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On: 05 January 2015, At: 15:26

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



International Review of Public Administration

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rrpa20>

Trust and governance institutions: Asian experiences

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Published online: 03 Jan 2015.



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To cite this article: Jie Gao (2015): Trust and governance institutions: Asian experiences, International Review of Public Administration, DOI: [10.1080/12294659.2014.995867](https://doi.org/10.1080/12294659.2014.995867)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/12294659.2014.995867>

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BOOK REVIEW

Trust and governance institutions: Asian experiences, edited by Milan Tung-Wen Sun, Clay G. Wescott, and Lawrence R. Jones, Charlotte, NC, Information Age, 248 pp., US\$85.99 (hardcover), US\$45.99 (paperback), ISBN-10: 1617359475, ISBN-13: 9781617359477

The relationship between trust and governance institutions has attracted attention from public administration scholars in recent years (Klijn, Edelenbos, & Steijn, 2010). Over the past three decades or so, the concept of governance has become pervasive in government around the globe, inspiring a mode of government in which the public, private, and third sector work together to provide public service. Does this partnership among stakeholders from different sectors affect public trust? If so, how? What factors determine the level of trust in government as a whole? If the trust-governance link seems to be intuitive, is there empirical evidence to support it? These are legitimate questions that have not been adequately studied. In this regard, *Trust and governance institutions: Asian experiences*, edited by Milan Sun, Clay Wescott, and Lawrence Jones, is timely. It provides a notable contribution to the existing literature by introducing the Asian experience of the trust challenge in the era of governance.

The book addresses three aspects of the trust issue. The first section explores how network governance affects public trust and the legitimacy of the government. The second presents useful strategies for dealing with the performance deficit that can follow in the wake of a high-level decline in trust of the government. The third examines the implications of weak trust – or the absence of trust – for governance. The book shows that political leadership and policy/political context are the two most important determinants of trust in government. Building solid anticorruption networks and developing e-government are some effective measures to restore and foster public trust.

Almost every chapter in this book addresses one question: what factors determine the level of trust in government? Case studies from seven Asian states (Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, Philippines, India and Bangladesh) are presented. From the political, institutional and cultural perspectives, these studies identify a number of factors that either foster or undermine trust in public officials and government institutions. A central theme is that the link between governance and trust is not direct, and to understand it properly, one must first understand the effects of two intervening factors.

The first factor is performance – that is, whether the government or the network institutions have the capacity to perform their duties responsibly, and whether their performance meets with citizen expectations. In the cases where there is a relatively high level of trust in government, such as in Singapore, an important feature is that the government has been effective in resolving problems and able to deliver services that meet citizen demand. In Taiwan's case, the anticorruption network has not been so successful in garnering public trust because its efforts in tackling corruption do not meet citizens' expectations, particularly on information transparency. The performance–trust link

seems to be more direct than the governance–trust link, at least in the cases of Singapore and Taiwan.

The second factor is the corruption–trust link. Transparency is the key element here: in most cases, the level of corruption is related to the degree of transparency, and the degree of transparency correlates with people’s trust in government. In India, Taiwan, Thailand and Bangladesh, corruption can be cultural, institutional and even systemic. These countries have each developed their own formulas for fighting corruption. E-government seems useful in this respect. When citizens have access to e-information, trust seems to have been fostered. While political efficacy plays an important role in the relationship between e-government satisfaction and trust in government, the adoption of information and communication technologies in governance provides a practical and technically feasible way to cope with the trust deficit.

Most cases in the book suggest that the political and policy environment within which the government works with other institutions is crucial to the government’s performance level, the extent of its transparency, and the effectiveness of the network institutions. In the case of Hong Kong, after the city-state returned to the People’s Republic of China under the framework of “one country, two systems”, the change in political and policy environments seems to have severely impaired institutional capacities, causing relationships between various political players and institutions to fall apart. Governance in the colonial period was undemocratic, yet effective. Under the new political framework, all the major institutional actors feel inhibited when it comes to performing their duties, resulting in a political system that is essentially paralyzed. As a result, the post-handover Hong Kong government, though corruption-free and efficient in managing daily affairs, faces a perceived performance deficit, leading first to a severe trust crisis and from there to a legitimacy crisis.

As a contrasting case, Singapore shows the crucial role of the political champion in enhancing the state’s capacity in policymaking and implementation, improving the competence and vitality of the civil service, and undertaking systemic reforms to achieve good governance and (re)gain public trust. The People’s Action Party (PAP) serves as that champion, promoting a high-standard meritocracy in the recruitment and promotion of civil servants, ensuring an honest and corruption-free administration, and actively emulating useful policy ideas from other nations. Undoubtedly, the higher level of public trust in government in Singapore can be attributed to the combined effect of the PAP’s ability to deliver results and its favorable policy context.

Put in this light, the governance–trust link comes down ultimately to the question of how to achieve good governance. Performance and transparency are both indicators of good governance. In a networked environment, the government should not only steer its relationship with actors from other organizations, but also develop strategies to effectively manage this relationship. Unfortunately, limitations in the political environment mean that this is not always possible.

One of the problems in undertaking a comparative study is deciding what nature of lesson one can draw from the results. Are we looking for diversity or commonality from a comparative study? This book cannot provide a definitive answer to that question. That said, it makes a timely contribution and points to the need for further research. For readers who are interested in governance, trust and public administration reforms in Asian countries, this book provides inspiring insights and abundant empirical evidence.

Notes on contributor

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/12294659.2014.995867>