



REVIEWS

Dominique Caouette and Sarah Turner, eds. 2009. *Agrarian Angst and Rural Resistance in Contemporary Southeast Asia*. London and New York: Routledge. 289 pp.

This book offers an exciting collection of articles on agrarian change and rural resistance in Southeast Asia. It transcends the boundaries between local and (trans)national scales of action, and between hidden and open forms of protest, connecting different academic perspectives. Starting point is the current process of intensified integration of rural societies into global capitalist markets and a parallel expansion of neoliberal state policies that seek to facilitate and shape this process. How small-scale farmers in Southeast Asia experience, negotiate, and resist (or welcome) these changes is at the core of the book.

Ten excellent articles based on in-depth original research discuss current challenges to farmers' livelihoods and land rights, and explore the targets, forms, and outcomes of rural resistance. Three further contributions (by the editors Dominique Caouette and Sarah Turner and by Tim Forsyth) offer thoughtful introductions and discussions of the case chapters. The Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand (three "incomplete" democracies), Malaysia (semi-authoritarian), and Vietnam (communist one-party state turned capitalist) are the countries in focus. These cover different political contexts that influence the trajectory of agrarian change and the opportunities for peasants to resist. Firmly actor-oriented, the contributions highlight the experiences of subsistence cultivators, semicommercial farmers, plantation workers,

“indigenous” swidden cultivators and—at supra-local levels—peasant organizations, national NGOs, and transnational advocacy coalitions, within broader networks of allies and adversaries.

The aim of the book is threefold. First, the editors make a strong case for a multi-scalar analysis that encompasses sites of struggle that range from villages and plantations to national and transnational arenas. Since “the contemporary drivers and consequences of agrarian change are multi-scalar processes in themselves,” the scales of resistance “are becoming more and more intertwined and complex.” Second, the editors seek to connect separate literatures on resistance by highlighting the potential connections between covert, small-scale “everyday forms of resistance” and “hidden transcripts” (inspired by James Scott) and open, organized, large-scale forms of claim-making and counterhegemonic discourse (inspired by Antonio Gramsci, Karl Polanyi, and recent social movement literature). Third, a focus on actors and decision-making processes aims for a sensitivity to context—cultural, political, and historical. The book has reached these goals with success, and it offers a wealth of other insights besides. The chapters move from the community level to national and global scales, and the agents in focus shift from villagers to activist organizations in national and transnational arenas.

The three community-level chapters grab the attention of the reader by questioning the assumption that small farmers would naturally resist “intrusion” by the capitalist market. Moreover, the chapters show considerable diversity in the ways in which farmers are involved in, affected by, and responsive to intensified commercialization and related state policies and power.

Sarah Turner and Jean Michaud found among the ethnic Hmong in northern highland Vietnam an active involvement in commercial textile embroidery and cardamom production for distant markets, but an apparent refusal to maximize such market integration as profit seekers. Moreover, many Hmong continued to value subsistence rice farming. The authors explain this “resistance” as a conscious livelihood strategy of income diversification and subsistence security, and as a means to protect their ethnic identity as highlander rice producers.

Contract farming was welcomed by small farmers in a lowland village in northern Thailand studied by Andrew Walker, even though contract farming is perceived as a disguised form of proletarianization by critical academics. Previously debt-burdened garlic farmers appreciated the opportunity to produce other crops for companies

that shoulder the costs and risks. In the context of a “vibrant national and international agro-commodity trade,” moreover, farmers had some bargaining power in negotiating their contracts as companies competed for access to land and labor. Despite structural inequalities, Walker argues, the farmers “ideologically value the commercial agricultural market” as a “potential contributor to local livelihood improvement.” The anger and frustration he did encounter concerned issues like late payment and unreasonable quality standards enforced by companies and their brokers. But Walker doubts whether the term “resistance” is appropriate. “There is a risk of oversimplifying the intentions underpinning these various acts and statements and framing them within the reassuringly familiar narrative of a local community resisting the incursion of the capitalist market.” Instead, Walker argues, these Thai farmers display “an *experimental orientation*” as they are transacting, negotiating, and maneuvering their position within the constraints set by state power and corporate expansion, and they are “open-minded about the possibility of success and the potential benefits of collaboration.”

