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Developing a tourism region through tourism and culture: bordering, branding, placemaking and governance processes

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ABSTRACT

China's pre-pandemic national-level planning advocated a combination of culture and tourism to advance growth in the Greater Bay Area (GBA) mega-region. Culture is seen as increasing regional cohesion, with multi-destination travel products connecting subregions and cities. This paper examines perceptions of progress towards a coherent GBA cultural identity and its implications for tourism. We examine tourism stakeholder perceptions of the GBA, assess the prospects for the development of collective identities in the region and assess the prospects for implementation of the GBA brand. Surveys and interviews with stakeholders indicate that the prevalent top-down planning approach has so far generated limited regional coherence and may also be limiting bottom-up placemaking initiatives. Debordering between Hong Kong, Macao and the mainland cities offers opportunities for tourism development, but these have so far been limited, also because of intensifying competition between mainland GBA cities in international markets, challenging the implementation of an umbrella brand. Regional stakeholders so far show little buy-in to the overarching 'quality living circle' concept for the GBA. New governance structures may be to support the development of a coherent regional identity and generate place leadership to successfully combine top-down and bottom-up placemaking initiatives.

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Introduction

Cities and regions have increasingly adopted placemaking strategies to create coherent destination images and positioning. This paper considers the application of these concepts in China's Greater Bay Area (GBA) – a new 'megacity region' with aspirations of global prominence (Hui et al., 2020). The GBA region is being developed through de-bordering and re-bordering processes, with the integration of former colonies Hong Kong and Macao into mainland China. This creates the challenge of developing a new destination brand for the GBA region, which must also be given meaning for internal and external audiences through placemaking processes. As noted by Chen (2022, p. 86): 'The rapid development of such a huge megalopolis that attracts attention globally is worth investigating.'

The Pearl River Delta (PRD) area in China's south has been a focus of government economic policymaking since the 'opening up' of the country started in 1978. The recent 'Greater Bay Area' (GBA) plan extended the

PRD concept by incorporating the two special administrative regions (SARs) of Hong Kong and Macao into the economic integration process, strengthening regional economic and education links and promoting culture and tourism as drivers of regional coherence. The GBA initiative envisages an integrated economic and cultural region of more than 70 million inhabitants drawing on international 'bay area' settings such as San Francisco, New York and Tokyo. It will capitalise on Hong Kong's positioning as a global business hub connecting mainland China with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Macao, a former Portuguese colony, also contributes to the BRI, by making global connections between Lusophone-speaking nations (Greater Bay Area - Hong Kong, 2017). The GBA partners nine Guangdong cities with Hong Kong and Macao in pursuit of 'mutual benefits and improve all people's well-being and living standards; a high-level social civilization; and increased international competitiveness and influence, strengthening soft power of Chinese culture and

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deepening cultural exchange and integration' (Li et al., 2021, p. 3). Central Government aims to create a globally competitive business environment by accelerating market integration. In their evaluation of GBA governance, Meulbroek et al. (2022, p. 12) have noted a 'tacit' invitation to local and regional governments, the SARs and businesses to marshal the 'resources and capacities of a multi-polar region-in-waiting ... in the service of a nationally initiated and tendentially mainland-centric vision'.

The top-down GBA plan is economically-focused, and supported by advanced infrastructure and region-wide transportation networks such as Express Rail, bridges, and boundary control points. However, the GBA also seeks to promote social integration and to improve the quality of life in terms of education, healthcare, social wellbeing, housing, and environmental protection. Tourism can potentially help advance 'The creation of a 'quality living circle' within the GBA – providing an ideal place for living, working and travelling ... (which) involves the development and enhancement of new and existing lifestyle facilities around sports and recreation, arts and culture, tourism and hospitality.' (KPMG, 2018). The GBA tourism and culture initiative is a large-scale experiment, which parallels the European Union de-bordering experience (Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017) and has significant governance implications. Achieving such aims requires not just a new regional brand, but also the shaping of a new regional reality through place-making, which can be summarised as a process of turning the regional space into a public place which has meaning for all stakeholders (Dupre, 2019).

This study analyses the role of placemaking in creating regional coherence following debordering between Hong Kong and Macao and the mainland GBA cities, and the rebordering of the GBA as a new region. The primary objectives are to: (1) identify tourism stakeholder perceptions of the current status of the GBA, (2) to assess prospects for creating meaningful collective identities applicable to residents, visitors, and mobile populations and (3) address city-level implementation by identifying how GBA coherence is strengthened through brand building and by cultural development. This research makes a contribution to the study of the processes of tourism region building in the new context of the GBA in China, and highlights the need to combine branding and placemaking initiatives in such programmes.

The following literature review considers region-wide planning, placemaking and (de)bordering processes (Timothy et al., 2016). The authors then evaluate progress across the GBA towards a coherent region-wide sense of place.

Literature review

The Greater Bay Area (GBA) comprises nine municipalities across China's Guangdong province. Inclusion of the two SARs lends support to the Chinese government's pre-pandemic 'going global' strategy (Greater Bay Area - Hong Kong, 2020). Researchers have investigated governance of the two SARs within the GBA context (Wan, 2013), and border issues between Hong Kong and mainland China (Graddol & Danielewicz-Betz, 2015; Liu & Shi, 2021; Shen, 2003; Yang, 2006). Tourism has also been analyzed through themes such as urban networks (Zhao et al., 2019), city competitiveness (Kaijun, 2016; Yang & Yu, 2020; Zheng et al., 2016), destination branding (Kirillova et al., 2020), destination attractiveness (Chan & Shek, 2021; Hong, Ngan, Yu, & Zhou, 2022), product development (Bi & Tian, 2020), spatial structure (Hui et al., 2020), and infrastructure (Zheng et al., 2016). Recent studies have also highlighted tourism governance (Park et al., 2022) and cultural practices (Luo & Huang, 2023). Ong and Liu (2022) highlighted urbanization in Hengqin, a borderland sub-component of Zhuhai where governance is shared with Macao. Though GBA related research is growing, the role of culture in tourism development and regional attractiveness has not been addressed. The following section considers the literature on governance and (de)bordering processes, place leadership and place-making, particularly emphasising GBA related studies.

