



Special Issue 3, April 2016
Devoted to the work of Grant Evans



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Books for review should be sent to:

Justin McDaniel, JLS Editor
223 Claudia Cohen Hall
249 S. 36th Street
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, PA 19104

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Announcements:

Call for Article Submissions for the JLS:

The study of Laos and the Lao has grown significantly over the past decade. With the opening up of some historical and manuscript archives, the improvement of communication and transportation, and the launching of joint Lao-foreign research projects, Laos has attracted a number of new scholars in diverse fields of expertise. The *Journal of Lao Studies* (JLS) is an exciting new scholarly project which is expected to become the first and most prestigious venue for researchers who work on Laos.

We are now accepting submissions of articles, book review suggestions, review articles (extended reviews of major publications, trends in the field, or of political, social, or economic events). These submissions can cover studies on Laos, the Lao diaspora (Northeast Thailand, Europe, the Americas, Australia, and so on), or studies in regards to ethnic groups found in Laos (Hmong, Akha, Khmu, among others).

Language: Lao and English are the main languages, other languages are welcomed. Please check with the editors first before submitting articles in other languages not listed here.



Special Issue 3, February 2016

Information and Announcements	i-ii
Introduction PETER COX and BOIKE REHBEIN	1-5
Bibliography of the Works of Grant Evans.	6-11
The Genesis of <i>Red Brotherhood at War</i> . KELVIN ROWLEY	12-23
From Peasants to Lords: The Intellectual Evolution of Grant Evans. CHRIS HUTTON and DOMINIC BLAETTLER	24-36
Upland Geopolitics: Finding Zomia in Northern Laos c. 1875. MICHAEL DWYER	37-57
Lao Peasants after Socialism. BOIKE REHBEIN	58-69
Contextualizing Development: Grant Evans, Peasant Studies and the Lao Development Sector. KATHRYN SWEET	70-75

Introduction

Peter Cox¹ and Boike Rehbein²

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

¹ Consultant, Vientiane; petercox2@bigpond.com

² Professor, Institute for Asian and African Studies, Humboldt-University Berlin; rehbeinb@hu-berlin.de

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.

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Editorial board member, *Tai Culture* (2002-2007).

Editorial board member, *Southern Review: Communication, Politics & Culture* (2001-2007).

Editorial board, *Aseanie* (2006-present).

The Genesis of Red Brotherhood at War

Kelvin Rowley¹

Abstract

The paper traces Grant Evans' intellectual development from university times to his early academic writings presented as a pre-history of the book *Red Brotherhood at War* (1984). It situates this development in the historical circumstances of Australia between 1968 and the early 1980s, which were dominated by the Vietnam War and struggles between various leftist factions. The core of the argument concerns Grant Evans' reflexive attitude to dominant intellectual trends and his early critical attitude towards the totalitarian tendencies in countries that called themselves socialist at the time.

Introduction

I first met Grant Evans in 1969. We both came from farming backgrounds, came to Melbourne to attend university, lived in the student quarter near Melbourne University, and moved in the same social circles. We soon became good friends.

Over the following years, we engaged in constant discussion. There's a lot that could be said about Grant's personal qualities – his generosity, good humor and other qualities. I will not go into that here. Our discussions ranged freely over a myriad of topics, from pop music to astronomy. Most of these issues I will ignore.

What I will do here is to recall how our views on issues relevant to the writing of *Red Brotherhood at War* evolved. This is a retrospective summing up which brings coherence to discussions that were actually rambling and often confused. It ignores the diversions and sidetracks we explored from time to time, and does not attempt to give a full picture of the range of Grant's interests. This article simply tries to draw together the threads of what Grant and I discussed which led to *Red Brotherhood at War*.

I had begun a science degree at Melbourne University in 1966, but soon became more interested in politics and history. In 1969, I was doing night school to qualify for entry into an Arts course. Grant was majoring in English literature at La Trobe University, and completed that course. However, he became increasingly unhappy with discussions of Leavisite literary criticism.

This was a time of political and cultural ferment. The conservative hegemony in Australian politics forged by Robert Menzies in the early 1950s was unraveling. Social and sexual taboos were being swept away with the rise of the "counter-culture" of sex, drugs and rock'n'roll. A New Left emerged in the US, stressing empowerment of the powerless, human rights, and participatory democracy. The War in Vietnam provoked widespread protests and criticism of US foreign policy. China was swept up in Mao's Cultural Revolution. In 1968, the Soviet Union occupied Czechoslovakia to put an end to the "Prague Spring."

¹ Formerly senior lecturer, Faculty of Life and Social Sciences, Swinburne University of Technology, Australia; kjrowley101@yahoo.com.au.

Grant and I were both heavily involved in the student politics of the time, particularly organizing against the Vietnam War. We found ourselves arguing not only against defenders of the war, but against others in the anti-war movement. Many Labor Party supporters were lukewarm in their opposition to the war. On the other hand, the Maoists, who were numerous at La Trobe University, were sectarian and disruptive. One of Grant's Maoist opponents in those days was Ian Macdonald, who later became a Labor politician in NSW. In the last year of his life, Grant followed with keen interest the NSW Independent Commission Against Corruption's investigation into Macdonald's activities as Minister for Mining. These led to ICAC recommending Macdonald be prosecuted for corruptly issuing lucrative mining licenses to his mates (Shanahan 2013).

Marxist beginnings

Grant and I got much of our intellectual stimulus not from formal classroom discussion, but from debates with fellow students. Marxism was part of the zeitgeist, and we embraced it. But Marxism came in many different shapes and forms, from mathematical economics to cultural criticism. There was a lot of interest in philosophers, especially the "Western Marxists" who tried to create an alternative to Stalinism by developing a humanist version of Marxism. Grant and I diligently read Marcuse and wrestled with Hegel's ideas.

We were initially more attracted to Louis Althusser's criticism of the Western Marxist tradition, and to his defense of Marxism as a science. This lasted until he tried to explain what he meant by science. Then, at least as we saw it, he fell into incoherence and obscurantism. Neither of us paid much attention as the successors to Western Marxism and Althusser developed into post-modernism.

Both Grant and I read widely on current events. We were also both keen readers of the British journal *New Left Review* and the American *Monthly Review*. We both also read widely and eclectically, on mainstream social science. My main focus was more on economics and Grant's on sociology. We lapped up the works of C. Wright Mills and Ralph Miliband, and followed the British Marxist historians, especially Eric Hobsbawm. We were deeply influenced by Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1966; cf. Moore 1965a, b).³

At La Trobe, Grant worked on the student newspaper. In the early 1970s, with a group of friends we established a small-circulation magazine, *Intervention*, with the hope of stimulating a wider discussion of Marxist analysis of Australian economy, society and culture. Some of our friends joined the trade union movement, where they tried to apply ideas of participatory democracy and worker's control – as a rule, not welcomed by union oligarchs.

Grant and I also joined the Communist Party of Australia. The CPA had broken with the Soviet Union over the "Prague Spring" in 1968, and we supported its efforts to chart an independent course for itself and for Australia. Grant went to Sydney and worked on the CPA paper *Tribune* for a couple of years. Meanwhile, I did my Arts degree, majoring in history and economic history.

³ Barrington Moore, Jr, worked for the OSS (precursor of the CIA) in World War II, then at Harvard University.

We both left the CPA in the mid-1970s, having concluded that the efforts to reform the party were not enough to win it a wider base of support. Grant took a position teaching Sociology at La Trobe University and I took one teaching Politics at Swinburne Institute of Technology (later Swinburne University of Technology).

Actually existing socialism

This experience helped considerably to sharpen our thinking about “actually-existing socialism.” Initially, we were heavily influenced by the writings of Isaac Deutscher. He was sharply critical of Stalin’s dictatorship, but optimistic about the prospects for reform on the post-Stalin period.

I had read the classic literature of Cold War totalitarian theory before I met Grant. I thought Friedrich and Brzezinski offered a list of descriptors that did not capture the dynamics of the regimes to which it applied. They equated communist and fascist regimes, although their origins, ambitions and consequences were quite different. During the Cold War, the advocates of totalitarian theory tended to see all communist leaders as “new Hitlers” and any negotiations with them as “a new Munich.” This was, I thought, very dangerous.

I do not know if Grant read the classic literature on totalitarianism, but was certainly familiar with the general concept. We both found Isaac Deutscher’s arguments on the Stalin and post-Stalin Soviet system more persuasive.⁴

However, by 1969 we were beginning to think about the limitation to Deutscher’s interpretation. His views fitted well with the Khrushchev years, but after Leonid Brezhnev took over in 1964, democratization halted and even went into reverse, while the economy slid into stagnation. The suppression of the “Prague Spring” was not only a violation of Czechoslovakian national sovereignty; it was emblematic of all that was going wrong with the Soviet Union in the Brezhnev era.

Deutscher, we realized, was good on analyzing high politics but weak on economics. To understand the economics of the Soviet system, we looked to the writings of Paul Baran, one of the *Monthly Review* writers, and Maurice Dobb, the leading British Communist economist, who was a specialist on the Soviet economic system. They set out the best arguments we could find for the superiority of central planning over the market in achieving high rates of growth.⁵

Both clearly under-estimated the damage done by Stalin’s forced collectivization and purges. However, by 1969, it was clear that the problems went deeper than that. I had come across estimates for factor-productivity for the economies of Soviet-bloc countries,

The figures for the productivity of the capital stock in the USSR were not only lower than in the west (we knew that the Soviet economy lagged behind the west, so that

⁴ For the classical theory of totalitarianism, see Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski (1956). Isaac Deutscher (1907-67) was expelled from the Polish Communist Party in the early 1930s and moved to Britain shortly before World War II, where he worked as a journalist (cf. Deutscher 1966 a, b; 1970).

⁵ Paul A. Baran (1909-1964) was born in Russia, but lived mainly in Germany and France and migrated to the USA shortly before World War II. He also worked for the OSS during World War II. After the war he taught economics at Stanford University (cf. Baran/Sweezy 1966). For the career of Maurice Dobb (1900-76) see Timothy Shenk (2013).

was no shock) but it was actually declining. Far from overtaking the west, as Khrushchev had boasted, by the late 1960s the Soviets were falling further behind.

These figures indicated that the heart of the matter was the efficiency of investment, i.e., the system of central planning which Baran and Dobb had so praised. Furthermore, the problem was not unique to the USSR, but could be seen in more developed countries of the Soviet bloc.

At first, we looked to Ernest Mandel, the Belgian Marxist writer – like Deutscher, a follower of Trotsky – for a solution. He explained that the planning system in the USSR was warped by “bureaucratic distortions” which were defended by authoritarian controls. This could be fixed by democratization, the injection of “worker’s control” into enterprises and greater freedom into public life – without weakening the overall mechanism of central planning or the “leading role” of a Leninist party.⁶

The old communist Dobb did not accept this. In the 1960s, he took up the case for reform, for decentralization, as well as democratization. Dobb argued that a highly centralized system of resource allocation could work reasonably well in a poor country in the initial stages of economic development. But as development proceeds, the economy becomes more complex and such a system becomes increasingly dysfunctional. Reform becomes a necessity.

In 1971, I discovered Alec Nove’s textbook on the Soviet economy, which set out the problems in detail, and with great clarity. In 1972, his *Economic History of the USSR* reinforced the message. The centralized, top-down system of planning was itself the problem, reinforced by and reinforcing, the one-party system of rule.

The solution inevitably involved an expansion of the role of market mechanisms at the expense of central planning. This did not lead Grant and me to embrace the neo-liberal idea of the necessity of privatization. Elsewhere, Nove wrote extensively about how public enterprises could be run efficiently and accountably by salaried managers. This could be achieved without subordinating public purpose to generating and maximizing a private profit income stream.⁷

Grant and I agreed that the solution to the problems of Soviet-type economies was a transition to some form of “market socialism.” Public accountability meant making the “leading role” of the party contestable. This might lead to a western-style multi-party system, based on electoral competition between working-class and middle-class parties. However, this could not be taken for granted. Dominant-party systems, such as had emerged in Japan and Singapore, were al another possibility.

Accepting this, the question then became, where a Soviet-type system was entrenched, what pressures would be necessary to force change, and what would be the outcome? It was clear that in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, economic stagnation was providing the pressure. The ruling elite was resisting this, but Grant and I thought that eventually it would have little choice but to embark on the sort of reforms Alexander

⁶ Ernest Mandel (1923-95) fought in the Belgian resistance during World War II and became a leading official of the Fourth International after the war (cf. Mandel 1968).

⁷ Alec Nove served as a soldier in World War II, worked as a public servant in post-war Britain, then became Professor of Economics at Glasgow University. See Brown/Cairncross (1997). Crucial in shaping our views were Nove (1961, 1972, 1973, 1983).

Dubcek had promoted during the short-lived “Prague Spring.” The alternative, we thought, was not stasis, but regression to something like Rumania or Albania.

We did not think Mao’s China offered a credible alternative. It was still in the earliest stage of economic development. Even then, under Mao’s utopian impulsiveness China had not managed to operate central planning effectively. Yet from the early 1960s, *Monthly Review* writers, including Baran, had become increasingly enthusiastic about China (cf. the debate Sweezy/Bettleheim 1972). Baran died in 1965, so we will never know what he would have made of Mao’s Cultural Revolution. However, other *Monthly Review* contributors endorsed it with enthusiasm. However, Deutscher had realized that Mao was launching a devastating purge of the ruling party, reducing his country to chaos in the process. Grant and I were convinced that Deutscher’s analysis was right.

A realist approach to international politics

Marxism offered no coherent theory of international politics. Lenin’s theory of imperialism was essentially an explanation of the behavior of capitalist states before World War I. It did not purport to explain the international relations of communist states. They supposedly operated according to quite different principles from the international relations of capitalist states. The Soviet leaders claimed that their foreign policy followed the principles of socialist internationalism.

Grant and I thought that socialist internationalism had not survived the First World War. The realist framework developed by E.H. Carr in his study of interwar diplomacy *The Twenty Years’ Crisis* was a much more convincing explanation of Soviet foreign policy. Carr saw states as pursuing power politics in an insecure, unequal and competitive state-system. Carr rejected the view that foreign policy was driven primarily by moral principles or ideology, as idealists insisted. It was driven primarily by practical concerns and *raison d’état*.⁸

Soviet foreign policy in the 1920s and 1930s had been one of the case studies on which Carr based his argument. Then the USSR was the weakest and most vulnerable state in the European system. It played the other major powers of the day, Nazi Germany, Great Britain and France off against each other – successfully enough until 1941, when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union. The dramatic policy flips involved were incomprehensible to idealists, but easily explained by realists.

After World War II, to a realist the Soviet Union was an emergent great power. It had a hard-won sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, which it was determined to protect at any cost. In this context, we saw Soviet internationalism as essentially a rhetorical cloak for great-power domination. The occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968 was a case in point.

In this respect, we agreed with the Chinese criticism of Soviet “hegemonism.” However, in our view, the revolutionary zeal of Mao’s China was the bluster of an isolated and vulnerable country. Once China broke out of that isolation with the opening of relations with the US in 1972, it began to play the great-power game itself. China’s

⁸ The British diplomat, journalist and historian E.H. Carr (1892-1982) is best known for his multi-volume history of Soviet Russia. But in this context, his key work is Carr (1964). For analyses of Carr’s evolving ideas, see Halsham (1999) and Cox (2004).

maneuverings between the US and the Soviet Union in the 1970s were basically similar those of Stalin in the 1930s.

The US had also emerged from World War II as a great power. The theory of imperialism had greater relevance here, as the US developed truly global commercial and financial interests. Even so, the realist approach addressed issues this theory overlooked. The war in Vietnam was always more about the “credibility” of US power than about American commercial interests in Southeast Asia.

Peasants and nationalism

Once Cold War blocs stabilized in Europe, Soviet Union and the USA fought out their Cold War competition in the emerging nations resulting from the collapse of the colonial empires. There was much discussion of the role of the “Third World” of the newly independent countries, poor and predominantly rural, as a counter-balance to the two Cold War blocs.

In 1974, the Portuguese were giving up their colony of East Timor. Grant visited the country, and wrote about it extensively (Evans 1975). He supported Timorese independence, but was one of the first to warn of the danger of an Indonesian invasion. This experience stimulated his interest in the sociology and economics of peasant agriculture.

There was a lot written at that time about the role of peasants in revolution. Much of this was fuelled not only by a romanticized view of Mao’s China, but also by the back-to-nature sentiments popular in the “counter culture” of the time. It was espoused, Grant and I thought, by people who had never had shit on their shoes. No doubt, our upbringing in Australian farming communities made us skeptical.

Our interest in peasant studies had begun with Barrington Moore. Before 1974, both of us had dabbled in anthropology. While studying Asian history, I had discovered Hsiao Tong Fei’s *Peasant Life in China* in the Melbourne University library.⁹ After East Timor, Grant began reading in this field much more systematically. I followed along in his wake. We were particularly impressed by writers such as Marvin Harris, Elman Service and Eric Wolf.¹⁰ On peasant agriculture in Southeast Asia, Grant introduced me to the works of James Scott (1976), Samuel Popkin (1979) and Charles Keyes (1977). He also investigated the Russian populist writer on peasant household economy, Alexander Chayanov.¹¹

We continued to oppose the Vietnam War. We saw it as primarily a war of peasant nationalism against foreign invasion. Vietnam was unusual in that such a war was led by

⁹ Xiaotong Fei (1910-2005) was a pioneer of anthropology and sociology in China. He was honoured in the early years of the PRC, purged in the “anti-Rightist” campaign of 1958, and rehabilitated after Mao’s death. When he died, Xiaotong Fei was Professor of Sociology at Beijing University. Crucial in shaping our views were Xiaotong Fei (1945, 1947).

¹⁰ Marvin Harris’ magnum opus was *The Rise of Anthropological Theory: A History of Theories of Culture* (1968). Elman R. Service wrote *Primitive Social Organisation: An Evolutionary Perspective* (1963) and Eric R Wolf wrote *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (1971).

¹¹ Alexander Chayanov (1888-1939) was a Russian agrarian specialist prominent in the 1920s, purged in 1930 for “defending the kulaks” in the face of Stalin’s collectivization, and executed in 1939. Grant had a copy of his *Theory of Peasant Economy* (1966).

communists. We found Chalmers Johnson's *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power* (1962), analyzing the Chinese and Yugoslav experience during World War II, helpful here. This raised the issue of the relationship between communism and nationalism. In our view, this depended on circumstance. It was very different in Eastern Europe and Asia after World War II – in one case, the dominating power was the Soviet Union, in the other it was the US.

