

PhD Research Scholarship Opportunity at National University of Singapore

Asian Smallholders: Transformation and Persistence

With an ideal start date of 1 January 2016, Research Scholarships (RS) are available at the National University of Singapore (NUS) for prospective PhD students interested in completing research on the transformation and persistence of rural, agrarian smallholders in East and Southeast Asia. Successful applicants will complete their degree in either the Department of Geography or Sociology at NUS (applicants should state their preference for which department they seek to join; applicants may also indicate their desire to complete their PhD either under the Anthropology or Sociology stream within the NUS Sociology PhD programme). Deadline for application is 5 November 2015.

The RS covers four years of full-time study (fees and maintenance). Additional funds are also available to cover fieldwork and conference attendance. The end-date of the award will be the fourth year of study. The scholarship is targeted for applicants who have basic training and skills in the following areas and will continue to focus on these topics in their PhD programmes:

- Comparative Asian Studies
- Anthropology, Geography, Sociology or related fields
- Agrarian and/or Rural-based research in Asia

The PhD thesis work should be an independent project which fits broadly into the overall research project on “Agrarian Smallholders: Transformation and Persistence” (PI: Eric C. Thompson, Department of Sociology, NUS; co-PI: Jonathan Rigg, Department of Geography, NUS):

Agrarian transformations in East and Southeast Asia have taken a path that is distinct from that in countries of the global North as well as other regions of the global South. Notably, smallholdings and smallholders appear to persist even in the context of deep structural and ideational change. The ‘agrarian question’ was first raised by Karl Kautsky at the end of the 19th century. Reflecting on industrialization and urbanization in Europe, Kautsky predicted that traditional agrarian smallholder modes of production would eventually fall into extinction, being gradually overrun and made untenable by the spread of capitalist modes of production.

Intriguingly, whereas this prediction has indeed proven accurate for many regions of the world including Europe, Latin America and elsewhere, much of the East and Southeast Asian experiences have stood out as a sharp exception. While smallholding has persisted in this region, it has however, not persisted unchanged – agrarian transitions are an ongoing process in the 21st century, often taking novel and unforeseen directions.

What we see across East and Southeast Asia are the following patterns and trends in the smallholder sector:

- The continuing presence of smallholdings even in the context of rapid economic growth and deep structural change.
- A diversification of the classic smallholder into a range of ‘class’ types where the links between landholdings, occupation, livelihoods and wealth are diverging.
- A growing separation between smallholders and smallholdings in line with the diversification of the sector.

While the trends we have outlined are widely observed throughout East and Southeast Asia, they are not well explained. Why have smallholders and smallholdings persisted, when so many have predicted or proclaimed the ‘end of the peasantry’? Why has land consolidation *not* occurred throughout much of East and Southeast Asia? Why have some smallholders in some places become ‘middle-income’ peasants engaged in successful commercial farming, while others have remained impoverished or been pushed away from farming into a wider range of marginal pluriactive occupations?

The research aims to explore the puzzling persistence of the rural, agrarian smallholder sector in Asia, taking a historical-comparative, multi-scalar, cross-country approach. The research will be carried out in eight East and Southeast Asian nations (Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos), through national, district and household scale analyses. It is expected that the successful candidate will direct their attention at one or two of these eight countries, depending on their interests and knowledge.

Through this research, we seek to test the following hypotheses [with the primary scales of comparative analysis in brackets]:

- (i) Smallholder persistence has occurred through multiple, though not entirely unique paths (historical-comparative analysis of social, political and economic processes). Within this diversity, both common and unique factors can be identified across the eight cases. [National, District, Households]
- (ii) National-level policies support/inhibit smallholder persistence. [National]
 - a. Land tenure and property rights policies have a measurable effect.
 - b. Economic and trade policies have a measurable effect.
 - c. Political stability (or lack thereof) has a measurable effect.
- (iii) Local (district-level) implementation mediates the effect of national level policies. [District]
 - a. Local politics (e.g. conflict over landholdings; disputed visions for land reform) hinder the implementation and mute the effect of national policy directions.
 - b. Key district level actors may leverage national initiatives to accelerate the direction of national-level policies.
- (iv) Diversification of agricultural and non-agricultural activities has supported smallholder persistence. [District, Household]
- (v) Individuals and households are responsive/resistant to national-level policies. [Household]
- (vi) Smallholder persistence involves a transformation from productivist to post-productivist modes of land tenure (from producing to consuming the countryside; relative to national affluence). [National, District, Household]
- (vii) Conceptions of the “smallholder” (standards for what counts as agrarian smallholdings) vary considerably from nation to nation; but nevertheless can be captured within a range of variation that make it feasible to identify rural/agrarian smallholdings cross-nationally as a single empirical construct. (Qualitative analysis of the use and measures of smallholdings in policy documents and land records along with evidence from qualitative interviews.) [National, District, Household]

Ultimately, our objective is to understand systems of rural land use and tenure in contemporary Asia, with a particular emphasis on smallholders. The methodology employs a combination of top-down and bottom-up analysis, including historical and ethnographic analysis as well as archival research. The research will also develop a comparative understanding of contemporary smallholders in Asia through three levels or scales of analysis; the national, district and ethnographic scales. This multi-level and multi-

method approach will enable us to address the research hypotheses set out above and wider empirical and theoretical concerns. We do not see these being neatly answered by one method or scale of analysis but rather our approach as an integrated whole contributing to their resolution.

Departments of Geography and Sociology at NUS

The QS World University rankings (2015) place NUS in the top 20 universities in the world and number one in Asia. In the same rankings, and for the third year running, the Department of Geography (NUS) (<http://www.fas.nus.edu.sg/geog/>) is ranked in the top ten Geography programmes globally. The Department of Sociology (NUS) (<http://www.fas.nus.edu.sg/soc/>), also for the third year running, has been ranked in the top twenty Sociology programmes globally. Both departments rank first their respective fields in Asia.

Application Procedure

Graduate research students in the Departments of Geography and/or Sociology follow a semi-structured programme that involves a taught component in the first two years of registration. The programme allows a PhD student to acquire and develop to a high standard both subject-specific and transferable skills, thus enabling a student to access a broad range of future employment opportunities – in business, industry, consultancy, education, research etc.

Applicants must be university graduates with at least an upper second class honours degree or equivalent and at the time of the award of the Research Scholarship. Applications from candidates who also already hold a graduate degree (e.g. Masters) are particularly welcome. There is no restriction on the nationality of applicants.

Please note that the application deadline (for a January 2016 start) is 5 November 2015. For further information and details on pursuing application, please contact in the first instance Associate Professor Eric C. Thompson (email: soect@nus.edu.sg) and/or Professor Jonathan Rigg (email: jonathan.rigg@nus.edu.sg).