

SOJOURN Symposium

On More Than Rural: Textures of Thailand’s Agrarian Transformation by Jonathan Rigg. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2019.

Review essays by Rodolphe De Koninck and Michael J. Montesano, with a reply from Jonathan Rigg.

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Review Essay I: Rodolphe De Koninck

In *More Than the Soil: Rural Change in Southeast Asia*, published in 2001, Jonathan Rigg was already asking incisive questions about, among other issues, “the persistence of the family farm” (p. 16), “the nature of rural life and livelihood” (p. 29), “the industrialisation of the countryside” (p. 123), “rural change and the global economy” (p. 155). His handling of these questions was informed by his own fieldwork in Thailand but equally by his consultation of the writings of a good number of authors, such as Rambo (1977), Scott (1985), Kemp (1988), De Koninck (1992a) and Elson (1997), who had also investigated the evolution of peasant farming in the Southeast Asian Region.

Nearly twenty years later, he returns to his questions. In the meantime, he had revisited on several occasions the Thai villages that he had initially studied in 1982, extending along the way his investigation to several more, for a total of seventeen villages. He also consulted the work carried out by other researchers in Thailand as well as throughout the region, including in the context of a

large international research project, CHATSEA (Challenges of the Agrarian Transition in Southeast Asia), including, more specifically, what a number of his colleagues have contributed to this issue in a volume he co-edited (Rigg and Vandergeest, 2012). His questions are this time more insightful, and so are his answers. And all of these revolve around “a simple puzzle”—“why Thailand’s rapid development, modernization, and deep structural change have not led to more thoroughgoing restructuring of the countryside”—and around “a simple argument”—“we must view the Thai countryside as more than rural” (p. xv).

The book is broken down into ten chapters, each revolving around a single issue, or so their respective titles, nearly all made of one word, seem to imply: “More than Rural”, “Inheritances”, “Spaces”, “Flourishing”, “Society”, “Land”, “Labor”, “Livelihoods”, “Class”, “Futures”. But the reader quickly comes to realize that each chapter is quite sophisticated and intricate, full of nuances and demanding careful reading. In fact, each deserves a review, considering the amount of data, Thai and not Thai, that Rigg handles along with his interpretations, mostly based on the former, occasionally on the latter, often on both. Rather than attempt such a daunting task, I will select and comment on one or two statements from each chapter, hoping to illustrate Rigg’s own train of thought and sophisticated rendering of the issues at stake.

In the introductory chapter, *More Than Rural*, Rigg writes, “and yet, the smallholder and the smallholding remain—on paper—the dominant social form and economic enterprise in the Thai countryside and also in Indonesia, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (PDR), the Philippines, Vietnam and elsewhere (see Rigg, Salamanca and Thompson 2016)” (p. 3). While that appears fundamentally true, the “elsewhere” presumably and for good reason does not include Malaysia, particularly peninsular Malaysia, where large plantations cultivating rubber and palm oil now dominate the countryside. Fully commercial agriculture, whether practised on smallholdings, as is largely the case in Thailand, or on large plantations, is rapidly expanding throughout the region. Unfortunately, as we will see further

on, the increasingly dominant share of commercial agriculture, almost totally geared towards the export sector—and I am not referring here to rice cultivation and exports—do not seem to have been taken specifically into consideration in Rigg’s analysis of the restructuring of the Thai countryside. In the chapter’s last paragraph, Rigg writes, “at the same time as raising doubts about the validity and traction of the rural as distinctive space, an object of theorization, and a development point, the book also argues that the Thai rural provides an alternative insight into the Thai contemporary condition” (p. 14). This will turn out to be very true!

In “Inheritances”, the focus is on the institutional legacies of the past, on the perception of rural conditions throughout history and on the widely used categories employed by scholars to try and analyse them. “Our interpretations of rural life, living, and change are held hostage by the means through which we have come to understand the rural life: through household surveys, family ethnographies, and village studies. In that sense, the empirical world that the scholar records and then recounts is based on a set of potentially problematic assumptions about the Thai rural world. Rarely are these elementary research assumptions questioned” (p. 19). Rigg then goes into an interesting discussion of what these assumptions might imply, while avoiding what in my opinion is an essential issue: the very geography of villages. Villages are very dynamic entities, and nowhere in the book is there a proper description or mapping of the study villages. Nowhere, or so it seems, is their spatial configuration and evolution taken into consideration. In fact, the book contains only one map (Fig. 1.2, p. 12), of Thailand in its entirety, locating only very roughly most of the study villages. Rigg does not even address the issue of significant differentiation in population growth densities between the subregions in which his three groups of villages are sited. Why? Does Rigg consider mapping, even diachronic mapping, old fashioned and irrelevant?

