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EDUCATION, INDUSTRIALIZATION AND THE END OF EMPIRE IN SINGAPORE

Kevin Blackburn

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Education, Industrialization and the End of Empire in Singapore

Singapore under the ruling People's Action Party government has been categorized as a developmental state which has utilized education as an instrument of its economic policies and nation-building agenda. However, contrary to accepted assumptions, the use of education by the state to promote economic growth did not begin with the coming to power of the People's Action Party in 1959. In Singapore, the colonial state had been using education to meet the demands of its colonial economy well before the rise of the post-independence developmental state. *Education, Industrialization and the End of Empire in Singapore* examines how the state's use of education as an instrument of economic policy had its origins in the colonial economy and intensified during the process of decolonization. By covering this process the history of vocational and technical education and its relationship with the economy is traced from the colonial era through to decolonization and into the early postcolonial period.

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Introduction

Singapore's ruling People's Action Party has historically viewed education as an instrument of its economic policies and nation building agenda. Singapore leaders, in particular education ministers, have been open about what leading Singapore education academics, such as S. Gopinathan, have called the 'education–economy' nexus or relationship.[1] Writing on Singapore's industrialization during the 1970s, Goh Keng Swee, Deputy Prime Minister, and also an Education Minister in the late 1970s, simply noted that 'when it appeared evident that the manufacturing industry's growth prospects were such as to require numbers of technically-trained workers, the school system was restructured towards vocational and technical education. This began in 1969.'[2] During Singapore's so-called Second Industrial Revolution of the 1980s from a low-skilled industrial workforce to a more highly skilled one, Tony Tan Keng Yam, Deputy Prime Minister and Education Minister, regularly described how 'education must change to keep up with the economy.'[3]

This 'instrumentalization' of education in Singapore was characteristic of the developmental states in Asia of the 1970s and 1980s, such as South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan, which derived legitimacy from being able to deliver economic development, high rates of economic growth and sustained rising living standards.[4] Manuel Castells, a sociologist, was the first to apply the term 'developmental state' to Singapore in 1988. Castells argued:

> A state is developmental when it establishes as its principle of legitimacy its ability to promote and sustain development, understanding by development the combination of steady high rates of economic growth and structural change in the productive system, both domestically and in its relationship to the international economy.[5]

S. Gopinathan, working in the Singapore education system, has observed, 'A key strategy in these developmental states was the implementation of

policies in education and training designed to boost stocks of human capital.' He affirms that in these developmental states,

> the enhancement of labour productivity was seen … to lie in the expansion of education. In addition to expansion of secondary and post-secondary institutions, a greater emphasis on science and technology in the curriculum and expansion of vocational and polytechnic education, these states were able to achieve a tight coiling of education and training systems with state-determined economic policies.

Gopinathan concludes, 'Thus a virtuous cycle of investment in high skills creation, which justified high wages and thus higher standards of living all round, was created in these developmental states.'[6]

In the 1990s, Andy Green, from the University of London's Institute of Education, compared the approach to education by the East Asian developmental states with that of Western countries. In contrast to the operation of the East Asian developmental state, Green wrote, 'education planning, at least in its more explicit and directive forms, is not currently so fashionable in many western countries.' He noted: 'There has been growing scepticism among governments about the efficacy of central planning in general and particularly that which links education development with future manpower needs.' Green concluded that in the West, 'many governments have preferred to limit their role to indicative planning and leave the rest to the workings of the market,' while 'in many East Asian states, government planning has remained absolutely central to development, and this has generally entailed an integrated approach to the planning of economic development and human capital formation.'[7]

In the academic discussion of the Singapore developmental state, the origins of this Singapore 'education–economy' nexus are not fully explored but are considered, by authors such as Castells, to begin in Singapore's early postcolonial years, when a 'survival' ethos pervaded government policy.[8] The leaders of the Singapore state felt that its very existence was under threat as it was thought that maybe it was too small to survive as an independent state. Chan Heng Chee, a Singapore political scientist writing in the late 1960s and early 1970s, referred to the period as the 'politics of survival'.[9] In order to more fully understand the origins of the 'education–economy' nexus, we need to analyze the interactions between the key forces at this crucial time in Singapore's early postcolonial economic development – the legacy of the colonial economy, decolonization and industrialization. In particular, we need to focus on the history of vocational and technical education that helped create an industrial workforce necessary for the development of manufacturing in

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Singapore from the colonial era through the time of the end of empire and into the postcolonial period.

Undoubtedly, Singapore's early postcolonial educational system was influenced by the context of the end of imperial rule in Southeast Asia. Its education system, like that of its neighbours, had been historically shaped by colonial rule. The European imperial powers in colonial Southeast Asia saw their colonies as places to extract raw materials, such as tin, rubber, coffee and oil. They had scant interest in establishing manufacturing industries that they already had in their own countries.[10] Thus, there appeared little need to provide for any extensive vocational and technical education to train workers for industry.[11] The imperial powers of the region attempted to provide a primary education for the mass of the population with elementary levels of numeracy and literacy. Colonial officials viewed it as dangerous to overeducate the children of fishermen and coolies above their station in colonial life.[12] The provision of secondary and tertiary education beyond this level was limited to creating a small European-educated elite that owed its loyalty to the imperial power.[13] The knowledge the European-educated elites gained of their respective European cultures, languages and histories was to instil loyalty into the local elites so they faithfully served in the colonial administration and European business houses.[14] In 1959, Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, when speaking about this group, of which he saw himself as being born into, critically noted: 'The English-educated were the elite – the elite of colonial society' and 'somewhat too obedient to colonial authority'.[15]

Education under colonial rule, thus, was very much already an instrument of the state. A cursory look at the role of education in the colonial era suggests that there was a situation in which education was an instrument of the colonial state in promoting economic growth – there was a colonial 'education–economy' nexus, but this instrumentalization of education served colonial interests. Lee Kuan Yew's comments suggest that members of the colonial population were willing collaborators in using education to gain social and economic advantages and pursue social mobility in the 'education–economy' nexus. This experience adds weight to colonial education historian Clive Whitehead's challenge to Martin Carnoy's thesis that colonial education was just cultural domination of a passive colonial subject. Whitehead argues that the colonial population possessed considerable agency in the choices they made when undertaking colonial education.[16]

Upon gaining independence in the postwar period, the former colonies of Southeast Asia struggled to not only develop a manufacturing base for economic development but to set up the necessary vocational and technical educational systems to create skilled workers for industry.[17] Lee Kuan Yew, when describing the legacy of colonial education in Singapore soon

after independence in 1965, decried: 'The system [of education] that we inherited from the British was lopsided – too much emphasis was laid on examinations and the paper qualification'.[18] The end of empire's implications for education in Singapore were similar to that of her Southeast Asian neighbours despite having an economy that was not based on the export of raw materials, but one that was centred on entrepot trade in which goods were imported and then exported for profit without paying import duties. Most postcolonial leaders were suddenly presented with independence, after often fighting to wrestle it from their colonizers. They had to quickly deal with the problems of how to economically develop through industrialization and to turn their people into workers with the technical skills for manufacturing.

In contrast, the British decolonization of Singapore occurred over a long period of two to three decades, during which the local ruling elite in government and the civil service gained considerable experience and a modern economy emerged as the British prepared Singapore for self-government, according to economic historian W.G. Huff.[19] The Singapore that Lee Kuan Yew's People's Action Party took over in 1959 was not the backward swamp that has been sometimes claimed but the most modern city and economy in Southeast Asia. The commerce of the entrepot economy had produced industrial development at its fringes. This constituted a manufacturing base that employed 15.7 per cent of the workforce.[20] Economists Gavin Peebles and Peter Wilson, in their study of this myth, argue: 'Post-war Singapore was never a backward fishing village waiting to be transformed by Lee Kuan Yew into a modern economy as claimed'.[21] Peering beyond the People's Action Party inspired mythology that it inherited a fragile state and poor economy neglected by the colonial power reveals that in the 1950s, the economy had been industrializing. There was a rapid increase in manufacturing output from the start of the 1950s to the end of the decade. Huff has noted that 'annual surveys of manufacturing industry during the 1950s reveal an increasingly diversified industrial structure and the establishment of a number of new enterprises each year'.[22] The British colonial administration had established a polytechnic and ramped up vocational and technical education to address the technical labour shortage of the 1950s that came with the growth of manufacturing.[23] The People's Action Party would fully industrialize the Singapore economy and extensively expand vocational and technical education, but it inherited a sound base from the colonial administration from which it could carry out its plans. It did not inherit a swampy village.

