

Vatthana Pholsena. *Laos – Un pays en mutation*. Paris: Éditions Belin, 2011. pp. 208.

Reviewed by

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Pholsena's recent book *Laos- Un pays en mutation* is part of the *Asie Plurielle* series established by the French publisher Belin. This series provides introductory country studies for a non-expert public. After having covered already fifteen countries including Timor-Leste and Uzbekistan, Belin finally delivers a profound study on Laos. With Pholsena, the publisher got one of the most renowned experts on Laos as author. Her fields of expertise include history, politics of memory, ethnicity and the complex socio-economic dynamics of contemporary Laos. *Laos- Un pays en mutation* offers deep insights into the social, cultural and economic transformations of the Lao PDR and provides detailed historical excursions that contribute to the understanding of present developments. Even though the book is explicitly dedicated to non-specialists, it has much to offer to students and experts of Laos thanks to its broad thematic range and long-term perspective. It is a concise country study that is well suited as introductory and inspiring reading for anyone interested in Laos.

At present, Laos has become the unlikely center of an increasingly integrated economic region. The powerful neighboring countries of Thailand, Vietnam and China consider Laos as key hub for their trade interests and thus invest in various infrastructure projects. The most recent and spectacular project is a railroad from Kunming to Vientiane, intended to link southern China to Bangkok and Singapore. At the same time these countries are competing for political influence in Laos not least to exploit the country's rich natural resources. Copper mining, rubber plantations and hydropower dams entail considerable economic, environmental and social impacts in a country still characterized by village-based agriculture. The current processes of rural transformation, urbanization and increasing social inequalities pose considerable challenges for the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party with its new generation of technocrats inspired by the examples of Vietnamese and Chinese socialist market economy.

Pholsena embeds her excellent discussion of these contemporary dynamics within a detailed, historical analysis of the Lao nation-state. It is a history not only of ruptures but also of strategies of adaptation and *müang*-style flexibility. Divided into three main parts and nine chapters, the book tackles the political, economic, and cultural dimensions of this history and links it to contemporary aspects of Lao society. Eight meaningful maps add to the explanatory power of Pholsena's account, including a short chronology, a useful statistics table, and a list of selected reading from the appendix. The main text contains only few references since it is intended for non-academic use. Yet, the short bibliography gives some direction for further reading, in particular with regard to French literature, which is often overlooked in the English-speaking world.

Part one of the book discusses the history of Laos from the Lao Buddhist kingdom of Lan Sang to the postcolonial Lao nation-state. The coherent narrative makes the reader aware of the fascinating historical vicissitudes of the “Lao multi-ethnic people” (according to official discourse). Moreover, this section provides an overview of the country’s geography, demography and economy. This section also provides some key facts for the understanding of this special country: the low population density (6.5 million on 236,800 sq km), the difference between plains and uplands, which imply contrasting agricultural practices (wet-rice cultivation vs. swidden), the ethnic heterogeneity, and the fact that the “majority” of the ethnic Lao constitute only slightly more than half of the population.

Part two gives a fascinating account of the “ways of modernization” of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic since the communist revolution of 1975. One chapter discusses the changing role of Buddhism under socialism and its present significance as pillar of a Lao national culture. Another central topic is ethnicity and the relation between the modernizing state and the ethnic minorities of the uplands – one of the author’s main fields of research. Pholsena gives the reader deep insights into the state’s development strategies, such as large-scale resettlement and agricultural intensification. Furthermore, she explores the role of ethnic minorities in the revolutionary struggle and the current status of ethnic minority members in the Lao party-state (*phak-lat*). While some are members of the politburo – such as Pany Yathotou (Hmong) – most ethnic minority representatives mainly occupy political positions on the provincial and district level in regions where the Lao constitute the minority.

Part three discusses the political and economic regional integration of Laos. It is mainly an analysis of socio-economic data and lacks the compelling narrative of the preceding chapters. Yet, the author provides useful insights into contemporary economic and geopolitical tendencies, especially concerning the relations between Laos and its resource-hungry neighbors. Moreover, she gives a neat account of the *phak-lat* bureaucracy. Her discussion of the notorious *phu nyay*-politics demonstrates that the Western label of “corruption” fails to take into account the social and cultural complexities of patron-client relations in Lao society. In her short conclusion, the author calls for a local perspective to understand the responses and strategies for adaptation of the heterogeneous population of Laos facing massive social and cultural transformations.

As mentioned above, the book contains a useful selection of maps. Some of them are based on the fascinating “Socioeconomic Atlas of Laos” and complement the rich economic and demographic data provided in the book. One particularly telling map illustrates the time people need to reach their respective provincial capital from less than one to more than ten hours. It thus substantiates the much-cited “remoteness” of some regions and illustrates the fact that 50% of the population of Houaphan, for example, must travel more than 30 km to the nearest hospital. Another interesting map shows the ethnolinguistic diversity of Laos by demarcating, with different colored dots, settlements of more than 100 people, according to ethnolinguistic family – thus creating a kaleidoscopic impression instead of questionable ethnic boundaries. Two quite disturbing maps show the locations of approximately 40 projected hydropower dams, and the distribution of unexploded ordnance (UXO) throughout the country. A

somewhat problematic map is the one about the ancient Lao kingdom of Lan Sang. Of course Vattana Pholsena is aware of the perils of “historical” maps that suggest clear-cut borders – even if marked as “approximate frontiers” – and thus ignore territorial ambiguities. Yet a more explicit and critical analysis of this misleading map would have been necessary to prevent the unwary reader from assuming a historical “Greater Laos” occupying large parts of mainland Southeast Asia, including *Isan* and parts of northwestern Vietnam. In fact many *müang* entertained tributary relations with two or three larger powers and therefore could not be claimed by a specific territory. Moreover, territorial control by the Lao courts was almost non-existent in the mountainous areas beyond the river valleys (page 44) so that these areas would have to be consequently excluded from any map attempting to represent spheres of political sovereignty in pre-colonial times.

Admittedly, any book intended as a general country study for a non-expert readership cannot tackle all complex issues in full detail. Thus, comprehensive accounts on specific topics alternate with more cursory overviews, which still provide invaluable information for readers not familiar with the respective contexts. Pholsena succeeds in her challenging task to deliver a thematically comprehensive and historically informed analysis of modern Laos. *Laos – Un pays en mutation* should be taken as inspiration for comparable versions in the English and German languages, being a rare example of a book that can function both as reference for interested scholars and as a slim paperback companion for inquisitive travelers.