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**Asia in 2025:
Great power rivalry, contested politics,
and global disorder**

viella



CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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RICE, POWER, AND POLICY LEGACIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Jamie S. Davidson, *Rice Politics in Southeast Asia: Legacies of the Green Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2026, 332 pp. (ISBN: 9781009624640)

Jamie S. Davidson's *Rice Politics in Southeast Asia* offers a compelling and ambitious re-interpretation of the political economy of rice in three key Southeast Asian states: Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Moving beyond conventional explanations rooted in culture, rent-seeking, or electoral politics, Davidson advances a historically grounded and theoretically innovative argument that the enduring protectionism in rice sectors across these countries is best understood as a legacy of the Green Revolution's success rather than its failure. By foregrounding the long-term institutional and ideational consequences of a transformative developmental episode, the book positions itself at the intersection of comparative political economy, historical institutionalism, and Southeast Asian studies.

The book is structured in two main parts, preceded by a substantial introduction and followed by a comparative conclusion. The first part reconstructs the preconditions and transformative effects of the Green Revolution in the late 1960s and 1970s. Davidson begins by outlining the structural constraints faced by rice-deficient Southeast Asian states, emphasizing geographical limitations and demographic pressures that rendered full self-sufficiency elusive. Beyond explaining technical agricultural factors, the author shifts the analytical focus to the political and economic implications of this structural condition. In doing so, he highlights the centrality of rice both as a staple food and a politically charged commodity intimately tied to questions of legitimacy, development, and state capacity.

The core of Davidson's argument emerges in his treatment of the Green Revolution as a "critical juncture" that fundamentally reshaped both policy trajectories and political regimes. The dramatic increases in rice production were facilitated by technological innovations such as high-yielding varieties, irrigation systems, and chemical inputs. Davidson does not treat these developments merely as agrarian achievements. Instead, he presents them as important sources of political legitimacy. In Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines alike, the success of state-led rice production programs contributed to regime consolidation, poverty reduction, and broader pro-

cesses of structural transformation. Crucially, Davidson contends that this success generated a durable institutional and ideational legacy that would outlast the immediate gains of the Green Revolution.

The second part of the book examines the post-Green Revolution period, focusing on the persistence of rice protectionism through state-controlled import regimes and continued intervention in domestic production. Through detailed country studies, Davidson demonstrates how policies such as import monopolies, price controls, and subsidies remained remarkably resilient despite sustained pressure from international financial institutions and domestic reformers advocating market liberalization. While the Philippines eventually implemented partial liberalization in 2019, Indonesia and Malaysia maintained more robust protectionist frameworks. This comparative perspective allows Davidson to highlight both common patterns and national divergences, particularly in the institutional configurations and political coalitions underpinning rice policy.

One of the book's most original contributions lies in its conceptualization of "production nationalism". Davidson introduces this term to describe a coalition of state elites, bureaucrats, and allied actors who derive both material and symbolic capital from the pursuit of rice self-sufficiency. These actors are shaped by their involvement in the Green Revolution. They exhibit what the author terms an "emotional belief" grounded in pride. This refers to an affective commitment to the idea that national dignity is tied to domestic production capacity. This conceptual move represents a notable departure from standard rationalist accounts in political economy, as it foregrounds the role of emotion and identity in sustaining policy regimes over time.

Methodologically, the book employs a comparative historical approach, combining archival research, secondary literature, and fieldwork insights. Davidson situates his analysis within the framework of historical institutionalism, drawing on concepts such as path dependence and critical junctures to explain policy continuity. At the same time, he engages extensively with alternative explanations. These include culturalist interpretations of rice as a symbolically charged commodity, agricultural political economy models, and rent-seeking theories. While acknowledging their analytical value, Davidson ultimately argues that these approaches fail to adequately account for both the timing and the durability of protectionist policies.

The strengths of *Rice Politics in Southeast Asia* are considerable. First, the book makes a significant theoretical contribution by linking the legacy of the Green Revolution to contemporary policy regimes in a systematic and persuasive manner. By reframing a widely studied developmental episode as the foundation of long-term institutional persistence, Davidson opens new avenues for understanding how policy success can generate path dependence. Second, the concept of production nationalism is both innova-

tive and analytically productive. It provides a useful lens for examining how state elites internalize and reproduce development paradigms, bridging the gap between material interests and ideational commitments. Third, the comparative scope of the book enhances its explanatory power, allowing for nuanced cross-national analysis while maintaining a coherent overarching argument.

Nevertheless, the book is not without its limitations. One potential concern lies in the extent to which the Green Revolution is positioned as a near-deterministic explanatory factor. While Davidson convincingly demonstrates its importance, the emphasis on this single historical juncture risks overshadowing other dynamics that may have contributed to the persistence of rice protectionism. For instance, the role of contemporary political coalitions, evolving global market conditions, and shifting patterns of rural-urban relations could have been more fully integrated into the analysis. In this regard, the dismissal of alternative frameworks at times appears somewhat overstated, particularly those grounded in agricultural political economy and rent-seeking.

A related issue concerns the operationalization of “emotional belief”, exceptionally the role of pride in sustaining production nationalism. While the incorporation of affect into political economy analysis is a welcome and innovative move, the empirical grounding of this concept remains uneven. The extent to which pride can be systematically identified and measured across different actors and contexts remains unclear. This ambiguity raises questions about its analytical robustness. In some instances, the argument relies on inferred motivations and offers limited demonstration of causal mechanisms.

Furthermore, although the book foregrounds state elites and policy frameworks, it pays comparatively less attention to the agency of farmers and other subaltern actors. Given that smallholders constitute a significant portion of both producers and consumers in the rice economy, a more detailed exploration of their responses to and interactions with state policies would have enriched the analysis. This is particularly relevant in light of the book’s acknowledgment that many smallholders are net consumers of rice and may not uniformly benefit from protectionist measures.

Finally, the comparative design is a major strength, but it also raises questions about generalizability. The focus on three net-importing countries provides a coherent analytical frame, yet it leaves open the question of how the argument might apply to rice-exporting states in mainland Southeast Asia or to other staple crops in different regional contexts. Expanding the comparative horizon could further test the broader applicability of Davidson’s theoretical claims.

Despite these limitations, *Rice Politics in Southeast Asia* stands as a significant and thought-provoking contribution to the study of development, political economy, and Southeast Asian history. Its central insight – that

policy success can generate enduring institutional legacies – offers a valuable corrective to narratives that focus primarily on failure and dysfunction. By integrating historical analysis with theoretical innovation, Davidson provides a framework of interest not only to Southeast Asia specialists but also to scholars concerned with the long-term dynamics of development policy more broadly.

In sum, this book represents a rigorous and original intervention in the literature on food politics and state formation. It contributes meaningfully to the historiography of development in Southeast Asia, particularly by reinterpreting the Green Revolution as a technological, economic, and political episode with lasting institutional consequences. By situating policy continuity within a historical framework of path dependence and elite belief formation, Davidson productively bridges development history and political economy. While some claims invite further scrutiny, its analytical ambition and empirical richness make it an important reference point for future research.