

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Mapping the Landscape of City Branding in China: A Scoping Review (2014-2025)

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## ABSTRACT

This study provides a systematic review of English-language literature on city branding in China, analyzing 56 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2014 and March 2025. It identifies three interrelated dimensions: governance structures, localization pathways, and spatial configurations, which collectively shape branding practices. Using a Governance-Localization-Space framework, the study maps thematic distributions and interdisciplinary patterns, revealing the dominance of top-down narratives, uneven spatial representation, and limited grassroots inclusion. Although branding strategies frequently emphasize co-creation and public participation, such efforts often remain symbolic and are constrained by institutional hierarchies and algorithmic mediation. Core cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen receive disproportionate policy attention and discursive prominence, while inland and mid-sized cities face structural disadvantages in visibility, capacity, and narrative agency. To account for these dynamics, the study introduces the concept of the State-Space-Ideology Complex, framing city branding as a governance mechanism influenced by centralized authority, spatial inequality, and symbolic control. It highlights persistent tensions such as performative collaboration versus institutional asymmetry and global aspirations versus local grounding. The study contributes to city branding scholarship by moving beyond market-oriented and Western-centric paradigms, offering a context-sensitive analysis of branding under state-led governance. It concludes by proposing future research directions that prioritize marginalized perspectives, everyday spatial practices, and diverse methodological approaches, laying a foundation for more inclusive and critically engaged studies in non-Western urban contexts.

**Keywords:** City branding; China; Governance; Spatial inequality; Symbolic participation; Digital platformization; Localization; Ideology

## 1. Introduction

City branding has become an increasingly salient strategy for enhancing urban competitiveness, attracting investment, and cultivating symbolic recognition in the context of globalized urban rivalry<sup>[1,2]</sup>. Originating in corporate marketing paradigms<sup>[3,4]</sup>, the concept has evolved into a multifaceted and contested practice that encompasses governance mechanisms, cultural production, and spatial representation<sup>[5,6]</sup>. While the Western literature foregrounds stakeholder co-creation, participatory governance, and emotional resonance<sup>[7]</sup>, these models are grounded in liberal-democratic political structures. Such assumptions diverge

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markedly from the institutional realities of China's centralized governance system.

Since the mid-2010s, city branding in China has developed as a state-led initiative, closely aligned with national strategic agendas such as Ecological Civilization, the Belt and Road Initiative, and innovation-driven development<sup>[8,9]</sup>. This model operates through a tripartite structure in which the state formulates overarching policy frameworks, market actors translate these into branding narratives through public-private partnerships, and public participation remains largely symbolic within tightly constrained institutional parameters. The rise of digital platforms such as Douyin<sup>1</sup> and Weibo<sup>2</sup> has added complexity to this structure by enabling selective forms of grassroots engagement. Influencers, cultural producers, and everyday users contribute to urban imaginaries that emphasize lifestyle aesthetics and emotional appeal<sup>[10,11]</sup>. Although this trend suggests diversification in branding practice, such participation is often mediated by algorithms that align with state and commercial interests.

Despite increasing scholarly interest, research on Chinese city branding remains thematically narrow and spatially concentrated. Much of the existing literature focuses on ecological and tourism-related branding, paying disproportionate attention to first-tier coastal cities, including Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou<sup>[10,12]</sup>. In contrast, inland and mid-sized cities, many of which hold significant cultural, ecological, or industrial value, are underrepresented. This imbalance narrows the empirical base of the field and contributes to the symbolic exclusion of less-prominent regions from academic and policy discourse. Although branding strategies often emphasize participatory rhetoric, civic involvement tends to be limited in substance, shaped by institutional hierarchies and performance-based governance mechanisms.

This review addresses these conceptual and empirical gaps through a comprehensive synthesis of English-language scholarship on city branding in China published between 2014 and March 2025. It employs a Governance-Localization-Space analytical framework to examine how branding is institutionally shaped, locally adapted, and spatially distributed. The study pursues three primary objectives: to map the methodological orientations, thematic priorities, and spatial distributions in the literature; to analyze how governance structures, stakeholder roles, and localization processes function within China's political and institutional landscape; and to identify research blind spots, particularly those concerning grassroots participation, regional disparities, and digital mediation.

To support this analysis, the study introduces the concept of the State-Space-Ideology Complex, a heuristic designed to capture the interrelated roles of centralized authority, spatial stratification, and symbolic control in shaping branding outcomes. This framework facilitates a context-sensitive and theoretically grounded account of branding as a governance instrument and socio-spatial process. The review challenges dominant Western and market-centric assumptions by highlighting structural asymmetries and unresolved tensions, such as the contrast between symbolic collaboration and institutional exclusion, and between global branding aspirations and local specificity.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. Section 2 outlines the methodology, including search strategies and coding procedures. Section 3 presents trends in publication, disciplinary focus, and

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<sup>1</sup> Douyin is a short-video social media platform developed by ByteDance, launched in China in 2016. Its international counterpart is known as TikTok.

