

City branding through cinema: the case of postcolonial Hong Kong

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Abstract This study extends the city branding literature by outlining a framework for city branding through cinema. Through cinema, city officials can communicate their city’s identity, highlight the city’s cultural significance, differentiate it from regional rivals, and positively impact tourism. The empirical context of the study is Hong Kong, which continues to negotiate its identity almost two decades after its re-unification with China. A content analysis of 81 Hong Kong films produced between 2008 and 2015 reveal the modalities by which city officials and media producers reify the cultural significance of the city. Specifically, Hong Kong films (1) use local culture as backdrops for stories, (2) emphasize freedom of expression, (3) highlight regional localities, and (4) claim and link historical figures to the city. The study’s findings proffer implications for the city branding literature.

Keywords City branding · Cinema · Hong Kong

Introduction

According to Kotler, “people and resources are increasingly mobile as a result of twenty-first century technology and globalization” (Kotler 2004, p. 12). To compete on the global stage, places (e.g., cities, regions, nations) need to manage their branding to attract tourists, businesses, and new residents (Gertner 2011). Essentially, places engage in “territorial competition” in fear of being “wiped off the map” (Hospers 2004, p. 271).

Through city branding, urban officials and media producers can highlight the cultural significance of their city, differentiate from regional competitors, and positively impact tourism (Kavaratzis 2004). While scholarly interest in city, place and destination branding has increased in recent years (Ashworth and Kavaratzis 2009; Green et al. 2016; Hafeez et al. 2016), the literature provides limited insight into the role of cinema in city branding efforts (Donald and Gammack 2008). The purpose of this study is to examine how city officials and media producers articulate a city’s brand through cinematic productions.

Cinema’s role in city branding initiatives can be significant. Cinema is a cultural platform through which city officials and media producers can disseminate the city’s brand identity to its citizens and people around the world (Chu 2013; Gkritzali et al. 2016). First, a region’s films can be seen as the crystallization of citizens’ ideologies and anxieties (Ashcroft 2001; Dwyer and Pinney 2003). Second, cultural products, such as cinema, art, and music comprise a region’s “cultural technology,” which contributes to its economic and cultural capital (Chen 2016). Finally, films can project city images that may be attractive to tourists (Gkritzali et al. 2016).

For these reasons, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China (“Hong Kong”

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or “HKSAR,” for short) and its cinema industry were chosen as the context of this study. Twenty years after its re-unification with Mainland China, Hong Kong continues to wrestle with its postcolonial identity, and specifically, its diminishing role in the global economy (Lo and Pang 2007). In the last two decades, the emergence of major Chinese cities such as Shanghai and Beijing have de-stabilized the position of Hong Kong’s historic position as an economic mediator between China and the West (Chu 2013). As a means to heighten its cultural significance, Hong Kong turned to its renowned cinema industry.

Hong Kong once held the third largest movie industry in the world, after the USA and India. Underpinning the city’s cinema industry was a powerful distribution system, which had the knowledge and technical capital to produce, translate, and disseminate Hong Kong films to consumers around the world (Huat 2012). The world distribution of Hong Kong films created a generation of international celebrities, including Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, Chow Yun Fat, and Jet Li. The global distribution of Hong Kong films augment city branding activities. Moreover, Hong Kong’s creative industries, of which cinema is a major part, are a significant source of revenue and job creation (GovHK 2015). They contribute about HK\$98 billion to the local economy and represent 4.9% of Hong Kong’s gross domestic product (Hong Kong Film Development Council 2014). In this way, Hong Kong’s identity and cinema are integrally linked together. Yet, Hong Kong’s cinema industry has seen a swift decline in the last decade due to the rapid growth of the Mainland Chinese film industry, which has subsumed Hong Kong movies (Chu 2015).

Hong Kong seeks to reverse its diminishing status with city branding initiatives that highlight its economic and cultural significance. For instance, the “BrandHK” platform positions Hong Kong as “Asia’s World City,” an international creative and finance center (Chu 2013; Loo et al. 2011; Merrilees et al. 2018). Additionally, the “CreateHK” campaign leverages Hong Kong’s film industry, and effects an image of Hong Kong as an influential cultural production center (Chu 2015; Lee 2009; Liew 2012; Yeh 2014). Attempts to brand Hong Kong around economic and cultural dimensions help re-establish the city’s relevance on the global stage.

The results of the study contribute to the city branding literature. In the past, scholars have focused largely on conceptual issues such as defining city branding and outlining its theoretical domain (Kavaratzis 2009; Lucarelli and Olof Berg 2011). In recent years, scholarship has moved beyond conceptual domains, and has turned its attention to city branding *implementation* (Braun 2012; Green et al. 2016). Yet, the role of cultural texts, such as cinema, in city branding remains an understudied area of inquiry.

Literature review

By negotiating its identity and position relative to cities in China and greater East Asia, Hong Kong is practicing city branding. City branding is a strategic instrument to publicize a city’s competitive advantages by highlighting the distinctive and defining characteristics of the city (Zhang and Zhao 2009). Additionally, city branding helps cities secure economic and cultural resources such as foreign direct investment, cultural mega-events, attracting migrant workers, and tourism (Dinnie 2011; Donald et al. 2009; Kavaratzis 2004).

The practice of marketing cities (and regions, more broadly) is not new, and has existed for centuries as a way to attract migrants through the promises of opportunity. In nineteenth century America, local “boosters” promoted frontier towns to encourage westward migration (Schiel 2009). Additionally, the city-states of the early Italian Renaissance practiced urban entrepreneurialism, a form of inter-urban competition, to differentiate themselves from one another (Guggenheim and Söderström 2009). In the current epoch, city branding is about a “city’s ability to attract the highest possible value from global flows in order to promote local development” (Anttiroiko 2014, p. 1).

As a scholarly domain, city branding emerged from the related disciplines of place and destination marketing/branding. “City branding” refers to the creation of the brand image and serves as a conduit for residents to identify with their home, whereas “city marketing” relates to the dissemination of the brand narrative to stakeholders and the overall management of the brand (Kavaratzis 2004). Destination, place, and city branding are theoretical domains that overlap, distinguished mainly by geographic boundaries and the conceptualization of the target stakeholder (e.g., tourists, residents). “Appendix 1” provides a comparison of destination, place, and city branding. This study acknowledges the work done in the destination branding and place branding streams, but focuses primarily on the city branding literature.

City branding research can be organized under three classifications: producing city brands, consuming them, and criticizing them (Lucarelli and Olof Berg 2011). The majority of papers are based on single case studies, and measurable studies are few (Merrilees et al. 2009, 2013; Sevin 2014). Early research focused on the production of a city brand through the marketing mix variables (Prophet 2006). Yet, scholars quickly cited the limitations of using the marketing mix variables in city branding, and sought theoretical insights elsewhere. Some scholars leveraged corporate branding theory to explain how a city could develop an identity, positioning strategies, and value propositions (Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2005), while others



drew on urban governance theory to account for the administrative processes that underlie city branding work (Braun 2012). Overall, city branding research is conceptual and there is comparatively little research that examines the implementation of city branding (Braun 2012; Lucarelli and Olof Berg 2011).

