

US ISSN 0022-037X

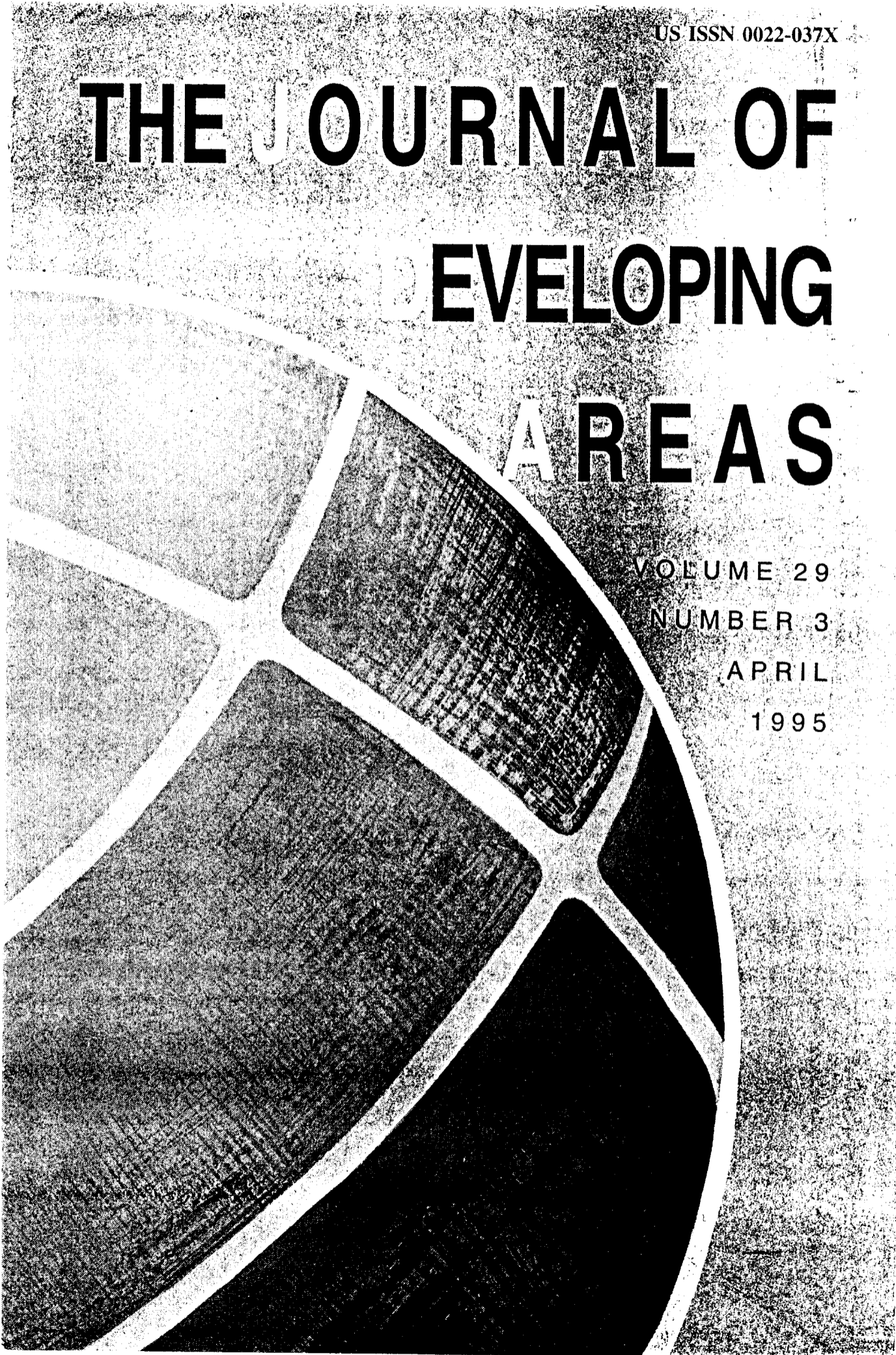
THE JOURNAL OF DEVELOPING AREAS

VOLUME 29

NUMBER 3

APRIL

1995



SINGAPORE CHANGES GUARD: SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND ECONOMIC DIRECTIONS IN THE 1990s. *Edited by Garry Rodan.* Melbourne: Longman Cheshire; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993. Pp. xxii + 209, \$49.95.

