

# Management of Success

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# Management of Success

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EDITED BY

**TERENCE CHONG**



**INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES**

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# FOREWORD

**O**n a recent visit to Beijing (March 2008) for the Lien Ying Chow Legacy Fellowship Council, I was privileged to meet up with several researchers from three Chinese “think tanks”, one of which was the Chinese Communist Party School in China’s capital. We were engaged for three hours on the topic “ruling with the consent of the people”.

In the Chinese political lexicon, there is a classic Chinese saying that “an emperor must have the mandate of heaven to rule”, and he rules only “with the consent of the people”. In today’s political context, the right to govern goes to the political party winning the most number of parliamentary seats in a general election. But whether the mandate to rule is won in a general election or by force of arms when one dynasty overthrows another, no emperor or government can rule without the consent of the people.

In my view, it is too simple for “democrats” to argue that the only manifestation of consent is through the ballot box. We all know that the ballot box can be stuffed and the will of the people perverted by bribes and corruption. It is also true that effete, corrupt and tyrannical regimes can and, indeed, should be overthrown by force, if necessary. I am told that a basic tenet of Chinese political philosophy goes so far as to advocate that it is the duty of good men to overthrow a bad emperor. Contrary to the perception of arch conservatives, the Chinese elite are as passionate about obtaining the consent of the people as much as “true blue” democrats in the West.

Chinese thinkers through the ages believe that improving the livelihood of the people is the foremost duty of the state. So it is with us in Singapore. Had we not concentrated on creating employment opportunities for our people, Singapore today would not be very different from countries much larger and better endowed than ourselves wracked by unemployment and racial conflicts seeded in poverty. East Asian countries or economies such as China, Japan,

South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore all believe that improving the livelihood of their people is the only way to achieve social harmony. In turn, harmony provides choice in selecting leaders. Choice through universal suffrage is one, but not the only, manifestation of choice.

When I was an undergraduate at the University of Malaya (1955–59), I read the works of two great development economists, namely Professor Arthur Lewis of Manchester University and Professor Walt Rostow of Columbia University. Practicing economists in the ministries of finance, and trade and industry of developing countries will find Professor Lewis very engaging dealing with problems such as unemployment, subsistence farming, low education standards, poor health conditions, and the myriad other problems finance and economic ministries face each working day.

Professor Rostow's five stages of economic growth serve better as the theoretical underpinning of thinking on how countries develop. Economic growth in most countries begins with agriculture. Agriculture is the basic foundation of most economies providing a livelihood to the larger part of the population. Agriculture occupies the most land area.

Only when agriculture produces an economic surplus will there be demand for the goods produced by the craftsman. Only when the craftsman produces a surplus will there be demand for the services of the teacher, the physician and the entertainer. So economic development in countries such as China, India and Indonesia must begin with the modernization of agriculture. Self-sustaining growth takes off only when agriculture with its vast rural heartlands raises their productivity, producing more than what they need for subsistence.

Professor Rostow's model of the structure of growth applies to a closed economy. As all economies are now integrated into the global economy, international competitiveness depends on where the country or economy stands in each of the five phases of growth. The first phase of growth is characterized by low (wage) cost production requiring simple skills or technology.

On opening up an economy, from a command economy as in the case of China in 1978, or a free enterprise economy behind high tariff walls, as in the case of Singapore in 1965 when we separated from Malaysia, most developing countries achieve rapid rates of growth (10 per cent plus) enjoying the low hanging fruits of cheap labour and accessible technology. As production costs of consumer products rise in advanced economies of the West and Japan, Singapore, China, Korea, Taiwan and now Vietnam are able to export garments, toys, TV sets, personal computers and other consumer products to Western markets.

