

# Mega-events and City Branding: A Case Study of Shanghai World Expo 2010\*

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City branding strategies are widely adopted by many cities in the context of intensified urban competition. Based on an analysis of official branding strategies through Shanghai World Expo 2010 and an attitudinal survey of the participants' understanding of Shanghai, this paper studies the effectiveness of Shanghai branding by mega-events. Shanghai World Expo 2010 has some active impacts on the city branding; however, there exists a mismatch between the identity as branded by the municipal government and the realities as experienced by residents and tourists, and Shanghai World Expo could have limited impacts on the city branding in the long run. Resident- and tourist-oriented contents should be the core value of "Better City, Better Life". Establishing issue-based institutional mechanisms for wider public participation and collaboration in city branding is necessary.

*Keywords:* city branding, World Expo, mega-events, identity, Shanghai

Globalization has intensified the competition among cities for markets, investments, businesses as well as tourists. City branding is widely recognized as an effective strategy to enhance a city's comparative advantages. In a highly competitive market, cities have to shape a positive image and differentiate themselves. Marketing the city's unique culture, history, comfortable living, and lifestyle is widely practiced to attract more resources in a competitive environment (Evans, 2003; Kneesel, Baloglu, & Millar, 2010; Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2004). The strategy of city branding plays a unique role to pursue opportunities for the local society (Kavaratzis, 2009). Many cities take advantage of such chances, creating a unique profile, although they always meet challenges (Baker, 2007; Trueman, Cook, & Cornelius, 2008). In this study, city branding refers to a strategy that presents a city with an unforgettable identity and an instrument that can convey a city's core values.

With closer integration into global markets, Shanghai, Beijing, Shenzhen as well as other Chinese cities

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are competing for a place in a wider area. City branding becomes strategically important in this process. Shanghai, the economy, finance, and cargo center of China, was entitled to host the World Expo 2010. The Expo has been the greatest event ever held in a developing country, with an attendance of around 84 million people, above 350,000 visitors a day over six months from May 1 to October 31, 2010. Registrations have come from 193 countries and 48 international and regional organizations (Shanghai Bureau of World Expo Coordination Executive, 2010a). Though Shanghai has a long history as an economic center, it has a relatively short history of branding. Rigorous studies that evaluate Shanghai's brand from both theoretical and empirical perspectives are few.

The objective of the study is to examine the effectiveness of Shanghai branding by reviewing theoretical insights into literature and investigating the understanding of the mega-events, Shanghai World Expo 2010 in the general public. It analyzes to what extent Shanghai branding has caught the city's good attributes and the lessons that can learn for the improvement of city branding. It shows that Shanghai has certain good qualities used for city branding, but its officially-designated identity and core values have not been accepted by the public. There is a mismatch between the city's identity branded by the government and realities experienced by the public. The Expo changed part of the city's appearance physically, but it did not change the general experience of Shanghai.

The rest of this study is organized as follows. Part II reviews strategies used in city branding and important considerations in city branding evaluation in literature. Part III is the methodology of this study. Part IV is an overview and analysis of the case of Shanghai, first by narrating the official designation of the city's identity, and then discussing public perspectives on the designated identity and values. The final part is conclusion from the empirical investigation and draws some lessons in the city branding practice.

### **Mega-events and City Branding**

The concept of product branding can be transplanted to city branding. Product branding and marketing have some inspirations for city branding. Any product brand implies physical or socio-psychological attributes and beliefs with the product (Simoes & Dibb, 2001). A city can be ascribed with a set of values fostered from the long course of urban development (Anholt, 2007; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). Like a product that possesses utility, a city can generate utility functions that customers can experience through daily business and other activities. Cities can be looked as spatially extended products and compete with each other as competition in a product market.

A city usually has certain identifiable images perceived by its people. A brand strategy brings residents, tourists as well as the wider international community the ambitions and appeal of a place (Anholt, 2007). An established literature suggests that cities wanting to flourish must deliver distinctive, memorable, and rewarding experiences to their target consumers (Dinnie, 2008). One crucial strategy within city branding is the creation of the city's identity from a range of contextual variables such as history, demography, economy, or even politics. The city's identity is a complex mixture of a city's spatial configuration and its socio-cultural values. City branding needs to synthesize various characteristics and transform them into a unique and irreplaceable identity (Smidt-Jensen, 2006).

