

Hong Kong's Place Branding from 1997 to 2024:

From Self-assurance to Aching Attempts to Come Back

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ABSTRACT: While previous research has explored Hong Kong's place branding, it focused on data prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and did not fully address the shifting geoeconomic and political contexts that define Hong Kong. The present paper aims to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive longitudinal analysis from 1997 to 2024. Applying discourse analysis on a corpus of official documents and policy addresses, our study uses a two-pronged framework that integrates place branding and critical juncture to comprehend the practices, politics, and consequences of Hong Kong's branding strategy. It argues that Hong Kong's current branding strategies are at a critical juncture, reflecting a devolution from an ambitious and holistic approach in the 2000s to consumption-driven promotional campaigns in the 2020s. The authors underscore the urgency and complexity of redefining a dynamic and adaptative branding strategy that can effectively showcase Hong Kong's strengths and values to the international community.

KEYWORDS: Hong Kong, place branding, critical juncture, discourse analysis, Asia's World City.

Introduction

While place branding has a longer heritage (Viktorin et al. 2018), it has gained significant attention since the late twentieth century with the fast-growing place branding consulting industry. In today's globalised and competitive world, place branding has become crucial in positioning cities, regions, or countries, as they compete for promoting tourism, attracting investment and talent, as well as hosting sporting and cultural events (Morgan, Pritchard, and Pride 2007). Governments worldwide have used branding principles and techniques and invested significant resources in creating and managing a unique identity and positive image for their place (Anholt 2007). This article examines Hong Kong's place branding strategies from 1997 to 2024, as Hong Kong faces the dual challenge of maintaining its international stature, while simultaneously deepening

its integration with Mainland China, and more specifically, the Pearl River Delta (PRD), also known as the Greater Bay Area (GBA) since 2017.¹

Although previous research, such as Lui (2008), Shen (2010), Law, Lee, and Poon (2013), and Lam (2018, 2020), has extensively explored Hong Kong's place branding, these studies focus on specific points in time before the Covid-19 pandemic. In contrast, our study provides a comprehensive longitudinal analysis that covers a period of nearly three decades. Moreover, prior analyses have not

1. National Development and Reform Commission, People's Government of Guangdong Province, Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Government of the Macao Special Administrative Region, "Framework Agreement on Deepening Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Cooperation in the Development of the Greater Bay Area," 1 July 2017, https://www.bayarea.gov.hk/filemanager/en/share/pdf/Framework_Agreement.pdf (accessed on 21 June 2024).

fully addressed the complex geoeconomic and political contexts that define Hong Kong. We argue that understanding these contexts is essential for comprehending the evolution, or devolution rather, of Hong Kong's place branding. Three research questions underpin our study: (1) What were the central themes and objectives of Hong Kong's branding initiatives, prior to the 2019 Anti-extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement and the stringent anti-Covid policies adopted by Hong Kong in 2020-2022? (2) What narratives and images has Hong Kong endeavoured to communicate to the global community, as it reopened to the outside world in January 2023 amidst the enactment of national security legislation? (3) What are the challenges of Hong Kong place branding in the 2020s?

To comprehend the practices, politics, and consequences of Hong Kong's branding strategy, this study employs discourse analysis on a corpus comprising official documents and policy speeches. The analysis is structured around a dual-framework approach. Firstly, it integrates themes identified from the literature review on place branding, with a specific focus on the context of Hong Kong. Secondly, it applies the concept of critical juncture to characterise a period of significant change that has long-lasting effects on institutions, policies, and social order.

Place branding and the case of Hong Kong

Debates in place branding

Place branding emerges as a multidisciplinary and prolific field, engaging scholars from diverse backgrounds to explore the concept itself and its implications, i.e., *the practices and consequences of branding endeavours* (Vuignier 2017; Swain et al. 2024), but also the *politics* that shape any branding exercise (Lucarelli and Giovanardi 2016; Lucarelli 2018). The research highlights the complexity of factors that shape a place's identity and image. Designed to enhance a place's reputation and competitiveness, place branding aims to attract visitors, investors, skilled labour, and students, while fostering a sense of pride and belonging among its residents (Kavaratzis, Warnaby, and Ashworth 2014; Mabillard, Pasquier, and Vuignier 2024).

A central debate in place branding concerns the tension between maintaining *authenticity* and pursuing *commercialisation*. This discourse revolves around whether place branding should prioritise preserving the unique cultural and historical heritage of a place or focus on promoting economic development and competitiveness (Anholt 2007). Furthermore, the relationship between a place's identity, the experiences it offers, and its projected image forms a crucial aspect of place branding. Scholars such as Govers and Go (2009), and Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013), emphasise that a successful brand must be rooted in the place's identity to avoid alienation, particularly from internal audiences. Another significant theme is the role of stakeholders in the branding process, which includes local residents, businesses, government agencies, and tourism organisations. The literature presents mixed views on stakeholder involvement, highlighting its necessity for reflecting community values and aspirations, yet also noting the challenges posed by potential conflicts of interest among different groups (Eshuis et al. 2018).

The discussions also extend to the distinctions among *place promotion*, *place marketing*, and *place branding*. Place promotion is identified with raising awareness through unidirectional communication; place marketing involves a broader set of interactive strategies; and place branding represents the most comprehensive approach, requiring substantial organisational capacity and stakeholder collaboration (Boisen et al. 2018; Ma et al. 2021). Hence, the concept of *brand equity* designates the value and effectiveness of a place's brand as perceived by its stakeholders, including residents, investors, and other target groups, e.g., international students (Jacobsen 2012; Florek and Kavaratzis 2014). Lastly, the interdependence of place branding and *reputation* management is highlighted, with arguments suggesting that place branding should be integrated into broader reputation management strategies to effectively build and sustain the reputational capital of a place (Bell 2016).

