

Why are cities becoming alike when each city is branded as different?

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Why are cities becoming alike when each city is branded as different?¹

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Abstract: Cities are becoming alike. As a result, there is a rise of “copy-cat” cities. There are many reasons for this, and this paper looks from the perspective of city branding: how does place branding lead to the homogenization of cities? Using the case of Singapore, and with references to Chinese cities, this paper highlights a number of accreditation tactics in place branding campaigns. Accreditation is necessary because the brand needs to seek credibility for the messages it sends. The types of accreditation used must also be globally understood, so as to reach out to diverse world audiences.

Keywords: City branding, accreditation strategy, accreditation tactics, Singapore, Chinese cities, place branding challenges

Introduction

Some foreigners observe that Shanghai is very much like other Western cities (e.g. see Gao, 2013; Gulliver, 2009). Besides the people and the language, the city is essentially modern, well-functioning and developed. It feels like a major financial centre, as if it was New York or London. Such comments can be considered flattering to the Chinese. Or the comments merely reflect a lack of better understanding of the Chinese city. Or that the comments are actually insulting because they inundate that Shanghai is just another copy-cat city. Regardless, these observers experience aspects of Chicago, Copenhagen and Canberra when they see the efficient Pudong International Airport, the clean effective subway system, the numerous shopping malls along Huaihai Road, towering skyscrapers, the creative districts of M50 and Red Town, and trendy bars like Bar Rouge and Mint. The city seems to lack a unique Chinese character.

Places, particularly cities, broadly compete in terms of livability, economic opportunities, attractiveness and vibrancy, to attract international investors, businesses,

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visitors, talented workers and audiences (Dinnie, 2011; Florida, 2002). This competition has also led to a proliferation of branded places. Places must stand out in the competition. So in the place branding literature, the concern is differentiation and uniqueness (see various contributions in (Dinnie, 2011; Knudsen & Waade, 2010; Morgan & Pritchard, 2004). If cities are differentiating themselves, why are cities becoming more alike each other? This paper explains this paradox by arguing that there are two inherent challenges to place branding. They are, as will be elaborated in the next section, the lack of credibility in self-promotional place branding campaigns and second the difficulties in communicating to heterogeneous and diverse audiences throughout the world.

The practice of place branding has evolved, and the accreditation strategy in place branding has now become necessary and important. Place branding theorizing should also reconsider the view that a place brand should primarily assert its unique selling proposition. While the assertion of difference remains important, its centrality has to be re-evaluated. The unique-story in a place brand has nonetheless become an institutionalized global practice in defining place identity, which often also highlights special historical, social and cultural values of the society (Hall, 1999; Lanfant, 1995; Ooi & Stöber, 2010; Richards, 1996; Richardson & Cohen, 1993). But the unique story may be too exotic to be appreciated, or lacks credibility because it is just self-promotion.

This article explains why the accreditation strategy is just as important, if not more so than the unique-story strategy, using Singapore as a case. The case will show how the accreditation strategy draws recognition, provide credibility to a city brand and create a homogenized trajectory for city development around the world.

What is the accreditation strategy? Firstly, the accreditation strategy provides recognition to the place by using tested formulas and established practices to draw attention, produce awareness and create an attractive place image. These practices include hosting attention-grabbing events (e.g. the Olympics), providing attractive amenities (e.g. green lungs in cities, vibrant cultural scene), hosting prominent businesses (e.g. Disneyland, MTV, Google), inviting famous personalities (e.g. President Obama, Lady Gaga) and implement attractive business policies (e.g. tax holidays, low personal income tax, good infrastructure). Secondly, the strategy is about giving credibility to the place brand. Credibility is sought through “independent” internationally-recognized

agencies (e.g. celebrated journalists, ranking bodies, famous personalities). Thirdly, the strategy is also about garnering best practices from other places, and offer what international firms, investors, visitors and talents want. The message is that the place can do what other places can do too, but possibly better.

Singapore has become an inspiration and model for urban development, city branding and good governance in Asia and around the world. The clean air, well-managed infrastructure, garden-city image, bureaucratic efficiency and welfare distribution system are well-regarded internationally. Even Economics Nobel Prize winner Joseph Stiglitz sings praises of the Singapore system, and suggests that the USA can learn from this tiny country in bringing about more social equity (Stiglitz, 2013). Various aspects of Singapore society have become the image and brand of the island city-state. Singapore, like Shanghai, is seen as very Western.

