

to the events leading to the Opium War (1839–42). The British regarded Chinese emigration as an act of liberation against the despotic Qing Empire. The Chinese were seen as a panacea for labour shortages in the Empire after the ban on slavery. Chapter 3 discusses the ‘stimulated interest’ in Chinese labour through plans to use Chinese migrant workers in Assam, Ceylon, Mauritius and the West Indies in the 1830s and 1840s. Chinese labour was welcomed over Indian migrants. Chapter 4 explains the failure to increase the number of Chinese migrants in Australia due to Australian labour concerns over threats to their jobs. Chapter 5 shows how the opening up of Hong Kong and Singapore in particular facilitated Chinese mass migration out of the Qing Empire.

This book is an important study of the British Empire’s plans to expand economically, not with British capital, but through Chinese labour. British officials and merchants used their experiences in Singapore and Qing China to paint a positive image of the Chinese in order to promote the view that the Chinese made excellent workers, so long as they kept away from vices. Therefore, Singapore became a model for the rest of the empire as Chinese labour was promoted in the colonies. Chinese labour was touted as a solution to what the British observers considered to be the ‘lazy’ native population of the colonies. Australia, as a settler colony of Whites from Britain, rejected Chinese labour out of working-class concerns that their jobs would be threatened by Chinese mass migration. The book clearly shows that to the British Empire, Chinese labour was acceptable so long as it enriched the coffers of empire and did not threaten jobs held by British (or White) workers. Race played a key role in maintaining the empire, and this book shows how racial stereotypes were used to justify the need for Chinese labourers when it benefited the British. This book is highly recommended for anyone keen on early Singapore colonial history and the study of British impressions of the ‘Chinese character’.

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More than rural: Textures of Thailand’s agrarian transformation

By JONATHAN RIGG

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Thailand is a good place to hone your scepticism about grand narratives of progress. Whether the story is about urbanisation, industrialisation, democratisation or secularisation, Thailand demonstrates that the pathways to the present—let alone the future—are meandering and unpredictable. A good number of Thai society’s ‘twists and turns’ (p. 11) are explored in Jonathan Rigg’s important book on rural Thailand. As the subtitle suggests, his interests lie as much with the ‘textures of Thailand’s agrarian transformation’ as with its trajectories. In this pursuit he is

very successful, producing a rich and nuanced account of the complexity of contemporary rural livelihoods.

From the first page of the book Rigg is grappling with a puzzle: agriculture has become much less important in Thailand's economy than it used to be, yet the number of smallholders remains high. The experience in many other countries, combined with the prognoses of development theory, suggests a reduction in agriculture's contribution to GDP will be matched by a reduction in the rural population. There is plenty of evidence that Thailand is not following this pattern. Why?

In answering this question, Rigg encourages his readers to think about 'the rural' in a new way; he wants to subvert common understandings of rural life as, for example, clearly distinct from urban experience. Following an overview of debates about the nature of rural Thailand in the past, Rigg draws on his extensive fieldwork in Thailand to construct a multi-dimensional account of rural persistence in Thailand. What emerges is a rural that is, well, 'more than rural': it is linked to the city by investment, employment and aspiration; rural households are multi-sited, multi-functional and generationally fragmented; non-farm work is often dominant in the village economy; agricultural smallholdings are combined with labour diversification; land ownership is no longer an indicator of prosperity; and rural villages are now homes to factory workers, immigrants, 'city people' (p. 198), and even academics. Rural smallholders endure in Thailand not as farmers, but as nodes in socially and economically complex webs of livelihood and cultural expression.

This is a sophisticated and nuanced account of contemporary rural Thailand, elegantly combining scholarly viewpoints and the voices of rural people themselves. The book's chapters are theoretically and empirically rich explorations of the qualities and characters—the textures—of rural livelihoods. *More than Rural* is first class scholarship. However, I would have liked a little more piquancy; perhaps even a dash of polemic. The persistence of the rural smallholders in Thailand is an issue of profound political importance that underpins much of the political turbulence the country has experienced over the past 20 years. Stories of diversification, adaptability and flexibility are laudable but, as Rigg himself shows, they are interwoven with stories of inequality, frustration, exploitation and political confrontation. The subtle textures of transformation cannot conceal the underlying structural challenges. In the simplest possible terms, I would have liked a clearer insight into whether or not Rigg considers smallholder persistence to be a 'good thing'.

A hint about Rigg's big-picture perspective comes in a short section towards the end of the book, dealing with the rural transition from 'vulnerability to precarity'. Rural people are no longer at risk of outright subsistence failure, as they were in the past, but their livelihoods are now precarious, largely as a result of their heavy reliance on informal employment. By Rigg's account, the informal sector made up 64 per cent of the workforce in 2013 (p. 188). Put simply, it looks like Thailand's economy has developed in a way that has not been able to provide secure employment for the rural population and draw them securely and permanently out of relatively low value (in economic terms) agricultural livelihoods. This is an important insight, but I am not sure where Rigg wants to take it. He is critical of 'productivist' (p. 225) approaches to rural Thailand, but plenty of his data appear to show that persistent (and worsening) inequality is the result of the relatively low productivity of both the agricultural

and informal sector pursuits that so many rural people rely on. Similarly Rigg is critical of the Thai state's development project as being based on a 'deficiency mind set' (p. 75), but I am not sure if he feels that the state should have done more, or less, to drive a thoroughgoing agrarian transition.

These are big-picture structural issues and dealing with them may, indeed, require more thoroughgoing grappling with the grand narratives and theoretical models of economic development. Rigg has done a superb job on the varied textures of transformation but his critical evaluation of the trajectory of transformation is a little underdone.

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Black market business: Selling sex in Northern Vietnam, 1920–1945

by CHRISTINA ELIZABETH FIRPO

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Christina Firpo's *Black Market Business: Selling Sex in Northern Vietnam, 1920–1945* is an excellent and revealing excavation of what the prostitution industry in colonial Vietnam looked like in the two decades before the old order of French rule ended, right before the Second World War. Though prostitution is what is under examination here, Firpo rightly points out that the selling of sex and sex work here took on many forms: formal prostitution was only one of these, with debt-bondage, A Dao singers, and taxi-dancers all implicated in the larger structures of sex for sale, in one form or another. Firpo sketches out a world where all of these possibilities were available to those who could pay, with the immiseration of a certain proportion of the population resulting from these exchanges. Sex for sale was built into the structure of everyday life in colonial Vietnam: that much is clear from this study. By using a black market economic approach, Firpo helps us understand that this trade in its many component parts was but one of many where the market and services for goods that the state designated as illegal met, for one reason or another. It was never difficult to sell or purchase sex in this period in Gallic Southeast Asia. And the numbers of people involved in the trade seem to have been larger than one might suppose, such was the ubiquity of sex for sale in colonial Indochina, and in Vietnam in particular.

Firpo's study is one of a number of scholarly works that have been produced over the past several decades looking at the selling of sex under colonial regimes in this part of the world. We have such work now on many different places in Southeast Asia: Spanish and then the American Philippines; the Dutch East Indies; British Malaya (and colonial Singapore in particular, through James Warren's incredibly detailed study on Ah Ku and the Karayuki-san); and British Burma, to name just a few.