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The Importance of the Historical Tang Dynasty in Place Branding Contemporary Xi'an

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1. Introduction

There is general agreement among academics and practitioners that places can be branded in a fashion similar to companies or consumer products (Anholt, 2002; Kotler and Gertner, 2002; Morgan and Pritchard, 1999). Place branding has become increasingly important for cities, regions or countries to access the limited pool of tourism, to entice foreign direct investment, and to draw talent. Consequently, a city will employ expansive and creative economic development strategies to position itself as a “distinctive destination for work and play” (Jacobsen, 2009, p. 71). Governments are turning to branding techniques to differentiate their place on the global stage and establish a competitive edge. It is believed that a strong and positive place brand can contribute and support to the sustainable development of a locality (Jaffe and Nebenzahl, 2001; Kleppe and Mossberg, 2006). Various human and physical characteristics ranging from politics, commerce and natural environment to aspects of culture—history, entertainment, sport and science—dramatically impact the perceived value of a place brand. Generally, place branding goes beyond the ambit of tourism (Pike, 2009). To convey clear and consistent signals to diverse target groups, a place brand must have a brand identity to differentiate it clearly from other places.

One effective means of presenting a place brand identity is through a story, a narrative that can be easily communicated (Morgan, Pritchard and Piggot, 2002; Pride, 2002). Just such a narrative might be employed to reconnect contemporary Xi'an to its glorious past as Chang'an, “ancient capital” of thirteen dynasties, a grand cosmopolis marking the gateway to the Silk Road. This research discusses the importance and opportunity of the historical Tang dynasty (618-907) for place branding Xi'an in the 21st century. Despite the city's illustrious past, contemporary Xi'an remains a dusty, provincial industrial mid-western city searching for a brand identity. However, we show that skillful promotion and branding of its splendid past may be one of the keys to the prosperous future economic development of Xi'an.

2. From Place Branding to City Branding

With theoretical roots in product and corporate brands, place branding represents the current evolution of branding principles. The nineties saw product branding develop into corporate branding (Balmer and Gray, 2003; De Chernatony, 1999; Keller, 1998; Keller and Aaker, 1998), and the dawn of the new century brought destination branding. While destination branding deals primarily with tourism, place branding also seeks to court foreign direct investment, attract talent and develop a local export market (Anholt, 2002; Fetscherin, 2010) and looks at potential locales from the vantage of prospective economic development. The unit of analysis of a place brand can be a city, region or a country. Hankinson and Cowking (1993, p.10) define a city brand as “a product or service made distinctive by its positioning relative to the competition and by its personality, which comprises a unique combination of functional attributes and symbolic” or emotional values. Like product brands, cities can satisfy both functional and emotional needs (Rainistro, 2003), and “the attributes that satisfy those needs need to be orchestrated into the city’s unique proposition” (Kavaratzis, 2004, p. 66). Though city branding strategies initially centered on *functional* attractions (e.g., buildings and infrastructure, economic stability, local support and services, and natural environment), recently the focus has shifted to promoting *emotional* elements (e.g., myth and sagas, quality of life, culture, people) (De Chernatony, 2006, Kotler et al., 1999), the better to sell a distinct aura or image of a place. Therefore, a city can choose to promote its functional values, its emotional values or a combination of both. For example, on one hand Paris promotes itself as a “romantic city” (emotional) but also offers some unique functional attractions like the Tour Eiffel, the Louvre or Versailles. History and heritage are other key components to a city’s distinctive brand identity.

Alternatively, cities like Singapore and New York emphasize contemporary elements—their cosmopolitan and international flair. Thus, a city can present its history, its contemporary merits or both. Taking again the example of Paris: on one hand, the city celebrates its rich heritage, its historic city center and monuments; on the other hand, in recent decades, Paris has promoted itself as a regional and global hub of commerce and enterprise, featuring the celebrated emergence of *la Defense*, the major business district featuring 72 ultra-modern glass-and-steel buildings, 180,000 daily workers and 3.5

million square meters of office space. Both historic and contemporary aspects of the city provide different value propositions, needs and objectives. Where the history might attract tourists, the contemporary might attract FDI and talent. This well-matched combination of functionality and emotional resonance makes Paris an even more effective place brand.

