

Abstracts

Peasant Strategies in Asian Societies: Moral and Rational Economic Approaches—A Symposium

Introduction

CHARLES F. KEYES

This introduction considers the issues raised in the debate, recently joined in the works of James Scott and Samuel Popkin and explored in the papers in this symposium, regarding the relative salience of moral and rational economic approaches to the study of the adaptation of peasantries to worlds transformed by their incorporation into modern states and into a global economy. The author offers a refiguration of theoretical assumptions, arguing that, in order to understand the variations in modes of adaptation that have been described in the symposium, it is necessary to assume that the constraints on the worlds of peasants generated by political-economic changes are made meaningful for social action not only in terms of instrumental rationality, but also with reference to culturally distinctive moral premises.

The Moral or the Rational Peasant? Competing Hypotheses of Collective Action

DAVID FEENY

The analytical and empirical foundations of the moral-economy and rational-choice approaches to peasant behavior are critically examined. Normative decision-making models are compared to models that assume household utility maximization. Differences between collective and individual rationality are highlighted. The importance and implications of risk aversion are explored. The effect of the introduction of markets on the economic security of peasant producers is considered, and evidence from Southeast Asian economic history is used to test the implications of both approaches. The results serve to challenge and qualify the arguments put forth by the moral economists on both analytical and empirical grounds.

Moral Economy or Political Economy? The Peasants are Always Rational

PIERRE BROCHEUX

James Scott's and Samuel Popkin's theories must undergo the test of historical facts. The author considers three points: the village community; the individuals and

the spirit of enterprise; and the peasant protest movements in Vietnam. Having not worked in exactly the same fields (South or Central Vietnam) or on the same periods (colonial or postcolonial eras), both Scott and Popkin have generalized their own experiences. In fact, the Vietnamese peasants cling to “moral economy” or engage themselves in “political economy” according to the general situation and to what is at stake for them. Thus, the two explanatory schemes—Scott’s moral economy and Popkin’s political economy—cannot be used separately or one against the other but must be used together to permit an adequate consideration of the transformations of the Vietnamese peasantry.

The Moral Economy of the Kiangsi Soviet (1928–1934)

JAMES M. POLACHEK

The Kiangsi Soviet marked the first systematic attempt by the Chinese Communist party to use existing peasant models of collective action for purposes of building an independent military apparatus. The history of that attempt is here examined against the background of the moral economy school’s claim that revolutionary movements in twentieth-century Asia have successfully wedded themselves to such traditional patterns of action in order to achieve larger political purposes. This analysis of the politics of mobilization inside the soviet area finds that peasant society was traditionally too stratified and too divided against itself to offer unified resistance to threatening external forces, and emphasizes that mobilization tended to engage collective competitive instincts, setting groups of peasants against each other, rather than against hated representatives of post-traditional authority in the countryside. This finding is in turn used as a point of departure for raising some larger questions about the model of revolutionary legitimacy postulated by James C. Scott and the moral economists.

Indulgence and Abundance as Asian Peasant Values: A Bengali Case in Point

PAUL R. GREENOUGH

The author questions the assumptions of an “Asian school of scarcity and risk,” of which James C. Scott is the principal exponent, using Bengali peasant history as a case in point. He argues that it is more likely that the subsistence traditions of Bengal derive from locally generated values of abundance and indulgence than from a universal “moral economy” and suggests that detailed accounts of subsistence traditions in other parts of Asia will confound attempts to prove that European experience is a reliable guide to Asian practices.

Economic Action and Buddhist Morality in a Thai Village

CHARLES F. KEYES

Although the Thai-Lao peasants living in rain-fed agricultural communities in northeastern Thailand have experienced some improvements in their socioeconomic situation as a consequence of the growth of the Thai economy since the mid-1950s, these peasants still constitute the poorest sector of the population of Thailand. Moreover, the socioeconomic position of the rural northeastern Thai populace has actually declined relative to that of the urban populace and that of the rural populace living in central Thailand. The economic disadvantageous position of Thai-Lao peasants is linked with a sense of being an ethnoregional minority within a polity that has been highly centralized since reforms instituted at the end of the nineteenth century. Much of the social action of Thai-Lao peasants with reference to the political-economic constraints on their world can be understood, as long-term research in one community reveals, as having been impelled by rational calculation aimed at improving the well being of peasant families. The ways in which peasants have assessed in practice the justice of these constraints as well as the ways in which they have assessed the limits to entrepreneurship must be seen, however, as being rooted in moral premises that Thai-Lao villagers have appropriated from Theravāda Buddhism as known to them in their popular culture.

The Problem of the Fifth Modernization—A Review Article

JAMES P. HARRISON

Statements on Democracy Wall in Beijing and in posters and underground publications throughout China, especially in 1978 and 1979, document in depth for the first time the arguments of Chinese dissidents. The dissidents maintain that without "the Fifth Modernization" of guaranteed personal freedoms and "true socialist democracy," the four modernizations cannot succeed and China cannot become a "great socialist country." Recent publications, some of which are reviewed in this article, give a fair sampling of these arguments and must be taken into account in future evaluations of the Chinese Revolution.

Women in Recent Chinese Fiction—A Review Article

YUE DAIYUN
CAROLYN WAKEMAN

Women have assumed a prominent role in China's post-Cultural Revolutionary fiction, just as they did in the literature of the May Fourth period. Addressing issues

that apply not just to women but by implication to society as a whole, writers like Zhang Jie and Zhang Xinxin experiment with new literary forms to describe the special problems that continue to afflict women: problems of male domination and discrimination and, in some ways more burdensome, problems of self-definition and self-fulfillment. Recognizing the obstacles to their equality, productivity, and happiness, they are somewhat disappointed and disillusioned about the new society in which they once fervently believed.