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Review of Charles F. Keyes' Article : Economic Action and  
Morality in a Thai Village

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In this article Keyes criticized two models of peasant society and behavior and offered his own model primarily based on Weber's idea about the relationship between religious beliefs and economic behavior. "The political economy" model as implied in Samuel Popkin's image of peasants as "rational beings continuously striving to raise their subsistence level" was regarded by Keyes as adequate to the extent that it centers the interest on individual actors who are presumed to be motivated by the concern with economic self-interest which is supposed to be true of human beings - peasants included - everywhere in the world. However, Keyes pointed out that its weakness lies in the failure to relate individual actors to others who together with the former form a community with a system of religious beliefs which has become the ethical and moral basis for economic action. Most anthropologists would agree with Keyes' comment on this overemphasis on peasants' economic rationality. It gives an oversimplified and overidealized image of peasants. In this view peasants everywhere are essentially the same as modern businessmen, always conscious of their economic interest and calculating in their actions which for the most parts is aimed at maximizing their economic interest. In this model, marginal role is given to religious beliefs, ethics, morality and social customs as determinants of peasants' economic behavior while emphasis is given to political factors such as class exploitation and social injustice as explanation for the problem of poverty and backwardness encountered often in peasant societies. It is thus not surprising that the "political economy" approach has gained wide popularity among the Marxists. It is elegant and superficially convincing, based as it was on the model of rational human actors consciously making choice in the pursuit of their material interest deeply rooted in their hedonistic psychology. However, a closer look at human society and human behavior will reveal the fallacy of this approach.

The second model criticized by Keyes belongs to the "moral economy" approach as argued by James Scott. This model views peasants everywhere as living under similar conditions - conditions of dire poverty making sheer subsistence almost the sole concern of peasants and ruling out any thought of risk-taking - and thus adhering to the same set of values. This is a very simplified and naive view of peasant community and behavior. To Keyes this may be true of some peasant societies under a very difficult subsistence condition but it cannot be applied to peasant societies in the Northeast of Thailand, particularly after World War II. This approach does

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not give any consideration to the issue of social injustice and the inferior, disadvantaged position of peasant communities in their relationship with the larger society, an important fact to be taken into account in explaining poverty among the Thai-Lao Northeast peasants which constitute an under-privileged minority group in Thai society. In this sense the moral economy approach distorts reality <sup>more</sup> than the political <sup>(even)</sup> economy approach .

More important, as in the political economy model, it fails to give any consideration to the importance of religious beliefs which have a strong impact on peasants' values, morality and conducts. Peasants' morality may be influenced by poverty but to Keyes this is less important than the influence of religious beliefs and practices and this fact makes it unrealistic to think that peasant values are every where the same.

With these modifications Keyes went on in his article to analyze social change as taking place in his research village in the Northeast. To him peasant actions are constrained by the facts of the political economy, e.g. inferior position of the Isaan ethnic groups in Thai society, overbearing and autocratic attitudes of the Central Thai-dominated bureaucracy, etc. as well as governed by Buddhist-derived morality. The large part of his paper is devoted to discussion of the influence of Thai Buddhism on peasants' perception of the world, concepts of morality and economic action in their pursuit of self interest.

Concerning the political economy of Thailand, in absolute terms Keyes pointed to positive changes taking place in his village since the first study in the early 60's, such as the increase in cash income, diversification of crops, establishment of new enterprises at the village level, increasing opportunities for off-farm employment in urban centers and increasing use of chemical fertilizers. This can be said to be more or less true of most villages in the Northeast. However, when it comes to his claims that the average landholding per household has increased and that there is a widespread adoption of the new high yielding variety of rice, one cannot be certain that this can be generalized. Regarding the former, in the face of rapid population increase in the past few decades and a limited supply of land, the reverse trend, i.e. smaller average size as a result of subdivision for inheritance, seems to be generally the case. His village may be an exception to this trend, favored by the fact that there was available a vast field of public grazing land near the village for grabbing by individual villagers. As to the adoption of high yielding variety there is also a question if this really means the non-photosensitive, short stem variety which requires a perfect control of water in the paddy field or the traditional

variety improved upon and recommended by the government experimentation stations. If it is the former, a widespread adoption seems to be out of question except in a limited area, in view of the lack of effective irrigation in most parts of the Northeast. Limited adoption would not have much impact on increased rice yields in the village.