Overall, the academic discourse on place branding is rich and varied, offering insights into how places can strategically manage their image and reputation to achieve economic, social, political, and cultural objectives.

Hong Kong's place branding

The redefinition and exploration of Hong Kong's identity preceded and followed the 1997 handover (Law, Lee, and Poon 2013). Mishra (2010) delineated Hong Kong's brand identity through attributes such as the world's freest economy, autonomy, geographical proximity, hospitality, immigration-friendly policies, multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, status as a business icon and cultural hub, youthfulness, progressiveness, innovation, international orientation, enterprising spirit, excitement, a blend of modernity with tradition, and constant evolution.

Chan and Marafa (2016a) demonstrated that inbound tourists, local inhabitants, and governmental officials unanimously view Hong Kong as a cosmopolitan city and a tourist destination. Yu, Xiao, and Liu (2022) suggested that the promotion of Hong Kong as a destination could be augmented by highlighting its unique local culture and traditions, including its film industry, as noted by Chen and Shih (2019) and Gammack and Donald (2006). The potential role of sustainability in the branding of Hong Kong has garnered increasing attention, positioning the city as both a green (Chan and Marafa 2014, 2016b, 2017; De Jong et al. 2018; Fok and Law 2018) and a smart city (Chan, Peters, and Pikkemaat 2019). In her analysis of the construction and perception of Hong Kong's identity and image as mediated by the official Brand Hong Kong website and the Tripadvisor Hong Kong forum, Lam's monograph (2020) posits that the Brand Hong Kong website employs a top-down representational approach that foregrounds the city's economic accomplishments, emphasising its commercial and fiscal strengths. This representation, predominantly shaped by implicit assumptions of the city's inherent qualities (Lam 2018), overlooks the narratives of the broader citizenry and visitors, resulting in a discrepancy between the digitally curated brand identity of Hong Kong and the actual perceptions held by the populace. These discussions point to the challenges in creating a cohesive brand identity that resonates with both internal and external stakeholders, emphasising the need for a more inclusive and representative branding strategy that acknowledges and integrates the city's cultural heritage, sustainability initiatives, and the unique contributions of its residents and visitors.

Discourse analysis of Hong Kong's place branding

To investigate the evolution of Hong Kong's place branding from 1997 to 2024, our research employed a two-step methodological approach. Firstly, we assembled an extensive corpus of texts. Despite originating from the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government, they are of varying nature:

- i. all the policy addresses (PA) made by the Chief Executive from 1997 to 2023, that are archived in a dedicated website maintained by the government, <https://www.policyaddress.gov.hk/2023/en/archive.html>;
- ii. official reports commissioned by the HKSAR government in relation to Hong Kong's branding exercise;
- iii. backgrounders provided by the Brand Hong Kong website, <https://www.brandhk.gov.hk/>;
- iv. dedicated websites for the various campaigns (Hello! Hong Kong <https://www.hellohongkong.com.hk/>; and Night Vibes Hong Kong <https://www.nightvibeshk.gov.hk/en/>);
- v. Hong Kong government press releases (<https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/today.htm>).

We also compiled English language articles from local media venues related to Hong Kong's branding. Secondly, we conducted a discourse analysis, a qualitative method that examines both the content and usage of language to uncover meanings within sociocultural contexts (Gee 2014; Alejandro and Zhao 2023). This approach is particularly suited to place branding research (e.g., Lam 2018, 2020), as it allows for an in-depth exploration of how language reflects and shapes practices and helps to critically evaluate strategic positioning and narratives in branding efforts.

Background

Hong Kong at a critical juncture

The concept of critical juncture underscores the significance of relatively brief periods of profound change, during which the decisions made by key actors can set institutions on specific developmental paths that are difficult to alter (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Rokkan 1970; Capoccia 2016). These junctures are characterised by situations of uncertainty where the choices made can lead to the establishment of new institutions or the transformation of existing ones, with these decisions having lasting consequences. This concept emphasises the importance of contingency, the agency of actors during pivotal moments, and how the outcomes of these junctures shape the constraints and incentives that reinforce the new path.

Applying this concept, the authors contend that the handover of Hong Kong from British to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, the 2007-2008 financial crisis, the China-US trade war since 2018, anti-Covid-19 policies, the implementation of the Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the HKSAR (national security law) in 2020, and the Safeguarding National Security Ordinance in 2024, constitute critical junctures. Indeed, these events have significantly impacted Hong Kong's

global positioning, economic status, and social fabric, marking a turning point in the city's development. The strategic push for closer economic ties with Mainland China through the GBA represents an attempt to navigate the 2020s' critical junctures by leveraging regional integration for economic revival while balancing the need to maintain Hong Kong's unique advantages and global standing. This period of flux stresses the importance of strategic choices and their long-term implications for Hong Kong's identity as both a distinct part of China and a significant player on the international stage.

