

(p. 178)? The book thus leaves the reader with “homework”. Snippets of “real-time” background information would allow the interviews, which have substantial breadth, to achieve greater depth.

Nonetheless, *It's a Living* offers an exciting look into social, economic and cultural aspects of Vietnam as it undergoes rapid change. Finally, it appears that no nuance has been lost in the translation of conversations from Vietnamese. Readers will find that each voice retains its own idiosyncratic style of speech. This faithfulness makes each of the accounts vibrant and memorable.

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*Fields of Desire: Poverty and Policy in Laos*. By Holly High. Singapore: NUS Press, 2014. 213 pp.

Anthropologist Holly High identifies her monograph as a “political ethnography of desire” (p. 1). The study is based on her fieldwork in 2002–3 in Don Khiaw, a village in southwest Laos on an island in the Mekong River. In her 2005 doctoral dissertation, she argued that notions of personal desire and aspiration fuelled many individual poverty-reduction strategies. In *Fields of Desire* she amplifies her analysis of desire with Deleuze’s psychoanalytic concept of “delirium”. She cites Deleuze’s contention that “every society is at once rational and irrational” and that “underneath all reason lies delirium” (p. 180).

Don Khiaw is a fertile site to study investments in desire as its residents often migrate within Laos and even across the border into Thailand to find work and earn money. According to High, “[a]ll of these migrations are fuelled by significant and sometimes surprising desires” (p. 3). That is, the poor — and often young — residents migrate not only for survival but also for the pursuit of dreams and self-transformation. Moreover, state attempts to obstruct and

criminalize the rural poor who seek work across the border have not reduced these flows of desire. The power of desire is revealed in the case study of a teenager, Deng, whose libidinous aspirations to work in Thailand were expressed in terms of wanting “gold all over my body” — a fantasy that promised the “unconstrained possibility of becoming something else” (p. 76). According to the author, “[t]here was something delirious about Deng’s desires.... For all their apparent irrationality, they produced a kind of rationality that can be seen in the repetitious outcomes of lives lived in rural Laos” (p. 81).

The book also focuses on the ambivalent relationship between “desiring” villagers and the state. Taking her cue from Deleuze, High argues that “[d]esire can produce resistance to the dominant assemblage, but it can also inspire normativity and aspirations for conformity” (p. 15). While the state is seen as exploitative, corrupt and destructive, the Don Khiaw villagers also perceive it as a source of possible nurture and expect it to provide resources needed for wealth, education and health care. Aligning herself with what she calls “resistance to resistance studies” (p. 7), High refers approvingly to Tania Li’s emphasis on the seductive aspects of the state and to her critique of Scott’s anarchy theory advanced in his *The Art of Not Being Governed*.

High elaborates this approach through the psychoanalytic concept of “extimacy” — the intimate incorporation of an external entity — and it is here that she wanders into her own world of fantasy with what she calls the “extimate state” (p. 172). She attempts to explain the intimacy of the state by reference to Sahlin’s study of the “stranger king” myths and legends of foreign rulers who commit barbaric acts before being installed as legitimate kings by union with a local woman representing autochthonous nurturing female power (pp. 122–23). She then cites Buddhism as an example of “stranger-power” by referring to the That Phanom chronicle of Buddha’s airborne journeys as a foreigner along the Mekong, his conversion of indigenous human and non-human powers, and his leaving of distinguishing marks on the land (pp. 169–78). In fact, such Buddhist legends are common throughout the Tai world of

Theravada Buddhism and are usually associated with Buddha's creation of a "Buddha kingdom" (*Buddhadesa*) — an archetype of an imagined utopian realm to be preceded by a righteous ruler (*dhammaraja*) and realized with the advent of the compassionate Future Buddha, Ariya Metteyya — and there is a long history of "holy men" rebellions in southern Laos and neighbouring Northeast Thailand inspired by such Buddhist millennial beliefs. High also argues that "[s]tates operate not only through a monopoly of force, but also through utopian promises, the appeal of which persists and sometimes even becomes stronger the more they fail to be realized" (p. 108). But why resort to exotic theories of mythological stranger kings and ignore the more fundamental and culturally meaningful imaginary of an ideal and legitimate "nurturing" state?

High is on much firmer ground in her perceptive and cogently argued analysis of mutual aid which has special relevance to policy. "Mutual aid is a grand narrative in Laos in the making of the nation-state" (p. 153). She observes that labour was regularly requisitioned from the rural populace for state poverty-reduction development schemes, commonly described in the language of mutual aid as if cooperation was an inherent quality of village life. However, mutualism is not just a component of state discourse; it also traverses the realms of state and village as "an enduring obsession and a delirium" (p. 156). Further, mutual aid is a village ideal, and there are recriminations when it fails. Yet it succeeds spectacularly when forms of cooperation comprise person-centred networks of neighbours, friends and family, as in village merit-making festivals.

*Fields of Desire* is a thoroughly researched and eloquently written ethnography that connects psychoanalytic theories of desire to the analysis of state/villager relations in a way that will appeal to both social scientists and state planners.

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*Burmese Lives: Ordinary Life Stories under the Burmese Regime*. Edited by Wen-Chin Chang and Eric Tagliacozzo. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press. 268 pp.

The theme of this book — everyday lives of everyday people — is taken up with enthusiasm, sympathy and nuance in its ten (excluding the introduction) chapters. The narratives are sometimes poignant, and often compelling, providing us a glimpse into the lives of men and women who have had to negotiate the often inexplicable and unpredictable currents of wider political and economic forces.

This book is a timely and welcome contribution to Myanmar studies, a field that has until recently focused on broader themes such as the military, the political struggle for democracy, ethnic armed conflict and peace negotiations. Where there have been accounts of individual lives, they have tended to be biographies of the elite or well-known individuals such as Aung San Suu Kyi, F.K. Lehman, Ne Win, Than Shwe and U Nu. When we do encounter the lives of “ordinary” people, these have often been presented as collective voices amalgamated into harrowing accounts of human rights abuses and suffering. Undoubtedly, these themes and personages play a fundamental role in advancing our understanding of Myanmar and its people. Nevertheless, these studies only document certain aspects of the diversity of experiences.

This book achieves the goal of presenting the everyday lives of people in Myanmar in three distinct ways.

First, it examines the lives of Burmese people within the context of wider political events, such as the 1988 demonstrations and the Saffron Revolution of 2007. This is elegantly done by the authors, who describe the ways in which personal lives are woven into and