

Rice Politics in Southeast Asia: Legacies of the Green Revolution.
By Jamie S. Davidson. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press,
2026. Ebook: 310pp.

The Green Revolution in Southeast Asia has been the subject of much debate and controversy, ranging from praise for its role in ensuring food security to condemnation of its environmental destruction and its contribution to indebtedness among rural communities. Jamie Davidson offers a refreshing look at the reasons why rice is considered a “political crop” and why food security in Southeast Asia is so dependent on rice security. Indeed, all rice-growing countries in Southeast Asia have been strongly influenced by the successes of the early Green Revolution technological progress in rice production—short-statured modern rice varieties grown with improved seeds dependent on chemical fertilizers, proper water management and the use of synthetic pesticides—and conditioned to believe that this model could continue in perpetuity and be applied to a geographically and politically diverse region.

Rice Politics in Southeast Asia traces the lingering influence of the 1960s and 1970s, when rice security improved, when the rice sector faced declining productivity and self-sufficiency and when the region lost its comparative advantage. However, the assertion that “no *successful* Green Revolution, no durable rice protectionism” (p. 6) is something of an oversimplification, as there are other extenuating factors for the sector being protected by the state. Rice remains a staple food with strong cultural legacies dating back to past Southeast Asian civilizations, and rice sufficiency remains a political imperative that governments in the region feel they must protect.

Davidson documents the key outcomes of the Green Revolution: increasing overall rice production, reducing rural poverty and enabling political stability. But, as he notes, the latter accentuated more authoritarian governance in the region. In fairness, Davidson gives a balanced view of how these outcomes have contributed, positively or otherwise, to economic transformation. Extensive evidence from international and domestic studies shows that the Green Revolution has unequivocally reduced hunger and poverty, although malnutrition remains a critical issue in Southeast Asia. The concept of “production nationalism” expounded in the book is important when discussing the political economy of rice. However,

Davidson devotes too little time to considering why political leaders in importing countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines continue to espouse 100 per cent self-sufficiency targets despite ample evidence that this cannot be achieved. It would have been interesting if Davidson had examined why Malaysia in the 1980s and 1990s decided not to pursue 100 per cent self-sufficiency but aimed for the lower bar of 65 per cent, which gradually rose to 85 per cent.

The Introduction is a mastery of facts from diverse sources and perspectives, interspersed with the author's (often original) interpretations, and it gives an excellent, holistic overview of the topic. Chapter One provides information on the pre-Green Revolution period in Southeast Asia, while Chapter Two contains the hard facts on how the Green Revolution was experienced across the region. Chapters Three to Five, focusing on Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines, are also organized chronologically, beginning with the immediate post-Green Revolution period. These chapters provide captivating reading as Davidson charts the escalating tensions between single-minded government efforts to expand rice production and the shifting preferences of Western donors in the 2010s.

The author's decision in this book to focus on the political aspects of rice-importing countries is noteworthy, as there is already extensive literature on the technologies behind the Green Revolution's successes in such countries. The politics and policies of rice-importing countries deserve attention, especially how the interaction of geography, technology and politics perpetuates an import-dependency that disincentivizes farmers from improving productivity. The role of fertilizer subsidies and price guarantees is ably explained and makes for fascinating reading, as does the argument that protectionism offers lessons for the future, especially given concerns about rice farming's contribution to global warming and the sustainability of an ageing population of rice farmers.

The conclusion defends the role that the rice economy has played in influencing the political and economic systems in several Southeast Asian countries. Yet it seems to have missed out on the impact of some strong trends influencing rice's importance, such as the increasing recognition of nutrition security, demand for more nutrition-rich food, regenerative farming practices that advocate mixed and inter-cropping and the rise of a more environmentally conscious populace. The conclusion would have been richer with a

discussion of these trends, which Southeast Asian leaders consider key to the sector's future.

Overall, Davidson's work is a valuable contribution to the existing literature on Southeast Asia's Green Revolution in rice production. It neither advocates nor condemns, and it offers several fresh and justified perspectives. It is a worthwhile read and should be recommended to anyone interested in regional food security beyond mere production. It offers many pointers and lessons for the future, and one is reminded of Santayana's famous quip that "those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it".

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