

# Place Branding in Southeast Asia: a Contested Landscape

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The last two decades have seen an exponential increase in the application to locales of different size (neighborhoods, cities, regions, nations) of marketing and promotional techniques of product differentiation typical of the commercial domain. Place branding—as this phenomenon is commonly called—entails the production and dissemination of positive, competitive, and highly curated place-images. The communicative practices utilized within this (somewhat) novel genre of promotional discourse are varied and generative of complex outcomes. They entail a variety of semiotic modalities—ranging from mediatized artifacts (i.e., verbal slogans, logos, promotional images) to linguistic objects (i.e., vernacular idioms and scripts), from local products and commodities (i.e., regional foods and crafts) to built environment (i.e., monuments, parks)—and involve various spatial scales and social actors (NGO activists, politicians, urban planners, marketing experts, citizens, visitors, etc.). This (tentatively) two-section panel intends to explore how the multifaceted phenomenon of place branding is unfolding in Southeast Asia, intersecting with contemporary processes of nation-building and indigenous placemaking. Our focus will be on the inherently contentious nature of place-branding projects.

As Nakassis (2012) points out, brands should be understood as complex “citational structures” designed to unfold through time and space to ensure consumers’ recognition of specific objects (e.g., a pair of sneakers or a cup of coffee) as instantiations (or brand tokens) of a distinctive and consistent brand type (e.g., Nike or Starbucks). Place brands, however, complicate this form semiotic regimentation (see Agha 2020; Graan 2016: 80-82, among others). While place-branding processes presuppose an analogy between commodities and places—typical of a neoliberal extension of market rationality to every domain of life—places, as Agha states (2020: 332), “are not like toasters or blue jeans.” Unlike ready-made commodities, places are unique and saturated with a stratified history of events, experiences, and interpretations. To establish as legitimate place emblems (or brand tokens) an open-ended series of artifacts, products, experiences, and social behaviors, the branding of places requires processes of political selection and metonymic reduction: a monument standing for a city, a local delicatessen standing for an entire culinary tradition, etc. Place brand formulations are therefore highly unstable and open to contestation. In attempting to regiment a highly centrifugal web of references and voices, place branding inevitably raises questions of authorship, ownership, and authenticity. At an ethnographic level, our aim in this panel is to scrutinize the debates unleashed by place-branding efforts proliferating in contemporary Southeast Asia. At a more general theoretical level, the panel discusses the ambivalent nature of place-branding: on the one hand, an epitome of the rampant commodification of cultural phenomena, with nations and cities acting like commercial ventures and corporations (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009); on the other hand, a discursive tool to advance indigenous rights and alternative political projects.

## Single session

### References cited

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- Nakassis, C. V. 2012. "Brand, Citationality, Performativity." *American Anthropologist* 114:624–38.