

## Introduction

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This issue is devoted to the work of Grant Evans who passed away on 16 September 2014 at the age of 66. Grant was arguably the most influential scholar of Lao studies and is quoted by virtually every student in this field. Beyond this, he also was possibly the most interesting author in the field as his work incorporates the spirit of major social transformations as well as his personal character to a much higher degree than the other available literature on Laos. It is therefore one of the goals of this special issue to shed light on the relationship between the man, the historical times and his work.

All authors of this issue were close friends of Grant and his family and have engaged with his works for decades. Their papers deal with three topics that are at the core of Grant's thinking: the constant engagement with Marxism, his interest in socialist countries that eventually led him to Lao studies, and peasants. The topic of Lao peasants is the thematic core of this special issue. It tries to show that this work is not properly intelligible without taking the topics of (academic) Marxism and (applied) socialism into account. We focus on Lao peasants for several reasons. Firstly, Grant's possibly most lasting contribution to the field of Lao studies has been his work on peasants, particularly his classic, *Lao Peasants under Socialism* (1990). Secondly, not a great deal of literature on peasants, globally and in Laos, has been published in recent years. This volume might stir some interest to follow up on Grant's work. The third and most important reason for focusing on peasants is that the topic is closely connected to the other two most important strands in Grant's thought.

To acknowledge the close links between Marxism, socialism and peasants is relevant as Grant may have been one of the last anthropologists, certainly in Lao studies, who had both a keen political interest and a deep understanding of society based on social theory. He did not study some remote and supposedly exotic tribes for academic sake but he chose the topic of peasants and socialism in Laos because he wanted to know why the project of a socialist revolution had failed. To read his work as compartmentalized hyphen-anthropology would be a gross misinterpretation. The younger generation, however, has completely lost touch with the political ideals and disappointments of the 68-generation. This special issue aims at a clarification of the debates and objectives that are actually at stake in Grant's work.

Grant left a quiet, conservative, inland river town in Victoria, Australia, to attend La Trobe University late in the turbulent 1960s. While, in a broader sense, this was a time of perhaps unprecedented intellectual and social freedom, it was also the height of the Vietnam War and a time of unbroken conservative governments who told offensive lies to justify military conscription and Australia's participation in the war. University politics were being radicalized and the traditional student Labor Clubs were increasingly becoming controlled by Maoists, or supporters of the Australian Communist Party ML, who annoyed Grant just as much as the conservative establishment. He was active in establishing the La Trobe Students for Democratic Society, or SDS, which was part of a broader New Left movement whose following in

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Australia included those sympathetic to the Labor Party left, the liberal Marxists in the Communist Party of Australia, and many unaffiliated anti-war activists.

It was inevitable in the context of the times and the subject matter of his publications that he had to endure a great deal of criticism. As a keen follower of the *New Left Review*, he remained between the camps until his last days. In his student days the New Left was portrayed and condemned by the then fashionable Maoists as bourgeois reactionaries more interested in the plight of burning babies than world revolution. The New Left, of course, at the time also was under attack from the right. Some will remember the delightful statement by J Edgar Hoover: "The New Left is composed of radicals, anarchists, pacifists, crusaders, socialists, communists, idealists and malcontents. This movement, best typified by Students for a Democratic Society, has an almost passionate desire to destroy the traditional values of our democratic society and the existing social order."

With the end of Australia's involvement in Vietnam, Grant turned to broader social and political issues: he helped edit the Communist Party theoretical journal, *Arena*; he was a frequent contributor to the *Digger*, a small but influential underground newspaper; he traveled to Timor to interview FRETILIN leaders and to write of the situation on the ground; and he became a tutor at La Trobe University. He was very uncertain about his future at the time and not convinced he would make his way into academia. For much of the following period, he remained in no man's land between insignificant academic posts and freelance journalism.

Peter was lucky to accompany Grant on his initial investigations into the story of "yellow rain". They were searching the refugee camps in North and Northeast Thailand looking for the CIA star witnesses that had provided the story of a supposed genocidal attack on Hmong tribespeople in Laos. Allegedly, Soviet biological weapons were being used to wipe out the Hmong. The story had emerged through missionaries working in the refugee camps, had been picked up by the BBC correspondent in Bangkok and was being widely circulated by the international press agencies and particularly supported by the *Asian Wall Street Journal*. The allegations had also been rather sensationally written about by Sterling Seagrave in his 1981 book, *Yellow Rain: A Journey Through the Terror of Chemical Warfare*.