Consensus on the city's identity is one of the key steps in city branding, which concerns with how culture and history, economic growth and social development, infrastructure and architecture, landscape and environment, among other things, can be combined into a saleable identity that is acceptable to the public. The

main challenge is how to delimit a city's identity in a manner that is acceptable, marketable, and presentable in a daily manner. Therefore, city branding often leads to disputes over competing representations, understanding, and identification of the city. The city's identity and core values cannot be seen as neutral statements of fact, but must appear as claims and accusations exchanged with a variety of interest groups (Kavaratzis, 2009).

An important issue of city branding is: How the city is understood by all groups. The branding is of a success, if it is able to deliver identity and core values that are deemed valid, distinctive, appealing, durable, and communicable (Gertner & Potler, 2004). Since many cities have similar characteristics to present, effective city branding is to create a unique identity distinguishing one from another. City authorities have their own aspirations and are responsible for the implementation of city branding, and people communicate their experience with the city on various occasions and in various forms. People usually translate their evaluations and judgments into their own understandable identity of the city. Therefore, city branding should convey both the intention of city authorities and the experience of its people.

City branding can be understood within a three-level communication framework. The first level refers to physical and observable aspects from which a city can be seen. The second level consists of propaganda tools that a city adopts to market itself. The third level is people's communication about a city through their voices, and those of the media. In the process of city branding, these multi-level communications should be concerned (Morgan et al., 2004; Kavaratzis, 2009; Derudder, Taylor, Witlox, & Catalano, 2003).

Mega-events play an important role in city branding because such events always draw both domestic and foreign sustainable attention. Mega-events can attract funds, create jobs, increase tourism incomes for the host city, and bring economic and social benefits although much investment is needed in the related field (Short, Breitbach, Buckman, & Essex, 2000). Mega-events can produce significant changes of urban landscape and urban functions that have a positive effect on the city branding (Jafari, 1988). These changes always include producing new landmarks of urban space and architectures for hosting and servicing the event; introducing new markets and marketing of event-centered commodities and souvenirs; upgrading the position of the host city through improvement of international relations and enhancement of economic and social capacities; and publicizing the city's identity through media coverage, tourist visits, and public participation (Essex & Chalkley, 1998; Whitson & Macintosh, 1996).

City branding is evaluated based on people's readings on the city. Anholt (2007) identified six distinct aspects, through which a city was perceived and city branding can be evaluated. They are as follows:

- (1) Place: it mainly includes physical aspects, appearance, and physical attributes;
- (2) Presence: it mainly includes familiarity, status, standing, and global contribution;
- (3) People: it mainly includes cultural alignment, friendliness, cultural diversification, and safety;
- (4) Pulse: it mainly includes vibrancy and interesting activities for residents and tourists;
- (5) Potential: it mainly includes economic and educational opportunities for future development;
- (6) Prerequisite: it mainly includes living standards, basic infrastructure, and public amenities.

The above aspects cover both tangible and intangible dimensions of a city's developments, which will be analyzed against the strategy and effects of Shanghai branding in the following sections.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design and Sample Selection**

According to the development of theoretical insights into the city branding literature and empirical

analysis based on case studies, Shanghai branding evaluation is based on a review of city branding literature and a study of relevant official documents, interviews with officials from the municipal government, and an attitudinal survey conducted. Based on the municipal objectives to brand Shanghai as an international finance, economy and cargo center, the paper divided the questions into four parts under the guide of Anholt's (2007) and Kavaratzis's (2009) frameworks of city branding valuation. The questions are to be answered from five, being the highest score and the strongest agreement, to one, being the lowest score and disagreement. Open questions are provided through which the respondents can provide additional answers and suggestions in free-text form.

Table 1 summarizes the demographic profile of the respondents. A total of 180 people responded to the survey. After the data screening procedure, the number of usable questionnaires was 174. There were 55% males and 45% females, 25% single and 75% married in the study. The respondents' age ranged from about 20 to 60 years old. Occupations of the respondents were college students, corporate employees, service job workers, self-supported business owners, professional jobs, government workers, and others. Table 1 presents more information on the respondent profile.

Table 1

*Respondent's Demographic Profiles*

	Before the games ( <i>N</i> = 60)		During the events ( <i>N</i> = 60)		After the games ( <i>N</i> = 60)		Total
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
<b>Gender</b>							
Male	33	55	32	53	31	52	96
Female	27	45	28	47	29	48	84
<b>Domestic or foreign</b>							
Foreign	8	14	13	21	9	15	30
Shanghai residents	28	47	24	40	26	44	78
Other domestic tourists	24	39	23	39	25	41	72
<b>Age group</b>							
Younger than 20	6	10	7	12	8	13	21
20-29 years old	9	15	9	15	11	19	29
30-39 years old	13	21	12	20	13	22	38
40-49 years old	13	21	15	25	14	23	42
50-59 years old	11	19	13	22	11	18	35
60 years old and older	8	14	4	6	3	5	15
<b>Marital status</b>							
Single	15	25	19	31	19	32	53
Married	45	75	41	69	41	68	127
<b>Occupation</b>							
College students	7	11	4	7	5	9	16
Corporate employees	8	14	12	19	11	18	31
Service job workers	10	16	12	20	11	18	33
Business owners	7	12	5	9	6	10	18
Government workers	3	5	3	5	3	5	9
Professional jobs	13	22	13	22	13	21	39
Others	12	20	11	18	11	19	34
<b>Monthly income</b>							

(to be continued)

≤ 1,000 yuan	4	7	31	9	5	9	14
1,000-2,999 yuan	8	13	39	11	7	12	22
3,000-5,999 yuan	21	35	19	32	23	38	63
6,000-9,999 yuan	18	30	20	34	20	34	58
≥ 10,000 yuan	9	15	9	15	5	8	23

*Notes.* One US Dollar is equivalent to 6.30 yuan on December 31, 2011, at China Foreign Exchange Trade Center. Monthly income has not been required to fill in for the foreign respondents.

### Data Collection Procedure and Analysis

The survey conducted in three periods (from May 1 to May 4, 2009, one year before the celebration of the Expo; from May 2 to May 5, 2010, the period shortly after the celebration of the Expo; and from May 1 to May 4, 2011, one year after the Expo). Every 60 questionnaires were distributed respectively in the three surveys. During the first survey, 59 questionnaires were valid and the effective rate was 98%. During the second survey, 57 questionnaires were valid and the effective rate was 95%. During the third survey, 58 questionnaires were valid and the effective rate was 96%. Questionnaires were distributed at three sites:

- (1) The Bund, a landmark and a hot scenic spot for tourists beside the Huangpu River;
- (2) The exhibition venues in the Expo area;
- (3) The People's Square in the downtown area in Huangpu District of Shanghai.

The questionnaire involved two parts, including positive and negative socio-cultural, economic and environmental impacts. The first part is about the information of the respondents. The second is the respondents' impact on the perception of the Expo. The survey was administered by the authors. After the purposes of the study were explained, respondents completed the questionnaire on the spot. Data analysis is conducted in the following.

### Shanghai Branding Strategies

The process of Shanghai branding involved both semantic promotion of certain attributes and physical reconstruction of the city. According to the propaganda and formal official documents on the Expo, the strategy of Shanghai branding was to make the theme "Better City, Better Life" to be understood in a particular way, to publicize its harmony urbanization, and to minimize negative images on its urban demolition and relocation.

#### Branding Shanghai Through Tourism Promotion

Tourism development is an important component of identity building. Tourists are the ambassadors of the city to some extent. Shanghai possesses a lot of unique tourism resources. After the Opium War in 1843, Shanghai had been a foreign concession by the foreign powers until the victory of Anti-Japanese War in 1945. The city had accepted thousands of Jewish escaping from the murder during World War II (Emest, 1995). Those are of historical and cultural significance which regarded as valuable tourism resources within the city.

