

***Political Authority and Provincial Identity in Thailand: The Making of Banharn-buri.* By Yoshinori Nishizaki. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 2011. Hardcover: 254pp.**

Occasionally a new book profoundly challenges common assumptions and traditional narratives. Yoshinori Nishizaki's timely and meticulously researched *Political Authority and Provincial Identity in Thailand* is one such book. Seeking to provide "a more balanced, complex, and nuanced picture of rural politics and state society relations in democratizing Thailand" (p. 5), Nishizaki tells the story of Banharn Silpa-archa, a former prime minister, long-term member of parliament, and for many the archetypal corrupt rural strongman, who hailed from Suphanburi, an agrarian province north of Bangkok. Tracing how Banharn acquired and maintained provincial power and legitimacy, Nishizaki questions the dominant urban image of a rural electorate prey to local strongmen who rise to power through violence, electoral fraud, patronage and pork-barrel projects. Instead he demonstrates how Banharn's success is based on careful cultivation of provincial pride and identity.

Banharn makes for a fascinating read. After early success in business, he served in parliament as a leader of the Chart Thai party from 1976 virtually without interruption until in 2008 the Constitutional Court barred him from politics for five years. His corruption scandals and generous use of pork barrel politics to channel state resources back to Suphanburi were well-publicized, and his brief premiership in 1995–96 was widely perceived as having contributed to the economic crisis in 1997. Thus he became for many urban, educated Thais the personification of the rural boss who relies on "dirty money transactions twenty-four hours a day" (pp. 7–8). Yet, unlike other politicians similarly accused, in Suphanburi he still enjoys unwavering respect and support.

To explain this, Nishikazi weaves several social-psychological explanations into a causal model that deals with provincial legacies of state neglect and memories of backwardness, as well social action (defined here by generous donations, state fund allocations and local leadership in policing the activities of the bureaucracy). It also takes into account the institutional setting of the post-1973 patrimonial democratic state, which allowed for social actions, and the clientelistic networks that helped advertise development projects and foster legitimacy at the local level. In sum, Nishikazi says, "Banharn has symbolically created a uniquely modern and socially distinguished provincial community, has incorporated into that community a vast

number of people who were once physically and psychologically isolated from each other, and has given them a strong positive and provincial identity that they lacked" (p. 212).

The chapters are organized to track the theoretical model. Chapter Two traces the historical origins of Banharn's dominance in Suphanburi. Chapters Three, Four and Five each detail respective activities undertaken by him — high-profile donations, allocations of state funds and strict surveillance of civil servants. Chapter Six analyses how these initiatives were systematically broadcast, often by signboards and ceremonies. Chapters Seven and Eight illustrate through daily social narratives how provincial pride is expressed and how constituents deflect common criticisms of Banharn. Finally Chapter Nine applies a theoretical and comparative perspective to the findings, drawing on previous collective social narratives and social identity theory but also bringing in comparisons from Thailand (e.g., Narong Wongwan) and the region (Kakue Tanaka in Japan; Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, Kim Dae Jung in Korea).

Clearly, this is an ambitious study — one perhaps best considered a work of political anthropology. Building on extensive field research in Suphanburi and neighbouring provinces, Nishikazi skillfully combines primary interview data and careful observation with secondary source material. The result is a compelling narrative not only of how Suphanburians support Banharn but also of the broader effects of collective identity in shaping political domination by a politician or party. The work thus joins an important but relatively small literature on rural Thai politics (e.g., Askew, Walker and Nelson). It seems particularly timely as urban-rural polarization grows in Thailand and contending political forces utilize these cleavages for their own agendas.

This fine and carefully crafted book leaves little to criticize. As the title telegraphs, the strength of the analysis is at the provincial level, and the descriptions of Banharn's activities nationally — for instance, the exploration of his activities in the parliamentary Budget Scrutiny Committee — are somewhat superficial. It is also somewhat unfortunate that the data analysis stops in 2001, leaving out the Thaksin Shinawatra era (2001–06). One wonders how Thaksin's recentralization of budgetary and administrative processes and the public financial management reforms may have affected the pork barrel activities of politicians like Banharn — not to mention the longevity of the legitimacy model Nishizaki suggests. Finally, there is surprisingly little engagement with Banharn's own worldview. Though there is clear value in focusing on the views of ordinary

Suphanburians, critical engagement with views Banharn has expressed in speeches and interviews might have enhanced Nishizaki's argument and analysis, especially since some readers might struggle to fully buy into the argument that provincial pride rather than material benefits underpin Banharn's success.

These are minor points however. In general, this excellent study offers valuable insights for Thai political analysis and is a welcome addition to the growing literature on rural politics in Thailand. In its depth and analytical rigour, it should be essential reading for those interested in understanding rural politics and state society relations, not only in democratizing Thailand but wherever similar patterns can be seen.