

Power and Populism: What the Singapore Model Means for the Chinese Dream

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Abstract

Singapore's political system is sometimes criticized by proponents of liberal democracy as being highly authoritarian and inhibiting of individual freedom. Yet, as the recent 2015 general elections show, Singaporeans have largely consented to such a model as a legitimate social contract between themselves and the government. Given that the Singapore model is widely studied by Chinese officials as a positive pattern for governance, what do the latest results say about the future of the Chinese governing system, and to what extent is the Communist Party able to wield power while catering to populist sentiments, in particular the achievement of the Chinese dream?

Keywords: Singapore; China; populism; Chinese Dream

Following Deng Xiaoping's landmark visit to Singapore in 1978, China has demonstrated much interest in emulating Singapore in several aspects of its domestic governance. In 2012, then vice-president Xi Jinping commissioned China Central Television (CCTV) to produce a ten-part series on Singapore's governance and the ways in which China could learn from the city-state. It was mentioned that Singapore had created a "unique miracle in the world" and that Chinese leaders would like to adopt such a model of governance for China's "further reforms and sustainable development."¹ Consequently, following Xi's ascension to the Chinese presidency, the phrase "Chinese dream" (*Zhongguomeng* 中国梦) has been mentioned frequently as an aspirational goal for the Chinese people to pursue, and synonymous with President Xi's views about the future of China.²

What then, is the link between the Singapore model and the Chinese Dream? According to Liu Mingfu, a senior colonel in the Chinese military, and the author of the book *The China Dream: Great Power Thinking and Strategic Posture in the Post-American Era*, the "secret" of the Singapore model lies in its being "tolerant to diversity"; this diversity, as Liu puts it, is due to Singapore's ability to "using capitalism and socialism to supplement one another and create a more perfect

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1 Pei and Kor 2012.

2 Li 2015; Callahan 2016.

result.”³ In this respect, socialism with Chinese characteristics can be defined as a “combination of the best from China and the best from abroad, especially the best products of global capitalism.”⁴ To what extent is Liu’s analysis an accurate depiction of what the Singapore model is about? Given that the People’s Action Party (PAP) claims socialism as a driving worldview towards their governing philosophy,⁵ such a line of reasoning should not be dismissed entirely, notwithstanding the ongoing evolution of the PAP’s thinking under different leadership administrations.

Yet, as observed, there exists a difference in the social traditions of the East Asian little dragons (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore) from that of China.⁶ Moreover, given the sheer disparity between Singapore and China in terms of country size, can a Singapore model *really* provide a blueprint for Beijing in terms of its future? What are the elements of the Singapore model that resonate with Beijing, and what are the limitations, if any, of such a model as applied to China? To what extent can Chinese leaders learn, or are willing to learn, from Singapore’s experience, not just as a model of semi-authoritarian rule with staying power, but in respect to other aspects of its governance, such as its parliamentary system, its light-touch regulation to cyber citizenship, and a civil service that is seen to be largely non-politicized (civil servants are obliged to resign from their jobs in order to run for political office).⁷ Finally, this article hopes to address the central question that relates to the Chinese Dream and the future of the Communist Rule in China: *is staying in power a by-product of good governance or is it a pre-requisite to good governance?*

This article will proceed as follows: I will first briefly touch on the tenets of what the Singapore model entails. Given that this has been studied by a number of scholars in various fields, from economics⁸ to education⁹ to the environment,¹⁰ I will focus my attention on elements of the Singapore model as applied to the field of governance, and more specifically, how it is being conceived by Singapore’s founding leader, Lee Kuan Yew – whose ideas were instrumental in shaping the character of modern Singapore.¹¹ To be certain, Singapore’s so-called success story cannot be attributed to Lee alone, nor the result of a single

3 Liu 2015, 74.

4 Ibid.

5 For a discussion of how socialism – broadly defined – is used as a governing worldview in Singapore, see, Quah, Chan and Seah 1985; Goh 1976. To be certain, the Singapore model evinces certain traits compatible with democratic systems, and thus can be more accurately termed “democratic socialist,” according to Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. See Chai 2013.

6 Berger 1987.

7 This is not to say that the civil service is entirely apolitical. Many PAP politicians come from the senior ranks of the civil service and upon retirement, many take up senior positions in the bureaucracy and government-linked companies. However, the key point to be stressed here is that the civil service in Singapore is not subjected to the same level of politicization as that in China. For a study in the relationship between the government and the public service in Singapore, see Chan 1975.

8 Huff 1995.

9 Marginson 2011.

10 Koh 2011.

11 Han, Fernandez and Tan 1998.

ideological narrative (be it socialism or the lessons from British colonial legacy). Instead, it can be argued that pragmatism and an acute sense of Singapore's vulnerabilities framed the way Singapore's first-generation leaders understood and applied themselves to the work of governing the country, both in its domestic and external aspects.¹² Following this, I will go on to discuss the Chinese Dream, as envisaged by President Xi Jinping and what this Dream tells us about the future of China as well as the *type* of China that is hoped to be presented to the world. Finally, I will conclude with an appraisal on the extent to which the Singapore model is applicable to the fulfilment of the Chinese Dream and what this could mean for the future of the Communist Party's leadership in China.

