

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: Amsterdam University Press, 2021. 190pp.

In Laos, there is an odd co-presence of symbols of its royalist past on the one hand and of present-day socialist structures and rhetoric on the other. Phill Wilcox aims to study the question of how both get together. Luang Prabang, the study site, manifests this rub between the royal and colonial past, as preserved in the context of the UNESCO world heritage status, and the socialist present particularly.

Using the example of the National Museum, which was once the Royal Palace, Wilcox shows that the past is encompassed by the socialist present by means of silencing potentially contestable aspects of the past, most notably the end of the last king, his wife the queen, and the crown prince. Exhibition and tour guides respond in nebulous and inconsistent manner to any requests from tourists about this matter. This approach is not coincidental, Wilcox stresses. It is part of an overall strategy to cut short any critical historical questions and to impress the visitors by projecting Luang Prabang as timeless instead.

Capturing different voices regarding the past and present of the Lao nation, as is the subtitle of her book, Wilcox brings in pieces of conversations she had with young male Hmong migrants in Luang Prabang. Her interlocutors, as she says, voice in private secret dreams of their homeland. Their position in Luang Prabang, Wilcox states, is an ambivalent one: while their folkloristic difference is harnessed for touristic purposes, their past allegiance with anti-communist forces makes them different in a suspicious sense and

with a marginalizing effect. She presents her Hmong interlocutors in agentic terms; she shows their eagerness to move on in life, taking job and education opportunities where they arise, including increasingly in cities in China.

Wilcox then takes up an issue that had already loomed from her first chapter, that is, the issue of the rising presence of China in Laos, enhanced through the railway project connecting Kunming in Yunnan with Vientiane as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. Wilcox notices an overall concern about the latter among her informants. Against the background of this concern, she makes two observations about her interlocutors' stances. First, many of them regard China as part of a developed future that they wish to partake in by learning Mandarin or studying in China. Second, the concern about "the Chinese" and "China in Laos" connects all those sharing that concern and reassures them in their common Lao-ness, which is allegedly under threat, given the "rising China".

Despite the unreconciled past, the awkward presence of royal symbols, the contested right of belonging of the Hmong, and the threat assumed to emanate from the rising Chinese interest in Laos, the Lao state appears to be alive and well. Wilcox echoes Holly High in stating that the Lao government is anything but post-socialist and deploys High's usage of desire and Michael Herzfeld's concept of cultural intimacy to show how the state has entered even the most private spheres. Wilcox's private narratives entail a possible moment of critique, which may bear the seeds of social change. At the same time, she argues, complaints about the state have the effect of legitimizing the state (p. 142). With this contention, she builds on High's argument that although Lao residents are deeply frustrated with the state, they continue to invest their hopes and desires in it. Yet, looking at this case, we may ask: does complaining about governmental decision-making imply that the complainer recognizes the state? This point is more claimed than discussed in the book. Indeed, it should be considered, as Wilcox mentions, that her young interlocutors have never experienced anything different from the present government.

Readers interested in heritage and how the UNESCO world heritage site in Luang Prabang supports or undermines the government and its historiography, might be disappointed. Likewise, the major differences between different Hmong histories and lifeworlds do not come to the fore. The positionality of her interlocutors and the context of her research remain a bit shallow, and the ethnographic base might appear anecdotal at times.

These shortcomings aside, the book is written in an admirably accessible and personal style. Wilcox's anecdotes are pleasant to read and will ring a bell among readers familiar with Laos. It is obvious where the author's sympathies lie, and she writes in great appreciation for this country.

This book will be on the reading list of scholars from different disciplines, including social sciences such as human geography and political science, who are interested in Laos. It will also speak to anyone interested in the expansion of China in Southeast Asia. The book's organization in chapters, each with an abstract, keywords and bibliography, will make it easy to use the book chapter-wise in class.

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