Consequently, some scholars have taken the opportunity to create frameworks for city officials and marketers to implement city branding. For instance, Kavartzis (2004) introduces a model that involves three factors: (1) a city's actions (e.g., urban design, infrastructure projects), (2) advertising and graphic design communications, and (3) using media to control word of mouth. Alternately, Braun (2012) outlines eight factors that serve as a guideline for practitioners to implement city branding; four factors have to do with the city's ability to implement city branding (e.g., urban governance, financial budget); four other variables relate to the substance or choice content of the brand. Other scholars also proffer insights into the development of a city's brand image positioning (Hultman et al. 2016; Merrilees et al. 2009; Nikolova and Hassan 2013). By creating the city brand image, a city can minimize different interpretations of its city identity.

Another school of thought suggests that spectacular cultural events could be used as a means to communicate the desired characteristics of the city to consumers around the world. For example, the opening ceremony in the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games mixed next-generation technology with historical Chinese narratives to communicate that China is a modern nation with a focus on sustainable technologies (Wu et al. 2013; Zhang and Zhou 2009). The story of the Olympics Games speaks to the power of cultural products, such as film, art, and music in augmenting city branding efforts.

Cinema as a city branding tool

A place's creative, culture industries can be effective channels to deploy city branding. Through cultural products such as cinema, art, and music, city officials and marketers can strengthen the relationship between cultural products and a city, and influence consumers' perceptions of a place (Dinnie 2004). Cinema augments city branding efforts in several ways.

First, films can project location specific images and myths of a city, which may be attractive to tourists (Gkritzali et al. 2016). In other words, city officials can "articulate a recognizable vision of the city that corresponds with the desired perceptions of the permanent and visiting populations" (Donald and Gammack 2008, p. 66). For example, the Hong Kong Tourism Board employed movie stars, such as Jackie Chan, on marketing promotions, and created cinema tours for consumers to visit

famous cultural sites featured in movies, such as the Tian Tan Buddha, which was prominently displayed in the influential crime film, *Infernal Affairs*.

Second, film is a critical cultural object that participates in a "grammar of cultural interrogation" (Dwyer and Pinney 2003, p. 17) and concretizes the ideologies of citizens (Ashcroft 2001). As such, film is a medium through which city officials and citizens can reflexively examine their city's identity. With respect to Hong Kong, cinema is a "critical platform in articulating deep seated cultural uncertainties arising from the formalization of the timeline for the handover of the British colonial outpost to the People's Republic of China" (Liew 2012, p. 765). It is a medium through which Hong Kong citizens negotiate their changing political status, as they shift from being colonial subjects of the UK to citizens of the People's Republic of China.

Finally, cinema, along with popular music and television shows, constitute "cultural technology," which is a set of resources that contribute to a city's or a nation's economic and cultural influence (Chen 2016). The marketing of South Korean pop cultural products (the "*hallyu* wave") in the 2000s contributed to the successful branding of South Korea as an influential pop cultural production center. For example, Psy's hit song, *Gangnam Style*, made Seoul's Gangnam district a household name around the world. Another example is *Dae Jum Guem*, one of South Korea's most popular television dramas. Exported to over 91 countries, the show reignited local and foreign interest in traditional, Korean culture. Based on the immense popularity of the show, the Korea Tourism Organization promoted tourism to cities depicted in the drama.

Summary of literature

The city branding literature takes the city as the main unit of analysis, and proffers conceptual frameworks for promoting the city ("[Appendix 1](#)"). Meanwhile, a subset of scholars suggest cultural texts, such as cinema, art and music, may be effective vehicles to construct and disseminate city branding to stakeholders (Donald and Gammack 2008; Gkritzali et al. 2016). Yet, the process of how city branding can be implemented through cinema remains obscure. The case of Hong Kong and its cinema industry will be used to unpack the issue of city branding can be performed through cinema.

Context: postcolonial Hong Kong

Located in the South China Sea, Hong Kong is a former British colony comprised primarily of Cantonese speaking people originating from the Guangdong province of China.



Before its re-unification with China, Hong Kong held a unique role as the conduit that linked China to the rest of the world (Lo and Pang 2007). In 1997, and in accordance with the Sino-British Joint Declaration, Hong Kong was re-unified with the People's Republic of China under the principle of "One Country, Two Systems," which provides the former colony autonomous, democratic governance until 2047. This special status is reflected in Hong Kong's official designation as the "Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China."

After the 1997 re-unification, Hong Kong witnessed a rapid decline in its economic and cultural influence, and a subsequent loss of identity. China's embrace of capitalist markets and the opening of the Chinese economy vastly diminished Hong Kong's position as the gateway to the China (Lo and Pang 2007). Consequently, Hong Kong lost its "in-between-ness," the quality that underlies the city's historic, economic significance (Chu 2013). While Hong Kong remains a link between China and the economies of the world, Chinese cities, such as Shanghai, Dalian and Beijing have emerged as cosmopolitan, global trade centers in their own right: "it is not that Hong Kong is becoming another mainland city but rather, that other Mainland cities are becoming more and more Hong-Kong-ized" (Chu 2013, p. 5).

Hong Kong is an ideal case study because it is in the midst of negotiating its political and cultural identity. Politically, the city and its citizens face a "crisis of confidence" regarding Chinese sovereignty and the One Country, Two Systems principle (Erni 2001, p. 390). Additionally, Hong Kong citizens retain an identity that is distinct from the Mainland Chinese (Lu 2009). They hold more positive attitudes toward the use of local Cantonese and English, as opposed to Mandarin, which is the national dialect (Lai 2011).

The point is that Hong Kong is experiencing a post-colonial identity crisis. Hong Kong seeks to retain its status as a global economic mecca, but its role as the conduit between China and the world has been subsumed by other major Chinese cities, like Shanghai and Beijing. Additionally, Hong Kong citizens are wrestling with their transition from colonial subjects of the UK to citizens of the People's Republic of China. In response, Hong Kong took action to highlight its uniqueness, so that it is not simply perceived as another city in China (Chu 2013).

Hong Kong city branding initiatives

In the face of marginalization, Hong Kong city officials organized two interrelated platform initiatives to distinguish Hong Kong from other Chinese cities. The first strategy, "BrandHK," positions Hong Kong as an international finance center and cultural hub. The second

strategy, "CreateHK," which lies at the heart of this study, brands Hong Kong as a creative production center, especially for film production.

The BrandHK campaign, launched in 2001 by chief executive Tung Chee Hwa, formalized Hong Kong's identity as an international financial center and cultural hub, and had the overall goal of making Hong Kong "Asia's World City" (Loo et al. 2011). The brand was the result of extensive research that sought to understand Hong Kong's competitive advantages, Hong Kong's values, and Hong Kong's aspirations. The research resulted in BrandHK's positioning statement:

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 2016)

In addition, BrandHK emphasized favorable conditions for creative industries, and the city's ability to link talent with Mainland entrepreneurs, especially with respect to the film industry (Chu 2013). Furthermore, BrandHK had urban infrastructure components, such as the expansion of the city's rail network, the construction of the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Center, and the development of the West Kowloon Cultural District.

The launch of BrandHK was accompanied by a brand logo—a stylized dragon that incorporated the Chinese characters for Hong Kong and the letters "HK." According to Mishra (2010), the "dual expression of the dragon image, i.e., in English as well as in Chinese shows a combination of modernity and antiquity and also symbolizes the meeting of the east and west that makes Hong Kong so special.... The dragon's smooth, fluid shape shows a sense of movement and speed, representing Hong Kong's ever-changing character" (p. 55).

