

mount to any other prior identity (Punjabi, Bengali, Indian, or of a particular sect) led to the partition of two of India's most populous provinces (Punjab and Bengal). The fallout from this partition continues today, and is one of the major topics of Chadda's book.

Chadda examines the Nehruvian approach to dealing with ethnic demands, contrasts it with the approaches of Indira and Rajiv Gandhi, and those of India's non-Congress government, and finds some common threads and some significant differences between the various approaches. But she argues that the underlying motive for all Indian governments was to maintain "relational control," meaning the ability of the Indian state to maintain its own security vis-à-vis its neighboring states, and to keep other powers (the U.S., Russia, China) out of South Asia.

While focusing exclusively on the Indian case, this book could be a useful reading for any class focusing on ethnic conflict, international relations, or post-colonial states. The cases Chadda studies cover all of these areas, and give concrete examples. These examples would be very useful for discussion in undergraduate level courses and possibly in some high school classes. This book provides an alternative framework for discussing "ethnic conflict" to what is often heard in the media, i.e. that wars such as those in the former Yugoslavia and in Central Africa are the outcome of "age-old" conflicts. Rather, as discussed by Chadda, they are often the outcome of actions taken by governments which do not have the desired effect.

The weaknesses of this book include Chadda's too-forgiving attitude to the Indian government's heavy-handed approach to the insurgencies in Punjab and Kashmir, as well as a need for closer proofreading to catch not only typographical errors (of which there are many) but errors such as this: "Raju Thomas calls this the 'Rodney King' complex: anxiety for status and a nagging sense that India has not received its due as a major regional power" (p. 206) [italics added]. I believe the Rodney to which she wishes to refer is *Dangerfield*.ⁿ

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Stalking the Elephant Kings *In Search of Laos*

BY CHRISTOPHER KREMMER
HONOLULU: UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII PRESS, 1997

Once drawn into the vortex of the Cold War and a key Southeast Asian "domino," contested violently and vigorously by the U.S. and USSR superpowers, Laos later slipped into relative oblivion and became what journalist Stan Sesser describes as the "forgotten land." The Australian Christo-

pher Kremmer's intriguing new volume draws attention to a "landscape as dramatic and beautiful as any, and people of great civility, charm, and generosity. . ." (p. 213). Kremmer's "search for Laos" was his sideshow while working as a journalist in neighboring Vietnam. The major motif of the volume is to uncover the "secret" history of what happened to the principal royals of Laos following the communists coming to power in 1975. Kremmer is an excellent writer with a real talent for powerful imagery, and the book reads like a mystery novel. His distaste for, and devastating critique of, the current regime will be welcomed by many of the Lao diaspora scattered around the globe.

Unlike many Westerners and Thais who travel to Laos for only short periods of time and never venture beyond the capital of Vientiane, Kremmer spent "many" months traveling to the remote parts of the country, particularly in the northeastern areas of Sam Neua and Viengsay in Huaphan Province. He also traveled to the ancient royal capital of Luang Prabang, the Plain of Jars, and the southern area of Champasak and the ancient Khmer ruins of Wat Phu. The bulk of the book consists of reflections on these travels, and interviews and conversations he had primarily related to the fate of Laos's last royals.

Kremmer must be admired for his boldness in seeking out interviews with key and prominent figures. Among individuals interviewed were: Princess Mahneelai, wife of the last Crown Prince of Laos, Vong Savang; Prince Sauryavong Savong, the last king's sole surviving son living in France (phone interview); Sisana Sisane, the official historian of the Lao PDR; Souphaxay Souphanouvong, one of the sons of Prince Souphanouvong, the "Red Prince," and currently a well-placed technocrat; and Peng Dee, a former dancer at the Royal Court of Luang Prabang. These interviews provide a rich diversity of views on both contemporary Laos and the "secret" history which Kremmer is seeking to uncover.

Despite its highly readable mystery style mystique, the volume is flawed by Kremmer's superficial, ethnocentric, and often distorted views of the Lao PDR, reinforced by a virile anticommunism. He refers to Vientiane (except for the Buddhist temples), the capital of Laos, as "a mouthful of rot" (p. 212). Actually, Vientiane is a charming city nestled along the majestic Mekong River. In describing a major political ceremony, he refers to Lao ladies as "pear-shaped" (p. 202). He compares the exquisite Lao national dance of *lam vong* to slow motion karate (p.92).

