

12-1-2018

## Varieties of Control in Southeast and East Asia

Michael G. Vann Ph.D.

Sacramento State University, [mikevann@csus.edu](mailto:mikevann@csus.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Vann, Michael G. Ph.D. (2018) "Varieties of Control in Southeast and East Asia," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 10 : No. 1 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol10/iss1/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of International and Global Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact [phuffman@lindenwood.edu](mailto:phuffman@lindenwood.edu).

## Varieties of Control in Southeast and East Asia

Review Essay by Michael G. Vann, Department of History & Asian Studies, Sacramento State University, [mikevann@csus.edu](mailto:mikevann@csus.edu).

Greitens, Sheena Chestnut. *Dictators and Their Secret Police: Coercive Institutions and State Violence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Padios, Jan M. *A Nation on the Line: Call Centers as Postcolonial Predicaments in the Philippines*. Durham and London; Duke University Press, 2018.

Systems of control are essential. Complex societies cannot function without institutions and practices that guide, monitor, and discipline individuals. Scholars from a variety of disciplines have placed critiques of political, economic, and cultural management at the center of their discussions of modernity. Fifty years ago, Samuel P. Huntington published *Political Order in Changing Societies*, arguing that what distinguished states was not their ideology but whether they effectively governed or not. His statism rejected the bipolar ideological certainties of Cold War divisions in favor of the mechanics of governing. At the same time but in a dramatically different milieu, Michel Foucault's studies of hospitals, prisons, and sexuality turned attention away from the formal political state and towards scores of other institutions that disciplined and punished members of a society. Such a theorization of power called attention to the ways in which what might seem benign and banal was actually essential to creating, maintaining, and reproducing social elites' hegemony. While by any metric Foucault and Huntington could not have been more different, their critiques of systems of control belie the significance of such power relationships to academic studies. Two recent books on Southeast/East Asia capture the diverse approaches to the study of power. If Sheena Chestnut Greitens' *Dictators and Their Secret Police: Coercive Institutions and State Violence* is a conventional work of political science that uses South Korea, the Philippines, and Taiwan as case-studies to advance a theoretical model, Jan M. Padios' *A Nation on the Line: Call Centers as Postcolonial Predicaments in the Philippines* is a beautifully written anthropological study of a crucial phenomenon of late capitalism's globalization. In both their subject matter and their disciplinary framing, these two books would seem to be at odds with each other. Yet when considered together they offer valuable insights into the management of Southeast/East Asian societies in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In *A Nation on the Line*, Padios offers an ethnography of Filipino call centers. Padios quickly schools the uniformed reader who might scoff at such a seemingly trivial subject. She persuasively argues that the now ubiquitous call center, nocturnal office complexes filled with hundreds of highly educated and well-paid young Filipinos, is one of the most important institutions for understanding the contemporary Philippines and its place in the global economic system. Based upon several years of field work, including going through the hiring and training process, Padios carefully explains how the contemporary call center is the latest manifestation of a struggle to forge national identity that breaks free of colonial and postcolonial systems of dependence. For a century, the Philippines most important export has been Filipinos. The 20<sup>th</sup> century began with sending agricultural laborers to American sugar plantations in Hawai'i and then to Central Californian farms and continued with the nursing diaspora as Filipina workers became an essential component in the American healthcare industry. Since independence in

1946, thousands left the archipelago for jobs on cruise ships, domestic service in wealthy homes in Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, and Saudi Arabia, and sex work in red-light districts such as Singapore's Orchard Tower. Remittances from these over-seas wage-earners have been central to the survival of those who stayed home and a crucial component of the national economy. These overseas workers are heroes to many Filipino families. Yet, the dependence of diasporic employment has been a source of national anxiety. Call centers promised to keep workers at home, to keep them within the nation-state. Padios describes the optimistic enthusiasm of boosters who promised that call centers would be a way for Filipinos to leave the service sector behind and enter the information economy. They claimed to offer a path from stigmatized manual and service labor to privileged high-tech careers. As its subtitle indicates, *A Nation on the Line* demonstrates that despite higher wages than other entry level jobs, professional work sites in new office complexes, and employment at home in the Philippines, call centers have failed to live up to the hype and not taken the nation into a new developmental era. Rather, call centers keep Filipinos trapped in a post-colonial relationship with their imperial overlords. Indeed, legacies of American rule create moments of what Padios calls "colonial recall," where a century of Yankee paternalism, exploitation, and discipline structures contemporary relationships. She shows the importance of a perceived "Filipino/American relatability" to the commodification of Filipino post-colonial culture as an item to be sold to American corporations. Meanwhile, the structure of call center work, with agents working nightshifts to answer calls from disgruntled and often xenophobic American customers, places new stresses on the Filipino worker.

