For

How will the Singapore brand hold its own after Lee Kuan Yew, in a world of Brexit and Trump?

Reputation is precious. Top talent and hot money gravitate only to the most attractive, respected nations. For a country as small and as young as Singapore, its brand is its most valuable asset, as seen in its stunning ascent from Third World to First World in just 30 years, spearheaded by a concerted, closely coordinated programme of nation branding.

How did Singapore create this country brand, cultivate and guard it, sell it to its "shareholders", and make it known to the world? And how will Singapore build on its brand now, with the passing of its influential first Prime Minister, and in a global context marked by new forces of protectionism and divisiveness?

Koh Buck Song has worked on the nation branding of Singapore in various capacities, from global investment promotion to enhancing liveability and projecting "soft power". In this second edition of *Brand Singapore*, his 29th book as author/editor, he offers an illuminating inside look at — and candid critique of — a country brand that is as rich in resource as it is potent with promise.

"Koh is a writer of style and substance on country branding. His book is a must-read for anyone interested in place branding on a national scale, especially in the Asian region."
— Prof Ruth Rentschler, University of South Australia Business School, Australia

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KOH BUCK SONG

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SECOND EDITION

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Praise for BRAND SINGAPORE

"Few governments have moulded their country's image as consciously and diligently as Singapore's. Koh Buck Song has written an illuminating and entertaining account of the building of Singapore's 'brand', an effort so successful that its politicians sometimes seem to confuse their country with a Fortune 500 company."

— **Simon Long**
The Economist, UK

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University of South Australia Business School, Australia

"In this excellent new edition, Koh Buck Song provides a highly illuminating account of Singapore's nation branding. The acknowledgement of the political environment within which nation branding occurs is a particularly welcome contribution to the place branding literature."

— **Dr Keith Dinnie**
Nation Branding: Concepts, Issues, Practice (Routledge), UK

"A must-read for all policy-makers and business leaders, who are struggling to survive in the ever-intensifying global competition. Building the brand of a nation is not magic. There are fine-tuned

mechanisms and strong volition behind the front stage. The secret of Singapore's success is precisely uncovered by Koh Buck Song."

— **Yasu Ota**
Nikkei Asian Review, Japan

"Koh's well-documented story (on Singapore) offers inspiring ideas… it is almost a declaration of love to place branding by a prominent practitioner in the field."

— **Grupo TASO**
Place branding consultants, Spain

"Comprehensive and well-researched, giving readers insight into the mechanisms and multifaceted nature of Singapore's nation branding... Koh's enlightening account truly expands notions of Singapore beyond the strict regulations, stable environment and economic prowess that it is most known for."

— **Rachel Chan**
Center on Public Diplomacy,
University of Southern California, USA

"An important contribution to the discipline and research field of nation branding. Koh's book illustrates the central role that nation branding can play in long-term economic development. Koh's book outlines how Singapore's clear nation branding strategy has been core to the city-state's transformation over the last 50 years."

— **Jonathan McClory**
The Soft Power 30 index, UK

BRAND SINGAPORE

NATION BRANDING AFTER LEE KUAN YEW, IN A DIVISIVE WORLD

Second edition

KOH BUCK SONG

Marshall Cavendish Business

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For Vivien,
who had an instinct for
the value of branding,
and loved Singapore.

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INTRODUCTION

Reputation is precious, perhaps now more than ever. Of all earthly possessions, your brand is the most valuable thing you could have for moving up in the world – whether as a person, company or country. Without a good CV, you would not be entrusted with a high-level job. For businesses, success rests on corporate standing and customer support, both of which start with having a good name. As for countries, only the most attractive and respected places have the power to draw top talent and hot money.

All these realities of country branding and brand-building are being challenged even more today, in the light of global developments since the start of the 2010s. Countries that used to lead in global rankings of country brands have seen their nation brands damaged, as their politics and societies have

become more divided and divisive. The two prime examples of this were both seen in the same year of 2016, in Britain after the Brexit vote in the June 2016 referendum to leave the European Union, and in the United States after the controversial election of President Donald Trump in November 2016, leading to the whole country being referred to by *Time* magazine as the "divided states of America"[1]. Under the administration of President George W. Bush from 2000 to 2008, the USA left the world more divided, mainly because of its hardline Middle East foreign policy; now, forces from within threaten to tear the country apart.

