

Hardcover: UK

A tale of two city-states

At first glance, Hong Kong and Singapore could be twins, but the manner in which the authorities handled political dissent led to very different results. What happened?

BY J. MICHAEL COLE
STAFF REPORTER

It has often been said that democracy is not endemic to Asia, or that its development is inevitably stunted by so-called "Asian values" or "Chinese characteristics." Opponents of this view, meanwhile, argue that modernization leads to democratization as an increasing number of groups and individuals are empowered and therefore become more prone to challenge the authorities. This has led to the belief — and hope — that modernity, oft-defined as the adoption of capitalism, will transform a state from within and initiate the process of democratization.

If this were the case then China, of all countries, would be expected to be the next country on the democracy waiting list. And yet, there are hardly any signs that it is about to do that. How do we explain this?

As "most similar cases," two Asian city-states — Singapore and Hong Kong — allow us to experiment with the impact of modernity on post-colonial regimes with a tradition of "soft authoritarianism." By following the emergence of contention alongside rapid economic development in the city-states and how the authorities responded to that challenge, we can establish whether democratization is a teleological phenomenon — in other words, that modernity/capitalism inevitably leads to democracy — or if other preconditions are necessary for this transformation to occur.

This is what Stephan Ortmann, assistant professor of comparative politics at Fern University in Hagen, Germany, undertakes in *Politics and Change in Singapore and Hong Kong*. To this end, Ortmann presents a detailed analysis of the ruling elites in Singapore and Hong Kong, as well as the oppositional groups that have challenged their authority.

The author shows us that "soft authoritarian" regimes depend on performance for their legitimacy. Their ability to deliver on their promises (stability, security, economic growth), therefore, is directly related to the emergence of oppositional groups and their capacity to challenge the authorities. It quickly emerges that while the Singaporean elite has been largely successful in implementing its policies, Hong Kong authorities fared much worse. Public housing, among others, is discussed to compare the outcome of similar projects in the two city-states. Given its performance, Singapore's People's Action Party (PAP) was able to cultivate the belief that the stability of the state — its very survival, in fact — depends on the party.

The fact that the PAP was a direct descendant of post-colonialism, whereas the Hong Kong authorities in the 1970s — the period of interest here — were British colonial and manned mostly by foreigners, also had an impact on perceptions of legitimacy.

Beyond this, the strategies used by the ruling elite can be simplified to two approaches: co-optation and coercion. The section of the book that explores these two is by far the most fascinating, especially when it comes to Singapore.

Co-optation was an instrument used by both one-party city-states to prevent the emergence of strong oppositional groups by bringing them into government and thereby institutionalizing the opposition. Invariably, however, oppositionists were limited in their ability to climb the hierarchy and were relegated to consultative (as opposed to partisan) bodies with very little ability to influence policymaking. What little elections were held were usually for such positions, which while not threatening the ruling elite nevertheless gave it a veneer of democracy.

By Ortmann's account, Singapore was much more successful than Hong Kong in using co-optation to pre-empt the opposition. In fact, it went to great lengths to give the public a stake in the survival of the PAP: social engineering (quotas on ethnicity within districts, a "multiracial state"), extremely high rates of employ-

PUBLICATION NOTES



POLITICS AND CHANGE IN SINGAPORE AND HONG KONG: CONTAINING CONTENTION

BY STEPHAN ORTMANN
228 PAGES
ROUTLEDGE

ment within the public sector and large government-linked corporations are all part of this strategy.

Coercion, for its part, includes a variety of techniques, from surveillance of oppositionist groups to assembly laws, censorship of the media to defamation lawsuits. In that regard, Singapore has also been far more successful than Hong Kong, so much so that to this day oppositionists are afraid of speaking out for fear of its impact on their jobs and the high likelihood that doing so will result in a ruinous lawsuit. The portrayal by the PAP of oppositionists as "extremists" and "troublemakers" has weakened the image of dissidents with the public and compelled many to play by the rules by joining the system rather than fighting it from outside. This explains why Hong Kong, which didn't treat oppositionists as harshly, saw far more non-institutionalized techniques of opposition, such as mass rallies, during its tumultuous years.

