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Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier

TANIA MURRAY LI

Durham: Duke University Press, 2014, 240p.

Land's End is an intimate analysis of the effects of capitalist relations and a fascinating complement to Li's previous work *The Will to Improve* (see Murray Li 2007). While the latter critiques well-intentioned, top-down, large-scale development programs in the Indonesian province of Sulawesi, this new monograph places the spotlight on small-scale farmers in the same province and the insidious effects of capitalism in foreclosing their choices. These indigenous highland peoples, she argues, have plugged into global capitalist circuits of their own volition through their everyday decisions such as the choice of crops to plant and this eventually alienated them from their own lands and each other. Furthermore, while some modernization theories had previously contended that the impact on people so adversely displaced could be mitigated by opportunities for wage work, Li demonstrates that such options were severely limited. "Land's End" does not refer simply to the ending of access to common land but also to the dead end in employment prospects for thousands of landless highlanders even as some of their neighbors prospered.

Li's case study is a window for observing the workings of market competition in a society that had been insulated from such circuits until as late as the 1990s. The setting of the study highlights the incursion of almost perfect market competition, a case of free market success rather than market failure. Although Sulawesi had once been colonized, Dutch rule there had been fairly light, especially in the inaccessible highlands, and the Lauje—Li's subjects—were not compelled to sell either their produce or their labor at that time. It is arguably this element of compulsion that distinguished capitalist relations from pre-capitalist ones. Li defines "capitalist relations" as "the ensemble of relations characterized by private and unequal ownership of the means of production (land, capital), a group of unequal non-owners compelled to sell their labor and the use of capital to generate profit under competitive conditions" (p. 8). Such a definition places the spotlight on the uneven impact of capitalist relations on the actors within the Sulawesi community and these relations become the central focus of this book.

Her argument is structured in five parts. The first chapter elucidates the spatial, social, and trade positions between the highlands and the coast. The villages (*desas*) tended to be positioned perpendicular to the coast and each group of *desas* is striated into a hierarchy where power and opportunities increase the closer it is to the coast. The most powerless—socially and politically—were the *bela* who lived at the highest gradient. Unlike scholars such as Scott (2009) who theorized that the highlands in mainland Southeast Asia were a refuge from state-like polities on the lowlands, Li depicts the Lauje's relationship with the coast as more vexed than that captured by the coercion-resistance model. While the Lauje tended to keep their distance from state power in the lowlands, they "were marginalized by a discursive regime that saw them as backward" and "came to see

themselves in the same light” (p. 56). They were thus simultaneously attracted to the coastal idea of progress while also valuing their autonomy, as evidenced by the fact the highlanders engaged with trade at the coast and paid taxes voluntarily during the colonial period although they retained autonomy in food production.

In general, until the 1990s, the highland economy runs on a dense network of intra-personal relationships. Li shows in the second chapter that the Lauje have a strong recognition of individual autonomy that is based on acknowledging the link between work and ownership. Working the land is a way of staking ownership to it. Even children are awarded the right to earn from the crops that they planted themselves. Along with this implicit recognition to reward individual efforts comes the parallel obligation to care for others. Care and concern are expressed through a network of reciprocity such as communal work parties in which neighbors work for each other for free, and the practice of *modagang*—buying food from kin and neighbors at cheaper prices, the preference for referring to paid service as a “gift” rather than employment.

These practices began to change as the Lauje started planting cacao. In her third chapter, Li explained how cacao led to the enclosure of common land and paved the way for land accumulation for those who had the capital at this crucial juncture. Cacao as a standing tree crop required extensive land but less effort in cultivation, challenging the equitability of customary associations between work, reward, and ownership that had previously obtained for the Lauje. *Lokasi*, an awkwardly adopted term for private land, entered the vocabulary of a people whose language previously had no English equivalent for the word “land” (p. 84). Where ownership of land could once be rotated as people took turns to work it, enclosure now became the norm. These enclosures were rarely resisted on the basis of customary laws partly because the cacao crop signposted ownership. Such laws, in any case, have little authority, as they are informal and illegible to the state. These voluntary moves into planting cacao for sale thus tended to have the effect of concentrating land into a few, making it difficult to get it back to grow food.

As a result, Li explains in Chapter four, the ratio between the price of cacao and the price of rice became crucial in determining whether these farmers could survive. In the decade 1998–2009, inequality in the highlands intensified, with some highlanders having no access to land at all. At the same time, other options to survive a crisis, for example, by turning to kin for food or land narrowed dramatically as few grew enough food to sell. It was at this juncture that capitalist relations emerged in earnest since the desperation of farmers and the “erosion of non-commoditized relations” worked in concert (p. 116). The competition that characterized this form of relations meant that the highlanders lost their land, not through land grabs by faceless corporations, but to their neighbors through mechanisms as mundane as land sales or even gambling games where small-scale farmers wagered their meager land in a last bid for fairer fortune.

