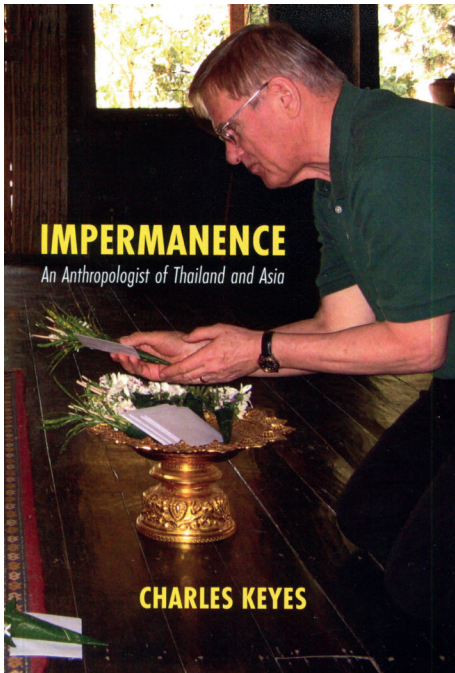


and appear as scattered and at times, barely visible reference points for anecdotes not necessarily related to music. The abundance of information raises questions of relevance which begs the question: how can the relevance of the various strands of information be evaluated in the absence of a grounding and overarching theme to which they could be relevant? The absence of an overall framing context gives the book a feel as though it comprises data that were aggregated but not sorted according to any criteria or organized around a set of disciplinary interests that could give it shape and definition.

These misgivings aside, this book is a significant contribution in the study of Thai music, the history of Bangkok, and the history of recording there. It presents information not previously assembled, and this is too important to be overlooked. The book should be read by anyone with an interest in Mitchell's topics.

John Garzoli

*Impermanence: An Anthropologist of Thailand and Asia* by Charles Keyes (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2019). ISBN: 9786162151385 (paperback). 625 Baht.



This book is a personal memoir or autobiography of Charles ‘Biff’ Keyes (or *Ajarn* Biff to his former Thai students). Keyes was professor emeritus of Anthropology and International Studies at the University of Washington (UW), past President of the Association for Asian Studies, and a renowned anthropologist of Mainland Southeast Asia, particularly Thailand.

The viewpoint and life experience of others can provide inspiration and motivation when reading a memoir. This autobiography is about Keyes’ life story beginning from his childhood roots in Nebraska and growing up in Idaho Falls, to become a distinguished anthropologist. It also provides a detailed depiction of his long and productive career at UW. He trained numerous graduate students in sociocultural anthropology and forged academic links between institutions in the

US and Thailand, Vietnam, and the Lao PDR.

I first saw the draft manuscript of this memoir on his computer when my friends and I visited his family in Portland, Oregon in 2019. I was struck by the word “impermanence” on the book’s cover, so asked if he was a Buddhist. He responded

that although he had given up formal affiliation with any religion, he found Buddhist philosophy fascinating. Keyes adopted the concept of impermanence (*anicca*) to reflect on how this principle shaped his own life. Undoubtedly, Buddhism has influenced him following his lifelong research on Buddhist culture in everyday life of the people of Thailand and Mainland Southeast Asia. He mentioned that the way he sees himself situated in the past is primarily a Buddhist practice.

There are three interrelated components in the Thai Theravada Buddhist Trinity. They are ทุกข์/ทุกข์ (dukkha or suffering), อนิจจา/อนิจจัง (*anicca* or impermanence) and อนัตตา (*anatta* or non-self, detachment). The cycle of birth, aging, illness, and death that all living things must go through has created a basis for human suffering. The knowledge of impermanence heals our heartache, leads us to worldly detachment and thus gain enlightenment. Buddhists believe that by understanding *anicca*, we understand that there is no permanent entity underlying our life (*anatta*). Life is always transient. Impermanence is the cornerstone of Buddhist principle and practice. We all are living in the moment, temporarily. The nature of *dukkha*, *anicca*, and *anatta* reflects the universal law of human life.

This memoir is the most complete story of his life. Keyes has made his own choice as to what is worth recording or remembering. It reflects how he wanted to structure and perpetuate his memories in a written record. Keyes' real-life stories and specific incidents, such as Thai academic and student protests in 1973, or the history of the anthropology department at UW, are vital contributions to the historical record.

The book has ten parts covering his childhood, higher education, research in Thailand, academic career at UW, students, international scholarship, and retirement. His autobiography is a straightforward account of his life, but is presented in a scholarly style with concrete evidence, including footnotes, in-text citations, and relevant photos. This memoir is thus easy to follow, as Keyes organized the content chronologically. His writing style is neither emotional nor sensational but highly empirical. Keyes has stated that this memoir is for his family and others who may be interested in it.

Keyes had a long, productive career and a fulfilling life before being diagnosed with the terminal illness, ALS. The society and people around him laid the groundwork for his becoming an anthropologist. He has vividly described his childhood socialization where he was living in Mormon-dominated Idaho Falls. Being a member of the Presbyterian Church, he began to sense himself being a cultural minority. He also encountered a few people who belonged to racial minorities there. His childhood experience thus laid the solid foundation for him developing a deep interest in ethnicity and cultural diversity.

