

## **SINGAPORE: UNLIKELY POWER** (JOHN CURTIS PERRY)

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Singapore is, in some ways, the modern Venice, a maritime city made wealthy by being in the right place, with the right assets, at the right time. Also like Venice, it doesn't loom large in the modern American imagination. Mostly, if we think of Singapore, it's as the setting for *Crazy Rich Asians*. It should get more attention—Singapore is interesting for its history, its economics, and for combining democracy with limitations on the popular will, a particular interest of mine. So, wanting to learn more, and given that this book is the only recent overview of Singapore, by a noted Asia expert, I thought it would be a good choice. Not really. This book is dull, plodding, and a bit of a fraud.

It's not technically inaccurate, as far as I can tell. My complaint is that whatever the accuracy of its portrayal of Singapore, it was published in 2017, but very obviously written nearly twenty years before (probably the last time that the author, retired professor John Curtis Perry, prepared a new lecture for his students at Tufts). Despite slapping in a few references to the 2000s and 2010s, something Perry probably got a graduate student to do (I'd guess the same one assigned to write the hagiographic profile of Perry on Wikipedia), nothing in this book that is not trivia takes place after 2003. The reader therefore feels underinformed and shortchanged. Still, other than that, and the boring style, it's a competent enough short history of Singapore. At the end, I know more than I did before—but probably less than could be gotten from Wikipedia.

Most of the book is taken up with a linear history lecture. As far as beginnings, Perry is eager to believe that Singapore was a relevant place before the British, in the form of Stamford Raffles, showed up in 1819. To be fair, Raffles himself contributed to this myth, while attempting to sell Singapore to those back in England. The reality was, and even Perry has to admit it, that although there were a few transitory trading villages several centuries before, and the Portuguese tried to set up a fort there, when Raffles arrived it was all jungle, and Singapore was created singlehandedly by the English. By itself, this doesn't mean much, but it's just one example of Perry's ham-handed efforts to show that he's

all multicultural and liberal and stuff, despite being an old white guy. Other examples include carping constantly about the British, “with all their faults,” while never specifying any, and puffing his chest out when telling us that Singaporeans, unlike dumb Americans, don’t restrict stem cell research using human embryos. Naturally, he poo-pooes the Communist threat of the 1950 and 1960s. None of this adds to the book; it just erodes what little good will the reader has left.

For the creation of modern Singapore, a few things mattered. First, when the English created Singapore out of nothing, it was designed as a planned port and city, and it emphasized free trade and free immigration. From that, everything else flowed. Free trade meant less corruption, as well, and under English management Singapore made all the right moves and right investments through the nineteenth century, expanding the harbors and other infrastructure and flexibly adapting to changes such as the move from wind power to steam power. British dominance of the seas helped, of course—nobody was likely to attack Singapore when the Royal Navy would come and shell you a few weeks later. And then came the disaster of World War II, in which the British ignominiously lost Singapore and its people were subjected to a brutal Japanese occupation.

As far as postwar Singapore, the focus of the book is naturally on Lee Kuan Yew, who made modern Singapore in his image. But we don’t learn all that much about him. Perry’s main source appears to be David Marshall, a lawyer who was briefly first Chief Minister after Singapore held its first elections (prior to independence), and later a moderately leftist opposition politician. He died in 1995 and did not write any books, but Perry offers numerous direct quotations without sources, so presumably Perry knew him personally. All of this is mostly impressionistic and holistic, though—the reader isn’t told the details of Lee’s program with any specificity. What we can derive is that Singapore is basically a technocracy where the government does not solicit the opinion of the average person, but offers comfort, stability, and corruption-free rule. True, the country is democratic, in that there are relatively free elections, though we are told almost nothing about the opposition parties, which would have been interesting. But the media is controlled, and the opposition neutered, in part through punitive civil suits. In practice, the government is big on planning—not in the sense of socialist

central planning, even if the government does own quite a few local companies, but in guiding the overall thrust of Singaporean progress. This includes most of all planning for infrastructure, both for business reasons, and for leisure and public perception, such as the giant Jurong Bird Park and the equally massive Marina Bay Sands hotel.

