

Søren Ivarsson, *Creating Laos: The Making of a Lao Space between Indochina and Siam, 1860–1945*. NIAS Monographs 112, Nordic Institute of Asia Studies. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008. 250 pp. Hardbound: ISBN 978-87-7694-022-5; paperbound: ISBN 978-87-7694-023-2

*Creating Laos* is a delightful book. It will be of interest to Lao-watchers (both academics and informed readers), regional specialists and those investigating the rise and consolidation of contemporary nation states. The book deals with just a snippet of Lao history, from 1860 to 1945. Ivarsson sets out to understand the meaning of “Laos” during this time: what was Laos as a territory, a people, an idea? He explains that his interest is in “cultural nationalism” rather than state nationalism. His is not a history of treaties or policies, but an account of an emerging and shifting *cultural* sense of nationhood. Ivarsson’s use of the concept of culture here is unusual: he appears to mean it in the sense of “high culture”, although he does not use this phrase. Ivarsson proceeds from a study of the records left by elites such as “historians, lexicographers, artists and the like” (pp. 8ff.), educated and often urban people who were engaged in often explicit attempts to be opinion leaders and to shape emerging conditions. He also includes analysis of the written records left by French colonial officers and Thai authors as well as administrative maps. Over the last century, anthropologists

and more recently academics in related disciplines such as cultural studies have “relativized” culture by arguing that, far from the preserve of the so-called “civilized” few or leaders, culture is something that everyone has, and the issue for analysis is to elucidate the patterns, meanings and discourses that inform not only high culture, but also mass culture and indeed subaltern or oppositional cultural dialogues. Readers looking for an historical account of cultural nationalism in this sense, of the everyday, lived experience of Lao-ness, will not find it in this book. It is very much about how “the Lao” were known by others and by leaders, rather than what they knew about themselves in these relationships. Nonetheless, the book remains an excellent addition to the literature, not least for its attention to cultural aspects, and it will no doubt spur more attention to cultural aspects in future historical research in the region.

*Creating Laos* begins with an examination of the idea of “Laos” during the first phase of the colonial encounter. This topic is approached through an examination of French colonial discourse, attempts by European scientists to define a Lao race, and the use of history to argue that French colonialism had recuperated a people and place fallen from a previous golden age. This chapter illustrates decisively that knowing Laos was not a matter of simple observation, but of creating an object to then know. The second chapter provides a very interesting account of Laos through Thai eyes, particularly the

evolution of writings about the so-called “lost territories” among scholars and in school texts. Ivarsson puts forward the argument that Laos was a “non-country” from the Thai perspective at this time (pp. 65ff.). The third chapter is the longest and also one of the most interesting. It provides an account of how Lao nationalism was cultivated by the French (particularly in the period 1893–1940) through interventions such as road links between the major Mekong Valley towns, national histories and a national language. Ivarsson dwells on urban elite perspectives, remaining silent on the experiences of rural people, uplanders and minority groups. Nevertheless, the chapter sparkles with an entertaining and insightful use of fresh sources, such as the French civil servant who is quoted as describing Laos as “a blister on the foot of the peasants from Annam” (Marquet in Ivarsson, p. 106). Such arresting quotations are effective in persuading the reader of Ivarsson’s main argument: that Laos, in the form in which we encounter it today, was not a foregone conclusion. Rather, it was “created” — in sometimes unintended ways — through the tension between competing images and projects of what Laos was and what it could or should be. What remains to examine now is if and how these competing elite projects and images translated into everyday lives and experiences. Then, as now, most Lao lived in rural areas and were diverse in language, education and interest in urban politicking. Was there a “trickle-down” effect from the

elites that Ivarsson discusses to such people? Were their ideas opposed, adopted or transformed in such local interactions? Ivarsson’s innovative and highly readable book provides a valuable step towards considering these and other questions about the Lao past.

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