

Understanding Hong Kong through Singapore



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In 1984, Singaporean journalist Chen Jiachang penned a series of articles titled 'Hong Kong at the end of the century and Singapore's future interest' and arrived at the following conclusions:

- 1) The transition in sovereignty at 1997 would spell the end of Hong Kong as it would lead to the mass exodus of Hong Kongers with anti-communist sentiments or mistrust against Beijing.
- 2) Post-transition Hong Kong would struggle to be comparable to the wilted Shanghai, let alone regaining its former glory. After the retreat of British administration, Hong Kong would no longer face nor embrace the global stage.
- 3) Singapore should exploit Hong Kong's decline and prepare to replace it as the pearl of orient, as Singapore's existing relationship with the west would be one of its edge over Hong Kong.

Two decades after the transition into China, these remarks felt even more at home as Singapore crowned itself at the brain of ASEAN and Hong Kong became a concubine of China. As the two financial centres of Asia, they played important roles in One Belt One Road, from honest brokers between Beijing and others to financiers that diversify risky ventures. To understand their role in One Belt One Road, we must first understand their current circumstances; and to understand Hong Kong and Singapore, it is best to understand the differences between them. Let us return to Chen's conclusions, which ultimately centre upon only one thing: Singapore's edge over Hong Kong after 1997 is its effort to embed itself into the global political network and function as *the* neural hub of East Asia.

Compared to Hong Kong, decolonization in Singapore does not entail the erasure of British legacy, but instead were further exploited to attract capital, technology and personnel from the west. English, for example, was uplifted to the status of national language and the British code of law remained largely unchanged. Immigration, particularly educated specialists, is encouraged through welfare and accommodation. Singaporean government also devotes a lot of resource to the cultivation of local elites, often sending those passing exams and psychological evaluations with flying colours to study in the best academies overseas. On top of the meritocracy, though the majority of population were ethnic Chinese, the city state rejected Chinese ethnic nationalism and maintained a safe distance from China to retain its political autonomy and its own sense of national values.

Naturally, the Singaporean model comes with its own limitations and dilemmas. The eager introduction of foreign talents clashed against its process of nation-building, climaxing at the population white paper in 2013. When Singaporeans read that immigrants from China would not be limited, protest broke out with slogans such as 'Singapore for Singaporean'. The rare display of public dissent pointed to

the fact that, in Singapore, immigration has deteriorated into a flashpoint between global connection and local identity. As it happens, localist sentiment fueled by ire against Chinese immigrants is something shared by Hong Kong, yet while Singaporean government relented and tightened its control on unskilled immigrants, the leaders of Hong Kong lambasted localism as fascistic and unpatriotic. Such opposing reactions reveal a crucial difference between Hong Kong and Singapore that was often overlooked:

While Hong Kong is a special administrative region of China, Singapore is a sovereign state by itself.

Singapore's sovereignty entails formal diplomatic autonomy that is unseen in Hong Kong. As a sovereign state, it can directly engage with other countries as equals via formal channel. Its attraction of regional elites has transformed Singapore into the hub of human capital in Southeast Asia (SEA). In the context of OBOR, Singapore's diplomatic channels with other SEA nations and prominence within ASEAN allow it to play the role of facilitator and man-on-ground between Beijing and Asian neighbours. "You should not be mistaken that if a railway is built in Indonesia, Singapore has no role to play", the former government chief economist Tan Kong Yam said to 50 academics in Beijing Foreign Studies University, "Singapore may not be building the railway, but the master planning, the financing, everything is done in Singapore".

On the other hand, Hong Kong's political status was sometimes interpreted as a weakness, with the prime example of the Philippine president refusing to take a phone call from Hong Kong's Executive Chief during the Manila hostage crisis. However, ambiguity in politics was a strength in disguise. In April, Li Ka Shing's bid to take over Australian energy giant the Duvet Group was approved while the offer from China owned State Grid was rejected for fear of foreign infiltration. The approval of Li's offer spells a clear message from Australia, Bloomberg noted, 'in spite of the pending 2047 expiry of its separate administrative status, Hong Kong isn't China, and its businesses aren't Chinese either.' When Beijing's influence was seen with suspicion in Southeast Asia, Hong Kong's distinctiveness makes it a logical choice of frontman representing China's interest.

In the context of OBOR, while Singapore's connectivity with the region dons it the role of a broker and facilitator between Beijing and the region, Hong Kong's proximity to and distinction from China makes it an ideal frontman to represent Beijing's interest. Comparison made between Hong Kong and Singapore should not be limited to lines such as 'Why Hong Kong wanes and Singapore waxes?' or 'Hong Kong suffering from an innate disadvantage', but to develop a holistic understanding and recognize distinctions between the social, economic, political and historical elements inherent to the duo.

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