The nature of nationalism was a vexing issue. We were particularly influenced by the debate between Tom Nairn and Eric Hobsbawm in the pages of *New Left Review*. This was part of an extended debate between those who believed nations were communities of great antiquity, and those such as Hobsbawm and Ernest Gellner, who argued that nationalism was a product of modern history. We were persuaded by the modernists.¹² The idea of national self-determination only became an organizing principle of international politics with the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, and Eastern Europe in the interwar years provided a laboratory demonstration of how difficult it could be to apply it in practice.

The end of the Vietnam War

We were not surprised by the way the Vietnam War ended. Essentially, in its attempt to defeat what it misinterpreted as Soviet expansion the US had taken over the French effort to maintain foreign domination in Vietnam. Escalation turned a guerilla war into a war of attrition which took a huge toll of human life. The Americans were unwilling to bear the cost this imposed on them. When they withdrew, the Saigon regime they had propped up collapsed in two years. This left the Vietnamese communists finally in full control, but of a devastated country heavily dependent on Soviet and Chinese aid.

Nor were we surprised by the outcome in Laos. When the Americans left Vietnam, their allies in Laos began seeking an accommodation with their Vietnamese-backed opponents. The upshot was a more-or-less peaceful transition to communist rule. In both countries, post war reconstruction commenced under authoritarian one-party rule. This followed roughly the Soviet model, and we expected that it would work reasonably well for a few years before the familiar problems would begin to accumulate.

We were surprised – and shocked – by what happened in Cambodia. We had expected something similar to events in Laos; I had expected the political centre would hold out better under Prince Sihanouk, moderating the new regime. This was way off the mark.

Instead, the victorious Khmer Rouge expelled all foreigners, renounced all outside assistance, and evacuated the entire urban population to the countryside. Then they closed Cambodia off from the outside world. Sihanouk disappeared from sight. At first, the only source of information was official propaganda, which was upbeat. But within a couple of years a trickle of refugees had crossed into Thailand with terrible tales to tell.

¹² This debate was kicked off by Tom Nairn, 'The Modern Janus' (1975). Ernest Gellner first presented his ideas in *Thought and Change* (1964) and reformulated them most forcefully in *Nations and Nationalism* (1983). Eric Hobsbawm developed his ideas in his multivolume history of the 19th century, and summed up in *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (1990).

In the absence of hard information, debates about Cambodia generated much more heat than light. Noam Chomsky emerged as a leading critic of the “western propaganda machine” over Indochina and Cambodia in particular. He condemned journalists for reporting speculation in the absence of facts. When Francois Ponchaud published *Cambodia Year Zero*, an account of life under the Khmer Rouge based on his own experience (he was one of the westerners expelled by the new regime), refugee accounts, and close scrutiny of official propaganda, Chomsky published a critique which was scathing in tone and nit-picking in substance.¹³

Grant and I found ourselves among the pessimists. Vast areas of farmland had been abandoned due to fighting and bombing. The only possible outcome of repudiating foreign food assistance under these circumstances was widespread starvation.

We began following developments in all three countries as closely as we could, scouring newspapers for reports, gathering academic articles and whatever we could find by way of official documents. We soon became aware of the extent to which developments in the Indochinese countries were being shaped by the politics of the great powers.

The US was temporarily out of the game, but bitter about what it saw as its humiliation at the hands of the Vietnamese. Triumphant but desperately impoverished, Hanoi was demanding reparations from the US. Its chances of getting this were zero.

The Vietnamese were especially keen to get American reparations, because their patrons in the communist world had fallen out with each other. Throughout the war, Hanoi managed a careful balancing act between China and the Soviet Union. Now that the war was over, China demanded that Hanoi break its ties with the Soviet Union. Heavily dependent on economic assistance from the Soviet Union, Hanoi refused to do so. China stepped up the pressure. When the Khmer Rouge regime made its border dispute with Vietnam public and denounced the Vietnamese as aggressors, China immediately threw its full weight behind them.

Mao's death in 1976 and the ascension to power of Deng Xiaoping brought about dramatic changes in Chinese domestic policy. Especially in agriculture, the country began making some the changes Grant and I had been discussing. However, there had not been the slightest change to China's relations with Vietnam and Cambodia.

Clearly, this was not a matter of Maoist ideology. The crucial fact for Beijing was that Vietnam was in China's backyard. In our view, this confirmed the realist view that Chinese foreign policy was the *raison d'état* of an emerging great power. Embedded in an unequal triangular relationship with the US and the USSR, it was trying to assert its position as a regional power over communist Indochina.

Meanwhile, developments inside Cambodia remained shrouded in mystery. In 1978, a handful of sympathetic outsiders were allowed in, to write glowing accounts of the new regime. These included Ted Hill, leader of the Communist Party of Australia

¹³ Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, ‘Distortions at Fourth Hand,’ *Nation*, June 6, 1977, concentrated on cataloguing errors in press coverage, which the authors treated as “propaganda” to whitewash America's role in Indochina. They commented on the French version of Ponchaud's book, which was published in English as *Cambodia Year Zero* (1978). Chomsky and Herman elaborated their approach in several works, culminating in *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988).

(Marxist-Leninist). Grant and I agreed that if he thought things were good, they must be very bad indeed.

There were violent clashes on the Thai-Cambodian border, as well as the Vietnamese border. Rumors of high-level purges abounded. Only a couple of Khmer Rouge leaders appeared in public, and they blandly assured their listeners that all was well.

With the Soviet purges of the 1930s in mind, I remarked to Grant at this point, "Watch the General-Secretary!" This would be the person who ruled the Party. This would mean he would also run the regime, and in particular its secret police – presumably, the instrument of any purge. In 1978, the only thing I knew about this man in Cambodia was his *nom de guerre*, Pol Pot.

Deciding to write *Red Brotherhood*

In late 1978, we heard that an acquaintance of mine, Malcolm Caldwell, was going to visit Cambodia. Malcolm had even asked to meet Pol Pot himself. He was Southeast Asian specialist from Scotland who I had met a couple of years previously when he had visited Australia. I had found him very enjoyable company. He was highly intelligent, well informed, eloquent - and deeply deluded.

Malcolm was a romantic. He was opposed to industrialization, and believed that Mao's aim was to create a rural utopia in China. *Easy Rider* meets Chairman Mao, I thought to myself. He rejected my view that the Khmer Rouge had imposed a new catastrophe on Cambodia, claiming they were leading Cambodia where Mao had pointed, to an agrarian socialism.

Caldwell went to Cambodia in December 1978 in the company of two American journalists, Elizabeth Becker and Richard Dudman. They did an extensive but carefully arranged tour of the countryside. When they returned to the ghost-city of Phnom Penh, they were given an audience with Pol Pot. He delivered a tirade against the Vietnamese, who he accused of plotting with the KGB and the CIA against the Cambodian revolution. Then Becker and Dudman were returned to their hotel, while Caldwell got a private *tete-a-tete* with Pol Pot.

What Malcolm made of all this we will never know. Shortly after he returned to the hotel, gunmen broke into his room and shot him dead. Becker and Dudman were flown out ASAP, and a week later the Vietnamese army invaded Cambodia.¹⁴

Not long before Malcolm's murder, Grant and I found ourselves in argument with our friend Gavan McCormack. Gavan had written a lengthy article expounding the Chomsky view of postwar Indochina (McCormack 1979). Things were better than western propaganda had made out. The disputes between the Cambodian and Vietnamese had been blown out of proportion. They had fought as comrades-in-arms against US imperialism and were not about to go to war against each other.

¹⁴ The circumstances of Malcolm Caldwell's murder are described in Elizabeth Becker, *When the War was Over: Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Revolution* (1986). Caldwell (born 1931) was a researcher in the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, and a founding editor of the *Journal of Contemporary Asia*. His rural romanticism is evident in his last book, *The Wealth of Some Nations: Introduction to the Study of Political Economy* (1977). His previous work, *Cambodia in the South East Asian War* (1973), was more narrowly-focused, conventional, and much better.

In fact, we argued, things were much worse than that. Comrades were murdering comrades. The Vietnamese would invade Cambodia as soon as the ground was hard enough to carry tanks. The whole region would then explode into war once again. The Soviet Union, China and the US would support opposing sides. We had no idea how it would end, but we knew a lot more people would die before we found out.

Grant and I found ourselves in such complete agreement on this assessment that we decided to write an article together about it. Then we decided to visit the region to see for ourselves what we had been talking about. We could afford to do this, because by then both of us had positions as lecturers – regular, reasonable incomes at last. Then, of course, the planned article turned into a book. The result, a few years later, was *Red Brotherhood at War* (1984).

We conceived that book as an immediate response to events in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. A basic motive for writing it was our disagreement with many of the arguments that were circulating at the time, both those of anti-communist Cold warriors on the right and of utopians on the Left. However we sought to base our refutations on factual evidence, rather than our own subjective preferences.

To gather that evidence, Grant and I both visited the region at every opportunity over the next few years, visiting as many of the places we wrote about as we could, and talking to people involved, at every level. Spent a lot of time with journalists covering events as they happened. We also learned an enormous amount from academic specialists on the region, too. But we were ourselves neither journalists nor regional specialists.

Commentators on the book acknowledged that we had gathered an impressive range of empirical material even when they disagreed with our perspective. The underlying theoretical scaffolding was not so widely recognized. We made few references to general political theories, but we bought the theoretical perspectives we had developed over the previous decade to the book.

The general methodology of the book was historical and comparative. We tried to explain different outcomes by looking at similarities and differences in historical background, social structure and political institutions. This approach owed much to Barrington Moore, and Marxism generally. It was also shaped by what we read on peasant societies and nationalist movements generally.

Our approach to the workings of the communist states of Indochina owed much to analysts of Soviet-bloc politics and economics, particularly Isaac Deutscher and Alec Nove. Our approach to the foreign policies of these states was based squarely on the realist tradition in international relations.

We organized the empirical material we gathered by conceiving our subject matter as existing on three distinct but interacting levels. There was, first, the internal politics of the individual nation-states, and the jockeying of individuals within them. There was the level of regional politics, with Thailand and the ASEAN states vigorously opposed Vietnam's role in Indochina after the overthrow of the Pol Pot regime. Finally, there was the level of the great powers, China, the US and USSR, whose rivalry shaped events in the region so decisively. This made a complex story manageable without oversimplifying it.

Grant would go on to a distinguished career in Asian studies, based on solid work he did after his collaboration with me on *Red Brotherhood at War*. But I think important

foundations of that career lay in the debates about politics and social theory Grant had with me and other friends in the decade before the two of us decided to join forces to write that book.

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From Peasants to Lords: The Intellectual Evolution of Grant Evans

Christopher Hutton¹ and Dominic Blaettler²

Abstract

This paper reviews Grant Evans' writings on peasants, focusing on the theoretical frameworks within which he operated. Evans' career is marked by a turn away from the ideological beliefs of his youth and early academic career, and in tandem with this, his work shifted from the socio-economic anthropology of rural Laos to a broader concern with Lao society, religion, culture and history. Evans became increasingly concerned that Lao history should be written outside the framework of post-1975 communist nationalism, and the logical culmination of this was his project to document the modern history of the Lao monarchy. His critique of central planning and social engineering was extended to the assumptions of (many) aid interventions, especially those that brought a prepackaged ideological agenda to the complex social, economic and moral economy of rural Laos. While by the end of the 1990s peasants were no longer the main focus of his work, he continued to insist on the continuing relevance of the category and the importance of a proper, anthropologically informed understanding of the rural economy and of Lao peasant society.

Introduction

In his early and mid-career, Grant Evans' most important anthropological writing concerned peasants. He published a series of articles on this topic in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Evans 1986, 1987, 1988b,c, 1990a), and two books *Agrarian Change in Communist Laos* (1988a) and *Lao Peasants under Socialism* (1990b). For Evans, the events of 1989, in particular the collapse of the Soviet Union, marked an intellectual watershed, after which an entire field of academic enquiry with its common points of reference and framework of assumptions, almost instantly came to a halt. While Evans was intensely critical of the political systems he found in Southeast Asia (and by extension in other communist societies), he had been very much formed by the surrounding intellectual and ideological debates. While he continued to publish on peasants, his primary focus gradually shifted to more general historical and cultural themes, notably the abiding significance and pervasive social presence of Lao Buddhism. This led him ultimately to research on the Lao royal family (Evans 2009).

Simplistically, one might say Evans moved from fieldwork with peasants to studying aristocrats. These are, perhaps not coincidentally, the two categories that appear in the subtitle of Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (1966), a work that Evans greatly admired. In this paper we present a brief survey of Grant Evans' writing on peasants and agrarian policy, and then move on to a discussion of the continuities and discontinuities in his thinking, taking into account the overall trajectory of his work.

¹ Professor, School of English, The University of Hong Kong; chutton@hku.hk

² Professor, Bern University of Applied Sciences, Switzerland; dominic.blaettler@bfh.ch

1. Debates and controversies in the late 1980s

Evans began his university studies in 1968 as a member of a generation of students radicalized by the Vietnam War, becoming part of what he termed the 'New Left' in Australia (Rehbein 2011: 99, and Rowley, this volume). Not surprisingly, Evans' work on peasants was written in dialogue with Western Marxist and pro-communist writings, against the backdrop of the post-1975 fall-out from the Indo-China conflict. His first substantial experience of Southeast Asia began in 1979 with the research for *Red Brotherhood at War* (Evans and Rowley 1984). He subsequently carried out fieldwork in Laos between 1979 and 1987. Unlike in other communist states in Southeast and East Asia, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), which came to power in 1975, largely backed down from its initial plan for radical reform in the countryside. New taxes imposed on the countryside in 1976 triggered widespread resistance, and the collectivization drive of 1978-79 faltered in the face of a potential exodus of lowland farmers to neighbouring Thailand (Evans 1988a, b, Dommen 1989). In a survey of writings on 'peasant consciousness' (1987) Evans examined critically the work of radical Western scholars, notably James Scott's *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1976). Scott's views are seen as shaped by an ideological project, namely the search for 'the social bases of a radical historical subject other than the proletariat'. For this reason, Scott presented the village as relatively autonomous economically, as opposed to the proletariat which is tied to the capitalist class through industrial production (Evans 1987: 197). For Scott, the cultural autonomy of the village pre-existed the rise of urban societies and remains the basis for its potential as a site of resistance (Evans 1987: 197, Scott 1976). On this view, there is a latent rebellion, a 'cognitive structure of revolt' in peasant society and folk culture. The peasant world is by and large free of the impact of hegemonic institutions. The primary exception to this is religion, which is however subject to 'slippages' in meaning as it travels down the hierarchy (Evans 1987: 196).

Describing the intellectual debate between Scott's 'moral peasant' as opposed to Samuel Popkin's 'rational peasant' (Popkin 1979) as 'sterile', and finding more of substance in Scott's argument, Evans nonetheless pointed to Popkin's attention to political organization among peasants as a positive feature missing in Scott's account. Scott wrote 'as if the modern state has hardly penetrated the country-side of South-east Asia' (1987: 197). Evans was skeptical of Scott's account of hegemony and his application of the concept to peasant societies, noting that for Gramsci the issue at hand was 'party-building and the creation of working-class political institutions' (1987: 208). The search for an understanding of 'what peasants think' was, Evans concluded, a response to 'fading hopes for a peasant revolution' (1987: 210).

Evans rejected autonomous readings of peasant society, in particular the understanding of it as somehow set apart from politics and the impact of the state. In particular, he criticized Marxist-inspired research for its neglect of 'formal political institutions among the peasantry' (1987: 211). There was a clear dilemma in relation to accounts of 'peasant consciousness'. Do we take an external view and imply the presence of exploitation from the underlying social and economic inequalities? Or do we need to draw on direct ideological statements from the peasants themselves, in which case what might be termed resistance was hard to distinguish from the everyday grumbling and grievances that are a mundane feature of village life? Attempts to frame peasant society in terms of exploitation, on the basis that peasants were surplus givers in a wider society of surplus takers, were simplistic (Evans

1988b). Stratification and inequality involved both exploitation and a web of 'reciprocal rights and duties', and it was extremely hard to find a point of view, either 'emic' or 'etic', to distinguish neatly between the two (1988b: 232).

In *Agrarian Change in Communist Laos* (1988a) Evans showed considerable sympathy for the magnitude of the task faced by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party on assuming power. The new administration, he wrote, 'was bequeathed a particularly weak administrative structure by the former Royal Lao Government', especially given that the majority of the state's budget came from external aid. The Royal Lao Government (RLG) was so dominated by the United States that the US ambassador was known as the 'second Prime Minister' (Evans 1988a: 4). The LPRP's approach to collectivization was beset by natural disasters as well as logistical problems. The government was faced with a potential mass exodus of lowland Lao peasants into Thailand (1988a: 46); it needed to be flexible and was able to moderate its policies according to experience. There was 'general confusion rather than general coercion' (1988a: 43). The regime's problems were not unique to communism but were those 'faced by a modernizing elite and its state apparatus trying to gain control of a refractory economy and bend it to its aims' (1988a: 13). The party was 'a peasant-based party' and was 'sensitive to issues raised by its rural cadres and allows criticism of its policies' (1988a: 45). In a speech held in Vientiane on December 26, 1979 Kaysone Phomvihane, faced with a severe contraction of the Lao economy between 1975 and the end of 1977, set out criticisms of the command economy model and 'excessive centralism' (1988a: 53). Evans concluded that 'a basic commitment to decentralized socialism seems entrenched in Laos' (1988a: 87). The new policy launched in 1979 was not a retreat from socialist objectives in the form of 'economic liberalization', but rather 'a radical re-thinking of economic policy and a modification of the role of agriculture and the peasantry within it' (1988a: 2).

2. Lao Peasants under Socialism

Lao Peasants (1990b), the most influential work of Evans' early academic career, represents a significant shift from *Agrarian Change*. There Evans applied an anthropological perspective to debates about planning, collectivization, resistance and social control, using Laos as a basis for comparative study, but its analysis reflected considerable alienation from the rhetoric and political goals of the regime. The field work was carried out on cooperatives in the Vientiane Plain, and while this was in one sense a limitation, it was also an advantage since these cooperatives were in the best position to receive 'support and backup' from the government, and this therefore made them a test case for the policy as a whole. In any case it was extremely difficult at that time to get permission to do any kind of field work at all: 'by pure accident, this book [*Lao Peasants*] now stands as a unique document of the Lao peasantry at the time of high socialism in Laos' (1995: xxv).