Governance and bordering processes

As former British and Portuguese colonies respectively, Hong Kong and Macao were designated 'Special Administration Regions' (SARs) on their return to China in 1997 and 1999. Since handover, they have formed part of the 'One-Country Two-Systems' arrangement. Hong Kong has sought to retain its '*distinct identity and strengths as an international business, financial, shopping and aviation centre*' (Hong Kong Government Information Centre, 2021). The integration of the SARs is critical to GBA development, transforming the mainland borders from international to intra-national (Graddol & Danielewicz-Betz, 2015), thereby fostering political, socio-economic, taxation, mobility, legislative, and linguistic integration. However, Chen (2022, p. 98) argues that future coordinated development across borders will be constrained by the different administrative system, ideologies and culture prevalent across the GBA cities.

Gao et al. (2019) argue that China should be understood through its borders, and Huang et al. (2022) note border research has shifted towards regional and local boundaries from the previous national border

focus. Though borders are typically created by institutions and policy makers, individual actors are also active in devising strategies to respond to and negotiate border constraints (Zhao et al., 2019). Bordering is therefore a negotiated process, and as evidenced by the GBA case, which includes both the bordering processes of creating new regional borders, as well as a de-bordering process linking the two SARs and the mainland cities. Creating the GBA may be viewed as a 'symbolic process where local authorities (or entrepreneurs) intentionally emphasise the boundary and the differences between countries to enhance its tourist appeal' (Zhou et al., 2018). Bordering processes involve more than simply drawing lines – the enclosing and differentiation of space creates a new reality, externally projected through place branding, and experienced internally through placemaking processes.

Referring to debordering between the PRD and Hong Kong, Shen (2003) argued that cooperation has been 'bottom-up' and a consequence of post-handover demographic and cultural ties, rather than direction by mainland authorities. Nevertheless, the 'reform and open-door' policy was critical for stimulating the movement of people and goods between the mainland and Hong Kong. Yang (2006) reported that the borderlands became a 'co-existent' and highly interdependent space, with Hong Kong making large-scale manufacturing investments in the GBA. Critically for tourism, integration of the borderland contributed to an acceleration of Mainland Chinese arrivals into Hong Kong from 2.38 million in 1997 (*Hong Kong 2003 – Travel and Tourism*, 2003) to 43.8 million in 2019 (HKTb, 2020). The debordering process has also stimulated regional mobilities and integration (Więckowski & Timothy, 2021), and the GBA boundary may now be considered domestic or supranational rather than international. This distinguishes the GBA from longer established Asian 'growth triangles' which have leveraged resources and attracted investors across international borders (Henderson, 2001).

As a result of de-bordering, infrastructural developments are improving GBA connectivity, notably through high-speed rail and cross-boundary bridges (Choi, 2021). The world's longest bridge-tunnel system – the iconic Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge (HZMB) (Han, 2018) – includes artificial islands, which now feature as attractions in tour packages combining border features, bridge-viewing, shopping, and dining areas (China Highlights, 2021). This will arguably create a 'dual circulation' pattern between the GBA and China (Kan, 2022), extending to both inbound and outbound tourism. Despite the progress towards integration,

many respondents in Choi's (2021) survey of Hong Kong businesses were vague about the meaning and scope of the GBA. Others viewed the region as focused exclusively on integration between the two SARs and the mainland. A further 40.6% anticipated that the GBA would not impact on their businesses, indicative of a gap between official aspirations and local stakeholder perceptions.

Internal fragmentation of the region is also evident from the differing roles assigned to each city in GBA planning. Hong Kong is positioned as an international hub for finance, professional services, transportation, trade, and aviation (Greater Bay Area – Hong Kong, 2020), with Macao functioning as a global centre for tourism and leisure. Li et al. (2022) noted that the diverse resources, capacities, and priorities of the various GBA cities are a challenge to top-down central planning.

This indicates that (de)bordering processes may complicate destination branding. A brand story is needed for tourists to build experiences around a unique regional identity that can provide lasting competitive advantage. The brand is an outcome of multi-stakeholder collaborative decision-making (Prideaux & Cooper, 2002), involving both tangible and intangible aspects: 'The place product is a unique combination of building, facilities, and venues which represent a multiplicity of autonomous service businesses, both public and private' (Hankinson, 2009, p. 98). A partnership approach is necessary, but this presents many challenges for destination marketing organizations (DMOs), who often struggle to exercise management control, and destination identities often remain under-developed. Destination branding also faces the challenge of authenticity: 'what sells and has success is the brand that is honest, and valuable in itself' (Hornskov, 2014). According to Gilmore (2002) destination branding should therefore reflect an authentic reality, rather than a projection. Linking the GBA regional brand to an authentic local reality and engaging a range of stakeholders might arguably be achieved more effectively through placemaking rather than through traditional destination branding. Placemaking goes beyond the intangible brand to include physical, social and cultural elements as well. This is important to enable the individual destinations in the GBA to establish distinctive identities within the GBA umbrella. By emphasising placemaking, the current study extends the theoretical contribution of Kirillova et al.'s (2020) GBA study which consolidated the coopetition and cross-border marketing concepts in light of stakeholder perceptions, thereby underpinning the uniqueness of member cities united under a common brand.

Placemaking and place leadership

An extensive review of the placemaking literature related to urban development and tourism by Dupre (2019) identifies placemaking as a process of creating place meanings or sense of place through identities and images associated with local communities. Palermo and Ponzini (2015) have defined placemaking broadly as the process of 'making better places'. Lew (2017) emphasises that placemaking can be achieved either through bottom-up, organic and incremental processes, or through top-down, master planned approaches. He argues that organic placemaking can support local culture more effectively than top-down programmes, which often struggle to link to local stakeholders. Placemaking can facilitate holistic destination development by enhancing attractive place qualities for both residents and visitors and link cultural, tourism and other stakeholders through a coherent place narrative. It is increasingly viewed as an effective strategy for the development of tourism markets (Hultman & Hall, 2012; Priatmoko et al., 2021). Richards (2020) operationalised this concept in the tourism context by identifying resources, meanings, and creativity as the core elements of placemaking, with all three necessary to make better places for tourism. Richards (2020, p. 7) conceptualised resources as the 'network linking space of flows and space of places to harness resources, tangible and intangible'. Tangible resources include destination hardware, such as heritage buildings, natural resources, and facilities, whereas intangible resources or 'software' include language, knowledge, and skills. Creativity gives meaning to resources by enabling stakeholders to identify with them, and creativity is also a catalyst for 'making things happen'. Institutional creativity includes the development of structures to facilitate action, including governance. In the case of the GBA, Chen (2022) views the development of the new region as 'a process of making meaning', reflecting the analysis of placemaking by Dupre (2019).

