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<Book Review>

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wanted to identify themselves differently from the West. The Siamese lamb versus the French wolf is another way of creating “We versus Them,” even when this may serve the same agenda of defending the elites’ power position. Second, the book does not address the issue of Siam being a bellicose victor in wars with its neighbors. The Thai historical textbook traditionally omits this aspect of Siam bullying nearby kingdoms, such as in the sacking of Angkor in 1431—an event that may help boost the Royal-Nationalist narrative but inevitably casts Siam as a devilish villain. Although Strate’s book deals mainly with Siam’s ties with the West, Siam’s complex relationship with neighboring kingdoms, particularly from the perspective of it being an aggressor, may shed light on how the National Humiliation discourse can become disturbingly hollow, discursive, and self-serving.

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Red Stamps and Gold Stars: Fieldwork Dilemmas in Upland Socialist Asia

SARAH TURNER, ed.

Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2013, 320p.

One of the most striking changes observed while working in the uplands of Laos over the past decade is the rapid growth in the number of tourists, as ecotourism and minority cultural experiences become increasingly popular. The opening of these areas to tourism seems to indicate that a significant barrier has been removed in the socialist countries of mainland Southeast Asia. Recognition of the cash income that can be derived from tourism has certainly made the region’s landscapes and people more accessible to those who are interested. With political stability and economic opening, researchers’ access to these regions has also become easier over the decades. However, as *Red Stamps and Gold Stars: Fieldwork Dilemmas in Upland Socialist Asia* illustrates, the challenges to conducting ethnographic research in this region remain formidable.

This volume’s most valuable contribution is the way it unfolds and then fills in the framework of “dilemma.” The chapters are a rich selection of the many difficulties that ethnography faces in this region, although the authors come at their studies from primarily anthropology and geography. In addition to the well-known problems associated with spending extended time in places that are difficult to travel to and lack many of the basics that are taken for granted in researchers’ home countries, at the center of these personal stories is the political minefield that one must navigate in order to get approval for, carry out, and maintain relationships within, field-based research within the socialist administrative structures of Vietnam, China, and Laos. Here, the uplands means minorities, and this immediately puts us in a politically sensitive landscape of extreme complexity.

Not only is it difficult for researchers to get there and do their work, but also it is risky and dangerous for local people, including both villagers and government officials, to participate in the telling of local stories and writing of ethnography.

Relationships with government officials come out in all stories. In different ways, we learn how “government” quickly loses its salience when we start to approach the field, as the Communist Party and the line ministries often tell us very different things. These two hands of “the government” frequently do not know what each other is doing, perhaps pointing to an inherent tension between the red stamp and the gold star. Indeed, the fact that there is never one monolithic government cannot be emphasized enough in these countries.

Neither is the boundary between government and citizen obvious or reliable. Arriving in the village, our informants often become our friends, and may also be official representatives of some part of officialdom. The way we perceive our roles and responsibilities, across the personal and professional divide, is a source of ongoing stress. The chapters of this book offer new insights on the old question of how one embeds oneself in a community, striving to observe from as close a vantage point as possible, yet struggles to maintain some sort of objectivity in those observations.

The 15 chapters of fieldwork dilemma are organized into three sections, which provide an introduction to the book’s approach, an engaging body of case study reflections, and final discussion of the positionality project in this specific region. In Part 1 “Heading to the Field,” Sarah Turner sets the stage with “Dilemmas and Detours: Fieldwork with Ethnic Minorities in Upland Southwest China, Vietnam, and Laos,” introducing us to tradition of reflexive discussion of the position of the field researcher that has grown and deepened since the 1980s. Jean Michaud then provides a review of minority policies in the three countries in “Comrades of Minority Policy in China, Vietnam, and Laos,” taking us through the pre-Socialist, core-Socialist, and reform eras. These chapters are effective in setting the stage for the coming chapters.

Part 2, “Red Stamps and Gold Stars,” consisting of 10 chapters, is a fascinating collage highlighting the diverse range of perspectives that a researcher’s positionality may project. Stéphane Gros reflects on learning from mistakes in “Blunders in the Field: An Ethnographic Situation among the Drung People in Southwest China,” having inadvertently “produced an event” in the research community, underscoring how local power dynamics are situated in history, units of social organization, and pre-existing internal tensions. This “blunder” also shows how the researcher can become a resource for local people within these social dynamics. Magnus Fiskesjö writes about decisions the researcher makes in “Gifts and Debts: The Morality of Fieldwork in the Wa Lands on the China-Burma Frontier” in engaging with local social institutions, and the implications that must be dealt with as a result. In addition to his discussion of joining drinking bouts as “participant intoxication,” he raises other seemingly mundane but highly enlightening experiences, such as how local people “bore” intrusive officials out of the community by providing short, uninformative

answers to questions, not offering welcome meals and other subtle means avoidance.

