to summarize how a given city is known by its audiences by using such categories. For instance, if place business category is highlighted in media portrayals, the city is more likely to be associated

with financial and economic opportunities in the minds of the individuals.

Branding and city branding

In their attempts to understand city branding, scholars have drawn parallels with other kinds of branding, such as product, service and corporate branding. A brand can be seen as consisting of a set of perceptions with the aim to differentiate the product from the competition (Aaker, 2000). Product and service brands are often developed in a similar way, putting emphasis on the definition and selection of clear objectives and positioning as well as appropriate values (Aaker, 2000). The strength of a brand depends on to what extent the perceptions are positive, consistent and shared by consumers (McDonald *et al*, 2001).

Between corporate branding and city branding there are various similarities, and several commentators even point to the relevance of the *metaphor of place as corporate brand* (Anholt, 2002). It is argued that city branding is similar to corporate branding (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005; Balmer and Greyser, 2006) and that concepts of place branding are grounded in corporate branding (Kavaratzis, 2004). Other similarities between corporate brands and city brands are that both concepts have multidisciplinary roots, address multiple groups of stakeholders, have a high level of intangibility and complexity, and need to consider social responsibility as well as deal with multiple identities and need a long-term development understanding (Hatch and Schultz, 2009).

There are also differences between corporate branding and city branding and some scholars argue that the complexities involved in city branding are greater than corporate branding. It is for example harder for a city to adopt and project a single clear identity, ethos and image, and may be not even desired (Kavaratzis, 2009). Furthermore, cities do not compete in the same way that companies compete, with profit maximization as the single most important objective. Cities instead compete for residents, tourists, funding, events and investments among various other objectives (Lever and Turok, 1999).

City branding process fundamentally starts with the identification of clear characteristics and attributes of a city (Dinnie, 2011). Therefore, it is important to explicitly state what differentiates a given city from others. These aspects constitute the basis of the messages that are subsequently disseminated among target audiences to establish a brand. Kavaratzis (2004, p. 67) posits that, '[e]verything a city consists of, everything that takes place in the city and is done by the city, communicates messages about the city's image'. In other words, a city always communicates and disseminates its messages through its actions as well as its communication and branding campaigns. Kavaratzis furthermore proposes three distinct types of communication – namely primary, secondary and tertiary communication – to outline the different process through which a city is able to reach out to its target audiences. In primary communication, communication is not intentional, but the city's actions (the city landscape, infrastructure, behavior and structure) has communicative effects even though communicative messages is not the main goal (Kavaratzis, 2004). Secondary communication is described as the intentional communication that often takes place through established marketing practices (Kavaratzis, 2004). Tertiary communication is related to word of mouth, and to communication by media (Kavaratzis, 2004).

Succinctly stated, a city brand refers to the unique identifying characteristics that are attached to it in the minds of the audiences whereas city branding is the process of identifying, communicating, and manipulating these associations. City branding can be seen as an important element in economic development strategy (Rainisto, 2003) as it can stimulate socio-economic development, create competitive advantage and increase inward investments and tourism (Cova, 1996; Kavaratzis, 2004; Balakrishnan, 2009). In the Chinese context, mega-cities are given the role to actively engage with foreign publics through their branding campaigns. A positive brand perception is likely to bring a competitive advantage to these cities in their attempts to make social, economic, and even political transactions in the international arena.

The next section introduces the role of media in city branding to better explain the theoretical framework in which this research is carried out and to give a more inclusive picture of the branding process.

MEDIA AND BRANDING

Media representations

This research conceptualizes media as having a crucial role in city branding processes because of two reasons. First, media has the potential to influence the perceptions of individuals, and in the case of city branding, the networks of associations in the minds of the target audiences. As most of the world is out of sight and out of touch for the majority of people (Lippmann, 1922), it is not surprising to see that there is a tendency to rely on mediated news to get informed about foreign cities and countries. Second, media cannot be thought independent from society (Curran, 2002). Media also reflects public opinion (Liebman, 2007). Thus, it is possible to see media as an arena through which the associations in the collective mind of a society can be analyzed.

