

This op-ed by PCI vice president Tom Plate appeared in the South China Morning Post on 8/29/2016.

The Singapore political system may prove a difficult model for China, whatever the West thinks

Tom Plate says a changing Singapore, though increasingly seen now as an acceptable model for China, may be a hard act to follow after all

Singapore has been an upwardly mobile Asian phenomenon for decades. But Americans were the last to realise the extent of the achievement. Until recently, the US establishment media smugly scoffed at this soft-authoritarian-style city state.

But, over time, facts do matter: lately, its role in Asia – especially as a non-ideological signpost for those leaders of China who wish to implant further mile-markers down pragmatism road – is increasingly apparent.

Singapore has been an absolute stand-out, particularly for a small city state (think Norway, sort of, but warmer). It bobs at the top of the charts in the gold-medal statistical metrics: high per capita income, exceptional governance, internationally lauded health care, scary-smart kids in well-run schools and so on. Its ministers and civil servants generally outshine other countries', especially in ethically challenged Southeast Asia. It has sported notable prime ministers: the late, legendary whizz Lee Kuan Yew; the underappreciated, charming Goh Chok Tong, and, since 2004, the well-serving, intelligently determined Lee Hsein Loong.

All were nurtured in the ultra clean, tightly wound People's Action Party (PAP), which until relatively recently hovered over Singaporean politics, not wholly unlike the Chinese Communist Party in the way no one seriously challenged it. But the PAP is now under a measure of other-party competition (with some even hailing the birth of genuine two-party democracy).



Who can step up as Singapore's next leader?

Recent health downturns within the reigning elite serve to remind Singaporeans that nothing is forever. Last year, at 91, founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew died; earlier this month, current prime minister Lee, one of Lee Kuan Yew's two sons, suffered a collapse during a speech and had to be revived; also this month, an ailing finance minister emerged from hospital, and a former president, S. R. Nathan, passed on, to a proper state funeral.

Right, nothing lasts forever – except surely China, which accounts for about a fifth of the global population. It's not ever going away, but unwise Americans sometimes almost seem to wish it would, as if viewing nations and governments like imperious TV producers pondering whether to renew a sitcom series ("Gaddafi's ratings are down – maybe we should cancel?"). One father of that "wishful" thought is Cornell-University-educated Gordon Chang, who in his book *The Coming Collapse of China* declaimed: "The end of the modern Chinese state is near. The People's Republic has five years, perhaps 10, before it falls." This came out in 2001.

For myself, predicting China's collapse seems joyless speculation. The resultant suffering and sadness (not to mention world economic collapse) would be immeasurable. Nowadays, our more sophisticated China-critical crowd narrows the scope of its Sino-failure prediction and

focuses on the Communist Party, which has a public relations image in the West today not unlike that of Singapore's PAP decades ago.

One exemplar of the pessimism-revisionism school is Professor David Shambaugh, the respected director of the China Policy Programme at The George Washington University who – unlike Chang – sees a way out for China. It should draw on the political model of Singapore's PAP. His important new book, *China's Future*, makes the case that the Chinese government must turn away from its constant defaulting to the repression option that “like chemotherapy for someone who has cancer, can work for a while, but not forever”. Instead, it should maturely accept a more evolutionary approach: “This would entail a real opening of the political system to embrace many of the elements and attributes of the semi-democratic systems currently operating in Hong Kong and especially Singapore.” If it doesn't, Shambaugh predicts, the Communist Party “will gradually lose its grip on power”.

There may be trouble ahead for China and Singapore



Why Hong Kong's struggle for autonomy cannot follow Singapore's path to independence

To the far-flung, worldwide secular clergy of political scientists, this thought about a redemptive Singapore road is anything but new; but in America it is almost novel! Singapore's political system as the better way now for China? "It is not democracy as it is known in the West (indeed it operates more efficiently)," writes Shambaugh the pragmatic. "[But] even Singapore has rid itself of the more draconian aspects of its authoritarian past. For China to go down this path would still require a significant and far-reaching transformation of its current political system."

Singaporeans deserve to enjoy a chuckle over its new status as a positive model after decades of detention in the public-opinion purgatory of relentless Western human-rights condemnations. But this brilliant country is changing, too. In 2011, the PAP was rocked when it got "only" 60 per cent of the national vote. It rebounded in 2015, but the theoretical possibility was set: the ruling party could be voted out.



[Why Xi Jinping's bid to put 'power in a cage' must go to the very top](#)

On the mainland, of course, that prospect is about as easy to imagine as finding deeply discounted Mao posters for sale on Taobao. Shambaugh agrees. "Would the [Communist Party] be willing to undertake ... constraints on its complete monopoly of power? The chances are close to zero."

Singapore's foreign policy also seems under reorientation. In the past, it emphasised a balance towards Beijing and Washington. Now, the tilt feels more US-leaning than Sino-US balancing.

Thus, as a model to emulate, it becomes a somewhat problematic target when it itself is in flux. Yet, nudging China into more suave, cosmopolitan politics would add to stability in Asia and the world, and merit Singapore something like a Nobel Peace Prize (at least!).

In that sense, one might almost wish that the city state stuck to its old ways but, of course, I personally cannot suggest this: after all, I am from America, which itself is stuck in its old ways.

Columnist Tom Plate, Loyola Marymount University's distinguished scholar of Asian and Pacific studies, has just been appointed vice-president of the Pacific Century Institute, based in Seoul and Los Angeles. He is the author of Conversations with Lee Kuan Yew, in the Giants of Asia book series

***This article appeared in the South China Morning Post print edition as:
Hard act to follow***