Speaking of location, the third chapter, “Spaces”, finally brings some of the study villages into the picture and shows quite clearly that “[h]ouseholds can no longer be given the coordinates of a rural

address: the geography of the household is rural and urban” (p. 61). That point is remarkably demonstrated, in many ways, in this very chapter as well as throughout the book. In fact, Rigg does provide a figurative illustration of what this implies with a graph entitled “Multisited household in Ban Nam, Bueng Kan Province, Northeast Thailand 2016” (Fig. 5.1, p. 101). While this demonstrates how the geography of these households is both rural and urban, it does not make up for the absence of a clearer representation of evolving land use, population densities and village layouts. However problematic it has become to talk of villages, as Rigg shows repeatedly, the difficulty should be illustrated. The chapter “Spaces” also addresses the very dynamic implications of cross-border spaces; that is, those involving international labour migrations, whether legal or illegal. It also deals with the equally complex issue of the interpretation of the rural and the urban, in several more ways than the spatial one— “[t]he urban mentally shapes the rural and vice versa, with manifold implications for theory, policy, and practice” (p. 64).

One of Rigg’s methods of analysis consists in moving between the local scale and the national one, usually very explicitly, sometimes less so. In chapter 4, “Flourishing”, he instead deals exclusively with the national scale, summarizing efficiently the nature of Thailand’s twelve development plans, from 1961 until the present. He identifies “a shift from development as an imminent process over which the state is only indirectly involved to a project where the state takes a leading role” (p. 72). But he equally shows that the situation has evolved very rapidly, with inequalities increasing within the urban and rural realms as well as between them, beyond their increasing interpenetration. “Rural Thailand is becoming a post development space in the sense that the delivery of development to marginalized and relatively poor rural people is no longer the *raison d’être* of governmental policy” (p. 82). One should add that this has been the tendency in Malaysia for perhaps longer and is occurring in several other countries in the region—quite spectacularly in Indonesia! Why is the Thai state doing the same?

The key focus in chapter 5, “Society”, is on households and how their very nature as “units of social belonging” (p. 96) is

being significantly impacted by the transformation of agriculture. This means different labour requirements and relations, within and without agriculture, as well as increased social and spatial mobility of household members. To illustrate this, Rigg alternates between the national level and that of a few of 'his' villages. "With work no longer neatly tied to place—the village and its surrounding lands—so the household has been respatialized, in the context of the respatialization of the rural more generally (as suggested in chapter 3)" (p. 100). "Millions of rural Thais leave home each year to engage with work in other places.... What these migrants have not done, however, is desert their families, abandon their homes, or sell their lands" (p. 117). This is well taken. I add that I wrote about the occurrence of an equivalent resilience in the Kedah Plain of Peninsular Malaysia (1992b) and have since observed it in Central Java.

This persistence manifests itself, as Rigg points out in chapter 6, "Land". He writes, "[s]mallholders, the backbone—as they are often termed—of the Thai nation, in terms of both their role in the labor force and their contribution to society, have apparently resisted the inevitable logic of the farm-size transition" (p. 118). Rigg then deals quite elaborately with this issue, revisiting Francesca Bray's essential work, *The Rice Economies* (1986), in which she suggests that wet-rice agriculture is agroecologically unsuited to scaling-up. This is of course relevant not only to Thailand but also to most Southeast Asian countries where family-based rice cultivation is still widespread when not dominant. Rigg does deal with several other potential hypotheses, some obvious, some not, which could explain this widespread phenomenon of slow, even nearly non-existent land concentration in Thailand and elsewhere. These include advantages in terms of efficiency, productivity and environmental sustainability of smallholdings, which are very apparent in rice cultivation as well as in other forms of crop production, including several cash crops. Rigg also refers briefly to the positive consequences of the land frontier, which at one time was quite active in Thailand, in providing access to land among smallholders. As he could have pointed out, that 'logic' has applied to most of the region's countries.

