

**IPS Roundtable, 11 May 2011:
“Brand Singapore: How Nation Branding built Asia’s Leading Global City”
Speaker: Mr Koh Buck Song**

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This little red book is one with a curious image on its cover. The image in question is of a stick of chewing gum emerging from its silver wrapper. Embossed on the gum is the word “Singapore” and a star repeated in diagonal lines.

The book’s author, Mr Koh Buck Song, interprets the picture as a new Singapore emerging from the metaphorical wrapper of old preconceptions. “Brand Singapore: How Nation Branding Built Asia’s Global City” is Mr Koh’s 17th publication as author and editor, and the writer-cum-business consultant spoke about its central theme, nation branding, at a recent IPS roundtable held on 11 May 2011.

No longer confined to the realm of products, the branding conversation has extended to ‘branding nations’ in light of much discourse on global cities, Mr Koh said.

From Singapore’s rise from Third World to First in 30 years and to a Garden City or safe haven for business, branding plays a role in highlighting key narratives that a nation aims to project to the world, he noted. While external branding is important in the realm of international diplomacy and attracting foreign investors, one cannot forget internal branding which



influences how citizens perceive their own nation.

One experiment that Mr Koh often did with an audience was to ask them what the crescent moon on the Singapore flag represents. Many Singaporeans often gave the textbook answer in the national education curriculum: that the crescent

moon on their flag stood for a young nation. However, the crescent moon is recognised internationally as a symbol of Islam. The fact that most Singaporeans are surprised when presented with this other notion for the first time illustrates the power of Singapore’s internal branding so far, Mr Koh said.

The external branding of Singapore, on the other hand, often emphasised what he called “hard power items” such as industry, finance and manufacturing. However, he felt that more effort could also be made to spotlight Singapore’s “soft power items”. Here, Mr Koh referred to Richard Florida’s work, which highlighted the importance of three Ts – Talent, Technology and Tolerance – in nurturing creative cities. Mr Koh acknowledged that Singapore had taken new risks in importing new events like the Formula One Night Race and the Integrated Resorts, and noted that tolerance was required for society to accept subsequent trade-offs like noise pollution or social ills. However, he felt that the Formula One Night Race and Integrated Resorts still belonged to the category of “hard power items”. He believed that Singapore would soon be in a position to turn much more attention to “soft power items” like the Gardens by the Bay or the National Art Gallery of Singapore that would show another side of what the nation had to offer.

Mr Koh cited the inter-ministry National Marketing Action Committee, which has articulated four core values that will guide the country’s nation branding efforts. They are captured in four ideas: transforming, daring to dream, collaborating and nurturing. He saw Singapore’s foray into organising the Youth Olympic Games as an attempt at expressing these values, although many felt that the Games organisers did not get

enough brand value for the amount they had spent.

Despite the occasional hiccup, Singapore has been consistently ranked top or near the top on various city indices. But how should it continue to stay in the lead with close competitors like Japan and China catching up, if not trumping it in certain aspects? What is Singapore’s brand promise to the world?

For Singapore to clearly distinguish itself from others, it would have to display a clear identity, what Mr Koh called the “focused substance” in nation branding. This “focused substance” would articulate a clear vision of what a nation has to offer. Such focus would also affect other policy decisions, such as which arts projects Singapore decides to fund. However, he qualified that the limits of censorship will also determine how much brand value the country could get out of the arts. Mr Koh cited Melbourne’s branding campaign as one which encompassed the “focused substance” he referred to.



The campaign was visually centred on an iconic logo of the word “Melbourne” written on what looked like pages of a book. The logo was meant to represent Melbourne as a book, and also a metaphor for a city meant to be read and savoured slowly. Aside from this, Melbourne was also the second city to be conferred the title of UNESCO City of Literature. Mr Koh had spoken to civil servants behind the campaign, and according to them, efforts to list the city as a UNESCO City of Literature were separate from those to design the campaign along the theme of a book. This, to Mr Koh, speaks of the city’s

genuine character and outlook on life which was successfully incorporated into its branding.

However, there were also downsides to becoming too narrowly focused in terms of brand promise. The Melbourne campaign, for example, might connect well with those who love reading, but not with others, Mr Koh noted. Good nation-branding, he said, would lie somewhere between these two extremes.

But besides identifying a clear vision of what it wants to be known for, the government has to engage both the private sector and the general public for successful nation branding. The general public has to possess a basic understanding of what nation branding is in order to contribute to it, Mr Koh noted. The private sector, at the same time, could be an important arena for promoting Singapore business and its country brand.

While conscious branding is an important part of the equation, Mr Koh also highlighted historical events as a contributor to a nation’s image on the international stage. Singapore, for example, is often framed in Western media as the poster child of the nanny-state. However, between the media attention given to the sentencing of two foreigners who committed vandalism in Singapore, Michael Fay and Oliver Fricker, he acknowledged that Singapore had come some way from this unfavourable nanny-state image. In Michael Fay’s case, Singapore’s nanny-state image was played up when US President Bill Clinton intervened and asked for clemency on Fay’s behalf. This drew substantial attention from the international media, thus projecting Singapore as a place of stern order. Fay was not spared from the cane, though his sentence was reduced

from six to four strokes of the cane after Clinton’s intervention.

However, in Oliver Fricker’s case, matters were more muted as Switzerland did not intervene with Fricker’s sentencing and the media did less to revive this austere image of Singapore. Mr Koh likened such incidents that weighed on nations’ reputations to “brand keloids”, a brand “scar” that could be removed with some cost and pain or one that becomes benign with time. The image of Singapore could change relative to the worldview of other countries whose reputations are also shaped by responses to emerging events, he suggested.

The Singapore brand has also started to emerge in less familiar areas, said Mr Koh. A *Sports Illustrated* magazine shoot, for example, featured a bikini-clad Caucasian model posing on a Singapore trishaw; luxury brand Salvatore Ferragamo has also designed neckties with Singapore’s Merlion mascot printed on them. While some may criticise such branding for frivolity, it might complement the current national brand by correcting the sense of Singapore as a “stuffy” place where one cannot have fun, Mr Koh posited.

Besides working on events and images, changes in domestic policy would also contribute to nation branding. In formulating domestic policies, Mr Koh cautioned against a “Singapore cocoon” mentality, where one narrowly focuses on domestic demands, without enough consideration of the implications of these policies on a world stage. In improving the nation’s brand, Mr Koh recommended a quest for clear identity. He also highlighted the need for more tolerance in Singapore society. If one saw a country’s people as its own ambassadors, the desire to endorse one’s country could only

be cultivated through allowing more space for expression of creativity, he said.

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