<sup>2</sup> Weibo is a Chinese microblogging platform launched in 2009 by Sina Corporation, often compared to X (formerly Twitter) due to its hybrid format of short posts, trending hashtags, and multimedia sharing.

spatial orientation. Section 4 synthesizes thematic patterns related to governance, localization, and spatial inequality. Section 5 discusses the theoretical contribution

## **2. Methodology specification and procedures**

This scoping review follows Arksey and O'Malley<sup>[13]</sup>, refined by Levac et al. <sup>[14]</sup>, and guided by PRISMA-ScR<sup>[15]</sup>, ensuring transparency and breadth. Given the field's interdisciplinary nature, the aim is to explore its scope, thematic contours, and knowledge gaps, rather than assess evidence quality or causal claims. The review had three objectives: (1) mapping research on Chinese city branding published between 2014 and March 2025 (i.e., the date of database retrieval, not a projection of future publications); (2) identifying key themes, methods, and disciplinary perspectives; and (3) exposing conceptual and empirical gaps. These aims shaped a six-stage procedure: defining research questions, sourcing studies, selecting articles, charting data, and synthesizing findings.

A scoping review was conducted in March 2025 using Web of Science and ScienceDirect databases. The search applied the Boolean string: ("city branding" OR "place branding") AND (China OR Chinese), with filters for English-language, open-access, peer-reviewed articles published between 2014 and March 2025. The initial search yielded 144 records after removing duplicates. Rather than applying rigid inclusion criteria, the review adopted an iterative relevance-based approach. Studies were retained if they examined Chinese city or place branding, with attention to governance, stakeholder dynamics, spatial identity, or discursive practices. Excluded materials included non-Chinese cases, editorials, abstracts, and grey literature. Notably, five articles without explicit mention of “city branding” were included due to thematic alignment with spatial representation and ideological contestation. A total of 56 studies were selected for thematic analysis.

### **2.1. Literature screening and PRISMA-ScR flow**

The screening and selection process followed the PRISMA-ScR guidelines<sup>[15]</sup>. As shown in Figure 1, the literature screening process began with 144 records identified from two academic databases (Web of Science and ScienceDirect). After removing 6 duplicate entries, 138 unique records were screened by title and abstract. This step resulted in the exclusion of 67 irrelevant studies, and 71 full-text reports were subsequently retrieved. Six of these could not be accessed. The remaining 65 reports were assessed for eligibility, and 9 were excluded for reasons such as lack of focus on China, absence of governance/stakeholder relevance, or insufficient spatial/practical branding content. Ultimately, 56 studies met all inclusion criteria and were incorporated into the review.

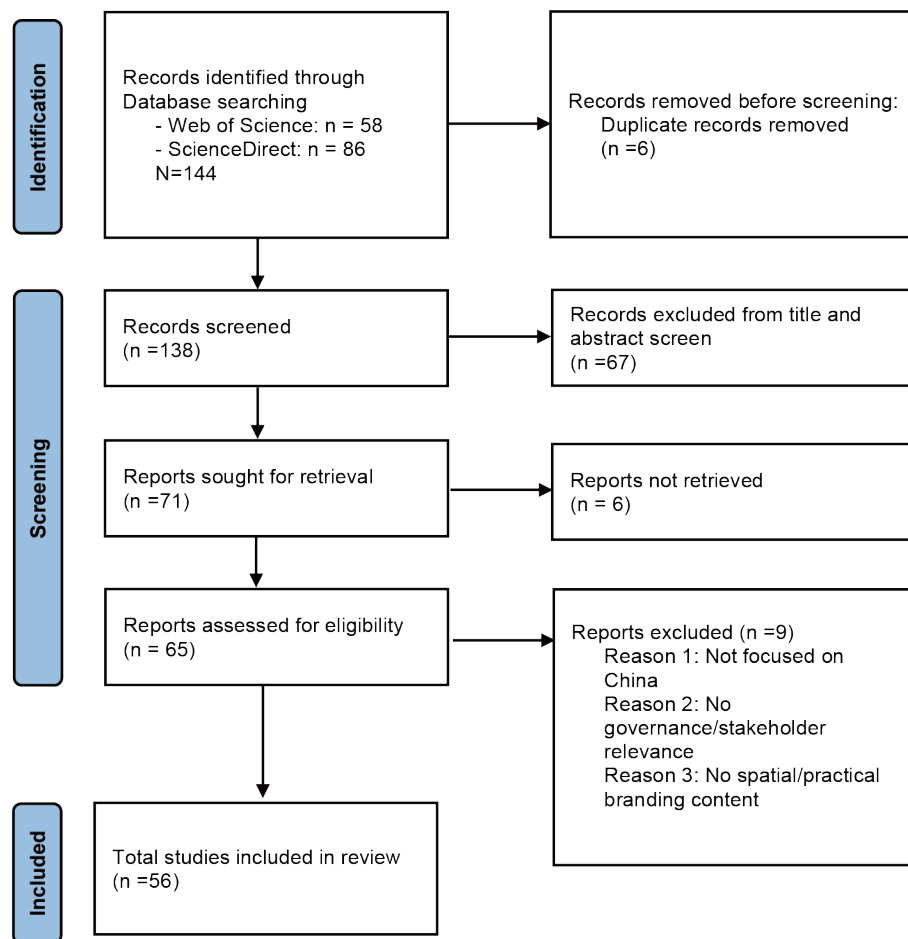


Figure 1. PRISMA-ScR Flow Diagram Depicting the Literature Screening and Selection Process

Source: Author's illustration based on Tricco et al. (2018).

