

## Book review

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Cecilia Tortajada, Yugal Joshi and Asit K Biswas, *The Singapore Water Story: Sustainable Development in an Urban City State*, Routledge: London and New York, 2013; 304 pp.: ISBN: 978 041 565783 9, £27.99/US\$48.61 (pbk)

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Sustainable development, a notion originating in the 1980s with equal concerns with development and conservation issues, has been a daunting challenge for most countries, especially those industrialising latecomers on the world stage that are eager to accumulate material wealth and political strength commensurate with those of advanced economies within a relatively short space of time (Wang, 2014). With ‘industrialisation model first and consequence later’ still the catch-up approach widely adopted by these countries since the end of the Second World War, sustainability has been deemed a bourgeois dream that can only be pursued and accomplished once the high tide of urban and industrial development has already passed, and where environmental concerns are deeply embedded in democratic civil society. As such, many existing studies on the practices of sustainable development are simply drawn from the experiences of western industrialised countries. Among the few works dealing with more challenging sustainability-building processes in less developed places, *The Singapore Water*

*Story* vividly documents the march made by this admittedly authoritarian city-state from economic backwardness and environmental degradation towards water sustainability and urban prosperity, which provides exemplary illustration for many developing countries to realise the mutually reinforcing effects of environmental conservation and socioeconomic development.

This book focuses primarily on the well-aligned relationship between state and society as the very foundation on which a successful water story eventually unfolds. When strong, visionary, pragmatic and effective state machinery met a homogeneous, aspiring, supportive and de-politicised society, Singapore started to proceed on a fast-paced track to provide amenities and prosperity while tackling pollution and poverty. Although the eight chapters tackle various aspects of water management in Singapore, including engineering, technological and international approaches to augment supply as well as legal, economic and social routes to smooth demand, the role played by the state-society coupling has loomed larger in a search for the key to Singapore’s transformation from having poor water conditions to having some of the best in the world. Following a brief introductory section that presents water endowment and policy interventions in general, Chapters 1 and 2 preliminarily reveal the critical state function in securing the quantity and quality of water supply as Singapore launched its rapid industrial and urban development following

its independence in 1965. Two impressive traits are identified through the description of state operations. One is the firm political will and long-term vision of the leadership that was urged by the pressing resource vulnerability and uncertain political support when it first came into power to prioritise life quality improvement in the nation-building agenda. Among the numerous strategic plans, action plans, programs and campaigns to strive for a city of excellence, even though some 'may not have been immediately implementable due to resource constraints, their early consideration has made possible their posterior tracking and implementation once it has become feasible to do so' (p. 27). The other trait is the pragmatism and flexibility in the style of state-led policy-making. Measures have not been ideological or wedded to any rigid paradigm. Rather, they demonstrate the 'open-mindedness in dealing with new times and new challenges' (p. 56), which can be distilled from a range of mindset and policy shifts from developing surface water sources to water recycling, from a focus on financing water production to the importance attached to limiting water demand, from top-down coercion and enforcement to social engagement and creating awareness, from keeping people away from water bodies to promoting activities near them, and from valuing water on the basis of its economic costs to appreciating its significance for human development, all of which are repeatedly demonstrated through the rest of the book.

In addition to the forward-looking leadership and non-political decision-making, Singapore's strong statism is also reflected by the effective policy implementation, covered in the next two chapters, and which presents the administrative, legislative, economic and technological instruments to enforce environmental regulations and promote water conservation. On the institutional level, the holistic approach is well

illustrated through a streamlined procedure which involves agencies in charge of investment, environment, land use and construction so that environmental considerations are incorporated into development processes. In the field of legislation, Singapore went through three stages from an initial focus on public health to the creation of the Ministry of Environment (ENV) in 1972, through regulating trade effluent in the following two decades, to the integration of administration and consolidation laws following the formulation of the Singapore Green Plan in 1992. It is important to note that the promulgation of all laws was followed by strict inspections and enforcement. Regarding economic leverage and technological facilities to curb increasing water consumption, Singapore's water pricing used to be based upon direct cost recovery until 1997 when marginal cost pricing according to the most expensive source of desalinated water was introduced. Also in that year, it became mandatory for all new premises and ongoing building projects to install the water-saving low capacity flushing cisterns.

Having sophisticatedly addressed the state capacity to lead Singapore toward excellence through its water management in the context of urban development, the book then turns to the question of how the top-down enforcement become accepted and complied with by the broader society. From the emphasis put on education, the leadership realised the importance of de-politicised public engagement to achieve authoritarian but effective governance. Largely coinciding with the three-stage legislation timeframe, the interactions between state and society started with simple information dissemination by agencies, evolved into various education and awareness campaigns as exemplified by 'public consultations' in making the Green Plan as well as efforts to overcome apprehension in using recycled water and culminated in 'providing means for the

people to get engaged and become responsible for the management of their resources' (p. 128) such as building people's affinity with water.

The extraordinary state capacity and unusual societal homogeneity are further presented in two concrete water-related events. Chapter 6 analyses the domestic river cleaning that used to be proposed by pre-independence administrations but ended without taking substantive actions. When the river no longer played the key role in Singapore's trade exchange in the late 1960s, the Prime Minister requested direct notifications, rather than mere discussions, on how the cleaning initiatives were proceeding. As the urgency and seriousness shown by the top leader was clear to every government agency, fund requests sent by the ENV to lead the cleaning were approved immediately by the Finance Ministry. Moreover, the Master Plan became a government edict to be implemented by the relevant government agencies under the coordination of the ENV so that it was not carried out in isolation as had happened several times before (p. 137). These clearly reflect the Singaporean state's pragmatism and its ability to mobilise resources and action. Chapter 7 shifts the focus to the role of the media in constructing a water-based relationship between Singapore and Malaysia. As a part of their respective societies and with their abilities to shape the views of the public, both the Singaporean and Malaysian media demonstrated consistent and strong pro-government tendencies in reporting the bilateral negotiation, with coverage growing from being supportive in the beginning to negative framing later. Different from domestic nation-building in bilateral issues, however, this homogeneity led to nationalistic sentiments and the unintended breakdown of negotiations.

Around the central notions of a strong state and an accommodating society, this book unfolds an intriguing Singapore water story that has lasted for five decades with proven success. Despite the sanguine expectation for a bright future with Singapore's 'think ahead, think again and think across' policy-making philosophy, as well as technological, policy and management innovations as elaborated in the last section, the story does not address how its future development could be institutionally sustained when the leadership may change as has happened elsewhere (Chang, 2002). Perhaps it is beyond the scope of an approach based on storytelling and requires deeper deliberations in the framework of development studies. Besides, as mentioned before, both the story's content and some technical phrases are highly cross-referenced throughout the book, which does impress readers with the achievements Singapore has made, but also may pose difficulties to those who are less familiar with this particular city-state in understanding its geography, the organisational structure of the government and the timeframe of parallel progresses across different aspects. This would be minimised if a complete index, detailed maps, a list of abbreviations and a chronicle of developments could be provided. Undoubtedly, *The Singapore Water Story* stands as a very informative book that deserves close attention from those who are concerned with sustainable development in industrialising countries.

## References

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