Absolute increases in income there may be in the Northeast, still Keyes was concerned with the increasing disparity of income between the Northeast and the rest of Thailand. This fact has also been increasingly pointed to by Thai development planners and more government resources are now planned to be spent in the Northeast hopefully to help narrow the gap. Mostly for political reasons, it has been a custom in Thailand to attribute the major cause of poverty in the Northeast to government negligence and at worst to the unfair treatment of the subordinate Thai-Lao ethnic group by Central Thais. Forgotten is the fact that the Northeast region is very poor in land and water resources with subsequent low levels of expectations among the peasants there. Large scale improvement is not technically nor economically possible.

and a feeling of passive resignation to poverty

However, with many development projects going on in the Northeast since the 60's and receiving more concentrated effort recently the government can no longer be fully blamed for negligence. Also with the spread of democratic ideas and better communication via mass media, transportation network and personal contact, a point can be made that the traditional prejudice of the Central Thais against the Northeasterners has become lessened, particularly among security-minded government officials who are very much conscious of the need to reduce gaps between the government and the peasant masses. After all this prejudice is not deep-rooted and is characterized by the tendency to make fun of the simple-minded and easy-going Northeasterners rather than to discriminate against them. At the same time modernization and development have helped the Northeasterners to regain their self confidence and feel less different and less socially and psychologically inferior to the Central Thais. Of course, a "Northeast" identity is maintained but this is not to be confused with "Lao" identity and the resultant inferiority complex which was once a problem. Many Northeasterners now can be found occupying high positions in the government. After all, the great prime minister of Thailand in recent history, Marshal Sarit, was himself a Northeasterner, the fact that has contributed greatly to the pride of the Northeasterners. These changes in the recent past and that are rapidly going on now must be kept in mind when looking at the statistics of income distribution between the Northeast and the rest of the country which seems to increasingly favor the latter more than the former, despite the country's overall economic development.

One can always question the reliability and meaningfulness<sup>4</sup> of these statistics but more important they must not be taken to mean more social injustice being done nor the government's lack of sincerity.

In his story of the government taking land from the peasants Keyes seems to emphasize the government's arbitrary use of power without regard to the well-being of the peasants. A problem like this has occurred often in recent years not only in the Northeast but in other parts of rural Thailand, testifying to the conflict of interest between the government who is concerned with protecting public land from private encroachment on the one hand and the peasants who are thirsty for new land as a result of family expansion on the other. On the surface the government action seems to be arbitrary but in fairness to it, it must be admitted that in many cases the peasants act with a very selfish motive, often at the expense of their neighbors who thereby find no land to graze their cattle or depressions to store water for agricultural use. Problems like this are very complicated in nature and cannot be simply dismissed as indicating government arbitrary use of power.

In line with his argument about the importance of peasants' morality based on religious beliefs, Keyes is quick to point out that Thai Northeast peasants, though many times disappointed by action of government officials, are still likely to accept the legitimacy of the paternalistic authority of the government. As Buddhists they still regard government officials as well as well-off urban dwellers as deserving their high status because of their accumulation of merits according to the law of Kamma. Exploitation, if there is any, does not necessarily lead to rebellion. Political economy approach can never explain peasants' behavior because it fails to take peasants' morality or ideology into consideration. According to Keyes this has been the mistake of the Communist Party of Thailand.

