

Book Reviews

Claudio O. Delang, *Living at the Edge of Thai Society: The Karen in the Highlands of Northern Thailand*, London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003. xvi + 244 pp. 14 figures, 4 tables, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 0-414-32331-2.

Some may consider it a little self-indulgent but I should like to open this review by considering the last footnote in the book's final chapter, the Afterword by Charles Keyes on the 'politics of "Karen-ness" in Thailand'. In this last-minute statement, Keyes refers to one of my articles (Walker, Andrew [2001] The 'Karen Consensus', Ethnic Politics and Resource-use Legitimacy in Northern Thailand, *Asian Ethnicity*, 2(2), pp. 145–62). Published in an earlier issue of this journal, it addressed the political implications of recent Thai-language representations of the Karen:

Walker has created a strawman—which he labels the 'Karen consensus'—which he accuses of promoting a 'primordialist' 'commitment to Karen culture as an intrinsic property of a defined and definable group of people'. As the contributions to this volume clearly demonstrate, no such 'Karen consensus' exists. (p. 218)

For reference, it is worth recalling the relevant passage from my article.

For some of its originators the [Karen] consensus may, perhaps, arise from a firm commitment to Karen culture as an intrinsic property of a defined, and definable, group of people. Under threat from the external forces of the market and the state, this unique ethnic heritage is seen as deserving of documentation, preservation and promotion. However, the authorship of a primordial ethnic identity does not necessarily amount to a commitment to primordialist views of culture. The recognition that traditionalism can be a strategically useful manoeuvre in the pursuit of rights and resources is now commonplace. (p. 160)

What I was arguing was that for most of its authors the 'Karen consensus' is motivated *not* by primordialist sentiment but by political strategy, and I remain convinced that this relationship between ethnic representation and political objectives is a live issue that warrants ongoing debate and critical scrutiny. Keyes' argument that Thai Karen 'seek not to defend traditional practices but to draw on their traditions in situating themselves within the modern political economy of Thailand' (p. 216) is descriptively sound but lacks a sense of critical scrutiny of how something as fraught and 'invented' as tradition can be moulded to this political end.

Fortunately, some of these tensions are nicely explored in this volume, especially in the early chapters of the book. Pinkaew Laungaramsri, for example, in her characteristically penetrating account of the historical development of representations of the Karen, notes that 'Official perceptions of the Karen as docile and country bumpkins have been turned into an image of modest and humble Karen who live in harmony with nature' (p. 37). Though committed to the empowering force of counter-discourse Pinkaew is clearly uncomfortable with these stereotypical images, pointing out the risk of the Karen 'being chased into a corner of the bio-centric argument of real/pure and unreal/impure "nature" in which Karen habitat can never qualify as "real" nature' (p. 39). She calls for 'deeper and more radical struggle through which Karen livelihood

and their relationship to their natural surroundings can be dynamically defined'. Exactly what form this struggle may take is not explored in detail but I suspect it will have to go well beyond a symbolic focus on the ecological sustainability of traditional agricultural practices.

Similar arguments to those presented by Pinkaew are put forward in the other two chapters in the first part of the book. In his study of the Karen in Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary, Reiner Burgin writes of the increasingly common representation of the Karen as 'benign environmentalists' (p. 45). He recognises that this is an 'important asset' in national political debate but argues for an approach 'based on the right of the Karen . . . to defend their own case as well as from the appreciation of their different conceptions and values' (p. 61). Unfortunately, his account of the diversity of Karen views in relation to tradition, modernisation and identity is all too brief. Somewhat more detailed local insights are provided by John McKinnon in his account of an NGO supported festival and participatory mapping exercise in a Karen village near Chiang Mai. Through a close reading of events over several days McKinnon is able to highlight the importance of 'pragmatic and dynamic syncretism' (p. 82) in Karen activism. He argues that:

the Karen can be accurately portrayed by more than just the images of what they might have been in the past . . . Resistance relies on more than working from the fashionable and moral high ground of indigeneity.