This transition from the colonial era to postcolonial times raises several questions. What are the origins of the 'education–economy' nexus of the Singapore developmental state? Does it actually precede the 'survival'

ethos of Singapore's early postcolonial years? Are its origins in a colonial economy in which the British focussed on using education to create a local elite to help further their administrative and commercial interests? What role did the British colonial authorities envisage for vocational and technical education? How did decolonization impact on vocational and technical education?

Notes

1 S. Gopinathan, *Education and the Nation State: The Selected Works of S. Gopinathan* (London: Routledge, 2013), p.23.
2 Goh Keng Swee, 'A Socialist Economy that Works', in C.V. Devan Nair (ed), *Socialism that Works . . . The Singapore Way* (Singapore: Federal, 1976), p.81.
3 Linda Low, Toh Mun Heng, and Soon Teck Wong, *Economics of Education & Manpower Employment: Issues & Policies in Singapore* (Singapore: McGraw-Hill, 1991), p.64.
4 Manuel Castells, *The Developmental City-State in an Open World Economy: The Singapore Experience* (Berkeley: Berkeley Roundtable on the International Economy, University of California, 1988), p.3; and Manuel Castells, 'Four Asian Tigers with a Dragon Head: A Comparative Analysis of the State, Economy and Society in the Asian Pacific Rim', in Richard P. Appelbaum and Jeffrey Henderson (eds), *States and Development in the Asian Pacific Rim* (London: Sage, 1992), p.56.
5 Castells, 'Four Asian Tigers with a Dragon Head', p.56.
6 Gopinathan, *Education and the Nation State*, p.40.
7 Andy Green, *Education, Globalization and the Nation State* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1997), p.49.
8 Castells, *The Developmental City-State in an Open World Economy*, p.43; Castells, 'Four Asian Tigers with a Dragon Head', pp.58–59; Gopinathan, *Education and the Nation State*, p.20; Green, *Education, Globalization and the Nation State*, p.46; and Terence Chong, 'Vocational Education in Singapore: Meritocracy and Hidden Narratives', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, Vol.35, No.5, 2014, p.639.
9 Chan Heng Chee, *Singapore: The Politics of Survival 1965–1967* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1971).
10 Norman G. Owen (ed), *The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), p.198.
11 Gail Paradise Kelly, *French Colonial Education: Essays on Vietnam and West Africa* (New York: AMS Press, 2000), p.19; and Douglas Foley, 'Colonialism and Schooling in the Philippines, 1898–1970', in Philip G. Altbach and Gail P. Kelly (eds), *Education and the Colonial Experience* (2nd rev edn) (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1984), p.44.
12 Keith Watson, 'Rulers and Ruled: Racial Perceptions, Curriculum and Schooling in Colonial Malaya and Singapore', in J.A. Mangan (ed), *The Imperial Curriculum: Racial Images and Education in British Colonial Experience* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp.152–158.
13 Paul W. van der Veur, *Education and Social Change in Colonial Indonesia* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies, Papers in International Studies, South East Asia Series No.12, 1969), pp.1–49.

14 Paul H. Kratoska, 'Elites and the Construction of the Nation in Southeast Asia', in Jost Dulffer and Marc Frey (eds), *Elites and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp.36–55.
15 Quoted in Francis T. Seow, *Confucius Confounded: The Analects of Lee Kuan Yew* (Kuala Lumpur: Berita, 2010), pp.170–171.
16 Clive Whitehead, 'The Historiography of British Imperial Education Policy, Part II: Africa and the Rest of the Colonial Empire', *History of Education*, Vol.34, No.4, 2005, p.441.
17 David Joel Steinberg (ed), *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1987), p.446.
18 National Archives of Singapore, *The Papers of Lee Kuan Yew: Speeches, Interviews and Dialogues, Volume 3: 1965–1966* (Singapore: Gale Asia/Cengage Learning Asia, 2012), p.443.
19 W.G. Huff, *The Economic Growth of Singapore: Trade and Development in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp.278–297.
20 Huff, *The Economic Growth of Singapore*, p.285.
21 Gavin Peebles and Peter Wilson, *Economic Growth and Development in Singapore: Past and Future* (Cheltenham, Britain: Edward Elgar, 2002), p.26. See the critique of the image in Rodney King, *The Singapore Miracle: Myth and Reality* (Perth: Insight Press, 2006), pp.7–15.
22 Huff, *The Economic Growth of Singapore*, p.286.
23 H.E. Wilson, *Social Engineering in Singapore: Educational Policies and Social Change* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1978), p.177; and Mickey Chiang, *From Economic Debacle to Economic Miracle: The History and Development of Technical Education in Singapore* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1998), p.234.