*A Nation on the Line* is a well-structured book of 188 pages of engaging prose. The book's introduction and five chapters will be of interest to anthropologists and students of the Philippines but will also be accessible to a variety of non-specialist readers with an interest in globalization and late capitalist labor systems. In the introduction and first two chapters Padios explains the origins of the call center, situating the institution in the context of the new internet-based technologies of the information economy, neo-liberalism's international distribution of labor (and de-industrialization of the United States of America), and the ways in which colonialism created a special relationship of cultural familiarity and linguistic compatibility (unlike the French or the Dutch, the Americans spent money on colonial schools and spread the English language). Starting with the third chapter, Padios takes the reader inside the call center. Based upon her ethnographic field-work, she draws upon the voices of Filipino call center workers that served as her informants as well as her own experience as a participant-observer who successfully applied for a job and made it through the training program. Here she shows how the industry is failing to live up to its promises to both the Philippines and Filipinos. Call center jobs turned out not to be gateways into high-tech careers, building the nation's domestic professional capacity and moving it out of international dependency. Rather, call center work is really a new form of low-level service work. True, new hires earn much better salaries than position's in other entry-level jobs, but there is relatively little room for professional advancement. And then there is the impact of stress. Despite their fluency in English, familiarity with cosmopolitan consumerism, and often elite education, call center agents have to follow set scripts and are often verbally abused by frequently lower-class American customers. Management techniques, which could have been inspired by Foucault's discussion of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, and rigorous attention to quotas and time-per-call measurements further tax employees' emotional well-being. That the call centers work nightshifts dictated by North American business hours adds social alienation to workplace frustrations, leading to binge

drinking at an hour when their neighbors are going to work. Tied to the needs of American corporations (who are outsourcing customer service jobs), the industry fails to do much for national development. Padios shows that this is merely a new form of serving and caring for North American interests. In the last chapter, she applies queer theory to the institutions, revealing that call center agents are often viewed as sexually deviant, perverse, and threatening by a Filipino society that resents their salaries, suspects that the centers are sites of immoral behavior, and fears the workers as carriers of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS. This last point is sadly ironic as many gay and trans Filipinos found the industry to be not just non-discriminatory but welcoming and even celebratory of LGBTQI communities (admittedly often based on stereotyped notions of queer identities). *A Nation on the Line* further demonstrates how call center employees, with high salaries and access to new lines of credit, find themselves trapped in patterns of conspicuous consumption and indebted to predatory lenders.

An anthropologist by training, Padios engages critical theory in *A Nation on the Line*. Yet, this skillful author never lets potentially distracting and obscure theoretical discourse enter into her prose. Indeed, her use of Foucauldian, Marxist, and queer theory is to be commended for its clarity and relevance to the subject matter. Considering her disciplinary background and methodology, it should come as no surprise that the author places herself in the book. She starts with an anecdote about a family member who rejected a career in nursing in America in order to pursue a more lucrative call center job in the Philippines, and throughout the book uses her own experience in a call center as evidence. But Padios goes further than this. She examines her privilege as a well-educated Filipina-American negotiating a workplace that she could instantly leave alongside Filipino nationals who face much more immediate material needs. She shows tremendous empathy for her informants and the difficulties they face as they negotiate late capitalism's drive to blur the lines between work and leisure. This approach allows her not only to humanize her subject of study but also to place these observed individuals in larger networks of power of which the call center is only one example. Balancing individual lives, the institutions of multi-national corporations, and early 21<sup>st</sup> century globalization, Padios' work is successful in many different registers.

In theory, *Dictators and their Secret Police* shares *A Nation on the Line*'s interest in systems of control in Southeast/East Asia but is in many ways a much less profound book and has a fairly limited objective. Sheena Chestnut Greitens' goal is to prove her theoretical model. Directly drawn from her award-winning doctoral research in political science at Harvard, she argues that state violence in authoritarian regimes is tied to the structure of coercive institutions. Greitens holds that dictators must make a choice between prioritizing coup d'états or popular revolts. She analyzes levels of fragmentation/centralization and exclusivity/inclusivity, noting that elite threats are best met with fragmented and exclusive institutions of repression while centralized and inclusive security forces are better able to put down popular insurrections. In "Part I: The Puzzle and the Argument," Greitens devotes the first quarter of *Dictators and Their Secret Police*'s 300-odd pages to presenting her model. The book, which reads like a lightly revised dissertation manuscript, then uses three case studies to illustrate her argument: Chiang Kai-shek and his son Chiang Ching-kuo's hereditary one-party rule in Kuomintang Taiwan (1949-1988), Ferdinand Marcos' personalist dictatorship (1972-1986), and South Korean military rule under Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan after Park's 1979 assassination (1972-1987). Curiously, the author divides the case studies into two sections of three chapters each. In "Part II: The Origins of Coercive Institutions," each chapter is titled "Organizing coercion in

