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CHINA AND THE “SINGAPORE MODEL”

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With the death of Singapore’s founding leader Lee Kuan Yew in March 2015 and Chinese president Xi Jinping’s ongoing anticorruption campaign, the international and Chinese media have been full of stories about the interest of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership in the “Singapore model” of good governance combined with authoritarian rule. The official Chinese press has noted several “waves of Singapore fever” since China’s “Great Reformer” Deng Xiaoping first visited the Southeast Asian city-state in 1978.

Beijing’s infatuation with Singapore had already been evident during the 2012 once-in-a-decade transfer of power within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), in which references to the city-state featured prominently. A Central Party School media organ under Xi Jinping praised Singapore’s People’s Action Party (PAP) for its “high efficiency, incorruptibility, and vitality” over several decades of one-party rule. Moreover, it has been widely reported that Xi’s anticorruption drive is part of the effort to establish a merit-based civil service emulating that of the PAP. According to former Singaporean foreign minister George Yeo, Xi lavishly praised Singapore in a November 2013 meeting, and in his condolence letter to Singaporean president Tony Tan after Lee Kuan Yew’s death, Xi called Lee “an old friend of the Chinese people.”¹

China remains obsessed with Singapore, which is the only country in the region to achieve advanced economic industrialization without un-

dergoing substantial political liberalization. The key “lesson” that China is trying to learn is how to combine authoritarian rule with “good governance” (“meritocratic” one-party rule). This fits well with Xi’s set of political goals, known as the “Four Comprehensives,” which seeks to develop a “moderately prosperous society” while strengthening economic reforms and rule of law, as well as party discipline. Assessing the influence of the Singapore model on these processes sheds light on China’s active dissemination of meritocratic authoritarianism as a model of governance and the

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challenge that it poses to proponents of democratization.

The impact of the “Singapore model” on China shows that learning by nondemocratic states is not necessarily a short-term “modular” phenomenon that is largely reactive in character, but can be long-term and highly institutionalized. Singapore’s leaders have carefully codified their national model and taught it to thousands of eager Chinese government officials who have visited the city-state to learn its secrets. This makes the “Singapore model” the opposite of what is usually expected with regard to “political learning”: Instead of a major power using its clout to diffuse its own regime form, a small and relatively insignificant country is teaching its governance approach to the “pupils” (government officials) of a major power through carefully designed courses, official and unofficial publications, direct government advice, and an industrial park set up in China. In this way, Singapore actively promotes its own model of economic growth with political stability as a “counter-hegemonic” alternative to the supposed liberal-democratic consensus.

It has become increasingly clear, however, that China sees what it wants to see in Singapore, making the “lessons” learned more caricature than reality. The key to Singapore’s success as a society that is both modern and authoritarian is not simply its carefully calibrated repressiveness, but also its ability to promote meritocracy while allowing a limited degree of political openness and organized political opposition in a multicultural society. China’s recent crackdown on dissenters, squeezing the already limited political space allowed during the post-Tiananmen Square Massacre period, is actually moving the country further away from rather than toward the Singapore model. Already a “lonely” emerging superpower with few peers to which it can compare itself, China sees Singapore as the only political model offering applicable lessons. Yet despite the long-ruling PAP’s landslide electoral vic-

tory in 2015, Singapore appears to be moving in the opposite direction, with opposition consolidating and authoritarian constraints loosening.

China's fascination with Singapore's political system as a role model started in the aftermath of the violent crackdown on the Chinese student movement in 1989. On his famed Southern Tour in 1992, Deng Xiaoping asserted that China should learn from the tiny Southeast Asian city-state and eventually overtake it. This triggered intensified interest in Singapore's governance model among Chinese academics and officials. Dozens of books and thousands of academic papers have been published over the past quarter-century, with about a thousand more being added every year. Since 1990, more than 22,000 Chinese central and local-level officials have traveled to the city-state to explore various aspects of national and local governance, visiting nearly every ministry, government department, and statutory board. Singapore's Nanyang Technological University has even created a program specially tailored to Chinese officials, which has been dubbed the (Chinese) "mayors' class."²

