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