

The Filipino people are now enjoying the fruits of the labor of the author in our quest for energy self-reliance, most especially the geothermal and hydropower development. But while he does not agree with the privatization of Petron, we must realize that Petron's privatization was successful because it was nurtured and managed well to become a very profitable company during the Marcos administration. While we have yet to see the benefits of the EPIRA, it is too early to pass judgment on policy decisions of post-Marcos administrations on the power sector. Suffice it to say that I agree with the author that the success of deregulating a very critical industry, like oil and power, is a strengthened, responsive, and well-administered regulatory environment. The challenge that lies ahead of us is to be able to duplicate the achievements told in the book in our own version of democracy in which political intervention, not only by the politicians but also by those with self-interests from the private sector and nongovernment organizations, is a commonplace.—**FRANCISCO L. VIRAY**, *PRESIDENT, TRANS-ASIA POWER GENERATION CORPORATION.*

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1. For a discussion of the Ramos administration's privatization strategy that was done for the Philippine National Oil Company Exploration Corporation (PNOC-EC), see page 45.

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Glen Lewis. 2006. *Virtual Thailand: The Media and Cultural Politics in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore*. London and New York: Routledge Curzon. 227 pp.

The virtuality of Thailand as a state of mind exists as a creation of an imagination, partly based on reality, but largely comprised of constructed representations, all of which serve to achieve the agenda of the state and the elites in their state-building projects in the context of a globalized world. It is in this complex terrain of images that the media takes a central role, and tourism becomes the dominant field where media images are inscribed and take root. Glen Lewis has clearly illustrated this in his well-researched although sometimes disparately argued book.

Tourism subsists on a mediated construction of opposing categories of modern and ethnic. “Amazing Thailand” and “Malaysia Truly Asia” both capitalize on the organic allure of an oriental culture that offers raw forms of meanings that are different from modern and built environments. Yet, Thailand and Malaysia also have to present an imagery of convenience of modern-day living in which tourists thrive. Thus, you have posh hotels with the amenities of modern life just a few yards away from the exotic and the ethnic. Nothing could be more vivid than seeing elephants walking the streets of modern Bangkok. This is precisely why Singapore is trying hard to find an image that goes beyond its economic power—shopping malls and corporate culture. To be able to compete in the international tourism market, Singapore attempts to match the cultural Thai and Malay to which Western and/or affluent Asian travelers are more attracted to.

In all these, organic meanings have to be represented as cultural attractions. Images have to be reconfigured beyond their traditional roots and forced to exist as an object of gaze for the paying outsider. In the case of Thailand, this could even take the form of offering the weary traveler the various incarnations of its traditional hospitality, including the touch of massage parlors and go-go bars. These complex plays of representation—produced by the power that comes with the ability to reconstruct the native landscape and its inhabitants, and represent them for tourists to gawk at, take photographs of, and be mesmerized about—exist in a political economy not only of symbols but of pragmatic politics. In the process, elements of the native landscape that may compromise the image of safety and allure which the state would like to project have to be reconfigured, hidden, and, in some instances, silenced.

It is in this context that the projection of beauty becomes just the other face of the oppressive structures of beauty-fixated politics. The Philippines has had this experience during the reign of Imelda Marcos. Yet, Thailand has become even more corporately innovative. While Imelda used influence, both subtle and blatant, on the press to project an image of the true, the good, and the beautiful, Thaksin simply did the more practical and effective way—which is, own the media.

As Lewis illustrates, the virtuality of Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore, while manifested in the poster images and slogans of its tourism industry, uses the media as its lifeblood. Here, Lewis points out another dualism that exists parallel to the oppositional categories

of tradition and modernity that can be seen in how tourism is discursively constructed. The media becomes a terrain in which the opposing categories of freedom and limits are defined. The mass media in mainland Southeast Asia—particularly in Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore—exist as an object for the state to provide spaces for freedom and mobility, even as it is used to limit those spaces as well. What Thaksin gives through his mobile-phone company, he takes away through the structural limits he imposed in his virtual control of—if not great influence on—the telecommunications industry.

As a child of democratization processes, and as an institution traditionally tasked to provide a venue for critic and engagement, the mass media ideally should act as a conscience to ensure that the virtual representations of Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore peddled both by their government bureaucrats and by tourism operators are truly authentic. Yet, the mass media is also effectively positioned for the controlling gaze of the state. Lewis pointed out correctly that mass media has edged out educational institutions, indicating that it is an important shaper of consciousness. In some countries, these could be done in more draconian ways. Singapore and Malaysia have very stringent controls on the press. In others, attempts to control are carried out not by intimidating laws, but by sheer brutality manifested in actual killings of journalists. The Philippines, in fact, has prided itself on a free media, but at the same time has had the highest number of journalists murdered in recent years. Thailand, on the other hand, has seen a more subtle, if not insidious, process of control. Instead of deploying draconian laws or vicious killings, Thaksin's Chief-Executive-Officer approach appropriated corporate control and ownership of the media as a way of making it toe the line.

But as Lewis correctly pointed out, the globalization process has rendered the field for media representation virtually beyond totalizing control. The logic behind the capacity of a state to control its media institutions and manage the production of images—as a lynchpin for a virtual Thailand, or Malaysia, or Singapore to project an image that is safe, alluring, and exciting to a global market of tourists, assuring them of a land free of terrorists, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), and bird flu—is ironically linked to a global market where images and information are considered free commodities. A globalized media is one that is not bounded by state borders or delimited by state policy. Even as states are busy covering up or sanitizing information from within, global communication networks such as Cable News Network

and British Broadcasting Corporation, and even media organizations from other (perhaps competing?) countries are as effective in projecting terror and disease as real threats to the paying tourists.

However, Lewis should have emphasized more in his book the countervailing forces that continue to challenge the hegemonic image factories controlled by state structures from within their boundaries. Thaksin may have had control of the media through corporate channels, but considering recent events in Thai politics, this did not protect him from losing his legitimacy and perhaps, worse, at least for Thais, his "face." These forces are not products of globalized forces that are naturally beyond the reach of a single Thaksin, or of Malaysia's United Malay National Organization, or of Singapore's People's Action Party. There are enough stories to tell in Southeast Asia, and in particular, in Thailand, Malaysia, and even Singapore, of local struggles to challenge the virtual representations that are being projected by state image managers and media handlers. Most of these happen at local levels, as people-based or popular movements that push for sustainable development and for human rights, both of which address a convergence of discourses that relocate the representation away from postcard images that are politically convenient to the powerful elites, and closer to images that are more relevant and authentic to the lives of local people. These kinds of images are missing in the picture that Lewis has painted for us. Local stories of resistance and counter-imagination are potent forces that could interrupt the grand narratives and the broad strokes of a constructed landscape that is virtual Thailand.—**ANTONIO P. CONTRERAS**, *PROFESSOR AND DEAN, COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS, DE LA SALLE UNIVERSITY, MANILA.*