

Singapore or the Revolution of Territory. Part One : the Hypothesis.

Rodolphe De Koninck

Volume 34, numéro 92, 1990

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/022105ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/022105ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Département de géographie de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0007-9766 (imprimé)

1708-8968 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cette note

De Koninck, R. (1990). Singapore or the Revolution of Territory. Part One : the Hypothesis. *Cahiers de géographie du Québec*, 34(92), 209–216.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/022105ar>

SINGAPORE OR THE REVOLUTION OF TERRITORY PART ONE: THE HYPOTHESIS

by

Rodolphe DE KONINCK

*Département de géographie,
Université Laval, Sainte-Foy (Québec), G1K 7P4*

*And it is said that in laying down the laws, the
legislator must have his attention fixed on two
things, the territory and the population .*

Aristotle, Politics, II, 3, 20

THE SINGAPOREAN OVERHAULING

Over the last three decades, the society, the economy and the territory of the island Republic of Singapore have been the object of fundamental changes. The City State's transition from, in the late fifties, the status of a problem-riddled colonial leftover, to that of a disciplined, efficient and, if a bit vulnerable, developed country has of course been scrutinized. Several studies have shown how the problem of urban decay (You, 1957 ; Kaye, 1960) has been essentially resolved through a massive state-sponsored programme (H.D.B., 1986). Others have shown how the faltering economy (Buchanan, 1972) itself has been overhauled and continues to be redirected to adapt to the vagaries of the world economy (M.T.I., 1986) ; or how the very people of Singapore have been closely Republic-trained in a manner which is sometimes reminiscent of some of Socrate's precepts laid out in Plato's *Republic*²! Yet others have illustrated how the territory of Singapore — about 640 km² — is being extended, to a point where it is "growing" at a faster rate than the country's population which, in 1988, stands at about 2,65 millions.

Most authors agree that the results of the overhaul are generally positive, at least in the sense that the general material and social conditions of living (housing, health, education, consumption) have greatly improved, to a point where, in all those fields, the country is well ahead of its neighbours.

THE INTERPRETATIONS OF SINGAPORE'S SUCCESSES

There is of course no unanimity among the observers of the Singaporean experiment as to what are the *fundamental* reasons behind its successes. Yet a certain number of factors are constantly referred to, whether they are singled out or combined in various

ways. To the risk of oversimplifying these interpretations which in some ways are also illustrations of the Singaporean achievements — what I have called elsewhere *la révolution des fonctions* (De Koninck, 1991) —, one could group them under four distinct, yet often overlapping categories.

First, there is the *political* explanation. This refers both to the general political context under which Singapore has evolved since its access to internal autonomy in 1959, its integration into the newly created federation of Malaysia in 1963 and its separation from it in 1965; and to the way it has been led through this evolution by a breed of exceptionally skillful politicians. These are the prominent members of the People's Action Party, in power since internal autonomy was granted, but also and perhaps foremost its leader, the Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew who has also remained at the helm since that date. The skill and the pragmatism of these leaders have been well analysed (for example Chan, 1976 and Mauzy, 1987): in fact, it is evident that their role in defining a Singaporean ideology and in providing political leadership has been crucial to the nation's achievements and remains so to this day.

The second explanation could be called *technocratic*. By this is understood the actual implementation of development policies. The responsibility to define and administer these policies, many of which were bred in the minds of the political leaders, has been in the hands of an exceptionally competent group of technocrats and planners. Several studies have illustrated how most of the Singaporean development projects have been implemented with honesty, competence and efficiency (Ooi and Chiang, 1969; You and Lim, 1971; Chen, 1983). Even if mistakes were made, for example in some of the initial housing estates, these have usually been corrected, to a point where a fundamental characteristic of the Singaporean planning implementation appears to be its capacity for adaptation. In fact, while Singapore can be considered as one of the most closely planned societies in the world, it is also one of the most versatile: goals and planning procedures are constantly being redefined. The country's stability rests on a form of permanent mobility.

This could be said in particular about a more narrow or at least a more specific element of the development process: the *economy*. As a third factor, Singapore's economic record has indeed been impressive. It has undergone an accelerated reconversion in a context where entirely new industrial sectors have been developed and foreign investment has been attracted on a large scale. The trading function has remained important but only thanks to a massive development of Singapore's harbor facilities, with the result that its five terminals handled a volume of 120 million tons of goods in 1986 as compared to 60 in 1976. More than half of this trade is accounted for by petroleum and petroleum related products, Singapore having become a major refining centre. The electronics industry, the communication and banking sectors, all these are being rapidly developed (Krause *et al.*, 1987). Notwithstanding a near recession in 1985 and 1986, the economy keeps a solid growth rate and the population's standard of living is growing just as steadily while maintaining the highest per capita savings rate in the world (42%; M.T.I., 1986, p. 10).