The effort of Shanghai branding can be traced back to the promotion of the city as a tourist choice since China introduced openness and reform policies. In the city planning formulated in the early 1990s, tourism was first viewed as an important economic sector that could generate direct revenues, increase domestic consumption, create employment opportunities, and restructure urban industries (He, 2011). Later, to transform Shanghai into a first-class metropolis and an attractive destination of tourism, tourism was proposed as a chief goal in the "11th Five-Year Plan" (2005-2010) as well as the medium-term plan of tourism development (Wang & Zhao, 2007).

Various measures were taken to boost tourism. These included massive investment in tourism

infrastructure, creation of new tourist spots, and development of different tour routes that linked the city's historical civilization and recent modernization, formulation of official standards of tourism service (Lu, 2003). Taking its indubitable advantage of combination culture and capitalism civilization, Shanghai successfully attracted increasing number of tourists from domestic and abroad (see Table 2). Tourism development became a fast-growing part of the city's economy, and a tourist-oriented advertising of city branding was undertaking. As a successful tourism promotion, Shanghai Tourism Festival has been successfully held every fall since 1996.

Table 2

*Number of Foreign and Domestic Tourists, and Tourism Income of Shanghai From 2000 to 2010*

Year	Domestic (10,000 person-time)	Foreign (10,000 person-time)	Tourism income (100 million yuan)
2000	6,433.81	181.40	859
2001	8,255.53	204.26	956
2002	8,761.13	272.53	1,098
2003	7,603.38	319.87	1,254
2004	8,505.26	491.92	1,400
2005	9,012.36	571.35	1,812
2006	9,684.69	605.67	1,934
2007	10,210.26	665.59	1,992
2008	11,006.32	640.37	2,014
2009	12,361.15	628.92	2,096
2010	21,463.16	851.12	3,053

*Note.* One US Dollar is equivalent to 6.30 yuan on December 31, 2011 at China Foreign Exchange Trade Center. Source: Shanghai Municipal Statistic Bureau (2001-2008); Shanghai Almanac Compilation Committee and Editorial Department (2001-2011).

### Branding Shanghai Through the Expo

The process of Shanghai branding tried to present a modern and people-oriented city that was reflected in the Expo theme "Better City, Better Life". The unique historical legacy, the city's hospitality, and new developments were taken in city branding. Many publicity programs marketed Shanghai as an open global city with oriental and western civilization and embraced modernity as part of the preparation campaign. These identities were branded symbolically through the event's logo, the theme, and the mascot (see Figure 1) and materially through the construction of landmark exhibition buildings.



Figure 1. a. The logo of the Expo; b. The theme of the Expo; c. The mascot of the Expo.

The theme for the Expo is "Better City, Better Life" that aims to promote sustainable and harmonious living in cities since the population living in urban areas has surpassed those in the rural areas. The logo and

event slogans enunciated Shanghai as a member of the international family, sharing the same vision with other international members. The mascot *Haibao* (treasure of the sea) articulated the traditional Shanghai culture of port and sea. The blue, cartoon-like mascot has been highly praised for its innovative use of the Chinese character 人 (a person). Shanghai made a proactive interpretation of the city's values, emphasizing the urban changes that would come in the future.

However, the official identities and values are challenged by the economic, environmental and political reality observed by the participants. Economically, Shanghai is currently China's largest economic and financial center, which is achieved by financial policy monopoly rather than free market competition. Environmentally, due to lack of effective controls, ecological degradation is widely visible especially in other Yangtze Delta. Politically, livelihood such as high housing price undeniably meets a fair amount of criticism on various occasions (Black & Bezanson, 2004; Wu, 1999; Chiu, 2002). Shanghai is thought of experiencing all of the above problems.

To address these contentious problems, Shanghai makes a proactive interpretation of the city's values, emphasizing the achievements that have been made and promising the changes that would come in the future. Shanghai professes that the hosting of the Expo would produce opportunities for new developments of the city and upgrade the city's position in the hierarchy of the global city system (Shanghai Bureau of World Expo Coordination Executive, 2010b). With regard to the "Better City", Shanghai promised to prioritize environmental protection in the planning, designing and construction of the Expo projects, with the implementation of strict ecological and environmental standards. In responding to "Better Life", Shanghai argued that the Expo would enhance communication and deepen understanding among the people with different cultural backgrounds.

