

## SUMMARY OF THAILAND GEORGIST LECTURES

at Chulalongkorn University, Tuesday, Feb 12, 2013; and  
at Mae Fa Luang University, Tuesday, February 26, 2013.

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As part of my visit to Thailand and Korea for the month of February, I sought to offer ideas on Georgist economic philosophy wherever an audience was available. The single largest presentation was at Chulalongkorn University, the country's pre-eminent institution of higher learning, before an audience of approximately 150 government officials and academics.

The host for this event was the Faculty of Engineering Department of Surveying, which also includes the discipline of real property assessment. It was announced on rather short notice -- only about three weeks -- but the audience was composed largely of officials from the Ministries of Natural Resources and Environment (including the Department of Lands), Finance, and the Prime Minister's office.

The interest of the attending audience was land valuation, particularly using GIS technology. There is a strong interest in the techniques I was able to address, and programs of assessing land values, at least at the block level, have already begun. Work at the individual parcel level will come next. Thailand is fortunate in having a cadre of trained government servants who will be able to institute sound land valuation, even though the programs are just beginning.

My two lectures were separately titled "Why Tax Land Value?" and "GIS Use in Land Valuation." Each lecture, along with questions and responses, lasted about one hour. A final lecture was given by Dr. Wicha Jiwalai about the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) program of increased technical collaboration. There is currently a concerted effort to cooperate on trade and economic development programs in the region as a whole. His title was "MRA in Surveying for AEC: Chances and Impacts on Cadastral Surveying in Thailand." (The acronyms stand for Multi-Nation Regional Association and Asian Economic Community.) Following this all-afternoon program, a reception and dinner was proposed for those interested in further informal exchanges.

The arrangements were initiated by Dr. Charasroj Bothdamrith, a senior policy planner in the Office of the Prime Minister. I have known Dr. Charasroj for several years through personal family contacts, and his courtesies were important in arranging the event. The on-site logistical arrangements were made by Dr. Chanin Tinnachote in the University Department of Surveying and Assessment. Dr. Chanin was a most gracious host for the day.

The central arguments I made were essentially two: 1) that taxing land value is the most ideal tax revenue design, and 2) that land value taxation is only possible when the assessments of land values are done well. Once the land assessments are shown to be sound and credible, the policy people, involved in the institution of tax revenue design, will be able to sell and implement a land value tax regime. I emphasized that, as philosophers have frequently noted, "ought implies can," and only by creating land value maps will the politically aware public appreciate the relative disparities in market value among land parcels in various localities.

As a former Peace Corps volunteer, I am fluent in the Thai language, and I began with cursory remarks in Thai for

about five minutes before switching to English. In most instances, the audience has studied abroad and had considerable fluency in English. Indeed it might have been insulting for me to lecture in Thai before people whose English was far better than my Thai. (It is, after all, fifty years since I first served in a rural town in the North. And in the "new Thailand," many of these mid-level public officials have Masters' degrees and more, and several have studied abroad, and/or in international schools based in Bangkok.) Yet even though most of my audience was able to understand English, most of my powerpoint presentation consisted of diagrams, graphics and maps. This allowed quick demonstration of my facility with the disciplines involved and of the general state-of-the-art examples I have collected.

The land value maps have been done largely by my partner and colleague Bob Breglio in New York and are able to show both high quality land valuation projects as well as contrasting maps with only mediocre valuations. I have also collected land value maps from many other sources for comparison. I also was able to show land value graphics using other visual techniques, particularly those based on the ideas and applications of nineteenth-century economic geographer Heinrich von Thunen. I emphasized that geographers have picked up on these ideas far more than have economists. Indeed one woman in the audience with a degree in Geography afterward approached me to say that it was as if she was back in school all over again--stuff she knew well! The graphics and diagrams were enormously effective. As it happened also one of those in the audience that approached me later was Thailand's Map-Info representative.

The outgrowth of my effort is yet to be seen, but I believe that it will bear substantial fruit. I left a stack of my business cards with the website addresses of the most compelling Georgist material, and left a pile of books for the university library as well as courtesy copies of the two books I've had a hand in -- Tucker's *The Self-Supporting City*, and Smiley's *Crumbling Foundations*. People were also made aware of the Georgist website created in Thai by Retired Navy Admiral Suthon Hinjiranon. Because this website contains materials grounded in Georgist ideas and considerable writing by George himself -- much translated into Thai by Admiral Suthon -- the website offers a complement to the technical information that I imparted. See <http://utopiathai.webs.com/>.

My next meeting was with Dr. Charasroj and Admiral Suthon in the more intimate setting of the Prime Minister's office on Thursday afternoon. Although Dr. Charasroj will retire from public service later this year (1913) at the mandatory age of 60, he is sufficiently attracted to the Georgist philosophy that it will likely play a continuing role in his professional life. His proficiency with GIS technical tools and satellite imagery, as well as his appreciation of the basic Georgist message gives us promise that the ideas are kept alive in Thailand. My paper on the historical roots of Thai treatment of land economics was rejected last year by the lead Journal published by the National Institute of Development Administration. It was clear from

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the blind reviewers' comments that they had no comprehension of this line of thinking whatsoever. Dr. Charasroj now has a copy of that paper so that it may be introduced to Thai readers through another venue. My hope was that upon leaving Thailand and on to Seoul at the end of February to plan the 2014 Georgist conference with the people there (see [www.theIU.org](http://www.theIU.org)), I'll have interested enough Thai tax people that we'll have some solid representation there. That remained to be seen.

My next visit was to the North of Thailand where I'd served my Peace Corps stint some fifty years earlier. The second largest city in the North, Chiangrai, is now the home of a new university, founded in the name of the Queen Mother about ten years ago. See <http://www.mfu.ac.th/2012eng/index.php>. The vision is to have all classes conducted in English within a few years, as already many students are drawn from other Southeast Asian nations proximate to Thailand. Because the youngest son of my closest family friends is now a faculty member in the School of Liberal Arts, and an instructor in Natural Resources and Environmental Management, I have a close working relationship with this School, and have lectured there on every occasion of my visits. See Dr. Apisom Intralawan's website at <http://www.mfu.ac.th/school/liberalarts/S-gen.html> and [http://www.mfu.ac.th/nremc/content\\_detail.php?id=150](http://www.mfu.ac.th/nremc/content_detail.php?id=150).

On this occasion, I made a presentation on how the recapture of resource rents could be done in Thailand comparable to practices prior to the adoption of Western notions of land ownership. I've written on this subject at length although the most important paper has not been published. The title of this new presentation was "Bringing Back our Commons." Because this was a class of graduate students from several Southeast Asian nations and whose English was moderately proficient, I was able to talk at length in English. Indeed many of the concepts I employed for Thailand had analogs in Burma, Laos, Nepal, Vietnam, and the Philippines as well. Dr. Apisom said that he intended to refer to this lecture as a framework for other material in his seminar course. Besides my visit to the University, I also participated in a workshop hosted by the Mayor of the City of Chiangrai, in which a Professor of Urban Planning from Chiba University in Japan was also welcomed.

Following my week in Chiangrai Province, I departed from Thailand for Seoul, the third stop of my twenty-two days in Asia. That visit constitutes a separate story.>>