

Pasuk Phongpaichit, and Chris Baker, eds. *Unequal Thailand: Aspects of Income, Wealth and Power*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2016. 186pp., including references and index. ISBN. 9789814722001

Does Thailand have an oligarchy? If so, how do we define it for the particular national case of Thailand? And, most importantly for this collection of essays, what is the empirical evidence of this oligarchy in contemporary Thailand? These are some of the main questions that pervade this new edited volume. Translated and reworked from a Thai-language edition, *Su sangkom thai samoe na* [Towards a More Equitable Thailand] published in 2014 by Matichon, this volume is a timely and useful review of some of the political economy issues facing Thailand today. With nine chapters by Thai scholars and technocrats, the aim of the book is to provide contemporary data and analysis on the material foundations that have fostered a growth in inequality and a strengthening in oligarchy in recent years. Some chapters achieve this better than others, but all provide insight into these issues. In terms of raw empirical analysis, all of the research essays are a success. In particular, the second chapter on land distribution as an indicator of both inequality and oligarchy by Duangmanee Laovakul is an absolute gem and makes the volume more than worth adding to one's library.

Theoretically speaking, the introductory chapter by the editors utilises very recent publications on inequality and oligarchy to frame the research-based chapters that follow. These publications include Thomas Piketty's bestselling *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014) and Jeffery Winters' comparative political economy treatise *Oligarchy* (2011). Those familiar with either Piketty's or Winters' ideation on these topics will find them reflected within the chapters of this volume. In terms of the latter's theory on oligarchy, however, the editors seem to have disvalued the analytic nuance of Winters' repositioning of oligarchy toward its original Aristotelian meaning, one which highlights the unique power position of agential material wealth without falling into the structural (or teleological) constraints of Marxist historical materialism. In its place, Phongpaichit and Baker create the moniker 'flexible oligarchy', to refer to any group of elites (whether military, political, bureaucratic, royal, business or so on) that network in order to 'rule' the nation. This is somewhat frustrating, because the insights on how wealth is defended, why oligarchs fight, and what this means for a political society are lost. At best, oligarchy then comes to mean any 'network' of individuals that is somehow more powerful or more influential than the average Thai person. Networks there are in Thailand, but to elide the difference be-

tween an oligarch and an elite is to misunderstand the challenge posed by inequality and oligarchy in the country.

Misgivings on theory aside, all of the follow-up chapters can easily be read for the new and very important research they present. The most startling contribution in the volume is the initial analysis by Duangmanee Laovakul in the previously mentioned second chapter on land title documents (*chanot*) provided by the Land Department. This has never been done before in a publication available for readership outside of the government. Traditionally, the Land Department does not publish this information for those outside the government. The results are as fascinating as they are depressing. A common indicator used by the UN, World Bank, and many national governments to measure inequality in wealth, income, or both, is the Gini Index, which ranges from 1 to 0, where 0 would indicate a perfectly equal distribution of wealth and 1 an extremely unequal distribution. Whichever Gini Index number one reads for Thailand in terms of yearly income will be hovering around 0.50 for the last decade; these pale in comparison to the Gini Index number at 0.89 for inequality in nationwide titled land distribution. The landholding analysis is also broken down by region via Thai *rai* (14.4 million hectare) and by MPs via declared value.

In the past, the best resource a researcher had for measuring a Thai oligarch's net worth was the annual *Forbes* 'Thailand 50 Richest' articles. With the addition of landholding data, one has a more complete picture of the distribution of assets beyond that of just publically traded companies. The greatest strength in this analysis – and the reason it was likely trusted to the scholar in the first place – is also its greatest weakness: the landholding data are completely anonymous. Granted, one can make educated guesses about who some of these owners are, but for a political economy analysis in a nation where over a third of the population work in agriculture, knowing who owns what parcel of land is of utmost consequence. This reviewer is still waiting for a day when one can see a map of Thailand, or at least of Bangkok, coloured to delimit who owns what exactly. Factor into this the complication of how much land the Crown Property Bureau of the Thai monarch does or does not own and these seemingly economic issues of inequality take on a decidedly more political tone of oligarchy. Hence the importance of a theoretically robust theory of oligarchy beyond mere 'network' becomes ever more significant.

Another compelling piece of research in this important volume is Chapter Five, by Nualnoi Treerat and Parkpume Vanichaka, on elite

networking via special executive courses. The interviews that the scholars were able to get with attendees of these elite executive courses are of great value for understanding how specific policies that could benefit the oligarchy come to fruition. The attendance on the courses of members of 'billion families' brings to light some of the behind-the-scenes mechanics of how an oligarch is able to connect with those in parliament, the military, the bureaucracy, universities or the media. Public sector courses have been offered by the National Security Academy for Government and Private Sector (*Po Ro Or*), the Office of the Judiciary, the King Prajadhipok Institute and the Election Commission. Two private sector courses include the Capital Market Academy by the Stock Exchange of Thailand one by the Chamber of Commerce. In a political society where scholars have argued there is limited social capital, these executive courses take on a greater meaning. Like other chapters in this volume, the authors are able to deepen and build upon the theoretical discussion begun by the editors in the introductory chapter.

Overall, this is an engaging and well-crafted volume that delivers much needed new empirical research on the challenges of inequality and oligarchy in Thailand. This book represents some of the best minds from Thailand on the state of country's current political economy. It will be of interest to scholars and students of Southeast Asian political economy as well as those enquiring into how inequality and oligarchy varies across the globe.

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