Continuity Without Rupture: The Colonial Foundations of Singapore's Postcolonial State

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Abstract

How did Singapore's postcolonial state transform inherited colonial institutions into the foundations of national legitimacy and global success? This article argues that Singapore's post-1965 governance represented not a rupture from British colonial rule, but a strategic extension and recalibration of colonial governance strategies, particularly through education, bureaucracy, and systems of social control. Rather than dismantling colonial administrative and educational structures after independence, Singapore's leaders preserved and repurposed them as instruments of meritocracy, efficiency, discipline, and nation-building. Drawing on colonial administrative records, parliamentary speeches, oral histories, education policy documents, newspaper coverage, and secondary scholarship in Southeast Asian and postcolonial history, this study examines how colonial hierarchies were transformed into legitimizing narratives of modern governance. Particular attention is given to elite education, scholarship systems, racial management, and archival memory in order to demonstrate how inherited colonial institutions were reframed as national virtues rather than imperial remnants. The article further explores how Singapore's governance model later circulated internationally as a template for postcolonial development in states such as China, Rwanda, and the United Arab Emirates. Ultimately, it contends that Singapore's postcolonial success depended not on the rejection of colonial governance, but on its ideological reinvention and global normalization, challenging conventional narratives of decolonization as a decisive break from empire.

Introduction

In the years after World War II, young Singaporeans attending colonial mission schools were caught between two realities. One former student of Raffles Institution – an elite secondary school founded by the British to educate a small administrative class – later recalled the tension of singing British patriotic hymns in the classroom while knowing that British authority had already collapsed during the Japanese occupation. One former Raffles Institution student later recalled that although students continued singing British patriotic hymns after the Japanese occupation, many no longer viewed British power as invincible. (Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, 1985). The daily routines of school life – English-language prayers, British-style examinations, and the Union Jack flying over the schoolyard – remained firmly colonial, even though the fall of Singapore to Japanese forces in 1942 had demonstrated, for the first time, that imperial power could be broken.

When independence arrived in 1965, the most visible change within these schools was symbolic: the Union Jack was replaced by a new national flag. Yet the structures beneath it remained largely intact. The curriculum, language of instruction, examination system, and ideals of discipline and hierarchy persisted with little alteration. This classroom continuity illustrates a broader pattern in Singapore's transition to independence: while the symbols of empire were removed, its governing frameworks were recalibrated rather than dismantled. In this sense, the colonial classroom did not disappear after 1965 – it was inherited, repurposed, and nationalized.

With little of the joyous fanfare typically associated with a country's founding, Singapore's parliament declared its independence on August 9, 1965. The announcement was made during a heated parliamentary session, followed by a brief radio broadcast to a populace unsure of the political and economic future of the island. There were no large-scale parades or public celebrations. Singapore had joined the Federation of Malaysia, a state that had gained independence from British rule in 1957, two years prior. Without the slow transition that characterizes decolonization, Singapore was thrown out of the federation and thrust into independence when that union broke up due to racial and political strife.

Independence did not result in an institutional vacuum despite this abrupt break. A colonial police force, an English-language judicial system, a centralized civil service, and an administrative geography created during British administration were all inherited by the new state. At the center of political life, government structures like the Padang, City Hall, and the Supreme Court continued to anchor power in areas designed to project control and order. The decision to keep these buildings in use was motivated by a deeper continuity as well as practical considerations, since new institutions could not be established immediately. Singapore's leaders decided to maintain and repurpose current institutions, using the same physical and bureaucratic logics that had organized colonial authority, rather than building a completely new administrative hub or rejecting colonial foundations. In this way, the postcolonial state was not merely constrained by inherited forms; it actively adapted them to serve the purposes of nation-building.

Decolonization, according to postcolonial historians of Asia, involved the fall of empire, the rise of self-government, and the potential for national rebirth. Although independence brought about political change, continuity dominated rupture, especially in the institutions that organized administration, according to Singapore's experience, which contrasts with this framework's emphasis on rupture. According to Nicolas J. White, the effects of British colonialism in Southeast Asia were uneven, and in Singapore, these effects were remarkably resilient (White, *British Business in Post-Colonial Malaysia*, 14–18). The colonial focus on export-oriented commerce, administrative and legal predictability, and a professional civil service produced governance mechanisms that the postcolonial state could easily preserve and expand rather than destroy.

These colonial logics persisted in areas other than administration and economy. According to Kamaludeen Mohamad Nasir's study of Chinese secret societies, postwar authorities continued the colonial tactic of "pragmatic" governance (Nasir, “Representations and Management of Chinese Secret Societies,” 45–67), which allowed for the tolerance of particular social formations as long as they did not pose a threat to state power. These practical arrangements' continued existence shows how colonial ways of governance were deliberately maintained and modified rather than abandoned following independence. When taken as a whole, these studies indicate that Singapore's postwar history is best understood as a situation in which colonial governance was recalibrated and legitimized under the language of nationhood rather than as a clear rupture from empire. When taken as a whole, these studies indicate that Singapore's postwar history is best understood not as a clear rupture from empire, but as a process through which colonial governance was recalibrated, expanded, and legitimized under the language of nationhood and modern state-building.