Media representation is the way in which certain individuals, groups, communities, ideas or – within the scope of this research – cities, are portrayed in media platforms. The ‘objective’ reality goes through various filters before it takes the form of a newspaper article or TV news. Earlier research in the field shows that various factors including the cultural differences between the reporters and reported groups as well as personal convictions might influence the way media covers certain issues (Avraham, 2003). For instance, an oft-studied topic in media representation is related to the portrayal of gender (McCabe *et al.*, 2011). A normative ideal of beauty is apparent even in children’s fairy tales (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz, 2003). Similarly, task descriptions of males and females seem to have different priorities even when the individuals have the same titles (Denny, 2011).

Country and city representations are no exceptions to this rule. From popular culture products of media – such as films and novels –

(Iwashita, 2006) to news articles and op-eds (Xiao and Mair, 2006), the portrayals of places are influenced by various factors. Therefore, despite the fact that the source of the news is the same, the news coverage is likely to be different. Within the scope of this research, the source is fundamentally the development and branding attempts of two Chinese mega-cities. Media portrayal of these cities, however, is expected to reflect the assumptions, acceptance, and attitudes of the societies toward the branding messages.

China in mass media

Mass media is seen as, ‘the main channel for a country’s national image to enter the international society’ (Guo *et al.*, 2013, p. 44). Li and Tang (2009) have argued that mass media have the power to discursively construct reality and shape behaviors and public opinion. On a related note, critique is often pointed towards international journalism for reporting about developing countries with bias and constructing non-Western countries as *the other* and in a negative light (Li and Tang, 2009). Some have claimed that, in American media, China is regularly portrayed negatively, as exotic or as the other. Yet, it has also been maintained that the coverage of China by international news media often is fair – and that the negative coverage many times comes from China’s actions and policies (Li and Tang, 2009). In terms of journalistic behavior, Guo *et al.* (2013) have claimed that Western journalists rarely express their personal views bluntly when they cover China in their reporting and find that the Western journalists opinions of China are more covert, as ‘they use indirect description and metaphors to show their emotions’ (Guo *et al.*, 2013, p. 44).

Guo *et al.* (2013) concluded in their study on Chinese national image under the background of Beijing Olympic Games 2008 – researching topics and tone of coverage in the *New York Times* and *The Times* of London – that both papers ‘acknowledged that China is a country with rapid economic development, but without transparent politics and with significant social issues’ (p. 47). They also conclude that, ‘The Chinese

government and media's objective to improve China's national image faces difficulties in countering the stereotypes of Western media' (Guo *et al.*, 2013).

Combining place brand categories and media representations

This research is based on two assumptions. First, the brand of a city rests on the perceptions of the audiences and stands for the networks of associations about a given city in the minds of the individuals (Zenker, 2011). Indeed, this definition makes the concept a subjective reality that is difficult to capture and measure. Second, the subjective reality is both influenced and represented by media representations. Therefore, an analysis of news sources will yield informative results about how a city is seen. Furthermore, by using place brand categories – place characteristics, place inhabitants, place business, place quality, place familiarity and place history – , it is possible to analytically approach these portrayals.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Case selection

Chinese mega-cities are selected as a focus in this study partly because research about global cities, world cities and mega-cities hitherto mainly has been focused on cities in Western economies, resulting in the dominance of a perspective centered on the developed world (Yulong and Hamnett, 2002; Wei *et al.*, 2006; Wu and Ma, 2006). This is, however changing rapidly, especially with the emergence of mega-cities in Asia and developing countries, and the on-going shift of political and economic power to Asia that is taking place today (*The Guardian*, 2012). City branding and urban competitiveness related to cities in China has in a similar way only to a limited degree been researched (Wai, 2006; Jiang and Shen, 2010), and there is consequently a limited depiction of the branding of Chinese cities in the literature, especially in international journals in English (Wai, 2006). The number of

publications is however increasing rapidly, indicating the relevance and importance of understanding what is happening in this part of the world.

