

collection of photographs, posters and printed slogans owned by Noorman in Yogyakarta. He is a retired veteran of the Indonesian revolution and an ardent supporter of Indonesia's former first President Soekarno. The author shows how Noorman uses photographs and other technologies including mechanical productions such as prints and photocopying to question the validity of the New Order historical narratives which treated former President Soekarno, his political idol, cruelly. 'Noorman exploits photocopying and photography to collect texts and images circulating in the public sphere and transform them into new kinds of documents for his alternative history.' (p. 255)

In the Epilogue ('Beyond the paper', pp. 295–300) Strassler examines significant developments in the technology of photography because of the invention of the digital camera. As has occurred in other parts of the world, the new technology of the digital camera has transformed the practice of photography in Indonesia, sweeping aside the 'traditional' film and paper-based photography. Strassler discusses how this elemental change has created a new digitally based 'discourse network' that includes new forms of photograph production and storage, new modes of circulation and fundamentally altered relationships between the visual image and materiality (p. 300), as among other things manifested on the Internet site Facebook.

The Indonesian state, with its distinctive bureaucracy and inimitable political logic, has characterised the way its citizens employ and consume various kinds of media technologies, crossing over ethnic and geographic boundaries. The *Afdruk Kilat* ('Express printing') stand, for example, can be found in Yogyakarta, as well as in Padang. Moreover, photography at wedding ceremonies is found not only in Yogyakarta, but also all over Indonesia. Furthermore, the widespread distribution of printed copies of local politicians' identity photographs in the public sphere can be found all over the country during *pilkada* (*pemilihan kepala daerah*, 'Direct elections for local leaders'). However, Strassler unfortunately does not investigate the use of identity photographs in this manner by local leaders. Although this is intended to be a study of photography on Java, it seems to me that it actually represents the wider study of the world of photography in a multi-ethnic and archipelagic country called Indonesia.

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Laos

Multidisciplinary perspectives on Lao studies

Edited by KAREN L. ADAMS and THOMAS JOHN HUDAK

Tempe, AZ: Southeast Asia Council, Center for Asian Research, Arizona State University, 2010. Pp. xxii, 429. Maps, Notes, Bibliography, Index.

doi:10.1017/S002246341100049X

Lao studies are undergoing something of a resurgence, after sparse years during which the government of the Lao PDR made doing social scientific research as difficult as possible. It is still not easy. There are bureaucratic hurdles to negotiate, and

political sensitivities to address — not to mention the cost of *per diems* for Lao associates. But an under-researched country with 49 officially listed ethnic groups, each with its own language, culture and ecological relationships to a wonderfully varied environment, has an irresistible attraction for intrepid scholars.

Lao studies have recently been given a significant boost by the series of international conferences inaugurated in 2005 at Northern Illinois University. The second International Conference on Lao Studies took place in 2007 at Arizona State University, where more than a hundred papers were presented. This collection brings together 19 of the best of these papers, together with an introduction by the editors. The papers are grouped into five sections covering language, literature and information access; material and visual texts; history; sustainable practices; and gender and ethnicity.

It is not possible in a short review to discuss, or even mention, all 19 papers. As in any such collection, some papers stand out, for their scholarly content, their intrinsic interest, or both. Linguists will find much of interest in studies of how a newly literate ethnic group (the Prai) develop literacy practices (Frederick Diller), how language loss occurs in expatriate Lao speakers (Eric Brown), and how numeral classifiers can be compared across Tai-Kadai languages (Somsonge Burusphat). And economists will argue about the value of the Nam Theun II dam to the Lao economy (which Michael Theno finds potentially beneficial) and over the business prospects for Lao artistic textiles (which Carol Ireson-Doolittle and Geraldine Moreno-Black also view positively). Plus there are studies about how the ethnic Lao and Hmong communities are faring in the United States.