These remarkable achievements are in turn often attributed to a set of social, ideological and cultural factors. The social and ideological ones are often grouped under the heading of *social monitoring*, considered here as the fourth factor. This includes various forms of mobilisation and social control that have been applied with great skill and with exceptional determination (Margolin, 1989). There is no doubt that, as a result, civic discipline, professional achievement seeking, extensive consumerism and political demobilisation have become widespread in Singapore.

As for the closely related *cultural factor*, the fifth one, it refers to the so-called Confucian values. It is frequently presented in the literature as an explanation of the economic successes of the various little and medium size dragons of the East³. This type of explanation which deals with technical skills, moral values, family, discipline, respect of authority, etc. could also be considered as a recognition of the importance of ideological factors. With reference to Singapore, the cultural hypothesis can be found in Margolin (1986) and Régnier (1987) in particular, but also in Mauzy (1987). It is worth noting that the emphasis on Chinese and Confucian values as a possible fundamental source of explanation of political and economic behaviour is particularly widespread among western observers.

But in total, however refined and elaborate the descriptions and explanations of the Singaporean development experiment, few if any authors seem to recognize the central role that spatial changes have played. Of course, nobody can fail to notice the evolving landscapes of the City State. But all observers, with the partial exception of Goldblum (1986), seem to consider these impressive changes as mere consequences of the development process, or simply inevitable considering the island's limited size (De Koninck, 1990).

THE TERRITORIAL REVOLUTION

The very relief of the island of Singapore and of its neighbouring islands has been and continues to be modified: hills have been cut down to fill swamps, for example on the Jurong side, or to extend the shore lines. In fact, Singapore is being polderized: its coastline is ever changing (Wong, 1985), not only through land filling but also because of the transformation of its major estuaries into fresh water reservoirs. This is associated with even greater changes in land use. What with the development of large housing estates — which now account for 85% of the country's population — and of industrial parks, including the largest one in Southeast Asia (Jurong Industrial Estate) and the phasing out of land based food production — which had become crucial during the transition period (De Koninck, 1975) —, the face of the island is changing in colour! While the former countryside of "mainland" Singapore is increasingly urbanized and being serviced by a massive transportation network⁴, the urban landscapes are being "greened". Between 1970 and 1985, over 600 000 trees were planted (M.C.I., 1987, p. 195).

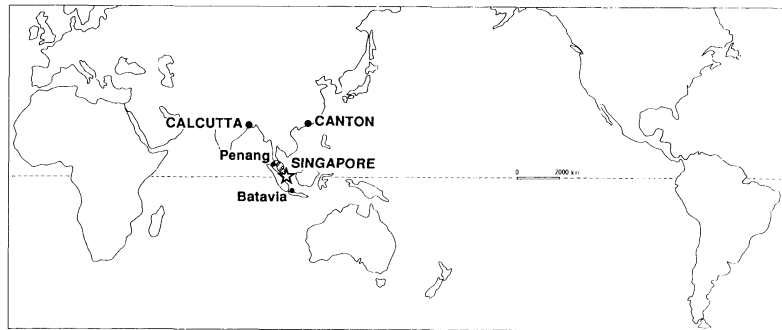
Even if the Republic of Singapore is extending the size of its national territory to a point where at least 20 square kilometers were gained over the last three decades, its needs appear greater than its capacity to grow spatially⁵! So the City State is increasingly exporting some of its activities. Not only is mariculture developing rapidly in the Singaporean waters, pig rearing, once a major activity on the island is now being contracted out to farmers producing for the Singapore market on some not too distant Indonesian islands. Much of Singapore's fresh water, notwithstanding its efforts at developing its own reservoirs (which cover 60 km²), comes from the Malaysian mainland. The Republic's industrial sector is also taking in another Indonesian island, in the sense that much of the development of the free trade zone on Batam (20 km to the southwest) is controlled by Singaporean interests (Régnier, 1987, p. 221 sq). Finally the Singapore Armed Forces have access to the jungles of Brunei for their training activities.

But all this territorial "expansion" should not hide the fact that it is first and foremost the very territory, the very environment of the City State which is constantly being overhauled. Singapore is indeed the site of a permanent territorial revolution.

