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# Class, Economy, and Politics in Southeast Asia

*Kevin Hewison and Jim Glassman*

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# 1

# Introduction

Since the Global Financial Crisis that began in 2008, inequality has resurfaced as a subject of discourse for economists, especially in the West (see Gold 2017). It also motivated popular protest. Occupy Wall Street presaged a progressive and global movement that targeted growing socioeconomic disparity and the failures of political democracy in the United States, United Kingdom, Chile, Croatia, Spain, Hong Kong, and South Korea. Radical analysts censured the rich. “The billionaire class,” Savage writes (2019), “is the modern, capitalist equivalent of the feudal landed gentry: acquiring its fortunes through the exploitative extraction of rents and wielding its immense wealth and power to tighten its illegitimate grip on both politics and the economy.”

Several countries in Southeast Asia also saw Occupy protests. However, these were limited to capital cities and joined by a smaller number of protesters than in European countries. Despite these demonstrations, income and wealth disparity in Southeast Asia remains high. Using the Gini coefficient, international agencies like the United Nations Development Programme have found that the countries of the region have high levels of income inequality, comparable with Latin and American and African countries (UNDP 2019, 308–11).[1] Table 1 shows the World Bank’s Gini calculations of income inequality. However, because these data cannot reveal much about distributions of income and nothing at all about wealth inequality and distribution, these data are supplemented by measures of the percentage of wealth and income controlled by the wealthiest groups in each Southeast Asian country, alongside some regional comparisons. The data show that the share of incomes and wealth captured by the wealthiest is exceptionally high.

[1] The Gini coefficient is a commonly used measure of income inequality. It measures inequality on a scale from 0 to 1, where 0 is perfect equality and higher values mean higher inequality. A Gini index is expressed as a percentage.

**Table 1. Pre-tax income and net personal wealth controlled by the wealthiest, 2023**

| Country | World Bank Gini* | Share of national income (Top 10%) | Share of national income (Top 1%) | Share of wealth (Top 10%) | Share of wealth (Top 1%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Thailand | 34.9 | 56.0 | 23.0 | 74.2 | 43.7 |
| Cambodia | 30.7 | 55.7 | 26.8 | 59.4 | 25.7 |
| Myanmar | n.a. | 51.1 | 26.5 | 67.5 | 34.4 |
| Philippines | 40.7 | 49.9 | 19.6 | 63.5 | 32.2 |
| Malaysia | 40.7 | 47.5 | 20.1 | 60.8 | 29.4 |
| Vietnam | 36.1 | 45.8 | 16.4 | 59.7 | 26.6 |
| Lao PDR | 38.8 | 45.7 | 17.1 | 60.1 | 26.4 |
| Indonesia | 38.3 | 41.2 | 14.8 | 61.0 | 29.6 |
| Singapore | n.a. | 32.9 | 10.3 | 62.8 | 31.5 |
| Southeast Asia | - | 50.1 | 19.0 | 70.3 | 39.2 |
| East Asia | - | 44.8 | 16.5 | 69.3 | 31.8 |
| Africa | - | 54.6 | 19.8 | 71.5 | 36.3 |
| Latin America | - | 58.5 | 23.0 | 77.6 | 46.1 |

■ Note: Gini index is for the latest available year. Sources: World Bank (2024a); World Inequality Database (2023)

It might seem incongruous that such high levels of inequality produced relatively limited protest in Southeast Asia during the Occupy movement. However, this monograph seeks to contextualize this within the process of capitalist development in the region. The study attempts to reveal who has benefited from capitalism, and how political regimes have developed close relations between those who control wealth and those who have political power. It is necessary to investigate the economic, social, and (geo)political structures that produce inequality and the political reactions to it.

This attention to the underlying aspects of inequality was highlighted by Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014). The bestseller captured the zeitgeist of the period, pointing to the global phenomenon of wealth accumulation within countries. Arguably, Piketty's major contribution is his discussion on the inequities produced by such accumulation and distribution of capital. Although his work was comprehensive and data-driven, it failed to adequately explain the social, political, and economic structures and mechanisms that produce inequality.[2] In addressing this gap, this book examines the fundamental relationships between the rich and the poor, and the institutions that mediate these relationships. As Erik Olin Wright asserted (2015, 16), "If we want to really understand—and even alter—what's going on as inequality creates social and economic distance, we must go beyond income and wealth trends to identify the class relations that generate escalating economic inequality."

This monograph heeds Wright's advice and explains how class analysis can help in understanding economic and geopolitical developments in Southeast Asian societies. The argument is not that class analysis comprehensively explains all matters of social reality, but that class analysis can expose the relations of economic exploitation in society and how they underpin social, political, and ideological structures. The aim is to understand economic exploitation across the region by emphasizing the ways in which production has been organized during the periods of the emergence, development, and growth of capitalist production.

What is this thing called class? In the social sciences, there are several ways in which social class is used (see Chapter 2). However, class broadly refers to a system of social stratification or differentiation in which people are arranged into sets of social categories ("classes"). In some uses, these arrangements reflect the distribution of power in societies and economies. In others, groups of people are ranked into various categories defined by income or employment strata.

Class is not the only way of conceptualizing how societies are organized and power is distributed. In Southeast Asian studies, there have been various approaches to social organization. Some have focused on monarchies (Jory 2016). In the 1960s and the 1970s, there were arguments that societies were arranged around patron–client relations (Wilson 1962, 45–97; Doronila 1985). Others modified this and considered societies to be arranged as "functional groups" that extended vertically through society (Hindley 1970). Still others identified "strategic groups," linked by a common interest in protecting or promoting appropriation (Evers 1973, 108–31). This monograph does not provide detailed accounts

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2 In more recent works, Piketty has taken his analysis further, looking in more detail at these structures and mechanisms (see Piketty 2020).

of each concept and approach. However, several terms are derived from Max Weber's concepts of class, status, and party. The discussion of his work in Chapter 2 provides an account of the theoretical underpinnings of these approaches.

Class as a concept produces various definitions and theoretical discourses. Confusion abounds in studies that discuss class or use class analysis in Southeast Asia. In his introductory essay for his collection, the *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Thailand*, Pavin Chachavalpongpun wrote using a mixed bag of terminologies. He drew on the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. However, later in his chapter, Pavin explicitly eschews class analysis and repeatdly uses cryptic terms like "political elitist class" (2020). Another example of this theoretical confusion is found in Daniel Bultmann's (2023) article, "Conflict and Elite Formation in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia." While he claims to use a concept of class to analyze the three countries, Bultmann actually employs a form of elite theory (see Chapter 2). The result is an analysis that fails to account for historical changes in patterns of domination.

In contrast to these and other recent studies, this monograph aims to provide a theoretically concise framework for the use of class analysis for understanding conflict and development in Southeast Asian societies. In this class analysis, economic exploitation is analyzed, alongside social, political, and geopolitical forces. This includes how the ruling class influences perceptions on class reality in Southeast Asia. The monograph also seeks to highlight some of the literature that is relevant for the study of class in the region. While the emphasis is on ideas grounded in Marxist conceptions, as will be seen in the extensive reference list, it also draws from non-Marxist accounts.

Class analysis is not a Marxist creation. It has long been used as a concept for understanding inequality and social structure (Dos Santos 1970, 166–67). Historically, philosophers, theologians, and rebels have contemplated the way societies are stratified by wealth and power (Bottomore 1966, 3). In precapitalist times, every potentate believed that wealth and reign were natural—they are a product of custom, morality, and a special relationship between the ruler and the ruled. The Enlightenment brought a change in the Western understanding of rule and inequality (Meek 1976, 1–36). These were no longer conceived as a natural or divinely ordained phenomenon, but were eventually seen as an outcome of human action. Philosophers shed light on the hierarchical organization of society. Notions of status and class emerged to describe these arrangements (see Ossowski 1963, Part I).

Modern class analysis owes its genesis to the conceptions of social and economic life, exploitation, and rights often associated with four Western revolutions: the English, the French, the American, and the Industrial. Each of these had its own prophets and philosophers, who were linked broadly with liberalism, radicalism, and conservatism. They speculated on the reasons for hierarchies and sometimes protested against them (Nisbet 1966, Ch. 1; Hunt 1981). There was increased attention to class difference. Karl Marx's multifaceted conception was drawn from French historians who had previously deployed notions of class struggle (Aron 1965, 141). Before him, French political philosophers Alexis de Tocqueville and Henri de Saint-Simon had rejected ideas that significant individuals—specifically kings, queens, and aristocrats—were the drivers of history. Instead, they emphasized collective entities such as classes and even class struggle (Aron 1965, 209). From this, a new thought emerged: inequality was something that could be changed. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1998, 8) famously declared that the "history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" and called on the working class to defeat their oppressors, the capitalist class.

By the 19th century, Western expansionism, represented by imperialism and colonialism, as well as exploiting colonies and resources across the globe, was also upsetting long-held ideas about the ways non-Western polities were organized. Local reformers and intellectuals, along with political activists from China, Japan, and the Middle East imbibed many of the new ideas transported from the West.[3] Often Western ideas were picked over for what was contemporarily useful, and these ideas were often fused with local understandings and critiques of political, social, and economic arrangements of both traditional rule and colonial power. For Southeast Asia, scholars have underscored the role of liberal and Marxist ideas in Indochina (Woodside 1976; Nguyen and Ho 2019), Siam (Nidhi 2005, Ch. 1), and the Philippines (Constantino 1975). Muslim intellectuals in the region also adopted modernist ideas about social, political, and economic structures, some from the West and others from the Middle East (see Kurzman ed. 1998).[4] Change was imminent among Southeast Asian nations, after a long period of imperialism, nationalist anti-colonialism, and struggles for political development. The new geopolitical agenda was about winning the people's support for independence. But it was also about economic progress. As is now known, it is capitalism that came to dominate. Capitalism was not the

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3 In discussing past societies geographical terminology is used to name areas and regions. Like Reid (1988, 1–10), we refer to "Southeast Asia" as a region that has some recognizable geographical, human, and historical coherences. This terminology, and others like it, are used as a convenient way to identify areas that may not have been described in such regional terms in earlier times. Likewise, country names for parts of post-colonial Southeast Asia are sometimes transposed to earlier places and times. Siam is also used for what became Thailand in the twentieth century.

4 Later, the Russian and Chinese revolutions added important radical dimensions to anticolonial, nationalist, and Marxist analysis in Southeast Asia and in other colonial and recently postcolonial societies. In particular, these revolutions showed that pre-industrial societies could be radically transformed. Maoism added the important theoretical innovation that peasants could act as modern revolutionaries (Meisner 2007, 42–71).

inevitable economic path for postcolonial regimes. Anti-colonialism unleashed vigorous debates on economic strategy and winners and losers. Colonial capitalism was widely seen as exploitative, producing great wealth along with poverty and misery. But international geopolitical trends saw newly independent states sucked into the global Cold War, pitting the capitalist West and its allies against the communisms emanating from the Soviet Union, Communist China, and their allies. One strand of western Cold War strategy was to make the region “safe” for capitalist development, even if this involved great destruction, considerable violence, and millions of lives lost.

The next chapter discusses class and class analysis in theoretical terms, first considering and critiquing several approaches to class that have been influential in the study of Southeast Asia: Weberian analysis, functionalism, elite theory, and poststructuralist and postcolonialist approaches to area studies. This is followed in Chapters 3 and 4 by a discussion of Marx’s approach to class and a consideration of other Marxist works that underpin the consideration of class in Southeast Asia.

In Chapter 3, a Marxist approach to class analysis is applied to Southeast Asia. It includes a background of precapitalist societies, but the emphasis is on the modern and colonial periods when capitalist societies were developing in the region. Meanwhile, Chapter 4 turns to the postcolonial era, with particular attention to the Cold War and the subsequent period of neoliberal globalization. These two chapters argue that class analysis is essential for an adequate understanding of social, economic, and political development in Southeast Asia. With a focus on capitalist development and accumulation, each developmental epoch is analyzed to reveal the class dynamics that supports the rise and embedding of capitalism. This necessarily involves understanding the relationships that developed between those who control the means of production and those who do not, and how these relationships are mediated by the state. These relationships and institutions provide the key to understanding the inequality that has become so pervasive in the region.

2

# Theory, Class, and Politics in Southeast Asia

The focus of this book is on class, specifically Marxist approaches. However, for theoretical context, this chapter briefly grapples with other established approaches to social stratification, which have been important in examining Southeast Asia. These are Weberian analysis, functionalism, elite theory, and poststructuralism.

## Weberian Analysis

Max Weber's theories on class, status, and authority have been influential in studying Southeast Asia. Interestingly, like Marx before him, Weber was unable to complete a full theoretical statement of his position on class before his death. Despite this, Weber frequently used the term in his writing, and his approach has been both influential and contentious. While some similarities with Marx are noted, Weber's perspective on class is generally viewed as a challenge and as an alternative to Marx's approach. Weber's complex analysis tends to be simplified when used for the study of Southeast Asian societies; his ideas and concepts are most often used to *describe* rather than to analyze and explain.

Most discussions of Weber's work begin with his seminal and multidimensional account of social stratification, where he discussed class, status, and party (Weber 1970, 180–95). He argued that these three concepts accounted for "the distribution of power within a community," and that they are universal concepts (Weber 1970, 181). In his view, class is an objective characteristic; it is comprised of a group of individuals who share a similar position in the market economy and who receive similar economic rewards (Giddens 1973, 43). He deemed that a certain class resulted from the uneven distribution of material property that affects a person's life chances (Gane 2005, 216). Weber distinguished a variety of propertied, commercial, and other social classes. However, Weber did not consider that the commonalities of class and the economic inequalities they engender necessarily gave rise to class association or to a consciousness of class situation (see Bendix 1974, 152). While class led to *economic* inequality, Weber did not view it as the most significant source of *social* inequality, which he attributed to status.

Status refers to groups of people differentiated by non-economic qualities such as honor, prestige, religion, and race. In Weber's analysis, status is a person's social position or standing relative to that of others. In this context, "status honor," which derives from *non-market* positions, results in not only stratification, but also in influence and power. Unlike class groups, Weber thought that consciousness of commonalities among status groups was significant; there was a common and conscious interest in achieving and maintaining prestige. As he commented, status is "a specific style of life" (Weber 1970, 187). This lifestyle is "nurtured by belief in a providential 'mission' and by a belief in a specific honor before God" (Weber 1970, 190).

Completing his stratification trinity is "party," with Weber (1970, 194) arguing that "parties live in a house of 'power'." Whereas classes and status groups are collections of people, parties are organizations concerned with the distribution of power in society. As organizations, parties are rational and formal, seeking to use collective action and influence (power) for political aims, including their domination in society. In other words, they are engaged in the instrumental struggle to influence social action and gain political control (Gane 2005, 220).

Weberian-influenced positions have been applied in studies on Southeast Asia, beginning from the 1920s when Dutch colonial officials reported on aspects of Indonesian society, religion, rebellion, and the prospects for capitalism (see Alatas 1963, 29–31).[5] Importantly, these colonial works, and later studies influenced by Weber, have tended to avoid his analysis of class, status, and party. Instead, they favored his attention to bureaucracy, religion, and authority, and particularly his discussions of charisma and patrimonialism. When Weberian-influenced scholars consider the rise of capitalism in Southeast Asia, their analysis often takes on a historical institutionalist bent, with a focus on patrimonialism and bureaucratic corruption (see Hutchcroft 1998, Ch. 2). This approach also directs

[5] Alatas (1963) documents that this early attention to Weber in Southeast Asia involved discussions related to Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, originally published in 1904 (Weber 1930). Later scholars tended to give more attention to Weber's broader social and economic theory rather than to this work.

attention to the state rather than to the class interests that underpin particular forms of bureaucratic organization (see Kuhonta 2008, 33–42). When class is discussed, it is often in the context of the rise of amorphous intermediate classes, where the middle class is defined in neo-Weberian terms as a “cultural entity defined by values of individualism and rationality,” or by indicators of status, occupation, and income that resonate with Weber’s analysis (Robison and Goodman 1996, 8).

Given Weber’s definition of class as an objective characteristic defining a group of individuals who share a similar market position, it is surprising when Weberian analyses of Southeast Asian societies generally struggle to identify it. Instead, later Weberians have shifted their attention to status and traditional conceptions of hierarchy. One exception is Hans-Dieter Evers (1973, 109–11), who rejected claims that classes did not exist in the region. However, Evers preferred to analyze classes-in-the-making, which he termed “functional groups,” and considered that rapid social change in the postcolonial era meant considerable fluidity in society.

Much Weberian analysis has also been influenced by the work of functionalists, especially by Talcott Parsons, who was an interpreter and translator of Weber’s work. Parsons’ major theoretical contribution was structural functionalism. This approach underpinned modernization theory, which was highly influential in North American social science.

## Functionalism

Whereas Weber considered class unlikely to produce social solidarities and any consciousness regarding common social locations, structural functionalism considered class largely irrelevant to social structure. For structural functionalists, society is an aggregation of individuals, brought together by “agreements” that become patterns and institutions in society. These patterns and institutions constitute a “social system” that allocates roles and rewards, and develops institutions that function to maintain the social system in a stable, self-regulating manner. For many structural functionalists, this position means that social stratification and inequality are natural features of a social system that must provide appropriate rewards for the skills and expertise necessary to maintain the equilibrium of the social system (Turner 1986, 62–68; 87–101). Also indebted to Emile Durkheim’s positivism, structural functionalism lends itself to empirical analysis, measuring patterns of social stratification and status. This analysis leads to statistical studies that consider all societies as a series of layers defined by “socio-economic status.” Using these statistical measures, some analysts correlate social stratification with categories such as religion, political identification, and ethnicity.

When applied to developing countries, including those in Southeast Asia, structural functionalism often formed a theoretical bedrock for a heterogeneous body of ideas identified as "modernization theory." Arguably the dominant paradigm in the social sciences and in Western policy-making during the Cold War, modernization theorists identified the impediments to development or modernization in societies, polities, and economies. This kind of analysis often led to cultural determinism and an emphasis on establishing social and political stability. The most highly theorized structural-functional approach applied to Southeast Asia is Fred W. Riggs's study, *Thailand: The Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity*, where he emphasizes the dominance of elites within a normative perspective on a social system's self-regulation and stability. As Riggs (1966, 386) explained: "It seems clear that if a system is well-integrated, its performance, by definition, is adequate to maintain the system at the prevalent level of differentiation. Consequently, we can assume that a well-integrated system will resist change. It will be in a state of equilibrium." In this context, Riggs and other modernization theorists believed that social change could only be explained as resulting from failures: "a malintegrated system might precipitate forces of dissatisfaction...which could lead to system change" (Riggs 1966, 386). In this perspective, political and social struggle can only be considered as something deviant, produced by anomalies in the system that indicate that it is no longer in equilibrium.

This perspective means that class and its attendant notion of conflict are largely unnecessary for analyzing society and modernization. This is because class and other forms of inequality are essentially a necessary part of a social system, ensuring that positions and roles are filled by the most appropriate persons and that these persons are appropriately motivated to fulfill their functional roles. The rewards offered for these persons tend to reflect a culture of shared values (Lenski 1966, 14–16).

## Elite Theory

Modern elite theory emerged in the early twentieth century as a counter to Marxist explanations of power and historical change. According to elite theory, rather than Marx's revolutionary change and emancipation, "all that can realistically be hoped for in an age of bureaucratic organization is effective rule by powerful, organizationally-based, self-interested, but nonetheless responsive and responsible elites" (Higley and Pakulski 2012, 321). In its broadest uses, elite theory is the idea that all societies *must* be divided between those who are ruled and those who rule. The latter are a tiny and well-organized minority, variously termed the political class, governing elite or, sometimes, the aristocracy, who dominate various spheres in society and the economy, and work together to rule. The majority—often termed the unorganized masses—are excluded from decision-making in all of society's economic, religious, political, and cultural realms. Whereas structural functionalists struggled to explain social change, elite theory embeds a limited notion of change when it discusses the circulation of elites through the recruitment of new members or social groups, or by the replacement of an established elite by a "counter-elite," often accompanied by elite splits, a crisis, or a revolution (Bottomore 1993, Ch. 1).

Like other theoretical approaches to stratification, when elite theory has been employed in the study of Southeast Asian politics and society, it often becomes a descriptive terminology, frequently without adequate attention to the theoretical underpinnings of elite theory. In this descriptive use, elites are easily identified. They are the rulers in every society, from the earliest times to the contemporary era. It is these elites who shape politics, economics, and society. This leads to a focus on inter-elite competition as a way of explaining grand historical change. That change occurs only when elites go through processes leading to reorganization and the establishment of a new stasis in society. This focus on elites (and counter-elites) generally means there is only limited consideration of "the masses" or the nature of their domination by the elites (see Winters 2011; Case 2018; Morgenbesser 2020).

In the study of Southeast Asia, there has also been a tendency for an eclectic mixing of these approaches. For example, those influenced by Weber and structural functionalism will also often refer to elite domination (see Riggs 1966; Wurfel 1988; Hutchcroft 1998). This theoretical eclecticism often results from an effort to *avoid* class analysis, be it Weberian or Marxist. Hence, Weber's use of class only occasionally seeps into the work on Southeast Asia that is located within elite theory. It is reasonable to see this theoretical contortion as reflective of both Cold War ideology and the domination of North American area studies scholarship by approaches rooted in modernization theory. That kind of scholarship buttressed many studies of the region, and especially those that were deeply embedded in the anti-communism of the Cold War. In this context, class analysis was considered an unacceptable approach in the social sciences.

## Poststructuralism/Postcolonialism

The desire to avoid class analysis is also seen in the late twentieth century, with the development of poststructuralist and postcolonialist approaches to area studies. The former draws on a broad body of work strongly influenced by postmodern theorists like Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Jacques Derrida. Postcolonial studies are deeply rooted in cultural studies and associated with the writings of Edward Said, Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi Bhabha, among others. Both these closely related approaches identify themselves as radical, breaking away from the dominant modernization approaches and also rejecting Marxism's structuralism. In addition, as Larry Alan Busk (2023) has argued, they reject universalism, leading to a focus on micropolitics, and to a curious congruence with several conservative and libertarian thinkers. Much of their work and ideas have become mainstream in many North American graduate studies programs because of this seeming radicalism. In an academic context that steers clear of Marxism, poststructuralist and postcolonialist radicalism downplays class analysis and the universalism its use implies (Chibber 2014, 63–64). Such approaches do not necessarily deny the existence of classes but consider class exploitation—sometimes referred to as "classism"—as merely one aspect of the many overlapping or intersecting ways a person's identity can impact and be impacted by discrimination and inequality. This "intersectionality" includes race, colonialism, gender, sexuality, nationalism, and ageism (see Hill Collins 2019). The radicalism of such an approach is easily recognized in its oppositions to these multiple forms of inequality.

In downplaying or rejecting class analysis, some postcolonial theorists insist that class was never as important as Marxists claimed, and that it deserves no more attention as a force in social stratification than other social processes that generate division, subjection, and inequality; this is the intersectionality argument (Day 2001, 198–201). Where postcolonial studies meets area studies in academic work, there is an emphasis on decolonization as a cultural project. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2010, 227–28) argues that postcolonialism in all the social sciences theoretically and politically privileges "the unequal relations between the North and the South. Such relations were historically constituted by colonialism, and the end of colonialism as a political relation did not carry with itself the end of colonialism as a social relation,...as an authoritarian and discriminatory mentality and form of sociability." Some postcolonial approaches hold that decolonizing involves a cleansing of lingering colonialism, where a true "postcoloniality" acknowledges intersecting identities. In doing this, these approaches tend to carry an expansive cultural relativism.

The poststructuralist/postcolonial turn is ably addressed by Marxist scholar, Vivek Chibber, in a way that has significance for this monograph's approach to class and culture. Postcolonial theorists reject categories like class and capitalism as universalist, whereas Marxists view them as concepts with global relevance and insist that capitalism is a global force that imposes a logic on its (class) actors. In their opposition to universalism, poststructuralist/postcolonial approaches direct attention to the local, seeking out the "political agency" of subalterns (Chibber 2014, 66). In this context, Marxist analysis is often identified with colonialism and is lambasted as a colonizing project. Postcolonialism also rejects the political practice associated with Marxism for allegedly depriving "actors" of their "agency." It does this, they argue, by neglecting culture; that is, by refusing "to recognize the autonomy and the creativity of actors in their particular location" (Chibber

2014, 64). Postcolonial analysis will often acknowledge that a worker is oppressed and exploited and will celebrate the myriad ways a worker may resist—their agency—but any notion that the workers of the world or even of a particular society may unite in and through class struggle is firmly rejected.

Chua Beng Huat (2008, 231–32) lamented that postcolonial studies had seemed to bypass Southeast Asia. In fact, though, in recent years postcolonial studies has become increasingly significant in Southeast Asian Studies. However, as with the other approaches already discussed, these postcolonial perspectives have seldom been adequately theorized. Instead, the tendency has been to adopt a postcolonial tenor to prioritize and pluralize individual and group experiences of inequalities in environments defined by cultural experiences. In other words, postcolonial terminology is sometimes adopted and used descriptively, or as a shibboleth, to "decolonize knowledge." In Chua's (2008, 234) terms, this scholarship operated "within what may be said to be an 'intuitive' sense of 'postcoloniality,' derived from the fact that the countries in question had been colonized." For example, one might study migrant workers in Singapore, and decry abuse and exploitation by a family (as employer) and by a state that regulates their work and behavior (see Johnson 2023). Yet this approach blurs the fact that domestic workers have affinities with working classes across the globe, are a part of Singapore's working class, and have been politically and socially disruptive (Bal 2016; Greener 2022).

