

# The multi-level governance of formulating regional brand identities: Evidence from three Mega City Regions in China

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## ABSTRACT

The emergence and expansion of clusters of large metropolitan areas also known as Mega City Regions (MCRs) is a worldwide phenomenon. In China, governmental attempts are made to develop so-called regional brand identities for them. Regional brand identities, as a subspecies of place brand identities, differ from regional identities in the sense that they are the result of conscious branding efforts on the part of public authorities rather than more historically evolved regional identities as experienced by citizens. In this study, the establishment of regional brand identities for three MCRs in China is examined, as these are constituted through and institutionally embedded in intergovernmental relations. We map the perceptions of national, provincial and municipal governments of regional brand identities based on planning documents and relevant interviews. The emergence and stabilization of the regional profiles for China's largest MCRs Pearl River Delta (PRD), Yangtze River Delta (YRD) and Jing-Jin-Ji (JJJ) are featured in their dynamic territorial boundaries, centralized institutionalization and various symbolic meanings. The national government promotes the regional brands to reinforce the strategic awareness and future direction of the region, and these profiles are diffused at the provincial and municipal level.

## 1. Introduction

Large urban conglomerations have emerged in recent decades in various parts of the world and have by now become a prominent phenomenon in the globalized economy (Brenner, 2002; Florida, Gulden, & Mellander, 2008). The reasons for this re-scaling of the state are largely functional in nature in that they were initiated to deal with issues that cannot be addressed within the geographical hierarchy of existing territorial-administrative entities. These new regional entities are expected to engage with economic growth, infrastructure development and various strategies for environmental and landscape preservation. As new regions since the 1970s have typically been planned with the aim to develop or increase the competitiveness of an area, a shared identity is crucial to safeguard the functionality and sustainability of new regions (Castells, 1997).

The rise of such Mega City Regions (MCRs) can be witnessed around the world, and popular cases can be found in Europe, such as South East England, the Randstad, Central Belgium and Rhine-Ruhr (Goess, de Jong, & Meijers, 2016; Hall & Pain, 2006). Similarly in the past two decades, the emergence of MCRs can also be observed in Asia and Latin America. In China, Asia's (and the world's) most populous country,

promoting the strength of regions is regarded as an essential strategy to make its urbanization process manageable and successful (Luo & Shen, 2009; Wu & Zhang, 2007; Yang & Li, 2013). China's MCRs are typical examples of planned new regions, as their territorial boundaries and the developmental visions underlying them are defined in planning documents drafted by the national government. Typical examples are the three most developed and best-known regions: the Greater Pearl River Delta (GPRD), the Yangtze River Delta (YRD) and the Jing-Jin-Ji region (JJJ). All three were actively promoted by the national government and have been recognized, adapted and adopted in some form by provincial and municipal governments.

The coining and institutionalization of such denominations for emerging regions can be considered a form of place branding. A 'regional brand identity' refers to an attractive description or shared understanding of what the region represents as formulated by relevant government bodies. Governments play an important role in the promotion and coming into being of new regions. A regional brand identity is different from a regional identity. Most scholars conceptualize the regional identity as consisting of two intertwined dimensions: the identity of a region and the regional consciousness of its residents (Paasi, 2002). The former refers to it as a set of natural and cultural assets with given

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bounded spaces in the region, such as landscapes, dialects, local foods and music (Everett & Aitchison, 2008; Sletto, 2002). The latter refers to the social collective identification residents have. For the adoption of a regional brand identity, its regional identity counts as an important background factor, since it affects the social acceptance of the regional brand identity among its inhabitants. Current interest in the scale of the city-region marks a new stage in the rapidly intensifying debate on regional brand identities since new regions may appear which will also be far larger in scale (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015; Oliveira, 2015).

Regional brand identities are obviously influenced by the local context they are embedded in, such as past developments and current political and administrative concerns. Boisen has illustrated branding and three types of nonstandard regionalization in the EU. The first type is metropolitan regionalization, which is driven by the development of urban agglomerations. The second type featured in specific business sectors, which is promoted by the growth coalition of public authorities and private actors. The last one is featured in project-based cross-border cooperation, which is funded by the supranational government, such as the EU (Boisen, 2015). Compared with the nonstandard regions in the EU, the regionalization in China is planned by the national government and its effective institutionalization occurs through intergovernmental relations, while private actors are less prominent in this process. Emergence, acceptance and/or rejection of regional brand identities by different levels of government depend on relative power positions, resources under their control, interests and problem perceptions, which can also be found in region branding in other areas (Paasi, 1991; Zimmerbauer, Suutari, & Saartenoja, 2012). Different governments throw in their own, often divergent, interests, concepts and targets, and attempt to mould the regional ‘brand’ in their own ways and all of these jointly affect the emergence of a new regional brand identity.

This multi-level governance in action can be perceived as a struggle between desired and more generic brand identities for the region as initially promoted by the national government and those subsequently adopted and interpreted by regional/provincial and local/municipal governments. In this contribution, we examine the interplay of various tiers of governments in establishing such regional brand identities, how the narratives of these brand identities across levels compare with each other and how multi-level governance mechanisms guide the appearance of differential regional brand identities across different regions. Our study is based on empirical data collected regarding the three Chinese Mega City Regions mentioned above, but we embed them in the wider international academic debate and address the global implications of our findings beyond these specific Chinese cases in the concluding section.

In the rest of this article, we will proceed as follows. In Section 2, we will theorize how regional brand identities are formulated in the region building process as multi-level governance theory. In Section 3, we present our research methodology. Section 4 will offer a brief account of the territorial, symbolic and institutional shape of three Mega City Regions in China: GPRD, YRD, and Jing-Jin-Ji. Sections 5, 6, and 7 will then delve more deeply into the symbolic aspects of these regions and

present the multi-level governance of regional brand identity formation in these three different MCRs through an analysis of the relevant national, provincial, and municipal urban plans. Section 8 will compare the common and differential features across the three regions, highlight the main insights gleaned on regional brand identity formation through multi-level governance. Finally, Section 9 will conclude and discuss the broader theoretical implications beyond these specific regions and China.

## 2. Theory: the multi-level governance of regional brand identity formation

### 2.1. City and region branding

In the academic literature on place branding, the discussion regarding city branding has become relatively elaborate, sophisticated and comprehensive, but the number of studies about region-branding is very limited. There are 2017 articles with city brand in their title, abstract or author keywords in the core collection of Web of Science from 2008 to 2018, while only 773 articles published related to regional brand. Since the boundaries of cities are far easier to draw than those of regions and they have stronger political visibility, their branding activities naturally catch scholarly attention. Moreover, the debate on city (brand) identity and regional (brand) identity occur in different academic disciplines. Regional identity is a subject discussed primarily by scholars in human geography and regional planning; for a long time the cultural and political aspects dominated in the way regional identities were studied, with branding aspects barely receiving attention. The concept regional identity rather referred (and still refers) to the historical and cultural identity of a region and the perceptions residents have of it (Paasi, 2002). It was only with the rise of new regionalism that the establishment of regional identities came to be adopted as a vital instrument in planning and marketing to mobilize human resources to enhance regional competitiveness (Paasi, 2013; Zimmerbauer, 2011). City marketing and branding emerged as an important topic in the toolkit of municipal governments already much earlier, with various scholars in urban planning, marketing, tourism, and public administration contributing to conceptual development already from the 1970s onwards (see Table 1). Therefore, with input from a variety of fields, the constituting elements of city brands were also refined over time, with city brand identity, city brand position and city image being distinguished from each other (Anttiroiko, 2014; Chapman & Lynch, 1962; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005; Wäckerlin, Hoppe, Warnier, & de Jong, 2019).

The focus on the regional scale in place branding theory originated in globalization and state-rescaling (Björner, 2006; Messely, Dessein, & Rogge, 2015). This regionalization process invites new governmental bodies or private entities in into decision-making on urban development and reshapes the existing power relationships. Thus, the main argument in region branding also covers the change in involved actors, branding strategies and governance features. In the recent case studies,

**Table 1**  
Differences between region and city brand in the literature.

	Region	City
Relevant concepts	Regional identity (Paasi, 2003; Terlouw, 2012), regional brand (Oliveira, 2015; Dinnie, 2017); regional image (Zimmerbauer, 2011)	City identity (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013), city image (Chapman & Lynch, 1962; Young & Lever, 1997), city position (Anttiroiko, 2014; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005)
Literature	Human geography (van Houtum & Legendijk, 2001), regional planning (Paasi, 2009, 2013)	Urban planning and geography (Oliveira, 2015), public administration (Braun, 2008; Eshuis & Edwards, 2012), marketing (Gertner, 2011; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013), tourism (Chan & Marafa, 2014), political studies (Anttiroiko, 2014)
Background	Globalization, regional rescaling (Deas & Giordano, 2003; Björner, 2006; Messely et al., 2015)	Globalization, city competition (Van den Berg & Braun, 1999; Boisen, Terlouw, Grootte, & Couwenberg, 2018)
Main governments involved	Regional or provincial governments	Municipal government
Stakeholder perception	The boundaries and understanding of region can be different according to different parties	The concept of a city and its brands can be relatively clear

municipal, provincial and/or regional governments, public institutions and private actors have been found to cooperate in activities to create an imagined space for residents, visitors or investors (Hospers, 2006; Witte & Braun, 2015). The national and even supranational government (such as the EU) are involved in the development of cross-border regions by funding certain projects. The growth coalition of public authorities and private actors can be found in the regions dominated by specific business sectors (Boisen, 2015).

As for branding strategies, the communication model proposed by Kavatzis, which distinguished between primary, secondary and tertiary communications can also be applied in studies on region branding (Kavatzis, 2012a, 2012b). The primary communication related to infrastructure projects and the development of public space take place some famous cases, such as the Øresund region (Pedersen, 2004). The secondary communication referring to promotion actions, such as advertising, public relations can be found in the promotion of logo, symbol, slogan by local governments or agencies (Augustyn & Florek, 2015). The tertiary communication can be reflected from the evaluation and feedback from residents or visitors (Martin & Capelli, 2017).

As for governance features, Ind and Bjoerk state that branding governance is a new management philosophy which goes beyond traditional brand management (Ind & Bjerke, 2007). This is combined of the necessity to engage stakeholders in place brand governance and also serves political, administrative and social function aimed at realizing public equity (Kavatzis, 2012a, 2012b). On the other hand, in the governance of commodification where the marketing philosophy guides stakeholder involvement focusing primarily on place commodification (Lucarelli & Giovanardi, 2016). Region branding practices show a combination of the above two types of governance features with different regions showing different positions on this hybrid spectrum of governance modes.

