

the left, a man who did not fear to confront or challenge the existing political or social order. Some saw him as a troublemaker, while others admired his courage and intellectual capacity to address pressing issues.

The book is a revision of Ito's dissertation, and at times reads as such with an excess of detail. The book would have benefited from actively bringing in more recent work on Buddhist modernity into the analysis. Overall, this study of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu is an excellent contribution to Buddhist Studies, and it will contribute significantly to the field of modern Buddhist studies.

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Thailand's political peasants: Power in the modern rural economy

By ANDREW WALKER

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Few scholars have perhaps done more than Andrew Walker in the last few decades to enhance our understanding of rural politics and society in Thailand. Drawing on his firsthand observations in one small village (which he calls Ban Tiam) of Chiang Mai Province, Walker makes another important and timely contribution in this book, offering a provocative analysis of profound political and socioeconomic changes that have engulfed rural Thailand.

Walker's argument is that the Thai peasantry is not what it used to be or what many observers of Thailand think it is. Most peasants no longer fit the stereotyped images of dirt-poor, risk-averse people eking out precarious subsistence lives on the margins of Thailand's capitalist economy. They have now escaped absolute poverty by diversifying into, or experimenting with, risky profit-maximising cash cropping and contract farming, and by actively seeking temporary employment in non-agricultural sectors. They have become 'middle-income peasants' by adopting 'economically diversified and spatially dispersed livelihood strategies in which agricultural and non-agricultural pursuits are intertwined' (p. 75).

According to Walker, the state has played a pivotal part in this transformation by subsidising, rather than taxing, rural economy, as exemplified by the policies of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra. It is true, Walker notes, that low agricultural productivity and 'relative' rural poverty remain serious problems, but that does not change the fact that state policies have by and large benefited the peasantry. The peasants naturally want the 'subsidising state' to continue to do what it has done for their livelihoods or to do even more. Their new political aspirations are reflected in the changing pattern of their interactions with the state. Instead of rebelling against the state or trying to keep it at bay as they once did, today's peasants seek to be tied to the state, so that they can maximise benefits from it in the form of construction projects, cash price subsidies, bank credits, health care, and so forth. Particularly

illuminating in this respect is Walker's 'thick description', in chapter 6, of seemingly apolitical festivals, whereby villagers use the language of local community to make themselves appear eligible for state grants.

The picture that emerges from this book is that the state is now increasingly compelled to address the multiple needs of the middle-income peasantry — 'a major new player in the Thai political landscape' (p. 5). No politician, party, or institution that composes the state can afford to ignore this player; the tail no longer wags the dog. Through such lenses we can better understand Thaksin's resilient rural popularity, the emergence of the pro-peasant redshirt movement, and the resounding electoral victory of the Phuea Thai Party led by Thaksin's sister, Yingluck.

Although some scholars might wince at Walker's use of the label 'peasants' to describe relatively well-to-do agricultural producers, this minor issue hardly detracts from the quality of his book. The book represents a refreshing departure from much of the existing literature that depict Thai (or Southeast Asian) peasants either as poorly educated pliant masses susceptible to elite manipulations (e.g., vote-buying) or as morally outraged Lilliputians who overtly or covertly resist encroachments of the capitalist state. Walker also challenges some abiding assumptions in Southeast Asian studies that the state is an exploitative Goliath bent on extracting surplus from the countryside. This book is particularly welcome in post-Thaksin Thailand, where the political consciousness and behaviour of peasants remain poorly understood or even grossly misunderstood.

To quibble, this book leaves a few questions unanswered. First, Walker does not give a precise definition of 'middle-income peasantry', leaving the issue of who does, and does not belong to, this important class rather unclear. He shows that the average household yearly income in Ban Tiam (as of 2009) is 125,000 baht, substantially above the poverty line of 50,000 baht in northern Thailand (p. 62), but this data does not seem very helpful since it includes the incomes of affluent commercial elites who constitute 20 per cent of the village population. If, say, a landless household earns 80,000 baht a year (much lower than the village average, but more than 50 per cent above the regional poverty line), would it be considered as a 'middle income' household, or as part of the 'poor' or 'near poor', under which Walker subsumes landless labourers? How typical would that family be in Ban Tiam? To address these questions, Walker could have supplied a breakdown of incomes for all Ban Tiam's households. Also wanting is the data on landholding size and land tenancy in the village, which clearly affect peasant household incomes. These data would help us see more clearly where some 60 per cent of Ban Tiam's village households, which Walker claims belong to the 'middle-income' bracket, stand economically.

Second, Walker's discussion in chapter 3 seems to be less than a good fit with his main argument. Here, he argues, taking an all-inclusive view of political power, that offerings to protective spirits are one manifestation of political peasants' attempts to domesticate external powers. This is an interesting analysis, and Walker shows his great talent as a seasoned ethnographer, but presumably the peasants have been engaging with the spirits all along, long before they attained middle-income status. To what extent, then, is their behaviour the outcome of their new economic positions?

Finally, Walker's interpretation that middle-income peasants constitute a political base of support for the pro-Thaksin redshirt movement and Yingluck's Phuea

Thai Party (pp. 4–6, 222–3) is not entirely convincing. If middle-income peasants are sharply divided in their assessment of Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai Party (pp. 205–14) — this is another valuable part of the book that challenges the received wisdom that Chiang Mai is Thaksin's stronghold — why can't we logically expect them to be equally divided over the redshirt movement and the Phuea Thai Party? Walker's analysis here contradicts his other assertions that 'local social life is simply too complex for it to be used as a one-dimensional template for political action' (p. 198) and that '[t]here is no ready-made social basis for political mobilisation' (p. 218).

These quibbles aside, Walker's book will most likely change the way many specialists and observers of Thailand look at Thai peasants and stimulate much-needed serious intellectual debate on the Thai peasantry. This is a valuable addition to the literature indeed.

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Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the fate of South Vietnam

By EDWARD MILLER

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Southeast Asia endured a turbulent political transition from the colonial to the postcolonial order. Nowhere was that turbulence bumpier than in Vietnam. Current Vietnamese orthodoxy defines the conflict the rest of the world calls the Vietnam War as a struggle for national independence from foreign domination that ran from 1930 to 1975. During that protracted conflict, something happened that did not occur anywhere else in the region: a state disappeared from the regional system. Some postcolonial states were artificially forged, i.e. Malaysia. Some were created by irreconcilable differences, vis. the Republic of Singapore. But only the Republic of Vietnam, more commonly known as South Vietnam, did not survive the Cold War and decolonisation periods to take a place in the Southeast Asia of ASEAN. English-language studies of the Vietnam War remain focused, by a large majority, on various aspects of the American experience of that war. It would be wrong to say they ignore the destruction of their ally, but fair to argue that many scholars tended, for a long time, to dismiss South Vietnam in terms that often approached caricature. But times change, passions fade, new generations pose new questions. Literatures evolve. Recent scholarship, challenging an orthodox American interpretation that, broadly speaking, denounced every aspect of the Vietnam experience as avoidable disaster, is now at last complicating our understanding of the Republic of Vietnam. A focal point for that trajectory is the man who created the state, and whose overthrow and assassination marked, to many, the most significant turning point in its story: Ngo Dinh Diem, founding president of the Republic of Vietnam.