RICE IN THE MAKING OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

By Richard A. O'Connor

Southeast Asia is so diverse that some doubt it is a region. Indeed, divided up into eleven nations, the region is home to literally hundreds of peoples whose speech, dress, and demeanor all differ richly. Yet beneath today's political and ethnic mosaic are great continuities in rice, trade,[1] and urban life[2] that give this corner of Asia its distinctive character.

Rice is a key to the region. Jane Richardson Hanks (see the following article) captures how deeply Siamese country life once revolved around rice. Other villages might tell other stories, but lifestyles across the region center on rice. How did a single crop become so vital to so many? A full answer would require one to go back to rice's domestication in South China's Yangtze basin around 6000 BCE, and then trace how some Asian cultures evolved around rice and others didn't. Within this epic, our essay looks only at mainland Southeast Asia, and, skipping over rice's entry and spread, goes back just a dozen centuries or so to show how a wet-rice specialization made the region we now know.

Early Great States and Their Farmers

In the first millennium CE the mainland's first great states arose, clothed in royal and religious borrowings from Indian civilization. In the span of a few centuries these Indianized realms collapsed and their peoples declined.[3] In their place, Burmese, Tai (ancestors of the Lao, Siamese, and Thai, among others), and Vietnamese states arose and their peoples went on to rule the mainland. Case by case these shifts appear to be ethnic and political successions wherein the strong displace the weak, but seen together regionally the similarities testify to an epochal cultural and agricultural change.

To grasp what changed, we need to go back to the mainland's early Indianized states. In the seventh century, were we to look across the lowlands, we'd see a few great cities with grand temples, refined arts, and elegant courts, all richly clothed in Indic borrowings. Around these stars were lesser satellites, each with lesser temples, arts, and courts. And off in the countryside, mostly close to these centers, were the farmers whose labors fed the cities and funded their glories.

Their agriculture varied locally, but four similarities stand out. First, farmers grew a variety of grains, not just rice. Second, to get more grain, these farmers typically extended their fields rather than get more out of existing land—what's called an extensive as opposed to intensive strategy. Third, to varying degrees, these farmers practiced house gardening, growing a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, and herbs on their house plots. Here the strategy was intensive: using every scrap of soil, sun, and moisture, a house garden near the equator could furnish almost half of a family's subsistence.[4] Fourth, to water their crops, these farmers moved earth laboriously: they dug ponds, built tanks (reservoirs), extended canals, or mounded earth into bunds (small dikes) that held back rain or floodwater. What these small farmers did in the countryside, workers in great temples like the Khmer's Angkor Wat magnified in the realm's center.

The New Rice Farmers

Were these lowlanders to look northward, it would be with disdain at the humble hillfolk, "savages" who had neither great cities nor grand temples. Yet there the lowlanders would see the region's

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future rulers, living along fast-flowing streams in mountain valleys. In this eco-niche, Burmese, Tai, and Vietnamese traditions crystallized around an irrigated-wet-rice lifestyle that would eventually take over the lowlands.

Upland and lowland farming traditions differed in four critical ways. First, where lowlanders grew many field crops, uplanders mono-cropped wet rice. Second, where lowlanders extended fields to get more grain, uplanders farmed the valley bottoms more intensively, perhaps because hillside farming required very different techniques. Third, unlike lowlanders, uplanders did not house-garden intensively, perhaps because that strategy was less productive further north in mountain-shadowed valleys. Fourth, where lowlanders reworked the landscape massively for standing-water irrigation (ponds, tanks), the uplanders' followed slope strategically, using flowing water technology that their mountain valley homes favored.

An Agricultural Shift

Slowly but progressively, the upland complex (intensively mono-cropped wet rice with flowing water technology) spread into the lowlands, either colonizing new land or converting old settlements to the new way. Was the new better than the old? Not in any simple sense. Obviously it produced more rice, but lowland farmers already had surpluses. Against that gain in rice stood three losses. First, any monocropping scheme put all one's eggs in the same basket. Although wet rice was more reliable than dry, garden-farming's multispecies diversity spread environmental risk far better than any single crop ever could. Second, giving up house gardening gave up the autonomy of living off house land, property one could fence and protect. Third, the quick-spoiling bulk of garden produce deterred thieves, raiders, and tax collectors—how many ripe cucumbers could they use? Rice, on the other hand, attracted these vultures: once harvested, it was both valuable and portable. Was getting more rice worth these costs? Were subsistence security and household autonomy priorities, garden-farming should have won.

Competing Lifestyles

Why did history go the other way? Looking back, we can't easily separate agricultural from political change. In the end, intensifying wet-rice culture strengthened the state by making the population denser, richer, and better organized. Yet any success at society's top came long after farmers had begun change from the bottom. So we still need to explain why farmers gave up subsistence security and household autonomy to gamble on a rice-centered life.

Farmers who picked rice chose between contrasting lifestyles. Uplanders clustered in strong villages that expected local cooperation. Lowlanders, in contrast, typically lived in autonomous and sometimes scattered households, a style that gave competition free reign. Each stance had ecological origins.[5] On the one hand, intensive wet-rice cultivation concentrated farmers along waterways where everyone got more rice whenever households worked together.[6] Other than the advantages of labor exchange, households that cooperated to build and maintain an upstream weir (a small dam) could water a wide area. Meeting that irrigation need bred consensus-building leaders whose authority came from custom.[7] On the other hand, wide lowland river basins allowed farmers to scatter as they faced heavy flooding that periodically forced each household to go it alone. One adaptation, massive earthmoving projects, apparently bred tough-guy leaders whose authority came from coercion rather than custom. Once built, tanks favored private property rights, not local cooperation.

