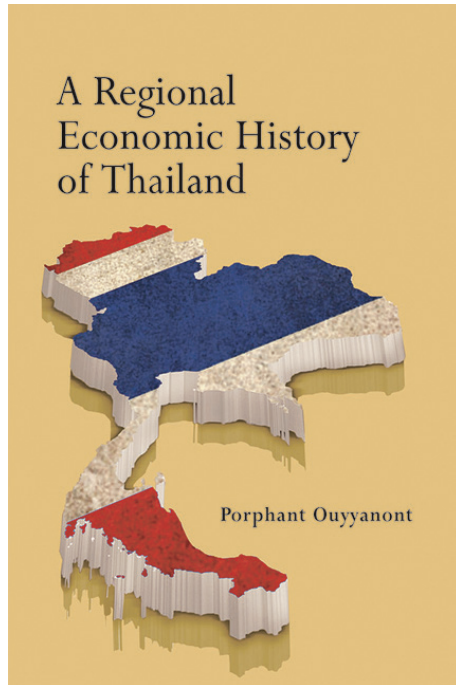


A Regional Economic History of Thailand by Porphant Ouyyanont (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing; Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 2017). ISBN: 9789814786126 (soft cover). \$29.90. 1,432 Baht.



The historiography of Thailand, in both the Thai and English languages, has long suffered from a tendency to focus on Bangkok, and by extension the Central region of which it is the heart, at the expense of the rest of the country. While this is understandable given the political, economic and cultural predominance of the capital in the present day, such studies have only served to reify the centrality of Bangkok in the mainstream national historical narrative and to occlude the significance of the various regions in the country's development. Porphant Ouyyanont's *A Regional Economic History of Thailand* is a powerful corrective to these faults.

Based on over twenty years of research, this book brings together much of Porphant's published and unpublished work on Thai history in a comprehensive and highly detailed study covering the economic development of the country from the early 19th century right

up until the mid-2010s. Loosely following the official administrative divisions of Thailand, the core of the book consists of individual chapters dealing with Bangkok and the four main regions: in order, the Central Region, the North, the South, and the North-east. Excluding the one on the capital, each of these chapters is split into two parts chronologically, with the Second World War marking the dividing line. For the most part, these regional studies are descriptive and empirical in nature, with Porphant presenting a wealth of statistical information in numerous tables to support his conclusions.

The Bangkok chapter is divided into three sections, that correspond with Thailand's political evolution, and largely follows the conventional narrative of its development. It starts by outlining the kingdom's integration into the Western-dominated global economy following the signing of the Bowring Treaty with Great Britain in 1855 and the role of the absolute monarchy in Bangkok's development as "an outward-looking port city" (p. 36). The second section then examines the role of the People's Party, which overthrew the absolute monarchy in 1932 and replaced it with a constitutional regime, in promoting manufacturing industries through the creation of state enterprises. The final part charts Bangkok's development since 1960, when the military government of Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat began to encourage greater foreign and private sector investment. With its discussion of issues such as the dominance of Chinese migrants in the commercial sector and urban labour, the narrative of this chapter will be largely

familiar to any scholar of Thailand. Nevertheless, this is necessary for establishing how Bangkok became the textbook definition of a primate city by the late 20th century. As Porphant shows, Bangkok's dominance of outlying regions was only made possible by the development of the country's transportation infrastructure, with the creation, first, of a railway network centred on the capital in the early 20th century and, later in the century, an extensive system of interprovincial highways.

Unsurprisingly, it is in the examination of Thailand's regional economies that the book really comes into its own. Each of the regional chapters clearly illustrates how the geography of that region affected its economic development. The North-east, for instance, has suffered from poor soil quality, high levels of aridity and a consequent lack of significant agricultural products for export. The relative poverty of this region, combined with its large population, has thus made it a fertile source of migrant labour for the capital and other parts of the country. Porphant also pays attention to the impact of tourism in bringing prosperity to certain places such as Phuket and Chiang Mai. More importantly, he considers the costs of untrammelled economic development, highlighting the environmental degradation and growing wealth inequality between different regions that has become increasingly apparent over the last thirty years.

