Holly High, *Projectland: Life in a Lao Socialist Model Village*

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Within the growing landscape of ethnographic studies of Laos, the relationship between the Lao state and upland groups is a prominent theme. One such upland village, a relocated Katu village in the southern Lao province of Sekong, Kandon, is the subject of Holly High's second monograph focusing on the southern part of the country. As the

book cover already indicates, this book is not intended to be a study of a Katu village for its own sake; it is ultimately about the Lao state and what it means to live in a socialist model village such as Kandon, a certified "cultural village." In an admirably consistent manner, the author's engaging argumentation frames the ethnographic narratives and touches upon a great variety of topics.

One of her starting points is her proposition that Lao socialism is anything but "post-". High argues that democratic centralism and vanguard socialism can be found in Laos alive and well (chapter 1). The latter is especially important because "vanguardism has produced a scenario observable in everyday village life, whereby one's fluency in the state's metalanguage, and in its socialist concepts and meanings, is an index of one's political prowess" (12). "Success," and its opposite, "necessity," are key poles in the "metalanguage of socialism" that High's interlocutors, especially Wiphat, the charismatic village head, deploy. New Kandon, the relocated Kandon village, has been successful in qualifying as a "cultural village." High investigates the cultural village policy and reveals the evolutionist underpinnings entailed in the distinction between desirable and non-desirable cultural features (chapter 3). However, the vagueness around what is not desirable implies a certain amount of flexibility, High argues, and enables villagers to retain selected practices while embracing new ones.

High can perhaps also be said to retain selected elements, here of classic monographs of the area, and to embrace new ones by highlighting often-overlooked phenomena. In discussing the implementation of development projects, she chooses the promotion of toilets and the certification of "open defecation free village" (chapter 4). Actually, the toilets cater to quite different needs: they are used by women to give birth, because taboos about spilling blood during childbirth in the vicinity of rice usually requires women to give birth in temporary huts away from the village. In her account of a ritual oath and buffalo sacrifice (chapters 5 and 6), High puts her emphasis not so much on the ritual minutiae of the sacrifice but on its relationship to the metalanguage of socialism. Wiphat's quote (chapter 1) is telling in this regard: while the majority of ritual practices have been abandoned, the remaining rituals, including buffalo sacrifices, are referred to as "necessary." High points out that the socialist state does not so much put an end to local animist practices but rather provides new pathways to practice them. Just as toilets allow rice-related taboos on birthing to be continued, the ritual oath is supposed to tackle problems of sorcery and witchcraft. Yet, when considering the vitality of animist ritual practices in Kandon, it appears to the reader that while the legitimacy of their persistence is locally clad in terms of "necessity," the latter seems to be rather grounded in their efficacy or, in other words, their success; given that buffalo sacrifices are deemed successful in preventing people from suffering and dying prematurely, one could regard these animist practices as the foundation that enables any success within the competition of recognition and resources within the Lao socialist state.

Chapter 7 revolves around the idea that desire is dangerous. This is why it is often denied and, instead, "necessity" is stressed. The key examples of this are narratives about marital decision-making: "Marriage strikes like illness," and, as High argues, illnesses often lead to marriages—as ancestor spirits are assumed to indicate their pity for unmarried descendants or their wish to have debts repaid by inflicting their kin with diseases. This chapter does not engage the wealth of the literature on the topic; in particular, there is no discussion of Kaj Århem's (2010) work, which could have helped to clarify a few aspects of the asymmetric alliance. This being said, High's focus on

the question of the motivations behind particular marital decisions is highly original and relevant. In chapter 8, High confides in the reader about the details of her rather adventurous journey to the still inhabited Old Kandon. During this journey, several misunderstandings revealed that while for the hiking anthropologist, the challenging environment might be the subject of fear, it might rather be sorcery and witchcraft that occupies the minds of her local interlocutors.

Notably, the role of women and gender in New Kandon is a red thread, or better, a counter-current, that runs through the book. The staging of success appears to be entirely in men's hands—after Wiphat, other male interlocutors are at the forefront of the ethnographic vignettes. In chapter 1, the reader already is introduced to a female counterpart (or contester) of Wiphat, Sum, who also specializes in catering to foreigners, although she is not a publicly acknowledged broker for external village visitors, such as officials and bureaucrats. Women's birthing taboos appear as remnants of the past but are facing a revival thanks to the sanitization policies (chapter 4). In her description of the buffalo sacrifice, she discusses how men, wearing women's clothing, encompass female potency. When High refers to buffalo sacrifices, she explicitly mentions the domestic violence into which intensive feasting can lead. In chapter 5, finally, High gives details on weaving as a female mode of value-generation that was part of a trade connecting the uplands of Sekong with Vietnam.

This well-composed book is a must-read for scholars of Laos and mainland Southeast Asia. High's discussion of the politics engrained in different mundane areas of life and in the national and local concepts of culture is of interest to a wider readership. The narrative and self-reflective style of the book will certainly appeal to graduate and undergraduate students. Together with the author's webpage, which offers additional material and images to accompany the book (https://hollyhigh.net/category/projectland/), *Projectland* is also a rich resource for teaching courses on the ethnography of Southeast Asia. One of the merits of the book is that it raises often-overlooked yet eminently important subjects such as birthing practices and narratives of marital decision-making. We can certainly look forward to future publications inspired by Holly High's thought-provoking work.

References

Århem, Kaj. 2010. *The Katu Village: An Interpretive Ethnography of the Avuong Katu in Central Vietnam*. Katuic Ethnography Project Report, Papers in Social Anthropology (SANS) 11. Gothenburg University.

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