

# Anthropology Book Forum

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**Holly High**, 2021, *Projectland: Life in a Lao Socialist Model Village*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 265 pp., ISBN 978-0-82488-874-9

This excellent book is an ethnography of an indigenous Katu village in Sekong Province in the highlands of southern Laos near the Vietnam border. The Katu comprise about a quarter of the population of Sekong Province in Laos (47), and a significant concentration in Quang Nam, the adjacent province across the Vietnam border. The author, Holly High, once pursued research in the Agrarian Studies program led by James Scott at Yale, and today is an anthropologist at the University of Sydney in Australia.

The uplands of Southeast Asia have long been notoriously difficult to study.<sup>1</sup> The inhabitants of the Katu village here, Kandon, once had a taboo against allowing guests to stay within the village perimeter or to enter their homes (76). In the region, languages and even language families can differ over brief distances. The mountains were only partially controlled by colonial forces until the military loss and exodus of the French from the region after Diên Biên Phu in 1954. During the Second Indochina War, often called the Vietnam War but also involving Cambodia and Laos, bombing by the U.S. forced the abandonment of highland villages for years at a time.<sup>2</sup> As High observes, 'the bravery, fortitude, and suffering of Kandon and the other highlanders of Laos who bore the brunt of the American bombing is extraordinary' but not central to most 'English-language accounts of war' (45). In addition to its history as a war zone, the physical geography of the area is forbidding. The mountains are so steeply sloped that farmers work at constant risk of falls from a height, and outsiders must undergo strenuous hikes to reach villages.

Vietnamese communists who sought recruits in the highlands starting in the 1940s characterized the area around Kandon as a 'vast land, sparse people' (54). But this was by comparison with the

densely occupied lowlands of the Vietnamese coast. A Kandon village elder echoes French archives in describing villages of the uplands in the 1930s, including Kandon, as 'small cities' that existed 'in liaison with satellite villages' with as many as '500 inhabitants' that could contain 'several dozen long houses' (55, ft. 10).

Today, indigenous people are a declining share of the population of the highlands of Laos and Vietnam as both countries pursue policies that seek to integrate minorities into the modern state. In Vietnam, this means transferring lowland populations more accustomed to modern agriculture to upland areas. In Laos, there is military employment and inculcation of indigenous villages into modern folkways. The latter is the main focus of *Projectland*.

The current border between Laos and Vietnam was not settled until an agreement between the two countries in 1977. After this, with the encouragement of the Lao government, many villages in Sekong Province moved in response. For Kandon, its westward re-siting put it more firmly within the orbit of the Laos state, and the move from Old Kandon to New Kandon is narrated by High as a transformation from tradition to modernity. The transition plays out under a regime in Laos that has been socialist since 1975 when the monarchy was overthrown. Laos is the only landlocked country in Southeast Asia, depriving it of easy access to ocean-going trade and international markets. Because of its geography, and other factors, Laos has not undergone an opening to markets (25) similar to that of Vietnam under *Doi Moi* in 1986.

High's principal informant, an indigenous leader named Wiphat, led the move of the village to its new location and became an interlocutor for the village with state officials. Wiphat is an ardent believer in the civic religion of Lao socialism, and the author shows how this way of thinking is 'lived, discussed, and deployed' in daily life (24). In Laos, she argues, socialism is a fundamental source of legitimacy for the government. Even collectives in agriculture, adapted to current conditions that include market mechanisms, remain 'foundational to the agrarian economy' (25). This argument pushes against prevailing English-language interpretations that assume socialism is over and Laos is in 'transition' to what will be a free market economy. It also lends nuance to the ethnography that follows.

The village leaders who espouse what High calls the ‘metalanguage’ (92) of Lao socialism are not without their critics. Wiphat spars with a group of fellow Katu who reject aspects of modernization and decide to return to Old Kandon. The reverse migrants are led by Wiphat’s brother-in-law, a man identified as Canphon, who explains his return to the original village by listing the problems that accompanied the move to New Kandon. These included cholera from a contaminated water supply (65), the addiction of a family member who stole food from relatives to pay for drugs (21), and, crucially, ‘less land than expected’ (218). In Vietnam, land reform was the main driver of resistance to successive governments before unification. In Laos, where about 70% of workers were farmers in 2020, the issue of land allocation remains important.

Thus, the comparison between new and old at the heart of the book makes clear that the huge benefits that come with modernization, including the socialist variety, are at a cost. In 2012, the author hiked to the original village to interview those who had decided to return. At this point, Old Kandon housed 150 people, all of whom supported themselves through farming (39). Shifting cultivation of manioc and corn, horticulture, trapping and gathering in the forest, and animal husbandry were the main economic activities in the old village. By contrast, in New Kandon, swiddens had been replaced by wet rice fields as a condition of resettlement (62) so that yields in the new area were almost a ton an acre. Thriving households in New Kandon held up to seven acres and could ‘hire out agricultural equipment, run shops, and lend money’ (38).

Not surprisingly, the old village is classified as poor by the Lao government. It lacks ‘electricity, piped water, road access, and a biomedical clinic’ -- ‘four of the five indicators determining if a village is poor’ (39). These are all, by contrast, present in New Kandon (pop. 1,261). In addition to adequate food, basic education, and agricultural and military work, the villagers of New Kandon can now access a hospital, for example. In another example, the new village won open defecation-free (ODF) credentials—a certification that wastewater facilities are adequate—under the program originating in Bangladesh, supported by the Lao government.

But the core assumption of anthropological research in this arena is that development indicators do not adequately express human experience. High, writing here in the mode of Scott, is attuned to the costs of this transformation for the Katu. A village myth told in both Kandons recounts a

time when ‘rice would harvest itself by following a string tied from a rice stalk to the granary door,’ and those who died could be brought back by being ‘buried in the trunk of a soft tree’ (216). But, the myth relates, people came to want more food. As the desire for food grew, the old, easy system of self-harvesting rice and revivifying loved ones suddenly stops. People no longer ‘die from leech and insect bites,’ the tale goes on, but they become ‘less delicate’ and must work hard. It is hard to avoid reading the myth as a collective comment on change in the village.

The economic development of New Kandon, with its regular exhortations to conform to norms set by the Lao state, comes at a tragic cost: the loss of Katu culture. Many of the expectations set by Lao officials are arbitrary. One of the conditions of resettlement, for example, was the construction of separate family homes to replace longhouses in which household work was shared among women in an extended family (63). Even prohibitions that have clear health benefits such as the discouragement of buffalo sacrifice—a great expense for poor households where the buffalo is eaten raw—diminishes a ritual long foundational to Katu village life.

Similarly, now that they inhabit a less remote area, the villagers of New Kandon encounter people with different norms, and higher social status, more frequently. The campaign against open defecation, while it no doubt improves drinking water quality, uses what High terms ‘sanctioned bullying’ of the poorest in the village who are the ‘least likely to have toilets’ (91, 97). More seriously, pregnant women often avoid using the local hospital for prenatal treatment and childbirth because they fear ‘criticism and judgment’ from Lao medical staff (108).

Resettlement to New Kandon also brings the villagers into part of Sekong Province where land is more valuable, and competition over land begins as they arrive. Ethnic Alaks, highlanders who had been resettled earlier to the same area, had already been granted part of the Katu parcel. The Alaks are relocated again but fight successfully to reduce land allocated to New Kandon by one-third. The state later allocates more New Kandon land to a Vietnamese rubber operation.

Cultural destruction, discrimination, and competition with fellow highlanders for scarce land in a new place - all these are part of the Katu experience under economic transformation. But one of the greatest harms to the people of New Kandon comes from development itself. In Old Kandon,

alcohol had to be home-brewed and so was ‘only available at festivals’ (217). In New Kandon, cheap, mass-produced alcohol enables heavy drinking among many of the village men. The free flow of alcohol is associated, High believes, with greater domestic violence. Certainly, modernization has the potential to improve the status of women through access to work outside the village, and socialist officials forbid forced marriage, bride prices, and the imposition of fines for women who seek divorce. But abundance has pitfalls too.

The title of the book, *Projectland*, refers to the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, and how its state projects, including resettlement for uplanders, ‘reach into the most intimate expressions of people’s selves and their personal agency’ (223). In its critique of the costs of transformation, the book continues in the vein of Scott’s *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (1976). In contrast to much work on Southeast Asia by U.S.-based social scientists, High is critical not only of the effects of the socialist state on villagers but also of neoliberal modernization gambits such as wastewater facility programs. It thus avoids slipping into ideologically driven observations about villagers new to modern practices of both left and right.

## NOTES

1. Oscar Salemink, “Sedentarization and Selective Preservation among the Montagnards in the Vietnamese Central Highlands,” in *Turbulent Times and Enduring Peoples*, ed. Jean Michaud (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2013), 139–64.
2. Ben Kiernan, *Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2017).

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