## 2.2. Data charting and thematic analysis

The selected studies underwent manual thematic coding using a combination of deductive and inductive strategies. Although existing city branding literature, including the works of Kavaratzis<sup>[1]</sup> and Anholt<sup>[16]</sup>, provided a general conceptual orientation, the coding categories were primarily derived from a close reading of the selected studies. This process emphasized emergent themes that reflect the distinctive trajectories of urban branding across different Chinese contexts. An initial codebook was constructed based on recurring patterns identified in the literature and refined iteratively throughout the coding process. As the coding was conducted by a single researcher, formal inter-coder reliability testing was not applicable. However, to enhance interpretive clarity and minimize potential bias, the coding structure was repeatedly discussed with experienced researchers during the analysis.

Three overarching and interrelated themes were identified through this process:

- (1) **Localization pathways:** Studies revealed how global branding frameworks are selectively adapted to reflect domestic political, cultural, and social imperatives within China. Localization is not simply a matter of translation but involves strategic reinterpretation within centralized governance settings.
- (2) **Governance and stakeholder configurations:** Research frequently addressed the distribution of power, inter-agency collaborations, and the influence of state institutions on branding processes.

These dynamics illustrate how stakeholder roles are shaped by hierarchical governance structures and political authority.

- (3) **Regional spatial disparities and epistemic structures:** The analysis uncovered systematic differences in branding strategies across geographic regions, especially between coastal and inland cities. These spatial variations also correspond to unequal patterns of scholarly attention and resource allocation.

These three thematic strands were not fully discrete. Many studies reflected overlapping concerns. For instance, localization efforts were often mediated through governance mechanisms, while spatial conditions shaped both stakeholder participation and the development of narrative strategies. Initially, four themes were identified, but iterative analysis demonstrated considerable convergence between governance and stakeholder dynamics, justifying their integration into a single thematic category. The coding process emphasized consistency and analytical rigor through iterative verification.

### **2.3. Rationale for choosing a scoping review**

A scoping review was selected given the fragmented and evolving nature of Chinese city branding research, making it suitable for mapping knowledge across complex or emerging fields<sup>[13,14]</sup>. Their flexibility accommodates diverse study designs and conceptual work<sup>[17]</sup>, which aligns with how city branding is theorized across governance, communication, and development studies. The absence of Chinese-language databases like CNKI, however, is a significant drawback that must be acknowledged. The main goal of this choice was to use open-access English-language databases to guarantee transparency and reproducibility. However, since many locally grounded theories, government policy documents, and empirical studies are only published in Chinese, this creates an inevitable linguistic bias. Therefore, the review's representativeness may be limited by the omission. In order to address this, the current version suggests future bilingual or multilingual reviews to create a more culturally contextualized synthesis of city branding research in China and specifically compares English and Chinese research orientations in the Discussion section.

## **3. Research characteristics and distribution**

This section presents an overview of the research landscape concerning Chinese city branding over the past decade. Drawing on the 56 publications selected through the scoping review, we analyse the temporal, disciplinary, and spatial dimensions of the literature to identify underlying trends, concentrations, and gaps. The analysis proceeds in four sections: first, it maps the publication trajectory over time; second, it dissects the disciplinary orientations and journal venues; third, it assesses the journal distribution patterns; and finally, it explores regional biases in case selection. Together, these dimensions offer critical insights into how scholarly engagement with city branding in China has evolved, where it has been most concentrated, and what areas remain underexplored.

### **3.1. Publication trend over time**

The literature on Chinese city branding has grown steadily since 2014, with notable peaks in 2021 and 2024 (9 publications each), and continued high activity in 2023 (8 studies). A slight decline in 2025 (3 articles) is likely due to the proximity of the review cut-off rather than a decrease in scholarly interest. As illustrated in Figure 2, this upward trend highlights increasing academic engagement with the topic, particularly in the post-2020 period, underscoring the growing relevance of city branding in both academic and policy discourse in China.



**Figure 2.** Distribution of Selected Publications on Chinese City Branding by Year (2014-2025)

### 3.2. Disciplinary origins and journal distribution

To understand the disciplinary landscape of the existing literature, a total of 56 publications were reviewed. Among them, 33 were single-discipline studies, with City Studies dominating (28), followed by Tourism (4) and Communication (1). Public Administration and Geography were not represented as sole disciplines. The remaining 23 publications were interdisciplinary, most frequently combining City Studies with Communication (12) or Public Administration (6), reflecting strong links between branding, governance, and media. Other combinations, such as City Studies with Tourism or Geography, or studies integrating three disciplines, were relatively rare. As summarized in Table 1, City Studies leads the field, while cross-disciplinary integration remains limited, particularly concerning Geography and Public Administration.

