

Chua Beng Huat, ed. 2007. *Elections as Popular Culture in Asia*. Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge. 197 pages. ISBN 0 415 42570 0.

Elections as popular culture

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Watching the pomp and absurdity of this year's US presidential elections, one cannot help but be struck by what such rituals represent, beyond the mere fact of choosing a new head of government and state. There is the element of carnival, of course, but also a persistent subcurrent of deeper meaning: that this overblown, pricey, closely-managed circus still does represent a chance for 'the people' self-consciously to assert their sovereignty. Against such a backdrop, Chua Beng Huat's lively edited volume, *Elections as Popular Culture in Asia*, offers an especially welcome stimulus. The volume presents a series of engaging descriptions and analyses of campaign festivities and foibles across states, but also poses deeper questions of how citizens interpret and enact their own roles in election tableaux - the distinction between "democracy as a political goal and the election as an instrument for attaining it" (p.140).

Chua's straightforward introduction lays out the rationale for the book and synthesises insights from the case studies that follow. The volume grew out of a workshop in early 2005 on the preceding "year of elections across Asia." It takes as a premise that campaigns are about more (or less) than just providing information for the rational weighing of choices, and elections, the aggregation of rational, solitary actions. Rather, even where electoral rules keep real choice in check, elections hold out hope for the governed of a better future - that *this* time, their vote could make a difference - and "remain the primary channels of popular participation in politics" (p.6). Contending parties assert their popularity by drumming up crowds and creating 'news', offering the illusion, at least, of sufficient popular mobilisation to confirm the winner's legitimacy in a world of hegemonic electoralism. Meanwhile, elements from civil society take advantage of relaxed rules and crowds to press their own agendas, including encouraging deeper and broader participation. The full syndrome is embedded in a specific culture and context, though; the script is hardly universal, however much elections as a concept may be presumed to be so. It is with this paradox that the volume engages, reading elections as an artefact and aspect of the popular culture in which they take place.

The chapters that follow address elections of 2004 (or the closest thereto) in Taiwan (by Ko Yufen), Hong Kong (Wan-chaw Shae and Pik-wan Wong), Indonesia (Jennifer Lindsay), the Philippines (Filomeno V. Aguilar, Jr.), Thailand (Pitch Pongsawat), Malaysia (Francis Loh Kok Wah), India (M. Madhava Prasad), South Korea (Keehyeung Lee), and Japan (Kaori Tsurumoto). While the quality is high throughout, some contributors follow Chua's prompt better than others. Several could have benefited from deeper engagement with the

workshop process and other chapters to sharpen their points. For instance, in faulting Japan's Public Office Election Law for discouraging popular engagement, Tsurumoto might have considered a comparison with Malaysia, or with pre-transition elections in a place like Indonesia, to tease out other contributing factors. A few chapters, too, for instance on Hong Kong, detour substantially into extra-electoral matters, reviewing wider political developments and sentiments. Most of the authors are part of the publics and cultures they describe; Lindsay is an exception, but can claim authority based on decades of observance of Indonesian elections. Some focus on the meaning with which citizens vest candidates and campaigns (for instance, the chapters on Thailand or the Philippines); others more on detailing what parties do (as for Japan and Malaysia).

Mobilisation and manipulation of emotions

Overall, the set of cases offers a set of colourful snapshots and a host of riddles. Campaigns, per these accounts, range

'cosplay' (the candidates' 'costume play'), sloganeering, and rampant commodification, with enough kitsch for sale "to transform the candidates into household celebrities" (p.35).

Elements of humour - of irony, parody, and sheer playfulness - recur across accounts. Voters in Hong Kong, for example, satirise leaders in cartoons, plays, cyber-protests, and other forums, 'modifying' official propaganda and 'photoshopping' pro-Beijing leaders' photos. Thais transformed even the September 2006 coup to entertainment, escaping the confining rationality of constitutionalism as they posed with the tanks and soldiers. And in South Korea, Lee proposes, online parody "often works as a semiotic guerrilla practice and a symbolic act of rebellion" (p.166), particularly easily disseminated and understood images.

At the intersection of popular culture and formal politics in nearly all the cases presented are the media, whether mainstream newspapers and television programs or

publications and messages. Surveys and exit polls are featuring increasingly, as well, for instance in the Philippines.

Testament to the entwining of media with politics, too, is the prevalence of celebrities in campaigns, whether as endorsers, entertainers at events, or candidates themselves. As Lindsay describes for Indonesia, the "intense slippage between the world of performance and politics at election time" (p.56) is apparent not just in television talk shows and other media spectacles, in the itinerant performers who work the campaign circuit, and of presidential candidates' crooning for the cameras, but in the mass media celebrities who seek the validation of being pursued by parties - confirmation of the worth of their name, and increasingly, of their own electability.