To understand the most effective strategies and approaches for city branding, the target city can be divided schematically according to its value provided (functional vs. emotional) and image (historical vs. contemporary). Taking these two key dimensions into account, we can create the following conceptual city branding framework outlining how a city might best configure a brand identity in keeping with its metropolitan personality.

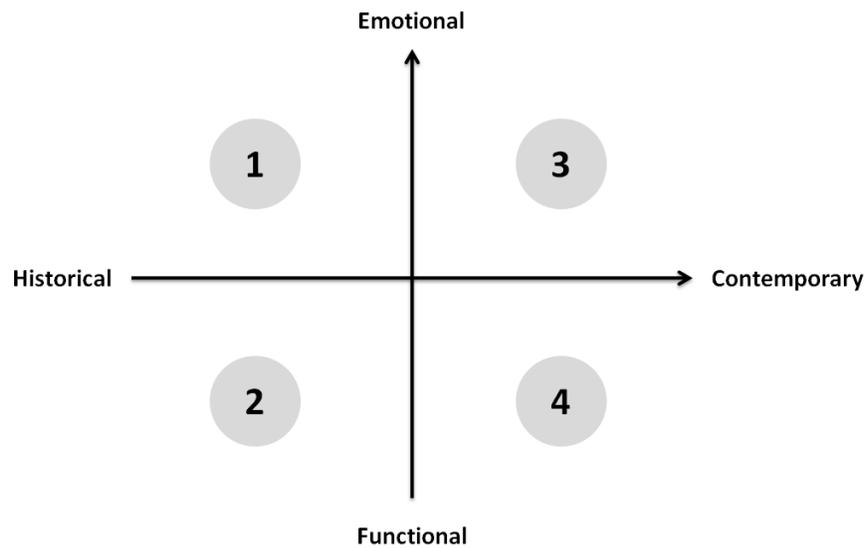


Figure 1: City Branding Framework—horizontal image and vertical value

3. From Tang Chang’an to contemporary Xi’an

3.1. Historical Image – Emotional Values

While Xi’an is renowned for internationally for the famous terracotta warriors of the First Emperor of Qin in nearby Lintong, an immense necropolis billed as the “Eighth Wonder of the World” that has drawn a vast numbers of tourists from within China and abroad since opening to the public in the early 1980s, the city truly reached its apogee almost a millennium later during the Tang dynasty. Chang’an was established as the

political, economic and administrative nexus of a far-flung empire that stretched west along the Silk Road into modern-day Kazakhstan, south into Vietnam, and north well into Siberia and North Korea. Merchant caravans filled the Silk Road that linked China, Central Asia and India, as heavily-laden Bactrian camels carried goods to and from the cosmopolitan and international hub of the Tang empire. With a population of two million, Chang'an, the grand capital, was the largest city in the world at the time. Markets in this planned city, set symmetrically on either side of the N-S axis, overspilled with Malayan patchouli and pepper from India, aromatic camphor from Java, pine seeds and rainbow carpets from Korea; Uygurs lent money; Iranian waitresses served liquor; Persians sold pilaf, figs and pistachios and Turks sesame buns and *nang*-bread (Benn, 2002, and Schafer, 1963). Capitals Gyeongju of Silla Korea and Nara in Japan patterned themselves upon the resplendent Tang capital. The internationalism of the age was also reflected in the religious tolerance that characterized much of the first half of the Tang dynasty. Buddhism linked India, Central Asia, China, Korea and Japan in a larger cultural continuum. In addition, Chang'an was home to many Muslims, Zoroastrians, Manicheans, and Nestorian Christians. An inclusive aura existed in the early Tang, an embracing sense that "the empire is open to all" (Wechsler, 1985).

People of today's Xi'an are keenly aware of this proud heritage. It is precisely this aura of internationalism and cosmopolitanism that city government and private entrepreneurs alike are trying to recapture and reinvent in the 21st century. Our assessment is that Xi'an, with its rich heritage, possesses historical-emotional values. Therefore, creating and amplifying a Tang dynasty aura might serve to impress a distinctive positive and substantive place brand upon the city.

3.2. Historical Image – Functional Values

Some real physical remnants of the Tang dynasty are still extant in metropolitan Xi'an. In the northern suburb, Daming Palace is currently undergoing reconstruction. The former site of Xingqing Palace has become a pleasant city park. Two Islamic mosques originally built in the Tang still stand, though they have been rebuilt several times in subsequent centuries. South of the Ming city walls still stand two famous Buddhist pagodas constructed in the early Tang, Big Goose Pagoda and the Little Goose Pagoda.

Many administrative districts and streets in contemporary Xi'an still bear their names of more than a millennium past, or carry the names of city gates. For instance, the central north-south axis of the city is called Chang'an Avenue, echoing the name borne by both the Han and Tang capitals. There is also a Chang'an district in the southern suburb. Vermilion Bird Road (Zhuque Lu) is named after the South Gate of Tang Chang'an. Parallel Hanguang Road is named after the southwest gate of the imperial city. In Shaanxi Normal University, the foreign students' dormitory is called Qixiyuan, for it stands on the former site of the Tang capital's southeastern Qixia Gate.

The plains and hills of to the north, northeast and northwest of Xi'an are dotted with tombs of Tang rulers. Zhaoling, where the famous Taizong (r. 627-649) was laid to rest, and Qianling, the only tomb in Chinese history where two rulers are interred, have already developed into major tourist destinations.

On the whole, though, few of these Tang sites have been developed. Many have not been restored. In Beijing, the Temple of Heaven is one of the most prominent attractions for domestic and foreign tourism. Nearly a millennium older than its counterpart in Beijing, set between a coal plant and a recycling factory along South Chang'an Road in Xi'an, is the Tang Altar of Heaven, virtually unknown but largely intact. Development of such sites would serve to confirm modern-day Xi'an's connection to Tang Chang'an, creating a sense of civic pride and collective identity.

3.3. Contemporary Image – Emotional Values

Entrepreneurs, urban planners and local government alike are keenly aware of the emotional appeal that the grandeur and splendor of Chang'an still holds. The marketing pitch of a Sino-New Zealand travel service evokes the grandeur of the Tang Capital:

Try to imagine 1400 years ago in the glory days of the Tang dynasty. Visitors to Xi'an encountered a city six times larger than imperial Rome and 40 times larger than medieval London. This is why Xi'an tours are a must-do experience on any China travel. (Xi'an Travel Service, 2010)

Recognition that this nostalgia might be harnessed and capitalized upon can also be seen in the construction of the grand 165-acre Tang dynasty cultural theme park, the Great Tang Hibiscus Garden. Shaanxi province government authorized construction of this "Tang Paradise" in 2004 as part of a larger effort to develop the Qujiang district in the

southeast of the city, situating the massive theme park on the site of the original Hibiscus Garden and Qujiang Lake. The park includes Qujiang River, a stock image in many Tang poems, now an artificial lake on which a UK-based company projects nightly water image movies. Tang dances and court music are performed in Purple Cloud Terrace, the palatial centerpiece of the entire park. In a tower devoted to Tang women, there are lively court scenes from the reign of female emperor, Wu Zetian; and an entire floor devoted to voluptuous beauty Yang Guifei, who bedazzled Emperor Xuanzong. Elsewhere, there are stone replicas of the six famous horses of Emperor Taizong (r. 627-649), testament to his “glorious age of Distant Vision” (*Zhenguan zhi zhi*), an epoch of civil brilliance, grand expansion and equestrian splendor. The theme park also contains an ensemble of bronze sculpture featuring famous Chinese Buddhist pilgrim, Xuanzang, and Monkey, Pig and Friar Sand, his unorthodox trio of disciples immortalized in the Ming dynasty novel *Journey to the West*.

Contemporary local businesses and city planners have consciously affiliated themselves with the past grandeur of Chang’an by incorporating names that echo tradition. South of the Ming walls along Chang’an Avenue, one finds the Tang Paradise Performance Theater, where full-costumed dances and songs are performed along with dinner. Along South Chang’an Avenue there is the Han-Tang Bookstore. The Tang imperial bathhouse is a five-story building with faux imperial red-and-gold décor and curved eaves. Outside the western gates of the recently reconstructed Ming city walls, one passes a garish Flourishing Tang Foot Massage. There is a Tang Paradise Hotel. And just inside the southern gate of the city walls, featuring as its centerpiece an enormous McDonald’s—is the modern Kaiyuan Mall, its name echoing the famous Kaiyuan reign era (712-741) of Tang emperor Xuanzong, a period often referred to as “the flourishing age of Kaiyuan.”

Modeled loosely on its original Chang’an counterpart and built on the same site, a new Western Market is currently under construction. Hu Ji, one of the chief architects and designers of this 21st century marketplace, boasted that the new Western Market will not only capture the essence of the original—a free-wheeling bazaar that featured an array of Indian, Persian and Central Asian goods—but will contain a galaxy of state-of-the-art American and European products (Hu, 2006).

3.4. Contemporary Image – Functional Values

Our assessment is that planned development of functional elements to supplement historical and contemporary emotional values could significantly bolster Xi'an city brand. Recently, to the southwest of the theme park, some major industrial zones (e.g., Xi'an Economic & Technological Development Zone, Xi'an High-tech Industries Development Zone) have been established. The new Xi'an Metro, a subway system, is in progress, and should help relieve the clotted metropolitan infrastructure. With the recently approved planning of Xi'an National Civil Aerospace Industrial Base, there is cause for optimism in the effort to attract both domestic and foreign direct investment and talent to Xi'an.

4. Example: Big Goose Pagoda

Xi'an nascent effort to create a place brand is reflected in the recent dramatic transformation and re-design of Big Goose Pagoda—a functional contemporary public space that conjures collective pride in the city's glorious past. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, there were no walls around the temple, no entry fee, and local children used the overgrown temple grounds as a playground (Zhang, 2006). In the late 1980s, the pagoda was surrounded by souvenir shops, containing the usual assortment of tourist knick-knacks. Today, on the southern end of the pagoda complex there is a huge bronze statue of Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang, erected in 2002. Along the eastern margin, there is a broad promenade connecting the southern and northern squares, large public spaces created in the past five years. The promenade is lined with stall after stall of free marketeers selling everything from carved chops to kids' shoes with wheels in the heel, from spinning tops with whips to *feicui* jade, from glow-in-the-dark halos to Shaanxi paper cuts, from Pepsi, Budweiser and Nestle's ice cream to scroll paintings of the eight frisky colts, the Four Beauties and ghostbuster Zhong Kui. Periodically there are bronze sculptures of Tang scenes: non-Han Chinese merchants, wrestlers, or Confucian court ministers. In the northern square, along the eastern margin, red lanterns reading "Tang" hang from the eaves of the Xi'an Visitors' Center and Kentucky Fried Chicken. Centered on the 216-foot Big Goose Pagoda in the background, there are five huge thirty by one

hundred meter fountains, set like steps, each slightly more elevated than the last (Nepowada, 2006). Every evening, the fountains are illuminated and there is a synchronized water dance that fuses an eclectic blend of Communist party anthems, classical, pop and traditional Chinese music. Natives of Xi'an have long since grown weary of the performance, so the audience of 10,000 to 30,000 that gather nightly is composed of gawking provincials, domestic tourists—for there has been a sunburst in domestic tourism over the last decade—and foreigners. The new vision of monumentality reflected in Big Goose Pagoda and contiguous public spaces, in short, is a carefully calculated hybrid of modernity and history, a nightly celebration linking contemporary Xi'an to historical Chang'an in the newly-created public space just north of Big Goose Pagoda, at once a tribute to a proud history and heritage, and a marketplace where commemoratives of Tang icons like Sanzang and the mercurial Monkey King can be purchased alongside Western fast food.

