

## Book Reviews

DOI: 10.1355/sj30-2j

*Space and the Production of Cultural Difference among the Akha Prior to Globalization: Channeling the Flow of Life.* By Deborah Tooker. ICAS publications series: Monograph 6. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012. 338 pp.

Some books come late but, when they do, the waiting pays off. Deborah Tooker's excellent, ethnographically rich and analytically dense monograph of an Akha village in Northern Thailand took over twenty years to complete. Tooker has documented the massive changes that have occurred in village life since the early to mid-1980s in other publications. But here she analyses the Akha, a group speaking a Tibeto-Burman language found from Southern China to Myanmar, Laos and Thailand, as they were at the time of her initial fieldwork. Insofar as anthropology documents exemplars of human culture and society that are situated in history, it does not make a significant difference if a work reports current or past events.

Tooker portrays the Bear Mountain Akha of the 1980s, when they had only recently arrived from Burma, as profoundly shaped by a history of migration and interethnic relationships. Even though there are very few sources on this history, Akha society bears the image of these interactions in the way that it reproduces itself. Thus, this case study addresses important and long-running questions in the study of upland Southeast Asia and of Southeast Asia in general, questions that have been put in focus most prominently by James C. Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed* (Scott 2009): How do uplanders and other non-state societies relate to states? How do their identities and modes of social reproduction develop through their interaction with lowland others? How do they define their autonomy

in the face of more powerful neighbours? Tooker provides decidedly local answers to these questions by focusing on practices relating to space and on rituals. At the same time, she criticizes the state-centric interpretations of upland and other Southeast Asian societies exemplified by Scott.

As Tooker demonstrates, the spatial conception of Akha sociality is not significantly different from the “galactic polities” or “mandala states” of the lowlands (p. 215). The Akha not only operate with similar distinctions of “inside” and “outside”, or “centre” and “periphery”, but they also position their own villages as centre. Outside forces, ranging from dangerous spirits to lowland states, are seen as a draining influence on the life force which emanates from the Akha village centre and produces the fertility of both humans and their rice fields.

But even within the village there is no unified source of life force. Instead, the centre–periphery distinction applies both at the level of the village as a whole and at that of the individual household. While at the household level life force emanates from patrilineal ancestors, at the village level it is situated in the house of the ritual leader. These levels can occasionally conflict, as the ritual leader is an outside and potentially dangerous force for the households in certain contexts. In others, the ritual leader represents the exemplary centre, with whom rituals of the annual cycle commence, then to be re-enacted at the household level. The centre–periphery distinction is thus purely relational and can be applied as a structuring device to several levels of sociality. However, the correct contextual identification of the distinction, along with others, like up and down or front and back, is crucial to ensuring the flow of life force.

In her fine-grained analyses of ritual, Tooker demonstrates how this flow is enabled or might be blocked. The most intricate of these is dedicated to the “spirit chanting” ceremonies for inside and outside spirits in Chapter Six. Here, the minute details of ritual (re-)produce the distinctions that define the relationship between the Akha and their neighbours. Ethnicity and transcultural relations are not separated from internal social and cosmological relationships.

A code of openings and boundaries makes possible both internal relationships of fertility and external relationships with states and neighbours.

The combination of rich detail and analytical coherence in this book bears testimony to the successful rapprochement of local and academic models. The volume is thoroughly and coherently infused by its theoretical point of view: a pragmatic, dynamic and culturally sensitive structuralism that goes back to Edmund Leach and Stanley Tambiah, and is enhanced by a current-day awareness of history and the embeddedness of communities in regional contexts. This is the best ethnographic account of one of the most conspicuous and well-known upland groups in Southeast Asia. It is an excellent contribution to the study of space, ritual and cosmology in this region and beyond.

#### REFERENCE

Scott, James C. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

#### **Guido Sprenger**

Institute of Anthropology, Heidelberg University, Albert-Überle-Str. 3-5, 69120 Heidelberg, Germany; email: sprenger@eth.uni-heidelberg.de.

DOI: 10.1355/sj30-2k

*INTRACO: Blazing a Trail Overseas for Singapore?* By Faizal bin Yahya. Singapore: World Scientific, 2015. xiii+164 pp.

This pioneering assessment of the failure of a leading Singaporean government-linked company (GLC) is a noteworthy achievement, as books assessing the fall of major state-owned enterprises in Southeast Asia are rare. This volume is also an interesting read because it addresses a compelling question: how could Singapore's first and principal trading company, INTRACO, fail in a country that adopted export-oriented industrialization to drive economic growth?