

Top Ten Things to Know about Singapore in the Twenty-First Century

By Charles Chao Rong Phua

Aerial view of downtown Singapore. Source: University of Strathclyde Glasgow website at <https://tinyurl.com/y7z49f55>.

1 MANY NAMES OF SINGAPORE. A place of human habitation long before 1819 when Sir Stamford Raffles established the British settlement, Singapore is the English version of the Malay word “Singapura,” which literally means “Lion City.” Legend has it that when Sang Nila Utama, once ruler of the Srivijaya Empire in Sumatra, discovered the island with white sandy shores in 1299, a storm nearly capsized his boat until he threw his crown into the turbulent waters. When they landed, they spotted a strange beast (orange head, black head, and a white neck breast; his advisers claimed it was a lion) from afar, and hence the island was named Singapura. He ruled until 1347. However, modern historians, citing zoological studies, question the existence of lions in Singapore. Before Singapura, Singapore was called “Temasek,” the Malay word for “Sea Town.” This explains why the Singapore mascot is the Merlion—a word that combines sea (Temasek) and lion (Singapura).

2 BRITAIN’S CROWN COLONY TO “UNSINKABLE” FORTRESS of the East. Sir Stamford Raffles, then-Lieutenant-Governor of British Bencoolen in West Sumatra, founded Singapore in 1819 with the intent of breaking Dutch dominance in the region. Singapore was designed and run as a free port. Owing to its geographical location and free trade, Singapore thrived and attracted Asians, Europeans, and Arabs. Under the Raffles Plan of Singapore, the country was divided into functional and ethnic subdivisions—Chinatown, Kampong Glam (populated by Malays), and Little India are a result of this policy. In 1867, Singapore became the capital of the Straits Settlement Crown Colony, which included four other British possessions that broke away from British Indian Rule under direct supervision of the Colonial Office in London. Winston Churchill has described Singapore as the “Gibraltar of the East.” But in 1942, the Empire of Japan conquered Singapore. The British surrender and Japanese Occupation left an indelible mark etched in Singapore’s founding fathers: no one will protect your country except yourself.



A symbol of Singapore, the Merlion was created in 1964. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/ybkgdjti>.



Sir Stamford Bingley Raffles. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/y773c85l>.



April 6th, 2015, Asia edition of *Time* magazine cover. Source: <https://tinyurl.com/oatwj9r>.



3 INTERNAL INDEPENDENCE, THE MALAY FEDERATION, AND NATIONAL INDEPENDENCE. The British first repealed the Straits Settlement and made Singapore a separate colony. After tumultuous internal political problems and negotiations with the British, the UK granted the colony complete internal self-government in 1959. British-trained barrister and rising political star Lee Kuan Yew became Singapore's Chief Minister. In 1963, Singapore joined the Federation of Malaysia. This was followed by two years of rocky relations, including race riots between Malays and Chinese, and the perceptions by Chinese that a meritocracy was impossible because of Malay dominance. On August 9th, 1965, Singapore, with Lee and the People's Action Party (PAP) at the helm, became an independent nation.

4 FROM MUDFLATS TO METROPOLIS. Singapore's infrastructural development journey is noteworthy. A key principle of the PAP government was that all citizens should own their own shelter (affordable public housing). Since 1960, public housing has accounted for more than 80 percent of Singaporeans' residences. Rapid urbanization meant people in rural villages were moved to Housing and Development Board (HDB) flats. The 1971 Concept Plan adopted a "Ring Plan" concept: centers of high-density development surrounding the central water catchment area and southern development belt connecting Jurong (west) to Changi (east). Residential development was further strengthened by a mass rapid transit (MRT) system in 1987.

5 THIRD WORLD TO FIRST. Under Lee Kuan Yew's leadership, Singapore jumped from Third World to First World within a generation (per capita GDP of US \$500 in 1965, the same as Mexico and South Africa, to US \$13,000 in 1990, surpassing South Korea and Israel). The stability and longevity of PAP rule provided necessary political stability and policy consistency for foreign investments and economic confidence in Singapore. Two economic strategies were key. First, Singapore heeded the advice of UN economic adviser, and later chief economic adviser for twenty-four years, Albert Winsemius to embark on export-led industrialization and growth through multinational companies (MNCs). International development experts recommended import substitution in the 1950s and 1960s for developing countries, but it failed more than it succeeded. Singapore also adopted state-led capitalism after studying Japan's successes and realized the powerful economic incentives of private ownership and profits with state guidance but not state control. This can be attributed to strategic pragmatism and the hard work of Singapore's Economic Development Board to court MNCs, the 1990s privatization of government-linked companies, a rigorous education system, and a population with a superb work ethic.