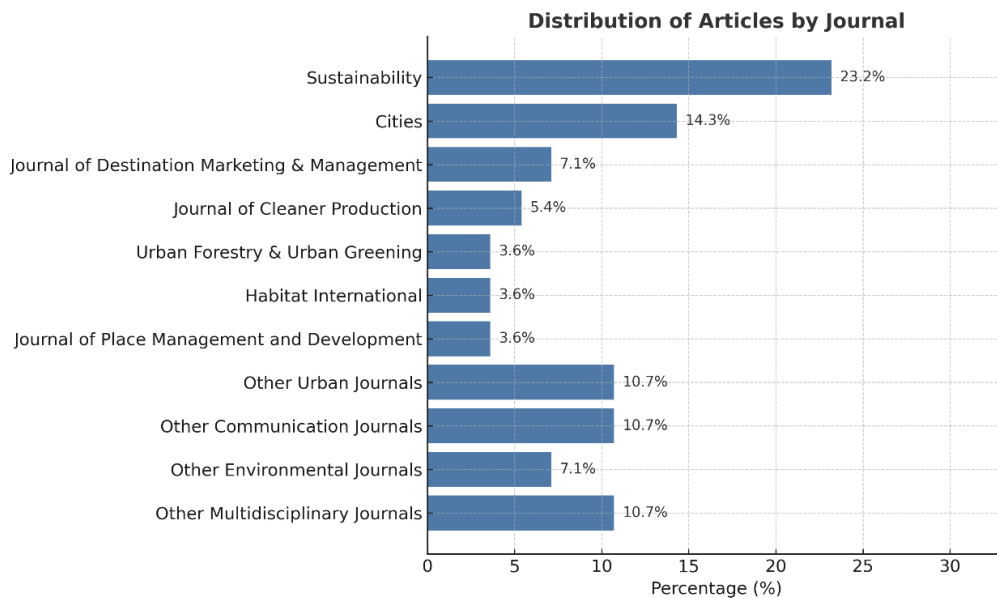
**Table 1.** Publications Summary by Disciplinary Orientation (N = 56)

Category	Sub-discipline(s)	Number of Publications
Single-discipline publications	Single-discipline publications	33
	City Studies	28
	Tourism	4
	Communication	1
	Public Administration	0
	Geography	0
Interdisciplinary publications	Interdisciplinary publications	23
	City Studies + Communication	12
	City Studies + Public Administration	6
	City Studies + Tourism	1
	Tourism + Communication	1
	Tourism + Public Administration	1
	City Studies + Geography	1
	City Studies + Public Administration + Geography	1
	Total Publications	56

*Notes.* Distribution of selected publications on Chinese city branding by disciplinary and interdisciplinary categorization.

### 3.3. Journal distribution and disciplinary orientation

The 56 reviewed articles were published across a range of academic journals, reflecting the multidisciplinary nature of city branding research in China. As shown in Figure 3, Sustainability accounts for the largest share (23.2%), followed by Cities (14.3%) and the Journal of Destination Marketing & Management (7.1%). Other contributions appear in journals such as the Journal of Cleaner Production, Urban Forestry & Urban Greening, and the Journal of Place Management and Development, indicating thematic overlaps with environmental and spatial dimensions. The remaining studies are distributed across urban studies (10.7%), communication (10.7%), and multidisciplinary journals (10.7%), highlighting the field's increasingly cross-sectoral orientation.