The “indigenous” Tagbanua on the Philippine island of Palawan studied by Wolfram Dressler resented (and resisted) their exclusion from intensive commercial farming by two principal actors: small-scale migrant farmers from the lowlands who encroached on their territory, and a state-led and NGO-supported conservationist program of community-based forestry management. Influenced by ethnic stereotypes, this program effectively “locked” the Tagbanua swidden farmers into the position of “indigenous” and “traditional” subsistence farmers (cf. Tania Li’s analysis of the “tribal slot”). Program officers tasked with livelihood projects denied them access to fertile farmland, capital, and other state support for engaging in commercial agriculture—but offered such access to migrant paddy farmers from the lowlands whom they considered “modern” and “productive.” Besides giving verbal resistance (covert expressions of anger about being discriminated by program managers, migrants, and NGOs) the Tagbanua are currently asserting their indigenous identity to claim rights as “people of the land” versus the “outsiders.”

The next three chapters deal with agrarian resistance that bridges local, provincial, and national scales. Lesley Potter’s chapter on oil palm plantations and resistance in West Kalimantan (Indonesia) moves beyond the community and discusses scale bridging by civil society organizations (CSOs). The huge conversion of community land

of the indigenous Dayak population into vast oil palm plantations since the 1970s (state-run and private, domestic and multinational) has produced community-based resistance by the Dayaks and immigrant laborers and smallholders. This resistance was initially localized, targeting estate management for issues such as non-implementation of contracts (Dayaks were promised smallholder plantation lots in return for their swiddens). Community resistance to the oil palm plantations per se is weak, since many Dayaks and migrants see advantages in them as a source of livelihood despite their tenuous access to land. CSOs, in contrast, seek to “encourage communities to resist the crop” in response to the continuing expansion of oil palm planting in the region and the negative long-term effects on communities. They tap into (inter)national advocacy networks by linking oil palm expansion to issues of indigenous land rights and environmental concerns. Forms of protest have turned more open with political democratization, and include “demonstrations, road closures, destruction of planted oil palm, camp burning and seizures of machinery.”

Martinez Kuhonta places the resistance of villagers and NGOs against the Pak Mun Dam in northeastern Thailand in the context of a broad “protracted struggle against the Thai developmental model,” which promotes a massive exploitation of natural resources for the sake of export-oriented industrialization and agribusiness. This developmental model is pushed by “a formidable modernizing alliance: state, domestic capital, and international financial institutions.” A vibrant NGO sector developed in the context of democratic openings; its repertoire shifted from village-based community work to national-level resistance as peasant protests against large developmental projects increased. Kuhonta shows how the civil society organization, Assembly of the Poor (grounded in village communities but supported by NGO advisors, academics, and students), linked the local struggle against the hydroelectric dam project (which threatened the livelihood of peasants and river fisherfolk) to international networks of anti-dam movements. Media-attracting actions, such as months-long protests at government centers in Bangkok and occupation of the dam, produced concessions by successive Thai governments. A salient side effect of government instability in Thailand is that rapid government change causes rapid shifts in opportunities to get claims answered or compromises made, although earlier agreements with national government may be revoked when a new party takes over.

Peasant perceptions and political opportunities are central to Tran Thi Thu Trang's analysis of dramatic shifts in repertoires of peasant resistance in northern Vietnam in the last fifty years. After the period of nationwide revolutionary peasant mobilization against French colonialism, peasants in the newly independent socialist state of North Vietnam engaged in everyday forms of resistance in the period of collectivization and central planning (1960s to early 1980s) and "more open and collective protests since the economic reforms initiated in the 1980s," although these have remained "localized and small-scale" and seldom target the national government. The author argues that the structure of political opportunities (in particular, the extent of government repression) cannot fully explain why peasants seldom targeted the national state in the last two periods. He stresses the importance of peasant "perceptions of the causes of their economic difficulties" and of the parties to blame, and "their understandings of what might be effective resistance" (an analysis that implicitly connects to framing theory). During the period of collectivization, for example, peasants continued to believe "in the government's legitimate right to rule and its good intentions towards the peasant population," given state policies promoting land reform, social services, and social equality. This analytical perspective, the author argues, uncovers "nuanced forms of discontent."

Nationwide agrarian movements—primarily concerned with land rights, control over natural resources, and agricultural trade policies—are in focus in the next three chapters. Vu Tuong traces the anti-capitalist discourse of current farmers' unions and NGOs (reformist and radical) in Indonesia to the anti-capitalist movement in the colonial period, when Dutch socialists introduced this discourse in the colony in the 1920s. It was subsequently incorporated by major nationalist movements (secular and Muslim) and by Sukarno's populist/corporatist post-independence regime. The author sees "striking continuities" with contemporary agrarian activists "in the deep mistrust among activists of foreign trade, foreign capital and international financial organizations" and "an obsession with rice as a symbol of social justice." This ideological trajectory helps explain why the anti-capitalist frame currently resonates with rural activists of different political stripes.

