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John Clifford Holt. *Spirits of the Place: Buddhism and Lao Religious Culture.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009. 368 pp. $58.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-3327-5.

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Lao Buddhism has been considered a blending of Buddhism, Hinduism, and animistic traditions. This synthesis has been predominantly understood and analyzed by Western scholars through the lens of Buddhism. Recently, historians Grant Evans and Martin Stuart-Fox have purported that the Lao government has utilized the dominant Buddhist tradition to instill propaganda and foster a rationalized form of Buddhism resulting in its subsuming the *phi* (spirits). John Clifford Holt in his new book on the Buddhist traditions of Laos questions this interpretation, conceding that this *buddhacization* process is occurring in Isan, an area that became part of Northeast Thailand when the French designated the Mekong River as the border between Thailand and Laos. But drawing on the previous work of Stanley Tambiah, one of Holt's mentors, as well as others, such as Frank LeBar and Adrienne Suddard, he proposes that it is through the categories of the *phi* that "Lao Buddhism is understood in its uniquely Lao manner" (p. 45). He reports that the *phi* cults are alive and thriving because the hierarchy of the spirit world is connected to shared narratives of protection and the "powers of place" that have not been eradicated, in spite of previous efforts by the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) government (p. 164). Moreover, he argues that the very ontology of the spirit world is understood as distinct from that of this world or the six Buddhist realms. The crux of Holt's argument is that in Laos it is *through* the lens of the spirit cults that the Triple Gem not only is considered a powerful protective element but also *is* a protective element. Holt suggests that most Lao have not intellectualized the dharma. Consequently an entity such as a stupa (or a monk) is not an object "of meditation" but rather "an active force" (p. 253). In this way the Lao Buddhist tradition is "inspirited," by the *phi* resulting in a mutually informing and transforming relationship rather than a synthesis.

The book consists of five chapters. The first analyzes Lao Buddhism and culture through the "prisms of the indigenous ontology of the spirit cults" (p. 61). Holt grounds his use of the spirit cults as the basis of his analysis within Lao history. Chapter 2 continues a historical analysis of Lao religious and political life and the cultural impact of numerous other groups who have overtly or covertly been involved in governing Laos: the Thai, French, Japanese, Americans, and Vietnamese. The third chapter concludes the historical perspective of a postrevolutionary Laos and explains how the *phi* cults and Buddhist *sangha* (the Buddhist community) have been affected. The first three chapters draw heavily on the research of such scholars as Georges Coedes, Georges Condominas, Frank Reynolds, Marcello Zago, Charles Archaimbault, Pierre-Bernard Lafont, and Ing-Britt Trankell, in addition to the work of Arthur Dommen, Geoffrey Gunn, Martin Stuart-Fox, Grant Evans, Soren Ivarsson, and Vatthana Pholsena, who provide some analysis of religion in Laos. Moreover, because of cultural similarities, Holt has also included research from Northeast Thailand (Isan) and Chiang Mai by such scholars as Tambiah, Charles Keyes, Leedom Lefferts, and Justin McDaniel. Finally, Holt utilizes Patrice Ladwig's research on Lao stupas to demonstrate that current understandings of Lao Buddhism exist through the lens of the spirit world.

Chapter 4 examines the field research data that Holt collected in his seven months in Laos between June 2006 and June 2007. The chapter provides new research and understandings into the effects of globalization and the UNESCO designation of Luang Prabang as a World Heritage Site. Previous efforts by the LPDR government to eradicate spirit cults appear to be in a state of reversal as government published tourist literature takes an instrumentalist perspective that embraces the *phi* cults as "quintessentially Lao" in order to capitalize on its uniqueness with tourists (p. 235). Holt demonstrates how the tourist industry results in the commoditization of the monks. Thorough literary and historical overviews weave the contextual frame for Holt's field research and interviews in Luang Prabang. His interviews with

novices, aged ten to twenty, provide important documentation of the experiences of primarily rural youth who come to Luang Prabang to study Buddhism and perform traditional rituals for tourists. Holt's final chapter analyzes how the *phi* cults remain prominent, through the "power of a place," even though economic and political power structures have been significantly altered over the past thirty years.

