SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia Vol. 34, No. 3 (2019), pp. 607–18 DOI: 10.1355/sj34-3e
 ISSN 0217-9520 print / ISSN 1793-2858 electronic

SOJOURN Symposium

On *Owners of the Map: Motorcycle Taxi Drivers, Mobility, and Politics in Bangkok* by Claudio Sopranzetti. University of California Press, 2018.

Review essay by Charles Keyes with a reply from Claudio Sopranzetti.

Keywords: Thailand, exceptionalism, collective action, political mobilization, mobility, capitalism, entrepreneurialism, urban ethnography.

Review Essay: Charles Keyes

Claudio Sopranzetti's *Owners of the Map* is at once two different books. As a contribution to scholarship it explores how motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok epitomize an aspect of the urban environment given little attention by other scholars—namely, the way mobility shapes urban life. It is also a unique first-hand account of a momentous political movement—the 2010 uprising of those known as Red Shirts against a government installed after a military coup in Bangkok in 2006. This account differs from other accounts of that uprising in that Sopranzetti was an active participant observer in this momentous event.

In the first part of the book, Sopranzetti shows how Bangkok was transformed from a traditional city originally organized around waterways—the Chao Phraya River and canals (*khlong*)—to a city modelled on colonial cities organized around major roadways (*thanon*) and then to a modern city with buses and trams and more recently the skytrain. As public transportation significantly expanded in an ever-enlarging city, there developed the need for people to get from

their homes to nodes in the system. Even as early as the 1950s, some young men primarily from villages in northeastern Thailand took up jobs in pedicabs to meet this growing need.[1] As the Thai economy continued to expand, the demand by urban dwellers for transport between homes, markets, bus stops and later skytrain stations also grew exponentially. Pedicabs disappeared and were initially replaced by taxis. But taxis in the enlarging urban world had difficulty navigating the small lanes known as *soi* that lay between the main roads. Enter the motorcycle taxi.

In the 1960s, as wealthier urban Thais acquired private cars, the Bangkok dwellers who made their living by working in recently established factories, hotels, stores, shopping malls and the rapidly growing service sector made up of small cafes, food stands, clothing shops and sundry shops catering to the needs of all urbanites needed to travel from their homes to places of work. As members of this class began to gain some additional money, they increasingly spurned walking great distances—often in stifling heat or monsoonal rains—to get to work. To meet this need, some young men and a few young women from rural (mainly northeastern) Thailand first rented and later purchased motorcycles to meet a growing transportation need that was cheaper and more convenient than regular taxis.

By the 1990s, motorcycle taxis had become an essential part of the Bangkok transportation system. Sopranzetti seeks to demonstrate that the choices made by young men (and a few young women) to become motorcycle taxi drivers were shaped by a significant change in the Thai economy—a shift away from wage labour in factories (themselves a relatively recent phenomenon in Thailand) to 'post-Fordist' entrepreneurship. Despite the importance of this insight, entrepreneurship does not appear in the index, nor does the concept of *itsaraphap*—'independence' or 'freedom' as the drivers themselves characterized their choice to be taxi drivers (see, for example, p. 146). This is unfortunate because it underlies the praxis (a Marxist term meaning action as contrasted with theory), a term that Sopranzetti makes much use of (see especially pp. 270–80), that has shaped the political economy of the taxi drivers.

Those who became taxi drivers did not do so simply because the work offered them the opportunity of *itsaraphap*; rather, it was because through this work they learned how to mobilize for collective and subsequently political action. Motorcycle taxi drivers "could also take control of flows and reclaim their centrality by adopting mobility as a tool of political mobilization, not just a form of labor or a locus of capitalist accumulation" (p. 12).

In part two of his book, Sopranzetti traces the significant role motorcycle taxi drivers played in the political upheaval of 2010. In 2001, a new political movement led by Thaksin Shinawatra, a media magnate originally from Chiang Mai in northern Thailand, succeeded in coming to power following a democratic election. This movement dominated Thai politics until 2006 when the military seized power and sought to re-establish the pre-democratic autocratic order. The coup was supported by many in the urban middle and upper classes who were horrified that 'stupid buffaloes'—the derogatory term used to refer to rural villagers, especially those from the Northeast—should consider themselves equal citizens of Thailand. In reaction, many villagers and ex-villagers now living and working in Bangkok—very much including the motorcycle taxi drivers—mobilized in protest. Although Thaksin himself was compelled to go into exile in 2006, his followers did not disappear. The drivers "embodied their role as 'owners of the map,' holders of an unmatched knowledge of the urban terrain and gatekeepers of its channels" and "transformed their mobility and invisibility as urban connectors into political tactics" (p. 197). Beginning in early March 2010, over a hundred thousand people from upcountry—mainly the northeast, but also the north—came to Bangkok. Here they were joined by migrants to the city and were greatly aided by motorcycle drivers who could guide what became known as Red Shirt protestors (more formally known as the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship or UDD) in and around the city.

