ANOTHER foreign company might soon join the list of major shareholders of the company that makes Singapore’s Tiger Beer, but experts say even if this happens, it would not dilute the brand’s status as a national symbol.

An unnamed buyer has offered to buy the stakes of OCBC Bank and Great Eastern Holdings in Fraser & Neave (F&N) and Asia Pacific Breweries (APB), which makes Tiger Beer. The two companies have a combined 18.2 per cent stake in F&N and 7.92 per cent in APB as at March 31.

A Reuters news report said that the offer came from the Thai Beverage founder, billionaire Charoen Sirivadhanabhakdi. Others speculate that the suitors could be Japan’s Kirin Holdings, which owns a significant share of APB. If Tiger Beer does end up mainly in foreign hands, it would not be the first local firm, with Singapore household names Raffles Hotel and Robinsons already having foreign owners.

Ms Shauna Li Roolvink, principal consultant of branding consultancy BrandHub, noted that Qatar National Hotels Company completed its acquisition of Raffles Hotel earlier this year. Before this, the owner was the Canada-based Fairmont Raffles.

And department store chain Robinsons is now owned by the Dubai-based Al-Futtaim Group.

“Nothing has changed about the brands,” said Ms Roolvink. “They are still very much known as Singaporean names.”

Mr Graham Hitchmough, regional director of branding consultancy The Brand Union Singapore, noted that Singapore companies have acquired brands and firms around the world.

“In Singapore of all places, there must be a recognition that we exist in an increasingly globalised world of corporate and consumer relationships,” he said.

Mr Allan Chia, head of programme for marketing at SIM University’s School of Business, said: “Over the past 10 to 15 years and through a couple of financial crises, we have seen numerous companies change hands to foreign owners all over the world, from banks to hotels to football clubs.

“In many cases, the true origin of a brand is complicated by the fact that the product may no longer be manufactured in the country of origin.”

Professor Bernd Schmitt, executive director of the Institute on Asian Consumer Insight at Nanyang Technological University, noted that there are many brands around the world that consumers perceive to be from a certain country, but are in fact owned by a company from another nation.

“Take Godiva for example,” he said, referring to the seller of fine Belgian chocolates. “Did you know that it is owned by a Turkish company?”

Likewise, he noted, many still do not realise that luxury carmaker Jaguar is now owned by India’s Tata Group.

“You could make the case that for certain luxury goods, it matters who owns the brand because you want to make sure that the new owner sticks to, say, an Italian manufacturer with the right skills, and won’t outsource to a cheaper location,” Prof Schmitt said.

“But with fast-moving consumer goods like beer, nobody can really tell the difference when it’s made.”

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WILL TIGER STILL REMAIN LOCAL?