These politically engaged perspectives drop off the agenda somewhat in the middle section of the book. The second section, on 'social practices and transformations' is a rather idiosyncratic collection of material on funerals, morality and traditional verses (the famous Karen '*hta*'). There is some fine ethnography here but one wonders what motivated this particular selection apart, perhaps, from the availability of the authors (Christina Fink, Yoko Hayami and Roland Mischung). The chapters, however, do highlight the value of intensive and fine-grained ethnographic research and in doing so implicitly highlight the relative lack of such research on the environmental and livelihood issues that have dominated in recent discussions on the Karen. 'Drawing on traditions' for political ends is a legitimate, and common, strategy. However, there is a real risk of producing a body of politicised ethnography that is increasingly detached from livelihood realities. These ethnographically rich chapters remind us that deep ethnographic engagement in local lives can also be an important source of empowerment.

The third section returns to some of the familiar ground mapped out earlier in the book. Oliver Puginier provides a useful account of Karen engagement with participatory land use mapping activities. His data highlights the very significant increases in paddy cultivation in Karen areas (though he does not focus on this point himself), contrary to the obsession in official and alternative account of the Karen as shifting cultivators. Claudio Delang's chapter is probably the most provocative in the book. In it he argues that Karen attempt to retain subsistence oriented lifestyles as a result of their socio-cultural emphasis on 'indigeneity' and 'many strandedness'. This is an argument that contains many of the key elements of what I have called the 'Karen consensus' but there is no straw man here—Delang's account is meticulously supported by detailed data collection, regression analysis and the like. Some may find the argument convincing, but to my reading, there is too much emphasis on cultural determinism and not enough on historical development and geographic constraint. I also strongly suspect that the view that the Karen in Bokeo district

(Thailand's strawberry heartland) only adopt commercial agriculture when they are forced to (p. 180) would not stand up to much ethnographic scrutiny.

This volume provides a good overview of recent research on the Karen in northern Thailand. This is valuable. However, the volume lacks much in terms of drawing the various contributions together and moving the agenda of research on the Karen forward. The preface and the introductions to the various parts of the book are little more than summaries. This is a lost opportunity.

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Barry Sautman and June Teufel Dreyer (Eds), *Contemporary Tibet: Politics, Development, and Society in a Disputed Region*, Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2006, vii + 360 pp. 22 tables, index. ISBN 0-7656-1354-9 (hardcover, alk. paper), ISBN 0-7656-1357-3 (pbk. Alk. paper).

What makes Tibet and associated issues so contentious? As the editors of this volume of essays point out (p. 3): 'Contemporary Tibet is the subject of one of the world's longest running ethno-territorial conflicts... virtually every aspect of state-society interaction in Tibet has been contested by the principal parties—the Tibetan exiles led by the Dalai Lama and the PRC government led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). They continue (p. 3) that 'the conflict over Tibet has above all been about its political status'.

However, it appears to this reviewer that another factor prevails in the public arena, a factor that should not be relevant but seems to be pervasive, at least in the eyes of the West, and that is the emotional factor. In many books and articles on Tibet, authors tend to allow emotions to blur their judgement when choosing a perspective to examine this highly charged issue.

In the book under review, Barry Sautman and June Teufel Dreyer have made a concerted effort to provide readers with a diverse collection of essays from different disciplines and approaches in an attempt to give some clarity to the overall question. While acknowledging that some of the ideas and solutions put forward by contributors to this volume will produce disagreement from some, nevertheless, overall this is a well-balanced, wide-ranging and thoughtful contribution to understanding the Tibet question.

In the introductory chapter, the editors provide what any good book should do: a clear and concise description of the contents. This is even more important in this instance due to the controversial nature of the subject. The volume presents a wide-ranging collection of essays, fifteen in all, which allows us an opportunity to examine different perspectives and angles on the Tibet question from a diverse group of authors, the majority of whom have already published extensively on Tibetan issues.

This volume of essays is highly readable; it is not restricted to those of scholarly persuasion, but to all who have an interest in matters relating to Tibet, and this aspect makes this volume of essays of particular value. This feature is of course attributable to the vision and skill of the editors.