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<Book Review>

Benjamin C. McLellan

Marlyne Sahakian. *Keeping Cool in Southeast Asia: Energy Consumption and Urban Air-Conditioning*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, x–xviii+229p.

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Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University

eye on the household labor available and the risks entailed vis-à-vis agricultural needs and responsibilities” (p. 164). In that way, Hmong people can create their own “life project” and “make livelihood decisions that are entirely rational while rooted in their cultural context” (p. 170).

Despite a slight imbalance in research between the two sides of the border, with a greater focus on the Vietnamese side than the Chinese, this study remains an academic achievement and makes a significant contribution to anthropological studies on the livelihoods of people on the frontiers of the Southeast Asian Massif. The research embraces an actor-oriented livelihood approach and strongly confirms the active agency of Hmong people in dealing with and making the best of an adverse situation. This is a representative case of “indigenization of modernity” (Sahlins 1999). The study also raises several research ideas, such as questions on ethnic minority: “The mere fact that the Hmong in Asia number roughly the same as the whole population of Laos should prompt critical thinking on the very notions of nation and minority” (p. 16). Tourism and hiking in Lao Cai, on the Vietnamese side—emerging livelihood activities that have an influence on Hmong society—need to be further investigated.

Nguyen Thi Le

Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University

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Keeping Cool in Southeast Asia: Energy Consumption and Urban Air-Conditioning

MARLYNE SAHAKIAN

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, x–xviii + 229p.

This book offers insights into some critical areas of social and environmental aspects of the sustainable development paradigm. While being focused on south-east Asia (SEA), and in particular on the Philippines, the book has relevance to other areas of the world where growing urbanization, economic development, and the current and potentially-exacerbated effects of climate change are likely to have cumulative non-linear effects on energy consumption (the impact of which will not be equivalent to the sum of the individual components of change).

The book is largely based on interviews with a variety of general and institutional stakeholders, which lends a personal touch to the case studies. Quantitative statistics and evaluation are not widely used. There are sections including good precis of historical developments leading to

the current situation, although brief. As a book that seeks to engage the reader in understanding a variety of social contexts and influences in the usage of air-conditioners and other cooling devices in the Philippines, the book succeeds. However, in building a quantitative and cross-country comparison, it has some shortcomings. The following paragraphs review the book chapter-by-chapter in brief, highlighting particular points of strength or weakness.

The introduction of the energy situation in Chapter two, the author tries to contextualize the energy consumption in the region, and the importance of some specific climatic and socio-economic and political factors. While nominally discussing “consumption,” the chapter in fact focuses to a large extent on the production or generation side, mainly examining electricity. The quantitative drivers for consumption are not well-examined, as there is little discussion of the split between sectoral demand. While this is not the focus of the book *per se*, it leaves some of the correlation between increased cooling load, energy consumption, and environmental impacts on a weaker footing. While discussing some of the major drivers in the residential sector, acknowledgment of commercial and industrial demand would have been welcomed. Moreover, the limiting factor of resource potential—for both conventional and renewable resources—would have been a useful point to consider in the comparison of various SEA nations.

Chapter three provides a good, if brief and perhaps a little outdated (given the publication date, much of the literature cited is from the 1980s–90s, while developments in the 2000s are minimally-addressed) overview of the historical introduction of air-conditioning, the socio-economic disparities in its utilization, and cultural variations in usage. The importance of built-environment and passive cooling is somewhat understated, although the technological lock-in associated is an important concept raised in this context.

The fourth chapter is one of the most useful of the book, with an overview of some of the main reasons for people (in the Philippines) utilizing air conditioning. Briefly, these are summarized as: sleeping better at night, health and safety, preparing and caring for a child, personal cleanliness, as a status symbol, enabling or driven by apparel fashion, air-conditioning at work, and the use in public spaces. Most surprising, perhaps, is the use for health and cleanliness—by the purification of polluted-air, particularly in urban environments. While this is somewhat decoupled from energy (in the sense that the pollution is largely from transportation), it is an interesting consideration for other contexts where there may be more of a feedback loop between increasing demand from air-conditioning leading to greater pollution from power generation.

The fifth chapter addresses the highly important issue of buildings—from the history of the influences on Philippine architecture to the preferences of consumers and the competing forces in the endeavor to develop sustainable, green buildings. Two particular points are clear from this discussion—firstly, that there has been a strong westernizing tendency in Filipino architecture, which has perhaps led to poorly-adapted building stock constructed based on inspiration from temperate western countries that perform inadequately in tropical environments. Secondly, that

globalization has reinforced this tendency, with these western-style buildings having a fashion status value attached—as opposed to the native styles. In effect, this has contributed significantly to the locked-in need for air-conditioning.

The last two chapters discuss some of the “opportunities for change through social learning.” This describes some of the broader landscape of political, cultural, economic, and specifically educational requirements and current constraints on environmentally-oriented social-behavioral change. Despite some contextually-specific elements (for example the influence of the Catholic church and a focus on one of the domestic energy companies), much of these sections is very general. As a positive, this means that the concepts discussed are likely to be widely applicable. To take a negative stance however, this leaves a gap—what is the specific and contextually essential component of social learning in SEA, particularly the Philippines?

From the overall perspective, it is hard to say that this book lives up to its title. There are a few immediate reasons for this. Firstly, while the book title includes Southeast Asia, the majority of the content focuses on the Philippines. More could have been done to extend the contextual correlation with other SEA nations. Secondly, by the final two chapters, the focus on urban air-conditioning and energy consumption also becomes highly diluted and diminished. What is the overall relevance and applicability of the social learning to energy usage and air-conditioning? What is and will be the overall potential impact? These types of questions remain unsatisfactorily unanswered, at least for this reader.

Benjamin C. McLellan

Graduate School of Energy Science, Kyoto University