

BOOK REVIEWS

Martin Stuart-Fox¹

Yves Goudineau and Michel Lorrillard, eds: *Recherches nouvelles sur le Laos/New Research on Laos*. Études thématiques 18. Vientiane, Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 2008. pp. 678.

History and politics conspired over half a century to make social scientific research in Laos all but impossible. From the brief Japanese occupation and the end of the Second World War in 1945 until the early 1990s, war, hot and cold, revolution and political sensitivity curtailed research in archaeology and prehistory, anthropology and ethnography, sociology and cultural studies. Economics, linguistics and history fared a little better.

Following the collapse of communism in the former Soviet Union and introduction of the 'new economic mechanism' that opened Laos up to the world, research again became possible. But it has never been easy. Rural areas have been difficult to access, and the danger of unexploded ordnance (UXO) left over from the war has been ever present. Bureaucratic delays and political intransigence have been even more constricting. And yet scholars, to their great credit, have persevered.

By my count, the volume under review is the sixth collection of research papers to appear over the past decade.¹ It is also the largest, at more than double the length of any previous publication, and the most ambitious in its coverage. The 27 articles range from archaeology and history to religion, linguistics and anthropology. They are divided into three sections covering the making of history, heritage issues, and social dynamics, to each of which there is an introduction by the editors in addition to their general introduction to the volume as a whole. Sixteen contributions are in English and eleven in French, including the three longest. The four introductions are also in French, so the division between languages is roughly half and half. Abstracts of all papers in both languages are provided.

The first five papers cover the areas of prehistory and archaeology, whose rich research opportunities are at last being exploited. For prehistorians, Laos is situated enticingly between the Hoabinhian sites of northwest Vietnam and the northern Khorat

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Plateau in northeast Thailand, both of which have contributed immensely to our knowledge of mainland Southeast Asian prehistory. Laos could well throw light on what Joyce C. White and Bounheuang Bouasisiengpaseuth call the “missing millennia” in regional prehistory, from 6,000 to 2,000 BCE. The two authors report on the Middle Mekong Archaeological project, which aims to survey the whole Middle Mekong region. Their own work focused on Luang Prabang province, specifically the valleys of the Ou, Seuang and Pa rivers where they located dozens of prospective sites during their 2005 survey.

It is one thing to identify likely sites, however, and quite another to mount expensive excavations. In a brief addendum, White and Bounheuang note that test excavations at two sites yielded Hoabinhian remains; but full-scale excavations are called for. The Middle Mekong project is backed by the American National Science Foundation and the National Geographic Society, so it is possible that funds for a major excavation will be forthcoming.

Thongsa Sayavongkhamdy and Viengkeo Souksavatdy report on a 2004 excavation of cave sites in an area now flooded by the Nam Theun II dam. This turned up a rare Neolithic burial site in which the flexed skeleton was almost intact. Radio carbon dating gave an age of 6190 ± 40 BP, or around 4,200 BCE, right at the beginning of the ‘missing millennia’. This excavation was funded by the Nam Theun II Power Company as a matter of urgency, but one wonders whether funds will be made available to excavate other sites that will be inundated when other dams are built.

Julie Van Den Burgh reports on another survey of archaeological sites on the Plain of Jars, which is part of a joint UNESCO-Lao government project designed to protect and manage the plain prior to application for listing as a World Heritage Archaeological Landscape. The plain was heavily bombed during the Second Indochina War, and all UXO have not yet been removed, but most of the area has been surveyed. The project began in 1998, and will culminate in World Heritage listing in 2010.

The two other archaeological papers report excavations undertaken in the 1990s, but provide their authors with the opportunity to reflect on the significance of their work. Anna Källén excavated Lao Pako, a low hill on the banks of the Nam Ngum. She found it to be an iron-age iron working site in use between 350 and 600 CE, which contained not only large numbers of ceramics, ornaments and utensils, but also infant burials. There was also evidence of pits dug into the hill in which offerings had been

placed. Källén believes these had to do with rituals that metaphorically associated metallurgy with childbirth, the metal being 'born' from the furnace like a child from the womb.

