

essential clues to what might be called ‘deep multiculturalism’ in Singapore. What do people actually do, consume, produce, negotiate, reject or prefer in terms of their cultural activities? This, alas, we do not discover here. But this is clearly an area that needs much more in-depth discussion in order to fully grasp Singapore’s multicultural identity and its probable evolution.

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*Engaging Asia: Essays on Laos and Beyond in Honour of Martin Stuart-Fox*. Edited by Desley Goldston. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2019. xxiv+478 pp.

*Engaging Asia*, a festschrift to honour Emeritus Professor Martin Stuart-Fox, is a collection of eighteen works; twelve are fragments of the discontinuous history of Laos that Stuart-Fox devoted much of his career to clarify. He retired in 2005 as Head of the History Department of the University of Queensland, where he was educated from start to finish. As an undergraduate, he majored in evolutionary biology—this is foundational in the sense that Darwinian principles have coloured his thoughts about history and cultural evolution for decades. Spanish philosopher Juan Ramón Álvarez discovered his writings on cultural evolution only in 2015 and liberally quotes him in the penultimate chapter, “Biological and Cultural Evolution”. Robert Bucknell, a classmate whom Stuart-Fox collaborated with on several publications on Buddhism, continues their disputations in “What is the First *jhāna*? The Central Question in Buddhist Meditation”.

One of Stuart-Fox’s early doctoral students, Souneth Photisane, writes of the obstacles that for years have stood in the way of publishing a government-sanctioned ancient history of Laos in his chapter, “On Writing Volume One of *The History of Laos*”. Premier

Lao historians Pheuiphanh and Mayoury Ngaosrivathna, both of whom Stuart-Fox salutes for their guidance in his own efforts to write a penetrating history of Laos, contributed “The Half Millennium Quandary, Establishing the Ayutthaya-Lan Xang Frontier 1357–1827”. They assiduously combed ancient Lao chronicles, the *Legend of Khun Borom* in particular, to show that early Lang Xang (Laos) had an agreed-upon understanding with the Ayutthaya monarchs about boundaries—namely, river systems—before the European powers intruded to carve up the region, which is the theme picked up in Geoffrey Gunn’s studied chapter, “The Invention of French Laos”. As part of their military mission to push back against the British, the French navy devised a plan to mark territorial ownership by propelling an untested gunboat up the largely uncharted waters of the Mekong. This ended unceremoniously when the fragile vessel capsized just below Luang Prabang, killing two naval officers. This tale of ‘Mekong mania’ is narrated in Kennon Breazeale’s lively tragicomedy, “The *La Grandière*, 1894–1910: A French Naval Presence on the Upper Mekong”.

The most rewarding chapter for dedicated scholars is “The Birth of Research into the Prehistory of Laos” by Lia Genovese. Louis Finot stands out for his lasting legacy of research and management of the Geographical Survey of Indochina (GSI) and Ecole française d’Extrême Orient (EFEO). He championed the career of Madeleine Colani, whose name is synonymous with astounding fieldwork on the Plain of Jars. In redrawing the map in the south, communities of ‘lost Lao’ found themselves inside the new border of Cambodia and eventually caught up in the Indochinese whirl of terror. Some of the survivors eventually worked their way into the ranks of the Pathet Lao. Martin Rathie talks about this in “The Lao Long of Cambodia: *Ethnic Lao in the Cambodian Revolutions*”. And Delsey Goldstone, deft editor of the festschrift, uncovered the relatively bloodless path the Pathet Lao took in seizing power in “Marxist Leninist Ideology Drove the Lao Revolution”.

Soulatha Sayalath fast-forwards to the post-revolution acumen of the People’s Revolutionary Party in “Mobilizing Hearts and Minds:

Reconciliation Politics in Laos”, which echoes the observations by Stuart-Fox on the persistence of an inborn worldview that drew many of the diaspora back home and, ironically, reconstructed new oligarchies from the bones of the old. A serious story with a touch of humour is illustrated with a comical photo of an anesthetized buffalo in Katherine Sweet’s “Nurse Khamphanh and His Dead Horse: The Practice of Biomedical Science in Early Twentieth Century Laos”. Sara Tiffin’s hilarious depiction of the British trading armaments for Indonesian pepper appears in “An Embassy from Banten at the Court of Charles II”, and a tragic picture of French colonial inhumanity towards rubber plantation labourers is painted in “Tonkinese Migrant Labor in Cambodia: A Coolie History” by Margaret Slocomb.

Two illustrated reflections are contributions from Stuart-Fox’s ‘journo’ associates. The first originated from a stint with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in Laos, the second as war correspondent with United Press International (UPI) Saigon between 1965 and 1966. Stuart-Fox wrote copy while photographer Tim Page took pictures in black and white, which shine a sombre light on the madness of the war. A select handful of the pictures illustrates Page’s blunt prose in “Laos in the 60s”. In the vignette “Photographing Laos”, we are treated to an exhibition of wistful colour photos excerpted from two books that resulted from the return trip of Stuart-Fox and Steve Northrop to Laos in 2004. Steve’s poetic prose is a sonorous memento of their deep affection for the Lao. Timothy McGrath’s “Decentralization in Vietnam Resolving Central-Political Relations” identifies new liberalizing rustlings of the Vietnamese Phoenix. And last, but not least, Volker Grabowsky’s ambitious research on “The Ethno-Religious Identity of the Tai People in Sipsong Panna and Its Resurgence in Recent Manuscripts” is aspirational in the face of a kind of Darwinian devolution of a once glorious scribal tradition.

Why study ‘little Laos’? Read this book.

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