The Law of Reputation and Brands
in the Asia Pacific

Efforts to expand the scope of legal protection given to reputation and brands in the Asia Pacific region have led to considerable controversy. Written by a variety of experts, the chapters in this book consider the developing law of reputation and brands in a fraught area.

ANDREW T. KENYON is a professor of law and Deputy Dean at the Melbourne Law School, University of Melbourne, where he is also Joint Director of the Centre for Media and Communications Law.

NG-LOY WEE LOON is a professor at the National University of Singapore Law Faculty and the Director of its LLM (IP and Technology) programme.

MEGAN RICHARDSON is a professor of law at the Melbourne Law School, University of Melbourne, where she is also Joint Director of the Centre for Media and Communications Law, and Associate Director – Law of the Intellectual Property Research Institute of Australia.
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The Law of Reputation and Brands in the Asia Pacific

Edited by
Andrew T. Kenyon, Ng-Loy Wee Loon and Megan Richardson
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Notes on the contributors

ELIZABETH ADENNEY is an associate professor of law at Deakin University, Melbourne and has published widely on copyright and moral rights law – in Australia, Canada, the UK and Germany. She is the author of a treatise The Moral Rights of Authors and Performers (2006) and of the Australian chapter in Gillian Davies and Kevin Garnett (eds.), Moral Rights (2010).

CHRISTOPH ANTONS holds a chair in law at Deakin University, Melbourne. He is a chief investigator in the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation (CCI) and an Adjunct Research Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for Intellectual Property and Competition Law in Munich. His recent book publications include the edited collections Traditional Knowledge, Traditional Cultural Expressions and Intellectual Property Law in the Asia-Pacific Region (2009); The Enforcement of Intellectual Property Rights: Comparative Perspectives from the Asia-Pacific Region (2011).

GRAEME AUSTIN holds the Chair in Private Law at Victoria University of Wellington, and is also a professor of law at the Melbourne Law School, University of Melbourne. His most recent book is Human Rights and Intellectual Property: Mapping the Global Interface (with Laurence Helfer, Cambridge University Press, 2011). He is an elected member of the American Law Institute.

MELISSA DE ZWART is an associate professor at the Adelaide Law School, the University of Adelaide and a Member of the Commonwealth Attorney-General’s Classification Review Board. Prior to joining academia, she was Legal Manager at CSIRO, advising on protection and commercialisation of intellectual property. Her key areas of research interests include copyright, technology and contractual communities.
Notes on the contributors

Susy Frankel is a professor of law at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand and Co-Director of the New Zealand Centre of International Economic Law. Her main research and teaching interests are in intellectual property law, traditional knowledge and international trade law. She is a member of the Editorial Board of the *Journal of World Intellectual Property Law* and *Queen Mary Journal of Intellectual Property*. She has also held the position of an Assistant Commissioner of Trade Marks, Patents and Designs for the Intellectual Property Office of New Zealand. Susy was consultant expert to the Waitangi Tribunal on the WAI 262 flora, fauna and cultural intellectual property claim.

Christine Greenhalgh is Emeritus Professor of Applied Economics, University of Oxford, and Emeritus Fellow of St Peter's College, Oxford. She continues to be active in IP research and is the Economics Research Director of the Oxford Intellectual Property Research Centre, and a Research Associate of IPRIA. Her textbook with Mark Rogers entitled *Innovation, Intellectual Property and Economic Growth* (2010) appeals to students of economics, business and law. She has recently contributed to several research reports for the UK IP Office, including studies of IP use and enforcement in small and medium firms, of trade marks and firm performance, and of IP and market structure.

Vicki Huang is currently a lecturer at the Deakin Law School. Prior to joining the Deakin Law School, Vicki was a research associate to Justice Finkelstein at the Federal Court of Australia and has had several years of practice in intellectual property law in Australia and the US. Her research focus is on interdisciplinary research into all aspects of intellectual property.