Media campaigns focused on Hong Kong's multiculturalism and hospitality culture of Asia's World City. For example, the Hong Kong Tourism Board created a set of marketing communications that targeted Indian and White tourists (Mishra 2010). Service programs, such as "Hospitable Hong Kong" and "Hong Kong Young Ambassador Scheme," trained young people to be polite and enhance service quality to tourists (*ibid*). Other media campaigns, such as "Faces of Hong Kong," highlighted the stories of local Hong Kong people to promote tourism (Chu 2016).

CreateHK—Asia's creative production center. In 2009, Hong Kong's Commerce and Economic Development Bureau established another initiative—CreateHK—to drive the development of Hong Kong's creative economy.



CreateHK is a “one-stop service” to provide financial support for creative endeavors, and to help “build Hong Kong into a creative capital in the region” (CreateHK 2016). Specifically, the agency coordinates government policy regarding creative industries, focuses the government’s resources for the promotion of creative industries in Hong Kong, and works closely with creative industries to boost development of creative, cultural products such as art, film, and cultural events.

Shortly after being established, CreateHK developed the CreateSmart sub-initiative, which provided HK\$300 million to support projects that aligned with the strategic direction of Hong Kong’s creative industry. In 2013, an additional HK\$300 million was added. By the end of 2014, the agency approved 194 of 398 project applications. Additionally, a Film Development Fund injected another HK\$200 million in 2015 and HK\$20 million in 2016 for the development of the local film industry and support of Hong Kong films in the Mainland (Hong Kong Film Development Council 2016a). Films developed under the Film Development Fund include Joe Ma Wai Ho’s *Give Love* (2009), Flora Chan’s *Bends* (2013), and Fruit Chan Gor’s *The Midnight After* (2014).

Hong Kong cinema

Hong Kong once possessed one of the world’s most robust movie industries. In the late twentieth century, Hong Kong was the third largest movie industry, behind Hollywood (USA) and Bollywood (India). At its peak, Hong Kong’s movie industry produced over 140 films a year (Chu 2013). More significantly, Hong Kong had one of the strongest film distribution systems in the world with the knowledge capital, infrastructure and technology to dub and subtitle its movies into many international languages, and channels to distribute media to international markets (Huat 2012; Pang 2007). As a result, consumers around the world were able to watch Hong Kong dramas and films, and actors such as Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, Jet Li and Chow Yun Fat became household names. In this way, Hong Kong’s identity became inextricably linked to its cinematic industry.

In the last two decades, Hong Kong cinema has seen a dramatic decline in the number of productions and box office receipts (Pang 2007). Between the 1970s and 1990s, the Hong Kong movie industry produced over 100 films a year. By 2015, the number of productions dipped to 57. In conjunction with Hong Kong’s regression in socio-economic arenas, the precipitous decline of the Hong Kong movie industry contributed to Hong Kong’s overall loss of cultural significance.

Scholars attribute Hong Kong cinema’s decline to several factors. On the one hand, the Asian financial crisis in 1997 depleted sources of capital investment, which

financed the film industry; on the other hand, the SARS epidemic of 2003 kept theaters closed for an extended period of time and shut down movie production for 4 months (Lee 2009). When the Hong Kong film market shrank, top talent such as Chow Yun Fat and Jackie Chan turned to Hollywood for opportunities. Hong Kong’s young talent never filled the vacuum created by the exodus of Hong Kong’s main stars. Consequently, Hong Kong lost its status as trendsetter for pop culture in East Asia (Chu 2013). Meanwhile, the cinematic industries of China, South Korea, and Thailand were blossoming and gaining the attention of overseas audiences (Huat 2012; also see Zhu 2002).

To survive, the Hong Kong film industry turned to co-productions with Mainland China. Co-productions helped Hong Kong filmmakers finance blockbusters using Chinese capital investment, and provided Hong Kong films access to the large China market; Mainland film producers, on the other hand, gained access to Hong Kong’s talent and longstanding knowledge capital in film production (Huat 2012). By the late 2000s, co-productions with China were vital to Hong Kong cinema’s survival. The phrase, “either go north or wait for death” was often used within industry circles (Chu 2015). And by 2009, Hong Kong’s role in co-productions turned to production-only, using Hong Kong’s film production experience to produce Mainland stories written by Mainland scriptwriters and directed by Mainland directors (Chu 2015).

In the face of decline, the Hong Kong movie industry sought a new identity through two strategic endeavors that are related to CreateHK. The first endeavor reframes Hong Kong’s cinematic industry as a financing center (as opposed to production center) of Chinese and “New Asian Cinema,” which feature transnational East Asian casts and marketed for multiple regions (Pang 2007). In this new role, films are no longer necessarily “made in Hong Kong,” but rather “financed in Hong Kong” (Chu 2013, p. 111).

The Mainland-Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) of 2004 formalized the “financed in Hong Kong” strategy. Under CEPA, Hong Kong-produced, Chinese language films are exempt from China’s import quota of twenty foreign films per year. CEPA resulted in an increase of co-productions with the Mainland. China-Hong Kong co-productions leveraged Hong Kong’s knowledge capital and financing capabilities to produce movies that are primarily intended for the Mainland market. Co-productions with China have existed for many decades, but they took a different context. In the past, Hong Kong filmmakers looked to the Mainland for historical sites and co-productions always played a supporting role to Hong Kong cinema (Chu 2013). But now, co-



productions with China are Hong Kong cinema's main line of revenue.

Yet, the focus on blockbuster co-productions spawned a countervailing endeavor called "new localism" (Yeh 2014) or "the SAR New Wave" (Chu 2015). Films that embody "new localism" focus on localized narratives that highlight contemporary socio-cultural problems and introspections into the city's identity (Pang 2007). Some examples include *Echoes of the Rainbow* (2009), *A Simple Life* (2011), and *Aberdeen* (2014), which are filmed in Hong Kong's native, Cantonese dialect, and feature Hong Kong producers and actors. They are "made with distinct local ingredients that allow the audience a sense of recognition and empowerment" (Yeh 2014, p. 59), and represent an attention of "being 'Hong Kong'" and "local 'Hong Kongness'" (Chu 2015, p. 113).

City branding, postcolonial Hong Kong, and its cinema

The strategic deployment of city branding in Hong Kong films is intentional and explicit. At the funding level, the Hong Kong government has provided financial support for films that promote the city. Since 2013, the CreateHK city branding initiative and the Film Development Fund provided over HK\$820 million in funding for localized film productions. In 2017, the Hong Kong Film Development Council issued a press release that speaks to the integration of city branding with film:

Apart from facilitating cinema development, the Government will continue to promote the development of the local film industry through a four-pronged strategy, i.e. encouraging more Hong Kong-produced film productions for commercial release; nurturing production talent; promoting film appreciation among students and young people to build up audiences; as well as showcasing and promoting the brand of 'Hong Kong Films' in the Mainland, Taiwan and overseas markets, facilitating the participation of local commercial films in international film festivals, and helping drive Hong Kong's development as a film financing platform in Asia. (Hong Kong Film Development Council 2017)

Not all Hong Kong films advance the city branding agenda; most films have little to do with city branding. But the point is that there is a subset of films that are funded through city branding initiatives like CreateHK, which encourage filmmakers (e.g., producers, directors, screenwriters) to incorporate city branding elements into the story. For instance, a 2016 conversation between Ip Kwok Him, the President of the Hong Kong Legislative Council, and Gregory So, the Secretary of Commerce and Economic

Development, demonstrates that the integration of city localities and landmarks in Hong Kong films to augment tourism is strategic and intentional (Hong Kong Film Development Council 2016b). Ip poses the question:

Regarding the promotion of Hong Kong tourism with the aid of television dramas and films, will the Government inform this Council... whether it will encourage local producers to produce quality television dramas or films and conduct filming at local spots with beautiful scenery (such as Sai Kung, Tai Long Sai Wan, etc.), so as to promote those tourist attractions through the broadcast of such works outside Hong Kong?