A short history of the defunct Commission on Strategic Development

What started as an exploratory endeavour one year before the handover, with the "Hong Kong government's Information Services Department in 1996 [undertaking] the task of keeping Hong Kong visible on the international stage and distinct from other huge Chinese cities such as Shanghai and Guangzhou" (Chu 2011: 48), was formalised in 1998 with the establishment of the Commission on Strategic Development, placed directly under the Chief Executive and tasked "to explore the way forward for Hong Kong's long-term development strategies" (PA 2005-06: 7). In February 2000, that Commission released the 50-page report on *Bringing the Vision to Life: Hong Kong's Long-term Development Needs and Goals* that gave rise to Brand Hong Kong the following year, and to the Asia's World City motto (Chief Executive's Policy Unit 2000). The membership of the Commission was then "substantially expanded" and its role "enhanced" in November 2005 (Government Information Centre 2005), with Donald Tsang, the second Chief Executive, appointing 157 members, including four ex-officio, after having characterised it in his policy address a month earlier as "the most important advisory body" (PA 2005-06: 7) of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

Interestingly enough, an independent figure such as Kuan Hsin-chi, a liberal-minded professor from the Department of Government and Public Administration at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and chairman of the Hong Kong Civic Party from its foundation in 2006 until 2011, was a member of the Committee on Governance and Political Development under the 2005-2007 Commission. And even though membership was reduced starting in 2007 from 157 members to about 70 participants, the Commission allowed for somewhat diverse viewpoints. A thorough examination of the composition of the Commission would show that up to 2009, even though most members were either pro-establishment and/or pro-Beijing, there was still room for a wider range of perspectives, at least because of the heterogeneity of occupations. The Commission was still regarded up to 2012 as "a platform for all sectors of the community to explore with the Government major issues pertaining to Hong Kong's long-term development" (Chief Executive's Policy Unit 2018).

It was then drastically trimmed under C.Y. Leung's term, to 32 members in 2013, until it disappeared in 2017 at the end of Leung's five-year mandate. Carrie Lam announced in 2018 that it had merged with the Economic Development Commission, created by her predecessor, to become the Council of Advisers on Innovation and Strategic Development with a membership of 36 non-official and four ex-officio members. The mandate itself had shrunk as

it was tasked to merely provide “advice on Hong Kong’s strategic positioning in the global and regional contexts and directions of economic development with an aim of enhancing Hong Kong’s competitiveness and growth potential” (Government Information Centre 2018).

It was finally again reduced to 34 members by John Lee in March 2023 to become the Chief Executive’s Council of Advisers, with a mission to simply ensure “Hong Kong’s economic development and prosperity, [by] tapping the enormous business potential arising from innovation and technology, and its further integration into the national development as well as deepening regional and global collaborations” (Government Information Centre 2023). The roadmap had become narrower and, as we will see, the branding campaigns that were put in place starting at the beginning of 2023 thus echoed a fixation with proving that Hong Kong was finally “on the path to resume normalcy after the pandemic” (ibid.).

Findings and analysis of two decades of branding strategy

This section addresses the first two research questions of our study: it analyses 23 years of Hong Kong’s branding strategy, from the creation of Brand Hong Kong in 2001 up to the time of this article’s writing in mid-2024.

The first branding: A complex and holistic exercise aiming at the long-term

The Brand Hong Kong initiative was first presented to the world in May 2001 at the Fortune Global Forum in Hong Kong (Brand Hong Kong 2022). In his inaugural speech to the Forum, then Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa insisted, along the lines of *Bringing the Vision to Life*, that Hong Kong was to be defined as Asia’s World City, and that for that vision to succeed, several dimensions of what makes a “world city” had to be fulfilled (Government Information Centre 2001). The formula was to “capture the essence of Hong Kong and the role [it is] playing on the world stage” (ibid., emphasis added). In the wake of the 1997 financial crisis, Asia is described as a region of “opportunities” and “tremendous growth potential,” and Hong Kong is to play a role equivalent to the one played “by London for Europe” and “New York for North and South America” (ibid.). It argued that Hong Kong would continue to be an “international financial centre and a centre where multinational companies choose to make their Asia Pacific headquarters,” and remain “the ideal location to capitalise on the expanding business opportunities on the Mainland” (ibid.) – and even more so with China’s accession to the World Trade Organization. The level of influence exerted by Hong Kong would therefore persist to be far greater than its size might suggest.

But that unique position of Hong Kong would only be sustained if the city continued to invest in its “physical infrastructures” – transportation and communications – and “soft infrastructures,” meaning primarily education and training, but also research and development as well as urban planning. Both hard and soft infrastructures were to be geared at improving the overall “productivity and efficiency” of the city and would enable the development of new industries, and in particular tourism (ibid.). Yet, all these developments aimed at harnessing new opportunities, while

preserving and if possible enhancing Hong Kong’s competitive edge, were also to benefit Hong Kong itself with a commitment “to raising the quality of life for people throughout our community,” both on the “environmental front,” especially in relation to air quality and the proper treatment of solid waste and sewage, and on “the cultural front,” with the announcement of “a world-class cultural complex in Western Kowloon” featuring prominently (ibid.).

Finally, Tung Chee-hwa insisted in his speech on the distinctive features of Hong Kong society, in his own words “a vibrant, dynamic community committed to freedom and to the rule of law” that was enabled “by the implementation of the unique concept of ‘One Country, Two Systems’” (ibid.). Thus, the vision was:

- long-term – 30 years as per the report of the Commission on Strategic Development;
- the product of a mixed ancient and modern heritage – the East-meets-West narrative making its way in the logo itself, in which a stylised dragon incorporates the letters HK and the Chinese characters for Hong Kong, 香港;
- addressed both to the outside world and to Hongkongers;
- multifaceted and complex – (i) incorporating values such as cosmopolitanism and diversity; (ii) business and financial dimensions to further economic development and social, environmental, and cultural undertakings; (iii) to improve the quality of life of the community; and, last but not least, (iv) political commitments “to retain and enhance” the rule of law, freedom of expression and association, and the protection of the freedoms and rights of the individual provided for in the Basic Law. These four distinctive features are best seen in the summary of the overarching goals Hong Kong should aim for in order to succeed in its role as a world city on p. VI of the *Bringing the Vision to Life* report.

Asia’s World City in the policy addresses, from core positioning...