Supplementing the moral economy approach, Keyes spent a great part of his paper analyzing the peasants' religious beliefs and practices and their effects on morality and economic behavior. Keyes found Buddhism still a moving force in the village and held a positive view of its role in contrast to others who often blamed Buddhism for the fatalistic outlook and passivity of the peasants owing to its teaching of the law of Kamma. Keyes pointed out that Buddhism also teaches the people to improve life in this world and it is their moral responsibility to do so because this is implied in the law of Kamma which concerns not only deeds in past lives but also in this present world. Another important point in Buddhist teachings

is that these deeds must conform to the moral precepts and particularly must not cause injury to others. Keyes did not think that Buddhist teachings conflict with the rational desires of peasants to increase their income and material standards of living. As a matter of fact Buddhist teachings and precepts adhered to by the peasants, particularly when they once had the experience of monkhood, are said by Keyes to contribute to the ability to forgo the immediate gratification of desires and to detach from worldly passions. On the whole Keyes seemed to take a very positive and idealized view of Buddhism in the village setting.

values with implications for good work ethics

Relationship between religion and economic development is a very complicated process and has given rise to a lively academic debate beginning with Weber's works. As to Buddhism a point can be raised that Keyes' reasoning in some respects is rather simplistic and is not wholly supported by what are actually found in many Thai villages in general. For example, concern with merit making may have little to do with good work ethics because the former is in the realm of the unworldly, its worldly effect being mostly limited to the morality in interpersonal relationship. Despite the belief that making merit insures better status in one's next life, it is still difficult to see how this teaching can influence one's work ethics in this life. After all in Buddhism and despite the new teaching that emphasizes the connection between work and the ability to make merit, one needs not be very wealthy in order to make merit. To the average peasants, the rich can of course make more merit because of their wealth, not because of their good work ethics. If good work ethics are not lacking in Thai peasant communities, their basis might as well be found in other aspects of Buddhist teachings than the injunction to make merit.

As to the ascetic experience obtained from practicing Buddhist precepts one can also question their relevance to or transferability to secular life. In principles, the purpose of ascetic practice is to enable one to be always aware of the causes of suffering, to stay away from them and to feel compassionate toward all sentient beings - human as well as animal - who by nature are destined to get caught up in the vicious circle of birth, old age, illnesses and death, the main causes of this suffering. It is achieved by means of controlling, reducing and eliminating one's worldly desires. For the peasants ascetic practice is also taken to mean a sign of being good Buddhists and is aimed at accumulating merit as well as attaining spiritual (primarily) self contentment and peace of mind more than that at training self discipline. The same is more or less true of young men who traditionally enter monkhood. The monastic experience might teach them the ability to undergo hardship and to cultivate moral fitness but as far as training in self discipline and good work ethics is concerned, this seems to be of secondary importance, the effect depending on individual circumstances and the particular environment of the monasteries

concern. After all it is usually people of old age already retired or about to retire from active worldly life who are attracted to practice ascetic life. Buddhist ascetic practices thus could not have much impact on peasants' worldly behavior as far as work ethics and self discipline are concerned. Otherwise how one can explain the high incidence of gambling and liquor drinking among peasants in Thailand particularly in the Northeast where subsistence psychology still prevails and levels of expectations are still low. Sooner or later, usually when

they get old, they will realize the foolishness and futility of their carefree life and turn to an ascetic life and Buddhist Dharma for their spiritual consolation. The same is true of quite a few village hooligans or "Nak Leng" who in their prime age terrorized other villagers and gradually as they get old become reformed and decide to become good citizens as well as devout Buddhists. This type of personality can be found in many villages, particularly in Central and Southern Thailand. The example pointed out by Keyes in his village is not unusual. It indicates both the weakness and strength of Buddhism.

These questions do not imply that Buddhism totally fails to assert positive influence on peasants' values and morality. They are intended to add another dimension to Keyes' view of the influence of Buddhist teachings in Thai village. Keyes is certainly right in emphasizing the relevance of religious factors in understanding peasant society and behavior.

