

The Thai Village Economy in the Past. By Chatthip Nartsupha. Translated by Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit. First published 1984. Reprint ed. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999. 131 pp.

How wonderful to have this classic work available in English! Originally published in Thai in 1984, this book, *The Thai Village Economy in the Past*, catalysed a generation of scholars in disciplines ranging from history to anthropology. Even today, this book continues to shape the work not merely of academics, but also a wide range of activists. Thanks to this polished translation by Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, together with Silkworm Press, a wider international audience will now be able to enter these debates. Included in this English edition is an "Afterword" by Baker and Pasuk which provides an excellent overview of the intellectual trajectory of Chatthip's scholarship and its wide-ranging impact on others.

Chatthip's writings are widely read and have been extremely influential. As Baker and Pasuk note, Chatthip's research has spurred three schools of study: "the political economy group at Chulalongkorn University, the school of village study based on a cultural approach, and a new social and cultural study of Tai communities across the region" (p. 116). Chatthip was trained as an economist in the United States, and his dissertation was on the impact of foreign trade and foreign finance on Thailand's economic development in 1959–65. However, despite his American training, his approach to economics was more continental. His interests were at once humane and humanitarian, grounded in a concern with the quality of life of ordinary people. His first major work in English, *The Political Economy of Siam*, written and edited with Suthy Prasartset, was a trailblazer. Using a variety of English and Thai archival sources, Chatthip and Suthy offered a characterization of the overall political economy of nineteenth century Thai society. Included in their historical reconstruction was an effort to understand the condition of peasants and slaves; they even included a few early archival sources on the condition of women.

In *The Thai Village Economy in the Past*, Chatthip narrows his focus from understanding the overall political economy to unearthing agrar-

ian life, daring to supplement archival evidence with fieldwork and oral histories. Just how innovative this methodological approach was can be inferred from remarks made by another pioneering scholar Phya Snuman Rajadhon of a generation before, who explained that his account of peasant life was not based upon firsthand fieldwork but rather on “the verbal accounts of many other friends who have seen farming and have been kind enough to explain farming to me” (1961, p. 3). By contrast, despite his own health issues, Chatthip travelled to numerous villages, seeking out knowledgeable village elders for their perspectives on past and present. Both the questions he addressed and the interdisciplinary methodologies he used were path-breaking. I am among the generation whose interest in and approach to agrarian history were shaped by Chatthip’s innovativeness.

The book is short (the actual text is only seventy-seven pages), yet its arguments hold wide-ranging implications. In the first two chapters, Chatthip describes his interpretation of traditional Thai villages, noting their transformation from “primordial village communities” to “subsistence village economies” under Thai feudalism. The two subsequent chapters considers the impact of the Bowring Treaty of 1855. While Chatthip describes the rise of a

... parasitic form of capitalist development in the central region, he argues that the northern, southern and northeastern regions of Thailand resisted capitalist encroachments and remained independent subsistence economies well into the twentieth century. By shifting the traditional focus away from the urban centers to the villages, Chatthip argues, as Baker and Pasuk summarize, that the village “has its own society and culture which are profoundly different from those of state and city. (p. 121)

In their “Afterword”, Baker and Pasuk include a well-considered summary of the major counter-arguments that were inspired by this book. As they note, I am among those who have disagreed with Chatthip’s interpretations. To some extent our differences are those of emphases. Chatthip’s concern is to highlight the independence of villages from the state; my emphasis has been on the impact of state penetration on village life. Although we share the view that an understanding of the means