What we bring to the field, for example our young children, has direct impacts on how we are perceived by local people. Candice Cornet explores how her role of mother was highly relevant for establishing relationships with the women of the village in “The Fun and Games of Taking Children to the Field in Guizhou, China.” We also bring the baggage of recent history. Jennifer Sowerwine explains her American experience with national identity politics while doing ethnography in Vietnam in “Socialist Rules and Postwar Politics: Reflections on Nationality and Fieldwork among the Yao in Northern Vietnam.” Interestingly, gaining competence in a minority language may raise red flags with government authorities. Learning languages inevitably means that friendships are deepened, and the field becomes an emotional place, where the obligations of intimacy push against politically constrained space. Christine Bonnin follows these relationships in “Doing Fieldwork and Making Friends in Upland Northern Vietnam: Entanglements of the Professional, Personal, and Political” through the questions of how engaging in research should or should not aim for political and ideological change.

Frustrating as the permissions required for fieldwork can be, the process of obtaining them can give us valuable insights on how the state works, and in this case how the state sees minorities within the national framework. As Pierre Petit recounts in “The Backstage of Ethnography as Ethnography of the State: Coping with Officials in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic,” researchers establish relationships with officials as they pursue the necessary paperwork, and this intimacy shines important light on the more subtle and practical matters of making the system work. Indeed, the researcher’s experience with the state is not defined by ideology alone. Moreover, it is often unpredictable. Karen McAllister’s chapter “Marginality in the Margins: Serendipity, Gatekeepers, and Gendered Positionalities in Fieldwork among the Khmu in Northern Laos” tells how state gate-keepers may in fact open doors, just as research assistants may be making official reports on the research.

Working in the uplands means dealing in politically sensitive social issues, for example shifting cultivation. As we are aware of the importance of socio-economic and political contexts for such issues, we often gravitate to a comparative perspective. Janet C. Sturgeon in “Field Research on the Margins of China and Thailand,” reflects on the complexities and dramas of a full-blown, transnational comparative study. The researcher may find herself between opposing political views within the community she is researching, as well. Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy in “Easier in Exile? Comparative Observations on Doing Research among Tibetans in Lhasa and Dharamsala” considers approaches to official and unofficial research, as she immersed herself in the seemingly “safe” topic of Tibetan folklore. At the end of this section, in “The Silenced Research Assistant Speaks Her Mind,” Sarah Turner helps give voice to the research assistant, who is of course also steeped in a complex web of relationships and power dynamics, and views the researcher’s participant observation through a very different lens.

The final section, “Post-Fieldwork,” is comprised of three chapters, each engaging in markedly differing narratives to put the foregoing chapters in a broader timeframe. The researcher will leave the field, but the informants, friends, and officials that work with the researcher carry on life in “the field.” Oscar Salemink in “Between Engagement and Abuse: Reflections on the ‘Field’ of Anthropology and the Power of Ethnography” provides insights on how research findings may be used for unintended purposes, by unintended audiences, with dangerous implications for collaborators. His chapter describes his strategy of anonymization and the further step of engagement with policy makers. Managed skillfully, the relationships formed in the field may endure, even forming the basis for long-term cooperation. Stevan Harrell and Li Xingxing’s contribution in “Textual Desert—Emotional Oasis: An Unconventional Confessional Dialogue on Field Experience” is a conversation, taking the form of texts written separately by the authors in Chinese, in which they discuss how their decade-plus of work has been hindered by a blockage preventing the publication of their findings. Exploring their doubts about their authority over the material and their emotional connections to the researcher village, they place their hopes in a “re-humanized framework” to enable them eventually to publish their work. Finally, Sarah Turner in “Red Stamps and Gold Stars on the Margins” recounts the book’s contribution to understanding minorities and everyday politics, state surveillance and trust, and the special ethical dilemmas that researchers face when they work with ethnic minorities in authoritarian, socialist countries.

By the end of the book, the intent of the ethnographer’s reflections is clear. The reader is left with much food for further thought, especially if he or she is directly involved in this type of field-based research. Yet, one is left with the sense that the researchers are primarily talking to each other, using the shared terminology, frameworks, and analytical methods that they use when writing their own ethnographies. In fact, the narratives seem strangely comfortable, even as they discuss the awkward details of creating, managing, and maintaining relationships in the field. But how familiar is this project to people from other disciplines who may spend time in the field and interact with people in villages, towns, cities, and government offices, perhaps in different modes of operation and collaboration? Another question remaining after reading this book is how to continue to draw out the critical voices of local collaborators—informants, guides, translators, gate-keepers, officials, and maybe even the people who simply observe the ethnographer’s work from a nearby porch. The challenge for this discussion will be to ensure that it is always firmly situated outside of the anthropologist’s comfort zone.

This book brings honest, critical, and nuanced perspectives to the project of reflexive thinking on the processes and implications of doing ethnography. Because the state is so ubiquitous in Vietnam, China, and Laos, this book provides multiple windows on how complex, subtle, yet powerful that state presence is. The authors’ narratives of their relationships with officials, informants, assistants, community leaders, with whom they have often developed intimate and emotional ties, capture the special complexities of their positionality. These stories will be extremely helpful for

young researchers trying to prepare for the unpreparable, as well as experienced fieldworkers who face similar administrative, emotional, and ethical dilemmas in their ethnographic lives.

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