Introduction: decropping the countryside

In the popular imagination, and as a subject of study, the Southeast Asian countryside is commonly associated with particular forms of economic activity, types of social organization and characteristics of landscape. It has also long been considered a target of ‘development,’ in the sense of overcoming backwardness, isolation and deprivation. Rurality is generally understood to be characterized by mainly smallholder-based agricultural livelihoods, by villages that form the basis for residence and social organization amongst households, by cultivated fields surrounded by natural features including rivers and forests, and by poverty relative to urban areas.

Much recent study of the Southeast Asian countryside has focused on the rapid pace of change away from relatively uncomplicated peasant-based livelihoods toward more complex, differentiated and mobile occupations (Rigg 2001). The village as a neo-logistic construct was critiqued by Kemp a generation ago (Kemp 1987), and village as an uncomplicated overlap of locality and social space has similarly been problematized in its specific country context for some time (Hirsch 1993). Yet, conceptions of rurality among city dwellers have in many cases failed to keep up with the changing countryside. The emergence of a large urban middle class has also constructed certain images and expectations of a countryside that harks back to an idealized past, raising questions not dissimilar to those associated with post-productionist countryside studies in Europe and elsewhere (Halfacree 1995; Wilson and Rigg 2003) and putting a different perspective on the need for or desirability of certain aspects of development.

In this chapter we seek to delink rural space from exclusively agrarian livelihoods, communities and landscapes, and to challenge some of the more static and romanticized constructions of Southeast Asian rurality, based largely but not exclusively on the experience of Thailand. We seek to understand rurality as a relational term, in particular as that which is not urban yet which is also not wild, and as a discursive construct rather than as an essentialized phenomenon. We challenge persistent popular and – to some extent – academic notions of rural spaces, both as essentially agricultural in character and as being made up of uncomplicated and harmonious communities. We thus employ the term ‘decropping’ in two related senses. First, we show how, despite the continued overall expansion of agricultural croplands in an absolute sense, the Southeast Asian countryside has in the process of development become progressively delinked from farming as a defining part of rural landscapes and social organization. Second, we explore
the ‘cropped’ views of the countryside that persist amongst many urban middle class groups and that are reinforced through media, helping to shape a new politics of urban-rural relations. We ‘decrop’ these views with examples of encounters that challenge outsiders’ normative notions of the rural, which in turn lead to disappointment and tensions when rural spaces and the people who occupy them turn out to be something different.

We commence with a case study of a peri-urban village in northern Thailand that has seen rapid and extensive change in a single generation, away from a quintessentially rural landscape and community, with few markers of development as commonly understood, toward a complex and partly urbanized physical and social space. We reflect on the expectations of middle class newcomers to this village and their encounters with a reality different to imaginaries derived from persistent urban constructions of the Thai countryside. We use this case as a springboard to introduce themes that we then extend to a review of related literature on changing rural spaces in Southeast Asia, bringing in examples from several countries. Finally, we conclude by considering what this decropped picture of rurality means for ways of thinking about rurality as the development moniker fades.

Encountering and decropping a changing rural space

Until at least the 1980s, the village of Nong Khwai in Hang Dong District of Chiang Mai Province was unreservedly rural in most of its markers of landscape and community. The village adjoined the forested slopes of Doi Suthep mountain, the landscape surrounding the village was dominated by paddy fields and some dryland cultivation with forests as a backdrop, the houses were mainly traditional wooden constructions, and the roads were unsurfaced laterite. The overwhelming majority of residents were rice farmers, who supplemented their livelihoods with local forest resources both for subsistence (mushrooms and other non-timber forest products) and for household-level artisanal purposes, notably wood turning and a range of other handicraft products. Irrigation was organized and locally governed through traditional muang-faai (channel and weir) systems, and the temple was the main focus of ritual and social activity. Although the village is located less than 15 kilometers from the center of Chiang Mai, road access was poor and the majority of villagers had only infrequent interaction with the city. This remained a rural place subject to contemporary discourses of development, which produced ways of thinking about future prosperity and served as a means for the state to enact its programs (Hirsch 1990).

A generation later, development has more or less disappeared from the vocabulary through which people discuss or think about their futures. Nong Khwai is part of the outer peri-urban zone of Chiang Mai. It is linked to the city by a four-lane highway along the main irrigation canal. While the landscape continues to include significant areas of rice cultivation, most of the fields are owned by outsiders, and most of those working them from temporary encampments during the wet season are Hmong and other upland farmers from elsewhere who rent the land. Few people living in Nong Khwai consider themselves to be farmers any more. Nevertheless, they refer to themselves collectively, and in distinction from newcomers, as ‘chaobaan,’ or villagers.

