

*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

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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 21<sup>st</sup> 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

first made by Hugh Toye in his book *Laos: Buffer State or Battleground* (1968). This, for Toye, provided the historical basis for what he believed should have been the role of Laos during the Cold War: to be a neutral buffer state, in preference to becoming a battleground for contending ideologies. Pholsena and Banomyong broadly accept the notion of Laos as historically a buffer state, as they indicate by their sub-title and in their introductory chapter. Given this context, Laos as crossroads is a new departure, though as the authors point out (pp. 131–134), it was always linked by trade to the region.

I read Lao history rather differently. The movement of peoples in mainland Southeast Asia has historically been from north to south, following the flow of great rivers (the Irrawaddy, the Chao Phraya, the Mekong), or down the coast of Vietnam. Conquests were at the expense of the Pyu, the Mon, the Khmer and the Cham. The Lao were part of this north-south movement, along with the Burmese, Siamese and Vietnamese. The kingdom (*mandala*) of Lan Xang that the Lao constructed on the middle Mekong was not a buffer state: it was a kingdom of comparable extent and might to Siam and Dai Viet, a kingdom which successfully defended its unity and independence from invaders from both east and west.

Only after Lan Xang split into three (Luang Phrabang, Viang Chan and Champasak) in the early eighteenth century were these weakened Lao kingdoms eventually forced to accept

the suzerainty of Siam. Even then they were not buffer states: they were tributary *meuang* of the expanded Siamese *mandala*. But they also maintained political relations with Vietnam and China as well as Siam, relations which ebbed and flowed in proportion to the relative power and interests of each.

The culture of Lao foreign relations was never shaped by the idea of neutrality or being a buffer between contending powers. It was shaped by the infinitely flexible political structure of the *meuang*, whose nested hierarchical relationships comprised the *mandala* of Meuang Lao. No fixed frontiers held antagonistic kingdoms apart. Trade and diplomacy in the form of tribute missions kept the Lao kingdoms in constant contact with the region. Even after the destruction of Viang Chan (Vientiane) in the Lao-Siamese war of 1827–28, Lao *meuang*, most notably Luang Phrabang, but also the Sip song Chau Thai, Xiang Khuang and some lesser *meuang* on the Mahaxai Plateau, kept up regional contacts designed not to maintain some kind of neutrality, but to preserve a degree of independence through a flexible accounting of power relationships.

Only with the arrival of antagonistic European powers was the notion of a buffer state introduced into Southeast Asian political thought – and then, as Pholsena and Banomyong acknowledge, it applied to Siam, not Laos. The Lao territories were divided: what is Laos today was part of French Indochina; the rest remained part of Siam. The French justified their rule over

Laos (and Cambodia) as protection from Siamese domination, only to open the way to domination by Vietnam.

Only with the advent of the Cold War was independent Laos cast in the role of a buffer state between communist North Vietnam and capitalist Thailand. But it was a role that rested solely on the interference of outside powers. Laos was in fact not neutral, but divided into spheres of control: Chinese in the north (after 1962), Vietnamese down the eastern mountains, and US/Thai along the Mekong valley. After 1975, Laos was tightly tied to Vietnam. It took the Third Indochina War to begin to unravel Vietnamese 'regional hegemony', and the 'solution' of the Cambodian conflict in 1993 to complete it (despite the continuing Lao-Vietnamese 'special relationship' – on which more below).

Laos as a neutral buffer state was an invention of the West, an intrusion of Western strategic thinking into Southeast Asia. Once the West withdrew, once Vietnam no longer possessed the prop of the Soviet Union, the countries of Southeast Asia could begin to revert to the regional relationships they previously enjoyed. The 'great power' in the region is once again China. But there is no military/strategic alliance among mainland Southeast Asian states to 'balance' Chinese power and no buffer between them. Security for mainland Southeast Asian states derives, as it traditionally did, from diplomacy underwritten by moral expectations, recognition of China's status, and the mutual benefits of trade. This may not

satisfy realist analysts, but it worked fairly well in the past.