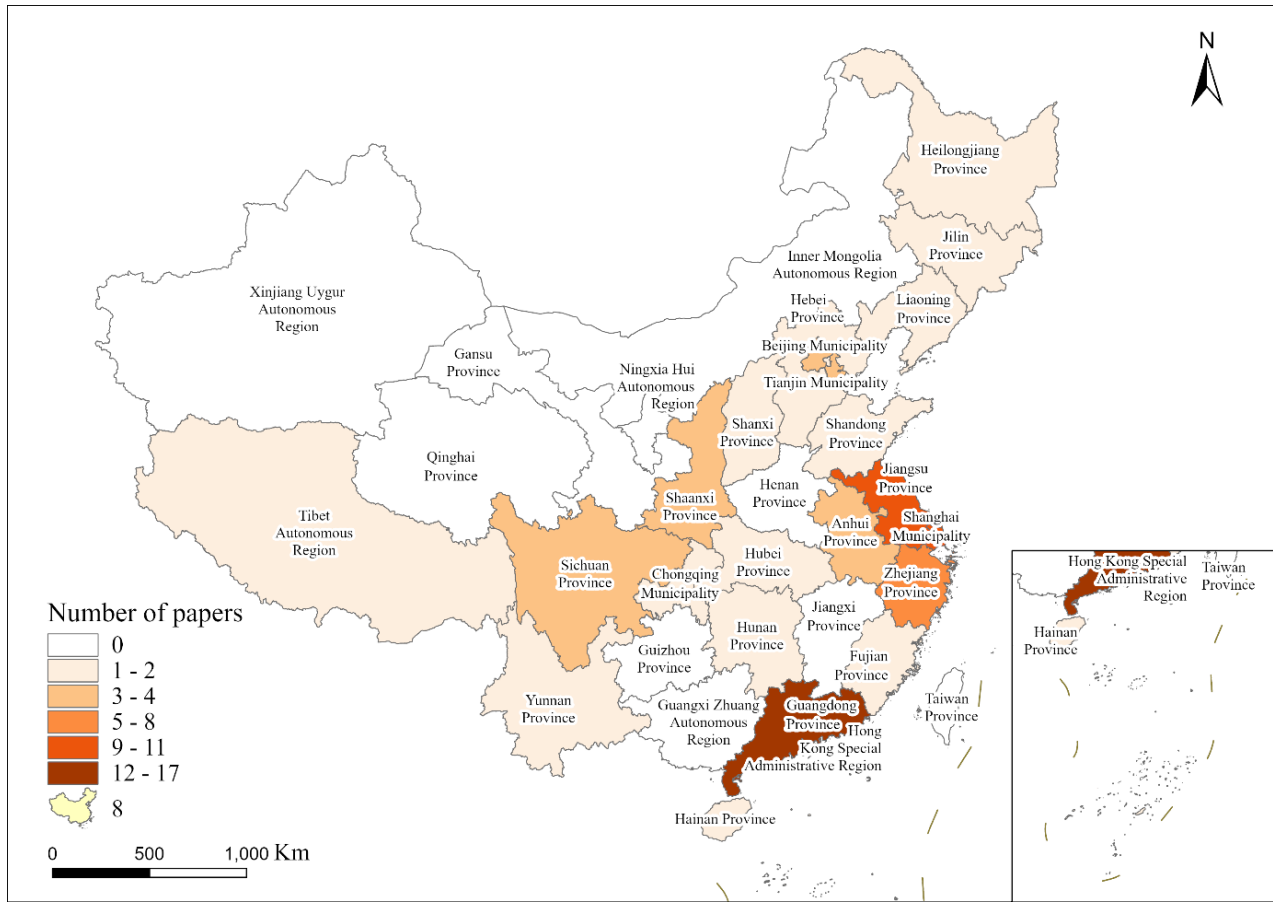


**Figure 3.** Distribution of Journals Publishing City Branding-Related Literature (n = 56)

### 3.4. Regional distribution and spatial bias

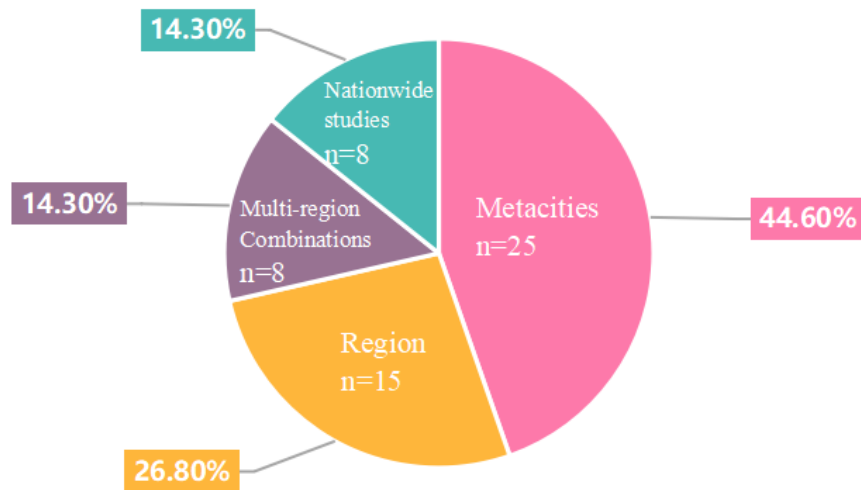
Chinese city branding research exhibits a marked spatial imbalance, both in terms of regional coverage and the scale of cities studied. As shown in Figure 4, the spatial distribution of studies by province reveals a strong concentration in economically developed eastern regions. Guangdong, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang emerge as the most studied provinces, while large parts of western and northeastern China remain significantly underrepresented. This spatial clustering corresponds closely with China's economic geography, where coastal areas dominate in terms of urban development and policy experimentation.

Further evidence of this spatial bias is provided in Figure 5, which categorizes the 56 reviewed studies according to their geographic scope. Nearly half of the studies (44.6%) focus on megacities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, indicating a clear dominance of first-tier cities in the literature. In contrast, only 15 studies (26.8%) address specific regions, and merely 14.3% adopt multi-regional or nationwide perspectives. This suggests that the field is still largely cantered on well-known urban centres, with limited attention to smaller cities, inter-regional dynamics, or national-scale branding strategies.



**Figure 4.** Spatial Distribution of Chinese City Branding Studies by Province

### Geographic Bias in Chinese Research Literature (n=56)



**Figure 5.** Geographic Distribution of City Branding Studies in China

**Notes.** This pie chart illustrates the spatial concentration of city branding literature, with nearly half of the studies focusing on major cities such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen.

Together, these findings highlight the need to broaden the geographic lens of Chinese city branding research, encouraging greater engagement with less-developed areas, inland cities, and cross-regional



comparisons. Addressing this imbalance would not only enrich the theoretical diversity of the field but also contribute to more inclusive and representative policy insights.

#### 4. Thematic trends and analytical frameworks in chinese city branding

As shown in Figure 6, from 2014 to 2025, research on Chinese city branding has demonstrated a steady increase and diversification across three thematic dimensions: “Governance & Stakeholders,” “Localization Pathways,” and “Regional Spatial Patterns.” Among these, governance-related topics have consistently dominated the field, peaking in 2021 with seven studies. Attention to localization pathways has grown significantly since 2018, while spatial patterns, although comparatively less explored, saw a moderate rise between 2020 and 2021. Notably, starting in 2018, most years have seen studies covering two or even all three themes simultaneously, indicating a gradual shift toward more integrated and cross-cutting approaches in city branding research (see Figure 6 ). This trend reflects a deepening understanding of the complexity of city branding and provides a more multidimensional analytical framework for future studies.