Even as their economies grow, China, India, Vietnam, Korea and Taiwan will be able to offer low cost production simply because of their large population base. Because of their respect for education, these countries have deep talent pools increasingly schooled in science and technology. In my view, these are very formidable low-cost, high-tech economies. China is such an economy today. Japan was such an economy thirty years ago. Because of Singapore's small population base, our wages will rise whenever there is a surge in the demand for labour. Though our schools and universities are second to none, our talent pool is minuscule compared with other Asian giants.

Inevitably, wage and other infrastructural costs will rise. Will we then be in danger of becoming a high-cost, low-tech economy? We have to move up to the league of high-cost, high-tech countries in North America, Russia, Western Europe and Japan. We have to aim to be a high-cost, high-tech country like Finland which overcome competition in low-cost, high-tech countries like China and India through sheer superior engineering. It is telling that in Finland, the engineer is more valued than the manager. In fact, engineers decline promotion to managerial jobs.

In fifty years, Singapore has moved from a Third World city of slums and unemployment to arguably a first world city. Unlike our starting point when we plucked the low hanging fruits of a low-cost, low-tech economy, managing success is infinitely a more complex and challenging task today. How do we remain competitive in a global knowledge-based world?

Most of the contributors to this publication are better schooled in political science than I am. It is said that man does not live by bread alone. True, but it is bread or livelihood that make informed political choices possible. The People's Action Party (PAP) government has governed Singapore since 1959, winning every general election along the way. It can be said that it has obtained the "mandate of heaven". After overcoming the ideologues of the Barisan Sosialis in 1963, the PAP has governed with the consent of the people by delivering on jobs and housing.

The older generation among us still shudders at the recollection of slum housing with the system of bucket toilets. We have come a long way from the Singapore of the 1950s and 1960s. Our children are better educated than ourselves. With intellectual skills and savvy, the young Singaporean can hold his own with his counterpart in New York, London, Beijing and Tokyo.

Some Singaporeans have climbed to the top ranks of international companies. Yet I detect some angst among our elite. It worries me that each year some 1,000 of our best and brightest leave our shores to be replaced by Chinese

and Indian talents who depart from their own countries, perhaps for the same reasons our young leave Singapore.

Managing economic success is tough. Managing political success is even tougher. In corporate lingo it all boils down to succession planning. In political science, there are two models of succession planning. In Plato's Republic, the philosopher king is selected by his peers. He is the first among equals. I must confess that intellectually I am partial to this model. Why? Because the head rules more than the heart.

However much the Platonic ideal appeals to us, it is still flawed. Its very virtue sows the seed of its own destruction. The philosopher king once chosen by his peers cannot be removed by them except through God's intervention. The philosopher king fossilizes into a dictator. Or like the emperor, he and not his peers chooses his successor. In a monarchy, he chooses one of his offspring.

On the other hand, succession via the ballot box is also fraught with danger. In a freak election, the electorate may well elect a government whose sole aim to get into power is to loot and plunder the treasury. Is there a middle way? I would leave it to political scientists to ponder this question.

One possible way is to have the electorate realize that if they choose a rogue government they will lose everything they possess, their livelihoods, their property, even their lives. In each successive election, the PAP has offered better educated slates of candidates. Though education is not full proof against character flaws, it is better than just picking candidates off the streets.

As no system is perfect, PAP candidates are not as streetwise as their less educated opponents. The first generation of PAP candidates was less educated than their successors. All constituencies were single seat. They stood and won on their own merit. Are Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) a protective cover for young PAP rookies who are not as streetwise enough to fight their own battles? As ministers themselves begin their political careers in GRCs, is there the danger that even minister-led GRCs may one day be lost to the opposition? These are questions worth pondering.

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# MESSAGE

The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies is pleased to publish the follow-up volume to the 1989 *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*. This volume is a collection of essays by experts in their respective fields which delve into the numerous public policies that have shaped and influenced the everyday lives of Singaporeans since the early 1990s. In the spirit of academic inquiry, this volume serves to identify key public policies that have been deemed responsible for the success of Singapore and to re-examine them critically for a better understanding of our development and progress as a young nation.