Keyes has also noted that he received an outstanding education at the University of Nebraska. What was most significant was less what he studied than the teachers who inspired him. In the beginning, Keyes had intended to become a physics major. Subsequently, he developed an enthusiastic interest in anthropology and chose to have a joint major in anthropology and math in his junior year. He developed a deep interest in religion. He also began to keep a journal, as Karl Shapiro, his teacher,

advised students to do. Based on his journal. Keyes could see what would become a primary focus of his scholarship, namely seeking to understand ethnic identity and the relationship between ethnic groups. He also developed a close relationship with a minister who advocated socially engaged religion. When he graduated from the university, he developed a deep interest in ecumenical dialogue and an attachment to social activism shaped by moral commitments. His interest in world religion continued when he went to graduate school and began what would become his life-long fascination with Buddhism.

Since he graduated with distinction, Keyes was offered fellowships from Cornell, Harvard, and Chicago in anthropology and received a national Woodrow Wilson Fellowship. Finally, he chose to enter the graduate school in anthropology at Cornell under the tutelage of Professor Lauriston Sharp, who had conducted pioneering ethnographic research in Thailand. Keyes would follow his teacher, making Thailand the focus of his professional and personal life.

In 1962, Keyes and Jane, his wife and co-researcher, arrived in Thailand to start their anthropological research in a northeastern (or Isan) village, Ban Nong Tuen, in Mahasarakham province. Their research made us aware of Buddhism in the everyday life of Isan villagers and the issues around 'Northeast Problems' resulting from the interface between Isan villagers and the Thai nation-state. I feel we can learn so much from this chapter, in which he has described in detail how two *farang* (Caucasians) observed the villagers and how the villagers observed them. The *farang* identity in villagers' eyes was associated with wealth and prosperity. The *farang* had many social worlds, their stay in the village was temporary to study village information, and they would return to their home eventually. Yet, the *farang* were patrons of the village because they could share their wealth and connect outside resources to benefit the community. After their initial anthropological research in 1962-1964, Keyes and Jane continued visiting the village until 2014, when the military junta seized political power from the populist government that had received staunch support from the Isan population. During this political turmoil, they became concerned that their visits might cause unwanted consequences for the villagers.

Keyes and Jane also undertook research in the Mae Sariang district of Mae Hong Son province along the Thailand-Myanmar border. Keyes went with a local team led by a prominent monk, *Phra Khruu*, to discover ancient Buddhist scripts in a cave along the Salween River. This event was undoubtedly the highlight of those years in Mae Sariang. What mattered to him most was not that visit itself but his long-lasting and valuable relationship with the *Phra Khruu*, who taught him so much about Buddhism and the way of life of the people in the area. Subsequently, he spent two years teaching at Chiang Mai University.

Keyes personally witnessed the rise of student protests in 1973. I especially like the section about politics and Thai academia, reflecting Thai political history, particularly student-led demonstrations on the streets of Bangkok in which students from Chiang Mai University became deeply involved.

Keyes also observed that many students actively assisted the northern Thai-based Farmer Federation of Thailand to help poor farmers improve their economic

condition and obtain more secure land titles. Thai academia by then, particularly in social sciences, became more involved in adjusting their teaching to address the plight of poor farmers and ethnic minorities in northern Thailand. Keyes also discussed the “Thailand Controversy,” associated with the widespread anti-war movements among university students and scholars in the US, questioning the role and ethics of American scholars in Thailand.

Narratives about the evolution of the anthropology department at UW are vital historical records for understanding the department’s history from various viewpoints. The chapter about his students moved me, showing that he understood his students so well professionally and personally, treating them as his second family. In 2003, he received a Graduate Mentorship Award for supervising the Ph.D. committees of forty-four students (about one-third from Thailand and Vietnam) and twenty MA students. Keyes reflected on his role as teacher, mentor, and dissertation advisor helping to build a global academy. He actively recruited non-American and American students from minority backgrounds to teach in Asian and other non-American universities. At the end of his career, he felt pride that some of his students from Thailand, Vietnam, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and America are now training new generations of scholars while others contribute to the development of internationalized anthropology at institutions in the US.

Keyes also regarded himself as an international scholar. In addition to his anthropological research in Thailand, he forged academic collaboration between American-based educational institutions and counterparts in Thailand, Vietnam, and the Lao PDR. He was the author, editor, or co-editor of approximately fifteen books and dozens of articles. He taught for forty-five years, primarily at UW and several institutions in Thailand, Vietnam, Scandinavia, and elsewhere in the US. Much of his anthropological research has involved the role of Buddhism in the everyday life of people in Thailand and Mainland Southeast Asia. He also had a deep interest in ethnicity and national cultures, and the transformation of rural society interfaced with national politics.

Keyes referred to the idea of *karma* [or *kamma* (กรรม)]: the actions of others who lived before one’s birth shaping one’s own life and one’s actions in life influencing the lives of others born after one’s death. All humans are accountable for their actions and accept the consequences of their deeds. Finally, Keyes has reached the end of his *karma*, leaving behind his positive academic legacy, particularly in Thai studies.

Ratana Tosakul