

BOOK REVIEWS

Singh, Sarinda. *Natural Potency and Political Power: Forests and State Authority in Contemporary Laos*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012. pp. 192 + x

Reviewed by

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Natural Potency and Political Power is an interesting book, but one that has not been easy for me to review. On the one hand, there is no doubt that Singh has provided an insightful account of the ways that many ethnic Lao people discuss and understand contemporary environmental issues, especially those related to wildlife consumption, forest management and conservation. But, even though I would certainly recommend it, I also felt somewhat uneasy and even a bit dissatisfied with parts of the book.

Relying on what the author refers to as “patchwork ethnography” (following Tsing 2005), Singh, an anthropologist from Australia, sets out, primarily through observations in the capital city of Laos, the Nakai District center, and a rural village on the Nakai Plateau, to “show how Lao people make indirect political statements in their commentary on social and environmental changes taking place throughout the country” (pg. 2). Although she fully acknowledges that, “[p]olitical debate is stifled and muted in post-socialist Laos” (pg. 2), she correctly points out that it is far from completely absent. With this in mind, she considers the politics surrounding forests in Laos, as “[f]orests frequently feature in politicized discourses because of their symbolic potency in Lao worldviews, as well as their material importance for national development and for the livelihoods of the largely rural populace” (pg. 2). She convincingly argues that, “In Lao worldviews, forests can speak of identity, aspirations, and authority, which in turn speak of governance and the legitimacy of the Lao state.” To make her point, Singh links environmental narratives with social understandings and commentary about the legitimacy of the state in ways that few authors have dared do in relation to Laos. She deserves a great deal of credit for presenting rich field data and generally convincing evidence to support her arguments.

After laying out her overall research project and objectives in chapter 1, Singh sets out to justify her theoretical framework in chapter 2. As she puts it, “Of central importance for this book is the dialectical contrast between civilization ‘settlements’ (*muang*) and the wild ‘forest’ (*pa*),” a point I will return to later in this review. In particular, chapter 2 deals with Lao negative views of “conservation”. She then continues, in chapter 3, to consider contemporary Lao beliefs associated with “wildlife and wildlife consumption.” In chapter 4 she specifically turns to Lao narratives and beliefs associated with the largest and arguably the most prestigious animal in Laos: the elephant, an apt topic considering the controversies surrounding wild elephants on the

Nakai Plateau, particularly in relation to the controversial Nam Theun 2 Hydropower Project, which despite being widely criticized by international non-government organizations (NGOs) located outside of Laos (NGOs, either local or international, inside of the country are not able to openly criticize the project) has oddly emerged as Laos' flagship large dam project, having received crucial support and financial guarantees from the World Bank, and more marginally and belatedly, the Asian Development Bank (ADB). In chapter 5, Singh focuses on debates in Laos surrounding forest resources, outlining the nature of forest decline in the country, the importance of forest resources to the Lao economy, and the Lao state's responsibility for the ongoing trend in forest decline. She correctly points out that recent experiences in Laos in relation to "community forestry" have demonstrated the desire of the Lao state to maintain firm control over the country's forest resources, and "the state's limited commitment to prioritizing the needs of the rural poor in the process of forest-derived development" (pg. 102). In particular, she argues that, "in contemporary Laos, clearing the forest is a sign of development, but forest decline without the receipt of prosperity is a sign of unworthy authority" (pg. 103). Chapter 6 builds directly on the arguments developed in chapter 5. The author shows how the Lao state tends to conceal forest decline, and shift blame for it onto others, particularly by attempting to make state authority over forests less discernible. I would argue that Singh is at her best in this chapter. She outlines how this process of making authority in relation to forests less visible is evident in relation to a well-known state-owned enterprise, *Bolisat Phattana Khet Phou Doi* (Mountain Development Company) (BPKP). Second, the author persuasively argues that, "forest decline is admitted but attributed to rural villagers through a focus on swidden cultivation and, to a lesser extent, deficiencies in reforestation" (pg. 132) (and village maintenance of planted trees in particular). Finally, Singh shows how conservation initiatives are frequently misrepresented and subverted to direct attention away from state actions, especially greed and incompetency when it comes to forest management. The perception of conservation being opposed to development, which is initially presented in chapter 2, is, according to the author, used to "reframe emergent competition between the state and villagers over forest resources as competition between Laos and foreign conservationists" (pg. 132). She points out that, "All three examples indicate aspects of strategic and opportunistic misdirection, but there are also many elements that point to the vulnerability of the Lao state and fundamental weaknesses in its claim to authority" (pg. 132). Chapter 7 provides some well formulated and presented concluding remarks. Singh states that, "This book has used the concepts of potential and worldviews to link ideas about state authority with ideas about social order. As an alternative to power, potential usefully recognizes that the exercise of authority is a relational and contingent social process...Everyday encounters are important in the localized construction of the state, but so too are the abstractions that people use to interpret and represent such encounters" (pg. 155). The first part of the final paragraph of the book is worth presenting at length:

[T]his book reveals how people in contemporary Laos nominally accept the state's authority, even though they may also continue to question its legitimacy. Significantly, the potential of the state is founded partly on a sense of mutual interest rather than the exclusive application of fear and coercion. Legitimacy is confirmed with the delivery of personal property,

while judgments of illegitimacy emerge when personal prosperity is deemed to be a promise that will never eventuate. A focus on promised to deliver prosperity moves analysis of the state beyond binaries of progress or failure and emphasizes the more dynamic, uncertain, and personalized perceptions of the state's potential. Furthermore, this analysis highlights how the rural periphery contributes to indirect social and political commentary in a context where open public debate is very limited.