Across the world, socio-political forces such as extremism and populism have come to the fore in individual countries in an unprecedented way. At the same time, the accompanying developments of withdrawal from some key aspects of globalisation, including greater protectionism and curbs on trade and immigration – leading to an inevitable drag on individual mobility, tourism and investment – have begun to transform the global context in which nation brands can assert themselves and compete.

In the field of nation branding and brand-building, Singapore continues to be a fascinating case study. By consciously creating and cultivating a country brand, the island – geographically small but internationally influential beyond its

physical size – pulled itself up from next to nothing to become Asia's forerunner in the league of leading nations. For example, in the 2014–15 ranking of the Country Brand Index, a global survey of 75 countries' reputations by the brand agency FutureBrand, Singapore held its own as a representative of Asia, being ranked 14th, second highest in Asia after Japan (ranked at number 1 globally for the first time).

But Singapore has lost some ground on specific individual measures. On the indicator of quality of life, Singapore, which used to rank top in Asia as the only Asian country in the top 10 – at number 8 – dropped out of the top 10 in this latest survey. The only indicator on which Singapore was ranked in the top 10 (in fourth place) was for being "good for business". Still, Singapore's relatively high placings are due, in large part, to a unique Singapore-style brand guardianship – unusual in the way the country's brand is shaped for its own people as well as in the way it is displayed to the world. This book assesses this remarkable brand journey, as well as the challenges for the future in a new world order.

Chapter 1 of this book explains the concept of nation branding, and positions Singapore's global standing in this space. Following that, the nation branding of Singapore is examined through the three main spheres of society: the public, private and people sectors.

Chapter 2, on the government's "visible hand" in nation branding, considers how the state plays the biggest role, as it does in most other spheres of life in Singapore. This chapter also reveals the impact of this level of central coordination in terms of social, economic and political policy, thereby also indirectly sustaining Singapore's strongest brand attributes. Today, these forces are being adjusted, with the passing away in 2015 of Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's first prime minister, thus marking a shift into a new era of country brand-building without Mr Lee's direct influence.

Chapter 3 looks at Singapore's corporate sector, including some key characteristics of how business people and organisations behave in relation to the country brand, as well as how the private sector has produced some global winners, and asks: Can business players do more, and how?

Chapter 4 takes stock of contributions made by individual Singaporeans to the country brand, as well as the activities and achievements that have attracted the attention of significant foreign audiences, sometimes even without directly meaning to. The game-changing impact of "SG50" is examined – a whole year in 2015 of citizen engagement to celebrate Singapore's golden jubilee of independence.

Chapter 5 offers an analysis of the deeper meaning behind Singapore's chief national icons, such as the Merlion,

and argues for a more holistic way of thinking about the symbols that influence the country brand.

Chapter 6 follows with a critique of troublesome international perceptions that have stuck, and whether these "brand keloids" – the enduring scars – pose obstacles to brand-building. The extent of the "stickiness" of these perceptions is evaluated.

Chapter 7 assesses the case study of the most recent official nation branding project, "The Spirit of Singapore" from the 2000s, and contemplates the future of Singapore as a country brand against the backdrop of a world that is becoming less open and welcoming in terms of trade, tourism, immigration and investment.

Singapore's traditional plus points – clustered around efficiency and effectiveness – are well-known to those who admire them. Among this group are many people, whether from developing countries or the most advanced states, who have seen worse in their own backyards and look up to the Lion City. To what extent has nation branding accounted for the republic's dramatic rise in five decades, over and above its many other "secrets of success"? And if a good name requires constant, conscious and coordinated cultivation, what are Singapore's chances of continuing to do this, and moving up even higher in the world? Can it succeed in its ambition to be a leading

global city? Has the very idea of a global city changed, with new questions being asked about globalisation itself? In the pursuit of progress, development and quality of life, could the method and manner of Singapore's nation branding, in fact, be the most important secret of all?

CHAPTER 1

FOR HEARTS AND MINDS

ONCE UPON A COUNTRY BRAND…

You know the type: ask them to choose between two restaurants for dinner, and they hem and haw, and hem and haw. Their protestations range from the robustly courteous ("I really don't mind; you choose…") to the blatantly false ("I eat everything!"). Finally, you ask: "Okay, what if I were to put a gun to your head for a reply on the count of three, which one would you pick? Don't hesitate, just say the first name that comes to mind." If you're lucky, you finally get an answer. That answer is due to branding.