Gregory So responds,

In recent years, the [Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB)] has been actively inviting international and regional television channels and production houses to film their popular shows in Hong Kong, which showcase Hong Kong's tourist attractions and natural wonders to overseas consumers. The HKTB also leverages on movies and television shows from source markets to promote Hong Kong.

But whether filmmakers subtly or explicitly integrate city branding elements is, ultimately, a creative decision.

In summary, Hong Kong's once influential movie industry has struggled due to the rapid growth of the Mainland Chinese film industry. It is only a matter of time before Hong Kong's movie industry is subsumed by Mainland Chinese cinema. The dual focus on high budget, Mainland co-productions on one extreme, and lower budget, localized productions on the other extreme have produced what scholars call Hong Kong's "M-shaped" cinema industry (Chu 2013). The middle budget films, which have sustained the Hong Kong movie industry in times past, have diminished (Pang 2007). Thus, the struggles of Hong Kong cinema mirror the political, economic, and social uncertainties of the city in the postcolonial period (Lee 2009). Hong Kong has seemingly lost its identity, and also its once formidable movie industry (Chu 2013; Pang 2007). Therefore, the socio-political and cinematic quagmires that Hong Kong currently faces inform the research questions of this study:

1. How do city officials and media producers implement city branding through cinema?
2. What city branding themes or characteristics do they communicate through cinema?



Methodology

To investigate how Hong Kong implements city branding through cinema, the researchers conducted a content analysis of 81 films produced between 2008 and 2015. The analysis is similar in spirit to other scholarly works that examine Hong Kong identity through the lens cinema (Chu 2013, 2015; Lee 2009; Liew 2012; Pang 2007).

Data collection and sampling

Data for the cinematic content analysis is comprised of 81 Hong Kong films with theatrical release dates between January 2008 and December 2015. This sampling frame represents Hong Kong's second decade under Chinese sovereignty. To access a list of Hong Kong movies with a release date in the sampling frame, the researchers consulted www.hkcinemagic.com (henceforth "HK Cinemagic"), an online database that tracks Hong Kong films. They conducted a background check of the website to assess its credibility as an archival source (Golder 2000). To the researchers' understanding, HK Cinemagic is the most comprehensive, independent database of Hong Kong films on the Internet. It was founded in 1998 as a fan appreciation site for HK cinema, and over the years, it grew to include feature articles, essays, interviews and reports.

After retrieving a list of movies from HK Cinemagic, researchers triangulated the results with another source, lovehkfilm.com (henceforth "Love HK Film"). Love HK Film is another fan appreciation website that features critical reviews of movies. The site was founded in 2002 to inform critical analysis of HK films. By cross-referencing the lists from both sources, the researchers compiled a "master" database of 472 Hong Kong films produced between 2008 and 2015.

Subsequently, the researchers read synopses for all 472 films on Love HK Film. When a synopsis for a movie was not available, they conducted a Google search for its synopsis. Based on the synopses and personal knowledge of the films, the researchers identified films with strong city branding themes. This purposive sampling process resulted in a pool of 81 Hong Kong movies germane to city branding. These films represent 17.2% of films produced in the 2008–2015 sampling frame (Table 1).

Data analysis

To prepare for data analysis, the researchers screened the 81 films over a 5-years period (2010–2015). They watched most of the movies through DVDs. When a DVD copy could not be acquired, they used streaming solutions such as YouTube and iTalkBB, a Chinese streaming solution

similar to Netflix. To ensure the best possible interpretation of the film data, the researchers sought films in their native language (usually Cantonese) with reliable English subtitles.

The researchers used conventional content analysis on the films to examine city branding phenomenon. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), conventional content analysis is appropriate when existing theory is limited, and in the area of city branding and cinema, work is limited. A conventional content analysis approach involves an inductive approach to develop analytical categories.

Based on the screenings, the researcher recorded notes on each film. The notes contained short summaries of the movies' plots, and detailed emergent city branding themes. The researcher's interpretations focused on latent content, which has to do with "interpretation of the underlying meaning of the text" (Graneheim and Lundman 2004, p. 106). The researchers inductively coded their research notes using procedures informed by Graneheim and Lundman (2004). The first coding stage was descriptive analysis, which involved the descriptive coding of each film (e.g., production year, director, genre, and presence of non-Hong Kong celebrity). The second stage was within-case analyses, whereby the researchers "hard-coded" each film. Using researcher's notes as the primary "meaning unit," they made interpretations, distilled each interpretation into sub-codes, and aggregated sub-codes into major themes ("Appendix 2"). The final stage was cross-case analyses, where the researchers compared films to one another using codes identified in the first and second stages. For example, they sought patterns by cross-examining city branding themes with genre.

Triangulation/intertextuality

To enhance the external validity of their analysis, the researchers cross-referenced their coding results with expert external sources, such as Love HK Film, Hollywood Reporter, and Variety. By triangulating their coding results with external sources, researchers made sure that themes in the films contained city branding themes, and that the interpretations were not a result of researcher bias (Golder 2000; Wallendorf and Belk 1989). Scholars refer to this cross-referencing as "intertextuality," which refers to the idea that all texts can be linked to other texts (Baker et al. 2008). Additionally, the researchers constantly reflected back on literature and external sources to compare and refine theorization on city branding and Hong Kong post-coloniality (Spiggle 1994). "Appendix 3" provides examples of triangulation procedures.



Table 1 Description of data

Production year	Number of productions	Number of sampled movies (proportion)	Number of films displaying city branding themes			
			Promote local culture	Freedom of expression	Regional localities	Historic figures
2008	79	14 (17.7%)	8	5	3	1
2009	61	13 (21.3%)	2	6	4	1
2010	73	11 (15.0%)	5	2	0	4
2011	54	6 (11.1%)	3	3	1	0
2012	51	9 (17.6%)	5	4	4	0
2013	51	10 (19.6%)	4	3	3	2
2014	46	8 (17.4%)	6	1	2	0
2015	57	10 (17.5%)	6	3	2	1
Totals	472	81 (17.2%)	38	26	19	9

Findings

Hong Kong's identity work is often reflected in its cinema. Through the production and international distribution of its films, Hong Kong can highlight its unique attributes and simultaneously negotiate its anxieties over Chinese sovereignty. The following passages identify four prominent themes that comprise a framework for city branding through cinema.

Thematic findings from content analysis

Promote local culture

"Local culture" is a term that refers to the everyday experience within specific localities. Local culture has many dimensions, but some of the more prominent ones include language, food, values, and political identity. According to scholars, the city's relation with China often reflexively defines Hong Kong local culture. Before the 1997 handover, Hong Kong local culture might be "seen as a process of dissociation from the economic, social, and political life of the mainland as well as a formation of local culture vis-à-vis the colonial cultural domination" (Fung 2001; p. 595). In this way, the concept of resistance became a major aspect of Hong Kong culture. In the postcolonial era (e.g., post-1997), these sentiments continue although Hong Kong locals now face the "reality of appropriating a new dual Hong Kong-China identity" (Fung 2004, p. 399). Representations of mundane local life and the negotiation of cultural identity are thematic elements that filmmakers play up in Hong Kong films produced between 2008 and 2015.