Covered in the volume are the Lao Buddhist celebrations of Pi Mai (New Year) and Boun Phravet (the festival containing the recitation of the Vessantara Jataka) held in Luang Prabang. There are also appendixes containing additional information on the Lao rendition of the Ramayana and the Cult of Khwan (vital essence).

While this volume provides crucial research into the dialectical relationship between the world of the *phi* and Buddhism, there is one challenge with the manuscript. Chapter 4's presentation of the field research and interviews from Luang Prabang sits uncomfortably within the rest of this well-written and documented text. It is not clear at the conclusion of the text what its purpose serves. Perhaps it is to literally ground Holt's observations within the contours of Laos. But more likely it is what remains unspoken that the reader must actively unpack. At the conclusion of the book, Holt draws on examples from Tambiah and Kamala Tiyavanich to elucidate how the actions of a monk can be perceived from both Buddhist soteriological and pragmatic spirit cult perspectives. He notes that monks are thought to be embodiments of the dharma but also an active force of protection ("buddhacization" and "inspiriting" respectively). Is there a connection between Holt's final thoughts and the "unmonk-like" behavior and commoditization of the novice monks who "perform" rituals for the tourists in Luang Prabang? Clarification is required to fully illuminate and locate Holt's field research within the rest of the text.

There are other issues that weaken an otherwise fine text. The book is somewhat limited in its geographical focus, particularly in the latter half of the study. Expansion of Holt's research to include the other two traditional centers of power within Laos, the Vientiane area in central Laos and the province of Champassak in the South, would have provided a more rounded study of the *phi* cults throughout the country of Laos, and allowed the opportunity to assess the "inspiriting" of Buddhism that Holt observes in the Luang Prabang area. Holt makes little mention of the large numbers of Lao Loum that live outside the national borders of Laos in Thailand, France, the United States, Canada, and Australia, as his focus is on the current state of Buddhism within Laos. However, with enormous amounts of funds being sent "home" to Laos from the diaspora communities living around the globe–communities that for the most part left Laos prior to government attempts to rationalize Buddhism–it does beg the question to what extent "ethnic Lao" from outside Laos have an impact on the religious culture and understandings within Laos, currently as well as in the future. Is this process of inspiriting one that carries on outside of Laos? The inclusion of a glossary of Pali and Lao terms would have been a good addition for those without training in these languages. Finally, while Holt does acknowledge the lack of standardized script and diacritics for the Lao language, it would have assisted the reader to have a single spelling of a specific term, designated in square brackets for quoted sources that utilize other spellings.

This text fills a gap in the literature concerning Lao Buddhism. Since the LPDR's change of governance in 1975, few sources on Lao Buddhism have been published. Consequently, the arrival of this text is a welcomed addition to an area of scholarship that is underresearched. Holt's area of expertise is Sinhalese Buddhism. His more recent publications include the coedited *Constituting Communities: Buddhism and the Religious Cultures of South and Southeast Asia* (2003), to which he contributes an essay, and *The Buddhist Vishnu* (2004), both of which investigate the sociopolitical contexts of contemporary Sri Lanka that shape religious understanding and meaning. Holt approaches Buddhism within the context of Laos utilizing a comparative stance that draws on his knowledge of the Theravada lineage found in Sri Lanka and its relationship with a more anthropomorphized spirit world than he suggests is found in Laos.

This book will be of particular interest for those studying Lao Buddhism, either within diaspora communities or Laos itself, as it will provide a current analysis of how Lao Buddhism is responding to the political and social environment of today's LPDR government. Holt's work will also be an informative piece for scholars who are researching lived religious traditions within a "secular" globalized world as it provides a case study demonstrating how the spirit-based tradition of Lao Buddhism is responding to Luang Prabang's designation as a UNESCO heritage site and consequently its engagement with a vastly increased tourist market.

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