

H-France Review Vol. 16 (July 2016), No. 101

Mai Na M. Lee, *Dreams of the Hmong Kingdom: The Quest for Legitimation in French Indochina, 1850-1960*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015. xi + 401 pp. Maps, photos, and index. \$26.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN-10: 0299298841.

Review by Christopher Goscha, Université du Québec à Montréal.

The Hmong people emerged in the highland massif in today's southern China. They enter the written record like so many other peoples living in this vast area of continental Asia, as the Han Empire spread southwards across the Yangzi River from the third century BCE. The Hmong people lived in tribes on the borderlands of the Chinese imperial state for centuries, intermingling with their powerful neighbor and often resisting it when the Chinese pushed too hard. By the nineteenth century, however, Hmong tribes and many others found themselves confronted with two new empires pushing northward into their lands—those of the Thais and especially the Vietnamese. In the mid-nineteenth century, massive socio-political instability shook China to its core, particularly in the southern highlands. As a result, tens of thousands of Hmong people fled southwards into yet another newly forming empire—that of French Indochina.

This is where Mai Na M. Lee starts her book, *Dreams of the Hmong Kingdom: The Quest for Legitimation in French Indochina, 1850-1960*. Taking 1850 as her starting point, Dr. Lee is less concerned with the question of what it means for the Hmong to have lived in the interstices of so many Eurasian empires over the *longue durée* than to understand the Hmong quest for legitimation in Indochina under the French. Hers is not a history of all the clans making up the Hmong in French Indochina, however. As the first line of the summary blurb on the back-cover of *Dreams of the Hmong kingdom* announces (and the rest of the book confirms), the author clearly positions her book as an alternative history to Jane Hamilton-Merritt's *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992* and its focus on General Vang Pao, his clan, and their now well-known partnership with the West in the war against the Vietnamese communists.[1] Indeed, Mai Na M. Lee seeks to reveal the story of the preeminent role played by other Hmong families during the period of French colonial rule, especially the Lyfoung and the Lobliayao clans.

Born and raised in Laos, Mai Na M. Lee arrived in the United States from war-torn Indochina in 1980. She completed her Ph.D. in history at the University of Wisconsin at Madison and is now an assistant professor in the History Department of the University of Minnesota. The author explains in her introduction that she is a “member of the Lee (Ly) clan” (p. xviii) and admits that this might shape her objectivity and influence who she could and could not interview. Indeed, when she tried to glean information from General Vang Pao in the United States for her study, the general told her “to go ask her own Lee clan.” As Dr. Lee added: “He chose to remain silent on the issue with me, a Hmong Lee, affirming what had already been communicated to Hamilton-Merritt, a non-Hmong” (p. xix). Mai Na Lee did indeed go and ask her own clan. In fact, she sought out many of her clan and others who had relocated to the United States, Europe, and Thailand, and conducted some fieldwork during a brief visit to Laos. Thanks to hundreds of interviews she conducted over several years, supplemented by work in the French colonial

archives in Aix-en-Provence, Dr. Lee builds upon Hamilton-Merritt's work to provide us with a fuller understanding of the Hmong people.

Dr. Lee states on her cover that she seeks to trace the “dreams of the Hmong kingdom” under the French. Even if the Hmong never realized their own independent political entity, Dr. Lee insists that it is important to understand the Hmong “quest for legitimation.” To do this, she briefly goes back to the distant past in chapter one to explain to readers how a “Hmong identity” emerged from the depths of the Han Empire some two thousand years ago. She explains that the Hmong defined themselves both in terms of their opposition to Chinese domination and by borrowing from Han culture. In a theme that runs through the book, the author explains how the Hmong borrowed from the Chinese Confucian repertoire a host of ideas from which they carved out their own unique identity. Of particular importance for Dr. Lee is the Confucian notion of “the Mandate of Heaven as a Hmong Political Ideology” (the title of this section of the book).

