

Asian Brands and the Shaping of a Transnational Imagined Community

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We investigate how brand managers create regional Asian brands and show how some of them are attempting to forge new webs of interconnectedness through the construction of a transnational, imagined Asian world. Some branding managers are creating regional brands that emphasize the common experience of globalization, evoke a generic, hyper-urban, and multicultural experience, and are infused with diverse cultural referents. These types of regional Asian brands contribute to the creation of an imagined Asia as urban, modern, and multicultural. Understanding this process helps one to appreciate the role of branding managers in constructing markets and places.

Brands are constantly helping to create new identities and social positions for consumers. For example, the production of global brands has helped diffuse the idea of global consumers connected through the consumption of the same brands (Holt, Quelch, and Taylor 2004). Brands allow people to feel connected to a sphere larger than their immediate environment, partaking in what McLuhan (1964) foresaw as the “global village.” Brands mediate new kinds of social relations, enabling connections between people who may have never seen each other yet come to share a sense of moral responsibility toward the brand and the community to which they perceive themselves as belonging (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001). As Geertz (2000) points out, the increasing number of economic, political, and cultural interconnections has helped expand the “catalogue of available identifications” (225), drawing new identities such as the global consumer (Alden, Steenkamp, and Batra 1999) or the Mediterranean consumer (Cova 2005). We study the

role of brands in helping to create these new transnational identities and connections.

We examine how brands help forge new ways for consumers to think beyond the nation they live in, as an imagined community. We use Anderson’s seminal work on imagined communities (1983) as a stepping-stone and counterpoint. Anderson argues that books, novels, and newspapers have allowed people to imagine themselves as a community. By popularizing vernacular languages, publications helped develop united fields of communication: people who until then spoke different dialects became aware of one another and their sharing of the same language and nation. Print capitalism forged national consciousness by imparting the sense that readers were experiencing the same kinds of social change.

We use these insights about print capitalism as mobilizing national consciousness to ask whether brands can help create similar kinds of connections between people living in different countries. What happens to the creation of imagined communities when the types of media change and become more regional in their diffusion? We argue that while brands operate in ways that are similar to newspapers and novels—for example, through powerful storytelling—the process of creating a pan-regional identity and consciousness is also very different. We are especially interested in the ways branding managers and other cultural intermediaries contribute to creating a regional consciousness.

The intensification of regional trade and the rise of regional institutions have led to an increased academic interest in regionalization (Iwabuchi 2002b; Munakata 2006; Rugman 2001). We examine the role of marketers in this process. More specifically, we investigate how branding managers can contribute to creating a sense of belonging and shared consciousness in the Asian region. We use Asia as the con-

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text of our study because of the increasing cultural, political, and economic integration across countries in this region (Katzenstein and Shiraishi 2006; Pempel 2005). Our approach is not determinist, in that we recognize consumers' ability to resist or ignore brand stories articulated around an Asian platform. Rather, we study brands as symbolic devices framing "horizons of conceivable action, feeling, and thought" (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 869), helping to create new ways for consumers to think of themselves as Asian.

We study the production of a transnational Asian subjectivity by closely examining how marketers imagine Asian consumers and how they use these ideas to develop regional branding strategies. By subjectivity, we mean the position or role that marketers imagine for consumers as they fictionalize their audience (Kover 1995; Ong 1975). Ideas about consumers, such as the idea of children as consumers (Cook 2004), have been shown to structure consumer culture (Bauman 2000; Slater 1997). Yet most consumer research studies have looked only at the way consumers negotiate their positions in consumer culture without looking at the other side of the equation, namely, the role of marketers in structuring these positions (exceptions include Cook 2004; Lien 1997; Peñaloza 2001). As Peñaloza argues, "In carving out the study of consumer behavior as a separate entity of inquiry independent of marketing activities, consumer researchers may be losing sight of the ways in which consumers and marketers negotiate cultural meanings in relation to each other in the marketplace" (Peñaloza 2001, 394). Looking at the ways marketers imagine Asia and Asian consumers helps us to understand a critical node in the production of cultural meaning that Peñaloza alludes to.

THE ROLE OF BRANDS IN THE GLOBAL MARKETPLACE

Research on branding in the global marketplace has often taken a managerial perspective and revolved around the standardization versus adaptation debate (Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000; Kanso and Nelson 2002). While this research can help companies configure their international activities, it says little about the symbolic dimension of brands as they are interpreted outside of their home countries. A symbolic approach to brands allows us to understand how marketers weave stories that connect people who may never have met each other. The ability for brands to provide the sense of living in a global village seems to be a key driver for the value of global brands (Holt et al. 2004; Steenkamp, Batra, and Alden 2003), yet it remains largely unstudied.

We ground our study in the burgeoning literature on the symbolic dimension of brands (Holt 2002; McCracken 2005; Ritzer 1993; Schroeder and Salzer-Morling 2006; Sherry 2003; Thompson and Arsel 2004). This stream of research has shown that brand stories increasingly frame the way we view a globalizing world and its contradictions. As Askegaard (2006) points out, brands increasingly structure the way we see things, places, and people. For example, Thomp-

son and Arsel (2004) demonstrate how the mythology of Starbucks as a massive, hostile competitor fuels anti-big-business sentiment in the United States while also shaping the meaning of the coffeehouse as a personal, intimate space. Holt (2004) shows how Mountain Dew is able to offer an alternative model of masculinity that answers societal demands for achievement while recognizing the reality of American working-class lives.

We are especially interested in the way brands help navigate the ways we see others living in other nations. Past research has shown that brands mediate new types of sociality and new types of collective identity. Cova (1997) and others (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995) have highlighted the social linking value of brands, which enables the formation of communities such as the Harley Davidson or Macintosh enthusiasts. This stream of research emphasizes the phenomenon that brand communities are not geographically bound and link people who may have never met but feel they somehow know one another (Muñiz and Schau 2005). However, the role of brand managers in facilitating these transnational connections and identities remains unstudied.

