

Tappe, Oliver. *Geschichte, Nationsbildung und Legitimationspolitik in Laos*. Untersuchungen zur laotischen Historiographie und Ikonographie, Berlin: LIT, 2008. ISBN 978-3-8258-1610-0. 394 pp.

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There is not much literature on Laos in the social sciences, especially in economics and political sciences. Young researchers working in these fields are desperately needed. Oliver Tappe is a young researcher who might be able to fill some gaps in the field of political sciences even though he is an anthropologist and historian by training. This book is his PhD thesis in anthropology, supervised by Volker Grabowsky, who is mainly an historian. It was completed in 2007 and published in 2008. As it is in German, not too many scholars outside of Europe seem to have taken notice of it.

Most PhD theses are formalistic. At first glance, this book seems to be a typical PhD thesis: theory and methodology chapters to start with, followed by two long empirical chapters plus an appendix of almost 100 pages comprising pictures, texts, questionnaires and glossary. However, the first glance is deceiving. This book is a great contribution to Lao Studies. Were it not for the formal criteria of a German PhD process, it might have become basic reading on Laos. It is one of the very few books that combine careful, thorough and well-informed empirical research with an original theoretical language. In contrast to most theses, the theory chapter is vital for the empirical argument and is not just included to meet imaginary academic standards. In this regard, the book presents us with true social *science* instead of the generic descriptive anecdotes typical of "Lao studies" until recently. It represents a new generation of Lao scholars who have moved beyond Orientalism on the one hand and compilations on the other.

The book deals with the construction of a Lao nation state on the symbolic level. It focuses on the writing of national history (“historiography”) and on national symbols (“iconography”). There is literature on both issues, and most of the facts treated by Tappe can be found elsewhere. The book’s virtue lies in the attempt at a comprehensive collection that is theoretically interpreted. Tappe interprets the symbolic construction of the Lao nation state as a “topography,” a spatialized configuration of movable elements (p. 8). The organs of the nation state develop the topography of images and narratives as a “reflection” of the nation, a “representation” (Paul Ricoeur) of real entities and history (p. 309). Technologies of power are used to construct an image, or rather a configuration of images, that represent the polity in the way desired by the organs of the nation state, i.e. the Lao Revolutionary Party (p. 33). Tappe interprets the images as “icons” (Charles S. Peirce) that refer to an object and to an interpretation (instead of just to an object). Against this theoretical background, he proposes to analyze the topography of icons that the Lao Revolutionary Party is constructing in order to consolidate its power and to form a convincing image of the nation state.

The analysis of official Lao historiography (pp. 61-241) reveals the “struggle” (*kaan tor suu*) leading to freedom and development as the guiding thread (pp. 52-61). In order to reconfirm this and to construct images of identification, the official historiography tells stories of national “heroes” (pp. 80-99). Tappe proves his point on the basis of Lao text books (such as Suneth’s well-known history), schoolbooks and government publications. He compares the official publications with popular images based on an original survey and comes to the result that official historiography is largely successful as popular heroes are almost identical with the official ones. However, there are two interesting exceptions. Phetsarat and Sisavang Vong are still regarded as heroes by many Lao even though they are absent from the official pantheon. Tappe explains this by Phetsarat’s image as *saksit* and Sisavang Vong’s manifold iconographic presence (pp. 186-190). He also adds that the two most important heroes in official historiography are collectives: the people and the party. Heroes, people and party are merged to form one uniform and unidirectional narrative of the great struggle. Tappe exemplifies this argument with regard to the story of the escape from Phonkheng prison (pp. 209-234).

The interpretation of official Lao iconography (pp. 242-307) deals with monuments and museums as well as posters, stamps, maps and money. The most important point is the shift from a purely socialist register of icons to an inclusion of Buddhist and even Royalist images (p. 296). The topography of places (including museums, monuments and busts) relevant to nationally mobilized memory also replicates the pre-socialist *muang*-structure (p. 304). Tappe interprets the entire topography of the nation state as an attempt to construct a representation that integrates effective icons into a consistent narrative of the national struggle for freedom and development from Fa Ngum to the present.

For those illiterate in German, several papers by the authors are and will be published containing aspects of the book. I am sure that he will continue to develop his line of thought and publish relevant texts in English in the near future.