The very idea of Hong Kong being Asia’s World City has experienced contrasted fortunes since it was first formulated. A detailed analysis of the policy addresses of the successive Chief Executives since 1997 provides quite a clear picture of the variations in the understanding of what was originally supposed to be a defining if not definitive branding.

It would seem only natural for the first Chief Executive, Tung Chee-hwa, to appear as the staunchest supporter of the formula as he is the one who commissioned the 2000 report that came to define Hong Kong as Asia’s World City. Even though the exact enunciation did not materialise until his 2001 policy address, Tung actually made references to Hong Kong being “a cosmopolitan city” able “to embrace the cultures of East and West (...) shaping a unique social culture” in 1997 (PA 1997: 27), then “the Asian centre of arts and culture” as well as “Asia’s entertainment capital” in 1998 (PA 1998: 11), becoming in 1999 “a world-class city” destined to “become the most cosmopolitan city in Asia, enjoying a status comparable to that of New York in North America and London in Europe” (PA 1999: 15). Drawing explicitly on the work of the Commission on Strategic Development, that vision actually became programmatic in 1999, with requirements “to build a world-class city” (ibid.: 46).

In 2000, this “long-term vision of Hong Kong becoming a major city of China and the most cosmopolitan city in Asia” is described as Hong Kong being “the world city in Asia,” becoming “Asia’s World City” once and for all in 2001, although one has to wait for the 2003 policy address² for a whole section, over three paragraphs, to be dedicated to the formula. In 2004, the wording does not appear as a specific section but is advertised in four distinct paragraphs. Tung’s last policy address in 2005 promotes that vision as his legacy for the years to come, the last paragraph of the whole address comprising two occurrences of the formula, even though the unique position occupied by Hong Kong hinges more tightly on nationally prescribed imperatives:

Our country’s prosperity has energised our future, reinforced our position as Asia’s World City and provided us with the opportunity to rebuild a sense of pride. With a growing sense of national identity, Hong Kong people will be able to play a positive role in, and make new contributions to, the peaceful rise and revival of our great nation. The people of Asia’s World City will be more affluent, united and eager to embrace an even better future (PA 2005: 44).

His successor, Donald Tsang, was initially very supportive of the formula: in his first policy address in 2005-2006, he referred to the term “world city” on six occasions, four times enriched by “Asia’s,” insisting on the openness and connectivity with the world and China for finance, trade, transportation and communication, and also in relation the quality of life of the citizens, arguing that “as Asia’s World City, Hong Kong cannot tolerate foul air and a poor environment” (PA 2005-06: 17).

Yet, in his 2006-2007 policy address, the formula completely disappeared, and the sole partial reference expanded on the statement he had made the year before: “As a world city, Hong Kong should not only attach importance to local pollution problems but also look at the wider picture,” in reference to the challenge of global warming (PA 2006-07: 22).

The following year, the very concept of Asia’s World City became linked to the development of creative industries, not only via the announcement of the West Kowloon Cultural District as a major investment in cultural and arts infrastructure, but also as a connexion to be pushed at the occasion of the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai, in which the generic theme of the event – “Better City, Better Life” – would provide an opportunity to introduce “Hong Kong’s quality city life and position as a creative capital” (PA 2007-08: 26). Moreover, it was announced that the city branding strategy would be “revitalised” under the guidance of the Financial Secretary in order to “step up publicity efforts highlighting Hong Kong as Asia’s World City” (ibid.).

...to scant references

In the “revitalisation” process that did occur in 2008-2009, using feedback from local and international audiences through opinion surveys, Hong Kong’s hard assets (unique skyline, infrastructure, and efficient transportation network) prevailed over its soft assets, and in particular its distinctive culture and “intangible benefits such as freedom of expression” (Brand Hong Kong 2021). The resulting campaign for the brand revival was “Faces of Hong Kong,” “a collection of stories told by people of all walks of life that portrayed

the softer side of Hong Kong” (ibid.) that was launched in March 2010 and indeed widely advertised at the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai. Yet, “Asia’s World City” completely disappeared in all of Donald Tsang’s subsequent policy addresses, and his remarks in 2009 sounded as if his was but a last and almost desperate stand to salvage the HKSAR’s unique features, especially in connection to the rule of law:

Some worry that in this process [the integration with the Pearl River Delta region], Hong Kong will lose its uniqueness. Some are concerned that Hong Kong may be marginalised with the rapid rise of Mainland cities and the ensuing competition. To dispel such worries, we must recognise Hong Kong’s unique competitive edges. We have the rule of law, the free flow of information and good international networks. “One Country, Two Systems” allows us to give full play to these strengths. We also have a respected brand in the name of “Hong Kong.” It stands for professional standards, creative and innovative enterprises, and responsiveness to change. Such “soft powers” are Hong Kong’s intangible assets and are vital for a knowledge-based economy. With these, we fear no competition (PA 2009-10: 47).

With C.Y. Leung taking over in 2012 as the Chief Executive, Asia’s World City completely disappeared from the policy addresses, except in 2015, when Leung alluded to it when detailing the policy responses drawn by the Steering Committee on Population Policy in anticipation of a labour force decline starting in 2018. Hence the launch of the “Our Hong Kong” campaign in 2015 to promote Hong Kong’s soft strengths, achievements, and aspiration, and to communicate “a sense of collective pride” through real-life stories about Hong Kong people while inviting foreign audiences – entrepreneurs, investors, and visitors alike – to experience the city first-hand. Overall, when suggesting to develop new world class strengths, Leung spoke exclusively about “a world-class hub of arts and culture” (PA 2013: 66) or “an international cultural city” (PA 2017: 72), echoing Donald Tsang’s “Hong Kong’s position as Asia’s creative hub” (PA 2011-12: 48). At best, Hong Kong was thus seen as a “super-connector,” helping [the] country go global and attract foreign investment” (PA 2017: 84). For Leung, starting in 2016, the priority as far as people’s livelihood was concerned ultimately became developing Hong Kong into a “smart city,” thus extracting “quality living” from the core values of the Asia’s World City holistic package and adopting a techno- rather than human-centric approach to that effect (Hu, Wang, and Zhai 2023).

