

**“Creating a Singapore brand for the international stage”  
by Kishore Mahbubani<sup>1</sup>**

**Subtitle: “The Singapore paradox: The world is not world class;  
Singapore is world class”**

It is a great honour to be invited to be the first speaker for the Distinguished Speakers Lecture series of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCCI). I hope that SCCCI did not make a mistake in inviting me: I am neither Chinese nor commercial. Actually, as a Sindhi, I should be in commerce. But a Chinese friend often introduces me by saying: “Meet my friend Kishore. He is a Sindhi who failed. He joined government service.” Now I have gone one stage lower: I have gone into academia.

It is also daunting to be invited to speak on “Nation branding”. Company branding is an age-old business. All good companies know the value of their brands. They cherish and nurture them. Many countries, by contrast, are not aware of their branding. Let me for the record add that I am sceptical of the concept of nation branding. Nations are more like human beings, rather than companies. Human beings are respected when they have great souls. The greatest living human being today is Nelson Mandela. He does not have a great brand. He has a great reputation. He earned this great reputation through the incredible generosity of his spirit and his ability to bring about national reconciliation in South Africa, against all odds. Hence, I believe that countries should be more concerned about their reputations rather than their brands. However, since the topic assigned to me is “nation branding”, I will continue to use the term branding.

To make matters even more complicated, nation branding, by definition, must be done in an international context. Company brands are ranked against each other. So too are national brands. However the international context has never been more fluid.

There will therefore be three parts in my presentation. First, I will do a broad review of the international context. Second, I will try to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the Singapore brand. Third, I will put across a few suggestions on how to strengthen the future branding of Singapore.

First, the international context. It is vital to understand that we are now entering one of the most plastic moments of world history. For the past few centuries, world history has been dominated by Western countries. By contrast, the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be the Asian century. The famous Goldman Sachs BRICS study predicts that by the year 2050, three of the four largest economies in the world will be Asian: China, USA, India and Japan (in that order). No European economy will be among the top four.

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There are many reasons why economic power is shifting to Asia. But the subject is too big to be covered in one lecture. My next book will be on the rise of Asia. However, one critical reason why Asian societies are succeeding is because they are becoming competent and pragmatic. Indeed, the best definition of pragmatism has been given by Deng Xiaoping: He said, “it does not matter whether a cat is black or white; if it catches mice, it is a good cat.” Hence, Asian countries have stopped being ideological. India has started to get rid of the licence raj. China has even introduced property rights.

The paradox here is that while the Asian states have become competent and pragmatic (after having learnt many aspects of competence and pragmatism from the West), the Western states are moving in the opposite direction. Indeed, I said recently to a largely Western audience – that our world (to paraphrase Karl Marx) faces a spectre: the spectre of Western incompetence. On many major global challenges, the West is dropping the ball. We face huge challenges in international security but we are staring at political failures in Iraq and Afghanistan. We face huge challenges in the international environment. Global warming is a real possibility but the West, especially the US, refuses to reduce emissions. We also face a potential failure in the Doha round of trade talks. Domestically, several Western states have difficulty making critical adjustments. With globalization and increased global competitiveness, it is no longer possible for the cradle-to-grave social welfare model to remain economically viable. All Western states are also obsessed with what they perceive as the threat from the Islamic World. They see dark futures ahead of them and are becoming increasingly pessimistic. Let me stress that I am not making these claims. The leading Western voices are doing so. In the latest issue of *Foreign Affairs* (Jan/Feb 2007), Dominique Moisi says “The United States and Europe are divided by a common culture of fear. On both sides one encounters, in varying degrees, a fear of the other, a fear of the future, and a fundamental anxiety about the loss of identity in an increasingly complex world.”<sup>2</sup> By contrast, Dominique Moisi adds that “much of Asia displays a culture of hope”.

What is the significance of this international context on the question of nation branding? Just imagine a situation where the value of company brands in the automobile business is decided by GM, Ford and Chrysler. They can say: “We are the oldest car companies. We should determine the value of car company brands”. No one would take them seriously until they could seriously revive their competence in car manufacturing. In the commercial world, incompetent companies will not be allowed to judge competent companies. But in the world of nation branding, this does happen. Countries which are becoming progressively incompetent are passing judgement on countries which are becoming progressively competent.