The choice to study Chinese cities, and in particular Beijing and Shenzhen, is also made because these cities are increasingly integrating with the global economy and are taking on powerful positions in the world economy (Wang and Zheng, 2010). China's thriving economy, its growing middle class, and its investments in infrastructure are components pushing the nation and its cities toward greater global presence (Global Cities Index, 2012). During the past two decades, along with China's rapid economic development, large Chinese cities are increasingly trying to change their relationship to the global economy, and aim at becoming international cities (Yulong and Hamnett, 2002).

Beijing and Shenzhen represent a suitable context related to the aim and the research questions posed in this study, and because they engage in city branding toward international audiences. The two cities are also selected because of their difference from each other and as such represent rare or extreme cases (polar types), opening up for the potential to observe contrasting patterns in the data (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). The two cities studied are similar in that they have large populations, large economies, and ambitions to become international, world, and global cities. Both cities studied are moreover impacted by policies and directives from the central Chinese government and the Chinese Communist Party. The cities are different in terms of their geographic location in China, history, size, development and resources.

A world capital: The case of Beijing

Beijing has a history dating back 3000 years, and also has a deeply rooted history as a political centre of over eight centuries (Zhang and Zhao, 2009). Beijing has not been a traditional trade and economic centre within China (Green, 2010) but rather served as a political and cultural hub as well as an educational and scientific centre. Since the founding of the PRC, Beijing has been China's

official capital, and has been established as the political and cultural centre of the nation (Green, 2010).

Some indicate that a main objective of Beijing's 'charm offensive' internationally is the creation of benign or peaceful images (Chen, 2012). Indeed, the initial idea behind hosting the 2008 Olympic games was '[e]nhancing China's national image by integrating the power of culture, publicizing the achievements of China's reform and opening up policy' (Guo *et al.*, 2013, p. 44). The motto for the 2008 Olympics and the theme 'One World, One Dream' was in line with China's 'bringing in' and 'going global' tactics, as well as the nation's eagerness 'to move to the center from a marginal position, and equally participate in building a new global order' (Knight, 2008, p. 171). Internationally, the Olympic Games was also a sign of China's rising international status and economic achievements (Gries and Rosen, 2010).

Being the capital, the image of Beijing is closely intertwined with its role as the political and cultural center of China. Beijing is aiming to move away from being too connected to China's political life, and instead focusing on becoming a center for education, health, culture and technology. Recently, Beijing has been positioned as a 'world city' (Yao and Shi, 2012), signaling an aim of reaching international audiences, and creating a city with the same standards as established 'world' and 'global' cities. In addition to being regarded as a world city, the overall strategic goal set for Beijing by the central Chinese government is that by 2050 Beijing will be a sustainable city with economic, social and ecological coordination (Yao and Shi, 2012).

Beijing also aims to be a global innovation center and has contributed to the availability of sophisticated technology, first-class infrastructure, and human capital (He *et al.*, 2006). Development of a high-tech sector in Beijing has been of significant importance, and has given the city comparative advantage over other cities (Green, 2010). Beijing's focus on being a global city has been regarded as Beijing reclaiming itself as a participant in the global city system (Zhang and Zhao, 2009).

Shenzhen – China's research & development center

Shenzhen is situated in the south of China, in Guangdong province, on the Pearl River Delta and just north of Hong Kong (Cartier, 2002). In the 1970s Shenzhen was only a small village (Chong, 2011). Since the early 1980s, however, Shenzhen has experienced vibrant economic growth, enabled by the establishment of the Special Economic Zone, the policy of 'reform and opening', and rapid foreign investment (Chong, 2011). During the last 30 years, Shenzhen has experienced a 'self-dependent innovation development' (Universiade Shenzhen, 2011). Today Shenzhen is a modern cityscape with a population of 10.63 million permanent residents (Shenzhen Government Online, 2014). Shenzhen has the largest and youngest migrant population with various cultural backgrounds and from all parts of China (Merrilees *et al.*, 2014).