Control of the media also plays a large role. While publications in Hong Kong were generally free, the situation is quite different in Singapore. Consequently, when the PAP fails to meet public expectations, the media will come to its defense and blame the shortcomings on some external factor or by singling out a few scapegoats. Lack of reporting on such incidents, or reporting that paints the authorities in a favorable light, therefore, has a substantial impact on public perceptions of the ruling elite. In Hong Kong, when the government fumbled, the media were able to report on it, which helped de-legitimize the elite and created opportunities for oppositionist groups.

Ortmann wraps up with possible scenarios for Hong Kong and Singapore, conclusions that are far from optimistic.

While Hong Kong, which was far less successful in delivering on its promises as a paternalist state and only reluctantly used coercion to constrain oppositionists, liberalized and, to a certain extent, democratized from the late 1970s until retrocession in 1997, Ortmann raises questions about the viability of democracy in the special administrative region, mostly because of the increasingly influence of Beijing in local politics.

As for Singapore, while acknowledging the role of the Internet, which the PAP has not censored as much as it has other media, and the party's limited attractiveness for Singaporean youth, the author does not see much hope for democratization, unless a severe shock, such as the global economic crisis, undermines once and for all the legitimacy of the elite. Given that Singapore appears to have emerged relatively unscathed from the crisis, that prospect once again looks distant.

While not addressing this explicitly, through his exploration of the techniques by which "soft authoritarian" regimes managed to stay in power, Ortmann shows us how certain parties in democratic states — and here Taiwan comes to mind — could deconstruct those achievements and push the country back in the other direction toward soft authoritarianism.



DON GIOVANNI
Mozart
A film by Joseph Losey
SecondSight 2DVD3132



DON GIOVANNI
Mozart
Terfel, Fleming,
conducted Levine
DGM 073 4010



DON GIOVANNI
Mozart
Allen, James,
conducted Conlon
Arthaus Musik 100021



DON GIOVANNI
Mozart
Weisser, Bystrom,
conducted Jacobs
Harmonia Mundi HMD
9909013/14 and HMD
9809013 (Blu-ray)

Classical DVDs

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

IT would be nice to be able to point to the best DVD of *Don Giovanni*, to some Mozart's finest opera. But with 23 versions currently available on Amazon.com it's impossible to evaluate all the contenders. It remains to the beleaguered reviewer to make some comments on the versions he happens to have available.

The opportunity is welcome, nonetheless, on account of the appearance in 2008, on three DVDs, of a *De Luxe Edition* of Joseph Losey's celebrated film of the opera, originally issued in 1979. Shot in the Italian city of Vicenza, with its wealth of Palladian mansions, this film combined visual splendor with great acting, a sardonic sense of comedy and a stellar cast for its day. It's not surprising that it's still often referred to as the finest film of an opera ever made.

The cast comprises Ruggero Raimondi as the Don, Teresa Berganza, a great singer daringly cast as the country girl Zerlina, Malcolm King (Masetto), Kiri Te Kanawa (Elvira) and Jose Van Dam (Leporello). Lorin Maazel conducts. This new edition has DTS 5.1 sound and is spread over two discs and is both visually and aurally superb. A third disc contains background material on the making of the original movie.

There's a political angle to this film. Losey, who worked with Bertolt Brecht in the former East Germany, was blacklisted during the McCarthy era in the US and moved to London. Here he quotes the famous Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci, but to the ordinary viewer no political theory will stand in the way of the decadent sumptuousness that's found on every hand.

It's understandable that Losey's *Don Giovanni* is available only from the UK branch of Amazon (www.amazon.co.uk) as it's in the PAL format, not generally used in the US. But why another outstanding version of the opera is only on offer from the same source is something of a mystery.

Bryn Terfel's 2000 performance as Giovanni is a masterpiece of dark intensity, as is the entire production, issued on DVD in 2005. It originated at the Metropolitan Opera, New York, under the baton of James Levine, so its non-availability on the US Amazon Web site is doubly inexplicable.