Hong Kong filmmakers often used the local culture and socio-cultural issues as backgrounds for their stories. Consistent with the "new localism" strategy, these films

have a double articulation. On the one hand, the local issues that serve as the backdrop for stories reflect the anxieties of Hong Kong citizens. Yet, the distribution of these films is also directed toward global consumers who may not always understand the localized nuances, but may appreciate them as a window into Hong Kong "slice of life." Within the sample, 46.9% (38 of 81) of films (6.4% of all films between 2008 and 2015) promoted local culture. While 24 of the 38 (63.2%) films were dramas (e.g., Ann Hui's *A Simple Life* 2011), the attention to Hong Kong local culture was also present in lighthearted comedies (e.g., GC Boo Bi's *Temporary Family* 2014). Films promoting local culture fall under several varieties: movies that tackle contemporary Hong Kong social issues, films that revisit the city's nostalgic past, and introspective visions that articulate how citizens see themselves and the city.

Many Hong Kong films are meditations on socio-cultural issues that the city faces, and particularly Hong Kong-China relations. For example, Flora Lau's *Bends* (2013) explores issues in Mainland-Hong Kong birth tourism. The story centers on the relationship between a Hong Kong socialite, Anna, and her Mainland Chinese driver, Fai. Fai's desperate attempts to bring his wife to Hong Kong from Shenzhen, China, to have their second child, reflect the consequences of China's one-child policy. Other local issues addressed by Hong Kong films include poverty and neglect. Ann Hui's critically acclaimed 2008 documentary, *The Way We Are*, focuses on the everyday lives of low income citizens living in Hong Kong's Tin Shui Wan, a land reclamation project rife with poverty and crime. Hui followed up *The Way We Are* with *A Simple Life* (2011), which is a biography of Chung Chun Tao, an elderly woman who is forced into a crowded convalescent home in the Sham Shui Po district after suffering a stroke. Her one remaining relative, played by Andy Lau, is a busy film



executive who is never around. In *A Simple Life*, Hui critiques young citizens on their neglect of Hong Kong's aging population.

Another variation of local culture is nostalgic films that depict Hong Kong's colonial past. By framing the past in rosy-colored lens, these films set up a contrast that is instantly legible by local audiences: the colonial past were the "good old days," while the current milieu under Chinese rule is more uncertain. Nostalgic films are often set in mid-twentieth century Hong Kong, a turning point in the city's modernization. For example, Alex Law's *Echoes of the Rainbow* (2009) is a semi-autobiographical story about a shoemaker's son who grows up during 1960s Hong Kong. The political tumult of the 1960s is placed into the distant background, though, in favor of romanticized collages of scenic Hong Kong landscapes, and warm, family narratives. *Echoes of the Rainbow* prominently features the historic architecture of Hong Kong's Wing Lee Street, and the popularity of the film aided in real life conservation efforts to preserve the buildings.

Some Hong Kong films adopted introspective storylines, where Hong Kong, its identity, and history are the central topics. For instance, *A Decade of Love* (2008) is a series of fictional short films that commemorate the 10-year anniversary of the Chinese re-unification, and illustrates Hong Kong's changing cultural geography in the decade since. Similar in format to *A Decade of Love*, *Ten Years* (2015) presents five short films set in 2025, and imagines the ramifications of Chinese rule. For example, Jevons Au's segment, titled "Dialect," presents a future where Mandarin, the national dialect, becomes the main dialect in Hong Kong, establishing class distinctions; citizens who speak Cantonese are marginalized, second-class citizens, who do not receive the full benefits that befall citizens who speak Mandarin. Chow Kwun-Tai's segment, titled "Self-Immolator" is even more direct; it depicts a protestor who wants to re-involve the UK in Hong Kong-China relations, and sets himself on fire to gain the attention of the British consulate.

Freedom of expression

Hong Kong's designation as a Special Administrative Region of China means that the city's artistic outputs are not subject to the same censorship standards of the Mainland. While Hong Kong-Mainland co-productions often placate the Chinese market by self-censoring political, social, and sexual topics deemed inappropriate by the Chinese government, some filmmakers have taken advantage of Hong Kong's comparatively liberal censorship laws to explore subject material that could never play in China. For global audiences, progressive positioning of Hong Kong cinema reifies the city as a haven for creative

visionaries who push political and thematic boundaries. Within the sample, 33.1% (26 of 81) of films (5.5% of all films) were coded with "freedom of expression" (Table 1). Of the 26 films, 13 (50%) were Category III (e.g., adults only) films and ribald comedies. Films that best embody Hong Kong's freedom of expression explore sexual and sexual identity topics.

The mid-2000s saw a resurgence of the sex exploitation genre in Hong Kong. These "sexploitation" films merit little critical value and carry the "Category III" adults-only rating. Yet, Category III films are culturally significant because their existence is symbolic of Hong Kong's freedom of expression; the gratuitous sex and nudity displayed in the film would not pass strict Chinese censors. The resurgence began with Cash Chin's *The Forbidden Legend: Sex and Chopsticks* (2008), whose successful box office performance spawned a sequel and a number of imitators, including *3D Sex and Zen: Extreme* (2010), *Due West: My Sex Journey* (2012), and *Naked Ambition 3D* (2014).

Films that explore sexual identity have also existed for a long time in Hong Kong. For example, Wong Kar Wai's critically acclaimed *Happy Together* (1997), which centered on a turbulent relationship between two gay men, was lauded for its sophisticated exploration sexual identity deemed controversial for its time. In the current milieu, Hong Kong filmmakers have continued the exploration of sexual identity in convention-defying ways, and their relative openness to sexual identity topics stands in stark contrast to Chinese cinema's aversion to these topics. For example, Danny Chen Wan-Cheung (*aka* "Scud") has produced and directed a series of controversial films that depict gay male relationships, including *City Without Baseball* (2008), *Permanent Residence* (2009), and *Voyage* (2013). Each of these films pushed the censors by depicting gay sex and male nudity. The films played in Hong Kong, and international film festival, but did not have distribution in China.

Highlight regional localities

By prominently featuring city localities and landmarks in movies, media producers promote tourism to cultural sites depicted in the film. Within the sample, 23.4% (19 of 81) of films (4.0% of all films between 2008 and 2015) highlighted regional localities. Of the 19 films, 9 (47.4%) were comedies; if city officials and media producers want to promote tourism, it is perhaps best to do that via light-hearted fair rather than foreboding dramas. While most movies in the sample were filmed in Hong Kong or its surrounding areas, these films blatantly promoted regional localities, or movies where the localities played such a role in the story that they were *defacto* "characters" unto



themselves. Two such localities are Macau, and Lan Kwai Fong.

Macau, a former Portuguese colony located 64 km west of Hong Kong, is East Asia's largest gambling and entertainment center. Macau is a Special Administrative Region in its own right, separate from Hong Kong. But within Chinese popular culture, Macau is often linked to Hong Kong due to its proximity and its Cantonese speaking population. Macau's opulent casinos and nightlife make it a popular backdrop for Hong Kong films, particularly those of the gambling genre. For instance, *The Man From Macau* films (2014 and 2015), *Look for a Star* (2009), and *Poker King* (2009) feature glamorous shots of Macau's casinos and world-class hotels, which highlight the hedonistic aspects of the city. The romantic comedy, *Guia In Love* (2015), features the Chapel of Our Lady Guia, one of Macau's famous landmarks, as its centerpiece. Hong Kong cinema also highlights other aspects of Macau's cultural offerings. *Unbeatable* (2013), a "Rocky-style" mixed martial arts film, establishes Macau as a legitimate fight entertainment destination, and *SDU: Sex Duties Unit* (2013) glamorizes the sex tourism industry that is sometimes associated with Macau's underbelly.