Further, in rejecting postcolonial approaches, Chibber argues that postcolonial rejections of universal categories are misguided (2014, 65). He contends that not only are some universal categories theoretically legitimate—for example, class, capitalism, exploitation—but they are also essential for radical political action. According to Chibber (2022), postcolonial studies tend to construct culture as an autonomous realm— a creation sometimes used to justify claims that cultural determinants of worker behavior can override economic and class-based determinants. To challenge this, Chibber (2022) argues that economics and culture are always intertwined within social processes, so that there is always a cultural dimension to the class phenomena constructed as "economic." This means that cultural dimensions are indeed at play whenever capitalists, workers, or others make decisions about issues such as where to invest, whether or not to strike, and so on. But Chibber also emphasizes that the specific content of cultural aspects of social processes is somewhat fungible, often more so than the specific content of economic demands. In this sense, a materialist class theory does not claim that "culture is *absent* in economic activity but that its content *adjusts* to accommodate the economic" (Chibber 2022, 43). This particular rendering of culture as interconnected with and adapting to specific economic necessities is useful and will help in constructively addressing specific aspects of cultural processes in Southeast Asia, without severing them from crucial economic determinants of class (see also Wolpe 1986).

## Marxism, Political Economy, and Class

In contrast to the approaches discussed so far, class is central to Marxist theory. As many accounts point out, Marx's magnum opus, *Das Kapital* (*Capital*), breaks off in a chapter on class at the end of Volume 3. In that brief section, he began by identifying the major classes in capitalist society:

> The owners of mere labour-power, the owners of capital and the landowners, whose respective sources of income are wages, profit and ground-rent—in other words, wage-labourers, capitalists, and landowners—form the three great classes of modern society based upon the capitalist mode of production.

And he immediately introduced complexity by observing:

> It is undeniably in England that this modern society and its economic articulation is most widely and classically developed. Even here, though, this class articulation does not emerge in pure form. Here, too, middle and transitional levels always conceal the boundaries (although incomparably less so in the countryside than in the towns). (Marx 1981b, 1025)

While acknowledging class complexity, Marx (1981b, 1025) saw the "constant tendency and law of the capitalist mode of production to divorce the means of production ever more from labour, and to concentrate the fragmented means of production and more and more into large groups, i.e. to transform labour into wage-labour and the means of production into capital."

While Marx's final chapter is incomplete, his use of class theory imbues his writing, with class as an essential element of his critique of the political economy of capitalist and other societies (Marx 1973; 1977; 1981a; 1981b). It is his analytical and political attention to class that distinguishes the work of Marx and some later Marxists from other versions of political economy and from the approaches discussed above.

Crucial aspects of Marx's approach inform the discussion in this monograph, including his emphasis on class as a process through which the surplus labor time of one class is expropriated by another—the crux of exploitation and the surplus value accruing to the capitalist class. Following an account of Marx on class, the discussion in this section turns to the contribution of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci.

## Marx

Marx considered that the work of bourgeois historians had demonstrated the existence of classes and the struggles between them in capitalist society (Bottomore 1966, 13–14). Distinctively, however, Marx did not limit his analysis of class to capitalist society. He also distinguished other modes of production in several historical epochs that exhibited specific sets of class relations. In other words, he saw class and class conflict as a motor of history and that class conflict in capitalist society could eventually result in a classless society. As a famous passage in *The Communist Manifesto* stated:

> The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.
>
> Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.
>
> In the earlier epochs of history, we find almost everywhere a complicated arrangement of society into various orders, a manifold gradation of social rank. (Marx and Engels 1998, 8–9)

In this political tract, classes are forms of relationships based on exploitation and stratification. Classes are conceptualized as "opposed to one another by virtue of the role they play in the productive process, from the point of view of the relations they establish among themselves in the organization of labor and in respect of property" (Dos Santos 1970, 188). In this sense, Marx considered classes as groups of people with a similar position in a social division of labor. Classes, while made up of individuals, cannot be reduced to their individual members (Barbalet 1983, 162–63). Marx viewed class relations as part of arrangements that are not exclusively economic; they also suffuse the legal, political, and cultural spheres (Andrew 1975, 459). This is why Chibber argued that class struggle revolves not just around production, but also aspects of social and cultural reproduction.[6]

While *Capital* was focused on Britain and its experience of capitalist development, Marx also gave attention to the non-European world and to colonialism. He was aware of the

[6] The Marxist debate on class and culture—and class as culture—is long. It particularly resonates in the work of historians like Christopher Hill and E.P. Thompson (see Corner 1985, 98–101).

negative impacts of slavery, colonialism, and the exploitation resulting from developing capitalism.[7] Marx considered colonialism an element of the global development of capitalism, and viewed colonialism much as he viewed capitalism: as a dark exploitative reality but also as a force that broke apart pre-existing and oppressive economic, social, and political arrangements. This dual path reflected Marx's view that capitalist development was painful, but that its nature was to expand markets and trade, and to embed capitalism everywhere. His discussion of how capital originated is also relevant when considering imperialism and colonialism. Marx (1977, Chapter 26) observed that "so-called primitive accumulation … is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production." And, wherever it occurred, primitive accumulation was violent: "In actual history it is notorious that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, briefly force, play the great part" (cited in Holmstrom and Smith 2000). When capitalism is created, this primary accumulation may also require a kind of gangsterism; resources, including the commons, are commandeered for private use.

While this monograph gives some attention to class in precapitalist times, much of the focus is on the development of a capitalist economy and society from a period that might be thought of as the age of colonialism, where both capital and colonial capitalist states played important roles. For Marx, a class structure is generally defined as a distinctive organization of the production and distribution of surplus. This necessarily includes giving attention to the role played by states in maintaining the class structure and in the production and allocation of surpluses. The development of a *capitalist* class structure is distinguished by the struggle over the value produced by wage labor (the proletariat) and the extraction of its surplus (exploitation) by the owners of capital (the bourgeoisie). Marx emphasized how the extraction of surplus is exploitative in the sense that those who produce the surplus—labor—are not those who appropriate and distribute it. It is the bourgeoisie that owns the means of production and distributes the surplus—a proportion of it as wages, and most of it remaining with capitalists as profits from surplus value (see Wolff 2018). This removal of surplus by the capitalist from the worker is necessarily conflicted, with the former establishing social, economic, and political means to ensure a surplus and to permit its extraction. When Marx wrote of class struggle in a capitalist society, he conceptualized this as centered on the allocation of the surplus produced by workers: capitalists seek to increase their wealth while workers want a greater share of what they produce, through better wages and conditions. In this, both the surplus and

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7 Postcolonial studies tend to dismiss Marx as Orientalist and Eurocentric. This perspective has been challenged most comprehensively by Kevin Anderson (2016). That said, the breadth of Marx's work has been well-known for many decades, covering the Chinese Opium wars, British colonialism in India and Ireland, colonialism in North Africa, and more (see Avineri 1969; Slater and McDonough, 2008).

related antagonism are conceived as social in nature, often made strikingly clear in wage determination, but also felt in the realms of politics and culture.

Aside from capitalists, wage laborers, and landowners, Marx identified several other classes and social fractions as important, including peasants, the lumpenproletariat, and groups that might be considered "middle class," like managers. His conception of the middle classes has long been debated. Marx saw the old middle class or the petit bourgeoisie, such as artisans, small businesspeople and merchants, as declining. They were being replaced by a new middle class of clerks, technicians, managers, and professionals (see Urry 1973). On the rise of the new middle class, Lefebvre (1968, 1040) observed: "The social division of labor modifies the technical division of labor not only because managerial functions are reserved to certain groups … but also because production as a whole is oriented in accordance with needs it creates or furthers."[8]

Aside from providing an overview of class throughout history, Marx and Engels also argued in *The Communist Manifesto* that the struggle between capitalists and workers would see the latter eventually triumph, ushering in a new society. But for this victory to be achieved, Marx considered that the working class required both an awareness of its situation—usually termed class consciousness—and considerable political organization. Marx's theory accounts for the position of individuals in economic production, their collective conception of their position, and the potential for social and political action to change these relationships (Bottomore 1966, 17–18).

For Marxist theorists, class relations in any society must be grasped in order to understand (and change) the exploitation that produces stratification and inequality. As has already been noted, Marx's class analysis did not argue that capitalism was totalizing. Multiple classes existed, even in a relatively mature capitalist society, and the development of capitalism did not immediately transform all institutions into capitalist institutions. Rather, capitalist development involves a dismantling of some or even many existing institutions, but only as far as this is necessary for capital to extract a surplus and for capitalism to reproduce itself—what has been referred to as the process of conservation-dissolution (Foster-Carter 1978, 51). Capitalist accumulation and the capitalist class can "proceed while leaving intact a great many aspects of the *ancien regime*" (Chibber 2014,

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8 Erik Olin Wright (1999, 61) notes that "the central debate regarding middle classes is understanding how those in such "middle" class locations "are linked to the processes of extraction and distribution of the social surplus." Likewise, the political location of the middle class has been widely debated. This has also been the case for Southeast Asia (see Robison and Goodman 1996; Hsiao 1999). While modernization theory saw the middle class as a bulwark for political democracy, the political history of Southeast Asia has revealed this to be a myth (see Aim and Arugay 2015).

71). (Indeed, it may even generate new forms of complex class fragmentation, as will be discussed below.) Likewise, aspects of culture that do not inhibit accumulation are not necessarily swept away.

The Marxist position on class, and especially on class struggle, was taken up by socialist and communist parties across the globe, most especially after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. The rise of socialist and communist parties and related organizations was also influenced by the Communist International (Comintern) founded in 1919 and, later, by Maoism, which emphasized the struggle of peasants against the expropriation of agricultural surpluses by landlords (see Mao 1926). Many socialists and communists also joined anticolonial struggles. "Bolshevism" became a serious concern for colonial governments as they worried about radical ideas influencing peasants and workers.

In Southeast Asia, the Russian Revolution inspired many activists (Onimaru 2016, 116).[9] *The Communist Manifesto* was translated into Chinese in 1920, Malay in 1923, and Vietnamese in 1925 (Crawford 2022, 562, 567–74). According to Crawford (2022, 564), the Malay (Indonesian) translation of *Manifest Kommunist*, was published by the Indonesian Train and Tram Workers' Union press after it had been serialized in the communist paper, *Soeara Ra'jat* (The Voice of the People). Marxism in Southeast Asia was largely a domestic effort, albeit with some Comintern direction to local communist parties. From the late 1920s to the early Cold War era, Marxist-influenced commentators and activists, such as Ho Chi Minh, Tan Malaka, and Jose Maria Sison, used Marx's categories in anticolonial and communist struggles.[10] In Thailand, where there was no anticolonial movement, Marxism tended to be associated with resident Chinese (see van der Kroef 1981, Ch. 1). As the Cold War developed, Marxism also inspired the work of a wider group of activists, including the writer and activist, Jit Phumisak. He was later killed in a clash between the Communist Party of Thailand and the Royal Thai Army (see Piyada 2018).

Marxist-informed academic studies multiplied, especially from the middle of the twentieth century. The result was the development of various "schools" of radical, Marxist and Marxist-inspired analysis, such as Thailand's political economy school (Hong 1991), a

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9 Despite early concerns about Bolshevism expressed by colonial governments and the Siamese monarchy, it was only in 1926 that the Comintern established its Far Eastern Bureau and, in 1927, the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat in Shanghai. As Onimaru (2016, 116) argued, these "two organizations were in charge of supervising local communist movements in East and Southeast Asia, allocating funds, dispatching couriers and agents, and receiving local communists who tried to go to Moscow." However, the first networks of activists they established soon collapsed.

10 Examples of works by Ho are available at https://www.marxists.org/index.htm. On Tan Malaka, see Jarvis (1987). Some of Sison's works may be found at https://josemariasison.org/.

Malaysian "school" of political economy (Jomo 1988; Maaruf 1988), and the "Murdoch School" of political economy (Hameiri and Jones 2014). Several important studies on capital, labor, and peasantry were produced (see Robison 1986; Limqueco, McFarlane, and Odhnoff 1989; Gunn 2003). They grew alongside studies on women and work that drew on Marxist and feminist approaches (Ong 1987; Prota and Beresford 2012).

## Gramsci

In adopting and extending aspects of Marx's ideas, Gramsci analyzed the relationship between the major class groupings and the main axes of exploitation, namely capital and labor, landed elites, and peasants, among others. Importantly, he also examined various class fractions. "Fractions" refer to segments of a given class divided from one another by their functional position. For the capitalist class, this includes financial, merchant, and industrial capital, as well as specific blocks of capital divided from one another by intracapitalist competition. An example of such competition is between large oligopolistic investors and smaller competitors. It can also refer to relations between dominant and intermediate groups within a specific social configuration, such as industrial capitalists, lawyers, industrial engineers, and groups within the middle class. Gramsci examined these relations to determine how they underpinned the formation of different kinds of political blocs—groupings capable of developing relatively coherent political projects. Thus, the Gramscian perspective involves going beyond the foundational struggle between capital and labor over exploitation to an analysis of the formation, dissolution, and struggles of political groups (see Kipfer and Hart 2012).

Gramscian analysis also highlights the notion of uneven development, especially of class formations and struggles generated by geographically and historically varied forms of capitalist industrial transformation. Gramsci provided a path into the politics of issues such as uneven regional growth and social struggle. Though his analysis was of uneven regional development within the Italian nation-state, Gramsci also laid the foundations for approaches to international relations. These approaches have been developed by neo-Gramscian scholars who employed his conception of *hegemony*, or the ability of a class fraction to lead politically by gaining consent from some of the governed.

A crucial feature of Gramsci's analysis is the way it undermines liberal positions by identifying the underlying processes from which states, markets, politics, and economics emerge as distinct. This gives his conception of hegemony its specific meaning. For Gramsci, class position is defined in relation to the production and appropriation of surplus value, but, as he puts it, in studying the development of a class, "one must take into account not only the process of its formation within the economic sphere but also its parallel growth in the ideological, juridical, religious, intellectual, philosophical spheres, etc." (Gramsci 2007, 143). Such a non-reductionist approach can also be found among other Marxists, including E.P. Thompson (1978) and Daniel Bensaïd (2009). Gramsci's complex "economics" centered on notions like the "determinate market," his recognition that while capitalism is built from market activities, these markets are not well-analyzed in the abstractions of liberal economics; varying markets are produced or determined within specific social, historical, and geographical contexts (see Thomas 2009: 347–64; Krätke 2011, 82–87).

There have been several efforts to use Gramscian-inspired analysis in Southeast Asian contexts. In studying Thailand's politics, John Girling (1984) used Gramsci's notions of hegemony, domination, and civil society to provide a more radical and critical edge to dominant perspectives on "culture." Recent literature on Southeast Asian civil society also draws from the Gramscian perspective, often focused on ideational power (see Landau 2008). Such works borrow from Gramsci without addressing vital questions on class and power. Yet, as Garry Rodan (2022, 14) pointed out, "Gramsci's emphasis on ideational power was meant to supplement—not replace—analysis of structural power relationships rooted in class." Works that take more notice of Gramsci's structuralism include Jim Glassman (2011) on the rebellion in Thailand; Ben Reid (2006) on Gramsci's use of "hegemonic historical blocs" and political crisis in the Philippines; and Prapimphan Chiengkul (2017) on hegemony applied to the political economy of food production in Thailand.

It is important to emphasize that Marxist scholars have paid attention to gendering and racialization as important processes associated with capitalism. Marxist-feminist class theorists like Shiela Rowbotham (1983) have attended to both women's formal positions in the market economy and the gendering of processes of social reproduction. Such social reproduction has often heavily depended upon the subsidy to accumulation provided by women's unpaid labor inside and outside the household (see Mies 1986; Fraser and Jaeggi 2018). Women's labor on assembly lines and inside the household has been analyzed in studies of Southeast Asia (Ong 1987; Chant and McIlwaine 1995; Van Esterik 2000). A long tradition of Marxist scholarship has also theorized the ways in which class formation has been historically racialized (see Wolpe 1986; Foster, Holleman, and Clark 2020). Studies of "racial capitalism" have examined the Atlantic slave trade and the role that slavery played in the development of US capitalism (Rodney 1972; Anievas and Nisancıoğlu 2016; Baptist 2016). Saha (2022, 55) summarizes this perspective, "racialization is not to be understood as a capitalist conspiracy, but as a mode of oppression with its own roots and logics that become entangled and structurally embedded in capitalist expansion."

Race and ethnic relations have had a crucial place in Southeast Asian studies. Part of this attention is due to the complexities of Chinese migratory influences on the region.

In addition, colonial policy used ethnicity as a means to order colonies, often creating and managing ethnic divisions. A result of this was that a colonial scholarship emerged, focusing on ethnicity (Furnivall 1948).[11] The relationship between capitalism, class, and ethnicity has also been incorporated in studying the rise of capitalism in the region (see Hewison 1989; Gomez 1999). Finally, there have been efforts to include regional ethnic realities into discussions of racialization and ethnicity in Western literatures (see Glassman 2020; Walton 2013; Campbell and Prasse-Freeman 2022).

## Class, Imperialism, and The Geopolitical Economy

A common feature of most non-Marxist approaches to class and stratification is their limited consideration of the global nature of capitalism. As already mentioned, Marx's analysis of capitalist development and his considerations on colonialism emphasized capital accumulation as a global process. Both *Capital* and *The Communist Manifesto* broach questions about colonialism and the roles of slavery and surplus drain from colonies and soon-to-be colonies. However, much of Marx's most critical discussion of these topics was in newspaper articles, correspondence, and notebooks (see Pradella 2015, 84). As colonialism reached its zenith, Marxists and some liberals provided significant analysis of colonialism and imperialism.

From about the late 1880s, Marxist analysis of the global expansion of capitalism intensified, particularly in response to brutal colonial wars. In her 1913 book, *The Accumulation of Capital*, Polish-German Marxist Rosa Luxemburg, sought to provide a comprehensive theoretical conceptualization of imperialism, arguing that it "was an unavoidable consequence of capitalism" and its "permanent need for expansion" (Gaido and Quiroga 2021, 62). Several years before Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin used similar terminology, Luxemburg declared that imperialism was "the highest and last stage of capitalist development" (cited in Gaido and Quiroga 2021, 60). She also discussed the significance of primitive accumulation for capitalist development, in which she distinguished three phases in capitalist development: "the struggle of capital against natural economy, the struggle against commodity economy, and the competitive struggle of capital on the international stage for the remaining conditions of accumulation" (Luxemburg 2003, 348).

11 In Malaysian studies, the "ethnic paradigm," which is based on colonial constructs, has become the dominant approach to analyzing inequality and often misses the class basis of wealth disparities (see Embong 2018).

Arguably, the best-known Marxist analysis of colonialism and imperialism is Lenin's *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, published in 1917. In contrast with Luxemburg, he contended that imperialism is caused by capitalism's tendency for concentration and overproduction, meaning that surplus capital needed to be exported for capitalism to produce ever higher profits. Lenin saw colonialism and "spheres of influence" as elements in capital's search for new resources, new sites of production, new markets, and new sources of labor-power.

The approach to class utilized in this monograph begins by acknowledging imperialism. It does this by addressing the globalization of capitalism over several centuries, including during the colonial era. But it does this through an approach that might be identified as "geopolitical economy." This approach is influenced by recent Marxist work, where the "geo" in this construction refers to the necessity for a conception of class that can help explain *transnational* phenomena, including colonialism and other forms of imperialism. The "geo" also underscores the fact that classes and states are transnational phenomena (see Glassman 2018).

A core precept of geopolitical economy is David Harvey's notion that capitalist development involves the search for a "spatio-temporal fix." As Harvey (2004, 64) explains:

> Overaccumulation within a given territorial system means a condition of surpluses of labour (rising unemployment) and surpluses of capital (a glut of commodities[,] ... idle productive capacity, ... surpluses of money capital lacking outlets for productive and profitable investment). Such surpluses may be absorbed by: (a) temporal displacement through investment in long-term capital projects or social expenditures (such as education and research) that defer the re-entry of current excess capital values into circulation well into the future, (b) spatial displacements through opening up new markets, new production capacities and new resource, social and labour possibilities elsewhere, or (c) some combination of (a) and (b).

This fundamental dynamism challenges notions of capitalist development that identify it with preconceived spatial "containers," such as nation-states. Neither classes nor states have inherently fixed locations; rather, such geographical fixity they may achieve is a product of the processes by which class and class struggles develop.

While theorists tend to construe classes as inherently national entities, the notion of transnational class forces as an expression of capital's search for a spatial fix has been addressed by Fernand Braudel (1981) and Leslie Sklair (2001). In addition, a significant part of the literature address the way states themselves are affected by transnational forces.

For example, early in the period of neoliberal globalization, Nicos Poulantzas (1978, 82–83) identified transformations in forms of governance, referring to “the internationalization of the state” to explain how transnational processes were generating the development of state formations decentered from their national moorings A useful example of this approach is Robert Cox’s Gramscian version of international political economy (1987). For him, US imperialism is neither a unilateral imposition by US state managers nor simply a hegemonic relationship between states. Rather, it results from a complex relationship between different fractions of capital and different sections of states, expressed via a hegemonic relationship between specific transnational actors.

A similar Gramscian-Marxist analysis of transnational class and state relationships was presented by Kees van der Pijl (1984; 1998) in his discussion of the “Atlantic ruling class.” He explained how particular fractions of capital, acting transnationally, can use and transform state structures in pursuit of transnationalized accumulation, articulating specific social relations and forms of capital accumulation or “concepts of control” (van der Pijl 1998, 51). A “concept of control” is a framework of “thought and practice by which a particular world view of the ruling class spills over into a broader sense of ‘limits of the possible’ for society at large.” For van der Pijl (1998, 51), this is a strategic articulation of “the special interests of a historically concrete configuration of classes and states with the management requirements of the order with which those interests are most immediately congruent.”

Focused on transnational strategies of various capitalist groups and developments in production and reproduction, van der Pijl (1988, 64) argued that it is state/society complexes, “rather than states *per se*, [that] constitute the basic entities of international relations.” He asserted the importance of this set-up:

> ... all social action is simultaneously structured by the tendency toward global unification represented by capital, and by the fact that every concrete state/society complex is ultimately held together by a specific structure of power and authority mediating its relations with other such complexes.

In van der Pijl’s approach, the relationship between geopolitics, imperialism, and political economy emerges from the globalizing tendencies inherent in capitalist accumulation. There is no distinct realm of “national interest” or “security” to constitute a distinct realm of geopolitics, even if state planners portray issues this way. Rather, different state/society complexes give rise to distinct transnational alliances and political blocs, which in turn express the interests of particular social actors in exploiting labor. Thus, geopolitics *is* the political economy of class (and other) social struggles, as it takes place both within and beyond specific national territories, a phenomenon ubiquitous throughout the history of capitalist imperialism.

Two observations about this approach are worth elaborating since they inform some of the ways the historical narrative is constructed in the ensuing chapters. First, the geopolitical economy approach provides a ready-made template for the historical narratives that follow. Yet, these are not simply defined as reflections of state-based interpretations. In particular, the terms used for long historical periods—such as "the colonial," "the Cold War," and "the post-Cold War" periods—tend to be linked closely to a geopolitical imaginary of state-based international conflict. "The Cold War," for example, is a pre-eminently geopolitical term, referring to a period of tension between several major powers and especially the United States of America (USA) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the People's Republic of China (PRC). Meanwhile, the term "post-Cold War" implies a shift in those particular geopolitical tensions. This template is organizationally useful, but there are no clear dividing lines between the historically evolving class processes associated with such periods, so the organizing terms do not identify simple class (or even geopolitical) realities. The Cold War is often seen as a context in which labor relations in countries like the USA were characterized by "Fordism" (a fundamentally Gramscian concept) when examined transnationally. Yet the use of a geopolitical economy lens shows that the Cold War period was a time in which a host of different kinds of class structures and labor relations were at play. These had significant consequences for the historical developments analyzed below. One of the most obvious of these consequences is in Southeast Asia. During the Cold War, older agrarian class structures, based partly on non-market activities, were being (incompletely) transformed into burgeoning urban centers that provided wage labor opportunities. For those in agriculture, wage labor became an off-season undertaking, as they moved between farm work urban jobs, and back again. This example illustrates that capitalist development has always involved multiple forms of labor, not just free wage labor. Its evolution has typically involved fragmentation and transformation of these forms—even the generation of new forms, such as the contemporary "gig"/platform economy—rather than homogenization. A geopolitical economy framework explains the complex ways extra-economic forces act to help produce this kind of non-homogeneous—albeit increasingly capitalist—labor process.

The second and fundamentally related observation is that the geopolitical periods discussed in subsequent chapters are an organizational convenience. The shifting geopolitical realities reflected by periods labeled "colonial," "Cold War," and "post-Cold War" refer to evolving modalities in phenomena. The realities of the Cold War created a context in which repressive state regimes, on both sides of the Cold War divide, could readily rationalize draconian restrictions on labor and labor organizing. This was typically done with significant support from particular social groups, including capitalists and many members of the managerial classes. In post-Cold War Southeast Asia, while the older Cold War rationalizations of labor repression waned, unions remained exceptionally weak. New ways of rationalizing repression also emerged, such as the need to prioritize investment over worker health, wages, and collective bargaining. Such repression also manifested in the state's linking of organized labor to political oppositions, as claims of disinformation (a newly predominant theme in the era of social media) are used to stifle political contestation.

In this sense, the geopolitical economy framework provides an avenue into a central theme in the work of Gramsci and other Marxists: the processes by which capitalists and ruling classes attempt to develop and maintain forms of hegemony. However, with the *geo*political economy approach of this monograph, such a class analysis requires a more concrete account of transnational ruling class formation, including within Southeast Asia (see Al-Fadhat 2020). With these considerations, it is now appropriate to address the general issue of what constitutes a ruling class.

