

Mis-modelling Singapore: China's Challenges in Learning from the City-state

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Abstract

Singapore exemplifies what China strives for: resilient authoritarianism despite advanced development with good governance and political stability. But lessons Chinese observers draw from the Southeast Asian city-state have been selective, leading to misconceptions. We focus on three key areas in which Chinese observers claim inspiration from the “Singapore model.” The first, Singapore’s “Asian values” discourse which is seen to provide an ideological defense of non-democratic rule, overestimates the impact of top-down conservative culturalism while underestimating the difficulty of propagating Confucianism in officially still communist China. Second, while elections in Singapore are seen to bolster the ruling People Action Party’s legitimacy in Singapore, they have been implemented to such a limited extent in China that any legitimation gain is unlikely. Finally, the chief lesson derived from Singapore’s fight against corruption, the importance of a committed leadership, ignores the importance of the rule of law in Singapore, a legacy of colonialism very different from China’s post-totalitarian trajectory.

Keywords: Singapore model; resilient authoritarianism; good governance; Asian values; elections; anti-corruption

Like no other country in the world, Singapore has drawn the attention of Chinese officials and scholars alike. This “Singapore fever” (*Xinjiapo re* 新加坡热) has, on the one hand, been due to the desire to find an alternative development path that would combine modernization with one-party rule and, on the other, is based on the belief by these Chinese observers that there are key similarities between China and Singapore that allow for meaningful comparison.¹ The majority of the Southeast Asian city-state’s population is ethnic Chinese, suggesting that there are cultural similarities while its ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) has Leninist elements that appear to be similar to those in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In particular, there is a top-down leadership based in the Central

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1 Ortmann and Thompson 2014; Ortmann and Thompson 2016.

Executive Committee with a cadre system in which recruitment is conducted through careful screening and a disciplined and cohesive party with powerful grassroots organizations such as the “Young PAP,” “Women’s Wing,” etc. Moreover, Singapore has also already undergone a process of rapid economic growth based on developmental planning, government-linked corporations and an export orientation.

Singapore exemplifies what Chinese reformers strive for: resilient authoritarianism despite advanced development with good governance and political stability. This should be achieved not through democratization which would end the Communist Party’s monopoly on power but instead through authoritarian tinkering in order to enhance the administrative capacity of the government and gain genuine popular support.² Chinese observers see this ideal as having been attained in Singapore, which appears to have developed practical solutions to a wide range of problems that are now confronting China. It is thus not surprising that thousands of Chinese officials have visited Singapore following Deng’s Southern Tour in 1992. One of them was Xi Jinping 习近平, who in 1993 visited the city-state when he was still governor of Fujian province.³ In November 2007, shortly after he had been promoted to the Politburo Standing Committee, Xi met Lee Kuan Yew 李光耀 and discussed with him various issues about the city-state’s governance model, including the training of civil servants and meet-the-people sessions.⁴ In response to Lee Kuan Yew’s death, Xi called the statesman an “old friend” of China.⁵ Many other Chinese leaders also sent condolence letters, which is highly unusual for a foreign leader.⁶ This interest in the “Singapore model” (*Xinjiapo moshi* 新加坡模式) raised hopes about major economic and political reforms being undertaken when Xi took power in November 2012.⁷

Chinese observers have been attracted to the city-state due to its achievements under one-party dominant rule, which they believe can be attributed to Singapore’s Confucian cultural roots. But the differences in the institutional origins of the two political systems diverge to such an extent that any meaningful learning from the city-state is unlikely to result in the kind of utopia Chinese leaders are envisioning. Singapore is at its core a constitutional regime rooted in British-style institutions, while China is an illiberal post-totalitarian regime in which the Communist Party serves as the main anchor of the system. In particular, this affects the concept of the rule of law, which in Singapore, at least in the official discourse, constrains the government while in China the government rejects the concept of an independent judiciary, as Chief Justice Zhou Qiang 周強 made clear in early 2017 when he emphasized that law is only an instrument

2 Tsang 2014.

3 Lam 2015.

4 Elegant 2007.

5 *Bloomberg News* 2015.