Chapter 7 addresses the fundamental issue of “Labor”, in agricultural activities but also in non-agricultural ones. Displacement of labour is occurring with increased mechanization, which even in rice cultivation has become widespread; for example, with the use of hand-tractors for land preparation as well as for transport. Rigg shows how the impact of overall industrialization, occurring within the urban as well as rural domains and largely encouraged by the state and private industry, is transforming the landscape—physical and social. Along with improvements in education and the resulting improved professional capacities and increasing needs and expectations, farm labour becomes much less appealing. This then brings about the desire to migrate outside of the village, whether daily, seasonally or even definitely. It also explains the increasing role of migrant labourers. Consequently, with reference to several of his study villages, Rigg writes, “[s]mallholders, unable to secure their escalating needs from farming alone, had diversified their livelihoods” (p. 166).

Chapter 8 is therefore focussed on the theme of “Livelihoods”, one of Rigg’s favourite objects of study. In addressing the evolution of livelihoods, he finally provides useful and welcome landscape descriptions of Thailand’s Northeast region, where most of his study villages are located—two are in the northern region, and two are in the central basin in the vicinity of Ayutthaya. Here he deals with soil, climate and hydrography, and the overall ecological conditions, with farmers engaging “in a sophisticated strategy of risk minimization, working across a wide range of land types” (p. 175). This is followed by forays into “Livelihood Trends, Trajectories, Transitions and Turbulences”, which allow Rigg to “question the apparently irrefutable logic of deagrarianization” (pp. 178–79). He explains, quite convincingly, how the growth of the national and regional economies, as well as an increase in agricultural productivity, have provided for employment and income diversification, thereby allowing the family farm and household to act as a home base. For example, he is right to point out that “there is increasing differentiation not only between but also within households” (p. 179), with some members

remaining active on the farm, while others are fully employed outside and even, in frequent cases, not even residing in the village while maintaining their involvement in the household finances.

In chapter 9, Rigg returns to another of his chosen objects of study, this one even more complex: “Class”. He had written about it, briefly, in his *More Than the Soil* (2001). In preceding chapters of the current book, he has shown how farming and labour patterns in the rural realm have been deeply transformed. He now adds how, “increasingly, a slice of the rural population are selling their labor to usually larger and more capital-intensive farmers” (p. 199), pointing out a bit further on that “Thailand’s miracle growth was achieved without the wrenching of peasants from their land or of the land from peasants” (p. 201) and “indeed, the fact that smallholders have not been dispossessed ... has ... rendered the process even more profitable” (p. 201). Interestingly, largely equivalent processes have been observed in Malaysia (De Koninck 1983; 1992b). The chapter also contains a long-awaited and most useful table (p. 202), listing all the villages studied by Rigg; it is entitled “Class configurations in the Thai countryside, 1982–2016”. Unfortunately, it is difficult to locate several of these villages on the sole map present in the book (p. 12). As for the table, it contains a detailed list of ‘class types’, which are in fact types of employment. These concern fourteen villages and include more than twenty categories such as peasant cultivators, rice farmers, rubber smallholders, agricultural wage laborers, handicraft workers, factory workers, workshop employees, small business owners, government employees, migrant workers, domestic labour out-migrants, etc. What it shows is how complex the social composition of the Thai rural world has become and how migration and mobility have become central in that composition.

In the concluding chapter, “Futures”, Rigg returns to his many-faceted definition of the rural realm, insisting on its rapidly evolving nature. This leads him to suggest that in Thailand “the agrarian transition has been collapsed into a single generation” (p. 229) and that it should perhaps be conceived of as a process of transformation rather than as a transition towards a given state. He adds that, in

trying to imagine the future, two scenarios might be considered: one would be characterized by “[l]and consolidation, modernisation and rural exit”; the other by “[s]mallholder persistence and distributed livelihoods” (p. 230). Concerning the second—and with a reference to some of Tania Li’s work (2010)—he writes that we should “engage with rural people not as inputs, capitals, or labor or for their utility or productivity potential but as people.... When we do that, it becomes clearer why so many households are keeping a tight hold on their ‘uneconomic’ holdings, maintaining a semblance of subsistence farming along with commercialized nonfarm work” (p. 231).