## The Ruling Class

Kees van der Pijl's study (1998) of an Atlantic ruling class recognizes the importance of the US military–industrial complex (MIC) and acknowledges the social role of violence in producing and reproducing class structures. This is a point that can equally apply to colonial arrangements but can also be applied to the postcolonial period. As he argued, "Violence and war are essential constitutive aspects of rule ... and also of capital" (van der Pijl 1998, 34). He remarked that capitalists became the dominant class within social formations where capitalism has developed to be the main mode of production. Previous ruling classes were demoted to supporting state positions. Yet this is a fluid and ongoing process within which capitalist rule internalizes aspects of the pre-capitalist past. This position is well-illustrated in Southeast Asia, where, for example, pre-capitalist monarchies have become important elements of capitalist hegemony, and where some monarchs have become important capitalists themselves (see Kershaw 2001; Puangchon 2020).

The concept of the ruling class deployed in this monograph enables us to position within that class the leading elements of the US MIC and leaders/capitalists from China, Japan, and across Southeast Asian countries during various overlapping historical periods.

## Class, Politics, and State

This approach to ruling class also means attention to the state, politics, and the way in which they are related to the configuration of struggles over social and economic power—in essence, the questions of who gets what and how. In this, the state, encompassing the institutions and arrangements that broadly manage and seek to maintain class power, also becomes a site of class struggle. Clearly, the state is significant for the discussion of classes and socioeconomic domination.

The Marxian relational conception of class includes notions of domination and ruling: that is, a class, or parts or fractions of a class, will prevail—dominate and rule—in a society, or even transnationally. In capitalist society, it is axiomatic that capitalists deploy forms of power that are crucial to the organization of state, society, and their rule. Yet one of the basic facts of the capitalist economy is that capitalists compete with each other, primarily for economic gain, but also, in a related manner, for leverage over the state. Such competition and the divergent interests of different class fractions raises the question of how the capitalist class can rule.

Marxist studies of ruling classes highlight the roles of particular fractions that are able to become dominant in specific contexts. The relationships between state, politics, and class have long been debated by theorists, including Marxists. Here, it is sufficient to briefly consider two interconnected Marxist approaches: instrumentalist and structuralist perspectives (Poulantzas 1969; Miliband 1970).

In broad terms, the instrumentalist approach posits the state as being in the service of capitalists and operating in the interests of capitalists. The state is populated at senior levels by people with shared interests, concerns, and often a similar class position. In this perspective, these officials and representatives of capitalist interests may cycle in and out of high-level state positions, while senior officials can move between business and state. This relationship means the capitalist state and its governing apparatus can become an instrument wielded by and/or for the capitalist class or a particular fraction of capital.

The structuralist position asserts that an overlap between capitalists and the state is incidental to the fact that all capitalist states are tasked with preserving and enhancing the capitalist mode of production and protecting the interests of "capital-in-general." In this context, the state's role is structurally determined, and the direct participation by the capitalist class in the state is unnecessary as the state is bound to develop and implement a policy that promotes accumulation and exploitation.

These approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Clearly, the instrumentalist position cannot explain all state policies and actions. Yet it is also apparent that, in much of Southeast Asia, there has been an evolving and often direct relationship between elements of the capitalist class and state officials. There are several ways in which instrumental relations and constraints might operate. One is family ties between capitalist families and those of state managers, through marriage, schooling, moving in the same social circles, and sitting together on the boards of various companies. All business people know the value of making "connections" that influence state policymaking. There are also state officials who are simply bought by wealthy capitalists and do their bidding. In discussions of Southeast Asia, such relationships are often rendered as "corruption," "rent-seeking," and "cronyism," but these neglect to assess the class interests involved in such relationships (see Hutchcroft 1998; Kang 2002). Some of these officials have been able to use their control of the state to become major capitalists. This was the case in Indonesia under President Suharto, when he and his family used access to the state to develop an expansive business empire (Robison and Hadiz 2004, Part II).

State managers do have their own interests to promote and protect, often eliding the relationship between "national interest" and self-interest (Miliband 1983, 63–64). High state offices are coveted because they often pay relatively well and provide status and opportunities for personal gain, including through illegitimate means. At the same time, there is a convergence of interests that derives from the nature of capitalist social and economic organization. As capitalism has been embedded in the countries of Southeast Asia, there has been a structural imperative for state managers to adopt policies that are in the "national interest," enhancing capitalist development and promoting the broad interests of those who own capital. Such relationships vary considerably in different places and at various times, which is illustrated below. In most cases, as international investment and production has expanded across the region, a "national interest" involves policies that attract international capital.

The deepening of capitalist globalization has seen senior state managers making policies to make national economies "competitive" in attracting highly mobile regional and international capital, offering tax breaks, subsidies, "flexible" labor policies, and other incentives that attract foreign investment or production. Often, these incentives for regional and international capital are also appreciated by fractions of domestic capital. Additionally, the capitalists who are investing within such policy regimes increasingly want "global rules" for capital, marking a space for transnational capitalists who seek to have political influence at local, regional, national, and international levels (see Sklair 2001).

The degree to which capitalist power over the state is exercised instrumentally or structurally often reflects one of the crucial variables in any sort of class process: the development of specific forms and levels of intensity in class struggles. Capitalists commandeering and instrumentalizing forms of state power may, for example, reflect an effort to use the state to gain specific benefits, including those associated with direct subsidies to their firms and the use of repressive force against labor organizations. This is a recurring theme in the historical examples detailed later. In cases where state actors implement policies that specific, powerful segments of the capitalist class find objectionable, those capitalists may engage in activities, such as stalling investment or attempting to destabilize and delegitimize the government (for example, through negative media coverage of government policies), until the state's policymakers feel compelled to change them.

In exercising their power, dominant fractions of capital routinely form political blocs that incorporate other crucial actors who assist in developing a hegemonic social position, and rule over allied social groups by leading, rather than merely through repression. These groups include middle class professionals and aligned actors who perform significant functions in organizing and managing power, such as lawyers, media specialists, and those within state agencies like central banks, foreign ministries, and the like (Glassman 1999).

Capitalists themselves are often involved in governance. They are aware of the conditions of the reproduction of social relations that must be met for them to dominate wage-labor and to increase their accumulation of surplus value. Yet, as a broad body of scholarship shows, this focus also means that many capitalists are routinely involved in the processes of governance that enhance that accumulation. This has implications for our use of the terms "capitalist class" and "ruling class." In the following chapters, we use the term capitalist class—whether transnational or not—in a narrow sense: "capitalist class" points to those actors who are formally tasked with appropriating and reinvesting the surplus directly from the operations of firms employing wage labor. We use the term "ruling class" to be inclusive of capitalists, state managers, intellectuals, military leaders, and others who play crucial roles in projects to secure the reproduction of capitalist social relations, establish an ideology that is supportive of their capitalism, and maintain the hegemony of capital.

## From Theory to Concrete Analyses

In the following chapters, key elements of the Marxist geopolitical economy framework are employed to understand the development of capitalism in Southeast Asia. Because our focus is on capitalism, capitalist classes, and working classes, the processes outlined above are not only relevant for the capitalist economies of Southeast Asia, but are also adaptable to the so-called transition economies of Vietnam, Laos, and Burma/Myanmar. With the development of capitalism in these societies, analyzing them as "socialist" is no longer particularly useful. One might doubt that the sway of capitalism is complete in these countries, but the fact that capitalist firms and production processes play a huge role in their development cannot be denied. Thus, analyziing their development requires scrutinizing class relations appropriate to capitalist societies and states. Attention turns now to more empirically grounded accounts, since the framework can only be properly tested, modified, and/or discarded through its application to specific contexts in Southeast Asia.

# 3

# Class in Southeast Asia

## Pre-Modern, Modern and Colonial Eras

Contemporary economic disparity—measured by income and wealth—in Southeast Asia is among the widest in the world (see Table 1). As explained above, while distributional data tell us something about who wins and who loses, authors like Erik Olin Wright (2015), have observed that such measures do not explain much about the *causes* of inequality. What are the mechanisms that direct money and capital to those at the top of the distributional system? What structures work to maintain this distributional pattern? How have these structures emerged and been maintained? In the next two chapters, answers to these questions are sought through the historical and contemporary examination of class relations. Such an analysis provides an important perspective on why, in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, inequality is so vast across the region.

This chapter provides an overview of the evolution of class structures and class relations in Southeast Asia, beginning from about the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries before turning to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and a focus on colonialism, emphasizing the foundations of current class processes in the region, which are discussed in Chapter 4. In considering class formation across Southeast Asia, it is important to remember that periodization is a convenience adopted for the discussion of change over time. This should not obscure the fact that the requirements of production generate new divisions of labor that are "overlaid on, and combine with, the pattern produced in the previous [historical] periods," with the combination of "successive layers" (Massey 1979, 235). Massey's sedimentary image of class relations does not imply that, once established, such relations become rock-solid—for class formations shift and change; they are transformed and altered by class struggles.

The account of class outlined here uses Massey's image of sedimented class relations, structures, and class struggles in four historical phases, considered over two chapters.

First, the major features of class formation in the early modern period are presented, emphasizing the dynamic nature of social structures in the region, impacted by changing patterns of trade and production.[12] Second, attention is directed to the crucial changes and new class processes introduced into Southeast Asia by European imperialism and colonialism, emphasizing not only the influences spreading from Europe but also the beginnings of industrial development and attendant local class transformations throughout much of Southeast Asia. Third, in the following chapter, the effects of Cold War competition on processes of capitalist and industrial development are considered, highlighting the bifurcation of class processes between countries aligned with the "Western" capitalist powers and countries aligned with the socialist bloc. Fourth, also in the following chapter, the evolving nature of class processes since the end of the Cold War are examined to reveal some of the ways in which they have "converged" across different countries—partly through the activities of regional and transnational class networks—while also highlighting the retention of path-dependent differences that persist across locations. In the conclusion, we return to the issue of economic inequalities, showing that the class perspective we have outlined helps clarify some important dimensions of these inequalities.

## Class and its Transformations

At the end of the pre-modern period, Southeast Asia was a relatively sparsely populated, well-watered area covered by forest. In a system Elson (1997, xxi–xxii) described as peasant production, most of the population made use of these natural resources as agriculturalists and as hunters and gatherers. Rice was a major crop across the region, with other foods collected from forests, rivers, and oceans. Agriculture was mostly a family- and community-based activity, in a gendered system, with specific tasks allocated to men and women and others shared by families and communities. Their produce was mainly for subsistence. The crops grown and the food gathered were mostly consumed within families or locally, while people engaged in trading for necessities they could not produce themselves. However, local production was not always sufficient, with food shortages and starvation resulting

[12] The use of historical categories like "early modern period" is not meant to be precise. Reid (1993, 1–20) explains the complexities associated with trying to determine the beginning and end of this period. The periodization used in this monograph is meant to highlight a few major and uncontroversial aspects of social change that occurred between these rough starting and ending dates. It should also be noted, as Reid (1993, 3–6) does, that Southeast Asia is a poor candidate for a "region," as this term has been understood by many historians, geographers, and social scientists (see Glassman 2005, 790–791). Such "region-ness" emerged during periods like the early modern, and especially the Cold War, through the kinds of "external" interventions discussed below.

from droughts, floods, and the actions of rulers and states (Bowie 1996, 127–31; Lieberman 2003, 106–21).[13]

Because much daily life was centered around kinship groups and agricultural cycles, scholars have often credited rural life with a degree of social egalitarianism, including in gender relations (see Atkinson and Errington 1990; Chatthip 1999). This shows that the labor process, especially in wet rice agriculture, was mostly family-based, where men and women shared agricultural work, though many tasks were gender-specific. There was also mutual labor exchange, where villagers worked with neighbors—such as transplanting rice seedlings, harvesting, and building houses—in exchange for their neighbors' labor. This meant that labor was about subsistence and that local produce, like rice, was not valued in monetary terms unless it entered trade. This labor process and the resulting rural egalitarianism may also be attributed to the relative isolation of many communities from the state, and to the capacity for the disgruntled to escape the imposts of rulers by fleeing to even more isolated areas in uplands, hinterlands, islands, and beyond (see Chatthip 1999; Reid 1988, Ch. 4). Yet, local forms of social hierarchy and exploitation cannot be ignored. Kinship and family leaders, for example, could appropriate surpluses from agricultural producers through a variety of means, including rents in kind or religious allocations (Condominas 1990, 89–90). But this kind of extraction typically involved goods produced in people's day-to-day lives. They were not "commodities" in the sense that agricultural produce was not fundamentally for sale, but for direct consumption, barter, payment of in-kind rents, or redistribution through, say, religious donations and appropriation by rulers, both by local "lords" and more distant "kings."

While a degree of remoteness from the imposts of rulers was possible, in many places, local lords who were often landholders could also make demands upon local people for labor, rent, and products. It is also evident that as powerful kingdoms developed, and trade expanded, rural populations became increasingly connected to urban centers, and were often expected to provide surpluses of labor and product to powerful figures (see Baker and Pasuk 2017, 190–93). People were required to work, go to war, and provide produce for royal families and their bureaucrats who often claimed to control or own both them and the land they used. Moreover, as kingdoms further developed, significant proportions of populations were subject to organized actions by rulers and their bureaucracies, with

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13 In discussing the general condition of Southeast Asians, Reid (1988, 50) suggests that only warfare led to major famines. Bowie (1996), however, argues that food shortages and starvation were more common.

involuntary bondage, indenture, and slavery being widespread.[14] As these kingdoms evolved as urban centers, the peripheries and their populations were important to rulers not just as sources of soldiers and slaves, but as producers and collectors of valuable crops and products from forests, rivers, and seas, many of which entered developing regional and international trade networks. As commerce expanded, trading routes crisscrossed the region by land and sea, reaching China and Japan, and areas in South Asia and the Middle East (see Ricklefs 1993, 19–21). Along rivers, between islands, and across plains, there was trade, war, slavery, and service. For example, along the Mekong River, there was considerable trade among villages. There was even an extensive movement of goods from places like Yunnan into and out of what are today Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand (Bowie 1992, Osborne 2001; Sarasawadee 2005).

Trade intensified as some rulers developed the administrative and coercive capacity to squeeze additional labor and product from the population, making some of these rulers and their ruling classes even more powerful. Trade also made some urban agglomerations wealthy and vibrant as trading centers, and centers of religion, learning, and art. Overland and maritime trade routes also brought migrants to the region, along with new belief systems and ideas about governance. These ideas were selectively taken up and modified by locals, including those who ruled in the region, with some declaring themselves sultans, rajas, and kings, usually claiming divine authority (Wolters 1982, 16). As kingdoms developed, so did the bureaucracies and arrangements for managing and ruling quite diverse populations. Claiming warrior and divine sanctification, the relationship with the ruled could be highly personalized. However, as more state-like arrangements emerged alongside powerful ruling classes, so did a system of nobles, aristocrats, and officials to manage and benefit from their control of people, land, produce, and trade.

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14 Reid (1983, 27) has argued that “the movement of captive peoples and slaves was the primary source of labour mobility in Southeast Asia. Typically, it took the form of transferring people from weak, politically fragmented societies to stronger and wealthier ones.” It has been shown that slavery was important for production, that trade in people was organized, and that extensive networks were established to move thousands of slaves across and beyond the region, with Europeans involved in the trade from the time of their entry into the region (Allen 2014, 130). There has been a long debate about the meaning of slavery in mainland Southeast Asia, and especially for Siam. Much commentary held that slavery in Siam was not “real” slavery but something unique that needed to be understood by eschewing Western meanings of slavery and unfreedom (see Cruikshank 1975). As Bowie (1996, 100–101) points out, while there is a “need to understand slavery within the context of a given society,” the claims about “the cultural uniqueness of Thai slavery” leads to a neglect of social and political power. Her conclusion is that slavery was remarkably widespread in the 19th Century Siam and included slave trading. Writing of earlier times, Baker and Pasuk (2017, 190–193) describe production in the Ayudhya kingdom as being reliant on an extensive system of “servitude” that included slaves. Also referring to Ayudhya, Mérieau (2021, 163) avers that “the kingdom undeniably relied extensively on slavery and consequently can be described as a slave society.” For more on the extensive slave trading in other parts of Southeast Asia and across the Indian Ocean, see Allen (2014, Ch. 4) and Chakraborty and Van Rossum (2020).

Wolters (1982, Ch. 2) has referred to the governance of the pre-modern kingdoms of Southeast Asia as *mandala*. Political and economic power radiated from royal palaces to the hinterland, but power often diminished as distance from the centers increased. *Mandala* expanded, contracted, and overlapped as they came into conflict and competition for the benefits that came from controlling people, land, commodities, and trading routes that funneled tradeable goods to the most powerful kingdoms. This arrangement was reflected in the ways in which people were variously connected to the rulers through a myriad of intermediaries, who often overlapped in their various claims on people and communities for products and services (see Kemp, 1996).

These arrangements led to complex and geographically variegated class structures. In some areas with small populations, large tracts of unclaimed land, less intense systems of production, and few demands for service, social hierarchy and organization remained relatively simple, only involving local leaders, free peasants, and slaves (see Bremen, 1982). Even if such arrangements did permit a degree of autonomy, Southeast Asia's pre-capitalist communities were not closed, static, or completely self-sufficient societies, as they were linked into broader networks.

Where larger population agglomerations developed—such as Angkor, Luzon, and Bali—and where intensive wet rice cultivation thrived, this was linked to more complex forms of social organizations for controlling local irrigation, terracing, and other aspects of the labor process (see Sugiyarto, Supriyono, and Hartatik, 2020). These forms of social organization also established coercive measures to extract surplus product and labor, including indentured and slave labor. In kingdoms where trading was significant, like Ayutthaya and Majapahit, highly structured systems of coercion and administration were developed to move rice and other products from hinterlands into trading networks. Groups of artisanal workers and merchants clustered around such centers of power, together with noble families, religious leaders, and bureaucrats. It was the accumulation of surpluses from trade and war, and through mandatory service and slavery, that made rulers wealthy and powerful. Their kingdoms were often in competition and clashed in wars, where captives, including women and children, were taken away as slaves or were resettled in dependent relations with royal and noble powers. Some of the layers of these kinds of class arrangements remain visible in contemporary Southeast Asia.

These royal systems involved a ruling class built around a king and entourages of kin and nobles who congregated in urban trading centers but with an aristocracy of bureaucrats and lesser leaders that stretched into the hinterlands. This ruling class was essentially a network of local and royal power, with the more powerful nodes generally seeking and being granted rights to extract wealth from those they ruled. This could be through taxes or corvee labor for weeks and months each year, or whenever a powerful figure demanded service. Such work could be on royal projects, such as irrigation systems or canals for transport, or might involve service with armies or for nobles-cum-bureaucrats. In many areas, particularly in forested and mountainous areas or remote islands, extraction focused on valuable produce—such as valuable timbers, oils, animal skins, and spices—many of which entered regional and international trading networks.

The early sixteenth century saw the arrival of the Portuguese in the region, soon followed by Spanish and Dutch traders and missionaries, with outposts in Malacca, Timor, the Philippines, and Batavia (Tarling 2001, 36-42). These arrivals marked the beginning of a period that added new forms of class sedimentation in Southeast Asia. Targeting the valuable spice trade and carrying ideas of Christianization, these Europeans could initially do little beyond establishing seats at local trading tables, where Chinese and other merchants were already well-established. Indeed, Chinese merchants—who were ubiquitous in port cities like Malacca, Banten, Manila, Cholon, and Ayutthaya—prospered in this period, acting as intermediaries between the Europeans and Chinese coastal ports (Reid 1993a; Baker and Pasuk 2017, 121).[15]

From the outset, European imperialism was violent. As Europeans scrambled to get control of valuable commodities, they conspired among themselves and engaged in violent conflicts and battles. The Dutch East India Company (VOC), for example, sought treaties with Southeast Asian rulers but was also willing to unleash violence, abducting and killing locals. In Makassar, in 1615, the VOC's "violent rivalries" with Portuguese and English traders saw some local dignitaries become involved, with the Dutch abducting and murdering several (Mostert 2018, 27). Poor relations between Makassar leaders and the Dutch eventually led to military battles. European imperial companies and states often unleashed cruel repression in response to opposition or in retaliation for not getting what they wanted.

The European search for the great wealth that flowed from trade meant they rubbed up against existing trading patterns, where, for example, Muslims controlled the spice routes to Europe via the Middle East and the Chinese controlled much of the trade to and from Northeast Asia (Brown 2003, 32–48). The existing traders became objects of both envy and resentment, particularly among European traders who considered the Chinese and Muslims to have special advantages as "insiders" in restricted trades that Europeans

[15] As Allen (2014, Ch. 1) points out, the Portuguese, Dutch, and British also joined the active slave trading that operated across the region.

struggled to access. Indeed, some local royal courts tapped Chinese merchant wealth, while holding these merchants as subordinates. In other instances, however, merchants were allocated administrative positions. In essence, in the courts of early modern Southeast Asia, the significance of trade meant that merchants—some of them foreign—came to hold economically and politically powerful positions and offices. This reflected the significance of trade connections that provided royal leaders with great wealth; indeed, some were themselves avid traders (Baker and Pasuk 2017, 121). Initially, Europeans were brought into these arrangements. In Ayutthaya, trade was so vibrant that foreign merchants—Mons, Chams, Malays, Indians, Burmese, and later French, Dutch, Portuguese, and English, among others—flocked to the city. In that city, the Chinese also had a large presence, long pre-dating the Europeans, with many settling in the city and nearby. It is for these reasons that Baker and Pasuk (2017, 218) can refer to eighteenth-century Ayutthaya as a cosmopolitan city.

The integration of powerful Chinese and later Europeans into courts and administrative structures presages what would become an enduring feature of ruling class structures in Southeast Asian capitalism: dominant economic actors were deeply integrated into ruling class networks and sometimes into the structures of state power, serving to expand not only their own fortunes but also the reach and influence of leading state actors. Those who seek evidence for clean and simple distinctions between states and markets in early modern Southeast Asia will not find them, nor will they find them in ensuing periods. Ruling class structures in the region have long integrated—albeit in sometimes shifting fashion—the most powerful economic, political, and other actors.

To conclude, while there was variation across the region in the pre-modern era, a pattern of class rule can be discerned, with members of each class occupying a particular location in production. Production was in the hands of people who were involuntarily bonded, indentured, enslaved, or required to deliver products or labor time to others. A related group of artisans produced specialized goods for trade or for the rulers and others, mostly in urban centers. The surplus product supported a ruling class—constituting rulers and their kinship group, nobles, and aristocrat-bureaucrats and officials, the religious hierarchy, and traders and merchants—who distributed and exchanged the goods produced by others. For some centers, this class system resulted in great wealth and power, and produced hierarchical systems of governance.

## Class Formation and Colonialism

Imperialism in Southeast Asia was initially built on trade. However, as Europeans worked to establish and maintain their trading positions, colonies were established. Creating colonies required relationships with the existing local ruling classes. In some cases, those relationships were bluntly antagonistic. The British went to war several times to overthrow Burmese kings, while the Dutch fought numerous brutal wars across the Indonesian archipelago as they established the Dutch East Indies. In other places, positions were created within the colonial hierarchy that allowed local rulers to continue to exercise some of their powers, but in arrangements largely dictated by the colonial rulers, as the British did on the Malay peninsula. In Siam, while there was no formal colonialism, trade and diplomatic pressure meant that it too was integrated within the colonial orbit, in what Benedict Anderson (1979, 210) concluded was a “semi-colonial” condition. Siam, like the rest of Southeast Asia, saw its old social structures, class relations, and political institutions shaken and altered by imperialism and by a rising capitalism and its new classes (Owen ed. 2005, Pt 2).

In examining great social, political, and economic change wrought by imperialism, three interconnected developments had crucial impacts for class processes: (i) the transformation of production and the rise of industry; (ii) the associated rise of new classes; and (iii) the formation of national-territorial states and the development of new bureaucratic administrative structures.

## Transformation of Production and the Rise of Industry

Imperialism transformed Southeast Asia. Initially, the transformation affected trade patterns. However, as colonies were established, political and social transformations also occurred. Most significantly, a transformation to a capitalist economy began, changing the way people worked, patterns of domination, and establishing the power of capital and capitalists.

As observed earlier, there were significant numbers of powerful and prosperous merchants in early modern Southeast Asia. However, their presence should not be construed by itself as marking the development of capitalism in the region. Much of the trade that merchants were involved in, though extensive and crucial to the power of monarchs, was peripheral to the labor processes that consumed most agrarian producers’ daily lives. Most local populations continued with farming. However, as imperialism and colonialism expanded, more peasants became tied to local, regional, and international capitalist markets.

The region's capitalist transformation was a lengthy process. Before the advent of colonialism, as already discussed, most labor was connected to agriculture, fishing, and forests. Moreover, many of the goods produced were not "commodities." But these patterns of work, trade, and production were already undergoing change when Europeans became deeply involved in the region (see Reid 1997). Trade expanded, especially in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Likewise, the nature of work was changing for some, including migrants from China, with more workers being paid in money or having their labor service converted to cash payments as a tax. Such changes did not always amount to capitalism but capitalist relations of production were emerging. B.J. Terwiel (1989, 237), writing of still relatively isolated inland parts of Siam at the beginning of the nineteenth century, refers to plantations, brick manufacture, and other small-scale industries as "an indigenous form of capitalism [that] seems to have evolved under the umbrella of the absolute state." Colonialism and changing patterns of trade accelerated capitalist development.

Keen to dominate the Asian seaborne trade, the Portuguese seized Malacca in 1511. They ultimately failed, as Ricklefs (1993, 23–24) argues, because the Portuguese remained dependent on Asian traders and their arrangements with the region's rulers for the products being traded. After the Portuguese took control of Malacca, the port's trade declined as Asian traders rerouted to other ports. Nonetheless, the Portuguese incursion and local responses disrupted exchange networks, presaging changes to regional and international trading patterns. As Ricklefs (1993, 24) explains:

> There was no longer a central port where the wealth of Asia could be exchanged. There was no longer a Malay state to police the Straits of Malacca and make them safe for commercial traffic. Instead, there was a dispersal of the trading community to several ports, and bitter warfare in the Straits.

