



## Projectland – Life in a Lao Socialist Model Village

Holly High University of Hawai'i Press, 2021

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## **Projectland – Life in a Lao Socialist Model Village**

HOLLY HIGH

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*Projectland* is a beautifully composed ethnography of the Katuic-speaking 'socialist model village' of New Kandon in southeastern Laos. A core argument of the book is that 'Laos is a socialist country' (8). As the author, Holly High, contends, 'Lao socialism' is a politico-cultural reality that must be understood on its own terms; a 'lived affect' and 'metalanguage' through which lives in New Kandon are understood, evaluated and enacted.

High posits 'success' and 'necessity' as the two poles of this socialist metalanguage and, concomitantly, of her book. Chapters 2–4 present New Kandon as a self-proclaimed success story. They offer detailed vignettes on local historiography, and on New Kandon as an 'exemplary culture village' and Laos' first 'Open Defecation Free Village'. Unpacking these vignettes, High argues for a Lao socialist concept of culture. This culture concept eschews Western liberalism's preoccupation with 'authenticity' in favour of an evolutionist notion of culture as *acculturation*: the consciously pragmatic cultivation of self and society. Consequently, socialist culture villages like New Kandon serve less to preserve tradition than to proclaim—to officials, TV crews, development workers, ethnographers—that the state's exacting struggle for acculturation is indeed being won. In this illiberal 'politics of recognition' tangible results routinely rank second to the efficacy of performance. As High shows throughout *Projectland*, the *story* of New Kandon's success owes not least to the extraordinary ability of Wiphat—New Kandon's energetic leader—to 'generate elation' (71) by rhetorically matching events to socialist doctrine.

Chapters 5–7 shift focus to the sacrifices, failures, fears, conflicts, doubts and disavowed desires that form the murky backstage of New Kandon's success story. They showcase villagers' (often vexed) efforts to augment state power with the 'occult powers' that continue to shape local lives and provide insight into the (often tragic) 'presence in absence' of New Kandon's women. Here High identifies the trope of 'necessity' as villagers' key means for negotiating the limits, strains and ambivalences of their 'successful' acculturation as model socialist citizens of Laos. Among several touching examples of how this plays out is High's weaving teacher, Liliha, who invokes 'necessity' to defuse the discrepancies between state proclamations of progress and gender equality, and her lived reality of poverty and constricting custom.

In Chapter 8, High journeys into the mountains from whence Wiphat once led his people to New Kandon—and to which several families have since returned. This chapter is the apex of High's extraordinary effort to meld empathy and critical self-reflection into ethnographic insight. Good ethnography, High concludes, works as much through failure as success.

*Projectland* is a timely, thought-provoking book. A rigorously feminist contribution to anthropology, it offers inspiring reflections on methodological relativism and the very axioms of the discipline itself: ethnography and 'culture'. As a

contribution to Lao- and Asian Studies, *Projectland* offers innovative perspectives on state-society dynamics, village politics, socialist transformation, contemporary political *culture* (see below) and the interplay of resettlement, customs and cosmology. High's tenacious foregrounding of female perspectives in particular mounts stimulating challenges to entrenched, male-dominated narratives about history and economy in upland Laos. *Projectland* is also an absolute joy to read. The 'imaginative reconstruction' of the wartime arrival in Old Kandon of Vietnamese 'revolutionary missionaries' that opens Chapter 2 is one of many instances where High distils meticulous research into evocative prose. Theory (and, not least, psychoanalysis) is used concisely, often implicitly, and always in the service of unpacking thickly grounded cases.

My chief comment concerns High's positing of 'Laos is socialist' as a (the?) core argument of her book. I concur that socialist-style *rhetoric* is salient—even resurgent—throughout Laos. I too consider Laos a vanguardist project and agree that the problem with 'Lao socialism' lies less in its ideals than implementation. Lacking democracy, the project of acculturation so ambiguously exemplified in New Kandon indeed remains largely 'project as projection' (200); a tautological image by and for an elite struggling to acknowledge difference between itself and those it proclaims to improve. However, in labelling this project unequivocally 'socialist', High risks obscuring her well-argued point: that 'Lao socialism' operates primarily in the discursive, affective-emotional realm; as political *culture*. While Laos indeed never declared a 'postsocialist agenda' (9), Laos today is a country where, for worse *and* better, lives are fundamentally shaped by rapid enclosure, extraction and commodification—including from below. As *Projectland* convincingly shows, New Kandon's residents want piped water, toilets, taller children, gender equity, soothed spirits, electricity, etc.—not a classless utopia built on scientific materialism and collectivised means of production. Wiphat's invocation of 'keywords' ('unity', 'solidarity', 'struggle') identified *by High* as 'socialist' is self-admittedly tactical (72): part of a 'quid pro quo deal' (57) in which (performance of) political obedience is exchanged for material development. No villager is quoted saying 'socialism' (a striking absence considering that the claim 'Laos is socialist' is routinely uttered throughout Laos; as a gloss for the country's Marxist-Leninist *political system*). 'Socialist model village' is not an official accolade in Laos—it is High's label. One could thus leave *Projectland* wondering: might a term like 'market-Leninism' (London 2012) have better served to highlight the often awkward relationship between rhetoric and reality in contemporary Laos?

Yet High's nuanced claim precludes such cavalier dismissal. First, one might consider *Projectland's* ethnographic achievement as lying precisely in unearthing 'socialism' as a key imponderabilia of life in New Kandon. Second, the propensity to privilege economics in defining 'real' socialism is indeed both ironically Marxist and reflective of the very concern with 'authenticity' High so deftly provincialises. That 'Lao socialism' today operates less as economic system than (subconscious) 'felt thing' does not make 'it' less real. *This*, it seems to me, is the premise of

High's claim. In its multifaceted sum, *Projectland* provides a powerful polemic for the reality-qua-efficacy of discourse, affect and façade. It is not a book about political economy, but about the very real spells (un)wittingly cast by the 'metalanguage' of 'Lao socialism'. Highly recommended!

## Reference

London, J. 2012. *Market-Leninism*. Working Paper Series no. 124. Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong, Southeast Asia Research Centre Working Paper Series.

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