Whereas virtually all the residents of Nong Khwai in the 1980s had been born there, had married into the village or had arrived there to clear forest land for cultivation, the residential population of Nong Khwai is now very diverse. Other than descendants of the earlier village households and their spouses, Nong Khwai is home to many migrant workers. These include Shan construction workers from Myanmar who live in camps run by well-to-do villagers who have invested in small construction businesses that employ these migrants. They also include a large number of dormitory workers, most of whom come from more remote villages elsewhere in northern Thailand and who work either in Chiang Mai town or for more proximate
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employers including the Night Safari and Royal Flora Exhibition that are part of Chiang Mai’s visitor-oriented economy. In turn, these two attractions brought with them an expanded road, which has catalyzed other changes in the area. The dormitories are also owned by better-off villagers, built within the residential space of the village and hence neighboring the houses of the original residents.

The diversity of Nong Khwai is further extended by a significant number of middle class and foreign residents who have bought land and built houses on the edge of the village, taking advantage of its green landscape, mountain views and relative proximity to urban and peri-urban services. This phenomenon of “moving to the [peri-urban] countryside” (Tubtim 2012) is characteristic of large parts of peri-urban Chiang Mai and extends to many other parts of Thailand. Many of the newcomers bring expectations of rural life that are in part shaped by idealized notions of community, peaceful and traditional aspects of rural environments, and a conscious desire to live away from the city and in a more ‘organic’ mixed setting than would be found in one of the many gated communities that also dot the peri-urban countryside around Chiang Mai.

Newcomers do not always find what they expect. Many encounters help us to illustrate the gap between the spaces of rurality found in this slice of Thai countryside, on the one hand, and the expectations of newcomers on the other, a gap that is further widened by certain expectations of local people toward the newcomers. Three of these are detailed below by way of illustration. Our contention is that the confounded expectations exhibited by these encounters are the product of a highly ‘cropped,’ selective notion of the rural amongst Thailand’s urban middle class. As such, the case of Nong Khwai, while no more ‘typical’ of a Southeast Asian rural community than any other could be in such a variegated region within and between countries, nevertheless provides us an entry into a broader consideration of the dynamic rural spaces that are part of Southeast Asia’s contemporary development landscape.

**Encounter 1: property and privacy**

While the residential section of the village of a generation ago was largely unfenced, today fencing between houses is very common. Longstanding residents may have hedges with barbed wire, and some of higher economic status have concrete fences. Nevertheless, front gates are left wide open during the daytime. In contrast, most of the middle class newcomers have taller fences for privacy and tend to fully or partially close their sliding gates most of the time. However, each of the middle class houses tends to have one or more families of locals with whom they have closer relations, often through hiring for domestic help and who therefore have access to the house and garden.

On one occasion, a local villager who worked in the garden of a middle class householder cut a bunch of ripe bananas from a tree in her garden and then invited another elderly local villager, who lived nearby, to cut the banana leaves for her to use in making fermented bean wrappings. The owner of the garden in which the banana tree was located found out and expressed surprise that the local villager had cut the banana leaves that still had decorative value without asking her for permission, given that it was inside the fence. In turn, the elderly lady wondered out loud, with amusement, what the point was of keeping leaves on a tree that produces only one crop of fruit and is then barren.

Apart from the aesthetics versus utilitarian values associated with banana plants, this encounter reflects different notions of privacy. For the middle class newcomer, the fence is a spatial marker of privacy, within which any act requires authorization or permission from the owner. Villagers respect such privacy in many respects, but this does not extend to use of some plants,
nor to issues such as noise from village cottage industries during the daytime or music at nighttime, or to smoke pollution from burning leaves. Furthermore, for newcomers there is a reluctance to assert their ideals of privacy, for fear of giving offence. More often, space is shut off by physical measures such as closed gates. In a more fundamental sense, newcomers achieve privacy by building their houses on the available larger spaces at the edge of or even completely separate from the main residential sections of the village.

**Encounter 2: trees and normative landscapes**

Many newcomers are attracted to Nong Khwai for its proximity to the hills and its generally open and green environment, with many residual markers of rurality such as rice fields, trees and bamboo-hedged lanes. The association between environment and countryside is strong, the more so for those moving from Bangkok. There is a significant urbanite discourse about the value that villagers place on conserving their environment and managing their natural resources, and this is particularly strong in the case of northern Thailand with its forested mountains, traditional irrigation systems and so on.

Newcomers’ assumptions are challenged in Nong Khwai in a number of ways, none so materially poignant as in the case of trees. Along public lanes and in a few cases of trees on private land adjacent to the lanes, there have been several cases of removal of ancient trees for fear of their threat to power lines in the event of toppling during a storm. In 2012 there was a case of a large tamarind tree in the community area of one of the hamlets of Nong Khwai that the village elders wished to cut down. They went to the length of selling the tree to a lopper, without consulting the rest of the community. Some of the middle class group expressed concern about the loss of this greenery, and in the end a compromise was reached whereby the tree was coppiced. But in many other cases, trees have been removed with little sentimentality on the part of villagers, to the dismay of newcomers who find their shade and their views compromised. This included the cutting of several trees in the community area for the expedience of not having to do maintenance of branch lopping to protect the community buildings and clearing leaves.

Similarly, more and more villagers are replacing hedges with concrete fences exposed to the road. This is for a combination of showing status, the convenience of not having to trim vegetation, as well as providing security for those who are away for work during the daytime. Meanwhile, newcomers often place a green façade in front of their iron-railed front fences.

**Encounter 3: expectations of community and shared labor**

Longstanding residents in the village maintain a practice of shared labor, albeit in a much reduced set of activities than previously. Reciprocal labor use in agriculture disappeared a generation ago. However, for certain public works, in particular trimming of roadside weeds and hedgerows, maintaining community buildings and grounds, rubbish collection and beautification, there are regular public service days on which each household is expected to provide one member to contribute her or his labor, usually for a morning. Announcements are made a few days ahead of time through the village loudspeaker. This labor is organized on a sub-village hamlet basis.

The urban newcomers have a complex engagement with this practice. On the one hand, shared labor is entirely in conformity with their expectations of collective action and tends to reinforce their idea that they are living within a ‘community.’ On the other the timing of labor days is often inconvenient, occurring irrespective of weekdays and weekend distinctions, and during working hours. The timing is decided with no consultation. Furthermore, the announcements over the loudspeaker are hardly audible, compounded by the fact that they are made in
the local northern Thai dialect. Sometimes the newcomers learn of the day by word of mouth, or when they see villagers embarking with hoes and rakes on the day itself. Sometimes they join in, but more often not.

At the same time, many locals do not want to bother the middle class newcomers directly, feeling ambivalent about talking to them on this matter in cognizance of class difference. Many of the newcomers are ‘achaans’ (university lecturers or others of educated status), making it awkward for villagers to invite them to help given that it involves a request to use manual labor. Partly too, there is a continuing sense among the villagers that community membership for these purposes does not extend to newcomers, neither the wealthier urbanites nor the poorer construction camp and dormitory residents, who in any case are too busy making a day-to-day living to join in. The option of paying money (100 baht) instead of sending labor on the day has been discussed among villagers but has not yet been enacted, partly because the villagers who do join in are unable to do the same to the significant number of villagers, particularly from younger families, who do not participate, in part because they also work outside. There is also reluctance to create a norm of people paying money instead of giving time and labor.

Challenging quintessentially rural spaces

The changing nature of the Southeast Asian countryside has been documented in numerous studies, sometimes explicitly in terms of development and its impacts, but also through productionist-oriented conceptual lenses such as that of agrarian change. Here, we emphasize those aspects that challenge the longstanding ideas of rurality in contraposition to urbanity and urban values. Our challenge to the quintessentially rural extends to a brief review of literature that shows the phenomenon to be much more generalized than the single case of a peri-urban community in northern Thailand.

To begin with, it is important to note the difference between absolute and relative trends away from rurality as commonly conceived. For example, the total area of cultivated land in Southeast Asia has continued to expand, at the same time that agriculture as a share of GDP, of employment and as a component of rural people’s livelihoods has declined (De Koninck and Pham Thanh Hai 2017, Table 3). In this sense, the ‘decropping’ of the countryside denotes diversification rather than decline.

