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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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 ethnic 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 ethnic 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 “rescue” local histories from propaganda. 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 Hsêh Shêh-Ch’ung’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 fact, 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.” 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.”

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 the 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 fiction) the work here in Grabowsky and Wichasin’s thematic analysis I recognize the world being described from my own fieldwork in the region. This is a culture and a history poorly suited to cultural theory, and, as the last of the forests fall and highways penetrate the mountains, it is now 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 railroad of old, nowhere to be found.

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