

*Thailand's Political Peasants: Power in the Modern Rural Economy* by Andrew Walker (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012). ISBN 978-0-299-28824-2 (hard).

Anthropological research in Thailand began in 1949 with the Cornell University project to examine empirically the impact of modernization on rural Thailand. Bang Chan, the village in Minburi that was the focus of the Cornell project has long since disappeared, absorbed into greater Bangkok. Its disappearance was not, however, as Walker's new rich ethnographic book clearly demonstrates, the harbinger of the end of rural society in Thailand. Walker is one of a very few anthropologists today – and especially among anthropologists trained in the last decades of the twentieth century – who still sees relevance in the foundational project of asking how rural Thai society has been transformed by the influences of expanding state and market forces. The relevance stems from the fact that rural society not only continues to exist but that it has assumed a major, some would even say, a determinative role in Thai politics.

Walker's study is centered in a village he calls Ban Tiam in the Chiang Mai Valley of northern Thailand. The "village" designation requires some explanation since the term situates the residents both in a locally defined and demarcated locality known as a *ban* and in a local administrative unit known as a *muban*. Moreover, the *muban* is situated in an administrative "subdistrict" (*tambon*) and – unusually for rural Thailand – in a "municipality" (*thetsaban*) (see p. 62). In other words, the residents of Ban Tiam, like "villagers" throughout Thailand, belong and have long belonged to local worlds defined by local practices and are, at the same time, embedded in an administrative system determined by the central government. This double character of the village is key to understanding Walker's argument that "What is important in Ban Tiam's localism is that political society's relations with the state are mediated by appropriately embedded local actors" (p. 194). As I will suggest below, we must understand that Ban Tiam's localism, while sharing some characteristics with other localisms in rural Thailand today, also differs from them in some significant respects.

In contrast to theories prominent from the 1960s through the 1990s, Walker does not presuppose that rural relations with the modern state always entail "resistance", whether as overt protest movements or peasant rebellions or as what James Scott termed "everyday resistance", referring to how peasants subvert state policies in more nuanced ways. Walker, in contrast, argues that the "localism" of the village in Ban Tiam "seeks to draw the state into a socially and culturally legible field of meaning" (p. 194). By becoming active participants in the politics of the state, rural people in northern Thailand (and, it must be added, in northeastern Thailand) became the main source of power of the populist politician Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai Party (and its successor the Pheu Thai Party). In short, Walker

has provided the most compelling case I have seen to date of why rural society in Thailand, as a consequence of marked increases in wealth especially since the late 1990s, today shapes national politics as much as Bangkok governments shape rural society.

Central to his argument is that the villagers of Ban Tiam are part of what he terms the “persistent peasantry” of Thailand, but a peasantry that has been transformed significantly because of marked increases in income. In the case of Ban Tiam, this increase has come about primarily because of expanded agricultural output that has been markedly facilitated by subsidization by the state. While Ban Tiam villagers have remained agricultural and while increases in household income have made them “middle income”, I find the “peasant” or even “middle income peasant” designation to be very problematic. The “peasant” has long been understood both in popular thought and by theorists, such as Robert Redfield, Eric Wolf, and Julian Steward, among others, as being a subsistence cultivator who utilizes a low level of technology for production, and produces a surplus, a portion of which is appropriated in the form of rent or taxes. In Thailand, the *chaona*, or rice-producer, was the traditional peasant. It is the image of the *chaona*, especially one behind a water buffalo pulling a plow or harrow, which continues to be dominant in urban middle class thought.

In Walker’s own description, the people who live in the rural village of Ban Tiam are very different to the traditional peasant. Most are still agriculturalists, but they are not subsistence farmers and cultivate a variety of cash crops, not just rice. They produce a much larger surplus than their forebears did, but today they sell most of this surplus for their own benefit, with rents and taxes constituting a very small proportion of their expenditures. And as Walker repeats numerous times in the book, agriculture by Ban Tiam villagers is today subsidized significantly by the state rather than being a major source of state income.

Just as Bang Chan did not represent the type of Thai village found throughout Thailand – having been established on what in the 19th century was a frontier, being constituted of households living in dispersed residences, and, especially, being located near Bangkok where many villagers could find non-agricultural work – so, too, Ban Tiam represents only one type of rural community in contemporary Thailand. In contrast to Ban Tiam, most village households in northeastern Thailand – which has by far the largest rural population of Thailand and where I have carried out long-term research – do not gain their income primarily from agriculture. Rather the major source of household income in the Northeast is non-farm labor, especially labor undertaken in urban Thailand or overseas. Rural households in central Thailand where there has long been commercialized agriculture and in southern Thailand where incomes are more likely to be generated from fishing and mining are again different to those in Ban Tiam.

Walker's study does, nonetheless, highlight one characteristic that is today found throughout rural Thailand – namely, that of political participation. Because of significant “middle-level” incomes (whether from agriculture or other sources), higher education (most rural dwellers, female as well as male, today have at least a 9th grade education), intense exposure to mass media (especially TV), and embeddedness in socio-political networks that entail many personal relations between rural and urban people, Thai villagers today belong to what Walker, following Partha Chatterjee, calls a “political society” as differentiated from a “civil society”. While participants in Thailand's civil society organizations that seek to protect local resource allocations tend to be drawn from members of the urban middle class, participants in Thailand's political society are predominantly rural. These participants “are concerned with channeling power in desired directions, negotiating deals, and striking a reasonable balance between private and public benefit” (p. 231). They reject, either explicitly or, in most cases, tacitly, the view advanced by the traditional ruling elite that only “good” or “virtuous” men should exercise power. While the political system based on elections is, according to Walker, “ragged”, it is, he concludes, “more likely to be able to deal with the warts-and-all realities of political life” (p. 231).

In sum, Walker's book has helped bring rural Thailand back to center stage both for social science scholarship and for understanding contemporary Thai political life. His book deserves a wide audience.

Charles Keyes

*Bencharong and Chinaware in the Court of Siam: The Surat Osathanugra Collection* by Jeffery Sng and Pim Praphai Bisalputra (Bangkok: Chawpipope Osathanugrah, 2011) ISBN: 978-616-207-069-3 (hard)

This is an excellent 286 page hard-cover quarto, full colour volume devoted to the collection of Thai industrialist, politician and serial collector, the late Surat Osathanugrah, and edited by renowned ceramics expert Bhujjong Chandavij. In an opening paragraph, the purpose of the book is stated as giving a wider exposure to the cultural treasures of Thailand, notably antique ceramics, many of which the collection, by its existence, prevented from being smuggled out of the country.

The term *bencharong* (or sometimes spelt in English as *benjarong*) refers to a class of colourful porcelain, or occasionally stoneware, ceramics that occur in a variety of shapes similar to those of Chinese export wares. They were produced primarily for utilitarian purposes and their forms are consequently simple with gentle contours. The most common items are covered and uncovered bowls, jars of different sizes, plates, stem or pedestal plates, spittoons, spoons, teapots and tea sets. Their exterior surfaces are completely covered with design motifs; the interiors are painted and decorated less elaborately. The colour combinations, especially of