In examining the power of symbolic forms, such as brands, to forge collective identities, we draw upon Anderson's (1983) groundbreaking work on nationalism. Anderson argues that print capitalism allowed the creation of a national consciousness by helping people think of themselves as living in the same time and sharing the same history. Newspapers, by reporting contemporaneous events, allowed people to feel connected to other people in other places who might be witnessing the same events. Novels, by invoking a collective history and access to new commodities, carved a sense of shared trajectory. Finally, books helped people think of themselves as sharing a bond with the same land. For example, the Alpine landscape was used to construct and unify the Swiss nation through stories emphasizing that the Swiss all "gaze upon the same mountains" (Zimmer 1998, 658). Our study builds upon these insights about print capitalism to study the power of brands as one of the more prominent forms of media capitalism in mobilizing regional consciousness: how do branding managers contribute to a sense of mutual belonging in a region as diverse and divided as Asia?

REGIONAL DYNAMICS AND THE REMAPPING OF ASIA

The forging of an Asian transnational community seems implausible given the incredible heterogeneity and the lingering tensions between ethnic communities in the region. For example, Chua (2003) describes the widespread resentment against wealthy Chinese ethnic minorities in different countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia. These tensions, she argues, are only exacerbated by the diffusion of capitalism and economic liberalism. In addition, there is a long history of hostility, war, and violence

among Asian nations. Talking more specifically about the violent history of Japanese colonialism in China, Klein, Ettenson, and Morris (1998) have highlighted the animosity of older Chinese consumers toward Japan and Japanese products. In this context, it is difficult to imagine how branding managers could promote an Asian identity for their products. At the same time, regional cultural exchanges have never been as diverse and intense: international consumption of Asian television programs, movies, and songs has never been as widespread in Asia (Iwabuchi 2002a; Moeran 2001). These exchanges have provided new opportunities for consumers living in neighboring countries to participate in trans-Asian cultural experiences. We study branding practices within this context of intraregional cultural traffic and management initiatives.

The rapid globalization of media, in the form of television programs (Lee 2004), internet chat rooms (Choi 2006) or video compact discs (Davis and Yeh 2004), has led to an intensification of intraregional exchanges in Asia. Korean films (Dator and Seo 2004), Japanese television dramas (MacLachlan and Chua 2004), and Cantonese pop music have become increasingly popular in neighboring Asian countries, partly because they reflect lifestyles that Asian viewers can emulate, in contrast to the exotic and inaccessible ways of life shown in Western media forms. In fact, one of the striking features of these exchanges is that they all seem to reflect and talk about an Asian experience of globalization. By globalization, we mean the shared and novel experience of accessing a multitude of commodities, brands, and cultural products that help shape the feeling of living in the same region (Iwabuchi 2002b). The intensification of regional cultural exchanges has led cultural scholars to talk about the emergence of an East Asian consumer culture (Chua 2004; Iwabuchi 2002b).

These regional exchanges build upon and amplify the positive dimensions of cross-border integration, leaving behind historical rivalries and other sources of tension. They also strengthen a process of regionalization that has been happening at many levels in Asia. In recent years, Asia has become increasingly interdependent: trade agreements (Munakata 2006), migration patterns (Cohen 2004), and cross-border corporate alliances (Pempel 2005) have strengthened webs of interconnectedness. Politics plays an important role in the region, with regional forums such as ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) gaining prominence in facilitating intragovernmental decision making and cooperation (Solingen 2005). Although the region remains incredibly diverse and hard to unify along ethnic, linguistic, or religious lines, economic exchanges are leading to new forms of integration. The circulation of Asian brands is one such economic process. A wide variety of brand-building approaches is used in the Asian region (Cayla and Eckhardt 2007), with many brands utilizing global or local appeals (Zhou and Belk 2004). We focus on the Asian companies that are Asianizing their positioning, situating products as belonging less to a specific country and more to a region (Siriyuvasak and Hyunjoon 2007).

Importantly, though, when we talk of Asia, we do not refer to the geographic divisions as seen on a map. Asia, as we write about it in this article, is not a geographically bounded space but an imaginary space created by marketers. The managers we interviewed talked about Asia as a region, yet most of their strategies and discourses focused on the urban centers of East Asia such as Shanghai, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Taipei, Seoul, and Singapore. These omissions and selections are significant, which is why we work with an emic definition of Asia: that which managers select and, even more importantly, that which they ignore when developing Asian strategies, tells us about the process of re-mapping and redefining Asia along market lines. Here we are reminded of Simmel's (1903) insight that a border is not a geographical fact that has sociological consequences; instead boundaries are sociological facts that take geographical and political form.

In the rest of this article, we investigate the role of marketers in refining the imaginary world they call "Asia." Although researchers have shown how brands are adapted to local cultural specificities (Watson 1997; Zhou and Belk 2004) and how brands help make sense of a globalizing world (Holt 2002), we still know little about the role of brands in forging transnational connections. While we understand the power of other symbolic forms, such as newspapers and books, to evoke a national imagined community (Anderson 1983), the role of brands in the process of regionalization remains unstudied. How do managers, through their work on brands, help reimagine Asia? How is this process different from the creation of a national imagined community? What does this mean about the influence of brands in a globalizing world?

FOLLOWING ASIAN BRANDS: A MULTISITED STUDY

To research the creation of Asian brands, we traveled to the offices of corporations, market research firms, brand consultancies, and advertising agencies developing regional branding strategies. We employed a multisited approach, which allowed us to follow brands as they were developed by managers in major urban centers such as Beijing, Hyderabad, Kuala Lumpur, and Sydney. Multisited fieldwork gave us access to business networks with nodes in different contexts, such as marketing management and consulting. A multisited strategy is especially suited to investigating a phenomenon such as the creation of transnational brands, which is not linked to a specific physical place but crisscrosses national and cultural boundaries (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Kjeldgaard, Csaba, and Ger 2006).

