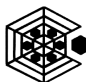

REVIEWS

Bouté, Vanina and Vatthana Pholsena, eds. 2017. *Changing Lives in Laos: Society, Politics, and Culture in a Post-Socialist State.* Singapore: National University of Singapore Press. pp. xiii + 457.

To many students of Southeast Asian studies, Laos (officially, the Lao People's Democratic Republic or LPDR) is probably the most unfamiliar and the most enigmatic nation-state in the region. This is so because of its "late reopening" to the world through its delayed entry to the Association of Southeast East Asian Nations in July 1997 and its "late reintegration' to the world capitalist order formalized through its entry to the World Trade Organization in 1998. This tome edited by Vanina Bouté and Vathana Pholsena aims to fill out part of the scholarly void brought about by years of isolation and academic inaccessibility. Indeed, publications on Laos of this multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary kind are too few and far in between. The book therefore follows a few good and comprehensive updates on the country starting with the work of Martin Stuart-Fox (1982), Grant Evans, ed. (1999), and Yves Goudineau and Michel Lorrilard, eds. (2008), among others.

The book is composed of fifteen chapters divided into four parts that roughly overlaps with three domains of knowledge: politics and governance (Part 1: State Formation and Political Legitimation), economic development and social change (Part 2: Natural Resource Governance and Agrarian Change), culture and society (Part 3: Ethnic Minorities Engaging with Modernity); including a part on special problems and trends (Part 4: In Search of Opportunities: Moving Across and Outside the Country). This review will comment on selected chapters distributed throughout the four parts.

In part one, perhaps the most important chapter is that of Martin Ruthie (chapter two), which details the political evolution of the Lao

People's Democratic Republic through the history of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party. Ruthie traces the beginnings of the party in the Indochinese Communist Party as inspired by Ho Chi Minh; the rise or its early leadership in the persons of Kaysone Phomvihane, Prince Souphanouvong, Phoumi Vongvichit, and Chao Sisay; the eventual establishment of the Lao People's Party in 22 March 1955; the rise and early successes of the *Pathet Lao* (Lao State) revolutionary movement; the struggles against the increasingly corrupt and weakened Royal Lao Government; the party's renaming to the Lao People's Revolutionary Party in the early 1970s; and, the eventual founding of the Lao People's Democratic Republic on 2 December 1975. While the 1970s is portrayed as a decade of party expansion and consolidation of its monopoly on political power, the 1980s is seen as a period of normalization of relations with former enemies such as Thailand and China, thereby allowing the increased possibilities of economic relations beyond the Soviet bloc that started its dissolution in the late 1980s and early 1990s. However by its fifth congress in March 1991, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party's founding members' are seen to have entered a period of retreat via retirement or natural expiration. In the same period, the party saw a series of corruption scandals. Indeed, one of the greatest challenges faced by socialist movements is how to formulate policies that engage re-integration into a capitalist world economic order while staying true to its socialist ideals. Most unfortunately, it appears that the Lao People's Democratic Republic is at the brink of failure. Ruthie observes a "shift from patriotic camaraderie to cronyism and nepotism" (42). With the decline of Soviet-style state welfare, Lao society seems to have retreated to patrimonialism where, "in the Lao context . . . is defined as a form of clientelism whereby incumbent revolutionary patrons are relatively free to decide administrative appointments" (43). With this scourge of corruption, Ruthie rightly questions whether "the LPRP [Lao People's Revolutionary Party] simply becomes a facade for power plays between elite families *like the RLG [Royal Lao Government]*, or if the Party will take radical steps to remain loyal to its historic legacy" (52, emphasis mine).

Other interesting works that break new ground are included in part one. Oliver Tappe (chapter three) interrogates the shaping of the so-called "national topography" of Laos through national commemoration and visualizations of the nation-state via monuments and the recognition of historical spaces. This set of state actions is essentially part of a broad political process that incorporates Laos's "Buddhist legacy of Lan Xang, revolutionary heritage, and multi-ethnic solidarity, represented

by the different statues of national 'ancestors'" (75). In the context of Cold-War politics in the region, Patrice Ladwig (chapter four) looks at the conflicted nature of the Lao Buddhist Sangha and its institutions as "zones of ideological conflict, fields of propaganda, covert actions, and counter-intelligence measures" (104). Vatthana Pholsena (chapter five) studies the so-called war generation "whose social identity was defined by the revolution and shaped by its active participation in the construction of a new socialist state in the post-war years of deprivation and poverty" (131) and how this "generational unit" diverged in postrevolutionary ideals and career pathways despite relatively uniform experiences in political socialization. Nicole Reichert (chapter six) looks at the experiences of Lao students and civil servants who were sent to the German Democratic Republic for education or training, where many of them experienced greater freedoms compared to what they have experienced in their homeland, and where many "perceive the integration back into Lao society and their jobs in the state bureaucracy as more problematic than their initial integration into their GDR [German Democratic Republic] life" (158).