It is through this set of Singapore lenses that this highlights the politics behind the accreditation strategy. Conclusions and lessons will be drawn for Chinese cities at the end. Before presenting the case of Singapore, the next section elaborates on the various tactics of the accreditation branding strategy.

City branding and overcoming its inherent challenges

As mentioned, there are two inherent challenges in the traditional place branding practice. The first deals with the credibility of self-promotion. City brands are meant to modify the perceptions of global audiences. They also selectively package the positive elements of the place into an attractive story. City brands are also place identities, around which various stakeholders rally. Tourists, investors, foreign workers and residents may use city brands as gaze lenses, through which they selectively interpret and grasp a framed picture of the society. Producing and promoting these stories, teaching people to interpret the place through branding campaigns are merely self-promotional. Are the stories authentic and credible? Place branding has this in-built mechanism to generate distrust because of the conflict of interests of commercialization and telling an authentic brand story. As a result, branding authorities are seeking independent recognition and endorsements to build on their city brands.

The second inherent challenge lies with a world audience that is very diverse. People come from different cultures, hold different worldviews and embrace contrasting, if not conflicting, ideologies. This means that different peoples will have different perceptions of a single place. Focusing people's minds across countries is thus easier said than done. Consequently, branding authorities want to tell their brand stories through global voices, for instance, a country's ranking in the World Competitiveness Report, making parallels to world famous examples and seeking endorsements from famous personalities.

Because of these two inherent challenges in the practice of place branding, the accreditation strategy is central. The accreditation strategy serves the function of adding credibility to the brand message and attempts to imbue the brand with globally understood voices.

There are at least three broad tactics in the accreditation strategy; all of which tap into the global voice, knowledge or consciousness. At the first level, the accreditation approach makes use of significant and popular events (e.g. the Olympics, World Expositions and World Bank meetings) to draw attention to the place (Brown, Chalip, Jago, & Mules, 2002; Burgan & Mules, 1992; Smith, 2004; Sun & Ye, 2010). The city seeks attention and recognition. And the recognition is offered by renowned "significant others". An example of this is the 2009 International Olympic Council (IOC) congress, during which Rio de Janeiro was selected for the 2016 games. It was held in Copenhagen. Because of the weight of the event, many famous persons from competing candidate cities came to the Danish capital. They included US President Barack Obama, then-Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, King Juan Carlos of Spain, Chicagoan and talk-show host Oprah Winfrey, and legendary footballer Pele. Thousands of journalists were reporting from Copenhagen. The announcement of the result was telecasted "live", reaching out to more than a billion people. A celebratory presentation of Copenhagen was shown. And after the IOC congress, global media attention on the city continued. Non-Olympic features and stories about Denmark were published, broadcasted and telecasted because journalists have also conveniently acquired other stories. For example, Oprah Winfrey made a feature on why Denmark has the "Happiest People on Earth" (Winfrey, 2009). The hosting of important and salient events, like this IOC meeting, provides

worldwide exposure. The place also gets brand leverage by being associated to popular and famous personalities. The organizational capabilities of the city are showcased and the world gives tacit approval to the place. So, on top of generating awareness and media stories, such renowned events celebrate the strengths of the place in various ways. Essentially, IOC, famous persons and journalists tacitly endorse the city.

Complementing the hosting of significant events in the first tactic, the second makes use of globally-recognized brands and businesses to vouch for the city. For example, a Guggenheim Museum will not only increase the cultural attractiveness of a place, like it has done for Abu Dhabi and Bilbao, but also tells on the cultural aspiration and sophistication of the place. In tourism, Legoland and Disneyland contribute to the appeal of a destination and increase the wholesome and family-friendly credibility of the destination (Braun & Soskin, 1999; Jolliffe, 1998; Nilsson, 2007). In businesses, choice global companies are lured to set up shop in a city because they communicate a message; e.g. the presence of Sotheby's, BBC and Google tell much about the city in terms of their economic strengths, political importance and the quality of the city's work force. So, paradoxically, a city wants to host certain choice iconic attractions and businesses that are also found in other places because they communicate success and credibility.

