

***Changing Lives in Laos: Society, Politics, and Culture in a Post-Socialist State.* Edited by Vanina Bouté and Vatthana Pholsena. Singapore: NUS Press, 2017. Softcover: 457pp.**

Academic research on Laos has grown significantly over the past decade. This growth in the field of Lao studies is well synthesized in Vanina Bouté and Vatthana Pholsena's edited volume *Changing Lives in Laos*. Incorporating the expertise of an impressive range of scholars, the 15-chapter book is thematically grouped under four research themes: state formation and political legitimation; natural resource governance and agrarian change; ethnic minorities' engagement with modernity; and mobility and migration. Each of these prominent themes is comprehensively addressed and, while different chapters will naturally appeal to different readers, the book successfully delivers an encompassing analysis of contemporary processes of social, political and cultural change in Laos.

In Section 1 the cumulative contribution of the five chapters is a nuanced understanding of Lao state formation, consolidation and change. Consideration is given to shifting interpersonal relationships and patron–client networks within the Lao politburo, the role of iconography in advancing historical narratives (which seek to align Lan Xang kings with the struggle for national liberation) and the political complexities surrounding political revolution and the state's relationship with the Buddhist Sangha. What each of these chapters emphasizes, and as Pholsena explicitly argues in Chapter Five, is that understanding political change requires moving beyond “normative political language” to give consideration to a broad range of processes including the socialization of individuals and the complex forces that internalize the “norms and values” of state institutions (p. 130).

Section 2 begins with what are, in this reviewer's opinion, the two best written chapters in the book. In Chapter Seven, Olivier Évrard and Ian G. Baird review the literature on how agriculture has been transformed across previous decades, particularly since 1975. With a strong focus on the development and poverty implications of agrarian change, the authors show that farming and land use changes during the past 40 years have “resulted in considerable reorganization of space” through elite land capture, foreign direct investment, contract farming and other forms of

capitalist enclosure (p. 189). In Chapter Eight, Michael B. Dwyer furthers this examination of agribusiness and agrarian change in an effort to “illustrate how the legacies of geopolitical conflict continue to shape state–community relations”, including the “ever-contingent” politics of “enclosure, dispossession, and displacement” (p. 202). While acknowledging the deleterious effects of recent agrarian change on rural livelihoods, Dwyer is careful to emphasize that what he describes as “the concrete politics of displacement” are inevitably complex, place-dependent, and “only starting to be adequately examined” (p. 201). This is a valuable insight that is of pertinence to the study of land contestations across the Global South.

In Section 3, three chapters on new forms of ethnic minority social interactions respectively explore how ethnic identities are produced through complex social entanglements, how religious practices of ethnic identities have shifted alongside changing socio-economic and political contexts, and the affective relationships and “non-material dimensions of material exchanges” that occur within the north-western borderlands rubber economies (p. 323). Through new empirical data and comprehensive ethnographic research, each of the three chapters serves to collectively illustrate Grégoire Schlemmer’s affirmation in Chapter Ten that, “if ethnicity can be precisely defined at a theoretical level, the reality is much more complex” (p. 261).

Finally, in Section 4, three chapters by Sverre Molland, Kabmanivanh Phouxay and Annabel Vallard present different ways of approaching and understanding contemporary patterns of migration and mobility in Laos. From transnational human trafficking and refugee flows, to domestic rural–urban migration, labour migration, “voluntary” and “involuntary” migration, and the commodity chains of Lao textile industries, Chapters Thirteen to Fifteen raise important questions around the relationships between mobility, migration, agency, human rights, development and governance. In the context of a “landlocked” country that is “commonly depicted in static, sedentary ways”, the three chapters successfully bring attention to the “important mobile characteristics” of the Lao state which, as Molland rightfully asserts, are yet to be sufficiently explored (pp. 346–47).

To explore the above four themes in sufficient detail, it is understandable that *Changing Lives in Laos* omits a range of

other socio-economic and political transformations. And while the volume's complex and multifaceted analysis of political power, agrarian change, ethnic minorities, and migration is one of its key strengths, it is also inevitable that such a thematic focus will disappoint some readers. What then, is missing from this volume? In this reviewer's opinion, the two most significant omissions are: first, a more detailed analysis of processes of urban change, and; second, closer consideration of shifting geopolitical entanglements, including foreign aid and investment flows.

To begin with the former, a lack of detailed analysis on urban transformations is not limited only to this volume. Rather, this "gap" can be seen across the growing body of literature on Laos. Bouté and Pholsena *do* emphasize urban change in their introduction, and Chapter Nine explores processes of rural–urban migration in the formation of new urban centres. However, in this reviewer's opinion, Chapter Nine — which is situated under the section heading "Natural Resource Governance and Agrarian Change" — also presents the shallowest conceptual analysis of all chapters. Given that — according to the World Bank — Laos now has the world's 20th fastest urban population growth rate, the study of its urban landscapes is long overdue.

Regarding geopolitics, *Changing Lives in Laos* would have benefited from at least one chapter examining the country's aid and investment partnerships. As Bouté and Pholsena note in their introduction, much of Laos' significant socio-economic transformations in recent years have been driven by growing foreign investment from neighbouring China, Thailand and Vietnam. China has become the country's largest provider of both foreign aid and investment, and this has brought profound social, cultural and political changes that are not extensively explored in this book. This is not to dismiss the importance of any of the chapters contained within the book. Nor is it to critique the editors chosen section themes. Rather, I simply point to two further themes of relevance to society, politics and culture in Laos that, if better explored, may have attracted a wider readership.

Changing Lives in Laos is a valuable book that provides an accessible compliment to some of the denser academic literature on Laos. For readers who are new to the study of Laos, this book offers a useful summary of key contemporary processes of social, cultural and political change. For those well-versed in Lao studies,

it offers new empirical data and a much-needed update to similar edited volumes by Grant Evans (*Laos: Culture and Society*, 1999) and Martin Stuart-Fox (*Contemporary Laos: Studies in the Politics and Society of the Lao People's Democratic Republic*, 1982).

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