Setting the tone of inquiry for part two is Olivier Evrar and Ian G. Baird's (chapter seven) piece that looks at upland-lowland relations since 1975. In Laos, the uplands have been synonymous to shifting "slash-and-burn" agriculture, while the lowlands have been consistently associated with settled wet-rice cultivation. The authors observe that "the most obvious phenomena in Laos has been the unprecedented and massive displacement of highland communities to the lowlands, especially during the last few decades, and the creation of many multi-ethnic settlements in the lowlands or in the uplands adjacent to major roads" (167). This trend apparently started in the 1970s and continued throughout the 1980s when the Lao government relocated many villages in the highlands "in order to keep control of the villagers and cut off supplies to the resistance" (171), a move that led to the near depopulation of "entire upland areas" (171). At about the same time, government also encouraged many inhabitants of the uplands "to come down and to participate in the rebuilding of the country by repopulating the lowlands, refilling partially deserted towns and villages, and to cultivate abandoned fields, after many lowlanders escaped to Thailand" (172). Government schemes have therefore led to huge portions of the population being resettled "with 30 percent of the villages in many districts and up to 85 percent in some areas" (176). The authors point out that starting in the 1990s and more especially so in the early 2000s, the highlands have become economically important

with the Lao government policy of developing depopulated areas through land concessions for the establishment of monoculture plantations of rubber, eucalyptus, cassava, and the like. These developments have resulted in local people not having access to forest and grazing lands. Moreover, even more drastic changes are introduced into the upland areas as government build dams and road systems that improve transborder connectivity. While the authors concede that these changes indeed bring great potential for economic development they "also introduce new threats (e.g. the spread of communicable diseases like HIV [human immunodeficiency virus], illegal migration, drugs and security issues, pollution, and ecological impoverishment)" (187). In summing up, the authors of this chapter note that "upland changes seem likely to leave the majority of the original inhabitants with less control over the lands and resources they previously had, and could therefore threaten their subsistence and cultural reproduction" (189). With this process of disenfranchisement of upland populations, the Lao government is faced with a challenge of legitimacy given its declared commitment to revolutionary ideals and given its officially declared recognition of the multi-ethnic character of its nation-state. This material and ideological contradiction is, of course, found in other Southeast Asian states, and not entirely unique to Laos.

Two other chapters compose part two of the book. The piece by Michael B. Dwyer (chapter eight) looks at the politics of land possession in the context of transnational agribusiness and the production of cash crops. Using statistical data and individual case studies, Vanina Boute's work (chapter nine) looks at the formation of new networks and the development of new forms of social differentiation in the sites of new towns and villages established by successive waves of farmer's migration.

Part three of the book focuses on the concept of identity. Gregoire Schlemmer's work (chapter ten) examines *emic* and *etic* notions of ethnic identity in a country of forty-nine officially recognized ethnic groups with the dominant ethnic Lao accounting for about half of the population. Schlemmer begins his discussion by emphasizing that the concept is highly ambiguous and varies "depending on audiences and circumstances" (251). He notes that in the Laotian language, the term "ethnic" refers "to all ethnic groups except the Lao" (252). People of other nationalities such as the Chinese and the Vietnamese who live in the country are also excluded from this term. As such, ethnicity demographically and politically "constitutes a minority" (252). Schlemmer points out that the categorization of peoples depends

much on how states perceived groups throughout their respective histories. These categorizations also depend on the nature of these states and the types of relations these states have established with their subjects. Ancient chronicles vary in terms of usage of ethnonyms. A dualistic classificatory system based on the Tai (lowland inhabitants centered on wet rice cultivation belonging to *muang* chieftaincies) and the Kha (mountain dwellers centered on shifting "slash-and-burn" cultivation has emerged from these chronicles). When the French came, they adopted these two terms often racializing them. After independence in 1953, a "tripartite classification" system was adopted that placed all groups under the umbrella label of Lao, distinguishing them according to place of dwelling: lowland Lao (Lao Lum), midland Lao (Lao Theung), and upland Lao (Lao Sung). The label "Kha," which had the pejorative meaning of "slave," was conveniently dropped. The regime of President Kaysone Phomvihane decided to do away with the tripartite system, criticizing it as unscientific. From that time onwards, at least officially, an ethno-linguistic system of categorization based on Soviet ethnography inherited from the Vietnamese was promulgated and used. Thus, books on the matter reflect the following categorization: 1) Mon-Khmer (or Austro Asiatic, mainly the former Lao Theung), 2) Tai-Kadai (former Lao Lum), 3) Tibeto-Burmese, and 4) Hmong-Mien or Meo-Yao (former Lao Sung). This however did not stop the general Lao population from using the more archaic classification systems. Schlemmer notes that at present categories of self- identification are quite fluid and that an "an individual can identify himself with different levels of segmentation . . . . Identification that is selected as relevant may vary depending on who is being addressed . . . . A *Pusho* would describe himself as such in interaction with another *Akha*, and as *Akha* in contrast to another *Hani*; but with a *Khmu*, for example, he will present himself as Lao Ko" (259). Compounding systems of classification are, among many others, changing ethnicities based on asylum seeking, in the case of entire families displaced by conflict, adoption of an outsider groom into a bride's family to continue a bloodline or lineage, inter-ethnic marriages, and even residence in multi-ethnic towns or villages where the tendency is to simply assume an ethnic Lao identity. Schlemmer's discussion points to the very sure fact that issues and challenges that relate to ethnicity will continue indefinitely. This reviewer agrees that this notion of identity was and is never a given, that the state and its actions will continue to impinge upon its salience as a uniting factor or as a differentiating factor in this fast-changing post socialist state, and that new patterns of interaction