In thinking about this book, my conclusion is that it is a must-read for anyone interested in wildlife, forestry and conservation issues in Laos. Without, however, wanting to give the impression that I am overly critical of it, it is worth pointing out some of its weaknesses and limitations. First, while it can be argued, as the author claims, that “a standardized system for Romanization of the Lao language is yet to be developed” (pg. viii), the reality is that there has long been a system for romanizing the Lao language, one that has been in use in Laos since the French colonial period. Even today, one only has to examine the romanized spellings of most Lao names to recognize that such a system does exist. It would have been appropriate for the author to have attempted to apply it, in order to make the large number of Lao language words and sentences included in the book more accessible to Lao people. In addition, a number of Lao words are clearly spelt incorrectly by the author, possibly demonstrating language limitations.

While the above issue is more of a quibble than a substantial criticism, I am more concerned by the way Singh described how the Lao government became much less positive about “conservation” projects beginning at around the end of the 1990s. While her account of what happened partially rings true, it tends to present a monolithic view of both “international aid” and the organizations that implemented “conservation” projects, and thus does not adequately represent the diversity of views regarding “conservation” and “development” issues within the international aid community in Laos at the time, or the wide range of approaches that non-government organizations (NGOs) adopted in Laos during the 1990s. I was an active member of the NGO community during this period, both as a practitioner and funder of NGOs, and my particular project – The Lao Community Fisheries and Dolphin Conservation Project (*khong kan pamong xoum xon lae bok pak hakxa pa kha*), which operated from 1993 to 1999 in Khong District, Champasak Province, and came under the Department of Forestry – took a very different approach to conservation and development than what Singh described generally for Laos. From the very beginning, we recognized that it was crucial that conservation be seen in a positive light, and that it not become labeled as “anti-development”, if our project was to be successful at winning over the hearts and minds of local people. Therefore, we did not recommend that any restrictions be put on villagers' activities per se. Instead, we promoted a participatory process that allowed local people, with state support, to identify their own natural resource management problems, and then implement their own specific and (crucially) changeable management plans to address them. We started by working in just a few villages, and indicative that villagers were far from opposed to “conservation” work, we soon started receiving unsolicited requests from villages outside of our project area for us to help facilitate similar programs in their communities. We decided that we would only work

in a village if we received a written request from its leadership to do so. By August 1998, we had received requests to work in 63 villages, and villagers had demonstrated their commitment to conservation, often by protecting their most important deep-water fishing grounds in order to conserve large brood stock in the dry season, and ultimately increase fish stocks for people to catch in the future. While the State emphasized protecting fish in the ‘breeding season’, mainly the rainy season, locals felt that the low-water dry season was the most crucial season to protect fish in. This story certainly does not coincide with the single narrative about conservation projects in Laos that Singh presents. Nor does Singh’s account adequately represent the varied views and practices of the work of many other NGOs working on different kinds of natural resource management and conservation projects in the country at the time. Certainly she could have written in a more nuanced and expansive way, and thus her description of this period should not be taken as the “last word”.

One of Singh’s key assertions is that “conservation projects” in Laos are generally seen as being “foreign” and imposed. While this is partially true, I believe, for a few reasons, that Singh overstates her argument.

First, Singh’s field sites were in Vientiane and Nakai. Therefore, her data were limited to the view in the capital city (an urban view) and an area that had become heavily politicized in relation to “conservation” due to the controversy surrounding the Nam Theun 2 dam, and the associated protected area that was developed as a direct result of that project. The circumstances in these two locations are far from typical for Laos, and certainly differ from places like Khong District, Champasak Province, where the “conservation” of fish and wetlands was added by the local government without NGO support as part of the district’s “development plan” in 1999.

Second, Singh’s results seem to have been greatly impacted by the way she used and understood the Lao language, a problem that should serve as an important lesson for researchers in the future. Singh uses the Lao word “*anurak*” to represent the concept of conservation, and it would appear that this is the word she used to discuss the idea of conservation with local people throughout her study. For us, we were quickly informed, even before our project began in January 1993, that “*anurak* is a Thai word, not a Lao word.” Thus we never used it, instead applying the term “*bok pak hakxa*” (protection, with more of a stewardship slant) to the name of our project (see above). This presented conservation in a different context, and in a Lao way. Since then “*anurak*” has become increasingly prevalent in the Lao language, largely because of its introduction through foreign conservation projects. No wonder many Lao people think of conservation projects as being primarily foreign—the only time most rural people have ever heard the term “*anurak*” (outside of possibly Thai television shows) is in relation to foreign projects, mainly those implemented by larger and less participatory organizations! But does this mean that Lao people are negative about the overall concept of conservation, as some might assume from Singh’s arguments? Many certainly are critical of foreign-funded projects that restrict their livelihoods without adequately allowing for local participation, but there are other forms of conservation, local ones referred to using “*bok pak hakxa*” or other Lao terms, that Lao people are much more amenable to. Regrettably, Singh does not seem to be aware of this major shortcoming, which I fear has crucially impacted the results of her study.

