

Book Reviews

DOI: 10.1355/sj28-2g

Thailand's Political Peasants: Power in the Modern Rural Economy.
By Andrew Walker. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012. 276 pp.

Andrew Walker's in-depth and well-written examination of rural politics is a welcome contribution to Thai studies and to peasant studies. Based on his repeated research stays in a place that he calls "Ban Tiam", a village in northern Thailand, Walker makes a compelling argument about the political behaviour of middle-income peasants and the relationship between their behaviour and the national government.

The book's argument revolves around relations between middle-income peasants and various sources of power. Middle-income peasants in contemporary Thailand, argues Walker, have a "thoroughly modern political logic. The strategy of this modern peasantry is to engage with sources of power, not to oppose them" (p. 219). A crucial concern of middle-income peasantry is to attract resources held by powerful entities that will aid their pursuit of security, safety and prosperity. Central to this concern is building, maintaining and expanding networks that link people to sources of power. Walker summarizes such networks as "political society" (p. 24). The politics of creating networks extends well beyond participating in such familiar institutions as elections and political parties; it includes a wide range of behaviour, a point Walker stresses at the end of the book in a ringing endorsement of a broad conception of politics and the importance of politics in everyday life (pp. 227–32). The power sources that villagers seek out also are wide-ranging. Walker's analysis emphasizes four: the spiritual world, the market, the community and the state.

An early chapter previewing the argument relates the study to themes in the literature about peasant societies in Asia, making clear that Walker is interested in showing the relevance of political society in rural northern Thailand to the broader academic landscape. Especially important is the contrast that Walker draws between the political orientation of middle-income peasantry, who constitute most of rural society in contemporary Thailand, and the poor peasantry that predominated in rural Thailand and elsewhere in Southeast Asia fifty or more years ago. James C. Scott's book, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1976), synthesized the political orientation of poor peasants of that era. Always teetering between survival and death, poor peasants were risk-averse, inward-looking and wary that external economic and political forces threatened their subsistence. Most of the peasantry of contemporary Thailand, Walker says, are in a much better economic situation and consequently have a political orientation that is much more open to interacting with, and anticipating benefits from, external forces.

Walker subsequently marshals data showing the impressive decline of poverty and rise of middle-income peasantry in rural Thailand generally and in Ban Tiam particularly. In the 1960s, about 96 per cent of rural Thai households lived below the poverty line. By 2007, only about 10 per cent were poor. In Ban Tiam during that period, the proportion of poor dropped from most households to about 20 per cent. Walker terms another 20 per cent of Ban Tiam's 130 households today its "commercial elite" (p. 62). The remaining 60 per cent of Ban Tiam's 130 households are middle-income. They have enough food; they have decent housing; and they have refrigerators, telephones, televisions, CD players, motorbikes and other belongings indicating their comfortable living standards.

Economic diversification and the tremendous efforts of the state are two major reasons for these improvements. Farming in Thailand has diversified from primarily growing rice to raising garlic, vegetables and other crops. Moreover, whereas a half a century ago farming would have been nearly their only source of livelihood, today less than a third of rural households rely on agriculture alone. Most

also have income from non-agricultural work such as construction, government employment, trade and other businesses. Government policies, programmes and investments are among the factors accounting for this diversification. They have been central to overall progress in rural Thai living conditions. Government spending on agriculture increased fifteenfold between 1960 and 2008; government credit institutions have in recent decades provided loans at reasonable interest rates; public expenditures for irrigation, roads, electrification and other infrastructure have ballooned, as have government-funded health and education services in the countryside. “In simple terms,” concludes Walker, “the Thai government, like governments in many other developing countries, has moved from taxing the rural economy to subsidizing it” (p. 220).

A “core political dynamic” for the peasantry in Ban Tiam village and many like it across Thailand is no longer, as it was decades earlier, evading government taxes and other extraction from the countryside but “maximizing state subsidies” (p. 58). Rather than trying to avoid the power of the state, middle-income peasants want to attach themselves to it. Hence, individually and in groups and organizations, villagers make concerted efforts to attract into their communities, for private and public improvements, state programmes, projects and agencies. Walker elaborates this dynamic in considerable detail. He contends, too, that it is a major aspect of the support of a large proportion of rural Thailand’s residents for the government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in the 2000s. Much more astutely than his rivals, Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai political party tapped into rural people’s demands and expectations of state support and assistance.

The other prime sources of power from which the middle-income peasantry tries to benefit are the spiritual world, the community and markets. The spiritual world of the villagers of Ban Tiam is complex and hierarchical. The prevailing attitude of middle-income peasants, Walker argues, is to reach out to various levels of the hierarchy, attempting to draw on the power of spirits to benefit villagers individually and collectively — much as villagers try to attract state

resources to their benefit. Community power also involves engaging external resources. Individuals gain moral standing from fellow villagers by using their own resources, connections and ingenuity to attract funding, development projects and attention from authorities and agencies that will serve collective interests and needs. Markets offer potential benefits to middle-income peasants, too. Unlike very poor villagers who are highly averse to putting their subsistence at risk, middle-income peasants, Walker demonstrates, have an experimental approach to engaging markets. Households learn through their own trial and error and the experimentation of fellow villagers what new economic pursuits — growing garlic, raising eggplant, contract farming, trade of one sort or another — bring benefits that outweigh costs.

As a whole and in its constituent parts, this book is a highly educational and enlightening read. From it, I learned much about Thai peasant society and its political relevance to the rise and fall of Thailand's national governments during the last dozen years. Walker also regularly links his analysis to a wider literature. Although his project does not include a concerted comparison of the political orientation of middle-income Thai peasants to that of their counterparts elsewhere, I suspect his argument applies to much of the peasantry of other Asian countries in which poverty has decreased dramatically, government-financed irrigation and other rural infrastructure have expanded significantly, and the rural economy has diversified greatly.

A few aspects of the book left me unsatisfied. The analysis says very little about political dynamics between the majority of villagers who are middle-income and the minority who are either poor or well-to-do. The poor still constitute about 20 per cent of Ban Tiam's households. What, I wonder, are they doing, what is the nature of their political society, and how do middle-income villagers interact with them? I also would like to know about Walker's methodology. From various passages, a reader can piece together that Walker's first visit to the area was in December 2002 and that he was there again in 2003, 2004, 2006, 2008 and apparently later. Several stays over a

number of years is a marvelous way to learn about a particular place, its people, society, politics and economy. Not clear to me, however, is how long each of these stays was and what Walker did while he was in Ban Tiam. He refers to surveying households in the village at least a couple of times; he also had numerous conversations with residents. At various times two assistants helped him learn from villagers; one of them, writes Walker, spent more time in Ban Tiam than he did (p. xi). I am not questioning Walker's deep knowledge and understanding of the village and its political dynamics. I am keen to know in some detail how he became so well informed.

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REFERENCE

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DOI: 10.1355/sj28-2h

The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand. By Justin McDaniel. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. 327 pp.

This is a frustrating and even troubling book. I say this not because it is “magnificent, beguiling, and thought-provoking” (Steve Collins, back cover), or “brilliant and innovative” (Anne Hansen, back cover), or “full of fresh observations and original thinking” (Craig Reynolds, back cover). When someone of the stature of Craig Reynolds asks, “Does anyone understand Thai religion in all its complexity better than McDaniel?” (ibid.), the reader tends to take notice (while at the same time surmising that perhaps there are some [millions of?])