

Southeast Asia

Vanina Bouté and Vatthana Pholsena, eds., *Changing Lives in Laos: Society, Politics, and Culture in a Post-Socialist State*

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In September of 2014, I had the honor of attending the funeral of Grant Evans, one of the founders of contemporary Lao studies. The previous summer, I took a class with Grant while I was living in Vientiane—this makes me, I think, one of his very last students. The first time that I met him, he gently requested that I call him Ajahn Grant, the norm in Lao being to refer to one’s venerable elders by their first names rather than their last names. “Ajahn” is a Lao honorific that roughly translates as “person of wisdom” or “teacher.” Some few months after the funeral, when my Lao colleagues started calling me Ajahn Leah, I remembered that first lesson from Grant and felt the honor of the title more keenly. I was his student and now I was a teacher in my own right.

This volume is the first significant collection to be authored by the next generation of Lao studies scholars after the passing of the field’s founder. The volume arrives

at a time of rapid socioeconomic transformation in Laos and between Laos and its neighbors in Asia. Since opening its borders to foreign investors in the 1990s, Laos has come to play a significant role in regional development with its more powerful neighbors (China, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia), especially with regards to hydropower projects along the Mekong River and its tributaries. As Laos is increasingly targeted for development, the government has come into international focus for its civil rights abuses and state violence—particularly after the disappearance of civil society leader Sombath Somphone in 2012. Recent economic shifts toward a more liberal economy are accompanied by increased social oppression and state violence. More broadly, these shifts reflect the changing backgrounds of state officials and Communist Party leaders as revolutionary cadres retire and are replaced by a generation of younger, more business-minded Lao elites.

This volume heralds a younger generation of Lao studies scholars working to engage these contemporary issues. The editors' ambitions are to engage with the "social and economic transformations [that have] reshaped the country considerably" (2), as reflected in scholarship since the 1990s, and which are largely unaddressed in previous edited volumes. The chapters reflect ongoing shifts in Lao society, including massive displacement of highland populations to lowland areas as part of government resettlement programs and general rural-urban migration flows. The volume is organized around three key themes: political power, agrarian change and migration, and new forms of social interaction. The chapters are ordered into four parts, each with a summary introduction addressing one or more of the key themes. The four parts are: the current political regime, rural society and resource management, ethnic minority groups, and migration both within and beyond national borders. The chapters are accessible yet also theoretically informed and politically relevant. As a portrait of an Asian state in transition, this work is of wide interest in Asian and Southeast Asian studies. The parts on agrarian change (part two) and ethnic minority groups (part three) would also be of interest to scholars of development studies in a global perspective.

Each of the volume's four parts contains chapters that impressed me, especially Patrice Ladwig's chapter on Operation Pagoda, Michael B. Dwyer's chapter on peacetime security, and Chris Lyttleton and Yunxia Li's chapter on rubber futures. Many of the chapters read like source documents or field guides, inviting future research and theorization. An excellent example of this is chapter 4, Ladwig's "'Special Operation Pagoda': Buddhism, Covert Operations, and the Politics of Religious Subversion in Cold-War Laos (1957–60)," a fascinating case study of the Cold War politics of religion. The fight for and against communism had a decisive impact on the practice and institutions of Lao Buddhism, as well as on Lao claims for political power on all sides of the ensuing civil war. Laos was an early testing ground for CIA covert paramilitary and counter-insurgency operations, of which religious intervention is one technique. The chapter is primarily descriptive—and how I enjoyed these sometimes-farcical descriptions of monk-operatives at temples. Ladwig ties the chapter together with a loose Weberian analysis of power and legitimacy in the context of civil warfare and revolution, linking these historical events to Sangha-state relations in contemporary Laos.

Dwyer's "The New 'New Battlefield': Capitalizing Security in Laos' Agribusiness Landscape" (chapter 8), in which the author traces the complexities of Laos's transition from battlefield to marketplace, demonstrates how wartime allegiances impact contemporary rural development. It's a startling analysis of the transformation of

“pacification” into “capitalization.” Dwyer uses historical and ethnographic research to analyze “post-conflict legacies as determinants of local geographies of development” (196). For example, allegiance during the war partially determines whether a community will be subject to resettlement, where resettlement may be an effort to bring an “untrustworthy” community under greater state control. Local histories are key to understanding the unevenness of development after war. Agrarian reform, resource management, and resettlement are all components of the “new battlefield” of peacetime security. The chapter is a significant addition to the literature on development and postwar reconstruction.

Lyttleton and Li’s “Rubber’s Affective Economies: Seeding a Social Landscape in Northwest Laos” (chapter 12) is a bleeding-edge ethnographic account of illicit socioeconomic relations on the border zone between northwestern Laos and southern China. The chapter is a well-drawn portrait of the role of interpersonal relationships in socioeconomic change—here, the creation of an “enterprise society” (312) that values market competition, wealth, and self-interest. In this border zone of extreme legal uncertainty and informality, interpersonal friendships and romances help to secure contracts and other financial arrangements between Ahka farmers and Chinese investors across the border. The authors’ larger aim is to demonstrate the affective, immaterial assets that are ushering in market-based society in highland Laos, where gift-exchange, romance, and socializing are crucial means for people to access economic opportunities. The chapter is an arresting account of the emotional work of socioeconomic transformation: “Emotional engagement is fundamental to processes of social change and self-making for people caught up in development’s slipstream” (311) on both sides of the border.

There are many resonances across the topics and time periods presented in this volume. I was delighted to read Vathana Pholsena’s and Nicole Reichert’s chapters together, as their related studies demonstrate the value of collected volumes that invite thinking across chapters. When read together, Pholsena’s “War Generation: Youth Mobilization and Socialization in Revolutionary Laos” (chapter 5) and Reichert’s “Socialist Pathways of Education: The Lao in East Germany” (chapter 6) present a compelling account of how socialist states use youth education as a means of building alternate futures. Particularly in these earlier chapters of historical analysis, the volume reads more like a field guide than a work of social theory (and I feel this for many texts in Lao studies). Contemporary Lao studies developed in response to the Vietnam-American war and ethnographic research in Laos has largely been limited to the last two decades of open borders. That many of these chapters are written to mark a young field of research rather than to expand a mature field is both a strength and a weakness of this volume. This collection is a highly relevant and very welcome addition to Lao studies and Southeast Asian Studies more generally.

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