While there were setbacks for Europeans, their global trading ventures and their growing colonial empires resulted in huge wealth for Europe. That wealth fired the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalist classes. As Marx and Engels (1998, 9) put it:

> The discovery of America, the rounding of the Cape [of Good Hope], opened up fresh ground for the rising bourgeoisie. The East-Indian and Chinese markets, the colonisation of America, trade with the colonies, the increase in the means of exchange and in commodities generally, gave to commerce, to navigation, to industry, an impulse never before known. . .

In Southeast Asia, following the Portuguese, other Europeans sought access to the wealth that flowed from trade, leading to competition among imperial states and further annexations of territories. The Dutch, seeking spices, arrived in Bantam in 1596, establishing the first permanent Dutch trading post there in 1602. In the same year, the VOC was created by the Dutch government and was granted a monopoly on Asian seaborne trade. Batavia was founded by the Dutch in 1619 and became the VOC's trading center in the region and eventually the capital of the Dutch East Indies colony (see Ricklefs 1993, 26–31).

Like the Dutch, other imperial powers authorized companies to foster trade, including the English (and later British) East India Company and the French East India Company. These companies often forged a path to colonialism through trade and warfare. The English East India Company, founded in 1600, arrived in Aceh and Bantam in 1602. It immediately clashed with the Dutch and Portuguese, but the British only achieved a degree of trade dominance following the establishment of free ports at Penang in 1786 and Singapore in 1819. These ports soon "attracted the bulk of the private trade," most of which "had previously sought out the Malay ports, [and] deprived the Malay rulers of their main source of revenue…" (Lewis 2009, 50). From Penang, the British soon established their political dominance over the Malay peninsula. The British position in Burma was established in the 1820s, leading to series of wars that dethroned Burmese rulers. The French took control of Cochinchina in 1862, and expanded its colonial ambit to include Cambodia, forcefully annexed Tonkin, and, finally, incorporated Laos (see Tarling 2001, Ch. 2). By the late nineteenth century, it was only Siam that was not a colony, although some of its territory had been annexed by the French and British. Its rulers adopted administrative measures that closely followed colonial patterns and its trade fed the colonies. The export of rice from Siam sustained British colonies in Hong Kong, Malaya, and Singapore, and was also traded to some European metropoles (Ingram 1971, 41–43).

Imperialism was not, of course, simply about the annexation of territory and the making of colonies. While imperialism may have sometimes been justified in terms of religion or some other "civilizing" mission, the real prize was tradeable commodities. From peasant farmlands to plantations, the colonies produced rice, tobacco, indigo, rubber, sugar, pepper, coffee, tea, and timber, minerals, and oil also became important exports. As the colonies developed, these traded goods were converted into commodities, and capitalist investors increasingly industrialized production.

Industrialization is usually considered a process where non-agricultural production, especially manufacturing, grows in significance relative to the other forms of production and work within an economy. But as Eric Hobsbawm (1999, 12) makes clear in writing about the British Industrial Revolution, industrialization also involves "an acceleration of growth because of, and through, economic and social transformation." That long capitalist transformation involved an interweaving and sedimenting of new and old classes. The transformations usually integral to industrialization include the transfer of a portion of the working population from agriculture to the manufacturing of various industrial commodities, along with the rise of capitalists who control the means of production. With this social transformation typically comes a change in the types of goods produced—how they are produced—and the forms that labor takes in these new forms of commodity production.

While not replicas of British industrialization, some similar changes emerged in Europe's Southeast Asian colonies and in Siam. For example, agriculture remained significant in most colonies and even expanded. Rice, still important for subsistence, became a major commodity and export crop in the second half of the nineteenth century. Burma soon ranked as the world's largest rice exporter, with Siam and Indochina also becoming large exporters of rice. The way that rice production was expanded varied among the colonies. In Siam, administrative changes "released" the indentured, bonded, and enslaved to take up agricultural commodity production in newly opened lands, much of which they cleared and developed themselves. This movement into agricultural production was attractive because it required relatively small capital outlays in the initial phases, promised reasonably good returns for the labor expended, and required skills and technology that were already available. While there were obvious incentives for previously bonded individuals and families to clear and occupy land, it was the growing global demand for agricultural commodities that expanded the land area under cultivation.

The expansion of cultivated land and the attention to agricultural commodity production led to rapid growth in exports. From the late 1850s to the mid-1920s, Siam's rice growing-area tripled, while the export of rice increased ten- to twentyfold, sometimes amounting to 30 to 50 percent of the total annual harvest (Ingram 1971, 38, 53; Sompop 1989, 44, 49, 51). For Lower Burma, official data calculated an almost tenfold expansion of the area planted to rice, with exports tripling between 1875 and 1910 (Aye Hlaing 1964, 92, 95). Michael Adas (2011, xiii) writes about the period that followed colonial "pacification:"

> In the half century after its annexation to Britain's Indian empire in 1852, the Irrawaddy delta region, which comprised much of what came to be known as Lower Burma, had been transformed from what its colonizers routinely depicted as an impoverished, sparsely populated backwater region of the Konbaung kingdom into the world's largest exporter of rice. Hundreds of thousands of hectares of what was officially designated "jungle waste" had been cleared and planted by a massive and ever-increasing flow of migrants.

This migration to the Burma Delta included many people from other parts of the British colony. It also included, in a pattern seen elsewhere in the region, "hundreds of thousands more—enticed by British incentives and indenture recruiters—[who] migrated from near and distant provinces of the Indian empire, as well as China, Malaya, and other areas in Southeast Asia" (Adas 2011, xiv, Ch. 2). Referring to J.S. Furnivall's description of "industrial agriculture" in the delta, Adas (2011, 132–33) notes that the mechanization of agriculture was unnecessary because large landowners could engage in extreme specialization and large-scale operations, using the substantial pool of semi-skilled Indian and Burmese agrarian wage laborers. Such large-scale production was also a feature in British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies, where plantations were introduced to develop "industrial agriculture" in producing rubber and other cash crops for export. In several locations, colonialists also sought to deepen exploitation through coercive systems that included compulsory cultivation and the forced delivery of export crops, indentured labor on plantations, and modified forms of *corvée* labor systems. Such systems were especially repressive in French Indochina and parts of the Dutch East Indies (Raben 2014, 30). In the Philippines, where sugar plantations and milling were largely operated by local investors, similar coercive measures were common, with Alfred McCoy (1992, 107–08) observing: "Judging from the record of violent uprisings in the sugar districts of Negros Island, indigenous ownership intensified the harshness of plantation life."

In this context, colonial industrialization was not just about industry, but also about a transformation in the nature of the goods produced, and how these goods were produced and exchanged. As discussed below, such changes were intimately related to the development of capitalism and capitalist social relations of production, which had significant class impacts.

The production of agricultural commodities dramatically altered existing economic and social relations and spurred industrialization. As already mentioned, in Siam and Burma, rice was transformed from a crop mainly grown for local consumption into the dominant export commodity. While there were some large farms in Burma, production in Siam continued to be on relatively small landholdings. However, in both economies, the broader rice economy was commercialized, monetarized, and industrialized. The milling of rice saw the introduction of steam-power that sometimes employed hundreds of wage laborers (Hewison 1988, 392–93). In terms of the sedimentation of institutions and classes, these transformations meant that agriculture, often involved three types of production: non-market production for direct consumption, simple commodity production, and capitalist commodity production. Each form exhibited different class relations, but there were also linkages between each type of production.

Once the crop left the fields, the trade in rice and its milling were mainly in the hands of Chinese and European businesses. However, in Siam, Chinese and other local millers soon pushed Europeans aside (Hewison 1988, 392). In essence, the system of peasant commodity production was subordinated to merchant capital, as peasants grew rice as a cash crop and sold it to middlemen, who transported it to mills in provincial centers or in Bangkok. The milled rice was exported by Chinese and European merchants. The industrialization of sugar production was also significant across the region. In Java, Knight (2014, 11) refers to the development of the sugar industry and steam milling as an "industrial project" at the cutting edge of manufacturing: "by the 1880s, the developed state of manufacturing on Java placed the island well ahead of any of its erstwhile counterparts elsewhere in Asia or its Indian Ocean counterparts and roughly on par with the most advanced sugar industries of the New World." Knight (2014, 52–56) also explains that the sugar industry spurred industrial development as it required foundries, ships, and workers, noting that, in Surabaya, there were foundries and dockyards, each employing hundreds of workers. Rice and sugar were not new crops, but with colonial capitalism, their production for export was industrialized. Colonial production also introduced new crops, expanded timber production, industrialized mining, developed plantations, and employed wage labor like never before.

In Malaya, the British established rubber plantations, which came to use indentured Indian labor, and expanded and mechanized tin mining. In Indochina, the French demanded taxes in cash, directed consumption patterns, established mines, and instituted plantations for tea, coffee, rubber, and pepper, while also intensifying and industrializing rice production and export (see Gunn 2014: Ch. 1). In Burma, in addition to expanded rice production, petroleum products were mined and exported, and teak forests were exploited (Furnivall 1948, 77–98). The Dutch in the East Indies established sugar, coffee, tobacco, and tea plantations, and exploited petroleum. By the early twentieth century, tin, rubber, rice, and timber were pouring out of mainland Southeast Asia.

The official French designation of Indochina as a *colonie d'exploitation* reflected patterns of production, exploitation, and profit across colonial Southeast Asia. These colonies and their products generally resulted in considerable wealth that was "drained" from the colonies to capitalist enterprise, often in the colonial capitals of London, Paris, and Amsterdam. As Gordon (2018) has shown, the flow of funds from the Dutch East Indies was substantial. For British Malaya, it has been argued that, in relative terms, the return on investment for colonial capital may have been the highest in the world in the eight decades after 1889 (Rönnbäck, Broberg, and Galli 2021; see also Khor and Jomo 2023).

## New Classes

Colonial investment brought new classes to the fore. Specifically, colonial industrialization introduced significant commodity-producing activities controlled by a rising capitalist class, employing wage labor, and increasingly linked merchant activities with production. Many industries that would become significant in the early twentieth century were implanted by colonial capitalists, as they extended their economic reach into Southeast Asia. Local investors-cum-capitalists also took advantage of the new opportunities as the nature of local economies changed.

The capital invested in tin mining exemplifies not just industrialization, but also changes in class relations spurred by technological development and colonial capitalism. Until the late nineteenth century, tin mining in Malaya and Siam was based mainly on investment by Chinese *kongsi* (commercial syndicates) and the efforts of Chinese "coolie" labor, much of it indentured.[16] Initially the Dutch East Indies followed a similar pattern. However, new arrangements were instituted as the Dutch colonial government took direct control of mines through its Bureau of Mines, and used increasing numbers of local wage-laborers, penal labor, and other indentured workers (Kaur and Diehl 1996, 95–98, 102). In the Philippines, following the US's takeover at the turn of the twentieth century, the mining of several minerals expanded, primarily under American companies, employing "50,000–75,000 laborers and hundreds of thousands of other people in auxiliary work" (Camba 2015, 292). In 1874, the British created the residency of the Federated Malay States, giving the colonial regime the ability to control production and to promote new technological developments that undermined the dominance of the Chinese syndicates and generated opportunities for Western tin mining companies (see Ross 2014).

Growing European demand for tin saw expanded Western investment, especially as technological changes—the introduction of the tin dredge—industrialized some aspects of the mining industry.[17] The demand for labor in the tin mines was substantial. Data for the Dutch East Indies shows that the labor requirement for the Bangka and Belitung mines expanded from about 19,000 workers in 1890 to 36,000 workers in 1925 (Kaur and Diehl 1996, 111). In Siam, tin mining was focused around Phuket Island, and by the mid-1880s,

[16] The term "coolie" is contentious and can carry negative connotations. For a discussion, see Breman and Daniel (1992) and Datta (2021, 6–9).

[17] The introduction of the dredge did not mean that other methods of mining immediately collapsed. Indeed, data for Siam shows that as late as 1912, 70 percent of ore still came from non-dredge mining (Falkus 1996, 93). In Malaya, even in 1936, *dulang*-washers, who were mostly women, still made up almost 15 percent of the workers in tin mining (Siew 1953, 13).

more than 40,000 Chinese worked in the area's tin mines, with some large mines employing as many as 900 workers. Conditions in the mines were difficult, with contemporary observers reporting that mine laborers were often overworked, prone to opium addiction, suffered poor health, and had high death rates (Hewison 1989, 52). Conditions were similarly arduous in Malayan tin mines, where women workers faced especially difficult conditions (Lai 1986, 56–67).

The companies formed to dredge tin in Siam were initially joint ventures between local Chinese-cum-Siamese officials and Australian interests. Elsewhere, colonial capital dominated the mining industry. As Hillman (2005, 182) concludes for Malaya, with few exceptions, the dominant companies were "English ... incorporated in London rather than in Malaya... [and s]hareholders were therefore overwhelmingly English." In other words, the capital raised came mainly from flotations on the London Stock Exchange, with Western banks in Malaya unwilling to make long-term loans, effectively limiting capital to British firms. Along with changes to technology, the advantages accruing to Western capital saw the Chinese share of total Malayan tin output decline from 90 percent in 1900 to less than 30 percent in 1940, even while production almost doubled (Hennart 1986, 137–38). This illustrates a common pattern in the colonial period: Chinese merchant and nascent industrial capital maintained an important role in the regional economy, though increasingly ceding power to industrial capitalists from Europe and, eventually, elsewhere in the world. Colonial capitalism remained dominant in many sectors until the Pacific War.

As production and trade grew, however, local capital found some opportunities for capital accumulation. This included those providing links between Western firms and the local economy, especially for those known as compradors. To operate effectively, Western colonial firms required knowledgeable local facilitators for their dealings with the local community and businesses, and with Chinese merchants and capitalists. In Siam, most of the compradors were Chinese merchants who could speak English, Thai, and various Chinese dialects. This was important in ventures like rice trading, because compradors for Western firms had to both purchase rice from Chinese middlemen and deal with government agencies. While Westerners made handsome profits from trade and industry, they often had to rely on their main competitors as compradors. This meant that the compradors not only received commissions from European firms, but also benefited their own businesses through their links to colonial capital (Hewison 1989: 50–51). In class terms, compradors were in a unique position, being local capitalists but also reliant on the link they had with colonial capitalists.[18]

Capitalism was advancing and new classes were being established, yet as Massey's image of sedimented class relations suggests, capitalist industrialization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not mean that the new was completely obliterating the old. Monarchs and local rulers remained, often continuing to expropriate wealth from rural areas, and wage-labor also remained limited. But rising capitalists, colonial administrators, and officials representing imperial capitalism worked diligently to consolidate the new ways of producing and working. They ensured that the colonies were made orderly and that the factors of production were in place, enabling investors and owners to produce the commodities required for the maintenance and development of the colonial empire and the metropolitan capitalist centers.

The demand for wage-labor expanded across the region, and the old methods of commanding and providing labor proved inadequate for supplying the workers needed in mines, on plantations, docks, and in foundries and factories. The increasing demand for workers was partially met by local labor as people were freed from earlier forms of bondage and slavery. But in places like Siam, Malaya, the Philippines, and Indochina, the increased demand for labor that came with the expansion of capitalist enterprise could not be met with local labor that moved into or remained tied to rural areas. It was the coolie trade that brought millions of Chinese men and more limited numbers of women to the region, especially between 1880 and 1940. For example, in Siam there was a net addition of about 500,000 Chinese to the total workforce from 1882 to 1917 (Skinner 1957, 61). In Burma and Malaya, large numbers of both Chinese and Indian workers—many of them indentured when they first arrived—were imported to work in mines, on plantations, and in other enterprises. Between 1881 and 1931, the Indian population in Burma increased by almost 775,000, while the Chinese population increased by over 180,000. In Malaya, between 1911 and 1931, the Indian population increased by more than 350,000 while the Chinese population went up by about 800,000 (Kaur 2006, 431–32; Li 2017, 5). In Malaya, Indians were first recruited as convict labor during the 1830s to work on railway and road construction; most were later repatriated (Datta 2021, 28). Large-scale

18 Mao (1926) considered compradors a class that was "wholly [an] appendage … of the international bourgeoisie, depending upon imperialism for their survival and growth." Together with landlords, Mao (1926) described compradors as "the most backward and most reactionary relations of production in China and hinder the development of her productive forces." Later research showed, for China and for Southeast Asia, that compradors had more complicated class positions than Mao allowed for. Examples of this work include Hao (1970) and Godley (1981).

Indian migration began from the 1880s, with around 400,000 individuals imported and set to work mainly by European rubber and coffee planters. Initially, they worked under an indenture system that, by the early twentieth century, evolved into a commission-based system for Indian recruiters, though conditions for workers remained largely similar to those under indenture. In essence, as Stenson (1980, 16) explains, labor recruitment and the migration of Indians to Malaya was the result "of specifically European political and economic needs." The import of labor brought workers to the region on ships described as a "floating hell" (Purcell 1967, 194), with the colonial state encouraging the trade through light regulation, reasoning that an abundance of labor would keep wages low. Ginés-Blasi (2020, 459), writing about the Philippines, describes a common situation across the region:

> …[T]hroughout the second half of the nineteenth century there was an unofficial network of unfree labour trade of Chinese workers travelling to the Philippines. These immigrants became tied to their creditors through debt, and this abuse persisted because it was financially fruitful for many actors, who took advantage of them in China and in the colony, at the time of an unprecedented inflow of immigrants.

These migrants might have been "unfree," but they were crucial for capitalist development. In Malaya, there was also an influx of Chinese and Indian women in the late 1920s and 1930s. The colonial regime considered them as domestic partners and as prostitutes. Chinese women might quell a male working class that the state found "quarrelsome." These women also entered domestic service and other service sectors, small factories, tin mining, and worked on rubber plantations (Lai 1986). Indian women were recruited with spouses and families as an incentive to recruitment. They often worked as weeders and tappers on rubber plantations. Across the region, female workers on plantations, mines and factories were routinely paid less than men doing the same work (Datta, 2021, 33, 56–57; Doeppers 1984, 95).

In several colonies, the development of capitalist industry during the late nineteeth and early twentieth centuries involved a process of class "racialization"—the socially simplified and idealized identification of specific racial or ethnic groups with particular positions in the social hierarchy. In earlier periods, there was an identification of different ethnic groups, with pre-colonial trading centers often having "quarters" for Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, "Moors," various Europeans, and more. The literature on the period often points to Chinese traders, travelers, and even officials, with attention turning to Chinese labor in later periods. However, as Terwiel (1989) has observed for central and eastern Siam, there were, by the early nineteenth century, many Chinese who had settled and worked across the region. Osborne (1996, 26) points out that Phnom Penh in 1866 had a population of about 35,000, most of whom were not Cambodians. With the advent of imperialism, colonial regimes manipulated race, pitting in some cases locals and migrants against each other or at least implementing policies of "managing" immigrants separately from locals. A colonial narrative of the "exploiting Chinese" also emerged, ignoring that many of the Chinese who came from Southeast Asia during the colonial era were poor and highly exploited by employers, which included Chinese merchants and industrialists. Nonetheless, the establishment of a growing, thriving, Chinese merchant community throughout Southeast Asia added an important layer to the class structure.

The racialization of class by colonial states was a pattern across the region. Administration was in the hands of colonial officials who often worked with elements of old ruling classes, while the commanding heights of the capitalist economy tended to be dominated by a mix of colonial and Chinese capital. Sometimes, colonial and Chinese capital were in competition, but in other cases, they cooperated through trade networks. Much of the urban and industrial labor that existed was, to some degree, segregated by race, typically as part of rulers' divide-and-rule strategies. In Siam, the monarchy's state was populated by members of the developing capitalist class. The monarchy, its nobility, and aristocrats proved adept in expanding their investments, often in cooperation with Chinese businessmen (Suehiro 1989, Ch. 3). They also managed the state, producing tax revenues for the king and, like colonies, provided the administration, infrastructure, labor, and order necessary for capitalist development.

In the developing capitalist sectors, migrant Chinese and South Asian laborers were often assigned to specific economic domains—as with the dominance of Chinese workers in the mines of Siam and Malaya and of Indian workers on rubber plantations in Malaya. Meanwhile, much of the local population remained involved in primary activities such as fishing and agricultural production, and remained disproportionately locked within those occupations, though such activities began to change through the effects of industrialization.

Thus, another layer of the new class structure involved the immigrant workers who were the main workforce in large factories, mills, building roads, laying railways lines, on the docks, and in many other areas of work. Working conditions were often harsh and dangerous, and demanded long hours and low pay (Hewison 1989, 52). In colonial Rangoon, for example, not only were working conditions difficult for Indian coolies, but coolie accommodation was overcrowded and unsanitary (Osada 2016, 5–9). As discussed in the following section, when workers and peasants banded together to demand better wages, improved conditions, better prices for their produce, or greater dignity, capitalists responded violently as they saw their profits threatened, while the state often portrayed the workers as dangerous.

In the racialized politics of colonies, workers who protested were often cast as "outsiders." As Skinner (1957, 159–62) points out, anti-Chinese attitudes that emerged in the early twentieth century were often derived from Western perspectives on China. In the colonies, particularly among influential officials and people in business, and reflecting a view developed in China, the Chinese were believed to be a "race" that was rebellious and anti-Western. The colonial experience with Chinese labor was marked by allegations that outside "agitators" incited strikes and boycotts. These racialized attitudes were reinforced for Western capitalists when they found themselves engaged in competition with Chinese merchants who were often accused of sharp business practices (Somers Heidhues 1974, 11–18). Of course, Chinese capitalists rightly considered that colonial states restricted their opportunities for accumulation. Racialized perspectives could also be imbibed by powerful locals. For example, the English-educated Siamese King Vajiravudh reflected Western attitudes in his 1914 newspaper articles that became the pamphlet, *The Jews of the Orient*. In it, he attempted to demonstrate, to Westerners, that the Thai were not "Orientals" of the rough, rebellious Chinese coolie type, but were rather more like Westerners. His "anti-Sinicism" was mainly an attack on working-class Chinese, and not the Chinese merchant class he considered civilized and "gentlemanly" (Hewison 1988, 405–06).

Later, local political leaders exploited ethnic politics to scapegoat the Chinese for a variety of alleged problems, leading to deep popular resentment in some places. A racialized view emerged, portraying the Chinese capitalist groups not only as wealthy, but also as potentially powerful, and possibly manipulative, exploitative, or corrupt. These groups have been identified and attacked for using their wealth to exploit other social groups identified as "locals."

This legacy of colonial ethnic politics is especially noticeable in Malaysia. Here, as elsewhere in colonial Southeast Asia, Europeans became state managers and investors in various enterprises. Their enterprises were facilitated by the colonial state, not least in their supply of labor. The British colonial regime not only sought to displace Chinese capital in several sectors and replace it with British capital, but also sought to undermine the dominance of Chinese workers, considering them to be "politically volatile" and insufficiently "docile" as employees, especially on rubber plantations (Stenson 1980, 15–16). The late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century boom in rubber production coincided with the early growth of the automobile economy. Rubber from British Malaya produced considerable wealth. To replace Chinese tappers, in 1907, the colonial government began funding the importation of Tamil workers from British India into rubber plantations (Satyanarayana 2002; Kaur 2009). The policy to diversify labor imports away from the Chinese, along with the impact of the Great Depression, saw them leaving the colony. The number of Chinese working in the tin mines dropped from about 100,000 in 1929 to around 34,000 by 1933 (Siew 1953, 29).

In Burma, the racialization of class involved Indians and Chinese. Large numbers of Indian workers were imported or migrated from other parts of British India. At least until the 1930s, they made up the bulk of Rangoon's working class (Osada 2016, 19). They also engaged in hawking, petty trading, and farming. A few Chinese, especially those who migrated earlier and were outside the coolie system, became retailers, agricultural traders, and processors of agricultural products. Some others became bureaucrats and functionaries in colonial governments, and, as already mentioned, many advanced into the capitalist class.

As capitalist development deepened, local populations also entered the waged workforce. There were multiple motivations for this move. As in French Indochina and the Dutch East Indies, they were often forced into work by colonial state regulation, dragooning, and repression. Others were prompted by changes to taxation, such as in Siam where the corvee was changed to cash tax collections. Across the region, market forces also attracted many into waged work (Elson 1997, Chs. 2, 6–7). Once local workers were found or forced into labor, they were often seasonal, retaining ties to their villages and the cycle of food crop production. During off seasons, when they were indebted or faced with poor crop yields, they moved to plantations and estates, as well as to urban areas, to work on the construction of roads, railways, tramways, bridges, canals, and buildings. They also took on unskilled occupations, including in the service sector. At the same time, and partly because of connections to their villages, colonial regimes struggled to keep local workers on the job. Adas (1986) describes a range of strategies "from footdragging to flight" that did not amount to rebellion, but caused problems for the owners of capital. Two examples illustrate the ways colonialism and industrialization transformed agriculture in Southeast Asia and its impacts on class formation. The first is the much-studied Cultivation System, implemented by the Dutch colonial regime in Java. The second is the rice trade.

The Cultivation System, implemented in 1830 and phased out gradually between 1860 and 1919, was designed to transform agricultural production in Java by emphasizing cash crops as commodities for the global market (Fasseur 1992). When the British briefly ruled Java in the early nineteenth century, they attempted this transformation through a land rent system meant to encourage commercial and monetized production by forcing landowners to collect their rents in cash rather than in-kind. However, the system was ineffective; villagers withdrew from producing crops that were highly taxed. When the Dutch resumed control in 1816, they attempted instead to bring agricultural villages into commodity production by allowing more traditional landholding arrangements while contracting through village heads to secure production of key cash crops, such as tobacco, tea, pepper, cinnamon, cloves, sugar, coffee, and indigo. In this system, village heads retained some power through contracting with the colonial state, while securing—with the force of the colonial state behind them—one-fifth of the land and one-fifth of village labor per year for these commercial crops. The crops produced were then delivered for processing to Chinese or European contractors or to merchants involved in the export trade. This system was tremendously profitable for the Netherlands East Indies government, which helped spur Dutch industrial growth by generating nearly a third of total Dutch public revenue between 1851 and 1870, causing Governor General J.C. Baud to call Java, "the cork on which the Netherlands floats" (Fasseur 1992, 57). The effects on Javanese villagers were less favorable, leaving them largely outside the new profit streams and, on some accounts. facing declining food consumption. By 1930, with much of the peasantry marginalized, the Cultivation System had been replaced by private agricultural estates that owned 9 percent of Java's land, establishing some control by capitalist landlords over the countryside (Brown 1997, Ch. 7).

