

***Vientiane: Transformations of a Lao Landscape.* By Marc Askew, William S. Logan and Colin Long. London: Routledge, 2007. Hardcover: 265pp.**

This book, as the authors say, is the first attempt to write a social and political history of Vientiane. The first and last chapters are written by all three authors, and besides this there are chapters on the pre-colonial period by Askew, the French period by Logan, the Royal Lao Government (RLG) by Long and Askew, and on the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) by Long. The book is well produced and interesting photos are used throughout. The admirable aim of the book is to restore historical Vientiane to its rightful place as a key urban centre in the Middle Mekong and redeem the city from its marginality in studies of urbanism in Southeast Asia today.

However, in reality it is a something like a short history of Laos with special emphasis on Vientiane. There is nothing particularly wrong with what they have written, except that much of it seems somehow redundant, despite some intriguing new details about the city itself. They explain: "In the research for this book we cannot claim to have unearthed strikingly new evidence in our account of Vientiane; rather, this study takes on the character of a synthesis of our own and other scholars' work, and is distinctive more for its emphasis on Vientiane and on urbanism than any discovery of new sources as such" (p. 7). The authors offer no reason for the strategy they adopted. Of course some sources, especially for the historical past, are difficult to find, as even are the sources for twentieth century history. But there is an enormous French archive still to be mined, and there are many sources, such as newspapers, that can be combed for information on the RLG period (1946–75), similarly for the post-1975 period. And, there are still many people who could be interviewed for both of these periods.

One theoretical claim of the book is that it places Vientiane at the centre of what the authors call a "Lao culture region", and they claim to have "paid more attention to the history and historical landscape of the west bank (now the Thai side) of the Mekong than most students of Lao history in exploring Vientiane's historical hinterland" (p. 7). However, the authors do not actually explain what makes the Lao culture region distinctive, although I certainly agree that Vientiane became both a real and imagined centre of "Lao-ness". In this regard, it is strange, for example, that in Askew's chapters he does not refer

to how “Vientiane” featured in Lao millennial poems as a kind of “New Jerusalem”. While Vientiane’s relationship with what is today northeast Thailand is a crucial one historically, and presented reasonably clearly here, discussion of this relationship almost completely disappears in the chapters on the twentieth century. But, of course, there have been ongoing connections with Nong Khai, and especially Sri Chiang Mai that used to be part of old Vientiane, with almost uninhibited passage back and forth across the river until the communist revolution. There is no reference to the fact that Vientiane during the RLG period was the most developed Lao city in the region and was a pole of attraction to Lao in Udon and Khon Kaen, something that was lost post-1975, so that when the opening up of Laos occurred in the early 1990s Udon and Khon Kaen had become modern urban centres that attracted streams of visitors from Vientiane. Lao in Vientiane actively listen to radio in Nong Khai and Sri Chiang Mai, and indeed, advertising in Lao script appears in these adjacent cities. None of this is explored in the book.

There is little discussion of the ethnic composition of the city. Vietnamese dominance during the French period is referred to, but the city’s changed composition under the RLG and after 1975 is not dealt with. A study of Vientiane by the Institute of Cultural Research, which has some data on the post-1975 migration, does not even feature in the bibliography. There is no discussion of religion and the city; and royalty’s relationship with Vientiane in the modern period is not examined.

The authors say that they have used the spelling “Vientiane” rather than “Vieng Chan” for the city because of convention, and I am happy to agree with them. “Vieng Chan” is a closer transliteration in English of the Lao pronunciation. But they say the French wrote it as “Vientiane” because of the “French inability to pronounce the actual Lao name” (p. 15). They seem unaware of the fact that in French the “ti” is pronounced as a “ch” sound.

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