

*Political Authority and Provincial Identity in Thailand: The Making of Banharn-buri* by YOSHINORI NISHIZAKI. Studies on Southeast Asia 53 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2011). ISBN 978 087727 783 5 (hard), 978 087727 753 8 (soft)

This is an absorbing account of the foundations of the political career of Banharn Silpa-archa in Suphanburi Province. Yoshinori Nishizaki sets out to explain why Banharn has enjoyed such high levels of support for a long time, and to differentiate between Banharn and rougher forms of local leadership based on money and violence. His approach goes to great lengths to allow Banharn's local supporters to speak through his analysis.

Banharn was born into a moderately well-off Chinese-immigrant family and had an unremarkable childhood. At age seventeen he left to work in his elder brothers' business in Bangkok. He made a quick fortune on the super-profits of becoming a favored construction contractor to the Public Works Department just at the time when development budgets began to boom. In 1966, he devoted some of these profits to building a ward for Suphanburi's only public hospital, and followed up with four schools and some temple buildings. Such charity was rare at the time and made Banharn an instant local celebrity. During the early 1970s when the state wished to recruit local businessmen to the anti-communist project, the king and queen attended the opening of one of Banharn's school projects, sealing his

local prominence. Soon after, Banharn was drafted into national politics. In over two decades in parliament, he devoted himself to sitting on the Budget Scrutiny Committee and ensuring a disproportionate share of budget for his province, vastly supplementing his own continued personal charity. This budget was channelled especially to building roads but also more schools and other public facilities. Banharn "fussily" micromanaged the implementation of these projects to ensure good value for money. He also ensured that his munificence was well advertised. He or his clients erected 432 signboards advertising his contribution to these projects, while Banharn presided at 760 opening ceremonies over 36 years.

Nishizaki's research is based mainly on 105 interviews in Suphanburi and scouring the province's local newspapers. From these sources he relays a "collective social narrative," the story which Suphanburi people tell about Banharn and their province. The story goes like this. Before Banharn, Suphanburi was not just neglected but positively victimized by the heartless central state. As a result of Banharn's charity, diversion of the budget, and harrying of otherwise supine and corrupt officials, Suphanburi has become one of the most "developed" provinces, envied by almost all others, especially for the number, size, and quality of its highways. Their pride in this unequalled development gives Suphanburi people a sense of identity as a lucky people under Banharn's leadership. As a result of this pride, they vote Banharn repeatedly back

to power with huge majorities, pooh-pooh criticism of him as corrupt, and celebrate his “heroic” efforts to distort the budget process on their behalf (even protesting against Nishizaki’s evidence that some other provinces might have done better in certain respects). To remain so prominent in local politics, Banharn does not have to buy votes, use violence, or even run a political machine of vote-brokers. In Nishizaki’s summing up, Banharn’s career demonstrates “human beings’ willingness or eagerness to follow a ruler who enhances their collective pride.”

This is a major addition to the rather sparse work on Thailand’s provincial or local politics. Its very local perspective, based firmly on the opinions of Banharn’s constituents, is very refreshing. Its presentation of Banharn as a local hero for his grateful constituents is a necessary corrective to other interpretations. The book is well written and engagingly argued.

Does this work change the general view of Thailand’s local politics? Not sure. At the outset, Nishizaki sets up a straw man, a “dominant plot in rural Thai politics,” full of strongmen, vote-buying, and violence. His argument that Banharn does not fit this plot is very convincing. But then both Nishizaki himself and his Suphanburi informants are at pains to claim that Banharn is unique. Among the many provincial luminaries that emerged in the same era, none has a similar trajectory. The other examples which Nishizaki briefly reviews (Chidchob in Buriram and Wongwan in Phrae) fit the “dominant

plot” more than the Banharn model. The closest example is Chuan Leekpai who became a focus of local pride in Trang (and more widely in the southern region). But whereas Banharn is celebrated for overcoming local backwardness by heroically prying the national budget away from the heartless central state, Chuan did nothing to develop Trang (a source of mockery among Banharn’s supporters) and won praise instead as a “virtuous” leader. Given the spectacular success of Banharn’s career, the lack of close parallels is curious.

Nishizaki produces Kakuei Tanaka, Ferdinand Marcos, and Kim Dae Jung as parallel cases from other countries. All came from regions which felt backward and victimized, and all were lionized locally for overcoming this reputation by access to national resources. All, like Banharn, had a disastrous time when they reached the pinnacle of national politics. That is not a big surprise. The very reason that makes them local heroes—their ability to claim an unfair share of national resources—makes them a butt of criticism and suspicion for people beyond their home base.

There is a fascinating theme which runs through this excellent study, Marc Askew’s recent book on the south (*Performing Political Identity*), and recent work on Thaksin. The identities which are becoming powerful in Thai politics are those formed around opposition to the centralized bureaucratic state. In the case of Banharn, this identity was limited to the province and excited envy and opposition beyond the provincial boundaries. It was also

focused on Banharn as an individual and may not even rub off on his dynasty. Chuan, however, helped to cement an identity of the whole southern region as different and in certain ways more “advanced” than the rest of the country. And his career helped to associate this identity with the Democrat Party, not just himself as an individual politician. Thaksin Shinawatra set himself up explicitly as an enemy of the central bureaucracy, and won a passionate following in areas with a long history of rebellious opposition to central rule. In sum, the legacy of Thailand’s over-powerful bureaucracy and over-centralized state is a menu of new identities based on accumulated resentment.

Nishizaki ends with a tirade against “urban-based public discourse” which tries to delegitimize rural politics by portraying rural people as backward, uneducated, and subject to the manipulation of gangsters and strongmen. He suggests that the current attempts to block rural aspirations by coups and court cases can only be “an endless, futile race.” I agree. But I think here Nishizaki has deserted his own academic approach. This “urban discourse” is just as much a “collective social narrative” as the Suphanburi people’s celebration of Banharn which he describes. It is also just as much about forming an identity based on pride (in the supposed superiority of the city and of the middle class) as is Suphanburi people’s pride in having so many roads. The big message of this book is that many examples of

“collective social narrative,” and many different identities based upon pride and perceived resentment are emerging as the old over-centralized and over-unified construction of the nation loses its grip.

Chris Baker

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