According to Do Young Oh's research on colonial universities, Singapore's higher education system was purposefully created during British control to replicate imperial ideology through curriculum, architecture, and spatial organization (Oh, “Singapore: Colonial Universities and Urban Space,” 45–62). In addition to being educational establishments, colonial campuses like Raffles College served as symbolic locations that upheld racialized access to knowledge, hierarchy, and discipline – aspects that the postcolonial state subsequently developed and maintained. This continuity has been characterized by some academics as a type of "pragmatic modernity," a theory that explains Singapore's deliberate maintenance of colonial institutions for stability and administrative efficiency.

However, Oh's finding of continuity points to something more deliberate than just practicality. Based on these observations, this essay makes the case that Singapore's postwar leadership intentionally promoted this continuity as a virtue rather than just extending colonial government and educational systems because they were useful. Colonial systems of elite selection, hierarchy, and discipline were reframed as proof of meritocracy, order, and contemporary governance. In this way, the postcolonial state purposefully chose colonial continuity since it could be justified as pragmatic, therefore pragmatism and deliberateness were not mutually exclusive. Singapore's founders transformed colonial governance into a legitimizing ideology of state authority by converting inherited imperial procedures into national ideals.

Instead of cutting colonial ties, Singapore's postcolonial transition maintained and adjusted them. The edifice of colonial rule, especially in education, social control, and centralized administration, was not demolished at independence, despite the fact that British colonial control had never been comprehensive. Rather, these structures were intentionally rebranded, inherited, and given new names. This perspective contrasts with that of C. M. Turnbull, who reinforced a narrative of rupture within Southeast Asian decolonization by framing Singapore's early independence as a dramatic break from colonial dependency (Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore*, 287–305).

This study argues that what appeared to be nation-building was, in many respects, the selective expansion and consolidation of colonial systems of governance, whereas Turnbull emphasized political separation. Turnbull’s interpretation emphasized Singapore’s political separation from Britain, the emergence of sovereign self-government, and the rapid development of national institutions after 1965 as evidence of decisive decolonization. However, with greater historical distance from independence, scholars have increasingly begun to reconsider the extent to which colonial structures themselves truly disappeared.

Singapore concentrated and strengthened the colonial administrative, educational, and disciplinary systems that had governed daily life rather than replicating the entire imperial apparatus of British control. By doing this, the postcolonial state turned inherited colonial customs into the cornerstones of legitimacy and national authority.

By interpreting Singaporean governance as a purposeful endeavor to rebrand colonial governance as a national virtue rather than merely as a case of pragmatic postcolonial adaptation, the theory put forward in this paper both advances and deviates from previous

research. This study contends that postcolonial leaders consciously portrayed old colonial institutions – particularly in education and administration – as proof of meritocracy, efficiency, and modernity rather than viewing continuity as incidental or inevitable. Therefore, whether Singapore's postcolonial model is a true break from colonialism or a calculated continuation of it, and how this recalibrated continuity was later presented outside of Singapore as a model for government abroad, are the main questions driving this examination.

Methodology

In terms of methodology, this article uses both primary and secondary sources in a historical and comparative manner. The National Archives and Oral History Center in Singapore houses oral history interviews, parliamentary speeches, education policy documents, British colonial administration reports, and contemporaneous journalistic coverage from The Straits Times. These sources are used to reconstruct how colonial institutions operated in practice and how postcolonial leaders publicly justified their preservation after 1965. In order to examine both structural continuity and changes in the rhetorical reframing of colonial acts as national accomplishments, special emphasis is given to language, symbols, and institutional design.

The article examines the historiography of decolonization and postcolonial state building in Southeast Asia in addition to archive study. The writings of historians like Do Young Oh, Kamaludeen Mohamad Nasir, and Nicolas J. White offer benchmarks for determining whether Singapore's experience is an anomaly or a reflection of larger regional trends. This study assesses continuity as an active process of selection, adaptation, and legitimization rather than as a static inheritance by placing Singapore in the context of other postcolonial governments that inherited British administrative systems. The essay moves beyond descriptive history to evaluate how colonial governance endured independence by being ideologically repurposed rather than being abolished thanks to the combination of archival and comparative methodology.

This article is divided into six sections to illustrate how colonial governance was maintained and repurposed following independence. In order to create a submissive elite, it starts by analyzing the fundamentals of British colonial power in Singapore, paying special emphasis to administrative control and education. After 1965, these colonial educational institutions were kept in place and rebranded as a meritocratic system that supported postcolonial authority, as the next section explains. The study then shifts its focus to racial management, examining how instances of social unrest were exploited to support centralized monitoring and control. The state's handling of archives and historical memory is then examined, which demonstrates how colonialism was reinterpreted as a neutral or advantageous legacy. After examining how Singapore's rebranded colonial model was sold overseas as an example of successful government, the last sections conclude with a contemplation of what Singapore's experience shows about the endurance of empire in postcolonial states.

Colonial Governance in British Singapore: Foundations of Control

From its founding as a British trading post in 1819 until the Japanese occupation in 1942, and again after Britain's return in 1945, British colonial rule in Singapore rested on an intricate system of social control, ideological management, and hierarchical inclusion in addition to political dominance. Instead of trying to fully integrate or educate the island's diverse communities–including Malay villagers, Chinese migrants, Indian laborers, and Peranakan elites–the British established structures that would support a small, obedient elite to serve colonial requirements whilst keeping the general citizenry politically passive. Education in particular became a key component of this effort.