SINGAPORE: TOWARDS A REVOLUTION OF TERRITORY

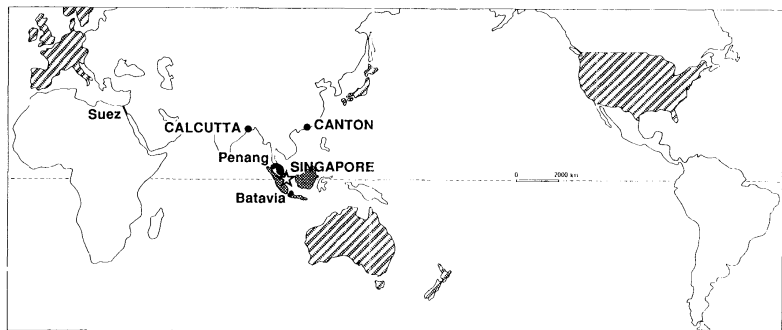
1819-1823

- Establishment of a trading post as part of the British commercial network between Calcutta and Canton.



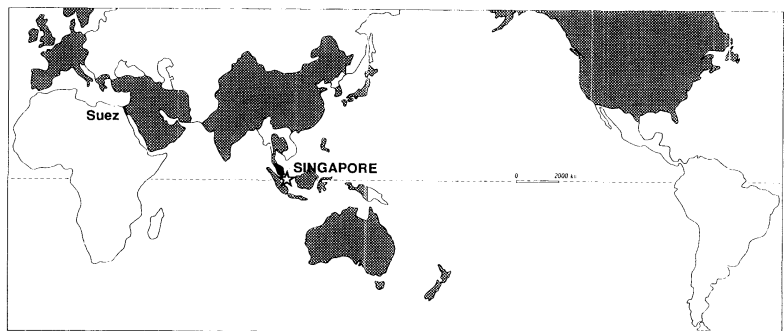
1824-1959

- Success of the emporium with the further expansion of commercial networks.
- Collapse of «Fortress Singapore» following the Japanese conquest of 1942, urban decay and the announcement of the British military withdrawal.



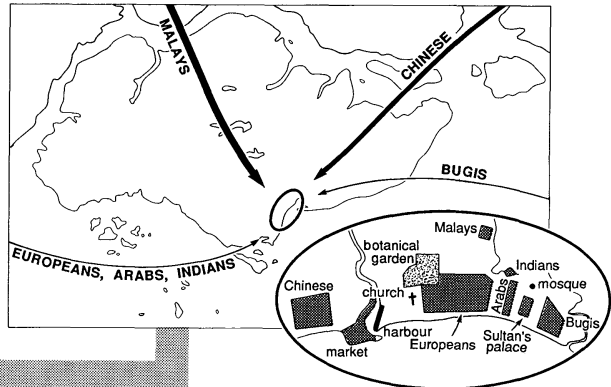
SINCE THE EARLY SIXTIES . . .

After the attainment of internal autonomy (1959) and the ephemeral insertion in the Federation of Malaysia (1963-1965), the Republic of Singapore is created (1965). The entire commercial and industrial functions of the island republic are redefined as the British are withdrawing. This results in a total integration of Singapore's economy into the world system.

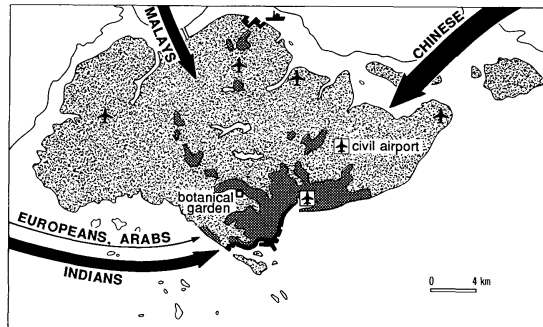


MODERN BEGINNINGS

- Arrival of immigrants →
- Formation of ethnic sections ■
- Development of the harbour ■
- Establishment of a botanical garden ■

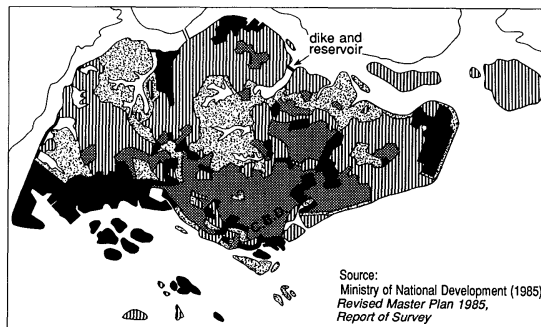
**GROWTH AND CONGESTION**

- Massive immigration, strong population growth →
- Population largely centered around the initial urban core ■
- Growth of the trading, naval and military functions ✈
- Peripheral areas weakly populated and mostly devoted to agriculture, even of an extensive nature... ■


CRUMBLING INFRASTRUCTURE
URBAN DECAY
UNEMPLOYMENT
POLITICAL UNREST
REVOLUTION OF TERRITORY

This means diking of estuaries, creation of reservoirs, polderisation, extension of shore-lines and overhaul of land use.