Which brings me to pose a final broad question to Jonathan Rigg. Considering the overall resilience and dynamism of agriculture in Thailand, should one not look more closely and specifically into the nature of that dynamism to try and understand the said resilience? After all, Thailand remains one of the world’s most intensively cultivated countries, with more than forty-three per cent of its territory devoted to agriculture in 2016, which is way above the region’s average. It is Asia’s second most important exporter of agricultural products, having conceded the first position only recently to the much larger Indonesia. Thailand also remained for a long time the world’s leading exporter of rice and is now number two, behind India. In the meantime, it has become the world’s number one exporter of natural rubber. Surely the causes of this phenomenal capacity of Thailand’s agriculture—largely based on smallholdings—to adapt to world demand are worthy of more scrutiny, over and beyond the role of contract farming.

These remain minor concerns, as Rigg’s goal to try and better demonstrate the intensity and complexity of the evolution of the Thai countryside is well achieved. While questioning the validity of concepts such as rural and urban, villages and household, he has nevertheless resisted the temptation to try and render them inoperative. This has allowed him, and us, to get a better grasp of the challenges that Thailand’s agrarian transformation involve both for the rural realm as well as for the whole of Thailand. Rigg in fact shows how analysing the persistence of agriculture, particularly smallholding

agriculture, and the intricate nature of the rural realm is essential to the understanding of the economic and political transformation not only of Thailand but also of much of Southeast Asia.

Review Essay II: Michael Montesano

Jonathan Rigg has clearly conceived of *More Than Rural* as a big, perhaps even career-capping, book. It draws, he writes, on his engagement with “questions of agrarian change in Thailand” while working in—and, yes, he is counting—“seventeen villages across three regions over three and half decades and ... surveying well over a thousand households” (p. xiv). Rigg’s latest book also synthesizes his own work and findings with those of other investigators. The result is by any fair measure both a great success and a rather urgently needed contribution to the serious study of Thailand. Two principal virtues account for that success and for the consequent significance of *More Than Rural*.

First, Rigg develops a compelling, convincing and intellectually elegant—if not always elegantly presented—answer to a series of related questions concerning “the paradox of the continuing salience of the Thai rural alongside its progressive diminution” (p. 221). He unpacks this paradox into a “puzzle”: in a wealthier, more and more urban society and in an economy in which agriculture plays a less and less important role, the number of Thai smallholders on the land has only grown, and “many millions of households” retain a connection to farming and to the countryside (p. 1). The failure of social and economic change to sever that connection will be news to few who know Thailand. But the underlying dynamics of that failure, accounting as they do for the continued prominence of the rural in Thai society, are harder to grasp. Rigg mounts a systematic and robust argument to explain those dynamics.

More Than Rural telegraphs this argument with the single-word titles of chapters that make up the core of the book: “Spaces”, “Society”, “Land”, “Labor”, “Livelihood”. To summarize, and at

risk of bastardization or distortion through oversimplification, Rigg demonstrates that one must understand ‘rural’ Thai households to comprise and to rely on members working remotely, whether in urban settings or in non-farm work in other distant locations, and that even members of those households who remain ‘at home in the village’ devote a considerable share of their activity to work outside agriculture. His close observation of rural households, reported in the magnificent chapter on “Society”, is of utmost importance here. He goes on to show in subsequent chapters that those households retain and typically cultivate their land—if sometimes less intensively in the face of diminished access to family labour.

This pattern of economic activity is hard to square with current official aspirations to realize ‘Thailand 4.0’. But it reflects, in Rigg’s argument, the precarious position of millions of Thai households with roots in the provinces, and their reluctance to part with the access to a modicum of security represented by their land. Further, it grounds the identities of members of those households as rural people, even as the rural has changed beyond recognition and as—crucially—‘village Thailand’ has persisted only because of its wholesale reconfiguration.

This argument and its component parts derive greatest value from the way that they empower observers of and participants in Thai life to understand much that they will have encountered as pieces of a broader picture. Rigg offers his readers, that is, a lens through which to view with new clarity and comprehension the life choices, de facto economic strategies, familial and occupational norms, and even sense of themselves and of their lot in life of a large proportion of the people of Thailand. If, individually, many of these choices and norms will be familiar to both scholars and others with experience of Thai society, Rigg’s signal achievement lies in explaining the way that they fit, snugly, into a coherent whole.

