

Editorial Foreword

Agriculture has not only been fundamental in shaping Southeast Asia's landscape, economy and social organisation over the *longue durée*, but is still very important today — both economically, for the region's countries are among the world's major cash crop producers, and politically, as the frequent source of conflict between rural communities, national governments and transnational companies. Reflecting the continuing relevance of land use and agrarian change and renewed academic interest in it, this issue of the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* features six research articles that examine relevant themes in both historical and contemporary perspective. The articles highlight significant analogies and continuities between the colonial era and the present times with regard to land dispossession, the conflict between customary land tenure *versus* land titles, the aversion of central states to shifting cultivation by ethnic minorities and the consequences of cash crop substitution.

G. Roger Knight's opening article contextualises the nationalisation of Indonesia's sugar industry, established in colonial times, in the changing politics of the Indonesian Republic's early years — from independence in 1949 to the mass murders of peasant activists and labour unionists in the mid-1960s that were the prelude to Suharto's New Order. Focusing on East Java's Brantas valley, which was opened up for sugar cane cultivation in the 1880s and in 1965–66 was a theatre of extreme political violence, Knight weaves a multifaceted narrative where agricultural change, farmers' and workers' mobilisation, and trends in alimentation converged by the 1960s in the nationalisation of the sugar industry, which 'effectively lined up the army with the interests of the sugar factories and ... pitted it against PKI-linked trade unions and peasant organisations'. After the annihilation of the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia; PKI), the army, in league with Sino-Indonesian entrepreneurs, consolidated their hold over Java's sugar industry with the aim of exploiting the growing domestic demand for white sugar, emblematic of modern consumer taste. But 'agrarian factors in Java itself rendered the "victory" of state and army ... a pyrrhic one,' writes Knight, for 'in relation to other crops, "the opportunity cost" of growing cane for sale to the sugar factories was simply too high, especially for a regime like that of Suharto's which aimed to accommodate as well as coerce significant rural elites'.

Next, Danny Wong's article details an early case of indigenous opposition to land dispossession: the court case brought in 1910–11 by the Dusun (Kadazandusun) of Papar, on the North Borneo coast, against colonial encroachment. Although the Land Proclamation of 1903 had recognised customary land tenure by instituting individual title deeds, the Dusun people initially avoided claiming tenure and thus opened the way for land expropriation by rubber and railway companies. Neglected by the governing North Borneo Chartered Company, the Dusun eventually petitioned the High Commissioner and demanded compensation as well as the halting of the

desecration of communal graveyards by estate developers. The hearing held before the Judicial Commissioner in June–July 1911 ‘was one of the longest court cases in North Borneo at that time’. The Dusun were represented by a British lawyer who had been briefly employed by the Company and they also enjoyed the support of a Dutch priest from the local Catholic mission — the Dusun’s leader being himself a Catholic convert. The ruling was unsurprisingly in favour of the Company, but Wong argues that ‘the seriousness of the case ... was not lost on the Judicial Commissioner, who ... duly recommended that the rights of the natives regarding graveyards be respected and protected’ — an orientation reflected in the subsequent Land Ordinance of 1913, which marked a sort of moral victory for the Dusun.

The French too, like the British, instituted private landownership in Indochina by the beginning of the twentieth century. Mathieu Guérin challenges in his article the belief that Cambodian peasants were able to freely access new land by virtue of the customary practice of clearing forest plots for farming during the time of the French protectorate (1863–1953). Through the scrutiny of administrative reports, court records and tax registers concerning three districts in Kompong Thom province for the decade of the 1930s, Guérin demonstrates the existence of landless peasants as well as a ‘strong correlation between age and land access’. He classifies the province’s farmers at the time into three categories: a majority of average and affluent peasants, who also included some widowed and divorced women; a significant group of poor peasants, made up of landless farmers and those with very small plots of land; and a few with large landholdings. As a rule, men aged between 40 and 60 years ‘had more farm land than the younger ones and their rice fields were more extensive’. Accordingly, Guérin speaks of an ‘accepted gerontocracy’ in early twentieth-century rural Cambodia, as he argues that archival records contain no indication of intergenerational conflict among peasants despite the unequal distribution of land; nor did differences in land access and social stratification result in peasant rebellions as elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Resistance to the colonial state took instead the form of ‘large-scale tax evasion’ by Cambodian farmers.