In the case of Buddhism its role has given rise to many conflicting arguments. The nature of Buddhism is that it contains many levels of teachings - for those who would like to attain Nirvana and those who are destined to get involved in the mundane world - and concerns many areas of life - spiritual as well as worldly happiness. The arguments that Buddhism is otherworldly-oriented, leads to negation of and withdrawal from the world and engenders a passive and negative attitude toward the world can be easily countered by pointing to the many other aspects of Buddhist teachings which center on social responsibility, good work ethics and improvement of life in this world as Keyes emphasized in his paper. However, this remains mostly a discussion at the scriptural level which reflects the discussants' view more than actual reality. The discussants' view might be based on a perfect logical reasoning starting from some major premises found in the teachings but until field research is undertaken we cannot be sure whether the believers' subjective thinking follows that logic or leads them to perceive the same meanings of life as alleged to by outside discussants.

What is needed, then, is more empirical research to find out what are the real nature of Buddhism as actually believed and practiced by the mass. In Thailand it seems that the aspects of Buddhism which emphasize self discipline and good work ethics have only a limited influence on the believers' worldly behavior in contrast to the influence of the teachings on compassion, tolerance, self reliance and peace of mind. The fragility of Buddhist morality in Thailand, which in recent years has been made very clear by the corrosive influence of modern materialism, lies in the nature of Thera-

least of all to attempt to sanction them in the daily behavior of the believer.

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vada Buddhism itself. Because of its primary reliance on the individual's own wisdom and effort to perceive and accept the truth, it does not attempt to force its teachings on the individual. It neither makes absolute demands on lay believers to strictly adhere to its precepts even though by nature these are very simple and far from being a detailed code of behavior. Having no power to excommunicate or ostracize the wrongdoers and with no customs of compulsory sermon attendance, it lacks the means to enforce conformity to its teachings. It cannot expect much help from lay society either. As Embree pointed out, being relatively loosely structured, Thai society is likely to tolerate a wide degree of freedom of individual behavior and, one can add, is rather weak in its power to assert effective social control over recalcitrant individuals. Despite a high veneration accorded to Buddhism and a profession of a strong belief in Buddhist teachings, many aspects of life in Thailand in general seem to be the antithesis of Buddhist teachings. On the whole it can be said that Thai Buddhism's influence is very strong in giving spiritual comforts and a compassionate, tolerant, self-reliant and optimistic outlook on life to the individual believers but rather weak in instilling self-discipline, frugality and good work ethics.

among  
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masses

Finally, besides these theoretical points there are two unclear references in Keyes' paper. The first concerns his data about men entering monkhood. It is surprising to learn that in his village the rate has not declined and most men stay until the end of the traditional three month lent period. In most other villages in the Northeast, this is usually not the case. Concern with worldly occupations, particularly in cases of urban employment has made it difficult for village youths to find time to enter the monkhood and even if they can only a few weeks at most are spent in the monasteries.

The second reference concerns "Buat Tham" movement. I am not sure this word is popularly used in the Northeast. I myself have never heard this word mentioned before. I do not know if it is the same thing as 1. Buat Shi Brahm, 2. the study to become Mau Tham, 3. the practicing of Buddhist precepts by lay followers on religious days or 4. the devout supporters of Wat Pah (forest monasteries) who believe in magical power of certain ascetic monks. If "Buat Tham" is a popular movement as claimed by Keyes, it should also spread to villages in the Konkhan area.

There is also another ambiguous point. To support his view regarding the positive effect of monastic experience, Keyes alleged the peasants use the term "Yu Kamma" (literally "being in Kamma" or bearing with suffering) to refer to the practice of being ordained to the Buddhist order, the same term used for the (practice of) lying by the fire required of women. I doubt ~~postpartum~~ if the villagers use the term in the former sense. The more ~~popularly used~~ term is "Kao Kamma" (entering Kamma) used to refer to a ritual of seclusion required of monks whose behavior violate certain precepts of the Buddhist order.

popularly used

temporary