Book Reviews

Political Regimes and the Media in Asia. Edited by Krishna Sen and Terence Lee. Abingdon: Routledge 2008. 233 pp.

In 2004, a workshop was held at Murdoch University that sought to link questions about the political role of media in Asia with notions of American imperialism. The rubric for the workshop included four key points: the first of which began with the words "Revisit questions about U.S. media imperialism"; and the second of which read: "Question the continued valorisation of the transnational, triumphalist, expansionist, liberationist dimensions of American media in the context of democratic movements in Asia". In the resulting volume, however, the first word of the workshop title has vanished. Empire is no more. The organizers appear to have discovered what seemed obvious to some from the start: the main obstacles preventing Asian media from functioning as consistent agents of progressive political change lie not in U.S.-inspired geo-political imperialist designs, but in local specificities and obdurate regional regimes. American media is at best a very marginal player in Asian political transformations.

The idea of Empire may have been a big red herring, but it had the advantage of giving some thematic coherence to the proposed workshop. What we now have is a volume resulting from a workshop with a lost theme, a collection of chapters that talk about media and politics in different ways, and on different levels. Despite Krishna Sen's best efforts in her short introduction, there is no great coherence to this set of papers. They fall, essentially, into two categories. Some simply update earlier reviews of the relationship between media and politics in various countries, typically focusing on developments post-2000. Others are mainly papers that clearly have

their roots in larger projects, which have been adapted for inclusion in the volume. In general, the papers in the first category are of lower quality than those in the second; they demonstrate limited conceptual rigour, drawing mainly on English-language secondary or internet sources, and not containing much real research. Some of them, however, provide very useful overviews. By contrast, many of the papers in the second category are extremely well-researched — leaving some readers to wonder exactly how they found their way into the volume.

First, the update papers. Three papers in this category deal with Singapore and Malaysia, with some emphasis on new and internet media. In his chapter on order versus liberty in Singapore and Malaysia, Cherian George looks at news coverage of terrorism and security issues since 9/11. George's is the strongest of the three chapters, but he confines his discussions of "alternative media" to a small number of political websites. Given this narrow canvas, he struggles to advance the debate media much beyond the arguments he has previously made in his own work — not to mention those outlined in Garry Rodan's important 2004 book on transparency and authoritarian rule in the two countries. Zaharom Nain gives an overview of Malaysian media during the early Badawi period, in a tidy chapter which contains little new information. The weakest chapter in the book is surely the one by co-editor Terence Lee, who gives an unremarkable account of why the "new" post-2004 Singapore turns out not to differ much from the "old" Singapore. No surprises here. Other "update" chapters are Glen Lewis's nicely-argued but rather thin discussion of the amazing demise of Thailand's Thaksin Shinawatra government in 2006; and Nancy Hudson-Rodd's heavily-referenced but rather pedestrian exploration of the repression of free speech in Myanmar.

Much more interesting are the research-based chapters. As a specialist on Southeast Asia, I confess that I read the three China contributions last — only to find that they were among the best bits of the book. The chapter on Shenzhen Press Group by

Chin-Chuan Lee, Zhou He, and Yu Huang is a fabulous piece of fieldwork, drawing on dozens of interviews, participant observation research, and the study of various documents. The authors demonstrate very clearly how media conglomeration in China functions as a form of post-communist state corporatism. Nevertheless, generalizing about press groups is difficult. On the one hand, "parent" newspapers are typically Party-oriented, while "offspring" publications appeal to a mass readership. Yet even this distinction is too simplistic; often, the same publication will orient different pages to different audiences (p. 13). In many Asian contexts, a given publication will perform multiple political and social roles at the same time — an important argument that might form a central theme of this volume. Another theme is that Asian media businesses are often not real businesses, and may not make profits in a conventional sense. Much of the Shenzen Group's income derives from newspaper subscriptions taken out by government agencies — a form of hidden state subsidy. Wanning Sun, in her discussion of Chinese print media and television dramas, makes some similar points, arguing that "Even the so-called state media are no longer monolithic" (p. 35) — we need to move beyond simplistic characterizations of a state-owned, controlled and censored media, and recognize the growing degree of tolerance for certain forms of diversity. Yingchi Chu develops comparable arguments in a chapter on Chinese television documentaries, some of which have moved beyond offering didactic propagandistic monologues, in favour of "polyphonic" modes of presentation that give voice to a range of alternative perspectives. Taken together, the three China contributions offer an excellent insight into recent developments in that country's rapidly-changing media.

The book contains four further strong research-centred contributions. Chuong-Dai Hong Vo offers an interesting discussion of several recent Vietnamese films from the *doi moi* period. She examines the ways in which contemporary Vietnamese cinema has become much more realistic, and now frequently contains lightly-coded criticisms of the Communist Party and the state. Jane Ferguson takes

us on a fascinating tour of insurgent media in the Shan states — a
mountainous region within Myanmar — demonstrating how creating
their own media forms an essential part of the process by which
Shan "rebels" seek to legitimize their cause and imagine their nation.
In the first of two chapters on Indonesia, David Hill examines the
transformation of local media in Manado, North Sulawesi, following
the fall of the New Order and the emergence of decentralization. As
in the Chinese case, Hill demonstrates that media businesses — in this
case, local television stations — were often inherently unprofitable,
and were kept in operation as political resources rather than for
commercial reasons. "Ownership" was not always easily determined;
one television station, TV-M, was informally owned by the son of
a powerful politician, while a newspaper, *Global News*, was linked
with the mayor of Manado. Hill shows how both print and electronic
media played lively and partisan roles in times of elections, as part
of a more competitive and contested political order in Indonesia.
Philip Kitley pursues related arguments in his article on the
media and the mobilization of audiences during Indonesia's 2004
election campaign — an "update" piece by someone who was
actually there, and who describes for us what he saw at party
rallies and parades. Kitley argues against traditional, static concepts
of the media audience in favour of a more nuanced understand-
ing of media audiences transforming over time. He also makes a
strong case for questioning the passing of the "New Order",
arguing that much from Suharto's time still lingers in "post-Suharto"
Indonesia.

Whether or not an edited volume possesses substantial thematic
coherence is arguably less important than whether or not the book
contains chapters of real quality. *Political Regimes and the Media in
Asia* is rather a hotchpotch, but, to the credit of the editors, more
than half of the contributions contain strong, powerful material.
Significantly, though, at least two of the best chapters — the one
on the Shenzen Group, and Hill's chapter on Manado — have
already been published in journal form. Serious researchers are now
increasingly averse to submitting their best work to edited collections,

and some leading publishers are similarly reluctant to publish such volumes. When a workshop idea flies, an edited volume is the natural outcome; but when the idea fails to pan out as hoped, participants should not be afraid to admit that the Empire has no clothes.

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