

Southeast Asia and others who seek to understand more about the Indonesian killings, Cold War-era politics in Indonesia, or political violence and its consequences in Southeast Asia more broadly will find *Unmarked graves* to be an excellent resource. Vanessa Hearman prompts her audience to see that what happened in East Java, ultimately, is a story of resilience and survival. To that end, what readers receive as well is a story of a scholar's perseverance to ensure that the truth will out.

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## Laos

*Engaging Asia: Essays on Laos and beyond in honour of Martin Stuart-Fox*

Edited by DELSEY GOLDSTON

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This edited volume contains new work by some major Lao studies scholars. It also contains studies by new and emerging scholars of no less importance. The chapters bringing to light new sources are especially welcome. *Engaging Asia* is organised, as the sub-title indicates, as a tribute to Martin Stuart-Fox. While it focuses on Lao history it also touches on Cambodia, Vietnam, Indonesia, China, Buddhist philosophy and the philosophy of history, mirroring Stuart-Fox's own wider interests. It caps this with biographical detail important to understanding one of the major Western, English-language scholars of Lao history.

Readers will find numerous studies of the French colonial period, which is ripe for revision. Geoffrey Gunn, a prominent scholar of colonial Laos, revisits the period offering a broad but concise overview of colonialism in Laos. His main question concerns how much modern Laos' territory, identity and economy owes to French colonialism. While recalling the notion of Laos as a French 'invention' he acknowledges that the parameters were set by Siam/Thailand long before 1893. One could go further and trace the origins of modern Laos in terms of territory and demographics to the 1827–28 Chao Anou War and the subsequent Siamese depopulation campaigns. Even after 1893, Gunn notes, collaboration by Luang Prabang was vital to French rule, suggesting that the Lao were more than passive bystanders in events. Gunn further elucidates French support for Lao nationalism from 1928, which subsequently stalled amid the Great Depression. He links France's halting support to stirring discontent among the burgeoning Lao Francophone elite, not unlike what happened in Vietnam after 1918. Lastly, Gunn describes conflict resulting from Vietnamese immigration. Vietnamese domination of the colonial administration was an important factor in developing Lao nationalism, especially among the Lao elite who also sought such posts.

Lia Genovese offers a detailed account of how the *École française d'Extrême-Orient* (EFEO) came to study the prehistory of Laos, and the role of Madeleine Colani. That Colani lived an incredible life is clear, and one can only

imagine the discrimination she faced for her age and gender. One perennial problem for colonial studies is the difficulty of knowing Lao subjects in the colonial period. Kathryn Sweet's study on the colonial health service offers a glimpse of a Lao nurse in Xieng Khouang whose horse died while he undertook an inoculation campaign. That we never know what became of his plea to the colonial authorities speaks to the difficulties of trying to recover Lao voices from the archives. Sweet's chapter is really about the spread of Western medicine or 'biomedicine' and its link to Western colonialism as a 'soft' tool of empire. Sweet's revelation that 98 per cent of patients treated were Lao and Vietnamese is intriguing, but the figures contain uncertainties, being entangled with those for vaccination campaigns. One doubts if Lao and Vietnamese received the same level of care as Europeans due to the racism inherent in French colonialism. Moreover, the fact that there were only 9 doctors for a population of 678,125 in 1914 suggests charges of neglect cannot be entirely discounted. The larger goal of trying to understand the positive as well as negative impacts of colonialism remains a necessary corrective to the literature.

Kennon Breazeale offers a masterful study of the Mekong River through the eyes of Thai, French and British officials. He draws from an array of primary sources from Thai, French and British archives demonstrating a level of scholarship few can match. While the topic concerns one French ship, the *La Grandière*, this subtle and sophisticated essay is actually a study of the sheer rugged, dangerous, and ever-shifting nature of the Mekong itself. It is a story of the failure of French and other conquerors to tame its waters. Accounts by Thai, the other rulers of nineteenth-century Laos, make this point clear. Breazeale provides some skilful translations, including of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab's observations about the river's unconquerable nature. Damrong warns that the Mekong cannot be safely traversed except with great care. This statement proves prophetic as the *La Grandière* sank in 1910, claiming the lives of two high-ranking French officials.

Another group of studies focuses on one of the most important topics in modern Lao history: Lao communism. Martin Rathie's work on a small Lao-Khmer cell in north-east Cambodia offers a unique vantage point on the origins and development of Lao communism. He offers a sweeping history based on substantial oral history research. Oral history is one of the most promising new subfields in Lao history, as works by Ian Baird, Vatthana Pholsena and others show. Many new details are revealed in Rathie's highly original work. While more could be said about Vietnamese involvement, Rathie's focus affords us a deeper look at communism in the Lao-Khmer-Vietnamese borderlands. He reveals an unknown part of the movement which became an important rear base for Pol Pot and others in 1965–67. The strength of Rathie's research lies in the 89 interviews he conducted, recording things not written down, which provide both a history from below and the individual human experience of war.