The official story in the West was that Pathet Lao Airforce planes launched rockets containing Soviet chemical or biological weapons to kill those Hmong who had supported the non-communist forces during the Indochina conflict. Witnesses described aerial attacks, a yellow powder falling from the sky, and many consequent deaths and injuries. Grant saw no real evidence or logic in these allegations and wished to track down the supposed witnesses. It took time to get the permissions to enter the various camps and to track down the star witnesses, the strategy being to locate multiple witnesses to the same incidents who were located in different camps, thus preventing collusion as to the answers. Eventually, the star witnesses were located, mostly Hmong military who had been supported by the CIA. They were expecting the same questions that the Western press had thrown at them. However, they were not expecting Grant Evans, who knew something of their country, their culture, and their recent history. He was waiting with the charm and patience of a Venus fly-trap.

Grant: What happened?

Star Witness: The government forces dropped a yellow gas from airplanes on us, and many people died.

Grant: What sort of planes were they?

Star Witness: I don't know, we couldn't see them.

Grant: How did you know there were airplanes?

Star Witness: We heard them.

Grant: And how long after you heard the planes did you see the yellow gas?

SW: It was some days later.

Grant: How long after that did people become sick?

SW: A few weeks.

Grant: Was this the year of great food shortage?

SW: Yes.

Grant: What was the government response?

SW: They sent rice.

So, the same government supposedly sent yellow rain and rice. A similar response was recorded from a number of witnesses across a number of locations. So the original sources of the genocide allegations had unwittingly provided a series of unrelated facts that were used by ignorant journalists and more mischievous external parties to create a completely fictitious chapter in cold-war history. Grant's refutation of these allegations earned him much criticism from the right-wing press and the United States authorities. However, his refutation has held up in light of subsequent revelations and explanations. Had the press correspondents dug a bit deeper, the world might not have heard of a chemical weapon called "Yellow Rain". Grant's book, *The Yellow Rainmakers: Are Chemical Weapons Being Used in South East Asia*, published in 1983, not only exposed a lie but also contains some brilliant anthropological insights into Hmong culture and how it helps to explain phenomena such as Yellow Rain and sudden deaths among the refugee communities in the United States.

It took Grant many more years to receive his PhD, to adjust to academia and to get a permanent position. The paper by Kelvin Rowley in this special issue neatly summarizes this development. At its end emerges the Grant Evans known to Lao Studies, the author and editor of *Lao Peasants under Socialism*, *Laos: Culture and Society*, *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance*, *A Short History of Laos* and *The Last Century of Lao Royalty*. These seem to be high-quality academic books written for a small field of specialists. To a certain degree, they are. The later books were published when Grant held the comfortable position of a reader in anthropology at Hong Kong University. To a certain degree, however, they have to be interpreted as a continuation of his political involvement. That Grant was not an ordinary academic who felt at home in his office and at academic conferences is indicated by the fact that he retired from his prestigious post many years ahead of time to live in Laos and focus on writing.

The decade in Laos is marked by his continuous theoretical and practical engagement with the socialist leadership. He was unable to refrain from criticism even though he had to constantly worry about his visa. This criticism stems from his deep attachment to Laos, which he had developed over the years. He had lasting friendships with plenty of Lao but he was also very much concerned about the developments under the New Economic Mechanism, such as nepotism, political repression, corruption and the loss of higher political ideals. While very few scholars of Lao studies even touch upon political issues, Grant dealt with them under difficult personal circumstances. This resulted in the Lao authorities acting repressively at

times and Grant lived in the continuous fear that he might be kicked out of the country. At the same time, he maintained good relations with many officials and researchers in Laos, which resulted in several successful research projects in collaboration with Lao authorities. In recent years, his introduction of inconvenient truths into the debate about the credentials of the red shirt movement in Thailand upset some academics who would prefer to maintain a more comfortable, polarized, simplicity about their social actors. Some people, who have become apologists for rotten regimes in neighboring countries themselves, came to attack Grant's breadth of interests as a betrayal rather than a continued pursuit of truth.