6 Ho 2015.

7 Wong and Ansfield 2012.

of the Party.⁸ In other words, China and Singapore have fundamentally different institutional “DNA” that inhibits effective learning. This misunderstanding has in part occurred because Singaporean officials have stressed the successes of the PAP and de-emphasized the colonial legacy in official accounts of the country’s history and institutional order.⁹

This article explores how the selective adoption of lessons from the Singapore experience has led to several important misunderstandings among Chinese observers. We examine three areas in which learning has been attempted: justifying authoritarian rule based on “Asian values,” using elections to enhance authoritarian legitimacy, and implementing anti-corruption measures. Chinese leaders have linked Singapore’s successful combination of authoritarian rule and economic development to its Chinese roots. Chinese scholars believe that Singapore’s “Asian values” discourse, which they see as based on Confucianism, proved to be an effective way to legitimate non-democratic rule in an Asian cultural context. But they overestimated the impact of this top-down attempt to promote this conservative culturalist discourse in Singapore society, while at the same time underestimating the difficulty of reintroducing Confucianism in China as a legitimizing ideology at the national level given continued (at least official) commitment to communist ideology. Secondly, Chinese reformers admire the popular legitimacy of Singapore’s ruling party, for which elections and civil society activism have played a crucial role. Yet the promotion of local or inner-party elections in China has been limited because they are seen to pose a threat to the rule of the CCP, while at the same time there has been a growing crackdown on dissent even as Singapore’s elections are becoming increasingly competitive and civil society more active.¹⁰ Finally, Chinese officials have been particularly intrigued by Singapore’s success in limiting malfeasance among government officials, with Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption drive reportedly inspired by the Singapore example.¹¹ In particular, Chinese observers have stressed the commitment of Singapore’s leadership to effectively implement good governance, often mentioned as the most important lesson of the “Singapore model.”¹² However, this view overlooks the history of the institutional reform behind anti-corruption efforts in Singapore, which has historical roots in British colonialism and the principle of the rule of law, very different from China’s post-totalitarian legacy.

Conservative Culturalism and Asian Authoritarianism

China’s most important motivation in learning from other countries is the need to justify and improve one-party rule, which is seen as superior to other forms of governance and the only way for China to regain global prominence. One aspect

8 Cai 2017.

9 Thum 2014.

10 O’Brien and Han 2009; Tan 2010; Wang 2014; Ortmann 2011.

11 *Bloomberg News* 2015.

12 Ho 2015.

in this regard has been the campaign to promote authoritarian values based on traditional Confucian culture. In this regard, Chinese observers often cite the example of the Singapore government, which promoted a discourse of “Asian values” that was subsequently incorporated into the country’s national education as part of an attempt to head off growing demands for political participation.

While many Western observers assumed that the “Asian values” discourse disappeared after the Asian financial crisis of 1997–98 (with critics sarcastically pointing out that family-based “Asian values” now seemed responsible not for the economic rise but rather the prevalence of cronyism in the region), it remained influential among Chinese observers.¹³ In this regard, Chinese scholars of the Singapore model have advocated adopting Confucian values to strengthen “socialism with Chinese characteristics.”¹⁴

The key lesson Chinese observers draw from Singapore’s discourse of cultural conservatism is that values education can be an effective tool in countering pressures for political change.¹⁵ In Singapore, faced with growing demands for greater political liberalization, which was reflected in the rise of a more assertive opposition parties and civil society, the government propagated a discourse of “Asian values” that emphasized the group over the individual, rejected contention, and promoted racial and religious harmony. In 1991, the Singapore government released a White Paper known as “Shared Values.”¹⁶ The idea came from the fear of the influence of “Western values” which, according to a speech by President Wim Kim Wee 黄金辉 directly quoted in the White Paper, has “exposed us to alien lifestyles and values,” with the idea of individualism being particularly worrisome.¹⁷ Then Singaporean Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong 吴作栋 warned that Singaporeans must avoid “Western” democracy, a free press, foreign television, and pop music, “which could bring the country down.”¹⁸ Michael Hill has called the PAP’s creation of “Asian values” a form of “reverse orientalism” because Singapore’s leaders appropriated stylized Asian values for their own nation-building project in an effort to immunize the population against undesirable Western influences.¹⁹

While this conservative culturalist view is often dismissed as mere rationalization of non-democratic rule, it is a position that resonates among some leading New Confucianist thinkers. One of the most influential is Tu Weiming 杜维明. While showing understanding for Western human rights advocates’ criticism of

13 Thompson 2015.

14 Wang 2011; Xue 2015.

15 Wang 2016. The use of education to strengthen Chinese Communist control was also behind the attempt to introduce a new national education curriculum in Hong Kong. A booklet promoted the “China model” and claimed that the Chinese government was controlled by “a progressive, selfless, and united ruling group” rather than the “malignant party struggle” in multiparty systems. Not unsurprisingly, many Hong Kongers denounced the reform as an attempt at “brainwashing.” <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2012/07/16/hong-kong-school-leaflets-praise-one-party-system/>.