From this governance perspective, it is important to note that both regional or city brand identities are influenced by various governmental bodies. In most cases, preconditions for branding choices made by governments at the regional and local levels are formulated in plan documents established by higher tiers of government which have certain expectations regarding the role cities and regions have to fulfil within broader national and provincial contours. The extent to which these preconditions bind local governments in their choices is nation-dependent. Some scholars have investigated the formulation of regional (brand) identities from a planning perspective, but little if any attention has been paid to the interaction across different levels of government in this formulation process (Paasi, 2013). Existing work examining the relationship between city branding and multi-level governance has inspired us to dig into the involvement and interaction of various tiers of government in the formulation process of regional brand identities (Lu, de Jong, & Chen, 2017; Ye & Björner, 2018).

## 2.2. The concept 'regional brand identity'

A region is a space of political governance, where governments play an important role in creating new spaces of identification and belonging (Del Biaggio, 2010). In regional building, governments adopt certain development goals or visions to invite other actors to accept their concept of the region as the dominant one. These regional development goals or visions in fact constitute its regional brand identity, which is promoted by governments in specific time-frames to solve economic and other problems. Different from regional identities, which evolve over time and are hard to study because of their political, social, and even emotional aspects, regional *brand* identities are often adopted in planning documents that reveal political intentions.

Place branding of which region branding is an example, is identity-driven (Boisen, Terlouw, & Gorp, 2011) and aims to match place identity with place image (Braun, Eshuis, Klijn, & Zenker, 2018). The identity of a place basically refers to what the place really is, as opposed to how people perceive it (place image) or want it to be perceived

(brand identity) (Wäckerlin et al., 2019). Distinguishing between regional identity and regional brand identity as done here is not completely new. As the autonomy of administrative regions has increased, Terlouw (2009) simplified this terminology by introducing thick and thin regional identities. A thick identity refers to a traditional culturally based and historically evolved broad and stable identity fixed to a given territory. It can serve multiple purposes and is not specifically focused on problem-solving. A thin identity is a more fluid instrumental identity focusing on the awareness to solve specific problems (Terlouw, 2009). Cassinger and Eksell also state that place identity is shaped over time, while place brand identity is created for strategic and commercial purposes (Cassinger & Eksell, 2017). Regional brand identity as introduced here largely coincides with the thin regional identity, which is future-oriented and aims to address economic or social issues. When a regional brand identity is aligned with regional identity (or a thin identity with a thick one, for that matter), it is more likely to flourish and last.

For the governance of regions in China, tasks are distributed across national, provincial, and municipal governments. Regional brand identities are consequently constructed through relationships among these tiers of government. They are open to reinterpretation and may meet resistance from each of these governments which have potentially divergent interests (Castells, 1997; Zimmerbauer et al., 2012). In this contribution, we aim to shed light on the handling of territorial, symbolic, and institutional aspects of region-building and spot possible varieties in this handling across the three MCRs. Since the involved governmental bodies are crucial to the recognition and adoption of regional brand identities, we try to grasp how they are conceived at different levels of government in the Chinese context. To understand the acceptance of and resistance to reconceptualized regional brand identities in multi-level governance systems, we examine the establishment of the 'regional brand identity' in three Chinese Mega City Regions.

## 2.3. Regional brand identity formation as multi-level governance

Davis and Reed (2013) have studied the impact of regional identity and memory on multi-level governance. Different from their approach, we examine the perceptions of national, provincial and municipal governments of these brand identities through the narratives in policy documents describing the Chinese MCRs and the implementation of infrastructure provision. As regional development is mainly a public sector matter in China, the input of private actors is insignificant and not covered here.

Multi-level Governance (MLG) can be defined as political structures and processes, which aim to cope with interdependencies among territorial units in political decision-making (Benz, 2004). MLG can, however, also refer to negotiated relationships across institutional boundaries, both vertically and horizontally (Guy Peters & Pierre, 2001; Hooghe & Marks, 2003). In our contribution to regional brand identity, we deem it suitable to embrace the former definition and examine just the intergovernmental relations. The vertical approach in MLG has already been applied to study urban governance in China, as for the urban politics of climate change (Liu, Wang, Xie, Mol, & Chen, 2012). Before 1980, urban sustainability governance in China had been predominantly top-down, with provincial and municipal governments merely responsible for implementing national mandates. Although the national government has preserved its leading role in governance, provincial and municipal governments have acquired more administrative and economic power since the fiscal decentralization in 1994. Also, local governments gradually gained momentum in the process of reshaping the state (Yang & Wang, 2008; Zhu, 1999).

Since MCRs emerged in the urbanization process in China, the roles national and provincial governments play in regional governance have attracted ample academic interest. The insights from scholars can be summarized as embracing a vertical scaling mechanism, which is

**Table 2**  
Urban planning documents and key information collected.

Urban planning documents	Key information collected
National Five year plan (FYP) and Urban System Plan	Key concepts of regional brand identities
Provincial FYP and Urban System Plan	Frequency of regional brand identities and the key measures to achieve them
Municipal FYP and Urban Master Plan	Frequency of regional names and city positions related to region

described as state rescaling (Li, Xu, & Yeh, 2014), upscaling and downscaling (Li et al., 2014). First, the national government cannot fully impose its regional vision because economic decision-making has been decentralized to lower administrative levels (Li & Wu, 2017). Second, provincial governments and municipalities are relatively independent administrative units, and they tend to compete rather than cooperate (Xu, 2009; Xu & Yeh, 2005). Meanwhile, the national government strives to fix regional development problems by issuing spatial plans or establishing institutions in response to a lack of coordination (Wu, 2016). The abovementioned studies on MCRs in China have provided both theoretical and empirical insight into understanding regional governance. Nevertheless, the roles and interactions of national and provincial governments in regional governance vary across urban contexts (Li & Wu, 2017; Xu, 2009). In stylized form, the constitution of regional brand identities in MCRs in China in a multi-level governance context can be described as follows:

1. The national level government initiates the promotion of certain regional brand identities in general terms, but their fleshing out requires active involvement of provincial and local governments.
2. Provincial and municipal governments may accept the suggested regional brand identity and make use of it in their own development. They may also create their own sub-regional brand identities to position themselves attractively within the proposed region.
3. In the negotiation and redefinition process among the various tiers of government, the importance they attach to it varies and so does the meaning they attribute to it.

Some scholars do mention the importance of the multilevel perspective in region branding building due to the variegated interests of actors (Lucarelli & Giovanardi, 2016). As for decision-making across government levels, our contribution is to our knowledge the first empirical study into regional brand identity formation in a multi-level governance context.

### 3. Methodology

This research has adopted three indicators to investigate the evidence of regional brand identities in the Chinese MCRs. The first indicator is the brand identities adopted in the Chinese planning documents, because the most reliable sources for the data collection on brand identities and popular names are plan documents rather than websites or brochures in China (de Jong et al., 2018; Han et al., 2018). The second indicator is the regional strategies attached to these brand identities. These regional strategies show how the branding initiative has been communicated to outsiders, but the implementation may not occur yet. The third indicator is the implementation of regional strategies. The infrastructure provision in the Chinese MCRs is selected as they are a crucial means by Chinese governments to improve regional integration.

As for the first indicator, since regional brands appear in a complex intergovernmental context, we first consulted all relevant national planning documents related to MCR development for establishing the general position of these MCRs within the national context, followed by a study of how provincial and municipal governments recognize and assess these same regions and express positive, neutral or negative attitudes in their plans regarding the regions. This approach is among

others suggested by many studies (Hague & Jenkins, 2005; Paasi, 2003; Raagmaa, 2002). More specifically, we selected plans drafted by the national, provincial and municipal governments on socio-economic regional development, all so-called Five Year Plans (FYPs) and Urban Master Plans (UMPs) drafted and approved after 2010. FYPs reflect strategic and comprehensive planning for economic and social development, whereas UMPs elaborate on the spatial changes in localities. Additionally, as Hong Kong and Macau do not have FYPs, their strategic plans are also included in this research to investigate the development goals at the national level. Since Macau has recently adopted a 13th FYP in line with mainland practice, we chose its 13th FYP instead of its strategic plan. An overview of the above is given in Table 2.

At the national level, we examined the national FYPs and UMPs. As for the provincial plans, we included those drafted by Guangdong, Hong Kong SAR and Macao SAR (for GPRD), Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Anhui (for YRD) and Beijing, Tianjin, and Hebei (for JJJ). When it came to the municipalities, we went through the plans made by 9 PRD cities (excluding Hong Kong and Macau), 15 YRD cities (excluding Shanghai) and 12 JJJ cities (excluding Beijing and Tianjin). In all cases, we first made a frequency-count of the region names in the text. The frequency of region names in the planning documents can demonstrate the attention and efforts from various levels of government paid to the MRCs. As counting of regional names demands verification within the text, we collected the development goals related to regional names from illustrative sentences or quotes in the urban planning documents, which demonstrate to what extent they display regional strategies.

Regarding the second indicator, we have scanned the entire paragraph wherever “PRD”, “YRD”, “JJJ” appeared, and the relevant brand identities were coded in terms of their relevance to different aspects of regional competitiveness, as suggested in Bristow (2010) and Kitson, Martin, and Tyler (2004). Then, we classified regional brand identities related to specific policy measures into 16 categories as discerned based on regional competitiveness literature and the Chinese planning context.<sup>1</sup> As for the last indicator, we investigated the high-speed railway development and the railway density within the regions. The high-speed railway is one of the major regional infrastructure policy in China (China Railway Bureau, 2008), the railway density is the length of railway divided by the size of the regions, which can illustrate the degree of regional integration from infrastructure provision perspective.

Whereas document analysis constituted the systematic basis of our data collection, we used expert interviews to clarify ambiguities found in planning documents and verify the adequacy of our understanding of the regional brand identities adopted by different levels of governments. We interviewed academics, senior planners, and other experts involved in planning for the GPRD, YRD, and JJJ to dig up additional insights not found in the official documents. The questions focused on their understanding of regional brand identities in connection with the region they were working in their economic significance vis-à-vis other

<sup>1</sup> The regional competitiveness categories in this research include infrastructure provision, reform and innovation, urban planning, emergency management, coordination policy, public service, talent policy, entrepreneurship, legalization, technology development, trust system, management system, culture development, environmental protection, urban function, and economic development.



regions and their broader social and environmental objectives. Interviews were held in the years 2018–2019 and lasted around 1 h. The information provided by respondents helped us to detail the planning process regarding the MCRs and understand the interactions occurring among different tiers of governments. The transcript of expert interviews is coded by their understanding of different levels of government's perception of regional brand identity. The list of respondents can be found in [Appendix A1](#).

