

Book Reviews

***Politics and the Press in Thailand: Media Machinations.* By Duncan McCargo.** London and New York: Routledge, 2000. 205pp.

This volume is an important and welcome addition to the paucity of literature on the Thai media. Focusing on major Thai-language daily newspapers and their political influence, McCargo has done an outstanding job of data collection. The book is based on extensive participant observation in Thai newsrooms, as well as interviews with reporters, columnists, editors, and publishers. McCargo's discussion of the circulation, readership, and political affiliations of various Thai newspapers is very useful. It contains a great deal of valuable information about how Thai news gets made, including firsthand observations of how reporters work, how articles are written, and how papers are edited. Much of this material cannot be found in any other source, English or Thai.

McCargo is highly critical of Thai newspapers, claiming that they make an excessively rigid distinction between reporting and commentary that cripples their capacity to interpret the news for their readers. In addition to this core argument, he makes a number of related criticisms: "news" consists primarily of collections of uninterpreted quotations from politicians and other important figures; serious conflicts of interest undermine the credibility of news articles; there is a lack of investigative reporting; opinion columns are opaque and unsubstantiated; Bangkok news is over-emphasized; and the press lacks proper provincial news staff. Furthermore, newspapers often function as mouthpieces for political parties or important figures rather than as businesses. All this adds up to a daunting indictment of the Thai

press and its professional standards, but one that is generally well-substantiated by the evidence.

The book is, however, weakly developed theoretically. In the first chapter, McCargo runs through a variety of ways of conceptualizing the political role of the media, only to reject them all. His own solution is to argue that the Thai press is “tricky” — “frequently ambiguous, hypocritical and inconsistent” (p. 21). This would appear to be equivalent to saying that the Thai press is diverse, which in a free press should presumably be a virtue. Only politically controlled presses could be unambiguous, predictable, and consistent. Yet one wonders if this “trickiness” is not an accurate reflection of the ambiguity, hypocrisy, and inconsistency of Thai élite politics — in which case McCargo may have too quickly dismissed the notion of the press as a mirror of political life (p. 20).

Although relentlessly critical of what he perceives as the failure of the Thai press to act as a force for progressive change, the lack of theoretical development means that the reader is never really sure of the standards to which McCargo thinks newspapers should adhere. It is a matter of debate whether, and to what degree, news outlets ought to interpret the news for their audience, but McCargo simply assumes that interpretation is useful and does not address this debate. He also does not explicitly articulate a vision of what it would mean to be “progressive”, or how that could be consistently achieved in the context of a free press that reflects social diversity. While he does provide a series of proposals in a short appendix, these are brief, and implementation is not discussed. The reader is thus left to wonder what ideal standard provides the basis for McCargo’s criticism, despite the fact that he could have drawn on a lively debate about these issues among journalists and ethicists.

However, the empirical riches of the book more than make up for its theoretical shortcomings. Various chapters discuss the structure of news organizations, the recruitment, role and training of newspaper reporters, the dynamics of editorial decision-making, a case study of one scandal, and an analysis of the influence and sources of political columnists.

In the chapter on the structure of news organizations, McCargo makes a number of his most insightful points. In particular, his observations on the impact of a cultural predisposition to hierarchical social interaction and the importance of in-group/out-group distinctions explain a great deal about the behaviour of the Thai press.

The training of Thai newspaper reporters is shockingly poor, with beat reporters considered as junior members of the news staff, outsiders compared to those who work in the newsroom. Because reporting is

considered an undesirable, entry-level position, there is a crippling lack of experience at this level. Lacking a tradition of investigative reporting, and considered too junior to contribute analysis, reporters are restricted to collecting quotations from politicians and officials, which are then compiled into stories.

Editorial decision-making is in the hands of the “insiders” — the news re-writers and editors who decide where to place stories and how to headline them. Yet, these people still see the news as an objective reporting of the facts, and they rarely contribute any analysis to the stories. This is partly out of fear of libel suits; they cannot be sued for reporting lists of quotations. Yet, political columnists — often doubling as editors — have *carte blanche* to express whatever opinions strike them, with little need for supporting facts. Columnists are seen as political insiders, and often couch their columns in cryptic language to enhance the impression that they are privy to esoteric knowledge that only the wise can fully interpret.

In a work so empirically rich, contradictions are inevitable. It sometimes seems that McCargo’s argument is at odds with his evidence. The claim that newspapers are often biased, with reporters and columnists caught up in serious conflicts of interest is, for instance, difficult to reconcile with the claim that they make an excessively rigid distinction between fact and opinion. In fact, he notes a number of occasions when this distinction is breached in practice. Part of the problem is that McCargo’s indictment of the Thai press in the abstract is based on generalizations, but as his own evidence makes clear, the Thai press is sufficiently diverse that it defies generalization. Even within each newspaper, different reporters and columnists have ties with different political parties, government agencies, and influential citizens, making for considerable diversity within each newsroom.

The Bangkok-centrism of the Thai press is replicated in this book, as is natural given the subject matter and McCargo’s sources of information. However, as McCargo himself points out, the Bangkok newspapers have low provincial circulation, particularly in the rural areas. Most rural Thais get their news by radio, often through government-run stations. It would be valuable for future work in this area to examine how radio news differs from newspapers. One wonders if there are systematic differences in the two news media, since rural Thais generally seem to have greater satisfaction with democracy and more realistic expectations about their political leaders than the newspaper-reading urban middle classes.

Despite these minor shortcomings, this book is essential reading for students of Thai politics, especially scholars who employ Thai news sources. Although McCargo is quite restrained in his use of

comparisons, scholars interested in other Southeast Asian presses will also find the book of substantial interest.

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Democracy, Development and Decentralization in Provincial Thailand. By Daniel Arghiros. Richmond, Surrey, UK: Curzon, 2001. 308pp.

During the past decade, the consolidation of liberal democracy in Thailand has witnessed the emergence of tightly contested electoral races around the country and colourful parliamentary debates in Bangkok — a far cry from the internal regime factionalism and occasional coups of the old “bureaucratic polity”. Scholarly interest in this political transformation has been considerable. Prodded by a suggestive 1990 journal article by Benedict Anderson and pioneered by the work of James Ockey, academic research on machine politics and local “godfathers” has evolved into something of a small cottage industry in Thai studies, as signalled by the recent publication of a volume on *Money and Power in Provincial Thailand* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2000), edited by Ruth McVey, and the single-authored volume by Daniel Arghiros reviewed here.

Overall, scholars working on electoral politics in contemporary Thailand appear to concur on the broad outlines of a common narrative. Beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, it is clear that the foundations of Thailand’s highly centralized, bureaucratic, and authoritarian polity began to give way in the face of trends towards greater influence and activism on the part of local powerbrokers in Thai society. Sustained rapid economic growth led not only to the emergence of an urban middle class but also to the transformation of small-town rural landowners, money-lenders, and rice millers into provincial businessmen with increasingly diverse interests and linkages. Counter-insurgency programmes in the 1970s, moreover, enhanced the importance of local notables as state authorities in Bangkok sought to mobilize forces in “civic action” and paramilitary groups against the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) and other radical forces in Thai society. Most importantly, the emergence in the 1980s of a political system in which regular, competitive elections began to determine