

BOOK REVIEWS

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***Education, Industrialization and the End of Empire in Singapore.* By Kevin Blackburn.** New York: Routledge, 2017. Pp. 121.

Kevin Blackburn is an associate professor of History in Singapore's National Institute of Education, the country's principal institution for training its teachers. Having taught in Singapore since 1993, he is clearly familiar with the country's internationally acclaimed education system. This accessibly-written book is useful for readers looking to understand the successive Singapore governments' development and instrumentalization of technical and vocational education to serve economic goals, as well as the anxieties, aspirations and dilemmas that influenced this process. His new book shows that there has been a growing "education-economy nexus" in Singapore since colonial times, in which economic considerations and educational policies have become intertwined. The interplay between the political and economic calculations of the respective Singapore governments, the socioeconomic aspirations and anxieties of local communities, and the changing structure of Singapore's economy have driven the development of technical and vocational education.

Chapter 1 discusses the neglect of educational development in early colonial Singapore, when colonial officials were reluctant to invest resources to support the educational interests of transient immigrant communities. Since the mid-1850s, however, the growing need for clerks to serve the colonial administration and business houses, and the growing desire for English language education as a "pathway for social mobility into white

collar employment" (p. 25) among the migrant communities, spurred the gradual expansion of English-medium schools and introduction of commercial classes. Nonetheless, it was clear that the colonial officials were not keen on creating "an overeducation of the masses" (p. 24). They also wanted to limit access to English language education for native Malays, so as to inhibit the latter's social aspirations.

Chapter 2 sheds some light on the intense debates and disagreements among colonial officials on the subject of vocational and technical education in Singapore between 1901 and 1941. The rise of manufacturing industries in Singapore, and the desire to provide suitable educational opportunities for local boys deemed "not suitable" for clerical work were the principal considerations. Nevertheless, it took the dislocations of the Great Depression to really convince colonial officials to expand existing schools, establish new trade schools, and to push previously reluctant parents and children towards vocational education. This impetus did not, however, stop Singapore from remaining "a colonial entrepôt with an industrial sector at its margins" (p. 55).

Chapter 3 demonstrates how the Japanese invasion and occupation of Singapore between 1942 and 1945 and the resulting destabilization of colonial rule accelerated the pace of industrialization, and correspondingly the development of institutions and infrastructure for education. The Japanese military administration laid special emphasis on technical education primarily to serve their own needs, but also to win the loyalty of the populace — especially the Malays. Subsequently, the returning colonial administration revamped English-medium education and established

new institutions, for instance, Singapore's first polytechnic. This was done to prepare Malaya for eventual self-governance and meet increased demand as Singapore's industrial sector grew further in the 1950s.

Chapter 4 brings us closer to the present, focusing on how the Singapore People's Action Party (PAP) government, after coming to power in 1959, dramatically and comprehensively reformed and expanded industrial education to support Singapore's rapidly industrializing economy. Similar to the experience of the erstwhile colonial administration, the "ingrained attitudes" (p. 112) of many parents and their children for academic education and white collar jobs impeded their early efforts. This was until the British withdrawal from their military bases in Singapore, announced in 1968 and completed in 1971, which heralded the loss of employment for about 40,000 employees in the naval base in Singapore. This galvanized greater public acceptance of, and public investment in vocational and technical education.

This book is timely — it comes as Singapore reconsiders its colonial legacies in the light of the approaching bicentenary of its founding. Blackburn aims to interrogate the "People's Action Party inspired mythology that it inherited a fragile state and poor economy neglected by the colonial power" (p. 5). He does so by showing that, by the mid-1950s, British colonial administration had already developed substantial infrastructure for vocational and technical education and an entrepôt economy that was producing "industrial development at its fringes" (p. 4). The postcolonial Singapore PAP government, therefore, inherited "a sound base" and not "a swampy village" (p. 4). The book proves to be a good reminder to scholars of Southeast Asian economies to be careful of popular histories or official narratives that over-state the extent to which a country's postcolonial history departed from an allegedly deficient colonial past.

Having said that, I am not sure that this "mythology" warrants any intervention today. Singapore's founding Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew publicly acknowledged Singapore's inheritance of British infrastructure and institutions on numerous occasions. Furthermore, the narrative

of colonial malaise and neglect was not a PAP invention. As Blackburn notes, this theme was already prevalent in Japanese propaganda during the war. Other local anti-colonial groups and social movements active in the decolonization process between the 1940s and 1960s also stirred up anti-colonial sentiments by highlighting the colonial government's failure to meet the economic and educational needs of local communities. Hence, the PAP's political postures exploited sentiments and beliefs about the deficiencies of colonial rule that were already prevalent.

While there is no bibliography, the footnotes in the book provide signposts to many key official reports and colonial documents, as well as seminal and recent scholarly works pertaining to Singapore's educational history. Due to the exclusive focus on the education–economy nexus, however, it does not discuss the questions of identity, culture, language and politics that simultaneously shaped the country's education policies in depth. For the post-World War II colonial administration and the PAP government, education was a powerful instrument not only to meet the pressing economic needs and socio-economic aspirations of the time, but also to engineer a new society and inoculate Singaporeans from harmful ideologies and social values. Students seeking a comprehensive understanding of educational policies in Singapore should read this book in tandem with other studies, for instance, Chia Yeow-Tong's recent *Education, Culture and the Singapore Developmental State: "World-Soul" Lost and Regained?* (2015). Johnny Sung's regrettably little-known earlier study, *Explaining the Economic Success of Singapore: The Developmental Worker as the Missing Link* (2006) is also useful for additional insights on how the PAP government stimulated the citizenry's support for the "Singapore developmental state" and revamped the education system to pursue workforce development.

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