16 *Shared Values* 1991.

17 Cited in *Shared Values* 1991, 1.

18 *Economist* 1994.

19 Hill 2000.

the “Asian values” rhetoric which “smacks of pernicious justification for exercising undemocratic authoritarian mechanisms of control,” Tu also argued that this culturalist discourse has a positive side as it helps counter “the danger of social disintegration.” Tu also claims that “the overall life pattern in East Asia involves consensus based on value formation significantly different from the modern Western emphasis.”²⁰

The same culturalist principle is behind recent official denunciations of the negative influence of “Western ideas” in China.²¹ The Chinese leadership has attempted to adopt Singapore’s conservative culturalist rhetoric and employed it to delegitimize any form of contention beyond the control of the regime. There have also been attempts to minimize cultural influences from outside, for example by limiting the number of foreign films in movie theatres or restricting foreign television programs.²²

This conservative culturalism is strikingly similar to earlier efforts to shield authoritarian regimes from the demands of supposedly universal democratic values, particularly in Meiji Japan, which in turn borrowed the idea of critique of Western civilization in the name of German culture from Imperial Germany.²³ While the Meiji reformers had broken with recent Japanese tradition by abolishing the Tokugawa Shogunate, they justified their reforms as a culturalist “restoration” by symbolically giving the monarchy greater powers (with the Meiji oligarchs actually keeping real authority for themselves). The Meiji constitution began with an elaboration of the monarchy’s divine right to rule, and Japanese were encouraged by the Imperial Rescript on Education to be obedient members of the national “family” under the rule of the emperor. Chalmers Johnson offers a cynical view of this strategy, suggesting that authoritarian elites in Meiji Japan, like those in imperial Germany, developed and propagated “ideologies to convince the public” that “culture” and “history” were decisive, not “political decisions.”²⁴

China also provides such an example of (re-)invented tradition with the revival of Confucian tradition in order to bolster CCP’s legitimacy in Confucianist terms. A new Confucian discourse took shape in China at the start of the reform-and-opening period after the fierce criticisms of Confucianism during Mao’s rule. In 1978 a Symposium on Confucianism took place at Shandong University (*Shandong daxue* 山东大学).²⁵ Lee Kuan Yew evidently influenced

20 Tu 2000, 200.

21 Buckley 2015.

22 Creemers 2015.

23 Thompson 2001. Ironically, many of the lessons these Chinese observers believe they have learned from Singapore can be traced back to Lee Kuan Yew’s interest in the “Meiji model” of authoritarian developmentalism. In the 1970s and early 1980s, Lee exhorted his country’s citizens to “learn from Japan,” drawing culturalist lessons from the Japanese experience that helped inspire the “Asian values” discussion in Singapore as “appropriate for economic growth and societal cohesion” but also inspiring the implementation of a “Japanese style system for internal security, surveillance and control” – Ramcharan 2002, 12.

24 Johnson 1995, 47.

25 Berger 2004.

this “Confucian turn” – in 1994 the China-sponsored International Confucius Association (*Guoji ruxue lianhe hui* 国际儒学联合会) named him its honorary chairman. Lee had already established a close friendship with Deng going back to the latter’s visit to Singapore in 1978, which was an important cause of China catching “Singapore fever.”²⁶ The effort to promote Confucianism in order to supplement an increasingly remote communism, which holds less relevance in a market-driven environment, as a guiding ideology in China has been enthusiastically supported by several leading Chinese intellectuals²⁷ and some key officials.²⁸ Moreover, the idea of a “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会) as well as the concept of “scientific development” (*kexue fazhan* 科学发展) introduced by Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 in 2002, have been informed by the Singaporean discourse of Confucianism. It is telling in this regard that since 2004 the Chinese Ministry of Education has founded nearly five hundred Confucius Institutes spread across six continents to promote Chinese language and culture around the world.