Shenzhen is branded as a research and development centre, as an innovative and creative hub, a design city, as well as a leader in Internet innovation, telecom technology and communication networks (Ye, 2011; Shenzhen Government Online, 2014). Some of China's most successful high-tech companies are based in Shenzhen, such as Huawei, Konka, Tencent, ZTE, BYD and Hasee (Green, 2010). Shenzhen plans to become a contender among China's world cities, and aims to become a world city, an international city, a global city and an ecological city (Chung, 2009).

Media outlet selection

China daily and Xinhua

China Daily is the widest circulated English language newspaper in China. It has also been called the English language *window into China*. The editorial policies are slightly more liberal compared with regular Chinese language newspapers. Xinhua News Agency is the official press and the largest news agency in China. The majority of Chinese language newspapers rely on news from Xinhua.

International newspapers

The geographical location of the media outlet, its physical distance to the news resources, as well as its relations with the host country are likely to influence the portrayal of a given city (Dominick, 1977; Brooker-Gross, 1983). Therefore, the research incorporated six additional resources based on their circulation numbers: two newspapers from the United States, two from the United Kingdom, and two from Hong-Kong. The United States and United Kingdom were chosen as representative of ‘Western’ approach to China and Chinese cities. Moreover, all three countries have an active press industry that predominantly works in the English language.

Quantitative content analysis

Given the fact that city brand is explained through place brand categories, this research carries out a quantitative content analysis on two levels: volume and category. In order to more inclusively capture the portrayal of Chinese mega-cities in the international arena, we examine the news articles published in English. Given the status of the language as a modern day *lingua franca*, such articles are likely to reach larger audiences. To account for variance in the region and publication, we chose two resources from the United States, the United Kingdom, Asia and China – including a total of eight different news resources in the research design.

Through a deductive content analysis, we identify coverage of Chinese mega-cities. In other words, we examine which aspects of these cities are promoted to international audiences in print media outlets. We also seek whether there are significant differences between Chinese and international media coverage through a quantitative content analysis. The research questions posed in the present study are:

Research Question 1: What are the levels of coverage in different news resources/regions?

Research Question 2: What are the topics covered in different resources?

Research Question 3: What are the impacts of such coverage on place/nation brands?

The study employs a quantitative content analysis method to measure the overall volume and topics of media coverage of Beijing and Shenzhen over a period of 5 years, from 2008 to 2012. This quantitative content analysis focuses on the volume and category of coverage at the expense of tone of coverage. In more concrete terms, the coding process is more interested in whether Shenzhen is connected with a given category such as economy, rather than whether the news piece is positive or negative. As the objective of the research is not necessarily to assess how positive or negative brand perception is, such a trade-off is acceptable. Consequently, the brands of these cities are explained through a categorical analysis (that is, combined place brand categories) rather than the sentiments of the news pieces.

The research analyzes news pieces from three different regions. First, two resources from China – *China Daily* and *Xinhua General News Services*² – are included in the study to portray how domestic outlets portray the mega-cities. Two resources from Hong Kong (*The Standard*, and *South China Morning Post*), the United Kingdom (*The Guardian*, and *The Daily Telegraph*), and the United States of America (*The Washington Post*, and *USA Today*) are also included in the dataset to capture the regional international portrayal of these cities respectively.

The sampling from news resources was done by using 1 constructed week per year. Constructed week sampling was chosen because of the method’s success in capturing annual coverage compared with other methods such as consecutive day sampling or random sampling (Riffe *et al*, 1993). Dates were generated using an online random generator.³

Subsequently, the data gathering process was carried out for both cities using two different databases. *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *The Guardian*, *Daily Telegraph*, *South Morning China Post*, and *Xinhua General News Services* were scanned by using the *LexisNexis Academic* database. *The Standard* and *China Daily* were scanned by using *Access World News Research Collection* database. The dates in the constructed weeks were entered to the databases to search for all articles containing the keywords *Beijing* and *Shenzhen*

separately. The number of articles accessed for each constructed week is shown in Table 1. Moreover, the number of all the news articles published in a given year (from 2008 to 2012) was also included in the final dataset to carry out an annual frequency analysis.