In laying that explanation out, Rigg proves good company. The passages of *More Than Rural* drawing on his varied fieldwork are among its most rewarding and valuable. They turn twice, for example, to a place in the Central Plains province of Ayutthaya that

has come to serve essentially as a dormitory area for workers on nearby industrial estates. Rigg treats the area as a pair of “villages” (p. 49) as he explicates the blurred spatial distinction between the rural and the non-rural, new livelihood opportunities in the service sector even outside strictly urban areas, and changing class realities. Insisting on that label—“villages”—is shrewd; it allows Rigg to use a perhaps extreme case of ‘village Thailand’ to confront his reader with the “more than rural” quality of the contemporary countryside in a particularly effective way. Rigg’s treatment of this setting in Ayutthaya calls attention to another dimension of his adept deployment of findings from the field. He takes on the Thai countryside as a whole, stressing the relevance of his argument to all regions of the country rather than drawing distinctions between those regions. This smart choice gives that argument power and persuasiveness.

At the same time, many readers of *More Than Rural* will have Isan, the Thai Northeast, in their mind’s eye as they work their way through Rigg’s book. Asking why that is the case is worthwhile. The author has chosen one of his own photographs of an unmistakably Northeastern Thai scene for the book’s cover, and its preface opens with an account of his earliest fieldwork in rural Thailand, undertaken in Mahasarakham Province starting in 1982. The likelihood that Rigg’s formative experience of Isan has shaped the sensibility that informs his writing about the Thai countryside more generally is hard to overlook. But there is another factor at work, too. To encounter in the Bangkok of recent decades—where, alas, so many of us concerned with Thailand spend much of our time—people whose lived experience reflects the “textures of Thailand’s agrarian transformation” is above all to encounter Northeasterners. The familiarity with those textures with which such encounters will have left many readers of *More Than Rural* will also lead them to find the book’s argument convincing. Rigg’s achievement is to make the applicability of that argument to Thailand as a whole equally convincing.

Rigg positions the Thai capital itself—once aptly labelled “the world’s pre-eminent primate city” (Sternstein 1984, p. 43)—very deftly in this book. It is astonishing how infrequently he invokes

Bangkok by name. But he does not need to do so, for “it is impossible to think about the Thai rural without conjuring the Thai urban”, he tells us (p. 64). Named or not, Bangkok is always there in the picture. But Rigg ensures, brilliantly, that one also always takes that picture in from the perspective of the countryside.

Another of the numerous instances in which Rigg explicitly and fruitfully draws on his fieldwork concerns the rise, with demand from China, of Pará rubber cultivation in a village on the banks of the Mekong in the Northeastern province of Bueng Kan. A “boom” in the cultivation of that crop from the late 1990s through the first decade of the present century had a transformational effect on local livelihoods; it even reversed longstanding patterns of out-migration (pp. 180–81). But, as in other rubber-growing areas of Thailand, high prices proved temporary, and a “bust” ensued (p. 181). This story illustrates a number of points central to Rigg’s concerns in *More Than Rural*. Yet the treatment of rubber in Bueng Kan would have benefitted from comparison with the experience of cultivators in traditional rubber-growing areas on the Eastern Seaboard or in South Thailand, people more accustomed to the price cycles affecting that commodity, during the same years. While he does cite the impressive work of Peter Vandergeest on rural Songkhla (Vandergeest 2012), Rigg has an evident lack of familiarity with and perhaps of interest in the South. One expects, nevertheless, that fieldwork there would confirm much of what he argues in this book.

The second source of the success and significance of *More Than Rural* lies in the manner in which it speaks to the present “texture” of Thailand and of Thai society as a whole. On one level, the interpenetration of ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ life in contemporary Thailand means that the ability of Rigg’s book to offer a critique that is “more than rural” in its relevance comes as little surprise. But the specific critique mounted depends for its persuasiveness on the lens with which the core chapters of the book equip the reader. Simply put, that critique amounts to a contention that the relationship to their smallholdings, the employment and livelihood choices, and

the persistent rural identities of Thailand's "part-time farmers, pieceworking peasants, sojourning factory workers, taxi drivers, and domestic helpers" are in fact not a function of the Thai rural at all (p. 216). They are, rather, due to the "precarity of nonfarm work" and to "the structural gulf" that simply affords decent opportunities to too few Thais (p. 216). Rather than a 'rural problem', Thailand just has a problem.