**Figure 6.** Annual Distribution of Chinese City Branding Studies by Thematic Focus (2014-2025).

As summarized in Table 2, a total of 77 thematic occurrences were identified across 56 English-language studies, revealing overlapping analytical categories and considerable interdisciplinary engagement. Specifically, 24 studies addressed localization, 39 discussed governance and stakeholders, and 14 examined spatial configurations. Many of these studies spanned more than one thematic category. Moreover, 21 of the reviewed publications incorporated perspectives from multiple disciplines, such as urban planning, media studies, public administration, and cultural geography.

**Table 2.** Overview of Thematic Trends and Disciplinary Integration in Chinese City Branding Studies (2014-2025)

Theme Classification	Publications	Interdisciplinary Linkage	Representative Studies
Localization Pathways	24	15	Lu & de Jong (2019); de Jong et al. (2018)
Governance & Stakeholders	39	17	Wang & Feng (2023); Zhang (2021)
Regional Spatial Patterns	14	9	Zhao et al. (2024) ; Zhu et al. (2024)

Theme Classification	Publications	Interdisciplinary Linkage	Representative Studies
Total Theme Occurrences	77	21	—
Unique Publications	56	—	—

**Table 2.** (Continued)

**Notes.** This figure summarizes thematic trends in 56 English-language studies on Chinese city branding from 2014 to 2025. A total of 77 theme occurrences were identified, as many publications engage with multiple themes. Interdisciplinary linkage reflects studies that integrate insights across academic fields. Representative studies were selected based on citation impact and thematic relevance.

**Additional Note:** Only studies that showed clear conceptual or methodological integration across several disciplines (e.g., combining urban planning and communication analysis) were categorized as interdisciplinary. Interdisciplinary was defined as more than just cross-disciplinary citation without integration.

### 4.1. Localization pathways of city branding in China

Localization in Chinese city branding operates through both top-down mandates and bottom-up innovation. National strategies such as Ecological Civilization and the Belt and Road Initiative are embedded into local contexts through institutional mechanisms, including Five-Year Plans, pilot programs, and special economic zones<sup>[9,18,19]</sup>. However, localization is not uniform. Coastal and first-tier cities tend to interpret these strategies more creatively due to their administrative flexibility and stronger resource bases. In contrast, inland and lower-tier cities often replicate policy templates with limited contextual adaptation<sup>[20-22]</sup>.

The symbolic dimension of localization is increasingly shaped by digital platforms such as Douyin and Weibo. These platforms impose algorithmic logics that prioritize virality and visual coherence, often at the expense of cultural authenticity<sup>[18,19]</sup>. Municipal governments frequently adopt trending formats to amplify visibility, resulting in homogenized narratives and aesthetic convergence. Industrial heritage, for instance, is often rebranded as “green innovation” to align with dominant ecological discourses, leading to symbolic dilution and cultural erasure<sup>[23]</sup>. The case of Chongqing illustrates how industrial landscapes are transformed into stylized green spaces, blending commercial aesthetics with official narratives in ways that risk suppressing historical memory<sup>[19]</sup>.

Despite these constraints, several cities have demonstrated agency in reframing cultural assets. Xi’an revitalized Tang Dynasty aesthetics in a manner that fused historical symbolism with digital expressiveness<sup>[24]</sup>. Yangzhou strategically leveraged its UNESCO designation to integrate local culinary heritage into global branding platforms<sup>[25]</sup>. These cases show how local authorities can transform cultural resources into branding assets while maintaining emotional and symbolic resonance. Nonetheless, structural asymmetries persist. In less-developed regions, limited administrative autonomy, weak planning capacity, and fragmented governance hinder effective branding. Technocratic implementations, such as Guangzhou’s sponge city initiatives, often result in low public engagement and underutilized infrastructure<sup>[26]</sup>. In Northeast China, outdated industrial legacies further constrain cities’ capacity to shift toward service-oriented identities, illustrating the entrenchment of spatial and institutional disparities<sup>[27,22]</sup>.

### 4.2. Governance and stakeholders in city branding

Governance shapes the institutional hierarchies and participatory arrangements that underlie Chinese city branding. Operating under a tripartite structure involving state agencies, market actors, and symbolic civic participation, governance practices remain centralized despite increased rhetorical emphasis on inclusivity<sup>[28,29]</sup>.

Public-private partnerships often reinforce institutional asymmetries. While framed as participatory, these collaborations typically prioritize administrative efficiency and capital investment. In cities like

Xuzhou and Dali, civic involvement is limited to symbolic gestures or curated visibility, rather than genuine influence on planning processes<sup>[30,31]</sup>. Branding campaigns may feature resident contributions, but the scope of participation is tightly controlled, reflecting a broader logic in which engagement is instrumentalized for legitimacy rather than empowerment<sup>[26,32]</sup>.