This study's most significant contribution to the historiography of Thailand, however, is the way in which it outlines how Bangkok's economic dominance over the different parts of the country is a relatively recent, and perhaps transitory, phenomenon. Before the late 19th century, the regional economies were oriented towards neighbouring countries, such as Burma (Myanmar) and China in the case of the North, and the port cities of the Malay Peninsula, such as Penang and Singapore, for the South. With the revival of cross-border trade since the late 1980s and the creation of subregional development initiatives, such as the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Economic Cooperation Program and the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS), these regions are becoming increasingly important as commercial hubs and, concomitantly, independent of Bangkok once more.

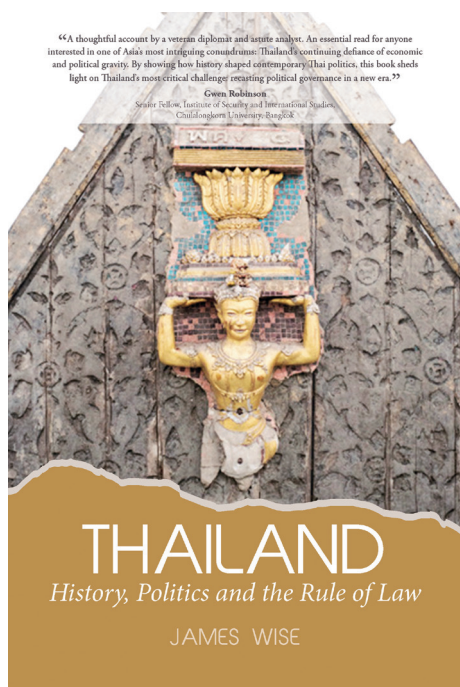
While Porphant's arguments are convincing, his division of the country into five distinct economic regions is a little too neat. Much of his study focuses on the economic links that emerged between Bangkok and the Central Region, on the one hand, and the outlying parts of the country, on the other. The reader is thus left to wonder as to what the economic connections between, say, the North and the North-east might have looked like, or even if they existed at all. A more serious and noticeable weakness, though, is the complete absence of any maps that might help the reader visualise the location of specific places and the transport connections between the different regions. Given the regional focus, this omission is surprising to say the least.

For the most part, Porphant writes in a clear and straightforward manner, but there are occasional grammatical mistakes and ambiguous sentences that are, perhaps, a result of this book being a translation of a previously published Thai version. There are also some inconsistencies in the spelling of place names, for instance Pak Nam Pho is referred to by both this spelling and Pak Nampo on pages 159 and 166 respectively. Combined with the lack of maps, these faults mean that readers would benefit from some familiarity with Thailand's geography and history.

Overall, this study offers a thorough and original examination of the regional dynamics of Thailand's economic development. Through his detailed examination of the past, Porphant is able to throw the country's present-day problems into sharp relief; underlining, for instance, the way in which the recent political turmoil is a symptom of long-established wealth inequalities between different regions. As such, this book will be of use not just to historians, but to anyone with an interest in Thailand.

James A. Warren

Thailand: History, Politics and the Rule of Law by James Wise (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2019). ISBN: 9789814841542 (paperback). S\$34.60. 680 Baht.



Anyone with at least a passing interest in Thailand will be familiar with the political turmoil that has afflicted the country for much of the last fifteen years and has led to the current military-dominated government. Understanding the causes behind the series of judicial and military coups that overthrew a succession of elected governments under the direction of Thaksin Shinawatra, and the sustained red and yellow-shirted streets protests in Bangkok opposed to, or in favour of, these interventions, is more difficult, however. While there are a number of journalistic accounts offering on the ground, eyewitness reports of these events, they often lack insight into the long-term factors that influenced said events. The specialised academic literature, meanwhile, might be too obscure and diffuse or even just inaccessible—locked behind journal paywalls or hidden away in out of print volumes in

university libraries—for the interested layperson. It is with this reader in mind that the former Australian diplomat, James Wise, has written *Thailand: History, Politics and the Rule of Law*.

As the Australian ambassador to Thailand between 2010 and 2014, Wise observed much of the country's political unrest first-hand and had direct access to some of the key actors. During an earlier posting to the country, he also witnessed the impact of the Asian Financial Crisis and the introduction of the so-called People's Constitution in 1997. In this book, Wise combines his diplomatic experience with a solid understanding of the academic literature to produce a highly readable and lucid account of the development of the kingdom's political, social and legal systems since the 19th century. In doing so, he is guided by the adage that to understand the present one must understand the past and the