

Agrarian Angst and **Rural Resistance** in Contemporary Southeast Asia



Edited by
Dominique Caouette and Sarah Turner



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Preface

Perched on the side of an iridescent green rice padi, an ethnic minority Hmong woman from Tả Văn commune in upland northern Vietnam explains what it was like in the 'old days' when the collectivization of production was promoted by the country's socialist state. With a shrug of her shoulders she comments that her family did not really change production notably during those times, but remained 'under the radar' and avoided the gaze of lowland state officials, so that they could continue working their land as they had for generations. Today, her family continues to prefer to remain away from the gaze of the state, and community members deal with any disputes internally, rather than calling on state authorities to address grievances. A few thousand kilometres away, in the highlands of Southern Mindanao, Philippines, members of the Merardo Arce Command of the New People's Army are discussing their latest operations in response to the recent military offensives of the 1001st Brigade-AFP in New Bataan. For these guerrillas, most of them from peasant origins, genuine social and political change in the country requires a full-blown revolutionary takeover. Short of such radical change, breaking down the control of large landowning family clans and multinationals based in Mindanao and implementing land reforms is impossible, while open and legal activism can only bring about short-term gains and partial reforms. At about the same time, on the small island of Penang off the coast of Peninsular Malaysia, in the Third World Network office, analysts are finalizing a new issue of *Third World Resurgence* on the recent food crisis and its effects on small-scale farmers in Asia, while colleagues in Geneva are posting a *Third World Network Info* note on the internet that describes the latest proposals made by the G20 on sensitive products in agriculture. The posting reviews and analyzes, paragraph by paragraph, the highly technical documents presented to the World Trade Organization Secretariat in Geneva.

What links such disparate peoples, places and processes? In short, agrarian transformations, market integration and globalization processes that are impacting upon the rural countryside in Southeast Asia and the resistance measures that local people engage in that they feel will best serve their cause for justice, equity or just plain 'being left alone'.

This book takes a multi-scalar approach to examine resistance occurring in relation to agrarian transformations in contemporary

Southeast Asia. We move the boundaries of scale from previous works to include not only 'everyday forms of peasant resistance' at the micro level, expanding upon those that James Scott documented in 1985 in his book *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, an important goal in its own right as people challenge different extensions of the market economy into their lives, but also national, regional and transnational acts of resistance and defiance against policies and activities often linked to global market integration. While problematizing old ways of examining scale as bounded, we incorporate instances of resistance acts often rendered invisible at the local, micro level as well as those more organized forms of opposition and dissent that are occurring across scale through to national and transnational social movements.

Bringing together scholars working on agrarian and rural resistance activities and movements at a range of scales and shapes, this book focuses on the five countries currently at the heart of the agrarian transition in Southeast Asia, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Thailand. The thirteen contributors, from both East and West, explore the wide range of responses by rural populations to agrarian and economic policies that are exacerbating the economic inequalities faced in different Southeast Asian countries, and their implications for resistance movements.

On the ground, this book emerges in part from a series of conversations in Montréal cafés around intuitions that there might be more in common between upland ethnic minorities in Vietnam and guerrillas in the Philippines *maquis* than one would first expect. The book is also the result of sharing research findings while participating in a series of panels organized for the Canadian Council for Southeast Asian Studies conference, Québec City, Canada in 2007, and a panel presented at the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) conference, Atlanta, US in 2008. We would like to thank Francois Fortier, Isabelle Beaulieu and Patricia Sloane-White who, along with our contributing authors, also gave papers in these panels. We are also appreciative of the valuable feedback Vincent Boudreau gave us as panel discussant in Atlanta. This book has also benefited from the comments of participants at two workshops held in 2007, one in association with the Social Science and Humanities Research Council Canada, Multi-Collaborative Research Grant 'Challenges of the Agrarian Transition in Southeast Asia', held in Montréal, Canada, and the other for contributors, held in Québec City, Canada. We are also indebted to Ben Kerkvliet and James Scott for their comments and kind words.

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