

***Dynastic Democracy: Political Families of Thailand.* By Yoshinori Nishizaki. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2022. Hardcover: 308pp.**

In 2011, Yoshinori Nishizaki made a significant contribution to the field of Thai studies with his ground-breaking book: *Political Authority and Provincial Identity in Thailand: The Making of Banharn-buri*. The book examines the rise of rural-based politicians in Thailand using Banharn Silpa-archa's dominance over Suphan Buri Province (also known as Banharn-buri) as the case study. With a wealth of data gathered in the course of his seven-year ethnographic fieldwork in the province, Nishizaki's book was both insightful and compelling. A decade on, he has produced yet another major work that is poised to become an important resource for anyone interested in modern Thai politics: *Dynastic Democracy: Political Families of Thailand*.

Motivated by the case of Banharn-buri (pp. xii–xiii), Nishizaki endeavours to shed light on the evolution of “dynastic democracy”—defined as “a subtype of democracy where the ruling elites are drawn chiefly from political families” (p. 3)—in Thailand since the 1932 revolution up until the June 2020 by-election in Lampang Province. He reinterprets the country's political history through the prism of patrimonial ties, arguing that the seemingly endless struggles of pro-democracy forces against military authoritarianism are actually “struggles for dominance between two main types of elite families, both of which stifle representative democracy: commoner political families and old-guard upper-class families tied to the Chakri dynasty” (p. xi). To support his argument, Nishizaki draws on an array of Thai materials, ranging from cremation volumes to personal asset records made public by the National Anti-Corruption Commission, to uncover the consanguineous and affinal ties that link numerous political figures together. In doing so, he identifies more than 700 political clans at the national level and the members of parliament associated with them, and demonstrates, often graphically, how intertwined and pervasive these clans are in the political landscape. The findings confirm Nishizaki's categorization of Thailand as a dynastic democracy (for instance, 41 per cent of all the elected MPs up to 2,000 came from political families) as well as his observation that, due to the concentration of parliamentary seats in a narrow range of kinship networks, “the more democracy has taken root [in Thailand] as a form, the less representative it has become in substance” (p. 11).

In his argument concerning the struggle between the two types of elite families, Nishizaki first discusses the survival of princely and bureaucratic families after the fall of the old regime in 1932. He points out that the very people who ended the absolute monarchy largely hailed from such families, causing them to make compromises that ultimately enabled the familial character of the pre-1932 state to persist and taint the new regime (Chapter Two). Subsequently, when the conservatives made a comeback in the late 1950s, their family ties provided a strong foundation for what would soon evolve into a powerful monarchical network (Chapter Three). Despite their small numbers, members of this network, many of whom are from princely and bureaucratic families, wield considerable influence in the country and have become a counterforce to politicians from commoner families, especially since the early 1970s. Having access to vital resources, including guns and vote canvassers, the latter have achieved growing dominance in the political system through elections, thereby posing a direct threat to the former who often react by adopting destructive and undemocratic solutions. This has resulted in Thailand's unique dynastic democracy, which alternates between electoral dynasticism and military authoritarianism (Chapter Six).

Dynastic Democracy is a fascinating book. Nishizaki's reinterpretation of the entire period of modern Thai political history through a family-based paradigm represents an admirable endeavour to break away from a very limited set of approaches that have long shaped our understanding of Thailand's political dynamics. His book, in this sense, injects a breath of fresh air into the field of Thai studies. Another strength of the book is that it is based on the largest and most comprehensive dataset ever collected on Thai political families. It should therefore be able to serve countless scholars in the future as a valuable source of genealogical information on various prominent families in the country, ranging from established ones like the Panyarachuns and the Sarasins to newer ones like the Chidchobs, the Buranupakons and the Harnsawats.

Despite its substantial theoretical and empirical contributions, however, Nishizaki's *Dynastic Democracy* still has certain shortcomings. For example, the book is ambiguous in its use of some key terms, such as "commoner-capitalist family", while its definitions of "political families" (p. 4) and "bureaucratic families" (p. 18) are excessively broad, especially in terms of their timeframe. Another weakness is that when trying to support his claim that the people

who overthrew the absolute monarchy were “half-hearted, lukewarm revolutionaries” (pp. 83–84) because they were part of the old-guard families, he does so simply by outlining the kinship networks that bound them to numerous princes and royalist figures at the time, which is not enough to support the claim. Nishizaki stops short of demonstrating how familial ties translated into sympathy for political rivals. They happened to be related, but as is well known, correlation and causation are two different things. There are also several historical details that run counter to Nishizaki’s argument, but are left out of the book. He does not explain, for instance, how the political oppression following the Bowaradet rebellion or King Prajadhipok’s abdication fit into his argument concerning the leniency of the new regime’s leaders. Lastly, apart from a few dozens of influential families that are discussed at great length in the main chapters, the book does not provide a detailed dataset in the appendix, or even a list of the political families identified, along with their respective members who held public office.

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