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Jonathan Rigg

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RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

*Dispossession, Accumulation
and Persistence*

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Rural Development in Southeast Asia

Dispossession, Accumulation and Persistence

Elements in Politics and Society in Southeast Asia

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Abstract: Rural areas and rural people have been centrally implicated in Southeast Asia's modernisation. Through the three entry points of smallholder persistence, upland dispossession, and landlessness, this Element offers an insight into the ways in which the countryside has been transformed over the past half century. Drawing on primary fieldwork undertaken in Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, and secondary studies from across the region, Rigg shows how the experience of Southeast Asia offers a counterpoint and a challenge to standard, historicist understandings of agrarian change and, more broadly, development. Taking a rural view allows an alternative lens for theorising and judging Southeast Asia's modernisation experience and narrative. The Element argues that if we are to capture the nature – and not just the direction and amount – of agrarian change in Southeast Asia, then we need to view the countryside as more than rural and greater than farming.

Keywords: Rural, Agriculture, Development, Dispossession, Accumulation, Persistence

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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:

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

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 oil palm

Crop	Area harvested (2017)		Gross production value (2016)	
	Million ha	Percentage total harvested land	billion US\$ (at constant 2004–6 prices)	Percentage gross production value all crops
Rice (padi)	50.3	39.5%	57.3	28.3%
Rubber (estate and smallholder)	9.1	7.1%	11.4	5.6%
Oil palm (estate and smallholder)	15.2	11.9%	25.6	12.7%
Combined	74.6	58.5%	94.3	46.6%
Total harvested area and production value of all crops (region)	127.5 million ha	100%	US\$202.3 billion	100%

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

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.'

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)



Illustration 1.3 Hmong village in Luang Prabang Province, Laos (2017)

(Laos) (Illustrations 1.3 and 1.4). I have also undertaken research among poor, mainly rural, migrants in Hanoi (Illustration 1.5).

Evidently, case studies from three countries are not sufficient, on their own, to make a regional case. The Element also draws liberally on work undertaken in other countries either to bolster the arguments being made or to provide the means to nuance or contest these arguments. That said, the empirical detail is drawn from mainland Southeast Asia, and there are reasons to think that insular (or maritime or island) Southeast Asia, and especially more remote areas of the insular Southeast, might offer a rather different view of agrarian transformation, where spatial integration, the inter-leaving of rural and urban transitions and pluri-activity are more limited and/or take different forms. These discontinuities will be noted as the argument proceeds.

2 Smallholder Persistence in Southeast Asia

2.1 Introduction

Between 2016 and 2018, we interviewed farming households in Thailand's northeastern region and in communes in rural areas of North Vietnam's Red River Delta.⁹ It was evident that household after household was keeping

⁹ The Thailand work was carried out with the assistance of Monchai Phongsiri, Buapun Promphaking, Albert Salamanca and Mattara Sripun; and the Vietnam work with Nguyen Tuan Anh and Jamie Gillen.



Illustration 1.4 Hmong shifting cultivation fields and secondary regrowth in Luang Prabang Province, Laos (2017)



Illustration 1.5 Rural migrants, Hanoi, Vietnam (2011)

tight hold of their rice land even when their holdings were sub-livelihood in size, agriculture was a marginal activity, alternative employment opportunities were available and farm work was regarded increasingly as low status. When we asked villagers why, in the light of all these factors, they continued to farm their land and grow rice, they explained:

[Ban Lao] is still a rice-farming village. Once a rice farmer, always one, no matter whether you earn money in other ways. Even with factories surrounding the village, some prefer to farm. They love farming, as their parents taught them how to farm. It's a tie to their roots. (Thong Bannarak, sixty-three years old, Ban Lao, Khon Kaen Province, Thailand, August 2016)

If I sold my rice land, where would we get our food from? At least if we farm rice, we still have rice to eat No matter how many rai we have now, it's our parents' land, and I won't sell it. (Mae Suk Wattana, seventy-five years old, Ban Lao, Khon Kaen Province, Thailand, July 2016)

I will never give up my land. I will farm rice until I get old, until I die. Without land . . . I will face poverty. Phạm Văn Phú, forty-six years old, Đại Bái, Bắc Ninh, Vietnam, July 2018)

[B]ecause we have been peasants for so long, we do not know what to do other than farming. Nguyễn Đình Tung, sixty-six years old, Hát Môn, Hà Tây, Hanoi, Vietnam, March 2018)

Embedded in these comments is not one reason but several jostling for attention to explain farmers' continued attachment to their land and to rice farming: a sense that rice land provides security, a fear of what the future might hold, an attachment to place and a connection with the past, a deep-seated desire to grow rice to meet subsistence needs, historical inertia and a feeling of filial obligation. What was not reflected in our conversations, however, was any sense that rice farming provided an occupation and an activity that would, on its own, meet the needs and aspirations of current and future generations. How do we interpret and understand this latent contradiction between the persistence of rice farming on the one hand and its broader diminution on the other?

2.2 Smallholder Persistence in Theory and in Aggregate

We start with the historical experience of another place. In the United States in 1880, there were 4.0 million farms averaging 134 acres (54 ha) in area. Sixty years later, in 1940, the number of farms peaked at 6.1 million, averaging 175 acres (71 ha). Another sixty years on from this, in 2000, the number of farms

was around one-half the 1880 and one-third the 1940 figures at 2.2 million, and their average size was more than three times greater than in 1880, at 436 acres (176 ha).¹⁰ It is figures like these that provide the empirical basis for the ‘law’ of the farm-size transition. Hazell and Rahman (2014) set out the development conditions that underpin this transition:

As per capita income rises, economies diversify and workers leave agriculture, rural wages go up, and capital becomes cheaper relative to land and labour. It then becomes more efficient to have progressively larger farms. Economies of scale in mechanized farming eventually kick in, accelerating this trend. The result is a *natural economic transition* towards larger farms over the development process, but one that depends critically on the rate of rural-urban migration, and hence on the growth of the non-agricultural sector. (Hazell and Rahman 2014: 3, emphasis added)

This law holds, then, that as countries modernise, structural change in the economy leads labour to be transferred from agriculture to non-agriculture, accompanied by the migration of populations from countryside to city. Land holdings, in response, amalgamate into larger units of production while emerging shortages and rising costs of labour promote mechanisation. Labour productivity in agriculture rises, and farming makes the transition from being a way of life to a business. Such is the powerful logic of the farm-size transition.¹¹ And indeed, there does seem to be a positive association between development (modernisation) and farm size at the global level: in other words, equilibrium farm size rises with development (Figure 2.1) (Eastwood et al. 2010: 3352). But there are exceptions, and many of these exceptions are to be found in Asia. As Figure 2.1 shows, for the countries of Asia, there appears to be no strong link between development reflected in per capita GDP and farm size.

Five areas of explanation offer themselves: agro-ecological, historical or temporal, political or policy-related, technological and economic or livelihood related. Taking these in turn, it may be that tropical environments on the one hand and wet rice cultivation on the other present certain agro-ecological limitations to large-scale agriculture, and therefore for land consolidation, while providing scope for small, highly productive farms to exist and support rural populations. Francesca Bray has also suggested that wet rice culture shapes the landscape in ways that make its simple conversion to other agricultural uses difficult (Bray 1986: 116–17). Certainly, looking at the dense patchwork of rice paddy fields in Flores, Eastern Indonesia, depicted in Illustration 2. 1, or the map

¹⁰ These are United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) data. The figures for 2015 are 2.07 million farms with an average area of 441 acres (178 ha).

¹¹ Also note the echoes with Marx’s primitive accumulation and Harvey’s accumulation by dispossession (see Section 1.1.2).

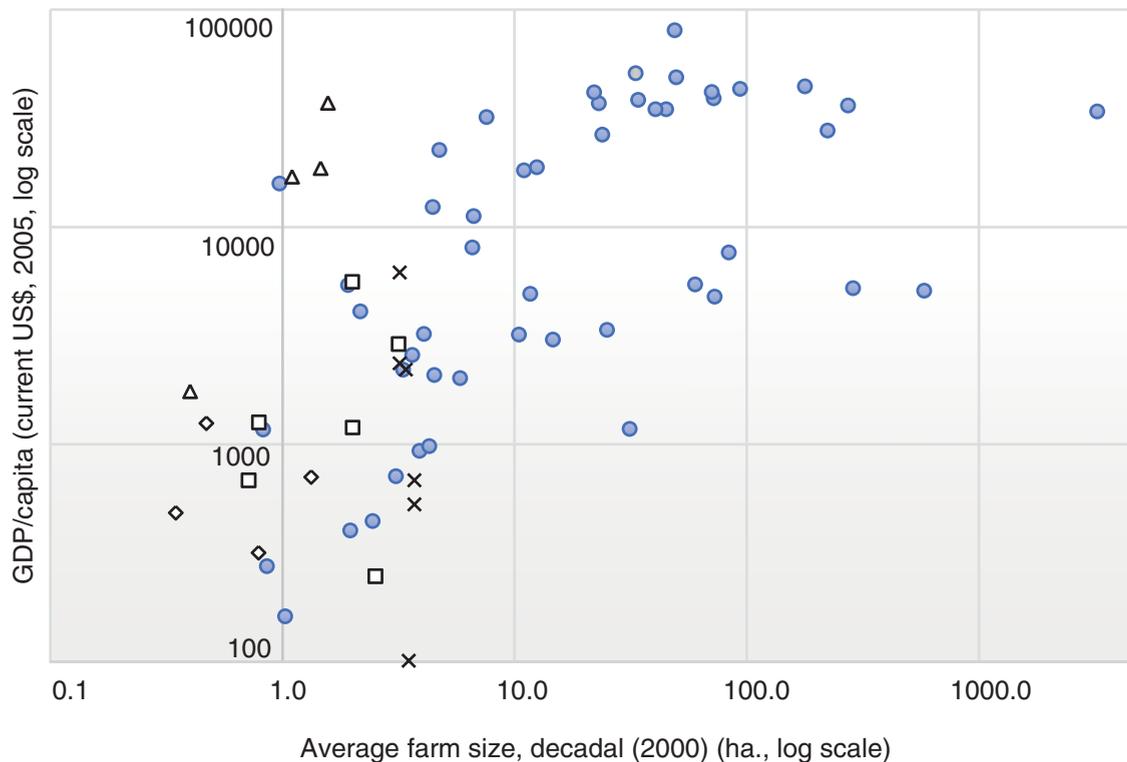


Figure 2.1 Average farm size and GDP/capita (62 countries)

Notes: (i) Squares = Southeast Asia; diamonds = South Asia; triangles = East Asia; (ii) Crosses = Thailand 1960, 1978, 1980, 1993, 2003 and 2013.

Sources: data from FAO and World Bank; and Thailand time series from Thailand's National Statistical Office.



Illustration 2.1 Wet rice fields, Flores, Eastern Indonesia (2018)

of rice plots in Khon Kaen province, Northeast Thailand (Figure 2.2), it is hard to imagine this being easily assembled or amalgamated into large fields suitable for mechanised production. It has also been noted for many years that irrigated wet rice appears to be able continually to absorb labour while maintaining per capita output, a process known as ‘agricultural involution’ and associated with the (much debated) work of Clifford Geertz in Java (Geertz 1963; see also p. 62). These two lines of argument raise questions about the scalability of wet rice culture, but in rather different ways. The first focuses on the physical landscape constraints that limit whether such farms *can be* scaled up; the second pays attention to whether they *need to be* scaled up.

Turning to historical or temporal factors, in the United States and Europe, the agrarian transition took more than a century to work its way out; in Southeast Asia, the process has been collapsed into less than half that time. Farmers who were semi-subsistence cultivators not many years ago – peasants – are still alive. Take Mae Suk, who was quoted at the beginning of this section. She was a young adult working her farm in 1960, when Ban Lao was only partially integrated into the mainstream of the Thai economy. She remembers a time when the arm of the state and the hand of the market rested lightly on her shoulders. As a seventy-year-old fellow villager remembered when she moved to the village as a young woman in 1962:



Figure 2.2 Map of rice plots in Ban Lao, Khon Kaen Province, Northeast Thailand (2015)

[The road to the village] was just a cart pathway in those days. It was so muddy [in the rainy season] it was difficult coming and going. It was just a forest and fields. (KI interview, 8 January 2015).

Perhaps, then, we are simply waiting for the demographic transition to occur – with the ultimate mode of population attrition, death – thus permitting the agrarian transition to follow. At that point, the farm-size transition will also take hold.

A third possibility is that human intervention – that is, policy, from producer price support to land reform and titling – has shaped, even stalled, the farm-size transition, fraying the link between development/modernisation and farm size. Certainly, Japan provides an exemplary – but perhaps also an exceptional – case of how state policies of smallholder support have profoundly influenced broader trajectories of agrarian transition (Shoji et al. 2019).¹² Land, which is said to be ‘sticky’ in any event, is made stickier still. But while Japan is an example of significant and long-term state support for farming, contributing to the stalling of the farm-size transition, much government policy across the Southeast Asian region during the

¹² Japan is the triangle data point in the top left-hand corner of Figure 2.1.

growth era has had a pro-urban and anti-farm bias (Anderson and Martin 2009). In effect, rural areas – where the bulk of the poor live – and producers have cross-subsidised cities and urban populations for much of the modernisation period.¹³

Technology can also have the effect of augmenting land, as well as saving (or displacing) labour. Most obviously, the Green Revolution in rice production, with the use of new seeds, chemical inputs (fertilisers and pesticides) and better control over water, has driven substantial increases in yields. Even more important in some areas, irrigation has also raised the cropping ratio (i.e. the number of crops harvested each calendar year), as well as yield per crop, while mechanical innovations from hand tractors to combine harvesters have saved labour and raised the productivity of labour. Together, more crops per year and higher yields per crop can raise total production, while mechanisation raises labour productivity, contributing to the possibility of higher incomes even in the context of falling farm size.

The final argument is that perhaps the persistence of the rice smallholder in Southeast Asia has something to do with the *quality* of economic expansion elsewhere, and the way in which this growth elsewhere translates into the realities of rural living (or livelihoods), and not with the *quantity* of economic growth, reflected in aggregate GDP per capita data (see Figure 2.1). When we run down this explanatory path, it requires us to explore the ways in which farming, as one livelihood activity, relates to others. It also requires us to open the ‘black box’ of the household to identify the social life of farm households. And finally, it requires that we think not in terms of farms (and agriculture), but in terms of people and households, who also farm. There is a methodological and a categorical challenge here. Methodologically, respondents’ self-identification – ‘We are rice farmers, we must farm’ (Ban Lao, August 2016) – may be out of step with the realities of living. At the same time, the binary occupational categorisation of ‘farmer’ and ‘non-farmer’ obscures the fact that many women and men in rural Southeast Asia work across this sectoral divide.

Before turning to a more detailed, ethnographic consideration of why and how households with small farms survive in Southeast Asia, there is a definitional nettle to grasp: what to call such households. Terms used in the literature include smallholders, small-scale farmers, peasants, and family farmers. All have their strengths and shortcomings (Box 2.1). Here ‘smallholders’ is used, while also recognising that this is not a problem-free term.

¹³ An exception to this is Malaysia where rice is a ‘political crop’, as Davidson (2018: 105) puts it. Even here, though, policies have been less directed at supporting (Malay) smallholders than at enriching the Malay rural capitalist class.

BOX 2.1 PEASANTS, SMALLHOLDERS, SMALL-SCALE FARMERS, FAMILY FARMERS

This Element uses the term ‘smallholder’ to refer to farmers working ‘small’ areas of land. This raises two important definitional issues. First, what of alternative terms such as ‘peasant’ – or ‘small peasant’ as Engels and Kautsky term them – ‘small-scale farmer’ and ‘family farmer’? While all these terms start from the assumption, implicitly, that such farms are ‘small’, a following question inevitably arises as to what, exactly, counts as ‘small’ in the context of the discussion.

Pinning down, in a prescriptive sense, a certain size above which a farm is no longer small is not a terribly productive exercise. All farms of a certain size are not equal: irrigated rice land against semi-arid dry land, grazing land for cattle against land for intensive horticulture, for example. That said, for many international agencies, two hectares is often used as the cut-off point above which farms are no longer counted as small. It is a rule of thumb, while accepting that the thumb is not especially exact.

Smallholders are farming households who own or manage farms that extend over a limited area, normally less than 2 ha. The implication is that the ‘holder’ also manages these farms and that these holders are far from wealthy; indeed, they comprise a large portion of the rural poor. But the nature and direction of agrarian change in Southeast Asia means these characterisations need not hold true, and increasingly so. There are growing numbers of relatively wealthy, post-productivist smallholders, many of whom employ labour and are very far from being peasants in the classical sense. The term *small-scale farmer* means something similar to smallholder, suffers similar shortcomings, but with the additional issue that these individuals are, first and foremost, farmers. Both these terms, smallholder and small-scale farmer, also exclude one important group in rural society, particularly if we are interested in rural poverty and livelihoods: *landless labourers*. These are rural folk who make a living from working on the land but have no rights to that land. The term *family farm* attends to matters of ownership and operation, but this can – globally at least – mean a farm of hundreds even thousands of hectares and definitions are unclear about who is a family member and how much hired labour keeps such a farm within the designation ‘family’.

Finally, what of peasants and the peasantry? Teodor Shanin (1971) considers the peasantry to have four defining features: social organization based on the family farm, farming (or ‘land husbandry’ as he terms it) as the main contributor to livelihood, a distinct cultural identity based around

the village-community and domination (and marginalisation) by outsiders. Thus, the peasantry are, at one and the same time, a class, a production category (peasant farming), a social entity (the peasant household) and a cultural identity. Others (e.g. Wolf et al. 2001), while they agree that there are peasants doubt whether it is possibly to think of *the peasantry* as a coherent class, because peasantries are always localised, and always produced in quite distinct ways by historical forces and environmental conditions. That aside, a *peasant* farm is – or was, because many scholars (e.g. Hobsbawm 1994) regard the peasantry as a historical artefact – subsistence or semi-subsistence oriented, and the profit motive subdued, if not extinguished. The *peasantry* are also often characterised as a subordinate class, notwithstanding Wolf's objections.

