Tomas Larsson


In this excellent book Tomas Larsson seeks to explain the origins of effective formal property rights to land in Thailand. He agrees with many economists that land titling has helped drive Thailand’s very rapid economic growth since the 1960s, but finds that the reasons for the adoption and effectiveness of titling are unclear. His highly original approach to the question is a model of concise, analytically-driven historical research, and Land and loyalty makes impressive contributions to scholarship on development, property rights, state formation, and security.

The core concept in Land and loyalty is securitisation. Larsson elegantly weaves together an unusual mix of academic literatures (including those on institutions, East and Southeast Asian comparative political economy, and constructivist International Relations theory) to argue that the Siamese/Thai state has understood land rights in security terms, and has designed land policy in response to perceived threats to the state and nation. Policy, then, has been driven by politics rather than economics, and has aimed consistently at ‘engendering a modicum of broad-based loyalty’ (p. 11) in the country’s population. How the state has understood security threats and used land policy to combat them, however, has changed dramatically over time. Securitisation is for Larsson not an independent variable but a causal mechanism: a process that is often highly consequential, but in ways that cannot be determined without close attention to context, sequencing, and the legacies of past securitisations.

How and why Siam/Thailand has securitised land rights are thus primarily historical questions. Larsson distinguishes between three main periods. In the first, which stretches from the 1880s to World War I, Siamese land policy was shaped by the state’s response to the threat of colonisation in the context of the unequal treaties signed by the country from 1855. Treaty provisions around extraterritoriality and land taxation, Larsson argues, led Siam to engage in an ‘intentional underdevelopment’ (p. 10) of land rights. While there were several reasons for this (see p. 63), the most striking to me was that ‘alien Asiatics’—subjects from nearby British and French colonies—had extraterritorial rights in Siam. The concern to keep claims to land out of the hands not just of foreign capital but of Asian migrants who were beyond the state’s judicial authority helped discourage Siam from developing formal rights in land. Many of the central dynamics of the first period continued into the second, interwar one. The major change was that in the 1920s and 1930s threats to the nation (and
especially to the small farmers seen as its ‘backbone’) joined threats to the state in driving land policy. Indeed, one of the outcomes of Siam’s prewar ‘underdevelopment’ of land policy was an agrarian structure dominated by small farmers rather than landlords and/or foreign plantations.

Things changed dramatically in the third, postwar period, when the Thai state came to see titling as a way of winning rural hearts and minds away from the new threat of communism. Title was meant to do this by making people secure owners of their land and increasing their access to credit. Larsson argues that key changes in context (including the end of extraterritoriality) helped to push this shift; so, too, did institutional innovations, including a massive expansion in agricultural lending that sought to avoid potential downsides of titling like farmer dispossession through debt. The state thus shifted from purposefully limiting formal rights in land to seeing such rights as vital to national security. Larsson’s pithy summary is that ‘In a nutshell, Thai farmers can thank the imperialists for getting land, and the communists for getting access to capital’ (p. 147). He also strengthens and expands his explanation of the Thai case by means of well-selected comparisons with the very different land rights histories of Japan (in the late nineteenth century), Burma (in the 1930s), and the Philippines (after World War II).

Nuance, context, and sequencing are theoretically and empirically central to Land and loyalty in a way that a brief summary cannot capture, and the book makes effective use of primary source material in developing its points. What emerges from the argument, however, is not just a detailed narrative of Thai history but some substantial implications for broader literatures. I explore three issues here. First, Land and loyalty sheds light on policy debates over land formalisation, debates in which Thailand is often taken as a model. One key theme is Larsson’s finding that Thailand’s success with titling has been built both on the underdevelopment of property rights before World War II and on the way in which Thai small farmers have been buffered from the market’s downsides. The key comparison is with colonial Burma, where a free market in land was imposed too quickly and with too few protections; as a result, ‘rural land and credit markets ballooned but then collapsed, and have yet to recover’ (p. 101). Larsson thus develops a Polanyian argument (though he does not frame it in those terms) in which obstacles to the full commodification of land can in fact play a role in market expansion.

Perhaps more profoundly, Larsson’s analysis presents the Thai experience of successful land titling as the outcome of a highly idiosyncratic history. Larsson expresses the hope (pp. 148–9) that his focus on the creative decisions made by state actors in the process of securitisation will push against ‘pessimistic’ institutionalist arguments that see current options as deeply constrained by the
structural legacies of the past. He also recognises, however, that his accounts of Burma, and of the ways in which the landed oligarchic class that formed in the late colonial Philippines has consistently been able to thwart twentieth century land titling efforts in that country, push in the other direction. To the extent that Land and loyalty emphasises the diverse structural implications of late nineteenth century decisions not only in Burma and the Philippines but in Thailand itself, it implicitly calls into question the extent to which one country’s experience with titling can be a model for anywhere else.

Finally, while the book makes a strong case for the role of securitisation in shaping land policy, it would have benefited in places from a clearer statement of securitisation’s relationship to other forces potentially encouraging formalisation. The comparison of Siam and Japan provides one example. Larsson finds that Japan’s rapid and successful land surveying and titling initiatives during the 1870s were driven by the securitisation of land policy in the context of unequal treaties that were written and sequenced in a very different way than were Siam’s. In Japan, Larsson writes, ‘the formalization of land rights was not only compatible with, but central to, the state’s efforts to enhance national security; in Siam it was not’ (p. 67). While these arguments about the Japanese and Siamese cases work well, they also invite the question of what would have happened if Siam’s treaties had been written and sequenced like Japan’s. Surveying and titling in Japan were part of a set of nationalist state-building initiatives undertaken by the new Meiji regime. These broader moves have no parallel in the very different political economy of late nineteenth century Siam, and it is hard to imagine that Siam could have moved so quickly and effectively to title land even if the state had had a security rationale for doing so.

In his account of the postwar period in Thailand, meanwhile, Larsson explicitly introduces ‘democracy and “voice”’ as ‘new drivers’ of land policy in explaining why the expansion of titling continued in the 1980s and 1990s just as the threat of communism was collapsing (p. 135). This move seems to bring a new causal mechanism into play alongside securitisation. However, Larsson also argues that democratisation itself was endogenous to earlier Cold War security policy in a way that seemed to me to overstate the case.

Land and loyalty makes an original and stimulating contribution not just to the understanding of land rights in Thailand but to much broader debates over political economy, development, and state formation. It makes a sophisticated set of arguments without sacrificing readability, and it is packed with fascinating historical detail. I recommend it very highly.
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