1 The 'education–economy' nexus and colonial Singapore (1819–1900)

How well did the British colonial administration provide an educational system to match the colonial economy before the coming to power of the People's Action Party in 1959? Mickey Chiang in his commissioned official history of vocational and technical education in Singapore delivered a harsh judgement when answering this question. He attacked the colonial administration for not training the colonial population with the skills required in the colonial economy and presiding over an economy that he called an 'economic debacle'. Chiang blamed the British for many members of the colonial population being underskilled and ending up as 'poorly paid unskilled workers and labourers, lorry drivers, taxi drivers, taxi dancers in cabarets, drivers of illegal taxis called *pao hon chiahs*, unlicensed hawkers and hawkers' assistants, and gangsters in the violent triad secret societies'. He condemned this situation as 'a tremendous wastage of manpower', which, according to him, 'the British had lived with this for many years and it had apparently not bothered them too much'. Chiang contrasted this wilful neglect of the colonial authorities with the policies of the People's Action Party, which when it 'grasped the reins of self-government in 1959 could not afford to adopt such an attitude'.[1] Were the colonial economy and the colonial educational system as mismatched as what Chiang suggests? This chapter offers a long view of education in colonial Singapore during its first century and what it reveals about the 'education–economy' nexus. Chapters 2 and 3 will continue the investigation of this connection throughout the colonial period of the twentieth century up to 1959.

Raffles' ideas of spreading the enlightenment through commerce and education

At Singapore's inception as a British trading post, education was intertwined with the conception of the port as a centre of commerce and free trade. Sir

Stamford Raffles founded Singapore as a trading station under the administration of the Governor-General and the Court of Directors of the East India Company, who governed British India. Raffles was enthused with the ideas of the European Enlightenment. In May 1823, when writing a memorandum to the Court of Directors and Governor-General Lord Amherst in Calcutta, Raffles declared: 'Commerce is universally allowed to bring many benefits in its train, and in particular to be favourable to civilization and general improvement.'[2] He made the argument that another key expression of the Enlightenment's ideas of freeing and uplifting the individual and advancing civilization was modern education. Raffles told the Court of Directors of the East India Company that he envisaged Singapore as not only what he called a 'great emporium' of free trade: 'Education must keep pace with commerce to ensure its benefits and avoid its evils.'[3] In his 1823 memorandum, or minute, to the Court of Directors of the East India Company, he waxed lyrical: 'How noble the object, how beneficial the effects, to carry with our commerce the lights of instructional and moral improvement.'[4] Education was to be used 'for the moral and intellectual improvement of the Archipelago and the surrounding countries'.[5] Raffles hoped that the benefits of the spread of modern education would include the abolition of customs and practices in Southeast Asia that he regarded as inhumane and degraded humanity, such as slavery, which was deeply entrenched in both tradition and in law. He envisaged establishing a grand educational institution when founding Singapore in 1819, which he called the Singapore Institution. It was not an afterthought. In a letter to his cousin, Reverend Dr Raffles, on 9 November 1819, Raffles proclaimed that after establishing Singapore as a free port, 'if I am able to carry out my plan for the establishment of a native college at Singapore, the system will be complete'.[6] Thus, for Raffles, free trade and modern education were both aimed at spreading the ideals of the European Enlightenment.

However, the Singapore Institution was not meant to provide education for the masses. Raffles argued that the Institution was aimed at 'affording to the higher classes a participation in the general progress of improvement, to raise them in a corresponding degree' so that the 'natural effect must be the improvement of their condition, and a consequent advancement in civilization and happiness.'[7] Raffles aimed 'to educate the sons of the higher order of natives', namely the local rulers and elites.[8] The sons of the local rulers were to be taught by a college of professors the literature of their own languages, such as Malay, Bugis, Thai, Javanese, Burmese and Chinese. In addition, they would learn English and science. By using experiments, they were to learn 'the principles of the Newtonian system of astronomy; the mechanical and chemical properties of matter' as well as 'zoology, botany and mineralogy'.[9]

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