Nancy Eberhardt, *Imagining the Course of Life: Self-Transformation in a Shan Buddhist Community*. Chiang Mai, Silkworm Books, 2006, xiv+244 pp., pb, Bt 695.

Drawing on two extended periods of ethnographic fieldwork in the 1980s and 1990s conducted in a Shan village in Mae Hong Son province, Eberhardt has written a compelling account of Shan perceptions of selfhood, life trajectories, and well-being as articulated in everyday life experiences, ritual practices, and community activities. Central to her argument is the dialectical and fluid relationship between individual self and society embedded in the Shan theories of human development, the theories she would rather call "Shan theories of person development" (p.165), as they transcend the rigid and linear course of change. A contribution to the field of ethno-psychological study, the book not only fills the recognizable gap in the literature on indigenous world views and practices of selfhood and 'life course' in mainland Southeast Asia, but also offers a reflexive formulation of how such issues can be contemplated beyond the conventional boundaries between Buddhist doctrine and popular religion, culture and psychology, mind and body, thought and feeling, and individual and society.

Opening with an account of a healing rite, Eberhardt delves into the heart of the Shan thinking and practice of a healthy self. For the Shan, the body is not only a physical entity, but a contested site between two opposing forces: the soul (*khwan*) and the spirit (*phi*). Although both life forces are in a transformative continuum of births and deaths, the separation between the two realms, the life-world *khwan* and the spirit-world *phi,* is essential in maintaining the well-being of the body and self. Through *pat phi* (sweeping away the spirits) and *haung khwan* (calling the souls), the spirit is driven away, the soul is propitiated and thus there is a reconnection of *khwan* and body in a reinstalled self. The connection between *khwan* and self is, however, disrupted at the time of death, when *khwan* becomes *phi*, setting off on a new passage of life to be reborn again. Yet the path towards this transition can be divergent, depending on the nature of death (usual or tragic) and degree of emotional attachments of the dead to loved ones and home. Merits made for the deceased through proper funerals and offering ceremonies such as *kotsaa,* a merit-making ceremony performed in the eleventh lunar month for those who have died in the previous year, are therefore crucial to facilitate the process of transformation and to ensure the disconnection between the life and spirit worlds.

But self is never an empty entity or a complete coherence since birth. The stories of rebirth are captivating accounts of how past selves and present souls are constantly re-interconnected in the actual world. As the deceased is reborn into a new child, the process of guiding the self towards maturity starts anew. Eberhardt nicely draws a common thread between

spirits, souls, and children, showing how each share a basic nature of immature self—the temptation and susceptibility of being lured by desires. The hungry spirit can be manipulated and controlled through human rites. The wandering soul needs the right treat to be persuaded to return to the body. The wild child is to be tamed and taught to know how to be self-restrained. All of these are significant processes in which selves are domesticated and made mature.

Shan people maintain their health and well-being personally and collectively through ritual assistance. The story of three annual rituals which were performed in one day, illustrated by Eberhardt, is a good example of how the technology of rituals is extensively employed by villagers to sustain various levels of healthy life. The *mei wan* (repairing the village) is aimed at purification and revitalization. The *liang tsao moeng* (feasting the village guardian spirit) is to reaffirm the reverential relationship with the guardian spirit whose power protects the livelihoods of village members. The *song phi* (sending away the spirits) leads bad spirits out of the realm of the human world. These are only a few of the countless rituals performed by the Shan in order to ensure the well-being of the self. Rituals as cultural strategies thus allow the Shan properly to prepare themselves to cope with the uncertainty of the world they live in.

Paui Sang Long, the well-known Shan novice ordination, is another terrain of ritual Eberhardt explores at great length in order to see how this theatrical rite represents a site of multiple forms of maturity-making. Her way of capturing this ritual is interesting and her interpretation revealing. Whereas much of the literature on Buddhism and gender emphasizes gender inequality, Eberhardt highlights the agency aspect of gender relations, the role of woman sponsors in the ritual and the social meaning embedded in their active involvement. In so doing, she demonstrates to the reader how *Paui Sang Long* is simultaneously a unique rite of passage for boys and a rite of maternity for middle-aged women. As the ordination symbolizes the path towards adulthood of young boys, it is also enthusiastically anticipated by women. Through the devoted role of *mae kham*, the sponsor of the novice ordination, the rite of *Paui Sang Long* comes to mark the rite of maturity for both men and women, by which women sponsors also gain respectable status and prestige through their dedication.

For the Shan, maturity as a form of self-transformation does not end when one achieves adulthood, but continues while aging. In old age, one learns to understand life and reality more deeply through detachment from the worldly world, the process Eberhardt calls "the second socialization". Long years of knowledge and experience, and closer connections with Buddhist practices, allow old people, especially temple-sleepers, to gain insightful contemplation of life, 'personhood', and self-control, a significant moral stage of human development looked up to by the young ones in the community.

Imagining the Course of Life is a rich and engaging ethnography. Eberhardt's stories are entertaining; one can feel the lively presence and energetic involvement of the anthropologist in everyday life of the Shan world as she moves from one ritual to the other. Focusing on specific events, yet with broader cultural reflections, this ethnography is a fascinating achievement of how dualism between personal understanding of self and human development and structural imperative of the cultural world can be resolved without abandoning its tension. The final chapter also suggests further terrains of exploration, including changes and their implications, significant topics that deserve closer investigation.

This is a work of great value, not only to the field of ethno-psychology in particular but also to students of mainland Southeast Asia more broadly. Those who are particularly interested in ritual, selfhood, and human development will find the book both insightful and illuminating.

Pinkaew Laungaramsri

Vatthana Pholsena and Ruth Banomyong, *Laos: From Buffer State to Crossroads?* translated by Michael Smithies. Chiang Mai, Mekong Press, 2006, 225 pp., Bt 525.

At first glance, the sub-title of this book *From Buffer State to Crossroads?* suggests that what is on offer is an historical argument about how Laos has evolved over the past two decades, with just some doubt insinuated by that coy question mark. But this is misleading. What the book is about, rather, is revealed by its original French title: *Le Laos au XXI siècle: Les défis de l'intégration régionale* (Laos in the 21st century: The challenges of regional integration).

The approach the two authors have adopted is analytical, rather than historical. The first three chapters make the case for Laos as a buffer state; examine its subsequent integration into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN); and assess the continuing importance of relations with Vietnam and Thailand. The next four chapters analyse the situation Laos faces today: the problems posed by aspects of its underdevelopment; by subregional transportation and communications links; by cross-border contacts and influences; along with some of the social responses to changes taking place.

The argument that Laos had developed as a buffer state between expanding Vietnamese and Siamese empires, which had been in conflict with each other for 'over a thousand years', was