It is evident that all these terms have their weaknesses: anything referencing the notion of 'small' harbours the challenge of where to draw the line; family farms may be large and highly capitalised; and peasant modes of production, in the purist sense, are seen by many as a historical artefact.

2.3 Smallholder Persistence in Practice and in Person

The majority of rice-growing smallholders in Southeast Asia do not own or operate sufficient land to meet their household needs from rice farming alone. They have, in the jargon, sub-livelihood holdings. This is true even with the yield-enhancing and production-boosting technologies of the Green Revolution, and in the context of government support and subsidies. Cramb's edited book *White Gold: The Commercialisation of Rice Farming in the Lower Mekong Basin* (2020) looks in detail at how smallholder rice farmers across the four Lower Mekong countries of Southeast Asia have successfully commercialised production and, in so doing, achieved a quiet miracle of production. But he also notes that these farmers are ageing, holdings are small, there has been a secular decline in rice prices while costs have increased, and 'governments are . . . increasingly concerned about the persistence of small rice farms and are looking for ways to encourage larger and more efficient operational units' (2020: 428).

In Thailand, in 2013, the average farm extended over more than 20 *rai* or 3.2 ha. Benjavan Rerkasem (2016: 111) has estimated that households require 62.5 *rai* or 10 hectares of irrigated (double-cropped) land to make a 'decent living from rice in 21st century Thailand, when self-sufficiency no longer means

producing enough rice to meet the family's requirements'. Only 4.5 per cent of farm households owned 60 *rai* or more. If we take a farm- and agriculture-centric view of livelihoods, it is hard to imagine how the 95 per cent of Thai farmers who do not have enough land to meet their needs can possibly 'get by'. Some, perhaps, do by hunkering down in a semi-subsistence mode of living, others by diversifying out of rice and embracing high-value and high-return crops and livestock. The majority, however, do so by embracing what has been termed occupational multiplicity, or pluri-activity. They do much more than 'just' farm. They diversify beyond agriculture to survive and prosper. This requires us to view farming in relation to non-farming, and individuals who farm and are members of households in relation to individuals who do not farm and are members of those self-same households. It also requires us to view rural livelihoods against urban living. It is a matter, then, of distribution as well as production between generations, sectors and spaces (see Ferguson 2015). Increasingly, farming is a marginal activity in thrall to non-agriculture, as Mae Suk explained to us:

These two kids of mine work in factories. They go to work [in the factories] as usual [but also] work on the farm in the rice farming season. [They] take days off from work to farm rice when it's needed. (Mae Suk Wattana, seventy-five years old, Ban Lao, Khon Kaen Province, Thailand, July 2016)

The sheer economic marginality of rice farming for all but the largest or the most miserly of farmers was also true in Vietnam. Table 2.1 outlines the costs and returns of a farmer with 3 *sao* (1,080 m²) of rice land in the Red River Delta, on the outskirts of Hanoi. The net profit from two crops per year amounted to around 3 million VND, or US\$136. This is equivalent to ten to twelve days' farm work at the prevailing daily farm wage in the area of 250–300,000 VND. No wonder, then, that

Although we still keep growing rice, we do not spend much time and concern for rice growing. . . . We can earn much more money from [other] jobs rather than spending time rice growing. Nguyễn Thị Du (female, thirty-four years old, Đại Bái, Bắc Ninh, Vietnam, July 2018)

Rice farming is hard work but does not generate a good income. . . . Many people leave their rice fields uncultivated because rice growing is not economically profitable any more. . . . Their children are working in companies, [and] the old do not have enough health [to work the land]. Đặng Việt Du (male, forty-six years old, Chương Mỹ, Hanoi, Vietnam, November 2017)

It was clear that for the large majority of our respondents, rice farming just didn't deliver and, moreover, for some it was not part of their life, although it

Table 2.1 Costs and returns to rice over 3 *sao* of land in the Red River Delta, Vietnam (2018)

	per <i>sao</i> (360 m ²)	Over 3 <i>sao</i> (1,080 m ²) of rice land	
		per season	per year
Production and returns			
Production (kg)	150	450	900
Market value (VND)	1,350,000	4,050,000	8,100,000
Costs (VND)			
Commune fees	100,000	300,000	300,000
Ploughing	140,000	420,000	840,000
Transplanting	300,000	900,000	1,800,000
Fertilizer	200,000	600,000	1,200,000
Harvesting	180,000	540,000	1,080,000
Total costs	920,000	2,760,000	5,220,000
Net profit (VND)	430,000	1,290,000	2,880,000

Note: Commune fees are levied per *sao* per year; US\$1 = 22,000 VND

Source: Household interview, Lam Điền, Chương Mỹ, 2018. See [Nguyen et al. 2020](#).

was part of the lives of others to whom they were emotionally and existentially connected.

The question is how this plays out in terms of the ‘household’, the social unit within which farming is situated. Who does what, when and how? Further, in what ways are the who, when and how changing over time? And, importantly, why, and – sometimes – why not? This requires us to open the black box of the household to examine changing gender and generational roles and relations, how these then underpin livelihoods and, in turn, shape the very spatial constitution of the household and the practice of farming itself.

‘Originally’ is a problematic adverb because it assumes that there is a starting point from which change can be measured. Nonetheless, a key purpose of delineating gender and generational roles and relations ‘today’ is to say something about how they have changed and then to seek an explanation. This tempts us into writing of *the* past in a singular and reductionist manner, and often the default characterisation of this past is one populated by sedentary, semi-subsistence peasants. While it may be true at a general level, there is devil in the detail and even in this part-imagined past, rural people specialised; they

experienced market exchange, mobility, landlessness, inequality and poverty.¹⁴ It was neither a world of bucolic abundance nor of shared frugality.

So, we need to be conscious of the pitfalls of characterising the past as that which the present is not (see [Rigg 2019](#): 17–32). That cautionary caveat aside, today's rural world is very different from 'the' past, and we should also not shy away from making this point. With that in mind, what has changed?

Essentially, rice smallholders have become more mobile and less 'agricultural'. Migration and mobility have become normal, and farming contributes a declining share of total household production. As noted, rice-growing populations were never 'immobile' in the sedentary peasant paradigm formulation. But migration was largely male and normally undertaken by young adults and the middle aged, often at particular times of year dictated by the demands of rice growing, or in response to existential crises. Non-farm activities and the migration which this often entailed were organised around and in relation to the crop and activity that held centre stage: rice cultivation. Michael Moerman, who undertook one of the first detailed village studies in northern Thailand notes the following:

In Ban Ping, rice is the main component of every meal, the major source of cash, and the object of most labor. Its production, consumption, and sale are the most common topics of village conversation. All other activities – economic, political, religious, and social – must yield to the rice cycle and the rains that govern it. Rice is a universally accepted standard and store of value. A ball of rice is the infant's first solid food; a basket of rice accompanies the corpse to the pyre. ([Moerman 1968](#): 10)

In 1982, I surveyed seventy-seven households in two villages in the Northeast Thai province of Mahasarakham. [Figure 2.3](#) shows the distribution of farm and non-farm work by gender and age cohorts. The majority of those involved in non-farm work were engaged in some form of mobility, whether daily commuting, circular or seasonal migration or longer-term sojourns, sometimes overseas. Like Ban Ping, however, farming and in particular the farming of glutinous wet rice dominated people's time and concerns and all other activities lay in the shadow of rice farming ([Illustration 2.2](#)). [Figure 2.4](#) shows the same data, for the same seventy-seven households, collected twenty-six years later. Evident in

¹⁴ As an example of such a historically problematic and reductionist simplifying of the past, see Jason Hickey's (2019) commentary on global poverty: 'Prior to colonisation, most people lived in subsistence economies where they enjoyed access to abundant commons – land, water, forests, livestock and robust systems of sharing and reciprocity. They had little if any money, but then they didn't need it in order to live well – so it makes little sense to claim that they were poor.' www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/29/bill-gates-davos-global-poverty-infographic-neoliberal.

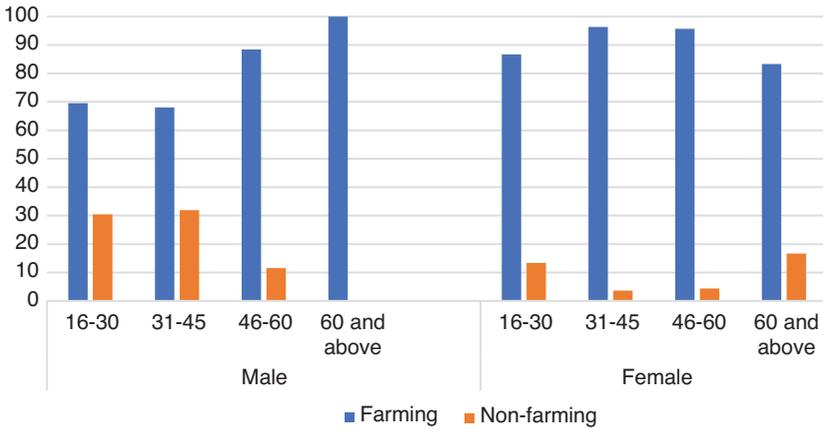


Figure 2.3 Farm and non-farm work, Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn, by gender and age cohort (% , 1982)

Source: author’s fieldwork with Albert Salamanca, 2008.

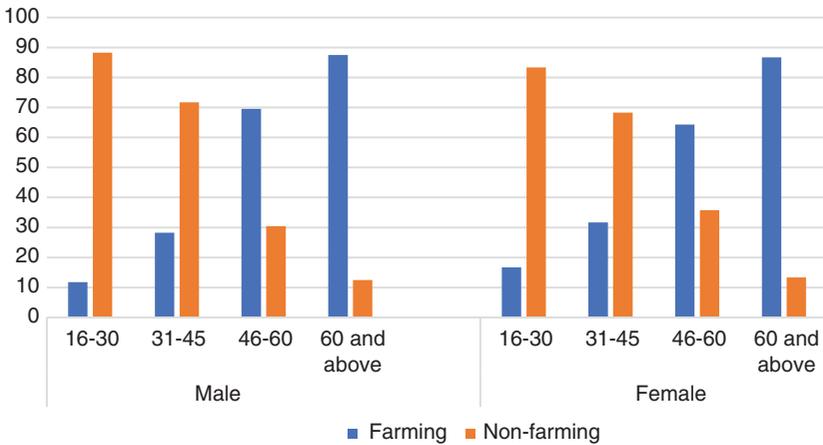


Figure 2.4 Farm and non-farm work, Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn, by gender and age cohort (% , 2008)

Source: author’s fieldwork with Albert Salamanca, 2008

these figures are three significant shifts, and the argument here is that these have common currency across the region.¹⁵

First, the relative balance of farm and non-farm work has shifted towards the latter, and accompanying this has come increasing mobility. Members of these

¹⁵ For example, see Kelly (2011) for the region as a whole, Lukasiewicz (2011) and McKay (2012) on the Philippines, Mills (2012) on Thailand and Elmhirst (2002) and Peluso and Purwanto (2018) on Indonesia.



Illustration 2.2 Rice, Southeast Asia's signature crop in the Toraja highlands of Sulawesi, Indonesia

rural households, some of whom still identified as *chao naa*, or rice farmers, were as likely to do something other than farming. Second, women appear to be just as likely as men to be engaged in non-farm work. Behind this lies a bigger story: Thailand's integration into the global economy from the mid-1980s and the industrialisation, much of it centred, especially in the early years, in and around Bangkok, arising from the large inflows of foreign direct investment. These factories, to begin with mainly labour-intensive manufacturing enterprises, drew their workers from across the country and many selectively employed young women.¹⁶ This raises the third point that we can draw from these data: while the gender differences evident in [Figure 2.3](#) may have disappeared, the generational differences have become sharper. Increasingly, it seems, farmers are old(er) and non-farmers are young(er). For old and young alike, education was the means by which villagers could engage with such usually distant non-farm work, providing them with the skills and the certificates to find employment away from the farm and the village.

Both in Thailand and in Vietnam, these themes were reflected in how respondents talked about rural life and work. Mr Pruek of Ban Kao in Nakhon Ratchasima province told us that he did not 'want to see [my children] work and face hardship like me'... 'That's why I sent them to school to study

¹⁶ But not all. Thailand has become a key global node for the manufacturing of car parts, and this has tended to employ men.

and find an easier life.’ Mrs Naruathai, also a resident of Ban Kao, told us that her daughters needed to ‘attend school as much and as high as they can’, so that they would not be reliant on farm work. In Vietnam, Nguyễn Thái Hà put it like this:

No, I do not want our children to follow us [into farming]. I want [my children] to study . . . to go out [and to] know the world. (Nguyễn Thái Hà, thirty-five years old, Đại Bái, Bắc Ninh, Vietnam, July 2018)

What these views do not always make clear is whether they reflect an avoidance of farming as a low-status activity or, rather, the recognition that given small farm size and declining returns to farming, it does not represent a tenable livelihood, let alone career. Ben White, in his work on Indonesia, for example, has argued that the absence of young people in farming occurs because they can’t get into farming, rather than that they want to get out:

In most villages [in this study in Indonesia], landlessness is widespread and less than half of farmers own the land they cultivate. Inequalities in landholding mean that most young people have no realistic prospect of becoming farmers, or at least not while they are still young. . . . It’s not surprising, then, that so many young rural men and women decide to migrate, to various kinds of paid jobs or informal-sector work, sometimes in other regions or as far away as Malaysia. (White 2015: 332)

Many of the core elements of the farm-size transition seem to be in place in Thailand and Vietnam: rice smallholders cannot survive from their farms alone; the region’s economic growth is providing an abundance of other employment opportunities; incomes are rising and economies diversifying; the young are being educated so that they can take advantage of these opportunities; mobility is becoming normal and the cultural and physical constraints to mobility are diminishing; and there may be growing social reasons for the young to avoid farming. Three questions follow: first: why, then, don’t villagers sell their land and ‘exit’ farming (to use the World Bank phrase, see Section 2.4) and allow farms to grow in size? The second and third questions relate to the puzzle underpinning the first question. If farmers are keeping their land, for whatever reason, what is happening to farming, and what is happening to the structures of rural society?

So far, the detailed discussion has drawn on the experiences of Thailand and Vietnam. Table 2.2 places the experience of these two countries in the wider, Asian context. These summary data indicate, at least at this aggregate level, that the persistence of the smallholder is a feature of the agrarian transition – or rather the absence of *this element* of the agrarian transition – across the wider

Table 2.2 Average farm size, Asia (1960–latest, ha.)

	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	Latest
East Asia						
China	-	-	0.6	0.4	0.4	0.6
Japan	1.2	1	1	1.2	1.2	1.5
Korea (Rep)	2.1	0.9	0.9	1.1	1.4	1.5
Southeast Asia						
Indonesia	1.2	1.1	1.2	0.9	0.8	-
Laos	-	-	-	-	-	1.6
Myanmar	-	-	-	2.4	2.5	-
Philippines	3.6	3.6	2.9	2.2	2.0	-
Thailand	3.5	-	3.7	3.4	3.2	3.2
Vietnam	-	-	-	0.5	0.7	0.6
South Asia						
India	2.7	2.3	2	1.6	1.3	-
Nepal	-	1	1.1	0.9	0.8	0.7
Pakistan	3.5	5.3	4.7	3.8	3.1	2.3
Sri Lanka	1.6	1.2	1.1	0	0.5	0.5

Note: For China and Vietnam land was collectively operated until the agrarian reforms of the late 1970s (China) and late 1980s (Vietnam).

Sources: Data extracted from [Lowder et al. 2014: 28–30](#); [Rigg et al. 2016: 124](#); latest data from NSO data (Thailand); [OECD 2018](#) (China); [Cho 2018](#) (Korea); FAO Family Farming Knowledge Platform www.fao.org/family-farming/data-sources/dataportrait/farm-size/en/ (Nepal, Sri Lanka, Vietnam).

region.¹⁷ Even for those countries that have seen an increase in average farm size since 1960, the increase has been very marginal indeed. Farms remain small.

Some of the possible reasons for the persistence of the rice smallholder in Asia have already been touched on, and for each country these apply in different ways and to different degrees. Taking a livelihoods approach – in other words, asking *how* rice smallholder production fits with other livelihood elements – helps ground these otherwise rather disengaged explanations. It reveals the brake that appears to be preventing ‘progress’ along the transition path that theory and the historical experience of countries in the industrialised North have provided.

¹⁷ I write ‘this element’ because agrarian transitions *are* occurring in the region, just not quite as expected.

