

Book Reviews

Whose Place Is This? Malay Rubber Producers and Thai Government Officials in Yala. By Andrew Cornish. Studies in Contemporary Thailand no. 5. Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1977. 132 pp.

The appearance of this book is on two accounts a very pleasing development. First, *Whose Place Is This?* offers a serious, well-informed treatment of Thai South and its rubber, each long cheated of its due in the study of modern Thailand. Second, its publication in the Studies in Contemporary Thailand series launched by Bangkok's White Lotus Press under the general editorship of Erik Cohen demonstrates unmistakably the promise of that series. Significant, varied English-language scholarship on Thailand may at last enjoy an outlet similar to those that have long served scholarship on the kingdom's Southeast Asian neighbours so well.

With *Whose Place Is This?* Andrew Cornish builds on his Australian National University dissertation in anthropology and on more than two years of fieldwork in rural southern Thailand since the late 1980s to offer a rare contemporary example of ethnography in the service of policy analysis. The policy problem that he tackles is the differential adoption of a rubber marketing scheme undertaken principally by the Thai Department of Agricultural Extension (DOAE) in two Malay villages of Yala province. He argues that the scheme succeeds only to the extent that it is assimilated into extant patterns of village economic life. And in a lengthy concluding review of earlier scholarship on the Malays of southern Thailand, he calls for attention to the experience of rural people rather than to that of élites. For he believes that the former group is far more likely to resort to resistance before the incorporative efforts of the Thai state than to the open rebellion that has attracted most scholarly interest.

Cornish's discussion of the organization and operation of the DOAE in Yala province is inspired and invaluable. Whether read as a finely detailed contribution to the study of the state, of development administration, or of Southeast Asian bureaucracy at the operation level, the discussion opens wide a window on a basic but neglected feature of the life of hundreds of millions of people of the region. It points to the continued *social*/significance of the bureaucracy, at least in rural or provincial Southeast Asia, even after countless scholarly efforts to bury unmentioned the "bureaucratic polity" of old. And it benefits, as does the book as a whole, from the very strong Thai and Malay language skills that Cornish brings to his scholarship. He and his publisher have shown uncommon scrupulousness in matters of transliteration from Thai. Cornish is also a knowledgeable and observant ethnographer. He writes in a precise, clear, and engaging style. All of these traits give *Whose Place Is This?* value not only as a contribution to the study of the Thai South and of contemporary Southeast Asian society but also as a rich and accessible pedagogical resource.

At the same time, Cornish rests the central arguments of *Whose Place Is This?* on rather less impressive empirical and analytical foundations. In particular, his treatment of Malay society and of the commerce in rubber does not support those arguments as effectively as his conclusions demand.

Cornish places considerable emphasis on the unfamiliarity of agents of the Bangkok-based Thai state with what he calls "Malay village economies" (p. 91) and "Malay structures of leadership" (p. 107). His reader is left with little sense of what makes these dimensions of village life in Yala particularly "Malay" or even of what "Malay" means. In point of fact, the multi-stranded relationships between agricultural producers and their sources of credit which define those "structures of leadership" in village Yala also mark the life of much of three continents. They are nothing more or less than the "linkages" omnipresent in the economic literature on rural financial markets.

As for the putatively "Malay" economies of the rubber-growing villages that Cornish treats in *Whose Place Is This?* settlements across peninsular Thailand devoted to the cultivation of that crop have shared

identical marketing arrangements, like to large exporters, and relationships to the world economy since the immediate post-war period at the very latest. These arrangements had their origins, of course, in the Singapore-centred, Hokkien-dominated commerce in rubber that came to organize smallholder or “native” rubber economies across Southeast Asia between the World Wars. The Malay leaders of this study who offer credit to cultivators of rubber in their villages and thus integrate those villagers into the regional commerce in rubber are participants in this same decades-old system. Their participation differs in no important regard from that of countless non-Malay rubber traders active since the 1920s in Thailand, in Malaya, in Sarawak, in Kalimantan, and in Sumatra.

The place of the Singapore-centred, Hokkien-dominated commerce in rubber at the centre of Cornish’s analysis of Malay-Thai relations in Yala also works to give that analysis a curious quality, as when he writes of “the potential for losing the village rubber economy to Thai control” (p. 117). For, of all the significant sectors of modern Thailand’s agricultural economy, none has remained farther outside the sway of both bureaucrats *and* merchants based in Bangkok than rubber. “Thai control” has never been an issue, whether at the provincial or national level. In many ways then, *Whose Place Is This?* offers not a narrative of Malay-Thai relations but rather one of yet another basically unsuccessful attempt on the part of the Thai state to come to grips with an economic sector that has never taken that state more than superficially into account. Similarly, it treats — vividly and valuably — themes in the relationship between villager and state in Thailand that obtain across the kingdom, with little reference to specific location or to ascribed ethnicity.

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