This is an important and valuable collection of essays on the future directions of Singapore in various areas and their implications for effective and enlightened governance as power passes from the Old Guard to a new generation of leaders. The process is complicated by two factors. First, the demand for individual and collective expression in the political, cultural, and social spheres is growing among an increasingly assertive citizenry. This presents a challenge to the ruling party, which until now has been able to set the national agenda and maintain public consensus among its citizens. Second, the rising economic expectations of the people, who have come to expect prosperity as more or less a fact of life, are providing government with a fresh challenge. Following decades of rapid economic growth, the now-tested strategy of relying on low-cost manufacturing exports is becoming irrelevant as the economy matures.

The book has 12 essays neatly divided into two parts. The first 6 essays cover politics and ideology, and the other 6 cover the economy and society. Editor Garry Rodan has put together an impressive list of scholars and papers to focus effectively on the theme of Singapore changing guard and the implications of this development for the future. Almost all of the authors are scholars who have been long-time observers of developments in Singapore, and their insights are particularly valuable.

A useful introductory chapter by Rodan successfully distills the various themes from the essays and weaves them together to provide a clear focus on the issues they seek to address. To quote, "state-society relations are seen to be at the centre of pressures for a reassessment of Singapore's political and economic direction" (p. xiii). The essays demonstrate in different ways that the New Guard is aware of "the critical nature of many of the pressures confronting it and the need for comprehensive responses" (p. xiii). And to paraphrase: politically, this response takes the form of new types of co-optation to broaden the sphere of state-society interrelations, and new forms of engagement to soften the authoritarian style of governance. Economically, the response takes the form of facilitating diversification through regional economic cooperation and to a lesser extent reducing the role of the state in those economic matters that can be adequately performed by the market alone.

Most of the essays on politics and ideology suggest that one cannot be sanguine about the prospects of a comprehensive response to address the issues at stake. James Cotton studies the attempt to institutionalize Lee Kuan Yew's legacy, but emphasizes the formidable difficulties of the approach owing to the openness of Singapore under a growing internationalization and the central role of Lee himself within the political system. David Brown draws attention to the delicate balance the ruling party must maintain in its attempt to enlarge the role of ethnic participation in certain spheres, while keeping sectional interests within bounds. The trick is to avoid legitimizing the ethnic-interest-group competition for

political power that generates insecurities about ethnic questions. John Clammer interprets the attempt to institutionalize the National Ideology as imposing a statist political culture that may well be at odds with the demand for broader political participation in an increasingly pluralistic society. Rodan argues that attempts by the New Guard to appeal primarily to the middle class may have been a misguided strategy for the simple reason that disaffection might well be much more broadly based. Indeed, he sides with the viewpoint that the elitist and meritocratic policies of the ruling party might have heightened working-class frustrations with social and economic inequalities. John Birch, by contrast, stresses the incongruity between the middle-class notion of the "free" individual and the "statist" ideology promoted by the ruling party.

These essays are insightful in many ways and, taken as whole, they perform an admirable task in directing our attention to the important question of state-society relations in Singapore. But the question, important as it may be, fails to take seriously the overriding concern of the Singaporean government with stability and prosperity. Like most other revolutionary governments that emerged out of a crisis situation, the Singapore government sees the task of state building as being of paramount importance. The modern history of the Singaporean nation is to a large extent the creation of the state. History is not rich with examples on how a revolutionary state accustomed to shaping society can evolve into a government that is held accountable to a pluralistic society. And the Singapore story, unlike that of most revolutionary governments in the twentieth century, is by most accounts a highly successful one. It is inconceivable that any government with such a proud record will change its methods easily. In this context, Jean-Louis Margolin's essay is particularly relevant for underscoring the growing confidence of the ruling elite in its own experience and approach.

The economic essays deal with various aspects of the changing economic conditions that arise from growing internationalization and its effects on industrial relations and the ability to retain a skilled labor force. Both Cheah Hock Beng and Chris Leggett suggest that actions to address these economic issues properly will of necessity come into conflict with the existing corporatist state. Mukul Asher and Linda Low question whether the dynamics underlying Singapore's current and projected development are likely to exert pressure for changes in the social and economic roles of the state, although an expanded role for the domestic bourgeoisie appears likely in some spheres. Interestingly, Catherine Paix's essay supports the view that the domestic bourgeoisie has considerable political influence in the shaping of economic policies that affect its interests.

As one puts down the book, one unavoidably comes to the conclusion that things may change, although there is no definitive view as to how soon and to what extent. Different perspectives are being offered, not just on the nature of the problems that confront the new leadership, but on various insights into the underlying social, economic, and political forces that are present and emerging.

YUE-CHIM RICHARD WONG
University of Hong Kong