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Spirits of the Place: Buddhism and Lao Religious Culture by JOHN CLIFFORD HOLT.
Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009. pp. 329+xiii.

Even though John Holt has been publishing major contributions in Theravada Buddhist Studies for over twenty years, he still manages to surprise the field. In his latest endeavor, Holt makes us reconsider not only what we think about the place of Buddhism in Laos, but the place of Buddhism throughout Southeast Asia. After this book, no longer will scholars be able to separate the study of spirits, local deities, and village and court ritual from the study of translocal “Theravada Buddhism.” Besides offering a solid overview of the history of Buddhism in Laos, he makes us think hard about the legacy of Paul Mus and the place of politics, colonialism, and Marxism in the study of Southeast Asian religions.

I did not come to this opinion easily. Originally, I must admit I was skeptical about this book. I was dead wrong. Like Holt’s several previous books, this book is clearly written, well-structured, accessible to a wide audience of undergraduates, educated travelers, and scholars new to the field. While it is not meant for experts, it actually does provide experts in the field with much theoretical meat to chew on. It is quite impressive how a non-expert in Lao Studies has been able to provide such a solid overview of Lao Buddhism. I suppose it is his fresh eyes, years of experience in Theravada Buddhist Studies in Sri Lanka and South Asia more broadly, and scholarly diligence and integrity, that has turned what I thought would be an “outsider’s” introduction into a provocative and comprehensive study. He discusses his lack of background in Lao Studies well and the limitations of the study in the introduction. However, there are more advantages in this book than limitations.

First come the advantages: This is the first comprehensive book on Lao Buddhism available in English. And the reader does not simply learn about Lao Buddhism specifically, but about ways of approaching religion and culture and Southeast Asia more generally. This would be a good textbook for Religions in Southeast Asia (since it reflects on major assumptions and approaches to the field of Southeast Asian religions in general) and

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introductions to Asian Religions and Buddhism. In fact, the author's critical reflections on Mus, Tambiah, Weber, and other major theoretical voices in the study of Religion and Culture, makes this book essential for students of religion. Holt shows us that we have much to learn from the ways the Lao people have interpreted and expressed Buddhism. His books makes us question some fundamental assumptions in the field regarding "canon," "colonialism," "animism," "ecclesia," "State religion," "Marxism and religion," "monsoon culture," and the very idea of "syncreticism." His thesis regarding the need to "read" Lao Buddhism "through" the ethics and practices of land-based spirit religions is provocative and timely for a field still struggling to make sense of the role of "local cults" in the intellectual and social history of Buddhism, both diachronically and synchronically. Moreover, his nuanced understanding of the relation of political history and religion is refreshing. Holt does not see Lao religion and culture as merely derivative of Indic or Thai civilizations. He writes "what I shall try to illustrate is that indigenous understandings of power incipient in the indigenous cults of 'cadastral' deities, or 'gods of the land' and ancestor veneration, provided the Lao with a conceptuality to field and then inflect Hindu and Buddhist principles of polity quite uniquely."(4) For this and many other reasons, the introduction (followed by a short introduction to "Laos") should be required reading for students of Buddhist Studies and Southeast Asian religions.

For the field of Lao Studies, this book also has advantages. Not only is it the best literature review of scholarship on Lao religion to date, but it also contributes new perspectives to both historical and contemporary problems in the field. For example, in the first chapter, dedicated to pre-20th century history, Holt provides a nuanced reading of Mus and emphasizes that "context" in historical studies of Buddhism is not merely the study of political or economic context (the influences of war, famine, taxes, royal decree, foreign guests, etc.). Inspired by Mus, Holt argues that context can also be seen as an "energy" or an "ethos" of a specific place that "is later personalized through the social and psychological experience of *events*; that is, through its existential realization, it is given a conscious social recognition through embodiment."(24; italics in the original) While this statement may seem vague to historians, Holt grounds Mus by showing how Lao understandings of local spirits and the "power of the place is not, therefore, transcendentally endowed, but rather is brought to fruition by its subjective social apprehension by [a specific] group."(25) In

this way, Holt sees Lao religion not as a “top down” phenomenon in which the people merely follow royally sanctioned rituals and elite ecclesia, but must be seen from the “ground up.” I particularly like the way Holt starts off this chapter by talking about *phi* (ghosts/spirits) before Theravada Buddhism. Usually, *phi* are put at the end of chapters or books like an afterthought, even though they are the most ubiquitous part of Lao religious life. Here is where I find this study particularly refreshing – Holt is writing a history of Buddhism in Laos, but is starting with religious activities (rituals and beliefs) that existed long before Buddhism existed there. Moreover, these local practices were not displaced or marginalized, he emphasizes, but remain the vehicle in which Buddhism is practiced and understood locally. He does the same thing when writing about religion and politics in Lao history. He argues that we need to look at the “ban” and the “muang” before the Indic conception of the “mandala.”