[...]” and in “Part III: Coercive Institutions and State Violence,” each chapter is titled “Coercive intuitions and repression in [...]” The chapters’ internal structure continues with such repetitive, mechanical, and dry organization. With frequent restatements of the argument and its crucial terminology and a standard conclusion which refutes a set of other hypotheses, some readers may feel a frustrating sense of déjà vu as they move through the book. If Greitens’ prose is formulaic, the book does offer a clear structure that is easy to follow. In the case studies, *Dictators and Their Secret Police* consistently reminds the reader that the evidence is proving the validity of her larger theoretical model. “Part IV: Extensions and Conclusions” contains a brief effort to apply the model to General Pinochet’s Chile, the East German Stasi, and Saddam Hussein’s Ba’athist rule in Iraq, and a final recap of her argument.

Greitens shows a mastery of relevant literature from her field and command of the political history of her case studies, but a series of shortcomings plagues *Dictators and Their Secret Police*, keeping the book from being of use to a wider audience. The book’s footnotes are copious and seemingly exhaustive. In contrast to Padios’ engagement with Foucauldian theories of power, Marxist critiques of late capitalism and the neo-liberal global order of things, and gender analysis, Greitens steers clear of post-modernism, conceptions of hegemony, and discourse analysis. Her approach is entirely focused upon institutions. To support her model, she cites both political science theory and histories of her case studies. While the vast majority of her secondary material is in English, Chinese and Korean sources are brought in. There are no Tagalog or Ilocano sources. *Dictators and Their Secret Police* draws on limited interviews with former officials and dissidents from each country. However, this source material is only referenced in passing, serving as anecdotal background information rather than essential evidence. A more thorough analysis of these interviews would have strengthened *Dictators and Their Secret Police*. Another area in which the book is lacking is its failure to consider gender as an analytic category. While in passing, she does mention the politically astute Soong Mei-ling/Madame Chiang Kai-shek, the infamously corrupt Imelda Marcos, and the martyred Yuk Young Soo who died in a 1974 assassination attempt on Park, but these important women fail to receive significant attention. Nor does she consider these coercive institutions as sites of male privilege and power with agents wielding the threat of sexual violence against the civilian population. And what of the cult of masculinity that these male dictators and their male secret police cultivated as both part of their persona and a tactic of intimidation? Here, Greitens would have benefitted from a reading of Saskia E. Wieringa’s excellent series of articles and books on gendered violence in Suharto’s Indonesian New Order (1966-1998).

The book’s greatest disappointment lies in its shocking failure to exhibit empathy for the victims of the regime in question. This is perhaps best illustrated in a discussion of violence in South Korea. In a passage where Greitens argues that there were relatively few executions under Park and Chun, her tone seems almost dismissive of other types of suffering the police state inflicted, such as beatings from riot police, short- and long-term detention, and torture. As she manages her data, only killings really matter. This attitude returns in her apologist presentation of Pinochet’s reign of terror in Chile. Her portrait of torture under Marcos is literally cartoonish, offering “humorous” editorial sketches mocking the regime’s use of violence. *Dictators and Their Secret Police* discusses Communism and anti-Communism in a rather simple manner, lacking essential complexity. Greitens treats all politics as elite politics, the stuff of leaders, parties, and institutions, and thus fails to consider support for Communism as part of broader social movements. With its focus on power politics, the analysis fails to explore the diverse forces behind anti-Communist regimes, which included not only the ironic and hypocritical

opposition to alleged totalitarianism but also a willingness to use violence to protect the interests of capital. Were these dictators and their secret police simply trying to stay in power or did they have ideological and material motivations as well? Were these regimes motivated by anti-unionism? What of the role of anti-feminism?

Taken together, *A Nation on the Line* and *Dictators and Their Secret Police* offer insights into systems of control in Southeast/East Asia. Both authoritarian regimes and multi-national corporations used a variety of techniques and practices to discipline and punish Filipinos, Koreans, and Taiwanese. While dictatorial political regimes have proved fleeting and vulnerable to protest, late capitalism's economic regimes show tremendous durability and adaptability. Indeed, neo-liberalism is so hegemonic it is difficult for many to see its webs of power, let alone imagine an alternative.