

# SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

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## <Book Review>

**Danny Marks**

**Tamaki Endo. *Living with Risk: Precarity and Bangkok's Urban Poor*.  
Singapore: NUS Press in association with Kyoto: Kyoto University Press,  
2014, 360p.**

*Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2, August 2015, pp. 421-424.

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of the same. The account would be more convincing still were she able to include more first-hand discussions, at least from the rulers or aristocracy themselves. As it stands, the closest her retelling comes to such a perspective is probably in her discussion of early nationalist periodicals, UMNO proceedings, and more radical nationalist statements. I suspect the fault lies more in what sources are available than in Amoroso's sleuthing.

The publication of this long-awaited book—adapted from Amoroso's doctoral dissertation at Cornell University—contributes to our knowledge of Malay political and social history, and at a time when discussion of the Malay rulers and their stature is especially keen (notwithstanding how out-of-sync *lèse-majesté* laws would be with Malay history, as detailed here). More broadly, the work serves to illuminate the actual workings of indirect rule: how and why colonial authorities worked with, and altered, extant structures and patterns of authority, and the implications of those adaptations for anticolonial struggles and postcolonial development. As such, the work will be of interest to scholars not just of Malaysia, but of British and other European colonial projects more broadly—and it is written in such a way as to be accessible and useful to both a specialist and interested non-specialist audience. With this volume, Donna Amoroso adds to her already considerable academic legacy—including, of course, the *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, which she was instrumental in founding.

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### ***Living with Risk: Precarity and Bangkok's Urban Poor***

TAMAKI ENDO

Singapore: NUS Press in association with Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2014, 360p.

Given the paucity of books and articles written about the day-to-day living of the poor and the informal economy in Bangkok, this book is a welcome addition. It offers readers a solid understanding of the contemporary urban lower class, revealing the homogeneity and stratification within this class. In particular, it investigates their daily survival strategies and responses to various risks, focusing on issues related to residence and occupation. It also examines whether upward mobility occurs within this group and what upward mobility means for members of this group.

The structure of the book makes it obvious that this book is Endo's doctoral thesis. Consequently, the first chapter is her literature review. She discusses various useful topics related to the urban lower class, including the informal economy debate, frameworks to capture the internal structure of cities, the risk response processes of the urban lower class, the place and organization units of their strategy for survival, and the life course analysis method. While these topics them-

selves are interesting, the overall chapter is disjointed: there is no strong thread or broader argument tying the various topics together and it is not clear what gaps in the literature this book is addressing.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the Thai government's policies toward the urban poor, particularly the development of slum-related policies. Endo's main critique of these policies is that they are premised on a linear notion of modernization. As a result, they failed to address the needs of urban lower class. While the author briefly mentions the Community Organization Development Institute (CODI), a government agency seeking to help urban slum communities upgrade their communities, the chapter would have been stronger if she had discussed the merits and drawbacks of the organization's slum-upgrading Baan Mankong project in this chapter. The project seeks to improve the financial capacity, social capital, and land tenure security of slum-dwellers.

In Chapter 3, Endo outlines her field survey and the case study communities. This chapter provides background information about their response to risks. Chapter 4 delves into the occupation dynamics of the case study communities. The author classifies their occupations, and then, using this data, sketches occupational profiles of the two communities. She finds not only that educational barriers unsurprisingly determine the range of occupational choices but also that each individual's occupational profile is constructed historically, based on individual preferences and changing external conditions. Chapter 5 details day-to-day life in the communities, including the process of constructing housing, creation of living space, and the function of communities as residential spaces. It describes how individual residences have been transformed into residential spaces and jointly these spaces form communities.

Chapters 6 and 7 jointly investigate a fire in one community, looking at responses in terms of residence (Chapter 6) and occupation, particularly among the self-employed (Chapter 7). The response of the community challenged the notion that migrants will return to the rural communities or origin when faced with adversity or risks. Rather, they decided to recreate their community near their original site. The state's poor management of the restoration process adversely affected the community, forcing them to stay long in shoddy, temporary housing. Chapter 7 shows that the fire severely hurt the livelihoods of self-employed workers, who lost their productions as well as the space they used to sell their goods. The fire hurt female workers and the elderly the most. Overall, many in the community were forced to enter a lower employment group and as a result, overall welfare standards dropped.

Chapter 8 analyzes female occupational paths and class disparities, focusing on the experiences of women in slum communities. From the late 1980s onward, many women were forced out of factories, particularly if they were middle-aged or the elderly. Many of them became self-employed and their type of self-employment depends on their resources and household conditions. It is clear from arguments made in previous chapters and this chapter that a large gender disparity exists in terms of occupational opportunities for women.