### Evaluation of Shanghai Branding

The survey tries to get the extent of the respondents' understanding and judgment on the efforts and effects of city branding after they personally experienced the Expo. Under the sample of the survey, Table 3 shows the mean scores that the sample respondents think of different aspects of Shanghai. The survey further evaluated the effect of city branding by investigating the impact of the Expo as a platform on the promotion of Shanghai's identity and core value.

Table 3

#### *Ratings on the Expo Attributes*

Variable	Dimension	Measurement	Mean score (N = 180)
International status	Economy	Development of service economy and business climate	4.1
	Population	Cultural mix of residents presence of international communities	3.5
	Infrastructure	Quality of public transport and cybernetic infrastructure	3.8
Cultural significance	Liberal arts	Knowledge on Shanghai opera and handicrafts	3.9
	Heritage constructions	Landmark building, protection of local traditional culture	4.2
	Place-based culture	Appreciation of local core values and cultural philosophies	3.8
Livability	Lifestyle	Understanding of the Shanghai dialect, food, and entertainment	4.0
	Environmental aspects	Cleanness and attractiveness of built environment	3.7
	Provision of public facilities	Access to cultural facilities, such as libraries, museums, and theatres	3.6

(to be continued)

The impact of the Expo	Standard of living	Service, education, and accommodation	3.5
	Governance	Transparency, effectiveness, public involvement, and public security	2.8
	Economy promotion	Enhancement of competitive advantage, attracting investment, and technological progress	3.8
	Local identity creation	Understanding of the slogan, the mascots, and the logo	4.1
	Image enhancement	New cityscapes and promotion activities supporting city marketing	3.9
	Attractiveness increase	People's awareness of the city, democratic liberalization, and creation of a harmonious society	3.1

*Note.* The rating indicates the degree of agreement and is on a five-point scale, with five being the highest score and one being the lowest score.

### Main Findings of the Survey

Although the Expo has changed part of the city's physical outlook in a short period, it has not fundamentally changed the residents and tourists' experience of Shanghai. Specifically, several points can be made on how they understood the city according to the responses:

(1) Shanghai's international status was acknowledged, but different dimensions of international profile were valued differently. Respondents gave a high score to the economic and financial role played by Shanghai, and some considered the city as a world superstar city in finance and economy because of the successful achievement of rapid economic growth in the past three decades. Some respondents were impressed by Shanghai's first-class infrastructure, such as the global connectivity and the capacity of the Shanghai Pudong and Hongqiao International Airports. Public participation and democrat received poor ratings. The ethnic diversity and the scale of ethnic congregation were not comparable to those found in other global cities. The survey supported that Shanghai branding was essentially a top-down enforced project with little branding initiative from the grassroots level, passive public participation and involvement in the process;

(2) The tangible aspects of the city's culture were appreciated in Shanghai branding, whereas the intangible values of culture were not widely accepted. Shanghai received a high recognition as a Chinese market-oriented culture center, but the philosophies of Shanghai's culture were not well conveyed in city branding operation. Shanghai had been colonial for nearly 100 years which formed its unique colonial culture. This understanding went alongside the combination of Oriental and Western culture. A few respondents thought that Shanghai culture represented a part of the Chinese socialist market economy culture which was a diverse country in terms of ethnic and cultural compositions. Many respondents had a low appraisal for Shanghai's human culture environment. They had a negative view on social issues, such as equality and social justice, and the transparency and effectiveness of urban governance;

(3) People's perceptions before and after the Expo greatly changed. Residents held high expectations about the events with various economic and cultural benefits before the Expo, although they were aware that these benefits would come with a cost. However, they realized that the benefits generated by the events were lower than they had expected. Although huge investments were made to improve the city's road network, the traffic jams threatened the city (see Table 4). Several respondents raised a question whether it was worthwhile to spend a colossal sum of money hosting the events. The following accident had negative effect on the respondents during the survey. One month after the close of the Expo, a 28-story apartment building in Shanghai erupted in flames, left 53 dead and more than 70 injured. Yet despite of the magnitude of the fire and the public demand for answers, Shanghai officials were keen to evade media questions concerning the disaster.



