NATION BRANDING IN SOUTH KOREA:
A MODERN CONTINUATION OF THE
DEVELOPMENTAL STATE?

Alena Schmuck

ABSTRACT

This article places the current South Korean Nation Branding project, which was institutionalised by the Lee Myung-bak administration in the Presidential Council on Nation Branding (PCNB) in January 2009, in the context of Chalmers Johnson’s concept of the Developmental State (DS). It assumes that Johnson’s model of a plan-rational, capitalist, interventionist state continues to serve as an explanatory tool in regard to South Korea’s political economic strategies. In this connection, the South Korean government’s efforts to improve the country’s international reputation (Nation Branding) are understood as an example of the country’s continued developmental orientation, since they display important parallels to the South Korean DS as far as their institutional set-up, actors and objectives are concerned. This hypothesis is investigated on the basis of an analysis of material published by the PCNB, as well as personal interviews conducted with members and associates of the PCNB.

Key words: developmental state, nation branding, country image, international reputation, Lee Myung-bak, governance

1 Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 2011 AKSE (Association for Korean Studies in Europe) Conference at Moscow State University in Moscow, Russia, June 17-20 2011 and the 7th KSGSC (Korean Studies Graduate Students Convention) at Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, 27-30 July 2010. My thanks go to the discussants for providing insightful suggestions for revisions. Furthermore, I would like to thank my professor and thesis supervisor Rüdiger Frank for his continuing support and advice throughout my research, as well as former Chairman Euh Yoon Dae, Planning Director Youn Jung-In and all other associates of the PCNB that I interviewed for this study for giving me the opportunity to get a first-hand insight into the South Korean Nation Branding project.
Chalmers Johnson’s theory of the Developmental State (DS) is one of the central concepts in explaining the economic growth of the Republic of Korea (hereafter South Korea) in the second half of the 20th century. According to this model, late industrialised (East Asian) countries,2 such as South Korea, Japan and Taiwan managed to achieve economic growth through the active, market-conforming, planning and directing role of the state and its bureaucratic institutions (Johnson 1982). While some scholars regard the East Asian, and in particular the South Korean DS as defunct—be it due to the completion of its main objective, the promotion of rapid economic growth and development,3 or as a result of liberalisation and deregulation measures taken since the 1980s4—others argue that the key elements of the DS are adaptable to changing conditions5 and continue in the form of an ‘internationalised model of development’ (Kong 2000).

This study places the current South Korean Nation Branding (NB) project, which was institutionalised by the Lee Myung-bak administration in the Presidential Council on Nation Branding (PCNB; Kor. kukka pūraendū wiwōnhoe6) in January 2009, in the context of the Developmental State. In the course of an internship at the PCNB in spring and summer 2010, I became aware of striking parallels that exist between the South Korean NB endeavour as an effort towards improving the country’s international reputation, and the South Korean DS, as far as their institutional set-up, actors and objectives are concerned. This paper investigates the hypothesis that NB in South Korea is an example of the way in which some of the key ideas and

---

2 Despite its focus on East Asian economic growth, the DS concept has been applied to country cases around the globe. These countries include France (Loriaux 1999), Finland and Austria (Vartiainen 1999), South Africa (Edigheji 2010), India (Sinha 2003), Brazil (Weyland 1998) and even the post-Cold War United States (Block 2008).


5 Theorists arguing that the DS is flexible and sustainable under new conditions are amongst others Johnson (1999), Woo-Cumings (1999), Woo (2007), Weiss (2000), Wong (2004), Uttam (2006), Hundt (2009), Park (2009), Stubbs (2009), and Hayashi (2010).

6 The official Korean equivalent of PCNB is actually ‘taet’ong’nyōng chisok kukka pūraendū wiwōnhoe’; the reference to the president (taet’ong’nyōng) is, however, usually omitted. All translations are by the author unless otherwise indicated.