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# Singapore, Singapura: From Miracle to Complacency by Nicholas Walton

*The Asian city state is a puzzle for western liberals*

Singapore, Singapura: From Miracle to Complacency, by Nicholas Walton, Hurst, £20/\$29.95, 288pp

Review by Victor Mallet

Singapore is a puzzle — almost an affront — to liberal writers and political analysts. The island city state, squeezed between Malaysia and Indonesia near the equator in south-east Asia, is pro-western in its strategic outlook and capitalist in its economics, yet politically authoritarian and socially dirigiste.

The country is also immensely successful. It is easy for freedom-loving westerners obsessed with per capita incomes to criticise illiberal regimes in North Korea or Venezuela that have failed their peoples, but harder to argue with what the late Lee Kuan Yew and his successors have achieved with Singapore's managed democracy.

"No country has improved the living standards of its people as quickly and as comprehensively as Singapore," Nicholas Walton quotes writer and former diplomat Kishore Mahbubani as saying in Singapore, Singapura.

Walton, a former BBC World Service journalist, duly pays tribute to the way Singapore and its 5.6m inhabitants have come to top the charts that define success in the modern world.

In the 2015 Pisa educational rankings, Singapore came first in all three categories: maths, science and reading. Infant mortality is half that of the US. In 2016, the police said there were 135 days with not a single crime reported. Per capita incomes are among the highest in the world. And all this in a place where, Walton says, 300 people were devoured by tigers in 1843 alone, and which has a tropical climate so awful that Lee Kuan Yew named air-conditioning as the most important invention for the island's progress.

Walton's framework for getting to grips with the Singapore story is a one-day, 53km walk from one end of the island to the other that he made in 2017. It works as a literary device because Singaporeans, like the inhabitants of Los Angeles, do not really do walking, so Walton gets to glimpse the normally invisible guts of the materialistic and apparently carefree society portrayed in the film *Crazy Rich Asians* (in which the heroine arriving from New York marvels at Changi Airport and remarks acerbically that JFK is just "salmonella and despair").

As the blisters develop and his feet start to bleed, Walton asks the right questions. What are the human and environmental costs of Singapore's success, and are they sustainable?

His conclusions are more nuanced than either Singapore's detractors or its cheerleaders would like. The island's vaunted meritocracy is imperfect, especially seen from the perspective of its Malay and Indian minorities; and the pressures on citizens to perform and conform are so intense that those who do not fit in sometimes opt for voluntary exile.

Inequality is also an issue. Around 85 per cent of the population live in public housing, but some live in ostentatious private opulence. "The typical Singaporean has financial security and a level of material wealth far beyond their parents' dreams. Real poverty is rare," writes Walton. "And yet, the typical Singaporean is angry. That gap between what the masses can expect and what the small numbers on the other side of that impenetrable glass ceiling are enjoying seems unbridgeable."

As he trudges through the industrial grime and discarded plastic of Jurong, Walton muses on Singapore's heavy ecological footprint. Sand imports for land reclamation are said to have led to the loss of 24 Indonesian islands.

In Hong Lim Park, he notes the conspicuously empty Speakers' Corner and considers the ruling People's Action party's relentless hold on political power and its persecution of opponents.

Walton's subtitle, *From Miracle to Complacency*, nevertheless suggests that Singapore's leaders have lost the ability to adapt and innovate as they have so successfully in the past to maintain the island's prosperity and security.

Empires and economic cycles come and go, and there is obviously a risk that Singapore will one day decline. But the danger of slipping from the top of the tree is one that Singaporeans themselves recognise and — as Walton grudgingly acknowledges — it is the kind of problem that almost any other government in the world would willingly swap for its own.

The reviewer is the FT's Paris bureau chief and former Asia editor