That final selection draws on what is called, in the vocabulary of branding, "top-of-mind recall". When a subject is mentioned, the first name that comes to mind is the one that has managed to connect and register with the person making a decision. In the branding industry, people are routinely gathered

in focus groups and asked questions to test, for example, which brands they mention on the spur of the moment, and also to reveal what they instinctively think and feel about these brands. The brands most often cited without hesitation are those that have secured top place in the short-term memory of their target audiences. This process is called “brand recall” – and the even more valuable type of this data is “unaided brand recall”, when respondents are not prompted which option to select (for example, asking “Which restaurant do you think is best for steak?” with no options given). For any brand, attaining a high level of unaided brand recall gives a significant competitive advantage in that particular brand space. If you can get many people to think of your brand first before others, it means that the chances of your brand being picked in a buying decision are that much greater.

The value of branding

Branding, then, is the sum total of actions taken to shape the perception of something or someone, so as to achieve and maintain top-of-mind awareness. It refers to conscious and deliberate efforts to create and cultivate an image for a product, party, person or place. Advertising and public relations

are the usual communications approaches employed, through platforms including the mainstream media, online social media and third-party endorsement.

In the branding process, assets and advantages are highlighted, and sometimes grossly exaggerated. At the same time, flaws and faults are set aside or even covered up. Branding can be very loud or very soft. It includes the most public and expensive proclamations, such as billboard ads for luxury consumer products – from limousines to lingerie – across the globe. Or, it can entail zero extra dollar cost, because branding also includes taking basic measures of self-improvement, such as a company getting its customer relations staff to do better based on user feedback and then informing customers about it using existing channels of communication.

Branding, then, is the sum total of actions taken to shape the perception of something or someone, so as to achieve and maintain "top-of-mind"awareness.

And branding is not all about profit and sales. Branding can also be done – indeed, needs to be done – just as much by non-profit organisations. Often, the lack of impact of non-profit organisations in advancing their causes can be put down to lack of branding. The more people know of and think well of a group – for-profit or non-profit – the more likely they will

support the cause it promotes. Some of this branding can be free advertising – increasingly an option through "viral marketing" via online social media – and some of it is good public relations, through doing things right and then influencing others to recognise it and compliment you for doing it.

Most of the time, branding is an expensive business. Advertising space is costed on perceived value. The process goes like this: Talent is vital to create branding concepts to begin with; man-hours are then essential to execute those plans and make the branding come to life; and, hopefully, the returns should be more than worthwhile. Good branding is worth paying for, if you consider that a reputation is the ultimate intangible asset, whether for one man or woman, or a huge global corporation. Multinational companies spend millions of dollars to construct and protect their corporate standing. Revenue, profit, growth, their very survival – all depend on this.

A brand is valuable because it takes a lot of effort to create, and also to preserve. Once damaged, a brand is very difficult to repair. As a corporate example, Enron is a brand-name that became impossible to use after the exposure of extensive accounting fraud brought down the energy company in 2001.[1] The collapse was all the more spectacular because Enron had built up a strong (but false) brand identity,

for instance winning *Fortune* magazine's award for "most innovative company in America" for six years. The earlier branding helped the company to become, in its heyday, the darling of the stock market and the international business media. But after its dramatic downfall, there was no hope of brand recovery.

Countries are not like companies

By contrast, countries are different from companies in more ways than one. First, "brand-building" is a closely related term to "branding" that applies more to a country brand than a commercial one. Brand-building can refer to actions to enhance a country brand that are less overt, broader in scale and longer-term in perspective. Sometimes, the effect can be sub-conscious, or even unconscious. For example, if a government buys an advertisement in a magazine to promote tourism, that is nation branding. If, at the same time, the government organises activities to engage citizens in events such as national celebrations of independence, that would be nation brand-building, if only indirectly. As flags are waved amidst the celebrations, some national values would be highlighted, and these are invariably the country's "brand attributes" displayed for the world to see.

Fostering national identity is key to enhancing the capacity of ordinary citizens to act as brand ambassadors for their countries, if only indirectly. Just as capitalism works through individuals being motivated in the first instance by the profit motive for personal gain, citizens who aspire to make a mark in the world (as a Youtube musician, for example) always add to the brand value of the countries they represent, whether they intend to do so or not, and in however small a way. Indeed, in the longer term, a place that seeks to be a global city would be much better-placed to achieve this goal if more people in that place have thought about the very concept of a nation brand and have considered the possibility of their own contribution to the country brand. Such nation brand-building efforts led by the state also have an external dimension that involves public diplomacy – essentially winning friends and influencing people in the international arena. A cocktail party for foreign diplomats is not what most people would call "branding", but it is almost certainly part of brand-building.