Digital platforms reinforce these dynamics. Residents are encouraged to participate as content generators, yet their input is filtered through algorithms that align with state and market agendas<sup>[33,34]</sup>. For instance, emotionally resonant narratives are amplified when they conform to nationalist or commercial aesthetics, but expressions of dissent or alternative imaginaries are marginalized<sup>[11,35]</sup>. Co-creation in such contexts becomes performative, serving symbolic governance rather than democratic responsiveness. Nonetheless, grassroots narratives persist. In Wuhan, residents used Douyin to share personal experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown, constructing alternative representations of the city rooted in solidarity and lived experience<sup>[11]</sup>. While such bottom-up contributions provide authenticity and emotional depth, they are rarely integrated into formal governance structures. This disconnect reveals a critical tension between symbolic inclusivity and procedural exclusion in the governance of city branding<sup>[36,37]</sup>.

### 4.3. Regional spatial patterns in city branding

City branding in China is marked by spatial asymmetries that mirror broader governance hierarchies. First-tier cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen dominate national and international narratives due to their political capital, resource endowments, and access to strategic platforms<sup>[38]</sup>. National policies grant these cities greater administrative flexibility and infrastructural investment, reinforcing their symbolic centrality. Meanwhile, peripheral and medium-sized cities face structural disadvantages in accessing visibility and legitimacy<sup>[33,39]</sup>.

Some peripheral cities attempt to navigate these imbalances through strategic differentiation. Two key approaches are observed: alignment with national initiatives through regional alliances and the development of culturally specific storytelling. For example, the Greater Bay Area's green branding aligns its ecological identity across multiple municipalities, while cities like Chengdu and Yangzhou emphasize culinary and heritage-based narratives to differentiate themselves<sup>[10,25]</sup>. However, these efforts often remain constrained by aesthetic norms and narrative filters dictated by central authorities or digital platforms, limiting their disruptive potential<sup>[9]</sup>.

Epistemic hierarchies further shape spatial inequalities. Dominant narratives of branding success are produced by and for core cities, marginalizing alternative models from peripheral regions. Even when innovation occurs in less-visible cities, their contributions are often reinterpreted through dominant frameworks that prioritize market appeal over cultural subjectivity<sup>[10,40]</sup>. This symbolic dependency entrenches the centre-periphery divide, making it difficult for peripheral cities to assert narrative autonomy.

Significant research on city branding can be found in Chinese-language databases like CNKI, despite the fact that this review concentrates on English-language studies. Governance, stakeholder participation, and global competitiveness are frequently highlighted in English-language research, which is frequently impacted by Western theoretical frameworks. Chinese-language works, on the other hand, usually emphasize moral governance, administrative implementation, and cultural revitalization under discourses like "*Beautiful China*" (美丽中国). These variations highlight epistemic imbalances between indigenous policy-oriented research and Western analytical traditions. Combining the two viewpoints would enhance the field's theoretical diversity and promote a more impartial comprehension of how Chinese city branding serves as both a cultural initiative and a tool for governance.

#### **4.4. Cross-thematic Synthesis: Interweaving Governance, Localization, and Spatial Dynamics in Chinese City Branding**

Chinese city branding operates within an interconnected framework shaped by governance authority, spatial inequality, and localized adaptation. Rather than functioning as isolated influences, the dimensions of governance, localization, and space interact dynamically, generating systemic tensions that structure urban branding outcomes. This review identifies five recurring tensions emerging from these interactions: symbolic collaboration versus structural asymmetry, spatial centralization versus peripheral erasure, state-curated narratives versus vernacular expression, global imaginaries versus local grounding, and sectoral-localization disjuncture (see Table 3). These tensions reflect the embedded contradictions of branding practices in China's hybrid state-market governance model. Although official discourses frequently promote participatory rhetoric, such as in Zeng Cheng's Greenway project or Guangzhou's Sponge City initiative, these branding campaigns often lack mechanisms for substantive civic inclusion. Institutional frameworks typically limit residents' ability to participate in the agenda-setting or design phases. As Zhao et al.<sup>[41]</sup> and Mitchell et al.<sup>[42]</sup> note, these initiatives tend to create an illusion of engagement rather than facilitate genuine empowerment.

National branding directives further compound this by packaging local cultural assets into standardized, state-curated formats. While intended to enhance national cohesion and international appeal, these scripts often reduce local diversity and erase culturally specific narratives. For example, industrial heritage may be downplayed in favor of universalizing slogans such as "green innovation," weakening authenticity. Moreover, when local branding ambitions outpace infrastructural or economic capacity, policy-practice mismatches can emerge, undermining long-term sustainability. Nevertheless, examples of grounded, context-sensitive branding practices exist. In Xiamen, edible landscaping initiatives have successfully integrated ecological goals with public participation. Similarly, in the Greater Bay Area, participatory storytelling projects among migrant communities have generated inclusive brand narratives that reflect lived experience and emotional attachment<sup>[37,43]</sup>. These cases demonstrate the potential for branding models that reconcile civic participation with national policy objectives. Despite such innovations, asymmetries persist. First-tier cities dominate branding visibility, while inland and peripheral cities often serve as symbolic supplements to national narratives without exercising discursive autonomy. These regional disparities restrict local capacity to shape authentic identities and perpetuate a centre-periphery hierarchy in branding legitimacy<sup>[44,33]</sup>. Even when local efforts are innovative or culturally rich, they are often filtered through national or platform-imposed aesthetic norms, constraining their originality and reach.