Andrew T. Kenyon is a professor of law and Deputy Dean at the Melbourne Law School, Joint Director of the CMCL and an editor of the *Media and Arts Law Review*. His publications include *New Dimensions in Privacy Law* (co-edited with Megan Richardson, 2006) and *Landmarks in Australian Intellectual Property Law* (co-edited with Megan Richardson and Sam Ricketson, Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Khaw Lake Tee is a professor at the Faculty of Law of the University of Malaya. She is the author of the book *Copyright Law in Malaysia* (3rd edn, 2008). Her teaching and research interests and experience are in intellectual property, land and information technology.
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**Kwanghui Lim** is an associate professor at Melbourne Business School and Associate Director of IPRIA. Kwanghui’s research explores the strategies used by firms to manage intellectual property and the commercialisation process. Recent papers include a study on the use of ‘knowledge brokering’ by biotechnology start-ups (with David Hsu, Wharton) and the impact of corporate acquisitions on the productivity of inventors (with Rahul Kapoor, INSEAD). Prior to joining Melbourne Business School, Kwanghui was an assistant professor at the National University of Singapore.

**Janice Luck** is a senior lecturer at Melbourne Law School, University of Melbourne, and has taught trade marks and designs law on the Melbourne law master’s for many years. She was until recently a special counsel at DLA Phillips Fox and has been a member of the Intellectual Property Committee of the Law Council of Australia since 1985.


**Don O’Sullivan** joined the Melbourne Business School in 2008 from University College Cork, Ireland. Don’s principal academic interest is in the impact of marketing activities on company performance. His research has been published in the *European Journal of Marketing*, and the *Journal of Marketing* among others, and his case studies on technology marketing are taught in business schools across Europe. Previously, Don was Client Services Director at a marketing services agency targeting the European technology sector. In this role he was responsible for a range of blue-chip clients. His team developed numerous international award-winning campaigns including a global ECHO award and two Icon Awards from *BusinessWeek*.

**Megan Richardson** is a professor at the Melbourne Law School, and is currently a Director of the CMCL and Associate Director of IPRIA. Primarily an intellectual property and privacy lawyer, she is a co-author (with Sam Ricketson and Mark Davison) of an Australian casebook.
Notes on the contributors

on intellectual property and has previously co-edited collections of essays including (with Andrew Kenyon) *New Dimensions in Privacy Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2006) and (with Andrew Kenyon and Sam Ricketson), *Landmarks in Australian Intellectual Property Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

**SAM RICKETSON** is a professor of law at the Melbourne Law School and also practises part-time as a barrister at the Victorian Bar, principally in the area of intellectual property. He is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences of Australia. Sam has written, taught and advised widely across all areas of intellectual property law, both nationally and internationally, and is currently a panel member of the World Intellectual Property Organization’s dispute resolution body in relation to domain names.

**DAVID TAN** is currently an assistant professor at the National University of Singapore Law Faculty. He is also an accomplished fine-art fashion photographer, having published a coffee-table book *Visions of Beauty* (2000) in association with Versace, and *Tainted Perfection* (2003) in collaboration with Cartier in Singapore. David was formerly with the Singapore Administrative Service, serving as Director of Sports at MCYS and Director of International Talent at MOM. In the area of law, he has published in a diverse range of journals including the *Cardozo Arts and Entertainment Law Journal*, *Yale Journal of International Law*, *Harvard Human Rights Journal* and *Media and Arts Law Review*.

**TAY PEK SAN** is an associate professor at the Faculty of Law of the University of Malaya. She is the author of the book *Protection of Well-Known Trade Marks in Malaysia* (2007) and several articles on intellectual property. Her teaching and research interests are in trade mark law, IP law and contract law.

**KIMBERLEE WEATHERALL** is an associate professor at the Sydney Law School of the University of Sydney. She specialises in intellectual property law with particular focus on interdisciplinary empirical research into intellectual property law court and administrative proceedings, and the interaction between intellectual property and international law. Her recent publications include ‘Patent infringement in Australia: Results from a survey’, in the *Federal Law Review* (with Beth Webster); ‘ACTA as a New Kind of International Lawmaking’, in the *American University Journal of International Law* and ‘Of Copyright Bureaucracies and Incoherence: Stepping Back from Australia’s Recent Copyright Reforms’, in the *Melbourne University Law Review*. 
Notes on the contributors


Peter K. Yu holds the Kern Family Chair in Intellectual Property Law and is the founding director of the Intellectual Property Law Center at Drake University Law School, USA. He is also a Wenlan Scholar Chair Professor at Zhongnan University of Economics and Law in Wuhan, China. In the summer, he has served as a visiting professor of law at the University of Hong Kong Faculty of Law. Born and raised in Hong Kong, Professor Yu is a leading expert in international intellectual property and communications law, a prolific scholar and an award-winning teacher.
Foreword