The aim of the work was to describe 'the confrontation between a modernizing regime and the social and economic world of its rural population, which remains embedded in a natural economy' (1990b: xii). The use of the word 'confrontation' is indicative of how the tone had shifted from the more sympathetic account offered in *Agrarian Change*. The opening pages of *Lao Peasants* take a skeptical look at the notion of 'primitive communism', which drew on Lewis H. Morgan's anthropological classic *Ancient Society* (1877). The idea of prestate societies as egalitarian and lacking a division of labour, although partially discredited, continued to influence both the

official anthropology of the Soviet bloc and Western Marxist understandings of precapitalist and postcapitalist societies (1990b: 9). However, following Lenin, there was strong suspicion of independent peasants as incipient or spontaneous capitalists (Evans 1988c: 75). Evans cited the work of the Soviet agronomist A.V. Chayanov (1888-1937), who rejected this idea and opposed large-scale collectivization (1990b: 23-26). The basic unit of the peasant economy was the household, both as producer and consumer, in a largely subsistence-based economy, and this represented a substantial barrier to collectivization. Chayanov was executed in 1937, but his ideas became current in the West during the 1960s. Chayanov also emphasized the dynamic nature of peasant society, rather than its division into rigidly defined strata, with families rising and falling, migrating, and dividing. While this model might not apply to societies which had more developed economies, it remained relevant to Laos where the natural economy remained largely intact, in spite of the radical political changes involved in the transitions from French colonialism to the Royal Lao Government and then the 1975 founding of the Lao PDR (1990b: 26). In this sense there was no fixed long-term inequality in Lao villages, as family fortunes constantly fluctuated. A newly married couple with young children was inevitably struggling with a lack of resources but would subsequently benefit from their children's labour and might inherit substantial land and resources later, whereas a well-off family might be diminished through inheritance. Given the rise and fall of individual and family fortunes within the village it made better sense to study poverty primarily at the village level (see further discussion below).

Lao Peasants stressed individuality 'both biologically and psychologically' (1990b: 211), and the contingency of the dialectic played out 'between the irreducibly social and individual nature of humans' (1990b: 211). Evans rejected the notion of a cross-culturally 'invariant human and social property called cooperation' (1990b: 210), and with it the idea that individualism and communism are to be understood as antithetical (1990b: 211). Given that 'spontaneous human cooperation is very sensitive to scale' (1990b: 211), and there are 'no clear economies of scale, especially in rice agriculture' (1990b: 220), attempts to engineer more efficient production and impose cooperative modes were doomed to failure (1990b: 167ff.). The 'microeconomic rationality' of the peasant should not be disregarded in the name of top-down social engineering and macroeconomic planning (1990b: 22). Collectivization was, as a general strategy, 'economically inefficient' (1990b: 172). The attempt 'to implement an orthodox communist model in the context of a peasant society has the paradoxical result of reinforcing many features of the natural economy that socialists claim they want to transform'. There was a failure to recognize that 'socialism has more in common with advanced capitalism than it does with the natural economy' (1990b: 230). There was no pure 'capitalist man', just as there was no 'socialist man', and socialism was not the dialectical opposite of capitalism (Mauss [1924-5] 1984, Evans 1990b: 231). This policy failure had in some cases led to an escalation of state coercion, fuelled by an evolutionary concept of social progress which stipulated a particular historical path. While communist land reforms directed against 'a clearly identifiable landlord class' often degenerated into 'violent attacks on all inequalities', Lao peasants had been fortunate in being 'spared such ill-advised social engineering' (1988b: 248). In addition to the general point about the inefficiency of state planning, one factor in the failure of cooperatives was resistance by women who had no desire to hand over control of land to male-dominated

cooperatives, nor later to the male-dominated trading cooperatives (1990b: 129-133).

A further critical voice from the Soviet tradition was that of Nikolay Bukharin (1888-1938), who like Chayanov had been a critic of Stalinist economics. Bukharin had argued that it was through the market that the peasants would come to socialism. In *Agrarian Change in Communist Laos*, Evans had referred to the choice between Soviet central planning as against the (relatively) decentralized Yugoslav or Hungarian model (1988a: 25). He presented the decentralized model of socialist planning as a desirable option. The final pages of *Lao Peasants* make the case for the possible role of the market in a socialist system, in particular the 'vertical integration' of peasant production into the wider economy. This could be initiated either from above or below (1990b: 223ff). In retrospect these closing pages seem particularly prescient, in their imaginings of how a system dedicated to socialist goals might nonetheless incorporate flexibly various economic modes, including forms of non-coercive cooperation. However, though the back flap of *Lao Peasants* even presented the book as making the case for 'market socialism', this trope is absent from Evans' later work. In the second edition he focused on the question of how capitalism might be mitigated by the 'moral economy' (see below). His work moved away from any explicitly ideological themes and from any sustained intellectual engagement with socialism.

3. Post-socialism and the Lao peasantry

Lao Peasants was reissued in 1995 with an additional chapter on 'post-socialism', and in a piece published in 2008 Evans offered a survey and a retrospective analysis. As he noted there, the study of peasants had undergone a 'precipitous decline', after a thirty-year boom beginning in the 1960s (2008: 507). In the chapter added in the second edition (1995: xi-xxxviii), Evans analyzed the transition from socialism to what he termed 'post-socialism', placing the social changes in Laos in the context of the collapse of the Soviet Union. In Laos socialism lasted 'barely fifteen years', it had shallow roots which 'were easily uprooted' (1995: xi), and subsequently 'traditional Lao peasant society 'had reasserted itself' (1995: xxi). But the 'political form' survived the transition, unlike in Eastern Europe. This was in part because of market reforms in the mid 1980s, but, more significantly, because Laos remained a largely rural, peasant society, whereas the regimes in Eastern Europe 'presided over industrial societies with highly urbanized and educated populations' (1995: xii). The transition to an industrial society had simply not progressed very far, and had benefited from recognition of the defects of Stalinist economic management. Peasant societies were less vulnerable to disruption than those with a high division of labour, because of the 'interdependence of the whole system' in industrial societies. Compared with China and Vietnam, Laos had experienced the least disruption, given that it had 'tiny urban centres, a tiny industrial workforce and no intelligentsia' (1995: xii-xiii). To this one should add a remark made in the original addition, to the effect that only 'extreme coercion, such as that seen in Pol Pot's Cambodia' could 'fully suppress peasant markets and impose state regulation of exchange' (1990b: 15). While some efforts had taken place in the direction of agribusiness, the end of socialism 'also saw the collapse of a coherent agrarian policy' (1995: xxii). One way in which Lao peasant society had remerged was in the form of increased freedom for 'the flexibility of the family farm' to reassert itself (1995: xxiii). Evans took issue with

the idea that the transition had significantly increased social stratification in the country-side (Trankell 1993), and re-emphasized the point made in the original edition against 'schematic arguments concerning peasant social differentiation' (1995: xxiv).

One argument running through *Lao Peasants* had been an emphasis on the 'distinct logics of the peasant economy, the socialist economy and the capitalist economy'. While the socialist economy had collapsed, the original critique of 'false assumptions' about peasant economics retained its force, now that Soviet or Vietnamese advisors had been replaced by international aid organizations and the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, etc. Just as the communists assumed that peasants were incipient capitalists and therefore pushed to collectivize them, so many mainstream economists 'also assume that peasants are mini-capitalists', though now this is to be celebrated rather than eradicated: 'They are also wrong, and no doubt this is the basis for the failure of many major agricultural development projects in Laos sponsored by them' (1995: xxv). NGOs working at the village level should not base their interventions on the notion that peasants were 'spontaneously cooperative', and needed 'to take account of context social, cultural, ecological when considering the nature of peasant economic cooperation' (1995: xxv). Thus Ireson (1992) had shown that cooperation among lowland Lao took a different form in the south to that in the north, a contrast between 'generalized reciprocity across the whole village' and 'strict reciprocity' within the narrower group. Ireson attributes this difference to different modes of cultivation, though Evans also wondered whether the background of refugee migration might also be a factor (1995: xxvi). This small discussion illustrates Evans' turn to history rather than to purely synchronic or functional explanations for social patterns.

Following a discussion of issues relating to highland Laos, Evans returned to his basic premise, that the administrative enforcement of common property regimes should build on existing 'common property resource management systems', such as that found in Black Tai communities in relation to paddy land, or local norms for the management of forest. Following Acheson (1989) Evans argued that the communities' own rules should be the starting point for regulation, though these are subject to potential disruption 'through a community's rising exposure to market forces, or because powerful corporations or states chose to override the priorities of the local community' (Evans 1995: xxviii, summarizing Acheson 1989). Forests as one of Laos' major economic resources were vulnerable to over exploitation. Finally Evans returned to the issue of socialism and the economy, noting that social political control over the economy not only fails economically but also undermines human freedom; on the other hand, capitalism must be constrained by politics, and even if socialism no longer operates as a grand ideology, the question of a 'moral economy' remains a pressing one (1995: xxx).

Of course once one begins to look at the category 'peasant' through the lens of micro-economics, geography and ecology, lineage structure, ethnicity, modes of cooperation in the 'natural economy', modes of production and exchange, economic integration with wider markets, relationship to or interactions with the state, relationships or interactions with religious institutions, and the socio-economic and cultural impact of globalization, including increasing access to mobile telephones, then one question is whether there is any meaningful essence to it. The irrelevance of the category to contemporary debates had been argued forcefully by Kearney (1996: 1, Evans 2008: 508). Evans however, while recognizing that the Lao peasantry was

now being transformed, perhaps out of existence (Elson 1997), insisted on its value as a historical category, and also its continued relevance whilst Laos remained predominantly a rural society: 'the decline of the peasantry globally has deleteriously affected studies of the peasantry in Laos' (2008: 508).

One theme that runs through Evans' discussion is his rejection of the idea that peasants should be seen as operating in a 'autarchic' or self-sufficient manner: 'peasants are part of larger political, cultural and economic networks, even though they operate to a considerable extent in a self-provisioning economy (Evans 2002: 514). No single economic theory could capture the specificities of particular peasant economies, not least because they display a range of anthropologically specific motives for acquiring wealth and trading objects. One cannot reduce the specific forms of value associated with exchanges around marriage or the acquisition of 'merit' to a general economic theory (2008: 515).

Evans' critique of pre-determined ideological, intellectual and policy frames widened from the original target of economic planning to embrace much of the consultancy literature on Laos, which, he argued, ignored the insights of peasant studies and was fixated on the alleviation of poverty. Determining who was poor and why and in what way was a far from simple matter (2008: 517). Drawing on the discussion in *Lao Peasants*, Evans rejected the applicability of terms used in consultant documents such as 'equity', 'equality' and 'inequality' to Lao peasant society. With their broadening horizons, peasants or villagers now had a stronger sense of their relative poverty, and the notion that they were poor was becoming part of their self-understanding. However, as far as policy was concerned, it made sense to measure poverty at the level of the village itself, rather than that of individual families or members (2008: 518). Evans' conclusion was that 'almost all consultant studies are based on an incorrect understanding of the dynamics of peasant society' (2008: 519), and poverty was often 'a direct outcome of outside intervention in the workings of these societies, in particular the government's policy of re-locating upland minorities in the lowlands' (2008: 519). The Lao government's insistence that upland swidden cultivation was 'ecologically destructive' ignored the differences between viable and non-viable systems. Restrictions on viable systems often made them unviable (2008: 519-520). One study of the government land titling and allocation programme noted that the staff linked land allocation to a reduction of the area under swidden cultivation i.e. allocating land became a way to reduce the amount available to villagers (2008: 520).

A similar set of concerns arose in relation to the use of the word 'community', given that the boundaries of the moral economy were determined by specific collective rituals or lineage practices, and forms of mutual aid and solidarity within those economies stop abruptly at this border. This was the conceptual error underlying the collectivization programme (1990b: 123-149, 2008: 520), and similar rhetoric in the present obscured the boundaries between distinct communities (2008: 521). These issues remained relevant for development questions, which needed to proceed with an awareness of pre-existing modes for the management of community resources (2008: 522-523). This critique extended to the use of terms like 'power' and 'equality' in relation to feminist analyses. Thus Ireson's *Field, Forest, and Family* (1999), for all its merits as a ground-breaking study of women across various communities, had as its 'unargued premise' the modern idea of equality 'by which the social relations of all other societies are measured and evaluated' (2008: 523). Most reports on rural Laos have an individualistic bias, whereas the 'prime cognitive unity

of rural men and women is their own family', and perceptions of gender are relational, i.e. understood through social roles, rather than individuated. As with the issue of social stratification, Evans argues that a careful look at anthropological reality shows social difference and complementarity rather than 'inequality'. Age was another factor which needed to be taken into account, especially the high status of older women (albeit through their sons) (2008: 524). Apart from Ireson's 'important study' there was little empirical work available, and documents produced by aid organizations simply reflected ideological 'clichés and verities' (2008: 525). Evans finishes with a plea for a combination of 'materialist' and 'culturalist' approaches, to be brought together with insights from 'a now neglected economic anthropology'. While the peasantry of Laos 'as a social formation may be entering its terminal phase', there was still much to be learned about the peasant's way of life' (2008: 526).

One tension that is apparent in Evans' work is the question of the autonomy of the village and peasant society. **On the one hand, he opposed any idealization of the village as actually or potentially a perfect model of selfless human cooperation, and rejected the notion that it was completely set apart economically and politically from wider social processes and the state. One clear example of its vertical integration, in the case of ethnic Lao rural society, was Buddhism. Yet he also saw the peasant economy as having its own complex and at least semi-autonomous level of efficiency, its own unplanned economies of scale and modes of cooperation. At the centre of the village economy was the 'flexibility of the family' or household (1990b: 219), with which it was counter-productive to interfere in the name of macro-economic planning or development.

As he remarked in an interview (Rehbein 2011: 101): 'Without all kinds of accompanying changes, collectivization just leads back to a sort of feudalism and that is what happened in Russia and China. So how do you get economies of scale in a peasant economy if nothing else changes? Why should you even get together? And the answer is that there is no point, because peasant agriculture is as efficient as it can be.'

The 'natural economy' in Laos was able to reassert itself once collectivization was abandoned, just as the latent Buddhism of its political structures and ritual mind-set remerged. To borrow from Louis Dumont on caste system, Evans seemed to believe that the social anthropologist must 'take the liberty of completing and systematizing the indigenous or orthogenic theory' (Dumont 1970: 37) and this understanding must feed any attempt at development aid. Yet at moments, as we have seen, he asserted a stronger form of outside interpretative authority, one radically at odds with insiders' self-understandings.

4. Evans' engagement with broader themes

Evans' 1989 appointment at the University of Hong Kong was a stimulus for wide reading on China and an engagement with Hong Kong society. His essay on 'Hierarchy and dominance' (Evans 1993) drew on that reading, with China at the centre of its comparative discussion. A further product of this was the collection *Hong Kong: The Anthropology of a Chinese Metropolis* (1997), co-edited with Maria Tam Siu-Mi. However Evans' attention remained primarily on Laos, though increasingly its history and the nature of historical memory. This gave rise to the publication of *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance* (1998) and *A Short History of Laos* (2002), two works which build on his observation of the complementary and contradictory

relationships that existed between Lao socialism, Marxism and Buddhism (1990b: 5). A concern with what Evans polemically characterized as ‘failed development plans and enforced communist isolation’ (2002: ix) gave way to a desire to rescue the history of Laos from its Leninist-nationalist simplifications and obfuscations.

Nationalism had been an important theme in Evans’ work from the beginning, notably in *Red Brotherhood at War* co-authored with Kelvin Rowley (1984, 1990). The central argument of the book was that nationalism had trumped communism in post-Vietnam war Southeast Asia: ‘at least in Asia, Communism has always been strongly nationalistic’ (1990b: xviii). In a world dominated by ‘nationalist passions’, the authors argued that there was much to be said for ‘the internationalist standpoint of classical liberalism and socialism’ (1990: xix), and much of the introduction and the first chapter is taken up with a polemic against the notion of the antiquity of nations and the effect of this both on history writing and on the self-understanding of modern states: ‘Arguments and interpretation based on “antiquity of nations” merely pander to the mythology of modern nationalism, the mythologies by which rulers of nation-states seek to gain legitimacy and mobilize popular support’ (1990: 5). In *Lao Peasants* the ideology of ‘fervent nationalism’ displayed by postrevolutionary states led to an obsession with self-sufficiency and internally generated surpluses (1990: 23). One key element of modern nationalism was the frame of reference and forms of knowledge created by the colonial state, yet in its representations of the past the communist state cannot acknowledge its dialectical dependence on colonialism (both as source of ideas and a focus of its revolutionary opposition), nor offer any nuanced or historically contextualized understanding of any previous national regime, for example the Royal Lao Government (1947-1975).

Rather than being directly concerned with peasants, themes of memory, Buddhism and the monarchy were dominant in *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance*. The book is first and foremost an attempt to bring awareness of the complexity of the past into a rapidly evolving society. The anthropologist as observer of social belief and public ritual is also the voice of history and memory in a dynamic yet confusing period of social change. The break-down of the Marxist-Leninist historical narrative following the events of 1989 led to the ‘re-traditionalizing of official narratives’, opening up a complex space where ‘legend and fact’ freely mixed (1998: 45). While Pathet Lao veterans had a view of the past shaped by propaganda about the ‘feudal’ or ‘neocolonial’ Royal Lao Government, younger urban Lao knew little about the RLG and aspired to the ‘dream work of modernity’ symbolized by Bangkok. Overseas, many Lao were engaged in a search for their roots, against an image of a ‘fantasy Laos’ (1998: 7-10). One key theme was the ritual gap left at the apex of the social order by the removal of the monarchy and the ambivalences surrounded the awkward and partial substitution of Kaysone Phomvihane for the king.

The *Short History* was likewise written with an eye to the future, for ‘young Lao’, both those ‘overseas who know little of their homeland, and for Lao inside Laos whose information on their past is limited’ (2002: x). A mature nationalism required the ability to look back on the past ‘in all its complexity’ and to ‘debate its meaning without restraint’ (2002: 236). In the final sentence Evans imagines the bones of the murdered King Sisivang Vatthana being returned to Luang Prabang and the chanting of monks ‘echoing through the temples of the ancient capital’ and thereby healing ‘the deep rift in the Lao nation caused by the revolution’ (2002: 236). This turn to history culminated in *The Last Century of Lao Royalty: A Documentary History* (2009). This

book reflected a concern with the loss of the material substance of personal and historical memory, notably the photograph, a concern articulated particularly strongly in *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance* (1998: 5ff.). The finished work was the product of extensive detective work in Laos and the Lao diaspora, a kind of rescue anthropology distinctive for its concern with a lost elite culture rather than that of a vanishing tribal society.