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Next, a country is much more multifaceted than any company, so that it is much more difficult for a country to have its

brand completely destroyed. Even the most unattractive place has some redeeming feature. War-torn Afghanistan might currently rank near or at the bottom of all possible holiday destinations, but give it time and anything could happen, just as tourism and investment have returned to places ravaged by natural disaster, from hurricane-swept New Orleans to tsunami-hit Phuket. For nation branding, time can heal almost all wounds. In the Asian region, Japan offers one of the best examples of brand recovery, from the nadir of its World War II expansionism to the popularity today, across affluent Asia and elsewhere, of all things Japanese, from Tokyo's Tsukiji market sashimi to winter wonderland vacations in Hokkaido.

Conversely, for countries, unlike corporations, it is more difficult to change names and start all over again. This is not to say that changing names is not attempted from time to time. Examples include a city like Bombay renaming itself Mumbai, or a country like Myanmar relocating its entire capital from the heritage-rich Yangon to the remote Naypyidaw, a move that accentuated its negative branding of secrecy under a military junta government in the eyes of international observers.[2] But starting over is not as daunting as it might seem, at first. The many Eastern European nations that used to be part of the former Soviet Union were given a new lease of life with the demise of communism in Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall

in 1989. For these new nations, the task of brand-building had to begin with working at dissociating themselves from any negative branding left over from the Soviet era.

Indeed, in the branding game, Russia, the nation most closely associated with the former Soviet mindset, is ironically the most successful among the former members of the Soviet Union in distancing itself from that past. First, it already had top-of-mind recall. Partly, Russia has more resources and the advantage of size. Also, it has a good springboard, building on its status as a BRIC country (part of the grouping that includes Brazil, Russia, India, China, touted as the world's four most promising up-and-coming economies, with South Africa the latest addition to the grouping[3]). In December 2010, Russia clinched another most valuable prize in nation branding platforms by winning the bid to host the soccer World Cup 2018. It drew in help from internationally well-known bid ambassadors such as national soccer team captain Andrey Arshavin, who played for Arsenal Football Club in the English Premier League. Russia's success shows that countries are more resilient than corporations.

Over a shorter time-span, the United States is a prominent recent example of the ups and downs that a country brand can go through. The USA's country branding was damaged during the Bush administration from 2000 to 2008, mainly due

to actions taken for the "war on terror" in the Middle East. Brand America was then rebuilt under President Barack Obama from 2008 to 2016, with a greater openness to the world, including a "pivot to Asia". But with the media coverage of the divisiveness in the run-up to the Presidential election of 2016, and with the signals of sentiment laced with racism and xenophobia rising right from the earliest days of the Trump administration, positive global perceptions of brand America appear to be under threat once again.

Brand recovery depends, to a large extent, on target audiences forgetting any negative branding in some measure. In the days before the Internet, there was at least amnesia to fall back on. Except for the most heinous of crooks, one could be forgiven one's misdeeds if enough time had passed; branding could rebuild all but the most devastated reputations. Today, it is a lot harder to hope that people will forget, because stuff that is online stays there for much, much longer and, worst of all, anyone can just "Google it". That said, this effect is tempered to a large degree by another phenomenon in the way that public opinion is formed in the world today. The information may be all out there, but most people are too lazy or too busy to do their

In the days before the Internet, there was at least amnesia to fall back on.

own homework. Instead, what happens is that they come to depend – almost entirely in some cases – on habitual sources of information. This leads to the infamous "bubbles" in which some people live, and through which they get their sense of the outside world, relying on hearsay from friends, family, Facebook feeds and even fake news, in what has been called a new "post-truth" universe. Hence, people can stay generally ignorant of both good and bad developments. They can remain ignorant of new successes just as much as they can stay oblivious to fresh scandals. Nonetheless, this qualification aside, online citations remain crucial for any brand, including nation brands. The things that are cited about any brand on the first few pages of a Google search get an unimaginable amount of "multiplier effect" dissemination and reinforcement. Hence, getting good stuff about yourself onto the first page of a Google search has become paramount. The trick is how to get it there.

The Google trick

This Google trick – of influencing what is said about your brand on a Google search, or what comes up top in such searches – is even harder to pull off when it comes to nation branding. For a country seeking to do better in the world, of the three basic

economic factors of production, land can usually be increased only with land reclamation, ever since imperialism went out of fashion, in a manner of speaking. The other two factors – labour and capital – will come your way only if you not only do the right things, but also do the right branding.

