

# **The impact of urban tourism in the global-local nexus of Singapore and Hong Kong - The ‘Tourism Capitals of Asia’?**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper is an attempt to discover the impact of urban tourism in shaping Singapore and Hong Kong, and how the strategic location of these cities within their respective local policy framework, regional relationships and their global position enable them to serve as tourism capitals of Asia. The paper presents a strong case to explore the links between tourism and urbanism of the two cities within the context of their global-local nexus. The paper will question how urban tourism, regional competition and global positioning demands have affected both cities as they strive to become ‘tourism capitals of Asia’. What are the impacts of urban tourism, regional and global tourist demands in shaping the image and identity of the city? What is the role of global visions and local aspirations in enhancing the city quality of life and increasing urban tourism, propelling Singapore and Hong Kong towards world city status, and as Asia’s model cities?*

**Keywords:** Asian urban centres, global-local nexus, cultural heterogeneity and continuity, global homogenization

## **Introduction**

This paper aims to go beyond the description of the urban tourism in Singapore and Hong Kong and aims to identify its relationship to other key factors shaping the spatial structures of these Asian urban centres. The paper will question how urban tourism, local context, regional competition and global positioning demands have affected both cities as they strive to become ‘tourism capitals of Asia’. What are the impacts of urban tourism, regional and international tourist requirements on the image and identity of the city? How do these cities face the globalization process and increasing urban tourism while addressing local aspirations, cultural diversity, migration, ethnic and spatial heterogeneity? What is the role of global visions and local aspirations in enhancing the city’s quality of life and increasing urban tourism, propelling Singapore and Hong Kong towards global city status, and as Asia’s model cities? The paper puts forward questions about how these cities respond to increasing urban tourism demands while balancing global visions and local aspirations while addressing related key issues and the importance of maintaining the city’s unique image and distinct identity. How does each city respond to the growing disparity between cultural heterogeneity and global homogenization in the process of placemaking and place marketing strategies?

The paper will look into the relationship between urban tourism and urbanism in Singapore and Hong Kong, each respectively analyzed by tracing the city's development time line and increasing urban tourism, highlighting key factors, actors and locations that shape the image and identity of the city.

## Urban Tourism in Singapore and Hong Kong

Both Singapore and Hong Kong are highly connected prominent gateway cities, international financial centres, and well positioned in the global setting; both cities aim to be open and cosmopolitan, Asia's World cities. The two rivals offer a particularly interesting case as Asian urban centres deeply embedded in the process of localization and globalization while competing with each other to be the 'tourism capital of Asia'. The case clearly demonstrates the advent of tourism economy as major income generator in many such Asian metropolises and the fierce competition these cities face. The case is also an interesting example of Asian cities with unique image and distinct identity that maintain specific similarities and simultaneous differences, both in tourism and urbanism. Both share a multicultural Asian identity and both cities position themselves as an 'Asian city that embodies the finest of both East and West'.

In order to understand the global performance of both cities in tourism industry, we have referred to The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report 2011 from World Economic Forum. The following figures show us how these two cities are performing in global and regional ranking.

<Fig 1> and <Fig 2> displays the global regional rankings and data for the Asia Pacific region. As the table shows, Singapore is the top-ranked country in the region at 10th position and is followed in the regional ranking by Hong Kong SAR at 12th overall.<sup>1</sup>

<Fig 3> shows 'the Open Borders Index 2011' of Singapore and Hong Kong, both ranking top among their global competitors. This captures the elements that determine whether a country's borders are open.<sup>2</sup>

Country/Economy	2011		2009
	Rank/139	Score	Rank/133
Switzerland	1	5.68	1
Germany	2	5.50	3
France	3	5.41	4
Austria	4	5.41	2
Sweden	5	5.34	7
United States	6	5.30	8
United Kingdom	7	5.30	11
Spain	8	5.29	6
Canada	9	5.29	5
Singapore	10	5.23	10
Iceland	11	5.19	16
Hong Kong SAR	12	5.19	12
Australia	13	5.15	9
Netherlands	14	5.13	13
Luxembourg	15	5.08	23

<Fig 1. Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index<sup>3</sup> 2011 and 2009 comparison>  
Source: The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report 2011, WEF (2011:8)

<sup>1</sup> Singapore and Hong Kong are amongst the top ranked for policy rules and regulations. These economies have put into place overarching policy environments that are conducive to the development of the Travel & Tourism sector, including well-protected property rights, rules attracting FDI, and a minimum of red tape required in setting up new businesses (WEF, 2011: 7).

<sup>2</sup> The intent of this index is to heighten awareness of the impact borders can have in hindering both travel and trade. Both travel and trade are enabled by factors that extend far beyond the physical and administrative borders, and include elements such as the general business environment or infrastructure (WEF, 2011).

				SUBINDEXES					
OVERALL INDEX				T&T regulatory framework		T&T business environment and infrastructure		T&T human, cultural, and natural resources	
Country/Economy	Regional rank	Overall rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score
Singapore	1	10	5.23	6	5.72	4	5.39	23	4.59
Hong Kong SAR	2	12	5.19	4	5.80	13	5.19	24	4.59
Australia	3	13	5.15	36	5.08	17	5.11	4	5.28
New Zealand	4	19	5.00	13	5.60	25	4.80	22	4.60
Japan	5	22	4.94	27	5.24	32	4.72	14	4.86
Korea, Rep.	6	32	4.71	50	4.86	28	4.76	27	4.53
Malaysia	7	35	4.59	60	4.71	40	4.35	18	4.72
Taiwan, China	8	37	4.56	46	4.95	31	4.73	55	4.00
China	9	39	4.47	71	4.52	64	3.84	12	5.06
Thailand	10	41	4.47	77	4.45	43	4.32	21	4.64

<Fig 2. The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index 2011: Asia Pacific>  
Source: The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report 2011, WEF (2011:16)

Country/Economy	OPEN BORDERS INDEX 2011		Pillar 1: Market access		Pillar 2: Efficiency of customs administration		Pillar 3: Efficiency of import-export procedures		Pillar 4: Transparency of border administration		Pillar 5: Air transport infrastructure	
	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score
Singapore	1	6.03	1	5.97	1	6.69	1	6.45	2	6.53	14	5.01
Hong Kong SAR	2	5.81	16	5.12	13	5.69	2	6.24	14	5.94	12	5.10
Sweden	3	5.65	96	3.75	2	6.33	3	6.18	3	6.53	10	5.23
Switzerland	4	5.57	58	4.23	10	5.77	32	5.29	7	6.21	13	5.08
Denmark	5	5.56	95	3.76	4	5.98	4	6.16	4	6.52	17	4.93
Germany	6	5.55	101	3.74	20	5.37	12	5.92	18	5.72	7	5.48
Netherlands	7	5.55	85	3.79	5	5.96	11	5.93	8	6.19	15	4.99
Canada	8	5.43	25	4.85	19	5.37	30	5.37	11	6.10	1	6.68
United Kingdom	9	5.40	91	3.77	8	5.82	16	5.73	19	5.53	5	5.51
France	10	5.36	97	3.75	24	5.18	10	5.95	28	5.11	6	5.50

<Fig 3. The Open Borders Index 2011>  
Source: The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report 2011, WEF (2011:92)

Apart from their high performance in global competition, in recent years both cities have also been attempting to develop their tourism economies by showcasing their unique local attributes to international and regional tourists. Both cities strive to construct an image of itself as a cultural destination attracting foreign investments, improving the quality of life, while cultivating the arts and tourism businesses. In the case of Singapore, the city branding exercise was done in a substantial and transformative manner featuring both marketing and infrastructure building content whereas 'Brand Hong Kong' campaign aims to create a new strategic position for Hong Kong in Asia and the international arena and to reinforce the confidence of the local population that Hong Kong remains 'Asia's World City' in the region (Shen: 2010).

Authorities in both cities have been pursuing place making and place marketing with development initiatives and strategies to promote urban tourism incorporating waterfront developments and selected forms of arts and cultural heritage development in order to stimulate visitor arrivals, but also to define and articulate national and cultural identity. These functions help to explain the higher priority allocated to it

<sup>3</sup> The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI) aims to measure the many different regulatory and business related issues that have been identified as levers for improving T&T competitiveness in countries around the world. The TTCI aims to measure the factors and policies that make it attractive to develop the T&T sector in different countries(WEF, 2011: 8)

in strategic planning and its increasing use to attract visitors throughout much of Asia. Image and identity are inextricably linked, forming a close triangular relationship with urban tourism.

## **Urban Tourism in Singapore**

From a macro perspective, Asia is set to become a strong growth engine for global tourism in general<sup>4</sup>. In 2010, Singapore welcomed an all time high of 11.6 million visitors, a 20 per cent increase from 2009, with its tourism receipts growing by 49 per cent to hit a record of S\$18.8 billion. And with projects such as Gardens by the Bay, River Safari, International Cruise Terminal and the National Art Gallery coming on stream over the next few years, Singapore is expected to achieve 12 to 13 million visitor arrivals and S\$22 to S\$24 billion in tourism receipts in 2011.

In the past, there were three ways identified in strengthening tourism in Singapore: the creation of an economic infrastructure which capitalizes on Singapore's geographic location, the reconfiguration of environmental resources in order to sustain nature-based tourism<sup>5</sup> and the refashioning of cultural attributes to project Singapore as a 'Global city for the arts' (Hall & Page: 1999).

In 1990s, Singapore started globalizing its aspirations, its heritage landscapes, as marketable landscapes for an international audience, which became subject to further re-making and re-theming under Tourism 21, a national tourism planning exercise mounted in 1996. National Tourism Plan Committee (NTPC) was formed in 1995 and 'New-Asia Singapore' was launched in Jan 1996, to present Singapore as a melting pot of Eastern and Western cultures. The New-Asia Singapore identity is essentially a 'top-down', state-led initiative conceived in the hope of repositioning the tourism industry for the new millennium, creating a new identity for the Singaporean community, and providing an avenue to rejuvenate urban places.

Singapore Tourism Board (STB) is a statutory board which plays not only a central financial role but also a social and cultural one. STB depicts a modern, progressive and cosmopolitan city state that has not forgotten its Asian heritage while at the same time, committed to making Singapore the "events and entertainment capital of Asia" and "most compelling shopping and dining destinations."

Master Plan 2003 produced parks and water bodies, while identity and heritage plans were designed to deal with identity and quality of living environment to make Singapore a distinctive city. Leisure Plan 2008 was also an acknowledgment of the significance of leisure and it proposes the extension of parkland and nature-based attraction and activities. Sentosa, Bugis Street, Singapore River are places that have dramatically transformed over the years to cater to changing consumer demands and urban planning ethos.

There was a concern among the ruling elites as to how Singapore could maintain its 'local' cultural identity and heritage, while establishing core values which can bind Singaporeans together in the face of 'progress'. The way heritage landscapes are constructed and drawn upon by the state for the purpose of nation-building and promoting urban tourism can be seen in such places as Chinatown Historic District, Kampung Glam Historic District, Little India District and Civic and Cultural District (CCD).

Another global aspiration for Singapore is to realize the cosmopolitan status, that is, to make Singapore a

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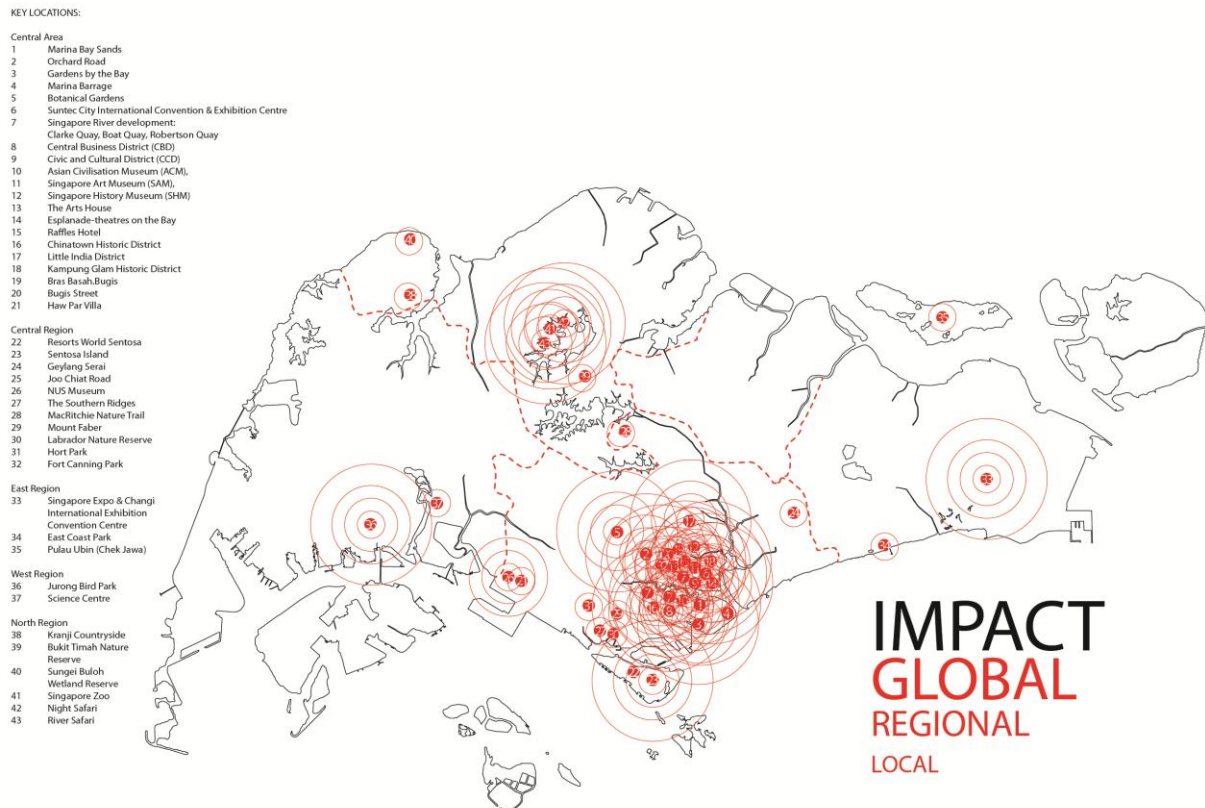
<sup>4</sup> According to the UNWTO, Asia was the strongest growing region in 2010. World Tourism Organization, "International Tourism 2010: Multi-speed recovery", [www.unwto.org](http://www.unwto.org)