Another locality that has been promoted in film is Lan Kwai Fong, a popular square located in Hong Kong's Central district. Lan Kwai Fong is densely populated with over 100 restaurants, bars, and clubs, and is a hotspot that caters to locals and expatriates looking for nightlife, food, alcohol, and entertainment. The three *Lan Kwai Fong* films produced between 2011 and 2013, are, essentially, long-form commercials that showcase the district. The movies display the lifestyle of contemporary Hong Kong youth, and puts Lan Kwai Fong's clubs, bars and streets in full display.

Claim historic figures

Through associations with historic figures, the city can highlight its historic significance and cultural impact to its citizens and people around the world. Movies allow city officials and filmmakers the artistic license to revise a historic figure's relationship with the city and manufacture cultural myths that can disseminate into the rest of the world. Within the sample, 11.1% (9 of 81) of films (1.9% of all films between 2008 and 2015) link significant historic figures to Hong Kong. The 9 films were all from the action/martial arts genre. Martial arts figures are popular subjects, since martial arts films are popular to international consumers and these myths can easily diffuse into the rest of the world through them. Historic figures that have been linked to Hong Kong include: Bruce Lee and Ip Man.

Bruce Lee—a popular martial artist, philosopher, and actor who obtained global icon status during the 1970s—is one of Hong Kong cinema's most significant cultural exports. Lee was a student of the Wing Chun school of martial arts, but later founded his own martial arts philosophy, which he dubbed Jeet Kune Do. Lee was born in the USA and lived there for the majority of his life. Yet, Hong Kong was where Lee spent his adolescence, and it was during the "Golden Age" of Hong Kong cinema when his acting career blossomed. In the 1970s, Lee starred in five feature films, produced by Golden Harvest. These films, which include *The Big Boss* (1971) and *Fist of Fury* (1972), received international distribution and shot Lee to international fame.

Over 35 years after his death, Bruce Lee has become the subject of Hong Kong cinema. *Bruce Lee, My Brother* (2010) is a biography of Lee's adolescent Hong Kong years, and notably ends with Bruce leaving Hong Kong for the USA. Yet, by emphasizing the time period that Lee spent in Hong Kong, the film is evidence of Hong Kong media producers laying claim to one of its native sons. At the time of this study, another film, *Birth of the Dragon*, was in the initial phases of development. The film is centered on Lee's famed duel with rival martial artist, Wong Jack Man, and the genesis of Lee's *Jeet Kune Do* style.

Additionally, Hong Kong cinema established a link with Bruce Lee in roundabout ways. For example, *Legend of the Fist: The Return of Chen Zhen* (2010) features the titular character played by contemporary martial artist-actor, Donnie Yen. But film aficionados will recognize that Bruce Lee first played the Chen Zhen character in *Fist of Fury* (1972). The mantle of Chen Zhen was later adopted by Jet Li, another internationally recognized martial artist-actor, in *Fist of Legend* (1994). Through a fictional character, Hong Kong cinema effectively laid claim to its martial arts lineage, from Bruce Lee to Jet Li to Donnie Yen.

Another figure that has seen the historic treatment in Hong Kong cinema is Ip Man, a martial artist who practiced and taught the *Wing Chun* style, which emphasized close-distance striking and defense. Up until the mid-2000s, Ip Man was a relatively obscure personality. Since 2008, there have been no less than six films about Ip Man. The sudden proliferation of films of which Ip Man was the title subject is no accident. The idolization of Ip Man is a means by which filmmakers develop a hero narrative that is indigenous to Hong Kong; not only was Ip Man based in Hong Kong, he was also the teacher of Hong Kong's most famous export, Bruce Lee. This relationship is alluded to in the closing credits to the 2008 *Ip Man* film, starring Donnie Yen, and made explicit at the concluding scene of *Ip Man II* (2009), where a young Bruce Lee asks Ip Man to train him so that he can fight people he did not like; the Wing Chun master tells Bruce to come back when he is older.



Subsequent Ip Man films reify this lineage, with a teenage Bruce Lee (played by Daniel Chan) making an appearance in *Ip Man III* (2015) and passing references in other Ip Man movies. By emphasizing and exaggerating Ip Man and Bruce Lee’s relationship, Hong Kong cinema drew a direct line between two martial arts forefathers, firmly entrenching them within Hong Kong.

Through the six Ip Man movies, three starring Donnie Yen, and three unrelated film franchises with different leading actors—*The Legend is Born—Ip Man* (2012), *Ip Man: Final Fight* (2013), and *The Grandmaster* (2013)—Hong Kong filmmakers effectively cobbled together, in piecemeal fashion, a grand chronology of the man’s life. The Donnie Yen films focuses on Ip Man at peak maturity, while *The Legend is Born—Ip Man* features a young Ip Man, and *Ip Man: Final Fight* has actor Anthony Wong playing an elderly Ip Man. It is important to emphasize that all films are heavily fictionalized. For instance, Ip’s confrontation with “Frank,” played by former boxing champion Mike Tyson, in *Ip Man III* never actually occurred. These historic liberties lend credence to the idea that Hong Kong filmmakers are more interested in developing a mythic Hong Kong hero than a true-to-life biography.

Intersecting thematic findings with city branding initiatives

To provide a deeper level of analysis, researchers examined whether BrandHK and CreateHK city branding initiatives exhibited the four themes from the filmic content analysis (Table 2). Of the two initiatives, CreateHK was more impactful in interweaving film and city branding. Between 2008 and 2015, CreateHK and the Film Development Fund sponsored the production of 27 films. Many of these films bore little relevance to city branding, but there was a subset of films that had strong ties to city branding.

CreateHK and the Film Development Fund sponsored six films with storylines that pertained to local Hong Kong

culture and nostalgia. These films, which include *Echoes of the Rainbow* (2010), *Bends* (2013), and *The Way We Dance* (2013), would be classed under Hong Kong’s “new localism” film movement. The city branding initiative also funded the development of *Beach Spike* (2011), a beach volleyball comedy shot in Hong Kong’s Paradise Cove. CreateHK also supported two controversial films that leaned on Hong Kong’s comparatively liberal censors. *Microsex Office* (2011) is a ribald sex comedy, and Fruit Chan’s *The Midnight After* (2014) is political commentary disguised as a postapocalyptic film. According to a LoveHKFilm critic, “[*The*] *Midnight After* depicts Tai Po [a region in Hong Kong] as a place cut off from the rest of the world where normal rules no longer apply – maybe just like Hong Kong after the Handover, where people have rights but cannot vote, and have resorted to compromising their humanity for simple survival.” CreateHK did not fund any films that focused on historical figures.

