

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

*Vientiane: Transformations of a Lao Landscape* is an antidote to common depictions of Laos as a marginal rural autarchy and its capital as a ‘colonial backwater’. It is the first sustained examination of this central ‘urban’ Lao space and succeeds in conveying the rich and turbulent history that has shaped it. Although the authors do not profess to have discovered any new material about the city, they have achieved a synthesis of the main English, French, Thai and Lao sources with the exception of manuscripts seized by the Siamese and still held privately in Bangkok and some colonial material held in Hanoi (p. 6). A series of maps throughout the book detail the historical transformation in the shape and size of the city. Notable photographs in the book include a fascinating aerial shot of Vientiane in 1929 and a picture of the White Rose Nightclub in 1969, infamous for its American era prostitution, complete with copulating dogs at the front entrance. The book consists of a re-examination of the elite-centred history of the pre-modern kingdoms, and the impact of French colonialism, the Cold War and socialist revolution on the twentieth century re-development of the city.

The authors view the city through the heuristic device of ‘landscape’ — the physical manifestation of its natural, cultural and economic environment — and use it to tell a story of political and social change. The focus on landscape brings to life much of the city’s architecture explaining the origins and fate of the old royal city walls, the French colonial treasury and the Soviet circus, to name but a few. It also allows the authors to examine the importance of the (now Thai) West bank of the Mekong River, which, in its heyday, was part of a greater Vientiane and included the city’s port and a major religious centre (p. 38). The physical character of the old city is brought to life in fascinating detail in the early chapters of the book, which recount the production and role of urban artefacts such as relic monuments and Buddha images in

attempts by various kings to assert their regional political authority. The emphasis on landscape also allows a refreshing reconceptualization of the usual story of the conquests of 'great kings' and illuminates their transience and subordination to changes outside of their control. Pre-colonial urbanism ended in the destruction of Vientiane by a Siamese army in 1828 sent to quell the rebellion of the Lao king, Anuvong.

The attempt to rescue Vientiane from the 'essentialized trope of bucolic backwardness' (p. 3) that has shaped external perceptions of it since 1828 is at once the strength and central tension in the book. The authors assess the city through the historical lens of the pre-colonial political polity — the *meuang*. In the Foreword, senior Laos historian Martin Stuart-Fox suggests that there is something 'quintessentially Lao' about the politics of the *meuang* (p. xix) despite the fact that it was always part of a broader pre-colonial political spectrum incorporating kingdoms only recently constrained to the Thai, Burmese, and Lao geospaces. *Meuang* were hierarchical social spaces centred on urban seats of power that enjoyed shifting dominance over other *meuang* and their transient populations. It could be argued that the *meuang* is being reinvented in contemporary civilizational discourse as the historically specific 'Lao' polity of the nationalist imagination. However, this should not allow us to confuse the shifting regional social hierarchy of the pre-colonial polity with the dramatically fixed geopolitical formation that emerged in the colonial era as modern 'Laos' centred around the capital, Vientiane.

The key tension in the book is between the authors' desire to chart the historical continuity of the *meuang* and the dramatic discontinuities that have made Vientiane what it is today. They argue that the political struggle (and ultimate defeat) of King Anuvong was an attempt to 'assert *meuang* identity' (p. 70) and in the continued ritual worship of the That Luang stupa by monks in the years after the sacking of Vientiane they perceive the 'memory of *meuang*' being kept alive (p. 71). Ultimately, the authors interpret the contemporary cosmopolitanism of Vientiane as a partial

re-emergence of the *meuang*. They take the optimistic view that regional integration and economic liberalization have allowed Vientiane 'to reclaim at least some of the role that it once held before the devastation wrought by the Siamese in the early 19th Century' (p. 185).

At the same time the authors acknowledge the history of destruction and transformation that Vientiane has undergone. Almost completely destroyed by the Siamese in 1828 it was further demolished by Chinese Ho bandit armies in 1875 before its resurrection by the French at the end of the nineteenth century. According to one colonial commentator in 1925, the city was like a 'forced plant, a hothouse plant: it needs, to exist, careful attention' (p. 99). Vientiane could have been destroyed again in 1946, when Vietnamese troops were dissuaded at the last minute from burning it in retreat from the re-occupying French forces after the Japanese withdrawal (p. 114). Even after the seizure of power in 1975 there was serious talk among Party leaders of abandoning Vientiane because of its proximity to Thailand, and moving the capital to Phonesavanh in northern Xieng Khuang province (p. 163). It becomes clear that the city's contemporary survival owes more to the events of the modern period than to any continuing links to ancient *meuang*.

The stand-out chapter in the book provides an account of the transformation of Vientiane under the influence of American development aid from 1954 to the declaration of the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 1975. This period is almost completely ignored in official literature due to the ruling Party's revolutionary struggle against the hedonism and corruption of Vientiane culminating in the removal of the monarchy. This despite the fact that in less than a decade a small colonial town of 10,000 was transformed into a cosmopolitan city of over 100,000 people, home to French, Canadians, Indians, Poles, Americans, British, Thai and Chinese and Lao migrants from all over the region. The authors acknowledge that 'in many ways contemporary Vientiane is more a creation of the two decades after 1954 than any other period in its history' (p. 138). The

book also re-evaluates the ‘revolutionary’ transformation of the city. Common references to the seizure of power in 1975 as a ‘revolution’ are rejected and the authors note that the new regime came to power through what amounted to an extended *coup d’etat* (p. 153). The impact of ideological statements from this period is called into question by the book’s examination of the material transformation of the city, which was more a result of the American withdrawal and Thai economic blockade than socialist redevelopment (p. 164). While the post-revolutionary regime is seeking new sources of legitimacy through a selective cultural nationalist valorization of pre-modern kingdoms, the pre-revolutionary city remains forgotten paradoxically at a time when Vientiane is emerging out of socialist stagnation. As in the pre-revolutionary period, an urban consumer economy has emerged that is producing vast inequalities between the urban and rural populations, corruption and social vices are prominent issues of concern and the city landscape is being transformed by foreign business competition.

Loss of social memory associated with the physical destruction of the landscape is a central theme in the book. This loss is apparent in the contemporary rush to embrace regional capitalism and redevelop Vientiane. The authors note that while lip service is being paid to conservation to obtain development aid, much of the remaining urban legacy of the city is being destroyed (p. 199). This is partly because of the Party’s inability to embrace the past. While the ancient Lao *meuang* of *lan xang* (land of a million elephants) is proclaimed by contemporary nationalists as a golden era, it is unable to be celebrated as a ‘great tradition’ in Laos in the same way as the monarchy is in Thailand because of the recent revolutionary past (p. 199). Contemporary historical amnesia is also partly equated with the corruption and struggle for new wealth that now define the city, as investors compete for politburo permission to obtain prime real estate and knock down symbols of even the very recent past. The authors end with the observation that “what counts as ‘history’ in Laos, and with clear consequences for Vientiane, is determined by those who hold the power to assign priorities and determine policy”

(p. 206). One wonders what history does not suffer the same fate. If *meuang* identity is so politically contingent, then the extent to which it can be seen as one of the 'key foundations for a Lao national past and identity' (p. 207) is very much dependent upon the currently uncertain ideological interests of the post-revolutionary elite.

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