The beginning of [section 2.1](#) noted that evident in some of the quotations of farmers was a degree of fear and uncertainty about the future. Smallholder rice farming might be a low-return activity and an unattractive one for many of the rural young, but it does provide a semblance of security. The fear that non-farm work might just dry up, and that growing rice provided an existential safety net, was evident in our interviews:

We keep growing rice just in case we lose our [other] jobs. If we no longer have any employment, we still have our rice fields which bring us an income. (Kim Thị Trung, forty-eight years old, Hát Môn, Hà Tây, Hanoi, Vietnam, March 2018)

[I keep my land but] just for a rainy day. If I fail in this job [as a metal worker], then [at least] I still have my rice land to work. (Nguyễn Đức Kha, forty years old, Đại Bái, Bắc Ninh, Vietnam, December 2017)

[I continue to farm] so we don't have to buy food! We want to have a store of rice to eat and secure our food needs. If we have to buy just one kilogram of rice it's gone so quickly and if one day we don't have any money, where would we find our food? But if we have a granary full of paddy, we feel comfortable and have peace of mind. (Dao Chitchop, forty-four years old, Ban Lao, Khon Kaen province, Thailand, August 2016)

It was also the case that older age cohorts, in the main, simply didn't have the skills or educational qualifications to access many of the opportunities in Southeast Asia's modernising economy.¹⁸ When we undertook a survey in three villages across three provinces in Northeast Thailand in 2016, the generational pattern of schooling was, unexpectedly, stark. Of the 563 villagers we surveyed, those older than age sixty had five years' education, on average; those in their twenties had accumulated more than ten years of schooling. This is an important factor lying behind the generational pattern of work evident in [Figure 2.3](#). In 1982, 27 per cent of farm workers were forty-six years old or older; in 2008, it was 74 per cent. The young *could* withdraw from farming and take up alternative work; for most of the more elderly, however, this was not an option: they were marginalised in farming given their limited education. But this is not the end of the story, for it is not just that older generations cannot access such work and are therefore left to labour in low-return farming. Another way to explain the pattern of work across age cohorts reflected in [Figure 2.3](#) is to place the emphasis on younger generations' inability to access land. There is simply no land available; they have no choice but to leave home and the village

¹⁸ Kim Thị Trung, quoted earlier, said, 'At my age [forty-eight years], it's not easy to get a job . . . jobs in the industrial zone are normally for the young who are around eighteen to thirty-five years old.'

and search for work in other places and sectors. With these two competing explanations in mind, do we divine in [Figure 2.3](#) a situation where the young will not enter farming and the elderly cannot leave or, rather, one where the young cannot enter farming and the elderly will not leave? Equally, and perhaps even more important, however, is what these data tell us about the precarious nature of work in modern sectors of these countries' economies.

Academic work on the precarity of late capitalism has mainly addressed conditions in the industrialised world but increasingly is also being applied to countries in the Global South, including in Southeast Asia (see [Arnold 2013](#); [Cruz-del Rosario and Rigg 2019](#); [Hewison and Tularak 2013](#)). Writing of Vietnam, Arnold states that 'insecure and uncertain waged work is increasingly prevalent in Vietnam' and 'liberalization has undermined institutions including family, community, trade unions, and the state as sources of social support' so that 'workers increasingly depend on the family and community for access to goods and services' ([Arnold 2013](#): 468–469). In Thailand, and notwithstanding the introduction of universal health provision and a national social security system, work in the formal sector is becoming increasingly informalised and characterised by insecurity, or precarity ([Hewison and Tularak 2013](#)). The fears expressed in the interview quotations presented earlier, then, were not groundless. The Asian financial crisis of 1997–8, the global financial crisis of 2008, the Thai floods of 2011, and the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 all demonstrated to rural households the risks of putting all their livelihood eggs in one non-farm basket.

There is, therefore, an argument to be made that one answer to the question 'why do smallholders persist' requires that we raise our eyes from the field and take our attention away from the rural. The attractions of farming cannot be understood in terms of farming alone but only make sense when seen against the type of work, and the risks inherent in that work, generated through Southeast Asia's integration into the global, neoliberal market mainstream.

The farmers quoted in this section mostly live in villages that are quite well connected to metropolitan centres. This connection is intense and can also stretch to surprisingly distant places. Factories on industrial estates in Ayutthaya in Central Thailand, itself 80 km north of Bangkok, pick up workers daily from up to 100 km away, for instance. The rural story is likely to be very different in places where such intensive rural/urban and farm/non-farm interactions are not possible. In such places, dislocations of distance – simple geography – are important in shaping agrarian transitions, and possibly in quite particular ways. Jessica [Clendenning \(2020\)](#) has recently completed a year's fieldwork in a remote, upland village in Flores, one of Indonesia's more remote 'Outer' islands (see [Illustration 2.1](#)). Flores itself has few jobs and little industry, and accessing work often requires either a long sea and land

journey or an expensive flight. A lack of opportunities in the village along with an absence of electricity and running water contribute to drawing young people away:

From the village, to be ‘successful’ was the most frequently cited motivation for families to pour large investments into education or migration. Success, for young people, meant lives different from their parents. This largely meant expanding their opportunities by obtaining an undergraduate degree, and hopefully, an office job. Farming was always the last, fall back option. (Clendenning 2018)

But their outward geographical movements were not matched by upward career movements. Many returned to the village with little to show for their sojourns away. The title of her thesis (Clendenning 2020) is ‘The Inevitability of Leaving and the Impossibility of Staying Away’, which neatly sums up the dilemma facing villagers from peripheral Flores. They have no choice but to leave, and no option but to return. McCarthy’s (2019) work in another, only slightly less geographically marginal region of Indonesia – Aceh at the northern end of Sumatra – resonates with Clendenning’s research. Like her, he notes how the teleology of modernisation theory is not taking root, even while local people embrace the everyday essence of modernisation, and McCarthy terms this ‘progressing sideways’. Farming is ‘linked both to stagnation and indebtedness but also survival and capital accumulation’, with farmers being at the same time market aware *and* subsistence inclined.¹⁹

This paradoxical co-presence of subsistence and commercial activities and logics, or ‘deagrarianisation without depeasantisation’, raises the possibility that the ‘peasantry’ continue to persist, both as social groups and as a peasant style of living and identification even in the context of globalisation. This has led to all sorts of categorical gymnastics. Andrew Walker, for instance, writes of ‘middle-income peasants’ (2012) in Northern Thailand. Charles Keyes (2012, 2014) in Northeast Thailand is reluctant to describe the villagers he has studied for half a century as peasants, of whatever hue, but terms them ‘cosmopolitan villagers’, to emphasise that they remain villagers even as they also become increasingly worldly. Naruemon and McCargo (2011), meanwhile, write of ‘urbanised villagers’ to describe villagers in urban contexts who continue to maintain their rural allegiances and sensibilities. Dayley and Sattayanurak (2016: 63), however, have little truck with any notion that the peasantry persist, arguing, ‘Thai peasants, as individuals, as households, as

¹⁹ We concluded something similar based on our work in North Vietnam: ‘rural populations who are thoroughly commercially minded and aware often continue to view rice, and to take decisions regarding its cultivation, through a subsistence-inflected livelihood lens’ (Nguyen et al. 2020).

a class, or as a unit of analysis no longer meaningfully exist. . . . Lamphun's peasants did not transform into a new homogeneous class or social formation, but evolved to take up wholly new and multiple occupational, social, group, and generational identities.' What we see here is less an argument about which of these terms best captures the changes underway, but a reflection of the fact that established conceptual frames do not work when it comes to shedding light on agrarian change in many of Southeast Asia's rice-growing regions.

2.4 Making Small Farms Work

To return to the village and farm, and the second and third questions posed earlier: what does this mean for rice farming as an activity and an occupation, and the farm household as the social unit that manages farming and, increasingly, much else besides?

The average age of rice farmers is increasing across the region, and there seems to be a link between ageing and per capita GDP (Figure 2.5). This seems intuitive: if development is leading opportunities to multiply in the non-farm sector, and if these opportunities are either mainly taken up by, or mainly available to, younger age cohorts, then those who remain on the farm are likely to be members of older age cohorts. Youthful attrition results in ageing in place.

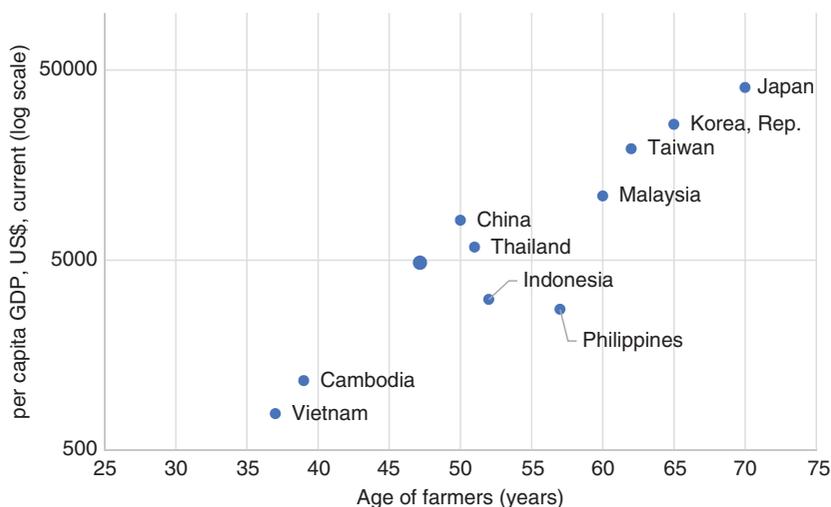


Figure 2.5 Average farmer age and per capita GDP

Note: per capita income as at date of farmer age recorded. Vietnam, 2006; Indonesia and Taiwan, 2010; Thailand, 2012; Japan, Republic of Korea, Malaysia, Philippines, 2013; Cambodia 2015; China, 2016.

Sources: FAO; World Bank; Food and Fertilizer Technology Centre for Asia and the Pacific Region; Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives (Thailand.)

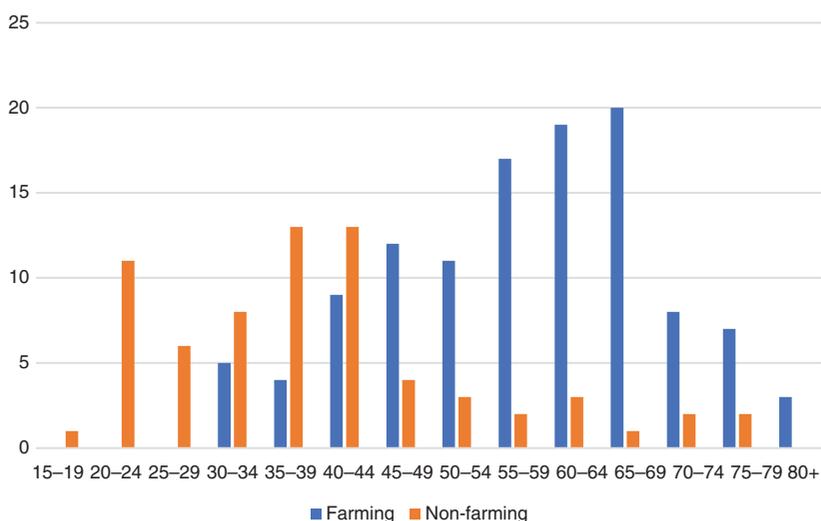


Figure 2.6 Age distribution of farming and non-farming adult household members in Ban Kao, Thailand (primary occupation)

Source: village survey (2016), n = 184

In Asia, this process is accentuated, arguably, because large farms are not emerging, so we do not see a ‘professionalisation’ of farming.²⁰ Furthermore, Southeast (and East) Asia’s populations are ageing at an unprecedented rate, with sharply falling fertility rates and rising life expectancy.

Figure 2.6 provides what seems to be a stark illustration of this process based on a survey we undertook in Ban Kao in Thailand’s Nakhon Ratchasima Province in 2016. Terms that have been used to describe this process range from the simply descriptive – ‘ageing’ (HelpAge 2014) – to the more loaded ‘greying’ (Maclachlan and Shimizu 2016 [Japan]). It has even been said that farming in Asia is facing ‘geriatrification’ (Wilson et al. 2018 [China]).

But things are not necessarily quite as serious as these data – and many policy pronouncements and newspaper reports (see section 2.6) – imply. To begin with, these data record primary occupation and many younger household members undertake farm work at the weekends or in the evenings (Rigg et al. 2020). Ageing farmers are, often, not alone in their endeavours. Second, mechanisation of many of the physically more taxing stages in the rice cycle (land preparation and harvesting, for example) and the shift to different forms of rice cultivation, in particular broadcast (direct seeding) over transplant rice culture, have significantly reduced the burden, making farming more ‘elderly friendly’.

²⁰ Which might mean a larger proportion of farms being managed by younger farmers, bringing the average age down somewhat.

Sometimes such processes of dis-intensification lead farmers to plant labour-saving tree crops on their paddy land, leaving land idle, or even abandoning it longer term. Finally, in countries like Thailand and Malaysia, migrant labour from neighbouring countries has helped fill any labour shortages left by the combination of migration and ageing.

These farm management decisions have social implications. Indeed, arguably none of this would be possible without some careful choreography on the part of households. The implications are profound because they challenge the very conceptual basis of *the* household and state attempts to regulate and count populations.

Surveys tend to define households in these terms:

[A] household is [a] social unit consisting of one or more persons who use joint accommodation and food. In other words, a household is a group of people who normally live in the same housing unit or its part ('live under the same roof'), who are or are not related and who eat together ('eat from the same pot'). (<http://microdata.worldbank.org/index.php/catalog/65/download/11426>)

A household is composed of the group of people living in the same dwelling space who eat meals together and acknowledge the authority of a man or women who is the head of household. (Beaman and Dillon 2009: 7)

Critical in the first of these two working definitions are the well-known phrases in parentheses, living under the 'same roof' and eating from the 'same [cooking] pot'. These make clear that the household is co-residential; it is based on the propinquity of its members, not (strictly speaking) on whether they are related. It is therefore about geography, not kinship. The second definition has the additional element of the acknowledged authority of a household head.²¹ What 'work' do these definitions perform given the changes that have been sketched? Do they capture the changes that have rippled through the Southeast Asian countryside and are they, then, 'fit for purpose'?

The sense that they do not, and are not, is reflected in a succession of terms that have been coined to describe the changing nature of the household: 'multi-sited' (Rambo 2017; Rigg 2019), 'multi-local' (Thieme 2008), 'trans-local' (Pinnawala 2008) and 'shadow' (Rigg and Salmanca 2011). All challenge the two core definitional attributes of the household, namely that the members of a household should 'live under one roof' and 'eat from one cooking pot'. Even the authority of a (usually male) head of household is compromised if that person is working and

²¹ Beaman and Dillon's (2009) paper is a survey experiment measuring the effects of altering the definition of the household. They conclude: 'Our results tell a cautionary tale, suggesting that the selection of the household definition deserves more attention in the design of future surveys and the analysis of previously collected surveys, especially when researchers are interested in changes over time' (p. 15).

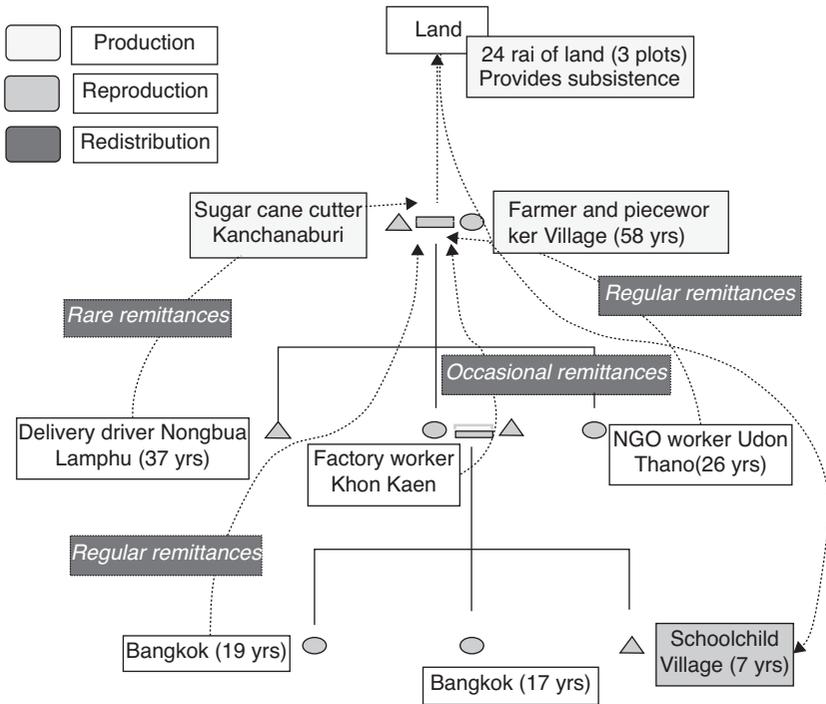


Figure 2.7 Household footprint, Ban Lao, Khon Kaen, Thailand (2015)

living away from home. These terms imply that it is only possible to understand the functioning of households – and therefore importantly livelihoods – across Asia if we, quite literally, stretch our definition to other places and people.

Figure 2.7 provides an example of such a multi-sited household based on an interview in Thailand. This makes clear that not only do we need to stretch our understanding of where, spatially, the household begins and ends. The figure also demonstrates why it is necessary to undertake three further ‘movements’ if we are to understand how and why rice smallholders persist across Southeast Asia. We need to bring

- The rural in close explanatory alignment with the urban (and vice versa);
- Connect farming with non-farming; and
- Consider rural households as units of redistribution as well as of production.

If we take the household as co-residential, then this household consists of a fifty-eight-year-old woman who farms 24 rai (3.8 ha) of rice land, and her seven-year-old grandson. But if we consider flows of resources into the household, and functional links with household members living elsewhere, then the household becomes multi-sited and multi-dimensional, embodying elements of production,

reproduction and redistribution, spatially stretching the household from Ban Lao in Khon Kaen, to other provinces in the Northeast, to Kanchanaburi in the west, and to Thailand's capital, Bangkok.²² Furthermore, these flows do more than craft livelihoods and wellbeing; they shape landscapes.

Deidre McKay's work on 'remittance landscapes' in an indigenous village – Asipulo – in Ifugao Province, a formerly remote part of the Philippines, demonstrates all four of these movements at work. The village is increasingly supported and sustained by remittances generated from migrant labouring, and lands that were planted to rice (paddy) are now bean gardens. The 'relations between remittances and bean farming within women's life histories in this local context show how the circular migration of female OCWs [overseas contract workers] to and from "abroad" can transform rural landscapes in material ways visible not just in housing and appliances, but also in crop and land-use decisions' (McKay 2003: 293). Most of Asipulo's migrants are women, and such gender-selective migration against a backdrop of traditional gendered labour divisions in agriculture means that farming has changed. Women's knowledge is no longer brought to bear in decision-making, male left-behind farmers make different cropping decisions, and land is cultivated to new crops, in new ways. It is for this reason that McKay writes of the 'remittance landscapes' of Ifugao (McKay 2005). Asipulo – as a 'community' and as a site of production and reproduction – only becomes meaningful when we connect it to places distant from Asipulo: to urban centres and the cosmopolitanism that this generates; to non-farm activities; and through a focus on how production in one site (whether rural or urban) underpins reproduction in another, permitting redistribution to sustain or, indeed to compromise, agricultural production.