Motorbikers, singers and 'smart mobs'

However colourful the election process, it remains a part of a broader political context. Lee's discussion of elections in South Korea, for instance, draws relatively little

and for participation beyond the mere act of voting. One wishes some of the contributors, however, had addressed these dimensions more clearly - to what extent the staged, shallow drama of Indonesian elections, jazzed up with hired bands of motorbikers and singers, for instance, actually represents or inspires engagement; whether the emotionally-battered Taiwanese have any 'gut feeling' to follow; or what outlets remain for older South Koreans, less keyed in than the '2030 generation' (in their twenties and thirties) to the "mobility and interactivity" (p.160) of online networks and 'smart mobs'.

Indeed, the volume as a whole might have benefited from a more nuanced analysis of who is excluded or included in campaign dramas. Lindsay, for instance, calls attention to those dynamics in noting how male the terrain of campaign parades and rallies has been, in terms of both participants and audience. Increasingly, women have been included in pawai (motorbike cavalcades), but still in an auxiliary role: as pillion riders performing choreographed movements. Pitch presents a disjuncture between how urban middle class and urban lower-income and poor communities understand, participate in, and are pursued during campaigns - though the analysis, unfortunately, focuses almost entirely on the former category. Loh, too, hints at the possibilities for different understandings of electoral processes and messages among those exposed to NGO messages, persistently marginalised from developmental rewards, or truly able, from experience of opposition rule, to imagine stability under an alternative to the long-dominant National Front.

The book will appeal to readers across the social sciences and humanities: it is a work on politics, both institutions and behaviour, but also on media, perception, and discourse. The actual details of the case studies will probably be familiar to most country experts, though the perspective and other cases on offer may encourage new lines of inquiry and comparison. Moreover, the volume is eminently approachable, suitable for undergraduates as well as more advanced scholars, and offers side notes in, for instance, fieldwork methods (most charmingly in Tsurumoto's contribution) and ways to work with emerging electronic media (especially the chapters by Lee and Pitch). Overall, the volume is an engaging addition to studies on popular culture and a useful corrective to overly structural approaches to elections, without pretending to offer the last word.

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from excessively structured and "dull and mind-numbingly similar" (p.179) in Japan, to "a spectacle of color, enthusiastic popular participation, [and] innovative modes of self-expression" (p.149) in India. Contenders aim not just to lure supporters, but to convince citizens to care and to vote at all. Ko describes that process of full-scale mobilisation and manipulation of emotions in Taiwanese elections, at least, as "akin to a provisional, contingent, and flexible guerrilla war" (p.23). Traditional symbolism complements modern touches across cases. Aguilar draws an elaborate, but convincing, analogy between campaigns and cockfights - elections as a gamble in the Philippines. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, campaign styles and events draw on such rituals as wedding ceremonies and all kinds of performance, presenting a degree of continuity with everyday life. And in Taiwan, 'image-making' extends from candidates' kneeling before citizens *in loco parentis* and begging for votes at temples, night markets, weddings, and funerals, to

free-wheeling internet-based communities and forums. Controls on mainstream media, or the manicuring of messages therein, are subverted by the ready availability cyber-alternatives in Hong Kong, Thailand, or South Korea, which allow new forms of debate, mockery, engagement, and empowerment. (One wonders whether jaded voters in Japan, too, engage in cyberpoliticking.) In India, where media (especially regional or vernacular outlets) are less fettered, coverage is flamboyant, from slick advertising campaigns to gossip, mudslinging, and free-wheeling discussion, generally premised on an assumption of politicians' essential corruptness. Party-linked mainstream media in Malaysia, meanwhile, carefully calibrate their sycophancy, as Loh describes, building hype and getting out the vote, but steering clear of actual substance. Opposition parties and NGOs, in turn, monitor these media as part of a broader critique, as they take advantage of loosened controls during the brief campaign to issue their own

distinction between elections and other 'political events' such as impeachment proceedings, just as Shae and Wong elide rallies in 2003 over a proposed National Security Bill and in 2004 over the establishment of universal suffrage with their analysis of the polls of a few months later. And elections in Hong Kong and Indonesia transpire in a political order transformed within the past decade - the former's handover to China in 1997 and the latter's abrupt change of regime the following year. Not just political institutions, but popular culture - and especially outlets such as mass media - have changed dramatically in the process. That imbrication helps to explain why citizens across the region still do vote: voters in the Philippines or Malaysia, for instance, see it not just as their duty and as a chance to assert a stake in rewards, but as a legitimate and even promising means of political change. In a larger sense, as Chua notes in his introduction, the volume offers evidence of campaigns as an avenue for political voice,