#### 4. Territorial, symbolic and institutional shapes of the three MCRs

In our empirical description of the region-building process, we lean on [Paasi \(1986\)](#). He has argued that a regional identity emerges when four elements become intertwined and begin reinforcing each other: territorial shape (definition of borders), symbolic shape (names, concepts and other symbols offering a distinct narrative of the region), institutional shape (institutions producing/reproducing the territorial and symbolic shapes) and functional shape (the recognition of regions as a part of the regional system and broader social consciousness).

Developing regional brand identities can be seen as the process of creating and naming symbols to express and strengthen the idea of the existence of a specific region ([Paasi, 2009](#)). Regional brand identities are also related to territorial and institutional shapes in the region building process, but less to functionality, which is largely beyond the grasp of public authorities. Below, we will first introduce the territorial boundaries, generic symbolic conceptualization and institutional evolution of the three MCRs in [Section 4](#). [Sections 5, 6 and 7](#) focus on the more symbolic features attributed to the three regions in the relevant plans of the various involved governments and examine the adoption and moulding of the regional brand identities as reflected in the national, provincial and local documents, respectively.

##### 4.1. Territorial shape of the regions

The origin of the Greater Pearl River Delta (GPRD), the Yangtze River Delta (YRD) and the Jing-Jin-Ji region (JJJ) can be found in the emergence of urban clusters (*chengshiqun*), as described in studies on urban systems ([Yao, Chan, & Zhu, 1992](#)). Regions evolved around the development of some mega cities, more particularly Hong Kong, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Shanghai, Beijing, and Tianjin (see [Fig. 2](#)). As the surrounding areas near these megacities also developed, the term Mega-City Region has been adopted by most scholars to describe JJJ, YRD, and GRPD ([Douglass, 2000](#); [Xu & Yeh, 2011](#); [Ye, 2014](#)).

When these regions emerged as clusters of large cities between which a growing number of functional economic relations evolved, the national government played a key role in promoting them as economic regions through issuing regional planning documents to clarify their functions, targets and spatial plans. The territorial boundaries are stipulated in these spatial planning documents (see [Fig. 1](#)).

The territorial boundary of the Greater Pearl River Delta is quite clear: it consists of nine PRD cities and two Special Administrative Regions. As for the Yangtze River Delta, it began with Shanghai and some cities from Jiangsu and Zhejiang Province. The territorial boundaries were redefined in the *Yangtze River Delta Regional Plan* issued by the State Council in 2010, including eight cities from Jiangsu Province and seven from Zhejiang Province. In 2016, in the *Yangtze River Delta Mega City Region Plan*, the area of Yangtze River Delta was enlarged to include nine cities from Jiangsu, eight cities from Zhejiang and eight cities from Anhui Province (see the left blank in the YRD [Fig. 2](#)). However, in the academic discussion, the borders of YRD tend to vary, and some scholars even include all the cities in Anhui, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Shanghai (Interviewee 3, Shanghai, 2019).

In the Jing-Jin-Ji mega city region, the concept of the Capital Economy Circle was used in 2010, which covers Beijing, Tianjin, and 11 cities from Hebei Province. In the *Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei Synergy Development Outline in 2015*, the coverage of JJJ remains the same.

From other planning documents, Anyang from Henan province, Datong from Shanxi Province and Dezhou from Shandong Province are also mentioned in the JJJ (see the left blank in the JJJ [Fig. 2](#)). The environmental plan for JJJ region even covers 26 cities, including some cities in Shandong and Liaoning (Environmental Protection [Ministry, 2017](#)). The ambiguous territorial boundaries demonstrate that JJJ's development is still in its early stages compared with that in the other two regions.

##### 4.2. Symbolic shape of the regions

Among the three regions, the GPRD clearly has the longest history, but it still demands higher-level intervention because of the variety of political and administrative systems involved. In contrast, the YPD has advanced the most, since it has experienced the failure of its institutionalization imposed in a top-down manner, and its subsequent reconstitution organized by municipal and provincial governments in a bottom-up fashion ([Li & Wu, 2017](#)). Compared with the former two, the institutionalization of the JJJ is still in the early stages.

The growth of the Pearl River Delta (PRD) cannot be seen apart from the roles that Hong Kong and Macau have played ([Bie, de Jong, & Derudder, 2015](#)). During the economic reform in the 1980s, Shenzhen Special Economic Zone was established as an experimental area to transfer Hong Kong's capitalist free market economy to mainland China. Zhuhai Special Economic Zone was established later as Macau's counterpart. The PRD area soon became the biggest national manufacturing base. The concept of the PRD Economic Zone was first introduced by Guangdong's provincial government in 1994, and it tended to emphasize the integrated development of the nine mainland cities in it.

The rise of the Yangtze River Delta is highly connected with that of Shanghai. The concept originated from the establishment of the *Shanghai Economic Zone* in 1982, which promoted coordinated economic development among several cities in Zhejiang province, Jiangsu province and Shanghai. Shanghai and the YRD entered a period of rapid development in the 1990s. *Pudong New District* was established in 1992 as Shanghai's Special Economic Zone, and it benefited greatly from national policies. Evolving into an international financial and trade hub, Shanghai remained the YRD's economic engine. In 2008, YRD cooperation even became a national strategy, as indicated in the issuing of *Guidance for Promoting YRD Reform and Opening Up, Economic and Social Development* by the State Council.

Jing-Jin-Ji is located around the Bohai Rim in the northern part of China. It is the national capital region and famous for its heavy industrial base, called Jing-Jin-Tang (formed by Beijing, Tianjin, and Tangshan). The concept Jing-Jin-Ji (JJJ) was first coined in the 1980s, but it took on a life of its own in 2004, when the two province-level cities, Beijing and Tianjin, joined forces with Hebei province and signed a Closer Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) for the Bohai Rim. Two years after the agreement the National DRC specified the concept of economic integration for the JJJ and began to formulate a Comprehensive Plan for the JJJ Metropolitan Region. The promotion of national policies and institutional establishment is presented through the key historical events of three regions in the next section.

##### 4.3. Institutional shape of the regions

###### 4.3.1. Greater Pearl River Delta

Much of the interaction between the PRD, Hong Kong, and Macau is economic in nature. Since the 1980s, manufacturing industries in Hong Kong and Macau have relocated to the PRD which enjoys lower land prices and labor costs. The turning point for this region was the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) on 1 July 1997. Hong Kong's reunification with mainland China fuelled the expectations and plans in Guangdong to promote the economic integration of the PRD and Hong Kong. The Hong Kong and Guangdong Cooperation Joint Conference was established in 1998 ([Fig. 2](#)). The idea

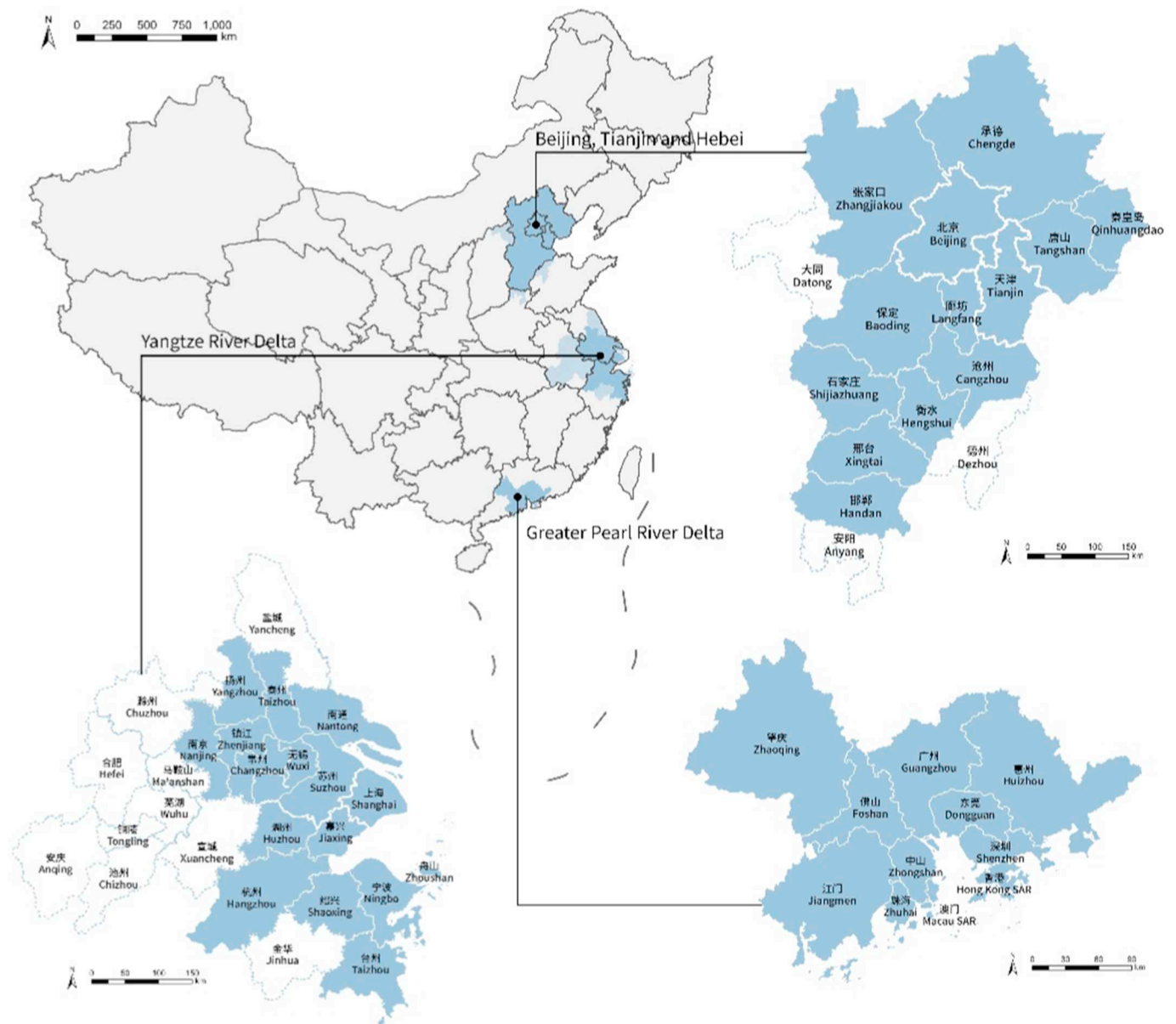


Fig. 1. The location of the Greater Pearl River Delta, Jing-Jin-Ji and the Yangtze River Delta (the expansion of the regions is left blank in each region).

of a Greater PRD was proposed immediately after the reunification of Macau to mainland China in 1999. In the same year, Macau returned to China, and the Macau Special Administrative Region (MSAR) was established. Two years later, in 2001, a Guangdong and Macao high-level meeting system was founded.