I've said before in this column that a somber portrait of the Don adds enormously to the effectiveness of Mozart's music. From this perspective, Terfel's performance is everything you could hope for. He's supported by a fine Leporello from Ferruccio Furlanetto, a veteran in the role, and other cast members reach a similarly high level. Renee Fleming is predictably

strong as Donna Anna and Solveig Kringsborn profoundly satisfying as Donna Elvira. I particularly liked Paul Groves's Don Ottavio (if the Don is presented as a villain, Ottavio's stature must necessarily increase). Hei-kyung Hong as Zerlina is an appropriate foil to Terfel, and John Relyea throws fresh light on the part of Masetto.

But it's Levine, as always, who steals the limelight. I've never heard the music of Giovanni's descent into hell played with such ferocity — clearly exactly what Mozart intended. This version, on two DVDs, remains the finest live performance of the opera I've seen and is unreservedly recommended.

The 1991 traditionalist Cologne version, conducted by James Conlon with Thomas Allen as the Don, would be worth considering but for one problem. This is that Allen, superb elsewhere (notably as Beckmesser in the 2001 Levine *Meistersinger*), is somewhat lackluster in this role. Otherwise there is much to enjoy, and no one who opts for this version would be wasting their money. Despite applause at the end, it appears to have been recorded without the presence of an audience.

The 2007 production from the Festspielhaus Baden-Baden, conducted by Rene Jacobs and with Johannes Weisser as the Don, is a lightweight affair. Scenery is almost nonexistent and costumes token. Musically it's notably authentic. Even so, with the competition so strong, this is a version that will not win many hearts.

The lack of visual support inevitably makes things harder for the soloists. They attempt to compensate by physical pranks — Giovanni sings *Deh Vieni Alla Finestra* lying on his back — but the final scene in particular loses in this cutback approach. There's no onstage band, and Leporello's closing the red stage curtain to represent the arrival of the fires of hell (reminiscent of Loge's similar action at the end of the Patrice Chereau's *Rheingold*) is at best a desperate measure.

The use of decoration in the arias ("improvisation" in modern terminology) in the 18th century manner will annoy some — it did me — but is competently handled. Weisser allows his youthful energy to stand in for true vocal power. Zerlina (Sunhae Im) is appropriately impressive, while Alexandrina Pendatchanska as Elvira sings *Mi Tradi* as it was written, with the introduction taken very slowly in the 18th century tradition of nature weeping in sympathy with humanity's woes.

Of these versions, then, the Terfel remains the one to beat if you want something more recent than Losey's intelligent, complex and frequently resplendent movie.

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Lines composed across Britain

Owen Sheers introduces British landscape poems in this anthology of familiar and lesser-known items

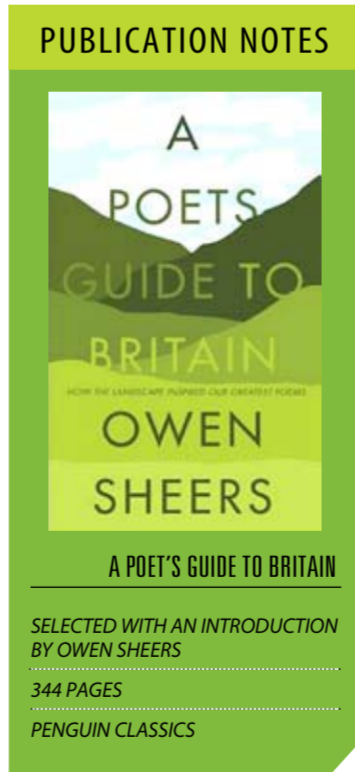
BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

A Poet's Guide to Britain is a companion piece to a BBC TV series in which the young poet Owen Sheers, who was brought up in South Wales, introduced British landscape poems to the accompaniment of film of the country they described. The book doesn't contain any photographs, however, and so is essentially an anthology of poems old and new, grouped into six sections.

The attraction of anthologies is what they contain that you don't know already. Of course they're sure to include many familiar pieces, and a few extremely familiar ones. These are, as it were, their backbone, what gives the collection authenticity and authority. But it's the lesser-known items that give such books their essential quality. What has this anthologist discovered that, if were not for him, you'd never have come across?