The researchers devised a deductive coding protocol for the articles and carried out the coding process. The main objective for the coding process was to understand the different topics through which the cities are portrayed in international media. There have been precedent works in the literature studying place branding and brands through print media portrayal (that is, Freeman and Nhung Nguyen, 2012; Guo *et al.*, 2013; Zhoue *et al.*, 2013), and studies discussing the main components and topics that are relevant to places' brands (that is, Anholt, 2010; Lucarelli and Berg, 2011; Zenker, 2011; Sevin, 2013). There is indeed an extant discussion in the literature about the various possible topics. Moreover, the newspaper articles are published under topical sections, such as business, politics and sports. Therefore, researchers initially created a codebook based on the literature and newspaper sections. During the two rounds of training, the researchers introduced three more codes and finalized the codebook. The codebook can be seen in Table 2.

Each article was coded only once. For news articles that might be included in multiple categories, the researchers identified the most dominant theme by looking at (i) the aspect of the city was highlighted and (ii) the section of coverage in the newspaper. After two rounds of

training, the inter-coder reliability between the researchers was very high (97 per cent agreement, Scott's Pi 0.962).⁴

ANALYSIS

The dataset is composed of 6240 news articles coming from 5 constructed weeks and the number of articles published about the cities in each source annually. Initially, the researchers analyzed the level of coverage and looked for variation based on region, source, and year. Subsequently, the news articles were coded. Lastly, the coded topics were discussed within the framework of *combined place categories* (Zenker, 2011).

Level of coverage

Between 2008 and 2012, the eight sources analyzed in this research published a total of 185–187 articles

Table 2: Codes

<i>Beijing as China</i> ^a	<i>Nature and environment</i>
Crime	Urban Space & Urban Development
Culture and Entertainment	People
Economy and Business	Politics and Diplomacy
Education	Promotional Campaigns
Health	Science and Technology
Insignificant	Sports
Military	Travel
	Other

^aCode only used for Beijing for instances where Beijing refers to the entire country.

Table 1: Total number of articles published about the cities per constructed week

	<i>Washington post</i>	<i>USA Today</i>	<i>The guardian (london)</i>	<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	<i>South China Morning Post</i>	<i>Standard Xinhua</i>	<i>China daily</i>
<i>Beijing</i>							
2008	16	5	27	26	163	7	669
2009	9	3	13	20	106	6	756
2010	17	0	13	19	74	12	675
2011	24	5	18	15	94	10	772
2012	38	3	19	36	182	11	768
<i>Shenzhen</i>							
2008	1	0	0	1	30	3	80
2009	1	0	0	0	27	6	103
2010	0	0	1	2	27	4	99
2011	0	0	0	2	18	3	116
2012	0	0	0	0	36	3	122

containing the keyword, thus related to Beijing and 38 682 articles about Shenzhen. As Table 3 shows, the city of Shenzhen's media coverage is relatively stable over the years. The minor changes do not necessarily reflect a pattern over the years. On the other hand, the number of articles published about Beijing is higher in 2008 than other years, as in the summer of 2008 the city hosted the Summer Olympic Games and attracted global media attention.

The annual coverage numbers revealed an interesting – yet not unexpected – finding. When the newspapers are aggregated into three geographical categories – West (American and British resources), Region (Hong Kong resources), and China (Chinese resources) – it is observed in both cases that Chinese resources dominate the news cycle, followed by regional resources. Western coverage seems to be limited. For Shenzhen, on average (and in total across years) around 77 per cent of the articles are coming from Chinese resources despite the fact that non-Chinese resources included in the research outnumber Chinese resources six to two. Similar to the case of Shenzhen, on average (and in total across the years) around 70 per cent of the articles about Beijing are coming from Chinese resources.

As an answer to the level of coverage question, it is possible to argue that – with the exception of 2008 and Beijing Olympics – there is no identifiable variation in the volume of coverage over the years. Beijing receives considerably more

coverage than the city of Shenzhen – however, as it will be argued in the next section – nearly half of the Beijing coverage is not necessarily related to the city but rather uses the name to refer to the entire country of China or the Chinese government.