Only a small percentage of Chinese people had access to English-medium schools, clan associations (Chinese kinship- and dialect-based community organizations that provided social welfare, education, and economic support for migrants), and mission schools for social advancement. But the goal of these schools was not to promote critical citizenship. Rather, they created a class of middlemen who acted as a bridge between the colonial government and the local community, including clerks, interpreters, teachers, and lower-level officials. Colonial governance during this period was characterized by what scholars have described as a "pragmatic accommodation," in which local institutions – including Chinese secret societies– were tolerated so long as they did not threaten imperial authority or disrupt social order.

Colonial education policy was shaped by the same logic of controlled inclusion. Access to schooling was encouraged only when it reinforced loyalty to the colonial administration and promoted social stability. Education was therefore conceived not as a universal right, but as a selective instrument for producing reliable intermediaries who could administer the colony without challenging imperial authority.

Early 20th-century British reporting clearly demonstrates paternalism at work. A 1927 Colonial Annual Report stated that "Chinese students who pass through the mission schools are admirably suited for clerical duties, while higher training is neither necessary nor desirable" (Colonial Annual Report: Straits Settlements, 1927). By restricting education primarily to administrative and vocational tasks, the colonial authority ensured that a small elite class could mediate between colonial rulers and local populations without fundamentally challenging the political hierarchy of imperial rule.

Mission schools such as Raffles Institution and St. Joseph's Institution consequently became training grounds for this colonial intermediary class. Alumni memoirs describe mornings spent singing "God Save the King," even as they were trained for roles as interpreters and minor administrators. Oral histories from former students suggest that clerical service was viewed as one of the most stable and prestigious career paths available within the colonial system. (Oral History Centre, Singapore, 1985). This illustrates how colonial education cultivated loyalty not only through material advancement and government employment, but also through emotional and symbolic attachment to imperial authority.

The colonial administrative reports from the early 20th century indicate that the objective was not empowerment but the production of a manageable administrative class. Through cultivating an elite that was fluent in English, educated in colonial customs, and reliant on official favors, British authorities created a meritocracy that was closely aligned with imperial principles.

According to historian Albert Lau, "education was a sieve for extracting loyal clerical cadres rather than a ladder of mass mobility."(Lau, *A History of the University of Malaya*, 15). Most people were denied access to educational and administrative opportunities; only a small, carefully selected elite was permitted to rise into government-linked positions, and their role was to support and sustain colonial rule rather than to reform or resist it. This elite formation would serve as the foundation for Singapore's postcolonial governance, which saw colonial institutions localized and enhanced rather than dismantled.

Less than 10% of Malay students and roughly 20% of Chinese children were enrolled in secondary school prior to the Japanese invasion in 1941. These differences were not coincidental. They were a reflection of a colonial educational system that restricted access to higher education and reserved mobility for a small, politically stable elite in order to maintain hierarchy. Colonial policy prioritized social control and administrative efficiency over mass advancement, ensuring that the majority of people were kept out of higher education.

Through vernacular schools and clan associations, Chinese reformers and community leaders –most notably Tan Kah Kee and proponents of Chinese-medium education – pressed for greater access, but these initiatives received little official support and were frequently viewed with suspicion by colonial authorities. Consequently, the growth of education continued to be strictly limited. These numbers thus show a system designed more for management than for emancipation, one whose institutional logic and inequality were subsequently carried over to the postcolonial state.

Education After 1965: Rebranding Elitism as Meritocracy

Even though the Singaporean government after Independence kept many features of the colonial British system, it rebranded that system as one in which meritocracy prevails; therefore, being good at something or working hard are grounds for getting a job irrespective of one's background. The idea about rebranding was expressed in official government documents and political speeches in such a way as to make it seem neutral and that no inherent preference or bias was part of the selection process. The late 1960s was a critical period for the Singaporean government regarding the need to "Find talent early" and make that talent available for use in the civil service; therefore, the government noted that selective education is both egalitarian and essential. The PSC was established by the Singaporean government as part of its effort to institutionalize meritocracy as the basis for selecting the country's leaders through three primary means: by creating national exams,by establishing a hierarchical system of schools to place students who received high scores, and by providing scholarships to students to attend elite institutions of higher learning around the world. Rather than creating a non-elitist, merit-based government, the post-colonial Singaporean government simply localized and expanded its creation of an educational and governmental class of leaders, thereby securing the continued legitimacy of governmental authority through an educationally self-perpetuating elite.

While many of the elite bureaucratic networks and corresponding civil-service examinations present in Singapore were also established, and continue to be maintained, in other previous British colonies, for instance, Ghana, India and Pakistan, what is particularly noteworthy about the way in which these systems survive in Singapore is the deliberate manner in which the

post-colonial state has obscured the colonial legacies of these bureaucratic networks and civil service exams while fostering a new societal narrative that positions them as uniquely national systems based upon ‘meritocracy’ required for a nation to survive in a post-colonial world that is generally regarded to be hostile towards former colonial possessions. These ideological transformations are the result of not only the manner in which bureaucratic networks and civil-service examinations have been emphasized within Singapore (namely efficiency, discipline and ‘talent’) as domestic principles; but rather, they are also the direct consequence of the omission of their colonial histories and the disproportionate benefits afforded to individuals of certain demographic groups as a result of these bureaucratic institutions.