The most impressive poem in this book that was new to me was a substantial extract from an even longer poem by Tony Harrison, the poet and dramatist born in 1937 in working-class Yorkshire. I should have known the poem, called simply *v.*, if only because its proposed adaptation for TV once caused an uproar in sections of the British press. But I didn't, and the extract printed here was a revelation.

In it, Harrison visits his parents' grave only to find it vandalized by football fans. One had sprayed *United* over it. Harrison, while



admitting this to be "an accident of meaning to redeem/ an act intended as mere desecration," nonetheless writes as follows:

Though I don't believe in afterlife at all and know it's cheating it's hard not to make a sort of furtive prayer from this skin's scrawl, his UNITED mean 'in Heaven' for their sake.

I found this so impressive that I looked up the complete poem

online. It contains a brilliant stanza inexplicably left out of this selection, as follows:

Some, where kids use aerosols, use giant signs to let the people know who's forged their fetters like PRI CE O WALES above West Yorkshire mines (no prizes for who nicked the missing letters!)

Readers in Taiwan may need to be informed that in the UK there's an ultra-right-wing anti-immigrant party called the National Front, or NF. "Nicked" is UK slang for "stole." Tony Harrison's frequent adoption, incidentally, of the accents of what in the UK is sometimes called "uneducated speech" is a self-imposed manner. The reality is that he's a classics graduate.

Of Sheer's six sections — cities, villages, mountains, islands, woods, and the sea — I was surprised to find the first the most enjoyable. London is evoked in many poems old and new, but poems on other British cities — Liverpool, Birmingham, Cardiff, Newcastle, Manchester and more — were constantly surprising and pleasurable.

For the rest, there are three extremely predictable extracts from Shakespeare (not by nature a landscape poet, but one of dramatic conflict) and many very well-known ones by Wordsworth, Hopkins, Marvell, and so on. These can be quickly passed over in the search for the new and the fresh, and you feel they are included to provide

the publishers with the possibility that the book will be bought up in large numbers for use in schools.

In his introduction Sheers describes how he put the collection together in the Allen Room of the New York Public Library, with the UK over 3,000 miles (4,830km) away. He left every day with his head full of British images, he says, and it's hard not to think how readers in Taiwan could easily enjoy the same experience.

Not surprisingly, the author refers to climate change, quoting Hopkins "After-comers cannot guess the beauty been." Not that there's anything admonitory or prophetic about the collection itself. Its value lies instead in its scope.

Sheers states that he responded to the hills and coast of South Wales long before he ever became involved with writing poetry, or even reading it. But this collection shows him as strongly loyal to his present-day peers, and his immediate predecessors — it's very wide-ranging in its selection from 20th century poets.

And anthologies are frequently the main places where lesser-known writers survive. T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence and Ted Hughes can look after themselves. But how many editions of Edwin Muir, Louis MacNeice or Peter Porter stand on people's shelves these days, not to mention Jo Shapcott, Sean O'Brien and Daljit Nagra?

Sheers also points out that a primary characteristic of landscape poetry is of the new meeting the old. The individual comes to what he sees as a new

scene, then quickly realizes that it's been there for far, far longer, and that others have seen it very much as it still is who had totally different assumptions and ways of seeing. At the same time, though, Sheers says that most landscapes aren't really natural, but the result of man's interaction with what was there originally. Imagining historical events taking place just where you're standing now is thus a frequent recourse of landscape poets.

One such poem made me laugh out loud. It's called *At Swarkestone*, the Derbyshire village where Bonnie Prince Charlie stopped on his southwards invasion of England in 1745. It begins:

He turned back here. Anyone would. After The long romantic journey from the North To be faced with this. A 'so what?' sort of place ...

The poem continues:
He could have done it. The German Royals Had packed their bags, there was a run On the Bank of England, London stood open as jelly, Nobody could have stopped him. This place did ...

I feel I know many such dull English places. But I didn't know the poet, U.A. Fanthorpe, before opening this book. But then such pleasant encounters are what we really value the best anthologies for.