

The ongoing investigation of massive official corruption, dating back decades, underlines the chronic deficiency of the Philippine state in precisely these capacities.

Recent events question Claudio's more benign view of corruption. The 2025 trillion-peso flood control scams, enabled by executive and legislative corruption of the budget process, have provoked public outrage at elite capture of state power and resources. The view that the Philippine state must first become rich and strong before it can become honest appears illusory, an implausible scenario—until voter “good governance” pressure can loosen the dynastic grip on the state.

Informed by Claudio's solid credentials as academic and activist, the book broadens our understanding of the complex interplay between macroeconomic policy, state capacity and corruption. His views will invite controversy. But this questioning of entrenched governance narratives is welcome and necessary to promote continuing discussion on alternative pathways to Philippine development.

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Bangkok Transformed: An Economic History, 1820–1950. By Porphant Ouyyanont, edited by Chris Baker. NUS Press, 2026. xvi+276 pp.

This book is both a memorial and a useful textbook on the economic foundations of modern Bangkok. A memorial because it is the last and, at his death, uncompleted work of the foremost economic historian of Thailand, Porphant Ouyyanont. Like an unfinished symphony, it has been creatively completed by the masterful and

judicious hand of another veteran Thai historian, Chris Baker. The result is a stimulating, elegant read and a most welcome work of reference, combining much that is otherwise scattered into one nifty and, at 200 pages, most readable volume. Books on Bangkok can be impressionistic and wistful, but here is a book that looks to the heart of the matter and reveals the underlying dynamics, processes and structures that have formed the bedrock of those colourful impressions. The book describes the economic factors in the transformation of Bangkok from a small Southeast Asian riverside, pagoda-lined port polity into a bustling, distended cosmopolis plugged into the channels and arteries of a colonially oriented global system of trade and unforgiving international markets.

Periodized from 1820 until 1950, the former and latter bookends are less examined than the more energetic developments of the 1880s to the 1930s. Change followed the “pattern of the high-colonial period” (p. 1) but with unique factors of geography and politics producing an idiosyncratic outcome; the argument is a familiar one to the specialist refreshingly told, stressing the impact of three factors: the rice economy, the role of the Chinese and the transformation of the Siamese monarchy into a pioneer capitalist enterprise. Indeed, it is in the latter that the book’s argument is at its most original.

The book is divided into eight chapters, each of which draws on work previously published by Porphant. The first sets the scene by considering the city’s changing scale and scope and examines the well-known debates over its population size before its first surveys in the 1883 Postal Census and the first official census in 1909. From the 1937/38 census, a snapshot of the city’s ethnic composition, land use and occupational landscape is discussed. This is followed by a chapter on Chinese immigration and the effect this had on the labour market and the rate of development in the capital. Next is a brief but valuable chapter on the development of the city’s administration, its boundaries only first delimited in 1892, followed by a chapter on the city’s transformation from a so-called Venice of the East to a land-based city defined by roads and traffic, which was already causing congestion in the first decades of the twentieth

century. Two chapters are dedicated to the role of the monarchy as a pioneer of capitalist entrepreneurship—first in the form of the Privy Purse Bureau and then, from 1932, as the Crown Property Bureau—and the only source of capital large enough to make a substantial contribution to economic diversification. The story of the founding of the Siam Commercial Bank and the Siam Cement Company has been told before, and anyone familiar with it will have been a little dissatisfied with the neglect of the substantial contribution made by foreign capital in these ventures. This book corrects this oversight and provides a fascinating and largely Danish perspective to the origins of these still extant companies. The final two chapters take the reader into the 1930s and 1940s and consider the city's development, from the intensification of foreign trade, as a commercial and transport hub, to its innovative and yet rather unplanned infrastructure, and the breadth, limits and ultimate failure of industrialization in comparison with its colonized neighbours. The reasons for this failure are multifaceted, but arguably they lie primarily with the lack of interest by the absolute monarchy in diversification, the government's conservative approach to the nation's finances, and a prioritization of "stability of the state" over economic development. The seventh chapter includes a welcome section on the history of the port of Bangkok, a hitherto neglected topic.

Much of the book will be familiar to economic historians of Thailand. The book's uniqueness, however, lies in its gathering of what has previously been rather scattered into one volume with a singular and important focus. While economic histories of Thailand have inevitably centred upon Bangkok, none have been limited to Bangkok specifically. Moreover, the book brings full circle Porphant's academic journey, which began with a doctoral thesis on Bangkok and ended with this final project. The other strength, which may at first appear to be a weakness, is the ending of the narrative at 1950, especially for those who place importance on the age of industrialization in the 1960s. The book's focus on the period from 1820 to 1950 helps the reader appreciate the important role of this earlier period in laying the foundations for what came after, from the

origins of its preponderant retail sector (pp. 20–22) to its perennial traffic challenges (pp. 73–95). For the non-specialist, the book will be a useful and easy-to-read introduction to Bangkok's deeper foundations without requiring any prior knowledge of the context.

The book includes plentiful, but never excessive, use of tables, which both adequately explain and intrigue. The use of extended quotations from contemporary reports is never overwhelming, as they provide fascinating first-hand descriptions of the economic and, to some extent, social situation at the time. This helps give the text a vitality and maintains interest across the statistical tables. A variety of contemporary maps assist the reader, although these disappear towards the end of the book, where a final cartographical iteration of Bangkok in 1950 might have been beneficial.

Had Porphant lived, he might well have been encouraged to write two further volumes examining the two subsequent periods of significant transformation described at the start of the book, and thus create a most useful and captivating trilogy. The book perhaps sets up the challenge for Porphant's successors to take on this task. As a stand-alone volume, it works well in providing the reader with a valuable introduction to the economic foundations that shaped the modern city, and it will be of enormous use to lecturers and undergraduates, to specialists of other colonial-era cities seeking comparative perspective, and the general reader interested in Bangkok's origins.

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