Retrospection and introspection are usually not the prerogatives of young nations like ours. Singapore's short national history may make such a volume seem rather like an indulgence. But Singapore is no ordinary nation. In fact, its status as a nation was thought to be "an absurd proposition" many years ago by its first Prime Minister. Given the historical circumstances of Singapore's independence, both government and people plunged straight into the business of surviving. With survival never assured or taken for granted, the achievements and progress enjoyed through the decades have demanded not just good government, diligent citizens or favourable global conditions, but have also nurtured a Singaporean culture and mindset that harbours narrow and specific definitions of success.

The many chapters in this volume willingly acknowledge the tangible and material success that so many of our public policies have yielded. However, they go beyond the obvious and analyse the side effects of such policies, unintended or not, as well as to ponder alternative forms of success. For such an exercise, retrospection and introspection cannot be helped. Finally, this volume is meant to be neither a comprehensive nor final word on Singapore society, but a small contribution to the rich and ever expanding mosaic of the Singapore story.

K. KESAVAPANY

*Director*

*Institute of Southeast Asian Studies*

## QUOTE

“My colleagues and I have repeatedly said that what we want is the open debate, a confrontation of arguments and views, with the general public as the ultimate judge. We welcome controversy; we never run away from it. You cannot carry out democratic processes without the open debate. I myself believe that in Singapore there is an inadequate amount of open debate other than on matters relating to very special interests.”

*Text of speech by the Minister for Defence, Dr Goh Keng Swee,  
at the annual dinner and ball of the Australian Alumni  
held at the Chinese Chamber of Commerce on  
Saturday, 11 March 1967 at 8.00 p.m.*

# PREFACE

**I**n 1989, the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) published the milestone volume *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*, edited by Kernial Singh Sandhu and Paul Wheatley. The 1989 volume was, and remains, the single most comprehensive collection of essays by scholars and professionals on Singapore. These essays delved into a wide variety of issues that were integral to the growth of modern Singapore, including political leadership, economic restructuring, societal transformation, foreign relations and national identity.

Profound global shifts have taken place in the twenty years since publication. The ending of the Cold War, the economic and political rise of China and India, September 11, the war in Iraq and the global financial crisis have irrevocably changed the world that Singapore faced in 1989. Meanwhile, within Singapore, the city-state has seen two prime ministerial transitions and the installation of third generation leaders who have articulated their vision for the twenty-first century. How has the local political, economic and social landscape changed? Is and should success still be “managed” in Singapore? What are the consequences of our success? These questions offer an invaluable opportunity to review and critique major policy decisions that have shaped modern Singapore.

Given that the challenges Singaporeans faced and, indeed, our very notions of “success” were very different twenty years ago, this volume seeks to achieve two primary objectives: first, to reassess key public policies that have shaped Singapore since 1989; and second, to offer a critical update on the crucial issues that have dominated public discourse in Singapore. In this sense, the *raison d’être* of the new volume is not much different from the task that Sandhu and Wheatley set for the old volume, that is, “to elicit the relative degrees and quality of success attained in different sectors of the societal community”.

Nevertheless, this new volume distinguishes itself by capturing the *Zeitgeist* of contemporary Singapore. A quick glance through the index pages of the

old volume will reveal many glaring absences of words that are today an integral part of our lexicon. Terms like “civil society”, “sexuality”, “civil disobedience”, “gay community”, “penal code”, “human rights”, “foreign talent”, “internet”, “gender”, “social compact” and so on, all of which did not appear in the 1989 volume, can no longer be excluded from any discussion on Singapore. All this is not a criticism of the old volume, but rather, a clear indication of the keen focus on developmental concerns, the specific understanding of “success” during the industrializing years and of the undeniable shift in the socio-political climate since 1989.