In 2002, the concept of the Greater PRD was officially adopted by the HKSAR government. However, a really significant milestone was the signing of the *Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Agreement* (CEPA) in 2003 by the national and HKSAR governments (Cheung, 2015). This agreement aimed to counter the national government's prioritization of the development of Shanghai and the Yangtze River Delta in the 1990s, which had significantly slowed down that of the PRD.

In 2008, the *Pearl River Delta Development and Reform Outline* was approved by the national government, which mentioned the cooperation between Guangdong province, Hong Kong, and Macau at the national level. Meanwhile, Hong Kong suffered from the financial crisis, and the economic connection with the mainland became crucial. In the period 2006–2009, the Guangdong, HKSAR and MSAR governments

first jointly conducted a *Planning Study of the Coordinated Development of the Greater Pearl River Delta Townships*, which brought up the concept of a 'bay area' development.

In the last two decades, the GDP growth of the PRD cities has remained around 10%, while Guangzhou and Shenzhen grew increasingly international, and they also aspired to the status of a global city, leading to some concern in Hong Kong about its competitive international status. Finally, the *Outline of Development Plan for Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area* was released by the State Council in February 2019. It showed the determination of the national government to promote this concept, despite the plan becoming controversial under the 'one nation two systems policy' and raising debates among Hong Kong's public.

#### 4.3.2. Yangtze River Delta

In 1983, a coordination organization, the Shanghai Economic Zone Planning Office was established by the national government, with the mission to explore alternatives for the problems resulting from the sector-dominated economic development (see Fig. 3). However, the

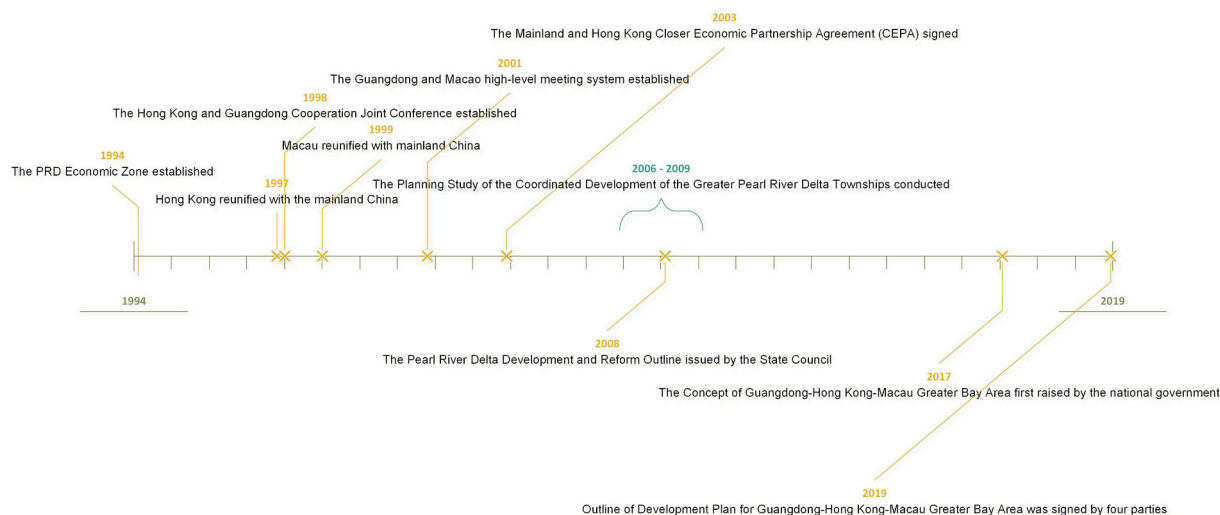


Fig. 2. Milestone events in the history of the Greater Pearl River Delta.



Fig. 3. Milestone events in the history of the Yangtze River Delta.

organization lacked efficiency and hierarchical control, and it was abolished in 1988 with the suggestion to establish a Provincial Governor Joint Conference.

The economic connection between Shanghai, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang provinces has intensified since the late 1980s. The engineers and technicians in the state-owned enterprises in Shanghai worked part-time on weekends in the factories in Jiangsu and Zhejiang. The technological transfer from Shanghai played an important role in the industrial development of these two provinces. In 1992, 13 cities from all three provinces, including Shanghai, Nanjing, Suzhou, and Hangzhou, founded the *Yangtze River Delta Urban Economic Coordinated Committee*. This was the first regionally coordinated and bottom-up initiated organization, nonetheless adopting similar concepts as the national government had done before. In 2001, Shanghai, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang province established the Shanghai, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang Economic Cooperation and Development Forum, of which the respective vice-provincial governors were in charge. In 2004, it was lifted to the level of main leaders and became the highest decision-making group at the provincial level.

In the 2000s, Shanghai still remained the leading city in the region, and the economic growth in Zhejiang and Jiangsu proved stable. The national government considered making use of spillover effects to boost the surrounding areas. In 2009, Anhui was also invited to attend the governor's forum of Shanghai, Jiangsu and Zhejiang Provinces and the Yangtze River Delta Urban Economic Coordinated Joint Conference. By 2010, the number of members in the YRD Coordination Committee had risen to 22, including some cities from Anhui province. Furthermore,

the national government finally formulated the *Yangtze River Delta Urban Agglomeration Development Plan* in 2016, in which Shanghai and 25 cities from Zhejiang, Jiangsu, and Anhui formed a powerful alliance aiming to compete with the world's most developed urban agglomerations.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, Anhui is interested in attracting companies relocating from Shanghai, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang.

#### 4.3.3. Jing-Jin-Ji

In 2014, the JJJ Coordination Development Leadership Team Office was established. After this, Beijing, Tianjin, and Hebei province also established corresponding offices to facilitate the operations of the JJJ Coordination Development Leadership Team Office (see Fig. 4). In 2015, the *Beijing, Tianjin, and Hebei Synergy Development Outline* was issued by the national government. Nevertheless, although the importance of the JJJ concept was repeatedly emphasized, the regional disparity is wider, and the integration tasks accordingly tougher compared with the GPRD and YRD regions. It suffers from poor collaboration among cities and the widest GDP gap between the core city Beijing and peripheral cities in Hebei. Acknowledging the deteriorating position of Hebei province, the national government unexpectedly drafted the plan of Xiongan New District in April 2017, which was located in

<sup>2</sup> Although 25 cities from Zhejiang, Jiangsu and Anhui province coordinated with Shanghai in the Yangtze River Delta Urban Agglomeration Development Plan (2016), this research focuses on the original 15 cities, which are far more connected with each other.

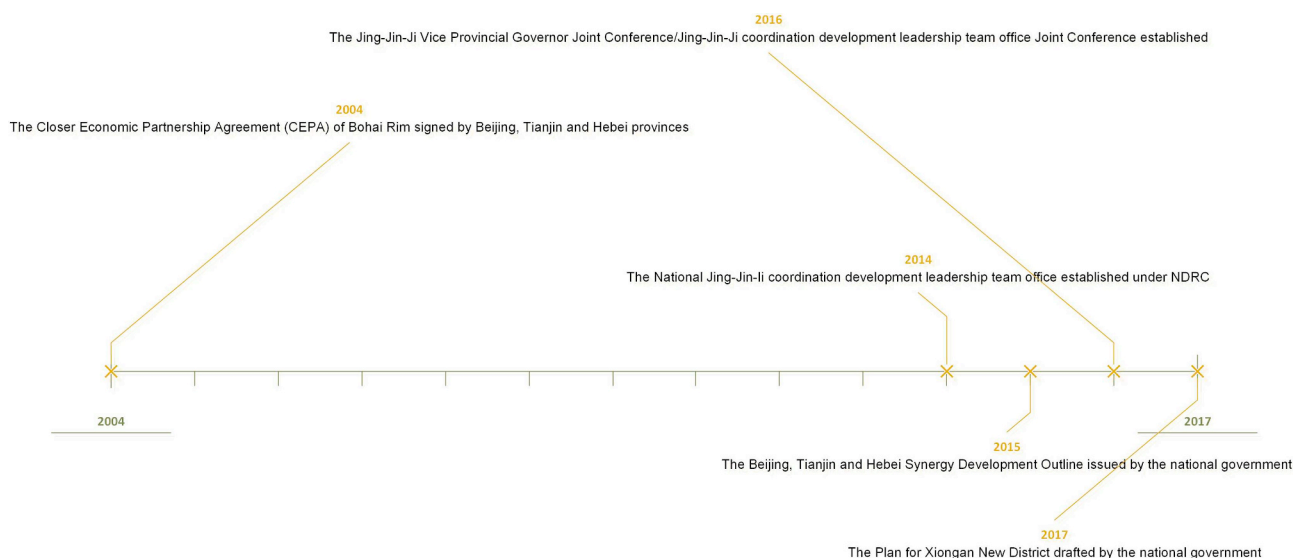


Fig. 4. Milestone events in the history of the Jing-Jin-Ji region.

Hebei province with roughly the same distance to Beijing and Tianjin. It was the first new district directly issued by the State Council (China's national government) and considered the most important planning event after Shenzhen in the 1980s and Pudong in the 1990s.

The recognition and adoption of the 'brand identities' attached to these regions among national, provincial, and municipal governments are now examined in Sections 5, 6 and 7, respectively.

### 5. Regional brand identities for the MCRs: the national perspective

In this section, the symbolic dimension of the three MCRs which cuts at the heart of their regional brand identities, is examined in the plan documents of the national government. Regional cooperation has been a key national policy to improve China's global competitiveness for over a decade (Interviewee 7, Shenzhen, 2017). The growing attention paid to regional development at the national level can be found in the strategic regional plans, National FYPs as well as Urban System Plans (see Tables 6 and 7). These show both in the increasing frequency by which regions are mentioned and how the national government sets developmental targets for them. PRD, YRD and JJJ are all approved as important regions and can be traced back to Deng Xiaoping's policy to "develop some regions to be wealthy first". From the perspective of the national government, the MCRs should take the lead in and be the exemplar for other city regions in China (Interviewee 7, Shenzhen, 2017; and interviewee 2, Shanghai, 2017). The national government has created new concepts for them, such as the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area, the Yangtze River Economic Belt and the Bohai Rim Economic Belt, depending on their regional economic and political contexts.