<sup>5</sup> Over the years, Singapore's mission has evolved from realising a vision for a 'Garden City' to creating 'A City in a Garden' where the island's seamless green infrastructure of parks and streetscapes play an essential part of Singaporeans' lives, homes, workplaces as well as creating recreational experiences and lifestyles in the Garden.

vibrant cosmopolis. Urban landscape transformation is a vital element in the global aspirations of this city-state. Singapore River transformation, Marina Bay Development and events such as Formula1 night race<sup>6</sup> held around the area have helped to put Singapore on the world map of urban tourism.

The re-branding of Singapore in tourism marketing from ‘Uniquely Singapore(2005)’ to ‘Your Singapore(2010)’ reflects the individualism and flexibility in tourism planning and the emphasis on diversity in choices. The two Integrated Resorts and the introduction of health and medical tourism launched in 2003 are also a few examples that show how Singapore is flexibly adapting to meet new tourism demands.

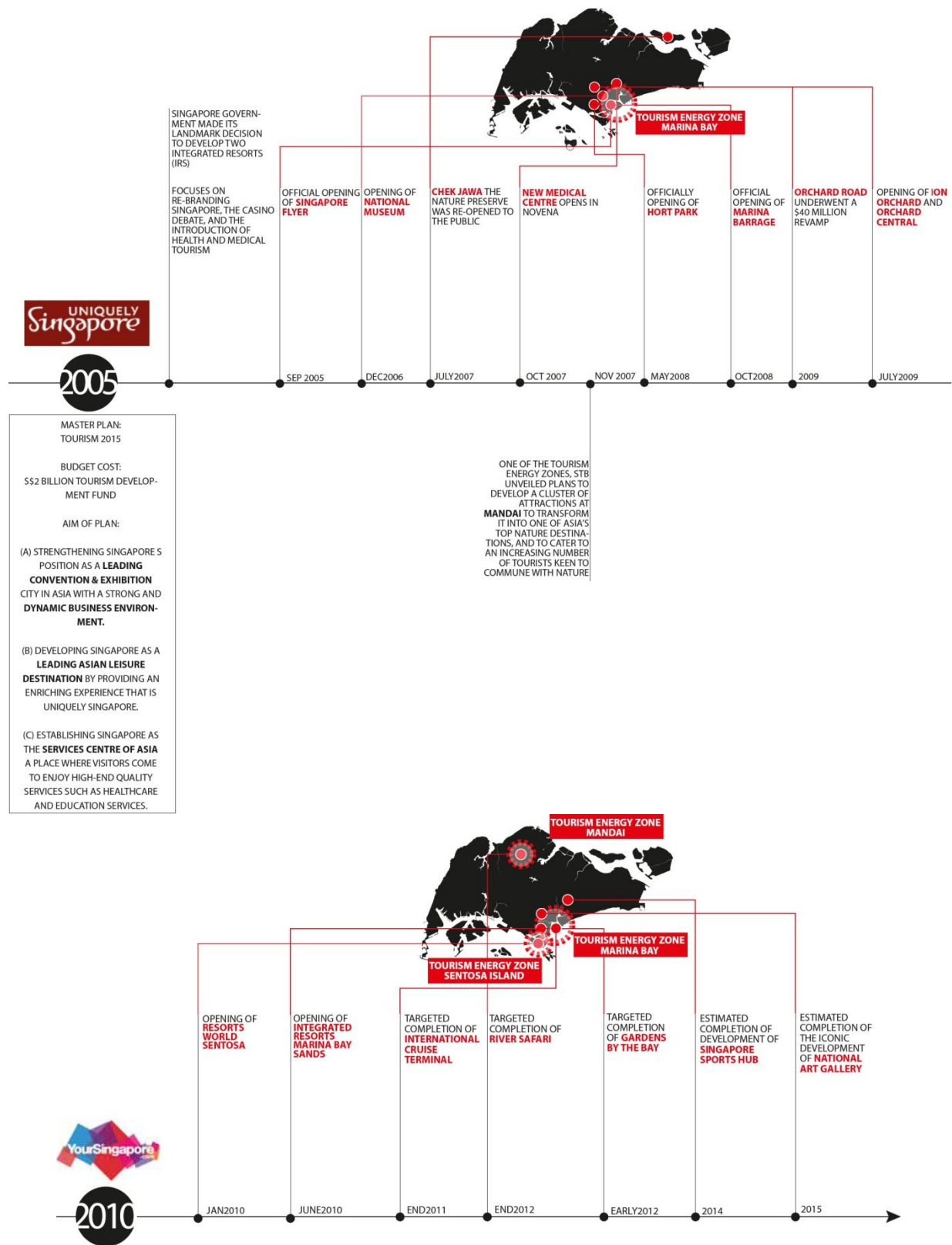
It can be argued that tourism industry has played a central role in shaping Singaporeans' own understanding of their national and ethnic identities. Furthermore, the vitality of thematic zones in ensuring sustainable urban tourism implies a desire to seek more productive and harmonious relationship among visitors with host communities and the environment. Thematic zones are supposed to remain fundamentally embedded in local cultural and societal activities. By demarcating a thematic zone, it is hoped that the landscape and its activities are not only authentically conserved, but will successfully attract both local and foreign visitors for generations to come, thereby generating its own economic sustainability.