Conclusion: insider and outsider perspectives

Evans broke with the radical politics of his youth once he encountered the realities of communist Southeast Asia ('to experience full-on communism is a kind of shock actually', interview, Rehbein 2011: 99), and the seeds of the shift from the anthropology of peasants to the study of history and monarchy can be found in his writings from the late 1980s. There could be no grand unified theory of peasant society or of peasant economics, since history, migration, war, politics, religion, kinship structures and ethnicity all potentially impacted on the village. There is little trace in his work of postmodern anthropology and of reflexive post-colonial anxieties about the epistemological claims of anthropology, though he was acutely aware of the colonial origins of the discipline (Evans 2005). His work is as much sociological as it is anthropological, and it drew both on social theory and traditional ethnography. Often in Evans' work it is the 'etic' outsider who has the clearest view, especially once the frame is widened to include history, and ultimately 'emic' insiders are seen as operating according to a cultural, historical political logic that of necessity escapes their own grasp. The clearest statement of this point of view came in an essay on a Hong Kong rumour. This arose in relation to a television advertisement for the Kowloon-Canton railway featuring young children playing at being a train. This advertisement, replayed on home video recorders, became the subject of intense speculation about supernatural phenomena, in particular that one or more of the children were actually ghosts (Evans 1997). Evans linked the rumours to fears about Hong Kong's looming political transition from British colony to Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China. His concluding remarks stake an unapologetic claim to interpretative authority: it required an 'outsider to recognize the importance of studying Chinese cultural belief in ghost* in modern Hong Kong'. While 'all Chinese are only seeing ghosts then it is only a *gwailou* [foreigner] who can see the cultural structure of the apparition' (1997: 293). This dichotomy between the insider and the outsider underlay Evans' first book, *The Yellow Rainmakers* (1983), which set out to find out the facts underlying rumours of the use of chemical agents by the Soviet Union in 1981.

One important element in Evans' intellectual make-up was a lack of affinity for academic identity politics and purist arguments for 'indigeneity' (2005: 52). In this sense he remained true to his roots in internationalism and cosmopolitanism, and the rejection of nationalism both as a political form and as a way of organizing knowledge, culture and memory. Progressive politics in the late 20th century and beyond has to a large degree set aside economic and political theory and now draws on arguments based on culture, authenticity, and autonomy. This shift from traditional leftist politics to identity politics has its corollary in academic research, in a distrust of outsider accounts, a suspicion of colonial modernity and its modes of knowledge, and the valorization of authentic insider experience and categories. While he was no supporter of colonialism, for example pointing to the racism of colonial settler

regimes and of French governance in general (2002: 59), Evans was impatient with ideologically-driven accounts of its policies (see his remarks on Gunn 1990, Evans 2008: 512-514), just as he found the blanket dismissal of the Royal Lao Government objectionable. Discussing Vietnamese communist anthropology Evans noted that, arguably, 'a Vietnamese dominated state is as foreign to the highland minorities as, for example, a French dominated one' (1985: 142). Later Evans termed the interventions of the Vietnamese state in the Central Highlands of Vietnam 'internal colonialism' (Evans 1992), and paralleled state-communist anthropologists engaged in constructing 'minority' categories to anthropological advisors to colonial states (Evans 2005: 47).

One of the problems with academic writing driven by identity politics is however, paradoxically, its inevitable substitution in development contexts of outsider values for insider norms. This was Evans' argument against communist anthropology, and subsequently his objection to much of the progressive aid agenda which succeeded it. For Evans, anthropology and an anthropologically informed history were intended as a resource for insiders, and in the case of a nation ruled by a one-party state, it was of necessity an outsider who could assemble an alternative narrative. In its absence there could only be a largely fictional narrative which would inevitably undermine the nation's attempt to confront its inherited contradictions and obfuscations. Evans' outsider 'realist' perspective was tempered by a sense that the economic, social, cultural and eco-biological were intertwined, and any attempt to reform or improve needed to find a basis in already existing practices.

Anthropology could reveal this multilayered complexity, 'the social and historical contingency of human sociability and individuality' (1990b: 211) and the extent of human diversity (1990b: 233). It showed that 'contemporary social arrangements are not immutable' and provided 'a glimpse of the breadth of human potentialities'. But 'knowledge of the diversity of humankind also provides a sober understanding of the *limits* of human possibilities' (1990b: 233). This suggests not just the limits of social engineering and interventionism but also biological constraints on the human species.

Faced with anthropology's colonial roots and the continued domination of western institutions and models, many anthropologists of Evans' generation took a post-modern or indigenous turn. Evans, by contrast, argued that what was needed was 'an anthropology that is more self-consciously and sensitively internationalized' (2005: 53). In this context it is worth noting that one of his constant themes was that Asian research students should write their dissertations on aspects of the West or of other societies 'exotic' to them, rather than, as so frequently, writing a PhD at a European or North American university on their own, 'native', society (Evans 2005). In similar vein, Evans criticized the assumption among western anthropologists that they were writing exclusively for an academic audience of people like themselves (2005: 53). For Evans, the indigenous-communist anthropology and historiography of Laos failed to reflect the experiences and self-understandings of the Lao people. His own work aimed, directly or indirectly, to inform and enrich debates among the Lao themselves, not only about the past but, more crucially, about the future direction of their society.

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Upland Geopolitics: Finding Zomia in Northern Laos c. 1875

Michael Dwyer

Abstract

In the 1870s, the borderlands of what became Laos, China and Vietnam were violently disrupted by the so-called “Haw disturbances” and associated local uprisings and population movements. These events upended the relative calm of the earlier French encounter with Luang Prabang, weakening the links between the lowland state and upland populations, and culminating two decades later in the sacking of Luang Prabang and the agreement of French protection. Read more than a century later, in the aftermath of subsequent French and American intervention, these events highlight the importance of the Southeast Asian uplands to lowland political stability, and the intimately social nature of what James Scott has called the friction of terrain. Drawing on Grant Evans’ analysis of the lowland-upland interface of pre-colonial *sakdina* rule, this article speaks to recent responses to Scott’s “Zomia” hypothesis, as well as larger questions, central to Evans’ work, about the relationship between economic processes and regional geopolitics.

Introduction

Arriving in Luang Prabang in 1867, Francis Garnier was highly impressed. A geographer and military man, Garnier was second in command of the French Mekong Exploration Commission, which had made its way over the previous months from Phnom Penh, under often arduous conditions, in search of a river route to China. Luang Prabang, for Garnier, marked “the first time since our departure ... that we had found a market in the sense this term has in Europe”, and he pronounced the city “the most important Laotian center in all Indo-China” (Garnier 1885: 292, 294). This was understandable; Luang Prabang was prospering at the time, and it was the main commercial hub in a vast mountainous interior that, as the Commission advanced upriver, was becoming increasingly pivotal to their efforts to turn Phnom Penh into a “French Hong Kong” and, in the process, rebalance a colonial race for European access to Chinese trade wealth that was being decidedly won by the British.

More surprising was Garnier’s description of the local population’s relationship to its neighbors to the north. The Chinese, he wrote, had until recently been “the regulator in this whole region”, and had exercised “a domination benevolent and wise, which stimulated production instead of enervating it,” and “increased the welfare and vital energies of the subject populations by elevating them on the ladder of civilization” (Garnier 1885: 294). In the wake of political turmoil in China, however – in part caused by European interference, although Garnier neglected to mention this – he saw the Chinese as “no longer capable of filling” this regulatory role, and he hoped that the French would take over in their place. Such an arrangement, he argued, would “counter-balance” the despotic rule imposed by the Siamese and Burmese sovereigns on their subject populations, and allow Luang Prabang to continue flourishing (*ibid.*). It would also, as

Soren Ivarsson (2008: 48) has pointed out, provide a convenient justification for ongoing French intervention in the region.

Almost a century and a half later, it is anachronistic – quaint even – to think of a time when European influence in northern Laos was on the rise, and Chinese on the wane. The American “pivot” to Asia notwithstanding, China’s political and economic influence in mainland Southeast Asia, and in Laos in particular, is today on the upswing; from agribusiness to energy to urban infrastructure, Chinese capital sits consistently atop lists of foreign investors, and Chinese development projects are widely portrayed by their boosters as “model units” that will lift Laos from Least Developed Country (LDC) status through a mix of macroeconomic growth and localized improvement (Nyíri 2009). Yet it is not just the geopolitics that have changed today, but also the variety of political economy that is envisaged to underlie them. Garnier’s emphasis on regulation, enhanced production, and the “vital energies” of northern Laos’s “subject populations” was typical of the Physiocrats, a group of eighteenth-century French philosophers who thought that value originated in nature, and believed government should therefore be a process of allowing natural wealth to circulate through the social milieu like blood through the body (Heilbroner 1953: 49; Foucault 2007). Despite being largely left behind by mainstream economists who adopted Adam Smith’s labor theory of value, the vitalism of the Physiocrats inspired a generation of colonial explorers (like Garnier) and, after him, colonial administrators who sought to “rule with nature” (*physio-cracy*). Yet today it is not the vital energies of agrarian producers that are widely seen, as they were by the European Sino-philos of Garnier’s day – including Garnier himself, as well as Adam Smith and Physiocrats like François Quesnay (Arrighi 2007) – as forming the economic motor of national development. Today it is the land itself, and more specifically, it is natural resources. The agrarian population is today more likely to be seen in the way.

Today’s rhetoric, exemplified by the Lao government policy of “turning land into capital”, sounds much like the French colonial rhetoric that emerged almost a half century *after* Garnier registered his impressions about Luang Prabang. These came in the early decades of the twentieth century, when the challenge of how to acquire Lao territory had given way the challenge of how to govern it; as Martin Stuart-Fox notes, there had been a re-scaling to Indochina as a whole: “what most exercised French colonial administrators was how Laos’s resources could be best developed, not for the benefit of the Lao, but in order to balance the [Indochinese] colonial budget” (Stuart-Fox 1995: 111). Hand in hand with colonial officials’ tendency to treat Laos’s land, timber, forest products and minerals “almost as a prospectus for potential investors” (*ibid.*, 134), came what Soren Ivarsson has called the stereotypical dichotomy of French Indochina: the racialized distinction “between the dynamic and industrious Vietnamese [and] the decadent and lazy Lao” (2008: 104). This was a far cry from the agrarian vitalism noted by Garnier, and it set a focus on physical-natural (as opposed to human) resources that endures to this day. Almost a century later, this construction of Laos as a resource-rich landscape to be exploited by more industrious outsiders remains both powerful and uncomfortable.

The relationship between the political economy of production and wider geopolitical dynamics is not merely a matter of subjective (and politically interested) interpretation, however, but also a matter of serious intellectual inquiry. This is a topic that was of great interest to Grant Evans, and that forms the heart of this article’s

engagement. Grant's intellectual entry into Southeast Asia began along lines that were essentially geopolitical (Evans/Rehbein 2009: 98), but even while co-writing *Red Brotherhood at War* (Evans and Rowley 1990), Grant began the trips to Laos that would lead to the foundational work on the Lao PDR's collectivization efforts for which he is even more widely remembered (Evans 1990). Collectivization, Grant noted, was never just about productivity, but rather about that ever-elusive nexus of productivity and control that is often called security:

As the smallest state in the region [Laos] had the greatest interest in stability, and Kampuchea's [1977] attacks on Vietnam threatened the security not only of the latter, but ultimately of Laos as well. With an eye to this, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party saw collectivization not only as a means of economic security, but of political security as well. "In coordination with the national defense and peacekeeping task," the party leader said [in early 1978], "it is necessary to build a strong administration at the grassroots level by grasping the central task – to reorganize production along collective lines." The ever-tighter interlocking of international developments with domestic decisions finally dictated the precise timing of Laos's collectivization campaign. (Evans 1990: 49)

While collectivization was eventually abandoned and smallholder farming widely recognized by state authorities as the more economically (and thus more politically) viable mode of lowland agricultural production (Evans 2002), the concern with security-oriented management of production persisted. But its locus became more remote. Nowhere did the tight interlocking of international developments and domestic policy decisions that Grant noted manifest more clearly during the 1980s and 1990s than in Lao government efforts to manage the farm-forest interface that is now known widely as the uplands. This was the territory where swidden cultivation and the industrial forestry efforts of the early postwar period came into conflict with one another at the same moment that they collided with earlier histories of upland population discontent and resistance (Persson 1983; Trankell 1999); these been exploited and stoked by first French and then American intervention strategies (McCoy 2003), and they remained at the heart of anti-government resistance in Laos through the mid-1980s (Gunn 1983). The Lao uplands thus became a space of political-meets-economic security *par excellence*, and it is of little surprise that the technologies of contemporary upland territoriality and population management – focal sites, village relocation, land zoning and concessions – were forged under such adverse political and economic conditions (Dwyer 2011).

The tensions between interpreting the Southeast Asian uplands as a distinctly modern political space versus as a pre-modern historical terrain have been brought to the fore by the debates over the last few years about James Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (2009). As Leif Jonsson has argued, the book's central dichotomy between subjugation and freedom – and particularly its mapping of the state and the stateless space of "Zomia" onto these two categories, respectively – echoes the all-too-simple perspective that justified US intervention in Southeast Asia (and elsewhere) during the height of the Cold War:

The case for Zomia appears to reflect the same binary in a post-Cold War setting. The state stands in the same monster-slot as did communism then, as Freedom's nemesis. Now the prospecting for Asian freedom (for American realization) is done by academics who warn against the evils of entanglement – in the form of social life and political negotiation. Zomians are no equal to US military intervention in the highlands of Laos or Vietnam or to the masculine recklessness of Rambo. But these share many shades of the American Frontier. Zomia is very much a post-Cold War image for America's Southeast Asia; "we" can still side with freedom and against oppression and find inspiration in them [sic] hills ... (Jonsson 2012)

Debates about Zomia have been lively and serious (also see e.g. Aung-Thwin and Aung-Thwin 2012). For me, they have emphasized the need to consider the uplands of Laos (and elsewhere) in a continuous historical frame – one that is capable of capturing both the pre-modern dynamics that surround what Scott calls "the friction of terrain" and the ways in which those dynamics articulated with and informed modern Southeast Asian history. The subject of this paper is one such early set of articulations, centered on the events of the 1870s which followed the Mekong Exploration Commission's visit to northern Laos, and ensured that when the next round of French explorers-cum-colonialists came back just a few decades later, everything was different. These events center on an uprising that occurred among upland peoples in approximately 1875, and that in turn altered the political geography that scholars have theorized under the label of *sakdina*. My reading draws heavily on Grant Evans' remarks on *sakdina* in his *Politics of Ritual and Remembrance* (1998), and it is partly for this that I offer this essay to the issue of the *Journal of Lao Studies* commemorating his memory. But an additional reason is to reflect on Grant's significance to the larger project of which this analysis is only a piece; this concerns the way that the Southeast Asian uplands, conceived as a continuously historical space in the sense described above, have shaped – and indeed participated actively in – the processes and debates surrounding the intersection of political security and economic development in contemporary Laos. The dynamics on display here, in other words, highlight a dynamism that would resurface in a later era when the political-economic problem of the uplands – a problem that begins to emerge here, and that blossomed in the early years of the twentieth century under French colonial rule – was evaluated critically and employed tactically by the designers of American Cold War strategy. While that moment is the topic of another work, the connection between the uplands' role in France's entry into Laos and the American upland strategy almost a century later sits squarely and menacingly on the horizon of the history recounted below.

My account focuses on events that befell the area surrounding Luang Prabang in the early 1870s; these produced the uprising mentioned above, as well as widespread famine, mortality and emigration to the west (Siam) by a large portion of the upland population. This event is bracketed by, and articulates with, two key moments in the French conquest of Laos: first, the moment of arrival and investigation, exemplified by the Mekong Exploration Commission's journey mentioned above but also including other visits as well; and second, the moment almost two decades later when the sovereign of Luang Prabang famously sought (and was granted) French protection in a series of events

famously memorialized by Auguste Pavie, the French consul involved, as the “conquest of hearts” (Stuart-Fox 1997; Larcher-Goscha 2003). The role of upland catastrophe – and the glimpse of Zomia that emerges in the breakdown of the *sakdina* system – serve as a corrective of sorts to the implied lack of violence in the French conquest of Laos. As they had in what is now southern Vietnam and then in Cambodia, the French stepped into a landscape of political fracturing and capitalized significantly. Re-centering the uplands in this drama – as not simply a physical space but a social and thus relational place – highlights the fact that if the conquest of northern Laos was bloodless in one sense, this was in part because the upheavals that preceded it had been so completely catastrophic. A note on methods and names: This paper draws entirely on published material, and relies centrally on my reading of the travel accounts of Francis Garnier (in the 1860s) and James McCarthy (in the 1880s). I have tried to balance the diversity of place names and spellings that appear in the historical record against the need for clarity and comparability (both with one another and with current locations). I have not standardized everything: the multiple namings and the diversity of transliterations and spellings are sometimes important parts of the data itself, and it is essential not to create too much artificial clarity in hindsight, given that confusion over geography is a theme in much of the historiography (e.g., McCarthy 1900; Thongchai 1994). I have also retained many of the original names for various ethnic groups, even though many of these terms are now out of date, and even offensive. I do this deliberately and critically: terms like *kha* and “tribe” capture important valences of belonging and otherness, and figure centrally in the events being discussed. The politics of identity are inevitably and closely tied to those of place, and thus to geopolitics as well.

1. Encountering the Region of Rapids

Luang Prabang emerged on France’s geopolitical horizon in the middle of the nineteenth century, sitting at the heart of what the French called Upper Laos, just below the confluence of the Mekong and one of its major tributaries, the Nam Ou (Figure 1). Prior to this, the French (along with the Dutch and the Portuguese) had been attempting to make inroads into (or defend their earlier points of access in) an East Asian landscape that was increasingly being locked up by the British. Britain’s advances were motivated by, among other things, the desire to secure its prize colony of India in both the economic and the political sense. The colonization of Burma and Britain’s diplomatic friendship with Siam grew from the need to secure India’s eastern frontier, while its gunboat diplomacy in China was aimed at prying open a string of treaty port concessions where Indian opium, among other products, could be reliably sold. All of this was in motion by the mid nineteenth century. By comparison, France’s colonial achievements in Asia at the time were minimal. French missionaries had an expanding presence in coastal Annam, but nothing that amounted to either territory or reliable commercial access to the “riches” of the Chinese interior. As late as 1863, three years after the Second Opium War brought the British and the French together to force the issue of “free” trade with China, the British remained the “masters of the Asian silk trade” (Brocheux & Hémery 2009: 23). France’s Minister of the Navy and Colonies, by contrast, was at that time still complaining that what France needed was “a real empire” in the Far East (ibid.: 24).