Richards' holistic view of placemaking envisages a blend of the top-down and bottom-up approaches identified by Lew (2017), with multiple stakeholders participating in the formation of meanings. Razali and Ismail (2014) also emphasise the need for 'a balanced or a harmonious relationship between tourists, local communities, and organizations and businesses that provide tourism services' in tourism destination development. The GBA programme approaches regional development, branding and placemaking from a predominantly top-down perspective, aiming to reach across (formal) borders to unite previously divided territories. Więckowski and Timothy's (2021) work on (de)bordering in

the European Union (EU) has potential lessons for the GBA. The EU used placemaking strategies to promote regional and cross-border cohesion. Whereas earlier European programmes promoted cohesion through economic measures such as fiscal integration and free movement of labour, later measures stimulated cultural and social identification. A notable example is the Øresund Region encompassing Copenhagen in Denmark and Malmö in Sweden. The new economic dynamics of bridging the Peberholm Strait and connecting the two cities raised questions about regional placemaking and local attachments for the new region and its identity (Hospers, 2006). Stoffelen and Vanneste (2017) observed that tourism de-bordering within Europe has relied on informal networks that build capacity and trust, as well as developing 'thick' institutional relations. Though there is a parallel GBA de-bordering process, the prevalent placemaking approach remains one of top-down master planning, as Lew (2017) suggests. Whilst the authorities seek meaning for those who live, work, study in and visit the region, we can question whether the formation of a coherent regional brand supported by all stakeholders is achievable in a top-down fashion.

Branding the GBA as a new destination

The GBA seeks to develop a 'Cultured Bay Area' and to expand regional cooperation through education, culture, tourism, and social security (Greater Bay Area - Hong Kong, 2019). In line with the placemaking concept as a means of 'improving the quality of life for all' (Richards & Duif, 2019), the Outline Development Plan for the GBA (Greater Bay Area - Hong Kong, 2019) seeks to enhance the quality of 'living, working, and traveling' by: (1) developing education and talent hubs; (2) developing a 'Cultured Bay Area' to promote cultural and creative industries; (3) stimulating leisure travel in the GBA; (4) expanding employment and entrepreneurship; (5) shaping a 'Healthy Bay Area' through cooperation in medical and healthcare services and; (6) cooperation in social security and social governance to encourage Hong Kong and Macao residents to work, live and retire in the GBA. The development of the '9 + 2' GBA cities includes developing a coherent identity around the unique positioning of the two SARs. The GBA brand is based on going 'global together', welcoming the two SARs into the 'motherland', with tourism as a critical placemaking element, and intra-GBA travel stimulating shared cultural identities. However, the coherence of the current regional brand is questionable. Lei et al. (2022) found that traveler perceptions of the various constituent GBA cities vary in terms of

gastronomy, hotels, integrated metro transport networks and photo-taking opportunities. Lu et al. (2017) concluded that though all GBA cities are actively branding themselves to attract tourism and investment, Hong Kong, Macao, Guangzhou and Shenzhen exhibited more sophisticated brand development. They noted potential conflicts between stakeholders, which questions the achievability of a unified brand.

Cultural assets across the GBA

Some of the '9 + 2' GBA cities (see Figure 1) have used cultural developments to progress the meaning aspect of placemaking. Shenzhen and Foshan, for example, have implemented 'cultural governance' strategies, including constructing and/or renovating cultural spaces, organising large public events, and promoting cultural tourism (Luo & Huang, 2023). The wider region possesses two UNESCO world heritage sites which evidence tangible heritage – Kaiping Diaolou and Village in Jiangmen and the Historic Centre of Macao (Huang & Liu, 2023). UNESCO Intangible Heritage is epitomised by Yueju Opera and the Dragon Boat Festival. The Chinese Government has also recognised Lingnan heritage, Cantonese cuisine, Cantonese dialect, and Martial arts as intangible cultural attributes. Guangdong Province has 589 cultural assets linked to particular cities, notably the Puzhai Fire Dragon which is associated with Fengshun city (Chinese Cultural Studies Centre, 2021).

The two SARs have emphasised tangible over intangible heritage, although Macao secured designation as a UNESCO 'City of Gastronomy'. The Hong Kong authorities are progressing the culture and tourism

connection with iconic developments such as West Kowloon Cultural District. The Hong Kong Government established a Culture, Sports and Tourism Bureau in 2022, a response to the national 14th five-year plan, which envisages the city as an 'East-meets-West centre for international cultural exchange' (Hong Kong SAR, 2022).

There is a prospect of developing GBA-wide tourism products through 'quality' initiatives which strengthen local awareness of what Guangzhou, Macao and Hong Kong offer. Enhanced intra-GBA infrastructure has strengthened physical links thereby improving mobilities. A *Culture and Tourism Development Plan* for the GBA was also adopted in late 2020. Tourism potentially extends regional integration by bringing together people from across the region and strengthening international exposure. However, the top-down planning approach compounds the challenges of developing a unified and coherent GBA regional image and identity that resonates with all relevant actors.

To examine the opinions of stakeholders about the prospects for coherent GBA placemaking, we conducted quantitative and qualitative research, as outlined in the following section.

Methodology

We adopt a mixed-methods research approach to accommodate the complexity and dynamism of the study setting. The single region focus is considered appropriate because the GBA is globally significant at a time when global political tensions have shaken interactions between the US and China. It is timely to assemble the combined findings of various official documents,

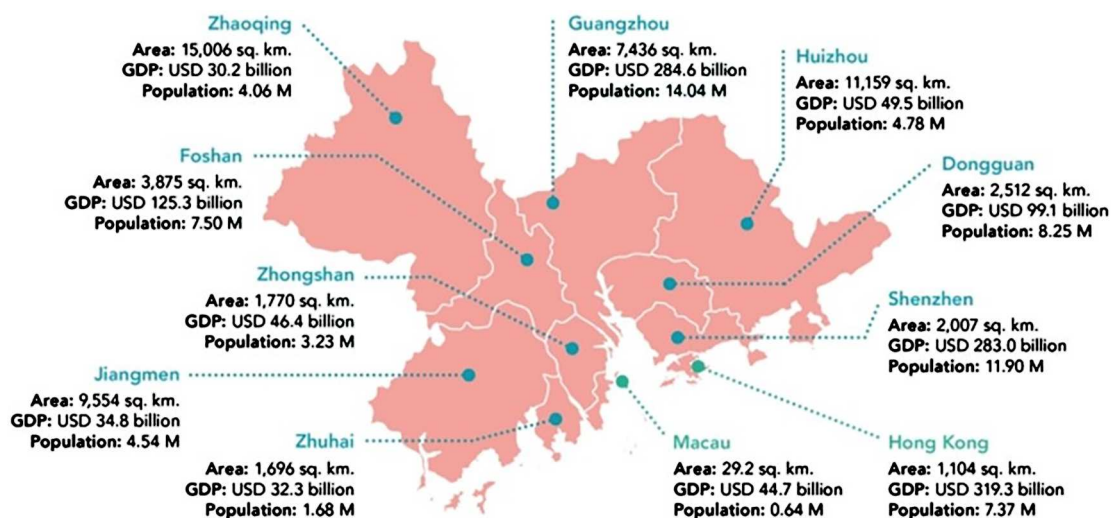


Figure 1. The GBA cities. Source: <https://www.smartkarma.com/home/daily-briefs/brief-thematic-chinas-greater-bay-area-the-essential-and-more-2/>

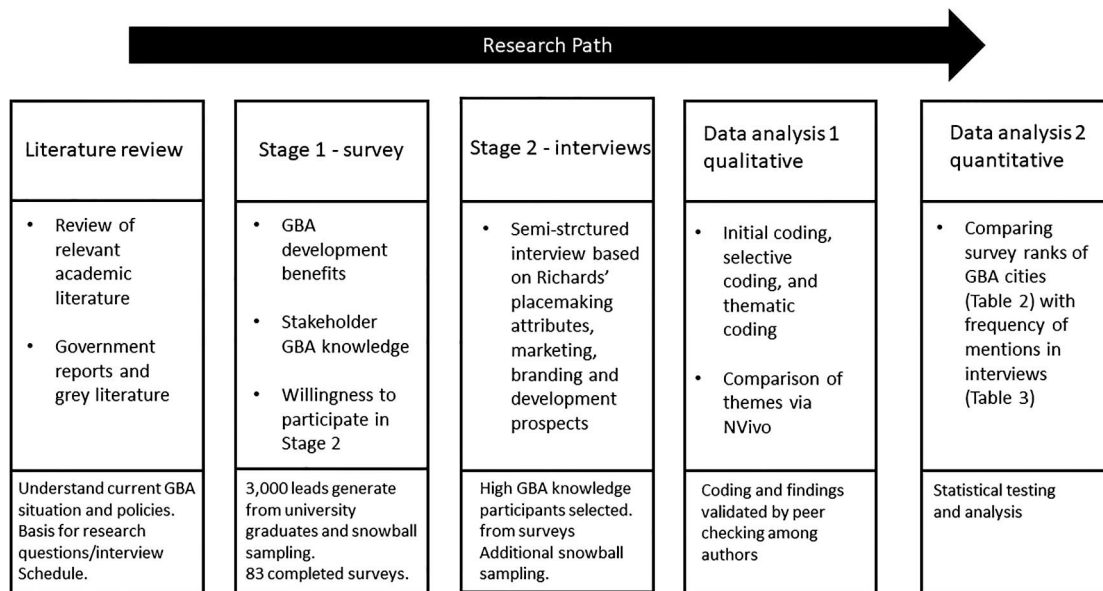


Figure 2. Research path for the study.

the relevant scholarly literature and the perspectives of tourism related respondents who have advanced insights into progress of the GBA.

The structure of the data collection process is shown in the research path diagram in Figure 2. This shows the different steps taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the data collection, and to provide a clear research audit trail (Carcary, 2009). As suggested by Gunawan (2015) we undertook the steps of respondent selection, triangulation, detailed transcription, and coding. These are described in detail in the following section.

Selection of key informants

During stage one of the study, a short online survey was distributed amongst regional contacts to source interviewees familiar with the GBA and to rank cities that will benefit from GBA developments using a Likert scale of 5 (1 – least to 5 – most benefit). The survey also included sections on: (1) participant information, including locations and organizational position; (2) GBA-related questions, including level of knowledge of the GBA and (3) participants' willingness to be interviewed subsequently. Recipients were also asked to forward the survey link to contacts with GBA-related knowledge. The survey was developed in English and then translated into Simplified and Traditional Chinese. The translations were checked by a professional linguist. The instrument was distributed in late 2020 and early 2021 to hospitality and tourism industry partners and university graduates in Hong Kong, Macao, and mainland China, through snowball sampling, generating

about 3,000 leads. A total of 69 valid responses were received from a total of 83 complete responses.

To select interviewees, initial screening selected respondents who ranked their knowledge of the GBA at a level of 4 and above on a 5-point Likert scale. The ten selected participants included six from hospitality (the hotel, F&B, and MICE sectors), one each from tourism services (i.e. travel agency), consulting, recreation and entertainment, and real estate. The sample was then expanded through snowballing, until reaching saturation. The final purposive sample used in the second research stage included 24 experts from policy-making, higher education, hospitality, tourism services, transportation, recreation and entertainment, marketing, and consulting companies. The selected informants were leaders/experts in tourism and their titles ranged from Chief Executive/Chair to managers of well-established businesses in Hong Kong, Macao, and mainland China. Those in senior positions are probably better informed than those at lower levels in the organisation, and therefore in a better position to make an informed judgement on the prospects of the GBA. The majority of our respondents come from the business sector and are business-oriented, however we also interviewed some academic and government (or former) officials to gain a broader coverage of opinions.

Interviewee profiles

The interviews of between 30 and 90 min were administered between February and April 2021. They were conducted in either English, Cantonese, or Mandarin with

Table 1. Participant profiles.

