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Champassak Royalty and Sovereignty: Within and Between Nation-States in Mainland Southeast Asia. By Ian G. Baird. University of Wisconsin Press, 2025. xxiv+359 pp.

Known for his major research on the ethnic minority peoples of southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia, Ian G. Baird has produced a much-anticipated monograph on Champassak. Drawing upon hundreds of interviews, matched by an array of print sources, Baird seeks to place the little-known royal House of Champassak on the map. Established in 1713, with its locus in the province that still bears its name in southern Laos, and a vassal of the Chakri Court from 1778, at least until the arrival of France on the scene, the dynasty never achieved sovereignty. As such, Baird seeks to reconfigure the fading fortunes of Champassak within discussions of kingship and sovereignty outside the fixed boundaries of the nation-state, and he returns to this theme in the conclusion. The book is divided into nine chapters, with approximately half dealing with the pre-colonial context and the other half from colonial times to the present.

In the opening chapter, on the origins of Champassak, Baird navigates between conflicting versions of the history of Theravada Buddhist implantation in the Mekong Valley, a complexity exacerbated by Bangkok's actions in forcefully imposing its own rule and manipulating dynastic succession. Two successive chapters discuss the ebb and flow of sovereign power under the last king of Champassak, King Khamsouk. In chapter 2, Baird explains the territorial system as it evolved, torn between Bangkok and the new French encroachment, climaxing in 1883 with the French takeover of all territories east of the Mekong River. Chapter 3 focuses on Champassak after the French gained control of Laos in 1893, although the seat of power remained on the west bank of the river. Chapter 4, on the "lost" Champassak royals in Cambodia, is based on a published article. It also breaks with the Bassac focus. Chapter 5 focuses on French rule in Champassak, albeit severely interrupted by the Japanese interregnum (although the term "fascist" [p. 150] hardly encapsulates Tokyo's

wartime pan-Asianist programme). Importantly, the discussion introduces the special role of Prince Boun Oum na Champassak, who, as heir to the southern kingdom, looked to the restoration of a greater Champassak only to find himself obliged to enter a pact with the court of Luang Prabang in the interest of national unity. Chapter 6 on Champassak royals in Thailand is a fascinating recitation of people's biographies connected to distant locations in northeast Thailand. Chapter 7 turns to a discussion of Boun Oum's stints as prime minister in the Royal Lao government. Notwithstanding Boun Oum's threats of secession, southern Laos emerged as a rightist base pitched against both neutralists and communists. Chapter 8 explains the staggering economic empire carved out by Boun Oum in Military Regions 3 and 4, from casinos to tin mining, literally confirming Lao communist propaganda condemning the corrupt Sananikone-Sisouk na Champassak clique, and ends with Boun Oum's flight from Laos for Thailand and France months ahead of the Pathet Lao victory in December 1975. A final chapter exposes the merits and demerits of those concerned in assuming the name Champassak, hardly useful overseas today, and stigmatized at home, a theme also fitting the author's argument on "nominal" sovereignty.

With its genealogical and interview approach, this work is not tidy history. For one, it is almost two books in one, the pre-modern and the modern, or before and after Boun Oum becomes a major player. While the thread of lost sovereignty is sustained through the book, in Champassak, there was still a *muang* or "realm" begging for an even "thicker" description of territoriality in a traditional sense. The scarcely legible maps and genealogical tables do not help. While there is much to applaud in Baird's oral history method, drawing upon rare linguistic skills and local knowledge, there is also a trade-off: the need for evidence-based documentation where it matters. For example, there is no alternative to French documentation on Boun Oum's surrender of Champassak's "sovereignty", such as was masterminded by the Saigon office of French General Leclerc in 1945–46. Neither should declassified US, including CIA, documentation be ignored when it comes to Boun Oum's business-military nexus in southern Laos. While

seminal investigations were conducted in Champassak in the early 1950s on ceremonies involving the Indigenous peoples as guardians of ancestral deities, it is regrettable that reference to Champassak's landmark pre-Angkorian temple, Vat Phu, is practically relegated to a footnote. Overall, Baird is more successful in interrogating Champassak's fluidity through time as opposed to space, such as would encompass a discussion on a Theravada Buddhist realm as opposed to elusive sovereignty in a Western sense. Nevertheless, that is not altogether a demerit for a pioneering work that fills a gap in the history of modern Laos and is a major point of reference for future researchers entering this field of investigation.

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Public Subsidy, Private Accumulation: The Political Economy of Singapore's Public Housing. By Chua Beng Huat. Singapore: NUS Press, 2024. x+150 pp.

Singapore's public housing, popularly known as HDB (Housing Development Board) flats, is internationally renowned for creating high homeownership rates, but its challenges are rarely understood. Chua's book is a masterful examination of these inherent tensions and contradictions. Employing perspectives from the political, economic and social lenses, it boasts impressive intellectual comprehensiveness. It is a must-read for anyone interested in public policy, detailing the conditions, intents, key shifts and realities that Singapore policymakers contended with to make HDB flats a success.

Arguing that the HDB was conceived as a nation-building exercise to transmute footloose migrants into committed citizens with a physical stake in the country's success, Chua contends that the eventual form of the HDB approach was not a bygone conclusion determined by economic necessity; rather, it was shaped by political