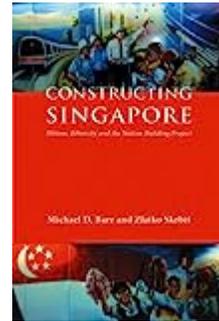




**Michael D. Barr, Zlatko Skrbiš.** *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, Ethnicity and the Nation-Building Project.* Copenhagen: NIAS, 2008. xiii + 304 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-87-7694-028-7; \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-87-7694-029-4.



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**Published on** H-Urban (February, 2010)

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## **Singapore: Elitism, Patronage, and Ethnicity in Governance and Education**

The common argument that Singapore's remarkable road from a seedy colonial seaport to a global center of commerce, whose cosmopolitan society and material achievements have become the envy of many developed and less-developed nations, has been researched and studied many times over. Largely through the mantle and vision of Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew and his ruling People's Action Party, the said rapid development and progress have also been achieved and maintained by a firm and monolithic control of the populace. This ordered progress and development, frequently characterized as social engineering, has often been praised as well as criticized for its curtailing of personal liberties and the subjection of its citizens as mere cogs and wheels in an efficiently managed utilitarian society. The undermining of political opposition or subversive groups and the marginalization of ethnic minorities, particularly the Malays, in the wake of economic development and social stability has also been critically covered in previous studies. On the platform of global capitalism, meritocracy, pragmatism, and both racial and religious pluralism, Sin-

gapore's government has attained a level of stability and prosperity that is still marveled at and vilified by both admirers and critics alike. Barr's and Skrbiš's collaborative work goes beyond this well-worn path and delves deeper into the ideology of elitism and cultural identity in the making of Singapore Incorporated. To its credit, *Constructing Singapore* is a penetrative study that provides an in-depth critical analysis of the elitist culture and mechanisms that shape and lubricate the nation-building process of the city-state into the model of efficacy that it is recognized today. However, their presentation of evidence from archival research, oral history, and formal interviews reveals that the country's ideals of multiracialism and meritocracy have also been distorted and misrepresented in the leaders' almost obsessive exercise of patronage and in continuing crises, both real and perceived.

The structure of the book, as laid out by the authors, can be divided into five parts: the first three chapters are an extended introduction to Singapore's official version or "myth-making" of its own history and its interpreta-

tion of elitism and ethnicity; chapters 4 and 5 focus on the two main arguments in the book, which are the flawed misconceptions of multiracialism and meritocracy as the basis of Singapore's success story; chapters 6 to 10 study the education system from kindergarten to junior college, paying special attention to the intricate dynamics of streaming and socioeconomic and ethnic background, and the contribution of *kiasuism* (fear of losing)—a pervasive cultural phenomenon in Singapore—to the high-stakes education process; chapter 11 analyzes the recruitment and formation of elite public servants from the top echelons of the civil service and armed forces; and the last chapter is a critical summary and assessment of the aforementioned nation-building process. As noted by the authors, they basically focus on the shortcomings and flaws of the Singapore system and their goal is not to belittle the nation's achievements, but instead, to contribute to a better understanding of the limits of the processes and mechanisms instituted.

The strengths of the book can be credited to the research methodologies of the authors. The sixty-plus formal interviews, which include retired civil servants, members of parliament, grassroots leaders, academics, students, elite scholars, and entrepreneurs, provide a broad, though not exhaustive, representation of the opinions of the society. An attempt was made to have the sample fairly reflect the ethnic make-up of the national population, which includes a Chinese majority and a lesser number of Malays, Indians, and other ethnicities. The interviews with former members of the elite civil service and the armed forces scholars' program are most noteworthy, as they provide an intimate understanding of the mechanisms that create and sustain the pool of elite public servants. It is also this same small pool of elite administrative servants who have influenced and shaped the policies of much of the nation-building project, especially in the context of elite governance and education.

The book's arguments on ethno-nationalism or Sinitisation at the expense of other ethnic groups, particularly the Malays, are not unfounded, as the marginalization of these minority groups as a result of ingrained cultural prejudices are hard to miss, even in cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic Singapore today. However, they fail to take into consideration the larger socioeconomic disparity of the Islamic religious identification of Malays vis-a-vis the more secularized non-Malay population. Similarly, the focus on the championing of Chinese or Asian values as an omnipresent factor in Singapore's elitist construction seems incongruent with the larger reality that Singapore's high school and junior college graduates are still

products of the English GCE (General Certificate of Education) O and A Cambridge systems. Also, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew's English-speaking background and impressionable period at Cambridge Law School cannot be emphasized enough. The underpinning of the Chinese scholar-mandarin is weak and flawed when contrasted to Lee's Western-borne concept of elitism and governance which, as the study also notes, appears to be a close reflection of [Arnold] Toynbee's vision (p. 44).

Perhaps one of the more intriguing subjects of the book is the discourse and analysis of the origins and influence of the pejoratively dubbed *kiasu* phenomenon, a distinctive Singaporean characteristic. The authors note that the traditional Chinese value of thrift and hard work has morphed into a more niggardly and anti-social cultural trait. This fear of losing out or failure has translated itself into everyday living and the obsessive quest for not just material rewards, but also social mobility through education as measured by grades and the paper chase, a quest in which parents are prime culprits. However, it should be noted that even though the *kiasu* Singaporean parent (usually a mother) has acquired legendary status, this is not a unique Asian phenomenon. While her concern is that her children achieve excellent academic grades, her proverbial Western counterpart, the American soccer mom, is just as demanding with respect to her children's performances on the field. Nonetheless, the connection between the high grades of Singapore school kids and the *kiasu* syndrome is unmistakable. This fear of losing out or the compulsive competitiveness in the Singapore system originates from the perceived vulnerability in the island's limited manpower resources and the delicate balancing act in maintaining racial stability. Hence, as the authors note, the draconian education streaming policies and the manic approach by *kiasu* parents are the results of a dialogue with a *kiasu* government. Parental expectations and fears feed on the government's obsession on reducing waste and mediocrity in Singapore's education system. A revealing argument against the flawed notion of meritocracy in the education system is the prevalence of private tutoring as a supplementary learning aid to many Singaporean students. The pressure-cooker system ensures that only families that can afford private tutoring, namely the Chinese families, have the necessary means and tools to surge ahead on the education front. The results are very evident today as higher socioeconomic groups such as the Chinese have consistently outperformed minorities. However, it should be cautioned that even though this is a factor, it is just one of the few that explains the socioeconomic dis-

parity among different ethnic groups in Singapore.

*Constructing Singapore* aims to illuminate the limits of the city-state's elitist education policies and the elitist culture of governance and it does just that. It is an invaluable study and critique of the nation's elitist mechanisms and processes as it shows the fragile constructions that hide injustices and distortions based in class, ethnicity-cum-race, and personal power networks (p. 269). A

recent article in the January 2010 issue of *National Geographic* compares Singapore to the Emerald City of Oz and M. M. Lee to the Wizard. This is obviously an exaggeration since Lee is clearly not a fraud and Singapore is not a product of fiction. Nevertheless, the article's message hits close to home when it hints that the culture of efficiency and excellence in Singapore glosses over the brooding social discontent that lurks just beneath her clean streets and flashy shopping centers.

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**Citation:** Frank Chua. Review of Barr, Michael D.; Skrbiš, Zlatko, *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, Ethnicity and the Nation-Building Project*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. February, 2010.

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