The increasingly violent protests led to a confrontation between protestors and military forces that took place in March and continued

until May 2010. Sopranzetti had an almost unique (especially for a Westerner) view of this uprising in that he was able to accompany several motorcycle taxi drivers to key places during the demonstrations. Although some Red Shirt leaders saw themselves involved in what was becoming a civil war, such was not the result of the uprising. On 19 May 2010, the government under Abhisit Vejjajva, who had come to power in 2008 following less-than-free elections and who was clearly aligned with the military, ordered (or at least allowed) an all-out attack on the demonstrators.

The end was not, however, a military victory by the government. Through negotiations the government agreed to new elections, which were held in July 2011, and these elections led to the return to power of Thaksin's movement now headed by his sister, Yingluck. What was unexpected was the role of the Association of Motorcycle Drivers of Thailand, whose many members had been involved in the demonstrations. In May 2010, the association agreed to a meeting between its representatives and envoys from the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration. Sopranzetti sees this meeting as routine (p. 236), but given the timing (at the conclusion of the uprising) and location (an army base), it was clearly an effort to co-opt motorcycle drivers in bringing peace back to the city. As a consequence of this and subsequent meetings, a new formal arrangement was reached between the association and the government. While this arrangement was beneficial to many drivers, some leaders felt that it was a betrayal.

Sopranzetti analyses the internal divisions in the association as representing two different conceptions of authority found more generally in Thailand, one based on *bāramī* and the other on *amnāt* (p. 251). The first is 'moral authority', traditionally deriving primarily from the monarchy and the Buddhist monkhood (sangha). The second is secular authority that is exercised primarily by politicians, the military and government officials. "To govern Thailand one needs to have both *bāramī* and *amnāt*, to claim moral charisma and exert institutional power, juggling both of them always with the risk of being dismissed as *itthiphon* [amoral influence].… Since 2006 no

political figure has been able to do so" (p. 255). The death of King Bhumibol in 2016 after a long illness exacerbated this problem since the new king is widely—among ordinary Thais as well as those politically engaged—seen as lacking in charisma.

In the early 1960s when I began fieldwork in Thailand for my dissertation, the model of ethnography that I had been taught was one where it was assumed that the anthropologist would live in a relatively self-contained community and observe and document the social and cultural life of that community. I was already aware that this model was becoming inappropriate. Increasingly, people the world over were living between worlds, the world of their home community and a larger world where they worked. While many of the residents of the central northeastern Thai village where I carried out my fieldwork—then especially women—remained imbedded in traditional Isan (Thai-Lao) rural society and culture, an increasing number—initially mainly young men—left the village to seek work in urban Bangkok or, more rarely, in other parts of Thailand where new types of jobs were being generated by a rapidly developing economy. Subsequently, young men were also followed by young women. Initially, these young people would work for a while and then return to their village to resume lives shaped primarily by the culture of their parents and grandparents. Over time, many decided to make their livelihoods in Bangkok or in other centres of development in the country, and an increasingly large number even went abroad to the Middle East, Europe, the United States and other parts of Asia to find temporary work. Many retained their roots in rural (especially northeastern) Thailand.[2] Many returned to their villages to invest in shops, rice mills and non-traditional commercial agriculture, as well as to build new houses for their families.

Sopranzetti belongs to a new generation of anthropological ethnographers. In his introduction to this book, he writes: "In the late 1990s anthropological studies, faced with the accusation of being more interested in stable roots than in ever-changing routes began to emphasize 'interrelations and links between local settings and larger regional or global structures and processes'".[3] Following

this approach, he focused his research attention on motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok whose origins mostly lie in northeastern Thai villages. The result is an impressive work that will long remain a major contribution to understanding the unique Thai urban politics of motorcycle drivers with strong links to their rural communities of origin.

Author's Response: Claudio Sopranzetti

I am humbled to have my book chosen for a *SOJOURN* Symposium and commented upon by such a towering figure in Thai studies. Professor Keyes's ideas and seminal writings have been both an implicit and explicit reference for much of my work. In particular, his research on Isan migrants has provided a model for a growing body of work that refuses to focus exclusively on Bangkok but rather sees the city as a node in complicated and often circular networks of mobility that connect and weave together contemporary Thailand. *Owners of the Map*, as Professor Keyes rightfully points out, is part of this body of work, a contribution that aims at juxtaposing and investigating the entanglements between mobility—and its role in urban life—and political mobilizations. In this sense, Keyes is right in pointing out that my work belongs to a new generation of multi-sited ethnographic analysis of contemporary Thailand. Similarly, he notices correctly that the text encapsulates two sections: the first dealing with the birth, development and expansion of the motorcycle taxi industry, particularly after the 1997 economic crisis, and the second focusing on the drivers' relationship to the Red Shirts movement and the post-2014 coup military government.