Overall, this book has a number of strengths. First, the empirical data is very thorough, well-classified, and detailed. The charts and tables in the book are easy to read and interpret. This clearly shows that the author has spent considerable time and energy in collecting and sorting through the data which should be useful to future researchers investigating similar issues. Second, the book does a good job of fulfilling one of its primary aims: showing disparities within the urban poor which have arisen due to a number of factors: gender, age, educational level, family conditions, and large macro-economic forces. It supports this argument by using both quantitative and qualitative data. The author colorfully recounts the life stories of some of the people she interviewed, especially in the book's vignettes. Third, the book nicely captures how market forces push urban dwellers to live in areas at risk, such as after a fire. She uses data to show that rental price are high and so are land prices. Consequently, those whose houses were destroyed by the fire were forced to continue to live in slum areas. Last, the vignette, "Community Development: Conflict and Existing Realities" (pp. 184–190) is fascinating. Complimenting Elinoff's work (2014), it reveals some additional insights into the problems of slum communities working with CODI's Baan Mankong project, such as an overly heavy work burden placed upon a few individuals in the community, numerous project delays, inflexibility regarding payment schedules, and an insufficient number of CODI staff.

However, the book is not without its weaknesses. One glaring shortcoming is the poor quality of the writing. The book is littered with confusing or grammatically incorrect sentences such as "macroscopical tides of change have hit the work and living spaces of this urban lower class" (p. 6), and long-winding ones such as "Securing initial investment funds and acquiring skills are essential to entering a high productivity occupation, but the scale of resources available is determined naturally based on the limitations imposed by individual and household conditions" (p. 235).

Another problem is that while the book is filled with valuable nuggets of information and insights about the urban lower class, together the book has no coherent broader argument and does not clearly tie these nuggets and insights together to form a bigger picture of socio-economic dynamics within urban slum communities. The conclusion does not cohesively bring together the chapters and answer how these communities respond to risks. Further, the conclusion could have been strengthened by suggesting some policy implications that arise from the findings. Endo does a good job critiquing some of the Thai government's policies affecting slum communities but disappointingly does not suggest anything new at the end. This suggestion is related to a broader critique of the book. It is unclear what the book is saying that is new to the literature that analyzes the urban lower class—scholars before have showed that disparity exists within this class. Also, the author does not answer the questions of what is unique about the lower class in Bangkok and whether one should expect to see similar trends worldwide or in Asia-Pacific.

In addition, while the author commendably seeks to gain a "more holistic understanding of the lives" of the urban lower class as well as their "encounters with risk and the risk response

process” (p. 16), there seems to be gaps in the understanding presented in this book. First, how can this discussion be holistic if there is nothing mentioned of political tactics and strategies taken by the urban lower class? For example, in my own research, a restaurant owner in a slum community in Don Muang district in northern Bangkok has acquired the most amount of capital in the community in terms of housing and occupation and is resisting the implementation of the Baan Mankong project because he does not want to share his capital with those who have less than him. Further, the urban lower class has responded to risks through its choice of community, district, and national leaders in elections, protesting against floods, and its participation or lack thereof in Baan Mankong projects. Therefore a discussion of the political strategies these community members have undertaken would complement this research. Second, although this book was published in 2014, the author mentions that fires are one of the biggest risks to communities but fails to mention the 2011 floods which severely hurt the livelihoods of the urban poor in Bangkok (and led to deaths of many) and which, I would argue, were a bigger setback than the fires were. Last, the author presents only economic data but never asks the communities about their own perceptions of risk—perhaps fire and economic lay-offs are not the biggest risks. Some more ethnographic data therefore would have also strengthened her data.

Despite these shortcomings, this book is nonetheless a useful contribution to the literature on the urban lower class in Southeast Asia. It valuably shows the connection between residence and occupation and reveals the differences within the class and some of the drivers of these differences. I recommend it as a good introduction to those interested in learning more about the daily lives of the urban lower class and the dynamics of the informal economy in cities in Southeast Asia.

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## ***Cars, Conduits, and Kampongs: The Modernization of the Indonesian City, 1920–1960***

FREEK COLOMBIJN and JOOST COTÉ, eds.  
Leiden: Brill, 2015, 351p.

*Cars, Conduits, and Kampongs: The Modernization of the Indonesian City, 1920–1960* is a commendable collection of essays that present modernization and the city not as ahistorical ideal-types but