Table 4

*Principal Component Factor Analysis on Residents' Perceptions on Negative Impact*

	Mean ( <i>N</i> = 180)
Negative impact items	
Negative economic perspective	4.6
Increased price of real estate	4.2
Increased goods and service prices	4.4
Excessive spending tax payer's money for preparation of the Expo	4.5
Disorder and conflicts	
Increased crime rate	3.2
More vandalism in your community	3.6
Increased traffic problem and pollution	4.5
Brought congestion in inner city of Shanghai	4.4

*Note.* All items were assessed on a five-point scale (Five being the strongest agreement and one being the lowest score and disagreement).

**The Expo Effect**

Huge investment on urban development propelled the city from its former foreign market and adventurer's paradise image. The municipal government anticipated that Shanghai could surpass the other Asian first tier cities through the hosting of the Expo. Shanghai had shortened the gap between itself and the other superstar cities in terms of economic capacity and dynamics (Zhang & Wu, 2009).

The respondents appreciated the physical changes of Shanghai, but it was pessimistic about the goal of "Better City, Better Life". Many agreed that the high-tech architectures, such as the Chinese venue, could become new tourism resources, whereas few were confident that the Expo alone helped fundamentally improve the overall quality of life for the sake of all Shanghai residents. Tourists complained that one must line up six to nine hours to visit some of the Pavilion, and these internal furnishings and luxury pavilion looked very different from the content, which is not worth waiting for so long (see Figure 2). To lead the trend of "Better City, Better Life" remains a long-term task for creating the international character of Shanghai.



Figure 2. The queue time is six hours for the visit.

What attracted people most to Shanghai was not unimaginable modernization but the combination of Oriental and Western culture and the unique colonial historical heritages. Nearly half of the respondents agreed that the Expo would enhance the city's identity in terms of combination of a strong personality as a former

colonial and energetic economic center. Although the slogan emphasized new trends and challenges that the city wanted to lead and meet, Shanghai's key personality as a culture combination was somewhat overlooked. As the theme slogan of the Expo, "Better City, Better Life" was officially interpreted as a reflection of a harmonious society; it was unclear how this harmony can be materialized through the Expo.

The city's values can be better understood from the daily routines of their economic and social life than the physical landscape. Some local respondents doubted whether the Expo could help much to satisfy material needs to the marginalized groups who represented a large portion of the city's population. Local respondents were seriously concerned about the widening income gap and the far reach of high housing price. The ideological propaganda slogans did not reflect substantial change and overall improvement as the ordinary people expected. Physical decay and substandard housing remained a serious problem in some areas of the city (Shi, 2011; Lamberti, Noci, Guo, & Zhu, 2011).

### Conclusions

City branding is more than an exercise of propaganda slogans or advertisement campaigns. Shanghai branding was lack of common consensus between the government and the public. The contradiction was linked to the absence of a two-way process of communication. Therefore, Shanghai branding should pay more attention to the proper communication, reorganization, and management of the city's identity recognized by the public. Two important points in Shanghai branding process should be emphasized.

Resident-oriented treatment of the livable contents of the city should be the core value of "Better City, Better Life". Social well-being of the ordinary people and living environment should be given more concern. The municipal government should consider more about public recognition instead of sacrificing the interests of socially disadvantaged groups in the process of city branding. Shanghai branding should focus more on the residents and emphasize more social well-being.

Forming consensus should be the guide on the city's identity. There should be common goals between the residents and the municipal government. Residents usually formed their understanding of the city's values through their experience and needs. This requires establishing issue-based institutional mechanisms for wider public participation and collaboration in the decision-making process in public policy, which currently seem insufficient in the case of city branding. Providing wider public participation in the decision-making process is necessary.

Comparative advantages should be fully used in the process of city branding. City branding should address the unique values and images that are consistent with the observable economic and social reality. Thus, any branding initiative must enhance the positive features.

City branding goals cannot be effectively achieved by a single high-profile mega-event. The city's identity needs to be incorporated both in official propaganda routine and the development practices. Although the Expo was hailed as successful mega-events and brought positive effects on the increased levels of tourism for a certain period, its long-term effects on city branding remain to be seen.

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