#### 5.1. Greater Pearl River Delta

The PRD, as a region aimed to be a hub for advanced manufacturing and service industries, is widely embraced in the *Outline of the Pearl River Delta Reform and Development Plan 2008*. The study in 2004 further added the PRD aiming to be a cultural centre and high-quality living circle (Table 3). In the *Outline of the Great Bay Development Plan (2019)*, the attention of the national government has evolved towards a

first-class bay area including closer links among PRD cities as well as broader cooperation with Hong Kong and Macau, hence reinforcing the importance of concepts such as the Greater PRD and the Greater Bay Area (see Table 4). The concept of the Greater Bay Area is important for the national government since it includes the symbolically crucial tasks to promote the integration of two Special Administrative Regions, Hong Kong, and Macau, within the Chinese planning system. HKSAR and MSAR still enjoy highly independent administrative powers, but the national government tends to get actively involved through regional identity formulation, as can be seen in the *Greater Bay Area Cooperation Mechanism* signed in 2017 by the national government, Guangdong Provincial, HKSAR and MSAR governments (Interviewee 7, Shenzhen, 2017).

#### 5.2. Yangtze River Delta

From the perspective of the national government, the YRD is now the most developed MCR in China, also having the most influential cooperation among its cities (interviewee 1, Shanghai, 2017; interviewee 5, by phone, 2017). Like the PRD, the YRD is also to become a hub for modern service industries and advanced manufacturing in the YRD Regional Plan in 2016. Moreover, the YRD also set a few more specific goals, including the most active resource allocation centre and technologically innovative high ground with global influence (see Table 4). The YRD is expected to lead in the development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt (raised by the national government in 2015, referring to the provinces located upstream of the Yangtze River). The national government has paid less attention to the YRD in recent years because the economic integration evolved more easily given the relative equality in wealth among the various cities (unlike in the JJJ) and the absence of thorny political issues (such as in the GPRD).

#### 5.3. Jing-Jin-Ji

The term Jing-Jin-Ji can be found both in the 12th and 13th national FYPs. The term Capital Economic Circle was coined in 2010 to focus on the urban agglomeration surrounding capital city Beijing. This concept still appeared in the 12th FYP, but it disappeared in the 13th FYP (see Table 3). The national government's attention had shifted to



**Table 3**  
Regional names mentioned in key national planning documents.

Region	12th FYP	13th FYP	Urban System Plan
GPRD	PRD (2)	Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area (1), PRD (4), GPRD (1)	PRD (37)
YRD	YRD (2)	YRD (4), Yangtze River Economic Belt (3)	YRD (36)
JJJ	JJJ (2) Capital Economic Circle (1)	Transfer non-capital functions from Beijing (4), Bohai Rim (4), JJJ (5)	JJJ (19)

**Table 4**  
Regional development goals of the three MCRs in key national planning documents.

Regions	Development targets
GPRD	Economic centre, advanced manufacture, modern service industry base, international gateway (Outline of the Pearl River Delta Reform and Development Plan 2008) World-class urban agglomeration, cultural centre, high quality living circle (A Study on Coordinated Development Planning of Urban Agglomeration in the Pearl River Delta 2004–2020) Vibrant world-class urban agglomeration; international technology innovation centre with global influence; the important support for the Belt and Road policy; cooperation demonstration zone for the mainland; Hong Kong and Macao; a quality living circle (Outline of the Great Bay Development Plan 2019)
YRD	The most active resource allocation centre, the technologically innovative high ground with global influence, the globally important modern service industry and advanced manufacturing centre, the important international portals in the Asia Pacific region, the leader in a new round of reform and opening up, the Demonstration Zone of Beautiful China Construction (YRD Regional Plan, 2016)
JJJ	A world-class urban metropolitan region, the reform leading area of regional coordinated development, the new economic growth engine of national innovation, the demonstration area of ecological restoration and improvement (JJJ Coordinated Development Plan, 2015)

the transfer of ‘non-capital functions’ from Beijing to other areas within the JJJ region. With Beijing suffering from severe environmental pollution and an overly crowded urban area, JJJ came to be regarded as the region that could relieve it from much of this ecological and population pressure. Therefore, the national government mentioned the demonstration area of ecological restoration and improvement as the target of JJJ in its Coordinated Development Plan. Becoming a world-class urban metropolitan region and the new economic growth engine of national innovation were also targets for JJJ formulated by the national government. Compared with the other two regions, its main goal was to offload pressure from Beijing to Hebei Province, while narrowing the developmental gap between Beijing and Hebei seemed of lesser importance (Interviewee 11, Beijing, 2017). The national intention behind this promotion of MCRs is to relieve their megacities from extreme population growth and funnel it to subordinate cities in the regions around them.

From the above development targets for the region in the planning documents issued by national governments, economic development, environmental protection, and urban function tend to be keywords. The national government adopted economic development as a crucial element in the regional brand identities for all three regions, such as the financial cooperation area (PRD) and globally competitive economic zone (YRD). The dominant focus of the national government is still international competitiveness, while regional imbalance is de-emphasized (interviews 11 and 12). When it comes to policy measures required to implement the brands, the national government emphasized infrastructure provision for the three regions in the 12th FYP, while boosting innovation was more often mentioned (especially for the PRD and the JJJ) in the 13th FYP.

## 6. Regional brand identities for the MCRs: the provincial perspectives

Since the planning system in China is such that the national plan documents have their exact equivalents at lower government tiers (provincial and municipal), we will present the provincial Five-Year Plans and Urban Systems Plans in terms of the three MCRs in Section 6. The (Greater) Pearl River Delta appears in plans drafted and adopted by

the Guangdong provincial government and the Hong Kong and Macau SARs. The Yangtze River Delta appears in plans developed by the Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Anhui provincial governments. Jing-Jin-Ji is dealt with by the Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei provincial governments.

### 6.1. Greater Pearl River Delta

Guangdong and Hong Kong are the key actors in promoting regional integration in the GPRD (Interviewee 8, Guangzhou, 2017; interviewee 10, Shenzhen, 2017). In the 1990s, Guangdong was the leading area in China’s ‘Opening Up policy’. After Pudong became a national new district in 1992, the Yangtze River Delta developed tremendously fast, which made Guangdong anxious to keep its leading position in the national economy. In 1994, Guangdong Province actively began striving for regional integration with Hong Kong. In 2008, *the PRD Development and Reform Outline* offered an important chance for Guangdong Province to gain support from the national government to speed up the region’s development. The term PRD appears around a hundred times and GPRD a few times in its 12th FYP, its 13th FYP, and Urban System Plan (see Table 5). The term Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area appears for the first time in Guangdong’s 13th FYP.

Until 2003, Hong Kong had hardly responded to initiatives for regional integration with the mainland. However, the growing economic pressure since China’s joining the WTO became a crucial factor in the changing relationship between Hong Kong and the mainland (Yeung, 2010). Its negative attitude changed gradually, and both PRD and GPRD were mentioned in the Hong Kong Policy Addresses of 2011 and 2016, as well as in its conceptual plan. Hong Kong even recognized the need to find synergy through co-operation and coordination as the “super-connector” for the mainland in its Policy Address 2016. Considering the rise of Shenzhen and Guangzhou (interviewee 9, Guangzhou, 2017), it admitted the PRD region as a multi-centred city region and itself as “an integral part” of this region in the HK2030 Conceptual Plan.

The role played by Macau is less significant, simply because of its limited economic scale and regional influence. It relies heavily on

**Table 5**  
Regional identities for PRD and GPRD gleaned from provincial level planning documents.

Province/SAR	12th Plan and Policy Address Hong Kong and Macau in 2011	Key regional concepts	13th Plan and policy address in Hong Kong and Macau in 2016	Key regional concepts	Urban System Plan and Conceptual Plan in Hong Kong and Macau	Key regional concepts
Guangdong	PRD (58) GPRD (6)	GPRD high living standard circle	PRD (115), GPRD (3), Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area (6)	Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area	PRD (166) GPRD (8)	World-class metropolitan region
Hong Kong	PRD (3)	PRD Economic Zone (Policy address 2011–2012)	PRD (1)		PRD (19) GPRD (4)	Multi-centred city-region (Hong Kong 2030)
Macau	PRD (4)		PRD (1) GPRD (1) Guangdong-Hong Kong- Macau Greater Bay Area (1)		PRD (5) GPRD (3)	

resources from the mainland and wishes to cooperate with the mainland to diversify its industrial structure. Macau mentioned the PRD more than Hong Kong in its Policy Address 2011–2012 and is closer to the national government by acknowledging that the cooperation between the PRD and the MSAR is a national strategy. Being aware of the benefits derived from the regional cooperation, Macau specifically mentioned the disadvantage of its highly limited land resources and the possibility to cooperate with its mainland neighbour Zhuhai in making use of the latter's land.

Regarding regional brand identities, Guangdong Province emphasized economic development in both its 12th and 13th FYPs (see Fig. 5). The provincial government also paid increasing attention to environmental protection. As for specific measures, Guangdong Province, Hong Kong, Macao all focus on infrastructure provision, which can be explained by the construction of high-speed railways within the PRD cities and to Hong Kong, and Hong Kong-Macau-Zhuhai Bridge in the 2010s (interviewee 3, Shanghai, 2017). The emphasis on the infrastructure provision in PRD also implies that constructing mega-infrastructure projects is an effective regional integration strategy (of the central government) when governmental and institutional cooperation is difficult to achieve.

Until 2019, nine cities in the PRD have been linked to high-speed railway networks. The Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge was open to the public in 2018, and the high-speed railway between Hong Kong and the mainland finished construction and used by residents in 2019. Although the policy process did not evolve smoothly, the implementation of these projects demonstrates that the regional brand identity has been promoted by further infrastructure provision. Within the mainland, the railway density in the nine cities is low with three cities even having no railways in, 2009 (at the end of 12th FYP). However, the railway density in the PRD nine cities has reached 0.06 km/km<sup>2</sup>, which is the highest among the three MCRs in 2016 (at the beginning of 13th FYP). The fast implementation of railway networks also underlines the progress made in region brand identity formulation.

In the PRD, the (G)PRD as regional brand identity was promoted as a regional brand and symbol of unity by Guangdong province when it perceived that the national government had shifted its attention to the YRD. The brand identity of the (G)PRD enjoyed only weak recognition from Hong Kong for a long time. It admitted to its relevance only recently, when it sensed its reliance on the mainland was on the increase. Acceptance of the GPRD by Macau has always been strong, but less weighty given its small size.