In his response, Professor Keyes does a better job than I would have done in pulling out succinctly the main historical threads running through the two parts of my work. Therefore, rather than rehashing that same historical narrative, I want to use this space to show why I believe these are not two 'different' books, as Keyes suggests.

In order to do so, I need to foreground a central, yet implicit, analytical and theoretical move that connects the two portions of the book: putting the analysis of contemporary capitalism, its modes of accumulation, discursive practices, and reshaping of everyday life at the centre of my work, therefore developing a dialogue with larger global analyses while remaining fully grounded in the specificities of the Thai case. The approach contains two elements: firstly, a reconciliation between the study of political-economic transformations, an attention to the centrality of discursive practices in shaping them, and an ethnographic engagement with the phenomenology of how those transformations become grounded and worked out in bodily practices, everyday rhythms and changing expectations; and secondly, a conceptualization of Thailand as a country that is experiencing—and in fact often pre-figuring—dynamics of flexibilization and precarization of labour, spreading discourses of entrepreneurship, and distancing from the factory floor as the main space of capital accumulation, typical of contemporary capitalism worldwide. I have written elsewhere about the first element (see Sopranzetti 2017), so here I want to focus on the second.

While to non-Thai experts the idea of exploring social movements in relation to capitalist restructuring may seem a pretty common approach, this trajectory has been remarkably tangential to Thai studies over the last few decades. The refusal to engage with larger political economic transformations and the insistence on explaining Thai politics only in relation to local dynamics is not new and had already been pointed out by Benedict Anderson half a century ago. In a seminal piece, he argued that this approach was the result of an ideology of *Thai exceptionalism* that claims that Thailand, because of its peculiar relation to colonial powers, cannot be analysed through the lens of critical or postcolonial theories (Anderson 1978). Unfortunately this attitude is still very much alive in Thai studies.

This is not to say that *Owners of the Map* is unique in challenging this orthodoxy. On the contrary, my approach stands on the shoulders of giants of Thai studies (Benedict Anderson, Charles Keyes himself,

Peter Jackson and Rachel Harrison, Michael Herzfeld, Kasian Tejapira, and Thongchai Winichakul in particular). I agree with them that *Thai exceptionalism* has limited both the theoretical scope of Thai studies and the ability of scholars of Thailand to engage empirically and conceptually across geographical and historical lines. Yet, while sharing their critique, my approach has not been to explore the effects of this exceptionalism or to adopt existing social theories and global labels to test their adaptability to the Thai case. Rather, I set out to explore ethnographically how Thai capitalism has transformed since the 1997 crisis and how state officials, policymakers and, in particular, motorcycle taxi drivers have *made sense* and *made do* with these transformations through local concepts and practices. In this sense, as Professor Keyes points out, *Owners of the Map* is at its core not just an ethnographic study of the drivers' mobility and mobilization but also a larger study of the "shift away from wage labour in factories (themselves a relatively recent phenomenon in Thailand) to 'post-Fordist' entrepreneurship" and of what it means for collective action to emerge among people who made this shift, a question equally important to contemporary Thailand as to many other countries around the globe.

Keyes is very perceptive in not using the word *neoliberalism* or *neo-liberalization* to refer to the transformation I am exploring, a terminological automatism common among those who want to include Thailand in a larger analysis of global capitalism. What I try to show, on the contrary, is that after the 1997 crisis the proliferation of discourses of free market, running the state like a company, and freeing entrepreneurship were coupled, in Thailand, with a massive expansion of the welfare state, an expansion that was central both to more and more people deciding to leave the factory floor, in my case to become motorcycle taxi drivers, and to the wide political support given by them to Thaksin, first, and eventually to the Red Shirts. Failing to recognize this tension, and defining Thaksin's policies as neoliberal, therefore, means missing almost completely what was at the core of the Red Shirts' demands and the motorcycle taxi drivers' mobilization: a mixture of market-

oriented entrepreneurship and welfare state measures that may seem to contradict mainstream analysis of contemporary capitalism but which, over the last few years, find echoes throughout South, East and Southeast Asia. In this, Keyes is accurate in pointing out the centrality of entrepreneurship and *itsaraphap* (freedom, independence) to my analysis and criticizing the unfortunate oversight on my part by which the two terms ended up in the book index only as "entrepreneurs" and "freedom" rather than as "entrepreneurship" and *"itsaraphap*". It is the duplicitous nature of these concepts, in fact, that works as glue for the two sections of my book. In this sense, *Owners of the Map* is held together by the apparent contradictions between the adoption of those discourses by many of the drivers, on one side, and the expansion of welfare provisions, which I already pointed out, as well as the emergence of collective action among the drivers, on the other; both dynamics that we do not usually associate with processes of flexibilization of labour, precarity, and competition among workers.

