

stitutes Central Asia for Central Asians, how distinct Scandinavian scholarship on Central Asia is from German or Russian scholarship, and what type of interaction Central Asian Studies have historically entertained with other area studies, especially Chinese Studies. One may deplore the absence of contributions on gender and environmental issues. Maps, index and bibliography are missing from the book, which is rather surprising, and the reader will have to use the abundant footnotes as references.

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Peter and Sanda Simms, *The Kingdoms of Laos. Six Hundred Years of History*, Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999. 240 pp. ISBN 0-7007-1125-2.

People in search of general histories of Laos in Western languages have long relied on the now classic studies *Historie du Laos Français* (Paris 1931) by French colonial administrator Paul Le Boulanger and *History of Laos* (New York 1964), written by Lao intellectual Sila Viravong. In recent years, however, a handful of books in Western languages have appeared presenting a general outline history of the Lao kingdoms and Laos. The book reviewed here belongs to this latter group.

The authors have, among others, a background in journalism, and between 1955 and 1973 they were frequently in Laos covering major events. During their postings to Laos, they seem to have developed a strong historical interest, particularly in the Lao monarchy, and for the many Lao who went into exile following the coming to power of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party in 1975. Thus, in the Preface the authors inform us that they have written the book as a 'tribute to a great nation' and as a book to the children of Lao in exile to help them understand the country that was their 'birthright' (p. xi). In doing so, the authors hope that their presentation of the history will serve as a 'mirror to the past into which the young and old may look

and see why it is still worth doing all in their power to re-create a just and democratic country, presided over, if the people wish, in the proud tradition of the past, by a Royal Family, who have, with their subjects, suffered so much since 1975' (p. *xii*). The authors thus leave little doubt as to their political sympathies and their motives for writing this book.

The 'historical mirror' they provide is not new. In the first chapter, we encounter the Lao in their mythical homeland in Southern China, united with the other branches of the Tai 'race'. We then follow them in their movement towards the lands on mainland Southeast Asia. In chapters 2-7, the historical canvas is filled with a seemingly endless list of Lao kings embodying the ups-and-downs of the Lan Xang kingdom. Not surprisingly one whole chapter is dedicated to Fa Ngum – the legendary founder of the Lan Xang kingdom – who 'forged a nation that through all her vicissitudes has survived to this day' (p. 41). While Sam Sen Thai who followed Fa Ngum also left 'a rich and prosperous nation' (p. 47), the history of Lan Xang subsequently followed a disastrous track only to reach 'a new golden age' under Souigna Vongsa who 'set about the recreation of a truly great Lao nation' (p. 94). In chapters 8-10, we encounter how 'Chao Fa Ngum's mighty nation came to a sad and inglorious end' (p. 109) as Lan Xang split up into three kingdoms; the expansion of Siamese dominance into the Lao territories; Chao Anou's attempt to throw off the Siamese yoke; and the Franco-Siamese struggle for control over the Mekong region. In chapters 11-12, the history of the Champassak and the Xieng Khouang kingdoms are given. Finally, while Siamese expansion into the Mekong region potentially could have led to the eclipse of a Lao independent state, the last chapter deals with the formation of Laos as a French protectorate. This delinking of 'French Laos' from the Lao territories West of the Mekong led to a situation where the Laos 'entered the twentieth century with a king bound together with the rich memories of Lan Xang and the consciousness of the individuality of being Lao' (p. 216).

In pursuing this historical narrative, the authors do not break any new ground in the writing of Laos's history – neither in

terms of methodology nor in the material used. Essentially, what they present is a classical nationalist representation of the history of Laos found for example in the books referred to above. Judging from the main source and by a comparison of the major themes treated, the book appears to be modelled very closely on Sila Viravong's text written over 30 years ago.

A basic problem related to writing a nationalist history of Laos is the problem of how to link the historical kingdom of Lan Xang with the modern state of Laos spawned from Franco-Siamese negotiations at the turn of the twentieth century. The problem stems from the fact that Lan Xang was first split into several competing kingdoms, and, second, of these only the Luang Prabang kingdom survived as a political entity to be incorporated in French Laos. This problem the authors themselves concede by using 'Kingdoms' instead of the singular 'Kingdom' in their title. For the Simms, however, continuity between Lan Xang and modern Laos does exist. If not in political structures then in the cultural sphere – in the 'memories of Lan Xang' and in the 'consciousness of the individuality of being Lao' (p. 216). Never do the authors, however, define, discuss or qualify what it means to be 'Lao' or how the perception of 'Laoness' has been formed and negotiated over time.

In their description of the Lao kingdoms over time, the Simms apparently have been inspired by the so-called *mandala* perception of the state in the pre-modern period. Thus, at one place they stress how the Lan Xang kingdom constituted not a centralized political structure but rather a loose conglomeration of *muongs* bound together partly by force and partly by self-interest (p. 126). This description, however, stands in stark contrast to the repeated use of the term 'nation' with reference to the period predating the formation of Laos.

Regrettably, Simms' treatment of Laos in the early French period and Lao kingdoms in the pre-colonial period only confirms how the writing of Laos's history to a large extent remains trapped in an historiographical straitjacket nourished more by concern with dynasties and battles (*vong-vong-cag-cag*) than by modern historiographical debates. As an introduction to the history of Lao kingdoms, the book leaves much to be desired

and it is clearly surpassed by the more subtle analysis found in Martin Stuart-Fox's *The Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang: Rise and Decline* (Bangkok 1998). Apparently, the book under review is intended as the first of two where the other will be dealing with Laos in the 1945-1975 period. Due to the authors' presence in Laos during that period, it can only be hoped that it will be more interesting reading than this one.

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Josiane Cauquelin, Paul Lim and Birgit Mayer-Köning (eds), *Asian Values: Encounter with Diversity*, Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1998. xix, 207 pp. ISBN 0-7007-1096-5.

This edited volume is the result of a study undertaken by the European Institute for Asian Studies commissioned for the Venice Forum on Culture, Values and Technology, an event that led up to the first Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM) in 1996. Its main purpose has been to facilitate an understanding and appreciation, especially among Westerners, of developments in Asia so that relations between Europe and Asia may be handled more sensitively and the two regions drawn more closely together in a 'deeper, more constructive and more beneficial relationship' (p. ix). This has centred, specifically, on an understanding of Asian values; their roots in ancient cultures and traditions; their transformation by modern developments such as market forces, consumer culture and Westernization; and their overall consistency. This volume also attempts to suggest fruitful directions for further studies of Asian values.

The book's subtitle, *Encounter with Diversity*, aptly characterizes not only the heterogeneous region that has come to be called Asia, but also the multiple ways in which Asian values have come to be understood and the variety of approaches that have been adopted in attempting an understanding of them. The book's editors and contributors comprise a credible mix of Asian and European academics, and a few have worked in