The second example is the growth of rice exports from mainland Southeast Asia. While using quite different methods from those enforced by the Dutch in Java, this expansion also demonstrates the effects of colonialism and industrialization on agricultural production. In the mainland, there was an interesting congruence among Burma, a British colony; Vietnam, a French colony; and Siam, formally independent but economically dominated by Britain. These three areas saw a massive expansion of rice production and exports from the mid- to the late nineteenth century, which was less imposed and mandated than the commercial cropping in Java. All the same, there were varying degrees of political coercion at different times. The British and French were often vicious and draconian in dealing with recalcitrant farmers. Yet, much of the mainland's expanded rice cultivation was generated by new market opportunities for small farmers, supported by governments. As mentioned above, the government encouraged small producers—mostly ethnic Burmans—to expand cultivation in the Irrawaddy Delta, and to sell their output through mostly European millers and exporters (Aye Hlaing 1964, 97). The broad division that the colonial administration established between Burman agriculturalists, Indian workers, and European capitalists was both part of the general divide-and-rule ethnic/race strategy and a commercial policy—one that was successful in the late nineteenth century; though it landed many rice exporters in considerable difficulty by the time of the Great Depression (Adas 2011, 185–208). Siam's rice export boom was partly a result of treaty arrangements first with Britain, and later, other colonial states, which facilitated crop and raw materials exports. This encouraged rice producers to monetize their operations and sell their output to commercial millers and exporters, most of whom were Chinese and Sino-Thai (Hewison 1989, 41–45).

A similar but more coercive process occurred in the French colony of Cochin-China (see Murray 1980). The result was a boom in rice exports in all three places. In class terms, the impact was deep. Increasing numbers of peasants, who had previously produced rice mainly for direct consumption or barter, were transformed into farmers dependent on local and world market prices to sustain themselves as producers, and on commercial millers, buyers, and exporters to sell their product. This process was driven in part by the industrialization of other sectors of the economy and by the increasing demand for rice from both colonial and metropolitan markets as the numbers of wage workers grew. A full accounting of the range of industries that began to develop in colonial Southeast Asia during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would make this picture more complex, but the pattern of commercialization, industrialization, and capitalism's development and its new classes would remain familiar.

## Administering Colonial Capitalism

As already intimated, the role of the colonial state and the colonial-like state in Siam was central for capitalist development. Pre-modern forms of government were transformed or incorporated into what became centralized, geographically bounded, and bureaucratized administrations with imperial systems of law and order. Imperialism and its traders undermined *mandala* arrangements. The establishment of colonial regimes did away with them. As they gathered up territory across the region, colonialists demarcated areas that resembled contemporary European notions of nations and states. This colonial marking of their territory went together with colonial industrialization, the commercialization of production, and associated class formation. As Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson (2001, 1375) argue in relation to the nature of colonial power, "there were few constraints on state power.... The colonial powers set up authoritarian and absolutist states with the purpose of solidifying their control and facilitating the extraction of resources."

Yet these arrangements also had to recognize, use, and modify earlier political and economic arrangements with, for example, pre-colonial and colonial systems, often working in parallel in French Indochina (Lopez Jerez 2019). Pre-colonial states in Southeast Asia had limited capacities to raise taxes from their subjects, particularly in monetary form, as most agricultural producers had limited access to money at best. For these states, as Reid (1993b, 69) observes, "revenue collection was always indirect and usually variable. Taxation was levied in numerous ways, including tribute, levies of produce, duties on trade, tithes and labour obligation." An answer to this problem was for colonial states to adopt some features from the pre-colonial state. For example, colonial states found the use of intermediaries in revenue collection useful. Previously, and usually through personalized links to nobles, local lords and leaders, intermediaries-cum-"administrators" would collect and funnel tax to the center, while keeping an agreed share for themselves. When Europeans first arrived, they often identified such arrangements with monopolies and unfree trade dominated by royals and their collaborating merchants. Yet the taxation systems colonial states adopted owed much to the old system as the colonialists (and Siamese monarchy) appointed revenue or tax farmers.[19] These tax farmers were often Chinese merchants who were contracted to pay the state a fee for the right to collect taxes in a particular area or on specific crops, such as rice and betel, or to provide and tax particular activities or products, like opium, alcohol, gambling, and prostitution (Butcher 1993, 19–22). Such activity could only be engaged effectively by "farmers" who not only had capital and commercial connections but also the necessary "muscle" to impose taxes on sometimes recalcitrant villagers. Indeed, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were marked by peasant revolts against tax imposts and the expansion of states (see Benda and Castles 1969). As colonial regimes developed, the taxes on the "sins" of opium, alcohol, gambling, and prostitution became important, in part because they did not compete with colonial capital (Butcher 1993, 22). The revenue from tax farms became significant for the Dutch and British colonial regimes and the Siamese state (Butcher 1993, 31).

For a variety of reasons, including the strengthening of bureaucratic regimes, tax farms were mostly phased out in the early twentieth century. However, they had contributed to the consolidation of capitalist forms of class power in several ways. First, while they developed as a means to deal with decentralized administration, they helped consolidate states through the centralization of power and further projects of state control. Second, by imposing taxes, they contributed to the increased monetization of economic activity, thus enhancing the dominance of cash and the market in people's lives and livelihoods. Third, they enabled considerable capital accumulation by some of the Chinese clans involved in the tax farms, some of whom were able to transform this wealth into other forms of business activity and capitalist accumulation.

Colonial states engaged in many economic and administrative activities that promoted the growth of capitalist enterprise: promoting and investing in specific industries, organizing labor supplies, policing, putting down strikes and rebellions, clearing forest, and building infrastructure, including irrigation schemes, ports, railways, and roads. In "non-colonial" Siam, the monarchy and its government were also deeply involved in the growth and nurturing of capitalism through these same kinds of measures. Significantly, the monarchy was also an important investor, alongside Chinese and European capitalists. With little distinction between the king's money and the state's, the monarchy's ventures included

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19 For details of the reforms undertaken by the Siamese state, see Hong (1983). Tax farming was a common system used for revenue collection under both colonial regimes, but also earlier, in monarchies across the world over a long historical period (see Johnson and Koyama 2014).

a wide range of commercial investments, which meant the state and capital were barely distinguishable (see Suehiro 1989).

Maintaining order and control were among the most significant state activities. Both states and capitalists sought to maintain strict control over the lower classes made up of migrants, local workers, and the peasantry. The state used law, military, and police against workers and peasants when they organized.

Employers often intimidated Chinese workers, and some made use of so-called secret societies run by Chinese bosses to control Chinese workers. However, these arrangements later came to be viewed with suspicion when secret societies and their leaders became politically active. By using private labor contractors and variable daily wages, employers also made work insecure, establishing a measure of economic coercion (Jomo 1988, 163). The colonial state and businesses also colluded to break strikes, with governments identifying leading "agitators" among migrant workers, arresting them, and often deporting them. On occasions, colonial states mobilized troops to break strikes. Employers also took punitive action against labor leaders, sacking them and their comrades, cutting off water and food supplied to workers' barracks, and employing strike breakers (see Ingleson, 1986, Ch. 6; Stenson 1980, 63–70).

When peasants revolted, these were often local responses to changing production patterns that resulted in local class changes, as some became rich and overbearing, resulting in resentment and violence. Peasants were frequently reduced to abject and "recurring poverty, debilitating powerlessness, precarious productive systems, constant ... impositions and exactions from external forces, and persistent threat of extinction" (Tadem 2010, 79). Colonial bureaucrats saw peasant uprisings as subversion (see Fernando 1999). From the late nineteenth into the twentieth century, revolts—local, anti-colonial, and rebellious—broke out throughout the region, with colonial states often unleashing draconian responses.

In the Dutch East Indies, writing of the nineteteth century, Sartono Kartodirdjo (1966, 1) refers to "social convulsions ... sweeping across Java," with colonial officials reporting:

> Many risings and attempts at insurrections by the peasantry.... Millenarian movements, a concomitant of social unrest and turmoil, appeared in various parts of Java, while religious revivalism manifested itself in the mushrooming growth of religious schools and mystico-religious brotherhoods throughout Java. In fact, the nineteenth century was a period of social unrest accompanying social change, brought about by the growing impact of the West.

The Dutch colonial authorities often used troops in response to rebellion, arrested all males in villages, and burned villages (Ch. 8).

Another example of ruthless suppression was the colonial state's violent response to the 1930–31 Saya San Uprising in Lower Burma. In the context of rising anti-colonialism, the negative impact of the Great Depression on rice prices, along with rising landlessness, caused widespread discontent. This sparked an uprising, led by the traditional healer and nationalist-monarchist Saya San. With emergency decrees in place, when the British colonial regime's modern war machine was finished, thousands had been killed in military operations, imprisoned, or executed, while the colonial intelligence service expanded to prevent similar rebellions (see Adas 2011, Ch. 8; Clipson 2010, Ch. 1).[20] Also in the early 1930s, in French Indochina, where peasant rebellion and rising communism mixed, colonial authorities established a vast system of intelligence and repression to limit rebellion. Tens of thousands were subject to imprisonment in atrocious conditions, deportation, torture, forced confessions, assassinations, and execution by guillotine.

Thousands more were killed in military operations (see Gunn 2014, Ch. 3). Even in the colonial backwater in Laos, there were several revolts by peasants and upland peoples, which saw the French using military responses to crush them (Gunn 2003, Ch. 5).

Despite such punitive responses, peasants and workers remained energetic organizers. As Brown (2004, 19) observes for Siam, by the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, organized attempts to improve wages and conditions became common. Across the region, ports were important nodes in colonial trade, and these were often targeted with industrial action. Organizing and strikes were also directed at the main export producers, such as cigar factories in Manila and rice mills in Bangkok (Doeppers 1984, 118–34; Brown 2004, 19–22). Where Chinese laborers predominated, workplace activism was often conflated with political agitation associated initially with Chinese republicanism or with secret societies. Later, by the first decades of the twentieth century, some of this organizing and activism was driven by nationalists and communists (Purcell 1967, 208). Capitalists repeatedly implored the state to intervene and break strikes, with colonial administrators only too willing to repress workers, often worrying that strikes had political motives. Colonial authorities liaised across jurisdictions on identifying "agitators," as the Thai royal state did with the colonial administration in Singapore (Brown 2004, 23–24). Various police forces and spying networks were established across the region to suppress unions and nationalist movements (Trocki 1999, 85).

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20 The rebellion also reflected the racialization of colonial capitalism. For details, see Saha (2022).

Concern about communism saw colonial states using charges of "Bolshevism" against labor organizers, who were often arrested, jailed, and deported. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, as labor organizing expanded, many unions adopted ideologies influenced by socialism and communism. This trend extended to intellectuals, students, and others as left-oriented activism grew throughout the region. In Indonesia, a Communist Party (later, *Partai Kommunis Indonesta* or PKI) was formed in 1920, and pushed for an anti-imperialist coalition and demanded an end to Dutch colonialism, with a rebellion failing in 1926. The Malayan Communist Party, established in 1930, organized trade unions in Singapore and in the mines and on plantations in Malaya. In the Philippines, the opposition and independence movements expanded; the Socialist Party, formed in 1929, pursued a nationalist platform and established its own labor organization, while the Communist Party went underground when it was banned in 1931 (Hewison and Rodan 2012, 29–31)

Meanwhile, the reaction of Dutch, American, and British colonial authorities and their metropolitan colonial offices to the Nghê Tĩnh rebellion in 1930–31 in French Indochina illustrates how colonial states cooperated to learn lessons on how to defeat threats to European rule, especially those emanating from communists (see Foster 1995). Despite the left-wing agitation that followed the establishment of the Communist International (Comintern), as colonial administrators well knew, a rising tide of nationalism and anti-colonialism was also washing through the region. Indeed, even Lenin acknowledged this, calling for alliances with nationalist movements (Hewison and Rodan 2012, 30).

Following World War II, as anti-colonial agitation renewed and gathered pace, the broad Left might have felt that the tide of history was running in their favor: The Philippines and Indonesia had gained their independence, albeit by very different routes; in China, the communists gained power; the French were on the brink of defeat in Indochina; and communists had launched armed struggles in Malaya and Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Burma (see van der Kroef 1981, 25–32). These movements had gained considerable support among workers. For example, in 1947, Malayan Communist Party-dominated unions controlled three-quarters of the organized work force in Singapore (Stenson 1970, 11–80). Meanwhile in Thailand, labor organization increased and a new generation of leaders, influenced by Marxism and close to the Communist Party of Thailand, emerged (see Hewison and Rodan 2012, 32). In several places, radical unions played a critical role in mobilizing broader anti-colonial, nationalist, and socialist movements of students, workers, and political parties. Leftist discourse, especially in labor circles, employed concepts of class, class struggle and exploitation, challenging capitalism, colonialism, and bourgeois nationalism. But Left triumphalism, radical political and labor organizing were soon confronted by the anti-communism propaganda of the Cold War.

In summary, far-reaching class transformations occurred by the end of the colonial period. Capitalism was developing rapidly, spearheaded by European colonial capital and, in several places, by Chinese capitalists, who were deeply integrated in complex ways into colonial states. Agriculture was changing, with many of its products commodified and oriented to global markets. Industrialization was underway, most notably in processing agricultural and other natural products. Moreover, considerable trade was reoriented to meet the demands from colonies and from Europe and North America.

Socially stratified and segmented structures among workers typically consigned local populations to different forms of commodified agricultural labor, while allocating the more limited manufacturing and other urban-industrial jobs to immigrant workers. This racialized stratification of the labor force could render struggles by workers against their exploitation complicated to interpret. For example, a 1910 general strike by Chinese and Thai workers in Bangkok seems to have been stimulated by a change in the head or poll tax imposed by the state on Chinese workers, and thus, might appear as a racially based protest against the state. Yet, this industrial action also enlisted workers from across a range of industries, including rickshaw pullers, dock workers, construction workers, fishermen, rice mill coolies, and others—in ways that speak to more general economic discontent with employers and working conditions (Hewison and Brown 1994, 487–88). At the same time, the strike also expressed an alignment of overseas Chinese communities with the revolutionary nationalist forces that were about to overturn the Qing Dynasty, as differing overseas Chinese communities rallied and protested to express solidarity. This action coincided with a global wave of industrial organizing and unrest.

States interpreted industrial action as "dangerous," blaming nationalists and, increasingly, communists. Clearly, though, these actions coincided and intermingled with anti-colonialism that, across the region, was rising in the 1930s. Japan's occupation of the region and its early and easy defeat of Western colonial armies, was to further entrench nationalism, which drove the birth of new states. Independence and the Cold War would generate further transformations in class structures, including changes that would generate new forms of politicization in the struggles of peasants, workers, and other social groups.

# 4

# Class in Southeast Asia

## Cold War and Globalization

For many in the West, the Cold War refers to a conflict between the USA and the USSR or the Soviet Union. Perhaps more broadly, it is viewed as a conflict between the post–World War II North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the "Soviet Bloc" that included, for a time after 1949, the PRC. It may also refer to an ideological struggle between capitalism and socialism. However, for many in Asia, the years of the Cold War were an interregnum in which anticolonial struggles came to fruition, and wars and insurgencies raged. Many of the communist parties involved in these struggles viewed themselves and their politics through the lens of anticolonial nationalism and of an epochal struggle between different ideologies and political systems. Moreover, numerous Asian communist parties had complex and sometimes vexed relationships with either the USSR or the PRC. Thus, the idea that Cold War struggles in Asia were simply a facet of relations between the West and its adversaries in the USSR or the PRC is problematic.

In this context, decolonization meant not only the establishment of "new" states but also the consolidation of "new" bureaucracies and protracted class struggles associated with decolonization along with the local and global impacts of the Cold War politics (see Glassman 2018). The USA and its Western allies, shocked by the "loss" of Eastern Europe after World War II, then by China's shift to communism in 1949, and by the outbreak of war on the Korean Peninsula, moved quickly to confront not only communism and socialism in Southeast Asia but also what they viewed as a "dangerous" radical nationalism.

The decolonization of Southeast Asia was a long and turbulent period. At the end of World War II, Thailand's situation was complicated because it had allied with Japan during the war. As the war ended, the country was led by politicians who had opposed the alliance with Japan and who had US support. This progressive administration vigorously supported decolonization in the region. However, Thailand soon experienced considerable political turmoil, culminating in a military coup in 1947. Its progressive leaders were overthrown and exiled, replaced by a conservative, military-backed regime.

The Philippines freed from Spanish colonialism in 1898, but was colonized anew by the US. While it regained its independence in 1946, its "special relationship" with the US continued to heavily influence the country's domestic and international politics. Indonesian nationalists declared independence in 1945, but had to confront a brutal Dutch effort to retain its colony. The nationalists eventually forced the Dutch to transfer sovereignty to an independent Indonesia in 1949.

Britain granted independence to Burma in 1948, and to Malaya in 1957. However, the two new nations soon experienced considerable political instability and internal wars. In an unusual turn of events, Singapore became part of Malaysia in 1963, only to be expelled and become an independent republic in 1965.

The French exit from colonialism in Indochina was bitterly contested. After World War II, the French sought to re-establish their colonies, but met opposition from nationalists and communists. Ho Chi Minh, the head of a provisional government in Vietnam, declared independence in 1945. France responded with troops, and a war that continued until 1954, and resulted in the partitioning of the country. A 20-year war then began between the communist North, led by Ho Chi Minh,  and the US-supported South. National unification was not officially proclaimed until 1976.

More peacefully, Laos gained independence as a constitutional monarchy in 1953, as did the Kingdom of Cambodia. However, both nations were dragged into Cold War politics and the conflagration in Vietnam, with communist regimes eventually taking power in both countries in 1975.

Once postcolonial regimes were in place, like their colonial predecessors, they had to deal with the rise of Leftist political discourse and enduring labor and peasant activism. There were varied responses. In Malaya and Vietnam, for example, there was armed struggle. In Burma and Indonesia, new regimes sought to integrate nationalism and left-wing politics, though ultimately with little success. In Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines, regimes sought to curtail certain forms of political representation and mobilization, targeting key socialist and communist organizations.

From the late 1940s until the late 1980s, the United States and its allies fostered arguments prioritizing the establishment of political order in their efforts to achieve Cold War victory. Such arguments were tied to the expansion of capitalist enterprise in the so-called "free nations" of the region (Tadem 2020). The emphasis on political order promoted and strengthened the region's authoritarian regimes that came to dominate politics. These right-wing regimes sought to maintain political order through repression. Throughout these decades, political arrests, disappearances, and murders crippled political oppositions, and deepened social divisions. This period also witnessed ferocious domestic wars, involving insurgencies and counterinsurgencies. Burma, North Vietnam, Cambodia, and Sukarno's Indonesia were exceptions to this pattern of right-wing authoritarianism but were repressive regimes nonetheless. The US and its allies treated these regimes with suspicion and actively undermined them (see Bevins 2020). In Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, US wars and bombing campaigns caused massive casualties, widespread fear, and social and economic disorder that lasted for decades (Hansson, Hewison and Glassman 2020, 496–97).

It was only after protracted wars that communist-led forces eventually triumphed in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. They each established forms of state socialism, including a Maoist-inspired genocidal regime in Cambodia. Indeed, none of these state-directed economies managed to attain the levels of growth and poverty reduction that its leaders had expected or demanded. Meanwhile, Burma came under the control of military leaders who favored autarkic development, which likewise failed to deliver economic benefits for the population.

The period of bitter political struggle during the Cold War had significant impacts on class transformation in Southeast Asia. One way to understand this is to note some of the Cold War effects of the region's major "hot war," the Vietnam War. The Vietnamese fight began as an anticolonial struggle against the French, which also included peasant demands for land reform. The depredations of French colonialism, which recruited so many Vietnamese to the anticolonial cause, and the inability of Vietnamese nationalists to secure support from Western powers like the USA in their efforts to oust the French, have been well-documented (Kolko 1985). When the French were defeated in 1954, the Americans stepped in to support a South Vietnamese regime.

During World War II, the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) formed the nationalist Viet Minh. Although it favored socialist development, it would limit major socialist agenda items like land reform and state ownership of industry until the war was over and independence was achieved. When the country was temporarily partitioned in 1954 at the Geneva Conference, the VCP leadership in the North began land reforms and attempted to develop elements of state-led socialism. However, these efforts were brief and abortive, as the US War consumed not only most of the VCP's energy, but also the lives and resources of many Vietnamese. Over three million people were killed before the war ended in 1975.

Following reunification in 1976, attempts at socialist reconstruction went largely unrealized, with the VCP announcing its *Đổi Mới* (renovation) policy in 1986. This policy moved away from most aspects of socialist central planning, adopting what the VCP called a "market-oriented socialist economy under state guidance," while maintaining party-state dominance (Kolko 1997, Ch. 1; Beresford 2008, 221). The new approach liberalized foreign investment and other economic regulations to open up greater prospects for capitalist development within the party-state system.

Vietnam's experience provides a starting point for thinking about class transformations that broadly affected Southeast Asia during the Cold War. An important provision of the *Đổi Mới* policy was the integration of different state projects and forms of state power directly into the process of economic development. This integration was evident on both sides of the Cold War divide, and had considerable consequences for class formation in both developing capitalist societies and those that claimed to take a socialist path.

In Vietnam, and to some extent in Cambodia, Laos, and Burma, one consequence of the Cold War and the war in the Indochina region was the state becoming a central site for planning and executing industrial projects and other forms of development. Again, Vietnam illustrates this process. Decades of war in the country destroyed much of the country's industry and agriculture. The recognition of this destruction and the VCP's ideological bent prompted it to allocate to the state a large role in economic development immediately after reunification (Kolko 1988, 480–82).

In promoting reunification and reconstruction, the VCP's approach to national development focused on state industries that were mostly modeled on the Soviet bloc experience. In these arrangements, state managers controlled the labor force to extract a surplus, while constraining the role for private capital. While the economy was "socialist" in the sense of being state-run, based on the experience of many Vietnamese workers and of developments in the USSR and the PRC, this was not state socialism as workers had no control over the economy.

During the war in the North and after its reunification with the South, the party-state leadership and professional cadres gained their power by controlling key institutions of the state, including the military. Given the effects of war and limited economic growth, the monetary wealth of the VCP elites during the Cold War period was modest compared to the growing wealth of state-supported capitalist classes and state elites in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. Still, the control of the VCP elites over important aspects of the economy through the reach of the party-state constituted a significant form of class power. The implications for workers and farmers, who were far less institutionally empowered, included not only difficult working conditions but also high levels of exploitation, even as the economy has recovered and grown rapidly in recent decades.

*Đổi Mới* changed these Cold War patterns, with the party leadership moving to a more market-oriented economic policy before embracing capitalist development. The changes in Vietnam post-*Đổi Mới* are discussed in the next section.

The Vietnam experience is also relevant for Cambodia, Laos, and Burma, although domestic situations and conflicts within and between states produced variations. Laos demonstrated some parallels with Vietnam, bolstered by connections between the parties in each state. The Pathet Lao (Lao Nation) came to power in 1975 through a struggle only slightly less lengthy and damaging than that of the VCP. They were also backed by both the VCP and the USSR. However, the Pathet Lao's infrastructural power has been far more constrained than that of Vietnam. This is due in part to the limited French colonial project in Laos, where there was minimal investment in infrastructure and human development. Most people in multi-ethnic Laos remained agriculturalists. During the period of reconstruction post-1975, the Pathet Lao had limited ability to reach the countryside, transform social relations, or spur industrial growth (Evans 1990). During the civil war period and immediately after the Pathet Lao takeover, the peasantry either relied on long-held livelihood strategies or migrated to escape war, US bombing, or state abuse, and find better economic opportunities.[21]

Cambodia had an internally devastating revolution. The originally neutralist country was drawn into the Vietnam War. A pro–US military regime seized power and crushed its opponents. Bombing and military incursions by the US and South Vietnam destroyed much of the country. One result of this was the radicalization of the Khmer Rouge (Cambodian Communist Party), which infamously and murderously turned on not just the country's population but also other Khmer Rouge factions (Vickery 1984, Ch. 3). Led by Pol Pot and Ieng Sary, the Khmer Rouge drew on radical Maoist models as it forced rapid agricultural collectivization. When the regime went to war with Vietnam in 1978, Vietnam invaded and installed a regime led by Heng Samrin, another Khmer Rouge leader, and his faction, which included post-Cold War dictator Hun Sen. Cambodia had little respite from violent struggle throughout the Cold War period, limiting its capacity for development. Nonetheless, Heng Samrin's faction eventually consolidated another party-state, albeit one that came to be dominated by Hun Sen, his family, and close political and business allies (see Chambers 2017).

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21 The war in Laos is often referred to as a civil war. The Pathet Lao received support from Vietnam, the USSR, and China, while the USA supported the regime based in Vientiane, and bombed large swathes of the country in a so-called Secret War (see Stuart-Fox 1997, Ch. 5).

If Cambodia had the most violent variant of a self-declared “socialism” during the Cold War period, Burma’s was the most idiosyncratic. Following the 1962 coup by Ne Win’s military, the state was allocated a leading role in economic development. However, this “Burmese Way to Socialism” was pursued by an incompetent military dictatorship rather than a party-state (Bünte 2017). Another characteristic of this regime was the continuation of regionalized and ethnically articulated counterinsurgencies (Smith 1999). The outcomes of military government and ethnic division include: the concentration of state-controlled activity around a few lucrative natural resource-based projects; booming incomes from illicit drug trafficking controlled by local strongmen and elements of the military; and high levels of out-migration by workers seeking more remunerative employment than what has been available in Burma. That out-migration meant that Thailand’s economic growth since the 1980s has been bolstered by relatively cheap migrant labor from Burma, Laos, and Cambodia (Arnold and Hewison 2005).