Lee Kuan Yew and the Singapore Model

While Singapore's political system is sometimes criticized by proponents of liberal democracy as being authoritarian and inhibitive of individual freedom,¹³ yet its government, led by the People's Action Party (PAP), regularly ranks among the top globally in terms of the quality of its government and the ability to govern effectively.¹⁴ Much of this success is due to Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's first prime minister from 1959 to 1990, and who up until his passing on 23 March 2015 retained a substantial influence in the country's policymaking, including serving as a minister mentor to his younger colleagues. A recent work, *The Legacy of Lee Kuan Yew*, which is a series of reflective essays written by some scholars and senior policymakers, both inside and outside Singapore, has highlighted the immense contribution made by Lee in the manner of his leadership, Singapore's foreign policy and its nation-building.¹⁵ According to Mushahid Ali, who co-edited the work, among Lee's "greatest contribution to Singapore's growth has been the self-confidence he instilled in the citizens that they are masters of their destiny, and that they can build a society united in their resolve to ensure their survival as a multi-cultural yet modern nation in Southeast Asia that will prosper for a century or more."¹⁶

In this respect, Lee's legacy would be felt most vividly in Singapore's civil service, which is widely considered to be among the best in the world, and which China seeks to emulate, in part or in whole (as we will further discuss). Former top senior civil servant Eddie Teo acknowledged Lee's shaping of Singapore's public service, which in Lee's mind, "should be cleaned up and turned into an incorruptible and meritocratic institution ... having watched

12 Schein 1996; Leifer 2000; Kassim and Ali 2015.

13 For works which are critical of the Singapore model, see Barr 2014; Gomez 2006; George 2007; Rodan 2016; Low 2014.

14 Worldwide Governance Indicators, Country Data for Singapore: 1996–2014, <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/pdf/c193.pdf>. Accessed 14 March 2016.

15 Kassim and Ali 2015.

16 *Ibid.*, xx.

how other newly-independent countries went downhill, Mr Lee realized that the best way for our public servants to imbibe the DNA of incorruptibility was for the political leaders themselves to stay clean.”¹⁷

Likewise, Kishore Mahbubani also highlighted Lee’s strong commitment to building strong institutions in Singapore that would outlive his term in political service. Noting that Samuel Huntington had once predicated that “the honesty and efficiency that Senior Minister Lee has brought to Singapore are likely to follow him to his grave”, Mahbubani expressed confidence “that many of the institutions [Lee] built will stand the test of time.”¹⁸ What then is (or are) the central tenet(s) of the Singapore model? Various studies have attempted to piece together how the Singapore government – led by Lee in earlier days – functions, and the extent to which such a model can be applied to other nation-states. For instance, Ortmann and Thompson argue that the key to Singapore’s success as a society 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.¹⁹ The same authors also highlighted Singapore’s blend of authoritarian-modernity as a template that Chinese officials are attempting to learn from.²⁰ Elsewhere, I have also analysed several key aspects of domestic governance that are characteristic of Lee Kuan Yew’s approach to governing Singapore, including the importance placed in political leadership, the stability of the ruling party and the country’s economic growth.²¹ These studies, however, focus mostly on political leadership and governing ideology, but do not account sufficiently for the *everyday processes* behind Singapore’s government institutional composition.

In this respect, a closer analysis of Singapore’s government institutions would provide clues as to how Singapore’s governing worldview is being conceived, operationalized and regularized in the activity of work processes and procedures. This is important, both for our study of the Singapore model and, consequently, for China, given that the complexity of governance would necessitate more than just “charismatic leadership” (as epitomized by Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore and Mao in China). Such an approach will also provide clues as to “what makes Singapore tick” beyond the idiosyncrasies of political personality (however influential they may be) and allow us to appraise the extent to which the prosperity and success of the nation can be sustained in the long run in the absence of its founding leader.

In the following, I will argue three key ideas that are deeply embedded within Singapore’s government institutions that are reflective of what the Singapore model entails. They are, namely, dynamic governance and being adaptive to change, nation-building from a position of weakness, and the upholding of

17 Ibid., 10–11.

18 Mahbubani 2016.

19 Ortmann and Thompson 2016.

20 Ortmann and Thompson 2014.

21 Ho 2016.

high moral standards in political leadership. Not surprisingly, Lee's influence looms large in all three areas.

Dynamic governance and adaptive to change

In a study of Singapore's government institutions, Neo and Chen articulate a framework with which to understand how the Singapore government operates, and more importantly, how it is able to address dynamic challenges that often involve many decision makers and in what way it is able to implement policies effectively and rapidly.²² In their study, the authors put forth the argument that the effectiveness of Singapore's civil service cannot be directly attributed to any single individual leader or any one particular cause or policy:

Instead we found a working system with multiple interactions and interdependencies. Its unique historical and political contexts were important but so were the ambition and active efforts to create and secure its future. Leadership was crucial *but so were the systems and processes that were institutionalized*. There were deeply-held beliefs and assumptions but there was also openness to abandon past practices and experiment with new ideas. Social stability was desired but there were also strong commitments and capabilities to change. Agencies operate quite autonomously and yet there was some coherence in overall direction. There were many policy ideas that were learnt from others but there were also significant innovations. Policies were executed efficiently but were also adapted in the process of implementation. *There were strong values and principles of governance that officials seemed to have internalized and yet these were mostly transmitted socially rather than formally.*²³ (Italics mine.)

According to the authors, the Singapore model can be best described as one of "dynamic governance." While this was not being articulated explicitly or documented by Singapore's leaders, it nonetheless remained "implicit in the minds of the leadership, and constantly refreshed with keen observations and thoughtful reflection."²⁴ This framework of governance, it is argued, is founded upon a country's institutional culture, and its government's capability is being tested in three areas, namely, "thinking ahead, thinking again, and thinking across." To develop these capabilities, there is a need to develop "able people and able processes" so as to better withstand and respond to future uncertainties and external practices brought about by the external environment.²⁵ In this respect, Lee was highly instrumental in forging public institutions that were highly adaptive and adroit in responding to the changing environment, while at the same time keeping long-term objectives in mind. According to Neo and Chen, the fact that the ruling PAP was confident in winning elections meant that it could adopt a decision-making process that "stressed long-term solutions and sustainable policies rather than short-term political popularity."²⁶ At the same time, Singapore remained highly receptive to learning from the experiences of other countries and finding

22 Neo and Chen 2007. The study was based on over 200 interviews with public sector leaders and staff as well as data and documents collected from several government ministries.

23 Ibid., 23.

24 Ibid., 11.

25 Ibid., 13.

26 Ibid., 28.

ways to improve on them. As recounted by Lee, it was estimated some “70 per cent of the governance ideas in Singapore were learnt and adapted from elsewhere.”²⁷ For instance, the decision to relocate the international airport from Paya Lebar to Changi (and in the process writing off some S\$750 million of investments) was motivated by Lee’s observation of aircraft landing and takeoff at Boston’s Logan airport, which was located beside the sea. By locating Singapore’s new airport in Changi by the sea, it would solve the perennial noise problem created by aircraft landing and takeoff over residential areas near the old airport at Paya Lebar.²⁸ Likewise, when building its armed forces, the Ministry of Defence learnt from the military doctrines and training methodologies of the Israeli Defence Forces.²⁹ Also, the personnel appraisal system in the civil service and the public sector’s approach to scenario planning were adapted from the Royal Dutch Shell group. Growing Singapore as a garden city was in part motivated by what Lee saw in Phnom Penh.³⁰ All this reflected as well the fact that the Singapore model was entirely the result of human endeavour and hard work, or as Lee himself puts it, “man-made ... contrived to fit the needs of the modern world and it has to be amended all the time as the needs change.”³¹ More importantly, they suggest that the Singapore model – far from being utterly unique or novel – is premised on more modest foundations, that is, learning from others and being responsive to changes in its external environment so as to maximize its chances of success.

Governance through a position of weakness

At the same time, Singapore’s leaders are wont to recognize certain ongoing and perennial patterns in international politics, particularly in regard to the nature of conflict,³² and consequently the need to fiercely safeguard Singapore’s national survival against external threats. In this respect, scholars of Singapore’s foreign policymaking have frequently alluded to the heightened sensitivity of Singapore’s leaders towards external geopolitics and the sense of vulnerability due to its geographical location.³³ The need to “cope with vulnerability,” as Michael Leifer puts it, necessitated a foreign policy that is “rooted in a culture of siege and insecurity which dates from the traumatic experience of an unanticipated separation from Malaysia in August 1965.”³⁴ With this backdrop in mind,

27 Cited in Neo Boon Siong, “Strategic Thinking of Dynamic Governance”, date unknown. <http://www.carecprogram.org/uploads/events/2009/Exec-Leadership-Devt-Program/Strategic-Thinking-and-Dynamic-Governance.pdf>. Accessed 6 September 2017.

28 Liew 2015.

29 Hussain, Zakir. 2016. “PM Lee takes stock of Singapore’s ties with Israel,” *The Straits Times*, 19 April. <http://www.straitstimes.com/world/middle-east/pm-lee-takes-stock-of-singapores-ties-with-israel>. Accessed 27 April 2017.

30 Neo and Chen 2007, 43.

31 *Ibid.*, 88.

32 For a sketch of this worldview, see Kausikan 2017.

33 Leifer 2000; Ganesan 2005; Acharya 2007.

34 Leifer 2000, 4.

Neo and Chen argue that Singapore’s approach to governance is consequently shaped by its leaders’ view of its “unique position, circumstances and history – its small size, lack of resources, geographical location and multicultural make-up”:³⁵

*The perceived vulnerabilities of Singapore’s position influenced the leadership’s intent and purpose, its activist stance, and the adoption of several strategic imperatives for good governance: long-term thinking, global relevance, sustained economic growth, social stability, financial prudence, self-reliance and people development.*³⁶ (Italics mine.)

From this, one might argue that the roots of the Singapore model were established, not from a position of power but from a position of weakness, in which its very statehood was not and could not be taken for granted, instead requiring the ingenuity of Lee and his team of first-generation leaders to establish and ensure it. This was a message that permeated successive generations of Singapore leaders, and which was mostly clearly articulated in the formation of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF).³⁷ The need then, to safeguard Singapore’s interests loomed large for Lee, and framed the manner in which Singapore’s foreign policy was being conducted. Former top diplomat Bilahari Kausikan speaks of Singapore’s sovereignty as “never a given”;³⁸ what ultimately mattered was the national interest, and for Singapore to survive and prosper, it was necessary to maintain good relations – as far as possible – with as many countries as possible. According to Lee’s former principal private secretary, “Mr Lee was a firm advocate of having a balance of power to create a conducive global environment and international order for small countries like Singapore to survive and prosper.”³⁹ Yet, there was a recognition that the international environment was highly unpredictable and thus Singapore had to be both “nimble and alert, to ensure that in any arrangement or shifts in the balance of power it had the preponderant force on its side.”⁴⁰

This position of weakness was also seen in Singapore’s staunch support in the formation and ongoing consolidation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) which, despite its institutional limitations,⁴¹ continues to retain a substantial degree of importance in Singapore’s foreign policymaking. While a number of scholars have highlighted the inconsistent character of ASEAN states’ approach to multilateral diplomacy,⁴² a more hard-nosed view of realpolitik reality would recognize the necessity – however problematic – of ASEAN as an institution instrumental to the region’s dealings with bigger powers. Bilahari Kausikan puts it starkly:

35 Ibid., 26.

36 Ibid., 27.

37 Huxley 2000.

38 Cheong 2016.

39 Chee 2016.

40 Ang 2015, 44.

41 Ba 2010; Emmers and Tan 2011.

42 Chang 2016; Yamakage 2005.

ASEAN centrality is not a boast about ASEAN's strategic weight. Rather it is an acknowledgement of ASEAN's relative weakness vis-à-vis the major powers and a means of turning that weakness into advantage. If ASEAN has been able to set some regional norms; if the major powers have found some ASEAN-led forum such as the ARF and the EAS, of use and worth their time, it is because they are confident that they can use these norms and forums in their interests, but if push comes to shove, ASEAN cannot frustrate their most vital interests. That is the only reason why they have been willing to concede a "central" role to ASEAN. In other words, in its relations with external powers, *ASEAN works best when it does not work too well*.⁴³ (Italics mine.)

Given this, one might argue that critics of ASEAN are missing the point and the real value of ASEAN's existence. It is precisely from a position of weakness that ASEAN derives its significance as a regional institution with which to engage the major powers. As such, it is not surprising that Singapore continues to promote ASEAN, not simply because it has much to gain from membership of ASEAN *internally*, but rather because ASEAN provides the leverage for Singapore (and other ASEAN states) to benefit *externally* in its relations with bigger powers. By starting from a position of weakness, ASEAN states – including Singapore – are able to become collectively enmeshed in order to make their voices heard (and their interests represented) at the international level, as opposed to going it alone and having their voices (and interests) dwarfed or drowned out by other global priorities.

Upholding of high moral standards in political leadership

A final, and perhaps, I argue, the most idiosyncratic aspect of the Singapore model is the emphasis placed on the adherence to high moral standards among political leaders, both in their public office and personal lives. In the case of the former, Singapore's government adopts a "zero-tolerance" policy⁴⁴ regarding corruption, while in the latter case, a number of high-profile political leaders have had to step down from office over the past few years as a result of their extramarital affairs being exposed.

For instance, PAP ministers are often decked out in white shirts and white slacks because white was seen to "symbolize purity and honesty in our personal behavior and our public life."⁴⁵ To this end, Lee was adamant that his ministers were being respected by the people and that they were able to live up to the expectations of the electorate. As such, corruption is taken very seriously in Singapore's political scene, as it runs against the grain of what the PAP purports to stand for. One way it has sought to minimize this from happening is to pay its

43 Kausikan 2015.

44 Critics of the Singapore model sometimes point to the Nassim Jade Scandal implicating Lee Kuan Yew and his family, suggesting that the Singapore government may not be as incorruptible as claimed. Lee Kuan Yew, then Senior Minister, submitted a written reply to Parliament explaining the circumstance behind the purchase, and the matter was then considered closed. See SM Parliament speech on 21 May 1996 <http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/066-1996-05-21.pdf>. Accessed 27 April 2017. Whether one is entirely convinced that Lee is innocent or otherwise beyond the scope of this article to ascertain.