The third tactic of the accreditation strategy promotes reputed and well-tested formulations of icons, attractions, facilities and regulations, such as art biennales, industrial parks and city green lungs (Dybedal, 1998; Florida, 2003; Harmaakorpi, Kari, & Parjanen, 2008; Knox, 2008; Mossberg & Getz, 2006; Slater, 2004). Unlike the first and second tactics, the third are not already "branded" but are events, facilities and attractions that international audiences are generally familiar (Kim & Jamal, 2007; Prentice & Andersen, 2000; Weaver, 2005). Using a widely accepted formula, Silicon Valley-like districts are found around the world, including Zhongguancun in Beijing. Tapping into the Silicon Valley experience, dedicated areas with accompanying infrastructure, knowledge institutions and regulations make such industrial parks attractive for desired businesses. Or following the footsteps of Sears Tower in Chicago, Burj Khalifa in Dubai and Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur, cities are competing to have mega-tall buildings to enhance their prominence. In Changsha, China, plans were proudly revealed in 2012 that the city will soon host the world's tallest building and it

will be built in just 90 days; the project created international media buzz despite the lack of official permissions received for the construction to commence (Montlake, 2013). Basically, these icons, attractions, facilities and institutions are best practices in urban planning and economic development. By having them, the cities underline their friendliness towards investors, businesses, visitors and/or residents. Such an accreditation tactic is basically a “me-too” approach, providing the mechanism for cities to race up to the next level as the other.

There are also risks in using the accreditation strategy to place branding. For example, because of the lack of democracy and the jailing of opposition leader, Yulia Tymoshenko, some European governments, including France and the UK, boycotted the football games hosted by Ukraine during the Euro 2012 championships (Harding, 2012). Because of the attention given to prominent events, protesters can use the occasion to point out abuses. So for those protesting against repressions in Tibet, there were similar calls for the boycott of the Shanghai Expo (Students for a Free Tibet, 2010). With social media, challenges to promoted views are also more widespread. Diverse user-generated opinions and reviews are challenging marketed messages (Jacobsen & Munar, 2012; Munar & Ooi 2012). What these mean is that the accreditation strategy requires not only management but also the authenticity and credibility of the brand boasts must be substantiated.

The next section will look at how various authorities in Singapore work together to accredit and brand the city. Singapore has a clean, efficient and modern standing. Such a perception is a double-edged sword. The Singaporean government has been successful in transforming a tiny former British colony into an attractive business and financial city over a short five decades. The stable social and political environment, modern infrastructure, controlled industrial relations, no-nonsense approach to enforcing civic behavior, pro-business policies and single-minded drive towards economic prosperity have unfortunately also led to the view that the country is sanitized, dull and sterile. In other words, Singapore is boring. The authorities have been trying to change the uninteresting image through the accreditation branding approach.

The Singapore case

Singapore is a city-state that has managed to improve its image for business, investment and tourism over the years. The Economic and Development Board (EDB), Singapore Tourism Board (STB), National Parks, Urban Development Authority and other state agencies are actively pursuing a vision of creating a desirable, exciting and energetic Singapore. It has, for instance, in the last decade, relaxed its regulations to encourage a livelier cultural scene and create a more vibrant city (Ooi, 2008). Branding and communicating a vibrant and exciting Singapore is done through at least four tactics.

One, various government authorities actively search and bid for major events to be hosted in the city. So, besides hosting pop concerts by international mega stars, popular musicals and block buster exhibitions, Singapore has successfully hosted major events, such as the 2006 World Bank and IMF meetings, the 2009 APEC summit and the first-ever Youth Olympics in 2010. Such events not only generate extensive international media publicity but also generate media stories on famous politicians, celebrities and sport stars. Singapore is presented as the backdrop for these important events and personalities. In short, these events and personalities give attention to Singapore, and also endorse Singapore as a place to visit, work and play.

Two, to seek even more credence that the city is a significant business hub, the Singaporean authorities sought investments and endorsements from international firms. State agencies aggressively sniff out opportunities to make Singapore into the regional and global headquarters of international organizations, including those in the media, design, telecommunication, pharmaceuticals and financial sectors. Drawing inspiration from Silicon Valley, Singapore has a few industrial districts to promote desired high-tech and creative industries. Incentives are provided to attract eminent companies. Knowing that the presence of leading firms will attract other investors, Singapore has aggressively canvassed and is now a regional hub for the global media industry, including MTV, Discovery, HBO and BBC. Similarly, the EDB has attracted Lucas Animation to set up shop there. These setups tacitly endorse Singapore as economically strong and as an innovative and creative city.

