John A. Marston, editor


As one thinks about _Ethnicity, Borders and the Grassroots Interface with the State: Studies on Southeast Asia in Honor of Charles F. Keyes_, which is edited by John A. Marston, a crucial question that pops up instantly is this: How do ethnicities negotiate with the state in relationships of power in the cases of Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos? The edited volume explores the foregoing question in nine different case studies contributed by experts.

Meanwhile, the volume derives from a collection of papers presented at a 2007 conference in honor of the imminent, long-time anthropologist (Dr. Charles Keyes) by his former students. Keyes was a member of the faculty of Anthropology at the University of Washington from 1965 until 2007. Linkages among the issues of state, society and modernity have been central in Keyes’ research. In fact, the publication shows how well Keyes’ mentees have approached these subjects. Editor John Marston teaches at the Center for Asian and African Studies of El Colegio de Mexico, specializing specifically on Anthropology and Buddhism in Cambodia.

As the introduction by Marston argues usefully, Keyes has always been intrigued by how states influence ethnic identity (p.2). Marston emphasizes that “state”, in this volume, is defined as “state authority” and the chapters themselves look at how populations find themselves in dialogue with states (p. 4). While states have spearheaded the ushering in of technical and scientific “progress” to their populations, all the contributors to this volume tend to question state abilities in achieving or even seeking such “modernity.” Moreover, it is a fact that such scholars as James Scott and Joel Migdal have concentrated on states defined by borders, but the other writers in this volume – in following Keyes – in totality address the issue of populations moving across boundary lines.

The fluid power relationship between state and society, accentuated by globalization, ultimately influences ethnicities in their struggle to maintain their identities. This volume examines this phenomenon in three sections: states, ethnicities and public ceremonies; how ethnicities handle state authority and social change; and finally how migratory populations cope with state-defined boundaries.

In Chapter One, Allison Truitt examines different depictions of the official state Vietnamese holiday “Hung Kings’ Death Anniversary.” The festival recalls
the memory of the contributions of the Hung Kings, considered the founders of Vietnam, whose dynasty is believed to have begun ruling in 2879 B.C. In colonial Vietnam, the holiday was used by the French to promote Vietnamese participation in colonialism. Following decolonization, the holiday stressed nationalism.

The post-1975, Hanoi-led, Socialist Republic of Vietnam has used this holiday to ritually unite all Vietnamese together in revolutionary pride. Meanwhile, anti-Hanoi Vietnamese who today live in the USA, use the holiday to invoke allegiance to the former, anti-Communist South Vietnam. Truitt concludes that the festival, “reinscribes,” instead of transcends, distinctive standpoints of Vietnamese modernity (38).

In Chapter Two, Jane Ferguson analyzes the Shan ethnicity’s Poy Sang Long Buddhist ordination ritual which is followed by Shan nationalist rock music. The ritual takes place annually in a community of stateless Shan on the Thai border with Myanmar. Ferguson argues that despite Thai state interpretations of the festival as exemplifying extensions of “Thainess,” the Shan view the ceremony as boosting Shan national rebirth. Meanwhile, the musical revelry is inundated with lyrics alluding to Shan history, nationalism, and overcoming servitude. Ultimately, through ritual and music, Ferguson finds that Poy Sang Long serves to empower Shan identity, overcoming their perceptions of marginalization by Thailand and Myanmar (p. 63).

In Chapter Three, John Marston looks at the re-ordination of Cambodian Buddhist monks following the 1975-1979 Khmer Rouge regime, which had attempted to eradicate all religion. These ordinations began as grassroots initiatives, though they were later controlled by the state. In 1979, Vietnamese monks began re-ordaining Cambodian monks with help from Vietnamese state officials, who sought a unified monastic order under the control of the Vietnamese state. After the end of Vietnam’s occupation of Cambodia in 1989, Vietnamese Buddhist influence over Cambodian Buddhism ebbed. Today Cambodian Buddhism is strongly endorsed by the Cambodian state. Marston concludes that the consecration of monastic lineage contributes to the endurance of religion as a social institution but it needs state endorsement (pp. 91-92). Marston might have stressed the role of Cambodian monarchy in helping to revive Cambodian Buddhism.

Chapter 4, by Ratana Tosakul, examines rural, village-based views on self-sufficient farm production in northeastern Thailand by scrutinizing the In-Plaeng Farmers’ Network in Sakon Nakhon province. She argues that while these farmers support Thai King Bhumipol Adulyadej’s (the state’s) campaign of “sufficiency economy,” which seeks moderation, adherence to Buddhist