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Book Reviews

Charles Keyes

Finding Their Voice: Northeastern Villagers and the Thai State

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Finding Their Voice: Northeastern Villagers and the Thai State focuses on the evolution of *northeastern (Isan)* identity and the struggles of *Isan* people with the Thai nation-state. It traces the history of Thailand's northeastern (*Isan*) rural people from "traditional peasants" to what Keyes calls "cosmopolitan villagers" (xii, 14). He contends that after centuries of rural impoverishment, there have been educational, economic, and infrastructural improvements in *Isan* that have facilitated enhanced awareness by northeasterners of their place in a globalized society. They have thus become "cosmopolitan villagers" and have increasingly participated in demonstrations and parliamentary politics to democratically advance their interests. This transformation is reshaping the Thai nation-state.

The author, a Professor Emeritus at the University of Washington, is a leading anthropologist of Southeast Asia who has conducted research in Thailand since 1962. Keyes sees this book as a sequel to one he wrote about *Isan* in 1967. At that time, he says, the "northeastern problem" for the Thai state was that northeasterners might be drawn to communism. The problem today is the refusal by Thailand's middle and upper classes to recognize the rights of northeasterners to have political influence (xii-xiii).

Beginning his narrative on *Isan* history, in Chapter 1 Keyes describes the village and Buddhist temple as central to *Isan* identity. In Chapter 2 he turns to examine the foundations of *Isan*. By the 1700s, migrations of Lao permeated *Isan* with Lao culture, and despite Siam's eventual control over *Isan* in the 1880s, *Isan* had already developed a distinctive identity. Chapter 3 discusses *Isan's* 1900–1902 Buddhist millenarian uprising, which convinced the state to grant northeasterners Thai citizenship, introduce compulsory education, and place all monks under centralized control (49). In Chapter 4,

though Keyes admits that Thai democracy has a “checkered history,” he points out that it allowed elected politicians from *Isan* to represent constituents (60). Suspicious that they were mostly Communist-leaning, the state repressed many of them. According to Keyes, such repression was perceived by northeasterners as symptomatic of central Thai discrimination. In Chapter 5, Keyes examines the period 1957–1973, during which the military administered Thailand with support from monarchy. For Keyes, *Isan* people recognized the Thai king as their leader but felt that the then-military regime prevented them from redressing their grievances. Some thus supported Communist revolution. However, as Keyes shows in Chapter 6, insurgency had faltered by 1983 partly due to new state decrees allowing amnesty and assistance for surrendering rebels and permitting the establishment of non-governmental organizations. In Chapter 7, Keyes illustrates how northeasterners, having experienced more upward mobility and interconnectedness with the world, have become increasingly involved in organizations to safeguard the environment, community rights and other regionally based interests. Lastly, in Chapter 8, Keyes argues that northeasterners have, since 2001, finally come to make their voices heard through supporting populist political parties of Thaksin Shinawatra and participating in the Red Shirts protest movement.

As for strengths, this book, based upon Keyes’s extensive research, offers an elaborately detailed history of *Isan*, which elucidates the growing political role of Thai northeasterners.

Though the book is meant primarily for academics and policymakers engaged with Asia, Keyes’s straightforward writing makes it accessible to the general audience. Yet the book does have weaknesses. First, Keyes sometimes tends to overgeneralize about *Isan* from work he has done over the years in *Nong Tuan* village. Second, there is much more diversity within *Isan*’s identity and history than Keyes acknowledges. Third, to emphasize northeasterners’ growing political participation, Keyes overemphasizes Red Shirts’ support from *Isan*, lessening the importance of its backing from northern and central regions. Fourth, Keyes never acknowledges that some northeasterners, including farmers comprising NGO “P-Move” and politician Newin Chidchob, are anti-Thaksin. Finally, though this book was written before the 2014 anti-Shinawatra coup, one wonders why Keyes’ “cosmopolitan peasants” only slightly resisted it. Ultimately, however, as a book revealing crucial socio-political transformations in Thailand, this book is one of the better studies available—aside from works on *Isan* written in Thai by Thai authors.

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