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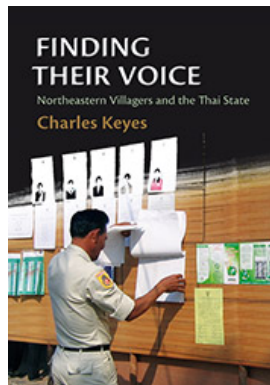
Peter Chaudhry reviews a beautifully written and

[Review of Finding Their Voice](#)

By

[Peter Chaudhry, NM-TLC Reviewer](#)

– 17 April 2015 **Posted in:** [Book Reviews](#), [NM-TLC Reviews](#), [Thailand](#)



Charles Keyes. *Finding Their Voice. Northeastern Villagers and the Thai State.*

Chiang Mai, Thailand. Silkworm Books, 2014.

Reviewed by Peter Chaudhry

Charles Keyes and his work will of course be very familiar to many *New Mandala* readers. An eminent scholar of Thailand, religion, and ethnicity in Southeast Asia, he has conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the northeast of Thailand (Isan) since 1962. In this important book, *Finding their Voice, Northeastern Villagers and the Thai State*, Keyes sets out to show, as he says in the preface, that ‘understanding the transformed “rural” northeastern region is essential to understanding how the Thai nation-state is being reshaped in the early twenty-first century’ (vi).

Few people are better qualified than Keyes to do this, given his long association with the Isan region. In *Finding their Voice* he takes the reader on a rich historical journey, exploring the place of the northeast in regional dynastic politics from the 16th century onwards, the emergence of a distinct Isan political and cultural identity in the early 20th century, the turbulent post war years, communism and the perceived ‘northeastern problem’ (*panha Isan*), as well as the ‘new politics of Thailand’ of the past fifteen years and the prominent role that northeast leaders and people have played in the recent Red Shirt movement. Along the way he weaves together his historical narrative with a sensitive analysis of the geopolitics of the region and Isan’s place within it, and illuminates his chapters with personal anecdotes and carefully crafted vignettes from his rich ethnographic engagement with the northeast, including Nong Tuen Village where he has been working for more than fifty years.

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Of course, the Red Shirt movement and its prominent northeastern leaders and supporters lend the subject of Isan's place in the modern Thai state-making process enormous topicality. But as Keyes persuasively argues, Red Shirt politics is the product of a long history of antagonism, repression, subjugation and condescension by Thai central elites towards the people of the northeast. Thailand's particular trajectory of capitalist development has relied heavily upon the labour of northeasterners, and it is the exposure of Isan villagers as migrants to urban Thailand and its material culture that has given rise to a consciousness of the disparities between the northeast and the central region of the country, fuelling the increase in the political sophistication and confidence of northeastern protagonists in Thailand's recent political drama. *Finding Their Voice* thus echoes and compliments well Andrew Walker's recent book, *Thailand's Political Peasants*, on the development of a 'middle income peasantry' in the north of Thailand who are similarly transitioning slowly from exclusively agricultural livelihoods to more complex, often migration-dependent ways of living, and who Walker observes are also increasingly sophisticated in the political demands they make upon the state, and elected officials.

In *Finding their Voice* Keyes observes how, by the beginning of the twentieth century, 'phrai, "bondsmen", had been transformed into *chao ban*, "villagers", who were now subservient not to hereditary superiors but to the Thai state' (8). As northeasterners increasingly worked away from the land, moving to Bangkok and other urban centres, and even overseas, they nevertheless retained close links to the Isan region, and to distinct moral perceptions embedded in Isan sociality and the moral precepts associated with being *chao ban*. Consequently Keyes describes them as 'cosmopolitan villagers,' as northeasterners have increasingly transplanted their physical connections to the natal village with a virtual connection to the whole of the Isan region, forging a powerful ethno-regional identity in the process. This identity is expressed by both the leaders and followers of the Red Shirt movement through the continued use of the term *phrai* to describe themselves, an ironic and humorous dig at the cosmopolitan ruling elite, but also a serious attempt at asserting their own distinct political identity. *Finding their Voice* thus traces the evolution of peasant villagers to cosmopolitan villagers, who are as Keyes notes: 'increasingly assertive in their claim for equal citizenship with both the old elite and the recently emergent middle class within the nation-state of Thailand' (14).

The first chapter of *Finding their Voice* introduces the key arguments and concepts of the book, particularly the notion of the village as the basis of Isan identity, and sketches the evolution of rural northeasterners' relations with the Thai state. In Chapter Two Keyes charts the history of the northeast as a boundary region between Lao and Siamese kingdoms, from the 16th to the 18th centuries. As he shows, the northeast increasingly became culturally Lao from the seventeenth century onwards, but the growing power of the Siamese kingdom resulted in constant expansion into the northeast until the end of the 19th century. At this point, Thai expansionism bumped up against the French colonial empire, which sought to expand into the northeast as a natural extension of its hegemony over Lao speaking areas. Competition resulted in the formal demarcation of Thai and Lao territory by the Franco-Siamese treaties of 1893 and 1904 and this, alongside the development of modernizing policies for the northeast by King Chulalongkorn, meant that the destiny of the northeast would henceforth lie with Thailand. As Keyes notes: 'After these events, any search for common identity among northeasterners would be carried out within the context of the Thai state' (29).

The extension of the control of the Thai state was challenged, however, by people whom Keyes believes 'held to older precolonial ideas of political authority' (32). The most important challenge was in the northeast and is the subject of Chapter 3: the *phu mi bun* millenarian uprising which began in 1899-1900 and was eventually forcibly repressed by Siam in 1902. Keyes situates the causes of this revolt in the tax levees and administrative reforms imposed by Siamese officials, which he contends the people of the northeast did not understand or want. Following this ultimately unsuccessful uprising he observes that 'the central Thai government set out systematically to transform the Lao of northeastern Thailand (as well as northern Thailand) into Thai citizens (*chat Thai*)' (49).

Chapter Four relates the story of this gradual incorporation of northeasterners into the Thai nation-state. Keyes highlights the important role that the development of modern communications and the transportation network played, and the critical role of a centralized education system in making northeasterners Thai. The chapter also discusses what Keyes considers to be the most crucial political date in modern Thai history: 1932 and the imposition of a constitutional monarchy. This watershed moment marked the point when Isan politicians became participants in national politics for the first time and when, consequently, a distinct Isan political identity began to take shape. Throughout the 1930s northeastern politicians were largely associated with the opposition and with leftist politics, which fuelled the Thai state's suspicion of

especially among the young has rocketed in a devoutly Buddhist country while older people still ...

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E. Bruce Reynolds reviews a new book that he doubts will be the final word on an

them as communists, and ultimately led to the infamous murder of four northeastern politicians in 1949 in the 'Kilo 11 incident.' About this incident, Keyes contends that the northeastern politicians were killed not just because they were followers of Pridi Banomyong (in opposition at the time), but also because they were northeasterners. As he observes:

'The death of these prominent northeastern leaders was a major catalyst in the development of Isan regional political identity and purpose, for it demonstrated most dramatically the attitudes of the central government towards those who identified with Isan political aspirations. In addition, northeasterners began to feel that central Thai political discrimination was but a symptom of more basic economic and cultural discrimination' (75).

Chapter 5 charts how, in the period between 1957 and 1973, the political relationship between the northeast and the Thai polity continued to deteriorate. The government set about tackling the perceived northeastern communist problem through a combination of government supported counter-insurgency activities and development spending. For their part, northeasterners grew increasingly frustrated by the large scale corruption of state officials utilizing development funds and national development schemes for hydropower and forestry that took resources from the northeast for central Thai and metropolitan development. Migration from Isan also increased during this period, heightening northeasterners' sense of being looked down upon by central, urban Thais. Keyes describes their relationship to the Thai state as 'schizophrenic': on the one hand they considered themselves Thai, but they also suffered from the condescension and discrimination of other Thais on a daily basis. From 1965 onwards, Keyes argues, a combination of the intransigence of state elites and the repressive actions and policies of the military left northeasterners with a feeling of being hemmed in, with few options for redressing their grievances.

By the end of the 1970s, it appeared that major conflict in the northeast between the Communist Party of Thailand [CPT] and the Thai military was inevitable. Despite the success of the CPT in recruiting northeasterners, the political platform of the CPT in the region was ultimately unsuccessful, as Keyes shows in Chapter 6. Indeed, by the early 1980s, the CPT-led insurrection had collapsed. One reason was the evidence from Vietnam and Cambodia where communist revolutions had been successful. The northeast was on the frontline and received both refugees and news of the actions of the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese communists.

A more important reason though for the CPT collapse, Keyes feels, was the failure of the party to offer a coherent and attractive programme and vision to the people of the northeast. Communist party leaders were urban intellectuals, out of touch with the villagers in whose name revolution was supposed to be carried out. Keyes concludes that they failed to articulate a critique of Thailand's class and power structure within the worldview of the *chao ban* and that, like the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, they: "failed to understand or decided to reject the cultural foundations of rural society based on the traditions of Theravada Buddhism" (127).

This coincided with a softening of state power in the northeast and a shift by the military to offer amnesty to communist fighters. Consequently many former communist cadres moved on to found and staff Non-Governmental Organisations [NGOs], which developed rapidly from the mid-1980s onwards and which continued leftist ideological critiques of the power structure. Importantly though, as Keyes notes, northeastern villages were not in thrall to these new organisations:

'The choices villagers actually made in the period after the 1980s were... not always in accord with what NGO workers expected them to do. This was a consequence of the new types of economic activity that many from the rural Northeast began to engage in' (134).

These new types of economic activity and the changes that resulted are the topic of Chapter 7. Keyes shows how northeasterners benefitted from the development of the Thai economy through migration, and as a consequence the villages and villagers of Isan were transformed as they became more integrated with both national and international economies. He relates how the attitudes of residents in the village he studied changed over time; families began to have fewer children and valued education much more, since acquiring Thai literacy and numeracy enabled them to interact effectively in a Thai dominated world. Their increasing sophistication led to the emergence of what Keyes describes as a 'new national politics' (136) as northeasterners became more strident in opposing the use of the region's waters and forests for 'national' development projects. The Assembly of the Poor and the protracted protest over the Pak Mun Dam signaled this political sophistication and confidence of northeasterners. Keyes quotes Chris Baker who, at the time, presciently observed that the Assembly of the Poor "differs radically from peasant movements of earlier eras. Peasants are not what they were" (166).

and butter issue and the anomalous tide that lifts some boats ...

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Robert: Thank you for the kind words. I'm glad to see that Nick Nostitz is back on FB. It seems that ...

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The final chapter of *Finding Their Voice* brings us up to date and discusses the final step in the story of northeastern 'peasants' emerging political consciousness, as they became 'Silent peasants no longer' (the title of the chapter). Keyes contends that even as northeasterners have made the transition from traditional peasants to Thai citizens, with sophisticated understandings of their interests, they remain in what Giorgio Agamben and, earlier Carl Schmidt, referred to as a 'state of exception' relative to the sovereign power of the Thai state. Their continued fraught relations with the Thai state, and their political empowerment, made possible the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra and his politics in turn empowered northeasterners and northerners. Shinawatra's overthrow by traditional elites, including the urban middle classes and parts of the intelligentsia, fuelled the Red Shirt protests in Bangkok. The Red Shirt protests in 2009-11, he writes, remind Keyes of Isan temple fairs, as the protesters were overwhelmingly northeasterners and Isan migrants living in Bangkok.

Critically though, Keyes' cosmopolitan villagers were 'Thai citizens with sophisticated understandings of rights and justice' (184) and, as such, were not seeking the violent overthrow of the Thai political system. Their primary demand throughout their demonstrations was for new and free elections. Neatly drawing together his historical narrative, Keyes observes that the protestors 'Sought the right to have a legitimate voice in a parliamentary democracy of the type envisaged in the overthrow of absolute monarchy in 1932' (190).

Finding Their Voice draws upon Keyes' extensive writings on Isan over the years, and this is, of course, a key strength of the book. In some of the chapters however, the book would have benefitted from close editorial attention to repeated descriptions of Keyes' past work and his association with Ban Nong Tuen. More substantively, the book sometimes assumes the reader has an intimate understanding of Keyes' core theory of 'cosmopolitan villagers'. This idea stems from the proposition that Isan villagers deploy a particular politics grounded in moral economy perceptions of the Isan locality, and Buddhism, and in the process explicitly reject the materialism of middle class Thai's and urban culture. Such a central proposition perhaps warrants more discussion in the book in terms of theoretical underpinnings, and also perhaps in reference to a wide literature from the region on the increasing cosmopolitanism of village life. As he explains in footnote eight of chapter eight: 'I have made a more extensive argument for why I use the term "cosmopolitan villagers" in Keyes (2012)' (224). But this reader was left wishing that a little more of this discussion had been included in this volume.

But this is a minor quibble. Taken as a whole, *Finding Their Voice* is a beautifully written and confidently argued book. It authoritatively charts the rise of Isan and the people of the region, from parochial borderland dwellers to modern Thai citizens, adept at utilising electoral politics and confident in confronting the traditional bastions of class power in pursuit of a vision of a more inclusive and diverse society.

Peter Chaudhry is a PhD candidate at the Australian National University.

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1. #1

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Dipendra KC

Posted April 17, 2015 at 3:12 PM

Thank you for writing the insightful review. Looking forward to grab a copy.

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2. #2

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kuis

Posted April 19, 2015 at 11:29 PM

I was really delighted with the insights this book offered. For the first time I understood the long struggle of the Isaan people in the context of the Thai State. It is a necessary read for everyone who wants to see and taste the background of the current political crisis.

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3. #3

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Suriyon Raiwa

Posted April 20, 2015 at 10:55 AM

What is in many ways most notable about Prof Keyes's book is the willingness to rethink some of his basic assumptions about Thai society and politics that it bespeaks. And not only is that intellectual honesty admirable, but it also has led Prof Keyes to a range of invaluable insights. How much members of elite and would-be elite circles in Bangkok (and their White Man camp followers) could learn from both that honesty and those insights. Silkorm deserves congratulation for publishing this book.

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