For the sake of space, let me jump ahead in Holt’s book. After leading the reader through an engaging, albeit brief, history of the development of Lao Buddhism in life under the royal, colonial, and Marxist periods, he provides the most compelling chapter -- “Commodities of the Place: Ritual Expressions and the Marketing of Religious Culture.” Holt uses his “fresh eyes” to try to understand the ways in which Lao Buddhism is flourishing in the modern period under a strict one party Marxist government that was initially (in the late 1970s and early 1980s) quite hostile to the practice of religion in general. Holt doesn’t write off modern Lao Buddhist “revival” as simply a product of marketing to tourists or internet or Thai influence (although more about Thai and even Christian missionary influence especially on modern Lao Buddhist education might have been helpful). Although he does write about the influence of tourist marketing and UNESCO in the official “branding” of Lao Buddhism and Lao culture in general, he shows through his interviews with novices in Luang Phrabang that their lay lives before becoming ordained novices certainly influenced the ways in which they saw their “career.” Moreover, despite some novices who “perform” for tourist cameras and provide stock answers to tourist questions, many novices are extremely dedicated to their practice, but that most of the practice takes place in temples in the early dawn hours long before many tourist wake up and shake off hangovers or late night card games. I thought that this chapter relied a little too heavily on novices from Luang Phrabang and would have been helped by comparative studies in

other, especially far Southern and far Northern areas (for example, I have found the attitudes and daily lives of monks and novices in parts of Attapeu, Savannakhet, and Phongsaly very different from those of novices in Luang Phrabang and central Vientiane). Holt centered his ethnographical work on Luang Phrabang because he wanted to see where the “power of the place” was being most tested by the forces of globalization. In this way, he turned what may have been an overly broad study of modern Lao Buddhism in general into a very useful study of a very particular place and time.

Holt’s study is therefore useful for both students of the history of religions (in its reflections on Mus, Weber, Durkheim, Tambiah, and others) and modern social scientists working in the region. There are a few limitations though. The one problem that many readers may have with this book is that it includes too many lengthy quotations from secondary sources. It relies too heavily on Hayashi Yukio and S.J. Tambiah. While these are excellent sources, there are very good smaller studies (in English and French as well as Lao and Thai) which remain unexamined. For a broad introductory overview (which is how this book is envisioned) it is fine, but the author could be accused for consulting far too few sources, especially Lao language sources, for this book. However, he states from the outset that one of his aims is to ground his study in the historiography of Laos. This book is not simply a literature review though. He is not simply summarizing what other scholars say. Holt identifies major gaps in the field and draws these gaps to the attention of scholars in Lao, Buddhist, and Southeast Asian Studies attention. Second, I would like to have seen more interviews with women and laity. While *mae xin*, *mae khao*, or *mae xi* (white-robed “nuns”) are not as prevalent in Laos as in Thailand or Cambodia, it would have been interesting to hear their opinions on the changes in modern Lao Buddhism. This is a problem Holt acknowledges, and in the text (especially his many descriptions of rituals) and in his notes (esp. #35, pg. 313) he remarks on the importance of women in Lao Buddhist life. While lay practitioners were consulted and many rituals observed, another chapter of ethnographic evidence from the non-ordained world of Lao Buddhism would have made the study fuller. He alludes to a number of conversations, especially about *phi*, with members of the laity (especially in chapter five), but I would have liked to have read more detailed interview transcripts. I would have also liked to learn as much about material culture in Lao Buddhism (images, amulets, ritual implements, texts, etc.) as he

offers on ritual observations (which are excellent, including the appendices on the Ramayana in Laos and the cult of Khwan). However, this is a long book and Holt, like most modern scholars, was under pressure from publishers to keep it under 350 pages. I had the advantage and pleasure of reading an earlier draft of this study and unfortunately much was left on the editing room floor.

There is much more to say about this book, especially Holt's argument about the reason *phi* belief and veneration have persisted in Lao society despite 150 years of colonial, American, Thai, Marxist, and tourist influence, as well as his reflections on "syncretism". Put simply, this is the first major study of Lao Buddhism in almost 40 years and a great addition not only to the fields of Lao Studies, but Religious and Southeast Asian Area Studies.