



Book Review

Extracting Development: Contested Resource Frontiers in Mainland Southeast Asia. *Oliver Tappe and Simon Rowedder (eds)*. ISEAS Publishing, Singapore, 2022, pp. 271 + ix. ISBN 978-9-815-01119-7 (pbk).

Over the past few decades, Mainland Southeast Asia has undergone massive social and economic change. No doubt, one of the main transformations that has occurred has been the emergence of resource frontiers throughout the region for primary goods and energy. As with all resource frontiers, those that have burst onto the scene in the region have done so through a sudden convergence of conditions that few would have predicted and that are necessarily unstable and uncertain. This characteristic instability and diversity of resource frontiers is what makes this period particularly fraught, as it brings great potential for improvements in social and economic well-being, while also being shadowed by the prospect of fleeting booms that threaten to fade as quick as they came, leaving behind ecological and social wreckage. Given the tensions that surround resource frontiers, they represent profound challenges for social scientists seeking to gain grasp over highly dynamic conjunctures in settings quite hostile to research. It is against this backdrop that Oliver Tappe and Simon Rowedder have assembled a collection of valuable studies aimed at explicating this dizzyingly complex scenario in the region. Titled *Extracting Development: Contested Resource Frontiers in Mainland Southeast Asia*, this volume contains 11 chapters, including an introduction, that collectively deliver a compelling story of staggering social and ecological disruption and the enduring relevance of the frontier concept for understanding how and why certain places become subject to frenetic bursts of development.


As explained in an excellent introductory chapter, the frontier remains a valuable heuristic for parsing rapid change in peripheral regions like Mainland Southeast Asia, the term's heavy baggage from its Turnerian associations notwithstanding. What the frontier means in this contemporary context is difficult to pin down, however. It is not a simple matter of remoteness or empty land awaiting settlement. Instead, Tappe and Rowedder are keen to specify that the frontier is defined by its relationality. That is, the frontier is remote but always and necessarily accessible to movements of people and capital; it is marginal but in ways that make it central to the dynamics of capitalist growth; it is a space of untapped abundance only in the sense that nature's riches can be profitably exploited and plugged into flows of circulation. What this all adds up to is a concept of the frontier as a dynamic assemblage oriented around the exploitation of contested resources. It is a frontier concept that builds upon work by Anna Tsing (2003; 2011), Keith Barney (2009), and Michael Eilenberg and Jason Cons (2019). Thus, the volume's different essays share an emphasis on 'frontierization', specifically, the production of frontiers *as such* by myriad casts of agents and institutions. One of the core contributions of this volume is the consistency with which its authors hew to this notion of the frontier while charting the combinations of top-down and bottom-up forces transforming frontier spaces. Mainland Southeast Asia's resource frontiers are not areas of passive conquest and plunder.

The chapters in this volume cover a wide range of geographies and topics. Represented are riverine issues along the Mekong in Thailand (Surimas & Middleton) and the

Laos-China border (Ponce), agrarian resource frontiers in Thailand (Fujita; Rowedder) and the Laos-Vietnam borderland (Cole), land contestation in Laos (Suhardiman & Kramp), mining frontiers in Laos (Tappe) and Myanmar (Mierzejewski), and legal-institutional transformations in Cambodia (Chheang) and Myanmar (Htun). In each of these settings, we find that communities in the resource frontiers of Mainland Southeast Asia pulsate with grassroots mobilization in defense of local resources and livelihoods, though familiar patterns of exclusion and marginalization can be readily evinced. Indeed, these chapters show most of all, the ways that the opening of new resource frontiers accelerates and intensifies the more typical forces of change that have never, in fact, overlooked these regions. As Tappe makes explicit in his historically rich chapter and others reveal with varying degrees of emphasis, frontiers have been an ever-present feature of Mainland Southeast Asia. What differs in the current conjuncture is the pace and scale of change, which ignites deep anxieties and sharpens social division between contesting groups.

In addition, what differs today is the ascendance of China, whose presence figures prominently in many of this volume's chapters (see Surimas & Middleton; Rowedder; Ponce; Chheang; Htun; Mierzejewski). Given their rooting in the various Southeast Asian nations studied here, the authors of this volume consistently frame China as a somewhat overbearing neighbour. Chinese traders and investors make frequent appearances in the chapters, though they are never quoted or given prominence and are usually mentioned as an irritant or obstacle, and always as a foreign presence to be managed. The wary stance toward China is perhaps understandable, given the immense size of the Chinese market for Southeast Asian goods of all sorts, the scale of potential investment capital to emanate from China, the persistent press of Chinese-controlled trade networks into the region, and Beijing's ambition to assert its geopolitical dominance in the region and secure vital raw materials. Nonetheless, the Chinese presence and position vis-à-vis these frontier spaces are given very short shrift in the chapters, despite the fact that, for better and worse, as the chapters show, Mainland Southeast Asia's resource frontiers are intimately tied to the northern behemoth.

The chapters contained in this volume should be useful for many researchers with regional emphases in Asia and who are interested in grounded, site-based qualitative social-science research in extractive regions. The primary audience for these chapters, therefore, will surely be scholars of Southeast Asia's extraction zones, as the empirical richness of this type of research will be most accessible to them. It is in this light that I offer a mild critique of this volume. The extremely narrow site-based focus of the chapters begs for a concluding chapter that zooms out to capture the whole regional scene and ventures one or more theoretical insights drawn from the experiences of these frontier spaces. After all, the utility of the frontier concept is its applicability across sites of capitalist development. That said, area specialists will glean much insight from these carefully wrought studies and they merit close consideration for inclusion in undergraduate and especially graduate curricula with a Southeast Asia area focus.

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