- Urban renewal and development of housing estates ■
- Establishment of free trade zones and industrial estates ■
- Shrinking of agricultural land but development of parks and recreation areas ■
- Designation of sectors for future development ■

**TIGHT IDEOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL CONTROL**

THE TERRITORIAL HYPOTHESIS

So, rather than consider this territorial revolution as a mere consequence of Singapore's overall evolution, the suggestion here is that it should be considered as a fundamental *factor*. The Singapore population lives on a mobile territory: the carpet on which it stands, so to speak, is constantly, daily, being displaced even pulled from under its feet. This repeated displacement of places is such that traditional reference points, whether cultural or ethnic, social or local are weakened. Notwithstanding forms of cultural persistence or resistance (De Koninck, 1972; Cheng, 1985; Siddique, 1982; Clammer, 1985), *spatial security* exists at only one level, one scale: that of the State as a whole in its territorial form. There lies the central hypothesis, namely that the Singaporean population's adhesion to the Republican project is linked to the permanent spatial insecurity — both internal and external — that characterizes the nation. Just as a cultural revolution can carry away peoples' minds and hearts, the permanent upheaval of a community's spatial basis leaves it in a state of vulnerability, of readiness. This readiness can be maintained, even reproduced to the extent that some form of external threat — whether political: from the neighbouring countries; whether economic: the world market — exists or is perceived as existing. In other words, the interpretation in Gramscian terms of the hegemony of the Singapore State, as proposed by Clammer (1985, p. 160), is insufficient. It must also refer to territorial "manipulation", whether it be conscious or not, planned or unplanned.

Short of undertaking a massive survey of "topophilia" among the Singapore residents, the territorial explanation cannot be verified as such. Its validity can however be emphasized through a systematic survey of the spatial and environmental changes that have been implemented in Singapore since 1819 and particularly since 1959. Essentially based on a comparative analysis of various maps, plans and photographs produced over the last thirty years, the record of Singapore's everlasting spatial changes and territorial dynamism should serve to illustrate the phenomenal extent of what has been a most resolute overhaul. It should also serve to suggest how successful political management does not only rely on political, ideological and social strategies but also on territorial ones. And also, perhaps, that the wisdom at work here is not only Confucian but even more universal, to the extent that Aristotle's criticism of Plato's *Laws* can be considered as such.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC-410-89-1201). A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the 18th Annual Meeting of the Canadian Council for Southeast Asian Studies, held in Halifax, 11-13 November 1988.

NOTES

¹ It should be pointed out here that the statement drawn from the *Politics* comes from a section where Aristotle is debating a passage from Plato's *Laws* (II, 704-709). His reference to "territory", often translated in English by the word "country" is meant to include both the national territory as well as that of the neighbouring countries.

² As far as I know, the wording used here to refer to the disciplined society is not common. Yet, the close social monitoring of the Singaporean population is well documented (for example Hassan, 1976). Passages in the *Republic* pertinent to the Singapore experiment can be found in book V: the most interesting ones concern the unity of the City and the reproduction of the elite.

³ See for example Hofheinz and Calder, 1982; Chaponnière, 1985; Vandermeersch, 1986; Holbrooke *et al.*, 1988.

⁴ In August 1987, during an average day, Singapore was the site of 110 active road construction projects (*Straits Times*, 24.08.87, p. 7).

⁵ This process had in fact begun just after the 1819 founding of Singapore by Raffles. In the years that followed, the shores at the mouth of the Singapore River were in fact filled in and extended (Wong, 1985; Collis, 1966). The growth of the Republic's land mass is still considered essential by the Singapore planners. See for example the recent declaration by the National Development Minister, reported in the weekly overseas edition of the *Straits Times* (16 September 1989), concerning an additional 15% increase of the Republic's size before the end of the century.