The last of the archaeological papers is by Marielle Santoni, who led the French mission to investigate ancient Khmer sites at and in the vicinity of Vat Phu. Like the Plain of Jars project, this was to provide the basis for World Heritage listing, which took place in 2001. Santoni's paper summarises the results of the earlier excavations, which have not been easily available to scholars. She discusses the means by which water from the sacred spring was channelled to the temple; the layout of the important nearby pre-Angkorean town of Shrestapura; and some minor sites downstream and along the royal way that ran between Vat Phu and Angkor in the eleventh century.

The next five chapters cover history and historiography. In the longest article in the collection, Michel Lorrillard reveals some of the fruits of his years of study of the history of Lan Xang. He begins his survey of the historical geography of Buddhism within the frontiers of modern Laos with the Mon period from the seventh to eleventh centuries CE. The earliest Mon principality on Lao territory centred on Thakhaek, which by the tenth century extended its influence to the plain of Viang Chan. But by then the Mon were already in retreat. The Theravada Buddhism of the Mon gave way to the Śaivism and Mahayana Buddhism of the Khmer, and there is no indication that the Mon of the Middle Mekong had any religious influence on the Lao.

Lorrillard argues strongly that Sayfong, downstream from Viang Chan, was never a Khmer garrison town, and that the famous stele marking the establishment of a hospital by Jayavarman VII was transported there from further south, probably from the Thai province of Sakon Nakhon. This seems very likely, for there are no archaeological remains at Sayfong. On the other hand the That Luang may have originally been a Khmer site (Pierre Gagneux certainly thought so), and the use of laterite blocks in the construction of some early stupas (for instance at Vat Si Meuang) does suggest Khmer influence on the Viang Chan plain. Even so, Lorrillard maintains, there is no evidence of Khmer political control north of Savannakhet.

Nor is there any evidence that the Theravada Buddhism eventually adopted by the Lao was introduced from the south. Rather, Lorrillard argues, the earliest indications of Buddhism in northern Laos point west to the Mon kingdom of Haripunjaya with its capital at Lamphun. With the establishment of the kingdom of Lan

Na in the thirteenth century, this became the source for the spread of Theravada Buddhism to Laos. Lorrillard thus discounts Lao chronicles like the *Nithan Khun Borom*, preferring the hard evidence of archaeology and epigraphy.

Lan Na certainly exerted the greatest cultural influence throughout northern Laos, but the diffusion of Buddhism seems to have been slow. Lorrillard points out that the first Lao king who was certainly Buddhist (since he took a Pali throne name) was Xainyachakkaphat Phaen Phaeo, who ruled a century after Fa Ngum had founded Lan Xang. And for the next century, until the capital was removed to Viang Chan, the cultural influence of Lan Na was overwhelming. In fact Lorrillard has argued elsewhere that the *That Luang* was probably designed by an architect brought from Chiang Mai by King Xetthathirat, who at the time ruled both kingdoms.

Only from the mid-sixteenth century, when Viang Chan became the capital of Lan Xang and Lan Na fell under the control of the Burmese, Lorrillard argues, did Viang Chan become the cultural centre of the Lao world. Its influence, marked by architectural style and large bronze statues of the Buddha, spread south and north, reaching its limits upstream from Huayxai and northeast as far as Hua Phan; and continuing well into the eighteenth century. These are major reinterpretations, which we must hope Lorrillard elaborates in book form in what will undoubtedly be the most scholarly history to date of the Kingdom of Lan Xang.

From Lan Xang we jump to the 1890s, that crucial time when France was establishing control over Lao territories east of the Mekong through the imposition of well defined frontiers. In a revealing study Andrew Walker shows how local French officials on the upper Mekong, who understood traditional overlapping jurisdictions much better than did their remote superiors, attempted to exploit them for commercial and political advantage. This was made easier because of the 25 km military exclusion zone on the Siamese side, a disadvantage Siamese authorities, who were quick learners, were desperately trying to overcome by reinforcing their administration in the zone and insisting on the significance of the Mekong as the frontier. This ironic reversal of roles – Siamese adopting the European conception of the state; French pursuing their interests by ignoring it - was only possible because local Siamese chiefs still understood their world in traditional terms. The conclusion Walker draws is that a frontier may be imposed through negotiations of power, but its meaning locally is the product of dialogue. But there was another assumption at play that Walker does not mention,

which is that many local French officials at the time saw the Mekong as a temporary frontier that they intended to push west. The Siamese well understood this, which is why they played the European game. In the end power trumped dialogue, even on the upper Mekong.