In Carrie Lam’s policy addresses, Asia’s World City appears only twice: in 2017, her first address entitled “We Connect for Hope and Happiness” in which she prospectively insists on “elevating Hong Kong’s status as Asia’s World City” – had Hong Kong lost its standing? – and then in 2019, an address in which the reference to “Hong Kong” appears in the title – “Treasure Hong Kong: Our Home” – for the first time since 2014. 2019 was the year of the

2. In 2002, Tung Chee-hwa postponed his Policy Address to January 2003 in order to give more time for his second mandate to start. The address was returned to October by his successor, Donald Tsang, again pushed to January by C. Y. Leung in 2012, and again changed back to October by Carrie Lam in 2017.

massive anti-extradition rallies questioning the legitimacy of Carrie Lam's government and its commitment to political reform to further enshrine the rule of law (Lee et al. 2019), a movement she dismissed in her address as "a handful of rioters initiat[ing] attacks and sabotages in an organised and planned manner" (PA 2019: 1). Yet, even though she stressed that "the characteristics that this Asia's World City takes pride in" are of being one of "the safest cities in the world, and being civilised, law-abiding," she also insisted on the city being "free, pluralistic and inclusive" (ibid.), hinting further down the address that cherishing "being an open and free city" allowed for a "return to calmness" and "to embark on the road to reconciliation" (ibid.: 3-4). In the two subsequent addresses, Carrie Lam was however back to less value-oriented positionings, characterising once more Hong Kong merely "as Asia's city of culture and creativity" (PA 2021: 37) and vying for the city to become "safe," "smart" (the most occurrences), and "liveable."

Stripping away the original complexity and Asia's World City no more

The dilution of the multifaceted and complex original ambition for Hong Kong to fully assume and further develop its attributes and calling for being Asia's World City therefore predates the thinning down entailed by the most recent branding campaigns.

At the end of 2015, a commentary published in the press had argued that indeed Hong Kong was "not anymore" Asia's World City (Dodwell 2015). Interestingly enough, the analysis itself was based on a study done by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), entitled *Building Better Cities* (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2015), in which the consultancy had surveyed the liveability of 28 cities across the APEC region, ranking Hong Kong in only 11th position – while Singapore was 3rd – with very low ratings for environmental sustainability, culture, and social health, as well as health and welfare. And even though the methodology of the survey can always be challenged, the criteria were made explicitly transparent, and it so happens that PwC had been the consultancy tasked with putting together the 2001 *Bringing the Vision to Life* report commissioned by Tung Chee-hwa. Ultimately, as the columnist noted, what had changed for Hong Kong was that it was not anymore the economic powerhouse for the whole of China – going from 18% of the country's GDP in 1997 to a mere 2% in 2015 – and that the city leaders seemed to be not "clear on what characteristics differentiate[d] their city," with knowledge of what distinguished it "better expressed in Beijing than here at home": hence the very severe concluding remark that the "concept of Hong Kong as Asia's World City fe[lt] like an empty marketing shell" (Dodwell 2015).

These unbending comparative metrics clearly contradict the claim that "do good" campaigns targeted at multiple stakeholders and yet focusing on a narrow understanding of the brand's meaning, such as the 2015 "Our Hong Kong" or the 2018 "Connect and Excel," had been successful in actually rallying people to the Asia's World City brand and the experience people had of the branding (Merrilees et al. 2018; Brand Hong Kong 2021). An examination of the composite data collected by the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute on various critical social metrics – from "core social indicators" and "public sentiment index" to "trust and confidence indicators" and "confidence in newly formulated policy addresses" – reveals

a consistent downward trend in these measures from 2005-2009, depending on the specific issue at hand. This decline was briefly interrupted by a transient increase in positive sentiment in late 2017, coinciding with Carrie Lam succeeding C.Y. Leung as Chief Executive. Subsequently, there was a general improvement starting in 2020. However, it is noteworthy that since this period of recovery, none of the surveyed metrics have returned to the levels of satisfaction observed prior to 2009.³

In John Lee's policy addresses, be it in 2022 or 2023, not once is the formula Asia's World City uttered. Yet, Lee did insist on the SAR being "located at the heart of Asia, [being] the most preferred destination for multinational corporations to set up their operations in Asia [and] an open and diversified metropolis where old and new styles meet, Hong Kong is also an appealing city embracing both Chinese and Western cultures" (PA 2022: 1). His diagnosis was that Hong Kong post-2019/2020 had been suffering from an image deficit or rather a distortion of what Hong Kong really stood for, in particular due to "external forces (...) deliberately smearing our country and distorting the situation in Hong Kong," hence the necessity, ostensibly borrowed from Xi Jinping's August 2013 call to "tell China's story well,"⁴ to "tell good stories of Hong Kong," highlighted right before his closing remarks in the 2022 address.

In the 2023 address, this imperative to "tell good stories of Hong Kong" was further developed with a reference to the role played by "patriots," hence the new exhortation becoming "Stay United to Tell Good Stories of Hong Kong": "We will unite patriots with affection for the country and our city to actively promote, in the local and the international arenas, the success story of 'One Country, Two Systems,' presenting the openness and cultural vibrancy in Hong Kong and our distinctive advantage as a conduit between our motherland and the world. We will also be telling our local and international audiences the true and good stories of our city" (PA 2023: 66).