As time passed and perhaps with a growing awareness of mortality, the Renaissance man in Grant became more focused on what remained to be done. After retiring from Hong Kong University Grant's priorities were to make a family and to write. Other interests remained, but they were increasingly channeled into the service of the two most important things. Grant was spending most of his time at the beautiful riverside house in Vientiane, reading and writing. Personal interests such as his love of music remained important because music could be enjoyed in parallel to his work and the devotion his family. The garden was a place of reflection and inspiration feeding into his work and sometimes as a place to be with family during respites from writing.

The public Grant was a student activist, leftist writer and editor, journalist, teacher, academic and writer. He leaves an extraordinarily rich collection of books and articles on Southeast Asia, Indochina, particularly Laos, as well as a wonderful collection of book reviews in which he brought his sharp and insightful anthropological weaponry to bear on a remarkable range of topics. He recorded many of his great insights as a sole observer of societies and processes at a time when others were unable to go beyond the official lines of the new socialist states, or were not interested in the post-War subject matter. The private Grant was a bon-vivant without affectation, a gentleman without pretension, a raconteur without venom, a mentor without favor, a supporter of the disadvantaged, loyal to friends and to his past, and a most devoted husband and father.

The papers dealing with Grant's work on peasants form the core of this special issue. They try to assess both the present situation of Lao peasantry and Grant's contribution to their understanding today. The goal is not to give an interpretation of Grant's work but to assess its lasting value. Each of the three articles approaches the topic from a different angle. The paper by Boike Rehbein studies contemporary Lao peasants from a sociological perspective, the article by Michael Dwyer looks at upland peasants from a historical perspective and the paper by Kathryn Sweet from a development aid perspective. All three perspectives were relevant in Grant's work. In order to contextualize both Grant's works on peasants and the contributions, the volume begins with a paper written by Kelvin Rowley explaining Grant's intellectual background and his interest in socialist countries followed by an article written by Chris Hutton and Dominic Blaettler about Grant's work on peasants and his gradual shift away from this topic. A bibliography of Grant's publications complements the papers. It was compiled by Grant himself and slightly amended by the authors of this special issue with the assistance of Nitnoi Faming.

The article by Kelvin Rowley focuses on the genesis of the book *Red Brotherhood at War*, which he wrote together with Grant. The paper tells the story not as a personal or philological account but in order to shed light on the historical times as the political background of Grant's intellectual engagement. He argues, very much

like this introduction, that Grant's later academic works on Laos remain unintelligible without the historical context of the Vietnam War and the political mobilization of the Australian left.

The paper by Chris Hutton and Dominic Blaettler picks up where the previous paper ends. It traces Grant's intellectual history as an academic. The guiding question is Grant's long engagement with peasants and his shift away from the topic in his later years. This shift has been read as senile conservatism by some and disengagement by others. The article tries to find out to which degree Grant's shift away from peasants to Lao history and royalty bears an inner coherence. It argues that these topics were not chosen at random.

Each of the three papers on peasants in Laos takes a different disciplinary and topical approach. The article by Michael Dwyer studies the history of the Lao upland regions, more precisely the integration of the hill-regions into the French colonial realm and their construction as backward peasant territories. The argument is based on historical sources and very well complements Grant Evans' works on "hill tribes". It is not well known that he did not only study Lao peasants but wrote several papers on the upland regions, which are documented in the bibliography.

The article by Boike Rehbein looks at contemporary peasants from a sociological perspective. It argues that contemporary developments fit the pattern proposed by modernization theory only to a certain degree. Peasants' patterns of perception and action studied by Grant Evans in the 1980s persist to a significant degree, while "modernized" groups in Laos begin to return to the countryside to become agricultural professionals. Laos comprises different historical times, from pre- to post-modernization.

The final paper by Kathryn Sweet deals with Grant Evans' relation to the development aid sector. He wrote several reports for various organizations and continuously tried to establish an interaction between academia and aid representatives. The article argues that the aid sector would have profited immensely from Grant Evans' knowledge but failed to take his works on peasants into account for several reasons, which are explored in the article.