### 6.2. Yangtze River Delta

Shanghai has long had a leading role in the YRD region (interviewee 1, Shanghai, 2017; interviewee 3, Shanghai, 2017). As a gate for international business and the nation's prime financial hub, Shanghai identifies itself as the core of the Yangtze River Delta. Aiming to develop into a world-class urban agglomeration, in its 13th FYP Shanghai developed its own regional concept of the *Grand Shanghai Metropolitan Economic Circle* (see Table 6). This concept emphasized synergetic cooperation with three cities in Jiangsu (Suzhou, Wuxi, Nantong) and three in Zhejiang (Ningbo, Jiaxing, Zhoushan). However, the political clout behind it was not nearly as great as that of the *Jing-Jin-Ji* and the *Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area* (GPRD).

Regional names for the YRD at the provincial level are sketchier and more varied. For example, Zhejiang province introduced the sub-brand identity *Hangzhou Bay Area*, which is featured in its *electronic commerce and information economics* (see Table 6), which consisted of 7 cities including Shanghai, Jiaxing, Hangzhou, Ningbo, Zhoushan, as a counterpart to the *Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area*. Though the sub-brand identity Hangzhou Bay is not new and harks back to the *Zhejiang Hangzhou Bay Industrial Belt Development Plan* in 2003, it remains a generic concept and is far from mature (interviewee 4, by

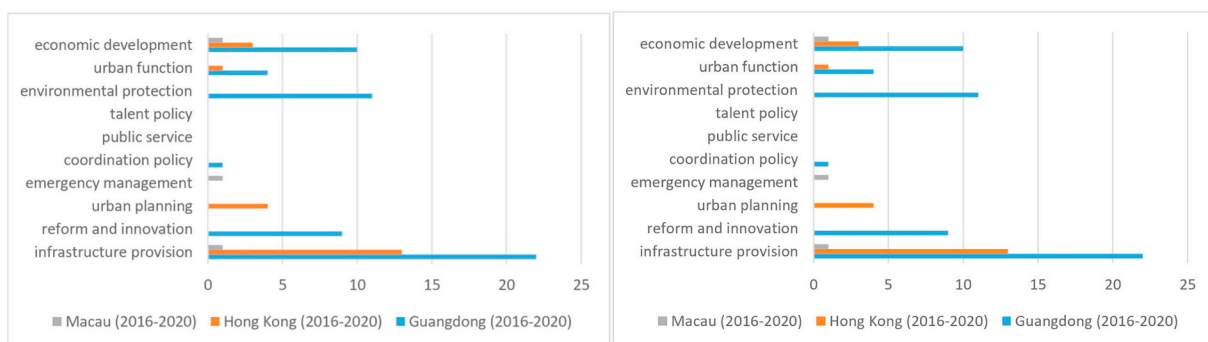


Fig. 5. Regional strategies related to brand identities about the PRD in Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macau 2011–2015 and 2016–2020.

phone, 2017). Jiangsu province also seems to juggle with a variety of regional synergetic brand identities. In its 13th FYP, we find two equivalent sub-region names, the Nanjing metropolitan circle, and Su-Xi-Chang (Suzhou, Wuxi, Changzhou) urban agglomeration, which is characterized by advanced manufacturing and service industry (see Table 6). On the one hand, Su-Xi-Chang urban agglomeration has built a close relationship with Shanghai and enjoys well-developed manufacturing base. The close relationship between Su-Xi-Chang and Shanghai is built upon interprovincial rather than intra-provincial inter-city cooperation and synergy.

Anhui, YRD's newest member, is obviously the least connected with Shanghai and its emphasis on regional strategy is weaker (interviewee 6, Shanghai, 2017). In its 13th FYP and Urban System Plan, the Wanbei urban agglomeration (located in northern Anhui province) and Hefei capital metropolitan circle come to the fore (see Table 6). Little is said in the way of interprovincial cooperation. In short, though the YRD has well-developed networks for inter-city cooperation in the manufacturing industry and urban development, these networks are founded on cities rather than provinces. Even after the publication of the *YRD Urban Agglomeration Development Plan* in 2016, the regional names adopted by different administrative entities are fuzzy and show substantial overlap.

Compared with the frequency of JJJ and PRD in their corresponding administrative entities, the provincial level governments in the YRD adopted a smaller number of regional brand identities in their planning documents (see Fig. 6). Moreover, the focus and attention from the provincial level entities also vary. Shanghai adopted more regional brand identities than other provinces, which revolve around infrastructure provision in its 12th FYP, while attention extends to coordination across policy areas in the 13th FYP.

As for infrastructure provision, the earliest high-speed railway constructed in 2010, and the total number of high-speed railways reached 20 in 2019, linking most cities in Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Anhui. The railway density in the YRD increased from 0.02 km/km<sup>2</sup> in 2009 to 0.043 km/km<sup>2</sup> in 2016 (when Anhui was also included in the YRD). The increase in railway density also shows the progress made in regional integration by infrastructure provision.

In sum, provinces located in the YRD all show firm recognition of the YRD as an entity, and are eager to symbolically construct their own regional sub-brand identities within it, such as Shanghai (the Grand Shanghai Metropolitan Economic Circle), Jiangsu (Su-Xi-Chang urban agglomeration), Zhejiang (Hangzhou Bay Area) and Anhui (Wanbei Urban Agglomeration). To some extent, one may assume that regional brand YRD being less explicitly mentioned and more often creatively used implies actually that it is now deeply ingrained in the region.

### 6.3. Jing-Jin-Ji

In Beijing's 13th FYP, JJJ is mentioned 80 times and recognized as a world-class urban agglomeration with Beijing as its capital city (see Table 7). A specific strategy of *synergetic development* is to transfer Beijing's non-capital functions to the areas around Beijing by getting rid of the undesirable industries to decrease the pressure from overpopulation, congestion, and pollution. A similar picture emerges in its *Beijing Master Plan 2004–2020*: Beijing has promoted the development of a metropolitan region around itself for a long time. It adopted concepts like “the nation serving the capital” and “the outside province protecting Beijing”, which demonstrates special value attached to Beijing, even at the expense of areas outside the capital (Interviewee 11, Beijing, 2017). Promoting regional integration for Beijing is more about deepening its cooperation with Tianjin (interviewee 13, Beijing, 2017).

Tianjin's contribution to JJJ's regional integration has been limited in recent decades (Interviewee 12, Beijing, 2019; Interviewee 13, Beijing, 2017). Following national economic policies, many state-owned enterprises have historically been relocated to Tianjin. Tianjin mentions JJJ 21 times in its 13th FYP (see Table 7), and stated that it will actively participate in JJJ's integration process. In fact, Tianjin primarily focuses on building a closer relationship with Beijing within the JJJ framework and on promoting its industrial upgrade to advanced manufacturing and services. In the JJJ synergetic strategy of the *Tianjin Master Plan 2005–2020*, the emphasis is the development of the Binhai New District where Tianjin's deepwater port is located.

Neither Beijing nor Tianjin deems JJJ coordination very important, presumably because they already have long-established strong political and economic positions as the development poles in the region. However, Hebei has long been known as providing cheap labor for Beijing and Tianjin, and it has become one of the biggest national steel production bases and polluted regions in China (Wei, Liao, & Fan, 2007). Accordingly, Hebei's aspiration to turn JJJ's synergetic development into a success appears from the far more elaborate texts and detailed strategies in its 13th FYP: JJJ is mentioned no less than 79 times (see Table 7).

Beijing mentioned it infrequently in its 12th FYP, but the numbers go up significantly in the 13th FYP, especially when it comes to policy coordination and environmental protection (see Fig. 7). In terms of regional coordination and environmental protection, JJJ somehow performed the worst of the three MCRs. Also, Beijing focuses more on environmental protection because this has become an urgent wish of the urban elites in the nation's capital. As for Tianjin and Hebei, they also began to focus on JJJ, and their attention covers many aspects of regional development. Hebei, with one of the worst living environments

**Table 6**  
Regional identities for YRD gleaned from provincial level planning documents.

Province	12th FYP	Key regional concepts	13th FYP	Key regional concepts	Urban System Plan & Urban Master Plan	Key regional concepts
Shanghai	YRD (24) Hangzhou Bay (4) Grand Shanghai Urban Economic Circle (1)	World-class urban agglomeration	YRD (14) Yangtze River Economic Belt (4) Hangzhou Bay (3)	World-class urban agglomeration	YRD (5) Yangtze River Economic Belt (3) Hangzhou Bay (4) YRD (24)	World-class urban agglomeration
Jiangsu	YRD (13) Yangtze River Economic Belt (0)	YRD Northern core urban agglomeration	YRD (7) Yangtze River Economic Belt (10) Su-Xi-Chang (2)	World-class urban agglomeration; Cooperation with Shanghai; Interaction with Zhejiang, Coordination with Anhui		“YZD world-class urban agglomeration northern core area”
Zhejiang	YRD (10) Hangzhou Bay (5)	World-class urban agglomeration; YRD Southern economic centre	YRD (5) Yangtze River Economic Belt (7) Hangzhou Bay (3)	World-class urban agglomeration; Deepening cooperation with Shanghai	YRD (7) Hangzhou Bay (2)	YZD world-class urban agglomeration southern international gate
Anhui	YRD (10)	Wanbei* urban agglomeration	YRD (14) Wanbei* (22) Yangtze River Economic Belt (9)	World-class urban agglomeration; Hefei Economic Circle	YRD (1)	Wanbei* urban agglomeration; Hefei metropolitan circle

Note: Wanbei\* is located in northern Anhui province.

of the nation, did not emphasize environmental protection at all in its 12th FYP, and only three times in its 13th FYP. As the weakest economic and political actor in the JJJ, accepting the undesirable heavily-polluting industries from Beijing is the only developing option for Hebei, as it emphasizes economic development, infrastructure provision and coordination policy in the 13th FYP.

At the end of 2019, Beijing, Tianjin and all the prefecture-level cities in Hebei have been linked by high-speed railways. The railway density in the JJJ has increased from 0.014 km/km<sup>2</sup> in 2009 to 0.026 km/km<sup>2</sup> in 2016, which is the lowest among the three MCRs. The low railway density is also evidence of the fact that the implementation of the JJJ regional brand identity still requires more efforts.

In short, Beijing, Tianjin, and Hebei all mention JJJ in their plans. Beijing sees it as a receptacle where the capital's unwanted functions can be transferred and Tianjin as an axis to Beijing where its industrial profile can be upgraded. Hebei province recognizes JJJ as one offering economic opportunities derived from regional integration, and little is said about accepting the residual functions from and a subservient role vis-à-vis Beijing and Tianjin. Structural inequalities in this region are consequently symbolically reflected in conceptualizations and narratives reflecting these inequalities.

