Cities of the Straits of Malacca'. The old town of Phuket might well have deserved recognition as part of this maritime trading complex. But sadly, it was not included and UNESCO kept to a Malaysian 'state party' or nation-state-based deliberation of sites of 'universal human value'.

There is another comparative example, which sits uneasily in the volume. Yangon in Myanmar is given some attention, interesting in itself, but the case does not illuminate or further contextualize the issues that Thailand faces (Paula Z. Helfrich). Myanmar is at an earlier stage of the journey that Thailand has already taken, and Thailand might serve to guide the government authorities of Myanmar, should they wish to take note of their neighbour's successes and failures in heritage protection.

Overall, the book serves as a manifesto for the advocacy role that the Siam Society has adopted; it provides some particularly interesting cases of the contestations and tensions which the struggles over heritage selection, protection, interpretation and presentation generate. The Society has set out the issues, problems and prospects for Thailand's heritage. It has indicated what needs to be done. But there is a further observation worth making. The list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites is by no means a definitive guide to the commitment to and management capacity of a particular country in the protection of its heritage. There is much that is undertaken on heritage issues within nation-states without the need to seek international recognition. But in drawing attention to the richness and depth of Thailand's cultural legacy which this present volume succeeds in demonstrating in ample detail, it does seem a little surprising and worrying that Thailand presides over only five World Heritage Sites and has only managed to identify four further sites to include on its Tentative List. The Siam Society has much more work to do.

——— * * * ———

Yoshinori Nishizaki, *Political Authority and Provincial Identity in Thailand: The Making of Banharn-buri*, Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications 53, Ithaca, NY, 2011, vvii + 254 pp.

reviewed by *Michael Buehler, Lecturer in Comparative Politics, SOAS, University of London, Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1H 0XG, UK. E-mail: mb107@soas.ac.uk.*

Scholars working on South East Asia had taken a keen interest in local politics years before calls to 'scale down' research on democratization to the subnational level had reached mainstream political science.[1] Hence, there is a rich literature on autocrats, bosses, 'little kings' and strongmen who have managed to stay in power over consecutive election cycles and now populate the lower rungs of South East Asia's political systems. Most of the early works on strongmen in the region saw the origins of their rule in individualized exchanges of goods for political

---

[1]   See, for instance, Richard Snyder (2001), 'Scaling down: the subnational comparative method', *Studies in Comparative International Development*, Vol 36, No 1, pp 93–110.

support.[2] Subsequent works set out to correct this image of local strongmen as benevolent local patrons by emphasizing the coercion and violence that many of these political entrepreneurs frequently deployed in order to gain and maintain power in local politics.[3]

However, political anthropologist Yoshinori Nishizaki argues that the resilience against defeat at the ballot box many of these figures show is the result of neither patronage nor coercion. Rather, local strongmen often stay in power because their rule (re-)shapes the social identity of voters. Concretely, people seek to enhance the status and prestige of the communities of which they are members. If politicians manage to influence people's perception of themselves and the group they belong to positively, people will support such politicians at the ballot box.

To test this hypothesis, Nishizaki follows the political career of Banharn Silpa-archa who has dominated politics in Suphanburi ever since he was elected in 1976 to represent this province north of Bangkok in the national parliament. Born as Tek Chiang Chaebe in 1932 into an affluent local Chinese family, Banharn moved to Bangkok as an adolescent and subsequently made a fortune in the construction industry during the 1960s. In the 1970s, he returned to Suphanburi to launch his political career, which was continuing at the time of writing.

Based on interviews and a close reading of Thai-language newspapers, Nishizaki argues that Suphanburi has long been perceived as one of the poorest and least developed provinces in Thailand. Consequently, Thais living outside the province belittled Suphanburi as 'backward', while locals perceived the central state as a 'body devouring development funds that were supposed to go to their jurisdiction' (p 48).