The BrandHK city branding initiative has a wider scope, where Hong Kong cinema was a supporting aspect. Having said that, BrandHK does reflect the thematic findings. In terms of local culture, BrandHK’s “Faces of Hong Kong” promotional campaign, which features vignettes of local citizens, is remarkably similar in tone and content to films of the new localism movement in the sense that the video shorts leverage local people and culture as a selling point to both internal and external stakeholders. Additionally, the BrandHK website lists a long catalog of Hong Kong’s regional highlights for tourists, including Lantau Island, West Kowloon Cultural District, which is a new center for the arts, film and entertainment. BrandHK also identifies Hong Kong as the “Hollywood of the East,” and names its native sons, including Jet Li, Jackie Chan, and Bruce Lee, who began their illustrious careers in the city’s cinematic industry. However, BrandHK does not appeal to the region’s relative freedom of speech.

Table 2 Intersecting thematic findings with city branding initiatives

Thematic findings	CreateHK	BrandHK
Promote local culture	Funded the production of six films that have a local-orientation: <i>Echoes of the Rainbow</i> (2010), <i>Bends</i> (2013), <i>A Complicated Story</i> (2013), <i>The Way We Dance</i> (2013), <i>Doomsday Party</i> (2013), <i>Wonder Mama</i> (2015)	“Faces of Hong Kong” promotional campaign feature vignette videos that feature Hong Kong citizens and everyday life
Freedom of expression	Funded two films that have controversial material: <i>Microsex Office</i> (2010), <i>The Midnight After</i> (2014)	Not applicable
Highlight regional localities	Funded the production of <i>Beach Spike</i> (2011), which was shot in Paradise Cove	BrandHK’s website lists all of Hong Kong’s cultural sites, and offers itineraries for tourists
Claim historical figures	Not applicable	Identifies celebrities who began their careers in Hong Kong’s cinema industry (e.g., Bruce Lee, Jet Li, Jackie Chan)



Discussion

Like many cities in the world, Hong Kong has turned to city branding to compete for economic and cultural resources in the globalized marketplace (Chu 2013). Through two branding initiatives—BrandHK and CreateHK—Hong Kong emphasized its role as an international center of finance and a regional leader in cultural production. A vital component in both city branding initiatives is Hong Kong's storied cinematic industry. Hong Kong augments city branding efforts through cinema by (1) using local culture as backdrops for stories, (2) emphasizing freedom of expression through films, (3) highlighting regional localities, and (4) claiming and mythologizing historical figures. The findings contribute to research on city branding and proffer significant practical implications.

This study contributes to the city branding literature by offering an actionable framework for city officials, media producers and marketers to implement city branding through cinema. Broadly, this study supports the idea that cinema is an important strategic tool in city branding (Donald and Gammack 2008; Gkritzali et al. 2016). Through a case study of Hong Kong cinema, we identify a four-pronged framework for implementing city branding through film. Thus, the current study represents an extension of purely theoretical city branding approaches, which define and establish the boundary limits of the city branding construct (Kavaritzis 2009; Kavaritzis and Ashworth 2005; Lucarelli and Olof Berg 2011). The results imply that in addition to traditional marketing mix variables, integrated marketing communications, and city infrastructure concerns (Karavatzis 2004; Braun 2012), city officials may want to include cinema as a strategic component in a city branding plan.

Overall, the current study is contextually similar to Donald and Gammack's (2008) research, which examines the intersection of cinema, city branding, and tourism. Donald and Gammack include cinema as one aspect of city branding, but the scope of their research is broader, including city branding through advertising, branding, and other marketing communications. Furthermore, the focus of their work is critical analysis of city branding as opposed to its implementation; their book is "not a manual for those who would brand cities" (p. 1). The current study supports Donald and Gammack's assertion that cinema is an integral part of a city branding strategy, but the results are geared toward city branding implementation as opposed to critical analysis.

Through cinema, a city and its constituents could (re)write their own narratives. In this way, cinema is functionally similar to cultural mega-events, such as the Olympics, which manufacture and communicate a city

identity to the rest of the world (Wu et al. 2013; Zhang and Zhou 2009). Yet cultural mega-events affect an identity that is primarily directed toward external stakeholders (e.g., tourists), and may not necessarily reflect the perspectives of citizens living in the city (Zhang and Zhou 2009). In the case of Hong Kong, cinema has a double articulation in its city branding functions. On the one hand, movies reflect localized stories that resonate with local citizens. On the other hand, some of these films are marketed to global audiences as a cultural product representative of the city. In other words, film is a modality of city branding that can satisfy the needs of both internal and external stakeholders.

Yet, in support of past scholarship, the findings indicate that the scope of city branding may be intra-national, as opposed to international. For example, Karavatzis and Ashworth (2005) suggest that European cities embraced city branding to distinguish themselves from one another in light of conditions created by European integration. The primary objective of city branding efforts in Hong Kong is to differentiate it from other cosmopolitan centers in China, as opposed to cities in the West (Chu 2013). The use of cultural products, such as film, to differentiate may be interpreted as a form of resistance to Chinese cultural imperialism (Chu 2015).

Overall, the results show how cinema and city branding initiatives are linked together to articulate a city identity. In the case of Hong Kong, movies reflect the city's ambivalence over Chinese sovereignty (e.g., *Ten Years*), explore subject matter that would be forbidden on the Mainland (e.g., *City Without Baseball*), highlight regional offerings (e.g., the *Lan Kwai Fong* trilogy), and associate historical figures who are native to Hong Kong (e.g., *Ip Man*). By drawing links between the city and historical figures, Hong Kong is able to author its own indigenous cultural myths, which get disseminated to the rest of the world through the distribution of its films.

Practical implications

The findings proffer several important managerial implications. City officials and media producers can coordinate city branding efforts that positively impact their city's commercial and cultural economies. This paper's findings may be especially relevant to emergent, creative markets. For example, Dubai has made significant efforts to distinguish itself from other cities in the Arab world through its cultural industries, and especially through cinema industries (Hafeez et al. 2016). A key effort in this strategy is the creation of the Dubai Creative Clusters Authority (DCCA), which is an initiative to harvest Dubai's creative talent, foster collaborations with foreign businesses, develop cultural products that are representative of Arab culture, and



disseminate these cultural products to the rest of the world. Abdulhamid Juma, DCCA associate and the Chairman of Dubai International Film Festival, describes the role of cinema in branding Dubai:

We have become the one window, or the single platform for Arab cinema in terms of the end-production of showing the films, or also to start the nurturing and supporting these films [sic], and take them outside the boundaries of the Arab world. Our motto when we started is ‘bridging cultures, meeting minds.’ One of these bridges is to bring the best films. But bridges are two ways. We also need to export good films about [us]—especially in this time when this region is looked at as a terrible region, a region that has a lot of problems and issues. So we have to produce more films, better films, and a vehicle to take those films to people outside of this region. (DCCA 2016)

Consistent with past research, this study’s results supports the call for the integration of city branding courses in business curricula (Sevin 2014; Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2008). City branding entails a different set of principles from traditional branding courses because the marketing mix variables do not properly solve city branding problems. Hospitality and tourism management concentrations may be a natural fit for city marketing and branding courses. An outline for a proposed course might start with conceptual domains and definitions (e.g., what is city branding?), followed by an introduction to implementation frameworks (Braun 2012; Kavaratzis 2004), and, finally, an exploration of the role cultural texts in city branding.

Conclusion

The year 2017 marked the 20th anniversary of Hong Kong’s re-unification with China. The city continues efforts to maintain economic and cultural relevancy in the global market through city branding initiatives. The results

of this study demonstrate how a subset of Hong Kong films produced between 2008 and 2015 complement city branding efforts. Through cinema, Hong Kong and its constituents (re)write their own narratives. In this way, cinema is functionally similar to cultural mega-events, which manufacture and communicate a city identity to the rest of the world (Wu et al. 2013; Zhang and Zhou 2009).