Despite the wealth of studies on agrarian change and other aspects of a changing rurality in Southeast Asia, popular and touristic images of the quintessential Southeast Asian countryside have nevertheless also been reinforced by certain scholarly works. Such studies need to be understood in the socio-political context of the times and places in which they were written. In Thailand, for example, we can trace some of the persistent understandings of time-honored rurality to writing dating from the post-leftist movements of the 1980s. For example, the political economist Chatthip Nartsupha’s influential 1984 book Setthakhid Muubaan Thai nai Adit (The Thai Village Economy in the Past) presented a detailed analysis of traditional rural livelihoods and culture, based on oral histories carried out in Thailand’s poor, and at that time still quite isolated, northeastern region of Isan (Nartsupha 1999, translated from 1984 original). Seri Phongphit (1986) of the so-called community culture school, presented a quite idealized purview of rural living (see also Phongphit and Hewison 1990). These works were written in the context of civil society and academic attempts at the time to challenge the negative ideas of rural life as backward and uncultured. They also sought to promote alternative paths to development triggered by disappointments with failures in the ability of fast-track mainstream growth strategies to improve the position of the rural poor, and also in the wake of the collapse of the earlier leftist challenges to capitalist development. Documenting, and sometimes idealizing, rural
culture was prominent in such studies. The work of many NGOs has been built on ideas in these studies, often reflecting quite a static perspective on rural Thailand, and furthermore one that easily transforms into normative expectations that “the answer is in the village” (NGO Coordinating Committee, cited in Phatharathananunth 2002, 27) in a traditionalist sense.

More recently, ethnographic studies of rural change have emphasized change away from the rural past. Of particular note is Jonathan Rigg and Peter Vandergeest’s (Rigg and Vandergeest 2012) collection of community restudies by senior authors one or two generations following their original (mainly PhD-level) accounts. Fourteen separate village re-studies carried out for this book between 2006 and 2009 document the fundamental changes in rural ways of life over the space of a generation or two. Five of these were based in different regions of Thailand. Michel Bruneau’s work on agricultural and social change in villages of northern and north-central Thailand (Chiang Mai and Phitsanulok provinces respectively) since the 1960s, Philip Hirsch’s analysis of generational change in a community of western Thailand (Uthaithani Province) since the mid-1980s, Jonathan Rigg’s detailed analysis of household level change in northeastern Thailand (Udonthani Province) since the early 1980s, Peter Vandergeest’s study of a virtual disappearance of the physical markers of village as recognizable rural community despite a seemingly re-agrarianized landscape in Songkhla Province, and Chusak Withayapak’s study of ethnic identity and village change in northern Thailand (Nan Province) since the early 1990s all present the countryside as highly dynamic but in often surprising ways that reveal non-linear paths of development and change (Bruneau 2012; Hirsch 2012; Rigg and Salamanca 2012; Vandergeest 2012; Witayapak 2012). Each brings a unique lens to the understanding of rural change. Yet, findings common to all these studies are the relative decline of agriculture in rural livelihoods, the geographical widening of horizons and experiences by rural people, and hence the unpacking of common assumptions about rurality and trajectories of rural change. Other studies in this collection cover village-level change in Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam, and the generalized findings reveal broadly similar patterns.

The above studies seek to understand what has happened in particular local contexts as rural places are incorporated into the wider political, economic, social and environmental currents of development. There is, however, also a growing literature that specifically and critically targets the construction of rurality based on stereotypical images and imaginings. These often go on to deconstruct the manufactured landscape or portrayal of such. One of the most interesting and entertaining of these is Rigg and Ritchie’s (2002) study of the Regent Hotel near Chiang Mai to show how rural landscape has been created for high-paying tourists in northern Thailand. They identify a post-productivist trend that sees “a shift from production in the countryside to consumption of the countryside” (ibid, 360).

The findings of these critical academic studies of Southeast Asian rurality are not always mirrored in popular imaginings. While it is somewhat speculative to trace the source of the popularly imagined countryside, a combination of media and educational influences no doubt plays an important part, showing that such imaginaries go well beyond the constructed tourist experience to embed themselves in domestic urban understandings of non-urban spaces and livelihoods. In particular, urban middle class views of the countryside have been shaped by a combination of textbooks together with enduring magazine, literature and television images. In Thailand, the popular 1960s novels on village headman Phu Yai Li have been serialized in numerous television versions. Thai textbooks inculcate ‘traditional’ values that are supposedly based on simple rural ways of life. Soap operas present the countryside and country people in the most bucolic way imaginable. A recent program has a well-known actor filming herself going ‘back’ to the land in a series titled, “Chan ja pen chaonaa [I’m gonna be a (rice) farmer].” And so on. Furthermore, the rural images that many middle class Thais have inculcated are
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influenced in no small part from their visits, or at least media exposure, to Europe, and this can be seen in the architectural and landscape design features of rural idylls that the wealthier amongst these construct in northern Thailand, around the edges of Khao Yai National Park northeast of Bangkok, in Kanchanaburi Province to the west of Bangkok and elsewhere. These are sometimes manifested as kitsch (for example restaurants adorned by Dutch-style windmills on northern mountain roads) and sometimes achieve closer resemblances to the pastoral character of European landscapes.

There is also a political project in construction of the quintessentially rural, Buddhist way of life in Thailand based on limited wants and needs. Most starkly, the ‘sufficiency economy’ [setthakid phor phiang] ideal has found its way into official discourse since it was first publicly espoused by the king in response to the 1997 financial crisis. The ideal exhorts moral behavior and modest material expectations of the rural poor, with an implicit critique that debt and other ills are the product of their illicit and extravagant behavior. Indeed, so pervasive has this normative idea of appropriate ways of living become that it has post-facto been employed as an interpretive framework to laud and promote rural development programs that predate the sufficiency economy narrative (Singsuriya 2015).

Thailand is perhaps more exaggerated in the gaps between urbanite images and rural realities than other countries in Southeast Asia, given the combination of wealth gaps, urban primacy of Bangkok and the place of rural-urban dynamics in the country’s recent and ongoing political imbroglio. However, we can see at least nascent parallels in Vietnam, the Philippines and Indonesia as those countries’ mainly city-based middle classes at once distance themselves economically from their rural compatriots while building nostalgic images of rural authenticity as a basis for national culture.

The nostalgic imagery of the countryside from Bangkok and other urban centers in Southeast Asia contains a mix of a disappearing past and one that in many respects never existed. Many years ago, Jeremy Kemp wrote about the “seductive mirage” of the Southeast Asian village community, at a time when the point of critique was as much fellow anthropologists as it was a more superficial popular understanding of the stereotypical Southeast Asian village (Kemp 1987). Jan Bremen wrote in a companion volume of the “shattered image” in his historical account of the construction and deconstruction of village society in Southeast Asia (Bremen 1987), showing how European notions of village and community had influenced not only understandings of, but also colonial policy toward, rural social organization in the region. We find an interesting resonance between these ‘outsiders’ unwitting imposition of their own constructs of rurality and that of contemporary domestic urbanite expectations of their own rural landscapes and social behavior.

Of course, not all of the imagery in question is invented or imagined. Some of the nostalgia is based on partial realities. Rural production was previously more exclusively geared to farming, and rice farmers did often privilege cultivation of their own food before producing for the market. People did share their labor for planting and harvesting. Housing materials were derived more from wood and other local materials than they are at present. Buffalo were used to plough the fields. But these aspects of rural Southeast Asia hark back a generation or more in most places. To emphasize the ever-growing gaps between lingering imagery of rural Southeast Asia and present-day realities, we briefly review the work of three authors who have explored rural-urban interactions to demonstrate the decreasing relevance of dichotomized discussion of rurality and urbanity.

Singapore-based US anthropologist Eric Thompson shows the gap between nostalgic, yet derogatory, Malaysian urban elite representations of the village (kampung) and the realities of everyday life. In particular, he shows that despite superficial characteristics of housing and landscape,
urban values are firmly rooted in village society. Most economic activity is based on commodity production and services in and outside of agriculture, unlike the bucolic and subsistence-based assumptions of Kuala Lumpur middle classes. Social interactions and other relations, along with occupational stratification, moreover, follow a more urban than rural pattern. In other words, the spaces of kampung have become "socially urban" (Thompson 2004).

Australian-based Vietnamese specialist in agrarian change and natural resource management To Xuan Phuc carried out a fascinating study of wealthy urbanites’ (dai gia) second homes northwest of Hanoi at Ba Vi. Ba Vi is at the transition of the Red River Delta into the mountainous northwest of Vietnam that the French geographer Pierre Gourou described in stark terms in the 1930s (Gourou 1936), and the area has long been farmed by ethnic minority Muong people. Phuc shows that members of the rising Hanoi-based upper middle class have occupied this rural space through speculative purchase of land, based on a desire to situate themselves during their leisure time amidst scenic rural landscapes driven by a type of nostalgia for markers of traditional village life, but with little desire for interaction with social aspects of rurality. The huge gap between urban rich and rural poor in a country long committed politically to the ideal of economic equality is made stark by the contrast in respective house styles and mutual disdain between the newcomers and locals (To Xuan Phuc 2012).

Finally, and in the most encompassing, indeed almost encyclopedic way, the prolific Singapore-based British geographer Jonathan Rigg (1998) has written extensively over at least two decades of the "rural-urban interpenetration" that breaks down any notion of an isolated rurality separate from urban influence and experience. This is driven by the increased mobility, communication and economic interactions between countryside and city. He shows systematically that the basis for rural economy is much "more than the soil" (Rigg 2000), delinking poverty in Thailand from full-time farming (Rigg 2005). Tellingly, Rigg’s prescient writing was counter-trend from the early 1990s in his skepticism about grassroots-based development as espoused by the community culture school of NGOs in the face of the rapid pace of rural change (Rigg 1991). More recently, Charles Keyes has written of ‘cosmopolitan villagers’ in recognition of the expanded world view and mobility of people with homes and/or origins in rural northeastern Thailand (Keyes 2012).

Beyond the constructions of rurality and the gap between imagined and actual realities of the Southeast Asian countryside, there remains an economic and political salience to rural imagery. At one level, portraying the countryside in its cropped form continues to attract tourists into the rural economy, albeit with limited trickle-down to people living in the sites visited. This extends increasingly to domestic tourism in search of getaways from the pressures of urban life. At another level, performance of rurality is part of the political scene, for example when farmers protest in ‘typical’ rural garb, such as the indigo mor hom shirts that northern and northeastern Thai farmers long ago ceased to produce and wear in daily life, but that immediately mark them as representing downtrodden rural interests. When less familiar markers of rural ways of life such as loud music, pickup trucks and other ‘modern’ trappings find their way into protests on city streets, such as at Ratchaprasong during the drawn out 2010 protests that were ultimately put down violently by the government and military, there is less sympathy from the powers that be and many urban residents. Andrew Walker (2012) has written of ‘Thailand’s Political Peasants’ to show not only how rural people have become fully incorporated into the rough and tumble of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary politics, but also of how the peasant imagery and discourse is employed within it. Meanwhile, Charles Keyes has shown, from his studies in northeastern Thai communities since the early 1960s, how rural people have finally ‘found their voice’ in national affairs (Keyes 2014), presenting uncomfortable challenges to urban elites accustomed to deciding who rules the country.
Conclusion: developed or decropped Southeast Asian rural spaces?

The countryside in Southeast Asia is changing rapidly, perhaps even more so than urban spaces. Many markers of development exist in places they were absent a generation ago. But not all such changes follow the linear paths and patterns of modernization, commodification and de-agrarianization that come with the moniker of ‘development.’ Indeed, there is a reflexive aspect to understandings and associated expectations of rurality, on the one hand, and physical, social and economic manifestations of rurality on the other. In other words, outsiders’ impositions and rural people’s expressions both shape the nature of the ‘rural’ in Southeast Asia. But this rurality is always a relative notion, particularly in relation to urbanity and sometimes also to modernity.

The gaps between imagined and experienced rurality can lead to clashes. Many of these clashes are everyday, even mundane in character, such as the encounters described above in the case of Nong Khwai village. Others are clashes of an academic nature, both within the scholarly literature as critique and counter-critique that refine our understanding of rural Southeast Asian realities, and between academic and popular notions of the rural. Yet other clashes are of a political nature, as rural majorities express themselves vis-à-vis actual or perceived oppressive urban elite interests, and as political actors take advantage of, or otherwise employ, rural identities for particular ends.

Our intention in this chapter has been to ‘decrop’ the Southeast Asian countryside, not only by reminding of the ever-diminishing relative significance of farming in the economic and social lives of people who live there, and of the fading relevance of development as a way of thinking about change, but also by suggesting that ‘cropped’ versions of the rural lands are based on selective understandings or deliberate obfuscations of reality. We do not take issue with the deliberate and discursive deployment of such selectivity. Rather, we suggest that a fuller understanding of the Southeast Asian countryside needs to be based in research that explores such selective representations of rurality as a subject in its own right.

References


