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Globalization, Culture and Society in Laos by BOIKE REHBEIN. London & New York: Routledge, 2007. pp. 171.

Although the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party still claims to "use Marxist-Leninist theory inventively" (Vientiane Times, 16 January 2009) for the modernization of Laos, the country's economy is consistently headed towards capitalism and economic integration into the dynamic ASEAN region. Heavily dependent on international financial aid and development cooperation, the Lao government is faced with both economic and political challenges due to the interaction of Laos with the globalized world. Lao society is currently transforming at a considerable pace, national identity politics is replacing socialism, and the mainly subsistence-based peasant economy is being confronted with a growing internationalized market economy.

These tendencies are thoroughly studied by sociologist Boike Rehbein (University of Freiburg), one of the few German experts on Lao language, culture and society. The author provides deep insights into the transformations of the modern Lao nation state which is increasingly affected by forces of globalization. This book presents an in-depth analysis of Lao culture and society. Rehbein carried out extensive field research with a multitude of methodological approaches over a period of more than ten years. As a specialist in Pierre Bourdieu's sociology, Rehbein applies and modifies theories and concepts of the French sociologist, reassessing them in the Lao context. The author develops a creative advancement of this theoretical approach while criticizing Eurocentric models. He comes up with the concept of *sociocultures* which encompasses cultural patterns and social differentiation. In Rehbein's view, different layers of sociocultures and hierarchized fields constitute variable configurations of Lao society. By adopting a historical perspective, he identifies the existence of pre-modern sociocultures within contemporary social structure, stressing the distinctiveness and complexity of the contemporary Lao nation state. Rehbein likewise works out a theoretical framework for analyzing the impact of globalization in non-Western contexts.

After dedicating the first two chapters of his book to theoretical conceptions and a general historical survey of Lao sociocultures, he explores specific fields such as economics, identity politics, language, higher education, music, and religion – or, with

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the author's words, "aspects of the kaleidoscope which is contemporary Lao reality" (p. 143). In chapters 3 and 4, Rehbein discusses the developments and transformations of the Lao economic field, analyzing social structure and economic habitus in both the centre and periphery. Chapter 5 provides the accurate observation that globalizing forces do not necessarily weaken the Lao nation state. Rather, globalization assists in the standardization of the state, e.g. concerning the financial, legal and administrative systems. Yet, these transformations hardly affect the political system, while the party continues to claim strict control over the public sphere and national identity politics. This leads over to a serious study of Lao language (Chapter 6). Discussing Bourdieu and Wittgenstein on language, Rehbein concludes that Lao society now faces both linguistic differentiation and standardization (i.e. sociolects vs. official public language). Furthermore, he explores recent tendencies of hybridization within the Lao academic field (Chapter 7) and the field of Lao music and youth culture (Chapter 8). Finally, the author discusses configurations of Buddhist and Animist belief systems, which in their interrelations and transformations are affected by processes of social differentiation and urbanization (Chapter 9).

Rehbein's merit is to show the complexities of Lao culture and society as it interacts with a globalized world. He presents his findings clearly to scholars and students of both Lao studies and social studies in general. The book should be of particular interest for Lao in exile because it provides interesting insights into current tendencies of their home country, for example concerning popular culture – even though the sociological jargon of the book might be discouraging at the first glance to non-experts.

The chapters of Rehbein's book can be read separately since recurrent theoretical references make them intelligible. However, this means a lot of repetition and redundancies, as the author admits in his introduction (p. 11). Some topics could have deserved even closer scrutiny and call for further investigations. There are many more Lao fields awaiting research (e.g. law, public health, sports, gender relations, ethnic minority sociocultures) for which Rehbein's approach can be highly stimulating and serve as a starting point.

In his conclusion, Rehbein states that the ruling party and the political field still occupies the leading position in Laos, although it is being increasingly challenged by the economic field and "threatened by symbolic phenomena such as language, cultural expressions, non-Lao identity symbols and globalizing cultural trends" (p. 140). It

remains to be seen if the fledgling urban middle-class, more self-conscious ethnic minorities or the internationalization of public discourses might contribute to the transformation of the political system of Laos. Surely, Boike Rehbein will be one of the first to notice.