Many Chinese scholars and officials who have visited the island nation have been preoccupied by the issue of how Singapore has successfully resisted democratizing, despite the pressures of modernization.³ Singapore's *Straits Times* reported in November 2008 that there are "a growing number of Chinese academics who have developed an interest in studying Singapore's rapid economic growth, political stability and harmonious social order in recent years." For instance, Nanjing University history professor Lu Zhengtao argued in his 2007 book *Singapore—Modernization Under Authoritarianism* (*Xinjiapo weiquan zhengzhi yanjiu*) that the Southeast Asian city-state demonstrates that countries can successfully modernize under authoritarian rule and that the CCP can successfully adapt in this manner.⁴ Lü Yuanli's *Why Singapore Can Do It* (*Xinjiapo weishenme neng*), which includes a foreword written by current Singaporean prime minister Lee Hsien Loong, had already been through eight print runs by 2009.⁵ Lü also founded a Singapore research center at Shenzhen University.

Beijing actively encourages research on Singapore, as is reflected in the fact that obtaining funding for Singapore-related projects is easier than for projects on any other country. A search of the China Academic Journals Full-Text Database finds only 230 articles with the term *Xinjiapo* (Singapore) published before 1992. Since 2008, more than 800 articles have been published each year, bringing the total to 16,965 in 2015.

Singapore seemingly demonstrates that Asian culture can provide an alternative to competitive democracy. Chinese observers see Confucianism, which stresses moral leadership over political competition, as being highly influential in Singapore's ruling circles. In the process of the ideological formation of what Jonathan London has called a "market-Leninist" regime, the Chinese leadership is experimenting with

a regime-supportive interpretation of Confucianism.⁶ Long before the Chinese Communist leadership looked toward Confucian values, the Singaporean government had issued a white paper propagating “Shared Values” based on Confucian tenets. This became part of the “Asian values” discourse, which constituted a campaign opposing liberal democracy for Asian societies on the grounds that non-Western peoples are inherently disposed toward authoritarianism.

The argument for the superiority of Asian values was largely discredited internationally in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, as some Western critics blamed a “culture of cronyism” related to Asian values as one cause of the crisis.⁷ To sympathetic Mainland observers, however, Singapore’s version of Confucianism appeared to underpin the PAP’s success in maintaining authoritarian rule, with the ruling party leading by moral example and incorporating a paternalistic understanding of individual rights as promoting consensus instead of conflict. As a consequence of this learning process, Chinese reformers are using lessons from the Singaporean model in their efforts to bolster the CCP’s ideological legitimacy and strengthen the governance capacity of one-party rule, thus reducing pressures for democratization. In 2014, the CCP ordered Chinese officials to attend lectures on Confucian classics that had been deeply reviled during Mao’s rule. This campaign has been described as an attempt to counter the diffusion of Western democratic ideas.

Chinese observers admire how decisions in Singapore, in the spirit of wise Confucian leadership, are made in a top-down fashion in the long-term interest of the people. They also underscore the exemplary role of Lee Kuan Yew.⁸ China’s “Singapore watchers” have further reasoned that this proves that centralized one-party rule is compatible with effective governance, which runs counter to the dominant global view that good governance should be decentralized and include public participation. This has been of special concern to the CCP because of its desire to strengthen Chinese political institutions without abandoning the dominant role of the Party. Singapore’s apparent success in eradicating corruption has been a major inspiration for China’s current anticorruption drive. In particular, the practice of punishing everyone equally and not sparing high-ranking officials was drawn from the Singaporean playbook. Strict and professionalized management throughout the hierarchy ensures swift policy implementation. This goal could well be behind Xi Jinping’s recent efforts to centralize his own political control.

Between Illusion and Reality

Despite having studied various aspects of Singapore for more than two decades, many Chinese observers misinterpret what the city-state’s experience really has to offer as lessons for China. Superficial simi-

larities—that Singapore’s population is predominantly ethnic-Chinese and that the ruling PAP has some Leninist features—mask important institutional differences, many of them legacies of British colonial rule. In part, this is due to the PAP’s own idealized version of Singaporean history—the so-called Singapore consensus, which overestimates the extent of the PAP’s actual accomplishments and downplays the role of British colonialism. A common myth is that when the PAP took power, Singapore was an economic backwater. In reality, the crown colony was one of the most advanced territories in the British Empire. Rather than transforming Singapore, the PAP guided it toward making further progress along this earlier trajectory.⁹

Another misconception concerns the extent to which merit determines elite status in Singapore’s government: Although competition within the PAP is intense and meritocratic, the ruling party’s leaders, following colonial patterns, have chosen to promote people like themselves—disproportionately male, ethnic-Chinese, and upper-class, and often drawn from a small circle of elite schools and well-connected families. This narrow elite recruitment means that “the rest of Singaporeans are excluded by definition [from elite circles] from the very beginning.”¹⁰

Although restrictions on civil liberties make Singapore an illiberal regime, its political system has retained some institutionally embedded libertarian characteristics. Jothie Rajah has recently argued that the “rule of law” in Singapore actually conceals strict controls on civil and political rights. But these legal checks constitute more than just pretense, and some judges have invoked them in making decisions that demonstrate a willingness to sometimes defy ruling-party opinion.¹¹ In one high-profile case, for example, the High Court overruled the 2014 conviction of National University of Singapore law professor Tey Tsun Hang, who had written a book critical of the judiciary.¹²

Moreover, in dealing with corruption the government has applied a clear and transparent legal process that is carried out by the independent Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau, which dates back to the first anticorruption commission established in 1952. Such examples of judicial independence are generally ignored by Chinese officials, who find only confirmation for their own version of “rule by law.” The Chinese approach merely codifies authoritarian practice into laws, as in the broad interpretation of the law against “picking quarrels and provoking troubles” that has been invoked to arrest a wide range of dissidents.¹³

Another important difference usually downplayed by Chinese observers is Singapore’s electoral system. Although falling far short of the principles of liberal democracy, it makes Singapore’s authoritarianism much more competitive than China’s.¹⁴ Elections in Singapore matter because they force the ruling party to defend its policies and respond to citizen demands. This has become more pressing with the growing

strength of opposition parties since the 1980s; their strong showing in the 2011 polls threatened the dominant position of the ruling party for the first time since independence in 1965.

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Instead of introducing major legal or electoral reforms, Xi Jinping has dismissed the separation of powers and competitive elections as “Western ideas.” He has centralized power by personally taking control over the most influential “Leading Small Groups”—party organs responsible for policy making. Although Singapore has shown centralized governance to be effective in the city-state, it is virtually impossible to replicate a similar approach in a

country as large and complex as China. According to Andrew Browne of the *Wall Street Journal*, decision making under Xi Jinping has become much more rushed and less predictable, leading to unprecedented policy reversals.¹⁵

Instead of balancing coercion and cooptation, Xi has tightened control over civil society activists even when they do not pose a direct challenge to his rule. The crackdown has included the arrest of women’s-rights activists, human-rights lawyers, and bloggers. Despite its official stance endorsing freedom of religion, the Chinese government has forced Christian churches to remove crosses in an apparent attempt to reduce the rapidly growing influence of Christianity. By contrast, the Singaporean government has taken a much more calibrated approach. The last time oppositionists were arrested under the Internal Security Act, which allows for detention without trial, was in 1987. The uproar that followed led the PAP to rely on more legalistic methods of discouraging opposition and to foster a culture of self-censorship rather than resorting to direct repression. This is particularly evident in Singapore’s approach toward Internet censorship, which involves blocking only a few websites.

Chinese observers’ interpretation of Singapore’s “Confucianist turn” is based on a one-sided view. Despite being trumpeted by Singapore’s government, the “Shared Values” white paper failed to create an ideological consensus in the multiethnic society around conservative Confucian culturalism. Rather, the discourse was largely confined to a number of “official government scribes,” most notably Kishore Mahbubani, Tommy Koh, and Bilahari Kausikan, often referred to collectively as “the Singapore school.”¹⁶ Meanwhile, China’s Confucian revival has been complicated by the fact that a Maoist faction within the CCP continues to resist the introduction of Confucianism into broader Chinese society (as symbolized by the mysterious nighttime removal of a large statue of Confucius near Tiananmen Square in 2011).