Three, to become a city beyond commerce and work, the city wants to be a “Renaissance City” (Ooi, 2011a; K. P. Tan, 2007). Singapore is to be prosperous in the

arts and culture too. So, the city has established a number of cultural institutions and promoted the arts within the context of the creative economy (Ooi, 2011a). Art schools, national museums, performing spaces and art districts are established over the years. 2014 will see the opening of the city's grand National Arts Gallery, for instance. Art and cultural festivals (e.g. Singapore Biennale, Singapore Art Festival), international cultural institutes (Tylor Print Institute, Christie's) and a constant stream of exhibitions and performances now constitute the Singapore cultural scene. The Singaporean government wants the city-state to be seen as the creative and cultural capital of the region. Many of these plans are not unique to Singapore but these are widely-recognized indicators of a good quality of life in a city.

Four, for the past decades, Singapore has already established itself as a business-friendly environment. This claim is only convincing if it is also independently verified. The Singaporean authorities thus boast of the country's high global rankings in the business areas e.g. in the World Competitiveness Report. In the Economic and Development Board's website, there is a page dedicated just to brag about Singapore's standing in global rankings: the least bureaucratic business environment in Asia; the best Asian country for intellectual property protection; the easiest place to do business in the world and many more (Economic and Development Board, 2013). Such rankings maintain and enhance the brand that Singapore is efficient, effective and business-friendly. Singapore is also known as a green city. People can see foliage covering streets and buildings. A new badge of endorsement is sought for this image. The city's Botanic Gardens is applying for the city's first UNESCO Heritage Site. Essentially, the rankings and UNESCO accreditation will independently present Singapore's credentials.

From the discussions on Singapore so far, place branding is more than image management (see Table). The accreditation strategy deals with the challenges to the credibility and authenticity of a brand image. The tactics involved seek endorsement from outsiders, and also about changing society (Ooi, 2011b). It is debatable if the brand drives societal change or a changing society is driving brand change. Regardless, the concomitant branding and social change processes can be contentious. To accentuate this reality, I will discuss two recently launched economic and tourism development projects: the Formula One races and the licensing of two casinos in the city-state.

Table: *Summary of the accreditation tactics in the branding of Singapore*

Accreditation tactic	Goals & purposes	Implementation of strategy	Resulting indicators
Tactic 1: Draw attention through the hosting of big and significant events	To increase attention given to Singapore as a city for work, play and business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Actively seek major industry meetings Actively seek big events for sports, and popular culture e.g. the Youth Olympics, pop concerts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prominent international meetings and congresses, e.g. aerospace, pharmaceuticals, World Bank Meetings, Youth Olympics Regular stream of concerts and performances News stories on Singapore and famous persons visiting the country
Tactic 2: Endorsement by respected businesses/ investors	To demonstrate that Singapore is really an efficient and prospering business environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to improve business friendly policies Set up industry clusters for choice industries, e.g. media and pharmaceutical Provide incentives for choice companies to establish presence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Famous firms such as Lucas Animation, MTV, BBC World have set up shop Thriving industry clusters and districts
Tactic 3: Modeling a “Renaissance City”	To make Singapore into a recognizably culturally vibrant city, and change its dull and sterile image	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set up art and cultural institutions Generous support for the arts Cautiously relaxing regulations to allow for alternative cultural expressions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> World class museums, such as the Asian Civilizations Museum and National Gallery of Singapore. Presence of art and cultural institutions, e.g. art schools, Esplanade – Theatres by the Bay, Taylor Print Institute Art events e.g. Singapore Art Festival, Singapore Biennale
Strategy 4: Seek independent recognition	Provide globally-accepted evidence that Singapore is a business and cultural capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refer to global rankings to show that Singapore is indeed a business-friendly environment Seek recognition that Singapore is indeed a green city 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High rankings in various business rankings, including the annual World Competitiveness Report Pending UNESCO recognition for the Botanic Gardens

Formula One (F1), casinos and a naughtier Singapore

Car races were popular in the streets of Singapore in the 1960s. Those races were made illegal in 1973 because they were seen to sanction reckless driving (I. L. P. Lim, 2008). Also with limited physical space, the government did not want to build a dedicated race course. According to the founding father of the country and prime minister-then, Lee

Kuan Yew, the races were for the masses and were damaging to the making of a culturally-refined Singapore (Lee, 2005). He has since regretted that ban and in 2008, Singapore staged its first F1 races.

