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Reviewed by Oliver Tappe\*

For many visitors to Laos, Champassak is a province in the south of the country, with the old Khmer temple site of Vat Phou the most prominent tourist attraction. But in the eighteenth century, Champassak was also an autonomous Lao kingdom, on an equal footing with Vientiane and Luang Prabang, before all three of them came under Siamese domination and later French colonial rule. Champassak's royal lineage continues to the present and has stubbornly asserted its sovereignty across time and through manifold historical vicissitudes. In his book, the geographer Ian Baird explores the history of Champassak, its struggles for sovereignty, and its significance for the modern Lao nation-state.

*Champassak Royalty and Sovereignty* is an insightful and original contribution to the study of political sovereignty in Southeast Asia. Taking the example of Champassak, a small polity that also included parts of present-day Thailand and Cambodia, Baird shows how sovereignty and power is contested, contingent, and shifting. The book adds a robust political economy perspective to the field of statecraft and authority in Southeast Asia, thus complementing the analysis of royal ritual and sociopolitical dynamics. Besides sketching the capricious history of a small Lao polity, Baird illustrates how precolonial conceptions and practices of sovereignty linger on under colonialism, in modern nation-states and diaspora communities.

The originality of this contribution to the study of sovereignty in Southeast Asia stems from Baird's multifaceted political, geographical, and anthropological perspectives, including a historical long-term one. Baird creates a dazzling picture of the workings of political sovereignty and authority in Southeast Asia by highlighting the shifting levels of territoriality and (in)formality as well as the contingent and unpredictable agency of the Champassak royals. Instead of an "absolute or non-existent" dichotomy, the author identifies "a matter of degrees along a continuum" assuming "various forms" (p. 14). The book offers fresh perspectives to

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key studies on sociopolitical configurations, royal sovereignty, and sacred kingship in the region (e.g., Tambiah 1976; Thongchai 1994; Wolters 2001).

The kingdom of Champassak provides a fascinating test case for the study of statecraft and sovereignty in the context of the Lao-Tai mandala or *müang*. Debates on this political concept have focused on its multilayered character that oscillates between the state and the kingdom, province, principality, etc. Sovereignty is always relational here, linked to pulsating hierarchized networks of different polities. Smaller ones seek autonomy through forging ties with more powerful neighbors, carving out spaces of economic and political control and cultural influence. In the Buddhist kingdoms of Southeast Asia, as well as among the royal elites of later nation-states, sovereignty relies on the permanent reproduction of legitimacy, a conjectural and unpredictable process that requires a great deal of “improvisation” (p. 9).

Laos offers various historical examples for the study of *müang* statecraft, as even the unified Lao kingdom of Lan Xang was more often than not a contested space between Siamese, Burmese, and Vietnamese kingdoms. Moreover, the region was always an arena of centrifugal forces as smaller *müang* demonstrated considerable autonomy and agency. Examples include the Tai Phuan kingdom of Xieng Khouang, the upland confederation of Houaphan, and of course Champassak, which for some decades (1713–78) constituted a sovereign kingdom next to the other autonomous Lao kingdoms of Vientiane and Luang Prabang (after the disintegration of Lan Xang at the end of the seventeenth century).

Soon under Siamese domination, Champassak struggled to maintain local autonomy and spaces of political and economic sovereignty. Colonialism brought considerable ruptures as Champassak’s vaguely defined realm was divided between French Indochina and Siam. The new border demarcations between Laos and Cambodia affected the spheres of influence of the Champassak royals, too. However, the colonial administration also offered new opportunities for ambitious local elites. With the emergence of a unified Lao nation-state, the royal house of Champassak remained an important regional power in the south of the country—and a permanent challenge to the authority of influential families in Vientiane and Luang Prabang. Eminent figures such as Prince Boun Oum became key political players in the young nation. They also played ambiguous roles in the civil war (1959–73) that tore the country apart. Finally, Communist revolution and exile marked a new chapter for the Champassak royals and their struggle for recognition.

Baird uses a fascinating variety of written and oral sources to reconstruct the history of the royal house of Champassak from ancient times to the present day. Sources include Lao and Siamese chronicles, contemporary Lao historiography, accounts written by members of the Champassak family, and hundreds of interviews conducted in Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, France, and the United States. Baird takes advantage of his vast networks in the region after having worked for decades on different issues such as fishery and hydropower dams, religion

and millenarianism, economic development and military resistance. Some of his more recent studies of local history inform this book as well as new case studies that shed more light on the complex and fascinating history of this little-known corner of Southeast Asia, a corner that tells us a lot about the mechanisms of sovereignty in the region.

The chapters of the book follow a historical chronology of Champassak's struggle for sovereignty, including the Lan Xang era, Siamese hegemony, and French colonial expansion (including the emergence of the nation-state idea with fixed boundaries). They are dotted with fascinating excursions such as the relationship between the court of Champassak and Austroasiatic upland populations, and the political tactics of branches of the royal family who ended up in Thailand and Cambodia. These densely written accounts produce an avalanche of names and places that may overwhelm those readers not familiar with the mainland Southeast Asian context—and perhaps even experts on Laos. That said, any scholar working on Laos will find this book and its love for detail a rewarding read.

Particularly successful studies are Chapters 5 and 7, which offer valuable insights into Champassak's localized autonomy and elite politics under French rule (vis-à-vis Bangkok's realm of politico-religious authority) and within the postcolonial Lao nation-state. During the turbulent decades of the Lao civil war, Champassak was consolidated as a southern right-wing stronghold (with close ties to the United States), sometimes even challenging the royal sovereignty of Luang Prabang, not least due to the political and economic maneuvering of Chao Boun Oum and his patronage networks. Baird writes that “this sovereignty did not come so much from official government recognition as from the unofficial but crucial political, economic, and cultural roles that the family played in southern Laos” (p. 236).

Boun Oum's unfinished royal palace appears as an ironic leitmotif and metaphor for Champassak's fragmented sovereignty. The Communist revolution of 1975 put an end to his project of asserting at least local royal sovereignty in southern Laos (it remains unclear how seriously Boun Oum followed secessionist ideas as indicated by US intelligence sources). Narrating the different trajectories and tragic individual fates of the Champassak royal family, Baird continues at a breathless pace throughout the final chapters of his book, following various traces, sometimes anecdotal, in the context of exile and insurgency. He shows how Champassak's already fragile royal prestige and sovereignty deteriorated further; for a while Champassak survived in Thailand as a Cold War pawn. What was once a variegated and shifting portfolio of resources of sovereignty is today sometimes only a Lao family name on a French doorbell sign.

*Champassak Royalty and Sovereignty* provides vivid stories from the margins. The book brings historical figures to life, even if many of the countless multifaceted characters introduced by Baird leave only ephemeral traces. Some notable surprise appearances include Khamtay Siphandon, military strongman of the Pathet Lao, who rather than featuring in a warfare context appears in a Lao soap opera setting. In the book's best phases, history comes to life through

dense and restless storytelling. Occasionally, hard cuts challenge the reader, for instance when the author jumps from the minutiae of Royal Lao Government political haggling to talismans made from human fetuses. Such plot twists come unexpected.

Baird's informative tour de force through a little-known local history leaves the reader enriched—and sometimes confused by dazzling detail. Historians might miss a fundamental critique of the sources, though, not least as some of Baird's key sources (both oral and written) come from the royal family itself. Nevertheless, the author's attention to the small fates of history and his empathy with its more or less prominent protagonists and their various struggles, aspirations, and tragedies make this book an enjoyable read for anyone interested in the history of Laos.

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