There are two levels at which Chinese observers “mis-model” the “Asian values” discourse in Singapore. First, Chinese observers fail to acknowledge that there is little evidence that values education was effective in promoting the acceptance of authoritarian rule in Singapore, which is based primarily on the belief in its efficacy. However, when Confucianism was introduced into the school curriculum as part of the Religious Knowledge Program in 1984, few students showed interest in the subject, with most wanting to learn about other religions, which as a consequence led the government to abandon it as a school subject. Moreover, although Confucian elements are clearly embedded in citizenship education, demands for political participation have increased significantly. In 2011, the opposition won the largest number of seats in the history of the independent city-state and even captured a group representation constituency that had been introduced as another obstacle for opposition parties. While the opposition lost some support in the 2015 general election, a post-election survey showed that 89 per cent of Singaporeans consider checks on government power important, while 86 per cent believe it is important to have an opposition in parliament.²⁹

Second, the attempt to revive Confucianism in China potentially runs counter to its ruling ideology. While Singapore has a pragmatic approach to politics that presents no obstacles to the promotion of cultural values, Chinese reformers wishing to follow city-state’s example of Confucianism have to embed them within the country’s so-called “socialist core values” which provide fundamental legitimacy for the Chinese leaders. There remains the fear that any alternative

26 Peh 2009.

27 Bell 2010; Fan 2012; Jiang 2013.

28 Page 2015.

29 Koh 2015.

ideology, even if intended to stabilize the regime, could be used as a basis upon which opposition to the regime is organized.

In particular, the Confucian idea of a loss of the mandate of heaven could easily be utilized to challenge communist rule. It is for this reason that the leadership has moved cautiously and unevenly in promoting new Confucian values to justify authoritarianism, as symbolized by the mysterious nighttime removal of a large statue of Confucius near Tiananmen Square in April 2011.³⁰

Strengthening Regime Legitimacy

Besides instilling conservative culturalism, another method Chinese reformers have considered in order to deal with growing societal demands is the limited use of elections to provide an avenue for participation and for strengthening the mandate of the government, while also ensuring control of the ruling party. Although Chinese experiments with elections have been extremely cautious, for advocates of the Singapore model the city-state represents the holy grail of authoritarian elections that strengthen regime legitimacy and responsiveness while still ensuring the ruling party's hold on power.³¹ It is thus not surprising that Chinese observers have been sent to Singapore since 2011 to report on elections.³²

Some Chinese advocates of the “Singapore model” have emphasized the need to copy some of the elements of the city-state's electoral authoritarian regime in order to allow the government to better gauge and respond to citizen complaints. However, transplanting limited elections or other related aspects into a closed post-totalitarian context, as in China, is unlikely to have the kind of positive results for which reformers hope. Chinese leaders have rejected the introduction of national-level elections, only permitting local and inner-party elections. Direct elections have been conducted in China for the county-level district committees since 1979, whilst there were preliminary experiments with village elections in the early 1980s before they were formally enshrined in law in the 1987 Organic Law of Village Committees. There have also been attempts to strengthen inner-party elections. Debates about inner-party democracy date back to the early days of the CCP in 1938 when Mao Zedong 毛泽东 hoped it would strengthen the party internally. By the early 1980s, there were more seats than candidates, thus leading to some degree of competition. However, according to Joseph

30 Jacobs 2011. Pang Qin (2013) has suggested that although national leaders continue to be cautious about efforts to bring about a systematic “Confucianization” of the CCP, local officials seeking greater legitimation have taken the initiative to forge ties with a large and growing group of Confucianist revivalists primarily in urban areas among the middle class. The increasing influence of Confucian thought in civil society as well as its advocacy by a number of prominent Chinese intellectuals have made it a more important phenomenon than the Singaporean discourse of “Asian values” which, while gaining official approval, has only shallow societal roots.

31 Based on the “Singapore model,” a relatively liberal Chinese observer, Cai Dingjian (2005), even advocated introducing national elections, but his ideas were largely ignored by government officials. For this reason, the analysis focuses mostly on the conservative discourse of what China could draw from Singapore's electoral regime.

32 Jiang 2011.

Fewsmith, instead of increasing legitimacy, these elections “failed to stem growing tensions within the Party, and perhaps even exacerbated them.”³³

In Singapore, elections are qualitatively different from the ones in China. Although biased in favour of the ruling party,³⁴ Singapore’s elections do not bar opposition parties from competing and, at least theoretically, even winning a majority in parliament. There are nine active opposition parties, and since the 2015 general election they field candidates in every single constituency.³⁵ The ruling PAP has responded to the decline in its share of the popular vote by making policy changes, however gradually and partially.³⁶ This includes recent curbs on numbers of immigrants and new social measures such as the Pioneer Generation Package, which provides social support for Singaporeans who were born before 1950.³⁷

