

INTRODUCTION TO THE ISSUE

Governing Southeast Asia: New Perspectives on States and State-Society Relations

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THIS ISSUE DERIVES, IN large part, from a conference held at Sogang University on 25–26 May 2012. It was keynoted by James C. Scott, and three of the subsequent presentations very explicitly took elements of Professor Scott’s vast and influential corpus as their points of departure. As *TRaNS: Trans -Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* moves into its third year of publication, the contributions that follow provide a broad range of new perspectives on the diverse nature of states and state-society relations across the region.

The first article, by John T. Sidel, praises Scott for his trenchant analysis of the huge economic and political transformation experienced by Southeast Asia from the middle of the nineteenth century into the early twentieth century: “No one has done more over the years to draw scholarly attention to the immediate impact and long-term consequences of what Marx termed ‘primitive accumulation’”. Scott, drawing inspiration from the historical analysis of Karl Marx, and even more so that of Karl Polanyi, emphasised the enormous significance of the two major transformations of late colonial Southeast Asia: the imposition of the capitalist system (through which “control of land increasingly passed out of the hands of villagers” and “the value of what was produced was increasingly gauged by the fluctuations of an impersonal market”) as well as the rise of the modern state. It is Sidel’s goal to provide a comparative analysis of the process of primitive accumulation in Southeast Asia, focussing attention on key differences in the trajectories of Java, the Malay Peninsula, the Philippines and three core regions of Mainland Southeast Asia (the Chao Phraya, Irrawaddy and Mekong river deltas). Amid the strong commonalities of experience across the region in the late colonial era, as subaltern classes “found themselves dispossessed and dislodged from direct access to the means of production”, he demonstrates how diverging historical trajectories have produced distinctive forms of capitalist development and political order. In essence, Sidel is paying tribute to Scott’s

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seminal contribution but at the same time asserting the value of greater differentiation of historical experiences and greater attention to their “diverse legacies”.

The subsequent two articles similarly acknowledge their indebtedness to the work of Scott but proceed to bring forth somewhat more direct challenges. The analysis of Dan Slater and Diana Kim asserts the critical importance of examining variation among states and refutes Scott’s expectation that (in Scott’s words) “projects of administrative, economic and cultural standardization are hard-wired into the architecture of the modern state itself”. They further disagree with Scott’s view that (in their words) “states’ appetites to control and extract resources from the societies they rule are practically boundless and universal”. Not all states seek to render their populations ‘legible’ (to use Scott’s influential term), they argue, and not all states have a ‘standardising’ agenda. On the contrary, one can observe a “radically uneven” desire to achieve legibility and “radically diverse” responses to “zones of lawlessness, disorder and illegibility”. They introduce the notion of “standoffish states” and “nonliterate Leviathans” and assert that the “most fundamental objective” of states (in general) is not to “maximise economic extraction” but rather to “minimise political challenges”. This is demonstrated by examination of three Southeast Asian states challenged by armed insurgency: British Malaya, early post-war Philippines and post-independence Burma. Even here, in the extreme circumstance of armed resistance against the state, standoffishness has commonly trumped any innate impulse toward standardisation. The British colonial state in Malaya eventually conformed to a standardising agenda in its efforts to defeat the insurgency, but only after a long initial period in which it was quite content to be both standoffish and nonliterate.

If Slater and Kim challenge Scott for not giving enough attention to the “fascinating heterogeneity” of state responses to societal challenges, the critique of Andrew Walker relates more to cross-temporal than to cross-national variation. In essence, he argues that Scott’s “elegantly presented” and “enormously influential” argument about how rural folk and Asian states relate to one another was formerly correct but is no longer so. This is because of a fundamental shift in the nature of state-society relations in rural Asia, away from the politics of taxation and toward the politics of subsidy. In the old order, states sought to maximise their extraction by making rural populations more ‘legible’; peasants, in turn, resisted the state and sought to make themselves ‘illegible’ (often fleeing to the uplands to escape the fiscal demands being imposed upon them). In more recent times, as governments offer a range of programs to boost agricultural productivity, rural populations seek “to present themselves as appropriate recipients of government support”. In his pithy summation, concerns over legibility have been replaced by a desire for eligibility; “Rather than being a threat to peasant livelihood, the state is increasingly a guarantor of it.” He proceeds to demonstrate this through a careful historical comparison of Thailand and South Korea. While government programs in South Korea have brought high levels of agricultural

productivity, those of Thailand “have had the effect of maintaining a large and relatively unproductive rural sector”.

