

Constructing Singapore



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Singapore has few natural resources but, in a relatively short history, its economic and social development and transformation are nothing short of remarkable. Today Singapore is by far the most successful exemplar of material development in Southeast Asia and it often finds itself the envy of developed countries. Furthermore over the last three or four decades the ruling party has presided over the formation of a thriving community of Singaporeans who love and are proud of their country.

Nothing about these processes has been 'natural' in any sense of the word. Much of the country's investment in nation-building has in fact gone into the selection, training and formation of a ruling and administrative elite that reflects and will perpetuate its vision of the nation. The government ownership of the nation-building project, its micromanagement of everyday life and the role played by the elite are three fundamental elements in this complex and continuing process of construction of a nation. The intense triangulation of these elements and the pace of change they produce make Singapore one of the most intriguing specimens of nation-building in the region.

In this critical study of the politics of ethnicity and elitism in Singapore, Barr and

Skrbi look inside the supposedly 'meritocratic' system, from nursery school to university and beyond, that produces Singapore's political and administrative elite. Focusing on two processes - elite formation and elite selection - they give primary attention to the role that ethno-racial ascription plays in these processes but also consider the input of personal connections, personal power, class and gender. The result is a study revealing much about how Singapore's elite-led nation-building project has reached its current state whereby a Singaporean version of Chinese ethno-nationalism has overwhelmed the discourse on national and Singaporean identity.

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