Philip Kitley (ed.), *Television, Regulation and Civil Society in Asia*, London & New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, ISBN: 0-415-29733-8, £60.

Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, Michael Keane & Yin Hong (eds.), *Media in China: Consumption, Content and Crisis*, London & New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, ISBN: 0-7007-1614-9, £60.

It feels rather like standing in line for a bus to come along. One waits a long time for something to be published on Asian media, and then out of the blue several emerge from over the horizon together! In addition to the two volumes considered here, we should also single out for high praise Duncan McCargo's *Media and Politics in Asia* (RoutledgeCurzon, 2003); Brian Moeran (ed.), *Asian Media Productions* (Curzon, 2001); and Hugo de Burgh, *The Chinese Journalist* (RoutledgeCurzon, 2003). I hope that my *Political Communications in Greater China* (2003), edited with Ming-Yeh Rawnsley and also published by RoutledgeCurzon has contributed in a small way to our expanding understanding of Asian media. RoutledgeCurzon, a recent merger of two publishers that has combined high quality output with a strong commitment to Asian studies, look set to corner the market in this field. However, we should not anticipate an unnecessary surplus of books on the subject in the near future. We are only now skimming the surface of understanding the dynamics of Asian media organisation, content, reception, and their relationship to the political and cultural processes there.

The two volumes reviewed here provide the solid, reliable and empirically based foundations for future research. While they do have very different foci, case studies and approaches, the books share an obvious interest in the extraordinary processes that have engulfed Asia and Asian media systems. Briefly, these can be

listed as: the pressures of democratisation in development-led authoritarian systems; the impact of adopting liberal market economics in previously centralised command systems; the decline of traditional media roles such as political propaganda and nation-building and the rise of the consumer culture; the increasing empowerment of civil society; and most visible of all, the influence of globalisation and what Laikwan Pan refers to as its 'anxious conspiracy' with the national interest (Donald, *et.al.*, p.56). Their discussions are informed by a clear recognition of an essential contradiction. Globalisation is often treated as an unstoppable force that will encourage the eventual demise of the nation-state and obsessions with national sovereignty. Yet, both volumes expose this as a fallacy; in fact, the nation-state is determined to resist its apparent mortality. The state remains a, if not the, most important unit of political organisation in the region, despite (or perhaps because of) globalisation, and by extension, the state continues to dominate the media landscape. Everywhere, the media are caught up in political attempts to reconcile ambitions of national sovereignty with the imperative of external engagement. Readers familiar with Asian history will find this far from surprising, as these attempts have structured much of Asian politics since first contact with the west. Globalisation adds a series of new dynamics that were not present earlier – the imperatives of global trade, and the development of new communications technologies that allow culture and information to flow around the world at speeds previously unimaginable. For example, contributions to Kitley's volume provide empirical corroboration of the so-called 'demonstration effect' whereby televised events in one country can influence political behaviour in others. This was most evident during the collapse of European communism at the end of the 1990s, but has also been visible in Asia where a regional flow of communications has developed and contributed to the development of a civil

society discourse that was previously absent. Amos Thomas's chapter in Kitley describes the 'phenomenal growth of transnational television in Asia,' and suggests that this may be because governments have used domestic television systems as tools of nation-building. They have ignored therefore the 'social aspirations and cultural tastes' of audiences that the transnational media are able to satisfy (p.249). Thomas is right to question the idea that these media have contributed to the creation of civil societies, since most transnational broadcasters transmit programmes in English for small shares of the audience. A significant proportion of modern culture and media flows have been internationalised, but overall Asian media systems remain local. Foreign programming is rarely the most popular where sufficient local programming of comparable quality exists. Moreover, there is a substantial body of research that suggests audiences tend to indigenise the content of foreign programmes in the way they decode and give them a meaning that is relevant to their experience. Anthony Fung and Eric Ma developed these ideas in their exceptional contribution to *Media in China*. Their detailed field research in Guangzhou explored how Chinese audiences consume and internalise Hong Kong television programmes. While the political effects of this 'demonstration' process are not as dramatic as in Eastern Europe in the 1980s, Fung and Ma conclude that Hong Kong television has offered a competing model of modernity that hybridizes 'traditional and modern imaginations and practices' (p.78). Chapters by Thomas in Kitley, Keane and Kloet in Donald, *et.al.* essay all point to the development of a regional transnational, rather than a truly international flow of media and cultural products. Unfortunately, serious academic analyses of democratisation have yet to fully integrate the influence of the media, and especially transnational media flows into their frameworks.

Yet television remains a 'domestic medium regulated largely by "national" considerations"' (Kitley, p.4). The legal, social and political frameworks in which the media operate are determined by the state. The state decides the precise mix of public and private television; how the media are financed; how different media are licensed; and ultimately it decides how the organisation and the content of media are regulated. This means that the state continues to employ a range of methods by which they might control the media within their own borders, even in a liberal-democracy that, at the theoretical level at least, encourages free media. As the two volumes underscore, Asian media feel this contradiction more acutely than others do. Many of the political systems in the region are still organised around an authoritarian model of development, such as Singapore. Others, such as Taiwan, are coming to terms with the consequences of democratisation. China is beginning to understand the effects of mixing liberal economics with political authoritarianism, while for others, such as Burma and North Korea, the absence of political freedoms is not lightened by any commensurate attention to economic development. Clearly, Asian governments are responding in different ways to the various pressures upon them, and such diversity draws attention to the theoretical foolishness of the 'Asian values' thesis.

These responses are discussed by the contributors to Kitley's volume. Each chapter shares an ambition of trying to understand how the media have contributed to the development of civil society throughout Asia, or how governments regulate the media to prevent the emergence of powerful opposition. The research presented demonstrates that 'strong states and institutionalised relationships between bureaucratic authorities and domestic corporations maintain barriers to the mediation of matters of public interest championed by civil society' (p.12). The essays suggest that it is a mistake to assume (as many Western idealists do) the existence of a single

universal approach to civil society, but concede that the combination of indigenous practices and foreign influences have shaped the activities and discourse of oppositional activists in the region. A 'free' media system then becomes a space for civil society activity to occur, but also becomes a political issue in its own right; it not only represents the liberal ambition of civil society, but is also a measure of how liberal a particular political system is (hence Freedom House uses the media as one variable in measuring the levels of democracy throughout the world). Unfortunately, the chapters in Kitley's book indicate that, because of outright state control or political cooptation of economic interests, civil societies throughout most of Asia have not yet had much success in gaining access to television. Only in Thailand (here discussed by Glen Lewis), Indonesia (Philip Kitley) and Korea (Ki-Sung Kwak) has civil society succeeded in influencing the shape of media reform. One might also add Taiwan where media reform is a powerful political issue that has encouraged the creation of several media-specific groups within civil society. Media liberalisation and political democratisation mean that these groups are now less concerned with political interference, issues of ownership and complicated share allocations than with the actual performance of the media and their social influence.

Despite Kitley's spirited defence in the introduction (p.4), the choice of case-studies appears a little arbitrary, as by extension is the definition of Asia; notable omissions include authoritarian Burma, democratic Taiwan, and Indian media that contribute to the manufacture of the image, if not illusion, of a pan-Indian identity and culture. However, if we accept that such edited books are constrained by such questions as whom does the editor know, and can we expect a book on Asia to cover the whole continent and still remain within the publisher's desired word length, then

Kitley's volume is a readable and thought provoking collection of essays that is sensibly arranged.

Occupying the core of the contributions is an interesting paradox, one that is implicit but does not receive the detailed attention it deserves: Many of the political systems used as case studies impose varying degrees of restrictions on the freedom of the media. These include Singapore's ban on privately-owned satellite television dishes and its frequent attempts to restrict the circulation of foreign publications, such as *The Economist* and the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, to the stipulation in the constitution of the Philippines that the media must be owned 100 percent by Filipinos, and the displacement of military control over the media in Thailand for ownership by private monopolies. However, do these governments recognise how a restrictive political culture that considers the regulation of the media as a strategy of governance actually undermines the achievements that governments claim is attainable by the model of development ('soft authoritarianism') they embrace? Economic growth and modernization are so dependent on education and the free flow of ideas and information that the restrictions on media freedoms emasculate the cultural and intellectual empowerment of the people who are responsible for the economic development of their societies.

This is likewise the central theme at the heart of the collection of essays edited by Donald, Keane and Hong. The contributors take a more economic approach to their subject than those in the Kitley collection (which is rooted in sociological and political theories of civil society), but also seek to understand content and processes of consumption. Moreover, they adopt a broader definition of the media, eschewing analyses focused on just the mainstream media – television and the press – to examine

in detail cinema, the Internet, and even rock music. This is the benefit of taking a single case-study approach; what is lost in geographic sweep is gained in depth.

Media in China draws one's attention to the unique combination of pressures that they are facing. The principle cause of these stresses is the political system's well-documented reluctance to change despite its embrace of liberal market principles. This means that the Chinese media are pulled in two directions. On the one hand, centralised political control insists the media are still 'mouthpieces of the Party, the government and the people, and they are important ideological and cultural fronts' (Redle and Simons: 25). This is inevitable given that China is still, for all intents and purposes, a communist system, and like all communist systems China emphasises the propaganda responsibilities of the media. On the other hand, however, are free market pluralism and competition, with the new challenges presented by China's membership of the World Trade Organisation looming over the media industries. This is the crisis the editors refer to in the title as the tensions between central supervision and market forces are not easily reconciled and are bound to cause inefficiency. This is clearly demonstrated in Yingchi Chu's excellent essay on Chinese cinema: 'A sustainable film industry can not survive within the tensions between official designs and movie-goers' preferences' (p.47).

The crisis is further exacerbated by China's relentless quest for national unity and identity: Can a centralised or a diverse media system best serve the interests of 1.6 billion people, representing 56 ethnic groups, scattered over 9.6 million square kilometres? And if television is a measure of development, how can we account for the 'estimated 150 million' who are still without access to television (Redle & Simons, in Donald, *et.al*., p.19)? The theme of identity is explored further by Laikwan Pan who examines how relations between China and Hong Kong are reflected through

movie production. Pan reveals that despite the political rhetoric, in cinema at least Hong Kong is still entirely separate from China. This seems to belie the official line: either Hong Kong is part of China or it is not.

However, China is not alone in facing the challenge of creating a sense of national identity. Kitley's volume indicates that this has been an extremely important and powerful motivator in the nation-building programmes of most governments in the region. For example, Glen Lewis describes how the media have been central in the promotion of Thai identity and legislation has ensured that the nation, the royal family and Buddhism are protected from criticism within the media, while the domination of Thai-language programming is a compelling symbol of the government's ambition for national unity. Other Asian governments find nation-building more difficult, and the creation of a national identity impossible. The Malaysian media system, here discussed by Philip Kitley and Zaharom Nain has been informed by the country's multi-ethnic character and the need to serve distinct ethnic communities. It remains to be seen how further globalisation and exposure to foreign influences will impact upon nation-building in the region. The temptation is, as most of the contributors to Kitley seem to agree, for governments to become increasingly protectionist, though the example of China suggests that this is incompatible with other priorities, such as economic development, responding to demands for political reform, and identifying a consensus on the role of civil society.

Both books offer much to excite the interested reader and are welcome additions to the growing body of literature on the media in Asia. Each chapter is rich in empirical detail and is meticulously researched. The theoretical depth and comparative breadth of Kitley's volume are admirably complemented by the strengths of the single-case study approach taken by Donald, Keane and Hong.

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