To design the research and analyze the data, we followed the logic of the extended case method, or ECM (Burawoy 1998; Kates 2006). The ECM has become a favored methodology for researching global questions about markets and cultures from an interpretive perspective because it engages with the contexts in which phenomena occur (Allen 2002; Arnould and Mohr 2005; Holt 2002). The ECM was de-

TABLE 1
RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS

Name	Position	Company type	Location	Brands worked on
Philip	Marketing director	Online travel portal	Singapore	Zuji
Jason	Market researcher	Market research company	Shanghai	Zuji Tsing Tao
Angela	Account planning director	Advertising agency	Singapore	Qoo Zuji
Damian	Director of brand consulting	Branding consultancy	Sydney	Zuji
Mark	Director of marketing	Branding consultancy	Hong Kong	Zuji
John	Regional planning director	Advertising agency	Hong Kong	Tiger Beer
Sandeep	Consultant	Branding consultancy	Hyderabad	Tiger Beer
Linda	National creative director	Advertising agency	Singapore	Tiger Beer
Lucinda	Planning director	Advertising agency	Singapore	Tiger Beer
Ray	Marketing manager	Brewery	Singapore	Tiger Beer
Katherine	Strategy director	Branding consultancy	Singapore	OSIM Tiger Beer
Sharon	Senior brand consultant	Branding consultancy	Singapore	Brands Creative Technologies TDK
Navonil	Planning director	Advertising agency	Kuala Lumpur	Malaysia Airlines
Dave	Research director	Market research company	Kuala Lumpur	Malaysia Airlines Qoo
Jovan	Group managing director	Branding consultancy	Singapore	OCBC 77th Street
Martin	CEO, consulting company	Branding consultancy	Singapore	OSIM SK-II
Joseph	CEO, consulting company	Branding consultancy	Singapore	OCBC Giordano
Peter	Vice president	Bank	Singapore	OCBC
Mike	Senior consultant	Strategic consulting firm	Hong Kong	Acer
Anthony	Managing director	Branding consultancy	Hong Kong	Star TV Jim Thompson
Bhuvana	Marketing manager	Business school	Hyderabad	Indian School of Business
Bill	Senior market researcher	Market research company	Sydney	Nissin Tiger Beer
Midori	Regional research manager	Market research company	Sydney	Pampers Dove

veloped to overcome the limitations of grounded theory, which overlooks the larger social, economic, and political context in which phenomena occur.

As in other hermeneutic methodologies, the first stage of the ECM involves the analytic reduction of empirical data into a set of themed materials. The second stage of the ECM analysis involves trying to explain the studied phenomenon in light of existing theory and the larger macro context that shapes the selected research context. To do this, we looked at quotes and observations about brands and regionalization and tried to relate these observations to the circulation of cultural products such as movies, songs, and television series in Asia. In addition, we tried to relate our findings to existing frameworks that look at the globalization of brands (Ritzer 1993; Watson 1997) and the adaptation of global strategies to local contingencies (Ger and Belk 1996). In the final stage, the ECM works by closely analyzing anomalous data (Van Velsen 1967) and using these anomalies to reconceptualize existing theories. In our case, we selected cases of branding development that could not be properly explained by previous theoretical frameworks focusing on national identities (Anderson 1983; Holt 2004). By examining the data that deviated from Holt's model of cultural branding, for example, we developed an alternative framework that helps understand regional branding strategies.

We interviewed a total of 23 managers using semi-structured depth interviews over a period of one and a half years (see table 1 for profiles of the respondents). These informants were chosen because they were involved in developing regional Asian campaigns, whether as consultants, brand managers, marketing managers, creatives, or market researchers. These managers were based in cities in which

the regional Asian headquarters of their companies were located and which tend to cluster in multicultural urban centers such as Hong Kong and Singapore. To reach "thick description" (Geertz 1973, 3), in this study we focus on two particular brands: the Singaporean beer Tiger and the online travel portal Zuji.

All interviews were conducted in English. Interviews lasted between one and two hours, beginning with general questions relating to the managers' experiences working in Asia, followed by more detailed discussions of regional campaigns they had worked on, before closing with their thoughts on Asianness and regional brands in general. Our empirical data set also included regional market research studies, positioning maps, strategy documents, observations at practitioners' conferences, and a variety of print, online, and televised ads for each brand. Working across these different sources allowed us to develop thick descriptions of brand development and check our emerging interpretations. Our sampling and analysis occurred in an iterative fashion, going back and forth between our data, our informants, and the existing literature on the globalization of brands, with the objective of reconstructing and extending current branding theories. Triangulation between coauthors led to novel insights and resolved differences in analysis.

BRANDING'S ROLE IN REIMAGINING ASIA

Although the branding professionals we spoke to outlined different approaches to building and sustaining successful regional branding campaigns in Asia, including utilizing both global and local appeals, we will focus on the pan-

regional brands they developed. These brands contribute to building transnational identities and connections by operating along the three key dimensions of time, space, and culture. Our first theme, synchronicity and the construction of cultural proximity, illustrates how brand managers construct an Asian identity and a certain kind of cultural proximity by building upon the contemporary experience of globalization and perceptions of a bright economic future. Our second theme, deterritorialization and the unmooring of brands from specific places, describes how managers seek to shed territorial associations from brands. Our third and final theme, multicultural collage and the creation of a mosaic Asian culture, shows that, instead of emphasizing cultural coherence and homogeneity, regional Asian brands function by invoking an assortment of cultural references.

Synchronicity and the Construction of Cultural Proximity

I think it's time to show / That all of us are no
Caricatures or stereotypes / No token yellows!
We simply have to be / Assertive, make them see
This is the new Asian / Ready for the twenty-first century.
(Dick Lee, Singaporean singer, in the song "Orientalism,"
1991)

Singaporean singer Dick Lee's forceful lyrics reflect the growing reassertion of a transfigured Asian identity. Rather than the exotic and feminine Asia of the Western imagination (Ching 2000; Praso 2005), the Asia Dick Lee refers to is resolutely modern, anchored in the present rather than the past, and readying itself for a new epoch. This image of the "new Asian" in Dick Lee's song echoes our informants' descriptions of Asian consumers as looking toward the future.

Tiger Beer's advertising for Western and Asian markets is an illustration of the distinctly different images that help forge what it means to be Asian in the minds of both Western and Asian consumers. The print ad for Singapore-based Tiger Beer in the United Kingdom depicts a svelte young Asian woman dressed in a cheongsam, defiantly returning the viewer's gaze as she straddles a bare-chested man lying on his stomach, ready for a massage against the backdrop of an indeterminate Asian-style doorway (Aitchison 2002). This representation of a mystical and Oriental Asia mirrors other Asian brands depicting boudoirs, opium dens, and silk outfits in images designed to appeal to the Western imagination (Praso 2005).

