

Vatthana Pholsena, *Post-War Laos. The Politics of Culture, History and Identity*. Singapore, ISEAS; Copenhagen, NIAS; Chiang Mai, Silkworm, 2006, xii+256 pp., map. ISBN 941-93619-3-8

The book begins by introducing the dual subject, firstly “the nationalist discourse of the post-socialist Lao state. More precisely, ...the ways the state is uttering its discourse of legitimization within a context of multi-ethnicity” (p. 6), and secondly, “the exploration of the sentiments of nationhood of men and women who belong to an ethnic minority group and who have been involved in the communist war and then the socialist project” (p.7).

Polsena in chapter two considers the possibility of “the awakening of ethnic identity in Colonial Laos”, and the disruptive impact of the French colonial administration which led to an increase in rebellions among some highland groups, exemplified by Kommadam’s armed resistance in the south.

The next chapter discusses the politics of identity in contemporary Laos. This can be internal, as illustrated by the old royalist divisions of Lao Lum (valley Lao), Lao Theung (Lao of the mountain slopes), and Lao Sung (mountain top Lao), now technically disallowed, but still widely used. Later in the book they are referred to as “a stroke of genius” since the terms suppressed “the pejorative nature and the racial connotations” attached to the colonial naming system (pp.154–5). The

relationship between Laos and Thailand is another consideration, with the “Lao authorities... wish[ing] to preserve and reinforce their country’s ‘unique’ image of authenticity and purity, so as to be distinct enough from Thailand’s...” (p.54). The revived role of Buddhism is also considered.

Chapter four deals with the supposed origins of the Lao people and the debates that arise from the felt need to seek an antiquity not always justified by the facts. Much attention is given to the views of Souneth and his archaeological investigations, and the apparent desire to establish the existence of a pre-Indian pre-Chinese civilization. As in any country, ethnicity is a rather sensitive issue, as can be seen in world politics, and also, given the pre-1975 Lao experience, the subject of bitter debate.

Two chapters, five and seven, are straightforward field research pieces based on the south, and so not necessarily representative of the rest of the country; one considers a (former) “heroic village”, where conflict and divisions can be seen among people “supposedly all united against a common enemy”, and where the mentality of “secrecy and paranoia” remain (p.141). The other considers the fallen condition (“re-marginalization”) of formerly high status quasi-urban persons confronted with new realities and government priorities. Chapter six, “Ethnic classification and mapping nationhood” deals in extenso with the problems of ethnic classification and the various modifications to the ethnic sub-categories which appeared in

the different censuses. The imposition of ethnic names never previously used by those obliged to use them is a curious by-product of this attempt at rigid classification.

The brief conclusion notes that “the question of identity and culture is closely tied to the issue of overcoming ‘backwardness’”. In a country where more than half the population was born after 1975, the old imperatives mean little to young people today.

Political scientists will appreciate the introductory and closing sections to this work, as well as much of the text, heavily larded with the jargon and theory of the discipline. This is a book about political mechanisms, and it examines how they operate not only from the top down but also at the local level and from the perspectives of members of an ethnic group, when a more relaxed style prevails.

This book is well-crafted, solidly reasoned, and highly recommended for those interested in things Lao, and of course subject to sharp debate whenever it touches the core of what constitutes a country made up of a mosaic of ethnicities, perhaps with more than any other country in the world, constituting its social fabric, while the modest size of country calls for prudence when it is compared to its immediate neighbors.

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