The F1 project was controversial because car races had stopped being locally popular because of the ban. Each F1 season would also cost about S\$150 million (US\$ 100 million) to stage. 60% is paid by tax-payers. Public roads in the middle of the central business district have to be closed for weeks. Besides that, roads have to be upgraded before the start of each season. Because the races are staged in the city centre, pedestrians and vehicle traffic flows are severely disrupted. While there are reports of brisk business during the F1 races, shopping centres surrounding the circuit area suffer because it is inconvenient for people to visit them (J. Lim, 2009; D. W. Tan & Lim, 2008). The noises are also deafening. Because the races are held at night, strong lightings are needed; the strong lighting consumes massive energy and is not environmentally friendly.

Despite the laments, Singapore will host more F1 races after the first five-year license agreement. S. Iswaran, Senior Minister of State for Trade and Industry stated the importance of the races for Singapore (*Straits Times*, 2009):

The F1 continues to improve Singapore's international branding and improves mindshare. It also serves as a very good platform for business networking, innovative activities and the creation of new opportunities

The Singapore Tourism Board declares that the F1 races "will help to put us firmly in the global spotlight...the buzz will boost Singapore's efforts to be the entertainment and events capital of Asia" (Foo, 2008).

In another controversial development in Singapore, the government has allowed the building of two integrated resorts (IRs), housing a casino each. In the February 24, 2011 issue of the *Economist*, a rare article about Singapore was published, "Sin galore – A strait-laced state puts the vice into 'service economy'" (*Economist*, 2011). Like car races, casinos were banned in Singapore for decades.

When the then-Minister for Trade and Industry, George Yeo mooted the idea of hosting casinos in Singapore in March 2005, many religious groups voiced strong objections. Civil society groups against casinos suddenly emerged. Many Singaporeans

were also supportive of the casino plans and criticized the naysayers by stating that Singapore was losing massive foreign exchange; Singaporeans were traveling and taking cruises to gamble. Furthermore, the social conservatives were giving the city-state a sterile image. The debate was one of the most enthused public discussions in Singapore ever (Ooi, 2005).

Eventually, the government decided to have two casinos, instead of the original plan of one. The decision was a pragmatic one – Singapore tourism, while still healthy, is losing market share; Singapore is facing strong tourism competition in the region; the casinos will give a S\$1.5 billion (US\$ 1 billion) annual boost to the economy and create 35 000 jobs. In 2011, the government collected S\$1.1 billion in tax revenues from the casinos (Ng, 2012).

Just as importantly, the casinos will not only change the image of Singapore but shows that Singapore is changing with the times. Like it or not, Singapore has to address the competition. According to Lee Kuan Yew, who has to make a U-turn in his earlier policy to ban casinos, the more important goal for Singapore now is to make the city “more lively and exciting, a fun place and, at the same time, retain its virtues – clean, green, safe and wholesome” (Lee, 2005).

These two controversial projects are central to the branding of a new Singapore. What have we learned? One, F1 is part of the popular culture strategy for Singapore in branding itself. Popular cultures draw global masses. Singapore may not be unique in hosting these events but the island-state is associated with the fun and exciting images of popular cultural events. Essentially both the F1 and the IRs will boost the array of attractions and facilities on the island. The reputation of Singapore as a congress centre, family-friendly destination and an eventful city is enhanced by celebrities visiting the races or them performing at the integrated resorts. For instance, in 2008 and 2009, some famous persons who were at the F1 events included singer Beyonce, actress Lindsay Lohan, businessman Richard Branson and actor Jackie Chan (Chee, 2009; van Miriah, 2009). Media stories about celebrities at F1 events give attention to Singapore. Singapore is glamorous by association. They provide popular entertainment as well as business facilities and amenities. They enliven the image of Singapore and is important in an

increasingly competitive climate. Singapore wants a naughtier brand image, and these two projects help.