In contrast, Tiger Beer's campaigns targeting Asians emphasize the advent of the region's global influence. In the following quote, a creative director articulates how Tiger Beer's ad agency drew from and reinforced this sense of Asia being a center of influence, anchored in the present rather than the past. She is describing an ad that Tiger Beer ran during the 2002 FIFA soccer World Cup, which was held in South Korea and Japan:

We made a film about celebrating the fact that this time is our time. And that had obviously two levels, too. One was

this event is happening over here, marking a special moment for Asians because the rising passion for football is enormous and that went down so well. [The ad showed] the non-Asian world sleepy or tired and then the line came on: "This time is our time." There was a follow-up by the word "cheers," and then you see a local football team that is basically enjoying the game. So that was a move we chose to leverage because it is a truly Asian moment, and act like a brand that celebrated the heroic moment in Asia's time. [We looked at] articles about China joining the WTO and the fact the Olympics were coming and there was a momentum that was building. (Linda)

Note that this passage illuminates how the experience of globalization drives the creation of a renewed Asian identity, through the increasing involvement of Asian countries in transnational institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the organization of transnational events such as the FIFA World Cup. In addition, the commercial conveys, by way of metaphor, the idea that Asian countries are coming of age together and sharing a path to a common future. Market research documents converged on Asian consumers' future focus, as outlined by a regional planner working on the campaign: "If you look at Asian consumers, particularly amongst a certain younger age group, they do feel that Asia is kind of at the head of somewhere that is new, at the head of nightlife and music and all those kind of things. Not so much the traditional old style cultural values or anything; it's today's cultural values that they see as being somewhere where Asia is leading. There is a sense of Asia's bright young people are the way of the future" (John). Similarly, a manager working for Tiger Beer explained how young people shared a desire to look ahead: "One thread that binds Asians all together is this notion of progression, and this need for self-progression, the drive that is driving the Asian economies and the Asian people, and it's that spirit we are trying to capture. The insatiable need for things that are modern and things that are new" (Ray).

The focus on young people looking forward is reflected in campaigns for brands other than Tiger, such as Singapore-based retail brand 77th Street or Hong Kong-based fashion brand Giordano. The emphasis on youth and the future helps construct brands that managers see as resolutely modern. Compare the above narratives on "progression" or Asia "leading" and being "modern" and "innovative" with the themes developed to sell Tiger Beer in the West, which evoke an Asia of the past. Images of opium dens and geisha-like Asian women freeze Asia in an indeterminate past, creating what Fabian (1983) has called the "denial of coevalness," the denial that non-Western people are living in the same time as their Western counterparts. Branding campaigns targeting Asian consumers, however, such as Tiger's World Cup campaign, draw from and reinforce an emerging sense of temporal proximity (Iwabuchi 2002b). In their attempts to expand regionally, the brand managers we interviewed kept referring to Asians, and more specifically East

FIGURE 1

STILL SHOTS FROM THE TIGER ADVERTISEMENT “THE QUEST”



Asians, advancing together toward a similar type of modernity.

Tiger Beer’s commercial “The Quest” is a follow-up to the World Cup campaign but goes further in defining the contours of Asian modernity. The commercial starts with an army horde holding a struggling prisoner of war. Army soldiers are dressed in ancient and timeless costumes, car-

rying banners with obscure symbols. An East Asian-looking man battles the story’s villain and rescues the captured heroine. In the second half of the commercial, the same rivalry is replayed in New York, with the two men fighting to hail a cab to a bar where the same woman is waiting, ready to share a beer with our Asian hero. See figure 1 for two still photos depicting the ancient and modern scenes in the ad.

The commercial ends with the tagline, "Tiger Beer: It's time."

With "The Quest," Tiger Beer attempts to increase the brand's regional appeal. For example, the brand avoids references to a specific era or locale in Asia. Advertising creatives deliberately avoided references to any period or monument that could be associated with a specific nation. Indeed, the actors portraying the lead characters in the ad are Vietnamese-German, Taiwanese, and Korean, and were cast because they were not immediately identifiable with any particular country. The commercial evokes the movie *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*, in that both are timeless, placeless, and transnational epic Asian stories (Chan 2003).

"The Quest" was specifically designed to reflect the evolution of Tiger Beer as a brand and Asia as a region. Until 2002, Tiger Beer's brand managers refused to associate the beer with anything too local or Asian. For example, the majority of advertisements portrayed Caucasian rather than Asian men in order to appear international and upscale (Zhou and Belk 2004). Local references, according to one manager, were seen as "down-market." "The Quest" signaled a new strategy for the brand, to confidently display its Asian origins in the hope that a modern Asian identity would appeal to neighboring markets such as Vietnam (where Tiger Beer holds the largest share in the market), Thailand, or China. The planning director for the brand explained that the journey of the ad's hero replicated the journey started by Asians: "It's about the journey to self-belief, from a lack of confidence to actual gaining of confidence and maturing to your youthful power. And the hero's journey is the same journey Tiger is on, which is the same journey as Asians themselves are on, which is the same journey to self-belief" (Lucinda). For managers working on the brand, "The Quest" was designed to evoke the evolution of Asia to a newly acquired confidence, as symbolized by Asian heroes operating comfortably in a city emblematic of globalization and capitalist success: New York City.

Such efforts to evoke confidence in an Asian future are not restricted to regional brands, however. Alongside regional brands emphasizing an Asian future, national brands in Asia are increasingly relying upon and reinforcing a sense of pride in national values, ideals, and progress. As an illustration of these nationalistic appeals, Chang Beer, the leading beer from Thailand, proudly articulates a national identity yet shares with regional brands an orientation to the future. In the following quote, one of our informants talks of Chang Beer's position as an authentically Thai beer: "This is the real Thai draft, and all the advertising is centered on a sense of Thai-ness, with some cultural influences and elephants and all that stuff, but much more authentically corresponding to what Thais see as Thai. Chang also appeared during the economic crisis of 1998 and it signified the hope of the future. Singha was destroyed almost overnight because it signified the past, almost what was wrong with the country" (Mark). Mark refers to Singha Beer, a premium brand of beer that is favored by Western tourists in Thailand. The example of Chang Beer illustrates the emphasis on the

future as a way to break from a Western gaze fixating Asian countries in an exotic, indeterminate past. Other Asian brands, such as the scooter brand Bajaj in India or Tsing Tao Beer in China, are relying upon symbols of national progress, like strong economic growth or, in Tsing Tao's case, sponsorship of the Beijing Olympics, to reflect the growing pride and influence of their home countries.