2.5 Super-exploitation and Smallholder Persistence

It is easy to marvel at the creative ways in which rice smallholders have managed their farms, engaged with non-farm work, embraced new opportunities, invested in education and adopted mobile lifestyles. Together, these adaptations have raised incomes and lowered levels of income poverty across the region – a considerable achievement. But the fact that families have not, in the main, given up their land hints at something about the quality and texture of these development transformations and their rural outcomes. Work in the non-farm sector usually provides a better return than farming. But this return has not proved to be good enough or secure enough to entice people to give up their farms. Returns to work alone do not tell the full story.

²² The need to include matters of reproductive work is core to Jacka's (2018) 'new analytical framework' for understanding agrarian change in China.

In the context of South Africa, [Wolpe \(1972\)](#) developed the notion of ‘super-exploitation’, whereby (male) work in commercial mines was made, as it were, super profitable by female subsistence production on the farms of the homelands:

When the migrant-labourer has access to means of subsistence, outside the capitalist sector, as he does in South Africa, then the relationship between wages and the cost of the production and reproduction of labour-power is changed. That is to say, capital is able to pay the worker *below* the cost of his reproduction [since] the family is supported, to some extent, from the product of agricultural production in the Reserves [making it] possible to fix wages at the level of subsistence of the individual worker. ([Wolpe 1972](#): 434 [emphasis in original])

The same logic can be applied to the workers in [Figure 2.6](#) who may be remitting money to the natal household, like those in McKay’s study, but their pay does not need to take into account the full cost of the (multi-sited) household’s reproduction. In effect, non-farm workers are being paid at less than the cost of their (household’s) reproduction.

2.6 The ‘Problem’ of the Smallholder

For many policymakers, some agencies and a few scholars, the persistence of the smallholder across Southeast Asia is not a cause for celebration, but for concern. It keeps farms inefficient, unproductive and unmodernised. As such, it is a threat to national food security. If agriculture is to modernise, then large farms need to emerge from the patchwork of small farms that characterise much of lowland, rice-growing Southeast Asia. Large farms can be mechanised, boosting labour productivity, and younger, forward-thinking farmers can apply new technologies and production methods to the ‘business’ of farming: ‘The rice farming sector [in Thailand] needs a transformation that turns small-scale farmers into large-scale farm operators to ensure productivity and profitability’ ([Subpawanthanakun 2016](#)). Similar sentiments can be identified across the wider Asian region including, for instance, in Malaysia ([Government of Malaysia 2010](#)) and China ([Huang 2012](#)).

What these views fail to recognise and consider is *why* this transition has not occurred, or at least not occurred to date. And as outlined earlier, it has as much to do with the failure, under conditions of late capitalism, for development-as-modernisation to provide the security and the surety that might enable smallholders to ‘exit’ farming. It would also mean, and perhaps policymakers have not made this connection, that what makes farming unproductive in economic terms at the same time makes non-farming profitable.

Bezemer and Hazell (2006), in one of the background papers prepared for the *World Development Report 2008: Agriculture for Development*, predicted a significant exit of population from farming in Asia, as a ‘tipping point’, predicted by Engel’s Law, is reached:

These levels of exit will far exceed anything that has been experienced in the region in the past, and will pose serious challenges for employment creation in the non-agricultural economy. If Asia is to significantly reduce its levels of rural-urban income inequality, then the exit from agriculture will need to be even larger. The greatest danger for Asia is that exits will fall well below the levels required to maintain (let alone reduce) rural-urban income inequalities. (Bezemer and Hazell 2006: 1)

The fact that an exit on this scale has not happened thus far is not a reason to suppose that it will never happen. Few countries in Southeast Asia will be able to put in place and sustain the sort of rural subsidy programme that exists in Japan. At the same time, however, the details of how the farm-size transition will work out are equally unlikely to mirror the historical experience of countries in the Global North.

2.7 Accumulation without Dispossession Redux

The discussion in this section makes clear why some scholars have seen over large parts of rural Asia not accumulation *by* dispossession (ABD), but accumulation *without* dispossession (AWD).²³ We do not see the grabbing of large areas of land from the peasantry, but rather the persistence of smallholders even in the context of rapid economic expansion, deep structural change, far-reaching modernisation – and substantial accumulation. This is not to say that ‘land grabbing’ (see Section 3.3) is absent. Land grabbing occurs in peri-urban spaces which come under intense pressure as cities encroach into rural spaces (see Fox et al. 2018 on Vietnam’s Red River Delta in the vicinity of Hanoi, and Leitner and Sheppard 2018 on Jakarta). Rising land prices have sometimes made the inducement to sell so great that it is hard for historically cash-poor farmers to resist (Table 2.3). A seventy-two-year-old village leader in Ban Lao, within functional reach (15 km) of the important provincial city of Khon Kaen, explained why farmers in his village were enticed to sell their land:

²³ For example: Paudel (2016) on community forestry in Nepal, Kan (2019) in the context of rural-urban relations in China and Jakobsen (2018) on peasant-worker configurations, also in China. In China, Zhan (2019) identifies three forms of AWD: land-based AWD wherein peasants retain access to their land but also engage in non-farm or village enterprise work; proprietary AWD in which peasants exchange their land for enterprise-based and high-value assets such as urban apartments, secure jobs, pensions and medical benefits; and the AWD described here in which land is retained as a source of security but contributes a declining share of household livelihoods.

Table 2.3 Land prices in Hanoi, Vietnam

Hanoi	
Date	Cost (per m²)
1989	1 million VND
1998	1.5 million VND
1999	1.4 million VND
2002	10 million VND
2007	10 million VND
2010	100 million VND

Notes: the Hanoi prices are taken from interviews with migrant workers living in different areas of the city.

Adapted from [Nguyen et al. 2012](#): 15.

In the beginning in the year 1995–1996 land was very cheap. A rai [0.16 ha] of land cost no more than 20,000–30,000 baht [US\$800–1,200] at that time. Villagers had land, but never could make money from the land [because it was so infertile]. They were very poor. One hundred thousand baht [US\$4,000] at that time was such a lot of money. So when they sold five rai [0.8 ha] and got one hundred thousand baht for the land it was just such a fortune. . . . Having that much money to buy some cattle, change your way of life, or better your living conditions. (Ban Lao, Khon Kaen province, Thailand, January 2015)

Land assemblers use every means and practice they can to buy land. In those countries where security of tenure and ownership is underdeveloped or poorly policed, like Cambodia, there is considerable scope for land grabbing ([Brickell 2014](#); [Park 2019](#)); in countries such as Thailand where land titling is more robust, there is less scope, but even there land assemblers work hard to inveigle villagers to sell, and as the previous quote makes clear, the lure of money can be a very great enticement indeed ([Illustration 2.3](#)).

The bigger story, however, is that accumulation has been made possible in such areas not by dispossession but by smallholder persistence. Farms and farming may not have modernised, but, paradoxically, this very fact has permitted the modernisation of other sectors and spaces and therefore of countries.²⁴ A modernised non-farm sector and an unmodernised farm sector are two sides of the same coin.

²⁴ To write that the farm sector has not modernised is not entirely accurate. Parts of the farm economy have modernised; I write it here in general terms to shine a light on the way in which some ‘problems’ with farming have as their counterpoint development successes in other sectors and spaces.



Illustration 2.3 Village land sold to a housing estate developer, Ban Lao, Khon Kaen (2015)

This experience of accumulation without dispossession does not hold sway across the region. There are many places, particularly beyond the wet rice-growing lowlands, where accumulation by dispossession appears to be the normal state of affairs. This provides a very different entry point for thinking through the direction of agrarian transition, the underpinning forces that shape this transition and its impacts for people and in places.

3 Dispossession in the Highlands and Forests of Southeast Asia

3.1 Introduction: Same Processes, Different Signatures

If we cast our eyes over the hills and forests (both upland and lowland) of Southeast Asia, quite another picture of agrarian change comes into view from that picked out among the region's rice paddies. This is not, generally, one of surprising persistence, but of deep change (*Illustration 3.1*). As *Dressler et al. (2018: 343)* write, the 'apparent vulnerability and demise of indigenous agriculture and ways of life looms large in frontier Southeast Asia.'²⁵ These two

²⁵ *Dressler et al.'s (2018)* paper, as discussed later, challenges this view – hence their use of the adjective 'apparent'.



Illustration 3.1 Hybrid maize in Houaphan Province, Laos, cultivated by minority farmers for the Vietnam livestock feed industry (Photograph Robert Cole, 2016)

views – of persistence on the core lowlands and change in the frontier uplands and forests – while markedly different are, often, intimately connected.

To begin with, the grip that smallholders continue to maintain on much of the long-settled lowlands has turned the interests of corporate entities to sites further afield for commercial opportunities, in frontier areas such as the uplands of Cambodia and Laos and the forests of Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. While agribusiness may have captured value in the lowlands through various contract farming arrangements and by selling inputs and buying outputs, in the uplands and forests they have often acquired land. So, and second, we see in these historically more peripheral spaces the forces of globalisation also coming to rest – what Barney terms ‘frontier neoliberalism’ (2009). Demand for agro-industrial commodities like rubber and palm oil, and annual crops such as maize and cassava, has drawn these places into the market mainstream. This is not to suggest that such frontier spaces and the people inhabiting them were cocooned and insulated from the market. There is ample evidence that market relations penetrated deep into the forests and hills of the region; inhabitants were trading goods and using money, even paying taxes with cash. The point,

prosaic though it is, is that the intensity and range of market engagements are, today, of a different order.

While rice smallholder households have provided their labour in the interests of global capital, tying multi-sited households to urban worlds and factory work, the people of the hills and forests have often been either forced to relinquish or encouraged to turn over their lands to commercial interests. On occasion, they have also offered their labour. Global land ‘grabbing’ (see section 3.3) exemplifies this process, one of accumulation by dispossession (ABD). Finally, in the hills and forests, lowland displacement processes are at work as landless and land-poor rural populations infiltrate and occupy such regions, often to eke a marginal living.

3.2 Problematizing the Uplands and Forests

We see then, in the hills and forests of Southeast Asia, many of the same processes at work as in the core lowlands, albeit with very different spatial signatures. The core questions also remain salient: how does capital transform and capture value in such peripheral geographical spaces? How are the people of the uplands and forests enticed or coerced to engage with such projects of market integration and transition? And what are the consequences for their livelihoods?

In his (2009) book *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*,²⁶ James Scott argues that the uplands were non-state spaces, places to which people would flee to escape the state’s predations:

I argue that hill peoples are best understood as runaway, fugitive, maroon communities who have, over the course of two millennia, been fleeing the oppressions of state-making projects in the valleys – slavery, conscription, taxes, corvée labour, epidemics, and warfare. . . . Virtually everything about these people’s livelihoods, social organization, ideologies, and (more controversially) even their largely oral cultures, can be read as strategic positionings designed to keep the state at arm’s length. (Scott 2009: ix–x)

No longer. Such peripheral spaces, at the margins of the state – and this includes both Scott’s upland spaces and hill peoples and lowland forests and their inhabitants – are politically sensitive zones of (in)security and also, and increasingly, zones of considerable economic potential (Illustration 3.2). It is this combination of political sensitivity and economic potentiality which has propelled the sometimes violent and anti-developmental incorporation of the hills and forests of Southeast Asia into the political and economic mainstream. This

²⁶ A refinement and extension of his ‘Why Civilizations Can’t Climb Hills’ argument.



Illustration 3.2 Upland Hoàng Su Phì District in Vietnam's Ha Giang Province, marking the border between Vietnam and China (Photograph Do Quy Duong, 2016)

has been justified and achieved through painting such spaces as, somehow and at multiple levels, 'wasteful'.

3.2.1 Wasteful Spaces

Many countries have suitable land available that is either not cultivated or produces well below its potential.

(Deininger et al. 2011: xiii [for World Bank])

The notion of wasteful spaces reflected in this extract from a World Bank commissioned report encompasses five sleights of hand. Together, they make the uplands and forests available and amenable for incorporation, settlement and transformation.

The first movement is to depict areas of low population density, which these zones have historically been, as *un(der)settled*, even empty. The second, and connected, tendency is to label the extensive modes of land use employed by those who do inhabit the uplands and forests – but thinly – as indicative of *un(der)utilisation*. In this way, groups who practice various forms of extensive shifting cultivation or swiddening and low-intensity forest use are characterised as engaging in production activities that do not use land to its full potential (see [Illustration 1.4](#)). This characterisation then entertains a third movement: portraying such activities as *un(der)productive* and therefore not contributing sufficiently to national development (see [Section 3.2](#)). Along with these tropes of 'un(der)settled', 'un(der)utilised' and 'un(der)productive' is a fourth

justifying pillar: *degraded*. Traditional modes of living in the hills and forests are not just un(der)productive but also environmentally destructive, wastefully using land and resources (timber) for little return. Finally, and fifth, the people of the hills and forests themselves – and not just the land and its use – are in need of modernising, even civilising. They are, therefore, regarded as (un)civilised. It has been argued, for example, that rubber is a civilising crop in Laos (as it was in China). In Xishuangbanna (Yunnan, China), Lu states that rubber stabilised shifting cultivation and drew the region's minority peoples more closely into the orbit of the Chinese state, intensified market relations and turned the region into a development success story, transforming 'its "backward", uncivilised population of ethnic minorities into a civilised, disciplined workforce' (Lu 2017: 735). The same approach has also underscored China's Opium Replacement Program (ORP) in Laos.

3.2.2 Rendering Technical, Rendering Political

This process of depicting certain spaces as unused or unpopulated and their conversion to more rational and productive uses is informed by the logics of the development project. Tania Li (2007: 7–10), in her influential work on upland Sulawesi, uses the term 'rendering technical' to describe the process by which the developmental 'will to improve' comes to be reflected in projects.²⁷ As Li (2011: 292) summarises in a later paper, the process of rendering technical 'takes a complex political economic problem driven by unequal power, and parses it into components that can be addressed by technical means'. This parsing process consists of, first, the setting of boundaries around a domain which then becomes a realm conducive to intervention and management; second, the assumption that people with certain skills and knowledges (i.e. experts) have the right to set the terms for the management of this domain; and third, that the issues identified (e.g. land degradation) and questions posed (e.g. how is land degradation best tackled?) are, essentially, non-political – and therefore matters best dealt with from a technical perspective.

This process can be seen at work in the hills of Laos, where land has been allocated to production categories; the people of the hills placed into resettlement villages; and land made available to investors, through concessions, for more productive use. The process of labelling and designation (unpopulated + unused + unproductive) determines who has access to land, and who has rights

²⁷ Drawing on the work of Timothy Mitchell in Egypt: "These apparently natural boundaries shape the kinds of solutions that will follow: a more scientific management of resources, and new technologies to overcome their natural limits. . . . What appears as nature is already shaped by forms of power, technology, expertise, and privilege. The alternative solutions that follow are not just technological and managerial, but social and political' (Mitchell 2002: 210).

of access to land. These are, therefore, political acts (Lu and Schönweger 2019: 4) and not mere technical interventions and practical articulations of ‘best practice’. The fact that households and individuals may be poor is not an accident of geography but a product of policy, notwithstanding the fact that these policies may be put in place with the best of intentions, informed by a will to improve.²⁸

The conventional approach to economic development, to making poor countries rich, is based on a technocratic illusion: the belief that poverty is a purely technical problem amenable to such technical solutions as fertilizers, antibiotics, or nutritional supplements. . . . The technocratic approach ignores . . . the real cause of poverty – the unchecked power of the state against poor people without rights. . . . The sleight of hand that focuses attention on technical solutions while covering up violations of the rights of real people is the moral tragedy of development today. (Easterly 2013: 6)

Another even more obviously political – rather than developmental – force is also at work, namely, the desire to extend state control over such spaces. To make them ‘legible’ so that the ‘state [can] gradually get a handle on its subjects and their environment’, (Scott 1998: 2), through various territorialisation processes from land-use planning and mapping to land settlement and infrastructural development (see Barney 2014). Putting mobile peoples into place, most obviously through resettlement, is at once developmental (it more easily permits the state to deliver progress in the form of healthcare and education, for instance), political (it allows people to be counted, tracked and controlled), and profitable (it opens up space and people for more productive use).

There are two principal outcomes of upland and forest transitions, justified on the basis of the depictions outlined in the previous paragraphs. The first pays attention to land transformation processes – in other words, what happens to land access and use? And the second is to labour transformation processes, or how are the people of the uplands and forests incorporated and with what livelihood consequences? Before turning to these two issues, which form the large part of this section of the Element, there is a final issue to note: the ways in which these changes do not just connect proximate places and people but also places and people that are quite distant from one another.

3.2.3 Connecting Countries, Spaces and People

The terms ‘teleconnection’ and ‘telecoupling’ refer to the ways in which changes in one site are bound up with processes that are spatially distant, in

²⁸ I use here the title of Tania Li’s (2007) book: *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics*.

another site. These connections can be socio-economic (livelihood change, commoditisation) and environmental (land-use change, environmental degradation), with the result that human-environment systems become ‘coupled’ over space. The focus tends to be on how *spatially* distant systems are coupled, but as Friis and Nielsen (2017: 8) note, they can at the same time be institutionally and socially distant, linking, for instance, global agribusiness with peasant farmers and peri-urban, commercialised livestock producers with upland, semi-subsistence minority farmers. While the terms ‘telecoupling’ and ‘teleconnections’ are sometimes used interchangeably, the latter has its origins in climate research and has therefore tended to be limited to environmental interactions across space. Telecoupling is broader, focusing on socio-economic as well as environmental interactions (Baird and Fox 2015). As research on teleconnection and more recently telecoupling has developed, the forms that this coupling can take have also, therefore, broadened. They can include the effects of policies across national contexts, remittance flows, labour availability, demand for particular commodities and sociocultural change resulting from distant experiences or technological effects (Baird and Fox 2015).