The *muang* (town) – *pa* (forest) dialectic, while somewhat useful at times, seemed sometimes to be overstated. While Singh carefully qualifies her views by making it clear that she does not want to suggest that “Lao worldviews persist as a series of static values that stubbornly resist all change” (pg. 56), I nevertheless often found myself feeling unconvinced by her application of this framework for understanding the ways Lao people see things, even though there were times when I felt that the dialectic worked quite well. Unfortunately, all the above limitations of the book are found in chapter 2, which I believe is the most problematic part of the book.

The rest of the chapters are much less problematic, but there are still some limitations. For example, in chapter 3, Singh translates the Lao term “*lin phu (phou) sao*” as “flirt with young women”, when it actually means to “have sex with young women”, thus fundamentally changing the meaning of the sentence. This is, however, only a small quibble. More importantly, Singh fails to mention that many people in Laos, based on Buddhist beliefs, choose not to eat certain wild animals known as “*sat 10 prakan*”, which refers to ten animals, such as snakes, tigers, elephants, etc., that should not be eaten. Certainly not everyone—or even most people—follow this rule, but many do, and this idea does have an impact on Lao views. It should have been mentioned.

In chapter 4, on page 98, Singh presents some dialogue between her and a government official who argues that elephants are not eaten because they are “useful”. She counters by mentioning that buffaloes are also useful and they are eaten. Crucially, she fails to recognize that in many lowland parts of Laos, such as Khong District, Champasak Province, buffaloes were indeed rarely if ever eaten in the past due to the belief that they were “useful” animals. While beliefs have largely changed, and Lao people virtually all eat buffalo meat today, this was not always the case, thus making the official’s argument much more reasonable than Singh seemed to recognize at the time. There is indeed something about the usefulness of animals that makes them less palatable to Lao people than Singh realizes.

Singh also misinterprets Lao history in chapter 4 in relation to Lao royalty in two crucial ways. First, she claims that villagers are mistaken when they associate royalty with Vientiane rather than Luang Phrabang. In fact, they are more correct than she realizes. First, the Luang Phrabang royal house was relocated to Vientiane by Chao Xaysettha in the 16th century after being repeatedly sacked by Burmese troops. It was located there until the Siamese destroyed and depopulated Vientiane in 1829 following Chao Anou’s failed revolt against Siam. Moreover, she discusses villager interest in Chao Phetxarat, and while it is true that he originally came from Luang Phrabang, he was in fact based in Vientiane when he was working for the French government and coming to the Nakai Plateau. Thus, it is not surprising that villagers associated him and royalty with Vientiane. Secondly, Singh only recognizes the authority of Luang Phrabang royals, when in fact her field site in the Nakai Plateau was mainly under the influence of Champasak royals, although it was on the fringes of Champasak control. Still, this should have been acknowledged.

While being largely sympathetic to Singh’s view about Lao forest management deficiencies, it would have been appropriate to have acknowledged some of the recent efforts to close crucial structural loop holes in the logging and wood processing system. Certainly, problems are far from resolved, and corruption remains endemic, but Singh chooses not to mention these recent efforts, even though she widely cites reports that

fully acknowledge these changes, while also pointing out many continuing problems. Some aspects of Singh's description of the FOMOCOP project are also inaccurate, although the overall picture appears to be correct.

I also feel that we need to develop a new term for Laos. While it is certainly not as "socialist" as it was, neither is it fully "post-socialist", a term developed to apply to European East bloc countries that became democracies in the 1990s. While Singh is certainly not the first author to describe Laos as "post-socialist", Laos only awkwardly fits the label. The government still espouses (albeit not very sincerely) the idea that "state capitalism" will eventually lead to socialism. Thus, Laos is more of a "transitional-socialist" country than simply "post-socialist".

Finally, although I have pointed out a number of limitations to *Natural Potency and Political Power*, I do not want readers to "throw the baby out with the bathwater", as Singh's book is certainly not a wasted read; far from it. Part of the reason that she has made some errors is because she has engaged in arguments that others have not dared to before. I am especially positive about her use of the idea of potential to frame her understandings of state interactions with the population in contemporary Laos. Her limitations are ones that should be expected in ground-breaking, and unusually (especially in the field of conservation) balanced arguments. This is, indeed, important to understand, and I hope all the readers of this review, including the author, recognize that despite its limitations, I believe that Singh's book represents an important contribution to the literature, and I will certainly be assigning it to my students to read. In fact, I already have!