

Indigenous history: an antidote to the Zomia theory?



As with the 19th century's doomed plans to build a railroad linking India to China through the region, wild speculations and crackpot theories have blossomed forth from Western ignorance of "Upland Southeast Asia" – or, particularly, the mountains that isolate the ethnic minorities of Laos, Burma and Yunnan along the borders that join those countries. Social theories strike out on a bold course, and they head up into the mountains with European aspirations that are incompatible with local cultural reality – not to mention geography – much like the prospect of that abandoned railway.

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Volker Grabowsky & Renoo Wichasin. 2009.
Chronicles of Chiang Khaeng:
A Tai Lu Principality of the Upper Mekong.
Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. 424 pages,
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THERE IS STILL, however, a vacuum of knowledge to deter such expeditions: very few sources of indigenous history and local legal codes have been available to English-language scholars of Theravāda Southeast Asia (a fact lamented and, in some measure, meliorated by Huxley, 2006). In many cases, whatever primary sources are available first emerged in fragmentary quotations presented through the distorting lens of modern (and modernizing) national histories. In the historiography of the region, skepticism is easily preached but difficult to practice without some contrasting source of information.

It is little more than a platitude to say that the history of any given ethnos within Laos cannot be known from the national history of Laos due to all of the distortions that arise from the creation of such a national history. The distortion and disparity can be even greater for the smaller kingdoms and ethnoi subsumed into what is now Thailand, South-West China and Northern Burma. Without the contrast provided by (uniquely local) primary sources, the researcher must attempt the impossible, as Susan McCarthy (2009, p. 50) admits, in trying to "rescue" local histories from propaganda that was created to subsume them.

In Grabowsky and Wichasin's latest contribution (a translation and analysis of the *Chronicles of Chiang Khaeng*) we have the real antidote to the malaise of "retrospective modernity", namely, primary sources of indigenous history. I would add that this is a palliative for many of the theories that currently animate historians and social anthropologists of the region concerned.

Grabowsky and Wichasin's analysis neither romanticizes nor reviles the pre-modern cultures they have documented along this stretch of the upper Mekong. Perhaps because the tendency to romanticize ruins (as representing something other than ruination) is so strong in the Western literature, it is refreshing (and even startling) that the authors open their description of this strange crossroads of civilizations as a "godforsaken part of the world" (p. 1). Chiang Khaeng's (rather modest) monuments were inaugurated with the

aspirations of its rulers and reflected a unique feudal society that struggled to survive in difficult conditions, but they are ruins all the same. In the era examined, the authors are practically contrasting one period of calamity to another, one sequence of devastating wars to another, in an area that remains depopulated and poverty-stricken to this day. It is outstanding to see this treated without posturing or propaganda.

Given the array of languages that the authors were working with in compiling the book, it is a shame that the publisher could not resolve minor errors that persist within the English. I winced at a few flaws in the figures as well. The year 1502–3 is given as equivalent to both C.S. 886 and C.S. 904 on one and the same page; the census data was out-of-date at the time of publishing; and the uncited figures for local forest-cover should have been replaced with real data from geographical or ecological studies, or else omitted (as deforestation is a crucial vector in understanding the area, past and present).

The authors have taken great care in evaluating the local history in the context of events to the west, south, and east of Chiang Khaeng, whence would-be empires were approaching in the 19th century (with railroad schemes and the opium trade in mind), while local kingdoms continued to contest the control of territories and trade routes with one-another.

By contrast, very little ink is devoted to the events that were unfolding to the immediate north of Chiang Khaeng, as the Chinese scrambled to assert (and extend) their own territorial claims to halt the French and British empires. There were comparable struggles with local sovereigns (and cultural assumptions about local sovereignty) on all fronts. In this respect, Grabowsky and Wichasin's work can be augmented with a comparative reading of Hsieh Shih-Chung's (1989) PhD thesis; this reveals that the struggle to the north, likewise, ended much more recently (and indecisively) than China's national history would have us suppose.

In just taking these two works together as covering this mountainous borderland from all four directions, we have a compendious but brief corpus of work that describes the agriculture, economy, law and society of the subregion in recent centuries, on the basis of very palpable facts and well-demonstrated findings that are utterly incompatible with the "zomia hypothesis" that now commands so much attention. On the specific issue of the relationship between highland and lowland populations, the few pages devoted

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Above:
Laos, Nong Khiaw
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to it in Grabowsky and Wichasin's new tome are vastly more useful than all the wild speculations to be found in the self-proclaimed "anarchist history" of James C. Scott (2010).

While the "official history" of any centralized state (such as Maoist China or Leninist Laos) may fail to give voice to the contrasting cultures and "dissonant histories" to be found along their rural peripheries, we can hardly redress this failure by looking to European colonial accounts of the same far-flung borderlands as if they represented the indigenous perspective. The latter is precisely the fashion that now dominates the anthropology of Southeast Asia, with quotations from colonial explorations taken as the primary sources to be extrapolated from, and the socio-political theories of Edmund Leach and Stanley Tambiah taken as guidelines for further speculation.

Although colonial archives are rich in precisely the sort of factual claims that one might elsewhere search for in vain, they certainly do not succeed at tasks they did not even attempt: they do not provide us with histories from the indigenous perspective. This is a deficit that cannot be compensated for with spurious comparisons between the Shan and the Berbers of Morocco (Scott, 2010, p. 29 & 277) nor with counter-posing evidence from the "maroons" of Jamaica and Brazil (*ibid.*, p. 25, 131–3, 189–90). Such comparisons cannot produce new facts for historians to consider; the careful work of both ethnography and philology that Grabowsky has offered throughout his career, can do just that.

Local history cannot be arrived at through logical induction from a general theory (neither one that unites "zomia", nor one that unites all "maroons" the earth over); instead, generalizations must proceed from the facts --and, even so, theories will always tell us less than firsthand fieldwork and the study of primary sources, never more.

For this reason, I would urge Grabowsky and Wichasin's book upon many scholars whose own research is far removed from Northern Laos.

Although the work was written without any reference to Scott's theories, it provides the contrast necessary to debunk them, and to instead situate the reader in the struggles that prefigured and produced the borders (and border-peoples) of Southeast Asia.

In addition to my respect for the monumental burden of translation that the authors have undertaken with the *Chronicles of Chiang Khaeng* (noting every Burmese and Pali loan-word that creeps into the narrative, etc.) I respect the detachment and accuracy that they have had in depicting this strange world between empires all the more. In contrast to the ideologies that have imposed themselves onto the history of the region (including current attempts to rewrite the area's history under the banner of academic "Anarchism", and even McCarthy's recent attempt to reconstruct local facts from national fictions) it is only here (in Grabowsky and Wichasin's tract) that I recognize the world being described from my own fieldwork in the region. This is a culture and a history poorly suited to carry the banner for any ideology, and, as the last of the forests fall and highways penetrate the mountains, it is now ever closer to the brink of extinction, amidst peace rather than war.

I hope that other researchers will be inspired by Grabowsky's work (as I once was myself) to conduct research by living in situ, working from the ground up, and using primary sources, instead of chasing after abstract theories that seek to join points on a map with the furthest horizons – to then end up, like the railway of old, nowhere to be found.

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