This complaint came just as France was beginning to capitalize on existing

fractures in the Vietnamese empire. France's first territorial foothold in Southeast Asia came in the south, where Huê's expansion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had produced a popular backlash of national proportions. The multi-decade Tay Son rebellion/civil war (1778-1802) was, in fact, what had given French missionaries their initial entry point into the region: in return for sheltering the Nguyen prince who would eventually defeat the Tay Son in 1802, French Catholics were given official approval to ply their trade in coastal Annam (*ibid.*: 17-18). The mid-nineteenth century provided a



Figure 1: Luang Prabang and surroundings. Current boundaries and place names are shown for reference along with key place names referenced below.

further opening, as subsequent Nguyen emperors proved less tolerant of Catholic missionizing and, contending with their own wave of post-Tay Son rebellions, became increasingly unable to maintain order in the south. Historians Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery note the particular “heterogeneity” of the south, and use the mix of diversity, remoteness and imperial overreach there to explain the “more than four hundred uprisings” that took place between 1802 and 1883 (ibid.: 9).

This turbulent landscape made Saigon, Phnom Penh and finally Luang Prabang successive geographic nodes in the quest for a “French Hong Kong,” a coastal port from where Chinese trade could be controlled. In 1858, Paris had sent a diplomatic mission to coastal Vietnam, aimed at establishing a protectorate or a treaty port somewhere in the region. As Brocheux and Hémery explain, somewhat by chance, the admiral in charge of the mission ended up capturing Saigon after a blunder at Danang, and ended up signing a treaty in 1862 that was catastrophic for the Vietnamese: Huế ceded a sizable chunk of southern territory to France and agreed to abide by the principle of religious freedom, thus opening the door for northward colonial expansion in the decades that followed (ibid.: 24-26). On the heels of this, France added to its control over the lower Mekong by signing a treaty of protection in 1863 with Cambodia, which faced looming threats from both Vietnam and especially Siam. With this acquisition, Luang Prabang emerged solidly on the horizon as the key to a French “river policy” that might compete with the “open door” that the British had in Shanghai and its other coastal treaty ports (ibid.: 9).

An 1872 account, written and published in Paris, both captures the geographical logic of the Mekong strategy and illustrates the conflation of particular and “general” interest that colonial rhetoric often relied upon:

The Governor of Cochin-China believed that he could attract to Saigon, a city laid out for half a million inhabitants, the important commerce which is carried on by caravans between Laos, Burmah, Thibet, and the western provinces of the Chinese Empire, thinking it by no means impossible to secure for its chief artery the Mekong, which diverts into the Indian Ocean the waters of the Himalayan plateaux. To secure for Europe, in its trade with the Celestial Empire, a vast entrepôt, of easy access, and at the same time free the route from China, shortened by twelve hundred miles, from that part of the voyage in which the periodical monsoons are to be especially dreaded, would have been no inconsiderable services to the general commerce of the world, as well as to our own colony, which must, as the result, have become one of its principal centers. (Prefatory note in De Carné 1872: xiii)

This passage comes from the introduction to one of the published reports of the Mekong Exploration Commission, which covered more than 9,000 kilometers between the time it left central Cambodia in 1866 and its arrival (after descending much of the Yangtze) in Shanghai in 1868. The Mekong turned out to be un-navigable for French purposes, cut by rapids that precluded direct river traffic between Saigon and the Yunnanese port of Jinghong. The mission thus failed at its initial objective, but it generated nonetheless a French desire for a protectorate over the upper Mekong region. This “region of rapids,” as Garnier (1885: 269) called it in the Commission’s official report, sat

at the as-yet un-demarcated intersection of mainland Southeast Asia's major political centers: Siam, Burma, China and Vietnam. The passages that Garnier wrote during the Commission's extended stay in Luang Prabang are worth examining for two reasons. First, in foregrounding the productivity of the local population, Garnier's writings give a window onto the workings of the economy at the time; despite their strategic bent, upland commerce emerges as a key theme, and contrasts markedly to the situation, described below, just a few decades later. The second reason is the historical context: Garnier's argument for French protection is less important than the fact that Garnier himself never got to make it. His superiors thought it "a little premature" (*ibid.*: 295), believing that Luang Prabang was in fact so secure that it did not actually need assistance, and would thus be inclined to turn it down if offered. The contrast is again apparent between the 1860s (when Garnier was writing) and the events of the 1880s described below.

Garnier's account of Luang Prabang is notable for the way it wove together observations about the economy, the population, and the geopolitics of the region. His description of Luang Prabang focused on its commercial center, and emphasized its extent compared to anything else the Commission had seen:

A very lively daily market is held under special roofs, situated close to the confluence of the Nam Kan and [the] Cambodia [i.e. Mekong] river. But all these merchants are quite unable to find space under [the roofs] and the open air vendors extend for more than one kilometer along a wide street parallel to the river, to which the pagoda that we had as our lodgings was connected. (Garnier 1885: 292)

Garnier's attempt to explain what he saw contained a strong dose of historical and geographical analysis. If the latter is unsurprising (Garnier, like many explorers, saw himself as a geographer), the former is notable for its contrast to the racial essentialism that followed only a few decades later. As Ivarsson notes, historical and essentialist forms of reason each had their own particular political agendas in French Indochina, the former being a way to discursively wrest Lao territory from Siam, the latter rationalizing the Vietnamese-centric mode of rule that followed (Ivarsson 2008). It is the first of these that Garnier deployed to explain the frenetic market activity he witnessed in 1867.

This unexpected activity in Luang Prabang, this commerce that had become relatively important, if one could judge by the many and diverse types of people, representing all the nations of Indo-China and of the Indies, evidently testified less to a change of race or an increase in the production of the soil than to a radical difference in the political regime. (Garnier 1885: 292)

Garnier contrasted Luang Prabang to the Siamese "oppression and monopoly" that the Commission had witnessed in southern Laos. Anticipating the French/Chinese analogy mentioned above, he characterized Siamese rule as a system that, "giving too large a part of the profits to the conquerors, had made the conquered disgusted with work that had become sterile and trade that was found to be ruinous" (*ibid.*). In contrast,

"In Luang Prabang, if life was reborn, it was because Siamese subjection imposed only light taxes and one felt in Bangkok that rightful consideration was due to this powerful province" (ibid.).

Garnier attributed some of Luang Prabang's independence to a system of three-way tribute that it retained with Siam, Annam and China (from the latter it received "nominal protection" in return for a token gift of elephants every eight years) (293). But he places greater explanatory weight on what Scott (2009) terms the "friction of terrain," a mixture of physical and human- geographic factors that made the mountains of pre-modern Southeast Asia difficult to conquer for any length of time:

The distance of Luang Prabang from the theater of the wars which tore Indo-China apart in the eighteenth century contributed greatly to assuring its prosperity, no doubt after having been one of the determining causes of its foundation. ... The mountainous region one has to traverse to reach Luang Prabang, the greater energy which its population owes to its mixing with the many martial wild tribes which inhabit the borders of Tong King [Tonkin] and Laos, provide excellent conditions for this province to resist the demands of Siam. ... Today, the kingdom of Luang Prabang is the most important Laotian center in all Indo-China, the place of refuge and the natural focus of support for all the peoples from the interior who want to escape from the despotism of the Siamese. (Garnier 1885: 293, 294).

It was no accident that Garnier focused on Siamese "despotism." Not only was Siam the power to which Luang Prabang was most closely allied, despite its apparent prosperity and independence. (As discussed below, it was to Siam that the king of Luang Prabang would first appeal when threatened fifteen years later – his request for French protection came only when this failed.) Equally important, Siam stood in France's way regarding the Lao territories of the central Mekong, the area south of Luang Prabang and north of Cambodia. In the early 1800s, efforts at self-rule there had been quashed by Bangkok, leading to the resettlement of Champasak to the west bank of the Mekong and the destruction of Vieng Chan (Vientiane) together with the forced relocation of its inhabitants to what is now northeastern Thailand.¹ If Luang Prabang seemed like it might be at the edge of Bangkok's control, central and southern Laos were areas of substantial concern for the Commission as well.

The second part of Garnier's argument thus turned to this larger question of regional geopolitics, contrasting Siamese and Burmese "despotism" with the gentler hand of the Chinese, as noted above. Garnier dwelled on the virtues of earlier Chinese "domination," the waning of which, he claimed, had left the region "without counterbalance" (294). His account reflects the Sinophilia that was typical of his day, and of Physiocracy in particular. As Giovanni Arrighi notes, "the remarkable peace, prosperity and demographic growth that China experienced for much of the eighteenth century was a source of inspiration for leading figures of the European Enlightenment. Leibniz,

¹ Similar things happened to the south of Vientiane as well, leading to the population of what is now northeastern Thailand by ethnic Lao. As a result, Lao historian Houmphanh Ratthanavong once quipped that it was not Laos that has an ethnic minority problem today, but Thailand (Evans 1999).

Voltaire and Quesnay, among others, 'looked to China for moral instruction, guidance in institutional development, and supporting evidence for their advocacy of causes as varied as benevolent absolutism, meritocracy and an agriculturally based national economy'" (Arrighi 2007: 3, quoting Michael Adas). Garnier's approving reference to China (294) was part of this intellectual legacy, melding the history of "nominal protection" by China to the liberal lexicon of regulation.

Garnier then got down to business. While allowing that Britain's conquest of Burma had led "the populations [there], who are prey to the unending wars, [and who] ardently hope for a more regular and more stable state of things," to receive "European tutelage ... with a deep satisfaction" (294), Garnier insisted that Luang Prabang was where "the progress of English influence has to stop" (ibid.). In laying out the case for French rule, Garnier grafted rhetoric about liberal government onto his earlier analysis of Luang Prabang's unique geography:

Thus it was important to make the king of Luang Prabang feel that, one day, we could ourselves take on the rights exerted over his principality by the court of Huế, now our vassal. That from now on he should resort to French influence to resist the claims of neighboring countries and stop this tiring search for equilibrium which he tried to maintain among them. ... Too far away from us ever to fear a direct subjection, which moreover was not necessary to realize our interests, he could be said to reflect our power and replace so many bothersome tutelages by an efficient protection without demands. Indeed, we would only ask him to favor the development of commerce toward the southern part of the peninsula, to help us do away with the fiscal hindrances, and to improve the roads in this direction (295).

This plea for "an efficient protection without demands" is the culmination of Garnier's argument, and it notably ends with a plea for infrastructure of both the physical and social variety. In it, the exploration of the Mekong comes full circle: unable to plan for a French Hong Kong in Saigon via a river monopoly, Garnier had begun to look for territorial opportunities instead. With the switch, the task of "unblocking" the region grew substantially. The apparently simple proposition with which Garnier ended – "only" to direct commerce toward Saigon, clear out "fiscal hindrances" along the way, and connect the Lao interior to the lower Mekong by a network of roads – turned out to be an enormous undertaking, far greater than the establishment of commercial infrastructure along the Mekong could have ever been.

Half a century later, road building, and specifically the experience of *corvée* labor, would come to dominate how Laos's upland population experienced the French colonial state (Gunn 1990: 55-60). As debates about imperial expansion became mired in the domestic politics of France's Third Republic, Garnier's promise of a "protection without demands" became subsumed by a political economy of outsourced colonial development, in which Paris demanded wealth from its Indochinese colonies but relied heavily on the private sector to finance infrastructure and resource development. In Laos in particular, the burden of infrastructure-building would fall largely on upland peoples, the high cost of infrastructure confining profitable investment largely to the Vietnamese highlands and deltas (ibid.; Brocheux & Hémery 2009: 119-120). By the early twentieth century, road-

building epitomized “unmitigated colonial oppression,” and *corvée* labor (which in Gunn’s estimate “probably never embraced less than twenty percent of the population” (1990: 59)), was implicated in a string of upland revolts throughout the Indochinese Union (Stuart-Fox 1997; Evans 2002).

But all of this was in the future. At the time of Garnier’s visit, only one thing was certain. When the French traded the Mekong strategy for the dream of a Lao territory, the task of “unblocking” Laos gained a new and far more complex target: the uplands of upper Laos.

2. The Breakdown of the *Sakdina* Frontier

In 1887, more than a decade after Francis Garnier’s death in Tonkin helped propel France into northern Vietnam, another Frenchman got the opportunity to press the case for French protection to the king of Luang Prabang. His success testified less to the logic of the proposal than to the fact that much had changed in the two decades since Garnier had first articulated it.

The intervening years had brought a group known collectively as “the Haw” into northern Laos. The story of the Haw helps bring into focus the changes in socio-political space that occurred in the upland heart of mainland Southeast Asia during the latter half of the nineteenth century. These changes formed the backdrop for portions of Thongchai Winichakul’s *Siam Mapped* (1994), which chronicles the emergence and consolidation of the “geo-body” of Siam – the cartographic polygon that came to define the territory of Siam during the nineteenth century, as the Siamese state made the transition to the Westphalian paradigm of singular hierarchical sovereignty and well-defined national boundaries. The mapping of the Siamese northeast is in many ways the climax of *Siam Mapped*; after learning “modern” geography along the Burma frontier, the Siamese administration was called to put its skills into practice along its eastern edge, especially in the mountainous areas northeast of Nan and Vieng Chan (Figure 1). Although this ultimately brought them into conflict with the French, what originally drew the Siamese to the northeast was geographical confusion over the precise location of what the British surveyor James McCarthy called “the Haw disturbances.” Following the British-Siamese friendship that developed earlier in the century (see Winichakul 1994), McCarthy was seconded to the Siamese government in 1881. He was thus well-placed to contribute when the Haw issue drew the attention of the king. As he reported:

Contradictory reports frequently reached Bangkok concerning ravages by Haw on the north-east frontier of Siam; and as villages were now reported to be plundered and destroyed, the whereabouts of which puzzled the heads of those who ought to have known, the king was graciously pleased to appoint me to the command of an expedition to the region of disturbance. ... For geographical research, especially, the frontier region provided a wide and interesting field; for the greater part of it still remained unvisited by Europeans, and on the maps the country was a blank. (McCarthy 1900: 18)

Thongchai’s account is written to problematize the nationalist historiography of

Siam's "lost territories," and his perspective is therefore centered on the Thai geo-body itself: it is national in its scale of inquiry, and its focus is largely cartographic. Looking more closely at the politics of population in the particular vicinity of Luang Prabang, we can see the dynamism of the uplands come into view in a way that complements Winichakul's genealogical account of the more static geo-bodies. My focus is instead the uplands themselves as a socially and politically dynamic space. The "Haw marauders" provide a point of entry here, and show that the uplands were far more than a backdrop, whether conceived as a blank spot on the map or a technical problem to be overcome. They were a historical subject in themselves – a dynamic assemblage of the social, the political and the geographical that would, to borrow Stuart-Fox's term quoted above, "exercise" colonial (not to mention contemporary) administrators for decades to come.

The subtitle to McCarthy's book *Surveying and Exploring in Siam* is "with Descriptions of Lao Dependencies and of Battles against the Chinese Haws"; this is doubly telling, testifying not only to the central role that the Haw played in his experiences, but also to how the area he was surveying was viewed from Bangkok. McCarthy arrived in what is now northern Laos in 1884, part of a second Siamese mission to fortify its north-east frontier, and to help sort out the confusion over precisely where the "ravages" by the Haw were taking place.

Who and what were these Haw that brought so much misery on large tracts of country, and established such a name for cruelty as to terrorize a whole population? They were, in a word, Chinese brigands. At one time, Chinese traders, known in Luang Prabang as Haw, came down from the north in great numbers to traffic with the inhabitants, and when the peaceful traders gave place to brigands of the same nationality, the name of Haw was naturally transferred to these. Since the appearance of these marauders, communications and trade had ceased, and the whole district had been thrown into confusion. (McCarthy 1900: 44)

McCarthy wrote that it was "about the year 1870 that the depredations began, the plunderers rapidly overspreading the country near the Tonkin borderland" (ibid.: 44). This tracks well with Garnier's account from twenty years earlier. In 1868, the Mekong Exploration Commission had encountered the question of how to head north from Luang Prabang. The Haw, still beyond the frontier at that time, had nonetheless crept into Luang Prabang's interstate relations. Despite the apparent prosperity in Luang Prabang, turmoil to the north was already a substantial concern. Garnier had written that:

The situation in the surrounding countries was such that it engendered the greatest hesitation as to the [choice of] route to adopt when leaving Luang Prabang. The Muslim rebellion in Yunnan against the emperor of China had been the signal for disorder and endless wars in the various Laotian principalities lying between China, Burma and the Siamese territories. Banditry became a chronic nuisance and some parts of this area had been complexly depopulated. The king of Luang Prabang had seized this opportunity to break off relations with China, to which it had stopped sending the usual tribute about ten years ago. (Garnier 1885: 304)

Two waves of Chinese (Qing) repression made the advance of the Haw seem to sweep not only southward, but westward as well. The first wave came, as McCarthy noted, from the borderlands of Tonkin, to the northeast of Luang Prabang (Figure 1). These were largely the “Flag gangs” formed in the wake of Qing efforts to put down the Tai Ping revolt (1850-64); the most famous Flag gang, the Black Flags, was subsequently recruited by the Annamese and the Qing to fight the French on the Chinese frontier, and was responsible for the death of Francis Garnier in 1873 outside Hanoi (Garnier 1885: xviii-xx; Brocheux & Hémery 2009: 40-44). A second wave came from the suppression of Muslim revolts mentioned by Garnier in Yunnan in the 1870s; together, these waves of “Haw brigands” wreaked havoc on northern Laos (ibid.), and in particular on the stability and isolation that had made Luang Prabang a relatively peaceful and prosperous refuge (cf. Scott 2009).² One of the reasons these intrusions caused so much political calamity was that they inspired local uprisings as well, including an important upland revolt near Luang Prabang in 1875 (Evans 2002: 35). The Haw raids, in other words, caused the *sakdina* system, a political-geographical system described below, to break down along one of its key fault lines: social class.

In *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance*, Grant Evans describes pre-colonial social relations between the king, local *chao muang*, lowland peasants and upland minority groups as orderly, if profoundly unequal. “The *sakdina* system (glossed as ‘feudalism’) in Laos prior to the French was one where the king theoretically had absolute rights, and his subjects had discrete and subordinate rights” (Evans 1998: 143). Under *sakdina* rule, both “the Lao peasantry and the *kha*” – a term to be elaborated shortly – “were obliged to render to the king and his *chao muang* goods in kind or labor.” Evans was providing context for a court ritual that was conducted in Luang Prabang in the second half of the twentieth century, and that had its roots in the political geography of the Haw period and before. The ritual involved the king and representatives of the Khmu, one of the most widespread ethnic minority groups in the uplands around Luang Prabang (and indeed throughout the north). Evans relates how the ritual – in which the king acknowledged the Khmu as the former owners of his territory, while the Khmu acknowledged the king’s ultimate political authority – symbolized reciprocity without equality. In contrast to the view of upland minorities as beyond the pale of the lowland state (Scott 2009), the Khmu under the *sakdina* system, were “not despised heathens but loyal, and respected, subjects” (Evans 1998: 145). Evans was precise about language, however:

I use the term ‘respected’ advisedly, and mean by it that in a context where there is no assumption of universal equality, and where if people act according to their ‘station in life,’ then one can have a system of mutual respect and reciprocity even though inequality is intrinsic to the system. (ibid.)

