

Book Reviews

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Finding Their Voice: Northeastern Villagers and the Thai State. By Charles Keyes. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2014. xiv+262 pp.

Northeast Thailand, known as Isan, is the largest of Thailand's four regions, covering nearly a third of the total land area, and accounting for about a third of the kingdom's population. It has always been the most impoverished part of Thailand, characterized by poor soils, uncertain rainfalls and flooding, and it remained tied to a subsistence-oriented economy while much of the rest of the country developed in the post-war period (p. 75). The vast majority of Northeasterners are more closely related, culturally and linguistically, to the Lao people of neighbouring Laos, and the region was only properly integrated into modern Thailand at the beginning of the twentieth century. A strong sense of ethnic difference from the Central Thai or Siamese persists, and Keyes shows (p. 7) how people who used to think of themselves as *khon lao* (Lao people) now tend to identify as *khon isan*, demonstrating a "growing sense of ethnoregional identity" which is quite new. Out-migration from the Northeast to Bangkok began in the 1960s, and in the 1970s expanded to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States (p. 151), and later to Taiwan. Today Northeasterners account for a large proportion of Bangkok's working classes and have formed the mainstay of the popular "Red Shirt" protests in favour of a democratically elected government led by supporters of Thailand's exiled former Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra.

Charles Keyes began his anthropological fieldwork in a village in the Northeast of Thailand in 1962, and for over half a century has revisited and studied the village, the region and the country. This is an authoritative and masterly work, a sequel to his 1967 *Isan:*

Regionalism in Northeastern Thailand. It charts the development of the largely isolated and traditional peasants of “A Small Rural World in the Early 1960s” (pp. 136–40) towards the “cosmopolitan villagers” (p. 14) of the twenty-first century. These migrants still remain “farmers”, he stresses, since they regularly return to their home villages to assist with farming, but the “cosmopolitan nature of rural northeasterners” is little understood by the Bangkok elite and middle-class Thai who still characterize them as stupid and ignorant (and politically naïve) subsistence agriculturalists (p. 186 ff.). The implication is that the “sufficiency economy” championed by Thailand’s king and the government installed following the 2006 coup is almost totally out of touch with the realities of Thailand’s present-day rural populations.

Chapter One provides a historical overview and a summary of the book’s argument, presenting the village and its Buddhist temple as the “bedrock of Isan identity” (p. 3). Chapter Two describes the physical characteristics of the region and gives an account of its history from the twelfth century up until the consolidation of Thai control around the time of the Franco-Siamese Treaty of 1893, which ceded the Lao territories on the left bank of the Mekong River to French Indochina. Chapter Three deals with the Buddhist millennial uprisings against Siamese rule at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, arguing that from the start, “Siamese officials and northeasterners understood power in quite different cultural terms” (p. 48).

Chapter Four charts the gradual integration of Isan into the Thai nation-state up to and immediately following the Second World War. Keyes stresses the extension of modern communication and transportation networks to the region, and how educational reforms led to the village primary school becoming the locus of a new sense of Thai national identity. Following the 1932 coup which established a constitutional monarchy, Northeasterners began to play a part in national politics as members of the National Assembly, torn between the rivals Pridi Phanomyong, who led the anti-Japanese Free Thai movement during the war, and the military officer Plaek

Phibunsongkhram. Fears of communist and separatist sympathies among Northeastern politicians dated back to shortly after the 1932 coup, when several arrests of political leaders were made (p. 58) and a severe repression of Isan politicians associated with Pridi took place as Phibun assumed power after the war. This repression brought home to Northeasterners the extent of discrimination against them (p. 74). Northeastern politicians, however, continued to participate in the second Phibun government (1947–57), arguing strongly for more development attention to the Northeast. It was around this time that the phrase *panha Isan*, the “Northeastern problem”, became common (p. 89).