At the same time, Chang is promoted quite differently from regional brands. In the past 10 years, the brand has relied heavily on Thai rock band Carabao singing about the "authentic Thailand" of rural areas and farmers to reinforce its position as the truly Thai beer. While regional brands are anchored in the urban metropolises of New York City or Hong Kong, national brands tend to be tightly anchored in the land and encompass both rural and urban areas. We develop these differences between regional and national brands, in their relation to space, in the next section.

Deterritorialization and the Unmooring of Brands from Specific Places

The stories and images of the regional brands we studied are deterritorialized. Deterritorialization refers to the detachment of social and cultural practices from physical places (Tomlison 1999; Üstüner and Holt 2007) and has been referred to as one of the fundamental characteristics of globalization (Craig and Douglas 2006). In the context at hand, the dislodging of brands from particular or fixed locations in space helps shape the idea that Asians are living in the same imagined transnational space.

The first dimension of this process is the unearthing of brands from well-defined places. To appear global and Asian, Tiger Beer and other brands downplay their national origins. "The Quest" and other commercials do not refer to any specifically Singaporean landmarks or places. In Tiger's most recent campaign, titled "Unravelling the Secret," the origin of the brand is advertised as "Asia, 1931." One of the marketing managers for Tiger noted that most consumers could not clearly tell where Tiger was from in Asia and that the company wanted to continue with that in their strategy: "Although the beer really has its origin in Singapore, we have never really resorted to advertising it as a Singaporean beer. I don't believe people could pinpoint exactly where it comes from. They know it comes from Asia but, whether it comes from Singapore, they don't really know that" (Ray).

Rather than openly asserting their national origins like many iconic Western brands (Holt 2004), the regional brands we studied downplayed them. Their origins remain vague and nondescript. Creative Technologies, a Singapore-based company that specializes in portable music technology, does not promote itself as Singaporean, nor does the company emphasize the brand's origin in promotional vehicles. As Sharon, the brand consultant working with Creative Technologies, describes, "Creative Technologies, which is electronics, makes the Jukeboxes, the Nomads, that's a Singapore-based company but you wouldn't know it. I mean, they want to be a global player, and they look like one, as in,

it's all about technology, innovation." Partly, the detachment of brands like Creative Technologies or Tiger from a well-identified place can be explained by the lack of positive associations between Singapore and technological innovation or beer. Importantly though, these ambiguous brands lack national brands' claims to territoriality. Unlike national brands claiming to be "sons of the soil," regional brands claim no territorial attachment, and this deterritorialization helps them appear as both globalizing and subtly Asian.

The second process reconfiguring the relationship of Asian brands and places is to create what we call the imagined space of Asianness. When advancing the notion of an imagined space, we refer to Appadurai's (1996a) work on the new imaginary landscapes of globalization, landscapes that do not have a topographical existence but rather an imaginary one. In our context, Asia is more imagined and constructed in the interaction between marketers and consumers than it is lived or linked to clear physical boundaries. Regional brands do not overtly claim their Asian origins; rather, they evoke the contours of a shared and imagined Asian space.

Urban imagery is key in evoking this Asian imaginary. The only recognizable place in the commercial "The Quest" is New York with its yellow taxis, wide streets, skyscrapers, and the passing of executives with briefcases, long coats, and hurried looks. Subsequent Tiger Beer campaigns depict other urban scenes such as young Asian males attending a party on top of a skyscraper. Other brands, such as the retail outlet 77th Street, utilize a similar type of urban imagery to expand beyond their national boundaries. 77th Street is Singapore-based but has moved into Beijing and has plans to expand to Kuala Lumpur. The ambition of the brand is to capture some of the street-wear fashion trends emerging from globalizing cities such as Shanghai, Seoul, and Tokyo. One of the branding consultants working for 77th Street talked about the brand as embracing youth culture, fueled by the increasing exposure of Asian youth to different cultural products and, importantly, the experience of the city: "The people that come from the province into the city very quickly catch on. . . . This is very interesting to see a city by itself having a culture. Anyone who comes from a province, the city would absorb them into this culture and it seems that this youth culture is absorbing everything, everybody" (Jovan). This remark by Jovan illustrates the prototypical Asian consumer imagined by our informants: a young, cosmopolitan and urban consumer living in a global city such as Singapore, Shanghai, Taipei, or Tokyo, cities that are exposing an increasing number of Asians to consumer culture through the circulation of new commodities, the construction of new malls, and the proliferation of television channels.

Brand managers use urban images because they represent the experience of a growing number of Asians: people living in rural areas are increasingly drawn to Beijing, Hong Kong, or Mumbai to find work (Jones 1997). These mega-cities have also come to occupy a central place in the imagination of many Asian people (Huang 2006). Travelogues, personal

reports, novels, and television programs about city life have become especially popular in Asia (Iwabuchi 2002b). These cultural products with transnational appeal depict professionals dealing with the contradictions of modern life and the experience of globalization as it is lived in metropolises (Siriyuvasak 2003).

Finally, the urban aesthetic of regional Asian brands reflects the lifestyles of the cosmopolitan managers we interviewed, and the places where these brands originate. Singapore and Hong Kong are what Appadurai calls "trans-localities" (1996b, 42), cultural islands that are so deeply involved in international finance, foreign trade, and media that they have become more transnational than local. They belong to particular nation-states but, through their participation in global flows of people, capital, and images, have become transnational. Hong Kong, for example, has been described as a "global cultural supermarket" where consumers fashion their identities by accessing a transnational and global network of images, ideas, and practices (Mathews 2000, 1). In addition, the colonial history of cities like Hong Kong and Singapore creates a transnational space, as they balance the desire to reclaim local roots and the pervading influence of colonial heritage (Murray 1997). Such megacities are central to the understanding of regionalization because they are placed at the juncture of diverse regional cultural flows. These cities, rather than nation-states, are central to the construction of a regional identity.

Multicultural Collage and the Creation of a Mosaic Asian Culture

The third process by which managers create transnational, Asian brand images is what we call multicultural collage, the process by which managers draw from multiple cultural referents to build brands. Rather than essentializing Asia into psychological traits or Asian values (Mahathir 1999), our informants infuse their brands with a wide variety of cultural traditions. The outcome of this process is a mosaic of cultures designed to appeal to an increasingly cosmopolitan young Asian audience. Through their blending of cultural referents, the brands we studied try to forge affective links between their commodities and local audiences (Craig and Douglas 2006; Kraidy 2005).

Regional Asian brands are at the confluence of many cultural flows. The consultant working for 77th Street explained that, for the brand to be constantly ahead of the latest trends in the region, it would have to represent fashion trends from a variety of cultures:

For this brand what happens, the thought behind it, is to be one that is international because the view is so international, linked by the multimedia and everything. Countries are so quickly in contact with each other, news spreads easily, they learn from each other so quickly, it cannot be from one particular country. Previously, the brand was built around Cantopop [Cantonese pop music], Beijing-pop, and then the K-pop [South Korean pop music]. Now it is predominantly J-pop [Japanese pop music] and K-pop in terms of influences. So

it [the brand] has to be very dynamic, very energetic; it has to be moving, very up-to-date all the time, very trendy. So that's the culture of the brand. (Jovan)

77th Street uses manga-style animation in its brand imagery and, as described above, combines trends from Asia and Europe, featuring Korean, Japanese, and Chinese celebrities and fashions. The brand has been engineered from the outset to be cutting-edge Asian, which, due to the shifting centers of fashion influence, requires it to have a multicultural identity. This multicultural mixing is characteristic of fashion brands, which typically draw from a diverse and constantly changing array of references to popular culture.

We see this type of multicultural brand engineering in other fields as well, such as banking. The Overseas Chinese Banking Corporation (OCBC) is a Singapore-based bank that was founded to cater to overseas Chinese throughout the region but is now expanding into Muslim markets such as Malaysia and Indonesia in the hope of becoming a major presence in Asian financial services. It is in the process of reengineering its brand to be more multicultural rather than just Chinese. Jovan, the branding consultant who helped design this change, explains:

Effectively the Chinese red, which is the predominant color of the brand as an identity, and the junk, has to be given a touch, looking where it can be more relevant to the Muslim community. This is where the green comes in. Previously, there was no green, it is only red and it's the old Chinese junk. So there was one major change in the whole identity. They [OCBC] would now be perceived to be a modern Asian bank rather than a local Asian Chinese bank. So they would be a lot more accepted by the Muslim communities predominantly here in this region. (Jovan)

Adding green from the Muslim color palette to the Chinese red is one of the ways OCBC's managers hoped to change its cultural orientation from Chinese to multicultural and Asian. This change was implemented in the design of OCBC's retail outlets throughout Asia to downplay the Chineseness of the brand. One of OCBC's vice presidents explained to us: "If we aim to be a strong regional brand, it does beg the question: to what extent is the Chineseness of this organization a hindrance or an advantage? At the end of the day we are basically saying we are not a Chinese bank, but we are a bank with a Chinese heritage and we like to look at it that way. So that has always been our plan and our intention; we are a regional bank with a Chinese heritage" (Peter).

The type of multicultural collage OCBC's managers are developing, combining Muslim and Chinese reference points, allows the brand to keep its appeal with its current customers, the majority of whom are from the Chinese diaspora, while expanding the appeal of the bank to other ethnicities. This multicultural mosaic is designed to build a transnational appeal, in a manner similar to the increasingly common practice of mixing actors from East Asian countries in film projects designed for the region (Chua 2004).

The creation of the brand Zuji illustrates this process of multicultural collage in more depth. Zuji is an online travel portal developed at the outset to be regional by a consortium of 15 major Asian airlines together with Travelocity. Out of all the brands we researched, it is the one with no home country. This is important because it truly is a placeless brand and because the management decisions concerning this pan-Asian brand are made in numerous locations, including cities like Sydney and Kuala Lumpur, which are not multicultural cities to the extent that cities like Hong Kong and Singapore are.

The brand's original logo was especially developed to reflect its placeless dimension, weaving symbols and aesthetics into a multicultural tapestry. Branding communications tend to be more visual than text-based in Asia and also tend to mix cultural referents more than is typically seen in Western advertising (Murray 1997). Figure 2 offers a visual depiction of the brand. The name Zuji means "footprint" in Mandarin, but consumer research conducted by Zuji's brand consultancy revealed that the name was presumed to be Japanese by many Asians in its market because of the way it sounds. The Zuji brand was specifically developed to represent an image of Asian modernity, walking a fine line between the rejection of conventional Asian motifs (such as red and gold) while conveying an Asian cohesiveness in design (employing a hint of calligraphy in the font and an eastward pointing arrow over the *j*). The brand is designed to be clearly Asian but in a modern style that can easily be embraced in a global context. This codification of Asian modernity is echoed in the use of Hong Kong-born, globally popular actor Chow Yun-fat as the brand's model. One of the brand managers responsible for creating the brand name and imagery explains: "The Singapore Airlines guys said, 'you know I don't want to see yins and yangs, I don't want to see golds and reds; I want a fresh, more contemporary approach. We are a contemporary company and we are in a space that is, technologically speaking, reasonably cutting edge for its time.' They want to be able to represent Asia

FIGURE 2

ZUJI BRAND LOGO



as being a modern part of the world, not something that is sort of like from a previous era and this was a good opportunity to be able to represent that" (Damian).

In developing the Zuji brand, brand managers engaged in developing a cultural mosaic with an assemblage of diverse signs. Mosaics are originally combinations of small pieces of stone, glass, marble, and clay cemented together to build a design. Similarly, the brand managers we studied borrowed symbols from different cultures to develop an Asian brand: the green and blue of the eastward-pointing arrow above the Zuji name were chosen because they belong to the typical Thai color palette; the name itself is derived from Mandarin; and the flag over the *j* in the logo is disconnected from the letter in order to avoid violating dictums of feng shui, an ancient Chinese practice of placement and arrangement of space that is popular throughout East Asia. The calligraphy style of the brand name is also common to many East Asian countries. The tagline "Your Travel Guru," while perhaps most readily associated with India, embodies the concept of one-to-one instruction that permeates South and East Asia.