Overall, this study emphasizes the significant role of cinema in city branding work. (Donald and Gammack 2008; Gkritzali et al. 2016). The underlying assertion is that the presence of a creative class (e.g., artists, film producers, architects, and engineers) is an important precursor to successful city branding (Florida 2005). While the results articulate how city officials can achieve a city brand through cinema, the findings themselves do not reflect a comprehensive city branding strategy. Other factors that need to be considered include the city’s actions, advertising and graphic communication, media, urban design, and infrastructure needs (Braun 2012; Kavaratzis 2004).

Future research can address other limitations of the study. One limitation of the study is that the results are drawn from an analysis of Hong Kong branding and cinematic initiatives, and one might argue that the themes may be limited to Hong Kong (Lucarelli and Olof Berg 2011). Thus, future research can examine thematic content from other cinema markets to see if there is consensus with this study’s findings. Second, the findings emerge from a content analysis of films released between 2008 and 2015. An opportunity to investigate whether thematic elements identified in this study existed in earlier periods (e.g., the pre-1997 period) represents an area of future research.

In closing, we hope that this research will stimulate future research that investigates the intersection of city branding and cultural texts.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.



Appendix 1: Summary of destination, place and city marketing/branding literatures

Literature	Definition	Target stakeholder	Key activities	Theoretical challenges	Exemplars
Destination marketing/ branding	Development and promotion of a destination (city, region, nation) to attract tourism and businesses	External stakeholders (tourists, businesses)	Destinations can be brands; development of a unique destination image that identifies and differentiates the destination	The destination image does not always match those of consumers and local residents	Blaine et al. (2005), Cai (2002), Hosany et al. (2006), Koltringer and Dickinger (2015), Morgan et al. (2003), Pike (2005), and Qu et al. (2011)
Place marketing/ branding	Development and promotion of a place (city, region, nation) to encourage tourism, new resident migration, and business relocation	Internal stakeholders (governance, tourism organizations, residents) and external stakeholders	Draws on social marketing, nonprofit marketing, and services marketing. Creation of a positive brand image of a place that reflects the perspectives of all stakeholders	Marketing mix variables do not map well onto place branding; difficult to negotiate place branding's multidisciplinary roots	Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2008), Hafeez et al., Hafeez et al. (2016), Hospers (2004), Skinner (2008), and Warnaby (2009)
City marketing/ branding	Promotion of a city to increase tourism, new resident migration, and business relocation; also a basis for residents to identify with their own city	Internal and external stakeholders	Creation of a positive brand image of a city that reflects the perspectives of all stakeholders	Few measurements studies; limited studies that examine the role of cultural texts in city branding	Braun (2012), Hultman et al. (2016), Kavaratzis (2004), Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005), Lucarelli and Olof Berg (2011), Merrilees et al. (2009, 2013), and Zhang and Zhou (2009)

Appendix 2: Examples of coding procedures

Film	Production year	Meaning unit (from researcher's notes)	Condensed interpretation	Sub-code(s)	Theme
Ten years	2015	Five short films that imagine Hong Kong in the year 2025. Stories are political and critical of the Chinese government... One short film, "Dialect," depicts a future where Mandarin has become the official language of Hong Kong, and citizens who only speak Cantonese receive fewer benefits than Mandarin speakers	Dystopic visions of Hong Kong under Mainland rule; suppression of local (Cantonese) culture and democratic freedoms	New localism; reflexive visions; social issues	Promote local culture
Permanent residence	2009	Scud's followup to <i>City Without Baseball</i> . Essentially, a gay love drama, which features gay themes and male frontal nudity	Gay themes and imagery that would be banned on the Mainland	LGBT themes; Sex exploitation	Freedom of expression
The man from Macau	2014	Reboot of the God of Gambler film series starring Chow Yun-Fat. Relative to the oftentimes violent HK originals, the reboot is a crowd-friendly film... The film plays like a long-form commercial for Macau tourism	Gambling comedy series that takes place in Macau, the gambling capital of the East. City imagery abound	Highlight regional localities	Highlight regional localities
Ip Man 3	2015	The third installment of the popular martial arts series, which focuses on the titular character, who is a founder of the Wing Chun style. The film features a short cameo by Bruce Lee, who was considered a "student" of Ip Man	Ip Man's roots in Hong Kong, and relationship with Bruce Lee are emphasized	Claim historic figures	Claim historic figures



Appendix 3: Triangulation: Examples of intertextual analysis

Movie	Code being triangulated	Excerpt from researcher notes	External source: LoveHKFilm	Secondary external source
Doomsday Party (2013)	Promote local culture	Ho Hong's bank heist thriller contains political and social overtones that would not be apparent to foreigners, but would be instantly recognized by Hong Kong citizens. Some issues include: political protests, rising real estate prices, government corruption, and the general anxiety that underlies Hong Kong nowadays	Solid debut work from director Ho Hong that manages a decent story alongside constant references to Hong Kong social issues	Among the characters in Ho Hong's film is a perturbed ex-schoolteacher who spends his days surveying press cuttings documenting Hong Kong's brewing social turmoil...With its spirited but insubstantial depictions of one too many threads for a two-hour film, his protégé's self-styled social-critique drama skims the surface of Hong Kong's social turmoil like a montage of newspaper headlines. (Hollywood Reporter)
Lan Kwai Fong (2011)	Freedom of expression/ Highlight regional localities	A "dramedy" about the nightlife and love lives of Hong Kong twenty-somethings. As the movie progress from one nightclub to the next, the viewer wonders if this is a long-form commercial for the Lan Kwai Fong district... Like a film about Las Vegas, the film does not have to be good; it just has to give people reasons to go... The film carries a Category III rating, and features sex scenes that are edgy by HK standards	The English title references Hong Kong's famed Central-located bar district, where locals and expats meet to network, get drunk and have plenty of sex... That said, some of the new talent here is notable for their willingness to perform in a daring manner; since many come from modeling, they're used to showing off their bodies, which results in plenty of plunging cleavage, buff chests and bare backs	The first in a trilogy, <i>Lan Kwai Fong</i> tells the story of a group of people who go clubbing together in the famous eponymous district of Hong Kong (often called "LKF"), from their sexual exploits to romantic troubles. <i>Lan Kwai Fong</i> and the other films in its trilogy are considered rather controversial and daring by Asian media standards. (Cinema Escapist)
Ip Man 3 (2015)	Claim Historic Figures	A purely fictional story that expands on the grandmaster's mythology. The film's contribution is the implied relationship between Ip Man and a young man named Bruce Lee... an attempt to string together the Hong Kong's martial arts lineage that began with Ip Man, passed to Bruce Lee, and continued with actor Donnie Yen	<i>Ip Man 3</i> actually begins with a meeting between Ip Man and Bruce Lee (Chan Kwok-Kwan), but after an audition, Lee is shown the door and Ip Man continues not being Bruce Lee's master	Since "Ip Man" release in 2009, a sequel helmed by Yip and four other related biopics have appeared, including Wong Kar-wai's "The Grandmaster" and novelist-auteur Xu Haofeng's "The Master," an apocryphal yarn about the hero's mentor Chan Wah-shun. Although none have secured the permission of Bruce Lee's trust to incorporate him (or in this production's case, his hologram) in a substantial way, "Ip Man 3" comes close to capturing his charisma in two playful scenes. (Variety)

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