Indeed, the idea that political legitimacy flows from the heavens above and from the people below and manifests itself in the historical quest for sacred kingship is at the core Dr. Lee's *Dreams of the Hmong Kingdom*. She sees the quest for the Mandate of Heaven at play in the messianic movements of Hmong leaders at the turn of the twentieth century and the strongmen that followed in their footsteps. The messianic revolts led by Xiong Mi Chang and Vue Pa Chay at the turn of the twentieth century and discussed expertly by our author may have failed, but they allow Dr. Lee to show how each of these holy, charismatic men sought to achieve the Mandate of Heaven. If they failed, she concludes, it was because “the Hmong did not deserve the celestial mandate” (p. 61). Although there are no written records to show how the Hmong appropriated Confucian concepts for achieving supraclan political action, Dr. Lee assures us that “we can detect clearly” in these two messianic movements “Han Chinese influence” (p. 61). This “particularly ‘Hmong’ method,” the author tells us on another occasion, “of applying Han Chinese Confucian concepts helps us detect, to an extent, Hmong agency,” even if, in the end, the Hmong clans failed to secure the mandate of heaven allowing them to create their own supraclan kingdom (p. 61). The author's quest to use the Mandate of Heaven to show how the Hmong sought to legitimate and concretize their dreams of a Hmong Kingdom runs through each of the remaining chapters of the book.

A second, less explicitly stated, but fascinating story also unfolds in the eight chapters making up this book. It is how the Hmong worked the margins of a vast space running from southern China to northeastern Laos by way of upper Vietnam to secure a place for themselves in French Indochina. The last two chapters also show how changes in the balance of power set in motion during the Second World War forced Hmong clans to renegotiate their partnerships as new states, armies, and actors arrived on the scene—the Japanese, the Vietnamese communists, and then the Americans. Dr. Lee succeeds much more convincingly in documenting and explaining the history of the Hmong along these lines rather than trying to identify (much less prove) the existence of a timeless Hmong Mandate of Heaven that travelled with them from the depths of time to the present.

Some of the best parts of this book trace the rise and fall of powerful Hmong leaders in the persons of Pa Tsi and his adopted son Blia Yao, who became “the most renowned Hmong leader of all time” (p. 163). What makes Blia Yao such an interesting character was his ability to draw upon local family ties and marriage alliances, combine and then tailor them to the French need to govern faraway parts of Indochina through a leader who could ensure the peace and ensure that colonial taxes arrived on time. Blia Yao's rise owed much to his “sworn blood brother,” the French military officer Henri Roux in charge of this Hmong region (p. 183). The French made such a pact with Blia Yao, Dr. Lee shows us, because he “had the skills to be a political broker for the Hmong” (p. 165).

Dr. Lee turns in chapter five to chronicling the rise of another local clan in the person of Ly Foung. This chapter is particularly interesting because Dr. Lee's careful research allows us to follow and understand how Ly Foung wrested control of parts of colonial Laos from Blia Yao by making himself not only

indispensable to the French, but also to the Lao lowland leaders who sought to promote their own control over the Hmong. Not only did Ly Fong speak French, but he also learned to speak Lao and used it effectively in interacting with the Lao royal family and in particular with Prince Phetsarath, who was in charge of administrative matters at the Lao level of French Indochina and pushed for the inclusive, unified Laos we recognize today. Like Prince Phetsarath, Ly Fong moved about the northern part of Laos and into northwestern Vietnam. He knew the Hmong peoples scattered across upper Indochina. But he also was involved in trade, picking up some knowledge of land surveying and helping the French and Bliá Yao apportion part of the nearby colonial road 7. This was a man on the move. In so doing, Ly Fong became an indispensable and increasingly powerful middleman, at ease navigating among the French, Lao and Hmong bureaucratic structures governing Hmong Indochina. Thanks above all to his ability to administer and find administrators for the Lao and the French, Ly Fong became a rival to Bliá Yao. Following the latter's death in 1935, Ly Fong further consolidated his position within the administrative Laos and in so doing ensured his family's predominance in a partnership with the French and the royal Lao government. As the author writes at one point, "Ly Fong was, after all, the only one capable of carrying out the bureaucratic duties required by the French" (p. 225). From an administrative position in Hmong Laos, Ly Fong sent his sons, most notably Touby, to colonial schools in the lowlands. Touby went the furthest—he studied in Vietnam and, thanks to a brilliant move engineered by his father, he lived in the home of the Lao royal family in Luang Prabang. All of these strategies explain better than any Mandate of Heaven how and why Hmong clans like that led by the Lee tied themselves to the French and Lao royal government so effectively. It would be fascinating to know more about Prince Phetsarath's role in incorporating the Hmong and other upland groups into a pan-Lao administrative structure via this partnership with the Ly family.