In the capitalist states in the region, the Cold War political agenda meant Western backing for anticommunist, pro-business governments. This resulted in the West throwing its support and resources behind right-wing generals while also working against legitimate, nationalist governments, such as in newly independent Indonesia. This Western support allowed repressive regimes to severely restrict political space for a range of activists considered oppositional, from communists and socialists to nationalists and democrats.

Meanwhile, the developing capitalist states of the region saw considerable intensification of both industrial development and state-guided economic activity. The result was a fusion of capitalist economies with authoritarian politics. In Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew’s People’s Action Party (PAP) quickly saw off its domestic socialist rivals and established an authoritarian parliamentary regime where no other party has ever gained power or been permitted to campaign freely. Once the communist insurgency was defeated in Malaysia, a similar pattern of electoral domination emerged, marked by its version of ethnicized politics. Brunei’s monarchy remains absolute. It eliminated all political rivals and became fabulously wealthy through oil revenues. In the Philippines, President Ferdinand Marcos converted electoral victories into a dictatorship. Seizing power with military backing and over the bodies of hundreds of thousands of opponents, President Suharto established firm control of Indonesia. Thailand, which had had military regimes in power for most of the post-1945 period, had a brief interregnum of civilian government from 1973 to 1976. However, this brief experiment with parliamentary democracy was smashed in a vicious military coup in 1976, leading to another 12 years of military and military-backed administration. Most of these pro–Western regimes vigorously promoted capitalist development while also enriching their authoritarian leaders and rising capitalist classes.

As decolonialization approached and was achieved across the region, class relations shifted as new states and local capitalists, riding the wave of nationalism, sought to replace some elements of colonial capital. "Modernization" policies began to place emphasis on industrialization as a way to move beyond "traditional" agricultural production, benefiting elements within domestic capitalist classes. The postcolonial development of capitalist classes was often bolstered by their relationship with state officials overseeing modernization. From the 1950s to the 1970s, state policies moved from promoting import substitution industrialization (ISI) to policies for export-oriented industrialization (EOI) (see Rodan, Hewison and Robison 1997).[22] A partial exception to this development of domestic capitalist classes was Singapore. The ruling PAP and Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew mistrusted the Chinese-speaking bourgeoisie, suspecting it having sympathy for Communist China. The PAP also considered that this class lacked the capacity to drive industrialization. Shut out of Malaysia, without an agricultural hinterland, and having suppressed the local capitalist class, the PAP relied on state and foreign capital for industrialization (see Rodan 2001).

## Postcolonial Development and Class Formation

In the 1950s, there was broad international acceptance that economic development required some state planning and investment to stimulate industry and improve the lot of the people. Such policies, built from post–War Keynesianism, were largely compatible with postcolonial nationalism, with postcolonial states promoting domestic investment, sometimes defining "domestic" by ethnic preferences. When domestic investors lagged, the state often stepped in with a range of efforts. These included nationalization campaigns in Sukarno's Indonesia; preferential treatment for Malays in Malaysia; a tepid state intrusion in the Philippines; and a somewhat haphazard approach to promoting industrialization in Thailand.

The state's expanded economic role led military and other state officials to become involved in business enterprises, often establishing cronyist relationships with members of the capitalist class. This was most noticeable in Thailand and Indonesia (Sungsidh 1983; Brown 2006). Over time, these relationships were personalized by political leaders to encapsulate the leaders, their families, and a small group of privileged capitalists, exemplified by Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines and Suharto in Indonesia (Hutchcroft

22 ISI involves trade and economic policies like tariff barriers to limit imports of certain manufactured goods. It seeks to replace these imports with locally manufactured goods to develop domestic industry. EOI does away with such domestic protection in favor of exporting goods where the country has a comparative advantage.

1998, Chs. 3–6; Robison 1986). In several cases, a rising local capitalist class, usually ethnic Chinese, worked with state officials.

There were significant gains for capitalists who linked with powerful political leaders. In the ISI era, when policies were aimed to limit imports, domestic businesses, especially in industry and banking, received considerable benefits. These included tax breaks, tariff protection, and subsidies. At the same time, Cold War allies promoted foreign investment in selected sectors, often as joint ventures in manufacturing, offering local businesses access to additional capital, and to skills and technologies that foreign firms could provide. As industrialization expanded, the state's investment role was reduced in several countries. Attention was redirected to establishing the institutions that promoted private investment. In addition, local banks aggregated and channeled much of this investment capital, making large profits in the process. In Thailand, local banking families became the most powerful and wealthiest fraction of the capitalist class (Hewison 1989, Ch. 8). The situation was different in Malaysia, with the governing United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) promoting ethnic Malay or *bumiputra* economic advancement. UMNO's New Economic Policy aimed to develop a Malay domestic bourgeoisie. This ethnicized program used state resources to promote Malays by reducing the foreign and ethnic Chinese domination of the economy that had existed under British colonialism and which continued after independence. The policy generated considerable antagonism from, for example, Chinese small businesses. However, it did develop a Malay class of capital owners, including large state-linked firms (Gomez and Jomo 1999, Ch. 3).

ISI declined unevenly across the region in response to changes in global business strategy and economic ideology, and to the saturation of relatively small domestic markets. As international capital became more mobile, it required the reduction of domestic barriers to investment. For the West's transnational corporations offshore manufacturing became more attractive from the mid-1970s. These corporations sought to reduce production costs with cheaper labor in Asia. They also supported the West's Cold War notion that promoting robust capitalism in Southeast Asia would be a bulwark against communism. Becoming more footloose in investment and production also meant that Western capitalists could roll back their own domestic Keynesianism. Globalizing production became a means to break unions at home. In Southeast Asia, foreign investment offered domestic capitalists opportunities to enhance their accumulation. Policy change led to a shift toward EOI. In Southeast Asian economies, EOI was touted as a path to greater profits by acknowledging a nation's comparative advantage. This initially meant producing commodities for the world market through the expanded use of labor that was cheaper than that of its global competitors. The policy shift to EOI was further promoted by a decline in international prices for agricultural commodities. Most importantly, firms from Japan, and later Taiwan and South Korea, needed cheaper production sites as their currencies increased in value. For Japan, a major stimulus for the relocation of production was the 1985 Plaza Accord (see Robison, Hewison, and Higgott 1987, Ch. 1).

The timing of the shift to EOI was not uniform across the region. Singapore adopted an EOI-like strategy in the 1960s. Malaysia was also quick to reorient toward the export of manufactured goods from specially established industrial enclaves in the 1970s, with both attracting considerable foreign investment, especially in electronics. Thailand became a manufacturing hub for Japanese industrial capital and transitioned to EOI in the 1980s. Indonesia transitioned more slowly as it was able to resist the change as its economy was buoyed for a decade by large oil revenues. Moreover, crony capitalists associated with the Suharto regime tended to favor the protectionist status quo. The Philippines, influenced by its agricultural roots, the pervasive cronyism among its capitalist class, and the role of American capital in manufacturing, remained tied to agricultural exports and protectionist industrial policies for a longer period (see Jayasuriya 1987).

EOI policies were eventually embedded across the capitalist economies of the region and the resulting increase in domestic and international investment contributed to some remarkable economic growth rates. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Thailand achieved the world's highest rate of growth. There, and in Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines, industry's contribution to gross domestic product (GDP) rapidly overtook agriculture. In several of these economies, as EOI policy intended, the export of manufactured goods surged. With employment in factories expanding, now mostly local workers, including thousands of women, moved out of agriculture and into the working class. In Indonesia, the contribution of industry to employment was more limited, with the agricultural and services sectors being the main employers.

EOI policy fueled growth by promoting private sector investment, both domestic and foreign. From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, capital formation and new business registrations grew substantially across the region, bolstering domestic capitalist classes. These expanding classes wanted wider access to investment funds. This meant they pressed governments to encourage increased foreign capital flows, particularly through developing local stock markets. Foreign direct investment, most notably from East Asia, grew as the pace of manufacturing relocation from that region to lower-wage production sites accelerated. East Asian joint ventures with domestic capital spurred accumulation. As competition for foreign capital increased between regional locations, domestic firms and joint ventures received state incentives and tax breaks. Businesses also benefited from regressive tax regimes, labor-repressive policies, and authoritarian political structures. Even latecomers like Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam had joined in this capitalist expansion by the late twentieth century, encouraging manufacturing and private capital.

With a growth boom in the region's economies from the mid-1980s, domestic and foreign investment grew prodigiously. As mentioned, a major stimulus for foreign investment was the Plaza Accord, which pushed Japanese companies to offset a higher Yen by seeking offshore production sites. As a result, Japanese capital flooded into the region and displaced the USA as the largest source of foreign investment in several countries, including Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia. There was also a surge in investment flowing from South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Despite this influx of foreign capital, domestic investment retained an important position. As Pasuk and Baker (1998, 39) observe for Thailand, "Foreign inflows may have sparked the [post-1986] boom. Thai investments made it a big boom."

The economic boom was also associated with considerable social change across the region. Propelled by ballooning exports, domestic markets developed, and economic "good times" ensued. This was especially noticeable in urban centers like Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, and Bangkok where construction mushroomed and consumption grew substantially. Investment opportunities expanded in industry, property, and services, including communications, real estate, and retail trade. Alongside this, the working and middle classes swelled, filling factories and the service sector. As a result, the proportion of families relying on peasant production declined. Poverty began to dip, but inequality swelled.

The region's capitalist classes faced both opportunities and challenges. While these classes expanded and diversified during the boom years, there was also a consolidation of powerful, often family-based conglomerates that grew their investments across local economies and, in some cases, expanded their investments regionally and internationally. In several countries, the previously dominant banking and industrial capitalists confronted emerging businesses from sectors such as telecommunications, real estate, tourism, and finance. In Indonesia, with the flow of oil revenues reduced, the Suharto regime reluctantly enacted liberalizing economic reforms. These reforms disproportionally benefitted members of Suharto's own family, who were increasingly engaged in business and politically connected conglomerates. These big firms also diversified their holdings into new business arenas, including former state monopolies such as in banking and financing, and seized opportunities in infrastructure and public utilities. As the predominant sources of domestic capital, they also partnered with foreign capital in joint ventures, within sectors like consumer finance, manufacturing, and services (Robison and Hadiz 2004, Ch. 3).

In Thailand, the long-standing preeminence of the big banks and their controlling families was challenged by rising business groups in new sectors such as telecoms, retail, real estate, integrated agricultural services, and auto parts manufacturing. Although the Sino-Thai-owned banks profited during the boom, several factors led to a challenge to their dominance. Under considerable pressure from rising capitalist groups and from foreign investors, the state further liberalized laws to allow local firms to access foreign capital, both domestically and internationally. The huge increase in foreign investment meant the demand for local partners went well beyond the bank-dominated conglomerates. In addition, the liberalization saw the local stock exchange rapidly expanding its listings as more domestic companies saw this as a route to mobilizing large amounts of capital for investment (Pasuk and Baker 1998, Ch. 3, Hewison 1997, 109).

In Malaysia, the New Economic Policy saw the UMNO-controlled state substantially increase public sector investment, providing cheap credit, licenses, contracts, and additional preferential treatment for ethnic Malays. However, when the country's economic growth rate lagged in the mid-1980s, privatization became a more significant state policy. As the government grew reluctant to abandon its electorally important promotion of Malays, its ethnic targeting meant that Malay businesses benefitted most. The political patronage involved in privatization meant that some Malay businesses and the ruling party became increasingly intertwined. One result of this "was the rapid emergence of a group of Malay-controlled conglomerates that were awash with capital. These arrangements have been termed "political business" and created a "new rich" among ethnic Malay capitalists (Gomez and Jomo 1999, Chs. 4–5).

While the impact of the boom was not as dramatic in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, the ruling parties enacted reforms that promoted the growth of capitalist enterprise. In these countries, it was the capitalist groups with the closest and most personalized relationships with the state and its leaders that benefited most from the rapid economic restructuring that followed the end of the Cold War.

Thailand has often been perceived as one of the more economically liberal Southeast Asian economies, but this perspective is inaccurate. From the 1950s to the early 1970s, the country's military leaders oversaw a regime that in class terms, linked big businesses, mainly owned by Sino-Thai families, to the military and the monarchy. To promote accumulation, laws prevented effective organization by workers, and collective bargaining was met with repression from both the state and employers. In addition, the state further facilitated accumulation by the biggest capitalists, such as agro-exporters, industrialists, and bankers. It provided agro-exporters with policies that promoted commodity diversification and exports. It supported urban-based industrialists by imposing a tax on rice, which was implemented between 1955 and 1985. This policy reduced returns to farmers, benefitting exporters while keeping the rice price low for urban consumers, which in turn allowed urban employers to generate high profits by keeping wages low (Glassman 2004, 62). The state supported bankers by limiting licenses for new banks and by preventing foreigners from engaging in branch banking until the mid-1990s. This allowed the oligarchic and oligopolistic banking fraction of capital to dominate the economy (Hewison 1989, 188).

From the pre-War period through to the 1950s, many urban-industrial workers were recent immigrants from China, but this rapidly changed as migration from Communist China was restricted. As a result, across the region, industrialization demanded an increased flow of local workers from the countryside into the cities and the working class. Employers often assumed that the lack of industrial experience of countryside migrants would deter them from organizing unions. However, many workers quickly learned to struggle for higher wages and better working conditions, despite the many restrictions on collective action. Factories began to employ increasing numbers of young women for jobs they considered needed "manual dexterity," especially in the expanding export industries producing garments and electronics (Bell 1997, 65–66). Employers considered that these rural women would be subordinate and passive workers (see Mills 1999). However, this expectation was frequently confounded (Glassman 2004, 101–04). From the 1980s, as more workers gained industrial experience, employers began to rely on migrant workers from neighboring countries to maintain labor subordination, reduce costs, and protect profits. Their vulnerability to police harassment and deportation and their separation from Thai workers and unions made it difficult for migrant workers to resist employer depredations (Arnold and Hewison, 2005).

Across the region employers, backed by the state, held the upper hand and reaped high levels of profit throughout the Cold War period, generating considerable economic inequality. In Thailand, official figures show that the country's Gini index rose from 0.425 in the mid-1970s to 0.478 in the late 1980s. This trend continued into the following decade (Suganya 1990, 15; Hewison 2021, 265). While Thailand's GDP per capita increased from $103 to $1,545 between 1960 and 1990 (World Bank 2024b), over the same period, real wages grew only 1.5 times, driving increased economic disparity (Glassman 2004, 105–09). Across Southeast Asia, as workers' wages were kept low, big conglomerates accumulated wealth, land, and policy influence.

Cold War ideology had bolstered capitalist development, with regimes portraying opponents as dangerous socialists and communists. At the center of Cold War ideology in Thailand was the country's monarchy which played a distinctive role in maintaining capitalist ideological domination, claiming to be a bulwark against communism. Recuperating from the nadir of its power and influence in the 1930s-1940s following the abolition of the absolute monarchy, the crown ultimately became not just an ideological mainstay of authoritarian rule, but also a towering player in the economy through its control via the Crown Property Bureau, of banks, industries, land, and a vast network of royalty-sponsored and government-funded projects (Hewison 2020, 124–25). In Brunei and Malaysia, monarchies have also been ideologically significant and centers of wealth and with politically significant roles. In other capitalist countries of Southeast Asia, like Indonesia, it was often the military that provided the ideological leadership in efforts to stave off communism, embedding the military in civil affairs (see Jenkins 1983).

State-anchored industries were also crucial to economic growth and class formation. Indonesia went through considerable political turmoil in the 1950s and 1960s, with Suharto's military massacring hundreds of thousands of civilians who were allegedly supportive of the Communist Party (see Roosa 2020). Under a military regime, the country's natural resources exports grew and delivered considerable funds to the state from the 1970s to the 1980s, when global oil prices spiked. The state-owned oil company Pertamina became a major site of accumulation for Suharto and his cronies (see Winters 1996, Chs 2–3). By the 1980s, the exports of manufactured goods from Indonesia began to augment natural resource revenues. Footwear production was outsourced from companies like Nike. This production was overwhelmingly carried out by poorly paid women workers (Merk 2016; Wicaksono, Hikmah, and Mulyanti 2023). As in Thailand, the economic growth seen in Indonesia was certainly dynamic, but the rewards flowed mainly to politically connected conglomerates.

Malaysia and Singapore made important strides toward higher value-added industrial exports. Though their post-independence economy was dependent on natural resource exports, from the mid-1960s, Malaysia began shifting to EOI, especially in electronics manufacturing, with real wages increasing. These export industries were initially based on investment from Japanese firms seeking cheaper manufacturing sites. As with assembly lines elsewhere in the region, this production involved high rates of exploitation of women workers (see Ong 1987). Malaysia's distinct racial history during the colonial era and early independence years created divisions among Chinese, South Asian, and Malay workers, undermining the capacity for labor organizing (Hing 1984; Rasiah 1995).

During the Cold War, Singapore emerged as the most industrially successful economy in the region. In Singapore, the PAP state also moved into EOI, including petroleum and petroleum products, electronics, transport equipment, and machinery (Rodan 1989, 114). By the 1980s, it focused on information and communications technology, among a variety of service industries (Rodan 1989, Ch 5). Real wages rose in the 1980s and early 1990s after falling in the 1970s (Carling 1995, 30). High rates of growth and capital accumulation saw wealth accumulating in the pockets of elites in and around the ruling PAP, through various government-linked companies (Barr 2014). The state further disciplined capital at several pivotal moments—for example, by driving up the minimum wage to discourage reliance on sweatshop manufacturing and to attract high-tech industries (see Rodan 2006). Although Singapore remains politically authoritarian, it entered the ranks of rich countries with considerably higher incomes and standards of living than most other countries in the region.

The Philippines' growth experience was far less dynamic. Beginning in the 1960s with one of the most developed industrial bases in the region – a legacy of 1950s ISI policies and US trade preferences for the former colony. The economy then suffered several setbacks, including a decline in its terms of trade, when its quota for sugar exports to the USA was cut in the 1970s. Its industrial economy also slowed under Ferdinand Marcos' dictatorship (Bello et al. 2004; Glassman 2018, 447–85). From 1960 to 1981, real wages for laborers, clerical workers, and professionals all declined (Reyes, Milan and Sanchez 1989, 49). But, as Hutchcroft (1998) details, this economic malaise did not prevent Philippine bankers from reaping high returns. In addition, some exporters became wealthy dealing in agricultural products sourced from plantations where wages and working conditions were abysmal (Oabel 2015, 203–07). Under the Marcos dictatorship, the First Family's cronies became wealthy. By the end of the Cold War period, the Philippine class structure was both highly polarized and poorly positioned for the competition that would develop in the post-Cold War period (see Hutchison 2006).

An overarching result of the Cold War for Southeast Asian economies was the expansion of manufacturing and the growth of manufactured exports, despite the division between "pro-capitalist" and "socialist" states. Many of these developments relied on investment from more industrialized countries, such as those in Northeast Asia, as production was relocated to sites with lower business costs, including cheap(er) labor. Simultaneously, agriculture and natural resource industries continued to provide employment and economic revenue. Each country also experienced deepened class-based polarization in different forms. States and their activities were central to all these processes. Under repressive regimes, capitalists profited greatly, while workers and peasant farmers continued to struggle with poverty. Despite increased growth rates in the late Cold War period, living conditions remained dismal in several of the war-torn countries of the region. The Chinese capitalists of the region, who had become such important players in previous centuries, continued to have central roles in almost all economies, becoming even wealthier, more powerful, and closely tied to state actors during the Cold War. Ethnic Chinese working classes, however, were in decline as migration from China virtually ceased. These processes would continue in the post-Cold War period, as the wealth of the leading local Chinese capitalists continued to grow and local workers and migrant workers from neighboring countries filled the working classes.

The end of the Cold War and deepening capitalist industrialization also heralded changes for state-capital arrangements and for capitalist accumulation. One critical adjustment resulted from perceptions that the external threat from communism had diminished, resulting in changes in the USA's security commitments to the region. These changes undermined the Cold War rationale for stridently anti-communist and authoritarian governments, and as the anti-communist hegemonic projects of the Cold War seemed less relevant, societies became more diverse (Stubbs 2009, 10). Populations had also grown substantially over the Cold War period, doubling in most countries of the region between 1960 and 1990.[23] Population growth contributed to urbanization but also to rural poverty and land pressures, adding to the pressures on natural resources like forests and water. As these changes seeped through the region's politics, its economies confronted the challenge of the 1997–1998 economic crisis, which heralded even greater social and economic transformations.

## The Asian Economic Crisis

The Asian economic crisis of 1997–1998 is a convenient marker of the shift from the Cold War period to the era of neoliberal globalization in Southeast Asia. This shift should not be conceived as a single event; rather, it was a drawn-out and uneven process. It first included the recognition that the PRC would become a major economic competitor for Southeast Asian exporters, as it ascended to the World Trade Organization in 2000. This recognition led senior Southeast Asian officials and some leading capitalist groups to initiate acloser economic ties to China as it deepened its market-oriented transition in the 1980s and 1990s. A similar shift to market-oriented policies began in socialist Southeast Asia. This saw calls for those states, in the words of Thai Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan, to be transformed from a "battlefield into a marketplace" (quoted in Glassman 2010, 38). The cracking of Cold War ideological hegemony also sparked anti-authoritarian political movements in Southeast Asia's capitalist countries, including popular uprisings in the Philippines in 1986, Thailand in 1992, and Indonesia in 1998.

In this context, the Asian economic crisis signaled that many Southeast Asians would also have to deal with problems such as the so-called middle-income trap, while also navigating economic, military, and diplomatic matters between major powers whose actions would inevitably shape their options. Most especially, the rise of China and the response of the USA, the hegemonic superpower, impacted political and economic development (see Jayasuriya 2023). This issue, too often understood as an abstract geopolitical issue, actually gets at the core of the geopolitical economy of regional and national class relations and

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23 A useful account of demographic change in the region is provided by Jones (2013).

how these were transformed with the end of the Cold War, giving rise to neoliberal globalization as a set of interrelated economic, social, and political policies wrapped into an ideological position.

The capitalists who emerged from the economic boom times of the 1980s and 1990s and who operated in new investment sectors may have shaken up some of the existing capitalist fractions. However, what were sometimes thought of as lumbering conglomerates also had access to vast resources, and were, in several instances, able to also move into the new areas of accumulation. Huge profits were made and, although much was reinvested, consumption and luxury spending increased markedly, further expanding domestic markets, but also setting the stage for the economic collapse of 1997–1998.

The devaluation of the Thai baht on 2 July 1997 marked the beginning of an economic downturn that spread across the region. There had been several explanations for the crisis, including poor economic policies, weak state and corporate governance, inadequate institutions, cronyism, corruption, moral hazard, resource misallocation, and failed liberalization. These critiques converged into a response that seemed to unite international financial institutions, Western investors and governments, and neo-Smithian economists, who all pointed to a flawed "Asian capitalism," also labeled "crony capitalism," as the root cause of the crisis (see Carson and Clark 2013). As a remedy, this coalition demanded that Southeast Asian states undertake deeper liberalization to reshape the relationship between the state and domestic capitalist classes.

As might be expected, capitalist classes across the region were unsettled by the crisis, leading to the collapse of several business empires. For example, in a number of countries, the banking and finance sectors were left in tatters, with many banks closed, nationalized, or sold off to foreign investors (see Hewison 2004; Robison and Hadiz 2004, 191–99). Some boomtime business groups suddenly had huge dollar debts and lost access to finance, and several collapsed. In some ways, this was a process of capitalist consolidation, with stronger capitalists, including foreign investors, gobbling up assets made cheap by regionwide devaluations and collapsed share prices (see Schumpeter 1994, Ch. 7).

One outcome of the crisis was the deeper penetration of financial capital across the region in the guise of neoliberal globalization. Many of the region's economies had benefited from earlier phases of globalization. Transnational corporations developed production chains that outsourced to factories across Asia, reducing costs and boosting profitability (see Burkett and Hart-Landsberg 2000). Domestic capitalists were among the beneficiaries when foreign capital inundated the region. Following the crisis, however, they struggled to accommodate to international finance capital, which was the dominant fraction of capital internationally, and its quest for neoliberalization (Kalinowski 2019, Ch. 3).

Neoliberalization as an ideology and a policy practice emerged in the early 1970s and propelled the globalization of production. This involved new and enhanced applications of capital, technology, knowledge, and logistics that intensified international competition in product, capital, and labor markets. In Southeast Asia, neoliberalism led to a deepening of the internationalization of capital in trade, finance, production and investment, and extensive liberalization (of, for example, labor markets, tax on businesses), privatization, and financialization (Kalleberg, Hewison, and Shin 2022, 55; see also O'Connor 2010). All of these involved changes in the relationship between capitalists and the state. According to Harvey (2001) such changes to regulation and financialization are integral to a broader strategy that permitted capitalism to free itself from the spatial "locks" that constrained its mobility and profitability.

The ascendancy of neoliberal ideologies and policies was facilitated by the weakening of labor movements. Indeed, the call for greater flexibility by employers was in part a reaction to the victories of unions and labor organizations in many countries. In the West, workers negotiated for greater institutional protections. In Southeast Asia, organized labor had already been weakened by Cold War repression; neoliberal policies further shifted the balance of power toward employers (Chang 2009).

## Class Formation Under Neoliberal Globalization

Following the Cold War, the Asian Crisis, and China's rise as a manufacturing colossus meant major class transformations for the capitalist economies of Southeast Asia. This shift included the socialist states, which quickly transitioned to capitalism. In considering these broad transformations, it is useful to first consider the case of agriculture's deepening commercialization before turning to an examination of the transformations for capitalist and working classes.