or engagement with the outside world as well as forces within the nation-state may very well produce new identities that will either produce composites or fragment older classifications. Such is the dynamism of culture in a complex, interconnected world.

Two other chapters comprise part three of the book. The article by Guido Sprenger (chapter eleven) looks at the "Buddhification" of the indigenous spirit religion (*sasana phi*) through a study of ritual. The work of Chris Lyttleton and Yunxia Li (chapter twelve) looks at how the introduction of rubber as a cash crop in the highland regions has led to culture change, mainly through Lao Akha-Chinese interaction.

Part four of the book mainly deals with the phenomenon of migration. The piece by Sverre Molland (chapter thirteen) details the political ramifications of migration and mobility. He astutely notes that resettlement whether "voluntary" or "forced" is "a politics of the domestication of mobility" and that "coerced sedentariness is transformed into unintended out-migration" (341). He then proposes that this out-migration can be viewed as "state failure" that indicates the "Lao government's inability to transform policy intention into outcomes." Relating to Molland's chapter is that of Khabmanivath Phouxay (chapter fourteen), which takes a detailed look at the undocumented Lao migration to Thailand. Here, the narrative of out-migration takes a very human face in the travails of specific individuals who have endured the alienating and oftentimes traumatic experiences in finding livelihood outside their country. Annabel Vallard's work (chapter fifteen), in the opinion of this reviewer, is the most interesting read in this section. She looks at how Lao textiles have penetrated the high-end market for silk products in the world market. As this process of penetration unfolds, she details changes in the social organization of how silk textiles are produced. From single weavers working with looms under their houses, the endeavor has evolved into a network of relations between weavers and traders; and most recently, this phenomenon of production has led to the emergence of dormitory-equipped workshops located in the capital and other main cities where young individual weavers from the countryside are able to experience Lao urbanity and oftentimes find a home away from home. The chapter is indeed a revelation in how much about social change can be learned through an interrogation of the production and trade of an erstwhile traditional cultural artifact.

Anthologies like this one will always be subject to the interests and expertise of their contributors. This fine one by Bouté and Pholsena has provided a most contemporary look into what has been happening

to this rather under-examined nation-state at the heart of continental Southeast Asia. This reviewer hopes that a repeat of this most informative endeavor will produce other anthologies in the future, which will hopefully include the following: more in-depth studies of the present Lao political elite, particularly the members of military; studies of movements that aim toward the protection of human rights and democratization; works that interrogate the effects of engagement within the Association of Southeast East Asian Nations and the increasing pool of external aid; and works that examine the emergent millennial Lao and how they affect the colors and contours of Laotian politics and society.—**Matthew Santamaria**, *Professor, Asian Center, University of the Philippines Diliman*

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Wataru Kusaka. 2017. *Moral Politics in the Philippines: Inequality, Democracy and the Urban Poor.* Singapore: National University of Singapore Press; Kyoto: Kyoto University Press. 355 pp.

In the aftermath of the election of Rodrigo R. Duterte to the presidency of the Philippines on 9 May 2016, a flurry of opinions has emerged regarding how the election of an openly brusque, antidemocratic, and politically incorrect leader serves as the final nail in the coffin of what is now retroactively called the "EDSA Republic." The liberal-democratic government structure inaugurated by the 1986 EDSA Revolution (and its immediate offspring, the 1987 Philippine Constitution) has been adjudged as having fallen short of its transformative promise.[1]

Among the most vocal proponents of this perspective would be scholar-activist-turned-politician Walden Bello. In writing about the political economy of the Philippines, Bello would constantly refer to the nation's governance being suspended in an "anti-development state" (Bello et al. 2009), hobbled as it were (especially under the

1. For example, Jose Luis Martin 'Chito' Gascon (a member of the 1986 Constitutional Commission, now the embattled Chairperson of the Commission on Human Rights), would look back sadly on the state of Philippine democracy: "The mistake (of those in EDSA 1) was thinking it was sufficient to remove a dictator . . . and everything would fall into place . . . We have seen that that does not happen. We removed the dictator, but we retained the political system." (Gascon, in Chua 2006).