This interpretation dispenses with the notion of Laos as a buffer state as a temporary Western imposition, an aberration in the historical pattern of mainland Southeast Asian regional relations. What we now see is a return to more flexible and more firmly historically grounded relationships, but in the modern guise of ASEAN.

Pholsena and Banomyong devote the best part of a chapter to considering why Laos (and Vietnam and Cambodia) joined ASEAN, and the challenges and benefits this poses for Vientiane. While the authors give due weight to the end of the Cold War and the UN 'solution' in Cambodia, they do not, I think, take sufficient account of the extent to which the Lao decision depended on Vietnam. This is not to say that Lao reasons for joining ASEAN were the same as those of Vietnam: just that if Vietnam had not joined, Laos would not have become a member.

For Vietnam, security in the face of a rising China was the first consideration. Given the events of 1979 and disputed sovereignty over islands in the South China Sea, Vietnam was desperate not to face China alone. China would be less likely to attack a member of ASEAN than to teach an isolated Vietnam a second 'lesson'. But this was not a primary concern of the Lao. Pholsena and Banomyong examine three sets of explanations of why Laos joined ASEAN, which are really accounts of what Laos stood to gain. A neo-institutionalist

argument is that Laos would benefit from inclusion in ASEAN's cooperative multilateral institutions to raise its voice in world forums. A realist view would be that Lao national security would be protected, not as in the case of Vietnam from China, but from Thailand, which fought a more recent border war with Laos in 1988.

The authors prefer a constructionist perspective. They argue that joining ASEAN permits Laos to contribute to building a 'security community', by means of which it would be able to pursue a genuinely neutralist foreign policy of peace and friendship with all other states (even if some friends, like Vietnam, remain more equal than others.) Though the authors do not stress this point, such a policy has the benefit of ensuring that Laos continues to receive aid and investment from the widest possible cross-section of donors.

A chapter is devoted to examining bilateral relations with both Vietnam and Thailand. The roots of the 'special relationship' with Vietnam are found in the events of 1945 when, at the direction of the communist controlled Vietminh front, Vietnamese living in Laos seized power in the Lao Mekong towns alongside the Lao Issara (Free Lao) nationalists and a handful of Lao Marxists. From there we jump to the establishment of a Pathet Lao liberated zone in northeast Laos in 1953, thanks to Vietminh forces. And from 1953 we leap to the present. There is no mention of the decade of warfare from 1964 to 1973, during which Lao and Vietnamese

forces fought side-by-side under the rain of American bombs. Yet this was the period when the all-important military relationship was consolidated.

For it is the military relationship above all that has caused the 'special relationship' to persist, not that in its current form it is 'multidimensional'. Since the death of Laos's first state and party president, Kaysone Phomvihane, who was half Vietnamese, his two successors have both been army commanders. It is true, however, as the authors argue, that the relationship is mutually beneficial in terms of both trade (legal and illegal, mainly timber) and security. Vietnam has always understood the relationship as strategic, as protecting its long and vulnerable western frontier.

The analysis of the 'tense' relationship between Laos and Thailand is much more searching and revealing, as one might expect from authors who are, respectively, Lao and Thai. But here again there is a curious lacuna. No mention is made of the event that still bulks large in Lao national consciousness – the sack of Viang Chan. Just as the Thai can never forget the utter destruction of Ayutthaya at the hands of the Burmese, so the Lao can never forget the equally total destruction of Viang Chan and the brutal treatment of its ruling family.

The relationship with China is only mentioned in passing, as 'an increasing influence'. But it is more than that. The Chinese presence in Laos is growing steadily. Substantial numbers of Chinese have moved into northern Lao towns, where much of the commerce is now in

their hands. Chinese companies have built factories, established plantations and begun mining. Their expanding political influence has been at the expense of the Vietnamese. Already the Lao are careful to balance their relations with Hanoi and Beijing. Once the last of the revolutionary generation of Lao military leaders have retired, the balance may well tip in China's favour.

Chapter four moves directly to the Lao economy, but the reader is not sure why. No attempt is made to set the chapter in the context of the transition from buffer state to crossroads. The discussion is informed and informative, and one assumes that the point being made is that Laos is ill-prepared to stand as some kind of sub-regional economic hub. The weakness of Lao financial institutions and the country's economic dependency are stressed. This is contrasted with self-sufficiency in food production.