As introduced in the first half of the book, Rigg's critique—grounded in an attack on Thailand's post-1959 "development project" (p. 67)—comes off as strident, without nuance, and unsatisfactorily counterfactual. Rigg is no historian; the story of Thailand's economic growth in the second half of the twentieth century merits more sophistication than he brings to it in *More Than Rural*. In any case, for the purposes of this book the path that has led to the current state of Thai society matters less than that state itself.

For that same reason, the inadequate treatment of the intellectual history of understandings of the Thai countryside in *More Than Rural* is not a grave problem. Rigg's discussion of the application of notions of "community" to rural Thailand and of the Community Culture (*watthanatham chumchon*) school associated with Chatthip Natsupha, his disciples and his admirers is brief, superficial and in the end only rather dutiful (pp. 20–21). His careful scrutiny of understandings of 'the Thai village' in village studies undertaken before 1970 is admirable and fair, but also a bit puzzling. It addresses studies undertaken by foreigners and published in English, though Rigg does cite William Gedney's translation into that same language of some of Anuman Rajadhon's works of armchair ethnography (Anuman 1955).

To be sure, those former studies reflected and shaped foreign scholars' understanding of the Thai countryside in the decades before the agrarian transformation that *More Than Rural* so successfully explicates. They may have reflected or shaped the understanding of some Thai scholars, too. Further, Rigg does need a 'base line' against which to chart that transformation. But it is not clear what

an accounting of foreign and Thai scholars' understanding contributes to the argument of Rigg's book, or, indeed, why it really matters. As far as he indicates, the ideas of those foreign scholars—unlike, say, the actions of technocrats at Thailand's planning agency, metropolitan bureaucratic and business elites, royalists and provincial merchants—did not have much influence on the history of that transformation. This puzzle gives rise, in fact, to a second one. The thirty-six-page bibliography in *More Than Rural* appears to list but a single entry in Thai—a journal article written expressly to engage Rigg's own scholarship, as it happens (Songchai 2013). In three dozen years of work on rural Thailand, certainly Rigg has gained insight from innumerable books, articles and reports in the Thai language. Why not cite some of them?

Wisely, Rigg does not allow academic debates over the nature of 'the Thai village' or 'peasants' to bog him down. His common-sense approach to these terms serves his book well. And, as he is able to frame it in the later chapters of *More Than Rural*, he makes persuasive and compelling his contention about the precarity of the lives of "the great rump" of Thailand's population with ties to the rural (p. 213). Shared precarity proves, Rigg holds, more important than undeniable differentiation among individuals in that population. It forges among them "a significant sense of common class identity", whether they remain in the countryside or reside for years or just months in cities (p. 220). In its emphasis on precarity, *More Than Rural* is a fundamentally political book. Yet just one of its passages is explicitly political. That passage associates the class identity noted here with the Red Shirts of the past decade and a half. It gives Rigg's thinking much in common with Federico Ferrara's emphasis on collective identities in Thailand. It is only unfortunate that *More Than Rural* does not engage directly with Ferrara's masterful work, *The Political Development of Modern Thailand* (Ferrara 2015), on this point.

Along with the two great virtues of *More Than Rural* discussed here, innumerable canny, striking and revealing insights distinguish

the book. Many of these buttress its principal contentions. Others will serve as prods to researchers in their own work. It is impossible to do justice to these insights in a short review like this one.

It is, however, necessary to point out that, for all the intellectual robustness, elegance and value with which Rigg has endowed *More Than Rural*, several aspects of the presentation of its argument both prove distracting and even seem to suggest the author's lack of confidence in that presentation. These include the textbook-like division of chapters into numbered sections and subsections, repeated parenthetical reminders that discussions in later chapters relate to sections or subsections—noted by number—in earlier chapters, and breaks from prose into, again, rather textbook-like lists of bullet-points. Put bluntly, the fine argument central to *More Than Rural* deserves better. Further, Rigg pauses to assure readers of the relevance of the Thai case to other parts of Southeast Asia, to Asia more broadly and to “the global South” (for example, pp. 119, 185) frequently and gratuitously enough to make one wonder why he simply did not include a proper comparative chapter in his book.