Gradually, meritocracy expanded from an educational policy to a moral justification for inequality and elite rule, thereby allowing former colonial methods of administration to persist not by means of coercion; but rather, through popular approval, legitimizing both bureaucratic networks and civil-service examinations in Singapore.

The continuity was deliberate. In a 1966 parliamentary address, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew declared, "We cannot afford to waste talent; every able child must be identified and trained for service to the nation."(Lee Kuan Yew, parliamentary speech, 1966). Such rhetoric implied inclusivity even though the institutional design – elite secondary institutions, selective streaming beginning at the elementary level, and English scholarship exams – favored those who were already privileged.

Among the most important establishments assisting this elite were Raffles Institution, Anglo-Chinese School, and Hwa Chong Junior College. A disproportionate number of their students came from wealthy families with fluent English speakers, private tutors, and enrichment activities. The main source of entry into Singapore's political, military, and administrative leadership was the Public Service Commission (PSC) scholarships, which were state-funded grants that paid for university education abroad in return for mandatory government service. By the 1980s, more than 70% of PSC scholarship recipients, according to academics, came from middle and upper-class Chinese families, leaving Malays and Indians underrepresented (Barr, *Constructing Singapore*, 41–58). Due to the cumulative advantages enjoyed by some socioeconomic groups, meritocracy and inherited privilege remained closely linked despite the Ministry of Education's public emphasis on the "fairness" of competitive exams and standardized testing.

"Everyone knew who the scholars would be before the results came out – those who had tutors, connections, and English at home were already ahead before the exam began," according to a former student from a less privileged neighborhood. According to Chua Beng Huat, the ideological function of Singapore's meritocracy is to maintain public trust in the government while also generating a stable ruling class.

The postcolonial state publicly reframed these disparities as essential trade-offs for national survival rather than denying them. Political leaders contended that uneven results were an inevitable byproduct of spotting and developing talent as effectively as possible, not a sign of systemic bias. As a logical and moral basis for government, educational stratification was thus not only accepted but actively defended.

Chua Beng Huat asserts that the merit-based system does not enforce a reduction in the level of inequality; rather, it is a way for the ruling party of Singapore to gain legitimacy through their use of naturalizing the outcome of inequality as natural and just. Each year, there are a series of recognitions that occur (such as: celebrations of academic top-scorers) that reinforce this ideological function through the use of highly publicized reporting in national newspapers (such as: The Straits Times) and TV announcements by the Ministry of Education. The stories of these top-scorers generally emphasize the individuals' commitment/dedication, the extent to which their families made sacrifices, and the amount they contributed to national service (such as: military service) suggesting that academic success, at such a high level, is illustrative of the existence of equal opportunity when in fact it is more indicative of a structurally-inherent advantage.

Scholarship records and longitudinal education data, however, present a different picture. Sociological studies conducted from the 1980s through the early 2000s, alongside Ministry of Education reports on school performance and university admissions during the same period, consistently demonstrated that students from English-dominant elite secondary schools remained disproportionately represented within the highest levels of academic achievement (Ministry of Education Reports, 1980s–2000s). Public Service Commission (PSC) scholars, in particular, were rarely drawn from government-funded neighborhood schools, which primarily served lower- and middle-income populations. Language policy, early academic streaming, and unequal access to enrichment resources all contributed to the disadvantages faced by students educated in vernacular-language streams, especially Malay students. Meritocratic success therefore reinforced many of the same social and educational hierarchies it claimed to overcome, rather than emerging as a purely neutral outcome of competition.

The PSC's Scholarship Programme was the clearest example of the continuity of colonialism after colonisation compared to other scholarship programmes. Traditionally, recipients had been students at British universities like Oxford and Cambridge, which were regarded as extremely prestigious, but in some cases recipients were sent to prestigious US or Australian universities. In return for receiving subsidized school, recipients signed contracts to go back to Singapore after graduating and serve a specified number of years (usually six) in the civil service and/or military, or with one of the statutory boards.

This mandatory return was ideological as well as administrative. The scholarship established "a bond of loyalty, not just financial but ideological, to the system that had raised you," according to a former academic and public servant. By means of this mechanism, the state made certain that individuals holding high-ranking positions in governance had received their education overseas, had been assimilated into elite bureaucratic standards, and were legally and symbolically obligated to the postcolonial state. In the same way that colonial clerks and officials once embodied imperial values, the rise of this cadre reflected the creation of administrative intermediaries during the colonial era, guaranteeing that Singapore's ruling class absorbed state ideology.

In transforming education after the war, the colonial forms of selective access, English-only education, various streams of students, and recruitment of an elite by the imperial elite ceased

to be seen as merely reproducing the elite of the empire but became celebrated as an institution of the nation by being attached to the language of opportunity and national service. While the focus changed from empire and duty on the side of the students to the country and merit for the students, the primary purpose of the education system continued; as it was before, its primary purpose was to find, train, and connect a small governing elite (educationally privileged) to the state through benefiting from educational privilege and a career of bureaucratic advancement. While the rhetoric of practical nation-building did not end colonial hierarchy, it concealed its existence, portraying the inherited structures of exclusion and control as neutral, efficient, and necessary for the nation. This logic of selective inclusion extended beyond education alone. Just as colonial and postcolonial schools cultivated disciplined elites while presenting hierarchy as merit, the postcolonial state also used racial management and moments of communal crisis to justify centralized authority, surveillance, and social control in the name of national stability.