<Fig 4. Global, regional, local impact of Singapore's key locations in tourism<sup>7</sup>>

<sup>6</sup> The race was co-funded by the Government of Singapore, footing 60% of the total bill, or \$90 million SGD, out of a total tab of \$150 million SGD (Wikipedia). The race is expected to rev up its tourism sector with a projected revenue of some S\$100 million (Channelnewsasia).

<sup>7</sup> By mapping the key locations in tourism, <Fig 4> reveals the high concentration of key locations in tourism in the Central Area & Region of Singapore.



<Fig 5. Timeline of Singapore's tourism development from 2005: Tracing the impact of urban tourism in shaping Singapore>

## Urban Tourism in Hong Kong

Hong Kong is the epitome of modern cosmopolitan city, a crossroad between Eastern and Western culture and a gateway to Mainland China. The former fishing community has been transformed by British colonialism and trade, as well as by its own economic miracle, into one of 'Asia's World Cities', taking in its stride the return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 (Lee: 2008). The branding of Hong Kong as Asia's World City, a major financial centre and headquarters of multi-national corporations and international institutions and its transformation to a more service economy shows Hong Kong's global visions.

Hong Kong's strategic location and natural setting combined with its high density compact development have resulted in its distinct identity and unique urban heritage. Its urban and heritage tourism are shaped by its recent transition from British rule to be part of Mainland China and its current status of one country two systems and its growing global visions and changing local aspirations of the people of Hong Kong since its handover in 1997. With increasing demands of improving the city's quality of life, regional and international tourism, Hong Kong is regarded as a successful high density city and an attractive tourist destination, including harbour tours, laser city shows and seasonal events such as the spectacular fire works displays for the enjoyment of the regional and international tourist but also for the people of Hong Kong.

From a Government perspective, tourism is an economic activity of demand and supply, in other words, the expectation and the fulfillment of the tourists on tourism products and a realization that the tourist expects a special tourism place with unique character that enhances their enjoyment of experiencing the city. The successful Discover Hong Kong campaign has transformed the city from a shopping destination to an urban tourist destination resulting in longer stays. Hong Kong is a place where the regional and the international tourist can experience spectacular views of the city and Victoria Harbour from the Peak and its vibrant Street life especially in the older urban districts with the convenience of a successful compact high density city with an efficient transportation system: a city with a rich natural heritage enjoying its unique natural setting.