45 Lee 2000, 183.

top leaders a generous remuneration, a practice that has invited considerable criticism from both domestic and foreign quarters, but one that it nonetheless still insists upon.⁴⁶ The political rationale for this was that a high salary would minimize the temptation to become corrupted. Furthermore, given the changing landscape of Singapore's society, one could not assume that public sector leaders would serve out of purely altruistic reasons and that they were “*not* necessarily motivated differently from bankers and lawyers as far as rewards went.”⁴⁷ Such a strategy, however, does not mean that corruption could be completely eradicated. For instance, during the 1980s then Minister of National Development Teh Cheang Wan was under suspicion for accepting bribes of half a million in exchange for housing contracts, and committed suicide shortly after investigations against him commenced. Lee, in his memoirs, mentioned Teh's downfall as “most dramatic” as the government had established a “climate of opinion” which looked upon corruption in public office as a “threat to society.”⁴⁸

More recent examples involving PAP Members of Parliament (MPs) include David Ong Kim Huat (in 2016) and Michael Palmer (in 2012), in which both men had to step down from political office following revelations of their extramarital affairs.⁴⁹ In both cases, Singapore's deputy prime ministers had to make public apologies to the constituencies the men were serving in. Other instances of corruption and vice implicating senior public officials have also surfaced in Singapore in recent years, such as the country's former anti-narcotics chief, a Foreign Service officer, and the head of the civil defence force, leading to the incarceration of those involved. Given that many PAP leaders have been scouted from the civil service, corruption or vice within public service would therefore – at least to some extent – tarnish the party's reputation and consequently the reputation of Singapore as a country free from corruption. In this respect, the attitude Lee had towards corruption circumscribed how the government viewed this issue, as expressed by Lee in his memoirs whereby he and his PAP colleagues were:

... sickened by the greed, corruption and decadence of many Asian leaders. Fighters for freedom for their oppressed peoples had become plunderers of their wealth.... We were swept up by the wave of revolution in Asia, determined to get rid of colonial rule but angry and ashamed of the Asian nationalist leaders whose failure to live up to their ideals had disillusioned us.... We had a deep sense of mission to establish a clean and effective government.⁵⁰

According to Neo and Chen, Singapore's strong stand against corruption is premised on the “belief in the value of integrity and service to society” and as such,

46 In a review of Singapore's ministerial salaries, it was highlighted that there was a need to attract and retain talented people in top government positions, and hence the need to pay realistic salaries that are pegged to the top private sector salaries so that it would not impose an unrealistically large financial sacrifice on those contemplating political office. As of 2015, an “entry-level” Cabinet minister in Singapore can expect to receive an annual salary from S\$935,000 (approximately USD\$671,000). Chang 2015.

47 Neo and Chen 2007, 176.

48 *Ibid.*, 187–89.

49 Foo 2016.

50 Lee 2000, 182–83.

“all cases of corruption attracted extensive media coverage and served as a constant reminder of the tough stance of the government on corruption,”⁵¹ particularly if they involved high-ranking public officials. To this end, public servants who were guilty of being corrupted were subjected to public shaming through publicity as a “key part of the punishment.”⁵²

Governing China and the Chinese Dream

In the case of China, I argue that the issue of governance remains paramount to the priorities established across successive generations of Chinese leadership, from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping. According to David Lampton, China’s greatest governance and leadership challenges are “figuring out how to tame mounting social pluralism, and direct it constructively and cooperatively.”⁵³ This is where President Xi’s vision of the Chinese Dream comes in. Shortly after the unveiling of China’s fifth-generation leaders at the 18th CCP National Congress, While visiting the National History Museum in Beijing, President Xi gave a speech entitled “Achieving Rejuvenation is the Dream of the Chinese People.” In this speech, Xi exhorted Chinese citizens to pursue the Chinese Dream (*Zhongguomeng* 中国梦):

In my opinion, achieving the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation has been the greatest dream of the Chinese people since the advent of modern times. This dream embodies the long-cherished hope of several generations of the Chinese people, gives expression to the overall interests of the Chinese nation and Chinese people, and represents the shared aspiration of all the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation.⁵⁴

Given the setting in which the speech was made, one might view Xi as invoking among the Chinese citizenry a strong sense of historical pride regarding their country, so as to unite them under the umbrella of a shared common destiny. As observed, “expectations are high in China for Xi to act quickly on a range of issues; there is a sense of urgency in Beijing because people feel that China’s ‘window of opportunity’ for global greatness is closing.”⁵⁵

This appeal directed at the Chinese Dream was once again made in Xi’s first official address to the Party during the 12th National People’s Congress on 17th March 2013, following the official handover of power. Unlike his first speech, in which the “Chinese Dream” was defined vaguely as national rejuvenation, this speech was a clarion call to action, with parameters more clearly defined:

“To realize the Chinese Dream, *we must take our own path*, which is the path of building socialism with Chinese characteristics”;

“To realize the Chinese Dream, *we must foster the Chinese spirit*”;

51 Neo and Chen 2007, 28–29; 159.

52 Ibid., 159.

53 Lampton 2014, 77.

54 Xi 2014, 38.

55 Callahan 2013, 22.

“To realize the Chinese Dream, *we must pool China’s strength*, that is, the strength of great unity among the people of all ethnic Chinese”;

“The Chinese Dream is, in the final analysis, the dream of the people; so we must rely firmly on them to realize it, and *we must steadily deliver benefits to them.*”⁵⁶ (Italics mine.)

Not surprisingly, the speech concluded with a direct reference to the Communist Party as “the central force for leading and bringing together people of all ethnic groups in advancing the great cause of building Chinese socialism,” as well as exhorting Chinese citizens to “rally more closely” with the Party in order for the Chinese Dream to be achieved.⁵⁷ The Chinese Dream theme would go on to be repeated in five other speeches that Xi made over the next fourteen months (April 2013–June 2014), both to locals and foreigners. In these speeches, Xi spoke on the need for “hard work [to] make dreams come true,”⁵⁸ and the need for innovation⁵⁹ as well as the Chinese Dream benefitting people from other nations.⁶⁰

Seen this way, the Chinese Dream can be understood as a proclamation of a Chinese political “gospel,” whereby China seeks to “confer blessings” both on its own citizens and the international community. As one Chinese scholar writes, “the core message of the Chinese Dream is that China’s rise is not a zero-sum game, but a mutual win–win situation for the rest of the world.”⁶¹ The image is then of China as a flourishing civilization whose values and way of life are attractive to both insiders and outsiders, thus rendering cooperation inevitable and conflict obsolete. Such an outcome, however, is not a certainty, but is contingent on the preservation of two key criteria, namely, socialism (with Chinese characteristics) and the centrality of the Communist Party of China.

Socialism with Chinese characteristics, according to Xi, remains an indispensable “doctrine” that “can save China ... [and] bring development to China.”⁶² Xi refers to China’s history to buttress his point, noting that the socialist system was an outcome of the Party’s “painstaking efforts ... accomplished by the whole Party and whole people, under several generations of the Party’s central collective leadership, through numerous trials and tenacious efforts.”⁶³ As such, Xi is allying himself with Chinese history – as interpreted through the Party’s vantage point – and concludes that Chinese socialism remains the “only way to achieve China’s socialist modernization and create a better life.”⁶⁴ Not surprisingly, Xi also maintains that Chinese socialism – however imperfect at present – remains “unique and effective” and that party members should guard against “erroneous views aimed at abandoning socialism.”⁶⁵

56 Xi 2014, 41–43.

57 Ibid., 45–46.

58 Ibid., 47–53.

59 Ibid., 63–69.

60 Ibid., 61–63.

61 Li 2015, 517.

62 Xi 2014, 24.

63 Ibid., 7.

64 Ibid., 9.

65 Ibid., 11.

Quoting the ancient Chinese philosopher Laozi, Xi said “governing a big country [like China] is as delicate as frying a small fish (*zhidaguo ru pengxiaoxian*, 治大国如烹小鲜),” thus party members ought not to be negligent in the smallest of matters and need to devote themselves to work and the public interest.⁶⁶ Interestingly, the above quote was also used by former US president Ronald Reagan in his 1988 State of the Union speech, but with the added advice “do not overdo it.” From this, it can be adduced that while Reagan’s emphasis was on a more *laissez-faire* approach to domestic governance, Xi’s approach would be to retain considerable Party oversight over matters of governance and policy affairs. This is because, given the single-party system of Chinese governance, the fortunes of the Communist Party are coterminous with the fortunes of China. In other words, a strong party and a strong China go hand-in-hand; as Xi puts it in a speech made at the 80th anniversary of the Central Party School, “Leading officials must study the Party’s guidelines, principles and policies, and the country’s laws and regulations. An understanding of these is a basic preparation we must make for our work, and it is also a political attainment we must have.”⁶⁷

Squaring the Chinese Dream with the Singapore Model

Why should we care about the Chinese Dream, Chinese socialism and the Chinese leadership? Xi’s words are not entirely unexpected, and his proclamations are not exactly unique. At the same time, the Chinese Dream discourse is not simply empty talk, but reflects a broader Chinese mindset concerning the ways in which Chinese leaders perceive China’s economic development and its place in the world. In the words of Zhou Tianyong, who is the vice-director of Research at the Party School of the Communist Party of China’s Central Committee, the Chinese Dream “is rooted in [the Chinese] people’s obligations, trust, hopes and dreams for themselves, families, society and country in the future, and the pursuit for the vision and ideal of China.”⁶⁸ However, it raises the larger question of the extent to which the Chinese Dream is able to incorporate and account for the interests of other countries, and that Chinese leaders are not perceived as merely acting on behalf of *only* China’s national interests. In a discussion of “the China model,” which was widely promulgated in the late 2000s, Suisheng Zhao observes that such a model, despite its “non-ideological, pragmatic and experimental approach” suffers from several fault lines: 1) it lacks moral appeal; 2) it has not been effective in dealing with important dimensions of human development home and abroad; and 3) the success of the model is very short and its durability is questionable.⁶⁹ If one sees such a model as

66 Ibid., 458.

67 Ibid., 452.

68 Zhou 2014, 7.

69 For a succinct outline of the China Model, See Pan 2007. For various analysis of the China model, see Zhao 2010; Fukuyama and Zhang 2014; Su and Tao 2017; Chan, Lee and Chan 2008; Breslin 2011.

possessing shades of what the Chinese Dream entails, then the bigger question that needs to be answered is whether or not it possesses universal appeal.

Relating this to the Singapore-model, China's interest in Singapore, as Ortmann and Thompson put it, lies in "trying to learn how to combine authoritarian rule with good governance."⁷⁰ However, as the authors also point out, similarities between China and Singapore, such as the predominant ethnic Chinese population and socialist governing features "mask important institutional differences"⁷¹ between both countries. In the case of Singapore, many features inherited from British colonial rule exist (including its legal system, not to mention Lee's own British education) that are not present in China's governing system, and which, despite a number of institutional changes over the years, continue to bear hallmarks of imperial China.⁷²

Furthermore, if one takes the themes discussed earlier as hallmarks of the Singapore model, then deeper cleavages between Singapore's governance experience and that of China become more pronounced. For instance, in the case of dynamic governance, it is unlikely that the standards of Chinese public service come close to that of Singapore. According to Saich, the advent of the internet has made it difficult for the Chinese government, which has traditionally practised a system of information control and censure, to monitor – let alone manage – what is being transmitted online or if its view of events prevails.⁷³ Other studies have also highlighted the difficulties of the Chinese government in relating to civil society (which is often viewed as anti-party and having pro-democratic tendencies), practising corporate social responsibility, and non-government organizations.⁷⁴ It is also observed that despite more than a quarter-century of reforms, Chinese government officials remain far too likely to interfere with the economy for various reasons, "sometimes to uphold regional blockages, sometimes to tax businesses, and sometimes to enrich themselves."⁷⁵ Indeed, David Lampton also notes that "some of the largest beneficiaries of initial reform (in the 1970s and '80s) have become resistant to further change that might reduce their gains."⁷⁶ In his discussion of the recently created National Security Commission, Lampton further makes the argument that Xi's "span of control is too broad to be effectively discharged and, for better or worse, creates the reality that policy is more reflective of one person's priorities rather than a collective judgment."⁷⁷ Notwithstanding the rhetorical emphasis President Xi places on reforms, it remains to be seen whether such reforms can indeed lead to the desired outcome whereby effective policymaking and dynamic governance can be achieved,

70 Ortmann and Thompson 2016, 40.

71 *Ibid.*, 43.

72 Callahan 2012.

73 Saich 2011, 337–342.

74 Zheng and Fewsmith 2008.

75 Fewsmith 2003, 33.

76 Lampton 2014, 79.

77 Lampton 2015, 774.

particularly in the highly complex environment and information milieu that is present-day China.

In addition, given China's rise, much of its international relations today are conducted from a position of strength, not weakness. While it still faces huge challenges domestically, its size and global influence make it far too prominent to follow Deng Xiaoping's "lying low" (*taoguang yanghui* 韬光养晦) strategy.⁷⁸ "Certainly Chinese leaders continue to espouse the narrative of the Century of National Humiliation to generate nationalist ideas, and to bolster their claims to defend China's interest."⁷⁹ Moreover, as Callahan observes, such a discourse has a powerful effect, for "the narrative of national salvation depends upon national humiliation; the narrative of national security depends upon national insecurity."⁸⁰ Yet as Schell and Delury explain, "it is not enough for China to constantly depend upon the national humiliation narrative to move forward, it needs a new story, particularly if it hopes to achieve its goal of a 'new type of great power relationship' with the United States."⁸¹ At present the signals that China is sending out, particularly to its smaller neighbours (in Southeast Asia) are highly ambiguous. On the one hand, Chinese economic initiatives (such as the One Belt One Road, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank) suggest potential for closer cooperation and collective regional growth, yet on the other hand, Beijing's hardline approach towards its territorial claims reflects a highly assertive posture that could possibly result in conflict. For instance, its former foreign minister Yang Jiechi had reportedly said during a regional meeting in 2010 that "China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact";⁸² such statements clearly reflect a Chinese mentality which sees itself as strong and powerful and thus as being entitled to a greater say (and share) of regional, if not international, resources.

Finally, the issue of corruption and moral leadership remains China's Achilles heel. While successive generations of Chinese leaders have railed against the effect of widespread corruption on undermining the legitimacy of the party, none has been willing – and able – to suggest the kind of structural reforms that would help tackle it. As observed, "reformers and conservatives alike have used the issue of corruption to push their own agendas. Reformers argue that corruption is caused by the incomplete nature of reform [while] conservatives claim that corruption is caused by lack of party discipline and increased Western influences that have entered with the economic opening."⁸³ Notwithstanding President Xi's high-profile "catching tigers and flies" anti-corruption campaign, during the period since he assumed power it is difficult to say whether such measures have had the desired long-term outcome and reduced (or even eliminated)

78 Chen and Wang 2011.

79 Zhang 2013.

80 Callahan 2004, 2013.

81 Schell and Delury 2013.

82 Pomfret 2010.

83 Saich 2011, 330.

corruption, or whether such measures are simply intended for political purges. As one Singapore-based analyst puts it, “Xi Jinping’s fight against corruption has yielded neither any high-ranking official from Fujian and Zhejiang – provinces in which Xi had previously served – nor anyone from his ‘princelings’ faction.”⁸⁴ Furthermore, given the fact that Chinese citizens are not very confident in the leadership’s capacity to deal with corruption effectively,⁸⁵ such lowered expectations provide a back-door of sorts for Chinese officials to engage with corruption while at the same time extolling the need for virtuous governance. The dilemma is further exacerbated by the fact that “as the more corruption is reported, the more people are liable to see the party as lacking credibility. [Hence] the reluctance to pursue senior figures unless there is political gain [...]”⁸⁶ In this respect, one might say that anti-corruption and reform measures in China are highly politicized affairs (witness the Bo Xilai case) and thus existing efforts to tackle these issues do not go far enough in addressing some of the root causes of the problems.

