

# Social Engineering in Singapore

H.E. WILSON



# **SOCIAL ENGINEERING IN SINGAPORE**

**EDUCATIONAL POLICIES  
AND SOCIAL CHANGE  
1819-1972**

**H.E. Wilson**

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**INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES**  
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*List of Abbreviations used in the footnotes*

CS. ARDE	Colony of Singapore, <i>Annual Reports of the Department of Education.</i>
CS. PFLC	Colony of Singapore, <i>Proceedings of the First Legislative Council.</i>
CS. PSLC	Colony of Singapore, <i>Proceedings of the Second Legislative Council.</i>
S. LAD	Singapore, <i>Legislative Assembly Debates.</i>
SS. ADR	Straits Settlements, <i>Annual Departmental Reports.</i>
SS. PLC	Straits Settlements, <i>Proceedings of the Legislative Council.</i>

# Introduction

The purpose of this work is to consider the social implications of educational policies adopted by successive governments of Singapore in the recent past. The period selected for most detailed examination is from 1918 to 1959, since this allows for comparison of the educational policies of four types of government, each differing in significant respects from the others. The types of government and the period itself encompass the final stages of British rule in Southeast Asia, a phase of colonialism in which educational policy can provide a valuable indication of the extent to which colonial regimes endeavoured to adapt to changed circumstances and to meet unfamiliar challenges. The final chapter considers the major features of the educational policies of the present government of Singapore, both for comparative purposes and because education since 1959 has been used most consciously to achieve a radical restructuring of society. However, since most of the records relating to educational policy decisions for this period are not yet available for public inspection, my conclusions are necessarily tentative.

During the interval between the First and Second World Wars, the form of government was one that had evolved over the previous one hundred years. It was essentially authoritarian, for no constitutional means existed by which the will of the governed could be consulted. The process by which important matters of policy were decided was nevertheless complex, subject to a variety of pressures and, not infrequently, it permitted a clash of wills between local government officials and senior civil servants of the Colonial Office in London. Constitutionally, Singapore together with Penang, Malacca, and Labuan formed a colony known as the Straits Settlements; but sharing several senior officials with the government of the Federated Malay States, the island was ruled in practice as an appendage of that yet larger entity British Malaya. This fact is of



relevance to the present study since it will be argued that policies applied in Singapore were generally determined without reference to the island's special needs.

From February 1942 to August 1945, Singapore was governed as a Special Municipality (*Tokubetsu-shi*) with a Mayor who was directly responsible to the Japanese Military Administration Department for the "Southern Area". Government was rigidly authoritarian, but the authority was now that of an Asian rather than a European power; and although policy was determined with reference to a very much larger area than before — the Malay States, Sumatra, Java, Borneo, and Celebes — in practice, a good deal of local autonomy was permitted to the individual state governments and to the Special Municipality.

The post-war years saw the return of the British. For a brief period, government was in the hands of a Military Administration which was succeeded, on 1 April 1946, by a civilian government. Under the terms of an Order of Council dated 27 March, Singapore became a Crown Colony constitutionally detached both from the former Straits Settlements and from the new, but ill-fated, Malayan Union. The educational policies of the British Military Administration and those of the succeeding civilian government will be considered together, partly because the constitutional change was of theoretical rather than practical importance, many of the senior officials serving under both regimes; partly because the problems created by the havoc of war continued to occupy much of the attention of the civil administration; and partly because both regimes were essentially authoritarian and British dominated. But if the government was still authoritarian, the basis of authority was no longer accepted without question by the governed or, significantly, by the officials themselves. It was clear to all that far-reaching constitutional changes were about to occur, and educational policies were profoundly affected by the growing political consciousness of the population and by the changed philosophy of government in Whitehall. In 1948, the first small step in the direction of democratic government was taken with the admission into the twenty-three-man Legislative Council of six members elected by popular vote. In 1951, a further step was taken when the number of elected members was increased from six to nine. There was thus a trend away from the complete authoritarianism of the past, although the changes were more

important as an acknowledgement of the destiny of colonialism in Singapore rather than for any immediate and drastic changes in policy. Government continued to be dominated by the official and nominated "unofficial" members, and the interests represented by three members chosen by the Chambers of Commerce were clearly sectional rather than popular.

The next administration was transitional in character, being basically representative with, however, control over specific matters remaining in the hands of British administrators. The elections which followed the adoption of the Rendel Constitution produced, in April 1955, a thirty-two-man Legislative Assembly from which six members were selected to be ministers; and these, together with three nominees of the Governor, formed a Council of Ministers. The Assembly had power to debate and legislate on all matters other than external relations, defence, and internal security. Perhaps because the party led by the new Chief Minister, Mr. David Marshall, gained only ten of the twenty-five elected seats, policy tended to reflect a compromise between conflicting interests rather than a single guiding philosophy of government. It was only with the coming to power of the People's Action Party in 1959 that government could claim with some justification to be fully representative. Since then, the government of Lee Kuan Yew has been confirmed in its authority and prestige through periodic general elections and, paradoxically, this has given it power to implement educational policies not all of which can be claimed to be popular.