Telecoupling research has tended to focus on how local and regional socio-ecological systems are connected to higher-level drivers and, at the same time, to large-scale plantation and forest conversions (Liu et al. 2013). Smallholder land use and livelihood change, by comparison, have tended to be relatively overlooked (Kelley et al. 2020), although there is no reason for this beyond one of size and visibility. One example is the work that Robert Cole (see Cole 2020; Cole and Rigg 2019) has undertaken connecting upland, minority, hybrid maize farmers in Laos’s Houaphan province, with traders and agribusiness and livestock producers in Vietnam (see Illustration 3.1). In the mid-2000s, as local livelihoods in Houaphan’s uplands were squeezed by government policies that limited access to traditional lands and livelihoods,²⁹ and with demand for animal feed in Vietnam escalating as living standards improved and meat consumption grew, Vietnamese traders crossed into Laos to establish semi-formal contract farming arrangements with cultivators searching for alternative livelihoods and income sources. Feeder roads were cut to previously unconnected settlements and hybrid (Monsanto) seeds extended to farmers who, just a few years previously, were semi-subsistence shifting cultivators. By 2017, Cole reports, all farmers were using Monsanto seeds and almost all farmers were selling their grain to CP Foods, a Thai-based global agribusiness. Cole and Rigg (2019) conclude: ‘In the space of 10 years . . . formerly semi-subsistence Lao farmers had become embedded within regional networks involving some of

²⁹ And driven by the assumptions and associated movements outlined earlier (see Section 3.1.1).

the largest global agro-industrial corporations' (p. 13), enabling 'the "capture" or absorption of land and labour of Laos' upland minorities within wider [regional and global] capital and material flows' (p. 11).

In their overview paper on telecoupling and smallholder farmers and farming, [Zimmerer et al. \(2018: 30\)](#) come to a conclusion that re-emphasises the point that apparently peripheral rural spaces may be just as globally integrated as those that are, apparently, more centrally implicated in such processes. These farmers are not being erased or displaced by globalisation, 'but rather . . . becoming further globalized and connected to distant factors through telecoupling that involves mediating private and public institutions at multiple scales (international, national, local)'.

3.3 The Process of Turning Land into Capital

When asked why they have come to Laos, Chinese investors repeat a ubiquitous mantra: 'China has labour and capital but not land, Laos lacks labour and capital but has land!'

([Lu and Schönweger 2019: 3](#))

'Turning land into capital' refers to the means by which 'underutilised' and therefore 'undervalued' land is made more productive through its commercialisation. The origins of the phrase lie in Laos where the government introduced its 'Turning Land into Capital' policy, or *kan han thi din pen theun*, at the 8th Congress of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party in 2006 ([Kenney-Lazar et al. 2018](#)). The desire by Southeast Asian states, like Laos, to extract value from previously underutilised lands, as such lands are viewed, is, at least, understandable. But why is it that the rice lands discussed earlier appear so 'sticky' and resistant to change (see [Section 2](#)), and uplands and forest lands so apparently malleable to the demands and interests of state and capital? Why is land apparently so easily 'grabbed', as it has come to be termed, in the uplands and forests, but so difficult to secure in the core, long-settled lowlands?

Countries in Southeast Asia tacitly recognise smallholders' and indigenous groups' rights to land – and, therefore, their right to a livelihood. These rights, however, are protected most assiduously by custom and by law in lowland, rice-growing areas. In the uplands and forests, such rights become contested especially insofar as they come into conflict with the interests of national development. The 'needs' of national development is an argument also made with respect to Southeast Asia's 'unproductive' rice smallholder sector (see [Section 2.5](#)), but in the uplands and forests the state and commercial interests find they have far greater traction when it comes to securing land. Not only is land held insecurely but also many of the inhabitants of such spaces belong to

minority groups, whether hill or forest ‘tribes’. They are often poorly placed to challenge state and commercial interests, and their lifestyles and modes of valuation are out of step (or seen to be) with the norms set by majority groups. In these ways, and for these reasons, land in the uplands and forests of the region is prone to being grabbed, and capitalised. In Cambodia, for example, *all* of the country’s economic land concessions (ELCs) are located in the peripheral uplands (Scurrah and Hirsch 2015: 5). Ian Baird (2011: 15) writes of the situation in Laos, and this is repeated elsewhere:

Essentially, the combination of expanded demand for land concessions in Laos, less faith in the ability of semi-subsistence farmers to increase their contribution to production for export, and a growing propensity for corruption amongst government officials created the ‘perfect storm’ that led to a massive boom in large-scale land concessions in Laos.

The conversion of degraded forest land to rubber, for instance, is cast as environmentally beneficial as well as developmental at a national level, helping recover land that is depicted as having been degraded by destructive – and even, in the case of the Philippines, criminal (Dressler et al. 2018: 347) – ‘slash-and-burn’ (or shifting) cultivation (Baird 2014a; Lestrelin 2010).³⁰ Kenney-Lazar et al. (2018: 1306) write of ‘competing national-level discourses concerning land use priorities – the importance of conservation in protected areas, the value of paddy rice in agricultural areas, and the need to develop projects following the law as Laos seeks to become a “rule of law” state’.

Much the same sequence of justifications is at work in the frontier forests of Indonesia and Malaysia as in the uplands of Laos, where millions of hectares of land have been turned over to oil palm. Customary tenure is not well recognised in national law, and indigenous groups are often characterised as lacking ‘development consciousness’ (McCarthy and Cramb 2009). They are, in Indonesian terms *belum maju*, or not (yet) modern. The result of this perfect storm (using Baird’s term) of factors and justifications has been the allocation of millions of hectares of land in mainland and insular Southeast Asia, mostly in frontier areas, to concessions and often to foreign investors (Table 3.1). These justifications can also be seen echoed in the comments of local officials:

Villagers want to cut deep forest for swidden so that there won’t be many weeds when they plant rice. We want to prevent them from cutting the forest and we want to make their lives more comfortable. . . . The government policy

³⁰ In government documents, ‘slash-and-burn’ is often preferred over ‘shifting’ cultivation. This is no accident: ‘shifting cultivation’ implies a careful and considered approach to agriculture; ‘slash-and-burn’ has intonations of wanton destruction.

Table 3.1 The scale of land grabbing in Southeast Asia

Country	Scale of land grabbing	Date	Sources
Cambodia [1]	Economic land concessions (ELCs) cover around 2 million ha or one-half of the country's total arable land	2012	Fox et al. 2018: 5
	The Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC) estimates ELCs cover 2.6 million hectares	2014	Scurrah and Hirsch 2015: 13
Indonesia	Indonesian government earmarks 6.5 million ha of 'idle land' for biofuel-related crops, around one-half for oil palm	2007	McCarthy et al. 2010
	7.8 million ha of oil palm, mostly in Sumatra and Kalimantan	2012	Carlson et al. 2012
Laos	Land concessions of 1.1 million ha or 5% of the country's land area, slightly more than the area (0.97 million ha) under rice cultivation [2]	2012	Kenney-Lazar 2018, Schönweger et al. 2012;
	3.5 million ha 'under agribusiness concession agreements and contracts', or 15% of the country's land area	2010	Kenney-Lazar 2012: 1023
Philippines	3.1 million ha of land allocated by the Philippine government for investments by multinationals and foreign governments	2010	Manahan et al. 2015

Notes: [1] The number of ELCs in Cambodia and the area they cover are disputed, and these figures are therefore only approximate; [2] this figure of 1.1 million ha in Laos excludes logging concessions, contract farming and hydropower projects and is therefore conservative. Including mining concessions and the figure rises to 2.1 million ha, some 9% of the country's land area.

is that the purpose of investments is to reduce poverty by creating jobs for the people. Villagers don't know or are not interested in developing their land; they just want to continue their lives like before. They want to clear the forest that has big trees. . . . We don't want investment on all their land, only land that is empty, not used in any way. (Interview with Xepon District official)

regarding Sun Paper's concession, 18 February 2015 [quoted in Kenney-Lazar 2018: 688])

This quote contains assertions that land is empty; that hill peoples are not interested in contributing to national development and are stuck in the past; that primary forest is cleared by swiddening for little productive purpose; and that without such interventions, populations will remain poor.

The claim that a massive land grab is underway in Southeast Asia's margins is apparently underscored by data such as those in Table 3.1.³¹ In remarkably short order, talk of land grabbing has become mainstream. But, and as Schoenberger et al. (2017: 703) write in their introductory essay to a special issue on the topic in the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 'terms like "land grabbing", "the global land grab" and so on are widely used in the academic literature without explicit or implicit definition'. When land grab is conjoined with the word 'global', then it usually refers to large-scale and often transnational land acquisitions (Borras et al. 2011); other scholars (e.g. Hall 2011), however, cast their definitional net more widely to include small-scale and more local processes of land acquisition, perhaps by local land assemblers, and argue that smallholders rather than being victims of land grabbing may, in fact, be agents of such processes. In this way, Hall complicates the sources, scale, agents and even ramifications of land-grabbing processes.

Whether we take the narrow or a more expansive definition of land grabbing, there is good reason to regard Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos and the Philippines as 'exemplary' cases, due to the scale of the process and the crops and actors involved (Schoenberger et al. 2017: 704). What the table and such claims hide from view, however, are the difficulties that investors face in turning their putative allocations (concessions) into actually functioning production sites. Disputes with smallholders, the failure of local authorities to follow through with concessions granted by national authorities, poor-quality land and other barriers and constraints have all contributed to a marked difference between granted, allocated and functioning concessions. Table 3.2 shows this for six Chinese concessions in Laos where the allocation rate was between 19 per cent and 78 per cent, and averaged 25 per cent.³² Accumulation by dispossession (ABD, see Section 2.1), in other words, materialises in ways that indicate a considerable degree of contingency linked to such factors as local social relations, community organisation and ties to local state interests, the power of different levels of government and links between commercial interests and

³¹ For an overview of land-grabbing literature in Southeast Asia, see Schoenberger et al. (2017) and the associated papers in the 44(4) special issue of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* (2017).

³² Of 62,707 ha of land granted, 15,600 were allocated.

Table 3.2 Land concessions granted and allocated, Laos

	RuiFeng	Jinrun	Lilieng	Sun Paper	Rong Xieng	Guang Da
Land concessions granted (ha)	10,000	7,000	2,500	39,000	2,407	1,800
Land concessions allocated (ha)	2,500	1,300	1,500	7,500	1,400	1,400
Percentage granted, allocated	25%	19%	60%	19%	58%	78%
Provinces	Luang Namtha	Luang Prabang	Vientiane	Savanna-khet	Savanna-khet	Savanna-khet

Note: The actual area planted may be considerably less than that allocated. Sun Paper, for example, was granted 7,324 ha in 2010, but five years after this, in 2015, had cleared just 3,228 ha (Kenney-Lazar 2018: 687).

Source: Data extracted from as Lu and Schönweger 2019: 17

the state at both local and national levels (Cramb et al. 2017; Hall 2012; Kenney-Lazar 2018; Kenney-Lazar et al. 2018).

These complexities explain why resistance to land grabbing and dispossession can ‘flourish and take hold in the most unlikely of places’ (Kenney-Lazar et al 2018: 1305). As Hall writes, in Southeast Asia, ‘we must struggle with complex dynamics of frontier migration, smallholder commodity production, enclosure from below, and overlapping and ambiguous institutions for governing property rights’ (Hall 2012: 1204). There is an additional issue with the land grab literature, and that concerns the use of the word – ‘grab’ – itself. Essentially, the global land grab literature dates from 2008.³³ But this does not mean that before 2008 there was no work on the topic; it was just referred to in more neutral terms: land ‘acquisition’ or land ‘deals’, for instance (Friis and Nielsen 2016; Hall 2013).

³³ Notably, a report published by the Spain-based NGO GRAIN in 2008, *Seized! The 2008 Land Grab for Food and Financial Security* (www.grain.org/e/93-seized-the-2008-landgrab-for-food-and-financial-security).

The rather one-dimensional view of what is occurring in the uplands and forests of Southeast Asia – the grabbing of land by powerful commercial and state interests over which indigenous people have little power to resist – overlooks and thus underplays the possibilities and scope for resistance, renegotiation and redemption. It also tends towards monocausal interpretations of processes – such as land-use change – that are inherently varied and complex (Kelley 2018; McCarthy 2010: 837–9). The on-the-ground reality tends to be messier than the straightforward ‘land grabbing’ moniker would suggest. Pressure and resistance from below have sometimes forced governments to backpedal and award small-holders land access rights in areas where land has been allocated to agribusiness (e.g. in Cambodia’s ELCs [see Fox et al. 2018]), what Kenney-Lazar calls the ‘contingencies of dispossession’ (2018, see also Baird 2020). There is a gap, then, between the neatness of ABD in theory and the dynamics and realities of dispossession in practice (Kenney-Lazar 2018). Two examples, one drawn from Indonesia and the second from the Philippines, are illustrative.

Much like the case of Laos, villagers in Sumatra and Kalimantan have also found their traditional lands acquired and enclosed, but for oil palm rather than rubber. Moreover, just as Hall and Kenney-Lazar emphasise, the varied local contexts of Laos within which this process is imprinted – and emerges – so too in Indonesia. McCarthy (2010), for example, in his study of land acquisition in Indonesia’s Jambi province, in Sumatra, notes how differentiated the local social context was prior to the process taking root, as well as the long history of land sales. This was hardly a social tabula rasa without a history of commercial relations. Such carefully wrought local studies warn us to be cautious about how we see and characterise these frontier areas of Southeast Asia, and the people of these spaces. In their study of indigenous farmers on Palawan in the Philippines, Dressler et al. (2018), contend that swidden farming is not simply extinguished under the combined forces of government policies, commercial incursions and growing land shortages. Rather, ‘swidden farmers renegotiate and persist with swidden assemblages in landscapes undergoing dramatic changes’, so that ‘while indigenous farmers on Palawan clearly do struggle with swidden due to declining productivity, land shortages and governance pressures . . . many still engage the socio-material basis of swidden as a buffer to the multiple exposures of governance and extractivism in the uplands’ (Dressler et al. 2018: 353).

These are all important reasons to be cautious of overgeneralised views wherein simple narratives of transition underscored by theoretical logics with global resonance are seen inscribed across the hills and forests of Southeast Asia – Baird’s (2014b) ‘meta-narrative’ of land grabbing. A combination of

market and price fluctuations, uneven and uncertain support from local and national governments and agencies, conflicts with local people and activists and environmental challenges and technical difficulties have all conspired to confront and unsettle the sense of a smooth and seamless process of neoliberal land grabbing (Baird 2020). At the same time, however, this should also not detract from the fact that many millions of hectares of ‘unoccupied’ land *have* been claimed, and much of that grabbed more or less violently, and with greater or lesser livelihood implications, across mainland and island Southeast Asia. Indigenous peoples while not powerless are far from powerful, and their room for manoeuvre is rarely abundant. Whether we call this a global land grab or distance ourselves from the term to avoid the hype, there is little doubt that deep change with considerable livelihood consequences, and often involving considerable injustices, is occurring across the countries of the region.

3.4 Turning People into Labour: In Theory and in Practice

Land conversion has livelihood effects. It is not just that forests, both upland and lowland, are converted to alternative systems; this conversion closes off or transforms some means of making a living and opens up others. These will also be imprinted unequally across social groups and geographical spaces. So, we need to ask two sets of questions, one directed at ‘what is happening?’ and the other at ‘for whom?’

A central conclusion of most studies from Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos and the Philippines is that the original populations of sites that have seen land acquisition, conversion and transformation can no longer pursue their traditional modes of living. It does not necessarily follow, however, that change also means a deterioration in living standards. In some contexts, such transformations can be developmental; they can leverage productivity gains and result in wages at a level that improves material living conditions. Coupled with state investments in health care and educational facilities, this can lead to real improvements in well-being and reductions in income poverty.

The local livelihood effects of large-scale land investments are addressed in a World Bank commissioned report on whether the global land grab can yield sustainable and equitable benefits, in a section entitled ‘Can Large-Scale Investment Create Benefits for Local Populations?’ (Deininger et al. 2011: 34–41; and see Li 2011 for a critique of this report). The answer to this question, unsurprisingly, is ‘yes’, but only in circumstances where property rights to land and other resources (such as water) are well defined, there is a ‘proper’ regulatory framework, information is accessible to all, there is a ‘level playing field for all’ (p. 38), and a fair price is paid for any land acquired. In some circumstances,

where such conditions are met, this can be developmental. The trouble is that in none of the countries and contexts discussed here are these conditions met. Much of the evidence, indeed, tells a rather different story: of former subsistence and semi-subsistence cultivators having their land taken with scarce recognition of usufruct or customary rights, of prices received for land being anything but fair and of work provided being poorly paid and insecure. The theoretical level playing field, in other words, is practically and characteristically illusory.³⁴ Nor, importantly, would one expect it to be otherwise. To that extent, the World Bank's 'yes' is wishful thinking.

3.4.1 Livelihood Effects in Laos and Indonesia

The egregious nature of the process is notably reflected in work on Laos, not least by Baird (2011, 2014a). The conversion of land to rubber has been inimical to the livelihoods and interests of former shifting cultivators, who are mostly members of one of the country's ethnic minorities. Their access to forest land has been blocked, undermining traditional shifting cultivation and foraging-based livelihoods; the area of land available has shrunk so that production is no longer sufficient to meet basic needs, and the land made available then awarded to foreign concessionaires; and villages and households have, in the process, been transformed from being 90 per cent food self-sufficient to 90 per cent food dependent (Baird 2011: 16; also see Friis et al. 2016: 35–7).