Interviewee #	Gender (M/F)	Sector	Title	Location	Level of GBA involvement
1	M	Travel trade	Director/ Chairman	Hong Kong	Substantial
2	M	Former government	Executive VP	Hong Kong	Limited
3	M	Transport	Director/ Chairman	Hong Kong	Substantial
4	F	Travel trade	CEO	Hong Kong	Substantial
5	M	Travel trade	Director/ Chairman	Hong Kong	Substantial
6	M	Entertainment	CEO	Hong Kong	Substantial
7	M	Former government	Executive VP	Hong Kong	Substantial
8	F	Hospitality	Manager	Zhuhai	Limited
9	F	Hospitality	Manager	Hong Kong	Limited
10	F	Hospitality	President	Hong Kong	Substantial
11	F	Entertainment	Manager	Macao	Limited
12	F	Entertainment	Director/ Chairman	Hong Kong	Limited
13	F	Hotel Developer/ Real Estate	Director/ Chairman	Hong Kong	Substantial
14	M	Transport	General Manager	Hong Kong	Substantial
15	M	MICE	Director/ Chairman	Hong Kong	Substantial
16	M	Government	Executive VP	Hong Kong	Substantial
17	F	MICE	Director/ Chairman	Hong Kong	Limited
18	M	Hospitality	General Manager	Shenzhen	Limited
19	M	Academic	Associate Professor	Zhuhai	Substantial
20	M	Academic	Professor	Macao	Substantial
21	F	Destination Marketing / Real Estate	Director/ Chairman	Macao	Substantial
22	F	Consulting company	Director/ Chairman	Hong Kong	Substantial
23	F	FoShan Government	Manager	FoShan	Substantial
24	M	Hospitality	Director/ Chairman	Macao	Substantial

the interviewer outlining the study purpose and procedures for informed consent. The Chinese transcripts were translated into English for analysis. Nvivo qualitative data analysis software was used for initial coding, selective coding, and thematic coding. Interviewee profiles are listed in Table 1. Most respondents were Hong Kong-based, because their high level of GBA involvement provided a key perspective on the debordering processes involved in creating the GBA.

The authors evaluated the interviewee backgrounds and their company affiliations, thereby setting the stage for more in-depth exploration of current GBA collaborations or projects. A good balance of male (13) and female respondents (11) was achieved. The open-ended interview questions generally addressed: (1) how interviewees perceived the GBA, including its relevance to their respective businesses, (2) overall GBA identity and (3) the self-identity of GBA cities and areas in terms of culture, heritage, and tourism. The interviews included questions about collaborative activities across the public and private sectors as well as between the different GBA sub-regions and constituent cities. The interview items drew from Richards' placemaking attributes, covering regional resources (both tangible and intangible), meanings or identification with these resources, and creativity (for example governance arrangements), as well as aspects of GBA marketing and branding.

The Interview transcripts were subject to open/initial coding, axial/selective coding, and theoretical/thematic coding to denote key concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Each interview began with a series of open-ended

questions, thereby permitting data analysis into emergent themes for comparison (Hardy, 2005). This 'constant comparison' of themes provides an analytic process when developing the structure of the theory by comparing pieces of data for similarities and differences (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). A broad picture of GBA placemaking and identity creation was formulated.

Findings

Benefits for GBA cities

The GBA city rankings presented in Table 2 show that respondents identified Shenzhen, Zhuhai, and Macao as the main prospective GBA beneficiaries. The proximity of Shenzhen and Zhuhai to Hong Kong and Macao respectively may have been a factor. Macao may be a beneficiary because of the disproportionate market share of mainland Chinese arrivals (70.9% in 2019)

Table 2. To what extent will these cities benefit from GBA developments? Rankings of GBA cities from the online survey.

City	City ranking	
	Rank	Average score (out of 5)
Shenzhen	1	4.130
Zhuhai	2	3.986
Macao	3	3.899
Guangzhou	4	3.768
Dongguan	5	3.333
Hong Kong	6	3.290
Zhongshan	7	3.275
Foshan	8	3.130
Huizhou	9	3.101
Jiangmen	10	2.696
Zhaoqing	11	2.580

Table 3. Rankings of Guangdong cities from the quantitative survey and qualitative (interview) data.

Guangdong City**	Survey: To what extent will these GBA cities benefit from the GBA development?		Interviews: Frequency of city mentions		
	Rank	Average score (out of 5)	Rank	Word count frequency	Frequency %
Shenzhen	1	4.130	1	252	29.3%
Zhuhai	2	3.986	2	208	24.2%
Guangzhou	3	3.768	3	198	23.0%
Foshan	6	3.130	4	102	11.9%
Zhongshan	5	3.275	5	27	3.1%
Jiangmen	8	2.696	6	23	2.7%
Huizhou	7	3.101	6	23	2.7%
Dongguan	4	3.333	8	17	2.0%
Zhaoqing	9	2.580	9	10	1.2%

** All districts or towns are grouped under the respective city.

(Macao Statistics and Census Service, 2020). Hong Kong will arguably derive less benefit because the more dispersed regional structure may undermine its current gateway status. The more peripheral locations of the lowest ranked cities – Jiangmen and Zhaoqing – may account for the lesser familiarity amongst respondents.

Respondent awareness of GBA cities and sub-regions was analyzed using an NVivo word frequency analysis of the interview data. Respondents from the two SARs were removed from the analysis to allow a clearer interpretation of prospective GBA benefits of mainland cities. Table 3 compares online survey responses and interviewee word frequencies for the nine cities. A Spearman's rank-order correlation of the perceived benefits from the survey and number of mentions in the interviews produced a correlation coefficient of 0.812, statistically significant ($p=.008$) at the 5% confidence level. Additionally, the interviewee rankings correlate significantly with city rankings in terms of tourism development (0.785, $p=0.012$) and happiness (0.876, $p=0.002$), indicating a high level of consistency in the results (Kan, 2022; Xie et al., 2021).

The city rankings show Shenzhen, Zhuhai and Guangzhou as the central core of a hierarchical network, likely attributable to their locations (Chong & Pan, 2020). Guangzhou is administrative capital of Guangdong province and since 1957, has hosted the globally significant China Import and Export Fair (Canton Fair). More knowledgeable interview respondents also ranked Foshan quite highly, indicative of its 'hidden gem' status. Foshan is well-known for martial arts (kung fu) and respondents frequently mentioned the culinary attributes of one of its districts – Shandu. Jiangmen also received 23 mentions, perhaps attributable to its UNESCO World Heritage-listed Kaiping Diaolou. Though Huizhou with its mountains and

scenic undulating countryside was viewed as less developed, one attribute mentioned was as a Chinese Medicine city. Dongguan is a renowned manufacturing hub, more recently promoting its cultural profile (Luo & Huang, 2023). Zhaoqing was the least mentioned city. In aggregate the word count frequencies are at the low end (below 30) for Zhongshan, Huizhou, Dongguan, and Zhaoqing.