Land ownership also differed: where multi-crop garden-farmers stressed private ownership, wet-rice specialists recognized communal rights. For Burmese, Vietnamese, and upland Tai, the village traditionally redistributed land locally so that each household got an adequate plot. For lowlanders, the evidence of private rights is incomplete but unmixed: no land redistribution, strong household ownership, newcomers had no claims, and newlyweds got plots from kin, not the community.

Ecology fostered these separate contrasts—settlement pattern, leadership, water technology, land ownership—but once these pieces got packaged together they took on cultural lives of their own. That's how the uplands' rice-centered "package" could leave its founding niche and move downstream to compete against the lowlands' household-centered ways. Why did rice win? We can only guess at the loser's virtues, but the winner's lifestyle had the social and moral coherence that Hanks found in Thailand's Central Plains.

The Making of the Modern Mainland

Rice remade the mainland slowly along a scattered and moving frontier. That's a hard history to write: its actors are obscure farmers and villages, not famous kings and cities. Yet to face this task we can put the rice revolution's beginnings first along the Red River in Vietnam, then in Burma, and finally in the intervening Tai areas. Arguably these rice complexes are independent cases scattered on a 600-mile arc broken up by steep mountains, ethnic boundaries, and dry-field peoples, but then all three appear on rivers whose headwaters converge in Yunnan. If the three are connected, the link is Tai.

In the first millennium CE, if not before, this wet-rice complex appears on the edge of the hills and makes inroads into the lowlands. In places it colonizes empty land in an underpopulated region. Elsewhere it meets flood farming (agriculture on the edge of flooded areas) and its highly successful tank/garden intensification. In some areas this was a protracted encounter where the eventual triumph of an upland ethnicity obscures considerable agricultural continuity. Elsewhere this upland/lowland meeting had more dramatic consequences, and it seems possible that the shape of Vietnamese culture and Burmese agriculture crystallized out of this encounter. Key to the newcomers' success was how their water technology opened two unused niches, one above and one below earlier farmers. Above were foothills where weirs worked just as they did in mountain valleys; below were floodplains where their skill in manipulating water flows let them breach levees to drain and irrigate back swamps for farming. Once Tai, Vietnamese, and

Burmese established these footholds, they succeeded by politics as much as agriculture.

Later, in the nineteenth century, a world market for rice accelerated the succession and gave it a new twist. Now household cooperation and irrigation skills hardly mattered. As the market blindly rewarded whomever had the most rice, what counted now was monocropping. Here wet-rice specialists—or their cultures—gained a new advantage over garden-farmers who subsisted more broadly. In this second expansion, sparsely settled floodplains become burgeoning rice bowls as Burmese, Tai, and Vietnamese immigrants and cultures swallowed up earlier peoples. Market forces thus completed an ethnic expansion and agricultural shift that had begun in mountain valleys at least two millennia earlier.

Rice, the Making of Asia, and the Writing of History

How then did rice shape mainland Southeast Asia? Without the wet-rice revolution, today's map would have not Thailand but Monland, a people the Tai pushed from power. Indeed, every other nation would differ deeply. Even the one ethnic holdover, Cambodia, lived centuries under Tai and Vietnamese rule.

Hindsight makes the change look inevitable, but a glance at island Southeast Asia shows it did not have to happen as a succession. In Bali, for example, wet-rice agriculture intensified around house gardening, apparently evolving slowly in place. As anthropologist Steve Lansing shows, rice shaped Balinese society.[8] So too Asia. Although Asia's peoples differ widely, many are cultural cousins in rice.

Our thousand-year Southeast Asian story hardly begins to tell Asia's 8,000-year tale of rice. Why isn't this epic already in our history books? At least for Southeast Asia, history still revolves around nationalism. So each nation has its own story where history's characters are kings and battles, not farmers and fields; the plot is politics and ethnicity, not agricultural and ecology; and the lesson is conflict and competition, not cooperation and complementarity. Hidden, then, is the local cooperation and regional commonality that rice once wrought and still favors. ■

NOTES

1. Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450–1680* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986, 1993).
2. Richard A. O'Connor, "Indigenous Urbanism: Class, City and Society in Southeast Asia," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 26, 1 (1995): 30–45.
3. The greatest cities represented four state traditions in three different language families. What's now Upper Burma revolved around the Pyu, linguistically a Sino-Tibetan people; and Lower Burma and Central and Northern Thailand had city-states ruled by Mon, an Austroasiatic-speaking people. Further east, their linguistic cousins, the Khmer, built powerful states in what's now Northeastern Thailand and Cambodia. And on the mainland's eastern edge, in Central Vietnam, the Austronesian-speaking Cham built multi-ethnic states that stretched from the coasts up into the highlands.
4. Michael Dove, "Review Article: Socio-political Aspects of Home Gardens in Java," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 21, 1 (1990): 155–63.
5. We've put ecological influences in the past tense although the evidence is largely contemporary field studies. See O'Connor's earlier *JAS* article noted by the editor below for sources.
6. Francesca Bray, *The Rice Economies: Technology and Development in Asian Societies* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).
7. Walter E. Coward, Jr., "Management Themes in Community Irrigation Systems," in *Irrigation and Agricultural Development in Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980).
8. See Stephen J. Lansing's *Priests and Programmers: Technologies of Power in the Engineered Landscape of Bali* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). His video, *The Three Worlds of Bali* (PBS Video, c1988, 1980), is an excellent teaching resource.

RICHARD A. O'CONNOR is Biehl Professor of International Studies and Anthropology at Sewanee: The University of the South, a small liberal arts college in Tennessee. Other than his work on Southeast Asia, he co-directs Sewanee's Center for Teaching and conducts research on campus culture, student study patterns, and anorexia.

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