Although French Indochina was by the 1930s a major producer of rubber, its cultivation never took off in colonial Laos. Yet over the past two decades there has been a boom in foreign-owned rubber plantations in Laos’s border provinces with China and Vietnam, whose dynamics are examined by Pinkaew Laungaramsri. In the pursuit of what she terms ‘frontier capitalism’ as a shortcut for the valorisation of national resources, the state faces, however, major dilemmas between land exploitation and environmental conservation, and between attracting transnational capital and disciplining it. The expansion of rubber cultivation in Laos has resulted in different agricultural practices adopted by Chinese companies along the northern frontier and Vietnamese companies along the southern frontier: ‘Through contract farming, northern Lao farmers are still landowners ... However, the large-scale land concessions and rubber plantations in the south have dramatically turned upland farmers into landless labourers.’ In order to defuse tensions over the expropriation of cultivated lands, unfair compensation and unstable employment conditions, local state agencies in southern Laos have been employing a ‘discourse of frontier development’ that reproduces the colonial bias against upland ethnic minorities who practise ‘backward’ agriculture and hence need to be ‘civilised’ by the central state.

Besides border areas, land disputes are increasingly frequent also in Southeast Asia's littoral regions as a result of the displacement of coastal-dwelling communities for beachfront property and tourism development. Magne Knudsen's article analyses the interplay of customary land tenure practices and state property law, and of early settlers and newcomers in the court cases over landownership that have proliferated since the 1990s in the municipality of Sibulan, in the Philippines' Negros Island. Like Java's Brantas valley, Negros' dense forest was cleared for sugar cane cultivation by the end of the nineteenth century and attracted immigrant farmers, but agricultural decline and land speculation after the Second World War caused them to move to unclaimed coastal lands and turn to fishing. Due to the recent appreciation in land values of littoral areas for tourism development, title-holders have been seeking legal 'ejection' of fishing families, who on their part resist eviction by claiming informal land tenure. Knudsen argues that, rather than suffering fragmentation, 'long-term settled coastal dwellers have been able to reproduce older kinds of localised relations and establish new ones that are important to them despite massive displacement pressure'. As a result, some fishing families 'continue to exercise considerable control' over disputed lands, especially when they are recognised as descendants of the 'original people of the place' or have forged alliances with rich newcomers.

In the final article, Stephen Acabado offers a historical and ethnographic analysis of the agricultural system of the Ifugao, in the Philippines' North Central Cordillera, in order 'to better understand agricultural ecology and relationships between the landscape and human organisation'. Dating back some 400 years and having undergone decline and outmigration in the second half of the twentieth century, the Ifugao have experienced in the last decade 'a revival of both tangible and intangible heritage' (e.g. agrarian rituals). The presence of terraced rice fields as well as swidden fields proves that shifting cultivation, rather than being an inferior subsistence strategy practised by culturally and technologically primitive peoples, constitutes in fact 'a complementary system', and that 'populations practising a combination of swiddening and intensive forms of cultivation demonstrate a risk-minimisation strategy'. The topographic characteristics of irrigated terraces, built on gentler slopes, and swidden fields, distributed on steeper gradients, as complementary elements of the Ifugao agricultural system are further underscored by factors such as production requirements, consumption needs and social status, implying a risk-minimising calculation on the farmers' part: 'The interrelatedness of the strategies employed by the Ifugao (and other upland populations in Southeast Asia),' concludes Acabado, 'challenges the unilineal model of agricultural intensification progressing from swidden to wetfield agriculture.'

It is fitting to note that several volumes have been published recently on land conflict and agrarian change, which will be examined in a forthcoming review article (one such volume, though, is reviewed in this issue). In this issue of the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, instead, Sally Percival Woods discusses in a review article scholarship that was occasioned by the fiftieth anniversary of the 1955 Bandung Conference. In addition, readers will find 16 monographs reviewed in the book review section.

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