

House of Glass: Culture, Modernity, and the State in Southeast Asia

Review >
Southeast Asia

House of Glass evokes the condition of the prison: the policing and surveillance of inmates, and visibility and transparency versus hidden power struggles, secrets and whispers. Where Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *House of Glass*, written in prison, was an act of resistance against the colonial state of the Dutch East Indies, the contributors to this volume wish to reveal what is hidden behind the discursive practices and representational realms of the contemporary state in different Southeast Asian countries.

By Heidi Dahles

This book examines the relationship between discursive practices, modernity, and state power in Southeast Asia. Moving away from political economy, the authors – representing diverse academic disciplines such as cultural studies, anthropology, political science, sociology, art criticism, and literary studies – analyse state narratives in the public media from a postmodern

and post-structuralist perspective. The eloquence and obtrusiveness with which Southeast Asian states plead their cause is the common concern of the authors. 'If cultural meaning is, in the final analysis, political meaning, then struggle in the field of text becomes highly significant', argues the editor (p.4).

The contributions are arranged into four sections, which may be labelled as follows: (1) the power of the nation state in a globalizing world; (2) nego-

tiating national identity; (3) dealing with heterogeneity; and (4) coming to terms with popular culture.

The omnipresence of the state in Southeast Asia and its permeation of the social, economic, and cultural life in the region raise the question of how the state comes to terms with processes of globalization. As the contributions to the first section show, a complex ideological framework and effective enforcement supports and ensures the state's continuance.

Southeast Asian states are strengthened, not weakened, by rapid capitalist development. As both Ien Ang and Yao Souchou argue, this entanglement with the West also generates attempts by Southeast Asian governments to seal off their societies from what they see as evil influences of Western media and Western consumer culture. Unavoidably, the embrace of Western industrial modernity brings about conflicts of control, as is forcefully illustrated by the state of Singapore. The chapters by Ray Langenbach and Lee Weng Choy show that Singapore has created a 'McNation', unable to deal with the ambivalences and contradictions of modernity.

In an increasing pace of global exchanges, the engagement with the

Western 'other' is rather prominent in political discourses in Southeast Asia, generating partly converging and partly conflicting processes of identification. Anti-Western discourses in contemporary Southeast Asian societies focus on cultural purity and pollution in an attempt to renegotiate national identity in a globalizing world. What emerges is an Occidental paradigm that reverses the Orientalist idiom. In this context, the nationalist identification of Vietnamese diaspora communities in the United States (Ashley Caruthers) and the commodification of Thai culture (Kasian Tejapira) represent challenging domains for research as the second section in this volume illustrates.

A third issue addressed is the relationship between integrative forces of colonial heritage versus cultural heterogeneity of the region. While most of the nation states in Southeast Asia inherited from colonialism a political system that is conducive to national unity based on equal rights for all citizens, few governments are able or willing to carry this principle to the full. Governance in almost all states is characterized by strategies of 'ethnicization', discriminating more or less explicitly among their ethnically diverse populations. The Malaysian state, for example, actively enacts 'forms of resistance against a universal inscription of international rules of conduct', as Loong Wong argues (p.185). By proclaiming to be an 'Asian

democracy' Malaysia makes revisions to its colonial past and negotiates a position between the East and the West in a global society. In a similar vein, the strength and weakness of the New Order has been its pursuit of economic development enforced by a patrimonial state and legitimized by discourses of national unity and harmony, glossing over major ethnic and religious cleavages, as Mark T. Berger shows (p.192). The political use of communication technologies and media censorship, which is widely used by Southeast Asian governments to enforce their discourses and exclude multi-vocality, is not an invention of contemporary states, Tim Harper points out. It is a legacy of the post-colonial regimes' project of nation-building.

In the final section, the struggle of Southeast Asian states to come to terms with popular culture is highlighted. While states are eager to develop the notion of Asian 'uniqueness' based on an Occidental paradigm, popular culture more easily acknowledges the modern Asian experience 'betwixt and between' a colonial past, Western modernity, and Asian values. Whether it is a Singaporean pop artist's repertoire (Wee), a museum exhibition featuring the Philippine sugar industry (Marian Pastor Poces), images of Vietnamese celebrities (Mandy Thomas and Russell Heng), or a lower class protest movement in Thailand (James Ockey), the discursive efforts in these instances are carried out against the

state's powerful directives. Ironically, the energy that the state in Southeast Asia invests in the orchestration and control of discourses reveals a deep-seated ambivalence and vulnerability 'as a result of the very conditions that contribute to its potency, wealth, and political legitimacy' (p.21).

House of Glass is an exciting book that will not only appeal to scholars but also to a wider audience interested in the politics of culture in Southeast Asia under globalization. The appeal is in the interpretive approach to widely publicized media events and the exposure of their manifold aspects within a kaleidoscopic perspective. However, lacking a thorough analysis in terms of the political economy of the region, only a readership well

versed in post-colonial history and regional power relations may avoid losing track. ◀

– Yao Souchou (ed.), *House of Glass. Culture, Modernity, and the State in Southeast Asia*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (2001), pp. 342, ISBN 981-230-074-0.

Dr Heidi Dahles is an associate professor at the Department of Culture, Organization and Management at the Free University in Amsterdam. Her current research interest is in organizational culture in Southeast Asian trans-border regions.
h.dahles@scw.vu.nl