² This refuge was of course relative; I thank a reviewer for the reminder that an earlier monarch had moved the capital of Lan Xang to Vientiane when Luang Prabang was threatened by the Burmese in the sixteenth century. The capital was moved back to Luang Prabang in the early nineteenth century following the Siamese destruction of Vientiane, almost half a century before Garnier’s visit.

This system of unequal reciprocity is inherent in the term *kha*, a Tai (Lao and Thai language) term for particular (generally Mon-Khmer speaking) upland minorities that is sometimes translated as “slave” but that, as Evans’ description implies, was far more complex than familiar Western notions of chattel slavery. As Andrew Turton and others elaborate, the opposition between Tai and *kha*, while rooted in linguistic and religious difference, is analogous to the geographic opposition between *muang* – the lowland rice plain where Tai state-making was centered – and *pa* – the wild, uncivilized forest where the *kha* traditionally resided (Turton 1999; Winichakul 1999). The *kha* appear frequently in the accounts of Garnier, McCarthy and other travelers of the era. Henri Mouhot, a French explorer who preceded Garnier in Luang Prabang by half a decade, described the *kha* in terms that, while clearly lumping together a number of upland groups and using language of the day, clearly gestured to the tension between the subjectivity of the *muang* and the freedom of the forest that, as noted in the introduction, has strong echoes in Scott’s (2009) work. Mouhot, in other words, was describing something like the forested edge of the *muang*, or the upland frontier of *sakdina*:

The whole chain of mountains which extends from the north of Tonquin to the south of Cochin China, about 100 miles north of Saigon, is inhabited by this primitive people, divided into tribes speaking different dialects, but whose manner and customs are the same. All the villages in the immediate neighborhood are tributary; those nearest to the town supply workmen for buildings erected for the king and princes, and these are heavily taxed. Others pay their tribute in rice. Their habitations are in the thickest part of the forests, where only they can find a path. Their cultivated grounds are to be seen on the tops and sides of the mountains; in fact, they employ the same means as wild animals to escape their enemies, and to preserve that liberty and independence which are to them, as to all God’s creatures, their supreme good. (Mouhot 1862: 362)

Later accounts pulled this aggregate apart in a few ways, gesturing to the complex geography at the edges of *sakdina* rule. Garnier’s and McCarthy’s accounts in particular form a striking pair for analyzing the changes in northern Laos’s political geography just prior to French colonization. As they had in Cochin China, the French would soon carve out a new territorial niche at the fault lines of two existing empires (China and Siam). For Garnier, the “many martial wild tribes which inhabit[ed] the borders of Tong King [Tonkin] and Laos” were a key reason for Luang Prabang’s uniqueness, providing a combination of protection and industriousness that contrasted markedly with what he saw further south. If this was hinted at above, it was more explicit in another part of his report. Describing a village along the Mekong just south of Luang Prabang, Garnier had noted that “[t]he population of Ban Cocsay is Laotian but a great number of savages from the neighboring mountains come to the village to trade their products” (1885: 288):

Those that we saw belonged for the greater part to the tribe of the Khmous. They are very numerous in the vicinity of Luang Prabang. Their physiognomy no longer had the submissive and timid expression which

the savages of the south show in their daily relations with the inhabitants of the river valley. They were treated as the equals of the conquering race. In the bosom of this mountainous region, their own cradle, they showed the better part of their native energy and their most virile qualities. Their numbers and the need to use them to defend the mountain passes against enterprising neighbors made them auxiliaries that were managed and not, as is the case in [southern Laos], [treated as] a taxable resource, productive in gold dust and in providing slaves. (ibid.)

Evans' account above provides an important corrective to Garnier's assertions of equality, and suggests that Khmu willingness to "defend the mountain passes against enterprising neighbors" may not have been absolute. Still, between Evans and Garnier, we can see the outlines of an upland political geography that seemed to work well – at least for Luang Prabang – when times were good, but that broke down in the 1870s with the arrival of "the Haw."

In 1884, McCarthy visited a village northeast of Luang Prabang that, based on his description, clearly lay outside the system of *sakdina* relations. A highland village of "Meo", it also contained a number of representatives from the "*kha*" tribes that had been involved in the uprising of 1875:

We halted for some days at a large settlement of Meo, between whom and the Haw of Tung Chieng Kam there was a close connection. There were upwards of 200 representative men of the Ka Che tribes. These tribes had been goaded into revolt some years before, when *more than half of them were killed or died from starvation*. They are usually called Ka Che (meaning slaves), and their homes are on the slopes of the mountains all over the Luang Prabang division. ... At one time they were associated only with Luang Prabang, but after the rebellion upwards of 20,000 settled in the Nan division [of Siam, see Figure 1]. The teak trade of Siam is carried on chiefly by their means, as they are sturdy and hard-working foresters, content with very small remuneration. (McCarthy 1900: 92, emphasis added)

In McCarthy's account we glimpse an upland landscape around Luang Prabang that was significantly depopulated by the arrival of the Haw, first by attacks, then starvation, and then migration westward to safer parts of the Siamese empire. A decade earlier, Garnier had estimated the population "for the whole province" of Luang Prabang at 50,000 (Garnier 1885: 293). Although the numbers are highly uncertain – Garnier himself qualified his estimate with the caveat that "the population can barely be assessed in a precise way" (ibid.) – a loss of the magnitude described by McCarthy is nonetheless staggering. If the two sets of numbers can be even roughly believed and compared, they imply an almost complete decimation of the upland population during the latter 1870s and early 1880s. Garnier also estimated the city of Luang Prabang to have around 15,000 people (ibid.), leaving roughly 35,000 or more (his estimate was a minimum) in the countryside. Some of these would have been residents of lowland villages: while Luang Prabang's lowlands are small, they are not nonexistent. Garnier's estimate of the upland population was thus in the range of somewhere under 35,000. McCarthy's description

above implies an upland population of over 40,000. More than half of these, according to the stories he heard, died from war or starvation; the other half survived and migrated to Nan, with only a scattered few sticking around in villages like the one he visited. McCarthy, in short, suggests that *all and then some* of the upland population estimated by Garnier either died or left.

At the very least, the two estimates suggest a major disintegration of the social fabric of the upland landscape. This had profound implications for Luang Prabang. As noted above, the kingdom had far less lowland space than comparable or even smaller *muang* like Nan, Vieng Chan, Sing or Chiang Mai. A French surveyor quipped around the turn of the century that “[w]ithout the agriculture of the *Khas*, the Lao [of Luang Prabang] would not have a grain of rice to put between their teeth” (Lefèvre-Pontalis, in Walker 1999: 37). Writing around 1900, this reflected the fact that uplands along the Nam Tha River (Figure 1) had once again become “the granary of Luang Prabang” (*ibid.*). But by then Laos was almost a decade into becoming part of French Indochina. In the 1870s and 1880s, in contrast, the upland periphery of Luang Prabang’s *sakdina* geography had all but disappeared.

3. Rereading the “Conquest of Hearts”

It was in this context of upland political rupture that a well-placed French representative was able to press the case, in 1887, for French protection to the king of Luang Prabang. Auguste Pavie, the French vice-consul and first French official posted in Laos, had written earlier to an acquaintance, “Let us gently extend our influence in Laos by placing agents there, by letting explorers and merchants travel throughout it, and its limits will become large” (in Stuart-Fox 1995: 117). Pavie himself was perhaps the most important of these agents in the expansion of French influence in Laos. His feats in Luang Prabang have, as Stuart-Fox aptly notes, become the stuff of legend (Stuart-Fox 1997: 22). But despite being remembered as a “conquest of hearts” (Pavie’s phrase), the events that led to French protection were both violent and contingent. The events of 1887 show how the destruction of the *sakdina* frontier allowed the French to capitalize on the geopolitical fracturing of mainland Southeast Asia yet again.

The title of McCarthy’s (1900) book reflects his intent to survey the “Lao dependencies” *within* the kingdom of Siam, not create a boundary *between* Siam and Laos; it also testifies to the fact that his mission was not only scientific, but military (also see Winichakul 1994: 109-112, 121-124). Ironically, it was a conflict generated by this larger securitization effort that ultimately led the king of Luang Prabang to seek protection from the French. McCarthy related the story of how a *chao muang* on the Tonkin frontier had allied himself with the local Haw in order to secure the area against Vietnamese encroachment, which authorities in Luang Prabang had allegedly ordered him to do. The account turned on a tale of intrigue, in which the lord had been deceived by a former apprentice, and was forced to take extreme measures – an alliance with the Haw – in order to defend the area (McCarthy 1900: 100-101). McCarthy thought this account “very satisfactory” and recounted it without any hint of doubt (*ibid.*: 100). Nonetheless, it apparently failed to convince the Siamese commander, who doubted the

chao muang's profession of loyalty and demanded to speak to him in person.³ As a means of leverage, he placed two of the man's sons "in close confinement" (ibid.: 106).

McCarthy, writing with the benefit of hindsight, described the lord as "the man who, above all others, influenced the whole of these countries" (see M. Lai in Figure 1). "[U]nless he were appeased, there would be no end of complications" (ibid.: 105-106). Complications, as predicted, ensued; after sending McCarthy off to survey further to the south and east, the Siamese military commander returned to Luang Prabang and then set off for Bangkok, "denud[ing]" Luang Prabang "of such means of defense as it had possessed" (ibid.: 108). Meanwhile, the Haw with whom the *chao muang* of Lai had allied himself headed for Luang Prabang, "these marauders having been brought down by the eldest son of Chao Lai, who intended with their help to avenge the arrest of his brothers" (ibid.).

McCarthy's account of Haw's descent from *Muang* Lai to Luang Prabang belies the distance involved, which was over 150 kilometers as the crow flies (see Figure 1). In his description of their passage through the Nam Ou gorge, the destruction of the *sakdina* geography is the subtext, inverting the "friction of terrain" with which the region was typically described:

The Haw continued their advance down the Nam U and reached M. Ngoi. There a narrow river-gorge, over a mile long, is commanded by a hill, whose limestone cliffs rise perpendicularly from the water. In the gorge the river is very deep, but the current is imperceptible, and boats descending can make no progress against a head wind. No hostile band anticipating opposition would attempt to force a passage, but the Haw evidently knew the men they were dealing with. They ascended the hill, and, seizing the excellent mountain howitzers, which had been provided for the defence of the position [presumably by the British to the Siamese military], rolled them over the cliffs into the river. They then pushed on to Luang Prabang. (ibid.)

The rest is almost predictable:

The Haw now acted in accordance with their usual barbarity. Beginning at the [temple], where they had chosen their quarters, they extended their murderous work throughout the town. The Chao Uparaj [vice-chief] was put to death, and the old chief^[4] was compelled by his sons and Burman guard to go on board a boat, where one of his sons was shot before his eyes.

³ Evans (2002: 36) implies McCarthy's naïvete, relating how "local elites" like this *chao muang* played both sides, using Lao titles in their relations with Luang Prabang and Siam, and Vietnamese ones in their dealings with Annam and the French.

⁴ Following McCarthy's English ("the old chief"), I have translated *Chao Uparaj* as "vice chief," although it could be also be translated "viceroy." Where McCarthy uses the term "chief," Garnier, also reflecting the geopolitics of his mission, referred to the head of Luang Prabang as a king. Mouhot (quoted above), a Frenchman by birth who was nonetheless more closely tied to English zoological and geographical circles, split the difference, calling the two leaders of Luang Prabang "the princes who govern this little state, and who bear the title of kings" (Mouhot 1862: 362).

Luang Prabang was fired and looted. (ibid.: 109)

The Haw's descent through the Nam Ou River Gorge was thus a symbolic and fateful ending to a process that began almost two decades earlier. When McCarthy tells his audience that the Haw "evidently knew the men they were dealing with," his ambiguity is palpable. On the one hand, he seems to be chastising his Siamese superiors, whose efforts he saw as bungling and tactless (ibid.: 105-108). But we can also read in his account a clear reference to the *kha*, who were for all intents and purposes gone. Much of this disappearance was physical, the result of death, starvation and flight. But even among the Khmu who remained, McCarthy's account suggests that few could be described as *kha*: they had left the social relations of the *sakdina* system, and *kha* is, above all, a relational term (Turton 1999; Evans 1998). The Haw, McCarthy suggests, knew that the *kha* had disappeared in this social sense as well as the physical one; the upland subjects described by Garnier and Mouhot were no longer there.

This is the light in which the decision of the Lao king to seek French protection in 1887 must be viewed. Luang Prabang's pre-colonial security sat at the intersection of interstate tributary relations, the *sakdina* system and physical distance. When the upland political geography of *sakdina* broke down, distance became irrelevant, and Luang Prabang succumbed to a tactical misstep within its relations of Siamese tribute. With the coming of the Haw, the uplands of Luang Prabang became, to use Scott's terminology, frictionless. And with the loss of this traditional form of security, Luang Prabang's turn to the French – "the symbol of a new form of overarching order and protection", as Evans put it (2002: 36) – was perhaps understandable, if difficult nonetheless. This historical moment is important, and emphasizes the need to see upland friction as contingent and dynamic: If the problem that exercised men like Francis Garnier was the need to unblock the Chinese frontier, it was precisely the opposite problem – the all-too-radical *opening* of the uplands in the 1870s and 1880s – that created the opportunity for France's colonization of Luang Prabang. This dynamic of friction and flow would remain pivotal for years, first challenging French efforts to exploit the uplands' riches, and then providing the Americans with a strategic opportunity to exploit the France's failure.

Conclusion: Legacies of Upland Underdevelopment

French efforts to "unblock" the Lao portions of colonial Indochina were slow to materialize, and highly partial at best (Gunn 1990; Stuart-Fox 1995; Ivarsson 2008). Given the prioritization of Vietnam and, subsequently, Cambodia by colonial administrators (ibid.), much of what was built in the way of public works in Laos was based on *corvée* labor provided by local, and specifically upland, populations (Gunn 1990). In contrast, concession-based development efforts, despite a speculative burst during the 1920s, crashed hard in the Great Depression, and left only the tin mines on the Paten River and the plantations of the Bolaven plateau. These were the exceptions that proved the rule that "for colonial capitalism, the 'profitable' Indochina centered on the Vietnamese highlands and deltas" (Brocheux and Hémery 2009: 120), not on Laos and its uplands.

This had profound implications. As noted in the introduction, the question of whether "the Lao" could govern themselves as a nation had been posed by the French

during the colonial period (Ivarsson 2008). If this had ramifications then, it was elevated to a whole new level after the Second World War, as Laos became enrolled in American efforts to contain communism to China and northern Vietnam; as American strategists attempted to theorize the practicalities of containment, they became increasingly exercised with the question of precisely what Laos *was*. Whether Laos was a “real” country or not has provided much critical fodder for scholars (e.g. Evans 1999; Ivarsson 2008). But it had even starker – and decidedly un-academic – implications when it was posed by American policymakers, strategists and their associated “expert” advisors. In these deliberations, the legacies of failed French *débloquement* figured centrally; as U.S. advisors reevaluated whether Laos could provide an effective buffer against communist expansion, they turned to problems of infrastructure, ethnic diversity and the culture of national civil service. Their answer, in 1961, was to try and push the pendulum of upland friction to a point similar to where it had been in the wake of the Haw disturbances almost a century earlier: they took the state’s absence in the uplands as a problem to be exploited – and indeed, a condition to be actively created – and put their efforts behind doing so (Blaufarb 1972; Dwyer 2011).

Today, as upland resources and populations occupy center stage in debates about development’s costs and beneficiaries, this history weighs heavily. But it also weighs ambiguously. Perhaps the central take-home message of the events described above, when Zomia reared its head – briefly but in ways that would echo loudly almost a century later – is the reminder that the uplands need to be understood as a social, rather than merely a biophysical, category. Laos may be “a mountainous landlocked country in Southeast Asia”, as so many development reports are fond of reminding their readers, but there is a lot more to this statement than is often understood. As the uplands continue to manifest the historical and sociopolitical dynamics described above, they are ever the *problematique* of government that Grant Evans described in his writings on the social geography of *sakdina*. This dynamic social nature means that the geopolitical and economic questions of upland development are unlikely to be settled anytime soon, and that socio-historical analysis of the sort Grant pioneered will remain relevant far beyond the academic realm.

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Lao Peasants after Socialism

Boike Rehbein¹

Abstract

Grant Evans argued that socialist collectivization in Laos had failed because peasants did not change their patterns of thinking and acting overnight. This paper tries to show that the argument is valid even today. At the same time as peasant habitus persists, however, modernization takes place. Peasants are transformed into labourers and commercial farmers and the role of agriculture generally decreases. But in Laos, just like in Europe, the story of modernization has come to an end. Members of the most “modernized” social groups become agricultural professionals catering for niche-markets. They do not return to the past but invent a new version of peasantry. All three tendencies exist side-by-side in contemporary Laos. The paper gives an overview of the tendencies and tries to explain them sociologically.

Introcuction

Lao peasants have experienced a roller-coaster ride. They saw the first attempts to commercialize Lao agriculture under French colonial rule, then suffered destruction and resettlement during the Indochinese Wars, they became heroes during the revolution and were forced into collectives after the revolution, before witnessing a return to commercialization. Ever since, they have been considered underdeveloped and backward. They seem to be doomed as a social group, while Lao agriculture is bound to become commercialized, before it will be reduced to large-scale agro-industry. Modernization presumably transforms the peasantry into blue-collar workers, service sector employees and a few agro-capitalists.

The fate of Lao peasantry may be more complex and more enduring than this account suggests. Grant Evans (1990) has argued that collectivization in Laos had failed because older patterns of behaviour were too persistent to be changed within a couple of years. He demonstrated that older peasant cultures were transformed by social and political changes but not erased. Does this argument still apply after 30 years of “New Economic Mechanism” or marketization? I wish to show that it does. And I will add that peasantry will even experience something of a resurrection, albeit in an entirely new shape.

