



Holly High, *Fields of Desire: Poverty and Policy in Laos*

Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2014. (Challenges in Agrarian Transition in Southeast Asia Series) 232 pages. Paperback, \$27.93, ISBN 978-9971-69-770-9.

HOLLY HIGH'S subtle, thoughtful, and lively ethnography study, *Fields of Desire*, deals with an issue that intrigues observers of Laos and other developmentalist countries, albeit hardly being articulated: Why would locals keep engaging in development schemes even though they have repeatedly seen them fail? In order to answer it, High goes beyond the dichotomy between advocates and critics of development. Instead, she observes how farmers on a Mekong island in southern Laos deal with the promises of poverty reduction schemes offered to, or forced upon, them.

Her central theoretical notion is desire—mostly inspired by Jacques Lacan—as a drive that emerges from what is incomplete and missing in the operation of daily life. This gap between what is there and what is hoped for does not simply manifest as an aim

to be attained in the future, but as a “delirium” of contradictory orientations that produces its own coherence and rationality, and thus, much of the dynamics of social life.

High excellently analyzes these contradictions and the way they play out in social life. The central contradiction that organizes all the others is the village’s relationship with the state. On the one hand, the state portrays itself as, and is understood to be, caring and nurturing, a powerful provider of goods, services, and opportunities to escape poverty. On the other, people experience the state as demanding, corrupt, and non-reciprocal.

Chapter 2 explores this relationship from the perspective of the role of rice production and the function of mothers in the household. The rice harvest is seen as a product of human labor, but it also reciprocates by providing nourishment. The state, however, fails in comparison on the count of reciprocation. A similar tension applies to the border with Thailand, just across the river, equally a site of hope and danger. In the past, the village was involved in anti-communist insurgency and charting a border with Thailand. Today, the village is exposed to state rhetoric that constructs Thailand as a danger to Lao sovereignty; meanwhile, Thailand is the destination of much hopeful emigration, and remittances form a major source of income.

In chapter 5, High carefully criticizes the idea that the caring state is an illusion while the corrupt state is the truth. If that was the case, villagers could give up on the state entirely. But they do not. Official and private images of the state remain in a tense balance that shapes villagers’ intimacy with the state. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 together detail the way poverty reduction schemes played out and failed in the village. High identifies a perennial misunderstanding of village dynamics on the side of the state. Operating on an image of village solidarity and mutual aid, the administration delegates services that are actually state services, such as infrastructure, to the village, expecting villagers to organize joint projects for their own improvement. However, as other scholars have pointed out, while villages are important in certain respects—e.g., in forming identity, influencing politics, and participating in ritual—production and wealth are usually a domestic matter. Mutual aid is based on household networks, not village solidarity, and is organized less in terms of efficiency than on the basis of its enjoyment and aesthetic value. Thus, the tension between these two levels of organization obstructs the translation of state demands into village reality. In particular, High narrates a World Bank project that was supposed to help all, but instead proved to be of benefit to none. True to her balanced approach, High avoids blaming any of the actors or portraying the project as laughable.

The final chapter links the case study to wider concerns of Southeast Asian social life. It argues that the village turns its outside world into an aspect of its core self—an idea inspired by Sahlins and Lacan, and crucial for the study of Southeast Asia. While the difference between inside and outside is of central importance for understanding the constitution of these communities, this same difference is paradoxically at the root of village’s self-understanding. Understanding this seeming contradiction goes a long way to explain the dynamics of Southeast Asian community building.

One major quibble with this otherwise excellent book concerns its theoretical approach. Arguably, the book uses the notion of desire consistently and in a way that makes a wealth of ethnographic data meaningful. However, it is not unproblematic. Lacan comes with a baggage of psychoanalytical epistemology that anthropologists routinely ignore when applying his ideas. Indeed, when High states toward the end of

the book that desire precedes structure, she moves closer to Freud than to Lacan, for whom desire emerges from the tension between signifier and signified, i.e. from structure. In the context of an ethnographic analysis, this raises the crucial issue of where the “self” that “desires” is located. Does a village somehow operate like a person? Is each of its members programmed to share in a kind of collective psychology? High carefully analyzes when villages are meaningful units (e.g., in politics) and when they are not (e.g., in production). However, the question—how the subject of desire is constituted—is left unanswered. An alternative would have been to reframe the subject matter, not in terms of self and desire but in terms of values and expectations, both terms pointing to the constitution of the social. In particular, value systems are by necessity contradictory and dynamic, and the situation High describes is in no way different.

Overall, this is one of the best books on Laos in English to be produced in the past few years. Its substantial insights into the contradictions and complexities of development might be inconvenient for anyone who desires quick answers and clear solutions. For that very reason, it is highly recommended not just for scholars interested in Laos and mainland Southeast Asia, but also for development experts.

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