



Sarinda Singh, *Natural Potency and Political Power: Forests and State Authority in Contemporary Laos*

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FORESTS, often the ground of much needed resources for development, are where the state's economic interests and rural villagers' livelihoods overlap. Ideology, governance, and political engagement largely determine whether this intersection entails mutual benefit or collision. This, in a way, boils down to two interactive phenomena: state-rural relations and political debates. *Natural Potency and Political Power* by Sarinda Singh takes on these two topics using forests, including wildlife, as the common platform and Laos (Lao PDR) as the case study. The former focuses on how the benefit of extractions from forests are managed (or not managed) and shared (or not shared) between state and rural residents. The latter presents how rural people are indirectly engaged with the state through discourse on forests and wildlife in a country where open political debate is delimited. The author utilizes information from private conversations and fieldwork carried out in the capital city of Vientiane, Nakai district, and the surrounding area of Khammouan province. The literature is organized and presented with the context to support the arguments. While the author presents most arguments convincingly and interestingly, there are views and expressions that can be challenged. This book is, however, recommended for a wide audience of readers seeking to understand more deeply about, or to better engage with, Laos. This includes, but is not limited to, scholars, students, aid workers, and NGO staff. Given the commonality of social and political practices beyond Laos, this book can also be recommended to readers with an interest in other Southeast Asian and developing countries. The following summarizes the author's major arguments, followed by comments and critiques.

In chapter 1 ("Peripheral Engagements"), the author first familiarizes readers with governance and how development, the major consequence of governance, is perceived differently. The author characterizes governance in Laos as policy-practice divide, patronage politics, self-censored, and of hierarchical obedience. Political debates, including those by rural villagers with the authorities, will therefore be affected by these settings. Open and contrasting views are mostly generated by state-controlled mass media and international observers. The author nevertheless argues that local villagers do indirectly make political statements through discourse on certain social or political symbols. He then provides the theoretical background to argue why forests and wildlife can be seen as social and political symbols, and hence platforms for indirect political debates. The analysis in this book is largely based on discourse, particularly information from personal conversations. Interpreting what local people say in local languages is therefore critically important. Chapter 2 gives examples of

how this is done in a discourse on conservation. After showing the state's and international observers' contrasting views on forest conservation, the author explains how rural people, for instance, make political statements associating forest wildness with backwardness, and urban centers with progress and development.

The next four chapters (three to six) form the core of this monograph, splitting the former and latter's focus on wildlife and forests respectively, and discuss in great detail their social and political symbols, and how social and political statements are made through discourses about them. Chapter 3 ("Appetites and Aspirations") begins with wildlife that are viewed as food, the way local livelihoods are dependent on them, and how they are used to present social relations. The author finds that wildlife consumption can, for example, symbolize rural-urban and Lao-Foreign divisions. Chapter 4 shifts focus to the non-food wildlife, the sacred elephants, and their potency as an eco-political symbol. Here, the author shows how elephants are used to demonstrate, legitimize, and question social order in Laos.

Chapter 5 ("Debating the Forest") and chapter 6 ("Concealing Forest Decline") evaluate discourses on forests and their decline by local people in addition to authorities and international players. Chapter 5 provides a good introduction to the complex system and reality through which timber, the main commercial forest product, is exploited. While emphasizing the state's control and effort to centralize benefits, the author also shows how some local villagers have managed to secure their share mainly through guiding foresters to trees that have a high value. The author then shows how the state and local people engage with one another through discourses on forests. While discourse from the state is generally direct and open in nature, the author also shows that even influential public figures comment differently in private settings. Official discourse on the obvious forest decline comes in many ways, but never with any explicit links to the state. For example, official discourse may acknowledge forest decline, but only after taking into account local villagers' swidden cultivation. Private and local residents' discourse, however, lean toward serious forest decline while emphasizing state-sanctioned exploitation and mismanagement as the major cause. The author concludes that, on the one hand, the benefits of forest exploitation are largely accrued by a minority "elite" in the name of national development, while costs are disproportionately borne by rural villagers. Chapter 6 focuses on the attempt to blur or redirect responsibility regarding the decline in forests. The author argues that the state tries to do this by blurring authority, blaming villagers, or labeling conservation as foreign subversion.

The question of the relation between the state and rural areas is a long-standing research question that spans many disciplines. The author's argument to use forests and wildlife as social and political symbols to examine this question is a step forward. While the author focuses on forests and wildlife, it is easy to see that this can also include other non-forest remote regions and non-wildlife resources. This monograph also contributes greatly to understanding urban-rural relations in Laos. The author's interpretations of local languages are outstandingly insightful. The characterization of governance in Laos is precise, and is actually valid in almost any country struggling with governance. This suggests that rural people, where open political debate is delimited, can engage with authorities indirectly through

discourse on social and political symbols and this expands the way one can conduct research on politics in Laos. As the author suggests in his conclusions, the forest or rural area can be a great way to understand the state.

There are, however, a few shortcomings. First, while dealing with indirect political debate, the author stops short of taking into account the “official” channels of engagement. For instance, the Lao National Assembly has changed dramatically, from being merely a ceremonial institution until the late 1980s to becoming an increasingly active political player over the years. A telephone hotline to the assembly during ordinary sessions and public consultations during the legislation process can also be considered direct political debate. Writing to the national assembly is also increasingly used as a channel for citizens to express their concerns. While focusing on indirect channels is a perfectly valid approach, the existence of a direct channel can raise questions on the relevancy of the outcomes, especially when this direct channel seems to have contributed to major policy changes or even the fall of high profile figures in recent years. There is also the issue of the ambiguous use of “elite” and “state” that seems to somehow lead to, in my opinion, a rather inaccurate presentation of the *Borisat Phattana Khed Phudoi* (BPKP) as an elite group whose interests contradict those of rural and urban residents or even the state’s interests. Although a combination of mismanagement and the Asian Financial Crisis resulted in huge economic losses in the late 1990s, the BPKP undoubtedly achieved its mission to secure economically viable access to Vietnam, including the development of an urban concentration to sustain this (based on interviews with BPKP management) and apparently with a cost performance comparable to other internationally funded projects.

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