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The Khmer Lands of Vietnam: Environment, Cosmology and Sovereignty. By Philip Taylor. Copenhagen and Singapore: NIAS Press and NUS Press, 2014. xvii + 316 pp.

The ethnic minority populations of Vietnam are hardly understudied, but the gaze of foreign scholars has long skewed towards the northern and central uplands. By comparison, the ethnic Khmer of southern Vietnam, or Khmer Krom, have received relatively little scholarly attention, despite numbering over a million and inhabiting some of the most ecologically and politically sensitive areas of the country. Philip Taylor's masterful new study does much to remedy this oversight. The product of years of ethnographic fieldwork, conducted in over 400 villages across the Mekong Delta and southeastern Vietnam, *The Khmer Lands of Vietnam* provides a richly illustrated portrait of the Khmer Krom and their environs. The book is replete with oral histories and local legends, which Taylor weaves together with his own analysis and ethnographic observations, providing insights into how Vietnam's Khmer see themselves, their natural surroundings and their place within nature.

The main point advanced by Taylor is that the Khmer Krom are both distinct from their Cambodian brethren and internally differentiated. The diversity of environmental conditions in southern Vietnam, Taylor argues, has given rise to regionally distinct ways of life, and there are thus multiple ways of "being Khmer Krom" (p. 266), each specific to a particular sub-region. The organization of the book flows from this premise, with each of its seven chapters surveying one such sub-region and its resident Khmer population, tracing the ways in which environmental conditions shape local livelihoods, identities and social organization.

In the first two chapters, we visit the eastern Mekong Delta, where the river meets the South China Sea. Chapter One covers the coastal province of Trà Vinh, where a network of sand dunes both provides a base for self-sufficient rice agriculture and a physical link between Khmer settlements, contributing to the region's prominence

as a centre of Buddhist learning. Chapter Two covers the provinces of Sóc Trăng and Bạc Liêu to the south, where Khmer settlements instead cling to rivers and canals, facilitating commerce and migration and giving rise to a more “outward oriented, cosmopolitan, and economically dynamic” way of life than is found in Trà Vinh (p. 79).

Taylor is no environmental determinist, and his analysis reveals a sensitivity to the indirect and sometimes unexpected ways in which environmental conditions shape social and cultural outcomes. Chapter Three, for example, surveys the central Mekong Delta, where conditions are ideal for rice agriculture and where a large Khmer population once thrived. The Khmer, however, were largely dispossessed of their farmland and displaced from their villages in the French and American wars, and they now scrape out a precarious existence in the towns, their “communal life ... all but disintegrated” (p. 121). In contrast, the Cà Mau peninsula, discussed in Chapter Four, suffers from perennial water shortages and saline intrusion, but adverse conditions have prompted collective responses by the Khmer, such as the use of temple pools as dry-season reservoirs. In Taylor’s view, such efforts have forged “stronger communal bonds” in the Cà Mau peninsula “than in the freshwater-dominated central delta where cooperation was less vital” (p. 152), allowing for greater cultural resilience in the face of recent in-migration by ethnic Kinh or Vietnamese.

Taylor then turns his attention westward, covering the mountainous border province of An Giang in Chapter Five and the coastal province of Kiên Giang in Chapter Six. These areas are broadly similar. Both maintain strong cultural ties with nearby Cambodia, and in both the Khmer have historically engaged in a mix of economic activities, including agriculture, fishing and forestry. In writing about An Giang, Taylor paints a portrait of selective engagement, as agricultural modernization and the privatization of common-pool resources place pressure on traditional livelihoods, but as tourism and a surge in cross-border trade open up new niches for entrepreneurial Khmer. In Kiên Giang, however, development has come at a high ecological cost, as extractive industries ravage the resource base and make the

livelihoods of the Khmer untenable. Faced with such devastation, Taylor questions whether “it might still be possible for Khmers to remain in this place at all” (p. 218).

In the seventh and final chapter, Taylor moves beyond the Mekong Delta to southeastern Vietnam, covering both the forested uplands of Binh Phước and Tây Ninh provinces and the sprawling metropolis of Ho Chi Minh City. The contrast between the uplands, where many Khmer still live in stilt houses and engage in subsistence farming, and the urban zone, to which a growing population of young Khmer migrants from the delta flock in search of economic opportunity and a taste of “urban modernity” (p. 248), is striking. While Taylor notes that the Khmer toponym *Prey Nokor* (or “forest capital”) encompasses both the city and the uplands, and draws an analogy between the contemporary practice of labour migration and the traditional “forest sojourns” of Khmer hermits (p. 266), these disparate regions would have best been treated in separate chapters.

The only other substantive shortcoming of this excellent book is that it could have elaborated more fully upon the theme of sovereignty and its meaning for the Khmer Krom. While the Vietnamese state wields full political control over its southern territories, Taylor does assert that the Khmer continue to exercise a form of cultural sovereignty over the region, which is “made manifest in miraculous events and in the telling of stories” (p. 161). He cites, for example, the legend of a sunken boat, once part of the Cambodian royal fleet, which exercises magical control over the river in which it lies, blocking the passage of outsiders and foiling the bridge-building efforts of local authorities. He does not, however, explore the pressing question of whether or not such supernatural events reflect a real — if latent — aspiration for political sovereignty on the part of the contemporary Khmer Krom and, if so, what form such aspirations might take.

Taylor has produced a worthwhile addition to the field of Vietnamese studies, one well worth reading for anyone interested in the history, culture and environment of the Mekong Delta. *The Khmer Lands* is a truly singular work of scholarship, one that brings into sharp focus a people and place long obscured from view, allowing

the reader a glimpse into both the physical and mythical environs in which the Khmer Krom live.

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Land Politics and Livelihoods on the Margins of Hanoi, 1920–2010. By Danielle Labbé. Vancouver, Canada: UBC Press, 2014. 228 pp.

This slim yet insightful volume offers an empirically convincing, theoretically provocative, and well-researched study of urbanization in the peri-urban village of Hòa Mực, located six kilometres from the centre of Hanoi. Building on extensive research into the everyday lives of residents, the book offers a welcome contribution to the study of urban land politics, the history of Hanoi, peri-urban livelihoods, and the way that we understand urban development and state-society relations in Vietnam. While the author is a professor of urban planning, the book's interdisciplinary research methods borrow successfully from a wide range of fields — including cultural geography, history, political science and planning — to give a wide-ranging and convincing account of the social-spatial transformation of this village, which was once part of an outer-city district (*huyện ngoại thành*), but which was incorporated into the inner-city district (*huyện nội thành*) of Cầu Giấy in 1997.

Labbé offers a clearly written and useful historical narrative of a process that scholars of urbanism call “in situ urbanization” (p. 69), which has produced Hanoi's urban mosaic of villages in the middle of the city — what locals call *làng giữa phố*. By situating this process in a longer history, Labbé convincingly shows that residents are active agents in urbanization, and that a “periurban character” (p. 42) is not simply a result of recent state reform policies. Instead, it can be traced back as far as the 1920s, when Hòa Mực villagers began to supplement agricultural with non-agricultural activities (p. 41). These side occupations (*nghề phụ*)