To lead the way, John Lee entrusted the Financial Secretary with taking the helm of a "'Hong Kong Team' comprising business leaders, the Hong Kong Trade Development Council and the Hong Kong Tourism Board, to visit traditional and emerging markets *to rebuild the image and branding of Hong Kong* through proactively establishing multilateral ties" (PA 2022: 60, our emphasis). But rather than being at the heart of Asia, Hong Kong, "*blessed* with the strong support of our country and the close connection to the world" (PA 2023: 1, our emphasis) became in his words more strictly speaking "the only world-class city that can capitalise on both the China advantage and the international advantage." And campaigns drawn by the "Hong Kong Team" in 2023, including "Hello Hong Kong," "Happy Hong Kong," and "Night Vibes Hong Kong" were merely designed "to attract visitors and boost local consumption" (ibid.: 2).

3. See the various polls of the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute, accessible at <https://www.pori.hk/pop-poll.html?lang=en>.

4. On Xi Jinping's formula introduced in August 2013, see "Telling China's Story Well," *China Media Project*, 16 April 2021, https://chinamediaproject.org/the_ccp_dictionary/telling-chinas-story-well/ (accessed on 17 April 2024).

Lavish promotional campaigns for questionable outcomes

The actual impact of these campaigns, although it is still quite early to make a complete assessment, has for now been pretty limited, and disproportionately so, given the means they have mobilised. And rather than revitalising a broader and more complex understanding of what being Asia's World City meant, they have targeted specific audiences, either separately (Hello/Happy) or with a mixed approach (Night Vibes/Day and Night Vibes), in an attempt to anxiously demonstrate that Hong Kong was back to "normalcy" and "com[ing] out of the pandemic with strength" (PA 2023: 2).

The "Hello Hong Kong" campaign was launched on 2 February 2023 and was intended as a large-scale global promotional effort aimed at attracting visitors to the city after it had just reopened to the world in early January (Government of the HKSAR 2023a). It consisted of four main types of activities: the distribution of 500,000 free air tickets to outside visitors who could also enjoy consumption vouchers known as "Hong Kong Goodies"; the sponsoring of visits for prominent guests, including business leaders, political dignitaries, media representatives, and influential figures; promotional actions carried out by the Hong Kong Tourism Board "to tell good Hong Kong stories"; and the marketing of major events in the MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions) sector, big finance summits and sports events alike, under the welcoming label of "Hello Hong Kong."

The campaign has received mixed reviews, with some believing that it would indeed help revive tourism quickly by highlighting new attractions and offering special deals to tourists, while others, especially in the PR industry, criticised the campaign for lacking a clear strategic vision and emotional connection, and for not addressing negative perceptions of the city. One such expert even described the campaign's messaging as "frothy, vapid, and meaningless," raising concerns that it would not be enough to restore Hong Kong's global reputation (Sudhaman 2023). The campaign was following the 2020 "Relaunch Hong Kong" initiative concocted by PR firm Consulium to help rebuild the city's reputation as a global business hub, a push that had resulted in little external activity despite a hefty HKD 43.8 million price tag (Sudhaman 2022). The total budget for "Hello Hong Kong" was even higher, earmarked at HKD 2 billion by the Chief Executive himself (Leung H. 2023), and yet Hong Kong welcomed 34 million visitors in 2023, a figure equivalent to only 65% of the pre-pandemic level.

The "Happy Hong Kong" campaign launched at the end of April 2023 more exclusively targeted Hong Kong people, and its main intent was to boost public morale, stimulate local consumption, and support in the economic recovery of the SAR (Government of the HKSAR 2023c). It featured a wide range of activities, including discounted movie tickets, gourmet marketplaces, carnivals, and various performances, workshops, and game booths showcasing local agricultural and fisheries products, for a rather reasonable estimated cost of HKD 20 million (Lin 2023). Yet again, the results were far from conclusive: the Hong Kong happiness index established by Wofoo Social Enterprises showed that this particular metric had dropped to a six-year low in mid-2023,⁵ and 70% of Hong Kong's small businesses surveyed by the Hong Kong Small and Medium Enterprises Association and Junior Chamber International

Hong Kong recently divulged that their incomes were still below pre-Covid revenues.⁶

In summer 2023, a new promotional campaign titled "Hong Kong – Where the World Looks Ahead" strategically positioned Hong Kong as a unique global city, emphasising its secure and dynamic business environment, vibrant cosmopolitan lifestyle, and direct connectivity to the expansive Chinese economy. The initiative portrays Hong Kong as the premier destination in Asia for investment, business operations, and living. It underscores the city's role as a major global financial hub with unparalleled access to the largest markets of the twenty-first century, situating it as a pivotal element of the Greater Bay Area. Additionally, the campaign highlights Hong Kong's status as a leading centre for technology and innovation research, as well as a prominent cultural and events destination, thereby reinforcing its multifaceted urban appeal.

Lastly, the "Night Vibes Hong Kong" campaign, launched on the occasion of the Mid-Autumn Festival in September 2023, and the subsequent "Day and Night Vibes" campaign (25 January to 25 May, 2024) both aimed at revitalising the city's nightlife and economy post-pandemic, encouraging residents and tourists to participate in a variety of events across entertainment, arts, culture, and consumption. The campaign involved subsidies and rent exemptions for vendors, indicating government and private sector investment, though specific costs were not disclosed (Wong 2023). Results included significant attendance at events, such as 660,000 visitors at lantern carnivals and a 30% increase in weekend foot traffic at certain malls (Government of the HKSAR 2023d). Despite these positive outcomes, the public's reception has been mixed, many considering that resources could be better allocated to revamp Hong Kong's ageing night markets instead of financing novel and short-term spots from scratch (Leung J. 2023). Moreover, the overall economic impact remains debated among experts, with some questioning the campaign's ability to significantly boost GDP growth (Wong, Kong, and Cheung 2023).

