Tiger Balm is a topical analgesic marketed as an external Over The Counter (OTC) medication for a spectrum of minor pains such as headaches, rheumatism, arthritic pain, muscle sprains and strains. According to its promotional material, it also relieves insect bites and even flatulence. As a cure-all for so many common complaints, Tiger balms is a staple in the medicine cabinet of most Asian homes, and has proved popular globally.

Manufactured by Haw Par Healthcare, Tiger balm’s geographical presence is impressive. It is produced in eight countries and sold in over 100 countries in five continents. While capitalizing on its Asian Heritage, it has also successfully broken cultural boundaries to become a truly international brand.

The brand’s history is cleverly positioned. It does not claim to be an ‘ancient Chinese medication’, but a modern efficacious medication that draws upon wisdom of Imperial Chinese sources. Its formulation is attributed to Aw Chu Kin, a herbalist form the Hakka province of China who emigrated to Rangoon in the late 19th century. Observing a need for a balm that was easy to store, transport and use, Aw brought his knowledge of Chinese herbal medicine to bear upon this local problem, and created Tiger Balm. The main active ingredients of Tiger Balm are menthol, camphor, cajuput, clove and cassia oils.
Tiger Balm has won international appeal by highlighting the universal elements of the brand. First, by sinking its roots in both China and Rangoon, the brand is not specifically Chinese, but generally Asian. This allows Tiger Balm to be co-opted by almost every community in North and South East Asia as a ‘local brand’. At the same time, it maintains sufficient exoticism to titillate the non-Asian market. Second, the altruistic beginnings of this medication are highlighted. The brand history stresses that Aw was motivated to treat his patients ‘the best way he knew’. It was not he, but his commercially minded son, who aggressively marketed Tiger Balm worldwide after his father’s death. The community-spirited origin of the brand contrasts starkly with the image of modern pharmaceutical firms. Third, the brand name and logo, which features a leaping tiger, is evocative of both Asia and general strength. The grace and tenacity of the tiger is powerful image which is used repeatedly in advertisements and packaging.

At the same time, Haw Par Healthcare has complemented its brand development with the foresight to protect aggressively all aspects of the brand identity. In addition to owning the “Tiger Balm” trade marked in every country in which it is marketed, the company has protected the image, name and reference to ‘tiger’ in both class 3 and class 5 in each country. This means that the Tiger Balm brand is insulated from competitors’ attempts to capitalize on the vivid tiger symbol. In this way, the brand enjoys an unambiguous public persona.

Tiger Balm brand successfully maintains a multifaceted persona by retaining its core values: it is a trusted remedy that enables users to get on with their lives unimpeded by pain. Significantly, Haw Par Healthcare has constantly
updated and localized these values. Tiger Balm closely identifies itself with traditional Asian (not just Chinese) martial arts by sponsoring martial arts tournaments. It has reinterpreted the public-spirited beginnings of the product into concepts of ethical pharmaceuticals. Today, Tiger Balm is major sponsor of tiger conservation projects in the UK (Woburn Safari Park), Singapore (The Night Safari), Australia (Melbourne Zoo) and the USA (the Golden Tiger Campaign of Endangered Species Project).

Personal recommendation is perhaps the strongest evidence of a successful brand.

Tiger Balm has simultaneously cultivated a multifaceted image through careful selection of distribution channels. As a ubiquitous everyday product, Tiger Balm is available in convenience stores and supermarkets. As a specialist's sports aid, it is available in health clubs and sports stores. Finally, as an exotic momento from Asia, Tiger Balm is available in duty-free shops in Asia and on board several Asian Airlines.

The huge value that can reside in a brand itself is well represented by the example of Tiger Balm. In addition to the original Tiger Balm, at least five other associated products have been developed successfully as brand extensions. Tiger Liniment, popular with the elderly, is a more liquid formulations for veering large surfaces. For the athletic user, there is Tiger Muscle Rub, a pre-exercise warm-up rub to prepare muscles for strenuous activity. Tiger Balm External Pain Relieving Medicated Plaster is a skin patch impregnated with Tiger Balm Formulation. It delivers more sustained relief while protecting clothing from any residue. The martial arts
community favors Tiger Balm Red, an extra strength formula befitting the tough strong image of its users. In contrast, Tiger Balm Softer, a gentler ointment, with a lighter fragrance and softer texture, is evidently aimed at the female consumer. When considering these brand extensions, it is important to note that these new products do not overly cannibalize the market share of the original product. Each of these appeals to a particular subsection of the Tiger Balm consumer market, and addresses a specific use. As an all round topical analgesic, Tiger Balm Original is still the family favourite.