While this example does not measure relative levels of modernity/traditionalism, the anecdotal evidence suggests that many such new developments will attempt interweave civic pride in Chang'an with current commercial needs of the city and its residents. More cases are needed to make this assertion more definitive. Our assessment is that while Xi'an possesses a strong historical identity, to better attract domestic or foreign investment and talent, the city needs to consciously develop a city brand that exploits, embraces and amplifies this past splendor.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

Beijing has the Great Wall and the Forbidden City, monumental testaments to its past as an imperial capital, paired with contemporary public space Tiananmen, the massive square housing Mao Zedong's Mausoleum. Recently, China's capital proudly hosted the world, staging an awe-inspiring colorful and dynamic Olympic Games in 2008. Shanghai, ever the glittering economic heart of China, is hosting the 2010 World Expo and boasts the massive 350 square kilometer Pudong Development Zone. To compete with these east coast littoral zones, Xi'an needs to re-invent itself.

City branding is understood as the means to achieve a competitive advantage in attracting tourism, investment and talent. It can also help galvanize community

development, reinforce local identity and identification of the citizens with their city, and activate constructive social forces (Kavaratzis, 2004). In this paper we propose a conceptual city branding framework consisting of two main dimensions. One represents a continuum of functional versus emotional values a city can provide and communicate; the second one measures a city's personality on a spectrum ranging from historical to contemporary. By means of preliminary historical analysis examining the meaning and construction of the Tang dynasty brand for the place branding Xi'an, we illustrate that while the city possesses strong historical functional and emotional identity, the contemporary city has not capitalized upon this identity, and has a relatively weak functional and emotional value proposition. The Great Tang Hibiscus Garden, the new public space around Big Goose Pagoda, the new subway system, and the contemporary functional business parks in the southern suburbs all show the potential of a promising new city brand blending emotional and functional, past and present.

While Xi'an has drawn a considerable volume of tourism, it has not yet proven able to attract business, foreign direct investment and talent comparable to Tang Chang'an in the past. To remedy this, the municipal government has decided to continuously broadcast promotional city image commercials every other day, five times a day, from July 1, 2010 until December 31, 2011. The 10-second advertisement emphasizes Xi'an's role as a tourist destination. Under the slogan "Chinese ancient capital, Landscape City – the international tourist destination city of Xi'an in China," the 10 second commercial covers monuments such as the Clock Tower, the Tang Paradise, the Qinling Mountains, and the Chan-Ba ecological zone. It is this sort of national and global self-promotion that can help Xi'an emerge from its present as a second-tier industrial mid-western city. Public and private organizations and companies need to understand how better to leverage both historical image of Chang'an and contemporary events and infrastructure to position the city to not only attract tourism, but also domestic and foreign investment and talents.

Given the proud heritage of Xi'an, the city should be able to position itself along both axes of the model attracting different constituencies, consumers and businesses. Great historical cities like London and Paris have displayed the capacity not only to capitalize upon their storied pasts, but to create new information systems and

infrastructures capable of supporting industry and commerce in the new millennium. While Xi'an is able to evoke its emotional and functional history, the city has been less successful in reinventing itself as a contemporary polis.

What is the role of the government in place branding? To no small extent, China is still centrally planned. In most cases, the central government determines how resources are allocated and which cities/provinces get developmental preference. Shanghai has begun to supplant Hong Kong as a financial center in part due to the purposeful shifting of resources to the mainland, a large investment in physical and soft infrastructure, and direct reporting to the central government. The success of Xi'an's difficult transition into a contemporary world city depends, to some extent, on government priorities.

In this age of information, cities must compete regionally, nationally and globally. Brand strengths and attractiveness dictate strategies a place employs to position, promote and market itself. City planners must also act as marketing managers competent in apprehending and navigating the needs of the corporate world, tourists, specific industries and other stakeholders. How to brand a city remains an exciting area which we hope the academic community will continue to research. The presented framework may be explored using different cities/countries as case studies.

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