## Agriculture: Capital and Commercialization

Labor moved out of agriculture as industry and services grew in Southeast Asian economies. Table 2 shows the proportions of GDP and employment in agriculture, industry, and services from 1960 to 2019. While these data only show four major economies, the trends in the declining economic contribution of agriculture have been seen across the region, including in the former state socialist countries. However, these trends should not be taken to mean that agriculture is no longer important. In fact, the area of land under cultivation has expanded and intensified since the 1960s (De Koninck and Rousseau 2013). In Laos, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Thailand, the agricultural sector continues to support millions of families.

**Table 2. Sectoral contributions to GDP and employment in selected countries, 1960–2019 (in percentages)**

| COUNTRY | 1960 | | 1970 | | 1980 | | 1990 | | 2000 | | 2010 | | 2019 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | GDP | EMP | GDP | EMP | GDP | EMP | GDP | EMP | GDP | EMP | GDP | EMP | GDP | EMP |
| **Philippines** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Agriculture | 23.7 | 61.2 | 26.4 | 53.7 | 22.0 | 51.4 | 19.2 | 45.2 | 13.9 | 37.1 | 13.7 | 32.9 | 8.8 | 22.9 |
| Industry | 34.6 | 12.6 | 35.4 | 12.6 | 42.7 | 11.6 | 38.2 | 10.7 | 35.0 | 15.9 | 32.3 | 15.7 | 30.3 | 19.1 |
| Services | 41.7 | 26.2 | 38.2 | 32.1 | 35.3 | 36.5 | 42.7 | 44.0 | 51.1 | 47.0 | 53.9 | 51.4 | 60.9 | 58.0 |
| **Malaysia** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Agriculture | 43.7 | 50.2 | 32.6 | 35.3 | 23.0 | 32.8 | 15.2 | 26.2 | 8.6 | 18.7 | 10.1 | 13.3 | 7.2 | 10.3 |
| Industry | 24.7 | 6.3 | 30.3 | 13.4 | 41.8 | 20.0 | 42.2 | 27.5 | 48.3 | 31.8 | 40.5 | 27.6 | 37.5 | 27.0 |
| Services | 31.6 | 43.5 | 37.1 | 51.3 | 35.2 | 47.2 | 42.6 | 46.3 | 43.1 | 49.5 | 49.4 | 59.1 | 54.2 | 62.7 |
| **Thailand** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Agriculture | 36.4 | 82.3 | 25.9 | 78.2 | 23.2 | 70.1 | 12.5 | 61.5 | 8.5 | 48.8 | 10.5 | 38.3 | 8.1 | 31.4 |
| Industry | 18.5 | 4.2 | 25.3 | 6.8 | 28.7 | 9.4 | 35.4 | 12.6 | 36.7 | 19.0 | 39.9 | 20.6 | 33.6 | 22.8 |
| Services | 45.1 | 13.5 | 48.8 | 15.9 | 48.1 | 20.5 | 38.2 | 32.1 | 54.8 | 32.2 | 49.6 | 41.1 | 58.3 | 45.7 |
| **Singapore** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Agriculture | 3.1 | 7.3 | 2.6 | 3.8 | 1.5 | 1.6 | 0.3 | 0.3 | 0.1 | 0.2 | 0.0 | 0.1 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Industry | 16.4 | 21.8 | 26.9 | 29.8 | 34.9 | 35.2 | 30.9 | 34.6 | 32.5 | 28.0 | 26.6 | 21.9 | 24.0 | 15.6 |
| Services | 74.5 | 70.8 | 65.0 | 66.4 | 59.9 | 63.2 | 64.2 | 65.1 | 60.7 | 71.8 | 67.8 | 78.0 | 70.9 | 84.4 |

■ Sources: GDPs and EMPs were calculated by the authors from World Bank Open Data, Asian Development Bank, International Labour Organisation, and various country statistical yearbooks for the years from 1960 to 2021. The sources report government statistics. As not all governments use congruent definitions, the table is presented for the assessment of broad statistical trends.

The use of land has shifted from food production to the expansion of commercial cropping of sugarcane, cassava, maize, coconuts, coffee, and rice, as well as aquaculture. Commercial and subcontracted cropping and chicken and pig raising has substantially expanded. Contracted farmers or tenants have been increasingly employed by domestic and multinational companies that control production and marketing. These include Malaysia's Sime Darby, Indonesia's Triputra group, and Thailand's Charoen Pokphand (de Koninck and Rousseau 2013, 149). Commercial farming has resulted in Vietnam becoming a major exporter of coffee, and Thailand and Vietnam ranking among the world's leading exporters of rice. In Indonesia and Malaysia, the massive growth of the oil palm industry since the 1980s has led to the huge clearing of forests with associated environmental degradation (Sheil et al. 2009, Ch. 4). Both countries are now among the world's largest producers of palm oil.

States promoted this transformation with policy changes on land tenure and the "Green Revolution." They also expanded markets globally while building infrastructure, particularly roads and irrigation. However, as de Koninck and Rousseau (2013, 151) explained, "territorial agricultural expansion is less and less determined and controlled by state policies and agencies but increasingly by large private concerns, predominantly multinationals." In essence, while non-market production for consumption and simple commodity production remain important, it is capitalist agriculture and its commodity production that have expanded.

Recent agricultural transformations in Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Myanmar have seen the state playing an essential role in facilitating primitive or primary accumulation. Economic reform expanded the capitalist mode of production by expropriating people from the natural resources they use, making those resources available for production while also pushing ever larger numbers of people into wage-labor. These rapid transitions to capitalist economic systems were accompanied by rampant land grabbing and the expansion of infrastructure such as hydroelectric dams, that further alienated people from their land (Baird 2011; Global Witness 2016).[24] Baird contextualized this in Laos and argued that the state's role included working with local and foreign investors to provide large land concessions for agribusiness (2011). Such activities invariably involved a loss of agricultural and common land; the state defines and legislates land as state or private, rather than village. Land is also lost when the state, private capital, and international financial institutions cooperate to build massive hydroelectric schemes, and export electricity to richer neighbors (see Blake and Barney 2018). Similar processes can be seen in fishing, where local small-scale fishing is replaced by industrial fishing. These transformations require regulation, sometimes through state force and repression, and largely benefit agro-industrial capitalist groups. At the same time, local and national officials who facilitate these transitions enrich themselves through their control of state power and resources. Some of these officials have been able to convert their wealth into capitalist investments.

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24 Of course, similar processes of alienation remain significant in the established capitalist economies of the region as peripheries, rivers, lakes, highlands, and seas are transformed for capitalist production (see Maxton-Lee 2018; Kusano 2019).

Agricultural transformation, urbanization, and the expansion of industry and services employment have led to changes in class structure. In the Philippines, Herbert Docena has referred to a “disintegrating peasantry,” that “has ceased to constitute the majority of working people in the country” (2023, 150–51). This came despite landholding being expanded and tenancy reduced. While acknowledging the “resilience of the peasantry,” Tadem (2018, 360) also recognizes that this agricultural class has been reduced by “changes in certain features and aspects of traditional rural communities such as new farm technologies, wider market linkages, growth of a wage-earning working class, increased interactions with the non-peasant world, the physical separation of families, and the establishment of more formal political structures.” In rural areas, class structures have been complicated by migration. Migration means that family farms, where they continue to operate, are often managed by an older generation whose farming viability relies on cash transfers from family members working elsewhere. The mechanization of farming has increased, but major activities like harvesting and large-scale commercial cultivation still require a significant amount of labor. This labor is often performed by migrant workers from poorer countries and women, and is among the most lowly work (de Koninck and Rousseau 2013, 144, 146). Factors such as migration, remittance, and commercial cropping reveal how agriculture is bound to circuits of capital and exploitation.

## States and Capital

As intimated, states are not just crucial for facilitating primitive accumulation and the extension of capitalist relations across societies, but have also been sites of significant wealth accumulation. In Myanmar, for example, the military has long been involved in business. When there was a transition to civilian rule beginning around 2008, which ended through another military coup in 2021, efforts to transform the country’s politics and economics failed to uproot military-connected conglomerates and the politico-business oligarchs who had already consolidated their economic dominance under the military (see Jones 2014; Ford, Gillan, and Htwe Thein 2016). The military had established and entrenched giant conglomerates, namely Myanmar Economic Holdings Public Company Limited (MEHL) and Myanmar Economic Corporation Limited (MEC), which are “owned” by military units around the country. In jade mining operations alone, Global Witness (2015, 10–12) concluded that senior ruling party figures and cronies (including known drug lords) accumulated almost US$850 million in 2013 and 2014. MEHL and MEC also benefited from the civilian regime’s reform efforts. For example, the privatization of previously state-owned assets in telecoms, logistics, transport and shipping, banking, construction, tourism, and supermarkets fell under the control of these military figures and their cronies. Of course, with the military back in control in 2021, military conglomerates remain at the center of the economy.

With a long and firm grip over the state apparatus, Cambodia's long-time Prime Minister Hun Sen and his family—his son Hun Manet replaced him as prime minister in 2023—have become a significant capitalist group. Thought to be worth $500 million to $1 billion, their investments have been in casinos, construction, land, logging, mining, furniture, transport, manufacturing, telecoms, media, energy, retail, tourism and other services, finance, and many more (Global Witness 2016, 3, 33–37). The rise of Hun Sen's family as a significant capitalist group in Cambodia has been built on their control of the state—encompassing the police, military, and bureaucratic offices—and their influence over the ideological apparatus, including media, charities, and associations. Their power is further reinforced by the family's domination of the Cambodian People's Party. Such political and economic power has facilitated the development of a broader capitalist class in alliance with Prime Minister Hun Sen, his family, and their party. Since the early 1990s, Hun Sen has rewarded supportive businesspeople—many of whom make substantial contributions to state projects—with honors, recognition, protection and support, and contracts in a kind of "elite pact" (Verver and Dahles 2015). The success of this strategy of twinning the state and capitalists meant that, as early as the 2000s, Cambodia's top ten tycoons all had close links with Hun Sen, his family, and their party (WikiLeaks 2007).

The accumulation associated with the control of or privileged access to the state has proven significant and persistent across the region. It has also been built on lucrative, powerful, and longstanding relationships. This is demonstrated by President Suharto's New Order regime and the links it formed with favored business groups after 1965 (see Robison and Hadiz 2004, Pts 1–3). In Malaysia, ethnicized policies that favored *bumiputra* capitalists also saw rent-seeking, usually portrayed as nurturing Malay capitalists. Under Prime Minister Najib Razak (2009–2018), however, a far more corrupt system developed. An estimated US$4.5 billion of state funds was channeled into personal, family, and crony pockets through the 1Malaysia Development Berhad alone (Brown 2018).

Capital, whether illicit or legal, has also spurred accumulation in the former "socialist" economies. In this, Vietnam has led the way. Following its abandonment of socialist development projects under *Đổi Mới*, party-state agendas for export-led growth quickly took hold. As capitalist relations expanded, so did allegations of massive corruption. In 2009, in the official National Strategy on Anti-Corruption to 2020, which resonated beyond Vietnam, the government stated that:

> Corruption is still taking place in a rampant, serious, and complicated fashion in multiple areas, especially in such areas as administration and use of land, construction investments, equitisation [... privatization] of SOEs [state-owned enterprises], management and use of funds, natural resources, mineral resources and

> State assets. [This leads to] adverse effects in many ways, eroding the confidence of the people in the Communist Party's leadership and the State's management, giving rise to potential conflicts of interest, social resistance, and protest, and widening the gap between the rich and the poor… (cited in Tromme 2016, 288)

An advantage for Vietnam as a developing capitalist economy was the investment for the expansion of the private sector that came from overseas Vietnamese (*Việt Kiều*). Some of those who had fled the country during the war and following reunification returned as *Đổi Mới* policies encouraged private sector development. Some, like Pham Nhat Vuong, who returned from Ukraine in 2009, quickly became wealthy. He established Vingroup that emerged to become one of the most powerful conglomerates with multiple lines of business (Reed 2019). These returnees and their capital were pivotal not just in developing the domestic private sector but also as investors in joint ventures, as Vietnam became a manufacturing base for global firms.

While Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar also moved quickly toward capitalist development, they did so in different ways and with different results than in Vietnam. Political leaders in Cambodia and Laos set out to emulate some of Thailand's growth policies of the 1980s and 1990s, based on low-wage production and assembly of manufactures for export. In Cambodia, textiles and garment production developed quickly, benefiting from special trade deals for US and European markets. Subcontracted factories—mostly with Chinese capital from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong—sprang up. The labor force for these factories was dominated by rural women who moved to urban centers (Ear 2013). Laos, with an economy still dominated by agriculture, also began to industrialize, with some investment flowing across the border from Thailand. However, while industrialization has grown more in Cambodia than in Laos, unlike Vietnam, neither country has emerged as a manufacturing base for global corporations. In Laos, capitalist investment has shifted to opportunities for profit in the hydropower sector, funded by the Asian Development Bank, World Bank, and private capital (Glassman 2010, 137–47).

In recent years, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia have increasingly sought various forms of investment from the PRC, including through the Belt and Road Initiative. These projects are fundamentally controlled from China, reflecting how relatively weak local capital in these countries has become as it has been integrated into the powerful Northeast Asian growth dynamic, including China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Meanwhile, even as Chinese projects in roads, railways, ports, and industrial complexes began to take hold, workers from Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos continued to flock to Thailand to do much of the low-paid and often dangerous work in sectors like industrial-scale fishing, farming, construction, domestic help, and factory production lines.

In the already capitalist economies of the region, recovery from the Asian crisis saw some major class reorganization. As economic growth returned, the increased concentration of capital saw intensifying exploitation and sustained inequality, while the wealth of the politically powerful oligarchic capitalist groups grew substantially. The relationship between states and the super-rich, while modified from the pre-crisis period, has remained important for surplus extraction in all economies and dominant in some, driving wealth concentration.

Neoliberal policies impacted the ways that states operated in the region. Particularly from the early 1990s, Western governments and finance capitalists pushed for more openness, where they identified "Asian capitalism" and its protection and political links as barriers to their trade and investment. After the Asian crisis, with capital flowing into the region again, industrialization patterns changed. As previously mentioned, the rise of China's production capacity made China the world's factory. This, along with advances in global logistics and supply chains, meant that Southeast Asian manufacturing became increasingly attuned to the needs of Chinese factories, pivoting to make components going into Chinese manufactured goods. Southeast Asian capitalists also sought opportunities in areas where there was continuing protection and state support. The result was more diversification by investors, particularly into services. The state further assisted accumulation by selling off state enterprises and pouring state money into massive infrastructure projects, mostly undertaken by the private sector (see Athukorala and Archanun 2013). With foreign investors, the conglomerates were the main beneficiaries of these changes.

The rapid growth of China has proven to be a boon for some of the dominant capitalist groups in the region. As many of these capitalists are of Chinese descent, they have been courted by China, and some have enthusiastically responded. For example, Thailand's mammoth Charoen Pokphand Group, originally an agribusiness group but now a diversified conglomerate, was the first firm to receive a business license for China's Shenzhen Special Economic Zone in the late 1970s. It is now a major economic force in both Thailand and China, and has developed a globe-girdling network of farms, factories, and other investments (Glassman 2010, 77–82).

Across the region, similar conglomerates have prospered. These include Malaysia's Robert Kuok Group, an investor in food, property, hotels, agrobusiness, and numerous other activities across Asia; Singapore's Robert Ng, a property developer; and Indonesia's Robert Budi and Michael Bambang Hartono, who control a major bank, clove cigarette manufacturing, and numerous other investments. Several of these conglomerates remain invested in export agricultural goods, where they operate with the advantage of being "local" while they gather large landholdings. The rise of such conglomerates not only builds great wealth but also enhances "market power," seeing off competitors and controlling prices (see Tuaño and Cruz 2019, 321–22).

Globalization has often been portrayed as the relatively free flow of capital to all corners of the planet. The neoliberal variant is supposedly based on a deep reduction of the role of the state in economic processes. However, Southeast Asia’s economic and class developments since the Cold War correspond poorly to either portrayal. Capital has certainly flowed more freely, but not in equalizing amounts to all areas. Countries that were already more prosperous, such as Singapore and Malaysia, have continued to gain economic advantage compared to those devastated by war, like Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. Specific regions within countries that also started with great economic advantages, such as the Bangkok Metropolitan Region and nearby provinces, have also grown more rapidly than less favored regions, like Thailand’s Northeast region. As a result, major wealth-holders and business groups have continued to accumulate capital rapidly while poorer groups continue to struggle with low wages and rural poverty. Everywhere, states also continue to play important roles, generally in collaboration with the most powerful capitalists, including, in some cases, foreign investors.

In Indonesia, despite the ousting of the Suharto regime during the political turmoil fostered by the Asian crisis, state links remained important as the capitalist class reorganized. Democratization and decentralization saw provincial and local officials become more significant in allocating privileges, licenses, contracts, and access to land and natural resources (Hadiz 2010, Chs. 3–5). Businesses had to deal more closely with these local officials, enriching some in these local administrations. At the national level, Carney and Hamilton-Hart (2015) observe that the political and economic turmoil associated with the crisis resulted in both continuity and change for the capitalist class. They note that the Suharto family and some crony capitalists dropped out of the ranks of corporate giants. Banks were also less prominent among the largest conglomerates. Family ownership declined somewhat, but remained significant, with some family-owned conglomerates privatizing their holdings. Even so, many of the largest conglomerates continued and prospered under the new circumstances. Business-government relations moved from the “captive patronage” of the Suharto era to a broader set of relationships that saw businesses and businesspeople getting involved in political parties, parliament, and local administration. At the same time, business promotion and development became a central concern and legitimating mechanism in politics, providing a structural mechanism that protects businesses and wealth (Carney and Hamilton-Hart 2015, 141).

An examination of Thailand allows for a more detailed and longer perspective on the post-crisis development of the capitalist class and its relationship with the state. Using *Forbes'* “Thailand’s Richest” lists the combined wealth for the top thirty families was US$ 19.1 billion in 2006 and increased to US$ 145.53 billion in 2018 or a seven-fold increase (Hewison 2021). This increase was far in excess of increases in GDP per capita, which expanded just under 2.2 times over the same period, while household disposable income did not even double over the period. There has been some change among those listed in Thailand's wealthiest families over the period, yet those at the apex of the list have remained reasonably stable. It is these families and a few others like them—the 1 percent—who dominate the commanding heights of the Thai economy in the twenty-first century. In 2016, Credit Suisse's Global Wealth Report showed that more than two-thirds of the country's assets were controlled by the richest 1 percent. The wealthiest have also taken control of much of the country's land, with a study from Thammasat University reporting that 80 percent of the land is owned by the richest 5 percent (Anuk and Manop, 2020).[25] Remarkably, 75 percent of the population owned no land at all in a country where, in the mid-1970s, tenants comprised only about 20 percent of farmers (Suehiro 1981, 318).

Thailand's pattern of wealth concentration, dominated by a powerful and cohesive capitalist class, has been a persistent feature of its capitalist development. Using data from the late 1970s and early 1980s, Hewison (1989) listed fifty-four families and business groups, including the royal family, that dominated the commanding heights of finance, commerce, industry, and agro-industry. The upper reaches of the capitalist class at that time can be compared with data for fifty-six groups/names in the *Forbes* data for 2006–2019. As would be expected in an economy undergoing considerable change for over several decades, the data show both stability and transformation. Fourteen families appeared on both lists, with several of these having diversified their investments over the period.

The most noticeable change has been the decline of bankers since the 1997–1998 economic crisis. In 1980, sixteen families were listed as members of the banking fraction of capital, which was then the dominant capitalist fraction. The five most significant banking groups constituted the pillars of the entire capitalist class at that time (Hewison 1989, 205). These were the Sophonpanich family of the Bangkok Bank, the Lamsams of the Thai Farmers Bank/Kasikorn Bank, the Ratanaraks of the Bank of Ayudhya/Krungsri, the Tejapaibul family of the Bangkok Metropolitan Bank, and the Crown Property Bureau/royal family, which controlled the Siam Commercial Bank. Leaving aside the royal family, only one of the 1980 banking families ranks near the top of the 2019 rankings.[26] This is the Ratanarak family, which retained some of its banking investments but substantially diversified its investment base following the Asian crisis. Although the Ratanarak, Sophonpanich, and

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25 This pattern of land concentration is occurring across the region. For detail on the Philippines, see Tuaño and Cruz (2019, 315).

26 Thailand's royal family is listed in a separate Forbes ranking of wealthy royal families. However, these rankings appear based on calculations from 2006. Hewison (2021, 264) assesses the wealth of the Thai royal family at up to $70 billion in 2019.

Lamsam families have rebuilt their wealth since the 1997–1998 downturn and remain in the Top 50, these families have not risen back into the top rank they held in the mid- and late twentieth century. The Tejapaibul family has not been listed in the *Forbes* rankings since the crisis (Hewison 2004, 244-50).

The slide down the rankings of Thailand's banking capitalists illustrates how state ties and interventions changed accumulation patterns. The business winners in the 1960s and 1970s were banking capitalists and their industrial partners. These families established highly profitable operations in an environment where regulations restricted foreign banking. Moreover, when the stock market was still inconsequential and raising capital overseas was highly restricted, banking capitalists accumulated strategic shareholdings in a range of other businesses, including the developing manufacturing sector, by making investments in sectors they were financing (Hewison 2004, 238–40). Much of the protection that permitted the growth of bank-aligned conglomerates was established under military regimes, with generals taking positions on the boards of the major banks, sending business their way, and providing protection from competition and the threats posed by regulation and law (Sungsidh 1983, Ch. 4). However, as EOI industrialization developed and the economy boomed, bankers lost their competitive edge. The capitalist class diversified with the rise of new capitalist groups more attuned to the opportunities afforded by globalization. By the late 1980s, the demand for finance outstripped the banking sector's capacity, prompting the state to liberalize the economy. Foreign investment was also expanded, the stock exchange grew and was modernized, and more foreign banks were established. Most importantly, restrictions on capital flows were lifted (Hewison 2004, 240–42).

Globalization and liberalization caused Thailand's economy to overheat with investment funds flooding into "unproductive" sectors like golf courses, entertainment, and luxury services. In these circumstances, when the Asian crisis hit, the banks underwent dramatic change. With huge non-performing loans, the banks struggled, with several technically insolvent commercial banks selling stakes to foreign investors or seeing the state nationalize them (Hewison 2004, 246–47). In addition, many of the investments of Thai bankers and their allied groups in manufacturing were made problematic by the crisis. Much of the export growth generated by devaluation—making Thai goods internationally cheaper—was in a manufacturing sector that was soon dominated by foreign-owned firms. This was especially the situation for automobiles, electrical equipment, and electronic goods, where international investors had snapped up cheap assets (Baker and Pasuk 2008, 12). For example, after the crisis, Japanese firms quickly took control of 80 percent of Thailand's automotive sector, with Toyota alone accounting for 40 percent (Sakkarin 2008, 81). The era of the class dominance of the domestic bankers was at an end.

The capitalist groups that emerged from the crisis and expanded their businesses were mostly those with diversified interests (especially those with more stable international operations), cashflows that came from basic consumption goods, or those that benefited from continuing domestic protection, including in media, telecoms, tourism, and food and beverages. One example is Charoen Sirivadhanabhakdi. He was relatively unknown among Thailand's tycoons in earlier decades but was listed by 2006, and since then, has consistently ranked among the top five in *Forbes* rankings. His businesses benefited from a liberalization of alcohol concessions, and his companies expanded by using a marketing network they developed under a previously state-allocated liquor monopoly. This meant that when Charoen went into beer manufacture, not only did he have a ready-made distribution network, but he could leverage the huge cash flow from liquor sales. The result was the rapid growth of a business empire that included beer, liquor, fast food, agriculture, retail, hotels, and enormous real estate interests (see Nualnoi 2008).

The expansion of consumerism and the growth of tourism that followed economic recovery, and which grew exponentially into the twenty-first century, increased the wealth of those Thai capitalist groups investing in beverages, entertainment, restaurants and fast food, hotels, duty-free retailing, travel, and hospitals. Having made fortunes in these sectors, several business families and groups that did not appear in the 1980s lists were catapulted into the *Forbes* rankings in the 2000s.

In short, Thailand's capitalist class exhibits both continuity and change over several decades. Continuity is seen in a group of business families that have retained their positions at the commanding heights of the economy as diversified investors, often with state protection or where domestic investors enjoyed distinct advantages over foreigners. Change has seen the rise of new business groups, often taking advantage of technological innovation and the rise of consumerism and services. In a pattern that emerged since the 1997 crisis and through neoliberalization, the richest business groups and families have been increasing their wealth rapidly and disproportionately compared with both the national economy and the rest of the capitalist class (see Hewison 2021).

Similar patterns have been seen elsewhere in the region. As noted above, in their study of Indonesian ownership data for 1996–2008, Carney and Hamilton-Hart (2015, 142) concluded that the concentration of ownership by dominant families remains, even if some of the owning families have changed. As in Thailand, Indonesia's biggest capitalists have amassed huge wealth: "Today, the four richest men in Indonesia have more wealth than the combined total of the poorest 100 million people" (Gibson 2017, 1).

It is noticeable that the region's conglomerates have invested less in technology and heavy industry than their counterparts in Northeast Asia—with some exceptions, such as various shipyards in Singapore, and energy and steel concerns in Thailand and Indonesia. As already observed, EOI succumbed to crisis and neoliberalization. Much of the more advanced production of items like automobiles and digital technology products is spearheaded by capitalists from East Asia. Indeed, much of Southeast Asian capital's boom in the era of neoliberal globalization grows out of the prior regional encounters with capital from Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, and increasingly from China. Southeast Asian capital has not, for the most part, industrialized as intensively. This is not because of incapacities on the part of most of these capitalists, but simply because it has been more lucrative to generate wealth through other activities, including the historically abundant natural resource base within the region.

