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### Bookreview [Review of: B.J. Kerkvliet (2005) *The Power of Everyday Politics. How Vietnamese peasants transformed national policy*]

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BENEDICT J. TRIA KERKVLIEL. *The Power of Everyday Politics. How Vietnamese peasants transformed national policy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005. 305 pp. US\$39.95, hardcover. Paper edition by ISEAS Singapore, 2005.

Since peasant studies came of age in the 1960s, at least two important concepts have gained widespread currency: “weapons of the weak” and “everyday politics”. Ben Kerkvliet, well known for his books on the Philippines and, since the early nineties, an established authority on Vietnamese agrarian politics, coined the latter. His new book on peasants’ opposition to agricultural collectivisation in northern Vietnam is a landmark in the analysis of previously unknown documents from Vietnamese government archives, kept in Center no. 3 in Hanoi. The author also stays loyal to his initial intellectual mission: he talks intensively and with great empathy to ordinary people whose everyday political behaviour matters. Whether Filipino Huk insurgents and peasants, or Vietnamese labourers and landless farmers, all have a history of local resistance to national policies, either capitalist or socialist in orientation.

When “the War against America” had not yet started, the Vietnamese one-party state hoped to gain from collective farming the necessary means to feed an undernourished population, but also to mobilise enough soldiers to wage the struggle for reunification of a divided country. Instead of voting with their feet, the Vietnamese peasants of the Red River Delta undermined this strategy by their everyday political behaviour. They frustrated their own leadership’s determination, sometimes with the help of local elites, to pursue collectivisation at any price, and refused to follow the example of their Chinese neighbours during the late 1950s and in the 1960s and 1970s. Kerkvliet is relatively mild on the process of land reform, which he nevertheless calls “divisive and violent”, a qualification that reflects the findings of a number of in-depth histories of the period.

The same elite that had started the system terminated it, not for ideological reasons, but forced by harsh realities on the ground. Party policies had become hopelessly compromised and were ultimately destroyed largely by the activities of villagers. De-collectivisation began locally among villagers themselves; national policy merely followed. The end was not a “Big Bang” with detrimental consequences similar to events in the former Soviet Union or the Eastern Bloc countries. The undermining of collectivisation ushered in the economic renovation politics of the late 1980s.

In telling the story of agriculture in northern Vietnam, the author lends a clear voice to those villagers who exercised agency and effected changes to a political model that was regarded as superior to agrarian policies elsewhere. Kerkvliet renovates his former middle-range theory of everyday politics to what he calls “mobilisational corporatism” a concept that echoes Daniel Chirot’s “socialist corporatism” but with the great difference of placing the peasantry at the centre of Vietnamese politics. Activities undertaken by the peasants, even those that did not conform to what was expected of them by the state,

carried considerable political weight and had the capacity to change the course of history. These insights into the important role played by peasants in the shaping of national policies offer a revised picture of Vietnam's political system and the interactions between state and society. The power of everyday politics is not unique to Vietnam, Kerkvliet asserts. Another innovative aspect of Kerkvliet's treatment of common-production agrarian organisations is his comparison of the Hutterite communities in which he found similar monitoring and sanctioning activities to those employed by Vietnamese peasants.

The book is very well written and its explanations are clearly argued. If one differs in opinion with the author, it might be a slight matter of scope or scale. This reviewer only noticed an understandable bias to land-based agricultural cooperatives. At one point (p. 165), Kerkvliet refers to seaside villages, where people evaded collective paddy farming to fish instead, suggesting that the catch could be sold on the free market. My research points to the existence of fishing cooperatives organised along the same principles as the farming ones, but with a much greater opportunity to undercut the collective pressure than was available to paddy farmers. Fishermen simply behaved as they had done before, using the sea as their commons, until the war stopped many of their activities and their cooperatives became even emptier of content than the agricultural ones. One can only hope that, inspired by Kerkvliet's example, someone will write a similar book on the southern part of Vietnam, where an ill-fated collectivisation attempt started after 1975. Only then will we have a complete and encompassing authoritative history of agrarian collectivisation in Vietnam.

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SAW SWEE-HOCK AND K. KESAVAPANY (eds). *Malaysia: Recent trends and challenges*. Singapore: ISEAS, 2006. x, 313 pp. US\$19.90, paper.

This volume, the outcome of a September 2004 workshop, is naturally tinged by the 2004 Malaysian national elections. While the 2004 elections dramatically reversed the anti-government swing of 1999, they also saw the new Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi confirmed with his own clear mandate. And this also means that there is frequent reference to, and sometimes quite deep analysis of, the phrase "Bangsa Malaysia", a phrase that has reverberated in Malaysian political rhetoric ever since the previous Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir, first used it in February 1991, in a speech to a group of businessmen and senior civil servants in which he set out the basics of his Wawasan 2020. The interest now is very much the result of a seeming contradiction between the typically older use of "*bangsa*" to refer to specific ethnicities in the early days of independent Malaysia and its now almost de rigueur use to refer to something more akin to "nation" – a sharp shift from exclusivity to inclusiveness.

The papers run through the range of topics one might expect of a volume devoted to electoral outcomes – internal politics, voting patterns, demographic shifts, and the interaction of external and internal factors, such as the rise of Islamism and the fluctuating fortunes of the Islamic opposition party PAS. This is complemented by an analysis of Islam Hadhari (Civilisational Islam), one of the key issues raised during the 2004 election campaign, and which is portrayed as Malaysia's version of a "progressive" Islam