

## BOOK REVIEWS

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***Heritage and the Making of Political Legitimacy in Laos: The Past and Present of the Lao Nation.* By Phill Wilcox. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2021. Hardcover: 190pp.**

Books devoted to Laos are relatively rare, and this one, which aims to “take a fresh look at issues of legitimacy, heritage, and national identity for different members of the Lao population” (back cover) should be welcomed to the Lao canon. Largely based on empirical research conducted by Phill Wilcox in the former royal capital of Luang Prabang, the book has some enlightening observations on the contradictions that pertain to Laos’ sense of itself, and, as the title suggests, how the leadership seeks to portray its own political legitimacy. In essence, the book explores the gaps and overlaps that exist in Laos between what is officially declared and what tends to transpire; between what is said in public and thought (and felt) in private. For anyone interested in contemporary Laos, and how it got here, this book is definitely worth perusing.

Wilcox employs Michael Herzfeld’s anthropological “cultural intimacy” model to illustrate how Laos’ political system has become embedded in the country’s contemporary culture and society, and how its citizens “live in and around the state” (p. 1). A key tenet of this model involves the beliefs that even when individuals “criticize the state or blame it for their misfortunes, they still recognize that the state has a fundamental right to exist” (p. 30). The author does a good job of discussing potential threats to the legitimacy of the Lao leadership posed by the increasing footprint of China, and the anxiety this is generating in society, even if mostly voiced in private. The ideological affinity that exists between the ruling parties in Vientiane and Beijing both ameliorates and complicates this issue. This is particularly so as the former has sought to

burnish its nationalist credentials in recent years, as an additional source of political legitimacy in a country where few nowadays will remember its victory against the royalist regime in 1975.

The above notwithstanding, this reviewer struggled a little with a few aspects of this book. First, the author asserts that the leadership continues to project the notion that Laos is on its way to a socialist nirvana, and expresses this using increasingly dated “revolutionary nomenclature” (p. 30), yet in the economic realm it has opted to pursue a capitalist track. But what if the latter (i.e. the capitalist approach to economics) is just as much a projection as the former, put out as a means of keeping elements of the international community, and particularly the country’s development partners ‘on side’? Perhaps the contradiction is not so much between what is said and what is done, but between what is said and said. And between what is (seemingly) done and done. Tellingly, there are aspects of the Lao economy that are distinctly un-capitalist, or at least distortions of what a market economy is supposed to entail. Cronyism and corruption undermine the creation of a properly functioning market economy in Laos, and significant assets remain in the hands of the government, or are held privately by a small number of individuals connected to the higher echelons of the ruling Lao People’s Revolutionary Party.

Second, at the centre of the book is a desire to try and find a means to reconcile, or at least explain, how Laos manages (or not) the various contradictions that exist around political legitimacy, heritage and national identity. An attempt to square the circle, if you will. But perhaps the circle is just a circle, kept in suspended animation by the cognitive dissonance of various actors. If so, the circle cannot be fully squared; at best, a hybrid “squirecle” can be achieved, but no more. As Masha Gessen observed in the *New York Times* on 11 March 2022, in totalitarian states there often exists a “perceived legitimacy” that its citizens are “forced to manufacture”. People typically crave stability, even if its existence, or the threat of its disappearance, is bogus. To be a semi-willing participant in such a conceit is a means of self-preservation; the alternative risks opening up a chasm from which there is no escape. The abduction and disappearance in 2012 of Sombath Somphone (a prominent civil society activist in Laos) is a tangible example. In order not to fall into that chasm, one participates—sometimes willingly, sometimes reluctantly—in the up-keep of the guard rails that serve to ring-fence the circle of genuine contradictions.

The choice of Luang Prabang as the primary lens is posited by the author as an ideal place from which to view these contradictions, as the past and present fortunes of the town bring these into starker relief than anywhere else in Laos. While true, one can argue that Luang Prabang is somewhat unique in contemporary Laos, and some of the author's observations are therefore not representative of Laos as a whole. Wilcox herself notes that Luang Prabang "assumes a paradoxical quality" (p. 40), relative to the rest of the country and the day-to-day lives of most of its citizens. If so, then Luang Prabang's utility as a lens through which to observe and analyse the country as a whole is problematic.

The book could also have benefitted from some more vigorous editing in its transformation from a doctoral thesis. In particular, at 50 pages, the introduction is roughly twice as long as any of the substantive chapters that follow and tends to steal the show. By the time the reader gets to the chapters that follow, the analysis feels a little like chewed meat.

However, the book does a good job in setting out and exploring Laos' vexing contradictions, and how they coexist—somewhat uncomfortably, at least from an outsider's point of view—next to each other. They help bring depth to our understanding of contemporary Laos, just like the way an individual's contradictions partly define their personality, beyond what they may say, seek to portray to others, or view themselves. Wilcox's exploration of these issues is of merit, by providing a nuanced portrayal of what is a deceptively complex country. Even if the key to reconciling Laos' various contradictions remains elusive and its destination is a false El Dorado, the journey is a scenic and illuminating one.

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