

other, to a funeral ceremony that may go on for days and is in part intended to reorient a soul now that it is no longer among the living.

Souls, ghosts, and exchanges are prominent in chapters 5, 6, and 7. What emerges in these chapters is a set of related ideas that crosscut any difference in ethnic culture. There are various Southeast Asian commonalities that the anthropological focus on ethnic specificities has often ignored. Langford's point is not to reassert areal anthropology but rather to juxtapose Southeast Asian materials with Euroamerican ones to examine bioethics and alternative engagements with life and death. In the aftermath of Asian wars and in the contemporary US context, the Southeast Asian dead appear cut off "from a reassuring participation in daily life, too often inconsolable and therefore without the power to console" (p. 207). The study strikes various balances among Southeast Asian worlds, contemporary western lives, medical practice, and academic orientations, including a welcome move to use Southeast Asian ideas about souls, spirits, and were-animals to put western theory in its place, regarding the recognition of "concrete socialities of living and dead [and the occasional] violation of those socialities" (p. 165).

In the afterword, on the status of ghosts, Langford offers creative play on the binaries of ghosts and guests, and ghosts and ancestors; "the literality of the ghost pulls at certain central thread of biopolitical theory, tending to unravel it" (p. 215). She is clear and sympathetic to the need to engage with the dead on terms other than the predominant Euroamerican one. While she tends to highlight how hospitals assert particular measures of control over life and death, some of the characters in her study suggest alternatives. One is a certain Dr. Stoltz who has long worked with Southeast Asian patients. With his Southeast Asian-language interpreters he has arrived at various creative ways to sidestep the confines of biomedical culture and its discursive regimes of control, in ways that have often surprised him. New options emerge when doctor and patient exchange messages that cannot be translated directly and people instead have to negotiate their differences toward an outcome that somehow facilitates each side toward a positive and agreeable goal (pp. 40–51, 204, 214–215). To me, these improvised balancing acts offered an unexpected parallel to the Southeast Asian engagements with souls and ghosts that Langford describes and analyzes.

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***Thailand's Political Peasants: Power in the Modern Rural Economy***

ANDREW WALKER

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This is a very important book for understanding political conflict in contemporary Thailand. The

stated aim of this book is to investigate “the underlying economic, political, and cultural processes that contributed to Thailand’s contemporary contests over power” (p. 5). To achieve this aim Walker examines “rural transformations that have produced a major new player in the Thai political landscape: the middle-income peasant” via ethnographic engagement in Ban Tiam, a village of 130 households in Chiang Mai province, a major town of Northern Thailand (p. 5). Walker argues that “in order to understand the politics of Thailand’s middle-income peasantry—including its strong electoral support for Thaksin’s populist policies, the political passions that brought the red shirts to Bangkok, and the electoral triumph of Yingluck Shinawatra—it is necessary to address how power is perceived in a context of rising living standards and a transformed relationship with the state” (pp. 5–6).

According to Walker, most Thai peasants are no longer poor. In the 1960s some 96 percent of rural households were living below the poverty line. However, sustained economic growth since then helped to reduce the number of poor rural households to 10 percent in 2007 (p. 39). Thailand’s poverty line in that year was 57,000 baht per household per year (p. 41). Annual income of rural households was 187,000 baht in the Central Plains, 175,000 baht in the South, 166,000 baht in the Northeast, and 160,000 baht in the North (p. 39). As a result, “In most areas of rural Thailand, the primary livelihood challenges have moved away from the classic low-income challenges of food security and subsistence survival to the middle-income challenges of diversification and productivity improvement” (p. 8). Most Thai middle-income peasants engage in farming and non-farming economic activities. Only some 20 percent of rural households rely solely on agricultural income. More importantly, “nonagricultural sources of income have proliferated and they are now more significant than farming for a great many rural households” (p. 8).

The emergence of middle-income peasants mentioned above is a result of state support for rural development. Worried about the spread of communist influence in the countryside, in the 1950s and the 1960s Thai governments started to invest in rural areas aimed at improving the living standards of peasants. A program of investment in rural development was laid out in the first National Social and Economic Development Plan (p. 49). In the 1970s pressure from politically assertive peasant movements and the victory of communist revolutions in Indochina saw the Thai state increase its efforts to win over rural populations. Since then, argues Walker, “there have been important long-term shifts in the fiscal treatment of the countryside, laying the foundation for the emergence of a middle-income peasantry” (p. 50).

Such policy alters state-peasants relationships in areas ranging from taxation to subsidies (pp. 8–9). Agricultural tax, such as the rice premium, which taxed rice exports to generate state revenue and reduce domestic rice prices, was abolished in 1986 (pp. 49–50), while the government invested heavily in rural development. Apart from infrastructure, government supported farmers on price, credit, land tenure, health, education, and welfare among others (p. 56).