A lack of jobs in other sectors of the economy exacerbated the problem as Li shows in her final two chapters. There are essentially three strategies for highlanders trapped without land or

jobs—loyalty, voice, and exit (p. 150). None of the three offers a true way out since tolerance to inequality led peasants to work harder without seeing results, their isolation made it difficult for them to seek allies to voice out their concerns, and Indonesia's high but jobless growth trajectory precluded an easy exit. It is on this basis that Li concludes, "progressive settlements aren't tied to growth but to a commitment for distribution fought for on political terrain" (p. 185).

Li's study resonates with a growing literature by scholars concerned with growing income inequality and concerns over the potential for the market to self-correct. Economists currently dominate the debate on precisely what these corrective measures should be. Most notably, French economist Piketty (2014) recently advocated for a global system of progressive taxes to prevent wealth from being concentrated in the hands of a few on the basis that such concentration is an inevitable long-term outcome when the rate of return of capital is larger than the rate of economic growth. Li's ethnographic contribution, however, seems reluctant to join in the search for generalized solutions. It does not advocate for specific policies beyond pointing to a need for direct cash transfers to dispossessed highlanders and a fostering of greater political will among local communities.

The biggest question mark left by this study is where to situate the Lauje within the global economy. Unlike scholars such as Tsing (2005) who focused on global interconnections forged by capitalist networks in remote areas, Li takes a resolutely localized approach. Capital, in her study, appears to flow within an internal circuit; between neighbors and villages within the province. There is perhaps room for future scholars to investigate the potential for change through external capital inflows. Cacao as cash crop had proved disastrous for some Lauje highlanders, but would capital flowing in from other, non-agricultural enterprises break the cycle of land-dispossession or further entrench it? At the end of Li's study, the economy in the Lauje highlands is undergoing yet another transition—this time away from cacao—and it is unclear what will replace it. Infusions of external capital that had been negligible in this study might yet play a bigger role in Sulawesi in the future.

Overall, this book is a valuable addition to the interrogation into the nature of capitalist relations and its attendant impact. The significance of Li's contribution lies in connecting a global pattern of inequality to a set of circumstances that is peculiarly Lauje-an, while giving human faces to a trend that has been quiet and insidious. Any system will have its winners and losers; what Li's book highlights is that the line separating the former from the latter is a thin one indeed. Hard work makes little difference in improving the circumstances of the structurally dispossessed. How could we mitigate the iniquities of the market? Should we? The audience of this monograph—largely winners in the system—will be confronting these issues for years to come.

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Champions of Buddhism: Weikza Cults in Contemporary Burma

BÉNÉDICTE BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE, GUILLAUME ROZENBERG, and ALICIA TURNER, eds.
Singapore: NUS Press, 2014, xxvii+261p.

Exciting things are happening in the study of Burmese Buddhism. Recent years have seen the publication of very important contributions to our understanding of this field. In particular, investigations of the roots of the “mindfulness” meditation phenomenon as a Burmese reaction to colonialism have garnered attention far beyond a scholarly audience concerned with Burma exclusively (for example, Braun 2013). Though fascinating, this focus on the origins and spread of the so-called *vipassanā* meditation movement has neglected what Kate Crosby, in the preface to *Champions of Buddhism*, calls “the Other Burmese Buddhism,” by which she means the popular yet politically marginal set of practices belonging to the so-called *weikza*-path. It is to examining this path that *Champions of Buddhism* is devoted, both as an introduction to this under-investigated phenomenon and as a stimulus to further inquiries into the nature of Buddhism in Burma and Buddhist global modernity in general. In both respects, it succeeds marvelously.

Unless they are experts in Burmese Buddhism, readers may at this point wonder what exactly is meant by the term *weikza*. In the foreword to the volume, the editors give a good idea by describing *weikza* as “a religious virtuoso” (p. ix). Because of his behavior, meditation skills, and expertise in the magical arts, a *weikza* attains the ability to live very long, with the purpose of being present when the next Buddha, Maitreya, appears in our world. Though the usage of magic with the explicit purpose of lengthening one’s life may not sound very “Buddhist” to some, one argument that this volume forcefully makes is that such practices are as Buddhist as monks singing sutras or meditating in temples. In her preface (the book has both a foreword and a preface, but—puzzlingly—no introduction), Crosby explores this alternative Burmese Buddhism by sketching the practical, political, and ideological motivations that have kept it in obscurity for so long. Together with Steven Collins’ postscript, Crosby’s piece connects the materials in the volume to a larger context, a context that is sometimes lost in the detailed accounts collected here.

The main body of the volume is divided into three thematic parts. In the first, the *weikza*