Nation branding is the lifeblood of any nation; it helps to attract physical and financial investments, business, trade, tourism and other economic inputs, as much as it boosts talented human resources, permanent residents and new citizens. In the global "war" for talent, resources and financing, the nations that succeed are those that can best maximise their aspects of *competitive* advantage on top of *comparative* advantage.[4] Comparative advantage – the economic concept that shows that every nation can benefit from free trade, even if it lacks an absolute advantage in all sectors of its economy – allows small economies like Singapore to make up for the disadvantages of being small. Singapore has leveraged this well, over almost 200 years as an important international trading post since the arrival in 1819 of Sir Stamford Raffles and the East India Company from Britain. But to stay perennially ahead of the global competition, something else is needed to go one step further and add yet another extra edge, for distinctive brand differentiation. Other things being equal, the nations that can do nation branding better will gain this added *competitive* advantage.

Singapore bought into this idea with gusto. The republic has done better than many other countries in this brand space, in terms of conscious and concerted branding since becoming independent in 1965. This book examines Singapore's track record in branding both internally and externally: who has tried to do what, to what effect, and where does the nation stand now in its ambitions to be Asia's leading global city. Throughout, the focus will be on how successful the state's efforts have been in influencing brand reception by Singapore's main target audiences, which include the country's own people as well as people all over the world. As a country, you can be paradise on Earth, but it's no good at all if no one knows. The message has to be delivered well and get through to the target audience. This is where a brand is different from an identity. Identity is character, a set of characterisations that flesh out someone or something. This becomes a brand only when effort is put in to communicate it to target audiences, and to sustain this messaging over time. The next level would be when audiences recognise and remember the brand. And the highest level would be universal top-of-mind brand awareness. Getting the brand messaging through to the audience is where most of the attention is focused in nation branding, as with all branding. And this is no simple task.

As a country, you can be paradise on Earth, but it's no good at all if no one knows.

How sweet is your brand?

Human minds are highly susceptible to influence, and yet, frustratingly hard to change. The brain works in strange ways, and often, the subconscious is as powerful, if not more so, than the conscious mind. In most cultures, the sight of a snake immediately strikes fear in the beholder even when it is generally a harmless species, whereas a teddy bear evokes affection, even though real-life bears are more dangerous than cuddly. Mental models are what people use to see and interpret reality. This is why something like, say, wearing a turban is a symbol of social status in some cultures – as in large parts of Asia and the Middle East – but may be seen as strange and even suspicious outside that region, especially in a post-911 world.[5] It would take a tremendous rebranding effort to alter perceptions of snakes and turbans. Conversely, messages conveyed by physically attractive people – like a blonde bombshell or a tanned hunk or a salt-and-pepper-haired gentleman in a handsome suit – are perceived better by target audiences, even though the messages could be false or the messengers completely fake.

Such mental frameworks are the products of the whole gamut of one's formative encounters with the world – upbringing, psychology, culture, history, geography, education, life

experiences. The most successful branding and rebranding efforts manage to tap into this layer of subconsciousness in the brain and to influence it, just as much as they create emotive connections with the heart. Branding advocates don't borrow the military expression "battle for hearts and minds"[6] for nothing. And the order in which those twin elements are usually mentioned is important – hearts, then minds. You must win over the first before you can affect the second.

So, perhaps William Shakespeare was wrong when he wrote in his play *Romeo and Juliet* that "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet". Actually, roses smell sweet mostly thanks to branding, to the largely subconscious perceptions evoked in all onlookers as a result of everything that has ever been said and imagined about the flower. If roses were renamed, say, "rubbish", their sweetness could not but be affected, surely. It would be impossible to wish away all the negative associations around the word "rubbish". Word association is much more than an after-dinner parlour game. Human beings make sense of any external stimulus by first connecting emotively with that stimulus, and then working it out into a kind of subconscious "narrative" in the mind, stringing together the "threads" that link all the "stories" about a certain subject over time. Branding facilitates the shaping of that narrative of heart and mind. This is what branding consultants are trying to get

at when they ask a client: "So what do you think is your brand story?"

Often, even those who are trying to brand themselves are not quite sure who they really are or what they want to be. They cannot articulate their "brand story" without some help because they lack the mode of thinking and the technical vocabulary – or just any vocabulary – to describe how they really think and feel. Also, they first have to identify and extract this "brand essence" from deep within their own subconscious, even as they are attempting the mammoth task of trying to read the minds of not just one other person, but in many cases, millions of people whom they have never met and will never meet. So, in determining the "sweetness" of any brand, contrary to what Shakespeare wrote, names do mean a lot. This is why people spend so much time and money trying to come up with smart names and taglines. If consumer branding is tough work, branding becomes even more complex when it covers an entire nation, with all its components and complexities, and when what you are trying to influence is the whole galaxy of perceptions (hearts) and opinions (minds) in the rest of the world.

The most successful branding and rebranding efforts tap into the subconscious just as much as they create emotive connections with the heart.

Nonetheless, people try, and some succeed. Nation branding involves actions to build the international reputation of a country, including applying to that country a combination of the promotional techniques usually used in the business world to build corporate image. What is needed, though, are not sexy advertisements or fancy public relations alone, but credible statements produced and disseminated consistently. When this is achieved, over time, the country earns the kind of reputation that is closer to what the owners of that brand would hope for. For example, Barack Obama, in his first few years as US president, did an almost single-handed nation-branding "job" of repairing the international image of America. Brand America had been battered between 2000 and 2008 under the Bush administration with its antagonistic handling of the global "war on terror". Obama's winning the Nobel Peace Prize after his first year on the job was a great, if controversial, personal accolade, but, more importantly, it added tremendously to the nation branding of America. The USA moved up from seventh place in 2008 to top in 2009 and 2010 in the Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index, which measures the global image of 50 nations. This nation-branding turnaround for the USA was achieved not through paid advertisements in magazines and other media, but mainly through independent news coverage and citations by other people who reported and commented on

what Mr Obama said and did. In the 2016 Nation Brands Index, the USA hung on to its top spot but suffered a significant drop in its score, closing the gap with second-placed Germany. It remains to be seen what impact a Trump presidency will have on the USA's nation brand rankings. But it would be a safe bet that there will certainly be some effect.

Public diplomacy and brand ambassadors

Public diplomacy – a subset of all the actions under the umbrella of nation branding – includes protecting the country's reputation and making friends with other nations, something that diplomats do on a daily basis. If other countries like the country you represent, they can become your external "brand ambassadors", to help shape the opinions of *other* nations about your country. But this will happen only if they generally agree with, and buy into, what you believe. What is said about Obama can work only when the images generated connect with the existing perceptions and mental models in people's minds. Today, the "Obama effect" is beginning to wane with the end of his term, and some observers have identified this as a factor for the USA dropping off the top of some other country brand rankings.[7]

CHAPTER 5

HEAR THE LION ROAR

MYTH, THE MERLION AND SINGAPORE'S REGAL BRAND

At the dazzling, high-tech opening ceremony of the world's first Youth Olympic Games[1] in Singapore on 14 August 2010, three larger-than-life characters dominated the stage: a dragon, a phoenix and a massive technicolour monster representing the demon of self-doubt. The third is a fantastical figment of the imagination, while the first two are the most iconic symbols from traditional Chinese culture. All three are universal emblems – appropriately. But in a way, it was a missed opportunity to place on the platform a uniquely Singaporean brand ambassador such as the lion, after which the Lion City is named. Of course, both the lion and the Merlion were represented at that event by the Youth Olympic Games mascots Lyo and Merly, but these two symbols were missing from the main show items.

Perhaps rightly, in the end, the designers of the opening show opted for imagery that contained a deeper cultural authenticity and wider appeal – two figures adapted from millennia-old creatures of Chinese legend and a third from the most modern international milieu of video games. Nonetheless, the absence of the lion and other Singaporean symbols is revealing. In a nutshell, it demonstrates the ambivalent position of national emblems in the nation branding of Singapore. Lyo and Merly might have appeared in the event's promotional materials but when it came to something like the main show, the tendency was still to appeal to symbols that are recognisable and comfortable, a status that the Merlion has yet to attain in global perception.

National emblems occupy an ambivalent position in the nation branding of Singapore.