Volker Grabowsky continues his study of Meuang Sing, from the establishment of French rule in the form of an autonomous French-protected principality (along the lines of the princely states in British India) to the rebellion that broke out in 1914 following the decision to administer Meuang Sing directly as part of the province of Haut Mékong. Grabowsky shows that the rebellion was not inevitable, but resentment ran deep in the prickly *chao fa*, who blamed the French for surrendering his territories west of the Mekong to British Burma, leaving him with a truncated *meuang* – an example in microcosm of the fate of the Lao west bank territories on the Middle Mekong.

It was precisely because the frontiers of French Laos that were finally agreed upon in 1907 left 80% of ethnic Lao in northeast Thailand (then Siam) that it was so difficult to create any sense of Lao national identity. What was essential was to differentiate ‘Lao’ from ‘Siamese’, and this, as Søren Ivarsson shows, had to be on the dual basis of history and culture. The new history portrayed Laos as the direct heir of the *Lao* kingdom of Lan Xang, and condemned Siam for its destruction of Viang Chan following the gallant ‘freedom struggle’ of Chao Anou, its last king. In the cultural domain, difference rested on religion (in the form of a separate *Lao* Sangha) and the written form of Lao as a language distinct from Central Thai. The irony is that this construction of a national Lao cultural identity took place within the context of, and indeed with the support of, the colonial regime.

The significance of history is again evident in Bruce Lockhart’s model historiographical study of how Lao historians in the LPDR have constructed the historical relationship between Laos and Vietnam. Lao historians have traced these relations since before the founding of Lan Xang, when the two kingdoms were similar in power (with Lan Xang enjoying an edge over Dai Viet). The really politically sensitive event was the Vietnamese invasion of northern Laos in 1479, which the Vietnamese authors of a history of Laos published in 1982 left out entirely.² Lockhart shows how Lao historians, though they deal with the invasion in some detail, portray it as a conflict between the ‘feudal’ ruling classes of the two kingdoms, the implication being that no such antagonism existed, then or later, between the two peoples – a usual Marxist

distinction. Similar ambivalence marks later Lao-Vietnamese relations to the end of the nineteenth century when the French imposed a fixed frontier between Laos and Vietnam. Lockhart ends his fine analysis not with the ‘lips and teeth’ ‘everlasting friendship’ of the revolutionary period, but by providing a brief overview of the politics of the historiography of Lao-Vietnamese relations from the perspective of Hanoi.

The section on heritage issues is the smallest, and would be smaller still if the first and last chapters had been included under history and social dynamics respectively, which is where they really belong. Sophie Clément-Charpentier has delved into the colonial archives to reveal both the circumstances surrounding the decision to establish Viang Chan as the administrative capital of French Laos, and the early development of the town. She rightly stresses the political dimension of the highly symbolic decision not just to resuscitate the former capital of Lan Xang (destroyed by the Siamese, rebuilt by the French), but also to construct the governor’s residence on the actual site of the former royal palace (carrying a much more ambiguous message.) Clément-Charpentier delves into colonial motivation in greater detail than the recent history of Viang Chan by Askew, Logan and Long,³ with extensive quotes from documents. She also shows how the regulatory framework encouraged the division of the town into ethnic ‘quarters’ (French, Chinese, Vietnamese, with the Lao pushed further out). Yet the urban plan of the colonial capital remained Lao, marked out by monuments (the site of the palace, the royal vats, the That Luang) and the ancient walls along whose foundations ran the *route circulaire*. Clément-Charpentier includes nine early plans of the city, and I wish this study had been published before I wrote my own overview in *Naga Cities*.⁴

Good use is made of maps in Christian Taillard’s study of the ancient system of water management on the Viang Chan plain, which was so important not just for irrigation, but also for draining away flood waters from both the Mekong and Nam Ngum rivers. This was possible because floods in the two rivers occurred at different times – in the Mekong from melting snows in Tibet, and in the Nam Ngum from rainfall in Xiang Khuang. Taillard first studied the ancient drainage system in the 1970s and regrets that more attention has not been paid to it as the modern city has rapidly grown. Not only does the current city plan largely ignore such natural features, but building regulations are all too frequently overruled for developers with the right political connections.

The next two chapters deal with Buddhist manuscripts. Harald Hundius outlines the importance and success of the Preservation of Lao Manuscripts Program, in which he was centrally involved. In ten years, from 1992 to the end of 2002, the Program inventoried and preserved (*in situ*) some 86,000 mostly palm-leaf (some mulberry paper) manuscripts in 830 monasteries across all 17 provinces. Of these, the most important 10,000 manuscripts have been microfilmed (over three million palm-leaf pages) to provide an invaluable resource for scholars into the future.

Since to copy a Buddhist text is a meritorious act, many texts exist in multiple copies. These are nevertheless important for what they can tell us about different recensions and lines of transmission. Justin McDaniel takes one of these texts (on ordination) as an example of a didactic and pedagogical resource monks may draw upon to organize rituals and provide material for instructive sermons. He argues that the frequent repetition of key words and phrases throughout the text assisted readers, and particularly listeners, to memorize the unfamiliar, but religiously significant, Pali terms, which senior monks would also explain.

In the only chapter devoted to the Lao diaspora abroad, Catherine Choron-Baix focuses on dance as the key defining element of Lao culture preserved by expatriate communities. For these communities, providing they are large enough and resident monks can be found, their cultural core is a Vat Lao, where people can congregate on important occasions and maintain social contacts. But in presenting themselves as Lao to the broader community (in France, where Choron-Baix conducted her study; or in Australia, or Canada, or the United States, where there are also substantial expatriate Lao communities), graceful court dances best symbolize Lao culture and identity.

But the preservation of the court dance tradition outside Laos presents problems. Dance is not something that can be learned from books, of which there are none. It is passed from teacher to student through years of instruction, and teachers who studied at the famed Natasinh School of Dance are few and aging. Children have little time to learn, and those who do must attempt to interiorize, as Choron-Baix explains in a beautifully written passage, a set of values at variance with those of the societies in which they now live.

Choron-Baix believes that after 30 years of economic struggle to establish themselves in new countries, older expatriate Lao are returning to their cultural roots. So are some of the next generation, partly I think because they see their own children

becoming increasingly French or Australian or American, as intermarriage becomes more frequent and even language is lost. But as dance becomes emblematic of Lao identity, it becomes transformed. Court dance was accompanied by a traditional orchestra and singers, resources unavailable to most expatriate communities. Ironically traditional dance is being revived in the LPDR, not as an expression of elite court culture, but as entertainment in response to tourist demand. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as the experience of Bali has shown, for it does preserve elements of traditional culture. But it will be a bitter pill for those forced to flee abroad to recognize that authentic Lao culture must still be sought in Laos, and not in Paris, or Los Angeles, or Sydney.

Christian Culas and Francis Englemann's fine socioeconomic study of the 'ethnic market' in Luang Phrabang has little to do with heritage, except for the assistance given by the Maison de Patrimoine (Heritage House) in ensuring that the market became one of the city's principal tourist attractions. The authors set the market in its historical geographical and economic context (Luang Phrabang as a trading centre for networks that link lowland Lao with Khamu and Hmong), examine its ethnic composition and its economic links to the tourist industry, and compare it favourably with the similar 'hilltribe' market at Sapa in northern Vietnam.

Culas and Englmann note that what they call the 'new Hmong market' (now better known as the night market) is 80% Hmong, almost all of whom are women who sell cotton embroidery and appliqué work. Many Hmong have moved to Luang Phrabang in response to government pressure to end opium production and curtail slash-and-burn agriculture – and to take advantage of educational opportunities for their children. Khamu too have moved into nearby villages, but comprise only around five percent of traders; while the Iu Mien are not represented at all. One reason for Hmong dominance, the authors suggest, is that they are sensitive to what tourists want: none of the Hmong clothing and bedspreads sold in the market are worn or used by the Hmong themselves.

Two articles on linguistics begin the section on social dynamics. Nick Enfield provides a typically thorough overview of the history and current state of research into Lao linguistics, which as he points out is overwhelmingly the linguistics of Lao. What is needed is for the same level of interest to be shown in the hundred or so other languages spoken in Laos, several of which are under threat of extinction. This is not

true of Lao, despite fevered warnings that it is about to be absorbed into Thai. A similar point is made by Boike Rehbein, who argues that what is rather happening is not ‘Thai-ization’, but rather a process of modernization, due on the one hand to political support for a public, national language, and on the other to the forces of globalization, which demand specialized vocabularies for use by professional groups. Rehbein draws on Bourdieu and Wittgenstein to argue that language can only be properly understood by taking into account its sociocultural context; and that context for Lao is constituted by modernization.

Modernization is also a theme in Patrice Ladwig’s study of the current state of the Lao Buddhist Sangha. Ladwig places the changing role of the Sangha in historical context, from the activism of the 1960s through to the revolutionary Buddhism of the early years of the Lao PDR to its current role as the preserver of key elements of Lao culture (as nationalism replaces Marxism as the dominant ideology.) Ladwig examines the social role of Buddhism through the prism of three projects involving the Sangha: care of HIV/Aids sufferers, drug prevention, and environmental protection. All three employ traditional Buddhist morality and forms of intervention, though monks are constrained politically, and are careful not to provoke the ire of the LPRP.

Richard Pottier summarises one small portion of his work on traditional therapies in Laos, the ritual *baci sukhuān* held to ensure the health of a new-born child. His analysis reveals the syncretic nature of the ritual, which combines Buddhist, ‘Indo-Khmer’, and indigenous Tai-Lao elements – the latter evident not just in the conception of the 32 *khuān*, but also in the shamanic role of the *mo mon* conducting the *baci* in calling upon the aid of ‘auxiliary’ spirits. The inclusion of Pali phrases in the accompanying chants, which in Buddhist ritual makes merit, in this therapeutic *baci* provides power to drive out any ‘foreign bodies’ (*kho*) that might have taken up residence in the child.

Grant Evans takes a critical look at the state of Lao peasant studies, focusing on the concept of the peasantry in the light of its apparent disappearance as a sociological category throughout much of Asia. Evans argues that in Laos, however, peasants have not yet disappeared, and that the decline in peasant studies has had an adverse effect – not just in terms of research focus, but on how the Lao peasant economy is understood (particularly by international consultants investigating how to reduce poverty, about whom Evans is scathing.) What is required, Evans argues, is renewed study by economic

anthropologists to investigate how contact with the wider world is impacting on peasant life, in order to understand the transition that is occurring.

Five of the last six contributions are on the anthropology of ethnic minorities in both the north and south of Laos. The exception is a study of opposition to French colonialism in southern Laos from 1945 to 1949 by Vatthana Pholsena, which, like Sophie Clément-Charpentier's chapter, really belongs in the history section – especially in view of its historiographical component. Pholsena pursues a dual approach to the history of this period, juxtaposing an account by an elderly Vietnamese sent to Laos as a young communist cadre to win over the Katu in the mountains of southeast Laos, on the one hand, against a recent publication in Lao glorifying the role of General Khamtay Siphandone as leader of the revolution in southern Laos, on the other. While the Vietnamese account reveals careful planning and infinite patience in winning the confidence of the Katu, the Lao history minimises Vietnamese involvement (and ignores the Lao Issara). Pholsena does not adjudicate between the two versions: the point she wants to make is that what the Vietnamese were doing is part of the history of this time and place, but that we must expect the Lao to construct their own account. For the historian, however, there is a third source, the archives of the French military and intelligence organization that Geoffrey Gunn made good use of in his *Political Struggles in Laos (1930-1954)*.

Of the five anthropological chapters, one has a relatively narrow focus: Guido Sprenger asks whether the Lamet (Rmeet) have totemic clans. Izikowitz in his classic study of the Lamet (1951) reported that they were divided into exogamous clans, defined by descent from a single ancestor. Grant Evans in two recent papers took issue with this interpretation, maintaining that Lamet do not have clans, but rather patronymics (derived, Sprenger says, from origin myths involving particular animals). Sprenger concludes that whether or not the Lamet have clans depends on one's definitions, but on the whole he favours Izikowitz over Evans.

Ian Baird is interested in the Brao concept of spatial organization, and how this might influence the way we understand the vexed question of borders in mainland Southeast Asia. His foil is Thongchai Winichakul, who in his influential *Siam Mapped*, argues that the concept of a defined border as introduced by Europeans never previously informed Siamese thinking about the spatial exercise of power. Yet the Brao, with no social organization above the village level, nevertheless recognise precisely

defined borders between adjacent communities. This is a good point to make. The extent of kingdoms was fluid because frontier *meuang* could shift allegiance; but at the local level people always had a clear idea of the borders of their own social space.

The three remaining articles all have to do with the relationship between upland minorities and the politically dominant lowland Lao. Vanina Bouté reveals how Buddhism and spirit worship continue to coexist in significant religious rituals of the Phounoy of Phong Saly. This chapter should be read in conjunction with Pichard Pottier's study of the *baci sukhuang*, for this is the principal ritual Bouté examines. Of note is that the Phounoy believe people have not 32 *khuan*, but nine for men and ten for women representing different parts of the body (women have an extra *khuan* for their breasts). These are 'called back' in the Phounoy therapeutic *baci* to concentrate strength, as in the Lao ritual. But the ritual comprises two parts: one conducted by monks in the temple; the other by an *atjan* (*acharn*), who expels and bad spirits at the edge of the forest. While the monks gain their power from their knowledge of Buddhist texts, the *atjan* depends on his experience and must have a reputation for being able to command the spirits.

Oliver Évrard examines the process of 'tai-ization' among the Khmu in northern Laos, based on fieldwork he conducted in the Nam Tha valley. There is no doubt that Khmu have been deeply influenced by their contact with politically dominant Tai groups – from language (some Khmu dialects have adopted tones) to wet-rice production to religion (some Khmu in close contact with Tai groups have become Buddhists). That said, Évrard maintains that we should not see what is happening as unproblematic cultural assimilation, but rather as a more dynamic and interactive process that creates a new sense of what it is to be Khmu in 'Tai social space'. Though the state seeks to integrate minorities into an inclusive 'national culture', Khmu have responded in innovative ways that preserve their sense of identity, if with new social and cultural markers.

The last article in the book is an illuminating study by Yves Goudineau on how the ethnology of southern Laos has been constructed over time in a simplistic binary way, contrasting lowland Lao against upland ethnic minorities, differentiated only by the degree to which they have become 'laoicized'. Goudineau begins by examining how 'the south' has been conceived in Lao discourse (as remote and uncultured), and how Lao power was articulated (as *meuang* that consisted, on the Bolovens Plateau and in

the mountains, of little more than a thin Lao net cast across a shifting patchwork of minority villages). To this French colonialism added the tropes of racial purity (in relation to ethnic intermarriage), submission (or refusal, marked by flight from French control and rebellion), and civilisation (determined by the extent to which ethnic groups had entered into a dependent economic and social relationship with the Lao.) The result was construction of an ethnic hierarchy, which relegated the Katu on the upper Sekong River to the status of dangerous and unruly savages. Fantasy took the place of knowledge, symbolised by the very name – for Katu means something like ‘high up there’, and was not used by the people to refer to themselves.

Goudineau ends with the present. The villages of the Katu (who now accept their designation, *faute de mieux*) were obliterated by US bombing during the Vietnam War. Reconstruction and cultural revival were encouraged by the declaration of Sekong as a separate ‘Lao Theung province’ in 1984. Villages took the traditional form of circles of houses around a central communal building, whose construction was marked by an equally traditional ritual buffalo sacrifice – all of which was at variance with government policy aimed at curbing swidden agriculture and primitive practices. So the state has stepped in; villages have been relocated, no longer built in circular form; and the Katu have been deprived of their autonomy, forced into a context that satisfies a Lao conception of what they should be.