What are the practical implications of all this for Singapore in the international branding game? First, there is no longer a gold standard of nation branding out there. The current gold standard is being maintained by countries which are the equivalent of GM, Ford and Chrysler. They no longer have the credibility to do so. Second, Singapore must develop greater self-confidence in its own judgement. Many Asian states were

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<sup>2</sup> Moisi, Dominique. “The Clash of Emotions: Fear, Humiliation, Hope and the New World Order.” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2007, p. 8.

politically decolonized before they became fully mentally decolonized. Hence, even though copying the best practices of others was a great competitive advantage for Singapore, we may have to stop doing so now. Let me cite one example. Today, many Western cities, including London, believe that a good city must have a ferris wheel. Hence, Singapore also decided that it should have a ferris wheel. Do we really want one?

This leads to the second part of my presentation: analyzing the real strengths and weaknesses of the Singapore brand. Company brands are inherently linked to their performance. A company that is performing badly inevitably does damage to its brand. For many years, the IBM brand was rock solid. However, when its performance began to falter, its brand also slipped. Today, IBM has recovered much of its strength but its brand has still not recovered fully. Performance matters in branding.

This is the great paradox about the Singapore brand. Singapore has consistently aspired to be world-class. Yet, in many areas, those who are supposed to be “world class” have slipped. By contrast, Singapore’s performance has exceeded previous world-class standards. Hence, it is quite puzzling that Singapore is still aspiring to be world class, when it has exceeded world class standards in many areas.

As a Dean of a School of Public Policy, I have naturally developed an interest in the subject of good governance. Companies measure their performance by looking at their bottom line: profits. Countries do not have a single measure of performance. Essentially, this performance is measured by the quality of governance they provide to their citizens. Good governance cannot be measured by one criterion. There are also no agreed measurements of what constitute good governance. The world still lacks a credible “Index of Good Governance” to match the “Index of Competitiveness” put out by organizations like the World Economic Forum (WEF). Let me suggest therefore that good governance has many dimensions.

In the case of Singapore, let me cite these 10 dimensions in which we have achieved or exceeded previous “world-class” standards:

1. Infant mortality: Singapore has the lowest rate in the world. 2.5 babies die before the age of 1 for every 1,000 live births.
2. Education: Singapore is among top-performing in international Science and Maths test. Some American schools use Singapore textbook in Maths. The country has a literacy rate of 95.4% among residents aged 15 years and older.
3. Poverty: Singapore has virtually no homeless people and no slums.
4. Health care: Singapore has a high life expectancy rate at birth of 79.9 years.
5. Housing ownership: The country has a home ownership rate of 90.9 % among resident households.
6. Economic growth: Singapore has had an average annual growth of 8.1% for the since 1965 (GDP at 2000 market prices).
7. Political stability: Singapore has enjoyed political stability since independence. It has not been involved in any war or conflict.
8. Ethnic Harmony: Singapore is ethnically diverse but has not seen any ethnic violence since the 1960’s.

9. Environmental management: Our country's ambient air quality was in the "good" level for 85% of the days in 2006. 100% of the population has access to waste collection services.
10. Cultural assets: Singapore has an increasing number of performing arts groups and has hosted an increasing number of international arts events. In 2003, the Esplanade was opened as a centre for the performing arts. We also have several important collections at the Asian Civilization Museum, the National Museum of Singapore, and the Singapore Art Museum.

Now let me turn to the future. While Singapore's excellent performance in several dimensions of good governance has helped overall to nurture a positive association with the Singapore "brand", it is not easy to market "good governance" as a brand. No company would try to market itself by merely saying we are a good company because we perform well and deliver good profits. They would market their products and always try to explain how they make the world a better place. Each tries to find a few simple images to associate with their companies: Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola: youthful; Apple: hip and cool; Banyan Tree: tropical and heavenly.

Are there a few simple images that we can associate with Singapore to convey the special strengths that Singapore has? I believe that there are a few. However, to pick out which strengths to highlight, we should be aware of the international context in which we are marketing the Singapore brand.

In the Western world, as Dominique Moisi pointed out earlier, there is a lot of dark foreboding about the future. In the Western mind, there appear to be various existential crises. Let me mention two big ones that I noticed from attending Davos this year. First, there is a growing sense of doom and gloom about the global environment. Second, there is deep concern about the growing divide between Islam and the West. In both these areas, the Singapore experience can produce messages of hope. Any brand that is associated with hope is one that is welcomed. Hence, I would suggest three possible branding propositions that could gain Singapore a positive brand internationally;

- (a) Singapore: a garden city
- (b) Singapore: a water city
- (c) Singapore: Where East meets West.

Let me explain briefly the content we can put in each brand.

