

by the government to trivialize traditional livelihoods and cultures.

Sadly, this discourse is largely invisible to donors who view development entirely in terms of superficial economic indicators created to further their own agendas. Thus *Moving Mountains* represents an important resource for the development enterprise as well as a fine collection of academic papers all of which serve to remind the reader of the importance of the micro viewpoint in assessing what changes and what does not.

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Spirits of the Place: Buddhism and Lao Religious Culture

JOHN CLIFFORD HOLT

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Current studies on the religious culture of Lao ethnic groups began with S.J. Tambiah's structural-functionalistic analysis (1970) and have progressed mainly through Tiyananich's biographical study on the traditions of forest monks (1997) and Hayashi's historio-sociological ethnography of practical Buddhism (2003). While these studies were conducted on the right bank of the Mekong River in the part of northeastern Thailand, generally known as Isan, Lao religious studies on the other side of the Mekong river, in the present Lao PDR, have been very limited until recently. In fact, *Spirits of the Place: Buddhism and Lao Religious Culture* is the first book to focus on Lao religion by bringing together a wide range of previous studies concerning Lao history, politics, and cultures.

Spirits of the Place primarily provides a thorough analysis of *phi* (spirit) veneration and its relation to Buddhism in Laos. The author, John Holt, has studied Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka for a long time, and a notable feature of this book is its comparative use of Sinhalese Buddhism in order to understand Buddhism and spirit cults in Laos.

Before embarking on an inquiry regarding the circumstances in Lao, the title words “spirits of the place” are explained through the introduction of Paul Mus’s term “territorial sacred power.” Mus, a French scholar of Southeast Asian studies, points out that the “religions of monsoon Asia” are characterized by belief in spiritual power associated with a given locality, such as the paddy field, family compound, or village. The practice of such beliefs requires that there be a social group which worships their ancestors, and focuses on the “spirits of the place” in order to clarify linkages between both spiritual and human realms, the past and present. By setting it as a key concept, Holt explores the basic social unit of Lao, *ban* (village), and its relation to the headman, human authority, and supernatural *phi ban* (village deity), or to *muang*, a cluster of *ban*, which includes *chao muang* (a *muang* chieftain) and *phi muang*. Holt finds here double hierarchical orders both in the real politic and in the supernatural, and he explains that spirit veneration is related not only to the religious realm but also to the social order as the bedrock of Lao religious culture.

On the basis of this concept of “the spirits of the place,” the first three chapters of the book develop the relationship between Buddhism and spirit cults and provide a diachronic description of Lao history. The first chapter illuminates the era of the Lan Xang kingdom (fourteenth–nineteenth centuries). The Kingdom did not support Buddhism in early times, but when it started to sponsor the Buddhist *sangha* from the fifteenth century, the worship of spirit cults still continued in many areas despite attempts by the state to suppress them. For instance, the veneration of stupas and *Phraban* (a Buddha statue as the axis mundi) had Buddhist-like forms but symbolized the power of the past.

The period prior to the revolution in 1975 is described in chapter 2. With intervention by Siam, France, and the United States in succession, national identification with Buddhism has undergone ceaseless changes. Under French colonial rule, the religion was excluded from Laotian national identity, and since the 1950s, aid from the United States has exacerbated the economic gap between the urban elite and the rural poor, an act that has been strongly criticized by the *sangha*, the support of which derives from the rural regions. Under these circumstances, the *sangha* has identified itself as a protector of Lao traditions and has sympathized with the communist Pathet Lao’s humanitarian agenda.

Chapter 3 depicts the revolutionary era when Marxist policy began to criticize Buddhism as otherworldly, and tried to change Buddhism as a means to sustain socialism and eradicate spirit veneration. However, the government’s misunderstanding of Buddhism provoked much criticism, while in Lao villages, traditional Buddhist monks were often expected to engage in manual labor. Despite this misunderstanding, Buddhism was almost commensurate with the Pathet Lao’s inten-

tion to sustain and serve socialism. According to Marxist orthodoxy, to be rational and scientific, the Pathet Lao tried to prohibit spirit worship after 1975. This prohibition is another reason the *phi* cult was associated with the pre-revolutionary social order, as *phi* was a supernatural embodiment of the “powers of the place,” and such powers could threaten the existing order of the government. Therefore, the Pathet Lao attempted to eliminate *phi*. But this attempt failed.