Changes in the balance of power can always disrupt such alliances and war is one of the greatest disruptors of all. Indeed, as the Japanese marched into Indochina in 1940 and then overthrew the Indochinese colonial state in March 1945, the French leaned on the Ly family more than ever. But it is also during times of war that differences between various groups resurface and rival groups turn to the new powers on the scene to help them advance their own local projects. Under Japanese threat, the French turned to the Ly family (now led by Touby) to help them restore their colonial order while another clan led by Faydang looked to another powerbroker that emerged from the Second World War, Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Touby tied the Ly clan's destiny to that of the French and then to the Americans, while the rival clan of the Faydang joined the Vietnamese. Dr. Lee ends her book with the fragile peace that came to Laos in the form of a coalition government in 1960 that saw her family's predominance wane as the Americans threw their weight behind yet another strongman, General Vang Pao, and Ho Chi Minh's government placed their bets on Faydang. In the end, the Faydang clan would emerge victorious with the Vietnamese communists and now hold key positions in running Hmong Laos today. The Lee and Vang Pao clans reside abroad.

Mai Na Lee's book is an important complement to Jane Hamilton-Merritt's *Tragic Mountains* and both should be read side by side. Missing in both books, however, is any serious discussion of the French and, in particular, of their colonial strategies for ruling the borderlands of Indochina at the local level. While I understand that Dr. Lee writes from her Hmong perspective and we should be grateful to her for the Hmong sources she brings to the table, I found myself wanting to know more about how the French, military officers in particular, developed their own strategies for ruling through the Hmong. For anyone who has read Osaar Salemink's account of Léopold Sabatier's work in the central highlands in the 1920s, Colonel Roux and his blood oath with the Hmong cries out for in-depth analysis and wider comparisons to French policies elsewhere in Indochina.^[2] While Dr. Lee rightly notes that the French at one time administered the Hmong through the Tai people (discussed in depth by Philippe Lefailler ^[3]), I would have liked to have known more about how such a multilayered organization of colonial rule functioned on the ground. The cases of military officers like Roux and Sabatier or one "ethnic minority" ruling another on behalf of the French can shed precious light on the mechanics of colonial rule and how colonial power worked (or did not) in these borderland regions.

Lastly, I couldn't help but wonder if the author could have said a bit more about Catholic (later Protestant) missionaries working in the Hmong highlands. I mention this because, if Dr. Lee is providing us with an important history of the Hmong in English, it is perhaps worth noting that the first history of the Hmong in French was published in 1924 by a member of the Missions étrangères de Paris, F.M. Savina, *Histoire des Miao*.^[4] It is not so much that the author should have added more archival sources from the Mission étrangères de Paris on Rue du Bac to her narrative. Rather she might have delved into this "foreign" history of the Hmong (Miao) and its author Father Savina to say something about the creation of political consciousness and legitimacy. The latter clearly "knew" the Hmong. Indeed he wrote one of the first dictionaries of the Hmong language in 1917. I wonder to what extent our good father Savina contributed to the emergence of these dreams of building a Hmong Kingdom.

NOTES

[1] *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993; second edition, 1999).

[2] Oscar Salemink, *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders: A Historical Contextualization, 1850-1990* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

[3] Philippe LeFailler, *La rivière Noire: L'intégration d'une marche frontière au Vietnam* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2014).

[4] F. M. Savina, *Histoire des Miao* (Hong Kong: Imprimerie de la Société des Missions Etrangères, 1924) and F.M. Savina, *Dictionnaire Miao-Tseu-Français* (Hanoi: Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient, 1917).

Christopher Goscha
Université du Québec à Montréal
Goscha.christopher@uqam.ca

Copyright © 2016 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.