In summary, as China ascended to economic prominence and Hong Kong's relationship with the Mainland has evolved over the years (Ho and Tran 2019), the SAR's political and economic policies have been reshaped accordingly. Consequently, Hong Kong's brand identity and strategy have also undergone significant transformation. This section has examined how, within this shifting context, institutions such as the former Commission on Strategic Development and the Current Chief Executive's Council of Advisers, along with policy addresses by successive Chief Executives, have played a pivotal role in shaping the perception and narrative of Hong Kong's brand strategy. The discussion below addresses the third research question about the challenges facing Hong Kong's place branding in the 2020s.

5. "Hong Kong People's Happiness Sink to 6-year Low," *The Standard*, 28 September 2023, <https://www.thestandard.com.hk/breaking-news/section/4/208702/Hong-Kong-people's-happiness-sink-to-6-year-low> (accessed on 25 June 2024).

6. Hans Tse, "70% of Hong Kong's Small Businesses Say Income Dropped Below Pre-Covid Levels, Survey Finds," *Hong Kong Free Press*, 3 May 2024, <https://hongkongfp.com/2024/05/03/70-of-hong-kongs-small-businesses-say-income-dropped-below-pre-covid-levels-survey-finds/> (accessed on 25 June 2024).

Challenges ahead

Hong Kong's branding strategy in the past 30 years or so is arguably characterised as a devolution process, showcasing ever decreasing levels of sophistication that went from a comprehensive branding outlook with Asia's World City to disembodied slogans such as Happy Hong Kong, Hello Hong Kong, and Day and Night Vibes. However, "place branding is [still] not about the use of logos and slogans" (Govers 2013). Effective branding strategies involve, first, a thorough understanding of the place's identity and, second, the meaningful engagement of stakeholders to ensure that the branding message aligns with the place's reputation.

Hong Kong's branding identity

The 1997 handover marked a pivotal moment, prompting renewed branding efforts to bolster Hong Kong's global competitiveness and maintain its status as an international financial centre and vibrant metropolis. The new HKSAR government actively pursued place branding initiatives, including the establishment of the Hong Kong Tourism Board in 2001, the promotion of major events such as the Hong Kong Arts Festival and the Hong Kong International Film Festival, and the development of iconic infrastructure projects such as the Hong Kong International Airport and the West Kowloon Cultural District. Despite challenges such as the initial failure of the West Kowloon mega-project (Lui 2008), Hong Kong has made significant strides in cultural branding. The creation of cultural landmarks and revitalisation projects such as PMQ, Tai Kwun, and M+, along with hosting international events such as Art Basel and Art Central, demonstrates a multifaceted branding approach. This strategy highlights not only Hong Kong's economic strength but also its cultural richness and diversity, reinforcing its status as a global city.

As our findings show, the government has employed various branding slogans and strategies to emphasise the city's unique cultural heritage, efficient governance, world-class infrastructure, and role as a global financial hub. Created in 2001, the "Asia's World City" motto has been a prominent branding tool, emphasising Hong Kong's connectivity, diversity, and cosmopolitan nature (Brand Hong Kong 2023). Hong Kong has long been celebrated as a global financial hub, renowned for its robust legal system, open market policies, and a high degree of autonomy. These attributes have attracted international businesses and expatriates, fostering a dynamic and cosmopolitan urban environment.

However, once the world's freest economy from 1996 onwards, Hong Kong fell second to Singapore in 2022.⁷ Hong Kong also fell from the 29th place in 2020-2021 to the 46th in 2023 in the Human Freedom Index.⁸ Previously recognised as a bastion of press freedom, Hong Kong witnessed a dramatic downturn in its standing within the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index in 2022, plummeting from the 80th to the 148th rank.⁹ Hong Kong used to be the world's busiest port for most of the period between 1987 and 2004, but in 2023, it fell out of the top 10 ports globally, with Dubai taking its place at number 10, reflecting Hong Kong's challenges in reversing its long-term decline in shipping. Concomitantly, there has been a strategic push for closer economic ties with the GBA. This initiative is seen as vital for Hong Kong's economic revival and long-term sustainability. The GBA aims to leverage the collective strengths of its

member cities to create a powerful economic bloc that can compete on a global scale. For Hong Kong, this means access to larger markets, additional resources, and a vast pool of talent. The integration promises economic benefits but also requires navigating substantial regulatory, legal, and cultural differences that exist between Hong Kong and its Mainland counterparts. The challenge for Hong Kong is to balance these two paths effectively. Maintaining its global positioning and unique advantages such as the rule of law and a free-market economy, while also capitalising on the economic opportunities presented by deeper integration with the Mainland, is crucial. Therefore, Hong Kong stands at a crossroads, with its decisions at this juncture likely to have profound implications for its identity as both a distinct part of China and a significant player on the international stage. The path forward involves intricate strategising to harness the benefits of GBA integration while safeguarding the attributes that have historically underpinned its success as a global metropolis. This balancing act involves not only economic considerations but also the careful management of social and political dimensions to ensure that Hong Kong retains its distinctive character and remains an attractive destination for international visitors, businesses, and talents.