This second aspect, as much as the previous one, contradicts contemporary social and political-economic analyses which tend to pair the expansion of entrepreneurship with the "undoing of the demos" (Brown 2015), a process of fragmentation of collective identities and organizing. Yet, my book shows that the drivers not only managed to organize collectively against those odds but rallied precisely around the desires that their position as 'free entrepreneurs' constituted and the structural restraints that prevented their fulfilment. Keyes is once again correct in noticing the importance of the relation between entrepreneurship and collective action. As he says: "Those who became taxi drivers did not do so simply because the work offered them the opportunity of *itsaraphap*; rather, it was because through this work they learned how to mobilize for collective and subsequently political action." While I would not agree with this directly causal and functional depiction of the relation between the two, I agree that the main contribution of my work is located around this node, both to studies of contemporary Thailand and to larger analyses of contemporary social movements.

In the context of Thai studies, in fact, the long shadows of *Thai exceptionalism* has directed most analyses of the Red Shirts movement and the political turmoil of the last few decades along two main explanatory lines: on one side, an analysis revolving around an inter-elite struggle, basically between the monarchic-military complex and the Thaksin-affiliated families; on the other side, a debate over questions of inequality and access, declined along class and regional lines. While both of these lines of inquiry have been helpful in explaining aspects of the ongoing unrest, they both seem to present an image of Thailand as an island, directed exclusively by powerful elite or internal dynamics. This, my work shows, means forgetting the centrality of this country after the 1997 crisis as a trial ground for austerity measures and push-backs against those policies and the everyday realities and tensions created by them. *Owners of the Map* is an attempt to bring these elements into the conversation, both to enrich the debate in Thai studies and to engage with discussions happening outside the regional divide.

Once we look at the Red Shirts and the central role of motorcycle taxi drivers in their mobilization as the unlikely emergence of collective action among people who, since the 1997 crisis, understood themselves as entrepreneurs in competition with one another rather than as workers with a collective identity and objective, Thailand becomes a privileged viewpoint from which to explore some of the most pressing questions of contemporary global politics, questions about the disappearance of self-identification of the working classes, about populism and identity politics and about the ebbs and flows of political mobilizations, both in the Global South and the Global North. In this sense, as in any ethnographic work, in *Owners of the Map* I begin to pose those questions and try to develop a method for engaging with how people on the ground deal with them, rather than providing any conclusive answer.

EDITORS' NOTE

At the time of going to press, *Owners of the Map: Motorcycle Taxi Drivers, and Politics in Bangkok* was awarded the 2019 Margaret

Mead Award by the American Anthropological Association and the Society for Applied Anthropology.

Charles Keyes is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology and International Studies at the University of Washington. Since retirement in 2013, he has lived in Portland, Oregon. He can be reached by email at keyes@uw.edu or ckeyes.keyes@gmail.com.

Claudio Sopranzetti is a Postdoctoral Fellow at All Souls College, University of Oxford, Oxford OX1 4AL, United Kingdom; email: sopranzetti.claudio@gmail.com.

SUGGESTED CITATION STYLE

Keyes, Charles, and Claudio Sopranzetti. "*SOJOURN* Symposium on Owners of the Map: Motorcycle Taxi Drivers, Mobility, and Politics in Bangkok". *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 34, no. 3 (2019): 607–18.

NOTES

1. Sopranzetti does not recognize how much Robert Textor's *From Peasant to Pedicab Driver* (1961) foreshadows his own work.
2. Pattana Kitiarsa in *The "Bare Life" of Thai Migrant Workmen in Singapore* (2014) provides insights into the worlds of transnational Thai villagers. I also have written about how northeastern Thai villagers have drawn on their urban and transnational experiences to understand their political roles in Thailand (see Keyes 2014).
3. This quotation is taken from Gupta and Ferguson (1997, p. 7).

REFERENCES

Anderson, Benedict. 1978. "Studies of the Thai State: The State of Thai Studies". In *The Study of Thailand: Analysis of Knowledges, Approaches, and Prospects in Anthropology, Art, History, Economics, and Political Science*, edited by Eliezer Ayal, pp. 193–224. Athens: Ohio State University Centre for International Studies.

Brown, Wendy. 2015. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. New York: Zone Books.

Gupta, Akhil, and James Ferguson. 1997. *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.

Keyes, Charles F. 2014. *Finding Their Voice: Northeastern Villagers and the Thai State*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Press.

Pattana Kitiarsa. 2014. *The "Bare Life" of Thai Migrant Workmen in Singapore*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.

Sopranzetti, Claudio. 2017. "Framed by Freedom: Emancipation and Oppression in Post-Fordist Thailand". *Cultural Anthropology* 32, no. 1: 68–92.

Textor, Robert. 1961. *From Peasant to Pedicab Driver*. New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies.