

Le Figaro – 12 March 2007 – page 2

Singapore, the laboratory of globalisation in Asia

A pioneer of economic growth in the region, the City State continues to believe in its model, an authoritarian meritocracy which has inspired China.

From our special correspondent in Singapore

The Crazy Horse closed down last month, a little more than a year after making its Asian debut in Singapore. The Singapore Crazy Horse, based on the model of the famous Paris cabaret, was meant to be another sign of the openness to the world of Singapore, one of Asia's top economic successes.

Firmly resolved to resist the competition of China and India, Singapore intends to hold on to its position of modernity in South-East Asia, capable of attracting tourists, investors and researchers who foster sustainable growth.

In this respect, alongside high technology centres, research institutes and prestigious university campuses such as Insead, two ambitious tourist complexes are being planned on a territory where space is scarce. Restaurants will host the best chefs in the world and casinos will cater to increasingly numerous Chinese clients known for their fondness of gaming tables.

However, just like the Crazy Horse – whose failure is ascribed to advertising restrictions aimed at preserving local modesty – the slot machines, the roulette and the black jack are likely to clash with the very strict rules of morality that prevail in Singapore since its independence. As competition has been growing more intense in the last few years, Singapore feels the need to put its mode of functioning to the test. The City State has to hold its own against Hong Kong but also big cities in continental China such as Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, not to mention Taipei, Seoul and other Southeast Asian centres. Becoming a major port of call for tourist cruises, developing museums and cultural activities, providing foreign patients with quality medical care, sometimes five times cheaper than in the United States, are new axes of development for Singapore. The City State regards itself as a high technology laboratory, a financial and business centre from which Western banks and companies can safely make inroads into the Chinese market.

A territory lacking natural resources

With Singapore becoming increasingly affected by the relocation of its less sophisticated industrial activities, the mainland Chinese are flocking to the City State to invest and protect their fortunes. The newcomers are not always welcomed with open arms. Some women who come to Singapore for the education of their children are forced to prostitute themselves for lack of money.

Singapore is well aware that it is one of the pioneers of globalisation and that its prosperity depends on it. Mr George Yeo, the Minister of Foreign Affairs sums up the philosophy of its leaders: "*We are a small boat. We must carefully study the current, position ourselves where it will bring us the furthest and make sure all the passengers understand the manoeuvre.*"

Kishore Mahbubani, a former diplomat who stood for the post of UN Secretary General without being elected and Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy regards "the high degree of paranoia" that prevails in Singapore as one of the driving forces that made it possible for this small territory situated at the extremity of the Malaysian peninsula, lacking natural resources and surrounded by supposedly hostile Muslim countries, to survive and thrive. At the time of independence, in 1965, racial unrest had led Singapore, which has a majority Chinese population, to separate from Malaysia and create a multiracial State. Today, the rise of Islamism and the terrorist threat contribute towards maintaining this level of alertness.

"The United States' aircraft carrier"

Since the 11 September attacks in the United States, the country has realized that its role at the forefront of Western modernity has made it a target of Al Qaeda.

Rohan Gunaratna, Head of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism, and author of a book on Al Qaeda, explains that "*Singapore is regarded as the US' aircraft carrier in the region: it is the most developed country, a cultural capital and an information centre. This is also where the Jemaah Islamiyah, which is plaguing Indonesia, was detected for the first time. For all these reasons we are a target for terrorism.*"

Iraq has transformed the terrorist threat, he says. In Southeast Asia, terrorist organizations such as Jemaah Islamiyah or the Abu Sayyaf group have "Arabized". They have stepped up cooperation among themselves and are now targeting the United States or their allies rather than the local authorities. "*Though we have managed to reduce the operational threat of the terrorist groups thanks to international cooperation between the information services, the ideological threat of extremism has increased,*"

Gunaratna, whose centre has set up a database on terrorist organizations worldwide, adds.

With its small size and its tight control of the population, Singapore has means that others do not have to protect itself from extremism. Since its independence, the emphasis has been placed on the multiracial aspect of society, "meritocracy" and the deliberate integration of communities.

Quotas have been fixed in public housing blocks to prevent the Malay and Indian minorities from being ostracized in ghettos. In schools, the wearing of uniforms is compulsory making the question of wearing the Islamic veil irrelevant.

"Mosques are funded by the community, without any foreign intervention and we keep a close watch on those who want to come to Singapore. We don't want extremists," explains Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, the Minister-in-charge of Muslim affairs. Four hundred pupils are allowed to attend madrasas, whose curriculum is carefully controlled.

The authorities are considering setting up an Islamic college to train imams, who, for the time being, go to al-Azhar University in Cairo and are kept under a close watch before, during and after their departure. Dr Yacoob admits that such control of the population is only possible because it is small but that makes caution all the more necessary: *"We can't stay away from external influences. Because of the small size of our population, we can't allow ourselves the slightest mistake. A racial riot would have much graver consequences here than anywhere else."*

In the country of Lee Kuan Yew, the theoretician of "Asian values", for whom economic development takes precedence over democratic opening, a single party dominates politics since independence. In a neighbourhood characterized by tall housing blocks, which are common in Singapore, MP Michael Palmer is on duty every Tuesday evening, as he would be in a true democracy.

"The law is the law and there are no exceptions"

In this city, you will not find any greasy paper lying about on the ground. At the foot of the buildings, there is a playground for children, a fitness course for adults to keep in shape, and a TV corner for the elderly where they can chat. Everything is spick and span and placed under the benevolent watch of a group of volunteer residents dedicated to the well-being of the community.

The MP listens to the complaints of his voters and tries to answer them as best he can. As a lawyer, he can help to advance a cause but not always. In this country where drug possession leads to capital punishment and hanging, the law is not to be taken lightly.

This evening, Michael Palmer meets with a father who has been separated from his little daughter for two years. The mother, a Filipino who came to Singapore on a domestic employment contract, infringed the law by having an affair in Singapore, something which is strictly prohibited by her residence permit. However much the father pleads and points to the psychological damages this separation will cause, there is nothing that can be done. "*The law is the law and there are no exceptions*" the MP reminds him after having intervened in his favour to the Minister concerned. The banishment of the mother and the child acts as a deterrent. It will not be lifted.

Deng Xiao Ping was inspired by Singapore when in 1978, he led China on the path of capitalism. The success of business in China, despite the absence of any political opening in Beijing, reinforces the Singaporean leaders' conviction that their recipe is the right one.

Their model, which is not overburdened with democratic precepts and the defence of human rights, arouses growing interest in Africa, in the Middle-East and in the Maghreb. For Kishore Mahbubani, "*The Arab countries are less and less attracted by the United States and the West. They are now turning to us. Asia, more than America, might be able to help them enter modernity.*" Singapore is concluding more and more contracts with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies. From Singapore, Europe seems far away, present through its companies but politically little involved in the region. "*We would like Europe to play a more active role in Asia,*" says Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, the son of Lee Kuan Yew who came into power in 2004. "*You don't see yourself as having a strategic stake in Asia, unlike the United States. If Europe wants to play a significant role in the world, it cannot not be interested in Asia.*"

Pierre Rousselin