The PAP's landslide victory in Singapore's September 2015 general election, winning 69.9 percent of the popular vote and 83 of 89 parliamentary seats, may have raised hopes among Chinese observers that the Southeast Asian city-state had found the magic formula for maintaining one-party-dominant rule. Yet at least part of the PAP's electoral gains—it won nearly 10 percent more of the popular vote in 2015 than in 2011—came from the fact that 2015 marked the death of Lee Kuan Yew and the fiftieth anniversary of Singapore's independence. Despite its sizeable vote gain, the PAP could not win back the groups representation constituency (GRC) that it lost to the opposition for the first time in the 2011 general election, in what was considered a landmark achievement for antigovernment forces.¹⁷

Most important, the PAP no longer has the aura of invincibility that makes a strong opposition unthinkable. Despite their losses in 2015, opposition parties remain very much a part of Singapore's political landscape, with realistic prospects of future electoral gains. After the opposition's strong showing in 2011, the PAP had to become more responsive, with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong publicly apologizing for the ruling party's mistakes and promising improvements. In the years since, the PAP has strengthened its community involvement and introduced more social programs to deal with citizen complaints. Moreover, the virtual absence of direct censorship (along with the more pluralistic nature of the government-linked mainstream media) means that in Singapore there is a lively public discourse that is far less controlled than what one finds in China.

Singapore's regular elections, which involve vigorous campaigns that influence government policies, sharply contrast with China's lack of any such polls. China initiated experiments with competitive village elections in 1987, but voting has not been adopted at any higher level. In addition, the quality of village elections has been seriously questioned, with vote-buying and other forms of manipulation often skewing the electoral process.¹⁸ Moreover, the central state has not reduced its control over the localities and thus denies them the autonomy needed for effective governance.

A Lonely Superpower

With China's more aggressive recent stance in the South China Sea, Singapore's geopolitical relations with China have cooled. But even in the past, the late Lee Kuan Yew, despite his close ties to China's leaders, made it clear that the city-state should be more wary of China than of the United States.¹⁹ Edward Snowden's revelations about surveillance carried out by the U.S. National Security Agency included documentation of extensive intelligence cooperation between Singapore and the United States.²⁰ Singapore has continued to support the U.S. role in the region,

most recently by deciding to allow four U.S. littoral-combat ships to operate from the island nation, perhaps out of an underlying worry about the impact of China's growing military presence in the region.

There are also concerns in Singapore that China's "one road, one belt" (or "new Silk Road") initiative may reduce Singapore's relative importance for Asian trade. Although touted as an opportunity for Singapore, the much shorter land route could lead to a significant diversion of Singapore's trade away from the Straits of Malacca. These tensions between the two countries may be behind the growing criticism of Singapore in China. This was evident from some of the negative comments by Chinese bloggers about Lee Kuan Yew's stature just after his death (calling him "only a mayor"), as well as from questions raised about "how Chinese" Singapore really is.

Nonetheless, it is unlikely that the CCP's obsession with Singapore will decline anytime soon, despite Chinese misperceptions of the factors that have produced Singapore's success. It would be hard for China to find ideological reinforcement for its project of combining centralized authoritarian rule with effective and corruption-free government anywhere else in today's world. China is a "lonely superpower," and not just because of its growing political isolation in the region due to its aggressive foreign policy. It is moving into unknown territory by attempting to modernize while remaining authoritarian, the only rising economic power in the twenty-first century to seriously pursue this strategy. Instead of seeking popular support through elections, the CCP is increasingly relying on nationalist appeals. The ruling elite emphasizes China's "century of humiliation" and its historic destiny; it seeks to revive conservative Confucianism, puts forth expansive territorial claims, and engages in displays of military power. Its policies are more reminiscent of the "Prussian path" to modernity and great-power status than of any political model in the contemporary world.

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