In chapter 4, tourism in Luang Prabang is discussed through interviews conducted with novices and observation of annual rituals. Since UNESCO’s appreciation of the “authenticity” of cultural tradition in Luang Prabang and the listing of the city as a World Heritage site in 1995, many tourists have flown into the ancient capital, where various changes in religious culture have taken place. Nowadays, novices interact intimately with foreigners, and the Pi Mai festival (New Year) includes a beauty pageant to attract more tourists. While some rituals such as Boun Phravet still retain their fundamental religious ethos, emphasizing the creation of merit, religious culture in Luang Prabang has been commoditized for tourist consumption.

In the last chapter, the author raises a question regarding the difference between Isan and Laos: while the *phi* cult in Isan seems to have undergone transformation in a Buddhist-dominated religious culture, why has this kind of Buddhacization not occurred in Laos? A number of explanations are possible: it could have been brought about by an absence of royal support for Buddhism throughout the nation’s history, or a lack of penetration of Marxist dogma into rural areas. But Holt emphasizes the characteristics of Lao religious culture and argues that *phi* cults are naturally out of ethical control, and remain outside the Buddhist cosmology. This nature enables one to view Buddhism or other religions such as Christianity through the lens of spirit veneration. The author uses the term “inspiring Buddhism” to describe the situation in Laos. The cult itself has not changed much, but the way of interpreting Buddhism has been changed by “inspiring” Buddhism into the cult. It can be said that spirit cult remains the bedrock of the Laotian worldview.

The originality of this book lies in its manifold comparisons of various viewpoints. Lao religious culture is juxtaposed with that of Sri Lanka for a comparison of Theravada orthodoxy. Thailand is used for comparison of royal support for Buddhism. Cambodia and Vietnam are compared with other countries of ex-French Indochina, and with Isan for insights into how the same ethnic group lives under different circumstances. The author’s specialization in Sinhalese Theravada Buddhism enables him to make complicated cross-country comparisons that render the locus of Lao religious culture very understandable.

The idea of “inspiring Buddhism” seems applicable to areas in Southeast Asia other than Laos. The outstanding studies of Tambiah and Hayashi on the Lao religious cultures of Isan, have depicted Buddhism as predominating over the spirit cults. However, Holt’s viewpoint emphasizes the persistence of spirit veneration, and its discussion of the ways in which the spirit cults are located outside the ethical control of Buddhism is particularly important. For example, there is a famous ghost story concerning a late nineteenth-century village near Bangkok. Nang Nak, a female

ghost who died during childbirth, frightened and annoyed the villagers, but was finally appeased by a celebrated monk from Bangkok. While this can ostensibly be interpreted as a story of control over a spirit cult by Buddhism, or the Buddhacization of rural spirit cults at a time when Thailand was modernizing, we can also see this ghost story as a case of “inspiring Buddhism.” Nowadays the female ghost is enshrined within the temple of the village and attracts many worshippers praying for an easy delivery or simply for a good luck. Though the ghost had been suppressed by Buddhism, Nang Nak seems to survive and conversely to support and strengthen Buddhism by occupying a corner of the temple. Despite the differences of historical process between Laos and Thailand, “inspiring Buddhism” can be used not only for the case of Laos but also for other situations.

One flaw of this volume is that it does not give accounts of religious reality in rural Lao that are based on the author’s own research. Except for chapter 4, which elaborates on novices’ views on religious life and two annual rituals, other chapters lack descriptions of the situation in rural villages, where the author stresses the importance of the substratum of the religion. Moreover, the spirit veneration mentioned in this book is too exclusively limited to types of guardian deities. A consideration of other kinds of spirits, such as *phi pop* or *phi phrai*, which are usually classified as evil spirits, would have enriched the analysis of the village situation. Notwithstanding these shortcomings, Holt’s approach to spirit veneration has the potential to shed light on the under-explored and overlooked aspects of religious life in Southeast Asia.

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Tai Lands and Thailand: Community and State in Southeast Asia

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In the current period of intensified globalization, reconstructing community is one of the most