

that took place separately in China and Vietnam, at the end of which crystallized thinking about what one country's method meant for another was not clear. Selden's co-editor, William Turley, did not do a better job of comparison when he dealt with "Party, State and People: Political Structure and Economic Prospects". In parts, the comparative perspective was rather inane in his work.

The two sections on Politics and Society have interesting papers by Brantly Womack and David Marr. Womack's analysis of the options open to Vietnam is an intellectually rigorous effort and his comparative perspectives are also useful and thoughtful; Marr on his part provides a rare look into the world of research and media in Hanoi.

However, a paper by Kristin Pelzer, "Socio-Cultural Dimensions of Renovation in Vietnam: *Doi Moi* as Dialogue and Transformation in Gender Relations" should have been better left out of this book. Her topic is interesting and deserves attention because most research is so taken up with the conventional issues of politics and economics. Unfortunately, her methodology is extremely questionable and the conclusions drawn lack depth. She analyses the significance of beauty pageants in Vietnam as reported in Thai newspapers. An *Asiaweek* cover picture of a Vietnamese woman entrepreneur also becomes a paragraph of serious musings on the role of women in capitalism or socialism. It may not have occurred to her that the picture could just have been the quirk of the magazine cover design artist, no more, no less. A few other pop icons are thrown in as well with the hit musical *Miss Saigon* and the movie *Full Metal Jacket*. About the only thing that can be taken seriously in this paper is her straightforward retelling of the controversial short story and movie, *The Retired General*, by Nguyen Huy Tiep. Tiep provides her with engaging material about the collapse of the old cultural order and assumptions as reforms plough ahead in Vietnam.

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***Mirror on the Wall: Media in a Singapore Election.* By Eddie C.Y. Kuo, Duncan Holaday and Eugenia Peck.** Singapore: Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre, 1993. 132 pp.

The title of this slim volume is allusive: not unlike the relation between Snow White's stepmother and her fabled mirror, the political leadership

in Singapore looks for meticulous accuracy from its media reports, yet grave consequences may ensue if the latter's pronouncements fail to accord with the expectations of its principal beholder. As a result, the media in Singapore is kept on a very tight leash.

The authors of this book point to what they call an "inherent contradiction". On the one hand, there is the open free market economic system on which Singapore thrives, and which crucially depends on the unimpeded and impartial transmission of information. On the other, we have a media system with near monopolistic control over that information flow, yet whose output is closely circumscribed by government supervision and by its own self-imposed constraints. In consequence, the media in Singapore suffers from a certain lack of credibility. It is this problem of credibility which the book examines through a study of the role of the media in the 1991 Singapore general election.

This is an important and original book, path-breaking in its use of empirical methods to survey attitudes within the general population and to rigorously analyse media content. While social scientists in countries such as Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea have empirically documented changes in social attitude as a consequence of modernization, which has profound political implications (the work of scholars such as Lau Siu Kai and Shin Doh Chul spring to mind), their academic counterparts in Singapore had previously not shown a ready inclination to follow this lead.

Kuo, Holaday and Peck set a precedent in their attempt to conduct such a study in Singapore. In this exercise, despite being handicapped (possibly critically) in various ways, they have not held back from coming to interesting and provocative conclusions.

The 1991 election was, in some respects, a rather singular event. It was called a snap election by the new Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, who was seeking a mandate for what he termed as his more consultative style of leadership. At the outset, Goh set out his agenda for the election campaign, which moved swiftly to the vote in 18 days. The opposition parties conceded a majority of seats without contest; but in the remainder, the ruling party did less well than it had hoped for. The book here observes that the political leadership was not able to set unchallenged the agenda for debate during the campaign, even though it had the media behind it. The opposition managed to assert its concern over ethnic issues; and, despite being somewhat played down during the campaign itself, issues relating to the rising cost of living were increasingly forced on the political leadership's attention.

The survey carried out by the authors was taken immediately after the poll, and covered two constituencies, only one of which was contested by the opposition. In this constituency, only 60 per cent of respondents

chose to indicate how they voted. Some 34 per cent of the whole sample refused to answer any questions relating to election issues. Such a level of abstention must seriously weaken the statistical reliability of the results achieved. The authors note that relatively few of these abstainers (compared to the overall sample) reported that the media was unfair. This finding raises the uncomfortable question: were these, and perhaps other respondents as well, simply saying what they felt they were expected to say (a not uncommon attitude in Singapore's tightly controlled society)? How then are we to determine the thinking of those who were unwilling to express their views? This area of uncertainty limits the validity of much of the findings set out here.

The authors compare their survey results with a content analysis of election coverage in the local newspapers (all, except for one minor Tamil language paper, owned by the same company) and of television coverage provided by the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation. The latter analysis provides an official agenda of election issues emphasized by the media; while the survey provides a public agenda of issues of concern to the electorate. The comparison shows a weak correlation between official and public agendas. It also supports the hypothesis that while public discussion of issues may be limited by government policy or pressure, it is not so easy to similarly restrict public awareness of those issues. Indeed, the authors argue that some 17 per cent of their total sample (whom they label as "Critical Voters") were not ignoring the media, but were interpreting newspaper and television reports in terms of what was not being said, and questioning the emphasis placed on particular "official" issues.

These results were also consistent with the survey findings that the official media suffer from a serious credibility problem with the public. Only 40 per cent of respondents were prepared to describe newspaper election coverage as "fair"; the corresponding figure for television coverage was 38 per cent.

One interesting omission from the compass of this study was foreign news media coverage. Three Malaysian television channels are received in Singapore; the BBC World Service is clearly heard; while the government's battles with the foreign press are famous. Most recently, *The Economist* has felt the effect of official "gazetting", which restricts local circulation; while the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (accused of unwarranted interference in domestic politics through its news coverage) has had its local presence reduced literally to a shadow of its former self. Did none of the foreign news media play any part in shaping the public agenda (particularly among that minority of "critical voters") not just during, but also prior to the election period?

Despite its limitations, this book is a significant new study of an important aspect of Singapore politics, which moves beyond previous analytical research based largely on general observation and a reliance on local news reports (which, as this study convincingly shows, face an evident credibility problem). It is to be hoped that this study will be a harbinger of more rigorous analytical research to come. Already, its results provide much meat for current debate on the state of Singapore politics. In the Singapore context, the government too might wish to reconsider its policies towards the news media in the light of the book's findings and the leadership's own apparent misreading of the electoral mood. As Leslie Fong, editor of the *Straits Times* recently observed: "treating the press and, by extension, the public, as if they were incapable of thinking for themselves not only demoralizes journalists but also retards the maturing of Singaporeans as a whole. In the end, given that a credible, responsible and responsive press can only be good for Singapore, those who have to deal with it must ask themselves whether what they do, or do not do, will help or impede its growth" (*Straits Times*, 4 September 1993).

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***Singapore Changes Guard.* Edited by Garry Rodan. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993.**

What are the characteristic features of the state of Singapore? As I see it: able and intelligent government, remarkable economic achievements, high level of public services (housing, transport, city planning, green environment, and so forth), and citizens who are expected to work hard, and consume, but not to interfere (except, potentially, once every three or four years) with the processes of government.

The notion of a domesticated (political) but productive (economic) citizenry is officially justified in "neo-Confucian" terms: notably, discipline, respect for authority, and precedence of society over the individual. The dilemma, however, is that the values that help to maintain an orderly and compliant political system are not the ones that will stimulate the economic dynamism that a truly competitive Singapore will increasingly require in the global market-place.

To go fully over to "free market" values, including innovation, individual initiative and the will to win (over others), on the other hand, can