

Fields of Desire: Poverty and Policy in Laos

By **Holly High**

Singapore: NUS Press. 2014

Pp: xiv + 213

In the acknowledgements of Holly High's new, engaging ethnography *Fields of Desire: Poverty and Policy in Laos*, she remarks that acknowledgements are fascinating to read. They let us glimpse the complicated, unruly, and human dimensions of research. Even stuffy scholars take a moment to recognize their friendships, their personal and financial debts, briefly inviting us to imagine their research and writing as an amalgam of actual interactions, filled with living, breathing, and often complicated people. High's appreciation and knack for this dimension of research is unmistakable, and *Fields of Desire* is at its strongest and most compelling when, like a good acknowledgements section, it lingers on the unruly actualities of research and the individual people with whom High lived in 'Don Khiaw', a pseudonymous small island-village in the south of Laos. The result is an excellent and beautifully written contribution to the anthropology of Laos.

Throughout the book, High exploits her ethnographic sensibility to 'thicken' the concept of 'desire,' her principal theoretical aim. In the introduction, she surveys five distinct senses of 'desire' (pp. 8-16) and argues that although scholars often use the concept as if it were self-evident, it remains under-theorized and ethnographically 'thin' in the literature, especially the literature on 'resistance' in Southeast Asia. High insists that to 'thicken desire' we must study it as 'an indigenous, live concept' (14), but one which always implicates not mere positive 'wishing' or 'hoping' but also uncertainty, contradiction, and ambivalence.

Borrowing Deleuze's notion of 'delirium,' High explores both the wants and dreams of people living in Don Khiaw and their aversions, distastes, and suspicions. She focuses particularly on people's ambivalence in regard to the state. While people often accused the state of greed, corruption, and inefficacy, she shows that their 'aspirations for the future...included more, not less, incorporation with the state' (166). In orienting us toward the ambivalence of desire, High unmoors binary expectations; she encourages us to shun—or at least suspect—any simple answer as to whether people living in Don Khiaw 'like' or 'dislike' the state. Against the backdrop of 'resistance studies' (e.g. Scott, James, 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press) and what High playfully calls 'resistance to resistance studies,' (e.g. Li, Tania Murray, 2014. *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*. Durham: Duke University Press), High invites us to consider the affective space between suspicion, on the one hand, and enthusiasm, on the other. Don Khiaw, she argues, abounds with people who 'desire' the state ambivalently.¹

¹ Readers familiar with High's work, will notice that the argument here parallels her earlier writings on the issue of 'resettlement' in Laos (see especially her debate with Baird *et al.*: High, Holly. 2008. 'The implications of aspirations: Reconsidering resettlement in Laos'. *Critical Asian Studies* 40 (4): 531–50; Baird, Ian, et al. 2009.

'Reading too much into aspirations: More explorations of the space between coerced and voluntary resettlement in Laos'. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ocea.5129>

This is the author manuscript accepted for publication and has undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the Version of Record. Please cite this article as doi: [10.1002/ocea.5129](https://doi.org/10.1002/ocea.5129)

But what might it mean to ‘desire’ the state? The notion opens up questions about what kind of ‘object’ the transitive verb ‘desire’ takes, and High argues, following Deleuze and Guattari, that ‘the objects of desire are never simply things,’ but ‘aggregates’ (81). The state as an object of desire, likewise, is a relational aggregate. Desiring the state, as High describes it, seems oriented not only to the resources the state can procure or deny, but to a hoped for state/citizen sociality. In fact, barring High’s ethnographically rich and wonderful fourth chapter, ‘Poverty Becomes You’, and moments of the discussion of a ruin-like irrigation pump (112), *Fields of Desire* tends to linger not on the ‘things’ people want—e.g., more rice, gold, a new TV—but, rather, on the socioeconomic relations that people deem good or bad, and the idioms they use for talking about those relations.

Throughout the book—but without framing it in these terms—High focuses on two such ubiquitous and ethically charged idioms of sociality: *parasitism* (or exploitative relations of asymmetric ‘eating’²) and ‘mutual aid.’ People often talked about the state in the former idiom, as ‘that which eats, but does not return’ (41), even as they continued to hope to engage it in ‘mutual aid.’ As one man put it, ‘we do not eat with [the state], they eat with us. That’s all’ (40).

High shows convincingly that ‘mutual aid’ (a gloss for a range of terms that broadly imply ‘solidarity’) is found in both state propaganda and in non-government contexts, albeit with different emphases. Building from Grant Evans, the late, influential scholar of Laos, High argues that whereas the state discourses emphasize ‘mutual aid’ as a national condition that should be applied generally, villagers in Don Khiaw tend to discuss ‘mutual aid’ in regard to very specific, biographically individuated social relations (see Chapter 8).

I wished High had traced idioms of parasitism across state and non-state contexts with the same care. While she focuses on the state being the principal entity that eats ‘but does not return,’ her rich ethnography shows that people sometimes suspected one another, too. She provides multiple examples where people judged neighbors (76), friends, and even Lao people generally (167) of wanting, taking, and ‘eating’ too much. Might people in Don Khiaw desire relations with one another in much the same way they desire relations with the state?

High captures *Fields of Desire*’s central puzzle with a question: ‘How is it that’, she asks ‘when almost nobody believes anymore in the utopian development dreams, when almost everyone has been “de-mystified” about the nature of the state, almost everyone nevertheless continues to take part’ (171). Her short answer is that ‘desire’ always functions in such contradictory, delirious ways. But High and her rich, acknowledgment-esque ethnography also

Laos’. *Critical Asian Studies* 41 (4): 605–614; and High, Holly 2009. ‘Complicities and complexities: Provocations from the study of resettlement in Laos, a Rejoinder to Baird et al.’ *Critical Asian Studies* 41 (4): 615–620).

² High argues that eating, like desire, is ambivalently charged. But, as her examples attest, the negative valence of eating in Don Khiaw does not concern the act of ingestion itself. In other words, people in Don Khiaw do not seem as anxious about eating as, say, people living in Solo as Siegel describes them. In Solo, eating inevitably ‘indicates the inadequate suppression of desire’, (Siegel, James, 1993. *Solo in the New Order*. Princeton University Press: pg. 193), where people thus prefer to eat separately and, when together, either abstain or ‘turn to one side’ and eat as though they were alone (*ibid*: 50). In Don Khiaw, the ambivalence around eating does not appear to concern the consumptive act itself or the food consumed, but rather the improper distributions and flows of food (or money, or whatever one is ‘eating’).

point to another answer to this puzzle. Complaints about the failures of the state and hopes for its largesse are not mere reflections of what people want in the world, 'hidden transcripts' revealed, but they are always also rhetorical devices that people use to affect the world, elicit others action, and convince themselves.

Charles H. P. Zuckerman
University of Michigan

Author Manuscript