Another key difference between the old and new volumes is the streamlining of chapters. With 49 chapters, 57 contributors and a whopping 1,134 pages all lovingly bound in red hardcover, the old volume tips the scales at 2.5 kilograms! A more reader-friendly, slimmer publication that would reach out to younger students was needed. This unavoidably meant sacrificing some of the breadth and scope boasted by the old volume. Much of the sacrifice was borne by the section on the Singapore economy. The old volume had a total of twelve chapters on various aspects of the Singapore economy, including the oil industry, port services and price stability, while this volume carries only three chapters on the economy. Thankfully this is not too great a sacrifice because institutions like the Institute of Policy Studies have undertaken the task of furthering the discussion of the national economy on a regular basis through a variety of seminars and conferences. It was also decided that chapters in the old volume on our colonial legacy, trade unions, crime and control, the problem of corruption, and a foreigner’s reflections on Singapore need not be replaced. All this freed up the necessary space to commission chapters on more relevant issues like opposition political parties, civil disobedience, the role of the press, the internet, the impact of foreign talent and the politics of sexuality in Singapore.

Nevertheless, while it is healthy to bring in new topics, it is important not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. The spine of the old volume has been retained. This volume retains most of the sub-headings under which the chapters are organized, namely Leadership, Policy and Politics; The Restructuring of the Economy; The Transformation of Society; The Law; Modification of the Environment; Community and National Security; and Life in Singapore. The old volume also examined key issues like the leadership of the People’s Action Party, education, religion, national security, ethnicity, multiculturalism, and the arts and culture. It would be remiss of any book on Singapore not to update the analyses on these issues and we actively sought younger scholars to offer fresh perspectives. Where possible, contributors were encouraged to

make references to their counterpart chapters in the old volume in order to present the reader with an intellectual and policy-making trajectory from 1989 to the present. Meanwhile, events and issues within this volume were cross-referenced so that the reader may get a sense of a dialogue between the different contributors.

Finally, the most pleasant part of the job for an editor is to register his thanks to the many people who made this volume possible. First and foremost, I would like to thank the contributors for sharing their scholarly and valuable insights. Without them, this volume would not have seen the light of day. I am also, as is ISEAS, grateful to Ngiam Tong Dow for his Foreword. Special thanks to ISEAS Director K. Kesavapany for tasking me with bringing out this volume and for his kind support and helpful suggestions along the way. I would also like to thank my colleagues in the Regional Social and Cultural Studies programme, namely Lee Hock Guan, Ooi Kee Beng and Hui Yew-Foong, with whom many idea-refining discussions took place over numerous lunches. I am grateful to ISEAS Deputy Director Chin Kin Wah for his insightful comments, as well as Arun Mahizhnan, S. Tiwari, Asad Latif, Barry Wain and Tommy Koh for their constructive thoughts on several chapters. Last but not least, I thank ISEAS Managing Editor Triena Ong and her publications team for their professionalism and expediency.

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# THE CONTRIBUTORS

**Alex Au Waipang**, who has spent much of his career in the corporate world, has been a civil rights activist since the early 1990s, and is one of the key leaders of the gay equality group, People Like Us. In 1996, he started a website called Yawning Bread which has become one of the most read commentary sites in Singapore on politics and society. The photograph that he took of the Workers' Party rally in Hougang during the 2006 General Election, which he posted on his website, became an icon of that general election. Through his activism work, he has also built relationships with many civil and political actors and is a regular speaker at conferences.

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**Terence Chong** is Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singapore and Coordinator of its Regional Social and Cultural Studies programme. He has a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Warwick, UK. His research interests include Singapore civil society, middle class and identity formations, the sociology of culture, Southeast Asian studies and globalization theory. He has published in journals such as *Asian Studies Review*; *Journal of Contemporary Asia*; *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*; *Social Identities*; and *Critical Asian Studies*.

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**Russell Heng Hiang Khng** has a Ph.D. in Political Science from the Australian National University. An Associate Senior Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), he researches on civil society dynamics in authoritarian polities. He is a founding member of People Like Us, Singapore's first gay advocacy group, as well as Transient Workers Count Too, an association promoting foreign workers' welfare.

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