Racial management and the use of crisis to justify control

Postcolonial Singapore did not rely on education and bureaucracy alone to preserve colonial structures of governance. It also used moments of communal unrest to justify centralized authority, surveillance, and state intervention. By reframing racial and religious conflict as evidence of the dangers of uncontrolled public mobilization, postcolonial leaders transformed the crisis into a justification for political discipline and social control.

An earlier example of this process can be seen in the Maria Hertogh riots of 1950, a case chosen because it later became one of the most frequently invoked examples of communal instability in Singapore's official political memory. The riots are better understood not simply as spontaneous religious violence, but as a communal confrontation shaped by colonial legal authority and social inequality. Maria Hertogh, a Dutch-Eurasian girl who had spent much of the Japanese occupation living with a Malay Muslim foster family, became the center of a custody dispute after British colonial authorities returned to Singapore. When a colonial court ruled that Maria should be removed from her foster family, separated from Islam, and returned to her biological Dutch Catholic parents, many within the Malay-Muslim community viewed the decision as a colonial intrusion that disregarded local custom and religious autonomy.

Tensions escalated after newspapers circulated photographs of Maria dressed in Catholic clothing, which many Malay-Muslim observers interpreted as symbolic evidence of forced religious conversion. Large crowds gathered outside the courthouse and in predominantly Malay neighborhoods to protest the ruling. Violence soon spread across the city. Over the course of three days and four nights, eighteen people were killed – many during clashes between protestors, civilians, and colonial security forces – and more than 170 were injured (National Library Board Singapore Infopedia, "Maria Hertogh Riots"). The unrest exposed both the inability of colonial policing to contain communal tensions and the deeper grievances produced by unequal colonial governance, particularly the political marginalization of Muslim communities under British rule.

Colonial authorities largely portrayed the violence as irrational religious disorder. However, contemporary observers and later historians have argued that the riots reflected broader frustrations with colonial legal hierarchy, racial inequality, and the exclusion of local communities

from political authority. Yet after independence, postcolonial leaders increasingly reframed the riots not as evidence of colonial failure, but as a warning about the dangers of uncontrolled communal politics.

From the 1960s onward, the Maria Hertogh riots were repeatedly invoked in parliamentary speeches, public commemorations, and educational narratives alongside the 1964 Race Riots as proof that ethnic and religious mobilization threatened national survival (Lee, *From Third World to First*, 30–35). Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's first Prime Minister, frequently referenced such episodes to argue that only a strong, interventionist state could preserve "racial harmony" within a multiracial society. In this interpretation, the political and legal origins of the conflict were largely erased. Violence instead became evidence that public mobilization and communal passions inherently endangered social order, thereby legitimizing surveillance, censorship, and centralized control.

Antagonism on racial grounds was repeatedly invoked in postcolonial Singaporean governance rhetoric to reinforce centralized authority. Much like British colonial administrators had used "divide and rule" strategies to manage communal tensions, the People's Action Party (PAP) – led largely by English-educated elites such as Lee Kuan Yew, economist and future Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee, and diplomat-intellectual S. Rajaratnam, all of whom had been shaped by British legal and administrative traditions – presented themselves as rational, technocratic leaders capable of transcending communal politics. Racial crises therefore became political evidence for the necessity of a disciplined and interventionist state.

The 1964 Race Riots, which took place during Singapore's short-lived and tumultuous merger with Malaysia, have since become the most commonly referenced incident within this framework. Tensions between the Malay and Chinese communities had been running high due to disagreements over political representation, the Malay affirmative policy in favor of Malays as outlined in the Malaysian Constitution, as well as provocative statements from both Singaporean and Malaysian politicians. On July 21, 1964, a Malay procession commemorating the birthday of Prophet Muhammad made its way through the heart of Singapore. A religious procession soon turned violent as clashes between Malay and Chinese locals broke out, quickly spreading throughout the community. In the span of two major incidents that year, thirty-six people were killed and hundreds more injured.

Despite these events occurring on the eve of independence, responsibility for restoring order rested primarily with Singapore's local authorities, who imposed curfews, expanded security measures, and introduced restrictions on the press. In subsequent decades, these riots were repeatedly referenced in speeches, textbooks, and national commemorations to reinforce the fragility of multiracial coexistence in the absence of state supervision. Lee Kuan Yew later recalled walking through the burning streets of Geylang during the 1964 riots, presenting himself as a leader confronting chaos directly. These recollections functioned not merely as personal memories, but as political lessons intended to reinforce the idea that "communalism" posed an existential threat to national unity if left unchecked.

Beyond Lee's memoirs and oratory, the postcolonial state institutionalized this interpretation through its policies. The riots served as a rationale for measures regulating public gatherings,

ethnic associations, and internal security legislation, which were presented as precautions rather than overreactions. In this manner, the 1964 riots have been translated from a particular episode in history, driven by colonial heritage, regionalism, and social inequality, to a general lesson: racial diversity needed to be constantly managed and policed. By redefining inter-communal tensions as a natural and recurring threat, the PAP turned crisis into doctrine, using memory as a form of governance.

This ideology of managed multiculturalism, frequently expressed by the state as “racial harmony” achieved through discipline, meritocracy, and state control, was best exemplified in the realm of language and education. Instead of being dismantled after independence, the colonial tradition of English-medium education was actually amplified and rebranded as a neutral, unifying language capable of transcending ethnic differences. In reality, however, those who had been educated in English-medium colonial schools enjoyed a privileged position over those from Chinese-medium schools such as Nanyang University, which was eventually marginalized and shut down.

By placing English as the primary language of opportunity and social mobility, the state effectively rewrote the existing racial and class hierarchies as a product of individual merit rather than a function of history and inequality, and embedded them in the logic of educational success. Class and ethnic stratification were institutionalized through school streaming and linguistic criteria, as students were segmented not only according to academic ability but also according to linguistic affiliation. The unstated assumption here was obvious: upward social mobility could be achieved only through officially sanctioned routes, while social harmony could be maintained through compliance with officially sanctioned culture and politics.

What began as an aspiration for peaceful coexistence in society was gradually transformed into a formal national ideology. “Racial Harmony” was transformed from a descriptive concept to a prescriptive concept, not only defining the parameters of identity but also limiting the scope of political expression. Racial Harmony Day, which was first introduced in schools in the 1990s, is an example of this transformation. Students were encouraged to don their ethnic attire, taste their traditional food, and engage in the celebration of multiculturalism. This not only promoted the visibility of differences but also depoliticized them, taking the focus away from the inequalities in housing, employment, and education, where the state continued to enforce ethnic quotas and restrict political dissent.

Such practices were part of a larger, late-twentieth-century, global trend towards state-managed multiculturalism, but in the Singaporean context, these practices had a particular colonial significance. As with the colonial period, diversity was accepted provided it was orderly, non-confrontational, and apolitical. Pluralism was not seen as a space for critique and dialogue, but rather one to be carefully managed and presented. In this sense, the postcolonial state repeated the now-familiar logic of the colonial state: the celebration of cultural difference, the political expression of which was subject to careful control.

Thus, rather than treating race as a free platform for political debate, collective grievance, or popular mobilization – that is, as a space where citizens could openly question state policy or articulate competing visions of justice – postcolonial rulers, like their colonial predecessors,

treated racial difference as something requiring constant surveillance. Race is not a site for democratic expression, but rather a potential source of instability and thus a justification for state-sponsored mediation, surveillance, and control. According to researcher Lily Zubaida Rahim, the PAP's application of the principle of "community meritocracy" effectively eliminated meaningful political competition by tying racial harmony to national survival and framing dissent as a form of disloyalty rather than legitimate criticism (Rahim, *Singapore in the Malay World*, 77–91). In this context, questioning state policy, especially on racial or religious grounds, meant being labeled as irresponsible, divisive, or dangerous to the social order.

Education also continued the colonial hierarchy after independence. Schools and systems of scholarship, like the postcolonial state that invoked racial governance and episodes of communal crisis to justify centralized authority, surveillance and political control in the name of national stability, were central to the production of disciplined elites and the naturalization of inequality in the idiom of meritocracy.

Archives, National Memory, and Historical Repackage

The preservation of colonial governance after independence depended not only on institutions such as schools, bureaucracies, and security systems, but also on the control of historical memory. Examining archives and state-directed history education is therefore essential because they reveal how the postcolonial government legitimized inherited colonial structures by shaping the way Singaporeans understood the past.

If colonial governance and education were the institutional engine of continuity, then archives and historical education demonstrate the ideological side of rebranding. Independent Singapore has meticulously managed its historical memory, rewriting history to meet the needs of the postcolonial state, in addition to retaining colonial structures. The most illustrative example is the treatment of the so-called “Migrated Archives,” which are colonial-era records that were brought back to Britain in the 1960s. The selective release of these records to Singapore’s National Archives, many of which revealed the violence and repression of the late empire, led to significant gaps in the historical record (*The Guardian*, “Migrated Archives,” April 18, 2011). Due to the careful selection of which of these documents may be returned to Singapore's National Archives, the state did not inherit a complete colonial record, but rather a selected collection that excluded the most damning narratives of empire. The administration was able to portray colonialism as a peaceful prelude to nationhood rather than as a means of domination because of the deliberate silences created by this selective dissemination.

The absence itself is instructive because it enables the state to portray colonialism as a story of neutral or even positive legacies such as the rule of law, the development of infrastructure, and administrative efficiency, rather than as one of dominance. As scholars of archival politics have argued, the archive is never a neutral repository but rather an active tool of governance (Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 18–24): what is not preserved can have just as much political significance as what is.

This tactic is also used in state-run history classes. While downplaying instances of resistance, inequality, or repression, school textbooks highlight the “pragmatic” legacy of colonial systems.

Official curricula give strikes, student activism, and the function of left-wing or communist organisations very little, if any, consideration. Rather, the prevailing narrative frames British accomplishments as stepping stones to Singapore's current stability and celebrates continuity and gradual modernization (Noor, "The Hidden History of the Left in Singapore"). The national archive itself becomes a tool of governance – a carefully curated collection meant to forge a unified national identity rather than a neutral repository of memory, according to a 2018 Springer study on postcolonial archives.

It is also important to note the distinction between the analysis presented in this paper and the state narrative. While the former uses the concept of continuity as an object of critique, the latter uses it as an object of legitimacy. As Ruth Craggs and Claire Wintle argue, archives are not neutral repositories of memory but active sites of governance. (Craggs and Wintle, 257–275) In the context of Singapore, therefore, the management of archives and the education of history serve the purpose of domesticating colonialism, or integrating it into an unpoliticized narrative of the nation-state and its legitimacy.

Therefore, the national archive itself becomes an administrative tool, a painstakingly curated collection intended to forge a unified national identity, rather than an objective storehouse of memory. Instead of being rejected, colonialism is incorporated into the state's nation-building narrative in order to produce an acceptable postcolonial identity. Similar to how surveillance was rebranded as racial harmony and elitism as meritocracy, colonial memory was reframed as a foundation rather than a barrier. The Singaporean government has propagated this version of its history abroad, legitimizing its authority and making it appear intact, modern, and pragmatic despite its deliberate erasures.

Exporting the Singapore Model: From Postcolonial Survival to Global Template

By the late twentieth century, Singapore's model of governance was no longer seen as relevant only to its own national context; instead, it began to be promoted internationally as a system that other states could adopt. International observers came from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia to study how a resource poor island had turned into a hub of affluence. But what many of these observers saw was not a completely new system, but rather one firmly anchored in colonial legacies: rather than being dismantled, the British framework of strictly regulated pluralism, centralized bureaucracy, and elite recruitment had been recalibrated and repackaged under the name of "modernization." The reorganization of elite training pipelines, especially through the Public Service Commission scholarship program, was where this continuity was most evident.

One of the most important of these exports was the Public Service Commission (PSC) scholarship program, which recast the colonial policy of developing a small administrative class as a "meritocracy." By the late 1970s and 1980s, Singapore began to be included with Hong Kong, South Korea, and Taiwan as one of the "Four Asian Tigers" in the Western media and policy discourse, as a way of celebrating economic growth, administrative efficiency, and political stability in East Asia. Within this broader discourse, Singapore's administrative class and education system were often held up as a model of good governance.

Visiting delegations invariably extolled the efficiency and administrative discipline of Singapore's civil service system, but above all their interest was focused on the country's extraordinary economic growth. Foreign observers sought to understand how a small, resource-scarce postcolonial country could emerge as a global financial and commercial hub while maintaining political stability and social order. Much less attention was paid to the social consequences of this model. Within international discourse on Singapore's success, issues of racial stratification, socioeconomic inequality, gendered access to elite educational institutions, and political repression were frequently sidelined. What was celebrated instead was the seeming effectiveness of centralized authority, disciplined populations and depoliticized technocracy, even at the cost of democratic participation and political pluralism.

In Rwanda, reverence for the Singaporean model directly fed into policy making after the 1994 genocide, when Paul Kagame and the Rwandan Patriotic Front took control (Kagame, speech at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, 2008). Kagame built a highly centralized state during the late 1990s and early 2000s that was very similar to Singapore's focus on the training of elite bureaucrats, administrative efficiency, surveillance, and tightly controlled political participation. Later, Singaporean institutions including the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy became key training grounds for Rwandan technocrats and civil servants. Hence, Singapore's re-branded colonial architecture was circulated globally not as a historical inheritance of the empire, but as a universal template for modernization, order and economic development.

The Singaporean government actively promoted this paradigm as a global product. Starting in the latter part of the Cold War era, the government of Singapore deliberately positioned its development paradigm as an alternative to Western liberal democracy for post-colonial societies facing challenges of instability and ideological challenge (Go, *Patterns of Empire*, 201–215). In speeches throughout the 1980s, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew advised newly independent countries to abandon Western liberal ideologies in favor of a development strategy based on "discipline, order, and hard work." In a speech given in Manila in 1980, he said, "What is at stake is survival. Democracy in and of itself is not an objective. Progress will come from discipline, not slogans."

Such an ideology of exportation was reminiscent of the geopolitics of the Cold War, during which Western powers often turned a blind eye to or even actively supported authoritarian regimes that promised economic stability and anti-communist allegiance. Singapore's model was particularly apt for such a framework because it promised order without revolution, growth without democracy, and control without coercion. Thus, the global appeal of Singapore was inescapably tied to its colonial legacy. In fact, the methods of controlling colonial populations were systematized, re-packaged, and marketed as the hallmarks of modernity. What was created was not the negation of colonialism, but its re-making as a model of development worthy of emulation.

As Singapore's governance model gained international legitimacy during the late twentieth century, it evolved from a national survival strategy into a globally admired template for postcolonial development. The following section examines how states across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East selectively adopted and adapted Singapore's rebranded colonial institutions as models for modernization, technocratic governance, and political control.

From Model to Template: The Global Adoption of Singapore's Postcolonial State

The global circulation of the Singapore model became particularly visible in states seeking rapid economic modernization without political liberalization. Deng Xiaoping, the supreme leader of the People's Republic of China and the architect of China's post-Mao economic reforms was one of his earliest and most influential admirers (Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 312–320). Deng Xiaoping, on his visit to Singapore in 1978, praised Singapore for its political order, administrative efficiency and economic growth. These observations have often been linked by historians to China's later efforts with Special Economic Zones and market reforms. (Vogel, 312–320; Straits Times, 2015). This observation became a guiding thread for Chinese reformers seeking modernization without democratization and served as a direct source for the creation of special economic zones in Shenzhen that reflected Singapore's emphasis on technocratic governance and tightly regulated openness.

