

***Globalization, Culture and Society in Laos.* By Boike Rehbein.  
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Studies on contemporary Lao society are rare. In his book, Boike Rehbein investigates the effects of globalization on present-day Laos. Small in terms of its population (around six million inhabitants) and surrounded by much more powerful neighbours (notably Thailand, China and Vietnam), Laos plays a minor role in Asia's economic and political affairs. But, as Rehbein reminds us, the country "has always been at the crossroads of cultures, societies, economic forces and trade routes" (p. 4). Rehbein, a sociologist and long-term scholar of Laos, pursues two inter-related objectives in this study: firstly, to propose a revised model of Pierre Bourdieu's social theory — in particular the late French sociologist's concept of "field" — that is applicable to the Lao context; secondly, to contribute to theories of globalization through empirical research on a peripheral state.

The first two chapters develop the outline of the concepts and theoretical approach. Rehbein uses Bourdieu's concept of "field" — by definition, a social arena in which agents' strategies seek to maintain or improve their positions by virtue of access to the specific resources (habitus and capital) that are at stake in the field — though with two main nuances. Firstly, he proposes a more dynamic social space (i.e., not all agents' strategies are motivated by competition and social gains, players can interpret rules and goals differently in a given field, and fields, e.g., economic and political — can even overlap, p. 25). Secondly, he seeks to broaden the boundaries of a field, i.e., beyond the nation state "container model" (p. 25), by taking into account the influence of transnational actors. He also pointedly adds to this conceptual framework historical resilience and suggests the term "sociocultures" to describe those older social structures and divisions of work (a concept broader than labour) that continue to rule a majority of Laotian's social action.

Rehbein argues that various "sociocultures" persist in modern-day Laos. Subsistence ethics, i.e., a self-sufficient culture that sustains "many" Lao villages' "subsistential division of work", still prevail in rural areas, combined with a "personal social structure" (p. 38). Patrimonialism (a variety of patron-client relationship, or as Rehbein puts it, "a special type of a stratified social structure", p. 40) remains the dominant socioculture among the bureaucrats and the elite. However, as Laos progressively adjusts itself to the global

market economy, its society is experiencing increasing division of work and social differentiation, the effects of which (especially in the economic sphere) are the focus of the third and fourth chapters. The government, along with international aid and development agencies, is pushing households in rural areas (home to two-thirds of the population) to move from subsistence to market-based livelihoods. In consequence, capitalist logic has become the dominant doctrine in the economic field, yet Rehbein contends that market culture is restricted to only a small minority who have access to business knowledge and practices either through formal education or interaction with abroad. Instead, two cultures have emerged, or expanded, in the economic field (side by side with subsistence ethics and patrimonialism) that do not follow market rules: “taking culture” (defining the strategy of those who position themselves on the receiving end of international development aid without any expectation of giving anything in return) and “occasionalism” (including small traders and producers who run their business to satisfy their subsistence needs, instead of seeking profits). Rehbein explains this lack of “spirit of capitalism” among most Laotians by their “ill-fitting” habitus: those acquired dispositions (or habits of acting, feeling, thinking, founded on pre-modern indigenous conceptions of nature, labour and the good life) that equip Laotians with inappropriate resources in an increasingly global economic field.

The following chapters examine the effects of globalization in four areas of Lao society — national culture/identity, language, higher education and village beliefs — through a similar sociological lens. Rehbein argues that social groups equipped with different (older and newer) habitus and capitals and aiming at various goals react differently to the leadership’s nationalist propaganda or to the appeals of cultural globalization. Variations in Lao language (in use and vocabulary) are a reflection of present-day Lao society’s increasing social differentiation (between urban and rural populations, among the elites, etc.), exposure to foreign influences (especially in the fields of economics, politics and law) and enduring sociocultures. Such processes of hybridization (blending domestic and foreign elements that may become indistinguishable as a result) are also observed in the chapters on Lao academia, music and rural religious practices and beliefs. Rehbein notes that the development of an academic terminology in Lao borrows from abroad (mainly the West), yet also uses indigenous terms: this language becomes “glocalized”. Likewise, the growth of a music industry, under exposure to foreign influences, has not led to the extinction of Lao music; rather, the latter has

also become glocalized (the lyrics are in Lao and the music follows Western pop/rock standards), as well as more diversified so as to cater to different tastes. The last chapter is based on fieldwork that Rehbein carried out in recent years in Ban Pha Khao, a village located about ten kilometres from the city centre of Vientiane. As in previous chapters, Rehbein argues that social differentiation (mainly as a consequence of an increasing division of work), and the combined effects of domestic forces (i.e., the leadership's mixture of socialist and nationalist propaganda) and globalization have produced different hybrids of beliefs.

Rehbein's development and use of an ambitious theoretical framework, inspired by one of the most influential Western social theories, is what studies on contemporary Lao society need. This is all the more when it concerns such a vast and complex topic as the relationship between culture, society and globalization. The book's first four chapters, which demonstrate the determining role of economic and political fields in the evolution of present-day Lao social structures, are therefore fairly stimulating, for they engagingly employ conceptual thinking and factual analysis. The chapters that follow are less original, however, partly because they fail to interrelate concepts and empirical research rigorously. They should be considered as an introduction to separate more in-depth studies — a view that Rehbein actually shares with regard to some of his chapters (on the Lao music scene and village beliefs, for instance). He stresses that the study is an attempt to “present aspects of the kaleidoscope which is contemporary Lao reality” (p. 143). Still, it is unfortunate that the author places more emphasis on his conceptual framework, as opposed to empirical data to support it.