

More Than Rural

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Rigg, Jonathan (2019), *More Than Rural: Textures of Thailand's Agrarian Transformation*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 324 pages.

Jonathan Rigg's More Than Rural: Textures of Thailand's Agrarian Transformation is a culmination of the author's almost four-decade engagement with issues of agrarian conditions and change in Thailand. His interests and research expertise on agrarian matters have, over time, included Southeast Asia, and recently South Asia, as he continues to explore commonalities across these societies. The attempt in this book is to grapple with part of a wider fundamental problematique in the modern history of Asian societies (or rice-culture civilisations), namely, the nature and characteristics of agrarian transition during the course of capitalist industrialisation.

The experience of West European industrialisation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries gave rise to certain patterns of historical change (both in the agrarian space and the evolution of urbanisation) that assumed the status of "theory" in much of academic work and method. This book questions an important aspect of this "theory" concerning agrarian change, the persistence of small farm holdings in Thailand despite becoming an industrialised Asian "tiger economy" having already attained the upper middle-income tag, with a dominant export sector and almost absence of absolute poverty.

Stating the problematique in the preface and elaborating it in Chapter 1, Rigg tries to resolve what seems a puzzle, one that assumes the form of a paradox:

Change in rural Thailand has not followed the path of history, theory, or policy from other eras and places . . . The small holder has not been consigned to history. (p. xv)

. . . the paradox of the continuing salience of the Thai countryside, alongside its progressive diminution." (p. 1) $\,$

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By calling this a puzzle or a paradox, Rigg is emphasising the need to decipher the distinctness of historical change in non-European contexts (Thailand, or by extension, Asia) and explore alternative explanations. He achieves this in the case of Thailand by distilling evidence from his own detailed rural surveys initiated in 1982, from several rounds of studies conducted with Thai collaborators, and from numerous village studies – going back to the 1940s – by others. A total of 10 studies covering 17 villages and 1000 households generated the bulk of data used. This book consolidates the research findings that have appeared in his extensive list of previous publications. The bibliography reveals his comprehensive coverage of the literature on rural Thailand and the wider Southeast Asian region, intersecting varied disciplines over several decades.

The debates and controversies on Thailand's agrarian conditions and change form the basis of discussion throughout the book. The book has eight single-word-titled chapters (except the introductory one, which is titled "More than Rural"). Throughout the book, Rigg emphasises the proposition that agrarian transition and rural transformation in Thailand cannot be comprehended merely on the basis of changes in basic metrics of economic development, such as productivity, incomes, standards of living, poverty, technology, and trade. The multi-dimensional transformations that occurred are revealed as Rigg examines how the rural – labour, households, families, villages, and society - negotiated modern economic development and emerged in a form and character transcending its former rural quality and essence. Thus, the well-thought-out term "More than" in the book's title. To view the "rural" based on earlier descriptions, assumptions, and definitions as a population, place, or economic activity - or even as a set of social norms, behaviours, interactions, or cultural identities - is inadequate to comprehend the transformation that has taken place. By breaking down the various meanings, significations, and connotations of the concept category "the rural," Rigg proposes a different set of considerations (Table 1.1, p. 6). These capture the changed character of rural labour (mobile), households (multi-sited), occupations and livelihoods (flexible and multiple), and the hybrid character of rural people and their lives, encompassing modern amenities, tastes and preferences.

Chapter 2, titled "Inheritances," begins with a discussion on the historical idea of the "Thai rural" as conceived by the state over two centuries as an idyllic, prosperous, and self-sufficient entity. This is followed by a review of village studies by Western anthropologists and sociologists from the late 1940s and, later, by Thai scholars trained in the West. The history of the Thai development project aimed at creating a market economy through five-year plans or state-led market creation and development, briefly alluded to here, is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4 ("Flourishing") where the author brings in the indispensable work of Pongpaichit and Baker (1995), who trace the Thai market economy model underlying state planning to a World Bank document designed to guide the planning process and establish market institutions.

Although the rural in relation to the urban forms an important element in the Thai (or Asian) experience, the conventional rural-urban divide model is inappropriate or inadequate to understand this dynamic. This argument forms the focus of discussion in Chapter 3, "Spaces." and Chapters 5 through 9, titled "Society," "Land," "Labour," "Livelihoods," and "Class" respectively. The chapters delve deep into these issues in meanings, contexts, and transformations that were profoundly affected by the Thai developmental model. For this, Rigg manoeuvres imaginatively and deftly through his own (and his collaborators') extensive anthropological survey data, which cover more than three decades, and through the metrics that state-sponsored and other surveys generated over that period.

In the concluding chapter, titled "Futures," the author speculates on expected change in rural Thailand as regards farm holdings: will small holders ultimately be pushed out of the countryside and will large modern consolidated farms, as predicted by certain kinds of historical theory, emerge dominant, or will small holdings persist with new patterns of the distribution of livelihoods? The answer, according to Rigg, is that a bit of one or the other tendency could emerge in different regions of Thailand. In any case, the observed persistence of small holdings itself can only be understood by the fact that the value of (farm) land is not the same as its current market price. Nor does the economic philosophy behind living a certain way of life in Thailand (or Asia) conform to the principles of "modern" economic behaviour and thinking.

There are other issues on the development experience and agrarian transition in Asia that relate to other aspects of the same story, that a single book such as this cannot be expected to cover. Landless peasants, permanent rural-to-urban migrants living on the fringes of society, the large low-income urban informal sector, or even the contribution of agriculture (through adverse terms of trade) towards investible funds for initial industrialisation, also assume importance in a narrative of such a transition. This book, for its disengagement with conventional theory and as a creative exploration of textures of rural change, is nevertheless an invaluable contribution to the growing literature on alternative development thinking.

REFERENCE

Pongpaichit, Pasuk, and Baker, Chris (1995), Thailand: Economy and Politics, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur.