

1 Southeast Asia and Everyday Political Economy

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Introduction

Southeast Asia is an increasingly interdependent, globalized and urbanized region of the world. The eleven countries that are generally understood as comprising modern-day Southeast Asia are now ever more closely linked together via flows of trade, investment and migration, in addition to traditional state-led processes of regional integration – most notably the emergence of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) – as well as ever closer, and overlapping, bilateral economic and security ties.¹ In the nearly two decades since Thailand floated the baht, an event commonly held to mark the outbreak of the Asian financial crisis of 1997–8, the region has become more closely integrated than ever before. The launch of the ASEAN Economic Community marks – at least rhetorically – the high point of a period of state-led economic development, market reform and regional integration. Indeed today, we see a region that while not unified is certainly deeply interconnected. In the shadow of Asia's two giants, India and China, the Southeast Asian region has been somewhat sidelined within debates about and discussions of the looming 'Asian Century'.

Much analytical effort has been put into understanding the respective influences of state and market forces in driving the region's economic transformation. Nonetheless, Southeast Asia provides an important site for considering how processes of economic transformation are refashioning – and refashioned by – the lives and daily routines of ordinary people: their decisions to migrate across borders; their experiences of growing affluence as well as of inequality, poverty and associated forms of violence and destitution; their activities as activists, citizens and workers; and the ways in which economic and social relations, responsibilities and activities are being transformed. Southeast Asia is, and will remain, a heterogeneous region of the world. And yet, this very diversity of culture, politics, religion, society and economics – intersecting

¹ These are Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei Darussalam, Singapore and East Timor. With the exception of East Timor, all of these states are ASEAN members.

with divisions of race, class, gender and even age – provides important insights into how economic transformation takes shape. If we are entering an Asian Century, then we need to remain attentive to how this transformation is taking shape in the lives of Asia's people and their engagement in changing economic practices, with Southeast Asia providing an important terrain for initiating this focus.

Accordingly, this book brings an Everyday Political Economy (EPE) perspective to the fore. In this perspective, we consider not only the ways in which economic transformations 'touch down' within the lives of ordinary people but also how the emergence of more marketized forms of economic policy making is sustained and challenged through everyday practices of economic engagement. We use the term 'Everyday Political Economy' in a broad and inclusive sense, as a mechanism for generating interdisciplinary conversations across a range of theoretical traditions. As we outline later (and also in our conclusion), our use of EPE draws upon a broad extant literature on 'the everyday', 'everyday life' and 'everyday politics'. In certain respects we embrace the fuzziness of the term, in large part because it serves to open up interdisciplinary dialogue as well as to challenge what Hobson and Seabrooke (2007) have referred to as a 'regulatory' bias in studies of the International Political Economy (IPE). It should be noted, however, that while this book seeks to engage with work on the everyday in IPE (see following sections), we explicitly refer to EPE rather than use Hobson and Seabrooke's term 'Everyday IPE' (EPIE). This is in large part because we seek to develop an interdisciplinary and inclusive approach that reaches beyond the intellectual confines of IPE. Nonetheless, we recognize the significance of IPE works that highlight the role of non-elite local actors in constituting political economic transformations (notable here is Hobson and Seabrooke's engagement of the work of everyday politics scholars such as Scott 1985 and Kerkvliet 1990) or works that engage more of an 'everyday life' perspective emphasizing both the 'mundane' everyday of economic practices (Enloe 2013) and how these practices are underpinned by wider logics of discipline and/or governmentality (Amoore 2002; Paterson 2007; Langley 2008) (see also our concluding chapter in which we elucidate this distinction between an everyday politics and an everyday life perspective in more detail).

In this volume, we seek to present the EPE of Southeast Asia in ways that combine an understanding of both everyday politics and everyday life in order to understand how the reach of the market is being extended into the lives of ordinary people across this economically, culturally and politically diverse region. In this endeavour, charting the voices and actions of the socially marginalized certainly matters – and many of the chapters in this volume do chart these struggles. But it is just as important to examine 'the praxis that organizes' these accounts of everyday life (de Certeau 1986, cited in Joan Scott 1991: 777), in particular how actors' knowledges and accounts of the world take shape

within broader processes of state and capitalist transformation. In a Southeast Asian context, this widening and deepening of market relations includes things such as the rise of new commodity trading and consumption regimes (e.g., around Islamic finance and halal products or the turn of former factory workers to street vending), as well as new forms of intra-regional migrations (such as the expansion of markets for migrant domestic work or flows of ‘talent’). Ordinary people are situated in and constitute these economic processes and yet also seek to resist, subvert and challenge them. At the same time, however, resistance itself often takes shape within state-led attempts to accommodate dissent by creating spaces for ‘market friendly’ and regime maintaining civil society engagement (Gerard 2014; Rodan and Hughes 2014; Elias 2015).

In the years since the 1997–8 Asian financial crisis that hit many of the region’s economies exceptionally hard, we have seen a consolidation of the political economy literature on Southeast Asia with analyses of the crisis and its impacts providing a fertile ground for advancing political economy scholarship on the region ever since. Much early post-crisis work focused on the responses of elites – generating important insights regarding the tensions that emerged between different groupings of state elites in the aftermath of the crisis. But alongside this work, we can also observe an emerging consensus around the need to focus on the significant roles of non-elite actors and their daily practices of economic engagement. Indeed, this is a theme that has become increasingly important in recent years. Furthermore, as will be detailed later, the emergence of these more ‘everyday’ perspectives has also generated discussion over the development of a less Western-centric approach to the study of IPE. Such an IPE should recognize that economic transformations outside of the West be understood not in terms of a top-down modernization narrative but instead as enacted, embedded and resisted at the points of intersection with local practices and economic cultures. In so doing, such an approach offers an important point of departure for ‘rethinking’ Southeast Asian political economy.

This empirically rich book draws together a body of research in Southeast Asian studies spread across a range of disciplinary areas. The authors included in this volume are both established and emerging scholars working on the empirical study of Southeast Asian political economy, and the chapters draw upon original fieldwork conducted in Southeast Asia or among Southeast Asian diasporas. At its core, this research develops a focus on everyday practices of economic engagement that have transformed – and are being transformed by – the region’s embrace of market-led developmentalism. In so doing, this volume draws attention not only to a wide range of non-elite actors whose actions are not necessarily considered in studies of the region’s economic transformation but also to their practices and routines of daily economic life that play an important role in understanding economic, political and cultural change in

Southeast Asia. Thus, we aim to contribute both to an enhanced understanding of the everyday political economies at work in specific Southeast Asian sites and to the theoretical development of an EPE approach more generally, in which perspectives from emerging economies and non-Western actors are taken seriously. In so doing, we strive to develop the deeply influential literature on everyday politics in Southeast Asia, in particular with regard to the work of Scott (1985) and Kerkvliet (1990), by employing a global political economy lens in which the ‘everyday’ is seen not only as a site of political struggle and resistance but also as a site within which the ongoing marketization and economic transformation of the region play out in variegated ways.

Rethinking Southeast Asian Political Economy

In thinking about the everyday politics of Southeast Asia’s economic transformation, we aim to embrace (i) the mounting interest in moving beyond elite-centric studies of neoliberal developmentalism and towards a growing recognition of everyday economic actors and practices within a range of interdisciplinary studies of the political economy of Southeast Asia; (ii) the rise of an influential everyday perspective in IPE in which attention is drawn to the need to bring in non-Western, specifically Asian, perspectives; and (iii) the fact that Southeast Asia has traditionally served as a major reference point for those interested in everyday politics. Importantly, the Southeast Asian case enables a sharper focus on how the everyday does not exist as an autonomous space separate from the regulatory or elite level. Indeed, one of our central concerns is to show how the developmental ambitions of elites intersect with local social relations of gender, race, class and even age, producing distinctive political-economic outcomes, and how capitalist processes of marketization intersect with everyday lived experiences on the ground.

Social Conflict and the Political Economy of Neoliberal Developmentalism in Southeast Asia

In the wake of the Asian crisis, the work of a number of influential political economists served to define the study of the Southeast Asian region in important ways. This literature – often country-based – sought to emphasize the rise of neoliberal or more regulatory forms of state rule that served to replace the attachment to ideas of state developmentalism (Jayasuriya 2005; Hewison and Robison 2006). It has long been argued that the model of the Asian developmental state that emerged from the writings of Chalmers Johnson (1982) and others was never wholeheartedly reproduced within capitalist Southeast Asia. But with the crises in state governance that emerged out of the Asian crisis, social conflict approaches sought to emphasize the

fracturing of elite rule as neoliberal reform moved apace within the region's regulatory states (Robison and Rosser 1998; Hewison 2000, 2005; Khoo 2000; Jayasuriya and Hewison 2004; Case 2005, 2009; Hadiz and Robison 2005; Robison and Hewison 2005). The emphasis on elite fracturing and class tensions in this post-crisis wave of writings must be contrasted with the deeply undersocialized, highly technocratic accounts of Southeast Asia's economic transformation that are perhaps best exemplified by the World Bank's report, *The East Asian Miracle* (1993). And, of course, as we argue in more detail later, the emphasis on elites was not to deny the significance of non-elites in the transformation of the state. In particular, attention has been drawn to how political systems have sought to accommodate a range of social forces such as the region's rising middle classes (Robison and Goodman 1996; Hilley 2001), as well as the strategies and dilemmas faced by organized labour in ever more capitalist-oriented states (Hadiz 1997; Bello *et al.* 1998; Hutchinson and Brown 2002; Brown 2004; Hutchinson 2012). It is worth restating that scholarship mainly associated with the social conflict or 'Murdoch school' of critical political economy has developed grounded understanding of how capitalism and class politics operate within particular nation-states in the Southeast Asian region.

Interestingly, although this research has focused considerable attention on conflicts within the social elite in order to understand the nature of transformations in state rule in the region, the detailed empirical research that underpinned these accounts does open up further space for the discussion of a more 'everyday' political economy – for example, in terms of accounts of the rise of precarious, low-paid work (including migrant work) that have accompanied the region's neoliberal transition (Hewison 2006; Hewison and Kalleberg 2013); or more specifically in terms of thinking about and theorizing the agency (and lack of agency) of civil society actors and organized labour; see Rodan and Hughes's (2012) work on anti-corruption activism in the Philippines and Cambodia. While this work tends to depict labour and civil society activism rather cynically emphasizing the limited possibilities for resistance (and, moreover, democratization), one must take into account the endurance of authoritarian systems of rule, oligarchic capitalism and political violence in the region that place significant limits on the ability of everyday actors to enact a transformatory politics (Jayasuriya and Rodan 2007). Moreover, this greater openness to non-elite agency – and recognition of an expanding number of non-elite actors – has been reinforced by the increasing attention that disciplines such as sociology and social anthropology paid to the everyday economic and political cultures within which middle-class groupings and other social actors are embedded (see, e.g., Chua 2003 on Singaporean patterns of consumption, and Sen and Stiven's 1998 edited volume on women and the new rich in Asia).

We would suggest that in recent years an important shift is afoot in studies of Southeast Asian political economy. On the one hand, we have already charted the increased attention to the everyday that has emerged in Southeast Asian political economy scholarship. But, on the other hand, it is also important to consider the move within studies of the social anthropology (a discipline traditionally focused on the realm of everyday life) of the region to take political economy seriously (notably Tsing 2005; Li 2007; Nevins and Peluso 2008; Rudnyckij 2010). In seeking to represent the emergence of EPE in Southeast Asian studies, it is essential then to recognize the work of social anthropologists who have sought to connect ethnographies of everyday life to global political-economic restructuring. This work emphasizes the associated processes of enclosure, commodification and proletarianization that contribute to the ever-widening reach of the market into the lives of Southeast Asians (a position articulated most concisely in Nevins and Peluso 2008). Economic change is, nonetheless, overseen by forms of state rule that seek to promote ideals of the neoliberal citizen-subject while simultaneously ensuring that such ideas rest upon (deeply racialized and gendered) practices of exclusion – particularly of the region's indigenous, migrant and refugee populations (Ong 2006). Of course, we should also recognize the rise of more everyday accounts of the political economy of the region from geographers highlighting the everyday spatial organization of economic development both inside and outside the cities of Southeast Asia (Clammer 2003; Rigg 2003; Bunnell 2004), as well as the (re) location of neoliberal development within previously non-capitalist places such as the household (Brickell 2011). We identify this interdisciplinary consensus around the need to take *both* political economy *and* the everyday seriously as an important analytical shift in the study of the region. The chapters in this volume seek to showcase this emergent approach and, in doing so, reveal how the EPE exists in relation to complex configurations of classed, gendered, racialized and other sets of social relations.

*The Everyday Turn in IPE and the Significance of
Non-Western Contexts*

The development of a more everyday perspective on Southeast Asian political economy also mirrors wider trends within IPE – namely a significant body of literature that points to the role of everyday practices, cultures and relationships in understanding the social sources of the global political economy (Amoore 2002; Aitken 2007; Hobson and Seabrooke 2007; Langley 2008; Best and Paterson 2009; LeBaron 2010; Seabrooke and Elias 2010). Hobson and Seabrooke's edited volume, *Everyday Politics of the World Economy* (2007), seeks to identify how broader processes of global political economic change are rooted within particular forms of everyday activity. The arguments put

forward by Hobson and Seabrooke are important for a number of reasons. First, they rightly identify the problematic reification of regulatory elites and actors across a spectrum of IPE writings – be they state policy-makers, international financial institutions and other organizations engaged in global economic governance; elite groupings tied to international business interests; or so-called global civil society actors. Second, the final section of Hobson and Seabrooke's volume makes important points regarding the need to recognize how the EPE takes shape in non-Western contexts. Hobson (2007), thus, argues that we need to not only bring Eastern agents back in but also recognize how everyday practices of capitalist transformation that took shape in Asia are intimately bound up with the processes of capitalist transformation experienced in the West. As the chapters in this volume attest, an EPE approach can serve to highlight the inadequacies of much IPE scholarship rooted in the study of Western(ized) elites.

We build upon these two important insights – seeking to illustrate how IPE is enacted and performed at the very local (non-elite) level and also how the Asian region needs to be recognized as an important site within which political economic identities and behaviours are (re)produced. Conventional accounts of the incorporation of Southeast Asia into the global political economy emphasize the role of (both Western and Japanese) imperialism in the establishment of both states and markets in the region and the post-independence trajectories of states pursuing economic 'development' (Berger 2009). This economic history of the region is frequently overlaid with social constructivist accounts of the emergence of the idea of Southeast Asia as a region – a hallmark of the literature on economic regionalism within ASEAN and the so-called ASEAN-Way (Acharya 1998). Ordinary people have been profoundly affected by the politics of development pursued by states across the region – be it via the impact of large-scale development projects funded by international financial institutions such as the Asian Development Bank or the World Bank on indigenous communities, through the incorporation of large numbers of young women into export sector industries and systems of return migration, or through the increased commercialization and marketization of everyday life. But what we also see is that practices of capitalist developmentalism in Southeast Asia are themselves serving to generate newly marketized spaces, products and modes of work. In other words, everyday capitalist practices are not simply imposed on local communities in Southeast Asia but work within, and are embedded within, patterns of everyday social relations (Brenner *et al.* 2010). Accordingly, it is wrong to present Southeast Asia as just another site of capitalist expansion, without recognizing the distinct ways in which capitalist expansion takes shape locally.

Building on the recognition by Hobson and Seabrooke of the need for an Asian focus in the development of EPE, we demonstrate how a focus on the

Southeast Asian region serves to generate an important shift in how the concept of the everyday is articulated in political economy scholarship. Namely, this shift entails placing problem(s) of development more centrally within the analysis while also highlighting the embedded forms of gendered and racialized identities and inequalities that are so central to the functioning of markets. Although we acknowledge that most of the contributors to this volume are of the 'West', be it in terms of their nationality and/or their education/scholarly training, we seek to develop an understanding of Southeast Asia as a region in which new ways of theorizing and understanding the world can emerge. To this end, we draw upon the literature on the everyday advanced within IPE, seeking not to 'impose' this concept onto the Southeast Asian space but to ask how the study of Southeast Asia brings new and unique insights into how we understand the functioning of the global political economy from an everyday perspective. It is in this sense that we intend to take Hobson's call for the development of a non-Western IPE more seriously.

The Everyday Politics of Southeast Asia's Economic Transformation

The EPE perspective in the studies of Southeast Asia builds upon an important, widely cited and deeply Southeast Asia-centric body of work concerning the contentious nature of everyday politics within agrarian societies undergoing social transformation in the name of 'modernity' (Scott 1985; Ong 1987; Evans 1990; Kerkvliet 1990, 2005; Stivens 1996). Scott's work, for example, examines the often unconscious tactics of the socially marginalized Malaysian peasantry whose livelihoods and traditional social structures were ever more eroded in the face of agricultural modernization and mechanization. Scott asks what can happen when modernization leads to 'a gradual bulldozing of the sites where class conflict has historically occurred' (p. 243), suggesting that alternative manifestations of class politics would emerge – resistances such as foot-dragging, small acts of non-compliance or ridicule that evade direct confrontation with elites. These 'weapons of the weak' represent 'the tenacity of self-preservation ... the steady, grinding efforts to hold one's own against overwhelming odds – a spirit and practice that prevents the worst and promises something better' (p. 350). Similarly, situated against the backdrop of the decline of small-scale cash-cropping in Malaysia, Aihwa Ong's (1987) study of women migrating to take up work in export processing makes comparable observations about everyday resistance but also provides an interesting point of contrast to Scott's. Here class struggles are not simply being undermined by modernization but are completely reconstituted as peasant women manage their incorporation into new modes of capitalist discipline that take shape alongside recompositions of patriarchal gender relations within the factory setting. The evocative focus on incidents of spirit possession, alongside more

mundane forms of protest such as crying and requests for prayer breaks, represents women's engagement of 'an idiom of protest against labour discipline and male control' (p. 207). And yet, these weapons of the weak are approached with rather less optimism than Scott's account, serving as they do to reinforce traditional gender roles and stereotypes² (see also Hart 1991).

This literature serves to highlight the multiple visions of 'modernity' that exist within a region characterized by diverse experiences of colonialism and Cold War politics that fundamentally shaped the conditions within which resistances and even revolutionary struggles took shape. More importantly, it points to how everyday politics – that is, struggles that marginalized and subaltern groups engage in, often outside of formal political arenas – is shaped by experiences of poverty and destitution and is mediated by gender, ethnic, class and religious identities, as well as age.

The chapters in this volume certainly illustrate the many and varied manifestations of capitalist modernity in select Southeast Asian sites. At the same time, however, we should not ignore the important economic, political and cultural transformations that have taken place since the heydays of the (peasant-centric) everyday politics scholarship – transformations that have contributed to a fracturing of identities and the emergence of new sites of everyday resistance. We can also observe a growing range of non-elite actors engaged in forms of everyday politics as the boundaries between rural and urban living become ever more blurred (Thompson 2007). Strategies for everyday political action have also transformed – chapters by Nem Singh and Camba and Henry in the volume, for example, situate everyday politics within broader, more formalized resistance campaigns. Moreover, new, more formalized pathways for resistance have opened up for non-elite actors (see the discussion by Rosser and Tan on the courts in Indonesia and Hong Kong and the discussion by Henry on the formation of trade unions in Myanmar in this volume), which may well serve to transform the nature of everyday resistance politics.

The EPE of Southeast Asia

With these comments in mind, we propose that an EPE of Southeast Asia is about more than simply bringing the voices and experiences of the region's ordinary people into our analysis. Rather, it is through a focus on everyday life of the people, their daily routines and their ordinary – and at times extraordinary – actions that we come to see how economic transformation is manifested in relation to three important processes around which we have structured the chapters in this volume. These are: (i) the variegated pathways towards

² See the concluding chapter of this volume for more details on the everyday politics approach, specifically in terms of how it is utilized in the work of Benedict Kerklviet.

economic modernization – that is, how market building and development processes take shape and are resisted through an engagement with local social relations (gender, class, nationality, and so on); (ii) the widening and deepening of the market into everyday spaces – that is, how economic development projects and programmes increasingly specify the need for a politics of competitiveness in which new spaces (such as the household, religious practices or school education) are seen as prime sites for processes of marketization; and, finally, (iii) the production and performance of the economic subjectivities of worker and/or migrant and how these forms of commodification are challenged and resisted from below – that is, how the EPE intersects with individual and collective struggles and practices of contestation. Accordingly, the empirical chapters in this volume are organized into three analytically distinct sections to highlight key ways in which EPE matters.

Each of the chapters individually draws out the importance of an EPE perspective for understanding the specific case that it explores. However, in so doing, we are keen to allow for theoretical diversity and methodological pluralism. Indeed, one of the core aims of this volume is to show that there are various ways of ‘doing’ an EPE approach, especially as this volume brings together scholars working in a range of different disciplinary fields, including economic geography, law, political economy and social anthropology. Collectively, the chapters in this volume explore how economic change gets enacted in Southeast Asian political economies through a combination of top-down and bottom-up agency, how economic practices are being embedded in specific sociocultural contexts and institutional settings, and how processes of economic transformation embody conflicting subjectivities/contested rationalities which are sources of both acquiescence and resistance to these processes. In so doing, the contributions to this volume throw a new light on the ongoing political, economic and cultural transformation of Southeast Asia at a time where market relations are both widening and deepening. At the same time, taking Southeast Asia seriously offers a lens through which to question assumptions of mainstream IPE that the periphery is simply reactive to trends within the core.

From Developmentalism to Multiple Modernities

What is by now clear is that rather than following a set path to modernity and a ‘developed’ economy, Southeast Asia has been a site of multiple experiences and where ‘economic development’ has found variegated manifestations. A focus on the everyday recasts commonly held understandings of these processes. In so doing, it allows for the probing and ultimate rearticulation of a number of binary understandings: states versus markets as agents of economic development; the traditional and the modern as the opposite ends of