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CHARLES KEYES. *Finding Their Voice: Northeastern Villagers and the Thai State*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2014. 262 pp.  
doi: 10.1017/trn.2015.6

The political conflict that has overshadowed Thai society for the past several years – materialised into street occupations in Bangkok by the rural masses, followed by military coup d'états in 2006 and 2014 – has been a result of more than just a political struggle *within* the partisan-based political system. Rather, such conflict has been widely shaped by the changes that have occurred in rural Thailand over the past several decades (Jakkrít 2013; Walker 2012).

The struggles of rural people in making their voice heard are well captured by renowned anthropologist Charles F. Keyes in his latest book, *Finding Their Voice: Northeastern Villagers and the Thai State*. Keyes begins his book by pointing out that the massive arrival of the Red Shirts, especially from northeastern Thailand, in Bangkok in May 2010 provoked him to rethink what he had learned over the last four decades about Thailand and its rural population. Referring to his classic work *Isan: Regionalism in Northeastern Thailand* (1967), Keyes insisted that the so-called 'The Northeast problem' between the 1960s and the tumult of political movements in 2010s should be considered not in terms of the rural masses' disloyalty to the Thai state. Rather, as Keyes argues, the 'problem' is the result of the lack of understanding of urban elites and middle-class Thais toward the social, economic, and political aspirations of their rural counterparts.

*Finding their Voice* traces the modern development of northeastern Thailand and its effects in transforming the identity of the Isan people. The book consists of eight chapters covering a wide range of exploration of the Isan people dating from their integration into Thailand's modern nation-state at the end of the nineteenth century to the present day. Chapter 1 discusses the relationship between village and the state and the way in which 'traditional' Isan identity had been formed. Chapter 2 examines the integration of Isan into the modern Thai state during King Rama V's administration. Chapter 3 explores the rural resentment toward the imposed bureaucracy of the Thai state, which resulted in region-

wide Buddhist-based millennial movements, seeking not only to restore Isan traditional political structure and their identity based on Lao ethnicity, but also to express their moral critique of the newly imposed centralised administration and taxation. Chapter 4 highlights the shift, following the 1932 revolution, from unequal relations between the Isan people and local state officials to a reciprocal relationship between the people and their elected representatives in the national parliament – leading to the emergence of what Keyes calls ‘ethnoregionalism’.

Chapter 5 traces the ‘Northeast problem’ both as the result of a communist insurgency as well as regional poverty. The chapter explores how the government dealt with the issues especially during Sarit Thanarat’s despotic-paternalistic administration (see also Thak 2007). Chapter 6 discusses the failure of the communist movement in Isan and the rise of non-government organisations. Chapter 7 then turns to a new perspective on how the Isan people should be understood. Since the 1960s, out-migration has been pervasive as people sought jobs and social opportunities outside their villages. At the same time, many state development projects imposed upon Isan were plainly exploitative. Keyes argues that not only were Isan villagers eager to “embrace capitalism”, but they also maintained what he terms a “Buddhist version of the Protestant ethic”, which enabled them to take advantage of the new opportunities offered by an expanding Thai economy (p.141). The last chapter analyses the recent changes in the Isan people’s relations with the Thai state and the wider world. These “cosmopolitan villagers”, Keyes argues, are no longer “silent peasants” (p. 175). New electoral politics has transformed them into political actors. This change requires a new conception of rural Thai peasants.

*Finding their Voice* is an achievement of Keyes’ life-long engagement with Isan studies. From the 1960s to the 1980s, when Keyes completed his doctoral thesis (1966), most of his contemporaries employed a Marxist perspective in answering the “agrarian question” (Sharp 1953). Keyes, however, had no interest in the agrarian question and chose to look beyond the issue of production within the bounded landscape of a village. Rather, he took on a Weberian perspective (Keyes 2002) to study the Isan people’s perceptions, cultural interpretations, religious ethic, and economic actions, as well as the moral charisma of their politicians. In so doing, he analysed the relationship between state power and local villagers, and the contention that emerged from state intrusion into the countryside. This interest expanded into Keyes’s later studies of ethnic identity and village loyalty, ethnoregionalism, Buddhist morality and economic action, migration-modernity-development and, recently, cosmopolitan villagers.

While Keyes has successfully depicted the transformation and dynamics of the Isan villagers, there is however a tendency to portray them in a linear, evolutionary fashion: from traditional peasant to sophisticated citizen. Keyes writes that “the transformation entailed the evolution of traditional peasants into Thai citizens with increasingly sophisticated understandings of their interest situations” (p. 175). Keyes further argues that “The primary reason lies in the fact that the 2010 protestors were not ‘ignorant’ peasants but were Thai citizens with sophisticated understandings of rights and justice” (p. 184).

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In addition, while *Finding their Voice* provides a convincing analysis of the conflicting relations between the village and the state, it seems to take for granted internal conflicts within the community. Reading *Finding their Voice* is reminiscent of the 1960s-70s notion of internal colonialism, where uneven national development caused the marginalisation of the regional populace (see also Brown 1994). There is a risk in this perspective as the analysis often portrays “the fraught relations between villagers and agencies of the Thai state” (p. 175). In fact, the 2010 Red Shirts uprising was driven by the desire of rural people to restore their preferred government to power. During the last few decades the productive engagement between villagers and the state has moved far beyond our academic imagination, and I found this crucial turning point missing in the analysis of *Finding their Voice*.

With all said, I found the book to be one of the best for those who want to understand the dynamics of the region and its people. These days, a life-long study dedicated to one locality is very rare. But it is not the rarity that makes *Finding their Voice* worthwhile reading. It is the author’s humanistic interpretative approach that we should acknowledge for this academic masterpiece.

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doi: 10.1017/trn.2015.7