The Youth Olympic Games in 2010 can be seen as Singapore's version of a coming-out party on the world stage. The event was on a much smaller scale than the 2008 summer Olympic Games in Beijing, of course, but it was no less significant to the hosts in nation branding terms. The Youth Olympic Games was Singapore's latest international gesture of nation branding, seen by those in government as a sign that the country had "arrived" on the world stage. Some believe that this was, in all likelihood, Singapore's once-in-a-lifetime

chance to host an Olympic Games, given the size of the country. And there is no escaping this constraint, unless Singapore co-hosts a future event with a neighbouring country. In the international game of nation branding, Singapore can be said to start off already with a huge disadvantage. Most people see Singapore as a country with a double handicap – hemmed-in by its small size, hampered by a short history. This mindset is framed from the starting-point of Singapore's independence in 1965. But this applies only within the terms of reference of national sovereignty, a concept of nation-states that is relatively recent in the history of mankind. In fact, in thinking about nation branding, it may be more fruitful instead to include as much as is relevant from the history of that territory stretching as far back as possible.

Mining Singapore's history

By way of illustration, if one wanted to think in a comprehensive way about the nation branding of America, one would not only start from the Declaration of Independence in 1776 but go further back to include the history of the earliest Wild West settlers, the whole saga of slavery and of the native Americans. In other words, to catch all the "fish" relevant to nation branding,

one should cast one's "net" over wherever and whenever any significant event or idea contributes to the present projected meaning and received understanding of that country brand. It could even be argued that one should also go beyond human history and include natural history – as in the history of plants, animals and even minerals – if any of these added to the current composition of the country brand. For example, in any study of the nation branding of Canada, it would be useful to include consideration of the history of the maple leaf, in all its relevant representations.

Applying this way of thinking to Singapore, one must go back in time way before 1965, back at least to the 13th century and to the first important figure of Singapore – not Stamford Raffles, but Sang Nila Utama. According to legend, Sang Nila Utama was the founder of ancient Singapore. He was a prince from Palembang, capital of the ancient Srivijaya empire and now part of Indonesia. The prince ruled the island from 1299 to 1347, according to the *Sejarah Melayu*[2] or *Malay Annals*, a literary work in the Malay language that was commissioned in 1612 and chronicles the genealogies of the Malay rulers over 600 years in the area that is today Malaysia and Indonesia. At that time, the island that is today Singapore was a fishing village called Temasek – "sea town" in the Javanese language. The earliest written mention of Singapore is in a Chinese account from

the third century which refers to the island as "Puluozhong", or "island at the end of the peninsula".[3] Archaeological excavations have also unearthed evidence of human habitation, with references to Singapore's ancient history as a regional trade centre and much more than a maritime "pit-stop" along the aquatic trade link called the Silk Route, which connected China to the West for supply chain management for commodities such as silk, spices and sandalwood. Legend has it that Sang Nila Utama, eager to identify new territory for a new city and armed with what appeared to have been imperialistic ambitions, decided to explore the islands off the coast of Palembang. He set sail in a number of ships and reached Temasek. En route, the ships encountered a great storm, and were faced with the danger of sinking until the prince, on the advice of a ship's officer, cast his heavy crown into the waters, whereupon the tempest finally died down. Landing at the mouth of the present-day Singapore River, the party went hunting in the forest. It was then that the prince spotted a strange animal with a red body, black head and white breast. It was a handsome creature that moved impressively back into the jungle. Sang Nila Utama enquired of one of his chief ministers what animal it was, and was told it probably was a lion.

The way the story is told suggests an element of artistic licence. And true enough, ever since, science has contradicted

art. Studies of Singapore have indicated that lions have never existed on the island, not even Asiatic lions. Hence, some believe that the beast observed by Sang Nila Utama was more likely a tiger, probably the Malayan tiger. Others animals have also been suggested, including the golden cat or masked palm civet.[4] In any case, the prince saw this animal sighting as an omen of good fortune, and so, stayed on and founded a city. He named the city Singapura. “Singa” means lion and “pura” means city in the Sanskrit language; the name thus means “Lion City”. Sang Nila Utama ruled Singapura for 48 years and is said to have been buried on what is today known as Fort Canning Hill.

The Lion King

Some observers have suggested that the entire story of Sang Nila Utama is of doubtful authenticity, as some records show that the island was still called Temasek years later. Whether this is because the old name stuck for various reasons is unknown, due to the sketchiness of historical records from that era. Whatever the veracity, from the perspective of more recent history, there is no doubt that the legend of Sang Nila Utama and the Singapura of that time have a secure place as part of

the country's "early founding myths". In this sense, in nation branding terms, perception truly *is* reality.

