

*Portraits of 1957 Laos: Historic Photographs by Joel Martin Halpern.* Luang Prabang, Lao PDR: Big Brother Mouse, 2010.

Reviewed by

Jonathan H. X. Lee, San Francisco State University

*Portraits of 1957 Laos* is a memoir-like photographic travel document of an American anthropologist, Joel Martin Halpern who spent time in Laos in 1957, and again, in 1959. The text is in English and Lao. *Portraits of 1957 Laos* captures images of Laos from the particular interest of a cultural anthropologist: daily life in Laos, ceremonies and processions, cultural traditions, rituals and religious life, work, material culture, the royal family, life along the Mekong River, and various ethnic groups (primarily Lao, Khmu, and Hmong villages). In total, this volume contains 128 full color photographs. Of special interest to students and scholars interested in religions of Laos, Halpern captures the 2500<sup>th</sup> Buddhist anniversary in 1957, along with a Cow Spirit ritual. These photographs offer educators meaningful visual data to use in the classroom.

*Portraits of 1957 Laos* offers interesting factoids of life and society in Laos in 1957. For example, one image documents the celebration of Chinese New Year among the large Chinese merchant community in Vientiane. Chinese-Lao or Chinese-Laotian in Laos and in the diaspora is understudied, as such, students interested in this topic, will find this reference a useful start. It is well known that Buddhism is an important religious institution in Laos, as well as embedded in Lao society. Halpern provides some critical reflection on the gender dynamics of Buddhism in Lao society with the image of a Lao woman who takes her infant son to the Buddhist temple, noting the importance of Lao women in the transmission of Buddhism in Lao society. Halpern writes, "Although only men can serve as monks, Lao women are the most active in Buddhism on a day-to-day basis" (14). For readers who are interested in material culture, Halpern offers many pedagogically useful photographs with equally useful captions on the differences among the ethnic clothing of the White Hmong, Akha, and Khmu.

The photographs and description of the Cow Spirit ritual captured the particular interest of this reviewer who is interested in Asian American folkways and folklife. The Cow Spirit ritual continues to be practiced among Hmong American communities, albeit adapted to negotiate local restrictions on livestock and animal sacrifices in urban communities, such as Chicago. Hmong Americans must find culturally sensitive ranchers to sell them a calf to sacrifice on their farms. Halpern offers useful data on this ritual for anyone interested in ritual change and transmission among the Hmong diasporic communities.

For current scholars of Laos, this volume will offer many interesting and useful photographic images and data. Although it documents Laos, a long time ago, it offers meaningful evidence of life, culture, society, and history. Readers who have experienced Laos in the last two decades, and recognize the rapid and profound transformation of Lao societies will find this volume interesting as the images of Laos they captured are compared to Halpern's photographs.

As a pictorial memoir-like travel document, *Portraits of 1957 Laos* is recommended for teachers who teach children in the k-6 levels because the writing is clear, concise, and simple. College students and teachers may find it useful for images of ethnic Laotian clothes, material culture, and the ways that Buddhism is practiced and expressed by both men and women, lay and monastic believers. It is also recommended for anyone interested in the study of Laos. Lastly, this book is recommended to Laotian Americans who seek a basic, useful, easily digestible resource on diverse cultural aspects of life in Laos in 1957 and 1959.