Critically, Singapore is a meritocracy, where excellence is what matters. Both industry and government seems to be run like a very competent business, where all that matters is getting things done, done right, and done now. Along the same lines, fiscal discipline, and discipline in general, seem to characterize the Singaporean government (this is one of the “Asian values” Lee pushed). For example, in America we all pay Social Security tax, but it’s simply used to pay current beneficiaries, not invested or segregated in any way. Singapore has an equivalent, which goes into a sovereign wealth fund and has been carefully and successfully invested for decades. This technocratic prudence allows a free market system with low taxation (a maximum income tax rate of 22%, and zero capital gains or inheritance tax). Whether such a system, which works in a homogenous Asian society of six million people, could work in a society like America, is an open question, but it’s certainly worked for Singapore.

As successful as this recipe (the specific elements of which have varied over the decades as Singapore successfully developed) has been at creating prosperity, though, it’s only part of what makes a truly successful society, which needs a spiritual side as well. That side must be fed by high culture, of which Singapore, by deliberate choice, has none at all (though apparently it has lots of good food). It’s also fed by religion; it is not surprising that what seems to be the prevalent religion in Singapore is nothing, followed closely by megachurch Christianity, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, exemplified by Joseph Prince. Thus, the life arc of Singapore is probably going to be also like that of a business; eventually, having no deeper resources and faced with new challenges, it will just have played itself out.

And even as a business, that playing out is probably going to be sooner rather than later. As Perry notes, Singapore does not offer any kind of “creative sparks flashing from entrepreneurial inspiration and brilliance.” Perry moreover ignores the main challenge facing Singapore today—the fatal decline in its birthrate. (Really, we don’t get anything

on modern Singapore's problems. The only "Looming Threats" Perry discusses are piracy and that someone, perhaps China, will build the "Kra Canal" across Malaysia, an unlikely project Perry is very concerned to repeatedly discuss.) It is hard to tell from this book why the fertility rate has cratered to 1.16, one of the lowest in the world, despite desperate government attempts to reverse the slide. No doubt it is for the same reasons that Darrell Bricker and John Ibbitson adduce in *Empty Planet*. Urbanization and societal selfishness are probably exacerbated by the anxiety Singaporeans face from history and being menaced, to some degree, by both Indonesia and China. The government has been only too eager to remind them of external threats for decades, for its own purposes, such as by having February 15, the date of the British surrender to the Japanese in 1942, as a holiday, "Total Defense Day." That strategy makes less sense now that Singapore's people are collectively declining to invest in the future—so as a result Singapore is going to end up like Xerox or Sears.

But though the future is bleak, it's evident that Singapore is a classic example of the universal truth that culture dictates civilizational success. The Malays or the Indonesians would not have built Singapore. It becomes evident in this book that Singaporean culture is in essence a Chinese culture, threaded around critical elements of English culture (of the nineteenth century, not its rotten modern culture). Other elements are just not very important, even if everyone conspires to pretend they are. Actually, Singaporean Chinese culture appears to be a subculture of China, of groups from southern China that both were willing to emigrate and that were particularly trade oriented (as Perry notes several times, Confucianism looks down on merchants). Moreover, the Chinese have high IQs; that would also seem relevant, to both culture and success, but Perry lectures us that is only because they have low disease rates in Singapore. No other reason. Move along now. Perry shies away from discussing anything interesting about Singaporean culture; you have to look in the gaps between what he says to learn, such as that the Malays have never been entrepreneurial. Bu the key takeaway is no Chinese, no Singapore.

I did learn some interesting facts from this book. For example, Singapore has a huge petroleum refining industry (not that it has its own oil). Tin smelting (of Malaysian ore) was once a big part of the

economy. It has to buy water to drink. And I was reminded of some facts often forgotten today, such as the cruelty and sadism of the World War II Japanese military police, the *Kempeitai* (very well portrayed in the Amazon alternate reality series *The Man in the High Castle*). But to my disappointment, I will have to wait for another day, and another book (perhaps Lee Kuan Yew's memoirs?) to actually examine what Singapore can tell us about successfully limiting democracy and encouraging virtue through the government. I suspect that Singapore's model only works in Singapore, but you can't tell that from this book—or much else, either. Too bad.