Despite the economic crisis and restructuring, the relationship between capital and the state has remained important. This is especially true for authoritarian states, such as those in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, where personalized relationships, and the rise of state officials who use ill-gotten wealth to convert themselves into capitalists is noticeable. A similar pattern was evident in Myanmar under the military, which remained important under the democratic interregnum, and has deepened following the 2021 military coup. In Indonesia and the Philippines, the parliamentary systems established after the end of authoritarian regimes have largely been controlled by capitalist interests (see Warburton et al. 2021, Thompson and Batalla 2018, Pt. 1). In Thailand, despite political turmoil and frequent coups, its tycoons have maintained and deepened their alliances with the military and monarchy. These alliances have trenchantly resisted political and social liberalization. At the same time, Thailand's major capitalist groups have become critical for the implementation of state projects, especially in massive infrastructure development projects. The mutual reliance between state and big capitalist continues to define Thailand's political economy.

In completing the picture of contemporary capitalists, the economic role of the region's monarchies needs to be considered, as they remain politically and economically significant in Thailand, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia. In Thailand, the monarchy is the state's keystone ideological and political institution, but it is also the country's wealthiest business group. In Brunei, there is no effective distinction between monarchy and state. The Sultan and his family dominate the economy, with assets of around $20-25 billion. The various sultans in Malaysia and Indonesia have also re-established considerable political and economic power.

## Work and the Working Classes

Capitalist wealth accumulation relies on the capitalist class's capacity to exploit labor. As we have shown, the creation of working classes in Southeast Asia has been a long project. However, it accelerated in the twentieth century, with largely immigrant working classes being transformed into mostly local ones as rural peoples migrated to urban areas to provide labor power for industry and services. With the advent of neoliberalization, already weak working classes with only limited capacity to organize were further disaggregated by high rates of informal and precarious labor and the rise of platform work (see Kalleberg and Hewison 2013). This has been a recipe for very one-sided economic growth that has entrenched inequality.

In the early phases of post-Cold War industrialization, with the exceptions of Singapore and Brunei (Table 2), vast numbers of the economically active population remained engaged in agriculture. Since then, urbanization and industrialization have been rapid; by 2000, agricultural employment had declined substantially. Yet even in the more industrialized economies, only around 15–30 percent of workers were employed in the industrial sector. That manufacturing has failed to generate jobs much beyond these levels shows the significance of the service sector in generating employment. By the end of the 2010s, services employed 58–84 percent of workers in Singapore, Brunei, the Philippines, and Malaysia. Meanwhile, it provided just under half of all jobs in Indonesia and Thailand. In Vietnam, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia, services provided 25–35 percent of employment.

Despite urbanization and employment changes, except in Singapore and Brunei, agriculture and land remain important throughout the region. In Thailand, for example, where urban employment dominates and where the commodification and commercialization of land have been extensive and landlessness has risen dramatically, access to land continues to be valued (Hirsch 2020a). This has to do with the perception that land provides "social insurance" for people with precarious employment, particularly in the service sector, with its scant labor rights and limited social welfare. Yet this relationship to land is complicated. In many places, the smallholder farm is no longer viable, with the family farm only sustained by non-farm income. In commercial and subcontracted farming, wage labour dominates (see Hirsch 2020b). In this sense, capitalism has established its hold over all working people, in the cities and on the land.

During the Cold War, anti-communist repression operations meant that workers and peasants were often targeted as political opponents, with the state viewing organizations representing farmers and labor as susceptible to socialist and communist manipulation. Peasant organizations were harassed and smashed in several countries, with leaders arrested and killed. Unions were actively disorganized, limited, or banned in the countries of the region.

In Malaysia, the union movement was essentially banned when the colonial war was launched against the Communist Party of Malaya. Radical labor leaders were arrested or eliminated, and the police exercised a constant supervision of union activities, restricting organization and activism (Fong 1992 61–66). Such ruthless methods were common. In Thailand, military regimes banned unions for decades. Labor organizers were harassed, arrested, and assassinated. Counterinsurgency operations targeted peasant activists for repression and assassination (Haberkorn 2011). In Indonesia, along with the slaughter of hundreds of thousands, following the ousting of President Sukarno's regime in 1965–1966, the leaders and members of worker and peasant organizations were especially targeted (Hearman 2019). In the Philippines, President Marcos declared a communist threat in 1972 and instituted martial law. His decree quickly brought collective bargaining under state control, limited strikes and gave "the police and military a direct role in industrial relations, creating peak employer and labor bodies for incorporation within tripartite arrangements…" (Hutchison 2015, 68). With state control, repression, terror, and atrocities resulting in thousands arrested, as well as millions killed and injured, such Cold War actions amounted to class warfare. Deyo (1989) concluded that the Cold War historical experience made labor politically weak and dependent, subordinate to states and capital.

The victory of communist forces in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, along with the successes achieved by right-wing, anti-communist regimes in other states constrained post-Cold War political possibilities. Repression dampened and limited political space, preventing the development of active civil societies. While capitalist economic growth has lifted many workers out of absolute poverty, nowhere have workers been able to significantly influence the major political and economic decisions that have shaped their lives. Union density is low in all countries in the region, with membership highest in countries with state-backed unions.

The experience of Indonesia is illustrative of the working class's travails in the region. Under Suharto's New Order, the labor regulation regime was shaped by the state's determination to achieve and maintain high rates of economic growth. To accomplish this, the regime enforced a political stability based on repression, and restricted labor activism and organization. All independent unions were banned, as were strikes, and a state union was established. Additionally, to support capitalist development, the New Order kept wages low. The state became central to labor relations, and while labor was officially part of a tripartite state corporatism, it had almost no voice, and activism was barely visible (see Tjandra 2016, 55–58).

In the late 1980s and 1990s, EOI intensification saw labor politics revived in Indonesia. Because of the state's domination of labor, this revival was mainly through the work of non-governmental organizations. This revival was aided by international pressure to improve the New Order's abysmal labor relations record in factories linked to global supply chains (Hadiz 1997, Ch. 7). Non-governmental activism led to the establishment of union-like groups to challenge the state's control over labor. This activism had some impact, and following a long period when wages were shamefully low, substantial increases in the minimum wage were made by the mid-1990s (Tjandra 2016, 67–68). While this rise was important, the impact was limited since the minimum wage was mostly for those in the relatively small formal sector. This meant that most workers continued to receive low wages.

The 1997–1998 economic crisis was a watershed for Indonesia's politics and labor. The economic crisis led to the fall of the Suharto regime and brought a wave of political and economic changes that amounted to both democratization and neoliberalization. In politics and public policy, along with political decentralization and economic marketization, labor activists used the new democratic political space to register unions, and collective action expanded (Caraway and Ford 2019).

In opposing Suharto in 1998, workers joined students and civil society groups in street demonstrations that eventually led to Suharto's ousting. That political alliance presaged a post-New Order upsurge in labor activism not seen since 1965. After decades of state control and repression, early in the post-Suharto *reformasi* period, there was much effort to reform labor law, expand rights, and improve working conditions. The initial targets of this activism were the new government and the many political parties that emerged to contest elections. In the depths of the economic crisis, this was also a period of considerable turbulence for the labor force. In addition to political transformations, changes in the composition of employment occurred, alongside technological innovation, considerable corporate restructuring, and an intensification of the globalization of production and investment.

One result of this political and economic instability was a plethora of legislation that transformed the industrial relations system. The new government began to change labor laws, essentially playing catch-up after decades of authoritarian neglect. It quickly ratified eight International Labour Organization conventions, and a raft of labor laws were promulgated or updated. These laws provided fundamental rights: the right to organize trade unions, to engage in bargaining and to strike, and established minimum standards for wages, dismissal, working hours, social security, sick and maternity leave, holiday pay, overtime, severance pay, and labor contracting and outsourcing.

Yet the authoritarian past hung heavily over workers. The implementation and enforcement of laws and regulations remained problematic, especially in a context where these issues became the responsibility of newly empowered local governments. For example, factory inspections—meant to protect workers' rights—which were already rare, were further constrained by limited budgets and weak institutions. Along with the corruption of officials, there was also a collusion between officials and employers. Some of the legal changes also limited the capacity of unions to protect workers. For example, the right to strike was enacted in law, but only as a "last resort" and only after various consultative mechanisms had been exhausted (Tjandra 2016, 87). The result was that capitalists and state officials continued to hold sway over labor.

The big picture was that workers and unions gained from reform. Yet, since this flurry of changes and an initial spurt in membership numbers, unionization levels have remained low and are concentrated in the formal sector (Lane 2019, 2). Ford (2009, 164) provides data for 2006 showing union membership was a meager 3.6 percent of the total labor force and just 11 percent in the formal sector, lower than the region's average. At the same time, union federations and enterprise unions grew substantially, which further fragmented efforts to build worker solidarity. In contrast, capital has a clear and consistent voice in politics and policy debates. Combined with labor's incapacity to establish cross-class alliances, the result is limited political impact, including in national elections (Lane 2019).

One result of this limited political impact has been organized labor's narrow focus on the minimum wage. When wage setting was decentralized to local wage councils, unions tended to concentrate on local politicians and the minimum wage. For a time, this delivered some substantial wage increases and coordination among unions in some districts. However, these wage increases were often challenged by employers, who eventually convinced the national government to recentralize wage fixing; at the time, the government also enacted new regulations to limit wage increases (Caraway, Ford, and Nguyen 2019). Of course, some employers simply refused to pay the minimum wage, which was only received by a tiny minority of the labor force.

The lack of union representation in politics was starkly illustrated in 2020. During the COVID-19 pandemic, President Joko Widodo's increasingly authoritarian government introduced an Omnibus Act that modified 76 laws, including those on employment. By changing these laws, the regime cemented its alliance with capital. The government's aim was to promote investment, enhance business, and reduce the benefits received by workers in formal employment. Emphasizing the promotion of capitalist power, the omnibus act was intended to increase allowable overtime and reduce restrictions on labor outsourcing. It also rolled back political decentralization and environmental controls, a move that was welcomed by the Indonesian Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Emphasizing the class nature of the “reforms,” the text of the law was not made public until it was passed by parliament and approved by the president (Kurlantzick 2020). After years of relative quiescence under a democratic regime, the Omnibus Act brought tens of thousands of workers onto the streets, who joined students and other opposition forces, in towns and cities across the country. However, the demonstrations were met with police violence, and the legislation proceeded. Employer federations and chambers of commerce promoted and supported the Omnibus Act. Having been briefly hailed for its role in bringing down a dictatorship, organized labor continued to struggle against a powerful state-capital alliance that undid some of the initial gains for workers.

That same state-capital alliance was also seen in workplace struggles, where labor and capital face each other on a daily basis. As already mentioned, the enforcement of labor laws and regulations in Indonesia has been problematic. As might be expected, in enterprises with strong union membership, the unions have had some impact on labor regulation enforcement (Amengual and Chirot 2016, 1065–069). But where the few strong unions operated, they met employer intransigence and opposition. Employers took to intimidating or sacking union leaders, sometimes using state officials to act on their behalf. Another tactic has been to threaten to move businesses to provinces where wages were lower and unions less influential.

There are also structural limitations for workers and collective action that oppose state and capital. As has been noted, much employment in Indonesia is outside the formal sector and effectively beyond the limited enforcement of labor laws and regulations. Since employers can use non-permanent employment contracts, which can last up to three years, they avoid the legal requirement for severance payments, maintain flexibility in hiring and firing, and prevent unions from developing in their companies. With the passage of the Omnibus Act into law, increased labor contracting was permitted, which in turn expanded precarious work. The mass of precarious workers, with no benefits from their employers, and the self-employed who remain unprotected, lack access to many of the state’s nascent social welfare programs. In marketized Indonesia, with abysmally low unionization rates, mobilizing labor for enhanced social welfare remains limited by both state and capital.

As previously discussed, the early stages of capitalist development in Southeast Asia were marked by working classes that included large numbers of immigrants, particularly from South India and China. This changed following the end of the Cold War, when the working classes in the region began to become localized. Domestic migrant labor filled the ranks of the working class, often as temporary migrants from rural areas, but increasingly as migrants who became permanent residents in and around manufacturing enclaves and in cities where service sector employment expanded. Many of these migrants sought waged labor that promised better incomes, but also sought the opportunities and individual freedom associated with urban life (see Pasuk and Baker 1998, Ch. 8). While this rural-urban migration continues to be significant, in the era of neoliberalization, international migration has again become substantial.

A pattern has emerged within the region of migration from poorer to richer countries, with remittances from the migrants supporting their families and, in many cases, allowing them to consume more, receive an education, pay off debt, buy land, and build better housing, among other things (see Hewison and Young 2006). In the Philippines, those Filipinos who migrate to work abroad have been hailed as "new national heroes" for the economic benefits they provide through remittances (Rodriguez 2002). But despite these benefits and occasional accolades, migrant workers remain in precarious positions, reliant on the whims of employers and state officials, as well as economic ups and downs. With precarious work rising everywhere, immigrant workers are often seen by employers as being easily exploitable and even disposable. Moreover, they are likely to be targeted for different forms of discrimination by often corrupt officials, military personnel, and police forces.

In the region, Filipinos and Indonesians have been especially active in international migration for work in the service sectors of neighboring countries and even further abroad; most of these migrant workers are women. They have provided much of the domestic labor for professional and middle-class families in Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, and the Middle East as "maids." This support from individual workers to employing families—with many living in the household—provides these families with "caring sector" support, including for children, the elderly, and the infirm. This paid work—often with wages determined by the state—allows the employing families greater access to the workforce and higher incomes. In Singapore and Malaysia, however, the dependence on foreign workers goes far beyond the "caring sector," with large numbers of workers from low-income South Asia taking jobs that locals shun—in construction, factories, fishing, and in mines and on plantations. This pattern is also seen in Thailand, where millions of migrant workers from Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar are employed. Generally, migrant workers are prevented from organizing. In essence, the patterns of ethnicity and exploitation previously discussed are repeated. While these occur in new circumstances, it is the sweat of low-waged and precarious migrant workers that underpins capital accumulation and economic growth in Southeast Asia (see Rodan 2016, 214).

# 5

# Conclusion

This short monograph has argued that class analysis remains critically important to an adequate understanding of Southeast Asia's social, economic, and political development. Only by identifying these class patterns of exploitation and domination can we shed light on the inequality that has come to be identified with the region. Focusing on capitalist development and accumulation, it has been shown that analyzing the class dynamics underpinning each developmental epoch necessarily involves understanding the relationships between those who control the means of production and those who do not, as well as the institutions of the state that mediate these class relationships.

To condense the implications of the broad historical analysis outlined in this study, we can return to Massey's characterization of capitalism as involving numerous layers of sedimented investment and development. There have been many such layers throughout the periods covered here, but to determine the core features of contemporary class structures, we can summarize as follows.

The early modern period bequeathed several important legacies—or layers of sediment—to Southeast Asia. Among the most important of which was the entrenchment of Chinese merchant groups as major economic players across the region. Such merchants would play a persistent role in economic life from that point forward. They would eventually take on roles as some of the leading pro-capitalist forces in the region. The colonial period saw the temporary leavening of their influence through the arrival of colonial capitalists. Some of the latter brought with them industrial investments that began to spur the growth of resource industries and industrialized agriculture. Immigrant labor from South Asia and China came to play a dominant role in the wage labor force, while most local workers remained in agriculture. Colonial states took active, violent, and repressive roles in consolidating many of these developments. They also formed the territorial boundaries that gave Southeast Asia the bounded states that now serve as containers of national development.

The Cold War period showed that, as powerful as those national containers might be, they were also shot through with transnational forces. Anti-colonial movements in the region found themselves aligned both for and against the US-driven Cold War, which became a hot war in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. This political and ideological polarization also resulted in considerable violence elsewhere, including in Burma, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaya, and the Philippines. Political division provided the context for Cold War capitalist development in the region. Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines were firmly in the "free world" camp and received international assistance and investment capital. These states became even more integrated with the economic activities of powerful class forces. The US and its allies faced struggling "neutral" countries like Burma, Cambodia, and Indonesia, and those countries and liberation movements aligned with the Soviet Union and China. In such a conflicted situation, much like in the colonial period, transnational forces continued to wield powerful influence.

For a time, the Cold War divide saw the region pitting rapidly developing capitalist economies against self-proclaimed socialist countries that remained impoverished due to war, failed collective projects, and, in some cases, trade blockades. In pro-capitalist countries, Cold War state institutions buttressed the prospects of leading businesses, including those dominated by Chinese capitalists and by foreign investors. This not only intensified different forms of industrialization and transformed the labor process but also contributed to further social polarization. In the state socialist countries that emerged from the Cold War, Communist parties developed party-states that played central roles in capital accumulation, making those party-state actors some of the leading de facto "capitalists" as capitalist development spread across the region.

With capitalist economies firmly established across the region, the period of neoliberal globalization saw the leading elements of the capitalist classes in each of the countries emerge as dominant, increasingly interconnected, and eventually tightly interlinked with China's political and economic rise. States are continuously involved in these globalization and regionalization processes. This involvement typically strengthens the oligarchic power of dominant capitalists. In countries like Thailand, this includes maintaining a monarchy that is part of the country's ruling class, and which holds sway over the economy and politics.

From the perspective of geopolitical economy, Southeast Asia has witnessed the rise of transnationalized state-society complexes. In these complexes, ruling classes comprised a variety of actors, especially oligarchic capitalists, military leaders, and state managers. Many of these actors are connected to China through both markets and states.

This does not imply that Southeast Asia is now merely a transnationalized space of capitalist development. Uneven development always bequeaths various layers of class struggle. Today, in Southeast Asia, there is still a significant role for what Poulantzas referred to as the "interior bourgeoisie"—capitalists who have their major base within specific national spaces but still possess geographically expansive interests that lead them to promote various forms of international trade and investment (Poulantzas 1978, 57; Al-Fadhat 2020, 180). In short, state-society complexes in Southeast Asia are strongly transnationalized today, even though this does not eliminate the possibility of "national" projects in the interests of particular blocs or fractions of capital and segments of the ruling class (Wijaya and Jayasuriya 2024).

The class structures and processes highlighted in this study are considered the fundamental factors underpinning economic disparities across the region. Statistical measures like Gini coefficients provide a snapshot of inequality. However, we gain a clearer sense of how class processes structure disparity when we consider the wealth of the most powerful capitalists alongside the incomes received by their workers.

In late 2023, the *Forbes* list of Indonesia's richest had two members of the Hartono family at the top, with a joint net worth of $48 billion. That is equivalent to the yearly earnings of about 12 million workers receiving the minimum wage in Jakarta in 2023. In Thailand in 2023, the Chearavanont family had a net worth of $34 billion, or the equivalent of the yearly earnings of almost 8.5 million workers on the minimum wage in Bangkok. Both Hartono and Chearavanont families are from Chinese backgrounds. Overall, 9 of the 10 richest people in Southeast Asia are identifiably of Chinese descent. Many of them invested in different forms of trade, property development, as well as banking and financial services. Few of them are industrialists. By contrast, the working classes of the region are overwhelmingly local. While many remain involved in farming, most now earn their income in services and in informal sectors, often in precarious wage work. A minority work in better-paying assembly jobs like the auto industry in Thailand, the electronics industry in Malaysia, or the footwear and garments factories of Vietnam. Migrant workers generally engage in lower paid work with poor conditions and low pay.

These large disparities of wealth, controlled by people at the top, and the limited incomes of those at the bottom of Southeast Asian social orders stem from differential control over property and major productive assets—with few workers owning much in the way of assets except for their ability to work. These disparities also stem from differential political power and access, which then feed back into income inequalities.

The relationship between the capitalist class and the state has been strong across the Southeast Asian region. and spans much of the historical periods discussed in this monograph. The Cold War nurtured authoritarian regimes that repressed political oppositions, while also fostering capitalist development. The "socialist" states that emerged in the mid-1970s have been equally repressive and have turned to capitalist economic development in recent times. Today's Southeast Asian states consolidate their capitalist economies in ways that position them in hierarchies of regional and global production. This occurs in political contexts where the twentieth century challenges to states—labor activism and peasant rebellion—have mostly been tamed.

With supportive state policies, wealth has accrued to national and international capitalists. Nationally, capitalist accumulation has resulted in some of the world's most unequal societies, dominated by huge conglomerates with massively wealthy owners. These tycoons cooperate and collude with state officials, who manage the political systems—policies, laws, institutions—that maintain the order that enhances accumulation and great wealth. Having negotiated colonialism, wars, coups and dictatorships, and periods of democracy, tycoon families are among Southeast Asia's most enduring institutions, dominating the capitalist class. Clearly, their wealth matters, and their opinions and desires on many important questions shape economic, political, and social outcomes.

When considering class in this study, the focus has been on ideas grounded in Marxist conceptions. In part, this is because the Marxist approach is better attuned to understanding the power embedded in economic relationships that define classes. As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, key elements of the Marxist geopolitical economy framework have been employed to make sense of major developments in Southeast Asia over a long historical period.

Chapter 3 focused on the long historical epochs, from the pre-modern era until the end of the colonial era after World War II. This broad discussion centered on how the early modern period left important legacies for Southeast Asian capitalism. As mentioned, this included the penetration of Chinese merchants in domestic economics. Another was the entry of immigrant workers from South Asia and China, who came to dominate colonial wage labor, with most local workers remaining in agriculture. Colonial states were active in consolidating these developments, defining territorial boundaries, and promoting industrialization. The lasting impacts of colonialism across the region are seen, not just in the further development of capitalism and of the capitalist and working classes, but also in the nationalism that shaped postcolonial societies. Colonial rule was also repressive, shaping class, ethnic, and political conflicts in the region, including its wars and counterinsurgencies.

Chapter 4 traversed the period from the Cold War to the era of neoliberalization. The Cold War showed that the national boundaries established by colonialism were porous for transnational forces. Across the regions, anti-colonial movements operated regionally. They grated against US Cold War ideology, leading to violent local and regional conflagrations. In this context, transnational forces continued to have a powerful influence, as they had in the colonial period, and states became ever more integral to the economic activities of dominant class forces. In developing capitalist countries, Cold War states supported leading domestic and international industries and businesses, intensifying industrialization, transforming the labor process. These processes contributed to social polarization. In the recent era of neoliberal globalization, the oligarchic power of dominant capitalists has been strengthened. They do this through their dominance in domestic investment, with long-established relations with investors from East Asia, Europe, and the USA and, increasingly, through connections with China's political and economic rise. States are continuously involved in "globalization" and regionalization processes.

These class structures and processes are fundamental to understanding of the disparities in the wealth in the region. Inequality stems from the control that the capitalist classes have over property and productive assets, and from their political power that provides special access to the state. The relationship between the capitalist classes and the state has been strong across the region, most often forged during the Cold War authoritarianism that repressed political oppositions while nurturing capitalist industrialization. States were also fundamental in defeating the challenges posed by labor activism and peasant rebellion.

Looking ahead, two conclusions can be drawn. The first largely reiterates the perspective employed in this study. The second is a comment on the relevance of a class-based analysis to contemporary events.

The first point is simply that, as emphasized at the outset, class analysis is diverse in its theoretical moorings, and even a Marxist class analysis allows for a variety of arguments and positions. The analysis in this book is grounded in an understanding and analysis of Marx's considerations on accumulation and the dynamics of class struggle under conditions of capitalist development. This dictates a foundational emphasis on the labor process and exploitation, including through shifting and contested forms of social control over the production process. Considerable emphasis has been placed on transnational processes that affect ruling class formation and conduct at the top of social orders. For some, this might suggest an adherence to non-Marxist notions of ruling class or power elite behavior (Domhoff 2020). However, this would miss a point made by scholars like Faris Al-Fadhat (2020), who argues that a class analysis invites the bringing together of ideas on how class processes cut across the day-to-day activities of capital accumulation and the consolidation of ruling class power within states, and the significance of the formation of transnational ruling class blocs.

Chapter 2 emphasized how ideas from Marx, Gramsci, and contemporary scholars like Kees van der Pijl all provide important and interrelated conceptual tools for understanding the political economy of Southeast Asian development. As countries in the region continue their tumultuous movement into the twenty-first century, it is likely that the geopolitical, economic, and social outcomes previously highlighted will deepen. These include: the concentration of wealth and income in fewer, increasingly capitalist hands; the growing connections between major capitalists and ruling classes from South, Southeast, and East Asia regions, as well as across the Pacific; the precarity of much wage labor; and the ongoing stripping away by capital and states of the natural resource base previously linked to rural societies and village actors. Such significant transformations underscore the need to continue pursuing the analysis of capital accumulation.

The second point is to acknowledge the obvious: that social processes in the region continue to evolve, often quite rapidly, Take, for example, the apparent momentum toward a "new Cold War" between the US and the PRC in the period since the mid-2010s (see Jayasuriya 2023). This has led some analysts to suggest a forthcoming transformation in the conditions of capital accumulation throughout Asia. Undoubtedly, the world has been, and will continue to be, altered by changes in US-PRC relations, potentially at an accelerated pace as US hegemony declines. Yet such change cannot be analyzed adequately in strictly geopolitical terms. One reason is that such geopolitical analysis often overlooks the salience of class analysis. Recent studies by Al-Fadhat (2020) and Wijaya and Jayasuriya (2024) emphasize that capitalist development in Southeast Asia underscores the increasing significance of Poulantzas' "interior bourgeoisie." These interior bourgeoisie represent interests that extend beyond national boundaries yet are strongly anchored within national states, making them important proponents of *both* the continued internationalization of capital and of specific state projects to protect their interests. Wijaya and Jayasuriya (2024) describe the resulting policy orientation as "militarized neoliberalization"—neither a peaceful evolution toward globalized capitalism nor an abandonment of the neoliberal globalist project in favor of statist nationalism.

While these debates cannot be discussed further here, the flexible applications of class-based analysis highlight one final claim: that Marxist class analysis continues to provide valuable analytical tools for analyzing the development of Southeast Asia over the last several centuries. Through its creative development and use, it will continue to provide insights and understanding as social relations and conflicts continue to evolve in the region and internationally.

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