



Industrialization with a Weak State: Thailand's Development in Historical Perspective

Somboon Sirirachai, edited by Kaoru Sugihara, Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker

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One experience that unites all those who study any part of Southeast Asia is the realization that dawns, sooner or later, that such a large proportion of the available knowledge and information is produced by people from outside the region, one way or another. That is why it is considered so important to celebrate the work of local scholars who are able not just to add important perspectives to internationally produced knowledge but who are also able to communicate it effectively to society at large. This is the case with the late Somboon

Siriprachai (1956-2008), whose work on economics is captured in this book, which has been published as a collaboration between the National University of Singapore and the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Kyoto University. A preface by Kaoru Sugihara intimates that there were some editorial difficulties along the way, which explains the delay in publication.

At the heart of this book are seven chapters, each dealing with a different but related aspect of industrial development in Thailand over recent decades. Four of these chapters are based on papers included in scholarly books, two others on papers that first appeared in *Warasan Setthasat Thammasat* (Thammasat Economic Journal), with which the author was associated for a period as Assistant Editor and the last is based on two unpublished papers. The result is a book containing a reasonably coherent body of work, although it would of course have been more thoroughly developed if the author had had the opportunity to oversee it personally.

Siriprachai was clearly devoted to the interests of the common Thai people and his writings have the impression that they could be used at the community level to help people understand why, if Thailand's economy had been growing so strongly and apparently impressively for several decades, they themselves remained so poor. As a result, he makes repeated efforts to link theory with real-life conditions. He explains economic development in terms of an East Asian industrialization model that incorporate rent-seeking and corruption that, in turn, contributed to growing income inequalities. Additional elements in his analysis include rural-urban migration and declining fertility rates. The authorial style is discursive in nature combined with a relatively small amount of macroeconomic-level data. This would appear to be suitable to a style of pedagogy in which a

respected teacher explains the way the world works to receptive students. Insofar as the reader is spared the complex mathematical models of contemporary microeconomics, this is perhaps a good thing. On the other hand, those who have alternative understandings of which factors are important and how they interact with each other can only be persuaded by assertion rather than empirical evidence. This is perhaps one of those epistemological issues that pop up so frequently in the area of management sciences, in which so many different fields of inquiry, economics included, have at one time or another been integrated.

An example of the mode of thinking is presented in the chapter on 'Development Economics, Rent Seeking, and the East Asian Miracle,' on p.119: "The East Asian NIEs [newly industrialized economies] initially adopted import-substitution policy because it suited their factor endowments of limited natural resources but abundant cheap labour. However, once the policy had run its course, and once the quality of the labour force had begun to rise, policy makers in the East Asian NIEs were able to make the switch to outward orientation. By contrast, Latin American and sub-Saharan African countries persisted with import-substitution long after efficiency had begun to decline, because the strategy still benefited powerful entrenched goods." It is, of course, all too easy to pick on a passage, wrench it from its context and then criticize it for not being something it was not trying to be. Nevertheless, this still seems to be a little too sweeping in its conclusions: were all the East Asian NIEs following this path? Singapore, after all, is rather different from Korea and Hong Kong has quite different international relations than Taiwan. Were there no continuing entrenched interests in these countries who could affect policy formation and, if so, what had happened to them all? As previously mentioned, it is perhaps unfair to make these criticisms

because the chapters of the book were written for a specific kind of audience.

Overall, the direction of Siriprachai's thinking is sound and his desire to locate Thailand's economic development within the specific historical conditions of the country is very welcome. The book will appeal to readers interested in a leading Thai professor's understanding of the processes active in changing his own country and what those processes mean. In light of the generous tributes accorded to him as a person, then the book would also act as a fitting tribute to a scholar and a teacher.