A similar logic has evolved in post-genocide Rwanda under the leadership of Paul Kagame, president since 2000. Kagame publicly commended Singapore's efficiency of administration and achievements in building a disciplined governing elite able to steer development. In speeches and policy documents associated with Rwanda's Vision 2020 program, Singapore was invoked as an exemplar of centralized planning, technocratic governance, and tightly managed political participation. Singaporean institutions like the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy later became key training grounds for Rwandan technocrats and civil servants, institutionalizing the transfer of governance strategies between the two states.

In the Middle East, the United Arab Emirates has also borrowed from the Singaporean model. In fact, Dubai's ruler, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, said in 2014: "Our governance approach is inspired by the Singapore model – efficiency, zero tolerance for corruption, and a long-term vision for stability." In each of these cases, Singapore served as a model of how authoritarian rule could be compatible with global finance, modernity, and international legitimacy.

Collectively, these cases demonstrate how Singapore's system of governance, originally rooted in bureaucratic hierarchies inherited from the British Empire, became an influential model for postcolonial development. More significantly, many of these postcolonial states proved capable of exercising forms of administrative control even more extensively than their colonial predecessors. Unlike colonial administrators, who were often limited by linguistic barriers, incomplete local knowledge, and weak bureaucratic reach, postcolonial leaders possessed a far deeper familiarity with the societies they governed.

This familiarity enabled them to expand and intensify systems of surveillance, centralized administration, and social discipline with a level of effectiveness that colonial governments themselves frequently struggled to achieve. In this sense, postcolonial states did not simply inherit colonial mechanisms of governance; they consolidated and extended them in ways that transformed them into more deeply embedded instruments of state control.

This, of course, is part of the explanation for Singapore's unique attraction. Its promise was not just wealth, but order without chaos, a template for balancing authoritarianism and modernization. International interest was less about democratic participation than about stability, predictability, and controllable populations. In all cases, Singapore's reinvented colonial legacy of centralization, depoliticized technocracy, and elite civil service pipelines became transferable assets.

Such a circulation of administrative ideas demonstrates what may be called an "imperial afterlife," whereby the techniques of colonial management are re-presented as neutral, technical tools of modern governance. The circulation of such ideas has been described by historian Michael Barr as the "Singapore puzzle": an exceptional state, yet one that in fact represented the normalization of colonial logics of control in postcolonial form (Barr, *The Ruling Elite of Singapore*, 15–22). Rather than marking a break from empire, the Singapore model represented a refinement of imperial techniques –intensifying and systematizing forms of governance that colonial administrators had only been able to implement partially. By transmuting such continuity into a universal form, Singapore helped globalize imperial administrative logic long after the formal end of empire..

Conclusion: Consolidating, Not Dismantling, Empire

Singapore's remarkable leadership and improbable survival are often credited with its wealth and international renown. Yet this narrative of prosperity conceals a deeper continuity: Singapore's success is also a story of the endurance of imperial strategies of governance and control beyond the formal end of empire. Its achievement is significant not only as an economic accomplishment but also as evidence that colonial rule can be rebranded rather than dismantled; it demonstrates how systems of power may survive by transforming their language rather than their underlying structures. The evidence examined in this study suggests that Singapore's success emerged not through the rejection of imperial techniques, but through their careful adaptation, expansion, and legitimization within a postcolonial national framework.

In 1965, colonial structures such as surveillance systems, bureaucratic hierarchies, and educational institutions were not abolished. Instead, they became foundational elements of Singapore's national identity after being localized, expanded, and publicly reframed as instruments of meritocracy, efficiency, and stability. Similar patterns appeared in former British colonies such as Malaysia and Hong Kong, where English-language education and civil-service institutions likewise remained central to state legitimacy, demonstrating that the persistence of colonial administrative systems was not unique to Singapore. Singapore, however, went further by transforming these inherited institutional mechanisms into internationally celebrated symbols of modern governance and economic success.

If an empire recurs in postcolonial governance and survives decolonization, the distinction between colonizer and colonized becomes blurred. The logic of the empire—hierarchy, surveillance, and selective inclusion–did not vanish, according to Singapore's experience; rather, it evolved and became embedded in the same institutions that define modern nationhood. The conclusion is important: rather than putting an end to the empire,

decolonization might have merely taught it how to communicate in the language of progress and pragmatism.

This raises a more significant issue: what would happen if colonialism persisted through acceptance and adaptation as opposed to force? Singapore offers an unsettling response: power maintained through prosperity and efficiency may be even more resilient than power upheld through coercion. One example of how decolonisation can also refer to the quietly ongoing empire under new names is Singapore. The fact that other states have adopted and imitated its model complicates what we talk about as “postcolonial.” In China's centralized developmental zones, Rwanda's technocratic reconstruction, and the United Arab Emirates' urban managerialism, we see echoes of Singapore's rebranded imperial inheritance–the worldwide spread of an administrative logic developed during colonial rule. In Singapore's case, the British empire never truly collapsed because it was reframed as a tale of pragmatic modernity and spread throughout the globe. The postcolonial state in Singapore contributed to the normalization of imperial administrative logics by rebranding them as modern, efficient and pragmatic.

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