The multicultural mosaic of 77th Street, OCBC, Tiger, or Zuji helps project an image of cosmopolitan and resolutely modern Asian brands. The imagery that resonates with various communities, such as the splashes of Thai color in the Zuji brand or the Muslim green in the OCBC logo, function as hooks or gateways that allow consumers to identify with this newly imagined Asia. Zuji's marketing manager commented on some of the consumer reactions to the brand, which were revealed through market research on the meaning of Zuji: "What was interesting was that, within 6 months of having done the launch, we asked in tracking whether they [consumers] perceived the Zuji brand as well as the competitor brands as being fresh and innovative, having—what was it—fresh and innovative and having a sense of fun. Interestingly enough, we ranked high on those two measures compared to the competitors, so those associations are starting to be built" (Philip). The collage of diverse cultural referents has helped to build the brand as fresh and innovative, a modern brand appealing to cosmopolitan Asians. Zuji's marketing manager goes on to describe the lifestyle of their targeted consumer:

I guess people are also seeking new destinations, they are also looking for, you know, what's next. The consumers in our category, the young affluent ones, they're always looking for what's next. Is it Tibet, is it Mongolia, is it some parts of Eastern Europe that they've never been, so there is a segment of that, always looking for new places to go. I think they also—because they travel independently I think they travel as a lifestyle; their frequency of travel is quite high. Zuji tries to target young, affluent, cosmopolitan Asian consumers seeking to experience different cultures and countries. (Philip)

The use of lifestyle as a segmentation strategy for a transnational campaign is not accidental. As Appelbaum (2000, 275) notes, lifestyle "successfully flattens obstacles created

by political, economic and cultural differences, rendering the idea of national boundaries defunct." Similarly, the cosmopolitan positioning of the brand takes it beyond traditional, geographically derived boundaries. It helps fashion an idea of Asia as modern and at ease with cultural difference. The Hong Kong-based clothing brand Giordano with its campaign "World without Strangers" represents the same kind of cosmopolitan Asians. Commercials for Giordano portray young and beautiful East Asian models traveling to South America, playing soccer with the locals, or striking up conversations with them (Chua 2004). They are the cosmopolitan Asian consumers who would use Zuji.com to arrange their journey, shop in 77th Street's shops, and drink Tiger Beer: transnational Asians looking West but also resolutely looking East.

DISCUSSION: BRANDS AS SYMBOLIC FORMS

Brands and the managers who design them play an important role in changing culture (Nixon 2003; Ritzer 1993; Thompson and Arsel 2004). We extend this stream of research on cultural change by showing how managers can get brands to function as symbolic devices, helping to create transnational imagined worlds, such as the imagined Asia we have described. Appadurai (1996a) already noted the potential for electronic media and other information technologies to create landscapes of collective aspirations and identities. In his research on globalization, Appadurai (1996a, 3) draws on Anderson's work to talk of the media as offering new resources "for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds." For Appadurai, the globalization of media technologies may have shifted the balance between lived experience and imagination: people have never been as aware of possible ways of living (Hannerz 1996). We build on this critical insight that imagination is one of the central social practices influencing modern subjectivities but focus more specifically on the role of brands in this process.

We argue that brands are symbolic forms that can facilitate and mobilize the transnational imagination. They are similar in some ways to the newspapers and novels Anderson (1983) mentions in his work on nationalism. Newspapers and novels, through their tales of common experience and myths of common origin, produced the beginnings of "culture at a distance" (Lash 2002, 20), the enactment of a new kind of mediated sociality that replaced the organic, immediate, and familial bonds of the medieval city. In turn, brands can potentially create new kinds of socialities in the form of brand communities (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001; Muñiz and Schau 2005). Our research examines marketers' attempts to address people in novel ways, as cosmopolitan, urban, and modern Asian consumers, thereby creating the space for a new transnational imagined community.

The process by which branding managers create this imagined world shares with print capitalism its focus on coevalness (Fabian 1983), on people sharing their experi-

ence of the world. The newspaper symbolizes and reinforces the feeling that readers share some kind of chronological continuity because they are reading about the same events at the same time. Asian brands try to create this same kind of temporal proximity by emphasizing the globalization of Asia. This proximity is intensified by major events such as the World Cup and the Beijing Olympics, which, while promoting nationalism, also reinforce a common perception of Asia as a region with global status and influence (Katzenstein and Shiraishi 2006). If nations are often built on an invented common past (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Zhou and Belk 2004), the construction of an imagined Asia is characterized by the absence of references to a specific past, with a focus instead on the present and the future.

The relationship of regional Asian brands to place is also fundamentally different from that of national brands. The land as the metaphor for national identity pervades the imagery of many brands trying to stand for the nation. References to nature are widely found in nationalist discourses: soil, roots, genealogical trees, and landscapes are central to the construction of a national identity because they cement the intimate relationship between people and their land (Macy and Bonnemaion 2003). In contradistinction, the deterritorialized brands we studied avoid explicit references to nature, preferring the use of deterritorialized urbanity in regional appeals. The imagery of Asian brands is steeped in the world of megalopolises such as Tokyo, New York, Shanghai, Hong Kong, or Singapore. Harvey (1990) describes the apogee of the city and the proliferation of urban representations as the illustration of the increasing role of consumption, as opposed to production, in social life. The city comes to stand for the experience of globalization and access to new consumption choices. Furthermore, a focus on the urban allows the Asian brands we studied to extend their reach and appeal across borders. As Chua (2004) argues, stressing urban images enables easier border crossing for these brands, in contrast to stories about tradition, which denote boundedness, uniqueness, and exclusion.

Finally, regional Asian brands are built through a collage of cultural referents. They defy the neat categories of local and global (Steenkamp et al. 2003) or the idea of Asian culture as a cohesive set of values and ways of being (Schutte and Ciarlante 1998). Rather, these brands mix many kinds of spatial and cultural referents—Eastern, Western, national, regional, and transnational—to achieve the cultural hybridity that is necessary to appeal to diverse audiences (Craig and Douglas 2006). The process of multicultural collage involved in the creation of these brands goes beyond globalization models that take the West as the origin and center of global cultural flows (Batra et al. 2000). The West is only one of many cultural reference points in the regional branding campaigns we describe.

In some ways, this collage of cultural referents is similar to the construction of iconic brands described by Holt (2004) whereby branding managers draw from different stories and myths to create powerful brands. The regional brands we studied provide a synthesis of cultural referents (East and

West, future and present, New York and Shanghai) to construct a new identity myth for Asian consumers that is more appealing than the depiction of an exotic Asia. These brands weave together tradition and modernity, East and West, to construct a new type of modernity that does not mimic the West and that escapes the Western and Orientalist gaze representing Asia as exotic.