REFERENCES

- ARISTOTLE, *Politics*, with an English translation by H. Rackham, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1944.
- BUCHANAN, Iain (1972) *Singapore in Southeast Asia*. London, Bell and Sons.
- CHAN, Heng Chee (1976) *The Dynamics of One Party Dominance: the P.A.P. at the Grass Roots*. Singapore, Singapore University Press.
- CHAPONNIÈRE, Jean-Raphaël (1985) *La puce et le riz. Croissance dans le Sud-Est asiatique*. Paris, A. Colin.
- CHEN, Peter S.J., ed (1983) *Singapore Development Policies and Trends*. Singapore, Singapore University Press.
- CHENG, L.K. (1985) *Social Change and the Chinese in Singapore*. Singapore, Singapore University Press.
- CLAMMER, John (1985) *Singapore. Ideology, Society, Culture*. Singapore, Chopmen Publishers.
- COLLIS, Maurice (1966) *Raffles*. Singapore, Graham Brash.
- DE KONINCK, Rodolphe (1972) Measuring the Cultural Evolution and Modernism of Chinese Farmers of Singapore. *Cahiers de géographie de Québec*, 38: 242-262.
- (1975) *Farmers of a City State. The Chinese Smallholders of Singapore*. Montreal, Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association.
- (1990) Singapour, un petit dragon économique. In P. Gentelle, *L'état de la Chine*, Paris, La Découverte, p. 379-380.
- (1991) Singapour. To appear in M. Bruneau and C. Taillard, *L'Asie du Sud-Est*, Géographie Universelle, vol. 6, Paris, Hachette.
- GOLDBLUM, Charles (1986) *Singapour: une Cité-État moderne à l'épreuve de la fondation urbaine*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Université de Paris VIII.
- HASSAN, R., ed. (1976) *Singapore Society in Transition*. Kuala Lumpur.
- H.D.B. [Housing and Development Board] (1986) *Annual Report 1984-1985*. Singapore.
- HOFHEINZ, Roy Jr and CALDER, Kent E. (1982) *The East Asia Edge*. New York, Basic Books.
- HOLBROOKE, R., MacFARQUHAR, R. and NUKAZAWA, K. (1988) *East Asia in Transition. Challenges for the Trilateral Countries*. New York, Trilateral Commission.
- KAYE, Barrington (1960) *Upper Nanking Street, Singapore*. Singapore, Singapore University Press.
- KRAUSE, L.B., KOH, A.T. and LEE, T.Y. (1987) *The Singapore Economy Reconsidered*. Singapore, ISEAS.
- MARGOLIN, J.L. (1986) Singapour, bureaucratie, confucianisme, libéralisme. In R. Lew et F. Thierry. (ed.) *Bureaucraties chinoises*, Paris, l'Harmattan, 151-181.
- (1989) *Singapour 1959-1987. Genèse d'un nouveau pays industriel*. Paris, L'Harmattan.
- MAUZY, D. (1987) *Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP: Pragmatic Elitists?* CCSEAS Conference paper, Saskatoon.
- M.C.I [Ministry of Communications and Information] (1987) *Singapore 1987*. Singapore.
- M.T.I. [Ministry of Trade and Industry] (1986) *The Singapore Economy: New Directions*. Singapore.
- OOI, Jin Bee and CHIANG, Hai Ding, ed. (1969) *Modern Singapore*. Singapore.
- PLATO, *The Laws*. Translated, with notes and an Interpretative Essay by Thomas L. Pangle, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980.

- PLATON, *La République*. Introduction, traduction et notes par Robert Baccou, Paris, Flammarion, 1966.
- RÉGNIER, Philippe T. (1987) *Singapour et son environnement régional*. Paris, P.U.F.
- SIDDIQUE, S. (1982) *Singapore's Little India*. Singapore, ISEAS.
- VANDERMEERSCH, L. (1986) *Le nouveau Monde sinisé*. Paris, P.U.F.
- WONG, Poh Poh (1985) Artificial Coastlines : the Example of Singapore. *Zeitschrift für Geomorphologie*, N.F. Suppl.-Bd. (57) : 175-192.
- YOU, Poh Seng (1957) Housing Survey of Singapore 1955. *Malayan Economic Review*, 2(1) : 54-74.
- YOU, Poh Seng and LIM, Chong Yah, ed. (1971) *The Singapore Economy*. Eastern Universities Press.

(Acceptation définitive en décembre 1989)

CARTOGRAPHIE

Conception : Rodolphe DE KONINCK, Isabelle DIAZ et Louise MARCOTTE.
Réalisation : Isabelle DIAZ.
Photomécanique : Serge DUCHESNEAU.