### **Singapore: the garden city**

The greening of Singapore is a remarkable achievement. We are the world's only city-state, with no countryside. Hence, it would be natural for visitors to expect a concrete jungle when they were here. Instead, they find one of the greenest, if not the greenest, cities in the world.

There is one statistic that always astonishes me. The entire 48 continental states of USA have a land area of 9.1 million square kilometers. Singapore has a land area of 700 square km or 0.008% of continental USA. Yet this small area of 0.008% of continental USA has greater biodiversity than all of continental USA.

Some of it is clearly due to the lush flora and fauna found in the tropics. However, it also reflects Singapore determination to preserve our parks and forests. Our planning agencies, especially URA and NPB, have done a brilliant job of preserving the greenery in Singapore. Both URA and NPB are by any definition world class agencies. This is why they can produce a world-class brand: Singapore: the garden city. Please let me add what 2004 Nobel Prize Winner, Prof Wangari Maathai said, “When we plant trees, we plant the seeds of peace and seeds of hope”.

### **Singapore: the water city**

The story of Singapore and water is the story of a modern miracle. When I served in the Singapore Foreign Service, we were always told that one of our critical national priorities was to secure long-term water supplies. Hence, we were constantly negotiating with our neighbours for long-term water contracts. In my early years with the Singapore Foreign Service, in the 1970’s and 1980’s, if I had been asked whether Singapore would achieve self-sufficiency in water, I would have said “impossible”.

But the impossible has happened. Singapore will eventually achieve self-sufficiency. This is nothing short of a miracle. A combination of brilliant planning and enormous investment in science and technology has led to this happy result. Singapore has moved towards achieving water self-sufficiency at a time when many experts believe that water scarcity will be a major challenge for our world.

In March 2006, Singapore won three international water awards at the Global Water Awards 2006 in Dubai (PUB was named the Water Agency of the Year 2006. Home-grown water player, Hyflux, won the Water Company of the Year 2006 award and its SingSpring Desalination Plant at Tuas was the Runner-up in the Desalination Plant of the Year 2006 category.)

The winner of the Stockholm Water Prize in 2006 was Prof Asit Biswas. He spoke at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy on 16 January 2007. He made one remarkable statement: There is no scarcity of water in the world. There is only a scarcity of good public policies on water in the world. In an interview on the 2006 UNDP Human Development Report on the global water crisis, Prof. Biswas has said that Singapore now has one of the best, if not the best, water supply and wastewater management in the world, including all of the G-8 countries. He also said that “Singapore has what it takes to be the water hub of the world, and with the capacity to attract all the right people to develop into the world's intellectual capital for water management.” In this context, it is clear that Singapore public policies on water are among the best in the world. PUB, like URA and NPB, is also a world-class agency. Hence, we can justifiably develop the brand: Singapore: the water city.

## **Singapore: when East meets West**

Let me quote Dominique Moisi again to illustrate the deep angst in Western minds. In his essay, he argues that recent crises have proved that Professor Huntington's vision of a clash of civilizations is "more right than wrong". Hence, he adds that "the Western world displays a culture of fear", especially vis-à-vis the Arabs and Muslim worlds.

Many in the West increasingly find it hard to believe that different civilizations can live in peace. Hence, many of them are astonished to find churches close to mosques and Hindu temples next to Chinese temples in Singapore. On a daily basis, Singapore provides living proof that different civilizations can co-exist and live in peace. Hence, if the West wants to reduce its culture of fear and encounter a culture of hope, Singapore is the best place to come to.

Another paradoxical aspect of Singapore is this: we are the most Westernized city in Asia. Yet we are also the most multi-cultural Asian city in the modern world. No other modern Asian city brings together so many different cultures and religions in such close proximity. At a time when these cultures and religions are being torn apart globally, they have lived in peace in Singapore. This too is another modern miracle.

## **Conclusion**

Singapore is a fortunate country. To quote Kofi Annan, it is one of the few to go from third-world to first-world in one generation. We have many aspects of Singapore that we can celebrate. Hence, I'm confident that we will be able to find many good aspects of Singapore for international brand recognition.

Let me conclude by explaining why it serves the interest of Singapore companies to enhance the national brand of Singapore. When the national brand of Singapore becomes positive, it inevitably helps our companies. Take Switzerland for example. Most consumers like to buy Swiss products because they assume that the Swiss will pay attention to quality in all their products. The Swiss standards for integrity are high. Our standards for integrity are equally high. However, our standards are not as well-known as the Swiss standards are. I would therefore urge Singapore companies to work harder in trying to promote the national brand of Singapore. Both they and the people of Singapore will benefit from this.