(Dis)Engagement with stakeholders

Recent years have seen a significant shift characterised as a second critical juncture. The imposition of the national security law in 2020 and of the Safeguarding National Security Ordinance in 2024, and increasing political oversight from Mainland China have led governments, international organisations (including the G7, United Nations and European Union), business organisations, and human rights watchdogs¹⁰ to express their grave concerns about the erosion of civil liberties, the rule of law, judicial independence, and autonomy that have historically set Hong Kong apart from the rest of China, in accordance with the "one country, two systems" formula. This tightening grip combined with Hong Kong's three-year adherence to the Mainland's zero-Covid stance and stringent border control, have not only affected Hong Kong's global image, but also led to a brain drain. As a result, Hong Kong has witnessed a massive exodus: in 2019, the population in Hong Kong started to decline with record-breaking outflows of residents, not only local Chinese and Hongkongers (Chan and To 2023), but also expatriates from various countries whose intentions to leave Hong Kong made international news headlines (Tran 2024). This exodus indicates a potential disconnect between the city's branding efforts and the lived experiences of its residents, which relates to the concepts of brand equity and place reputation.

7. James Gwartney, Robert Lawson, and Ryan Murphy, "Economic Freedom of the World. 2023 Annual Report," *Fraser Institute*, 19 September 2023, <https://www.fraserinstitute.org/sites/default/files/economic-freedom-of-the-world-2023.pdf> (accessed on 22 June 2024).

8. Ian Vásquez, Fred McMahon, Ryan Murphy, and Guillermina Sutter Schneider, 2023, "The Human Freedom Index," *Cato Institute and Fraser Institute*, <https://www.cato.org/human-freedom-index/2023> (accessed on 21 June 2024).

9. Chris Lau, "Hong Kong Plunges to 148th in World Press Freedom Rankings, According to Annual Index by Reporters Without Borders," *South China Morning Post*, 3 May 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3176411/hong-kong-plunges-148th-world-press-freedom-rankings> (accessed on 26 June 2024).

10. See the compilation of all these concerns in the six-monthly reports on Hong Kong done by the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office, <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/six-monthly-reports-on-hong-kong> (accessed on 28 June 2024).

Brand equity and place reputation

City brand equity is understood through four dimensions: brand perception, perceived brand quality, brand loyalty, and stakeholder involvement in co-creation (Lucarelli 2012; Górska-Warsewicz 2020; Sokołowska et al. 2022). These dimensions underscore the importance of holistic engagement with stakeholders to enhance the perceived value of the city's brand, which is crucial for sustaining a competitive advantage and fostering a positive reputation. Moreover, Bell (2016) suggests a repositioning of place branding within the broader context of place reputation. This perspective acknowledges the limitations of traditional branding practices and advocates for a more integrated approach that considers the comprehensive impacts of a city's policies, cultural initiatives, and stakeholder interactions on its overall reputation. This suggests a dynamic interplay between urban development and branding practices, raising questions about the future trajectory of Hong Kong's development and its branding efficacy.

To promote Hong Kong's appeal and competitiveness on the global stage, it is crucial to enact more integrated and strategic branding and reputation management that resonate authentically with both residents and international audiences. These include the articulation of Hong Kong's unique identity amidst evolving sociopolitical dynamics, the adaptation of branding strategies to reflect the aspirations and values of both local and international stakeholders, and the challenge of maintaining Hong Kong's competitive edge as a global city in the face of increasing regional competition and global uncertainties. Additionally, the strategies must navigate the complexities of aligning Hong Kong's brand with its core values of progressiveness, freedom, stability, opportunity, and high quality, while also addressing the aspirations for quality living and sustainable development.

Conclusion

Our findings indicate that there have been three distinct stages in Hong Kong's place branding since 1997. First, in the decade following the handover, Hong Kong created a brand image that was ambitiously holistic and global. Second, from the late 2000s-early 2010s onwards, the HKSAR government focused more on the city's economic integration into the PRD and then the GBA, thus laying out the premises for Hong Kong's branding identity shift, that would be formalised in the third stage. In the wake of three years of isolation from the rest of the world from 2020 to 2022 and amidst grave concerns that Hong Kong may lose its comparative advantages in the national security era, the HKSAR government and the Chinese authorities have been trying in the current third stage of branding exercise to promote Hong Kong and rebuild local and overseas confidence, claiming that "Hong Kong is back in business,"¹¹ and that the "one country, two systems" principle would remain a permanent feature,¹² while launching a series of promotion initiatives that aimed at revitalising the city and attracting international visitors and investors, such as the visa-free entry scheme.¹³

As Hong Kong finds itself at a seemingly critical juncture, the effectiveness of these strategies to revive Hong Kong, rebuild confidence, and recover its former prominence remains uncertain. The current branding strategies of Hong Kong present several areas

of concern. The trimming down of Hong Kong's place branding from an ambitious and comprehensive approach in the 2000s – partially inspired by diverse societal interests, as evidenced by the inclusive composition of the early Committee on Governance and Political Development – to the more recent promotional and consumption-driven campaigns of 2023, which are primarily endorsed by a business-centric Council of Advisers (Government of the HKSAR 2023b), underscores a significant neglect of the complexities inherent in the city's identity and the importance of stakeholder engagement. The evolving nature of Hong Kong's brand identity, particularly in response to recent sociopolitical changes, emphasises the need for a dynamic and responsive branding strategy that can effectively communicate Hong Kong's strengths and values to a global audience. The mandate extends beyond merely telling positive narratives about Hong Kong; it suggests a fundamental overhaul – a "reset" rather than a mere "revival" – of the branding initiative. This approach would necessitate a bold reassertion of Hong Kong's newly redefined identity, whether for better or for worse.

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12. Ezra Cheung, Hoi-ying Lo, and Willa Wu, "Hong Kong's 'One Country, Two Systems' Principle Will Be Kept as Permanent Feature, Xia Baolong Tells Business Chambers," *South China Morning Post*, 26 February 2024, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3253216/beijing-attaches-great-importance-hong-kong-countrys-global-finance-hub-xia-baolong-tells-local> (accessed on 20 June 2024).
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