Two, the F1 and IRs generate spectacular images. The telecast of F1 races makes Singapore sights familiar. The intangible benefits are considered invaluable; Singapore would move away from its dull image as millions of people could see speeding cars racing round the city centre. The races will also remind F1 fans of Singapore annually. The illuminated and spectacular night skyline has also made their way into new editions of computer racing games – *F1 2009* and *Need for Speed: Nitro* (Loh, 2009). Similarly, the Marina Bay Sands resort complex - which features the “Sands SkyPark”, a garden larger than two football fields, connecting three 55-storey hotel towers at roof level, 200 meters above ground – is now an icon of Singapore.

Three, the F1 and casinos present a less strait-laced dimension of Singapore. This is part of the broader strategy to change the brand image of the place. However, there are also accompanying policies to make the arts flourish and making Singapore less of a nanny-state. The process is slow and on-going (Ooi, 2010). This also means that the desire to seek endorsement and recognition for a brand image has concomitantly become a vision and blue-print for social engineering.

Four, stakeholder relations must be managed. The Singaporean authorities have imposed two controversial projects after public consultation. Not everyone is happy. The debates continue as Singaporeans remain concerned about gambling as a social ill and the inconveniences and costs of hosting F1 races. But with the largely pliant mass media, the Singaporean government has managed to rally the society forward. Inadvertently or otherwise, seeking endorsements for a city brand image has become an exercise to gel the community and seeking ways to bring together diverse stakeholder interests, in the name of economic development and enhancing the liveability of the place.

Conclusions

The Singaporean government has embraced controversies to introduce globally-recognized projects to enhance the business and leisure offerings in the city. These projects also brand the city. But not all the accreditation branding strategies are controversial. The making of Singapore into a Renaissance City is largely welcome,

although some claim the liberalization of artistic and cultural expressions has been too slow. Regardless, there are important internal or domestic uses for the accreditation strategy of place branding. The accreditation strategy is often part of the social engineering programme of the authorities. This is because the accreditation approach is very much about a forward-looking brand. It is aspirational. It is used to shape social changes, giving a desired vision to a place and list the goals of a society (Ooi, 2011b). And as a vision, it is also used to mobilize and unite various stakeholders in society to achieve common aspirations. In the case of Singapore, the aim to attract investors, businesses, travelers and overseas talents entail the branding of Singapore. In that brand, Singapore must be attractive for business and the individual. The city must be economically prosperous and culturally vibrant. With that aim, the country has indeed opened up, and more democratic spaces are now allowed. And the resulting increased investments, visitors and global recognition are taken as signs of progress and approval.

Along the same vein, in the context of the 2010 Shanghai World Expo, the city and China received global support with the participation of over 200 nations and organizations and more than 70 million visitors. The event boosted Chinese domestic tourism and allowed millions of Chinese to visit the world without leaving their country. So towards an external audience, China asserted its soft power (Kurlantzick, 2007). Domestically, the Shanghai Expo brings great pride to many Chinese, as they experience ultra-modern and efficient Shanghai, and witness the global recognition given to their country's economic, cultural and political might.

There seems to be a proliferation of copy-cat cities in China. The Beijing Olympics (2008), Shanghai Expo (2010) and Nanjing Youth Olympics (2014) do not make these cities special, but only like other cities that have hosted big events. The assertion of cultural vibrancy follows similar schemes elsewhere. For example, the [Yellow River Arts Centre](#) – housing a contemporary art museum, a sculpture ground, an art history park and an artist village – will be opened in the oasis city of Yinchuan, China in 2014. But this massive project will likely put this relatively unknown city into the global art map.

Like in the case of Singapore, policies need to support societal goals, and the place brand wants to reflect those goals. Independent endorsements serve another

function. These endorsements allow for the society to know whether they have arrived. And the pursuit of these endorsements can bring about positive changes to regulations and development in society.

The accreditation strategy tells us that places are becoming more akin to, rather than more different from, one another. This is partly because of the inherent challenges in place branding. Unique brands and places may not be recognized by diverse audiences. Communicating understandable messages is essential in place branding. The various accreditation tactics not only offer widely understood messages, they also give credence to what is promoted. So, the criticism that Chinese cities are copying other places is well-grounded but many non-Chinese cities, including Singapore, are doing likewise. It is a global practice now. And the strategy works.

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