This argument has to be set against the background of the global transformation of agriculture under capitalism. In a first shift, peasants are transformed into commercial farmers producing for the market. This shift has occurred in several historical periods and in various places, even in Southeast Asia before colonial rule (Lieberman 2003). However, systems of commercial farming always disintegrated when larger systems of exchange were struck by crisis. This is – not yet – true for the Western capitalist world-system, which caused a second

¹ Professor, Institute of Asian and African Studies, Humboldt-University Berlin;
rehbeinb@hu-berlin.de

transformation of agriculture. Commercial farmers are replaced by large-scale agro-industry. At the same time, however, as huge specialized estates cater for the consumption of large populations, sometimes on a global scale, we see the emergence of a different type of agricultural professional, namely the artisan professional producing high-quality products, such as gourmet oils, superb wines or organic vegetables.

The paper argues that Laos experiences all these shifts as well as the persistence of earlier patterns of peasant behaviour at the same time. Agriculturalists are no uniform or amorphous mass of peasants but consist of different groups rooted in social formations corresponding to different historical times. The first part of the paper outlines the standard narrative of agricultural development and its anachronism with regard to Europe. In the second section, I summarize in which way the population of contemporary Laos is rooted in different historical times. The final part demonstrates that Lao agriculturalists today span across the entire spectrum of social groups and agricultural possibilities and will not be transformed in a uniform manner.

Peasants, Farmers, and Professionals

According to modernization theory, we just have to look at Europe's past to see what will happen to Laos in the near future. There is some truth to this, since Western capitalism is spreading across the globe and, at the same time, modernization theory is applied as a normative instrument by international organizations. Against this background, a brief look at Europe will actually contribute to our understanding of the similarities and differences between Laos and already "modernized" countries. After the Second World War, European peasantry was increasingly replaced by commercial farming, which in the end developed into agro-industry. This is the story of modernization theory. In the last decades, however, the ecological costs, community imbalances and lack of sustainability of this process were discovered in Europe. Agrarian specialists began to emerge who combine the care for landscape with a desire for a revival of community life and healthy agrarian products. This is at once a step behind and a step beyond modernization theory.

Economic literature still assumes that structural economic development is characterized by the shift from agriculture to industry and from industry to service. One may assess the structural progress of India and China, Thailand and South Africa in terms of substitution of agrarian production by industry and then by the service industry, i.e. according to the idea of tertiarization. However, the mature point of this sequence has already been reached both in Europe and in many countries of the global South. Is this the "end of history"? What will happen to agriculture in the near future? Today, agricultural goods are produced in global value chains comprising local, regional, national and transnational levels of production, distribution, circulation and consumption (Faust et al. 2004). These value chains imply fragmented production structures, monopolies of distribution and quality of consumption. In this regard, agro-food systems do not differ from industrial systems. The more global agrarian-industrial value chains are established, the more the opportunities and risks of such value chains become obvious. In many places, alternative agricultures are emerging. Peasants may become professionals without being farmers, small farmers may occupy market niches and industrial farmers may be re-discovering technological and social knowledge of the peasantry.

In the context of the environmental movement, agriculture in Europe has learned that successful farming is not only big industrial business but includes motives of peasantry. The preservation of the landscape, the contribution to community values and local organization of culture, politics, and economic associations has been revitalized by some people in some places. Urban idealists, impoverished farmers, rural property heirs and people with health problems have turned to emerging niche markets, such as organic products, high quality goods or labour-intensive specialty products. Any profession has to define what it does for human beings and for the world in general. This question may be asked by civil society to doctors, lawyers, and social workers, but increasingly this question is directed to agriculture as well. The environmental movement has in many respects asked these questions. However, it expected answers corresponding to the experience of its adherents. These are not the social groups that have actually come up with the practical answers to these questions.

This has entailed a change of generations. Young farmers, wine-makers, community managers or regular rural people looking for marriage know that their answers have to be economically valid. Economic viability is possible. Importing flowers and fruits from Africa and Southern America and producing wheat and corn in Europe is no answer. A new economic and civilizational synthesis is necessary and possible. It is now situated on the global level and at the same time answered at the local level. It will not be solved by central agencies. Even US-Americans begin to view this change not only as a reflection of European Romanticism but as a real problem and as an economic opportunity. Health concerns, environmental organizations and demand for high quality have created expanding niche-markets around the globe. Some Europeans have responded to the change and partly reversed the story told by modernization theory.

In order to understand contemporary agriculture in sociological terms, we have to distinguish the variety of forms of *work* from *labour*. As Hannah Arendt has argued, only part of human activity is performed in view of securing survival (Arendt 1958: 7). This is labour. Society also encompasses, divides and organizes activities like consumption, leisure, political action and thinking. I will subsume these activities *and* labour under the broader concept of *work*. Whereas the dividing line has been rather clear in Western capitalism, recent developments have started to blur it. This is not only due to Postfordist flexibility and self-exploitation but there is also an increasingly creative approach to labour. The change in the quality and status of labour points to the difference of labour and work. Work is something people invest in because it expresses dignity and sovereignty embedded in cultures, organizations and societies. This is the story told by ancient craftsmen as well as by qualified labour knowing that advanced industry would not survive without their enthusiasm and their skills.

However, this story can now be told by artisans of post-industrial production as well as by “reflexive peasants” interpreting the history of agriculture not as a technological change of labour but as a reinvention of agricultural *work*. Industrial sociologists analyzing the problems of modern labour markets discover the worker as an artist. The qualified labourer, necessarily independent and responsible for the process of production, is developing a certain status of sovereignty as an “industrial artist”. One may argue that parts of agricultural production have moved up the value chain to become professionalized. At the same time, professionals interpret their labour partly as work, as a meaningful project.

In social structure analysis, professionals make up the highest class in the labour hierarchy (Oesch 2006). These are self-employed professionals such as medical doctors or lawyers as well as the highest salaried groups such as top business executives. These groups have the characteristic that they do not distinguish as much between work and labour as the other social groups because labour to them is part of a life project, which is a work of art. They have justified pride in their achievements and are not really familiar with the concept of leisure. This attitude has begun to return into other social groups, which we might describe as artisans rather than top-level professionals.

With the globalization of capitalism and of environmental destruction, conservative European farmers and environmental movements are forced to discuss their problems on the same level as peasants and farmers from the global South. This configuration is entirely new. It entails the idea of global professional farming different from industrial farming as well as the idea of rural preservation. Commodification, inner colonization, central planning and industrialization are no longer the guiding themes. And tourism, natural and cultural heritage sites, resistance to globalization and nationalism are no longer the answers.

Lao peasants have hardly begun their transition to commercial farming before being integrated into the framework of global value chains and environmental destruction. It is almost entirely certain that they will not re-live European history. The idea of the agricultural professional is located beyond the scope of modernization theory. Now, this idea is spreading in Laos even before the European sequence has been completed or even come to a full start. We observe a wide variation of realities anchored in different historical times co-existing in one society.

Lao Sociocultures

Half of the Lao population is still classified as peasants (National Statistic Centre 2005). At the same time, ecological crisis has begun to haunt Laos just like other countries: climate change, rubber plantations, deforestation and pollution. The general framework of institutions and issues does not seem to differ much from Europe but the sociocultural conditions do. What does it mean to be a peasant in a globalized world? How does the rural population adapt to globalization? How do people become agricultural professionals in a peasant environment?

These questions have to be set against the background of the structure of Lao society. To become a peasant or a professional is not an individual choice but is conditioned by one's social environment. In Laos, social environments differ enormously. All contemporary social environments are heirs of earlier structures. They are anchored in earlier historical times. I refer to these persisting structures as "sociocultures" (Rehbein 2007). In Laos, structures even from precolonial times still persist today. Contemporary Laos unites elements of the precolonial *muang*, socialism and influences of colonialism with current capitalism and globalization. Agricultural environments can be rooted in any of these elements. Therefore, a brief overview of these sociocultures will clarify the social roots of contemporary peasants, farmers and professionals.

Most Lao up to this day dwell in villages. The village has a pretty clear social structure, which is mainly determined by kinship. It comprises a hierarchy according to age, sex and specific abilities. Usually, most of the villagers are relatives (Potter 1976: 52). Their respective social position and power is hardly disputed. One's father

always remains one's father. As the relative social position is tied to the respective person, one could speak of a *personal social structure* based on kinship. Much of this is implied by the Lao term for "village", which is *baan*. The term semantically refers more to the social organization than at the physical setting.

Village culture could be described as *subsistence ethics*, a term coined by James Scott (1976). He had studied peasants in densely populated areas – which Laos is not. However, many of the characteristics he found still apply to many Lao peasant villages. Their interest is focussed on having enough until the next harvest, not on having as much as possible. They achieve this by mutual aid (reciprocity), by reinforcing family ties and traditionalism (Evans 1986: 12). Peasants are interested in survival and security, not in affluence and profit. I would subsume reciprocity, family orientation and traditionalism under the term subsistence ethics in order to characterize mainland Southeast Asian village culture in general. Family orientation in some ethnolinguistic groups refers mainly to nuclear families (e.g. Lao), in others (e.g. Hmong) mainly to extended families (Sprenger 2006: 58).

The Southeast Asian village dates back many millennia. It has certainly changed a lot during this time. Subsistence ethics and personal social structure most likely have been defining characteristics all along, however. Sedentary villages were usually founded at important nodes of communication and/or places with valuable resources, such as salt, metal or fish (Higham 1989: 234). These often lay in the valleys. The valleys also allowed for a more productive generation of food, especially wet-rice. Some villages developed into translocal market-places and eventually into towns, much as most everywhere around the globe.

As the town usually was the market place and increasingly hosted a local ruler, social differentiation mainly took place in the towns, which corresponded to an increasing division of labour (cf. Grabowsky 2004). Any superior tried to accumulate as many bonds of loyalty as possible to enhance his position whereas inferiors tended to look for superiors who could guarantee security. Just as subsistence ethics characterized the economic culture of the village, *patrimonialism* was the prevalent economic (and political) culture of the *muang*. Ernst Boesch (1970) used Max Weber's term patrimonialism to describe the relationship between inferior and superior in Thailand. I would prefer an indigenous term, which is linked to the *muang*, and suggest the expression *phu-yai*-culture.

Villages and towns sometimes became part of a larger political structure, especially if they lay close to a ruling court. These principalities implied loyalties of minor entities to major entities, i.e. of villages to towns and of towns to a court – and sometimes of courts to a king or even an emperor. Jana and Oliver Raendchen (1998) have used the indigenous terms *baan-muang* to characterize the structure of Tai social entities. In the *baan-muang*-structure, the lesser entities – the *baan* – preserved some independence, especially if they were geographically remote from the centers – the *muang*. The main character of the relation was exchange of tribute and manpower against security. Loyalties shifted frequently according to the ability of the center to guarantee security and stability.

The Buddhist order was partly integrated into the structure with each monastery having the rank of the social entity of its location, while it partly formed a parallel organization with its own hierarchical structure and culture. *Muang* structures were hierarchical and closely resembled family relations. In a *muang*, most people were not really related, however, they were just loyal to one person that had some authority, like a father in the social structure of the village. This is a *stratified*

social structure.

There have been trade relations and some specialization between villages, which might have been on equal terms for some time. However, there has always been an unequal relation between sedentary and moving groups continuously shifting their location (Higham 1989: 59). There also emerged an inequality between valley and mountain peoples (cf. Leach 1970). Not all villages were integrated into a *muang*. Many were too difficult to reach. Others constantly shifted allegiance or paid tribute to various overlords at the same time. The Akha, for example, seem to define themselves as not having and not being part of a *muang* (Tooker 1996: 329). *Muang* were loose configurations rather than closed territorial states. They included some villages in a given region, while others remained independent, especially if they were nomadic and/or dwelling in the mountains.

Colonialism had a short and selective but nevertheless lasting impact (Pholsena 2006). The territory of contemporary Laos was covered by several *muang* and many more or less independent *baan*. The nation state of Laos was constructed by the French colonial rulers. They integrated the *muang* into a state with territorial borders, a market economy and a bureaucratic state. The French also attempted to codify a national language on the basis of the former *muang*-languages, to define what was to be considered orthodox Buddhism, to introduce a bureaucratic administration and to integrate the mountain dwellers against much resistance (Gunn 1990). After the Second World War, they lost control of their colonial empire in Southeast Asia and were superseded by the USA, who tried to stop the advance of communism – in vain. After decades of war, Laos gained its final independence in 1975, when the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) seized power.

The war had an even broader impact than colonialism. Due to the migration of about a third of the population, the physical damage and the large amount of money pouring into the country, the social structure of the towns changed considerably during the Second Indochinese War. At least ten percent of the population affected by this change left the country after the socialist takeover in 1975. These included much of the skilled urban population. Most of the citizens of the socialist nation state Laos after 1975 were subsistence farmers living in kinship structures controlled by an all-encompassing party organization that reached practically every village. That is, Laos now was an integrated nation state with mostly precolonial sociocultures and few economic and intellectual resources. It seemed as if the precolonial structure of an elite, a small group of city dwellers and the peasantry along with the Buddhist order was reproduced. However, the top families of the original structure were gone, much of the *muang* population had left the country and a lot of *baan* people had moved up into the elite through the LPRP. Furthermore, the old structure was complemented by the party itself, which is a specific, hierarchical structure.

This is the society studied by Grant Evans in his seminal book on *Lao Peasants under Socialism* (1990). The book argues that the socialist leadership had to increase production to achieve agricultural self-sufficiency and control of the population. According to Evans, the attempt to force peasants into collectives was bound to fail as collectives presuppose a completely different rationality than peasant life, namely organization and surplus production instead of subsistence ethics. The Lao leadership recognized this after only a few years, liberalized agricultural prices and began decentralizing the economy after 1979. Very soon after this, Laos introduced a market economy in coordination with the Soviet Union (Jullien 1995).

While the economy follows the model of Western nation states, the political sphere

still follows the model of a one-party state. Therefore, at least three levels of social structure coexist, *baan-muang*, socialism and the market. They comprise various sociocultures: subsistence ethics (*baan*), *phu-yai*-culture (*muang*), (formal) egalitarianism, and capitalism – possibly augmented by Buddhism as a separate socioculture. The nation state and capitalism have a greater historical depth than socialism but the communist party and its culture reach into every village. Socialism has left no Lao untouched.

Lao Agriculture and Globalization

In Laos, globalization began with the exchange of raw materials between village and forest dwellers and increased with the production of manufactured goods. Even today, Hmong or Akha provide Lao with forest products, while Lao provide them with manufactured goods and rice. This segmentary division of work was based on an unequal exchange with sedentary groups dictating the terms (Leach 1970). This was less so with the exchange of goods between sedentary villages. There had been an intensive trade in raw materials among Southeast Asian villages long before colonialism (Bayard 1984).

Wallerstein (2000: 56) has argued that this form of division of work could not be regarded as a predecessor of contemporary globalization because goods were not produced for a market and until the emergence of capitalism all of the exchanged goods were luxury items; only the capitalist world system created a supranational unity on the basis of economic relations. This argument does not have much value with regard to Southeast Asia. We know that goods have been produced for supranational and even global markets long before European capitalists ventured into the area (Reid 1993; Lieberman 2003: 22). Even if we do not accept the argument that the almost global trade between China, India, Southeast Asia and the Middle East before Wallerstein's long sixteenth century was a capitalist market economy and almost a world system, we have to accept that exchange between Stone Age villages in mainland Southeast Asia involved more than luxury goods. In fact, the bulk of trade consisted of necessary or everyday items like salt, metal, pottery, and food (Higham 1989: 228).

The segmentary division of work between sedentary and shifting villages, between mountain and valley dwellers and between town and country has survived colonialism and the introduction of nation states in Laos. This is true for the personal social structure and subsistence ethics as well. The introduction of socialism in Laos failed mainly because the leadership disregarded cultural and historical factors (Evans 1990). However, colonialism, capitalism and socialism altered Laos fundamentally. While the three levels of sociocultures correspond to different historical layers of society, they have to be distinguished from the contemporary division of work, which is increasingly transnational or even global, and the social structure of capitalism, which is the distribution of socially relevant resources (Rehbein 2007: 19). To a certain degree, globalization continues the trends of colonialism and its socioculture has begun to merge with it. Therefore, I will not distinguish between colonial and capitalist socioculture in contemporary Laos.

Social resources are closely linked to the ability to use them – or to patterns of action. Patterns of action are incorporated in specific social environments. Actions bear a certain regularity or form a pattern, which is partly due to the fact that they are incorporated and partly due to the stability of the social and natural environment.

Even though human beings have to learn most of their practices, these vary little because one tends to act the way one has learned to act. Our ways of walking, talking, joking and writing do not vary at random but remain rather stable over time – and may improve a little at best. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has subsumed the acquired predispositions to act according to a specific pattern under the term “habitus”. The habitus comprises tendencies to act that were acquired in the life-course. It is an embodied tradition, an embodied socioculture. This also implies that forms of action and traditions persist even after society has fundamentally changed.

People’s habitus is rooted in one socioculture more than in others and people’s social cohesion extends to persons with a similar habitus much more than to others (Bourdieu 1984). People with similar habitus also bear similarities in the composition of their resources and therefore in the forms of life they have access to. We may conceptualize the configuration of social groups as a space which is structured by sociocultures, contemporary division of work and distribution of resources. People are placed in this space according to their habitus. The distribution will show clusters due to similarities in the habitus. These clusters should be considered as social groups or *milieus*.

We can meaningfully define milieus in Laos on the basis of sociocultures and resources for the capitalist division of labour (Rehbein 2007). I wish to distinguish between three milieus mainly rooted in the *baan*, two rooted in the *muang*, four in socialism and four in capitalism (cf. table). Each milieu is defined by its habitus, which again in most cases is rooted in one socioculture and tends to generate a specific culture. In the socioculture of *baan*, I would distinguish between non-*muang* milieus (which are mainly ethnic minorities), a subsistence milieu with little or poor land and a subsistence milieu with good land. The patrimonial urban groups and the patrimonial elite are rooted in the *muang* socioculture. On the socialist level, one can distinguish the rural party structure from the lower officials, the established party representatives and the political elite. On the capitalist level, I distinguish between farmers, migrant labourers (including informal labourers), the urban middle class (small entrepreneurs, self-employed people, returnees, urban adolescents and students) and the economic elite (mostly Chinese and returned exiles).