Perceptions of GBA geographies

Interviewee perceptions of the GBA helped form a more detailed understanding of the territory. Some articulated a clear distinction between the western and eastern zones, indicative of linkages. With Guangzhou as a geographic centre, the West encompasses Huizhou, Dongguan, and Shenzhen with the East including Zhaoqing, Foshan, Zhongshan, Jiangmen, and Zhuhai. Interviewees viewed the West as more culture-oriented and less developed and the East as business focused. Another noted the more rugged landscapes and relative inaccessibility of the West, leading to the retention of established cultural practices. The East's better regional, national, and international connectivity has been enhanced by debordering through infrastructural developments such as the HZMB, high-speed rail and ferry connections between Hong Kong International Airport and Guangzhou. Interviewee 14 highlighted that the HZMB links Zhuhai and Hong Kong airports, thereby establishing the former as 'a satellite airport of Hong Kong ... linking up the airlines to do code-sharing ... apart from passengers we also see a lot of cargo opportunity from Zhuhai via Hong Kong.' He stated that 'politically, we don't have borders, we have boundaries'. Park et al. (2022) also noted strong linkages between Hong Kong and Zhuhai.

Respondents frequently noted the changing importance of the GBA cities. Guangzhou was characterised as China's original 'window to the world', though with Hong Kong increasingly assuming this role. Maritime culture is another prominent GBA feature, supporting cultural manifestations such as the Dragon Boat Races and Fire Dragon Dance in Hong Kong and Na-Tcha and A-Ma Gau in Macao. Gastronomy is also seen as a prominent manifestation of intangible heritage in the GBA.

There was recognition of Foshan's future prospects as a GBA cultural centre – it has strong historical links to Lingnan architecture, gastronomy, martial artists, and historic figures. Interviewee 24 described Foshan as one of China's four ancient towns with strong gastronomic associations and quoted the Cantonese saying 'eat in Guangzhou, chefs are from FengCheng (an area

of Foshan) (食在廣州 廚出鳳城)'. Expressed differently, this means that the finest food is available in Guangzhou, though with the best chefs originating from Foshan. So-called 'Father of the Nation' Sun Yat-sen is another regional connection and linkage. Born in Zhongshan, Sun moved to Foshan before residing in Hong Kong. Interviewees also mentioned various prominent marital artists such as Lam Sai Wing, Yip Man, and Wong Fei Hung. They have stimulated the growth of the regional film industry, as well as prompting the establishment of the National Art Studio in Foshan's Xiqiao Mountain.

Cuisine differentiates the GBA from the rest of China. Cantonese cuisine exhibits notable commonalities of cooking methods, taste, local seasonings and ingredients, as well as local variations. The varieties of meat dumpling consumed during the Dragon Boat Festival were mentioned previously. Regional foods are also associated with language, as evidenced by the following:

One of the unique features of Huizhou is the Huizhou spoken language, which combines Hokkien, Hakka, and Guangdong. This is found nowhere else and is reflected in the lives of locals and in the food. It's important for you to identify the cultural characteristics of the people. (Interviewee 3).

The authors anticipated that language might emerge as a potential regional differentiator. Surprisingly, only three interviewees referred specifically to Cantonese language/dialect as a distinction from the rest of China. These respondents were either non-Chinese or had been educated overseas. They expressed the view that the Cantonese dialect preserves the identity of GBA, with Hong Kong as its apex.

On the one hand, there's a strong sense of local identity and at the same time there's influence from the outside filtering in, while people continue strongly preserve the local dialect, more than elsewhere in China. (Interviewee 3).

Respondents may have been reluctant to raise the issue of language because of its potential sensitivity in a country where Mandarin Chinese has been vigorously promoted as a source of national unity. Future researchers may wish to use alternative research methods to draw out any underlying views on this issue.

Perspectives on GBA coherence

Some interviewees characterised GBA as 'nothing new', and as simply a 'multi-destination' re-packaging of the PRD. A few commented that economic development is driven by China as a whole rather than by GBA initiatives. Interviewees with a stronger business orientation/

background perceived GBA as a hub for business tourism and meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE). Others indicated that the links between Hong Kong, Macao, and Guangdong provide a 'destination cluster' catering to business and leisure tourism. Currently though, GBA seems more developed for domestic markets. Longer term, intensified international travel is predicted to bring growth, contingent on post-pandemic opening up.

Although interviewees identified many potentially unifying elements across GBA encompassing culture, language and gastronomy, regional integration may be constrained by developmental inconsistencies. Table 3 indicates that the major beneficiaries of GBA developments will be Shenzhen (near Hong Kong), Zhuhai (near Macao), and Guangzhou. Each has a stronger image than the other six mainland cities. The centre-periphery pattern focused around Hong Kong and Guangzhou is a challenge for reducing developmental inequalities. This said, Hong Kong may struggle to retain its current advantages in the long term. Some interviewees believe that the city will maintain its competitiveness in service delivery standards and deep international experience, particularly in hospitality and tourism. However, Mainland Chinese service levels are expected to rise progressively with accelerated GBA integration, easier cross-border travel and greater international experience, notably in finance and professional services. In this context, Hong Kong may lose some of its competitive edge over other Guangdong cities. Consistent with Park et al.'s (2022) findings, one explanation derives from the different administrative priorities in Hong Kong, Macao, and mainland China:

They even have a functional spin-off, say, for some of the regulatory bodies. So, you can see that this is how it has been operated and promotional wise, we have the HKTB joining them – previously there was another setup. So this is as good as you can get... the challenge is always the priorities that all these different authorities see for themselves. – (Interviewee 16).

Another interviewee opined that divergent mindsets may impede GBA-wide planning. He characterised Hong Kong as more 'economically oriented, aggressive, and competitive', with Macao being more 'laid-back' and focusing on quality of life.

In contrast to Park et al.'s (2022) findings, respondents questioned the capacity of the Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao authorities to implement the Culture and Tourism strategy effectively. Interviewees identified continuing barriers to debordering between the two SARs and the mainland, including the banking system, taxation, customs, and currencies. Uncertainties continue

over the regulations governing Hengqin island. Though under Macao administrative control, the mainland authorities exercise oversight (Macao Trade and Investment Promotion Institute, 2021). A lack of clarity over the status of the border has disinclined Macao residents from acquiring property and/or taking up residence on Hengqin island. The debordering process and progress towards more seamless mobilities has also been delayed by opaque labor laws, taxation, and financial regulations between the 9 + 2 cities.

