

## BOOK REVIEWS

MICHAEL D. BARR

*The ruling elite of Singapore: networks of power and influence*

London: IB Tauris, 2014

xvi, 140pp., ISBN 978-1-78076-234-0, hb £58

**Reviewed by Lee Jones**

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Although work on Singapore's political economy and political system is fairly extensive, the narrower question of how its ruling elite was created and operates in practice has largely been neglected – until now. *The Ruling Elite* is a useful and thoroughly researched account of elite formation and maintenance in the city-state since the 1960s. It provides ample empirical evidence of the deliberate, elitist and racist strategy pursued by Lee Kuan Yew and others to build a self-reproducing elite in their own image. The book clearly demonstrates how rulers smoothed the ascendancy of hand-picked individuals – overwhelmingly ethnic Chinese – thoroughly debunking the myth that Singapore is a meritocratic society where ethnic groups enjoy equal opportunities. It is likely to become a standard reference point for scholarship on Singapore, though its wider applicability is limited.

Barr's main thesis is that Singapore's ruling elite is the product of a deliberate strategy pursued by Lee Kuan Yew, based on Lee's peculiar reading of Toynbee. Confronting a situation in the 1950s where 'quality' elites numbered fewer than 150, Lee set out to forge a new socio-political class capable of governing the city-state in perpetuity. Barr argues that elite formation was driven by education, in elite schools and via government scholarships; socialisation, particularly into selective norms of 'Chineseness'; the assumption of a dominant economic role by the state; and patronage, particularly directed by the Lee family. Sketching Singapore's networks of power, Barr argues that the Lees now sit entrenched at the centre, running the city-state like a 'family business'. In the inner core are key ministers and People's Action Party (PAP) leaders, senior bureaucrats in ministries, quasi-state entities and statutory boards, military officers,

the chairs and CEOs of key Government-Linked Companies (GLCs), the Government Investment Corporation, Singapore Press Holdings and MediaCorp, and the three major Chinese banks, particularly OCBC and UOB. There is then a 'subordinate elite' which mainly implements the inner core's policies while keeping social groups in line: the National Trades Union Congress, and various corporatist social and religious bodies. The interlocking memberships and revolving doors between these institutions keep the elite remarkably autonomous, coherent and consistent in its worldview, making any serious external challenge practically doomed to failure, Barr argues.

Overall the book provides solid evidence for how the elite has grown and consolidated into an unrivalled system of rule. This is a difficult topic to research, and Barr has undertaken some excellent detective work. To demonstrate that the system really does 'work' as many suspect, he pieces together fragments of publicly available evidence to illustrate, for example, that the sudden government decision in 2004 to relax language qualifications for government scholarships was driven by Lee Kuan Yew's grandchildren being poor at Mandarin (p. 91). The book contains some intriguing insights on the rising preponderance of elites with a military background, and some very reasonable (albeit very pessimistic) prognostications about Singapore's future without Lee Kuan Yew.

Nonetheless, there are some real problems with the book. The most obvious is Barr's choice to present his material chronologically, portraying the rise and consolidation of Lee's project and the 'changing of the guard' to a younger generation. Although this central narrative is framed by some short, more analytical chapters, these do little more than summarise the intervening material, leading to substantial repetition. An analytical explanation for *how* such a coherent elite could be forged is never coherently presented. Indeed, the book is utterly atheoretical; there is not even a definition (let alone discussion) of 'elitism' as a social phenomenon, and nowhere are the key explanatory drivers of Singapore's elite formation ever set out clearly in one place. Instead, brief explanatory points are dispersed throughout the text. Thus, for instance, the crucial rise of the GLCs – which

provided an 'almost inescapable vehicle of elite patronage and power' – is discussed in just one paragraph midway through a chapter on the 1980s (pp. 58–9). Particularly since this – along with Singapore's small size – are cited as the explanation for Lee's success, this is grossly insufficient. To get any explanatory traction, the reader themselves must glean Barr's narrative for such morsels. A natural and very unfortunate consequence is that the book's immediate value to those studying elites in other countries is very limited. Barr dismisses early work that interpreted Singapore through a 'core executive' model drawn from political science, but at least this approach tried to draw out factors potentially common to multiple societies. By contrast, this book's narrative style often lends the text an episodic, journalistic, even gossipy flavour as Barr relates yet another micro-story of elite manoeuvring. The text is laden with footnotes (36pp of notes for a 140pp book), but the notes are often concerned to prove that some particular individual was behind a specific decision or shenanigan. In doing his detective work, Barr has arguably pressed his nose too far against the window.

A second and partly related set of criticisms concerns the specifics of Barr's argument. The failure to really explain *how* rival elites could apparently be so easily crushed or co-opted into the PAP-centred one is particularly problematic when it comes to the business community. Barr points out that the Chinese Chamber of Commerce (CCC) was initially a powerful and autonomous body. Nonetheless, the CCC was – somehow – persuaded to fund the creation of GLCs that then out-competed them, then 'marginalised' in the 1960s (pp. 33–4). Why would they accept this? Barr does not say. A more analytical account (say, one provided by Garry Rodan) might point to the political weakness of the bourgeoisie – its inability to organise its own political front – and the Cold War context, which led a fearful business elite to side with anyone capable of destroying the left. Furthermore, despite the CCC's alleged 'marginalisation', two major Chinese banks (one of them the driving force behind the CCC) are subsequently described as retaining 'autonomy' and being the 'only viable alternative power base for any alternative elite' (p. 37). Barr notes that the banks

and government regularly exchange personnel, making it questionable whether 'OCBC people who have been in government ... are OCBC people in government, or PAP people in the OCBC' (p. 37). This is an intriguing question, raising the issue of the fusion of state and business power in Singapore; it would suggest that the elite is *not* as 'autonomous' as often supposed but is in fact tied to large-scale capital (mostly state and international, but also local). This would explain why the bourgeoisie has tolerated the PAP's ascent, and why trade unions have been so thoroughly neutralised while some big businesses retain apparent 'autonomy'.