6 TOTAL DEFENSE. Singapore's peace, stability, and prosperity are premised in part upon its strong armed forces. Singapore has also benefitted from partnerships and cooperation with global and regional powers, and its Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) neighbors. This self-reliance in defense was a key lesson learned from British failures to protect Singapore against Japan's invasion and occupation for three years and eight months during World War II. The conscripted citizen army is well-trained and well-equipped with the latest technologies. A citizen army has the merits of garnering the entire nation's talent pool for the military's use in times of war. The two-year compulsory National Service in Singapore Armed Forces, Police and Civil Defense Force serves as a rite of passage from "boys to men." Total Defense was adopted to stress the comprehensive nature of defense—military, civil, economic, social, and psychological—that every citizen has a part to play in Singapore. Total Defense Day is celebrated every February 15th, the day British surrendered to the Japanese, through island-wide public warning system sirens.



Kampong Glam with Singapore city skyline and Sultan Mosque. Source: © Jpldesigns/Dreamstime.



The six frigates form the 185 Squadron of the Republic of Singapore Navy. Source: *Naval Analyses* website at <https://tinyurl.com/yaw8dprc>.

7 REGARDLESS OF RACE, LANGUAGE, OR RELIGION. Singapore is also successful because of the relatively high, by world standards, harmony between races and religions. In Singapore, religions do not participate in politics. All races and religions are treated equally, as articulated in the Singapore national pledge and institutionalized by the Presidential Council of Religious Harmony and Minority Rights. Deliberate policies ensure diverse races and religions intermingle, beginning when citizens are young children. Most Singaporeans stay in public housing, and there are ethnic quotas to ensure all races are represented in all precincts and protected spaces for communal activities planned by residence committees and community clubs. Primary education is compulsory, and all schools are integrated. National service is a common experience for all citizens regardless of race, language, or religion. Everyone has the same hairstyle, eats the same combat rations, and charges up the same hill. In the recent past, for various reasons including low birth rates and labor shortages, Singapore has attracted a large number of immigrants. In 2017, the number of foreigners in Singapore (approximately 1.4 million) constituted almost one-quarter of Singapore's total population (5.75 million). This significant development may test Singapore's positive multi-ethnic record.

8 CONFUCIAN MERITOCRACY. Singapore's governance model is often judged against Western standards of democracy. It is more accurately a Confucian meritocracy. The key to government success in Singapore is to be a good technocrat. Elections are held and there are several political parties, but the PAP dominates politics. Singapore is not an authoritarian dictatorship; the highly respected international organization Freedom House ranks Singapore as Partly Free. Thanks to the late Lee Kuan Yew's leadership, a Confucian emphasis on education was coupled with the rule of law. Academic top scorers were given generous overseas scholarships, along with well-planned and accelerated career paths to pinnacle positions in public-sector and, sometimes, private-sector government-linked companies. However, recently there has been a gradual shift to more emphasis on SkillsFuture (lifelong learning) and somewhat less of an intense emphasis upon academic performance. The Civil Service recently removed existing career scheme barriers segregating graduate and nongraduate staff, and recruited and promoted staff based on job performance and work experience, rather than academic qualifications.

9 AN IDEOLOGY OF PRAGMATISM. In foreign policy and in general, as a small nation that works hard to survive, Singapore relies on pragmatism. Elected and bureaucratic leadership use the HAIR criteria for talent selection—Helicopter vision, Analytical prowess, Imagination, and a sense of Reality. Singaporean leaders make policies based on hard-nosed rationality and what works.

10 ODD HONEST KID ON THE BLOCK. Corruption-free government is an ideal that Singapore strives to make happen in a realistic manner using competitive salaries coupled with strong disincentives for corruption. In 2016, Transparency International ranked Singapore seventh out of 176 nations in lack of government corruption. Singapore gets top rankings in transparency and lack of corruption for three reasons. First, strong leadership by example: when the top starts to be corrupt, the lower layers follow suit. The Confucian bias toward *junzi* (gentleman-scholars) sets a high moral yardstick to assess scholar-officials. Second, many nations don't pay public servants high salaries, and, rather than deal with the demands of the job, many people who could make higher salaries avoid government positions—hence, Singapore's middle way of paying officials competitive salaries. Entry-level pay for government ministers is 60 percent of the median income of the top 1,000 Singaporean salaries to “signify sacrifices that come with ethos of public service,” yet with variable components linked to individual performance and national outcomes. Third, consequences for default are clear and harsh. The power of shame and guaranteed legal action (Prevention of Corruption Act) reinforce the message of zero tolerance toward corruption. The Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) reports directly to the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and is strengthened by an empowered and vigilant public ready to give information on all suspected corruption. Regardless of an official's rank, he or she will be investigated if there is suspicion of corruption. ■



Singapore skyline and port area. Source: © Gunjan Karun /Dreamstime stock photo.

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