

***Aristocracy of Armed Talent: The Military Elite in Singapore.*
By Samuel Ling Wei Chan. Singapore: NUS Press, 2019. Softcover:
495pp.**

Singapore's military is exceptional in many ways. Although the Singapore Armed Forces are relatively small and has never fought in a large-scale conflict, the nation's Total Defence doctrine, high-tech edge, and deliberate decisions to gain operational experience by involving the force in complex international operations such as those in Afghanistan and the Gulf of Aden have earned it a reputation as being highly capable. Among the Singapore Armed Forces' (SAF) most unusual traits is its system for recruiting and retaining its military officers. Despite stiff competition with opportunities in the private sector and well-paid civil service, the incentives associated with military service has enabled the SAF to attract some of the nations' brightest and most ambitious leaders during both the initial build-up period and in the current era. This system has created a military officer corps institutionalized as a highly-educated professional cadre that leads the military and feeds the nations' top civil service and political posts while avoiding the civil-military tensions found in other Southeast Asian countries.

Central to the military's leaders is a cadre of "scholars", young capable officers who are enticed by scholarships to the world's top schools for undergraduate education and are commonly seen as standing a better chance to rise through the ranks more quickly and with greater institutional support than the other officers (sometimes called "farmers", p. 3) whom they serve alongside. Although unusual, perhaps even unique, the foundation and functionality of this system had not been fully analysed until the publication of Samuel Ling Wei Chan's *Aristocracy of Armed Talent*. Well-researched and balanced, this book delivers fresh ideas, plenty of new information and sheds light on some misconceptions about the scholar system. Furthermore, it ably situates its analysis of the Singapore's military leadership into the nation's larger historical, defence posture and civil-military landscapes. In doing so, it stands as an excellent companion to Tim Huxley's *Defending the Lion City*, another volume that ably tackles the big picture. With Huxley's volume now over twenty years old, *Aristocracy of Armed Talent* is a welcome addition to the literature.

Chan's research overlays the data gathered in twenty-eight interviews with Singaporean flag officers with a meticulous review of military leaders' public statements and writings. The first two chapters focus on context and are perhaps the book's strongest. Touching on the study's rationale, methodology and aims, these chapters also offer a highly readable and comprehensive history of the development of Singapore's military officer corps and how the milestones of that process related to other strategic and political developments. The following seven chapters rely heavily on the author's original research to discuss the officers' motivations, commitment and career ascension before discussing statistical analysis of the relationships between performance, potential and promotion, and then drawing conclusions about the traits that matter most to building a Singaporean senior leader and the merits of the military's scholar system. It is interesting, insightful and packed with original data.

Unfortunately, the book is not without faults. For one thing, the language is uneven. Parts are very readable, but some sentences are indiscernible. Terms specific to the Singaporean context are used without the explanations needed to clarify them for international readers and the text is littered with unsubstantiated and unnecessarily distracting adjectives. Second, the book lacks information about the analytical methods employed by the study. The explanations of how the interviewees were selected and the conduct of the interviews is sufficient, but there is no insight into how the interviews were examined and the data analysed to reach the author's conclusions. For example, in Chapter Three the author explains that five primary factors and three secondary factors were found to govern the recruitment of scholars. The primary factors were ranked in terms of their importance and the secondary factors were things that encouraged recruitment, but could not sway the individual's decision on their own. For researchers seeking to replicate the study or use the findings in comparative projects, it would be important to understand how the author determined the rankings and distinguished between the primary and secondary factors, but that explanation is missing.

As a contribution to the field of civil-military relations, the book's main weakness relates to its approach to the role of culture. It draws on a Chinese saying that "a good son does not become a soldier" to assert that Singapore's majority Chinese cultural foundations posed a barrier to its establishment of a capable military while also noting

that most members of the Indian community belong to non-warrior castes and the Malays display “greater predilection military service” (p. 46). Indeed, the question of how Singapore’s government could overcome cultural stigma provides a central premise and rationale for the research repeated at the start of several chapters (pp. 76, 145, 314, 349). This is problematic at many levels. First, the idea of a Chinese cultural aversion to military service is a trope that regularly featured in informed conversations and the literature dealing with Southeast Asian civil-military relations which the author incorporates at face value. However, even though this is an assumption commonly made in the region, it should not be accepted without evidence. Unfortunately, the only supporting information the book provides is the saying and a single poll (p. 47). It ignores the existing literature that wrestles with the contradictions between filial loyalty and nationalism in ethnic Chinese contexts (e.g. Charles Stafford, “Good Sons and Virtuous Mothers: Kinship and Chinese Nationalism in Taiwan”, *Man* 27, no. 2 (June 1992): 363–78) and the empirical cases where Chinese-majority societies have been able to sustain large standing armies. Indeed, the world’s current three self-governing Chinese-majority territories—the PRC, Taiwan and Singapore—all maintain large militaries founded on very different recruitment and retention models. Furthermore, the unique evidence marshalled by this study directly undermines the military aversion assumption in that many of the senior officers interviewed specifically discuss prestige (“to be somebody” e.g. pp. 108, 110, 124), the honor of service (e.g. pp. 115, 121–22) and youthful “idolization” of the military (e.g. p. 124), as factors that directly encouraged their decisions to serve, even if the education and financial opportunities were more impact factors. The interviews show some families encouraged their children to join military service whereas others thought it a poor choice (pp. 108, 124, 136–39). The fact that the ethnic identity of the officers in each of the numbered interviews is unknown further problematizes the argument. Presumably, this information was left out of the volume to mask the participants’ identities, but after presupposing that cultural heritage as a factor in military recruitment, it is analytically troublesome to lump the interviewees together as simply Singaporean and then draw conclusions about how the Singaporean system overcame cultural barriers. This confusion does not directly undermine the value of the data, but it does call into question the value of some of the book’s assessments.

Overall, those that turn to *Aristocracy of Armed Talent* as a data-driven empirical case-study that informs them about the details of the Singaporean model and how it fits into the strategic landscape will find themselves rewarded. Those looking for an important contribution to civil-military relations may find themselves frustrated by the volume's unfulfilled potential.

JOHN BRADFORD is President of the Yokosuka Council on Asia-Pacific Studies and an Adjunct Fellow at the Institute of Contemporary Asian Studies. Postal address: 902 Platine Yotsuya, 13-4 Arakicho, Shinjuku, Tokyo, 160-0007, Japan; email: John.Bradford@YCAPS.org.