

1 Setting the Scene

1.1 Introduction

For the past four decades, Southeast Asia, along with East Asia, has been viewed as a region of miraculous growth – a developmental success story and an exemplar region. The World Bank's (1993) *The East Asian Miracle* set the tone, but academic and popular books and policy reports continue to be published regularly that deploy the same broad arguments: this is a region that has, at the broadest level and notwithstanding periods of interruption, 'got it right'. Different countries in different eras have garnered different sobriquets: Singapore as a 'newly industrialising country' (NIC) or Asian 'tiger' or 'dragon' in the 1970s; Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand as 'High Performing Asian Economies' (HPAEs) or 'second-generation' NICs in the late 1980s; Vietnam as a 'transition miracle' or 'tiger cub' in the 1990s; and, later still, Cambodia and Laos as developmental 'poster children' in the 2000s.

This is well-known and well-worn territory. But there is a chapter in the miracle story that is often overlooked, with the abiding tendency to focus on factory Asia, urban expansion, education and skills acquisition, global integration, new technologies and flows of foreign direct investment. This gap or absence concerns rural areas (the countryside), rural populations (mostly farmers) and rural activities (largely agriculture). The rural becomes, in this way, at best a reservoir of labour and a source of food, and at worst a relict space and, almost, a residual concern, waiting to be transformed by processes with their roots lying elsewhere.

This Element presents the case that such an omission is problematic in three ways. First, it leads to a tendency to overlook, or at least to underplay, the key human development challenges that remain to be tackled. That is not to say that urban spaces and industrial work do not have their own challenges, but they are of a different complexion and, often, of a different order. Second, this omission narrows the way in which we think about processes of transition and transformation (i.e. development). The countryside and rural people have been deeply implicated in, and have contributed significantly to, Southeast Asia's urban and industrial transition and, therefore, to its 'miracle'. The rural has been far from a bit player in Asia's growth story. And third, this omission means that an opportunity is lost to theorise differently about the texture, trajectory and direction of change. What does Asia's development look like if we take a view from the countryside?

One of the reasons why the rural has so often been overlooked in modernisation narratives is that 'the rural' has been viewed in contradistinction to 'the urban', reflected in the tendency to write of a rural/urban divide or dichotomy:

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Some [social and economic divisions], such as the dichotomies between countryside and city ... are as familiar today as they were obvious to observers [in the 1960s] ... For confirmation, one need only consider the sharp rural-urban divisions that define opposing factions in Thai politics since 2001, a gulf so wide that it now threatens to bring growth in this otherwise successful regional economy to a halt. (Coxhead 2015: 7)

The trouble with this emphasis on the rural/urban divide, however, is that it has the effect of creating a spatial binary (itself questionable) which is used as the categorical marker for occupation, residency and activity. This, then, has the further effect of separating the rural and the agricultural from the urban and the industrial, to create discrete rural and urban worlds, dislocated from each other in multiple ways, and by much more than just geography. Not only are there difficulties with neatly identifying and drawing a distinction between rural and urban, but, and even more so, there are growing difficulties of assuming that people stick to these spatial addresses in terms of residency and occupation.¹ Populations are characteristically mobile, households are no longer co-resident (i.e. household members may well live in different places, rural and urban), and factories increasingly locate in the countryside (see Rigg 2019). Following from this – and this is the second tendency that arises from the omission of the rural – is that there are good reasons to argue that rural areas and populations have critically contributed, indeed centrally so, to the process of Southeast Asia's modernisation. The willingness of rural people, and especially the young, to leave their homes, move to urban areas and take up non-farm work has been remarkable. In this way, growth

has been based on the continuing role of small farms in releasing labour power for industrialization, cross-subsidizing capitalist growth, reworking gender and generational relations to free young men and, especially, young women, to work in the factory sites of the global economy. ... The key to understanding accumulation in Asia is not through how producers (peasants) have been separated from their means of production (land), but how their continuing connections permit accumulation. (Rigg 2016: 62)

Turning to the third and final tendency, this feature of the agrarian transition in Southeast Asia raises the possibility that the region – and Asia more broadly – offers a different model and experience of both rural/agrarian transition and urban/industrial transition. In other words, in offering a different empirical

¹ A point developed most significantly in the work of Terry McGee in which he proposed a distinctive form of urbanisation in Asia where *desakota* regions represent an interleaving of rural (*desa*) and urban (*kota*) through processes of *kotadesasi* (see McGee 1991, 2008, and also Firman 2004; Kontgis et al. 2014; Ortega 2012).

experience the region challenges widely accepted theories of change. As Arnold and Campbell suggest:

Modernisation theory is predicated on a historicist narrative that sees peasant smallholders move from the farm to the factory, with informal labour giving way to formal employment – most significantly within expanding industrial manufacturing sectors. Contemporary developments in Mekong Southeast Asia challenge this historicist narrative. (Arnold and Campbell 2018: 184; see also Masina and Cerimele 2018 on Vietnam and McCarthy 2019 on outer island Indonesia)

Drawing on these omissions, the aims – and the contributions – of this Element encompass the empirical, theoretical, conceptual and policy related. First, the intention is to show how and why engaging with the rural is necessary if we are to comprehend broader development transformations in the region, to bring these ‘relict’ spaces and ‘residual’ populations into the explanatory centre of things. Second is to make a case for the distinctiveness of the agrarian transition in Southeast Asia (and Asia more widely), thus challenging generalised transition theories based on the (particular) historical experience of the Global North. Third is to unsettle the rural, in terms of function and imagination. And the final intention is to shine a light on rural transformation processes and their implications for rural people, as well as cast a wary eye over Southeast Asia’s growth experience. The quantity of growth is easily grasped, but what of the *quality* of growth?

Regarding this final aim, the rural becomes the lodestar or keystone in understanding and *judging* development. Too often, development is simply read-off from economic growth rates or income data. But – and this point has been made many times, and over many years (see Sen 1999) – growth rates and levels of income are only instrumentally important when it comes to thinking about development, not intrinsically so. With that in mind, the Element also asks: what does development do, and mean, for ‘ordinary’ rural people and, equally importantly, how do they both respond to and shape the very processes of transformation?

1.1.1 Rural Entry Points

If, as suggested in these foregoing paragraphs, there is no clear division between rural and urban, if industrial activities are to be found in rural spaces, and if rural people increasingly circulate between different places and activities, let alone have sensibilities that are as much urban as rural, how should we ‘enter’ the field of rural studies in Southeast Asia?² Rhetorically, where is the ‘space’ for a rural

² In this section, I am addressing the question analytically. Equally importantly, however, practical and methodological questions also relate to how we define rural livelihoods, track rural households and assess who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’ in any study of the rural. Not long ago, many

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perspective on development? Indeed, where is *the* rural, in all its guises and manifestations?

The Element tackles this predicament by starting in the rural – after all, one needs to start somewhere – and then tracks the implications of change, socially, economically (in livelihood terms), politically (with a small ‘p’) and spatially, wherever this leads. What will also become clear is that the rural is not just a starting point; it is also often the anchor and the end point, in life course and existential terms. Many key life course moments, such as birth, marriage and death, occur in the rural. Far from being progressively eroded by processes of modernisation, the rural – much altered, to be sure – has a continuing resonance and, therefore, relevance. However, and importantly, these resonances are often new and produced, rather than old and inherited.

Clearly, it is not possible to squeeze all aspects of the rural into a short Element such as this; there are choices to be made. And here three rural starting points represent the core of the discussion and are used to explore the themes identified. The first focuses on smallholders and, especially, wet rice-cultivating smallholders. Rice (see Illustration 2.2) is the signature crop of the region, and smallholders who cultivate wet rice represent the single most numerous economic unit and social entity in the region – notwithstanding the structural and technological changes that have accompanied the region’s modernisation. Plantation or estate crop spaces are the second starting point, focusing on rubber and oil palm. While rice may represent the region’s subsistence inheritance, rubber and oil palm are emblematic of its market present and future. The third entry point leads on from the second: the rural landless. The landless (and the land poor) are frequently viewed as the poorest and most vulnerable rural group, those for whom development has either passed them by or rendered them worse off through processes of adverse incorporation.

A justification for the first two choices can be made on the basis of their importance and salience in the region: in terms of land planted, the population involved in cultivation and value generated (Table 1.1). Rice, rubber and oil palm, taken together, account for more than half of all harvested land in Southeast Asia (2017), provide ‘work’ for hundreds of millions of people and have a gross production value of US\$94 billion or close to 50 per cent of total agricultural production value (2016). These are, evidently, large and significant numbers. The justification for the third, the landless, lies in both their number – which is also large – and their significance given that one of the underpinning aims of the Element is to judge the developmental outcomes of agrarian transition.

villagers appeared to be ‘worlds unto themselves’ (Elson 1997), relatively easily (but still problematically) studied as self-contained social and economic worlds. No longer.

Table 1.1 Southeast Asia land planted and value of rice, rubber and

Crop	Area harvested (2017)		Gross pro
	Million ha	Percentage total harvested land	billion US\$ (at constant 2004–6 prices)
Rice (padi)	50.3	39.5%	57.3
Rubber (estate and smallholder)	9.1	7.1%	11.4
Oil palm (estate and smallholder)	15.2	11.9%	25.6
Combined	74.6	58.5%	94.3
Total harvested area and production value of all crops (region)	127.5 million ha	100%	US\$202.3 billion

Source: Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO) data downloaded from www.fao.org/faos

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The reason for the selection of these three themes, however, is not just that they are significant in these brute, statistical terms. They also represent very different ways in which processes of transformation – or development – come to rest, for people and in places. They thus provide a productive means of examining the broad reach of agrarian change across the piece in the region. The focus on smallholder rice cultivation imputes stasis: this, after all, has been the dominant agricultural system for centuries and remains so. Estate crop agriculture, on the other hand, while not new, is representative of the ways in which rural areas have been transformed by their progressive incorporation into the market. The landless, meanwhile, are the flotsam, the human residue of the processes of market integration and accumulation that have made the region such a ‘success’. These three entry points, then, provide the empirical groundings for the Element.

1.1.2 Grounding the Element Theoretically

Studies of agrarian change often start with the late nineteenth-century work of Frederick Engels and Karl Kautsky. In 1894, Engels published ‘The Peasant Question in France and Germany’. He thought the future of the small peasant in industrialising and capitalising Europe to be quite hopeless:

[O]ur small peasant [in France], like every other survival of a past mode of production, is hopelessly doomed. He is a future proletarian.
 . . . [As in France] we foresee the inevitable doom of the small peasant [in Germany]. (Engels [1894])

Kautsky’s book length treatment, *Die Agrarfrage* or *The Agrarian Question*, was published five years later in 1899 (1988 [1899], see Banaji 1990).³ Like Engels, Kautsky also predicted the ultimate demise of the small peasant under the forces of capitalism. Importantly, however, both Engels and Kautsky thought that in neither a capitalist nor a socialist mode of production was the small peasant system sustainable. Under the former, small peasants would be absorbed by processes of capital accumulation and under the latter by the logic of collective production. This presented a dilemma for Kautsky: he was willing to neither countenance the dispossession of the land of the peasantry under capitalism nor entertain the fanciful idea that the peasantry might persist under socialism. Thus, as Banaji writes, ‘*The Agrarian Question* passed into history mainly as a work of “theory”, its conclusions forgotten and its political vision barely remembered’ (1990: 291). Reflecting this, it was a century after its first

³ For an extensive two-part review of literature on the agrarian question, spanning both its historical origins (part 1) and contemporary relevance (part 2) see Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010a and 2010b.

publication in German that a full English-language edition was published, in 1990.

Kautsky's book addressed two overarching questions, one largely theoretical and the second more practical.⁴ The theoretical question is as follows:

What happens to the peasantry and peasant agriculture under conditions of capitalism?⁵

The more practical question, which arises from Kautsky's answer to the theoretical question, and which continues to animate policy debates today, is as follows:

What should be done about the dispossession and ultimate elimination of the peasantry?

For Bernstein (2006), the advance of globalisation since the 1970s has meant that there is no longer either an agrarian question of capital or a peasant question to answer. This is not to say that the questions have been 'answered' in countries of the Global South, but that the changing context means they are no longer worth asking in Kautsky's classic formulation. For Bernstein, the agrarian question of *capital* has been superseded by an agrarian question of *labour*. To write of the peasantry in any purist sense no longer has purchase when rural labour is variously incorporated into global production networks, both agricultural and non-agricultural.⁶ For many other agrarian scholars (e.g. Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010a: 199, 2010b: 279–80), however, the agrarian question still provides a valuable (empirically) and intellectually cogent (theoretically) entry point for investigation. For these scholars, Kautsky's work has stood the test of time.

One of the puzzles of work on the agrarian question and the agrarian transition is that while peasants may have very largely disappeared, as a class if not always as an identity, the smallholder farm has not. Indeed, globally, there are around 570 million small farms, that is, farms less than 2 ha in size (Lowder et al. 2016). The majority, perhaps three-quarters, are to be found in Asia. This is a challenge for both theory and policy. Regarding the former, why hasn't the 'law' of the farm-size transition taken hold (see Section 2.2), especially in Asia, thus following the historical experience of the countries of the industrialised

⁴ The first volume of the English-language edition attends to the first of these questions, and the following volume to the second.

⁵ Or, at greater length: 'whether and how capital is seizing hold of agriculture, revolutionizing it, making old forms of production and property untenable and creating the necessity for new ones' (1988 [1899]: 12).

⁶ For Eric Hobsbawm (1994: 292), 'the most dramatic and far-reaching social change of the second half of the twentieth century, and the one which cuts us off for ever from the world of the past, is the death of the peasantry.'

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North (see Vicol 2019 and Krishna 2017)? Furthermore, the fact that small farms continue to dominate the Asian countryside also raises questions of policy: what is to be done, in policy terms, in the light of the persistence of small and putatively inefficient farms? As Otsuka et al. (2016: 441) have warned, ‘unless new policy measures are taken to expand farm size, Asia as a whole is likely to lose comparative advantage in agriculture and become an importer of food grains in the future.’

East and Southeast Asia’s position as an exemplar of development, as outlined at the start of the Element, takes a read that the process of accumulation by market integration has been developmental – that it has resulted, broadly speaking, in ‘good change’.⁷ This Element shines a light on this association and asks what happens to rural people, areas, and activities during processes of market integration and capitalist accumulation. Evidently, the countries of Asia are richer and in aggregate terms their populations wealthier, but how has this been achieved and with what consequences?

The word ‘accumulation’ is rooted in Marx’s notion of primitive accumulation: ‘the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production’. It is primitive ‘because it forms the prehistoric stage of capital and of the mode of production corresponding with it’ (1887: 508). Accumulation occurs through the separation of producers – peasants – from their means of survival and, most of all, from their land. This occurs through the enclosure of common land, the creation of private property rights, the accumulation of land by a small number of *kulaks* or *zamindars*,⁸ the dispossession of peasants and their consequent and inevitable proletarianisation (Hall 2013). For Marx, primitive accumulation was also a historical event: it characterised Europe in the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries as capitalism replaced feudalism. It *had* occurred.

David Harvey in *The New Imperialism* (2003) revived the debate over primitive accumulation, priming it for application in contemporary times. To do this, he re-badged primitive accumulation as ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (ABD) and argued that it could still be seen in operation across the world, but most of all in the rural South where capitalism until that time had made only limited in-roads, especially in the rural periphery. Just as capitalism in feudal Europe deprived peasants of their means of living, so too capitalism, in the guise of neoliberalism and with the support of states, was uprooting rural populations in frontier areas of the rural South. Land has been ‘grabbed’, in the popular

⁷ Here I use Chambers’ (2004) definition of development as ‘good change’, thus embodying both normative and temporal aspects.

⁸ *Kulak* were prosperous Russian peasants; *zamindar* is Persian for (large) landowner and generally applied to the Indian subcontinent.

vernacular, and enclosed and rural populations excised from their lands, sometimes to become workers on large-scale estates or simply labour in other geographical spheres and economic sectors. Deprived of the ability to meet their needs from farming, these marginal rural populations have been proletarianised.

One criticism of Harvey's work (see Levien 2011: 456–7) is that he does not define ABD. He recounts what it does, but not what it is, and therefore how and why these outcomes occur in certain places and not in others. With this criticism in mind, Levien (2011: 457) 'define[s] accumulation by dispossession as the use of extra-economic coercion to expropriate means of subsistence, production or common social wealth for capital accumulation'. Perhaps of greater salience for this Element, others (e.g. Kenney-Lazar 2018) note that there is an explanatory gap between theories of ABD and the actual, on-the-ground experience of it: in fact rather than in theory, things do not work out in this way and dispossession occurs or does not occur in quite geographically contingent and differentiated ways, including in Southeast Asia (Kenney-Lazar 2018: 682).

While examples from rural Southeast Asia fit Levien's definition of ABD, as later pages will explore, the empirical experience of many tens of millions of smallholder farmers in the region has not been one of dispossession. One of the features of Asia, including South (Paudel 2016; Vicol 2019), East (Jakobsen 2018), and Southeast Asia, is that small farms have not, in the main, disappeared. Indeed, they are getting smaller and more numerous, rather than larger and less numerous. Farm households have been incorporated into the neoliberal development project without, generally, their complete removal from the land. Even while members of households engage with factory work in urban spaces, they remain existentially and emotionally connected to a rice-growing (usually) 'home'. The puzzling persistence of smallholder rice production in Asia has, therefore, been characterised as exemplifying a process of accumulation *without* dispossession or AWD. Rural populations, it seems, are becoming semi-proletarianised as they engage with non-farm (e.g. factory) work while also keeping a familial foot on the land. In other parts of the region, accumulation by dispossession does, indeed, appear to dominate the rural landscape. The discussion in Section 2 accords with AWD, and that in Section 3 with ABD.

1.1.3 Grounding the Element Geographically

The primary material presented in this Element comes from my own research in mainland Southeast Asia between 2014 and 2018: among rice-farming smallholder households in Northeast Thailand (Illustration 1.1) and the Red River Delta of North Vietnam (Illustration 1.2), and among minority shifting cultivators in Luang Prabang Province in the Lao People's Democratic Republic



Illustration 1.1 Rice smallholder in Bueng Kan Province, Northeast Thailand (2015)



Illustration 1.2 Mechanical threshing of rice in the Red River Delta, North Vietnam (2018)