The fact that uplanders can no longer meet their immediate needs from farming, because their access to land has been circumscribed, then forces farmers to become wage workers, simply to be able to survive. This work, however, often pays substantially less than the mandated minimum wage, itself already low. Baird quotes daily wage rates on rubber plantations in Bachieng District, in Laos's Champasak province of 18,000 kip/day (US\$2.34) against an official minimum wage of 25,000 kip/day (US\$3.25) (2011: 17).

Friis et al. (2016) undertook fieldwork in 2012 among a recently resettled ethnic minority population in the village of Na Nhang Neua in Luang Prabang Province's Nambak District, Laos. The incorporation of uplands into a Chinese-invested rubber plantation scheme denied local people land that had traditionally been used for foraging, grazing and hunting – on the basis that it was 'idle' land – initiating a 'cascade' of negative land-use and livelihood effects (Figure 3.1). The majority of 'average' households were negatively affected, many seeing a decline in food production and collection, leading them to become more reliant on food from the local market, and seeing a decline in their incomes.

³⁴ This mirrors the conclusion about ABD: in theory, neat and straightforward; in practice, messy and complicated.

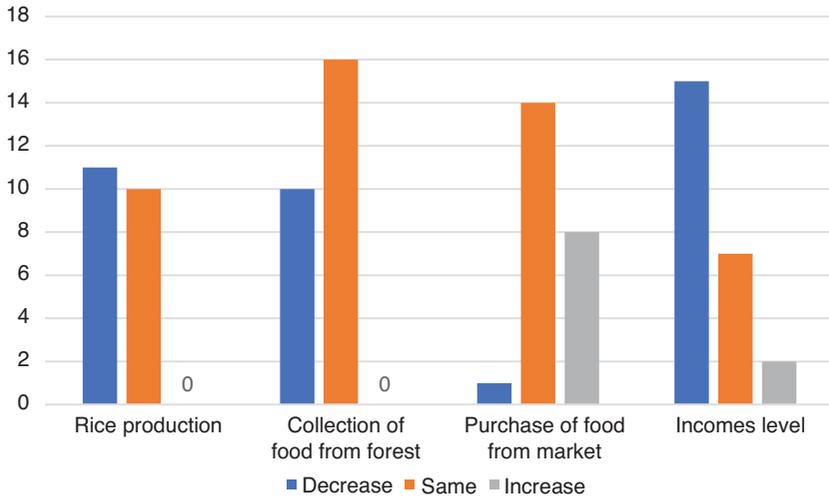


Figure 3.1 Changes in food sources and income levels among ‘average’ households in Na Nhang Neua, Luang Prabang, Laos (2012)

Note: n = 30 (data not available for some households)

Source: data extracted from Friis and Nielsen 2016: 36 and 27

Turning to a country – Myanmar – where much less work has been undertaken on the effects of rubber concessions on local populations, we see a similar narrative outlined in Kusakabe and Myae’s (2019) work in the Northern Shan State. As Figure 3.2 shows, the effects of the rubber concessions were to markedly reduce incomes from traditional land and farming-focused activities (cropping and live-stock breeding) and to increase reliance on local wage labouring and remittances from *ex situ* activities. There was a shift in sources of income and also a decline in incomes for 30 per cent of surveyed households, a deterioration in diet for more than half, and an increase in out-migration from zero before the expansion of rubber plantations to around 30 per cent of respondent households. This out-migration underpins the associated increase in the share of income from remittances (Figure 3.2). The key factor behind these changes – which were significantly livelihood eroding – was the reduction of villagers’ land holdings by more than half from 1.54 to 0.67 ha, as rubber concessions ate into the traditional land base. Finally, Kusakabe and Myae argue that the burden of these changes fell particularly heavily on women. ‘Women’, they write, ‘were vulnerable even before rubber production, as they lacked rights to resources and decision-making power’, but ‘the transition to rubber has [further] increased the burden on women’ (2019: 592).

The livelihood effects in Indonesia’s oil palm zone, mainly concentrated in Kalimantan and Sumatra, are also strikingly similar to those identified in the hills

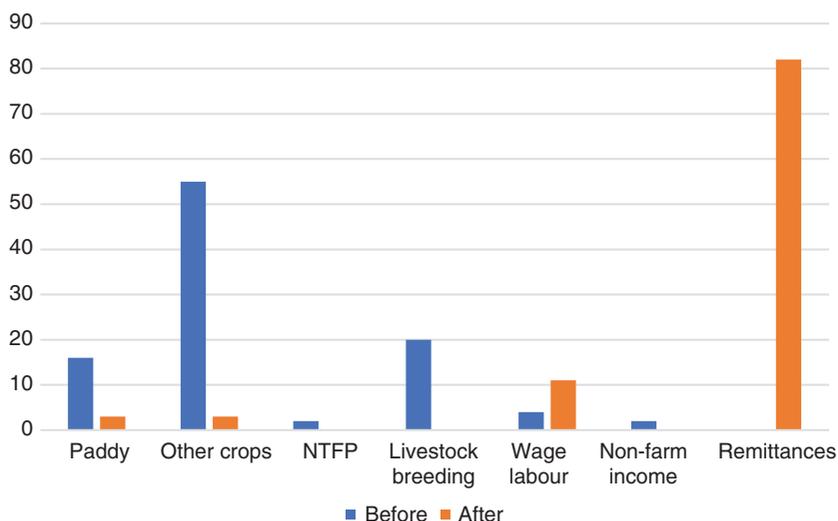


Figure 3.2 Household cash income, by source, before and after rubber plantation (2016, in percentages)

Source: data extracted from Kusakabe and Myae 2019: 592

of Laos and Myanmar. Land, formerly used by local people, is acquired and enclosed at subsidised rates; local farmers are squeezed onto smaller and often less productive areas of land where they struggle to make a living. Unable to meet their needs, these people are then forced to take on work on the plantations, often for marginal returns:

No doubt a great many people have prospered from the arrival of plantations, and opportunities for upward mobility among both workers and smallholders are impressive, especially during the period when land is still abundant, and labor scarce. Over time, however, the trajectory for most households is a downward one, as they face constricted access to land, and deteriorating rewards for labor. . . . These problems are not idiosyncratic, nor are they confined to rogue companies. They are integral to the dynamics of a plantation zone. (Li 2017: 1173)

Not all plantation labour is drawn from this disenfranchised local population; dislocated lowlanders are also attracted onto plantations in their search for work. McCarthy and Cramb, for example, argue that labour shortages in frontier oil palm zones of the Indonesian Outer Islands are met by Javanese workers ‘driven by landlessness and poverty in their place of origin’, who are ‘prepared to work for low wages in difficult conditions’ (McCarthy and Cramb 2009: 115; see also Baird et al. 2019 on Vietnamese labour in Laos). Here, we once more see the connections between lowland and upland processes and outcomes, telecoupling on a grand scale.

Viewing such processes through the lens of development justice allows us to see how aggregate economic expansion (i.e. national development) can, at the same time, create new and sometimes growing populations of poor. This has been termed ‘adverse incorporation’ (Hickey and du Toit 2007; McCarthy 2010) or ‘immiserising growth’.³⁵ It highlights one of the great injustices of such economic growth: namely, the ways in which national development priorities cause some groups to lose out, often relatively and, on occasion, absolutely:

Narratives of inclusion/exclusion . . . might propose that the solution to rural poverty lies in incorporation into the oil palm economy. Yet this research [about the livelihood effects of oil palm incorporation in Jambi] suggests that individuals who find themselves incorporated into oil palm under unfavourable conditions will not only remain poor but *may even face deeper poverty*. The impoverished are those who lose their land and their former economic base without being incorporated into the new economy on advantageous terms. (McCarthy 2010: 827 [emphases added])

Bader et al. (2017, and see Cole and Rigg 2019) have used data from Laos’s national expenditure and consumption survey (LECS) from 2003, 2007 and 2013 to construct a multidimensional poverty index (Table 3.3). They use these

Table 3.3 Multidimensional poverty, Laos (2002, 2007 and 2012 headcount, in percentages)

		Incidence of poverty			Percentage decline,
	Traditional living space	2002–3	2007–9	2012–13	2002/03 – 2012/13
Lao-Thai	Lowland	38	22	13	65.8
Mon-Khmer	Upland	82	63	46	43.9
Sino-Tibetan	Highland	84	82	61	27.4
Hmong- Lumien	Highland	87	70	51	41.4

Notes: ‘Traditional living space’ is a general characterisation; increasingly, members of these groups move – for example, to urban centres – and inhabit other than their ‘traditional’ spaces. Ethnic categorisation in Laos is a subject of long and continuing debate and controversy, and the categories and terms applied here are disputed by some scholars of Laos’s ethnic history.

Source: Data from Lao Expenditure and Consumption surveys (2002, 2007 and 2012), extracted from Bader et al. (2017: 2074)

³⁵ Griffin and Ghose use this term in their 1979 *World Development* paper, ‘Growth and Impoverishment in the Rural Areas of Asia’.

data to explore the poverty and livelihood outcomes of the country's market integration-driven economic growth for Laos's four main ethnolinguistic families. The lowland Lao-Thai show both the steepest falls and lowest levels of poverty; the traditionally highland-dwelling Sino-Tibetan and Hmong-Iumien categories see both significantly high levels of poverty and slower declines in poverty incidence. Whereas in 2002–3 the multidimensional poverty rate among the Lao-Thai was around one-half the rate of the Sino-Tibetan and Hmong-Iumien groups, in 2012–13 the figure was one-quarter. [Bader et al. \(2017: 2082\)](#) speculate whether 'the very processes that [have] generated growth have led to increasing deprivations in nutrition and self-rated health status at the same time' for some ethnic groups. We can speculate that some of this falling behind of upland groups can be attributed to the sorts of livelihood-eroding land acquisition and conversion processes discussed earlier.

3.5 Competing Visions and Values of Development

[W]e have to recognize that some of the [development] dilemmas we have explored really are intractable. ... This does not mean, however, that everything is a dilemma for everybody all the time. [We] suggest that neither focusing on the magic of land titling and land markets nor assuming the presence of collectively oriented peasants who are united in their resistance to capital and enclosure is as likely to produce sustainably or socially progressive outcomes as more qualified and nuanced analysis.

([Hall et al. 2011: 199–200](#))

Southeast Asia's traditionally marginal rural spaces and their populations, as this section of the Element has shown, have become integrated, physically through infrastructure development, socially through the provision of services and economically through the extension of the market and market relations. This process, from the perspective of governments and many multilateral agencies, is developmental and justified as such. It is good for the country because it permits the full exploitation of the space economy and the resources to be found in formerly inaccessible spaces. It therefore contributes to national, aggregate economic expansion. It is also good for the populations who live in these areas as it permits them to modernise; opens up new income-generating opportunities, whether farm or non-farm; and allows the state to bring such benefits as medical care and education.

However, for many this narrative of developing and modernising peripheral spaces is far from unalloyed, and the benefits of integration have been fleeting or illusory. Scholars temper the win-win mainstream narrative with three key interventions. First, that the benefits of such processes of integration are unevenly distributed. Second, there is good evidence that in some cases and

circumstances, some groups do not just miss out but are actually *harmed* by such aggregate economic growth-generating processes – hence, adverse incorporation. This form of growth and the policies and assumptions that inform it are, therefore, anti-poor. But, and third, we do need to be careful about generalising from cases, whether they are positive or negative.

Finally, it is worth remembering that continued physical, social and economic isolation is not a policy, nor is it credible. So, the development failures raised in this section should not be read as a clarion call for a ‘return’ to some, probably mythical, past. Rather, these failures raise the point that integration is not enough; it is the circumstances under which integration occurs which are critical.

The fourth and last substantive section of this Element changes the object of analysis from certain rural spaces to a particular group of rural people: the landless. Smallholders may struggle trying to build a reasonable, socially acceptable living from small, even sub-livelihood, plots of land. But at least they have access to the basic livelihood resource in rural areas – land. What of those who own no land? How do they cope?

4 The Landless and Land Poor

4.1 Introducing the Landless and Landlessness Debate

Among the rural populations of Asia, it has long been thought that poverty is deepest and most intractable among the landless and near-landless. Furthermore, contemporary agrarian change is thought to be making matters worse for this significant portion of the rural population. As Borras and Franco write, ‘In most agrarian settings, the rural poor are various social classes and strata of the landless and land-poor peasants and labourers’ (2010: 10).

The view that the agrarian transition – or the resolution of the agrarian question – is working out to the detriment of the very poorest and most vulnerable social groups in the Asian countryside has a long pedigree. More than four decades ago, Griffin and Ghose (1979) outlined the problem and its evolution, arguing that

- Landlessness and near-landlessness are high, and growing;
- A significant portion of the rural population are wage labourers or tenant farmers;
- Innovations in agriculture are not benefitting the landless who are losing out to larger landowners in both relative and absolute terms; and
- The growing use of labour-saving machinery is depriving the poor of work and driving rising levels of poverty.

We see here the intersection of three, linked processes: a land squeeze as populations grow and press upon the limits of available farmland, the concentration of land as the forces of capitalism encourage land accumulation, and the displacement of labour as mechanisation and other labour-saving technological advances make it more profitable for larger landowners to substitute capital for labour. These processes create a double squeeze on the rural poor: they both generate growing landlessness and reduce labouring opportunities for the landless.

Following this line of argument, [Griffin and Ghose \(1979\)](#) argued more than four decades ago that much of Asia not only has an inheritance of landlessness but that this situation was becoming more acute and was ‘probably . . . the single most important reason for the growing impoverishment in parts of Asia’ ([Griffin and Ghose 1979](#): 377). In terms of the policy implications that flow from this diagnosis of the problem, they suggested that the redistribution of productive assets, especially land, was the ‘obvious’ and most direct way to reduce rural poverty: ‘Such a “land reform”’, they asserted, ‘is certainly the fastest and in some instances perhaps the only way to improve the standard of living of the very poor’ ([Griffin and Ghose 1979](#): 379). This notion that provision of land to the landless will, at a stroke, do much to address rural poverty has lain at the heart of redistributive land reform initiatives for the past seven decades.

The logic of land reform seems, at first blush, to be clear: livelihoods in rural Asia are mainly crop and farm based, and farming relies, above all else, on land. Thus, ensuring that rural households have, at least, access to and, preferably, secure ownership of land sufficient to meet their needs seems indisputable. However, ‘land reform is a many-splendoured thing’ ([Griffin et al. 2002](#): 279) and for land policies in general and land reform in particular to be counted as pro-poor, they ‘must secure . . . a change in ownership of and/or control over land resources wherein such a change flows strictly from the landed to the landless and land-poor classes, or from rich landlords to poor peasants and rural workers’ ([Borras 2006](#): 73). Even with these cautionary caveats, however, the wrinkles in this diagnosis of the problem and its cure – in terms of policy – are multiple.

To start with, landless rural folk are not always poor, and that segment of the population is getting larger as rural economies diversify and rural populations become increasingly mobile. Such an equation of rural landlessness with poverty has little traction in industrialised economies, and Southeast Asian countries are rapidly becoming industrial. Second, allocating land to the landless, say through state redistributive land reform initiatives, may not be the best means to lift the rural poor out of poverty, especially when land scarcity is growing. Although it is contentious, educating and (re)skilling rural populations

so that they can do something other than farm might have a more pronounced effect on poverty than redistributing land. Furthermore, and third, many of the landless – and especially the young – may not wish to become landed and, therefore, farmers (see [Section 2.3](#)). Taken together, the solutions to rural poverty may not lie, predominantly, in the farm sector ([Rigg 2006](#)). If that is so, then assuming that rural poverty is connected to land (or, rather, lack of land) and addressing landlessness through land reform may only help perpetuate rural poverty by spreading a shrinking land base across an ever-larger population of land poor, if not landless, rural producers. In its contentious *Agriculture for Development* report, the [World Bank \(2007\)](#) accepted that land reform in East Asia, notably in post-war Japan, the Republic of Korea and Taiwan (China), had done much to address inequalities in rural areas, but questioned the automatic extension of such policies to other countries and contexts, noting that ‘there are many cases where land reform could not be fully implemented or even had negative consequences’ for the poor ([2007: 142](#)).

In Southeast Asia, the country with the most modern rice-farming sector and which has gone furthest in supporting smallholder production is Malaysia.³⁶ Even here, among the farmers of the Muda Agricultural Development Authority (MADA), and with considerable state subsidy and support (see [Davidson 2018](#)), incomes (from both farm and non-farm sources) are half the national median, which would count such households, on most relative measures of poverty, as poor ([Figure 4.1](#)). We see in Malaysia, therefore, the limits to smallholder support in an upper-middle-income economy, and also the limits to land reform.

A final point, and this links back to the discussion of the persistence of rice smallholders, while dividing and re-allocating land to the landless and land poor may be socially redistributive (and this, to be sure, *is* important), may also have negative impacts on the modernisation of the farm sector. A 2010 Malaysian government report stated that the ‘overriding issue in our agriculture sector is the predominance of small-scale farmers’ and this was key in leading ‘farming not being approached as a business with profit maximisation objectives’ ([Government of Malaysia 2010: 519](#)). Reflecting on the Malaysian case, while rural poverty relative to urban poverty may be more pronounced today than it was in 1980 ([Figure 4.2](#)), it does not follow that the solution to such widening inequality lies in keeping people on the farm, and in agriculture. Indeed, the solution might be the reverse. To consider the ‘problem’ of landlessness in Southeast Asia and its salience and solution today, it is helpful to start with a historical perspective, and there is no better place to begin than Java.

³⁶ This is true if we discount the insignificant and failing Bruneian experiment with rice farming.