It is clear that to understand policy — the considered course of action adopted by government — one must first establish what purpose the government has in mind. When the form of government is autocratic, the purpose of the autocrat is all that must be sought. But when the government is one such as that which evolved in the Straits Settlements during the nineteenth and first two decades of the twentieth centuries, an understanding of the purpose of government is complicated by a variety of factors. First there is the question of where, and by whom, matters of policy were decided. In principle, the Governor in Council dealt with the essential business of government, with the British Monarch reserving the right to "disallow", upon the advice of his Colonial Secretary, any ordinance passed by the local legislature. In practice, the right was seldom exercised, since matters of policy were usually

decided before they reached the stage of being discussed in the Legislative Council. In the second chapter of this work, the process by which decisions involving educational policy were reached in the inter-war years is examined in some detail, and the conclusion is clear that the Governor and his senior advisers invariably had the last word. This represents a significant change from the period prior to 1867 (when responsibility for the administration of the Straits Settlements had been transferred from the India Office to the Colonial Office), for in the early years of the Settlement, decisions involving educational policy taken by the Resident not infrequently were overruled by the government in India.

Having identified the policy-makers, a further problem is to consider the extent to which personality and prejudice may have affected vital decisions. Here one treads on thin ice, for although some aspects of personality may be established beyond reasonable doubt, prejudice generally can only be inferred; and in the light of the evidence presently available, one can do little more than suggest that some relationship between personality and prejudice, on the one hand, and policy decisions on the other, does in fact exist.

Yet despite these and other complicating factors, it is possible to predicate certain general characteristics of the educational policy of a colonial government which arise from the imperative of the relationship between colony and metropolitan power: the first consideration must be the interest, real or perceived, of the colonizing state. It follows that in the formulation of general policy, priority will be given to defence of the imperial interest, both from external threat and internal subversion, and it is reasonable to anticipate that a large portion of revenue will be devoted to this end. What remains must be budgeted amongst a number of services, and inevitably the funds available will be small in relation to total educational needs. Furthermore, how these limited funds are used is likely to be determined by reference to the interests of the metropolitan authority rather than those of the subject people. Where the educational system tends to be elitist, policy will seek to ensure that the elite is sympathetic to the colonial power.

Here, however, a *caveat* must be heeded by acknowledging that colonial policy in practice was seldom determined solely by considerations of imperial interest. Missionary aims, new ideas on the extent and purpose of government involvement in social services, new educational theories, and reform movements may

each be expected to influence policy-makers, and these "humanitarian" influences would appear to conflict with, and hence mitigate, the claims of imperial interest. On the other hand, an authoritarian regime need not concern itself with the popularity or otherwise of any particular measure; and from this it may be argued that there existed, during the period of the pre-war British administration, an ideal opportunity for the introduction of educationally sound if unpopular reforms. Yet the opportunity was not taken, and the evidence is clear that this was due to a combination of factors the most notable of which were the need to limit expenditure, a suspicion of the advice of educators unfamiliar with the local situation, and the determination of local officials to retain control of the direction of policy.

The extent to which humanitarian considerations are likely to affect policy may vary according to a number of factors. During the Japanese Occupation, when the status of Singapore remained essentially that of a colony, because the period was one of continuing crisis the predominant consideration in forming policy was the perceived interest of the imperial power and, predictably, such considerations functioned to less effect.

When authority derives not from the power of an alien country but from the will of the governed, as expressed through periodic elections, one of the first considerations in the formulation of policy must be the satisfaction of the demands of the majority of the voters. The purpose of such popular policies is to maximize the degree of support for the government, which thereby secures its own continuance in office. Educational policy may therefore be expected to be egalitarian, and economic barriers such as school fees are likely to be reduced or removed. The increased intake into the primary levels which results from such a programme will create a pressure for more facilities at the secondary and tertiary levels. The system is likely to develop a momentum of its own which, divorced from rational assessment of the needs of society as a whole, will be checked only by financial and other material limitations. Moreover, *a priori*, the extent to which educationally sound policies can be introduced will depend upon the degree of popular support they can command. Ideal aims, in such a situation, must be devised within the confines of political practicality. The transitional administration of the years 1955 to 1959 pursued an educational policy which generally was responsive to popular

pressures, and the social implications of the policy are examined in detail in Chapter 5.

