

***Singapore in the Global System: Relationship, Structure and Change.* By Peter Preston. London and New York: Routledge, 2007. Hardcover: 277pp.**

The question — how a small state like Singapore positions itself in the global capitalist system — has always been an intriguing one for interested students. Matters pertaining to historical continuities (and discontinuities), economic sustainability and political survival remain the most captivating topics, inviting various interpretations. So far the existing literature on this subject has not been coy in its analysis of the historical trajectory, present strategies and future directions of this economically successful island state in the context of global changes and regional challenges. While most analysts are almost unanimously impressed by its achievements, they offer different interpretations of the factors contributing to the city state's accomplishments, which would inevitably include political stability, elite stewardship, strategic location and economic fundamentals.

This book by Peter Preston, who teaches at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, offers an ambitious and unconventional framework for understanding the path of Singapore's socio and politico-economic trajectories. He locates the development of the city state in its history, geography and strategic location. In the author's words, the book "puts Singapore back into its own history; it puts it back into its own geography, and it puts it back into those local, regional and global structures which have been its sustaining environment" (Preface). In so doing, he offers a fresh look at the subject thereby shattering the arguments that the Singapore success story had everything to do with the People's Action Party (PAP) and the state apparatus it has created. Preston gathers the diverse threads running through the Singapore national order and hones in on historical dynamics and transnational power. The resulting narratives and counter-narratives tell a story of a city state that emerged from the periphery to become a significant trading state, and thereby offers a different explanation. The author strongly suggests that Singapore's success is a function of non-political factors (history, geography and global forces), an argument which directly contradicts the mainstream and official polemics — that contemporary Singapore's achievements were *despite* of these circumstances, and *because of* state-led institutions and PAP policies.

The author begins his version of the Singapore story with a chapter entitled "Singapore contexts", with references to the historical changes that occurred (British Empire, Chinese civil war, Cold War

etc.) and spatial comparisons of Singapore with Shanghai and Hong Kong. The chapter intends to give legitimacy to the title of the book, but the elaboration of Singapore's development vis-à-vis Hong Kong's distracts the focus. Hong Kong is not just featured quite prominently in the first chapter but also in the substantive chapters that follow. The second, third and fourth chapters provide a fuller account of the arguments raised in the first. Only in chapter five ("Locating Singapore"), does the reader get a more extensive discussion of Singapore's history and politics. Chapters seven and eight regress to the author's overarching concern of the development of other cities in the Asia-Pacific region.

This is a curiously structured book. First, the title is about Singapore, but three-quarters of the contents deal with something else. While some of the discussions on comparative developments seem relevant, too many comparisons consequently sidetrack the main issues. Moreover, the only chapter devoted exclusively to Singapore (Chapter six "Locating Singapore") repeats much that was written in other chapters.

As far as the unconventional assertions are concerned, the author refers to an impressive body of social sciences literature. While these assertions were not entirely new, they appear refreshing in light of the author's dedication to prove them. Also, the comparative and macro perspective utilized by the author to examine Singapore should be applauded. Most analysts would have been content to view Singapore from within, or at best, relate it to the rest of the world. The author relates the world to Singapore.

What is less successful, however, is the author's attempt to narrate a different Singapore story convincingly, especially when he deals with its political and nationalist story. Here the reader finds more argumentative claims than academic substantiations. For example, when the author asserts that "Lee Kuan Yew is not Singapore; Singapore was successful before Lee or the PAP came onto the scene." (p. 123), the reader would expect more discussions on the apparent contributions of political pioneers such as Lim Chin Siong, Lim Yew Hock and David Marshall, or at least a more extended discussion on the PAP leaders who opted to stay with Lee after 1965. The author refers to these personalities briefly, only to repeatedly question the mystics attached to Lee as the "ideological capstone of the system" (p. 124).

If the author sought to locate Singapore in the global system, he has succeeded, but only as far as the discussion on its geography is concerned. The historical and economic arguments remain problematic.

The reader is still puzzled by two questions: how should the national history of Singapore be written? And how has Singapore's development — driven by the global, interconnected industries and businesses (and the drivers of world capitalism) — been integrated externally into new globalized circuits of accumulation before the PAP took power in 1959? While it is acceptable to claim that globalization has unified regional blocks or even the world into a single global system, it is less convincing to suggest that Singapore was already integrated into and benefited from the global system in the 1950s and 1960s.

Preston has some interesting things to say. For readers who are interested in an alternative interpretation of Singapore's mainstream arguments of its own national history and success, this book may be of value, but they should not expect to find new or compelling evidence.