Thanks to Sang Nila Utama, the name "Lion City" has been used ever since. A lion emblem – a stylised red lion head in profile – is used to represent the country by the Singaporean civil service on many platforms, such as all government websites. Singa, a cartoon lion character, has been the ambassador of the country's courtesy campaign for decades. The National Courtesy Campaign was launched in 1979 by the then Ministry of Culture to help create a more pleasant social environment in a country in which a large proportion of the resident population were descended from migrant forefathers brought up in rural or urban blue-collar lifestyles.[5] The cartoon tradition has continued elsewhere, with one of the lion's most recent new incarnations being the mascot Lyo (incorporating into the made-up name the first two letters of the acronym "YOG", as opposed to the more common spelling "Leo"), created for the Youth Olympic Games in August 2010. The other mascot, Merly, is a "Merlioness cub", with blue scales on its torso and four animal limbs, instead of a fish body and tail.

Thanks to Sang Nila Utama, the name "Lion City" has been used ever since.

The Sang Nila Utama story is a vital part of the way that Singapore has been imagined ever since 1299. Consciously

– and much more often, subconsciously – it has helped shape the "imagined community" on this island, as part of the country's internal branding that has been sustained into modern times. The US-based Irish theorist Benedict Anderson defined nation-states as "imagined communities" in his 1983 book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. The concept states that a nation is a community that is socially constructed, which is to say it is "imagined" by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group. Such a sense of community is imagined rather than real because the members of this community, being so numerous and far apart from each other, will never meet most of their fellow members, and yet, the feelings of kinship and affinity may not be any weaker because of that physical distance.

This truism of anonymity and relative isolation from others applies even in a small country like Singapore. In fact, this effect is arguably even greater, if one factors in the tendency to retreat into one's private space in densely urban environments, as well as the comparatively low level of appreciation for, and activism in, civil society in Singapore. There is no depth to one's relationships with most other fellow Singaporeans, hence no "vertical community" dimension. Instead, a deep "horizontal comradeship" is created and sustained through the constant self-reinforcing communication of information about common

© Photo by Koh Buck Song

Koh Buck Song has been closely involved in the nation branding of Singapore for almost three decades, in various capacities.

As socio-political commentator, editor and journalist with *The Straits Times* (1988–99), he articulated and critiqued the Singapore brand for global and domestic audiences.

In strategic public communications since 1999, he has advised the Singapore government on nation branding, quality of life, economic strategy, foreign investment promotion, entrepreneurship, urban planning, leadership culture, national security, environmental stewardship, international media relations, market competition and policies on media, heritage, arts and culture. He served on many citizen panels such as the Singapore Arts Festival steering committee and as Deputy Chairman of the Censorship Review Committee 2010, after also serving on the committees of 1992 and 2003. He has also consulted to foreign governments on country brand-building, soft power and bilateral relations.

As head of global media relations and strategic planning for the Economic Development Board – a lead agency spearheading "Brand Singapore" since 1961 – he led a team to create the "global entrepolis" brand concept for Singapore.

As head of public affairs (Southeast Asia) at communications consultancy Hill & Knowlton, his public-sector accounts included the global branding of Gardens by the Bay, Fusionopolis, National Gallery Singapore and the Singapore Garden Festival.

Koh has lectured on media policy at the School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University, and on leadership as Adjunct Associate Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. He has spoken on Singapore's global image at international conferences at Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Chicago University in the USA, as well as at Fudan University in Shanghai; Deakin University in Melbourne; and at the Japan Foundation in Tokyo on a cultural leaders programme.

Koh holds a master's degree in public administration from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, where he was a Mason Fellow, as well as degrees in English from Cambridge University and in education from London University.

Currently, he is Adjunct Editor at the Centre for Liveable Cities of Singapore's Ministry of National Development, where he has authored numerous reports, including for the World Cities Summit Mayors Forum and the Young Leaders Symposium in Singapore and New York, as well as edited books including *A Chance of a Lifetime: Lee Kuan Yew and the Physical Transformation of Singapore* (2016). He has also been an editorial consultant for organisations including the FutureChina Global Forum, Urban Redevelopment Authority, National Environment Agency, Lien Foundation and Wildlife Reserves Singapore.

This is his 29th book as author and editor. The first edition of *Brand Singapore* was translated into Chinese and published in China in 2012. His other books include *Heart Work* (2002) and *Heart Work 2* (2011), on Singapore's global branding for foreign investment promotion; *Perpetual Spring: Singapore's Gardens By The Bay* (2012), the official coffeetable book of Singapore's futuristic public gardens; and *Learning For Life: Singapore's Investment in Lifelong Learning Since The 1950s* (2014), about a key brand attribute of Singapore's manpower resource.