### 7. Regional brand identities for the MCRs: the municipal perspectives

This section presents the adoption and remoulding of the MCRs in the planning documents drafted by the various municipalities located in the three regions. We will follow the same order as in Sections 4–6. However, since Hong Kong, Macau, Shanghai, Beijing, and Tianjin operate at the provincial level rather than at the municipal level, these administrative bodies will not show up here. Overall, we see a growing frequency among most cities in making reference to regional brands to increase the competitiveness of cities located within their respective regions. How this is done and how important regional symbolic names are to them, depends on their relative importance within this region. The more important the city is, the less important the region seems to be for this city.

#### 7.1. Greater Pearl River Delta

The PRD as a concept is adopted by all nine cities in the region (see Fig. 8). The GPRD, however, is mentioned less often in their 12th and 13th FYPs and Urban Master Plans. Most but not all cities see a rise in their reference to the PRD in their 13th FYP in comparison with the 12th FYP. Among them, Guangzhou and Shenzhen appear not to identify themselves much with either PRD or GPRD; they consider themselves as the national front-runners and aim to be international cities rather than to be part of a regional entity (Interviewee 7, Shenzhen, 2017). As for the other cities, Dongguan and Huizhou both aim to be regional “central city” in the PRD, whereas the others only mention themselves as central cities on the west bank of the PRD (Jiangmen and Zhongshan), or as “manufacturing base” of the PRD (Zhaoqing). As for the railway density of the mainland nine cities, an increase can be seen in Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and Dongguan. From this perspective, Dongguan can be regarded as a regional centre (see Fig. 9).

#### 7.2. Yangtze River Delta

In the YRD region, all cities have pitched their urban development in line with the brand identities of the YRD. The keyword “YRD” is the most prominent in the 12th FYP plan, and municipalities have begun mentioning the Yangtze River Economic Belt in the 13th FYP, a policy that has newly emerged and is now attracting growing attention among relevant governments and aims to supplement the YRD rather than to replace it (see Fig. 7). Most cities indicate their positions as being that



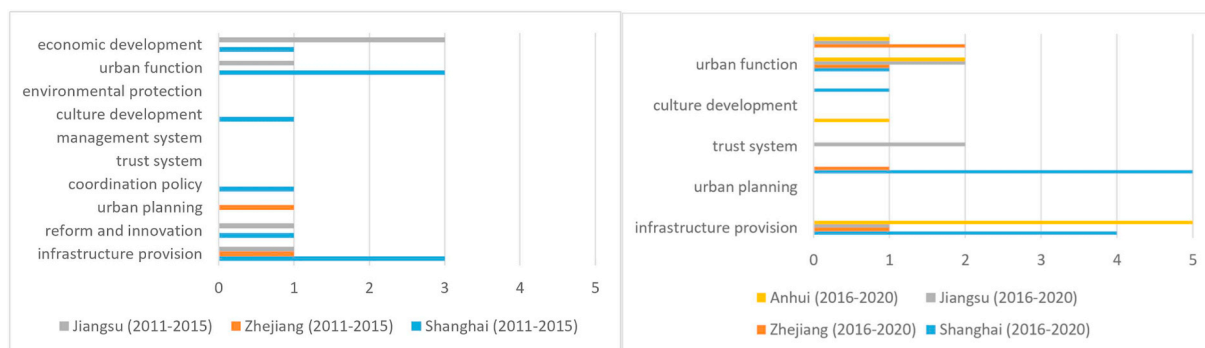


Fig. 6. Regional strategies related to brand identities about the YRD in Shanghai, Zhejiang and Jiangsu 2011–2015 and 2016–2020.

of “centre city” (Wuxi, Suzhou, Zhenjiang and Hangzhou) or “important city” (Ningbo) in the YRD region, or as having the specific functions of an “advanced manufacturing base and eco city” in the YRD (Nanjing). As for the cities located at the fringes of the region, they either emphasize their connection functions, such as “regional hub city” connecting east and west, south and north (Changzhou) or relate themselves to the YRD to only a limited extent (Zhoushan). As for the railway density in the YRD, Shanghai and Nanjing have a high density, while Hangzhou lags behind as a provincial capital.

### 7.3. Jing-Jin-Ji

All cities adopt the JJJ concept in their urban planning documents in this region. The keyword “JJJ” is the most prominent in the 13th FYP plans (see Fig. 8). 11 out of 12 cities even claim to be part of it in key sentences in their plans (except Anyang). Most of them adopt the terms Jing-Jin-Ji, but Bohai Rim and Capital Economic Zone also appear.

There is an increase in their use of the term JJJ in their 13th FYP (as compared with the 12th FYP), which is indicative of their efforts to pursue this developmental opportunity. These cities indicate their positions as “important city or node” in JJJ (Shijiazhuang, Cangzhou, Langfang). As an important city in Jing-Jin-Tang’s industrial base, Tangshan aims to maintain its historical position as the “centre city” in the Bohai Rim, and as a “pivot city” in the Capital Economic Zone. Nonetheless, the regional name JJJ appears less strong in other cities, and they also mention other regions or provinces as being of key importance to them. As for the railway density in the JJJ, Beijing and Tianjin dominates the top ranking and the other cities lag behind, which also reflects the disparity within the region.

## 8. Discussion

In this contribution, we focused our attention on the phenomenon ‘regional brand identity’. Distinct from ‘regional identity’, brand identities may be not derived from past heritage or commonly felt cultural characteristics, but they tend to be instrumental, follow economic objectives and are co-created by various tiers of government. Since newly emerging regions normally cross provincial and city borders and are of national importance, they are used by national, provincial and local governments alike for functional reasons, but these various bodies may see these functions and symbolic features differently, depending on their interests and perspectives. Since little is known about the formulation and evolution of regional brand identities (in contrast to city brand identities), the chapters above have explored the emergence of regional brand identities for three Mega City Regions

in China in the interplay across various tiers of government. We analysed which territorial, symbolic and institutional shapes these regions acquired over time and then focused on the symbolic representation of each of these three MCRs by involved governments across the various administrative levels.

Their territorial shape of the regions occasionally shifted over time, mostly towards expansion by incorporating new peripheral cities within the region. While the shape of the GPRD has remained stable over time, that of the YRD expanded substantially, and that of JJJ still shows a tendency to fluctuate but it is definitely growing. Compared with the regions in the EU, the scale of Chinese MCRs is decided by national government policy rather than bottom up within the urban agglomeration as most EU cases. The institutional shape of the three MCRs strengthened over the years through the establishment of coordination committees and organs, reshufflings of administrative entities, the proclamation of zones and the official adoption of regional plans. Institutional shapes have been successfully adopted in all three regions. The symbolic shape of the region appears to be predominantly that of being an economic growth pole allowing the Chinese national state to compete with similar MCRs around the world. In addition to that, the GPRD is also a political integration project between China’s mainland and Hong Kong and Macau. The significance of JJJ is to offer Beijing the greater geographic content to thrive in as the nation’s political and technological capital.

All three MCRs have progressed considerably, with the YRD being apparently furthest advanced. The YRD region has existed the longest and has the least deep divide among the involved provinces and cities in terms of wealth and income disparity. Only latecomer Anhui province’s adherence has very recently changed its territorial shape. The PRD is also firmly established; but the gap in prosperity is wider than in the YRD and the inclusion of two separate Special Administrative Regions Hong Kong and Macau (of which the former has not always been an eager partner) has made integration harder, especially institutionally. JJJ has traditionally been far less strong than the other two but has recently received a great push from the national government which has placed it firmly on the agenda of various involved governments. The steps taken in their territorial delimitation, symbolic conceptualization and narration, and institutional stabilization can be seen as a process of multi-level governance in which different government tiers throw in their own interests and agendas.

In the national plans, the regional strategies of the three MCRs enjoy solid support. They are invariably seen as economic zones with international competitiveness and/or world-class urban agglomerations that should be able to compete with other similar international MCRs. On the provincial level, the general adoption of the respective MCR brand

**Table 7**  
Descriptions on regional identities regarding JJJ in provincial level planning documents.

Province	12th FYP	Key regional concepts	13th FYP	Key regional concepts	Urban System Plan & Urban Master plan	Key regional concepts
Beijing	JJJ (0) Capital economic circle (1)	Urban agglomeration with Beijing capital city as its core	JJJ (80) Bohai Rim (1)	World-class urban agglomeration with Beijing capital city as its core	JJJ (14) Bohai Rim (2)	Important regional centre for social and economic development in China
Tianjin	JJJ (3) Bohai Rim (5)	JJJ national capital region	JJJ (21) Bohai Rim (2)		JJJ (6) Bohai Rim (16)	JJJ Economic Core Area, Bohai Rim Economic Zone
Hebei	JJJ (15) Bohai Rim (9)	World-class urban agglomeration	JJJ (79) Bohai Rim (1)	World-class urban agglomeration	JJJ (16) Bohai Rim (3)	JJJ World-class urban agglomeration

identity is equally strong across the three regions, but it is presumably most institutionally fragmented in the GPRD. In the PRD, the brand identity of (G)PRD was promoted as a symbolic shape by Guangdong province when it perceived that the national government had shifted its attention to the YRD. The brand identity of the (G)PRD had enjoyed only weak recognition from Hong Kong for a long time. In fact, it admitted to its relevance only recently, when it sensed its reliance on the mainland was on the increase. Acceptance of the GPRD by Macau has always been strong, but less weighty given its small size. In contrast, provinces located in the YRD all show firm recognition of the YRD as an entity, and are eager to symbolically construe their own regional sub-brand identity within it, such as Shanghai (the Grand Shanghai Metropolitan Economic Circle), Jiangsu (Su-Xi-Chang urban agglomeration), Zhejiang (Hangzhou Bay Area), Anhui (Wanbei Urban Agglomeration). These sub-brands also reflect the importance of specific industries in regions, such as in the Su-Xi-Chang urban agglomeration (advanced manufacturing and service industry), and the Hangzhou Bay Area (electronic commerce and information economics), where they operate like driving forces and inspire government actors. Finally, Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei all mention the JJJ in their urban plans. Beijing sees it as a receptacle where the capital's unwanted functions can be transferred to and Tianjin as an axis to Beijing where its industrial profile can be upgraded. Hebei province recognizes the JJJ as offering economic opportunities derived from regional integration, and little is said about accepting the residual functions from and a subservient role vis-à-vis Beijing and Tianjin. Structural inequalities in this region are consequently symbolically reflected in a conceptualization and narratives reflecting these inequalities.

At the municipal level, the region's names are often mentioned, but their meaning depends on the geographic, economic and political positions occupied by the various cities. Across the board, more prosperous and powerful municipalities rarely mention the regional brand identities. They tend to attach less importance to the region they are located in and rather consider themselves international cities in direct competition with their peers elsewhere, while the smaller and less prosperous ones adherent more to and depend more on the region they find themselves in.