The constitutional changes which occurred between 1959 and 1965 resulted in a monopoly of governmental power by a local, Singaporean administration; and it will be argued in the final chapter of this work that this power has been used to implement educational policies which, in their social implications, cannot be other than profoundly disturbing to large sections of the population. Yet the consummate skill with which these innovations have been made has, thus far, avoided exacerbating communal antagonisms. The aim has been to promote a Singaporean identity; yet such an aim cannot be achieved without some de-emphasis of ethno-linguistic differences. It is still too early to measure the success of these educational policies.

Since this study sets out to compare the policies of several governments, it is relevant to note that the circumstances within which these policies evolved were constantly changing. Economic trends, prevailing opinion, the composition of the population, the extent of the resources available, and international tensions varied for each of the periods considered, — indeed almost the only constants were those arising from geographic location and climate. Accordingly, it is necessary to adopt some objective criteria for comparative purposes. Since "policy" is determined by "purpose", it is clear that one of the standards by which policy must be measured is that of how well it achieved the objectives of the policy-makers. A second yardstick is suggested by the fact that generally education is acknowledged to have a profound effect upon the nature of society; and hence, the question of social impact is raised in terms of whether the policy tended to be socially cohesive or divisive. And thirdly, since education is of great significance to the individual who experiences it, the satisfaction of individual wants suggests itself. Here a difficulty emerges, for how are "individual wants" to be determined? Is education seen solely as a process by which the future adult may acquire the skills necessary to enable him to earn a living? In traditional Southeast Asian societies, this aspect received little if any attention; education, usually provided by the religious order, offered the individual the means by which he might gain acceptance into his society, and at the same time it afforded him the satisfaction of his spiritual needs. The skills necessary for his livelihood he gained at his father's knee, or in the

fields, or hunting and fishing.<sup>1</sup> But in the artificial, secular, and essentially urban setting of Singapore which lacks both a natural hinterland and an indigenous traditional society, it would appear to be irrelevant to look to public education for the satisfaction of private spiritual needs; and similarly, policy can hardly be condemned for failing to provide the means of acquiring acceptance into a society which had not yet evolved a discrete identity. What remains, then, is the simple measure of how well, if at all, educational policy enabled the youthful population to survive in the rigorously competitive conditions of city life.

Having thus somewhat arbitrarily selected the criteria, it is necessary now to sketch the historical framework, to establish the political, social, and economic circumstances within which educational policies were determined, and to identify some of the problems facing those who aspired to govern Singapore.

1. Perhaps the most authoritative account of the social aspects of traditional Southeast Asian education compared with the vocation-oriented schools introduced under Western influence remains that of J. S. Furnivall in *Educational Progress in Southeast Asia* (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1943), pp. 13-48. A valuable insight into traditional education in Burma, which was similar in many ways to education in Siam, Laos, and Cambodia, is provided by U Kaung, "A Survey of the History of Education in Burma before the British conquest and after", *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 46, pt. II (December 1963): 9-33. See also E. Michael Mendelson, *Sangha and State in Burma* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1975), pp. 150-57. An illuminating first-hand account of traditional Burmese education is to be found in Shway Yoe, *The Burman: His Life and Notions* (1882; rpt. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1963), pp. 14-20. The nature of education in traditional society of the Malay states is suggested by William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967), pp. 84-85; and by Philip Loh Fook Seng, *Seeds of Separatism: Educational Policy in Malaya, 1874-1940* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 11-12.

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# 1. The Emergence of a Divided Society

The circumstances of climate and location, although important, were not decisive factors in determining the founding or survival of Singapore. It is true that, located at the tip of the Malay Peninsula, the island with its sheltered harbour provided in the pre-steam era an ideal terminus, a pivotal point in the functioning of the East-West sea-borne trade which depended upon the alternation of the prevailing winds of the North-East and South-West monsoons. But a glimpse at the history of the island will reveal the extent to which the existence of a growing and vigorous community on its southern shore has depended upon the interests and intrigues of powerful states, rather than upon the more predictable consequences of geographical situation or regional patterns of trade. The early history of the island remains obscure, but the fact that Temasek — the site of the future Singapore — was captured and occupied by the Cholas during their punitive expedition against the south-Sumatran based empire of Sri Vijaya, suggests that the place had gained some importance by the early eleventh century, and that it owed allegiance to Sri Vijaya. After the decline of Sri Vijaya, Temasek may have recognized the suzerainty of the east-Javanese Hindu kingdom of Majapahit, although this is by no means certain.<sup>1</sup> Just who the people of Temasek were, and whether their economy was based on commerce or piracy, or control of the sea-passage to the immediate south of the island, are matters that are far from well established; the extent of the ruins that were still to be seen at the time of the founding of modern Singapore in 1819 indicates no more than that a settlement of some kind had existed

1. For a summary of the evidence at present available regarding the extent of Majapahit's influence, see D. G. E. Hall, *A History of South-East Asia*, 3rd ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1968), pp. 85-89.