The tourism industry has been an important part of the economy since it shifted from industrial sector to a service sector model in the late 1980s and early 90s. Nowadays, Hong Kong's tourism, along with international trade and financial services, is one of the three main sources of income for Hong Kong. It has international and regional tourist appeal and is one of the most popular destination among cities in Asia. The reasons for this achievement are its strategic location, economy, blend of Eastern and Western culture, infrastructure, legal system, safety, workforce and reputation (WTO, 2000).

In a regional scale, major regional hub supported by transportation network, rapid growth of cross border business and interaction with the Mainland, is leading to more regional integration and increasing demand from Mainland visitors bringing new demands and transformation in the retail, leisure, entertainment and tourism industry. This is evident in the increasing demand for flagship brand name stores, hotels and restaurants catering to the Mainland tourists.

In 2003, Hong Kong Government introduced the Individual Visit Scheme (IVS). The scheme allowed travelers from 49 Mainland cities to visit Hong Kong and Macau on an individual basis. The main reason for launching the Individual Visit Scheme was to boost the economy of Hong Kong and Macau. In 2010, mainland visitors have become the highest spending group, with average spending HK\$ 7,400 per person.

Except for two specific years (SARS in 2003 & Financial crisis in 2009), the visitor arrivals have continued to grow every year. In 2010, Hong Kong surpassed a record-high of 36 million visitors from around the world. In addition, due to the introduction of the IVS, there has been a sharp increase of tourists from Mainland China. According to The World Tourism Organization forecasts, the number of



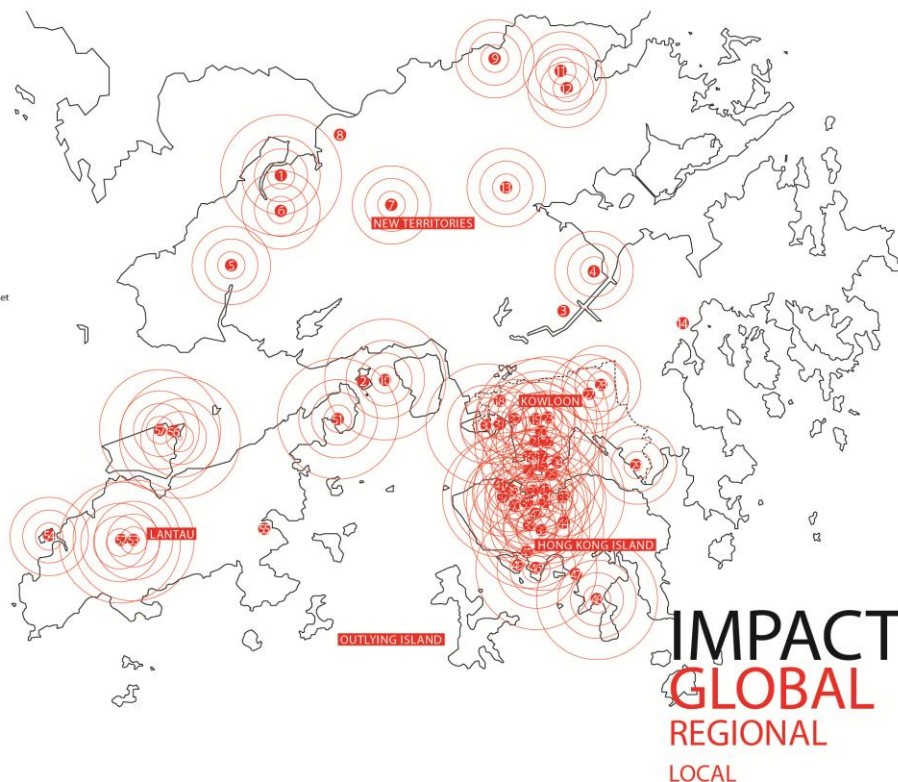
tourist arrivals to Hong Kong could reach about 57 million by 2020 and Hong Kong would rank fifth among the top destinations of the world. It increases competitive edge for Hong Kong because the geographical location can act as a tourism gateway of China, capturing both outbound travelers from the Mainland and en-route inbound visitors to the Mainland.

Hong Kong's status was expected to be ambiguous because of its move from British colony to a SAR of the PRC, which exercises ultimate authority, despite allowing a degree of autonomy (Henderson: 2002). However, Hong Kong's post-handover status has resulted in a growing sense of ownership and resulted in increasing local involvement instrumental in influencing in shaping city policy and recent governmental efforts. Hong Kong is transforming itself as an attractive destination, a place capitalizing its unique image and identity. The changing local aspirations are leading to more public involvements in bottom-up planning processes related to harbour front planning, heritage conservation and urban renewal strategy shaping city policy towards a better city and impacting urban tourism in a positive way.