Overreliance on a single key informant results in numerous errors and misinterpretations. Among noticeable and serious factual errors, Kremmer refers to the Thais shelling the capital of Laos in the late '80s. There was indeed an intense border conflict between Laos and Thailand in late 1987 and early 1988, but this fighting occurred far from the Lao capital. He also describes Kong Le, who carried out a dramatic 1960 coup, as a general. In fact, he was only a simple captain. Among serious misinterpretations are references to "begging" bowls of monks, and monks not being able to speak to women. Also, Kremmer's attempt to use Lao language terms leads to a number of embarrassing comments. Kremmer, for example, refers to himself as a *felang*, not realizing that this word in Lao, unlike Thai, means Frenchman.

Another misunderstanding of Kremmer relates to his overly romanticizing the monarchy that was deposed after the communist revolution. While there have been great kings in Lao history such as Fa Ngum, Samsenthai, and Surinyavongsa, the last two Lao kings

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were not of that grand genre. The last Lao kings were both feudalistic and French-oriented elitists. Decades after Thai kings had abandoned the feudalistic tradition of polygamy, King Sisavang Wong of Laos had twelve wives.

An additional serious misunderstanding of Kremmer relates to his attempt to describe the nature of Lao reeducation camps and those sent off to "seminar" after the communist revolution. Initially, the king of Laos was given an honorary "advisory" position in the new government. He and his family were only sent to "waste away" in such camps after their alleged implicit involvement in counterrevolutionary actions against the government, and their serving as a potential rallying point for resistance to the regime.

In addition, the experiences of those sent to "seminar" and reeducation camps varied considerably depending on the nature of their activities under the previous regime. Those, such as teachers and doctors, previously involved in non-nefarious activities did not spend long periods in "seminar." Those most severely punished were those involved with the American side during the secret war in Laos such as military, police, and interior officials, and those profiteering from drugs, prostitution, and gambling, for example.

The most disturbing part of the book comes toward the end of the volume when Kremmer asserts that Laos "remains a country worth saving." Here Kremmer asserts the patronizing "white man's burden" to "save" Laos, as though it needs to be "saved" from an "evil" regime which has finally brought peace, independence, and unity to a country which previously had been plagued by violence, chaos, and decades in which it had lacked political, economic, and cultural sovereignty.

Kremmer's fascinating "search for Laos" could be used fruitfully in social science classes as a means to stimulate critical thinking about

such issues as revisionist history, ethnocentrism, the nature of monarchy in Asia, and historical comparisons between contemporary Laos and the country before the communist revolution. Kremmer's book could also be used effectively in combination with such works as *Air America*; the novel, *The Brinkman*; and Dr. Tom Dooley's trilogy to assess the unanticipated consequences of U.S. covert political intervention and related intensive secret bombing in Laos which helped bring about the political conditions which Kremmer so deplures.

Kremmer has helped put Laos back on the map, but unfortunately his nostalgia for Laos's lost monarchy detracts him from searching for the authentic Laos which represents an amazing amalgam of Buddhism, Marxism, and free market mechanisms. ■

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The Shambhala Guide to Taoism

BY EVA WONG

BOSTON AND LONDON: SHAMBHALA PUBLICATIONS, 1997

X + 268 PAGES

Until the 1990s, there were virtually no suitable texts for teaching about Taoism (Daoism). General textbooks—both texts on Chinese civilization and texts on "world religions"—usually contain a mishmash of nonsense and long-obsolete data, and often give the mistaken impression that Taoism, at least after Lao-tzu (Laozi) and Chuang-tzu (Zhuangzi), was nothing more than foolish superstition. Such impressions were generally reinforced by the few general scholarly works on Taoism, such as Holmes Welch's *The Parting of the Way* (1957), and Max Kaltenmark's *Lao Tzu and Taoism* (1969). Used alongside the anthologies of Wm. T. deBary (*Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 1960) and Wing-tsit Chan (*Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 1963), such texts perpetuated the anti-Taoist biases of the Confucian intelligentsia. Modern Confucians, wishing to be perceived by Westerners as the noble stewards of a noble civilization, were generally embarrassed by all forms of religion (which is still considered foolishness by the Enlightenment mind). They therefore taught Westerners that Taoism held nothing of value and should be derided to heighten appreciation for the ethical rationalism of Confucianism.

This book is the first comprehensive introduction to Taoism by a modern practitioner of the tradition itself. Wong, raised in Hong Kong, is a practitioner of the little-known Hsien-t'ien (Xiantian) tradition of Taoism, and has authored several books on Taoism for the general public.¹ Scholars brought up on the texts mentioned above may be surprised by this book's contents, for it presents the "superstitious mishmash" of Taoism as a cultural tradition that has a clear and

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