BrandHK:
A Copycat In City Branding?

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Abstract: Brand Hong Kong is a systematic place branding programme launched by the Hong Kong government in 2001 to revive the local economy and enhance the competitiveness of Hong Kong. This branding programme has been considered successful and continues. This study, through literature review and a desk-based study of the relevant government documents, is undertaken to examine how BrandHK visualize a set of strategies to revive the local economy and the influence of popular academic theories of city competitiveness. It concludes that the similarities between BrandHK and the strategies of other cities pursuing place branding programmes demonstrate the strong influence of academic theories such as the creative class theory by Richard Florida. However, BrandHK has its own uniqueness and has contributed to the success of Hong Kong in becoming Asia's World City.

Key Words: Brand Hong Kong; City Branding; Creative City; World City; City-Region Competitiveness

The idea of branding Hong Kong was first explored in 1996 arising from the concerns that Hong Kong might 'vanish from the international stage' after the reunification of Hong Kong with China in 1997 (Fig. 1). With a view to reinventing Hong Kong, the Hong Kong government launched a systematic branding programme - Brand Hong Kong - in 2001 through which Hong Kong is positioned as 'Asia's World City'. A closer look at Brand Hong Kong (hereunder referred as BrandHK) shows that the notion to compete in a globalised economy is accepted unquestioned by Hong Kong government in pursuing this place marketing programme. The emphasis on building a strong regional economy and the familiar city branding strategies reveals the prominent influence of academic theories on city competitiveness. Whilst it looks like BrandHK is another copycat in place marketing, it actually responds to the unique characteristics of Hong Kong as an economy and as a city. Ten years after the handover, Hong Kong is coined by Time as Nylonkong (Fig. 2) – one of the three cities driving the global financial market. The set of economic policies symbolised by BrandHK seems to have contributed to the strong economic performance of Hong Kong economy. However, there remain questions as to what should be the ultimate goal of a city branding programme: strong economic performance alone or the quality of life for all.

The road map to a world city

While Michael Porter (1990 and 1998) advocates that the competitiveness of a nation depends on the ability of firms to enhance the productivity through innovation and clusters of industries, Richard Florida (2005, p. 22) believes that 'human creativity is the ultimate source of economic growth'. According to Florida, the competitiveness of a city depends on its ability to provide a 'broadly supportive community context' (ibid, p. 19) with diversity and open culture to attract and retain talents, particularly the creative workers – the highly educated and mobile professionals such as engineers, lawyers, artists and scientists. These creative professionals tend to cluster which will in turn influence the location decision of firms and hence the formation of industry clusters. The presence of the creative class and thus the industry clusters will enhance the innovation ability of a city to create new business ideas and commercial products – i.e. the key to the economic growth (Florida 2003 and 2005). On the other hand, Saskia Sassen (1996 and 2002) defines a 'world city' by how well a particular city is connected to other international cities and the number of corporate headquarters.

These academic theories have far reaching impact on city competition. In fact, an ever-increasing number of cities including Cardiff, Liverpool, Singapore, Hamburg or Bilbao adopt similar strategies (e.g. building flagship schemes or cultural icons) and pursue systematic place branding in order to sustain the economic growth and compete with other world cities for talents and inward investment (Boland 2007; Evans 2003; Kong 2007). BrandHK is no exception.

The background

Prior to the launch of BrandHK in 2001, Hong Kong has already been regarded as a world city: an international business and finance centre (En-

Figure 1. Hong Kong 1995 - Fortune's cover story predicting that HK would lose its international status upon the handover of HK to China in 1997.

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Figure 2. Hong Kong 2008 – coined as 'Nylonkong' – one of the three cities, New York, London and Hong Kong, driving the global economy in the age of finance.

right 1999), a leading international port and airport (Hall 1966) and a well-networked world city (Sassen 2002). The development of Hong Kong into a world city followed a path as described by Sassen. Almost the entire manufacturing sector of Hong Kong has been relocated to Mainland China. The service sector accounted for over 80% of Hong Kong GDP (Estes 2005). Structural unemployment has been persistent (CSD 2006). Apart from the threat of losing its competitiveness upon reunification with China in 1997 (BrandHK website), there has been constant competition for foreign direct investment from neighbouring countries such as Singapore (Lo and Yeung 1998) and the fast growing China cities such as Shengzhen and Shanghai (Enright 1999). The notion for Hong Kong to compete in a globalised market through place marketing is explicitly stated in the report of the Commission on Strategic Development (CSD):

'…Hong Kong needs to promote its unique position as one of the most cosmopolitan and vibrant cities in Asia… A successful external promotion programme can have a significant positive impact on Hong Kong's ability to achieve a number of key economic, social and cultural objectives.' (CSD 2000, p.33)

The CSD report highlighted the imminent need to enhance the competitiveness of Hong Kong in a highly competitive globalised economy, and develop Hong Kong and other cities in the Pearl River Delta Region into a powerful 'city-region'. The fast growing economy of China and the admission of China to the World Trade Organisation in 2001 were perceived as opportunities for Hong Kong to strengthen its role as a service hub in the South China region (CSD 2000).

