Le Laos: Stratégies d'un état-Tampon. By Christian Taillard. Montpellier: RECLUS, 1989. Pp. 200.

One of the best books on Laos is Hugh Toye's *Laos: Buffer State or Battleground* (1968). Written by a former military attaché at the British embassy in Vientiane it, understandably, has a military-political focus. Taillard's book takes up the theme of Laos as a buffer state, but as a human geographer his angle is different from those of most writers on Laos.

In the geographer's imagination the physical world looms large — the constraints imposed by mountain ranges, or the possibilities opened up by river valleys or alluvial plains, are uppermost in their estimation of the possibilities for success or failure of frail human creations such as states.

Lying at the crossroads of mainland Southeast Asia, Laos, according to Taillard, deserves the description "Indochina" more than other states in the region. The caravans from southern China that trekked down to the Malay peninsula from around the tenth century onwards brought not only cultural and political influences from elsewhere but provided crucial revenue for the early Lao kingdoms, allowing them to achieve occasional greatness.

Geographical constraints, however, ensured that the Lao states were never able to sustain their greatness. Neighbouring states have been able to prey on weaknesses caused by population dispersion, rugged terrain, and poor communications, and few natural comparative advantages, to either dismember Laos or to take it over. Thus in the last 300 years Laos had fallen under the sway of either Thailand, France, or Vietnam.

Yet Laos has survived against all odds. This, says Taillard, is a paradoxical result of its status as a buffer state, for it was, and still is, in everyone's interest to retain it as a buffer.

The unity of Laos has been most endangered when its neighbours and more powerful outsiders have attempted to draw it into their exclusive orbit. In recent times the Cold War era saw the country divided into two spheres of influence — Pathet Lao–controlled zones supported by Vietnam, China, and the Soviet Union; and Royalist zones supported by

states of the South-East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). The unity brought by the communist victory in 1975 was tenuous. Conflict with Thailand tilted the Laos axis towards Vietnam, and this was reinforced from the opposite pole by Vietnam's conflict with China, leading to a further consolidation of the "special relationship" between Hanoi and Vientiane. Laos' role as a buffer state was seriously compromised.

This conjuncture has now passed and economic liberalization in Laos has been accompanied by regional moves towards reconciliation. Laos has played a mediating role in these developments, and Vientiane has been a point of contact between opposite sides, over Cambodia, for instance. Laos' "vocation as a buffer state has been recognized anew" by its neighbours, writes Taillard, and it can now benefit from assistance provided by all of them.

One of the more useful chapters is on "L'organization spatiale" of Laos. Essentially, this argues that there were fundamental physical constraints on attempts at political and economic centralization in Laos after 1975. Out of necessity the provinces were allowed greater economic and political autonomy. At this point, however, his explanation confuses geographical continuities with political continuities. He suggests that this decentralization is a function of what he calls "thaï political systems", which he says "constitute a permanent element of spatial organization of the country". He goes on:

> They are distributed in three orbits, to take an image from astrology: one tight orbit for the provinces surrounding the Vientiane prefecture, one intermediate orbit for the provinces of the North-East and the Centre, and a peripheral orbit, distributed into secondary centres around Louang Prabang for the northern provinces and Pakse for the Southern ones. Thus one finds, over the long term, a permanent spatial configuration in Laos, because the three orbits recall, in a new form, the three divisions of the country known since the foundation of Lane Xang. (p. 63)

The notion "thaï political systems" is a useful one for describing the dispersal of power in pre-modern systems, and there is a superficial resemblance between the organization of the modern Lao state and pre-modern ones. Yet a qualitative difference separates the two: pre-modern

thaï states are ultimately defined by their inability to surmount this dispersal of power, whereas modern states in the long run have the capacity to overcome it. The difference between deploying soldiers on elephants against wayward lords and being able to send MiG jets against refractory provincial governors should not be sneezed at. In this respect I wish Taillard has not swapped his geographer's hat for that of fashionable social science.

The book contains much useful information and fifteen colour maps on population, types of vegetation, communication networks, and so on. It is a welcome addition to the small shelf of books on Laos.

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