Despite the significant improvement of living standards in rural areas Walker argues that

disparities in income and living standards between rural and urban populations are widening. The income gap between the richest 20 percent of the population and the poorest 20 percent rose from 8 times in the 1970s to between 12 and 14 in the 2000s. The average household in Bangkok is about three times higher than in the rural northeast and the north. “Although the national (and rural) poverty rate has declined dramatically, poverty is still about ten times more prevalent in the north and northeast than it is in Bangkok” (p. 45). Walker has pointed out that inequality in Thailand is not the product of surplus extraction by dominating elites. The cause of this disparity lies in uneven economic development. While labor productivity in agriculture is quite low, labor productivity in industry increased rapidly during the economic boom from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. Labor productivity in industry was about 8 times higher than that of agriculture in 1980 and the number increased to 16 times in 1990. This difference in productivity led to a difference in wages paid in the agricultural and industrial sector. For example, in 2006 wages in agricultural sector were only 44 percent of those in manufacturer sector (p. 48).

Income disparity has caused discontent among peasants, who have pushed for a fair share of the benefits of economic development. Peasants’ bargaining power is enhanced by socio-economic transformations in recent decades. As Walker puts it, “the forces of socioeconomic modernization that increase disparity also increase the power and eloquence of rural political opinion” (p. 48). Such transformations have helped to improve rural education, communication, and mobility. Urban-rural linkages not only supported the likelihood of diversification, promoted new forms of consumption, and blurred spatial distinctions, but also enabled rural dwellers to compare their disadvantages with affluent urban populations. “This heightened awareness of inequality can easily undermine some of the satisfaction gained from improved quality of life” (p. 48).

As we have seen, on the one hand, economic development in Thailand helps to reduce rural poverty and turns a majority of the rural population into middle-income peasants, yet on the other hand, it creates and fosters income disparities between urban and rural populations. For Walker, such a dilemma of uneven development is the root cause of the current political tension in Thailand (p. 220).

To improve their situation, peasants are seeking support from the state. They expect that “the state will improve its efforts to enhance rural livelihoods, reduce inequality, and provide a secure backup when experimental engagements with private capital fail” (p. 221). According to Walker, weaving the power and resources of the state into the economic and social fabric of village life is central to peasants’ political strategies (p. 221).

Thaksin Shinawatra recognized the needs of peasants and shaped his policies around their aspirations. As a result, he received strong support from peasants in the 2001, 2005, 2006 general elections (p. 221). However, Bangkok elites and intellectuals condemned the immorality of Thaksin and the electorate that had voted him into power (pp. 23–24). Bangkok elites prefer a “civil society” that emphasized law and institutions over rural “political society” characterized by “special inter-

ests, personal ties, a plethora of programs serving specific population groups, charismatic and controversial personalities, and recipients who are skilled in negotiating access to the state's resources" (p. 22).

The 2006 elite-backed coup ended the relationship between Thaksin and rural political society. In the post-coup period we have seen political conflict in Thailand centered around the contest of power between elites and peasants who mobilize under the banner of the Red Shirts. Contemporary peasant mobilizations, argues Walker, are the actions of rural political society to defend its relationship with the state. As he makes clear, "The red-shirt protesters have been defending political society's direct transactions with power in all its regular and irregular forms and rejecting the view that economic development and other matters of state should be guided by the elite embodiments of virtuous power located in the nation's capital" (p. 223).

The above account is the main argument of *Thailand's Political Peasants*. The book contains interesting evidence, analysis and insights on rural transformations and political contestation in contemporary Thailand that will be of benefit to students and scholars of Thai and Southeast Asian studies.

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***Global Movements, Local Concerns: Medicine and Health in Southeast Asia***

LAURENCE MONNAIS and HAROLD J. COOK, eds.

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This edited volume contributes to the growing scholarly literature dealing with the history of medicine. The editors collaborated with 12 scholars of Southeast Asia to come up with an 11-chapter compilation dealing with six countries, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. This is a difficult task to perform, as most scholarship tends to focus on one Southeast Asian country or a comparison between countries with similar histories, given that a characteristic of Southeast Asian countries is their diversity.

The volume begins by deconstructing the prevalent notion that the term "Southeast Asia" was constructed by North American scholars and its allies during the Second World War as a way to group the countries into "a community of nation-states." Southeast Asia, to quote Benedict Anderson, is an artificial construct and the region is "remote, heterogeneous, and . . . imperially segmented" (Anderson 1998, 5). Another strategy has been to group these countries according to the influences of the region's powerful neighbors, China and India. However, this proved to be insufficient with the migration of Arab, Chinese, and Indians to various countries fostering an image