

Martin Stuart-Fox, photographs by Steve Northrop, *Naga Cities of the Mekong: A guide to the temples, legends and history of Laos*. Singapore, Media Masters, 2006, 128 pp.

It will not only be discerning tourists who will welcome the publication of this lavishly illustrated book. Given the paucity of readily available literature on Laos, all with an interest in that country will find both pleasure and profit in this latest contribution from Martin Stuart-Fox with the valuable photographic accompaniment provided by Steve Northrop.

In choosing to focus on the three most important Laos cities along the Mekong, Martin Stuart-Fox has been able to present a rich offering of history, legend and folklore, and a measure of contemporary politics. Luang Phrabang, Vientiane (Viang Chan in this book's rendering of the toponym) are the more familiar of these cities, but the inclusion of Champasak is particularly welcome. The Champasak region, for it is a series of settlements rather than a single city, is often neglected in much of the general writing that focuses on the former 'Kingdom of a Million Elephants'. Now little more than a shadow of its former self, its previous centre has been eclipsed by nearby Pakse in terms of population and built environment. With its striking Vat Phu ruins, it seems certain that Champasak will attract much greater attention in the future.

Central to the book is the importance of the 'spirits of the river' for Lao settle-

ments along the Mekong. In the region's earliest times these 'snake-dragon' spirits varied in their character. Some were 'fierce and unpredictable, some more benign'. Called *ngeuak* by the first settlers, the knowledge that there were other, consistently benign spirits came to those dwelling along the river in the course of their interaction with Khmers and Mons and the assimilation of Buddhist mythology. These protective river spirits were the *naga*, or *nak* in Laos, and their presence was, and is seen, as vital to the establishment and then to the well-being of the three cities that are the subject of this book.

In relation to each of the three 'Naga Cities' the author traces their history from legendary times to the present, giving due attention to the calendrical festivals that mark the year. The importance of individual *vats* is highlighted, with accompanying photographs to supplement commentary in the text. For many readers the section on Luang Phrabang will prove most interesting because of that city's heritage status and the resultant exclusion of modern construction from the buildings in the peninsula formed by the Mekong and Nam Khan Rivers.

Although Vientiane does not have the picturesque character of the old royal capital there are good arguments for the attention given to the modern aspect of the city in this book. Few would suggest that its buildings can match the charm of Luang Phrabang, but as the country's capital and the fact that one of Laos' greatest festivals takes place each year

at the That Luang stupa are among the many reasons for the attention the city receives. Moreover, it is instructive to contrast the modern buildings depicted in the book and which form so much of Vientiane's built environment with what is found further upstream.

Champasak is a very different site, or more correctly series of sites, from either Luang Phrabang or Vientiane. Only an independent kingdom for less than a century between 1713 and 1778, it is correctly described as at the heart of frontier region where intermingling between Laos and Khmer was important – though the Khmer links with Luang Phrabang should not be forgotten. The ruins of Vat Phu and their spectacular site draw an increasing number of visitors, but remarkably little has changed at the riverside settlement where the rulers of Champasak once lived. Not so Pakse, where Prince Boiun Oum's last hurrah consisted of the construction of an amazing wedding-cake-architecture palace which had not been completed when he fled the country. Now completed and refurbished as hotel, it is a bizarre link to former times.

As interest in the cities of Southeast Asia grow, it can be confidently expected that this book will continue to be consulted by both those making their first visit to Laos and those who have the good fortune to return to this fascinating region.

Milton Osborne

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