Chinese scholars who discuss the electoral aspects of Singapore’s political system recognize the significance of elections as a strategy to win the support of the people and enhance governance.³⁸ There are, however, serious limits to the possible impact of elections. As Baogang He 何包钢 notes: “Chinese local officials are searching for political meritocracy, and modifying the electoral system by introducing a watered-down style of elections or so-called democratic evaluation.”³⁹ However, this has not been particularly effective because of the incompatibility of elections with the authoritarian system that allows for little real competition. Political loyalty is the most important criteria in China’s one-party system. He thus concludes: “The system is very costly in terms of time, preparation, and process, and it is often subject to manipulation. Moreover, it dilutes the influence of direct elections as it presents ‘democracy,’ but not genuinely enough.”⁴⁰ Moreover, although electoral contests have become more competitive, they are far from allowing voters real choice. Even though electoral processes have been added to the selection process of officials, they have become subject to manipulation because they are only one of many selection criteria, which also include civic examinations and “public opinion.” In the end, “party discipline” remains the most decisive factor.⁴¹ Many of the elections have become subject to the control of clientelistic networks, thereby making villagers cynical about the effectiveness of democracy.⁴²

33 Fewsmith 2010.

34 The campaign period is very short; gerrymandering is used to benefit the ruling party; group-representation constituencies (GRCs) require a team of opposition candidates to compete; the media, which is owned by government-linked corporations, seeks to undermine the opposition, portraying it as irresponsible and a threat to Singapore’s future: Ortmann 2015b. None of these obstacles has, however, made it impossible for opposition parties to make progress as recent elections show.

35 Ortmann 2016.

36 Rahim 2015; Ortmann 2016.

37 Welsh 2016.

38 Luo 2014.

39 He 2016, 148.

40 He 2016, 148.

41 He 2016.

42 Wang 2014.

The introduction of elections in China has done little to help solve the CCP's legitimacy crisis because the institutions that were subjected to elections did not have sufficient autonomy for effective decision making. While electoral procedures have been improved over the years, the exercise of power remained problematic. The fundamental problem was to assume that elections by themselves can improve governance without giving citizens meaningful decision-making power. Even village elections that have allowed some degree of competition face the problem that the decisions of elected representatives can be overruled by higher authorities. An additional difficulty is that village committee members are not only accountable to their voters but also have to fulfill tasks from higher levels, which places them in a dilemma when they receive unpopular orders.⁴³

Due to weak institutionalization and the lack of village autonomy, it is not surprising that there is no evidence that elections have had any positive effect on village governance.⁴⁴ The challenges are evident in the well-publicized case of Wukan 乌坎 in Guangdong province, where local residents sought to elect their own local government independent of party structures, leading to repeated conflict with higher authorities.⁴⁵ Most recently, government authorities have accused the autonomously elected village leader of corruption and arrested him despite renewed protests by villagers.⁴⁶ By contrast, Singapore is an independent state with elections for the national government, meaning officials can make decisions without interference from external actors. In other words, elected officials require final decision-making authority to provide the benefit of legitimacy and improve governance.

Moreover, Singapore's political system provides sufficient space for opposition to propagate alternative policies. This is only possible because Singapore's political system is rooted in liberal ideas of British constitutionalism, which recognizes the legitimacy of non-state activism⁴⁷ even if laws have often placed restrictions on it. By contrast, China is a post-totalitarian one-party state which in recent years has only intermittently granted some political space to activists. Instead of loosening control over competing interests and attempting to co-opt rather than directly repress activists, Chinese authorities have pursued much more aggressive censorship and often harsh crackdowns on those who dare to speak out. This has recently been exacerbated under Xi Jinping, who "has launched the most far-ranging crackdown on dissent and civil liberties in the post-Mao era."⁴⁸ This has even entailed restrictions on those forms of activism that do

43 O'Brien and Han 2009.

44 Tan 2010.

45 *Al Jazeera*, 12 July 2013.

46 Lau 2016. The case of Hong Kong is also relevant in this context. The failure to allow meaningful elections for the post of chief executive demonstrates the concern among central authorities about the inability to control local elections once they are able to form legitimate governments: Davies 2015 and Ortmann 2015a.

47 Chong 2005.

48 Pei 2016, 12. See also: Cook 2015; Shambaugh 2016.

not directly challenge the government, such as women's rights,⁴⁹ labour activists,⁵⁰ foreign NGOs and lawyers. Even environmental activists have faced repression despite assertions that they enjoy special privileges.⁵¹ This contrasts significantly with Singapore's approach of calibrated coercion that seeks to keep outright repression to a minimum.⁵² While political opposition and civil society face significant constraints, the city-state's institutional set-up helps legitimize the existence of non-state activism while in China activism is generally verboten. As such, these cases amply demonstrate that instead of moving closer to hybrid authoritarianism, China is actually moving further away from the "Singapore model" by becoming an even more closed post-totalitarian regime.

Eliminating Corruption

One of the greatest problems facing the Chinese leadership has been widespread corruption that has eroded support for the CCP. It has thus not been surprising that the seemingly successful fight against corrupt officials in Singapore has attracted the attention of Chinese scholars and policymakers because the city-state is regarded as largely free of corruption by international organizations such as Transparency International, which in 2015 ranked the country as the eighth least corrupt in the world.⁵³ Yet here too the Singapore case is "mis-modelled" because Chinese observers lack a holistic understanding of the context in which corruption is combatted in Singapore.

Chinese analysts have drawn a wide variety of different lessons from Singapore's anti-corruption experience. At the top of the list is the need for a strong and principled leadership. This is strengthened by a rigorous recruitment process for civil servants and politicians as well as high salaries. In addition, they see Singapore as having a rule-based approach with tough anti-corruption laws that are coupled with strict enforcement. This is enhanced by the fact that there is an effective monitoring system in place that makes it possible to detect corruption. A number of Chinese observers recognize the importance of the organizational independence of such agencies.⁵⁴ Overall, however, the main lesson Chinese observers take from Singapore is a top-down process in which the government effectively manages corruption through administrative control measures.⁵⁵

This is not surprising as Chinese observers are following a narrative propagated by Singaporean scholars and officials. The most prolific writer on the

49 Phillips 2016a.

50 Phillips 2016b.

51 This was particularly evident in the censorship of the highly popular documentary by Chai Jing, which among other things demonstrated the institutional problems and the widespread conflicts of interests delimiting China's attempt to effectively deal with pollution: Larson 2015.

52 George 2007.

53 Transparency International 2015.

54 e.g. Zhang 2010.

55 e.g. Wei 2009.

subject is Jon S.T. Quah, who identified key lessons for developing countries based on Singapore's experience.⁵⁶ According to Quah, to effectively fight corruption there is a need for committed leadership, the establishment of comprehensive anti-corruption mechanisms including an independent anti-corruption agency, the reduction of opportunities for corruption, and reduced incentives for corruption. Quah, like his Chinese counterparts, assumes that an effective fight against corruption is primarily the result of a strong and determined leadership.⁵⁷

The rule of law is not stressed as a primary factor in Singapore's anti-corruption success either by Singaporean writers or Chinese observers because it is a legacy of British colonial rule. Moreover, major anti-corruption mechanisms were created before the current PAP regime took power. The Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) was established in September 1952, seven years before the city-state gained self-rule.⁵⁸ The fight against corruption was deeply embedded in the British legal tradition, which propagated the idea that everyone would be treated equally under the law. Combined with significant autonomy, the CPIB is charged with enforcing anti-corruption legislation against any official, including the prime minister. While it is true that legal improvements during the early years of PAP rule have significantly enhanced the state's ability to effectively deal with corruption, these would hardly have been conceivable outside of this existing institutional tradition of the rule of law.⁵⁹

The mis-modelling occurs because the role of the PAP leadership in the process is regarded as the most important factor in the fight against corruption. It is often suggested that corruption was only effectively dealt with through the enactment of the Prevention of Corruption Act (POCA) in 1960 under the newly elected PAP government, minimizing the role played by the rule of law and suggesting that the monopolization of power is not a problem. However, this constitutes a major hurdle in China where the CCP continues to put itself above the law. The emphasis on strong leadership is to a significant extent the result of the historiography of the PAP, which claims that its rule represents a break in the historical connection with decolonization in 1959 when Singapore gained self-rule and the PAP was elected to office for the first time. In order to promote the PAP "success story," institutional continuities to the colonial past are either

56 Quah 2001.

57 Quah 2015. Quah has recently (2015) offered a critical assessment of Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign, arguing that more needs to be done because corruption in China is largely the result of low salaries, excessive red tape, the low likelihood of detection, widespread decentralization, and the culture of gift-giving known as *guanxi*. But he implies that with sufficiently committed leadership, such problems can be overcome.

58 Tan 1999.

59 One of the few observers to note this point, the late Cai Dingjian, who has largely been ignored by other Chinese observers despite his insights in regard to the "Singapore model," argued that in Singapore, the rule of law is "not just the government's management and maintenance of order in society, but how the government itself observes the rules, instead of relying on connections and current circumstances in carrying out its duties" (translated in Cai 2017).

downplayed or entirely neglected. Lee Kuan Yew, for instance, has emphasized Singapore's transformation from third world to first in one of his autobiographies.⁶⁰ This conjures up the impression that Singapore was a backwater in 1959, while in reality Singapore was a Crown colony and an important trading outpost in Asia with a GDP per capita lagging behind only Hong Kong and Japan.⁶¹ It was considered a centre of trade in Asia, with one of the greatest ports in the world, while banking, insurance, light industry and shipyard facilities had allowed it to play a dominant position in the region.⁶² Although Singapore has achieved rapid economic growth rates since the PAP took control, introducing economic reforms along the way, the fact that Hong Kong had a similarly rapid economic development suggests that the colonial institutions have been an important part of this success story.

For Chinese observers, however, crediting the PAP with stamping out malfeasance in office has the benefit of allowing them to argue that the CCP can be rescued from corruption *deus ex machina* by a committed leadership capable of single-handedly and radically improving state capacity in China. This naturally matches Chinese preferences that prioritize the role of the CCP. According to the preamble of the Chinese constitution, the People's Republic of China is ruled under the leadership of the Communist Party and according to the ideological basis of "Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory and the important thought of Three Represents." The rule of law would entail legal checks on the party, something which runs counter to socialist principles. Most of the legal reforms in China have instead focused on strengthening the laws for enforcement by the central government, which has been called "rule by law." The CCP believes that it cannot be bound by any external force that could constrain its own power and limit its activities. This fact makes it difficult to enact any fair and just legal system that deals with everyone equally and is thus an impediment to the development of an independent anti-corruption agency and court system. The party has created an entrenched group of people who collude with each other in a monopoly of power and the control of a great deal of the wealth of the country.⁶³ The CCP dominates the legal system in all respects through the Central Political and Legal Committee (CPLC) and, in regard to fighting corruption, through the Central Discipline Inspection Committee (CDIC).⁶⁴

By contrast, the PAP is an ordinary political party that is not mentioned in the Singaporean Constitution. The rule of law provides legal limitations for the behaviour of public officials and support for economic development even if it has simultaneously served as a means by which to curtail political opposition, which has been exacerbated due a compliant judiciary supportive of the ruling

60 Lee 2000.

61 Chen 1979.

62 Ginsburg 1955.

63 Yao 2002.

64 Zheng 2010.

party.⁶⁵ Even in regard to the latter, the discourse of the rule of law has provided activists with a rhetorical weapon against the government. For instance, activists have made police reports against the ruling party for some of the same allegations that have been used against opposition activists. Both Chinese observers and Singaporean apologists underplay the fact that at the core of Singapore's approach to combating corruption is the existence of the rule of law, which comes with formal institutional constraints in the form of a separation of powers and the supremacy of the constitution as well as the principle of equality before the law. In rankings related to the rule of law, Singapore is often highly placed.⁶⁶ Despite its illiberal nature, the requirement to provide checks on the exercise of power has not been abandoned. This is reflected in a decision by the High Court in 1994 which asserted that: "The court also has a duty to declare invalid any exercise of power, legislative and executive, which exceeds the limits of the power conferred by the Constitution, or which contravenes any prohibition which the Constitution provides."⁶⁷ In fact, there is a widespread belief in the equal treatment of citizens who trust the government to deal with corruption effectively.⁶⁸

The key lesson that Xi Jinping has drawn from Singapore's experience in fighting corruption is the need for a determined leadership and a willingness to crack down on both powerful senior and less powerful junior officials. Xi's achievements in this regard do appear impressive. His anti-corruption drive is the longest and most sustained of such campaigns since 1978; it has focused effectively on curbing extravagant behaviour of public officials; it has made extensive use of internal inspection teams; and it has netted at least 71 top-level officials of vice-ministerial rank or higher as well as 30 senior military officials just in the first two and a half years.⁶⁹ Yet rather than strengthening the legal institutions of the state, Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign has eroded judicial power in favour of the Party's internal disciplinary organs. Fu Hualing concludes that "in the immediate aftermath of the Xi take-over, anti-corruption enforcement is more opaque, more secretive and less rule-bound."⁷⁰ This is reflected in the fact that few if any of the officials receive a fair trial. This is hardly surprising given official warnings that attempts to promote constitutional governance and judicial independence will be viewed as efforts to undermine the socialist regime.⁷¹ In 2015, the highest judge in China, Zhou Qiang, emphasized that the concepts of judicial independence and the separation of power are "erroneous western thoughts."⁷² The campaign seems to be primarily targeted against potential political enemies.⁷³ It is thus being used