Respondents noted a lack of transparency in GBA-wide policymaking, including unclear relationships between the various city-wide and municipal governments. One observed the negative implications of inadequate information for foreigners about tax changes for investment and managing human capital. Concerns were also expressed about the reluctance of government officials to engage in industry consultations, thereby constraining the prospective development of bottom-up approaches. One interviewee attributed the prevalence of 'government language' as inhibiting stakeholder inputs which reinforces top-down approaches to governance:

They (government) will tell you this is how we do things ... this has always been our way ... etc. But it will be better if they are willing to listen to us earlier. They tend to look only at themselves. Everything is about 'I'. 'I am like this ...' 'I.I ... I ...' ... We still pay lots of tax. You are using our taxpayer's money. Instead of maximizing effectiveness, they use 'government language'. (Interviewee 13)

Effectiveness is inhibited by a knowledge gap between senior leadership and those administering policies, even when government planning initiatives are sound. Implementing GBA planning evidently suffers from inadequate attention to operational issues and feasibility. Respondents look forward to devolved power sharing across various levels of government as attention on the GBA increases, thereby reducing incoherence.

Potential for a coherent GBA brand

Many respondents had only vague awareness of the GBA brand and of the positioning of the cities. One proposed adopting a bottom-up approach amongst both residents and visitors to identify key impressions of GBA cities. Tech-smart Shenzhen, for example, could be positioned as a 'smart city'. Another suggested a different positioning for each GBA city, thereby enabling the region to appeal to different tourist markets. These can include segmentations based on visitor motivation and activities, such as gastronomy, photography and consumption of cityscapes (Lei et al., 2022; Kirillova et al.,

2020). An overall umbrella brand for the region could follow positioning for the constituent cities, with thematic region-wide tourism products drawing upon the disparate attractions of each. A Hong Kong travel trade respondent proposed developing cross-border theme-based itineraries between Hong Kong and mainland cities to attract a diversity of visitors. This is complex, given the aspiration of each city and/or district to highlight a multiplicity of cultural assets. One interviewee proposed adopting the 'umbrella concept' of Lingnan culture drawing on shared elements of history, culture, arts and gastronomy to inform a distinct identity for each city. The interviewee reactions reflect the diverse cultural governance strategies of the GBA cities and suggest challenges to establishing a coherent region-wide image and identity.

Discussion

Our research indicates that the GBA currently lacks a coherent brand, at least in part because the placemaking activities needed to underpin a collective branding are lacking. While debordering processes in the GBA may be enhancing tangible aspects of integration, such as increased accessibility, intangible placemaking measures, such as developing collective meanings around cultural expressions, lag behind. This is partly because of differential reactions to the GBA among stakeholders and persisting barriers to collaboration, as discussed below.

Reactions to the GBA

Respondents reacted to GBA developments in one of two main ways. 'Early adopters' have chosen to be proactive and to capitalise on the opportunities associated with the National Plan. Some hotel groups have already emphasised 'GBA culture' as part of their Guangdong-wide property development plans. Travel trade and MICE related companies have also established branch offices and formed partnerships within the GBA. By contrast and consistent with Choi's (2021) findings, 'laggard' respondents have adopted a 'wait-and-see' approach, citing a lack of clarity and transparency in GBA policies. Many regional stakeholders are evidently not yet embracing the central government vision of building a quality place for people to work, live and visit. There were concerns among some Hong Kong-based participants and notably former government officials, that the city may lose its competitive advantage, consistent with Chan's (2021) observations. These stakeholders have not yet bought into the 'quality living circle' placemaking concept of the GBA.

However, respondents with more GBA-related knowledge opined that involvement from the SARs will enhance levels of service and product quality in the region, and in time can create a shared sense of place.

Removing tangible and intangible barriers

(De)bordering processes mean many implementation challenges remain for the GBA. Although the Chinese government introduced 144-hours visa-free for foreigners traveling to Guangdong, travel trade respondents indicated that travel is still impeded by distinct visa requirements for entering Hong Kong, Macao, and mainland China. These respondents advocate swift elimination of this obstacle, enabling tourism developments to capitalise on new cross-boundary transportation networks and facilities. The so-called 'artificial island' Hong Kong and Macao entry and exit points symbolise the current debordering process and are attractions in their own right.

Further debordering initiatives may provide opportunities to enhance mega-regional identities. Cross-border settlement is already evident between Macao and Hengqin island, where Macao residents can cross the border freely. However, there is still hesitancy amongst many Macao residents due to diverging systems of income tax and social security legislation. As has been demonstrated in Europe, effective placemaking means going beyond the removal of barriers and attaching meanings or storytelling to the region. According to Meulbroek et al. (2022), if the GBA is a unilateral creature of central-state fiat, it will only amount to a package of infrastructural projects and financial incentives; it must ultimately become 'eco-systemic', by animating 'in region' developmental practices, mixed progressively with an emergent culture-economy of concertation and 'co-ordination' (p. 20).

Integrating culture and tourism

The GBA Plan envisages a unique culture as a resource connecting people from across the region, especially the intangible elements identified by interviewees, such as gastronomy, language, and martial artistry. Respondents suggested that GBA cities can become 'microregions' by strengthening linkages with their hinterlands and leveraging gastronomy, marital arts, Lingnan, and Cantonese dialect connections across South China. Foshan was identified as a prospective GBA cultural hub because of its rich tangible and intangible heritage. Luo (2021) also suggested that Foshan can use its location and rich cultural resources to strengthen network relationships with Hong Kong,

Macao, Guangzhou and Shenzhen. A coherent place narrative can add meaning to increase identification with the GBA: an 'internal story' can provide local communities with a sense of pride and self-identity and an 'external story' could encourage tourists and investors to learn about and explore the region. However, the fact that no current respondent could articulate a coherent GBA place narrative is indicative of the elusiveness of such stories.

Top-down and bottom-up placemaking approaches

In line with Lew's (2017) analysis, both top-down and bottom-up placemaking activities were identified in the GBA. Some respondents observed that China's top-down approach offers administrative advantages and swift implementation. However, its effectiveness in the GBA case is debatable. Our interviews indicated that the '9 + 2' cities have been operating relatively independently, and businesses seem to have been investing because of the perceived opportunities within China as a whole, rather than within GBA. Devoid of a coherent GBA brand, each city proceeds to brand itself, with bottom-up placemaking initiatives predominating. These findings reflect Chen's (2022) observation that little is being done 'to publicise the integrated tourism resources of the GBA as a whole.' Park et al. (2022) also noted the absence of GBA-wide governance to stimulate the necessary multilateral government interactions that might overcome the competing interests of diverse cross-border actors.