Jennifer Franco and Saturnino ("Jun") Borrás discuss a major "paradigm shift" in rural organizing and resistance, pursued by cadres of the National Peasant Secretariat of the nationwide underground

Communist Party of the Philippines from the late 1980s onward. These cadres moved away from the Maoist strategy of “protracted people’s war” and called, instead, for “open forms of collective action/mobilization” to “engage the state” on concrete issues affecting the rural poor. They helped develop a new repertoire of collective action, in particular to “radicalize and implement the government land reform programme” (CARP), which combined resistance at the level of landholdings (land occupations, share boycotting, etc.) with media-attracting mass actions at government offices at provincial, regional, and national levels. Success required pro-reform allies in the state bureaucracy and organized rural communities on the ground. The authors make a convincing point of the interdependence of collective actions across scales. The “peasants must win their struggle for land reform both on paper in the halls of government *and* on the ground in specific contested landholdings.”

Resistance against the Malaysia–United States Free Trade Agreement (FTA) by Malaysian citizens’ groups, in particular against the possible scrapping of import tariffs on heavily subsidized US rice, is discussed by Sandra Smeltzer. She notes the “global trend toward bilateral and regional trading relationships” after the collapse of the World Trade Organization’s Doha and Cancún talks, with the US, as the world’s largest agricultural exporter, “particularly keen to further open up foreign markets for its agricultural goods.” In the broad coalition that resists the FTA and the lack of transparency in the negotiation process, rice farmers from the Kedah and Penang “rice bowls” are linking up with NGOs, consumers, worker organizations, human rights groups, opposition political parties, and specific business organizations. Their influence is limited, however, given the political apathy of large chunks of the urban middle classes and strong FTA support from Malaysian businessmen and local cronies.

Moving to the realm of transnational activism, Dominique Caouette explores “how transnational advocacy networks can link local-level rural concerns and struggles with global processes.” He considers the activities of four transnational organizations: the Asia-Pacific Research Network (based in Manila), Focus on the Global South (Bangkok), the Asian Regional Exchange for New Alternatives (Seoul), and Third World Network (Penang, Malaysia). These are research and advocacy organizations, “think tanks of civil society,” producers of counterhegemonic discourses, which develop alternative knowledge to dominant paradigms, which can be used by local social movements.

Caouette discusses how these organizations are instrumental in developing transnational networks of activist intellectuals around global issues, connecting grassroots activists with activist scholars, and linking local issues to global frames such as “food sovereignty” and “global social justice.”

In a discussion chapter at the end, Tim Forsyth highlights several themes in the volume. One of these is the interpretation of acts as “resistance.” Agreeing with Walker, he calls for a critical reflection on our own (scholars’) assumptions on capitalist change and resistance. “Why do we assume that greater commodization and reach of capitalist markets cause resistance? Whose viewpoints are we assessing?” He warns against uncritically adopting dominant theories of resistance by which “we risk misplacing social or economic activities into predefined narratives of resistance that might overlook positive opportunities for poor groups, or misread impacts of economic change” (ibid.). This point is particularly relevant for community-level research where researchers need to interpret the intentions and perceptions behind villagers’ actions that are not (yet) framed by rural movements and NGOs.

The interpretive turn has clearly enriched the contributions. The authors highlight, for instance, the “farmers’ subjective responses” to contract farming (Walker); the ethnic stereotyping of “indigenous” farmers by government program officers (Dressler); rural actors’ own perception of “the causes of their difficulties” and of appropriate strategies of action (Tran Thi Thu Trang); “the perception of what is possible (or not)” and how this has “shaped—and at times unnecessarily limited—the aspirations and choices that people make in the rural political arena” (Franco and Borrás). The cultural lens is also applied to scale bridging, with mention of “cultural interpreters,” local intellectuals who translate Western ideas into culturally adapted forms (Vu Tuong).

This well-written volume covers considerable ground, of which only part has been touched upon here. Informative and enlightening, it makes a substantial contribution to the study of rural resistance and agrarian change in Southeast Asia.—**ROSANNE RUTTEN**, LECTURER, DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM.