

Charles Keyes on the Rise of the Isan Voice

By Robert J. Muscat

Charles Keyes' latest book on Northeast Thailand, *Finding Their Voice: Northeastern Villagers and the Thai State*, (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2014), is a tour de force. It covers the history, ethnography, and politics of the largest, relatively homogeneous, ethno-geographic population group within the Thai state. Keyes has drawn on the extensive literature and on his own decades of anthropological research. Since the end of World War II, the Northeast has emerged as central to Thailand's political travails. Keyes' book focuses on this emergence.

Keyes chronicles the history and long-gestating development (going back over a century) of a Northeast (or "Isan") regional identity. This identity, "finding its voice" in recent years, has expressed itself by voting populist leadership into parliamentary majorities, by placing the country's prime ministership into the hands of Thaksin Shinawatra and then his sister Yingluck, and then by massive demonstrations in Bangkok after the populist party had been thrown out successively by military coup. Thaksin earned his strong Isan support through income transfer policies that greatly exceeded those of previous governments. Keyes' book was published in 2014. At mid-2015, a repressive military still holds the government, civil liberties are being attacked, and no progress toward democratic contestation is in sight. The governance problem is commonly seen as a struggle between the awakened (North and Northeastern) rural majority and the Bangkok-centered middle class, wealthy, and military/royalist establishment. Thaksin fled into exile to avoid likely imprisonment for corruption. The establishment sees Thaksin as having undermined the democratic process that put him in power, and as a threat to the monarchy. (As Thai-watchers know, this summary cannot begin to set out the byzantine complexities of Thailand's political dilemma.)

I agree overall with Keyes' historical narrative. On Isan village life, his voice is one of the authoritative. Where the narrative errs in my judgment, is its portrayal (mainly negative, perhaps inadvertently) of the role of the U.S. The book assigns great importance to the quantity of American aid as a driver of Thai

economic growth between 1963 and the early 1980s. In fact, most (not all) U.S. aid was in the form of technical assistance, not financing for imports or capital projects. The annual dollar amounts provided by the U.S. Operations Mission (USOM) programs were small relative to the annual investment portion of Thai GNP, and to the government budget. To cite one measure, for much of this period, U.S. aid (in all forms) averaged less than 1% of Thai GNP; in Taiwan, by contrast, it averaged 6.4% of GNP, in some years reaching as high as 10%. (The numbers are in my own book on this subject and in Alexander Caldwell's 1974 book, *American Economic Aid to Thailand*.) In the Thai case, content was always more important than quantity. Since its beginnings in 1951 the content of the technical assistance -- institution-building, technical transfer, and the training in the U.S. of thousands of Thai officials and academics -- made substantial contributions to the country's economic development.

More importantly, Keyes records that US aid in the Northeast had negative effects on the core psychological/political problem of the character of villager/official relations, thereby exacerbating Isan hostility towards the central government. For this conclusion he draws on the summary judgment of two solid scholars, David Morell and Chai-Anan Samudavanija, that "In general, U.S. assistance programs worsened rather than improved this situation. By supporting a series of corrupt, self-serving military governments, U.S. aid allowed even more extension of the government into the countryside, and therefore directly stimulated negative interaction between officials and villagers. U.S. aid built ARD [Accelerated Rural Development] roads into the villages, into which the police could now drive in their USOM-provided jeeps, carrying their U.S. weapons."

In my 1990 study of the history of the aid program (*Thailand and the United States: Development, Security, and Foreign Aid*), I explained at length why I thought Morell and Chai-Anan's "worsened" judgment was wrong. I can cite here only a bit of the evidence.

The U.S. did support a project under which government teams (Mobile Development Units, or MDUs) were sent to visit Isan villages, bringing small benefits and pro-government PR. District officials had a reputation for lording it over villagers when they visited and for demanding sexual and other services. As early as 1961, I personally raised this problem as the USOM member of a

committee under then Deputy Chief of Mission Len Unger; the committee was giving first consideration to financing MDUs as a pilot project to help improve the government's "image." I recall pointing out that a paper by an American anthropologist living in the Northeast had reported how counter-productive official visits could be. We could be facilitating abusive officials' behavior by giving them wheels. The committee decided that any U.S.-supported unit should include someone from the staff of the local U.S. Information Service office so that such behavior would not go unnoticed. I don't know the upshot, but I would be surprised in the event if USOM and the other U.S. agencies involved decided to ignore this completely self-defeating potentiality if the MDUs had in fact then facilitated such abuses. Morell and Samudavanija cited no evidence, no recorded field observations, for their claim.

Both USOM and the Thai government were well aware of the damage being caused by the behavior of local officials. To respond directly, USOM financed a government program of in-service training for provincial officials that included skills upgrading and sessions on the responsibilities and proper behavior required in dealings with Isan villagers. The Thai government also dropped its former policy of sending its least competent personnel to the Northeast, sending out high quality staff instead.

For an example of a specific USOM-supported project that became counter-productive, Keyes describes the backlash caused by the displacement of Isan villagers whose lands were flooded: the Nam Pong multi-purpose dam project. However, U.S. aid financed only the pre-project feasibility study (by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers); the study actually pointed out the negative consequences the project could have by displacing the occupants of drowned villages. The project was subsequently financed by the World Bank, which included displacement compensations. The compensations apparently turned out significantly inadequate in the eyes of the displaced, with the negative consequences Keyes describes.

US aid did finance other irrigation projects in the Northeast, beginning back in the 1950s. The U.S. and Thai governments were even then looking for ways to counter the incipient political effects of Isan neglect. Under the first program, 121 "tanks," or small water storage containments, were built in locations thought to be

at least minimally suitable (for irrigation or domestic use water storage) despite the porous soil and chronically unreliable rain. The Royal Irrigation Department and USOM engineers recognized that the tanks were technically and economically marginal at best, but the idea was to show concern and to create at least some, even admittedly marginal, infrastructure projects. Somewhat larger, more successful, Isan irrigation projects were built later on, with both US and World Bank funding, even though these were also recognized as questionably justifiable according to usual project feasibility standards.

The broad judgment that US-aided development programs in the Northeast were politically counter-productive is puzzling, if not simply erroneous. The road system (built with USOM and World Bank aid) enabled huge numbers of villagers to migrate for outside employment that provided cash income for remittances, probably the major source of the whole region's economic advancement in recent decades, as Keyes describes. TVs, refrigerators, motor bikes, mobile phones, and housing improvements became common sights in villages across the region, thanks partly to the remittances. For those villages reached by the "farm-to-market" roads, the low-cost transportation opened up access to the urban markets, mainly Bangkok; the previously subsistence economy now had the opening for commercial agricultural expansion.

The irrigation story is mixed, certainly not entirely negative. In the case of one medium-sized USOM-assisted irrigation project I happen to know well (Lam Nam Oon), the positive impact on the thousands of families involved has been transformative. I cannot speak to their views about local officials or Bangkok; if negative, the source is unlikely to be this project. In public health, major USOM support enabled the government to virtually eliminate malaria, until then a big rural killer, including in the Northeast. The USOM logo (on the jeeps, sprayers, etc.) became ubiquitous in every village. It is hard to imagine how the malaria program could have been politically counter-productive.

After reading Keyes' book, I am reminded of the larger question some analysts have attempted to answer: What was the impact on Thailand's political development of the country's overall interaction with the U.S. during the post-W.W.II decades when that interaction was much closer and multilayered than it is now? Could orderly democratic process have been strengthened in such a way that

the polity could have received the Isan voice as a welcomed and legitimate player? Could the relation between “center” and “periphery” (as posed by Georgetown University scholar David I. Steinberg) have been nudged onto a less contentious path? A number of aid projects were designed deliberately to help ministries (some, like Health, eager to do so; some, like Interior, reluctant) shift design and implementation out to the periphery – the changwats and amphurs. Shifting was intended to increase efficiency and local relevance, not to promote regional political empowerment. While empowerment might have been encouraged by these initiatives, the centralizing effects of other programs, on balance, bolstered the basic unity and security objectives of successive Thai governments. Further, as Steinberg noted in 1985, the balance between encouraging centralizing or the periphery changed over time: “for the first two decades [of U.S. aid], efforts were made to build up centralized authority and power, while in the past decade attempts have been underway to diminish that power (at least as it relates to economic activities) and decentralize authority.” Efforts to strengthen local, decentralized capabilities (like a 1980s project in the remote and poor northern district of Mae Chaem) always faced the paradox that provincial and district authorities were civil servants under the central Interior ministry; strengthening local capability meant strengthening the reach of Bangkok. Political scientist David A. Wilson’s lesson from his 1970 review of the U.S. role in Thailand is also worth noting: “the leverage of foreign assistance alone is not sufficient to produce major modifications in the relationships of political and military factions, much less modifications in the constitutional structure of the government.”

What effect has the U.S. relationship had over time on Thailand’s polity-building failure? The answer may well be that in Thailand, as most everywhere else, the U.S. role (economic, diplomatic, and military) in nation-building and power-determination in other countries can never be more than marginal. A book exploring this subject anew, also drawing on diplomatic records of the U.S. embassy in Bangkok, could make an interesting read.

Finally, one cannot help but sympathize with the Isan lament I draw from this book. They recognize and decry forces and processes they see arrayed against them: the urban elite, industrialization, environmental destruction, attenuation of their traditional culture. The decline of agriculture as a fraction of GDP and as a

sector for residence and employment is a virtually universal result of modern development and technological change, forcing rural societies everywhere to contract and painfully adjust. On the other hand, the people of Isan have benefitted substantially from modern development: they live longer, have the fewer numbers of children they desire, fewer of their children die young, each generation has reached higher levels of education, they enjoy material comforts and entertainment unattainable until recently, they are in touch with the world, and they have become a major political force. Inevitably, all this change has had aspects of a Faustian bargain, eroding traditional religious and inter-personal ways of village life. I am reminded of a haiku recently penned by another American anthropologist and Thai-watcher, William Klausner:

Water scooped from well
as one gossiped with one's friends
Now, turn on faucet