This brief summary does not do justice to the richness of Goudineau’s account, which deftly weaves together anthropology and history, politics and cultural analysis. His insights cry out for book-length treatment, which we can only hope will eventually appear. That said, let me make one comment as a non-anthropologist. Sometimes in reading anthropology one has a sense, especially in those studies that are historically informed (as the best anthropology should be), of regretted loss, whether in the past or projected into the future. The anthropology of social groups removed from the wider world is particularly prone to be infused with a form of nostalgia that has buried within it a conception of culture as something uncontaminated by external influences, pure and unvarying in its transmission over time. But all cultures evolve and adapt, and always have. The tragedy in Laos today is that the pace of change is being forced, driven by a combination of greed (for resources) and ideology (of modernization). Évrard’s Khamu, though many have been displaced, retain some freedom to adopt what they will of Lao culture: but Goudineau’s Katu are at the mercy of power they cannot resist, for in the

Laos of today there are no mountains remote enough to retreat to. The power structure of the authoritarian state deprives the minorities of freedom of choice – along with most other freedoms.

This brings me to my final observation. This is a wide-ranging collection, but there remain some notable gaps in its coverage, even by comparison with its predecessor of fifty years ago – René de Berval's *Kingdom Of Laos* (English translation 1959). The arts are under-represented, and there is nothing on education (an egregious failure of the current regime), or the economy (except for the Hmong market), or foreign affairs, all of which were given some mention in *Kingdom Of Laos*. Conspicuously absent from both books, however, is any discussion of politics or administration. These are delicate matters, yet most of the topics covered in this collection are inseparable from politics, which in an authoritarian single-party state like Laos permeate every aspect of life. In fact politics, corruption and the abuse of power is a hidden sub-text in many of the articles in this collection.

One might hope that the next collection of articles on Laos would include research on the politics of the LPRP, center-province relations (including decentralization), administration, justice, human rights, the economics of peasants, and (displaced) minorities, and industries (forestry, plantation agriculture, casinos), land policy, education, health, the impact of transportation corridors, tourism, and the corruption that now pervades the Party and society. Of course this is a hope unlikely to be fulfilled: research into most of these topics would be impossible, and there are no Lao NGOs or organizations independent of the Party with which to work. Yet Foucault's injunction remains a stark challenge: to speak truth to power.

So to conclude, *New Research on Laos* makes a substantial contribution to Lao studies. If some articles stand out (Lorrillard, Lockhardt, Goudineau, to name but three), the overall standard is remarkably high. Several excellent younger scholars showpiece their research, and we can expect to hear more from them. The quality of production is first rate, as one would expect of the EFEO. Putting such a volume together and editing it is a burdensome task, and the editors are to be congratulated.

¹ The five others, in order of publication, are: Jacqueline Butler-Diaz, ed., *New Laos, New Challenges*. Tempe: Arizona State University Program for Southeast Asian Studies, 1998; Grant Evans, ed., *Laos: Culture and Society*. Chiang Mai, Silkorm Books, 1999; Mayoury Ngaosrivathana and Kennon Breazeale, eds., *Breaking New Ground in Lao History: Essays on the seventh to twentieth centuries*. Chiang Mai: Silkorm Books, 2002; Christopher Goscha and Søren Ivarsson, eds., *Contending Visions of the Lao Past: Lao historiography at the*

crossroads. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2003; and the special issue of *Southeast Asian Research* devoted to the politics of history and national identity in contemporary Laos, volume 14, number 3, November 2006.

² No author, *Laos: An outline of ancient and contemporary history*. Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1982.

³ Mark Askew, William S. Logan and Colin Long, *Vientiane: Transformations of a Lao landscape*. London and New York: Routledge, 2007.

⁴ Martin Stuart-Fox, *Naga Cities of the Mekong*. Singapore: Media Masters, 2006.