As Dupre (2019) notes: 'Place-making is a collective act, and it reinforces relations between community members, consolidates the foundations of a culture.' However, in the GBA there seems to be less collective identification that could provide a basis for an umbrella image. As mentioned previously, only three respondents proposed Cantonese language as a unique identity for GBA, despite the dialect's prevalence and rich cultural heritage. This also reflects Luo and Huang's (2023) identification of divergent views about cultural assets across the various GBA cities, a lack of identification that can limit regional placemaking prospects.

To build regional branding, sensitive place management will be needed, drawing upon divergent cultural assets. It will be important to develop a higher-level and values-based regional vision which extends beyond a task-orientation (Beer et al., 2019; Hu & Hassink, 2017). The various interesting localised place-making initiatives across the region (such as Lang Kwai Fong, New World Development's K-11 Musea Art Mall in Hong Kong and family D-Theme Park in Shenzhen's

Prince Bay)), indicate a focus on bottom-up rather than top-down placemaking, which might also explain the lukewarm stakeholder reactions about the prospects of the GBA. Achieving stakeholder buy-in may require them to be given a clear stake in the collective benefits of the 'quality living circle' of the GBA, perhaps as noted by Chong and Pan (2020) by creating 'channels for entrepreneurs other than government to participate in regional governance.'

Conclusions and opportunities for future research

Our findings indicate that to date the top-down branding initiatives of the GBA have failed to produce regional coherence, and may even have limited bottom-up placemaking activity. Regional stakeholders have so far recognised little benefit from the development of a 'quality living circle', and the indications are that new governance structures will be needed to engage stakeholders and develop the combination of top-down and bottom-up placemaking activity advocated by Lew (2017) and Richards (2020).

Linking these two levels of placemaking activity might be facilitated by the development of a cultural governance system, as suggested by Luo and Huang (2023). Cultural governance supposes greater collaboration in development processes, through dialogue, trust building, commitment to the process and shared understanding. Gugu and Dal Molin (2016) suggest that increasing involvement of stakeholders through cultural governance can have important outcomes in terms of developing new projects and infrastructure, new knowledge and increased cultural activities and audiences. Cultural governance would arguably allow GBA actors to capitalise on the significant cultural resources of the region with tourism potential, notably gastronomy, martial arts, Lingnan culture and language. Currently these resources are being utilised by some of the cities to develop their own tourism markets, with little consideration being given to their regional potential, which would also facilitate opening up the GBA to international markets. Having a cultural base for GBA integration might also emulate the success of placemaking initiatives elsewhere, as EU examples have shown (Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017). However, the GBA de-bordering experience offers a different perspective from the European examples prevalent across the literature. For Europe, Stoffelen and Vanneste (2017) emphasised the importance of providing an overarching vision that includes cultural and social aspects and building trust. Whilst physical integration has been the major GBA underpinning, there has been minimal attention to

developing cultural inclusivity and feelings of belonging. This may explain the highly variable support evident for the GBA concept between stakeholders across the region. The currently prevalent top-down governance may stifle the emergence of bottom-up placemaking initiatives, and has prompted a 'wait-and-see' approach amongst private sector entities in real estate and entertainment. City support has also been patchy, thereby perpetuating interregional imbalances, notably between cities in the East and West.

The (de)bordering processes linked to the GBA have also created challenges. In the SARs, concerns remain about losing competitive advantage versus the mainland cities, thereby increasing regional tensions. This also explains the deficient coordination and coherence across regional governance and diverging city priorities. The top-down implementation of 'big ideas' across China generally works well for hardware and infrastructure. However, it is less productive for culture since the latter relies more on 'bottom-up' organic approaches, evident in the concept of 'tactical placemaking' or 'creative placemaking'. Although the SARs were seen as helping the GBA to go global, uneven development means that each city will need its own clear direction and strategy to support the goal of regional development. Combining the individual efforts of the cities into an integrated destination development strategy will be important, because as Ho (2020) notes: 'Exactly because there is a natural tendency for intercity rivalry, it is important to remind each of the cities that working together rather than fighting each other will serve the best interest of all the cities in the area.' In our view this coherence can best be developed through the cultural governance approach described above.

Contribution to scholarship

The current study adds value to the literature by analysing (de)bordering and placemaking processes in the unique context of the GBA. Our research shows that the top-down placemaking approach in the Chinese context generates different opportunities and challenges than previous studies in the EU. A top-down approach is shown to have a number of advantages, particularly in terms of speed and the development of tangible resources, but at the same time creates challenges for stakeholder inclusion and the development of intangible cultural resources. Relative to previous GBA studies, the current investigation has given greater attention to destination development and Richards' placemaking perspective has provided a more holistic assessment of the challenges and opportunities.

Demand side challenges have also been considered, notably a prospective future emphasis on domestic versus international visitors. We have also extended Haven-Tang and Jones' (2012) work in emphasising place leadership as a complement to governance.

Study limitations

Much of the stakeholder sample was Hong Kong and/or Macao-based and tourism oriented, with lesser coverage for mainland and cultural perspectives. However, many respondents have active GBA involvements, enabling them to offer a tourism perspective on the complex emerging relationship with culture. A further methodological limitation was respondent self-identification of their levels of knowledge about the topic of interest. Some relevant respondents may have been omitted and others may have overestimated their level of awareness. Against this, the authors ascertain their thoughtful consideration of respondent suitability in covering key criteria (e.g. industry subsector, government, and private sector). A further concern stems from the assembly of empirical inputs in early 2021 as the pandemic was spreading, though before the implications were becoming understood. The authors are nevertheless confident that the findings offer meaningful guidance for the post-pandemic period beyond the continuing limitations on travel to and from China at the time of writing.

Opportunities for future researchers

Further investigations might provide enhanced insights about opportunities to develop aspects of intangible GBA culture. Events provide a prospective marketing and promotion tool, forming connections with other agendas such as fostering positive cultural, social and economic impacts. Though the potential impacts of de-bordering have mainly been addressed from a physical perspective (e.g. the construction of new bridges and related infrastructure), cultural impacts merit further scholarly consideration. Finally, attention should be paid to recent Hong Kong initiatives to develop GBA cultural links, connecting with the central government's long-range planning objectives to 2035. Our research has also focused on the decision-makers who are already aware of GBA developments. Future research could usefully also reflect on the role of grass-roots stakeholders, particularly those in the cultural and creative sectors, in driving bottom-up placemaking processes.

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