

Despite its limitations, this book is a significant new study of an important aspect of Singapore politics, which moves beyond previous analytical research based largely on general observation and a reliance on local news reports (which, as this study convincingly shows, face an evident credibility problem). It is to be hoped that this study will be a harbinger of more rigorous analytical research to come. Already, its results provide much meat for current debate on the state of Singapore politics. In the Singapore context, the government too might wish to reconsider its policies towards the news media in the light of the book's findings and the leadership's own apparent misreading of the electoral mood. As Leslie Fong, editor of the *Straits Times* recently observed: "treating the press and, by extension, the public, as if they were incapable of thinking for themselves not only demoralizes journalists but also retards the maturing of Singaporeans as a whole. In the end, given that a credible, responsible and responsive press can only be good for Singapore, those who have to deal with it must ask themselves whether what they do, or do not do, will help or impede its growth" (*Straits Times*, 4 September 1993).

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***Singapore Changes Guard.* Edited by Garry Rodan. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993.**

What are the characteristic features of the state of Singapore? As I see it: able and intelligent government, remarkable economic achievements, high level of public services (housing, transport, city planning, green environment, and so forth), and citizens who are expected to work hard, and consume, but not to interfere (except, potentially, once every three or four years) with the processes of government.

The notion of a domesticated (political) but productive (economic) citizenry is officially justified in "neo-Confucian" terms: notably, discipline, respect for authority, and precedence of society over the individual. The dilemma, however, is that the values that help to maintain an orderly and compliant political system are not the ones that will stimulate the economic dynamism that a truly competitive Singapore will increasingly require in the global market-place.

To go fully over to "free market" values, including innovation, individual initiative and the will to win (over others), on the other hand, can

only have disturbing effects on a paternalistic, one-party government and a submissive society — or rather, it will necessitate a different kind (a more recognizably Western kind) of politics and society.

There is a further consideration. It stems from the old idea, now given new prominence, that people “make themselves” by their choices in life. Thus, the character of a person is formed by the choices he or she makes when faced with certain limiting conditions. If these are conditions of extreme poverty, then obviously the only choice is to survive. But as economic conditions improve, so the range of choices grows, and the greater is the opportunity to develop a mature character. A whole personality, in this sense, is not restricted only to economic issues.

Such, at any rate, are the views of this reader — views that have been stimulated by the book that is under review.

Singapore Changes Guard is a thoughtful collection of essays: informative, analytical, comprehensive and comprehensible. Where there is criticism, there is usually — not always — a reasoned explanation. Half the book is on politics or political culture, and the other half on economics or economically-linked social issues. J.L. Margolin’s conclusion that Singapore is a “viable combination of high growth, social development and authoritarian polity” would no doubt be shared by most contributors.

Certainly, the assessment of political stability, administrative-technocratic skill and economic progress appears regularly in foreign, especially business, reports on Singapore’s competitiveness. Given the economy’s crucial importance (supported by political controls and administrative efficiency), it makes sense, I believe, to reverse the order of the book: to begin with economics and end with politics.

Such a reversal, at first glance, has the added attraction of starting with straightforward “technical” issues, on which there is substantial agreement, before moving on to the more debatable political and cultural arena. On reflection, however, even economic policy has political implications.

Thus, Cheah Hock Beng warns that in an era of more intense global competition, problems of higher wages, labour expectations of better work conditions, appreciation of the currency, and domestic pressure for political reforms will arise.

Chris Leggett, in turn, reports on Singapore’s “unique” labour relations. The labour movement complies with government directions; yet it also successfully “resocialises” the work-force. Nevertheless, he cautions that rule by a “meritocratic elite” stifles initiative, by preventing the expression of alternative views.

Linda Low, on the public sector, argues that despite the rhetoric of privatization and emphasis on market forces, the role of the state is still very evident in macro-economic management and in the array of statutory

boards and government-linked companies. There may be a need for still more government support to provide a better educated work-force, and to help enterprises (lacking economies of scale) to develop.

In addition to the chapter on national security, such “political economy” considerations clearly operate in regard to welfare. The government seeks to avoid Western-style “welfarism” (undermining the work ethic, so it is believed). It does so by providing the “preconditions” for social security (which remains an individual or family responsibility) by alleviating poverty, through income maintenance and subsidies for health and education.

Mukul Asher, nevertheless, queries whether such measures can sufficiently address the problems of social adequacy (such as protection against inflation and rising health costs), more equitable social security arrangements (for the poor and the retired) as well as “intangible aspects such as individual freedom”.

Indeed, an “oligarchy of virtue” (James Cotton’s expression) leaves little scope for democratization, precisely because the élite as “moral guardian” (in David Brown’s words) sees its role as imperative both to maintain “statehood” and to enhance the economy. The “changing of the guard” means more consultation and feedback; but there is little likelihood of a liberal middle class emerging.

The material interests of the middle class, as Garry Rodan puts it, are well served by PAP rule. Even though the middle class is somewhat alienated by “over-regulation” and other issues, it is not to the extent of attempting to transform political life. Unlike South Korea or Taiwan, where regimes radicalized the masses, such a situation hardly exists in Singapore.

Here, the emphasis on “Asian” values — rather than David Birch’s unconvincing “media crisis” — serves to reinforce party hegemony. (Although the PAP’s political style is more relaxed, its hegemony is not negotiable). Such values — in Brown’s account as in John Clammer’s — are supposed to counter the destabilizing impact of Western liberal democracy.

The values of discipline, respect for authority and commitment to the community (before the individual) are, indeed, widely shared. But Clammer rightly insists that such values are not “Asian” but universal — though of a conservative kind. (Democracy and human rights are equally universal, in a liberal sense).

Thus, he and others have aptly “deconstructed” the five values; but their own values, too, can receive the same treatment. Clammer, for example, simply assumes that capitalism is “basically exploitative”, without making any attempt to define that term, to relate it to the evidence around, or say what is “basic” about it.

Let us leave the last word to Margolin, who notes the three phases of PAP leadership. First was the “revolutionary” Third World phase of the period in opposition, followed by the social-democratic phase of the 1960s. For the two decades since then, and increasingly, there is the “Nippo-Swiss” model.

But Singapore (although atypical in important respects) is itself a model, as Margolin concludes: a model of economic growth, public housing, town planning and technological upgrading — and of the absence of corruption, unemployment and slums. And yet the paradox remains: authoritarianism in the polity persists in a context of substantial material improvement for most people.

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