65 Mauzy and Milne 2002; Rajah 2012.

66 Worthington 2001.

67 Cited in Lee 2012, 302.

68 Uslaner 2008.

69 Quah 2015.

70 Fu 2015, 150.

71 Lim 2015.

72 *Reuters*, 26 February 2015.

73 Cho 2015; Fu 2015.

primarily to strengthen Xi's control on power, much like Mao Zedong did, rather than to deal effectively with corruption in the long term.⁷⁴

The current anti-corruption campaign in China has resulted in widespread anxiety among government officials, which Minxin Pei has dubbed the return of "fear-based governance."⁷⁵ This has had negative consequences, resulting, for example, in reluctance by local officials to start new investment projects. As such, the anti-corruption campaign highlights the problem of path dependency due to different institutional legacies that are rooted in British constitutionalism in Singapore and in the arbitrary rule of past Maoist totalitarianism in China. This analysis also suggests that the current anti-corruption drive is unlikely to eradicate corruption in the long term.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to demonstrate that the learning between Singapore and China is hindered by serious misunderstandings that obfuscate the "Singapore model." Chinese observers have largely seen what they want to see: a one-party state that is built on Confucian principles and which is successful and legitimate. Upon closer inspection, however, the Chinese have misrepresented key aspects of Singapore's experience. The city-state is at its root a Western constitutional state, a legacy of British colonialism. The "Asian values" discourse constructed by regime-friendly intellectuals in Singapore was part of an effort to delegitimize rising demands for public participation but attracted only limited support within a highly westernized, multicultural society. In China, by contrast, a conservative revival of Confucianism to buttress authoritarianism may potentially come into conflict with official communist ideology. Given the very limited success of its attempt at implementing values education, Singapore has instead relied on political institutions to co-opt and control society while allowing some political space for civil and political activism. Despite continued authoritarian controls, opposition parties now campaign in increasingly competitive elections. While Chinese observers have identified elections in Singapore as an important mechanism for gaining legitimation and acquiring popular feedback, this lesson has only partially and incompletely been transferred to China. Elections have only been adopted at lower administrative levels and within the party, rendering them virtually meaningless as a form of accountability and, rather than allowing more space for alternative opinions, Xi Jinping has again resorted to greater repression. Finally, the differing institutional legacies of Singapore and China have been most obvious in the fight against corruption. By seeing determined leadership as the main lesson from Singapore while at the same time rejecting an effective and independent legal system which was key to the city-state's success in combating corruption, the ongoing

⁷⁴ Oster 2014.

⁷⁵ Pei 2016.

anti-corruption campaign easily becomes part of the factional infighting within the party that remains above the law. Despite its highly touted successes, Xi's drive against corruption has also led to a growing climate of fear that indicates a return to highly centralized power with yet unknown consequences.

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Biographical notes

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摘要: 作为中国所学效的对象, 新加坡除了发展先进、治理良好和政治稳定, 亦拥有具弹性的威权主义。但中国的观察员却只选择性的从东南亚城市国家中借鉴, 而引致了误解。我们现针对三个中国观察员声称由新加坡模式所启发的重点领域。第一, 新加坡论述的『亚洲价值观』只被看作为一个提供非民主统治意识形态的思想防线, 高估了由上而下保守文化主义的影响, 同时亦低估了一个在传播孔儒思想上困难但仍然正式实施共产主义的中国。第二, 新加坡的选举仍被看作是支持执政人民行动党在新加坡的认受性, 这些选举已经在中国有限度的实施, 以使任何从中合法化获得利益都。最后, 来自于新加坡主要的学习得到的教训为打击腐败, 就是拥

有一个坚定领导的重要性。新加坡法治的重要性是一个不容忽视的殖民主义遗产，这是与中国的后极权主义轨道截然不同的。

关键词: 新加坡模式; 具弹性威权主义; 治理良好; 亚洲价值观; 选举; 反腐败

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