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Rural Thailand: Change and Continuity

PORPHANT OUYANONT

Trends in Southeast Asia, No. 8. Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016, 31pp.

Rural Thailand is a slim, 25-page publication in the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute’s Trends in Southeast Asia series. The aim of the series is to “act as a platform for serious analyses . . . [that encourage] policy makers and scholars to contemplate the diversity and dynamism of this exciting region.”

In this issue, Porphant Ouyyanont seeks to explain how and why Thailand’s agricultural sector has remained such a significant player in the Thai economy, notwithstanding half a century of rapid and deep social and economic transformation. Not only does agriculture provide work for one-third of the Thai labor force and contribute significantly to national exports and output, but “rather surprisingly, village communities did not decline to the extent that one might have expected” (p. 2). In 1990 agriculture contributed 12.4 percent of GDP and 22.6 percent of exports. In 2014, almost a quarter of a century later, the respective figures were 10.4 percent and 17.8 percent. This, then, provides the context for the author to explore the “change and continuity” theme of the publication’s subtitle.

Given that the paper is only a short exposition, it is inevitable that the discussion is generalized in tone and aggregate in formulation. This is a big-picture description of agrarian change in Thailand over the modernization period, one where ethnographic or regional detail is eschewed in the interests of marking out a wider case. The empirical material, which is secondary, and the argument are not new; what is valuable, however, is to have the argument encapsulated in this succinct and clear manner. If a policy maker or student wished quickly to get to grips with the evolution of the Thai agricultural sector over the last half century, this would be as good a place as any to start.

Part of the reason for the persistence of agriculture can be understood in terms of a shift from

farming as a way of life to farming as a business and the emergence of Thailand as a significant player in the global agro-food system, from frozen prawns to industrial chicken, high-value vegetables, and canned pineapple. This is the “change” element in the subtitle, one where Thailand’s farmers have made the transition from peasants to agrarian entrepreneurs. But Porphant also states, “peasants showed a remarkable capacity to adapt to changing conditions while at the same time conserving their established patterns of behaviour and their particular mode of survival” (p. 23). This is the “continuity” part of the subtitle. The sustaining of the rural economy and village lives has been achieved by rural people embracing non-farm work and (temporary) urban living but without giving up their connections to natal homes. Households have been separated over space, but connections to the village and to land and farming remain surprisingly strong.

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Burma/Myanmar: Where Now?

MIKAEL GRAVERS and FLEMMING YTZEN, eds.
Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2014, xiv+447pp.

Metamorphosis: Studies in Social and Political Change in Myanmar

RENAUD EGRETEAU and FRANÇOIS ROBINNE, eds.
Singapore: NUS Press in association with IRASEC, 2015, xiv+428pp.

Political developments in Burma/Myanmar in recent years have been so unexpectedly rapid, if spotty and at times inscrutable, that people both inside and outside the country are often hard pressed to keep track of what is going on. The pace of events explains both the need for the kinds of books under review here, books whose titles indicate the urgency with which the question of change presents itself, and at the same time the reason why they appear dated virtually from the moment they appear, given the unavoidable lag between the time of a book’s preparation and its actual appearance.

The collection of pieces edited by Mikael Gravers and Flemming Ytzen appeared in 2014, whereas Renaud Egreteau and François Robinne’s collection appeared in 2015. As a result, the former necessarily suffers particularly acutely from a reader’s desire to pose the question “Yes, and then what happened?” To the extent that the book provides timely background accounts with which better to understand recent developments, however, it serves a very useful function. Its many parts, most of them short (even as short as just a couple of pages), catch readers up on a great range of topics that come to mind, or should, when thinking about a country that most of the