This led to the aspiration to develop Hong Kong as a centre city of a region 'enjoying a status similar to that of New York in America and London in Europe' (Policy speech by the then Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa in October 1998, cited in Flowerdew 2008, p.586).

BrandHK in a nutshell
The following statement presents how Hong Kong is positioned as Asia's World City:

'Hong Kong is a free and dynamic society where creativity and entrepreneurship converge. Strategically located in the heart of Asia, it is a cosmopolitan city offering global connectivity, security and rich diversity, and is home to a unique network of people who celebrate excellence and quality living' (BrandHK website)

Hong Kong is presented as the key to a powerful 'city-regional' economy offering the best location and opportunities for multinational corporations in Asia. There are also promises of strategic industry clusters including regional transportation hub, regional communication and broadcasting hub, as well as numerous flagship schemes such as West Kowloon Culture District, Cyberport, Science Park and Hong Kong Disneyland (BrandHK website). The emphasis is building a powerful 'city-regional' economy.

BrandHK also carries the message that Hong Kong will be a culture hub and a city of events. The competitive identity of Hong Kong are communicated via the core values of BrandHK: free, innovative, enterprising, excellence and quality living, and the attributes of Hong Kong are expressed as cosmopolitan, connected, secure, dynamic and diverse (BrandHK website). In essence, Hong Kong is a vibrant, diversified, free, open, clean and safe place for the hyper mobile creative talents to live.

The language used and the strategies adopted are commonly presented by other cities which pursue systematic place branding (Boland 2007; Evans 2003; Kong 2007). In the case of BrandHK, there is a clear motive to developing Hong Kong into what Florida described as a 'creative city'. Therefore, projecting an image of Hong Kong as an open, vibrant and diversified city is deemed essential in attracting the 'creative class' and hence the innovation industries to Hong Kong. Such similarities in the branding strategies adopted across cities are probably due to the active consultancy business by academics (Boland 2007). Documents show that the formulation of BrandHK has taken reference of good practices of other cities worldwide (CSD Report, 2001; BrandHK website) and two private-funded academic reports released in 1997 on the

competitiveness of Hong Kong as a city1. The recommendations from both studies echoed the mainstream academic thinking on city competition and advocated development of 'hub' functions, entrepreneurial culture and a knowledge-based economy (Jessop and Sum 2000).

Although words of competitiveness are seldom mentioned in BrandHK documents, the concept of city competition and the whole idea of strengthening the competitiveness of Hong Kong are explicit in the CSD report. Throughout the CSD report, the competitiveness of Hong Kong firms almost equates to the competitiveness of Hong Kong; which echoes with the idea of Michael Porter that productivity of firms is the key to the competitiveness of a city.

To strengthen the role of Hong Kong as a service hub in the region, BrandHK emphasizes on cooperation between cities within the Pearl River Delta Region. There are repeated emphases on strengthening the collaboration with Mainland China through the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) to facilitate Hong Kong companies to tap the opportunities of a larger market and to grow in size (CSD 2000, p. viii, p.11). It is also stated that a 'marriage of Hong Kong's traditional entrepreneurial spirit and the potential of the rapidly expanding technology sector could produce outstanding commercial success for Hong Kong companies' (ibid, p. 14). It is never stated in any BrandHK documents that Hong Kong will be the leading city in the region even though various analysis of the competitiveness of Hong Kong have commonly commented on the ability of Hong Kong to do so (CSD 2000; Enright 1999; Rohlen 2000). The building of a strong city-region economy by advocating cooperation between cities in a region and its role as a regional hub providing producer services and an ideal place for regional headquarters align with the arguments of Sassen (2002) on how city can successfully compete in a globalised economy.

Notwithstanding the similarities in BrandHK and the branding strategies adopted by other cities, BrandHK is like a mosaic taking pieces from different successful stories and is carefully crafted in Hong Kong style. BrandHK obviously has modelled on some common city branding strategies but there are tailor-made details in Hong Kong context by capturing the existing strengths and the characteristic of Hong Kong economy - well-established financial market, rule of law and the strategic location in South China. The benefit of 'One Country, Two Systems' are fully captured in BrandHK. The strategic position of Hong Kong as part of China after the reunification is emphasised alongside with the common law system and the East-meet-West culture which are inherited from the colonial time.

Based on the above observation, the agenda of BrandHK to develop Hong Kong into a cultural hub and a city of events do display a tendency of a copycat but the tailor-made details demonstrate the entrepreneur quality of Hong Kong.