A descriptive account of 'elitism' cannot get at these issues in a way that, for example, a Marxist account of the Singaporean state could, not least because it neglects societal dynamics almost entirely. The ballot box occasionally intrudes into Barr's smooth account of elite consolidation, but there is no account of *why* voters have increasingly moved against the PAP since the late 1980s, *why* Lee Hsien Loong has shifted to a quasi-liberalising reform agenda, *why* this does not seem to be working, and so on. There is no account of rising popular concern with the cost of living or mass immigration – a by-product of the PAP's development strategy – and how this is feeding into rising opposition support. Nor is there any mention of the emergence of an evangelical Christian segment of the elite, whose activities have been highly divisive. The dialectical relationship between social forces and ruling elites, and the contradictions between elite strategy and elite sustainability, are entirely neglected. The elite is simply the brainchild of Lee Kuan Yew, and Lee 'answered to no one' (p. 65). That Barr makes this claim is particularly ironic because he highlights that the idea of Lee as Singapore's 'national father' was a myth deliberately fostered in the 1990s. He quotes approvingly from other authors' criticisms of a rash of books that 'give the wrong impression that Lee built up Singapore almost single-handedly' (p. 88). Yet on page 130, Barr himself suggests that Lee 'almost single-handedly turned the Singapore political system into his domain' (p. 130). Barr thus ends up reinforcing the same myth which he criticises.

In reality, no one does anything single-handedly. Social phenomena demand social explanations. But the focus on a handcrafted elite system provides few explanatory resources to account for how that system was enabled to flourish, or the dynamics that cause it to transform.

SARAH TURNER, ed.

*Red stamps and gold stars: fieldwork dilemmas in upland socialist Asia*

Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013  
308 pp, ISBN 9780774824934, hb \$95

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This book is a very valuable multi-authored work diligently edited by Sarah Turner. It is divided into three parts, the first of which outlines some of the theoretical issues arising from the book and gives general historical background, while the second (the largest) covers a range of fieldwork experiences, with three chapters in the final section being concerned with 'Post-Fieldwork'. In all, 14 contributors each write reflectively about their experiences working in different fieldwork sites, often over extended periods. As Turner notes in her useful introduction, the question of positionality is critical in any reflexive account of fieldwork experiences and each of the contributors works hard to delineate the social, political and economic spaces in which their personal field research developed. The 'messiness' of the social, economic and political status of the external field researcher is not shied away from but rather constitutes a key point of reflection in the chapters. This messiness also arises from the overarching framework of the book in which all the contributors describe fieldwork in communities considered 'ethnic minorities' or ethnic nationalities by their respective nation states, which are themselves defined as being of Socialist Asia: China, Vietnam and Laos. The multiple political, economic and social tensions that emanate from interjecting oneself as an 'outside' researcher between states and their minorities means that work such as this can never be straightforward. Turner defines the principal theme as being the dilemmas and resulting negotiations that arise as a

result of working in ethnic minority communities in Socialist countries and this connects all of the chapters in a variety of interesting ways. Many contributors discuss their decision-making about whether and how formal official approval might be sought and obtained for research; others describe the need to keep many political balls in the air while respecting the sense of vulnerability to the political implications of research that many communities feel. Yet this focus on complexity and 'messiness' creates coherence within the book as a whole; it facilitates a breadth of comparison and contrast that is helpful in drawing out common themes, while each chapter is distinct in its own right.

The appeal of the book also comes from the fact that such a range of foreign (albeit predominantly western) researchers are included, the names of which will be familiar to students who have read contemporary ethnographically framed studies on these areas. Jean Michaud, Oscar Salemink, Steven Harrell and Janet Sturgeon all write interesting chapters that range over the comparative history of ethnic policy in this part of Socialist Asia, to the challenges of working in more than one of these states when conducting multi-sited field research or navigating the political and social minefield of dealing with post-fieldwork representation. Harrell, writing with his colleague Li Xingxing, and Salemink write insightfully and in a thought provoking way upon the discomforting realities that emerge around the complex political and social relationships that have to be built and upon which access and information have to be constructed. The book includes an admirably wide range of western researchers who are highly respected in their areas of research: Stéphane Gros, Magnus Fiskesjö, Candice Cornet, Jennifer Sowerwine, Christine Bonnin, Pierre Petit, Karen McAllister, and Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy. Each brings a particular voice, personality and distinct approach to discussing their particular research site and experiences, yet each chapter contributes well to the whole.

It is interesting that two local female researchers, Chloe and Vi who worked with Candice Cornet and Christine Bonnin respectively, have their thoughts transcribed by Sarah Turner in a chapter that aspires to give a sense of local perceptions of the outside