Because they interfere with creativity in the name of promoting creativity, intellectual property rights are perennially puzzling. But no law is as mystifying as the legal doctrines that recognise exclusive rights in brand names and celebrity reputations. Copyrights and patents protect finite advances – a book, a song, an invention – that are directly attributable to a particular innovator or team. The rights endure for limited periods of time. They can be critical to protecting those who invest in innovation from free riders. Trade mark law is somewhat more problematic. Protection lasts indefinitely. The audience can play as important a role as the producer in vesting marks with meaning and value. But classically, trade mark law has a benchmark: it is triggered when unauthorised use creates a likelihood of consumer confusion. Furthermore, recognising trade mark protection serves clear public purposes: the exclusive right to a mark lowers consumer search costs and gives producers incentives to maintain quality.

The protection of brands and reputations is quite different. It is fraught with all of the problems of trade mark law – value resides partly in the eyes of the beholder and the right can endure forever. Here, however, the nature and boundaries of the advance are unclear and the social value of the protection is ambiguous. The underlying rationale appears, as in trade marks, to depend on a search–cost idea – the notion that if the consumer likes the way that X does A, then she will be equally pleased with the way it does B. But why should Calvin Klein’s underwear be as nice as its outerwear? What does Ashton Kutcher really know about cameras? Is George Clooney genuinely a specialist in watches and cars; coffee and liquor? Isn’t it misleading to imply that the competence of a company or a celebrity transcends the core business in which that company or celebrity is engaged? Instead of dispelling consumer confusion, these rights appear aimed at fomenting it.

There are other problems as well. Celebrities do not need incentives to invest in their own reputations. Brand protection can stifle competition, for the stronger the carry-over value of an old mark in a new market, the
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harder it is for other enterprises to enter that market and compete. More disturbingly, the criminal docket suggests that when some people say they’d ‘kill’ to own a particular brand, they come close to really meaning it. Nor do rights over brands and reputation have obvious jurisprudential roots. They borrow from the theories that animate the laws of trade mark, unfair competition, privacy, defamation and copyright. Or, as suggested in this volume, perhaps the impulse to protect derives from morality, religion, romance or magic.

Yet, clearly, branding is of growing significance to business enterprises. It has given birth to its own industry, bred a cadre of specialists, and convinced many a court. The strategy is spreading to all parts of the globe; it’s been taken up by those who wish to protect the images of foodstuffs, artisanal products and traditional knowledge. Hence, the importance of this book. Since reputations transcend national boundaries, global harmonisation is highly desirable. But before international rules can be developed, the scope of the right needs more precise delineation. Its justifications need to be identified and examined critically. The costs and benefits of protecting brands and celebrity reputations must be compared in earnest and the contours of the right must be tailored to balance the needs of commerce against the social costs of privatising new swaths of the knowledge ecosystem.

This book takes an interdisciplinary approach to these questions, collecting the knowledge of experts in business, economics, law and cultural studies; professors and practitioners; doctrinalists, theoreticians, historians and empiricists. Most intriguingly, it focuses on the Asia Pacific, a region of increasing commercial importance, but whose law is largely unknown elsewhere; a region where legal doctrine is influenced by the United States and Europe, but leavened by such diverse sources as Islam, Confucius and traditional practice. These materials examine branding and reputation law in places where it is emerging (Indonesia, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore) in light of the experience of countries where it is of longer standing while still evolving (the United States, Australia, New Zealand). The book illuminates the range of policy choices available. As such, it is sure to influence the shape of the ultimate transnational regime.

ROCHELLE COOPER DREYFUSS
Pauline Newman Professor of Law
New York University School of Law
New York, June 2011
Editors’ preface