Topics

The deductive content analysis of news articles published about the cities show that Beijing and Shenzhen are portrayed differently from one another in the media, with each city enjoying a defining characteristic. Beijing is usually mentioned in the media in reference to the central government or the entire China (cf. Table 4, code *Beijing as China*). Moreover, the city is known for political and diplomatic events. With the 2008 Olympics, sports also became an important characteristic of the city. Yet this aspect of Beijing has declined drastically after 2008.

Shenzhen is portrayed as a business center. It is important to note that the city's identity as such a center does not necessarily come from various activities. Shenzhen Stock Market is widely covered both in Hong Kong and Chinese media, which thus increases the exposure to the city. As shown in Tables 5, 67.63 per cent of the articles about Shenzhen are *Economy and Business* stories.

In both cases, *soft* characteristics of cities – such as people, nature and environment, culture and entertainment – were overlooked and not caught

Table 3: Total number of articles published about the cities annually

	<i>Washington post</i>	<i>USA today</i>	<i>The guardian (London)</i>	<i>Daily telegraph</i>	<i>South China Morning Post</i>	<i>Standard</i>	<i>Xinhua</i>	<i>China daily</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Beijing</i>									
2008	1850	892	2043	1744	8402	504	30577	7107	53119
2009	667	208	882	809	5671	532	14646	6378	29793
2010	624	147	812	833	4770	543	15028	10610	33367
2011	921	160	862	881	5498	558	14665	9532	33077
2012	1572	319	1146	2340	8022	457	14543	7432	35831
<i>Shenzhen</i>									
2008	25	2	16	17	1715	164	3863	763	6565
2009	11	4	10	10	1533	227	4356	778	6929
2010	19	6	16	18	1312	202	5813	843	8229
2011	37	3	15	31	1189	153	6822	770	9020
2012	51	6	23	56	1760	179	4993	871	7939

Table 4: Beijing's portrayal in media

	2008 (%)	2009 (%)	2010 (%)	2011 (%)	2012 (%)	Total (%)
Beijing as China	39.45	48.83	50.10	58.98	53.85	50.53
Politics and Diplomacy	14.92	9.11	12.93	10.28	12.33	11.88
Sports	22.28	8.45	6.32	5.45	6.08	9.47
Economy and Business	7.16	7.42	5.94	6.61	9.33	7.35
Insignificant	3.83	8.17	4.21	6.88	6.16	5.89
Culture and Entertainment	3.43	4.23	3.45	4.02	3.24	3.67
Nature and Environment	2.16	3.19	4.50	0.80	3.08	2.74
Health	1.57	2.25	2.59	2.06	1.05	1.88
People	1.47	1.50	2.78	0.71	1.30	1.53
Urban Space and Urban Development	1.67	0.85	3.45	1.25	0.49	1.50
Science and Technology	0.39	2.91	0.48	0.63	0.97	1.08
Education	0.49	0.66	1.53	0.98	1.14	0.97
Crime	0.39	1.41	1.34	0.71	0.24	0.80
Travel	0.59	0.47	0.38	0.45	0.65	0.51
Military	0.20	0.38	0.00	0.18	0.00	0.15
Promotional Campaigns	0.00	0.19	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.04
Other	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.08	0.02
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Table 5: Shenzhen's portrayal in media

	2008 (%)	2009 (%)	2010 (%)	2011 (%)	2012 (%)	Total (%)
Economy and Business	62.50	64.47	68.63	71.33	70.06	67.63
Politics and Diplomacy	13.28	7.89	5.23	3.33	10.17	7.89
Insignificant	0.00	9.87	0.00	10.67	7.91	5.92
Nature and Environment	9.38	2.63	9.80	0.67	1.13	4.47
Urban Space and Urban Development	6.25	2.63	3.92	3.33	0.56	3.16
Culture and Entertainment	3.91	2.63	3.92	1.33	1.13	2.50
Sports	0.00	2.63	1.31	4.67	2.26	2.24
Crime	0.78	1.97	2.61	0.67	2.82	1.84
People	1.56	1.32	1.31	0.67	1.13	1.18
Science and Technology	0.00	0.66	1.31	2.67	0.00	0.92
Travel	0.78	2.63	0.65	0.00	0.56	0.92
Health	0.00	0.66	0.65	0.00	1.69	0.66
Education	0.78	0.00	0.00	0.67	0.56	0.39
Promotional Campaigns	0.78	0.00	0.65	0.00	0.00	0.26
Military	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Other	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

by the print media. Rather, Beijing – even when controlled for *Beijing as China* references – was covered in the framework of either sports (mainly 2008 Olympics) or politics and diplomacy. Shenzhen was covered in the framework of economy and business.