Measuring the performance of BrandHK

There are criticisms that some of the flagship programmes did not deliver the expected benefits. For example, Hong Kong Disneyland has not yielded the expected benefits in terms of revenue as well as the number of visitors (Yeung et al 2008). Also, just having a designated site and a label for industrial sites without a Hong Kong context will never be enough for developing high-tech industries (Baark and So 2006). This proves the arguments that copying flagship programmes or pouring resources into some hot emerging industries will not guarantee success in regenerating local economy (Florida 2005).

Notwithstanding these criticisms, figures presented on BrandHK website showing that Hong Kong economy is thriving. The set of economic policies together with the branding strategies seem to have successfully transformed Hong Kong into Asia's World City and a regional hub. The number of regional headquarters reached a record high of 1228 in 2007 and 3580 by June 2009 (BrandHK website). The heavy investment in infrastructure and flagship schemes appears in general to have paid-off (Estes 2005). By January 2007, Hong Kong has become the second largest share market for IPO listing and has received the second largest inward FDI in Asia (BrandHK website). Unemployment rate has continued to fall and average income level increased since the economy was badly hit by SARS in 2003 (CSD 2007).

However, all these performance indicators presented by the government: GDP growth, inward FDI and world rankings of Hong Kong, are output-related measurements in economic terms. Apart from the higher employment rate and higher average income level, what do the competitiveness and these economic outcomes mean to Hong Kong people in daily life?

Something is missing from the mosaic. In terms of quality of life, BrandHK is only limited to the commitment of improved air quality and equal opportunities for women in their publications by 2007. Although there are more coverage on public policies addressing social issues in their current publication such as the provision of free education and public housing (BrandHK website), other issues that are considered imminent such as rising income disparities (CSD 2000) are neglected in BrandHK documents or the local economic development policies. Social issues include the social exclusion and family violence in the most deprived communities, for example Tin Shui Wai – a community labeled as 'migrant slum', are out of the beautiful scenes presented in BrandHK (Estes 2005; Lee 2005; Wong, S., 2008). The ranking of Hong Kong on the United Nation Gini Index on income/wealth disparity has got higher in recent years (UN 2010). The problem of poverty, particularly the working poor, has aggregated despite of the economic growth and the improvement in unemployment rate, or the prevailing policies on public housing and education which have been in place for decades (Wong, H, 2009; Tsang 2010). The widening social inequalities and the expensive housing for the professional 'elites' seems to show that the socio-economic development of Hong Kong resonates with the world city phenomenon described by Sassen (1996 and 2002).

So BrandHK, like other branding of city, may still run the risk of marketing Hong Kong as a commodity and put too much emphasis on building a positive image of Hong Kong and the return in economic terms. The narrow economic focus and the underlying global ambition are so obvious that there are now public voices for social goals and community empowerment (Estes 205; Lee 2005). A good example of this is the slowdown of West Kowloon Cultural District develop-

ment when the general public clearly did not feel that the original government plan was responding to the genuine needs of Hong Kong community. The public feared that the original proposal would just be another luxury property development with iconic architectures in the backdrop and lack of local culture flavour (Kong 2007; Wong, A., 2008; Yau 2008).

Conclusion

BrandHK is not merely an image-building programme but indeed is visualising a series of place-based policies and strategies to strengthen the position of Hong Kong in the global economy and boosting the local economy. The similarities between BrandHK and the place branding strategies of other metropolis embody the dominant discourses of globalisation and city competitiveness. It also reflects the mainstream notion of how city compete for inward foreign investment, talents and market share by building a city's competitive advantages within a city-regional economy.

BrandHK embraces two main characters of Hong Kong: adaptability and entrepreneurship. It is these characters that prevent BrandHK from becoming a total copycat. Although BrandHK could not be said to be the sole driving force to the strong economic performance of Hong Kong, the series of place-based policies do contribute to the local economy particularly in its development into a world leading financial centre.

However, the prevailing city branding strategies like BrandHK are too often narrowly focused on the firm competitiveness and growth in economic terms. The ultimate goal of city branding policies should go beyond an improved local economy and aim to achieving a higher quality of life for people living in a place. In this respect, BrandHK, which emphasis on building Hong Kong as a city of events, flagship schemes and iconic architectures, still falls short in meeting the social goals when resources and focus are put on adopting common

city branding strategies and promoting the city as a commodity. There are also doubts whether the existing branding policy can sustain the strong economic performance of Hong Kong in the long run and whether it will ultimately bring real benefit to the quality of life of Hong Kong people. All these questions will be contested both in face of the current global economic crisis and over a longer time span.

End-note

1) The two private-funded reports are The Hong Kong Advantage conducted by Harvard Business School (Enright 1999; also cited in Jessop and Sum 2000), and Made by Hong Kong by MIT (Berger and Lester 1997, cited in Jessop and Sum 2000).

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