And then to a pair of fussier points. Rigg opts not to use the Royal Thai General System or Library of Congress standard for romanization of the Thai terms introduced in *More Than Rural*. That choice is his to make, and the little orthographic and phonetic absurdities and even inconsistencies that result will certainly leave some readers untroubled. More jarring—indeed, eyebrow-raisingly Eurocentric—is his decision to cite Thai scholars by their surnames rather than by their given names. That decision may reflect Rigg's interest in reaching a target readership in ‘the global North’ too parochial to adapt to scholarly conventions for the serious study of Thailand. If so, it is as curious a call as the near-total absence from the book's bibliography of works in Thai. For it is to readers who are, like Rigg himself, closely engaged with and committed to Thailand and the cause of equity and openness in Thai society that this immensely important book will speak most meaningfully.

Author's Response: Jonathan Rigg

To read Rodolphe De Koninck's and Michael Montesano's thoughtful reviews of my book was a pleasure; that they saw much that is good and valuable in the volume is more pleasing still. I have a high regard for their opinions and will engage with their critical reflections with the seriousness they deserve. But, just as Rodolphe ("each [chapter] deserves a review") and Michael (it "is impossible to do justice to these insights in a short review like this one") write that they cannot review the book in toto, so I too will be selective in how I respond, picking out those comments with which I think I can most productively engage.

We are held hostage by the places we study, the time period we occupy, the particular perspectives that such a temporal grounding affords and the discipline (and therefore approach and methods) in which—and, in a sense, *for* which—we work. Rodolphe is a geographer of Southeast Asia and a traditional geographer at that (I write that in no sense pejoratively), who has worked mainly in Malaysia and Singapore and to a lesser extent in Vietnam and Indonesia. Like Rodolphe, Michael is an area studies specialist, but in disciplinary terms he is a historian, and his country of specialization is Thailand, although he has also written on Myanmar, the Philippines and Vietnam. Michael has spent much of his career in an area studies rather than a disciplinary setting (the Department of Southeast Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore [NUS] and, more latterly, at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore). These biographical vignettes are not provided merely as contextual padding; they are explanatory too, as I will show. To put my own biographical cards on the table, I have spent the bulk of my career in mainstream geography departments—at Durham and Bristol in the United Kingdom. I have also been based at NUS in Geography and was director of the Asia Research Institute (ARI) for three years until the end of 2018. I have mostly worked in Thailand, but have also undertaken fieldwork and published on

Laos, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Vietnam, written several books on the Southeast Asian region, and one on the ‘global South’.

Now to turn to the substance of Rodolphe’s and Michael’s reviews. Rodolphe writes that he is surprised and somewhat disappointed that “nowhere in the book is there a proper description or mapping of the study villages”, and wonders whether I might “consider mapping ... old fashioned and irrelevant”. My immediate and all-to-easy response is to explain that I did have additional maps in the original manuscript but had to cut them back (as well as some figures and tables). But there is more to this than just simple production constraints. In cutting the maps—and not other things—I also reveal that I took them to be dispensable. I did not think they contributed significantly enough to the book’s argument to warrant their inclusion. I am sure that Rodolphe would have taken a different decision. He is, after all, the author of *Singapore’s Permanent Territorial Revolution: Fifty Years in Fifty Maps* (2017), and his *Malay Peasants Coping with the World: Breaking the Community Circle?* (1992b) has more than thirty maps and spatial diagrams. I know well the value he attaches to a good map! We reveal something of ourselves in these sorts of decisions and choices.

Michael identifies a different absence. He suggests that *More Than Rural* “is a fundamentally political book” and yet notes that “just one of its passages is explicitly political”. Again, this says something about Michael and also about me. In explanation, I wanted the political to come through sotto voce. By this I mean that I wanted the sedimentation of evidence—the bald facts and figures and the voices of farmers and workers—to do the work of the political for me. In the book, I wanted to shine a light on the explanatory gap between farmers’ actions and government policies—and the degree to which farmers have not followed the political script and not been held hostage by politics and policies. Policymakers (and scholars too) have had to recalibrate and recalculate their assumptions in the face of farmer action and inaction. That certainly applies to my own work, where events have oftentimes proved me to be wrong as much as right. It has been farmers, in other words, and not the

currents of intellectual fashion or the prescriptions of policy, who have forced me to play explanatory catch-up.

So, in the book I was interested to explore not just what policies do but also what they do not do—and my direction of explanatory travel is from the farm, farmer, farm household and village, to state institutions and policies, rather than the other way around. Seen from Bangkok, the epicentre of the nation and the home to all the country's ministries, rural development is very clearly a political matter; viewed from the rice paddy and the farmhouse, however, rural development is a matter of farming, and farming is early mornings, long days, hard work, heat, dirt and sweat. In my doctoral thesis, I opened with a quote from John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, which, unbidden, came back to me in writing this rejoinder: "The man who is more than his chemistry, walking on the earth, turning his plow point for a stone, dropping his handles to slide over an outcropping, kneeling in the earth to eat his lunch; that man who is more than his elements knows the land that is more than its analysis" ([1939] 1972, p. 117). Beautiful.

Michael writes that "it is astonishing how infrequently he invokes Bangkok by name" but, "named or not, Bangkok is always there in the picture" and that "picture is from the perspective of the countryside". This completely captures what I sought to do, and this explains why politics recedes. Of course, someone else, without my biographical and disciplinary baggage and methodological predilections would have asked different questions, posed to different people, in different ways and in different contexts.

Both Rodolphe and Michael wonder about the 'elsewhere'. For Rodolphe, this elsewhere is Malaysia; for Michael, it is Southern Thailand. They are testing the book's thesis against their knowledge and experiences of other places and contexts. Does the argument travel, in other words? At several points in his essay, Rodolphe gauges my arguments against his deep and long engagement with parallel debates and processes in Malaysia. Sometimes he finds them wanting, and at other times resonant. That is exactly as it should be. Like him, when I find myself in communes in peri-urban Hanoi, Hmong

villages in upland Laos, or settlements on Nepal's Terai, I find myself continually asking: how is this the same, how is it different, why, and with what consequences for human well-being? So, Thailand, Isan, 'my' villages, these households and individuals *are* exceptional; but this does not stop them also being exemplary. Michael is absolutely correct when he writes that my "formative experience of Isan [the Northeastern region] has shaped the sensibility that informs [my] writing about the Thai countryside ... [and] is hard to overlook". And I would add to this my employment between 1993 and 2013 in a mainstream geography department at Durham University in the UK with no Thai, let alone Southeast Asian expertise, and where there was no great interest in these sites as *places*, rather than just as countries where processes come to rest and do their best and worst.

For Rodolphe and Michael, respectively, the disciplinary gaps are maps and politics; the regional gaps, Malaysia and Southern Thailand; and the sectoral gaps, farming systems beyond wet rice and rubber. While Rodolphe asks whether the absence of maps in my book might mean that I consider them "old fashioned and irrelevant", Michael identifies in the absence of Southern material "an evident lack of familiarity with and perhaps of interest in the South". Just as I value a good map, I certainly *am* interested in the South, but Michael is correct in writing that I lack familiarity with the South, something I admit to in the book. But—and I hope this also comes through—I place great value on fieldwork and what emerges and is possible from simply *being there*. It keeps me honest, I think. It explains the worth I attach to the empirical and the discomfort I feel in the data-free zones that characterize some scholarship. It also explains the criticism I have received in the past (and still receive) that my work is not sufficiently theoretical. I have travelled through the South, and undertook some fieldwork there following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami (in Krabi and Phang-nga); but I have not *been there* in a deeper, more profound and substantive sense.

That said, I am writing this reply during the COVID-19 pandemic that has compromised all sorts of research and made 'being there' impossible, at least for me. In virtually interviewing forty-four

migrants variously situated across Bangladesh, Laos, Myanmar, Singapore and Thailand, my co-researchers and I have been surprised at the quality of the information the approach has generated. I sense that I am also due for a methodological rethink.

Towards the end of his review, Michael raises three further critical issues. One concerns the structure and presentation of the book. He laments the “textbook-like division of chapters into numbered sections and subsections”, writing that “the fine argument central to *More Than Rural* deserves better”. Second, he seems perplexed why I periodically “pause to assure readers of the relevance of the Thai case to other parts of Southeast Asia, to Asia more broadly and to ‘the global South’”. Finally, he wonders why there are not more Thai language sources in the bibliography. The first is my fault; perhaps it is a result of teaching for many years and wishing to take the reader by the hand, guiding them through the argument. The third is my deficiency; my facility with reading Thai should be better than it is. The second, though, returns to my desire to highlight that Thailand is not just important in and of itself; I wanted to show in *More Than Rural* how and why it might also be counted as exemplary. This was one reason why I relegated ‘Thailand’ to the subtitle. I cling to the fanciful notion that people without any great interest in Thailand might be tempted to read my book and find matters of value therein.

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