Chapter Five deals with the period of military dictatorship from 1957 to 1973, when earlier hopes of a democratic future were dashed. This was a time of massive U.S. support for Thailand against what was seen as the communist threat in neighbouring countries. From 1960 the Northeast, seen as particularly vulnerable to communist propaganda owing to its poverty, became slated for counter-insurgency efforts and development programmes (p. 102). Keyes draws on his early fieldwork for some of this chapter, showing how every morning the village primary school children would chant their respects to the three “pillars” of Thailand — Buddhism, the king, and the nation (p. 95). But villagers had begun to draw a telling distinction between the king as a symbol, and the often corrupt or arrogant bureaucrats who served the people in his name (p. 97).

Of course, as in Laos, threats of communism and separatism were constantly exaggerated to obtain foreign funding (p. 216 n. 17), but what should have become a positive feedback loop did not work. Economically, the reason for the growing attraction of communist ideologies despite such intensive developmental efforts must have been that this funding was not properly delivered. The trickle-down problems of top-down development interventions have been closely examined by others. Keyes traces the growing disaffection of Northeasterners at this time largely to the lack of “legitimate institutional means” (p. 113) to express their grievances.

Chapter Six links the failure of the communist struggle, after the brief period of parliamentary democracy in 1973–76, directly to the

subsequent growth of civil society organizations and NGOs from the 1980s on. Not only did Northerners, Keyes argues, have access to news of the terrifying realities of communist government in neighbouring Laos and Cambodia, but the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) failed to appreciate the nature of a rural society based on the values of Theravada Buddhism (pp. 126–27) and was unable to offer villagers a compelling “vision of a political order” (p. 125). After the amnesty of 1980, Thailand saw the growth of a Buddhist ecology movement and a huge mushrooming of NGOs, many of them staffed by former left-wingers.

Chapter Seven reminds us of how the “small rural world” of Northeastern villagers embraced the new ideology of “development” (*kanphatthana*) in the 1960s and how those villagers turned to urban migration as a means of increasing rural incomes. It is the unevenness of economic growth (p. 136) which has led, after their participation in various nationwide natural resource protest movements in the 1990s, to their participation in a “new politics of Thailand” (p. 175) today. Buddhist values have continued to inform Northeastern villagers’ understandings of “development” (p. 171) and provide a moral basis for their lives.

The final chapter brings us very nearly up to date with the recent politics of the successors to Thaksin. Northerners throughout the last century slowly developed a sense of national belonging, but at the same time have become acutely aware of their own ethno-regional differences from the other peoples of Thailand. Earlier hopes of democratic participation in national affairs were disappointed, and neither the CPT nor the elite model of development has held much appeal for them. Contrary to popular perceptions, they are now “cosmopolitan villagers”, increasingly determined to make their voices heard in the future of Thailand as a nation. The book ends on an optimistic note which, given the frequent vagaries of the Thai political system, one can be certain will eventually be justified.

Keyes writes lucidly and compellingly and has a rare gift for penetrating analysis as well as meticulous ethnographic detail. This book is a worthy outcome to fifty-odd years of research on the country and its peoples, and will remain the authoritative work, I am

sure, for a long time to come. It has copious and helpful figures and tables, and a nice touch is the coupling of black-and-white inserts of the same theme but many decades apart, such as the ploughing with a water buffalo taken in 1963, and harvesting rice with an “iron buffalo” in 2005 (p. 139). The book is highly recommended as an authoritative outline of Thai political history from the particular vantage point of the vital Northeastern region, from village to nation.

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Ties that Bind: Cultural Identity, Class, and Law in Vietnam's Labor Resistance. By Tran Ngoc Angie. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2013. 340+xiv pp.

It is ironic that, just as workers around the world are discovering their voice, social scientists have been telling us that the concept of “class” is at best an anachronism. What people wear, the music they listen to, their place of origin, their ethnicity, their citizenship status and their consumption patterns are more important in defining their “identity” than is the brute fact of being an employee. And in the application of a crude postmodern psychology, it is supposedly our “identity” that determines how we relate to others and how we act socially.

The most influential exponents of this post- (or, more accurately, anti-) Marxist perspective in Asian labour studies have been Elizabeth Perry and Ching Kwan Lee. Elizabeth Perry argued that Shanghai workers in the 1920s and 1930s mobilized around social networks based on place of origin, gender and skills. This approach has