These contradictions should not be viewed as administrative inefficiencies alone. Rather, they are symptomatic of a branding regime that privileges symbolic control over democratic responsiveness. Addressing these structural constraints requires more than superficial inclusion. Reforms must prioritize institutional flexibility and grassroots empowerment, ensuring that branding becomes a vehicle for meaningful civic agency rather than a tool for technocratic legitimization. Ultimately, Chinese city branding is shaped by a dynamic interplay of centralized governance, localized creativity, and uneven spatial opportunity. National strategies provide direction and resources, but local governments and communities must interpret and apply these mandates within their constraints. As illustrated earlier, citizen-generated content, such as the emotionally resonant videos produced in Wuhan during the COVID-19 lockdown, demonstrates that grassroots narratives continue to influence urban identity construction<sup>[11]</sup>. These bottom-up practices suggest that even in highly centralized systems, public discourse and cultural expression remain powerful forces in defining the symbolic contours of the city.

**Table 3.** Key Tensions and Representative Cases in Chinese City Branding

<b>Tension</b>	<b>Description</b>
Symbolic Collaboration vs. Structural Asymmetry	State-led initiatives promote inclusion rhetorically but exclude communities institutionally.
Spatial Centralization vs. Peripheral Erasure	Core cities monopolize visibility, while peripheral cities rely on cultural commodification to gain attention.
State-curated Narratives vs. Vernacular Expression	National scripts limit the space for locally meaningful cultural representation.
Global Imaginaries vs. Local Grounding	International branding visions fail to address local ecological and economic realities.
Sectoral-Localization Disjuncture	Branding goals may not align with the industrial and civic foundations of the city.

Despite growing emphasis on inclusivity, branding authority remains skewed toward first-tier cities. Smaller and inland cities are frequently reduced to symbolic backdrops in national narratives, with limited autonomy to shape their identities. These regional asymmetries constrain local capacity to engage with or benefit from branding strategies, reinforcing a centre-periphery hierarchy<sup>[44,33]</sup>. Even when local efforts attempt to assert unique identities, they often face pressure to conform to top-down frameworks, which undermines diversity and deepens symbolic dependency.

In China, local adaptation, spatial hierarchy, and governance authority interact to create city branding. Even though official discourses place a strong emphasis on inclusivity and teamwork, participatory practices frequently stay symbolic. However, grassroots narratives-like digital content created by residents-show that civic creativity still has an impact on the development of urban identities. In order to promote more inclusive and context-sensitive urban identities, institutional adaptability and sincere public involvement should be given top priority in city branding going forward.

## 5. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive synthesis of the English-language literature on city branding in China, drawing on 56 peer-reviewed articles published between 2014 and March 2025. Employing a Governance-Localization-Space framework, the review offers a structured lens through which to understand how branding practices in China are institutionally shaped, spatially distributed, and discursively mediated. By thematically analysing these works, the review brings into focus the evolving dynamics of branding as both a governance strategy and a socio-spatial process in the Chinese context.

The findings point to several critical dynamics. First, city branding in China is overwhelmingly orchestrated through top-down state frameworks, closely aligned with national development agendas and ideological imperatives. Rather than being expressions of local distinctiveness or civic creativity, branding strategies often reflect centralized planning logics and institutional hierarchies. Second, spatial disparities remain a persistent feature, as core cities such as Beijing and Shanghai dominate branding discourse and policy visibility, while inland and mid-sized cities struggle with structural disadvantages that hinder their branding capacity. Third, despite the rhetorical embrace of co-creation and public participation, civic involvement remains largely symbolic. Institutional arrangements, algorithmic mediation, and performance-driven governance models constrain the scope of genuine engagement, positioning citizens more as content providers than stakeholders in shaping urban meaning. To interpret these dynamics, the study introduces the concept of the State-Space-Ideology Complex, which captures the interlocking forces of governance centralization, spatial asymmetry, and symbolic control that underpin branding practices in contemporary China.

The review is not without limitations. It exclusively analyzes English-language, peer-reviewed journal articles and excludes Chinese-language sources, policy documents, and grey literature, which may contain alternative perspectives or locally grounded insights. In addition, although the thematic analysis was guided by both deductive and inductive approaches, its interpretive nature may reflect selective emphases, despite collaborative efforts to ensure analytical consistency and rigor.

Future research could usefully address these limitations by incorporating multilingual sources and adopting mixed-methods approaches that include ethnographic, participatory, or digital methodologies. Particular attention should be given to peripheral cities, underrepresented actors, and everyday branding practices that remain underexplored in the literature. Examining how branding intersects with algorithmic governance, regional coalitions, and grassroots cultural production would enrich the understanding of urban imaginaries in the Chinese context.

By advancing a conceptual and empirical synthesis that foregrounds structural asymmetries and symbolic politics, this study contributes to the growing body of critical city branding scholarship. It challenges dominant market-centric and Western-derived models by offering a situated and theoretically informed account of branding as an evolving governance technology in a digitally mediated, authoritarian system.

## **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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