Economic dependency is indicated by the country's balance of payments deficit, which the authors argue will not be quickly reversed by the construction of large dams (notably the Nam Theun II) and sale of hydropower to Thailand, the only buyer. There is, however, no discussion of mining. Yet in 2005 and 2006, the value of Lao exports grew faster than for any other ASEAN member state, thanks largely to the boost provided by mineral exports from the large Australian owned and operated gold and copper mine at Sepone in central Laos (which also provided substantial revenue to the Lao government.) (Statistics in the French publication of 2004 have been

updated for the English edition, but still run a few years late. "The last three years" mentioned at one point actually refer to 2000–2003.)

In chapter 5 the authors address that question mark in their title: does the future of Laos lie in becoming the crossroads (or in their terminology, the 'logistics platform') of mainland South-east Asia? Forms of, and improvements to, transportation and communications are discussed with the help of tables on such matters as comparative transport costs and time spent at frontier crossings. The roles played by ASEAN agreements and the Asian Development Bank in promoting its Greater Mekong Sub-region project (which includes the Chinese province of Yunnan as well as mainland Southeast Asian states) are examined, but the authors rightly conclude that such theoretical concepts as 'growth areas' (triangles, quadrilaterals) including parts of Laos and 'economic corridors' following transport routes across the country "still have to prove their worth on the ground."

Nevertheless, as the authors correctly assert in chapter 6, there is no possibility that landlocked Laos can remain semi-isolated from the global changes sweeping the rest of Southeast Asia. A massive increase in tourism, increasing labour migration, epidemics such as HIV/Aids and SARS, and smuggling of timber (the example they examine), livestock and wildlife, all cut across borders and force Laos to confront the challenges of expanding regional integration. But then, as the authors point out, to claim

that historically Laos was isolated from the region was to perpetuate a myth.

Chapter 7 turns to social change, the failure of Marxism, the crisis of political legitimization and the resurgence of Buddhism. The attitudes of Lao youth are revealed through answers to the Vientiane Social Survey, and the chapter ends with a brief note on ethnic minorities in the face of resettlement and regional integration. Each is of interest, but treated as separate issues.

The conclusion is inconclusive, because at the end of the day the authors present no clearly argued case, either in terms of direction of change or of the economic and political challenges Laos faces today. Both can be glimpsed but could have been presented in a more connected way. That said, any book on Laos is a welcome addition to a woefully small literature, and this book is packed with useful information that will be new to most readers. There is a chronology that runs from 1353, the date of the founding of Lan Xang, to 2005, and a useful bibliography and index. The translation from the French by Michael Smithies runs smoothly, making the book an easy read.

Martin Stuart-Fox

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Michel Jacq-Hergoualc'h, *The Armies of Angkor: Military Structure and Weaponry of the Khmers*, translated by Michael Smithies, Bangkok, Orchid Press, 2007, xiii + 178 pp., Bt 1,350.

Michel Jacq-Hergoualc'h, Orchid Press, and Michael Smithies as translator of the original French edition, are all to be congratulated for the publication of this book with its intriguing subject. As Jean Boissellier points out in his Preface, the study of narrative bas-reliefs in the temples of Angkor have been of great importance for our understanding of a society that left behind such a limited number of written—or, more correctly, incised—records. Today, as scholarship has advanced so substantially, it is all too easy, even for a less-than-casual visitor to Angkor, to fail to recognise how much has been deduced from approximately 1,200 inscriptions, many of which have little to do with the material life of the Angkorian period. It is in these circumstances that the importance of narrative bas-reliefs has long been recognised. Lunet de Lajonquière, whose fame rests on his having been responsible for mapping temple sites throughout Cambodia in the first two decades of the twentieth century, observed in 1911 that temple bas-reliefs constituted 'a veritable mine of information' about Angkorian society and urged scholars to exploit this 'mine'. This was a challenge partially met by George Groslier, in his *Recherches sur les Cambodgiens, d'après les textes et les monuments depuis les premiers siècles de notre ère*, published in Paris