Of more general interest is Gregory Green's paper on the dissemination of information in the Lao PDR, which he finds woefully inadequate. Green pays lip service to the government's stated intention to advance education and develop the country's human resources, and then goes on to detail its abject failure to facilitate access to the information essential to do so. Very few books are published, most on subjects of scant interest; newspaper circulation is actually falling, because as Green carefully puts it, the information they carry is not valued sufficiently for readers to pay for it. Television coverage is inadequate; and the Internet is too expensive for all but a privileged few. What he does not spell out is that this is entirely due to the stifling combination of the system of government and repressive policies of the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party.

Three papers on Buddhism provide varied windows through which to view contemporary Laos. Alan Potkin, Catherine Raymond and Karen Brown tell the story of how the murals of Vat Oub Mong in Vientiane were lost when the *sima* was destroyed in December 2000 to make way for a new ordination hall. This act of seeming vandalism was performed to make merit for those who paid for the new construction, but it destroyed the one thing that made the *vat* itself remarkable. Such is the impact of new wealth on artistic heritage. Now attempts are being made to recreate the murals from the digital archive made before their demise — with the suggestion that merit-makers could be enticed to pay for the privilege of colouring in black and white outlines!

How Buddhism has legitimised political power in Laos is the subject of Saengmany Ratsabout's wide-ranging paper. He traces the legitimising function of Buddhism through the use made of its founding myths (introduction by Fa Ngum) and national symbols (the Phra Bang, That Luang) up to the present regime. Two points of criticism are his failure to consult French sources (Michel Lorrillard on the That Luang, for example), and to appreciate the difference between colonial support for a Lao Sangha separate

and distinct from the Thai Sangha and the use of Buddhism to legitimise political power, which the French consistently avoided doing. The French did leave Buddhism in better shape than they found it, thus enabling it to regain something of its legitimising role under the democratic Royal Lao regime. However, Buddhism was marginalised in the early years of the Lao PDR, which created its own revolutionary legitimising mythology (as Oliver Tappe demonstrates in his paper) — so making the current use of Buddhism to shore up the legitimisation of the regime more than a little ironical.

The third paper on Buddhism, Karma Leshe Tsomo's study of women who have taken Buddhist vows, reveals the support that institutionalised Buddhism gives to the patriarchal structure of Lao society. This is exacerbated because there exists no order of nuns in Theravada Buddhist societies (unlike the Mahayana Buddhism of Vietnam). Buddhism thus provides little support for the struggle to create more egalitarian gender relationships — which, as Kinnalone Kittiphanh argues in her article on feminism in Laos, still has a long way to go. Once again a substantial gap exists between what the ruling Party proclaims and what it does — in this case by the way it constricts the very organisations working for gender equality.

In summary, the papers collected in this volume make a welcome contribution to the growing corpus of Lao studies.

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Malaysia

Transforming brickfields: Development and governance in a Malaysian city

By RICHARD BAXSTROM

Singapore: NUS Press, 2010. Pp. xiii, 283. Notes, Bibliography, Index.

Earlier published as: *Houses in Motion: The Experience of Place and the Problem of Belief in Urban Malaysia*

Stanford University Press, 2008.

doi:10.1017/S0022463411000506

The communal angst and politics of Malaysia present a rich field for both academic discourse and journalistic display. Too often, however, the alienation of Malaysia is presented in the grand context of identity politics — Joel Kahn's *Other Malays*, and my own *Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya* would be classed as examples. Only rarely do we get down in the streets, shops and houses of the 'ordinary population' to see how these tensions actually work out — to see how the crises of identity are produced. Some of the essays of Farish Noor manage to do this; the present book certainly does it.

Richard Baxstrom takes his account into Kuala Lumpur's Brickfields. Though wonderfully entangled in the early history of Kuala Lumpur and heterogenic in both its population and present institutions, Brickfields is most notably an Indian-Hindu community area which, at the time of Baxstrom's research in 2000–02, was being 'improved' to make the neighbourhood 'safer, more orderly, more closely integrated with the rest of Kuala Lumpur' — and, more than coincidentally, to facilitate