Soon after taking up this post in the national parliament, Banharn began to channel national funds into the construction of hospitals, schools and roads in his home province. In addition, he established various 'welfare charities' pledging to support destitute Suphanburians. Finally, as Nishizaki shows, Banharn financed projects that were of high symbolic value to locals, including the purchase of a fourteenth-century Sangkhalok bowl, prized by the local population, which had been taken by the national government in Bangkok. Banharn also sponsored local dramas such as *The Blood of Suphan* that showed the province's historical great-ness. Such activities, in combination with constantly touring the province for 'on-the spot-inspections', always accompanied by an entourage of journalists, have changed citizens' perceptions not only of Banharn, but also of themselves. Nishizaki pro-vides countless anecdotes that show how Suphanburians have begun to speak of their province in favourable terms, pointing out the many 'victories' that have been achieved over other provinces ever since Banharn came to power, including 'better roads', 'cleaner towns' and 'hard-working bureaucrats', thanks to the dis-cipline Banharn has injected into the local state apparatus through his frequent impromptu visits to government departments. Nishizaki also describes how local citizens defend their parliamentary representative against corruption allegations

[2]   See, for instance, David Wurfel (1988), *Filipino Politics: Development and Decay*, Ateneo de Manila University Press, Quezon City.

[3]   See, for instance, James Ockey (2000), 'The rise of local power in Thailand: provincial crime, elections, and the bureaucracy', in Ruth McVey, ed, *Money and Power in Provincial Thailand*, NIAS, Copenhagen, pp 74–96.

or other attempts to question the moral integrity of Banharn. The shared experiences of travelling on newly built roads, being collectively engaged emotionally in the dramatic 'rescue' of cultural artefacts from sinister Bangkok elites, in combination with being constantly reminded about Barnhan's many other good deeds by signboards on hospitals, schools and other public buildings, have created an imagined community that locals can positively identify with and to which they have begun to refer as Banharn-buri. This 'provincial pride' (p 24), and the resulting emotional support for Barnharn, is so strong that he continues to win elections without having to resort to coercion, violence or vote-buying at the individual level, Nishizaki argues.

Several conclusions can be drawn from Nishizaki's in-depth account of the career of one of Thailand's most successful rural politicians. One: the democratization of rural Thailand has been cast in terms that were too negative in previous studies. Political dynamics in Suphanburi show that subnational politicians may not be the socially debased local bosses whose rule is solely based on violence, coercion, electoral fraud and the distribution of private patronage. In 'Banharn-buri', election-related violence is notably absent, as is individual vote-buying, according to the author. Two: the study under review here also exposes the simplistic and Western-centric understanding of 'progress' many 'community-driven' foreign development projects are based on in Thailand and other South East Asian countries.[4] At the time of writing, Suphanburians remained relatively poorer than their counterparts in other industrialized Thai provinces, Nishizaki shows. Yet residents in the province do not blame Banharn for this lack of economic growth (p 188). The study provides a fascinating account of how locals understand development and how this creates accountability dynamics that are based on a notion of service delivery that differs profoundly from Western development agencies. Three: Nishizaki's portrait of Banharn challenges the theoretical underpinnings of many existing studies on rural politicians in Thailand and other parts of South East Asia. For instance, Nishizaki's account of the 'non-material dimension' (p 26) of Banharn's material contributions to Suphanburi province challenges rational choice approaches to local clientelism, which see political behaviour driven by individual material interests alone. The author's findings from Suphanburi province suggest that voters may support politicians even if they do not greatly improve citizens' economic situations. Similarly, the argument put forward also challenges Marxist approaches. Class consciousness and, by extension, class tensions are absent in Suphanburi, according to Nishizaki's account. Instead, if not necessarily shaped by traditional patronage relations, emotional bonds between affluent politicians and the masses determine politics in the province.

Overall, the situation Nishizaki describes for Suphanburi is reminiscent of the kind of 'brand politics' that have become so ubiquitous around the globe in recent years. In many democracies, particularly at the local level, politicians have abandoned parties because they 'no longer see mass parties as able to offer a persuasive

---

[4]   See, for instance, Patrick Barron, Rachel Diprose, and Michael Woolcock (2011), *Contesting Development: Participatory Projects and Local Conflict Dynamics in Indonesia*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT. For a critique of such 'participatory' development projects, see Tania Murray Li (2007), *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC.

ideology, significant resources, or the organizational support needed to win elections'.[5] Consequently, much like marketing managers branding a product, politicians style themselves in a fashion they hope will win them public support, without spending too much thinking on actual programmes or the implementation of concrete policies. In other words, very much in the way that a decision about buying a Brioni raincoat is not determined by considerations about the functionality of the garment (a raincoat from Hennes & Mauritz would serve the same purpose for much less money), voters support brand politicians as a means of acquiring an identity rather than in the hope of receiving tangible benefits or because of concrete policy proposals. In other words, '[b]y acquiring the product, consumers aspire to become different people… A successful brand also helps to differentiate the candidate from the competition. Hence, the brand must innovate: it aims to awaken interest by surprising the voter…'[6]

Nishizaki claims that there is no shortage of Banharn-like figures in Asia and compares him to figures such as Kakuei Tanaka, Japan's former Prime Minister who was ousted for corruption, but nevertheless remains very popular in his home prefecture of Niigata (p 220); South Korea's Kim Dae Jung, who remains popular in Jeolla province for lifting it from 'backwardness'; and Ferdinand Marcos, who is fondly remembered in his home province of Ilocos Norte as a figure who had a transformative impact on the region. In fact, one does not need to venture this far back to find similar figures in the region. Brand politicians have appeared across democratizing South East Asia in recent years: Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand, Benigno Aquino III in the Philippines and Joko Widodo in Indonesia have become hugely popular by successfully branding themselves as innovators and visionaries determined to 'change' politics while actually offering very little in terms of concrete policy programmes or solutions to their countries' many problems.[7]

Nishizaki's study therefore points towards much needed research on such brand politicians and how they generate support from below, particularly in light of the relatively minor role that election-related violence has come to play in the region,[8] but also considering the fact that demands for patronage far outstrip the financial means of most candidates.

However, structural factors, which are given short shrift in this study, need to be placed at the centre of such a research enterprise. Nishizaki admits that Banharn's political career is unique in Thailand. For instance, Narong Wongwan, aka the 'godfather of Phrae province', a businessman who holds assets in the tobacco industry and allegedly has strong links to the drug trade in Thailand's northern regions, would have had the resources and contacts to follow a strategy similar to

---

[5]   See Eleonora Pasotti (2010), *Political Branding in Cities: The Decline of Machine Politics in Bogotá, Naples, and Chicago*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p 1.

[6]   *Ibid*, pp 4–22.

[7]   In Indonesia, Joko Widodo became famous as a provincial politician, not least because of his impromptu visits (*blusukan*) to markets, government offices and construction sites as mayor of Solo City prior to his presidency. Other district heads and mayors in Indonesia follow strategies similar to Banharn in Suphanburi, as the numerous reports on highly symbolic (but essentially useless from a development perspective) projects such as contracting Brazilian football players for local sports teams or building aerial Gondola systems as an answer to Indonesia's traffic problems, show.

[8]   Michael Buehler (2009), 'Suicide and progress in modern Nusantara: the absence of political murders in Indonesian elections', *Inside Indonesia*, Vol 96, July–September.

that of Banharn. Yet Wongwan's reign over the province was less durable due to 'lack of political will', according to Nishizaki (p 217). However, Nishizaki's account also suggests that Wongwan's political machine and the 'brand politics' he followed began to unravel when the USA increased its anti-drug efforts in the region, which shrank Wongwan's economic base. In short, local socioeconomic conditions may play an important role in determining the longevity of subnational political machines and the brand politics surrounding them.

Likewise, future research must examine more closely why exactly it is that people support such politicians. While Nishizaki's focus on 'the electorate' and its motivations offers a fresh perspective to scholarship on local strongmen that has focused mostly on elites, the author says surprisingly little about the composition of local electorates. He simply treats them as a homogeneous bloc. However, socioeconomic conditions again seem to play an important role in whether or not brand politics are an option for local politicians. The 'economic autonomy' of voters, for instance, plays a crucial role in determining the leverage politicians have over the electorate.[9] Arguably, in provinces where local socioeconomic conditions create 'locked-in' electorates, politicians have no need to engage in brand politics, as captive voters have to support them anyway.

Even if the electorate is fairly autonomous economically, therefore forcing politicians who cannot rely on patronage to engage in 'brand politics', existing research on 'brand politics' has shown that 'a good brand resonates with the public, but there is a high level of uncertainty and error in assessing a brand's potential resonance…'.[10] How receptive electorates are to 'brand politics' is another reason why future research on the politics of social identity needs to disaggregate 'the electorate', as the composition of local populations may determine what kind of 'brand politics' emerge and whether they help politicians to stay in power. Recent research on local strongmen suggests that, in fact, different classes think very differently about pork-barrelling or highly symbolic (but expensive) prestige projects conducted in the name of 'development'.[11] Brand politics of the kind that Banharn pursued in Suphanburi may therefore not be very successful in more affluent provinces. Future research will need to show whether brand politics are simply adjusted to such local circumstances or abandoned altogether if the electorate is more affluent.

Overall, Nishizaki's innovative work points to new directions in the study of local strongmen in South East Asia and beyond. Strongmen may stay in power for decades not due to coercion, the distribution of patronage or the adoption of actual policies that improve the socioeconomic well-being of the electorate, but rather because they strike a chord with the aspirations, dreams and hopes of local electorates. However, such research on the politics of social identity needs to examine whether the mass of voters is really the amorphous, web-like[12] entity the author portrays it to be, or whether the electorate is actually structured along

9   Kelly M. McMann (2006), *Economic Autonomy and Democracy: Hybrid Regimes in Russia and Kyrgyzstan*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
10   Pasotti *supra* note 5, at pp 4–22.
11   Rebecca Weitz-Shapiro (2014), *Curbing Clientelism in Argentina: Politics, Poverty, and Social Policy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
12   One of Yoshinori Nishizaki's advisers during his PhD at the University of Washington was Joel Migdal, who coined the term 'weblike societies'. See Joel Migdal (1988), *Strong Societies and Weak States: State–Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.

socioeconomic (or other) dimensions, with important consequences for the kind of brand politics described in this book. Nishizaki's book also raises new and important research questions about the sustainability of 'brand politics'. As the author points out, Banharn has failed to routinize or institutionalize his rule in Suphanburi province and it is therefore unlikely that his children will take over after his death (p 200). Brand politicians, in other words, struggle to entrench themselves to the degree that strongmen whose power is rooted in patronage and/or coercion do. The Thai case is therefore an important starting point for emerging discussions in scholarship on South East Asian countries that introduced elections more recently. For instance, the growing visibility of families and national politics[13] has prompted discussion about the Philippinization of Indonesia.[14] However, given the absence of election-related violence in Indonesia and the relative economic autonomy of most of Indonesia's electorate, it is arguably more accurate to speak of a 'Thailand-ization' of the country's politics, with 'brand politicians' emerging but subsequently struggling to entrench themselves in politics. In other words, local strongmen need to be differentiated into 'brand politicians' and 'bosses/local autocrats' since the power bases of these two types are very different, with potentially important consequences for the democratization of politics. While the former may be able to establish enduring political dynasties, the latter's grip on power seems to be temporary and unable to prevent other players from emerging in the local political arena.

[13]   See, for instance, Michael Buehler (2013), 'Married with children: the second round of direct elections for governors and district heads shows that democratization is allowing powerful families to entrench themselves in local politics' *Inside Indonesia*, Vol 112, July–September.

[14]   See, for instance, Andreas Ufen (2006), *Political Parties in Post-Suharto Indonesia: Between Politik Aliran and 'Philippinisation'*, GIGA Working Paper No 37, GIGA, Hamburg.