In other important ways, though, the construction of a transnational identity myth is also quite different from the process Holt alludes to. Holt studies brands that are squarely anchored in a single nation's symbols: rural Appalachia for Mountain Dew and the Mexican beach for Corona. In contrast, the mix of cultural referents from different places and nations plays an essential part in the construction of a transnational and imagined Asian world. While the appeal of brands like Mountain Dew is based on a process of intimate identification and specification with the United States—a specific landscape, a national myth—the brands we studied are unmoored from specific places and nations. Brand managers create the subtle feeling that these brands are from Asia because their lack of specificity enables them to claim that they are for all Asians. They manufacture a type of “close distance” (Mazzarella 2003) through their ability to appear at once distant and vague, yet strangely familiar.

CONTRIBUTIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Our contributions to consumer research are the following. First, by examining how branding practices expand the range of identities people can use to think of themselves beyond the nation, we contribute to better understanding the role of brands in the global marketplace. In the past 20 years, work in consumer culture theory has highlighted the symbolic dimension of brands (Holt 2004; Thompson and Arsel 2004). This body of research has tried to break away from the managerial focus of the branding literature (Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000; Keller 2003) to understand how brands live as stories in the imagination of consumers. By showing how brands can help forge new webs of interconnectedness, we consider this stream of research on a global level.

Second, studying the development of Asian brands helps decenter debates on the globalization of consumer culture. Decentering globalization studies means recognizing that cultural globalization is not limited to the export of Western products to other countries. Rather, there is a multiplicity of influential centers, such as Taipei, Beijing, Hong Kong, or Singapore, and a great diversity of cultural flows originating from many different places (Iwabuchi 2002a). When positing that Asians are bound to imitate the West because of a lag in economic development (see, e.g., Batra et al. 2000), consumer researchers have ignored the complexity of globalization, especially as Asians increasingly look at people living in neighboring countries to think of their place in the world. Iwabuchi's work on the circulation of Asian cultural products such as Japanese television series or Korean pop music has been particularly useful in decentering

studies of globalization. Our research follows this approach of looking at “inner globalization” (Yeung 2000), whereby Asian brands and products are created to appeal to populations of neighboring Asian countries. However, while Iwabuchi focuses on the circulation of broadcast media and music, we use the regional context to advance our understanding of brands as symbolic forms.

Third, we contribute to our understanding of space as a constructed and imagined entity, and the role brands can have in mediating this construction. We show how marketers can provide the cultural resources for individual and collective reimagining of place. They are trying to redefine Asia as East Asian and urban, as an imagined space of shopping malls, financial centers, and cosmopolitan consumers. Here we are reminded of Lefebvre’s (1991) distinction between spatial practice and constructed space, that is, between space as physical form and space as it is discursively constructed by politics and ideology. We show that brands can, like other symbolic forms, play a role in mediating the production of space, trying to recast Asia into a new shape with East Asian contours and metropolitan terrains. This extends current reflections on commercial spaces as sites of deep involvement with brands (Kozinets et al. 2004; Sherry 1998) by showing how brand managers attempt to reconfigure spaces like the imaginary Asia we have been studying.

Finally, we show how marketers can participate in the social construction of markets (Kover 1995) by producing transfigured ideas of Asia. In many studies on the globalization of marketing activities (Kanso and Nelson 2002; Roth 1995), culture is approached “from the outside” (Bouchet 1995, 69), as an exogenous variable, without attention to the way managers can shape culture. In contrast, we show how managers can play an active role in shaping cultural categories like Asianness. In building brands like Tiger Beer and Zuji, managers construct an Asianness that is resolutely modern, urban, multicultural, and East Asian. It is a novel type of Asianness that avoids reference to a shared past and so-called Asian values.

Research is needed to ascertain the symbolic power of these representations. More specifically, research is needed to examine how Asian consumers are interpreting the brand imagery we have described. It would be important to study how rural or poor consumers relate to the contours of Asianness as presented by marketers. The development of consumerist brand mythologies may further exacerbate the divide between the haves and the have-nots, a divide that is especially vivid in Asia. For example, Thomas (2003) talks of Vietnamese consumers avidly consuming Asian brands but feeling left behind by a narrative of progress and a bright Asian future. Those consumers who are written off by regional mythologies may be resentful of an identity they cannot participate in.

While we point to the emergence of a regional consumer culture in Asia, evidence on the power of regional frameworks is still mixed. Nobody ever went to war on the basis of regional affiliation. Marketers may attempt to build a

regional imaginary space, but there is plenty of evidence for the lasting importance of the nation in the way Asians think about the world. For example, Japanese consumers use images of a modernizing Asian region to reflect on “what Japan used to be” (Iwabuchi 2002a, 189) and the vitality it used to have when the country went through the same rapid economic development as its neighbors. In this case, Japanese audiences use the region as a way to think about their nation.

Finally, future reflections on the symbolic value of brands will need to establish the differences between brands and other symbolic forms in mobilizing people’s imaginations. Writing in books and newspapers helped develop a language of common intelligibility. With brands and other types of electronic symbolic forms, we are moving to another type of engagement. Lash (2002, 184) differentiates the “Gutenberg age” of deep learning and contemplation from the current electronic age of immersion and distraction. While books and newspapers functioned as pedagogical devices teaching people how to become citizens of the nation, the regional brands we studied address consumers as Asian through subtle evocations. The stories of regional brands are much less defined than the stories of the nation. Further research should examine brand knowledge as a new form of literacy and engagement. Such research would help us better understand the role marketing can have in shaping social life.

CONCLUSION

Some marketers and other cultural agents are trying to redefine what it means to be Asian. One campaign at a time, they are refining the contour of a transfigured, imagined Asia as urban, multicultural, and East Asian. The regional brand stories we describe operate by trying to sever the link between Asian consumers and the history of conflict in the region, by unmooring brands and consumers from specific, physical places and by creating multicultural mosaics that can appeal across national boundaries. The description of this process allows us to extend previous work on national communities (Anderson 1983), the development of national iconic brands (Holt 2004), and the circulation of popular culture in Asia (Iwabuchi 2002b) by explaining the role of brands in expanding the scope of potential identities.

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