### 9. Conclusion and implications

Regional brand identities are fluid and instrumental. In the Chinese context, they are instigated by the national government to strengthen the potential to address primarily economic questions. In this contribution, we have shown that in China's multi-level governance system, the national government promotes the regional brand identities as economic zones for their international competitiveness and world-class urban agglomerations that should be able to vie with other similar international MCRs. Moreover, the territorial borders of the regions are decided by the national government. Compared with MCRs in the EU, the national government plays a more important role in the Chinese cases and tends to establish scale and direction from the top down, while lower tiers of government throw in their own stakes and ideas, but within the range of options left to them by the national government. These brand identities are not always in line with historical or cultural regional identities, although coherence between identity and brand identity would probably make broad acceptance of the latter easier (Terlouw, 2009), which also reflects the governance towards place marketing rather than public equity (Lucarelli & Giovanardi, 2016). In sum, the regional brand identity is also like a package including every element, which is vague for provincial and municipal governments.

At the provincial and municipal levels, the functional assumptions under the selected regional brand identity are not called into question, but remoulded to fit their own economic interests. These findings are consistent with the attitudes of provinces and cities to regional identity in the Finnish context to the extent that Finnish provinces and cities struggling with their economic status or development tend to adhere

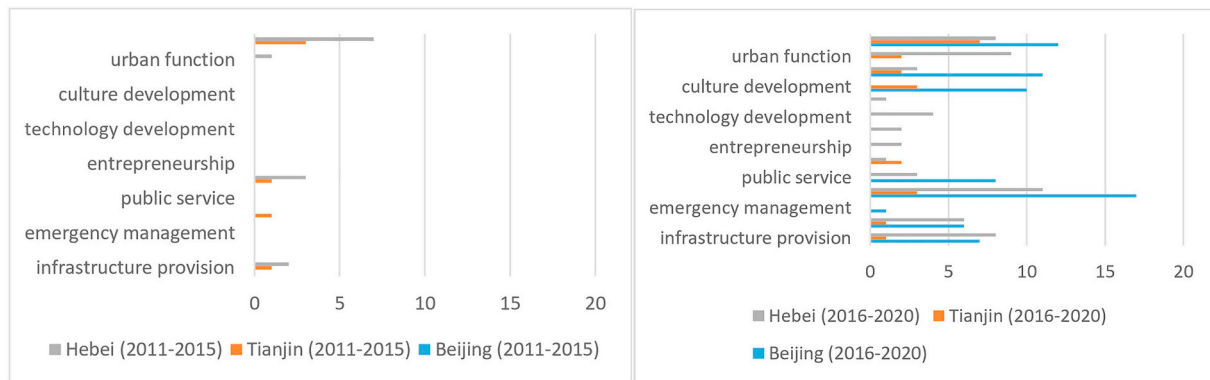


Fig. 7. Regional strategies related to brand identities about JJJ in Hebei, Beijing and Tianjin 2011–2015 and 2016–2020.

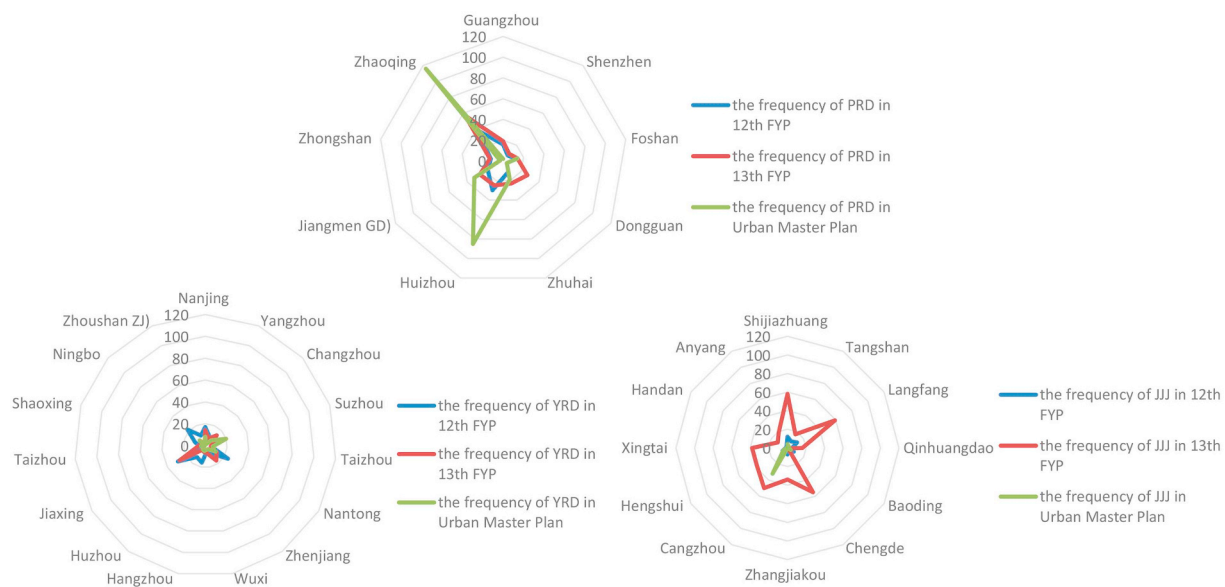


Fig. 8. Frequency of “PRD”, “YRD” and “JJJ” in municipal level planning documents in PRD cities.

more to and depend more on regional brand identities proposed for them and promoted by the Finnish national government (Paasi, 2013). However, successful and economic core provinces or cities do not look up to national level for direction in the same way. The sub-brands proposed by provincial and municipal governments also reflect the driving forces from specific industries rather than the national government.

This begs the question to what extent experiences in multi-level governance of regional brand identities in Chinese regions reflect broader international patterns. It is tempting to assume that the finding of the dominant position of the national government, as well as the sequentiality in the process (from national through provincial to municipal) and systematicity of representation (brands reflected and comparatively easily retrieved in plan documents), do not hold for many other nations. Transferability is possible to countries with a strong national government where megacities evolving into MCRs. As China has a systematic planning system, which many developing countries do not have, the involvement of multiple levels of governments will be the same, but the interaction among them, as well as private actors, will always remain specific to national institutional conditions. As residents' perception is an important dimension for regional brand identity study, future studies can further investigate the

role and perception of residents in the branding process.

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**Author statement**

**Haiyan Lu:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - Original draft preparation. **Martin de Jong:** Reviewing and Editing. **Song Yun:** Data collection, formal analysis. **Miaoxi Zhao:** Visualization and Validation.

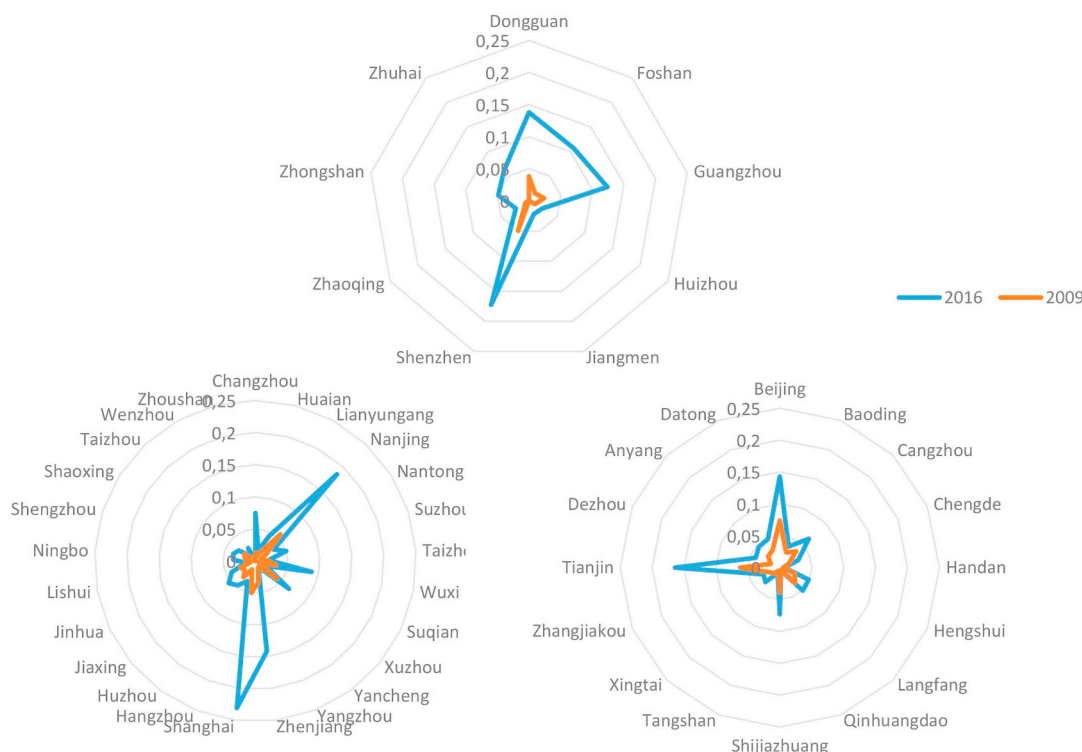


Fig. 9. Railway density of PRD, YRD and JJJ MRCs in, 2009 and 2016 (the unit is km/km<sup>2</sup>).

Appendix A

Table A1

Interviewees from planning and research institutes in three megacity regions.

Respondent's host organization	Respondent's position
1 Shanghai Urban Planning and Design Research Institute	Planner involved in Shanghai 2040
2 Shanghai Social Science Academy	Researcher working on coordination within the Yangtze River Delta
3 Shanghai Social Science Academy	Researcher working on regional governance in Yangtze River Delta
4 Zhejiang Province Land Survey Planning Institute	Researcher working on regional development
5 Nanjing Provincial Land Survey Bureau	Planner working on YRD regional planning
6 Tongji University	Professor working on Yangtze River Delta development
7 Peking University Shenzhen Graduate School	Professor studying and involved in Greater Pearl River Delta development
8 Guangdong Urban & Rural Planning and Design Institute	Chief planner involved in the planning at Guangdong and Guangzhou levels
9 Guangzhou Urban Planning and Survey Design Research Institute	Chief planner involved in the planning at Guangdong and Guangzhou levels
10 Planning & Design Institute of Peking University (Shenzhen) Co. Ltd	Chief consultant involved in the coordination of GPRD, especially with Macau and Zhuhai
11 China Academy of Urban Planning & Design Shenzhen	Chief planner involved in the Jing-Jin-Ji Coordination Plan
12 China Academy of Urban Planning & Design Beijing	Planner involved in the Jing-Jin-Ji Coordination Plan
13 Tsinghua University	Professor working on Jing-Jin-Ji Coordination

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