There does not seem to be fluctuation of topical coverage across regions. As Table 6 shows, Beijing's political center and Shenzhen's business hub identity are stable across regions. Yet, Beijing is also covered within the Olympic games framework. Especially in 2008 during Beijing Olympics and in 2012 in comparison to

London Olympics, the readers are exposed to Beijing in sports news.

So are the media representations of Beijing and Shenzhen in line with the cities' branding ambitions and objectives? In the case of Shenzhen, the ambition and objective has been to brand the city as an innovative and creative hub, a design city and as a research and development centre (Shenzhen Government Online, 2014). The aim is also to become an ecological city and a global city (Chung, 2009). This can to some degree be regarded as in line with the media portrayal of the city as a business hub. The vast focus on Shenzhen Stock Exchange

Table 6: Code percentages, broken down into regions

	Beijing			Shenzhen		
	China (%)	West (%)	Region (%)	China (%)	West ^a (%)	Region (%)
Beijing Government	53.62	25.77	41.80	N/A	N/A	N/A
Crime	0.89	0.31	0.45	1.85	0.00	1.91
Culture and Entertainment	3.30	5.21	5.41	2.02	25.00	3.18
Economy and Business	5.50	7.67	19.70	72.27	25.00	52.23
Education	1.02	0.00	1.05	0.17	0.00	1.27
Health	2.09	0.00	1.35	0.50	0.00	1.27
Insignificant	5.88	8.90	4.51	6.89	0.00	2.55
Military	0.18	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Nature and Environment	3.07	1.23	1.20	5.21	12.50	1.27
Urban Space and Urban Development	1.65	0.31	1.05	1.34	0.00	10.19
People	1.54	2.15	1.20	0.84	12.50	1.91
Politics and Diplomacy	10.98	15.64	16.09	4.87	25.00	18.47
Promotional Campaigns	0.02	0.00	0.15	0.17	0.00	0.64
Science and Technology	1.20	0.61	0.45	1.18	0.00	0.00
Sports	8.62	31.29	4.51	2.69	0.00	0.64
Travel	0.40	0.92	1.05	0.00	0.00	4.46
Other	0.02	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

^aIncludes solely a total of eight articles.

however takes a lot of focus in the media portrayals, and less focus is paid to more specific issues centering on R&D, innovation, creativity, design and ecology.

In the case of Beijing, the city’s aim has been to become a modernized international city ‘open in all aspects’ (Gu and Cook, 2011). Beijing has moreover strived toward moving away from being regarded solely as a political city, aiming to be also a cultural famous city, a liveable city, and an international, global city (Zhang and Zhao, 2009) and a global innovation centre. The media coverage is nevertheless still mainly focused on Beijing as a capital city and a political centre, rather than as a cultural, liveable, global and innovative city.

What do these numbers mean in terms of city branding? As mentioned above, it is possible to argue about a brand through combined place categories: place characteristics, place inhabitants, place business, place quality, place familiarity and place history (Zenker, 2011). These categories present a theoretical framework through which the brand of a given city can be summarized. The coding procedure yielded a detailed picture of the topics that are associated with the cities. Re-evaluating these results through combined place categories enables the researcher to present a concise overview of city brands. In the case of both

Beijing and Shenzhen, the national and international media portrayal is not instrumental in describing the cities’ spatial characteristics, giving information about their residents, promoting business opportunities, explaining their history or even their basic qualities. Basically, five out of six combined place categories are not reflected in print media. Thus the news coverage solely increases the familiarity of the readers with the place.