Issues of eligibility are also central to Youyenn Teo’s article on “familialist social policies” in Singapore. If one were to connect this analysis to Scott’s seminal contributions, it could be observed that the Singaporean state goes far beyond the task of merely creating legibility over society and moves into a new realm of what Teo calls “deep governance”. This involves the capacity of the state to internalise societal norms, and indeed to define “‘normal’ Singaporean ways of being”. Her focus is the state’s provision of a pension plan (the Central Provident Fund), housing (Housing and Development Board flats) and health-care. In trying to contain welfare spending and avoid moral hazards, the Singaporean state begins with “two explicit guiding principles: family as first line of support and self-reliance”. While these principles are “difficult to refute”, Teo acknowledges, there is much more happening below the surface. Through a process that she terms “differentiated deservedness”, the state is able to create boundaries and specific definitions that leave “little space for manoeuvre; being employed, being heterosexual, acquiring a spouse, staying married, having children become tremendously important behaviours that shape one’s access” to the benefits of specific state programs. If Scott’s notion of ‘legibility’ refers to the state’s ability to ‘read’ differences that already exist, the state described by Teo is able to “[generate] particular practices and behaviours” to which individuals must adhere.

Meredith L. Weiss gives attention to emergent categories of difference that are generated from below, specifically new collective identities and new forms and tactics of social mobilisation that one can observe throughout the region. Her interest is in broad trends, but in order to gain analytical traction she focuses her specific analysis on “archetypal ‘old’ and ‘new’ social movements”: labour on the one hand and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered (LGBT) activism on the other. Weiss is not arguing that class identities have faded from the scene, and nor is she downplaying the on-going importance of disputes between capital and labour. Rather, she is emphasising “the roster of categories now in play: class permeates identities, interests and strategies in myriad ways, but mobilisation along the lines of alternate identities is not reducible to class”. As her analysis of four maritime Southeast Asian countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore) makes clear, contemporary collective mobilisation is played out on a far more complex terrain. Based on her review of media coverage of protest events in the four countries, she observes that the state itself was the primary target in 1970 but less often so in 2010. In recent years, protest has “often centred around differently-defined identities”. The category of labour now includes large numbers of migrant workers, who are treated as subjects rather than citizens. Meanwhile, more and more activism in Southeast Asia centres around issues (such as human rights, environment and sexuality) rather than the old structural categories of capital and labour. In LGBT mobilisation, as in

other emergent identity categories, there are “[n]ew patterns and processes of identity formation, yielding categories that make new claims in new ways”.

The final article, by Michael Herzfeld, provides a new perspective on viewing politicians and political dynamics. The focus is not on ‘legibility’ from the standpoint of the state looking down on society, but rather on how political observers might ‘see’ new angles of politics by focusing on “performative styles”. At first glance, we might see two groups that are diametrically opposed to each other; upon closer examination, the two groups have certain “internal complexities” in common with each other. His major focus is a 2004 debate at Thammasat University, where the bulk of the 22 candidates for the position of Bangkok governor presented their platforms and fielded questions from the audience. Politicians anywhere, he notes at the outset, “must not only offer substantive proposals... but should do so in a style that implies their capacity for great achievement”. By focusing on performance, Herzfeld argues that one can discern similarities of style that straddle what might otherwise be viewed as unbreachable ideological divides. One cannot ignore, moreover, the interplay that links contending forces. Speaking of the red versus yellow divide in recent Thai politics, Herzfeld observes, “It is clear that mutually opposed factions in Thai politics, ostensibly representing diametrically contrasted social ideologies, are in fact inextricably bound up with each other’s trajectories of power”. His analysis of the contrasting styles at the 2004 debate, and the interplay among them, demonstrates “the centrality of performance to achieving political prominence”.

Academics, like states, deal with their subjects in very diverse ways. If there is one common theme across the six articles in this issue, it is the need for greater attention to variation and differentiation. Sidel puts the focus on divergences in processes of primitive accumulation, Slater and Kim on the heterogeneity of state responses to societal challenge, and Walker on temporal variation in how Asian states relate to rural populations. Each of these three contributions build, in distinct ways, on the work of James Scott. Teo then interrogates “differentiated deservedness”, Weiss highlights the emergence of new categories of difference and new modes of social mobilisation, and Herzfeld – through his examination of “performative styles” – focuses attention on internal complexities within political groupings and ideological tendencies. Collectively, the contributions below offer a range of new perspectives on the governing of Southeast Asia both in historical and contemporary times.