Conclusion

Returning to the Chinese Dream of national greatness and rejuvenation, it would seem that if such a dream does bear resemblances to the Singapore experience, then that is mostly coincidental and not one of deliberate design. In this respect, the Singapore dream (if one can speak of it as such) is said to be far less ideologically motivated, but instead premised on more material (and immediate) concerns. As this article has shown, Singapore’s approach to governance is highly flexible and adaptive to changes in both the domestic and international environment. The articulation of Singapore’s need to cope with vulnerability remains a key mainstay, especially in its approach to foreign policy whereby its survival is frequently spoken of in existential terms. Last but not least, the insistence on high moral standards among the ruling elite is seen to be an indicator of political competence and legitimacy.⁸⁷ Notwithstanding this, the past decade or so have witnessed growing discussions within Singapore society over deeper issues of identity, belonging and nationhood, thus suggesting social contestation to existing narratives that have in the past worked for Singapore, but may not do so in the future.⁸⁸

Be that as it may, what binds both Singapore and China closest for the present – in the author’s view – is the emphasis on *pragmatism*; but while the Singapore

84 Char 2015.

85 Saich 2011, 334.

86 *Ibid.*, 335.

87 Between May and June 2017, Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and his younger siblings Lee Hsien Yang and Lee Wei Ling were involved in a public dispute over the status of the parents’ home, which ultimately saw the Prime Minister presenting the government’s position during parliament proceedings. While there is much debate over who is right or wrong, the Singapore’s government legitimacy to rule remains largely unquestioned.

88 Lim et al. 2014; Goh 2016; Chua 1998.

government views pragmatism as a means of solving problems, Chinese leaders are pragmatic to the extent that pragmatism becomes a means of acquiring political capital. Hence the Chinese Dream is not a call to individual flourishing and achievement, but rather it remains highly politicized and is thus subjected to the winds of political interests that may run contrary to individual motivations. Moreover, as pointed out by Singapore's former top diplomat Bilahari Kausikan, "the China Dream is so broad that there's room for sweet dreams – or nightmares."⁸⁹ Given this ambiguity, it is difficult to say whether the Chinese Dream is used purely to buttress support for the Communist Party or whether such a dream (or dreams) is (or are) sufficiently big enough to incorporate the concerns and interests of other countries.

As I have argued in this article, China's emulation of Singapore's patterns and approach to governance remains partial at best. For one, China's public service remains a work-in-progress and substantially lags behind many countries. This in part is due to China's huge land size and population, which complicates the work of policymaking; at the same time, the deeply vested interests of its leaders render it difficult to be objective and dispassionate in decision making. Unlike Singapore, much of China's contemporary foreign policy is now being conducted from a position of strength, thus accentuating the differences between the two countries. While the issue of morality and corruption remains a shared concern at a broad level, personal infractions are taken more seriously in Singapore than in China, as the latter is subjected to other political considerations than is publicly admitted.

Finally, the absence of elections in China makes it difficult to assess public opinion about its leaders. In the case of Singapore, the recent 2015 general elections featured a highly competitive election campaign (all 87 seats were being contested) and a ruling party that was evidently more open to criticism from the electorate. The result was a highly successful one for the People's Action Party as it won almost 70 per cent of the popular vote (representing a 10 percentage point swing from the previous 2011 elections). In other words, by allowing greater political competition, it presented the PAP with a greater opportunity with which to showcase its credentials and ground work (from the previous elections) as opposed to having little or no competition. By being able to distinguish and differentiate itself, the PAP thus received greater legitimacy to govern, at least for the next five years. This cannot be said of China where the Communist Party in recent years has become more paranoid about "subversive ideas" and political opposition. One might argue that in the Singapore model, staying in power comes as a natural by-product of good governance, while in the case of China, it is a prerequisite to good governance.

89 Cheong 2016.

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摘要: 新加坡政治体系时而被自由民主的学家指责为独裁制度, 约束了人民的自由主权。然而在 2015 年的国家大选, 大部分新加坡国民对这一种社会契约表示赞同。由于新加坡模式受了许多中国官员的广泛研究作为优越的治理模式, 因此我们如何看待中国治理系统的未来成果? 共产党能否同时持守权利, 同时符合人民的要求, 以至于实现中国梦?

关键词: 新加坡模式; 中国梦; 李光耀; 治国系统

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