Given the fact that the coverage solely increases the familiarity of the cities in the eyes of the audiences, their impact on the Chinese national brand is limited to increasing brand exposure. It has been argued that a repeated exposure to a brand might influence consumers’ behavior toward the said brand (Zajonc, 1968). However, recent experimental studies in corporate branding have shown that such influences are not necessarily positive or observed in all target audiences (Ferraro *et al*, 2009). In 2011, the Chinese government included the promotion of the image of Chinese cities within its 12th Five-Year Plan (Fan, 2014). In other words, China sees the brands of these cities as assets to introduce a new China image to the rest of the world. Yet, the portrayal of Beijing and Shenzhen shows that these mega-cities are still under-utilized assets.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

China is both in the process of developing new mega-cities with a new wave of urbanization and of investing in the images of existing ones. Moreover, with China's government impetus toward international promotion, cities in China, and especially mega-cities like Beijing and Shenzhen as well as Shanghai, Chengdu, Chongqing, have become more involved in city branding activities and international branding campaigns. (Fan, 2014). These cities indeed have the potential both to facilitate Chinese relations with the rest of the world and to contribute to a changing image of the country. On the basis of the analysis of international print media, it is possible to argue that – at least – Beijing and Shenzhen are not fulfilling their potential.

Regardless of the region of the print media, the coverage of these cities highlights three themes. First, political stereotypes about China are rampant. The news media are more interested in China's domestic and foreign policy. The mere fact that the number of articles that covers 'Beijing' as a unified political player (Beijing as China code) is very close to the number of the rest of the articles in the dataset (the sum of articles covering Beijing and Shenzhen as cities) proves that the print media is more interested in Chinese policies. These stereotypes are unlikely to be broken solely by communication and promotion activities. New branding campaigns for China and Chinese mega-cities might follow a branding through deeds, for example, including concrete changes in domestic and foreign policy arenas, to improve the Chinese image, as well as concrete changes in the respective cities, to come across as authentically livable, innovative, and global.

Second, established institutions in the cities receive frequent coverage that do not decrease across the years. For instance, Shenzhen's stock market is prominently covered both in national and foreign media resources. In order to increase the volume of and to diversify the topics of coverage, investing in new institutions might be essential.

Lastly, in line with previous research on the subject (for example, Wang and Hallquist, 2011; Chen, 2012) mega-events were observed to spark

interest in the cities. The 2008 Beijing Olympics has undeniably increased the volume and changed the topic of coverage. The city of Beijing is still collecting its return on investment on this mega-event. Similarly, 2011 Universiade Games earned the city of Shenzhen an opportunity for global publicity. These events can be seen as opportunities to promote China and Chinese cities. Moreover, given their international nature, such events will also be likely to increase collaboration with foreign partners.

This study has its limitations. In order to better understand the media portrayal of China and Chinese mega-cities, further research is necessary. Despite the prominent role of English language among global audiences, a more inclusive picture of portrayal of Chinese cities should incorporate non-English resources. Moreover, it is possible to include non-print media resources, including social media platforms that include user-generated content. Lastly, future research should compare the Chinese experience with other countries that have used cities to change their national brand image, such as the United Arab Emirates.

We believe our research contributes to the study and practice of place branding in three ways. First, we portray the theoretical link between media portrayals and place brands and further investigate the link within the contours of the research. Second, we position city branding as a tool that can be used to establish national brands. Last, introducing place branding cases from a relatively understudied region expands our understanding of the concept and the practice.

NOTES

- 1 Mega-city is a commonly used term to describe metropolitan areas with a population of 10 million people or higher.
- 2 Xinhua is a news agency with its own outlets. For the purposes of this research, it is treated as a media outlet together with the other seven newspapers included in the dataset.
- 3 The generator can be found in this website: <http://www.lrs.org/interactive/randomdate.php>, last accessed 1 September 2013.

- 4 The intercoder reliability was calculated using ReCal2 develop by Deen Freelon (2013). The software can be found on this link: <http://dfreelon.org/utills/recalfront/>, last accessed September 2013.

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