Delsey Goldston, the volume's editor, offers a new analysis of the Lao Revolution of 1975 in her chapter, arguing it was ideologically pure. She connects Lao communist speeches to Leninist writings, arguing that Kaysone Phomvihane and a handful of other Lao communists not only read V.I. Lenin's works but in fact applied them in their revolutionary struggle. Her chapter on the ideological nature of Lao communism is vital for revising our understanding of Cold War Laos. Her claim that the Lao Revolution was 'practically peaceful', however, ignores the roughly 40,000 sent to

re-education camps, many of whom died or were held for over a decade, and the 400,000 who were exiled. Moreover, it obscures the military component in the 20 (not 30) year struggle of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) to overthrow the Royal Lao Government (RLG), or the balance of power in 1975 when the United States retreated while North Vietnam did not. Nonetheless she does offer insight into the Revolution, such as the fact that ethnic minorities were its bulwark while very few ethnic Lao participated. This suggests an apparent contradiction: that the Leninist LPRP based their revolution on ethnic minorities, who, according to Lenin, should have self-determination, and were quite different than the ethnic Lao peasants and workers who were seen as being further along in Marxist stages of development. The fact that peasants in Lao communist thinking were seen as being strictly ethnic Lao further suggests Lao communists may not have entirely escaped notions of Lao ethnic supremacy, not unlike the RLG's own racialist thinking.

Lastly, Soualatha Sayalath argues the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) used two recent events to reconcile with the Lao diaspora. These events were the 2009 SEA Games and the 2010 celebration of the 450th anniversary of Vientiane as the capital of Laos. While reconciliation is highly important, more could have been said about what the 200 or so overseas Lao subjected to the LPDR's charm offensive thought. At any rate, without deeper and more sustained efforts to reconcile the diaspora, any lasting achievement is doubtful.

The chapters on pre-colonial Laos from prehistory to the first Lao kingdom of Lan Xang are especially valuable. Two senior scholars, Mayoury and Pheuiphan Ngoasrivathana, offer a unique study of the Lao-Thai border from 1353 to 1891. Crucially, they question the idea that borders were a later invention of Western colonialism. There were detailed enumerations of the border in *kongdin* or 'Wheel of Territory' texts. The authors identify the underlying logic determining the border based on control of water catchments that were key to agriculture and control of water. They identify three points marking the border in the mid-fourteenth century agreed to by Ayutthaya and Lan Xang using an impressive array of Western and Lao sources. A true understanding of territorial control would serve our knowledge of the Lao-Thai areas, but the evidence available is scant and interpretations are subject to modern nationalist feelings, as they note. While Mayoury and Pheuiphan trace the Lao-Thai border they do note areas of overlapping sovereignty, like the Field of Double Affection and surrounding unclaimed territories, suggesting complexities remain in our understanding, and the continued relevance of Thongchai Winichakul's work.

Souneth Pothisane tackles the difficulty of writing on the period before 1353 and suggests some possible approaches to such a history. It remains difficult to conceptualise this period of history within a nationalist frame given that it concerns a time before the Lan Xang kingdom was established. Instead of an approach limited to the contemporary nation, Souneth proposes a span of geologic eras, encompassing the peopling of Laos and the wider region, the Stone Age of the Mekong basin, the Neolithic Revolution and concluding with the founding of larger and larger settlements. He draws together an array of new research, and is not afraid to make global comparisons. Souneth makes a complex subject understandable due to his expository power. One almost wishes he would write a volume on the subject himself. The only criticism might be the utilising of Lao terms when the people being discussed were not Lao. Finally, his

call to not discard the chronicles as useful sources is important: whatever difficulties they contain, they preserve a unique history and worldview.

Finally, Volker Grabowsky examines a cultural revival among the Tai Lue of Sipsong Panna in the People's Republic of China. It is an extraordinary tale of survival of a centuries-old practice of manuscript production through the turbulence of the twentieth century. The revival is fuelled by cross-border Tai Lue communities in Kengtung in Myanmar, Chiang Mai in Thailand and Muang Sing in Laos, and involves everyone from lay persons to charismatic monks to Thai royals. Grabowsky brings together his formidable knowledge of such manuscripts with interviews of the dedicated individuals working to preserve the manuscripts and thereby save Tai Lue culture for future generations.

Because of the broad scope of the volume it is regrettably not possible to review everything in the space permitted. Following Martin Stuart-Fox one can regard this volume as a state of the field of Lao history. It shows the problems and prospects of studying one of Asia's lesser-known countries: what can be achieved when marshalling an array of sources and tackling difficult questions. It remains difficult at times to hear Lao voices from certain periods. Even with the more recent history of decolonisation and the Cold War the problem is how to maintain a critical distance from one's sources and present an unbiased, objective view. It is difficult for researchers working closely with their sources not to become trapped by the views of one side or the other. But these scholars hold a lot of promise and potential for the future. And these issues are not unique to Laos but rather are larger issues in the field of history. These difficulties call for more archival work, new methods and a more diverse source base, yet problems remain. Beyond the battle for supremacy between the two Cold War blocs one notes misrule, violence, violation of rights, exploitation, dehumanisation and even genocide in both blocs, pointing to deeper issues in modern history regardless of ideology.

Please note: this review represents my own personal views and not those of my home institution.

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## Myanmar

*The Buddha's wizards: Magic, protection, and healing in Burmese Buddhism*

By THOMAS NATHAN PATTON

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This book is based on Thomas Nathan Patton's extensive fieldwork among the Buddhist population of Myanmar on the world of wizards or *weizzā*, as they are known locally, in his quest to understand their widespread appeal. He provides a rich in-depth ethnography and intimate examination of the *weizzā* cult in its broader