Trade marks – or brands as they are popularly known – can be extremely valuable intangible assets, not just in the Asia Pacific. The rights conferred by trade mark law together with other forms of legal protection are considerable, and firms have sought to exploit these to bolster their creative strategies designed to build and foster relationships with consumers and other audiences. Not surprisingly, they look to law to protect against attack by others when self-help measures seem inadequate for the purpose. At the same time, individuals who trade on their reputation have sought to establish allied forms of legal protection – extending the trope of the ‘personality’ of a brand to their own personal attributes which they may treat more or less as brands in their professional lives. In addition, individuals may draw on the powerful metaphor of privacy as a further rhetorical device to demand legal protection of their personalities against a diverse range of personal attacks by others in situations when the language of brands seems less appropriate or persuasive. This of course is not to deny that for many if not most people, privacy and personality have significant human dimensions, taking their functions beyond the commercial. Sometimes we even see ‘analogous’ reasoning extended to commercial brands, with traders now arguing that not merely commercial but more ‘personal’ features of their brands are under threat if law does not intervene to provide yet further protection against, for instance, dilution by blurring or tarnishment of the brand, or taking advantage of the brand’s distinctiveness or reputation. These arguments further challenge existing efforts to measure the value of a brand and the impact on a brand of competitive and other conduct, leading us to wonder about the use of scientific measures in the increasingly non-positivistic field of trade mark law. Most recently (in this part of the world) a range of other groups have begun to insist that their rights over their signs and symbols should be recognised by law, arguing that these have distinct cultural significance, serving as markers of the group’s personality as well as commercial value. On the other hand, all these extended forms of behaviour and attempts
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to enlarge the scope of legal protection have attracted considerable controversy, due to the severe limits these behaviours and laws may impose on competition and free speech and more specifically on the creativities and personalities of others.

What then makes the Asia Pacific distinctive in its response to these issues and controversies? For one thing it is more commercially and culturally diverse than other parts of the world, even if there is a common interest and history in engaging in international trade (especially among countries of the former British Empire). And the trade mark and other intellectual property laws that we are talking about are often newer there. Therefore rights may be less entrenched and more able perhaps to be contested. As the French sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in relation to his America field study in the 1830s:

Generally men become attached to a right or feel respect for it because of either its importance or the long period over which it has been in force. Such individual rights as are found in democracies are usually unimportant or of very recent date or impermanent. As a result they are often given up without trouble and almost always violated without remorse.¹

De Tocqueville spoke as a former European coloniser staring at a part of the new world that was growing in power and authority, was not like Europe or Britain in important ways, and was showing its independence. Now Europe (including the United Kingdom) and the United States are staring at the ‘new world’ of the South. Moreover, in the same way as France and Britain’s relations with America were reshaped in the nineteenth century by the previous century’s wars so relations between the United States and other parts of the Asia Pacific are now being rewritten by the conflicts of the current and immediate past century, in ways that are not yet completely clear and with the future even more fluid and unpredictable.

This lack of clarity and predictability is also relevant to our project. There is a substantial and growing body of high-quality writing around the law of reputation and brands in the United Kingdom and more broadly Europe as well as the United States, including in other books in the Cambridge Intellectual Property and Information Law Series. In contrast, far less is known – certainly of a scholarly reflective character – about the equivalent law of the Southern Asia Pacific. There is an important gap in knowledge here which this book seeks to address (or at least begin to address) with a range of linked essays written by scholars working

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in the diverse specialisations of the typical modern academy, and mostly coming from the common law world. Primarily we are legal scholars and practitioners, in keeping with the book’s focus on law. But we also include experts in economics, marketing and business strategy, whose contributions are designed to enlarge legal understandings.

The essays in this book have grown out of workshops held at the University of Melbourne and the National University of Singapore in January and June 2010 respectively. We are grateful to those who participated, as their questions and comments helped the authors of the papers that have ended up as chapters in this book to extend their knowledge and refine their ideas – and we are delighted that Rochelle Dreyfuss, who participated in the Melbourne workshop and offered many useful ideas, also generously agreed to write the Foreword. We are grateful also to our editorial assistant Oscar O’Bryan and to Vicki Huang who acted as editorial consultant for much of the project, as well as staff at the Melbourne Law School and NUS Law Faculty who assisted with the workshops. We also express our appreciation to the research and professional institutes which have made financial as well as specialised in-kind contributions to this project: the interdisciplinary Intellectual Property Research Institute of Australia (IPRIA) at the University of Melbourne, the Centre for Media and Communications Law (CMCL) at the Melbourne Law School, and the IP Academy in Singapore. Finally, we are grateful to the editors of the Cambridge Intellectual Property and Information Law Series and its referees for their advice and guidance and to our Commissioning Editor Kim Hughes for her patient and helpful support.

ANDREW T. KENYON
NG-LOY WEE LOON
MEGAN RICHARDSON
Melbourne and Singapore, June 2011