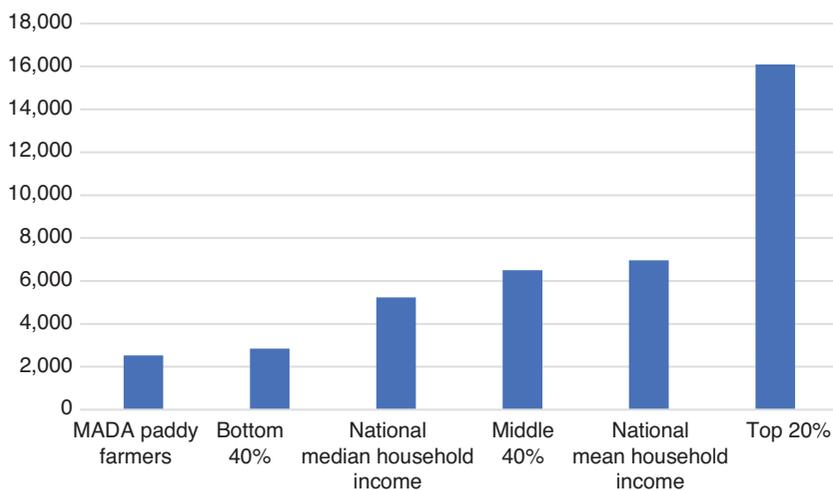


Figure 4.1 Mean monthly household income among farmers in the Muda Agricultural Development Authority (MADA), compared with national income figures, 2016

Note: RM = Malaysian ringgit

Source: data extracted from Omar et al. 2019: 99

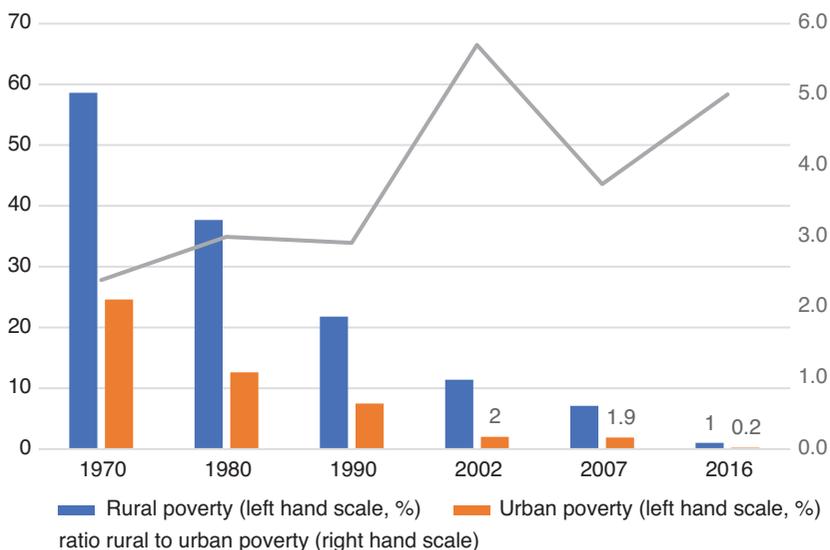


Figure 4.2 Malaysia: Urban and rural poverty, 1970–2016

Data source: <http://www.un.org.my/upload/mdg1.pdf>

4.2 Java and the Landless and Land-poor

Of all the regions and islands of Southeast Asia, the area that has probably garnered more attention than any other with regard to the question of land and landlessness, historically and today, is the island of Java. With 150 million inhabitants and rural population densities in some areas of more than 1,000 people per km², the challenge of how to sustain rural livelihoods, let alone improve them, given such extreme pressures of people on the land, has been of long-standing interest, dating back to the Dutch colonial period. Some 80 per cent of land holdings in Java are less than 0.5 ha in area, tenant farming is prevalent, and landlessness widespread. Landlessness in Java, moreover, is a 'long-established fact' (White 2018: 1109). While the long-standing 'fact' of landlessness on Java may not be disputed, studies of agrarian change show that scholars have interpreted the condition of landlessness and near-landlessness, and the reasons for and the effects of those conditions, in radically different ways.³⁷

During the nineteenth century, the Javanese countryside was characterised by most observers and colonial officials as populated, very largely, by small-scale, semi-subsistence peasants living in egalitarian communities. The fact that there existed populations of landed and landless and the degree of differentiation within the category 'landed' itself were overlooked by most administrators and scholars. By the turn of the twentieth century, however, studies were beginning to reveal hitherto unappreciated levels of difference and differentiation in the Javanese countryside. Even so, J.H. Boeke coined the term 'shared poverty' in the mid-1920s to describe Java's rural population. The term – and this indeed was how it was meant – entertained a vision of a largely undifferentiated peasantry, subsisting on tiny farms. Tacit in the term was the sense that while the rural peasantry in Java were no doubt poor, at least everyone was poor: it was a shared, if not a comfortable, experience.

The book that was to do most to cement a particular vision of Java's agrarian conditions, however, was Clifford Geertz's *Agricultural Involution: The Processes of Ecological Change in Indonesia* (1963). Geertz used and popularised Boeke's notion of 'shared poverty' but also employed another term to explain this condition: 'agricultural involution'.³⁸ The study has been thoroughly attacked from many quarters, mainly on the basis that it proposes an elegant but fundamentally flawed thesis because there is little empirical

³⁷ For a paper on the divergent accounts of Java's agrarian history, see White 2018.

³⁸ For a good summary of Geertz's book and central thesis, and why it gained such traction, see Ian Brown's (1997) *Economic Change in South-East Asia, c. 1830–1980* (pp. 103–10).

evidence to support the case that Geertz presents, and the evidence that he does provide is gleaned from one small corner of the island.

Geertz argued that intensive wet rice agriculture – *sawah* in Java – has the capacity to absorb almost limitless numbers of cultivators, each squeezing a little more output from the system but without any increase in labour productivity. This was achieved through an ‘over-elaboration of detail’ – in effect, the continual fine-tuning of a system of production to support a growing population on a stagnant, even declining, area of land. This elaboration Geertz termed ‘involution’ (roughly, the opposite of ‘evolution’), with the necessary result of ‘shared poverty’:

With the steady growth of population came also the elaboration and extension of mechanisms through which agricultural product was spread, if not altogether evenly, at least relatively so, throughout the huge human horde which was obliged to subsist on it. Under the pressure of increasing numbers and limited resources Javanese village society did not bifurcate, as did that of so many other ‘underdeveloped’ nations, into a group of large landlords and a group of oppressed near-serfs. Rather it maintained a comparatively high degree of social and economic homogeneity by dividing the economic pie into a steadily increasing number of minute pieces, a process to which I have referred elsewhere as ‘shared poverty.’ Rather than haves and have-nots, there were, in the delicately muted vernacular of peasant life, only *tjukupans* and *kjsktirangans* – ‘just enoughts’ and ‘not-quite enoughts’. (Geertz, 1963: 97)

The problem with this view, and it was appreciated at the time, was that agrarian change *was* leading to differentiation and that, indeed, this had been in place for many decades. Carey’s (1986) study of nineteenth-century Javanese peasant society noted the degree to which land ownership and access were unequal and how landowning peasants could draw on the labour power of the landless to accumulate further wealth. Boomgaard, similarly, in his analysis of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Java identified a deeply differentiated rural context where the ‘model’ Javanese village would consist of ‘four strata of landowners (the village administration, the yeoman and gentry group, the modal virgate-owner, and the smallholder), three strata of landless families (*cottar*, *Brinksitzer*, *Häusling*), a group of resident servants, and two age groups: the elderly and the bachelors’, along with a further group of non-agriculturalists (1989: 67, and see Brown 1997: 107–10). This is some way distant from Geertz’s vision of a ‘comparatively high degree of social and economic homogeneity’ in rural Java. The debate over historical agrarian conditions in Java reiterates the point made earlier: how we understand the past matters for how we see the present.

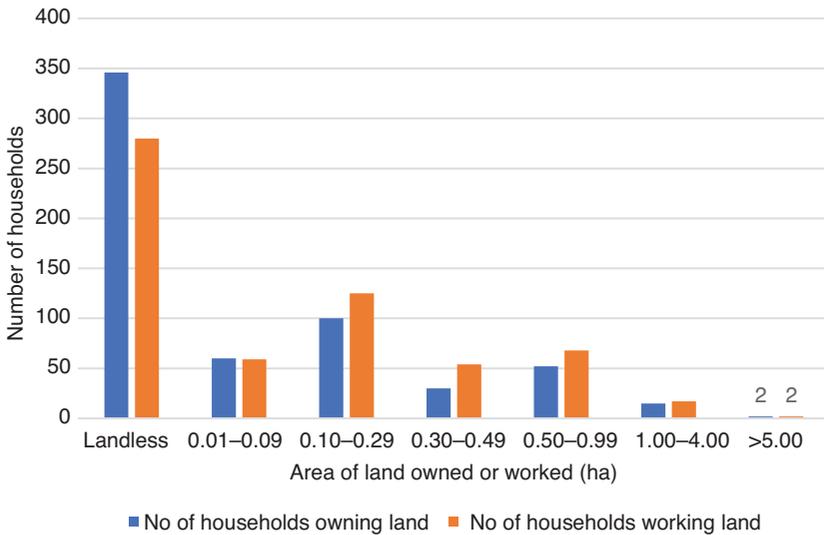


Figure 4.3 Land owned and worked by area, Bantur, East Java (1986–7)

Source: data extracted from Cederroth 1995: 52.

Cederroth's (1995) study of the village of Bantur in East Java, some 17 km east of Malang, provides a detailed insight into levels of landlessness, the concentration of land and the means of survival on Java in the late 1980s.³⁹ Figure 4.3 shows that 57 per cent of households in Bantur owned no land and another 25 per cent owned less than 0.30 ha. One-fifth of households owned 88 per cent of all land in the village, 3 per cent owned close to 50 per cent, and 1 per cent owned 30 per cent.⁴⁰ If farming is the basis for building a sustainable livelihood in a village like Bantur, then these figures provide reason to be deeply concerned about the well-being of the majority of households which own no land. Such data also provide a persuasive case for redistributive land reform.

For critics of the Green Revolution in rice (e.g. Mortimer 1973), the new technologies were also instrumental in making a serious situation worse still, undermining traditional norms of reciprocity and support and driving the further concentration of land, wealth and power, termed by Pearse (1977) the 'Talents effect'.⁴¹ Mortimer (1973: 64), writing in the early years of the revolution in rice production in Indonesia, thought that the Green Revolution, based on new varieties of rice and high applications of chemical inputs, would lead to 'further

³⁹ The main body of fieldwork was undertaken between 1986 and 1987.

⁴⁰ See Stoler 1977 for another study from south-central Java which shows a similar, highly unequal distribution of land.

⁴¹ 'Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them' (Matthew 13:12).

landlessness, unemployment and endemic rural poverty' and that the fruits of technology-driven agricultural intensification would accrue to larger landowners and, importantly, at the expense of the landless (Cederroth 1995: 41).

In Bantul, those without sufficient land to meet their existential needs had four options: to sharecrop or rent another household's land (see Figure 4.3), to work as an agricultural day labourer, to engage in non-farm work in the village or to leave the village and seek work elsewhere. This is where the narrative of cumulative immiseration begins to lose some of its persuasiveness. Cederroth (1995: 86) states that conditions and opportunities for the landless were far better in Bantul in the mid-1980s than they were two decades earlier, in the 1960s. He also remarks (p. 85) that the young do not wish to work in agriculture (a common refrain) and that the effects of the Green Revolution were more positive than he had expected (Cederroth and Gerdin 1986). Of 1,880 working-age villagers in his sample, 792 (43 per cent) had non-agricultural jobs, representing 60 kinds of work. No longer a 'safety valve' for the poorest and during times of crisis, various forms of rural non-farm work had become central to understanding rural conditions in Bantul by the mid-1980s. Since then, and not just in Java, rural livelihoods have become more complex still. I have argued that the village is no longer a sufficient entry point to understand agrarian conditions, nor the household as a co-residential dwelling unit an adequate methodological unit to capture trans-local (rural) livelihoods. In the same vein, land and access to it, and in a growing number of cases, are no longer unproblematic proxies or surrogates for income/wealth and, therefore, indicators of poverty.

The degree to which scholars need to be willing to countenance the possibility that their firmly held convictions will be over-turned by events is reflected in Sven Cederroth's changing views of the effects of the Green Revolution in Indonesia. In a book chapter published in 1986, just as he was beginning his work in Bantul, Cederroth, with Ingela Gerdin, wrote with confidence that

[I]t has repeatedly been observed that it is the wealthy farmers, as a group, who have been able to take full advantage of the new [rice] technology, and that consequently existing economic cleavages have rapidly widened. As a general conclusion such statements are *obviously true*. (Cederroth and Gerdin 1986: 128 [emphasis added])

Less than a decade later, and following the completion of his work in Bantul, Cederroth (1995) admitted: 'we were not alone in predicting such consequences' but 'in retrospect, it seems that most of [our] fears have not been realized' (Cederroth 1995: 42).

4.3 Making a Living On and Off the Land

There are good and growing reasons to approach the issue of ‘landlessness’, a powerful word to be sure, with an open mind. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that landlessness remains a trenchant problem in many areas of Southeast Asia, driving people through uneven relations to take on marginal work in the countryside, or to migrate to urban areas and equally marginal work in the region’s towns and cities, in the process dividing families and unsettling rural communities. Furthermore, in general and in most instances, the incidence of poverty among the landless is higher than among the landed (Estudillo and Otsuka 2009: 2).

Estudillo and Otsuka (2009) use longitudinal studies from the Philippines (Nueva Ecija and Iloilo) and Thailand (Central Plains and Northeast) from the 1980s to the 2000s to explore the evolving situation of the landless (Table 4.1). It was a ‘surprise’ to them that ‘there was a movement of households away from poverty in the midst of increasing scarcity of farm land and decline in labor employment opportunities in rice farming due to mechanization and wider adoption of labor-saving direct seeding method replacing labor-using transplanting’. As Table 4.1 shows, while the proportion of landless households grew across both countries and all sites and farms shrunk in size, real incomes rose, and poverty declined.

How did this happen, and how did it operate? First, non-agricultural income grew much faster than agricultural income. In the Philippines between the 1980s and 2000s, rice income fell from 37 per cent of total household income to 12 per cent, and in Thailand from 66 per cent to 26 per cent (Estudillo and Otsuka 2009) (Figure 4.4). The relative contribution of agricultural wages to household income also fell, reflecting the spread of mechanisation. But non-farm work and income expanded to more than fill this gap. These broader developments within which agrarian change is situated have had the effect of favouring landless and land-poor households, relatively speaking, shifting the balance of power to these groups from landed households. ‘Overall’, Estudillo and Otsuka (2009: 17) write, ‘it seems clear that the development of the nonfarm sector and increased access of agricultural households to nonfarm labor markets have proven to be the major driving force behind the reduction in poverty in rural villages in the Philippines and Thailand’, and this process has been ‘clearly pro-poor’.

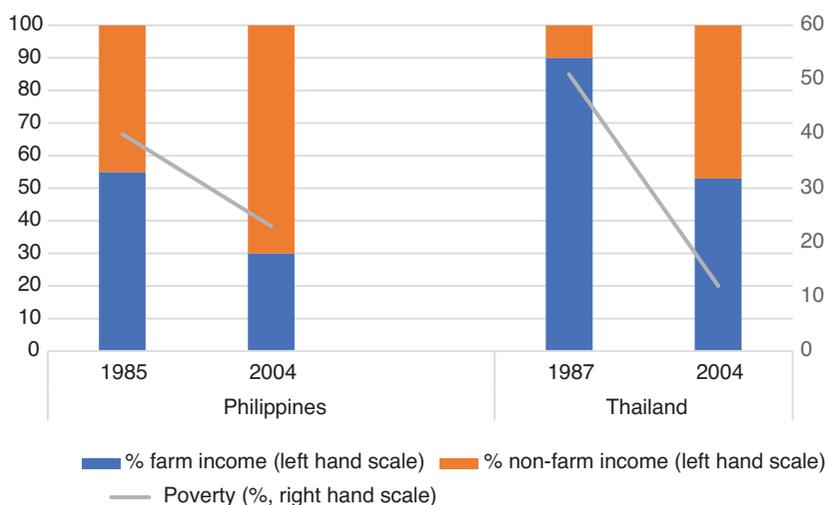
Therefore, two very different pathways are evident in the literature when it comes to divining the effects of agrarian transition on the landless and land poor, one broadly positive in developmental terms and the other sharply negative.

Table 4.1 Evolving agrarian conditions in the Philippines and Thailand, 1980s–2000s

	Philippines		Thailand	
	1985	2004	1987	2004
Average farm size (ha)	1.00	0.76	4.24	2.42
Households landless (%)	22	44	0	13
<i>Favourable areas</i>				
/capita income (PPP\$)	1,065	2,364	2,014	4,617
% farm income	55	30	90	53
% non-farm income	45	70	10	47
Poverty (%)	40	23	51	12
<i>Unfavourable areas</i>				
/capita income (PPP\$)	386	1,119	959	2,543
% farm income	64	40	79	26
% non-farm income	36	60	21	74
Poverty (%)	66	42	70	21

Note: The Philippine data are taken from studies in Nueva Ecija and Iloilo, and in Thailand from the Central Plains and Northeast.

Source: Data extracted from [Estudillo and Otsuka 2009](#): 40.

**Figure 4.4** Farm and non-farm income and poverty, Philippines and Thailand 1980s–2000s

Note: the Philippine data are taken from studies in Nueva Ecija and Iloilo, and in Thailand from the Central Plains and Northeast.

Source: data extracted from [Estudillo and Otsuka 2009](#): 40



Illustration 4.1 Preparing land with a hand tractor in Luang Prabang Province, northern Laos (2018)

A study that exemplifies the negative transition pathway is James Scott's (1985) *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, based on an in-depth study of the arrival of the Green Revolution in the village of Sedaka in the Muda Irrigation Scheme area of the Malaysian state of Kedah. The farmers of Sedaka recalled a time 'not long ago, when no one in the village was without land to farm, whether as a tenant or an owner' (1985: 164). In the absence of mechanisation, a farmer could not cultivate much more than 20 *relong* or 5.7 ha. With machines, large landowners could cultivate as much as five times that area, it was said. Mechanisation provided the incentive to accumulate land.

But different machines have different effects. Scott (1985: 114) states that the mechanisation of land preparation (tractorisation, [Illustration 4.1](#)) was broadly applauded by Sedaka's inhabitants, rich and poor alike, and the loss of wage work connected to land preparation using animal traction was more than compensated for by the spread of double cropping connected with improvements of irrigation and the spread of the early maturing rice varieties of the Green Revolution. The combine harvester ([Illustration 4.2](#)) was another matter,



Illustration 4.2 The combine harvester arrives in northern Thailand (2000)

however. Combines came to be known among the villagers of Sedaka as the ‘machines that eat work’, or *mesin makan kerja* (p. 154). Scott writes:

Size of farm is, of course, a fairly reliable indicator of income in Sedaka, so that winners and losers correspond closely to the rich and the poor. . . . Certain social facts about combine-harvesters are so apparent and indisputable that they are acknowledged by all concerned. . . . At the core of this consensus is that the poor, who depended on harvest labor, have been hurt and that the well-to-do have benefited. (Scott 1985: 154–5)

A little like Cederroth and Gerdin’s claim (see earlier) that the inequality-widening effects of the Green Revolution ‘are obviously true’, so too with Scott’s assertion regarding the ‘indisputable social facts’ concerning the combine harvester. But times move on, facts change, and opinions alter. By the turn of the millennium, mechanisation of rice cultivation in Malaysia had proceeded further than Scott’s farmers could have imagined (Table 4.2) and was broadly regarded as a ‘good thing’ (Omar et al. 2019). Nor was farm size any longer a reliable indicator of income in rural Malaysia.

The positive pathway is linked to the way in which economic growth and structural change offset, or dampen, the effects of agricultural mechanisation and land concentration. Estudillo and Otsuka (2009: 32) conclude:

Rural households are able to move out of poverty in the presence of increasing scarcity of farmland and declining labor employment opportunities in agriculture by diversifying their income sources away from rice to nonrice

Table 4.2 The spread of mechanisation in core areas of rice cultivation in Malaysia (2014)

Rice cultivation task or activity	Percentage of task mechanised
Land preparation	100%
Planting I: transplanting	2.6%
Planting II: broadcasting	82.2%
Chemical fertiliser application	83.0%
Chemical pesticide/herbicide application	91.0%
Harvesting	100%

Source: Data extracted from [Omar et al. 2019](#): 88.

crops and, more importantly, by engaging in nonfarm activities. The rise in nonfarm income is the most decisive factor directly responsible for poverty reduction in rural Asia.

This becomes evident when we compare [Estudillo and Otsuka's \(2009\)](#) paper with earlier studies. [Stoler \(1977\)](#), for example, looked at employment, work and poverty, especially for women, in the south-central Java village of Kali Loro. Like others, she too saw the Green Revolution driving further polarisation in rural Java, not least for the landless. She argued that the landless were particularly at a disadvantage, even relative to the smallest of landowners, because they had nothing to bargain with save their labour. They needed to ingratiate themselves with a patron before they could earn the right to work on a landowner's fields ([1977](#): 686). Stoler concludes, 'recent changes in agriculture brought about by the "Green Revolution" have given a distinct advantage to those already secure members of village society', thereby driving a 'process of increasing economic polarization in rural Java', largely to the detriment of the landless and land-poor ([Stoler 1977](#): 695).

4.4 The Status, Condition and Future of the Landless

Just as upland rural processes are linked to lowland rural processes (see [Section 3](#)), so the roots of landlessness and avenues for addressing landlessness are to be found as much in urban sites as in rural ones, and in non-farm activities as well as farm-based occupations. As the title of one of my own books ([Rigg 2019](#)) makes clear, agrarian transitions are *more than rural*. Methodologically, this means we need to regard rural settlements, livelihoods and agriculture as increasingly enmeshed with urban and non-farm spaces and activities. The formerly quite narrow view of rural conditions and how best to improve the livelihoods of rural people have been overtaken by events.

For the World Bank, this is seen, it seems, as primarily an opportunity to modernise farming: ‘As farmers age, as rural economies diversify, and as migration accelerates, well-functioning land markets are needed to transfer land to the most productive users and to facilitate participation in the rural nonfarm sector and migration out of agriculture’ (World Bank 2007: 9). The agenda here is clear: to encourage unproductive (i.e. older and smaller) farmers to leave agriculture and transfer this land to more productive users, and, therefore, permit the emergence of larger, more efficient and more profitable farms. The non-farm sector becomes the means to mop up much of this surplus rural labour, while those who are too old or infirm to engage in such work are supported through targeted safety nets (Li 2010: 69). Critiquing the World Bank’s vision of the agrarian transition, Li (2010: 69) writes, ‘somehow, the report assumes hundreds of millions of deeply impoverished rural people will find their way onto the transition path.’

The landless have one key resource, their labour, and this they must sell to make a living from farm or non-farm work. Across Southeast Asia, farm work is being squeezed by technological, social, economic and environmental change. Mechanisation of many aspects of production is eating into work; the seasonality of employment means that securing a stable and sustainable livelihood is hard; price twists often work against agriculture, while cultural change is rendering farm work for many of the young increasingly unattractive. With this in mind, and notwithstanding Li’s trenchant critique of the brutal and depersonalised World Bank vision of rural futures for small farmers, landless labourers and old people in rural areas, the non-farm sector *will* be a critical safety valve for the travails of the countryside. Increasing numbers of people will be employed, wholly or partially, in non-farm work, often in urban and peri-urban regions. Land will, therefore, no longer be quite the pivot on which all else rests. And thus, development policies for a just countryside will need to be less land centric in complexion.

Two important caveats remain, however. First, there are areas of the Southeast Asian region where the issue remains squarely on fair access to land, not least in frontier and remote areas where access to non-farm work is often circumscribed. And second, and this is another shortcoming in the World Bank’s (2017) report, the way that farmers and households have responded to the challenge of making a living in a context of a shrinking land base, whether because of land accumulation by the few or land fragmentation for the many, has not followed the script of rural exit. Rather, as outlined earlier in this Element, it has increasingly been through aligning (or interlocking) farm and non-farm work based on complex, sometimes gendered, often generational, and frequently spatially and sectorally promiscuous livelihood strategies.

5 Southeast Asian Rural Futures

5.1 Prognostication: A Mug's Game

Where is rural Southeast Asia headed? As the title of this sub-section suggests, predicting the future is generally best avoided. Events up-end the best laid plans and what seems clear and uncontroversial at one moment becomes murky and questionable the next.

In 1968 Gunnar Myrdal, in his magisterial three-volume study *Asian Drama: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations*, wrote:

The lofty aspirations of the leading actors [in South and Southeast Asia's 'drama'] are separated by a wide gap from the abysmal reality. . . . And that gap is widening. The movement of the drama is intensified as, through time, aspirations are inflated further by almost everything that is printed and preached and demonstrated, be it planned or not, while positive achievements lag. Meanwhile, populations are increasing at an even faster pace, making the realization of aspirations still more difficult. (Myrdal 1968: 34–5)⁴²

Less than a generation later – at least for Southeast Asia – and talk of Asia's future was one populated by tigers and dragons, not by countries beset by 'problems', as I point out on the first page of this Element. Benedict Anderson observed, 'anyone who predicted in 1950 that within a generation "miracles" would occur in the [Southeast Asian] region would have been regarded as an idle dreamer' (Anderson 1998: 3).⁴³

So, the prognosticator needs to tread very carefully indeed.

5.2 Through What Lens Do We View the Future?

This Element is about rural development in Southeast Asia. But what rural and which development have populated the pages to this moment? There are three broad entry points for thinking about rural futures, and each leads us to a different potential answer about how we view the present and future, track change and judge development. Whether we believe that change is 'good' and, therefore, constitutes 'development' depends, in no small measure, on where we choose to look and what we select to measure. More specifically, in coming to a view and a judgement, are we considering the present and future of

⁴² Myrdal writes of 'South Asia' but includes in this regional designation Pakistan (including Bangladesh, at that time East Bengal, part of the Dominion of Pakistan), India, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Burma (Myanmar), Malaya (Malaysia), Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines and sometimes South Vietnam (now reunified with the North as Vietnam), Cambodia and Laos.

⁴³ He wrote this during the Asian financial crisis of 1997–8, when economies were shrinking rather than growing, and poverty was rising instead of falling. This was also an event that caught another generation of scholars by surprise.

- Agriculture and farming;
- Rural areas; or
- Rural livelihoods?

And to push this a little further, are we seeking to track and gauge

- Agricultural development: the increase in agricultural output and the modernisation of farming;
- Rural development: the increase in rural output and the modernisation of the rural sector and rural areas; or
- Human development in the countryside: the reduction in rural poverty and improvements in rural well-being?

Each of these entry points takes us down a different track, and very often to a different answer or perspective. The first pays attention to sectoral change in agriculture, the second to development in rural space and the third to the livelihoods and living conditions of rural people.

Take, for instance, the case of resettlement in Laos (see [Section 3.2.2](#) for further detail). How do these entry points open up a different perspective on the effects of resettlement and come to a different judgement regarding the transformations underway? In terms of agricultural development, land settlement has led to the conversion of formerly thinly settled and extensively farmed upland areas to commodity crops such as rubber. Value measured in terms of aggregate agricultural output has risen. But rubber will have displaced the cultivation of food crops for (subsistence) consumption, leading to a fall in subsistence production and making hill populations food insecure. The integration of these populations into the market mainstream generates higher incomes and better and easier access to medical care and education but, quite possibly, also forges insecure, precarious and unsustainable livelihoods. Suddenly, [Bader et al.'s \(2017: 2082\)](#) observation that ‘the very processes that [have] generated growth have led to increasing deprivations in nutrition and self-rated health status at the same time’ for some ethnic groups is thrown into explanatory relief and made understandable.

So, it really does matter what perspective we take. ‘The facts’ of the matter never emerge unbidden. For [Burawoy \(2009: 195–6\)](#), problem choice in inductive research is often relegated to the footnotes, while it should be foregrounded. No research is therefore truly ‘exploratory’, in the sense of being fully open to possibility. Is the ‘problem’ of the Lao uplands one of underproduction, underdevelopment or unsustainable livelihoods, and how do these intersect? [Christian Lund \(2014\)](#) sets out the protocol and justification for case selection as follows:

A case is an edited chunk of empirical reality where certain features are marked out, emphasized, and privileged while others recede into the background. As such, a case is not ‘natural,’ but a mental, or analytical, construct aimed at organizing knowledge about reality in a manageable way. . . . Our research has the potential to be a case of many things depending on the configuration of our specifications and generalizations, and our concretizations and abstractions. It is through these analytical movements that the case is produced out of seemingly amorphous material. (Lund 2014: 224, 225)

In this handful of sentences, one can see the tensions and interplay between the academic desire to frame and demarcate on the one hand and the ‘realities’ of an ‘amorphous’ world on the other. Case selection is about making sense of a quite particular world, one that is made real and amenable to research through a set of conceptual and methodological movements. ‘As investigators’, Lund writes, ‘we establish frames of inquiry through which we understand the world’ (2014: 226). These entry points become choices from which much else flows; they determine the object(s) of our attention (farming, productivity, region, household, livelihood, income) and where we end up, in explanatory terms. It also leads development practitioners and policy-makers to pronounce on whether change is positive or otherwise – and helps explain why scholars and policymakers can embrace such different positions on what appears to be the same matter. On reflection, it becomes clear that the matters are not the same.

There is a second challenge, however. The boundaries of each of these entry points, even the first (agriculture and farming), are none too clear. There is a blurring of boundaries as farming increasingly occurs in peri-urban spaces, as rural areas become infiltrated by non-farm activities and as rural livelihoods become entangled with urban livelihoods. These border crossings are becoming more common, diverse and intense and increasingly less the exception to the rule in Southeast Asia. [Section 2](#) of the Element, on the persistent rice smallholder, highlighted these issues as households become multi-sited; livelihoods stretched across space including farm and non-farm; and as spatial integration not only brings people to urban areas and industry but also permits the urban and the industrial to colonise, both physically and imaginatively, the countryside.

An Element like this on rural development in the region, then, needs to be sensitive to the ways in which the rural is being reshaped and reconstituted under the wider forces of transformation. This concerns issues of space, the where of rural development; economy, the what of rural development; and society, the who of rural development.

5.3 Where Might Rural Change Lead?

Putting these cautionary caveats to one side, however, and what possible rural futures emerge? Here, three scenarios inform the discussion that follows:

- A modernisation scenario involving commoditisation and land consolidation;
- A persistence scenario where smallholders continue to dominate but only in the context of pluri-active livelihoods;
- A post-productivist scenario wherein new actors (or classes) enter the countryside and farming.

These scenarios are not mutually exclusive, but their emergence will likely depend on the balance between the policies of the state, the rationalities of economy and the shaping role of society. These will also necessarily operate in different ways across and between countries.

The first scenario anticipates a thoroughgoing commoditisation of rural spaces as farming becomes a business, rather than a way a life, and agrarian entrepreneurs replace quasi-peasants. This is already occurring, of course, with agribusiness capturing value through various forms of contract farming and, more widely, through the provision of cash inputs, from hybrid seeds to chemical fertilisers and ‘biosecure’ pigs (*Illustration 5.1*). But for this scenario to really emerge, there would need to be the amalgamation of generally small landholdings into larger units of production. The farm-size transition, in other



Illustration 5.1 Contract farming of pigs outside Hanoi, Vietnam (2019)

words, would need to take hold. This is what drives the World Bank's 'rural exit' strategy wherein (and to quote again) 'well-functioning land markets . . . transfer land to the most productive users and . . . facilitate . . . migration out of agriculture' (World Bank 2007: 9).

This also supposes that those who exit farming and, often, rural areas too can find productive, rewarding and secure work in the non-farm sector (as, to be fair, the World Bank [2007] report makes clear). And this, currently, is perhaps the key constraint. Much non-farm work that rural households take on to supplement declining relative returns from farming is both poorly paid and, perhaps more importantly, precarious. If this continues to be the case, then exit will likely be slow and halting, interrupted during periods of economic crisis when workers from rural origins head back to the countryside and their villages. Each crisis only serves to reinforce the risks of abandoning, rather than just leaving, the countryside. In the interim, farming households will continue creatively to combine farm and non-farm – the second scenario.

This is where state policies towards rural areas, farming and, more generally, social protection become germane. If social safety nets and guarantees were finely woven, then more smallholders would sell their land and exit the countryside and farming. The state could also intervene more energetically in the farm sector, supporting output prices, subsidising inputs, financing rural investments such as irrigation and narrowing rural-urban inequalities across the board. This would permit smallholder livelihoods to persist for longer, as the experience of Japan demonstrates. Shoji et al. (2019: 81) write that the 'position of smallholder family farms [in Japan] has been strongly shaped by government policy over more than fifty years', not least massive subsidies. But even in Japan, and notwithstanding the allocation of truly huge sums to support small-scale farmers, there is extensive land abandonment due to rural out-migration. The same, although on a lesser scale, is true of Malaysia.

The third scenario is that the very social make-up of the countryside changes. Rather than peasants becoming post-peasants, new classes of rural 'producers' with different logics enter the countryside. While this, as yet, is limited in Southeast Asia, the experience of Taiwan (Hung 2019) shows the potential for an injection of new farmers or *xinnong*, with no prior rural connections and with new ideals and agricultural practices, into the countryside. Ben White (see Bernstein et al. 2018) identifies three 'new peasantries' – persisters, returners and entrists.⁴⁴ Persisters are the next generation of smallholders, who take over the (small) family farm from their parents. Returners are those who have

⁴⁴ Bernstein does not use these terms.

departed for other work but return to farming in later life. Entrists are new farmers, who purchase land and take up farming as a departure and new venture.

5.4 The Cusp of Change

It is tempting to imagine some critical juncture is beckoning for rural Southeast Asia, a special moment, a tipping point. One way of viewing this is to ask: what will happen when the current generation of ageing farmers dies? Will land abandonment become a growing problem, as in Japan? Will their children, themselves ageing, return to take up the plough, replacing the super-aged with the only aged? Or will they sell their family farms and permit land consolidation? Alternatively, will new classes settle in the countryside and unsettle the fabric of the rural?

The questions and potential answers – Kautsky’s original agrarian question recast for the twenty-first century – will emerge in different ways across the region. And how this takes shape depends on the complex intersection of state policies, economic logics, social norms, demographic transitions and environmental conditions. Just as Eric Wolf deemed it plausible to think of peasants but not of *the* peasantry, so, we can contemplate rural futures but not *the* (or *a*) future rural.

The three scenarios outlined earlier – deepening commoditisation, continuing pluri-activity and emergent pluri-activity – relate mainly to agrarian futures. There are also growing numbers of people in the countryside who are not directly connected to the agrarian and the agricultural. People may live in the rural areas but not work there, or, if they do work there, not as farmers or in the agricultural sector. And while the shape and future of farming may be uncertain, there is one thing we can be fairly confident about: rural futures *in toto* will be less farming focused. Rural development will not equate so neatly to agricultural development, rural livelihoods to farming, and farming to land. It is hard to imagine that rural-urban interactions will not become more intense as frictions of distance decline. Whatever happens to farming and farmers, the rural will very likely become more urban, livelihoods and economy less agricultural, and rural development less a matter of land and farming. How that will take shape, however, *in detail*, remains a matter of conjecture.

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For Jeremy Oades
Long-time, long-distance friend

Notes

The names of all interviewees are pseudonyms. Photographs are the author's, except where indicated.

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