and relations of production provides the crucial scaffolding for understanding the political economy of a society, we highlight different evidence to support our interpretations. Consistent with the true scholar that he is, Chatthip provides some of the evidence that I would use to argue against him. Thus Chatthip provides considerable evidence for artisanal specialization and local, regional, and even international trade; however, he argues that this production and trade were part of a subsistence economy intended for use and not for profit (see Bowie 1992 for a counter-argument). I would suggest that Chatthip downplays intra-village class stratification. Thus, although he admits the presence of landless villagers, he assumes their plight was not serious (p. 30). Similarly, he recognizes the presence of slavery, but argues that Thai *sakdina* society cannot be considered a slave society since “there were no large plantations or mines using slave labor” and furthermore, they were treated “like members of the family” (pp. 30–31; see Bowie 1996 for a counter-argument). Less well supported is his assertion that there were “no landowners in the countryside like the lords of the manor in Europe who managed the cultivation on the land under their responsibility” (p. 14). I would counter-argue that there were consequential inequalities in land ownership. Similarly, I would highlight his evidence regarding the existence of exploitation and disagree with his conclusion that the state only exercised “external domination” (p. 14). Thus, scholars such as myself argue that Chatthip’s historical portrait is seductive, but overly romanticized.

These debates on determining the historical character of the Thai political economy carry over into other debates. One set of debates centres on whether or not Thai history has unique attributes that have contributed to its particular trajectory of development. Chatthip takes the position that Thai feudalism was very different from European feudalism. Unlike Europe, Chatthip argues that the traditional Thai state was “not an organisation involved in production, only in taxation” (p. 75). Furthermore, he suggests that Thailand did not have an urban bourgeoisie, arguing, “In Thai history, there were only two lead characters, the institutions of state and village. All other parts were supporting roles” (p. 75).

A related set of debates centres on the extent of change in the past and the historical agents of social change. In Chattip's view, village life underwent little change. Because traders and artisans were also villagers who "grew paddy as their main occupation and did not move to settle outside the village", Chattip argues that the Thai feudal economy "was thus an economy with no trading towns", foreclosing the emergence of "a local bourgeois class" (pp. 33–34). He suggests that the lack of local landlords "had the effect of allowing the village production system to fall into a backward and undeveloped state, remaining unchanged from the era of the primordial village" (pp. 14–15). Influenced by Marx's writings on the Asiatic mode of production, Chattip argues that historical change originated from outside the village (p. 73) since villagers were deprived "of the leadership of a reforming landlord class or progressive bourgeoisie" (p. 75).

Chattip's emphasis on the independence of villages from town has encouraged debates about traditional village beliefs and the role of agrarian values in shaping peasant responses to the encroachment of capitalism and the state. Chattip argues that traditional village beliefs were inherently egalitarian and "buttressed the strong internal bonds, self rule, subsistence economy, and identity of the village community" (p. 38). In his view, village beliefs have served as the ideological basis for disputes with the state (p. 42). In contrast to ancestor worship, Chattip suggests that Buddhism was a mechanism to "explain the legitimacy of the state to rule and extract resources from the village" (p. 41).

Although these various questions concern Thai agrarian history, their answers relate to contemporary discussions about the future directions of Thai development. Thus, in addition to catalysing interest in the historical roots of peasant political consciousness and ideology, Chattip's emphasis on the integrity of village culture has provided the intellectual underpinning for the "community culture" approach current among many contemporary NGO (non-governmental organization) activists. His belief that Thai village culture has unique attributes has catalysed a growing interest in determining transnational commonalities across ethnic Tai. Discussions regarding the historical role of the bourgeoisie have spurred debates about the contemporary role the urban classes

should play. Chatthip hopes for the emergence of “a progressive bourgeoisie” to work with the peasantry to “overthrow the parasitic capitalism that develops from exploitation of the countryside, develop industrial capitalism, and allow the countryside to remain in its old state” (p. 58). Thus, from anthropologists to historians, academics to activists, Chattip Nartsupha’s book continues to provoke research and lively debate. It has served as a model of scholarship for reconstructing agrarian history; its provocative arguments have invited its many readers to engage the evidence and consider alternatives. With this book now available in English, Baker and Pasuk have made it possible for a broader audience to now infuse a transnational life into what began as an exploration into Thai village history.

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