With the increasing involvement of the Development Bureau, Hong Kong Tourism Board, the changing Urban Renewal Authority, increasing importance of the Antiquities and Monuments Office and the newly formed Harbour Commission, developments such as West Kowloon Cultural District, Kai Tak redevelopment, Central Harbourfront, and more sensitive approach to heritage conservation, urban renewal strategy and harbourfront planning, Hong Kong is set to become even more attractive to local residents as well as regional and international tourists.

#### KEY LOCATIONS:

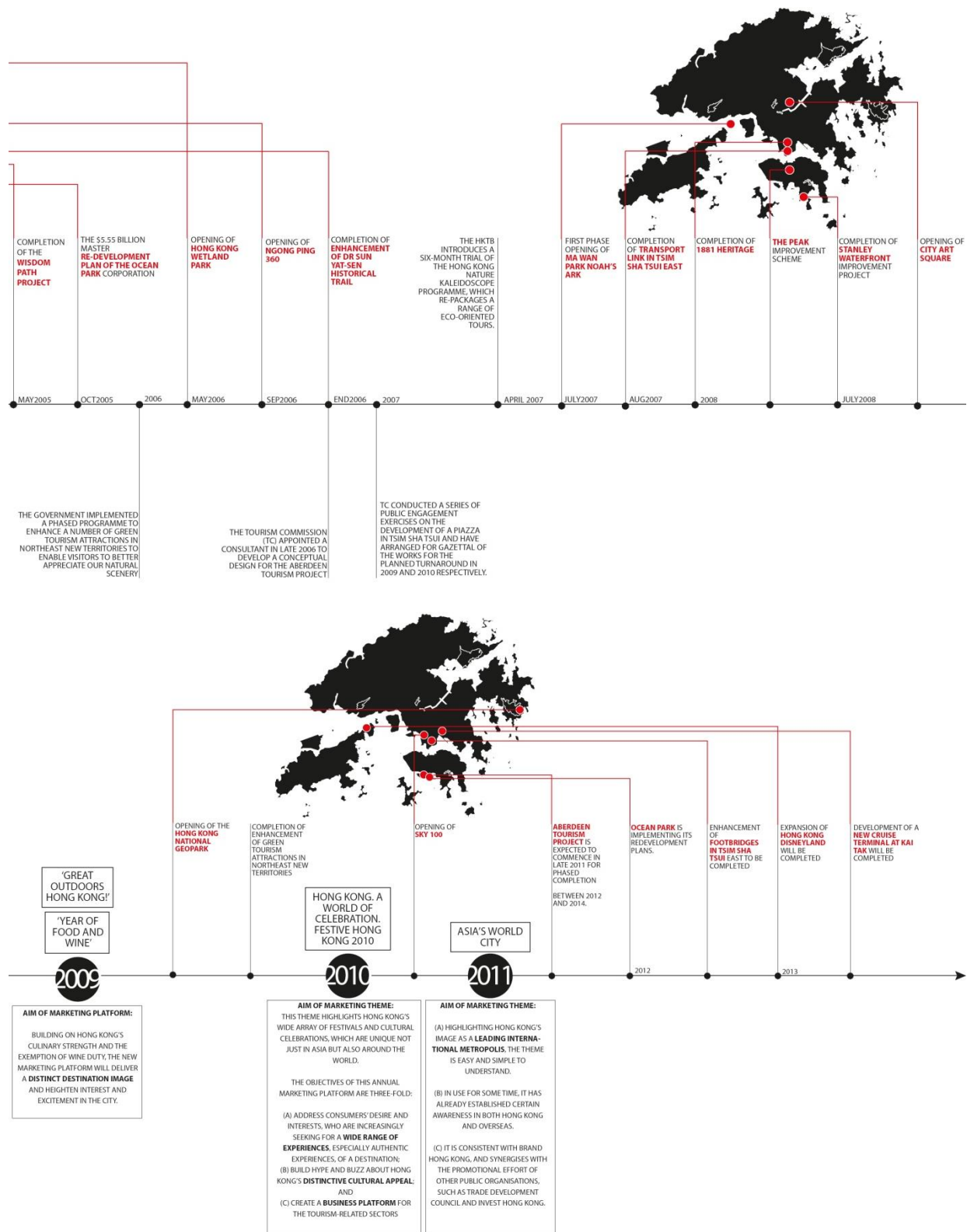
- New Territories
- 1 Hong Kong Wetland Park
  - 2 Ma Wan Park Noah's Ark
  - 3 City Art Square
  - 4 Sha Tin Racecourse
  - 5 Ching Chung Koon
  - 6 Ping Shan Heritage Trail
  - 7 Kat Hing Wai
  - 8 Mai Po Wetlands
  - 9 Tai Fu Tai
  - 10 Tsing Ma Bridge
  - 11 Fung Ying Seen Koon
  - 12 Lung Yek Tau Heritage Trail
  - 13 Lam Tsuen Wishing Trees and Tin Hau Temple
  - 14 Sai Kung Town
- Kowloon
- 15 Tsim Sha Tsui
  - 16 Ocean Terminal
  - 17 1881 Heritage
  - 18 Cheung Sha Wan Road Fashion Street and Apliu Street
  - 19 Mong Kok District
  - 20 Ladies Market
  - 21 Temple Street Night Market
  - 22 Jade Market & Jade Street
  - 23 Yuen Po Street Bird Garden / Flower Market / Goldfish Market
  - 24 Avenue of Stars
  - 25 A Symphony of Lights
  - 26 Clock Tower
  - 27 Kowloon Walled City Park
  - 28 Sik Sik Yuen Wong Tai Sin Temple
  - 29 Lai Yue Mun Seafood Bazaar
  - 30 DHL Hong Kong Balloon
  - 31 Sky100
  - 32 Dialogue in the dark
- Hong Kong Island
- 33 Causeway Bay
  - 34 Wan Chai
  - 35 Admiralty
  - 36 Central
  - 37 Llan Kwai Fong & SoHo
  - 38 The Peak
  - 39 Madame Tussauds
  - 40 Hollywood Road, Cat Street, Man Mo Temple
  - 41 Western Market
  - 42 Hong Kong Park
  - 43 Golden Bauhinia Square & Special Flag Raising Ceremony
  - 44 Happy Valley Racecourse
  - 45 Jumbo Kingdom
  - 46 Ocean Park Hong Kong
  - 47 Repulse Bay
  - 48 Stanley Market & Murray House
  - 49 Aberdeen
  - 50 Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre & Hong Kong International Trade and Exhibition Centre
- Island District
- 51 Disneyland Theme Park
  - 52 Ngong Ping 360
  - 53 Giant Buddha / Po Lin Monastery / The Wisdom Path
  - 54 Tai O Fishing Village and Stilt-house
  - 55 Mui Wo
  - 56 SkyCity
  - 57 AsiaWorld-Expo



<Fig 6. Global, regional, local impact of Hong Kong's key locations in tourism<sup>8</sup>>

<sup>8</sup> By mapping the key locations in tourism, <Fig 6> reveals the high concentration of key locations in tourism in Kowloon and Hong Kong Island in Hong Kong.





<Fig 7. Timeline of Hong Kong's tourism development from 2005:  
Tracing the impact of urban tourism in shaping Hong Kong>

## Conclusion: Global visions and local aspirations in urban tourism

The geometries of power arising from the interaction of global visions and local aspirations help transform the local landscapes of Singapore and Hong Kong and this paper has focused on the trajectories of both cities in regard to urban tourism. It can be argued that the key challenge facing Singapore and Hong Kong is how best to cater to increasing international and regional tourism, maintain its global position and retain its unique local identity at the same time. Developing 'strategic urban tourism' entails a balancing act between globalizing local sensibilities on one hand, while localizing global best practices on the other. This global-local nexus can be approached by striking a balance between the economic and humanistic objectives of urban tourism, and by globalizing local peculiarities in line with best practices from around the world (Chang: 2000). As we have seen in the case of Singapore and Hong Kong, the global visions of 'making a great global city' and growing local aspirations lead to developments of tourist attractions, the formulation of tourism policies, and the marketing of destination areas dictated by the needs and interests of international and regional visitors. A recognition that it is important to harmonize the world-class facilities with its unique local attributes, the role of the local factors and agencies in these processes should not be ignored. Since tourism not only caters to the needs and interests of global audiences but it is also geared towards meeting the cultural and leisure aspirations of the local community, and providing residents with a greater sense of belonging to their homeland (Chang: 1999). Thus the balance between global visions and local aspirations responsible for shaping sustainable tourism development and the city's unique image and identity will continue to transform and shape Singapore and Hong Kong as they both strive to become 'Asia's model city' and the 'tourism capitals of Asia.'

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