Table 1: Milieus in Laos

	<i>Baan-muang</i>	<i>Socialism</i>	<i>Capitalism</i>
<i>Elites</i>	Patrimonial elite	Leadership	Rich entrepreneurs
<i>Established milieus</i>	Urban patrimonialism	High officials	Middle class
<i>Rural milieus</i>	Wealthy subsistence	Lower officials	Farmers
<i>Marginalized milieus</i>	Poor subsistence	Rural party	Migrant workers
	Non- <i>muang</i>		Beggars

To a large degree, the social structure develops along the lines suggested by modernization theory: people migrate – physically and socially – from the left to the right of the table. The poor rural groups become unskilled labour, wealthy peasants become commercial farmers, and the old middle class transforms into the new middle class. However, contrary to modernization theory, the older sociocultures, both *baan-muang* and socialism, continue to exert an influence. And older ways of life do not simply disappear but partly persist and are, in some cases, re-invented by rural and urban dwellers.

Peasants largely retain a subsistence ethics, while the numerically small urban elites either retain or revive *phu-yai*-culture. Within the party, egalitarianism and a

hierarchical bureaucracy go hand in hand. In the classic urban setting of capital and labour, a competitive market culture emerges. This is only the case where capital and labour are not part of older patrimonial structures. In other social environments, capitalism is re-interpreted according to older sociocultures. Peasants interpret capitalism according to occasionalism – whenever they need money, they enter the market. Many city dwellers interpret capitalism in a patrimonial way, while corruption emerges where patrimonialism and global capitalism meet.

We have to understand peasant sociocultures in order to determine peasants' place in social structure and to arrive at a meaningful construction of social structure in the first place. Contemporary peasants partly and often largely follow a subsistence ethics, as argued by Scott (1976). Even if they are integrated in a nation state and a market economy, their primary goal is security, not profit or wealth. They organize work largely in view of this goal. And within the village, social structure is – at least partly – determined by kinship.

Surveys in Laos clearly showed that peasants who grew up as subsistence farmers do not have a capitalist habitus (Rehbein 2004: 204). In fact, this group comprises the majority of the population. Even people working in capitalist enterprises or engaging in business themselves cannot be considered capitalists in the Western sense. They strive for security or for taking care of their family and entourage (Hanks 1975). These two goals are partly contradictory and derive from different sociocultures, the second being linked to Lao urban culture. However, both aim at the immediate future and do not involve rational calculation and accumulation (Rehbein 2004: 131). When asked what they would do with money won from a lottery, 50 percent of my Lao respondents in the capital city of Vientiane said they would spend it with the immediate family, 30 percent would put it into a bank and only 13 percent responded they would invest it. In rural areas, everyone would spend it on rice and/or throw a party and no one would invest it in a capitalist sense (ibid.: 132, 220).

Almost all contemporary milieus have their roots in peasant cultures. More precisely, practically all Lao who became adults before the market economy really took hold in the late 1990s, actually grew up in peasant settings. They acquired the habitus of a peasant defined by subsistence ethics and personal social structure. It is evident any casual visitor to Laos that even high-ranking officials never feel completely ease in a formal urban setting. In this sense, peasant culture persists in the habitus of the overwhelming majority of the Lao population. Even under a drastic transformation, it would take decades to wipe it out.

Two examples are a very poor slash-and-burn peasant and the village head from a village on the banks of the Nam Ngeum reservoir. The poor peasant's parents and grandparents had been poor as well. None of them had any flat land to grow rice. Even after they had migrated to their present location, their lot did not change. This is partly due to the fact that they had no relatives in the village and partly because they had no other resources – no schooling, no savings, no influence, no position in the party. The peasant is already 73 years old, his children continue to live off slash-and-burn cultivation and his only focus in life is to have enough to eat until he dies. The family of the village head, 47 years old, also migrated to the present location and his parents were peasants as well. The main difference to the poor, old peasant, is that the village head grew up in the socialist zone of Laos during the war, where he had a Vietnamese teacher, managed to complete elementary school and entered the party. He also considers himself very poor but he owns 6 *rai* of land and makes 300 USD a

year selling surplus production.

These two persons will remain peasants for the rest of their life even if they have been integrated into the socialist party and capitalism. They represent approximately half of the Lao population. Some of these peasants make the transition to commercial agriculture but do not necessarily abandon subsistence ethics. An example would be a cattle breeder, 49 years old, in the same region as the two other persons just introduced. He had inherited a relatively large piece of land, about two hectares. But he uses this land for commercial purposes because his father had a decent school education and had advised him to breed cattle. The son followed the advice and says, “nature here is very nice and suitable for cattle breeding”. However, he has no ambition to expand the business or become rich. He makes 100 USD per month, which seems plenty to him. He remains rooted in subsistence ethics.

Apart from the *baan*-milieus and commercial farmers, rural party officials and the few rural industrialists live in the countryside. These groups are not peasants but they are not urban either. They bear some similarities to European farmers and agro-industrialists. Examples for agro-capitalists would be Sinuk and Dao, who own two of the biggest Lao coffee enterprises. While Sinuk is rooted in the old patrimonial urban culture, Dao would be a new capitalist. Both cater to slightly different markets corresponding to their cultural roots. Dao is the large-scale producer and Sinuk the high-end producer. Two other important coffee enterprises in Laos are Lao Mountain, owned by an American, and Pakxong, both aiming at tourists, expats and the Lao urban population.

At the same time, the first new professionals emerge in Laos. There are environmental NGOs and organic enterprises catering for the urban populations in Laos and Thailand. In Laos, Les artisans Lao or Xaoban would be examples for high-end cosmetics, supplements and specialties. However, some NGOs have sprung up that operate entirely within the rural setting aiming at environmental sustainability and organic production. This happens simultaneously with the emergence of similar organizations in Western countries – but not after the disappearance of earlier forms of sustainability, rather as a reenforcement of environmentally friendly traditions. An interesting example is the differentiation of the rice market. The bulk of Lao rice is consumed by the producers, the peasants. Apart from this, a mass market for the regular urban population has emerged. Recently, however, organic rice has begun to appear on local markets as well as in the shops. Organic rice can be marketed as “originally Lao”, i.e. grown in remote places without modern technology and substances, or as hip and organic, sold in fancy packages to financially potent customers. An example would be Sangthong Valley Organic Rice.

Conclusion

Grant Evans (1990) has argued that peasant forms of life show a certain resilience even under conditions of rapid and forceful change. He interpreted this resilience against the background of the debates between modernization theory and Marxism. It seemed evident that these forms of life were bound to disappear in the long run, to be swept away by capitalism. We now see a revival of peasant forms of life – but not as a return to the past, rather as a re-invention by the social avantgarde. The most “modern” segments of the society call for environmental sustainability and ecological quality. In Laos, they join forces with some of those peasants that were supposed to vanish with modernization.

This configuration does not exist in Western countries. We see professionals setting up businesses as alternatives to agro-industry both in Laos and the West. But in Laos, as opposed to the West, we see the coalition of old “tradition” and cutting-edge “modernity”. This coalition is complemented by all shades of grey in between: peasants in development aid projects, poor commercial farmers, mixed peasants and labourers, successful commercial farmers and agro-industrialists all belonging to different habitus groups or milieus. They make up the majority of the population and their interaction will determine part of the immediate future in Laos. Laos no longer is a pure peasant society but Grant Evans’ emphasis on the understanding of peasant culture still makes sense today.

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Contextualizing Development: Grant Evans, Peasant Studies and the Lao Development Sector

Kathryn Sweet¹

Abstract

Grant Evans is well known as an academic. What is less known is his engagement with development work. He was very attentive to the political and economic interventions in Laos, both by the government and foreign organizations. The paper argues that even though Grant Evans was asked to write plenty of reports and assessments for the development sector, his academic work on peasants in Laos was ignored. The argument tries to show how the sector could and still can profit from this work.

The publication of *Lao Peasants Under Socialism* (1990) established Grant Evans' credentials as a rural sociologist, an economic anthropologist and a serious scholar of post-1975 Laos. The study examined the failure of the Lao PDR's policies on agriculture and collectivization and was as relevant to the national socio-economic development agenda as it was to the approaches of development agencies assisting the Lao government. On an international level, it afforded rare insight into the organization of peasant society and economy in an under-developed, socialist state, while domestically it provided valuable ethnographic, political and historical context for current and future socio-economic development efforts. However, despite its relevance to development policy and practice, Grant's research did not provoke the wider engagement among the community of development practitioners that he would have liked. Symptomatic of the awkward gap that exists more generally between academic research and the international development sector, the full potential of Grant's wealth of knowledge about Laos and its peasantry has yet to be utilized in development policies and projects.

Lao Peasants Under Socialism (1990) and its predecessor, a working paper titled *Agrarian Change in Communist Laos* (1988) belong to the academic discipline of peasant studies, which enjoyed its international heyday in the 1970s and 1980s. While international interest in the discipline steadily declined, it remained highly relevant to the Lao PDR where, as Grant pointed out in 2008, the vast majority of the population was still rural-based and engaged in subsistence agriculture. He observed the rural situation in Laos changing only in the late 1990s, remarking: "the processes leading to the end of the peasantry in Laos have only started to gather steam in the past decade" (Evans 2008: 508).

Given the persistence of peasant modes of life, it is surprising that Lao-focused research in peasant studies has not been more prolific. Apart from Grant's doctoral thesis of 1983, published as *Lao Peasants Under Socialism* (1990), and Holly High's thesis of 2005, recently published as *Fields of Desire* (2014), the last three decades has produced few examples of research on the Lao peasantry. Grant expressed the opinion that the dearth of such research had affected our understanding of Lao society and economy, and by implication, efforts to 'develop' it (Evans 2008: 507-8). However, development policy-makers and practitioners' understandings of Lao

¹ PhD candidate, National University of Singapore, and consultant, Vientiane; kathrynsweet@yahoo.com

society and economy have been influenced not only by the limited amount of academic research, but just as importantly by their limited engagement with it.

Such a dilemma is not unique to Laos. Scholars of development have critiqued the professional and intellectual distance that exists between development policy and practice and that of academic research, and the tendency of the two pursuits to deal with similar subject matter in opposite ways. Maia Green describes academic anthropologists, and social scientists more generally, as ‘disassembling’ or deconstructing ideas and events in order to make meaning, whereas development policy makers utilized the reverse technique of ‘reassembling’ ideas or events in order to make meaning (Maia Green cited in Mosse 2011: 1). As a development practitioner myself, working in the Lao PDR since 1998 on a variety of rural development, reproductive health and UXO-related projects, I observe my professional colleagues going beyond the making of meaning, and crossing into the realm of action and compromise, a space in which the academic researcher rarely operates. A simpler rendering would be to describe academics as ‘thinkers’ and development policy-makers and practitioners as ‘doers’.

The gap between ‘thinkers’ and ‘doers’ is further exacerbated by what academic critics charge is the international development sector’s ‘dumbing down’ of complex issues, its lack of appreciation of political, social and cultural context, and its glossing over of inconvenient truths. Anthropologist David Lewis accuses the international development sector of “a reliance on heroic levels of ahistorical oversimplification” (Lewis 2011: 178), while his colleague David Mosse alleges the sector is based on “denied history ... concealed politics and hidden incentives” (Mosse 2011:7), thus broadening James Ferguson’s well-known charge of political avoidance and/or denial on the part of the development sector’s power brokers (Ferguson 1994).

In their defence, development policy-makers and practitioners, and certainly those in the Lao PDR, are often stretched for time. They often have long lists of activities that must be implemented within finite periods of time, sometimes requiring micro-management, frequent negotiation with government counterparts, and an ongoing search for national and international staff willing to work in remote, rural locations. Project design documents, approved by the Lao government and the international funding agencies, steer development activities in predetermined directions. As such, there is little room for contextual, historical knowledge or understanding, which could provoke an awkward questioning of the project design’s assumptions but without the guarantee of any quick and easy solutions to replace them.

As in other developing countries, the Lao PDR is not without its quota of development practitioners who lack contextual knowledge (or interest) of the society in which they are working. This is symptomatic of the wider gap between academia and development policy practice. Most, but not all, development practitioners working in the Lao PDR over the past three decades would be aware of Grant’s research. Surprisingly few, however, have probably engaged with it in any detail.

Grant once recounted the case of a senior development bureaucrat who, at a social function in the Lao capital, confessed to being clueless about the historical significance of Viengxay (the cave complex in the mountains of Houaphan province, which served as the base of the Neo Lao Hak Xat resistance during the Second Indochina War). Grant was so shocked – even travel guidebooks contain a line or two about Viengxay – that he refused to enlighten the hapless aid official, and instead

strongly encouraged him to skim-read a copy of *A Short History of Laos*.² In a more project-specific example, a social advisor to the Lao Land Titling Project once enquired if there was any evidence of communal land use and/or ownership in Laos.³ I suggested he consult Grant's research on a mixed Black Tai and Sing Moon village in Houaphan, where he documents the annual redistribution of communal rice fields (*na*) by village leaders based on the available labor and rice requirements of each household (Evans 1999: 132). The consultant's question and his reaction to my response (he was not familiar with Grant Evans or his work) confirmed his contracting was not been due to any contextual knowledge of social or cultural issues in Laos, but presumably due to his familiarity with the requirements of funding agencies, or his involvement in similar projects in the region. Of a lesser order, but just as indicative of the generalized approaches of the development sector and its disconnection from the local context, is the comment of a United Nations intern in Vientiane who quipped that he sometimes forgot he was in Laos ... and presumably thought he was somewhere else.⁴

Compounding the lacunae of contextual knowledge, development practitioners can appear ambivalent at best, ignorant at worst, of the theoretical approaches and debates around development issues taking place in the academic arena. Grant lamented "the theoretical poverty of [development] consultants" in 2008, observing that "peasant studies has barely touched them" (Evans 2008: 517). He was particularly dismissive of the development sector's understandings of the dynamics of 'poverty' and 'community', and the widespread practice among rural development projects to conduct wealth-ranking within villages. Grant argued convincingly from the perspective of an economic anthropologist that the main differences in wealth in rural Laos were to be found between villages rather than within villages. Inequalities within villages were neither systemic nor long-term in rural Laos, he pointed out, as the nation did not suffer from the entrenched class inequality found in parts of South Asia or Latin America. Rather, he described the economic status of peasant households in rural Laos as undergoing cyclic fluctuation:

[O]ver time there is a wave-like undulation in family fortunes. Invariably newly-wedded people with immature children have relatively few resources, but they acquire them through inheritance and as their children's labour enters the peasant economy. A snapshot of a village will reveal families in different stages of this domestic cycle. Thus someone who appears 'poor' in the snapshot would appear better off in a snapshot taken further on in the cycle. Similarly, a family at the height of its use of labour and land will appear well off, but will appear in a later snapshot as a diminished entity when land and labour are dispersed through inheritance and through children beginning their own domestic groups (Evans 2008: 519).

Grant also argued that kinship ties within rural villages link households at the beginning or end of the wave, with those riding its crest - an important factor that can

² Personal communication with Grant Evans, Vientiane, 2008.

³ The Lao Land Titling Project was implemented from 1996-2009, and was co-funded by the World Bank and AusAID. Similar projects were implemented in Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines around the same time.

⁴ Personal communication with UN intern in Vientiane, May 2015.

be missed if one views the village solely as a collection of individual households, and not also as an entity with its own social and economic dynamics. As such, he concluded that “almost all consultant studies are based on an incorrect understanding of the dynamics of Lao peasant society.” (Ibid.) Similar methodologies are still in use: in the course of writing this paper, a development consultant outlined the plans of a large-scale rural development project to conduct wealth-ranking of households within (not between) target villages, and to direct project support to those households assessed as the poorest and most vulnerable. The approach was based on allegedly successful programs in Bangladesh, a country with few if any social, cultural, political and/or historical similarities with Laos.⁵

Occasionally, Grant formalized his criticism of development practice. In the late 1990s, he wrote to AusAID, the Australian government’s international development agency, expressing his concern that the Lao Land Titling Project would facilitate the legalization of shadowy land grabs. AusAID replied in the style of government agencies by restating official policy and the specific goals of the project, unwilling and perhaps unable to engage in a debate about the legal, economic and social risks associated with a project of this nature.⁶ However, those who study contemporary land governance in Laos might agree that Grant’s prescient concerns were on the mark.

As a career academic, Grant remained largely aloof to the pragmatic bent of development policy makers and practitioners. He made only occasional forays into development consultancy, perhaps surprisingly given the pervasiveness of the international development sector in Laos until the mid-2000s, and its ability to provide visas in a nation not noted for its facilitation of international researchers. For the most part, Grant’s contributions were restricted to the provision of advice or opinions, rather than actual project implementation, unless one considers his capacity-building work with the Institute of Cultural Research, and the National Academy of Social Science in Vientiane to have constituted such a role. He accepted consultancy assignments with the Australian Development Assistance Bureau (AIDAB) in 1987,⁷ the World Wildlife Fund and the World Bank in 1991, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in 1998, and the Asian Development Bank in 2004.⁸ The latter contract was attractive, partly because it offered a rare opportunity to visit the Xaysomboun Special Zone while inspecting community-based irrigation schemes. And in 2013 he conducted what was to be his final development consultancy: a short study on the impact of ethnicity on education outcomes for the Australian government’s aid program.

One of the challenges Grant faced was how to adjust to the role of development consultant charged with advising development policy makers and practitioners. Heavily influenced by academia, Grant was most comfortable providing a thoughtful,

⁵ Personal communication with the Social Protection Adviser to the Social Protection and Sustainable Livelihoods Program, part of the Lao-Australia Rural Livelihoods Program (LARLP) funded by the Australian government’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 6 May 2015, in Vientiane.

⁶ I was the AusAID employee charged with drafting the reply to Grant Evans’ letter.

⁷ Grant produced a paper titled ‘Ethnographic Aspects of Farming Systems’ for the ‘Lao People’s Democratic Republic Report of a Pre-feasibility Study of a Multi-Purpose Dam on the Nam Thien in the Context of Promoting Development in Sayaboury’, Canberra: Australian Development Assistance Bureau’s (AIDAB), 1987, cited in Evans (1988: 79-80).

⁸ In 1998 Grant reviewed a series of reports on poverty for the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and in 2004, reviewed the ADB-Japan Foundation for Poverty Reduction-funded Community Managed Irrigation Project, cited in Evans (2008: 517).

deeply informed, anthropological view of Lao society. This was often presented in a format and style which contracting development agencies were not necessarily well-versed in, or equipped to deal with. His perspective did not always neatly accord with the latest development policy approach. Nor did it always meet the expectations of development technocrats for lists of easy-to-implement options and recommendations. In my view, Grant preferred to provide the results of his research, that is, his informed opinion to the contracting development agencies, and to leave the 'next steps' up to the development specialists themselves.

Grant was first and foremost an academic anthropologist, who carved out his place as one of the foremost commentators on Lao politics, economics, society, culture and history. However, his more recently published research, *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance* (1998), *A Short History of Laos* (2002) and *The Last Century of Lao Royalty* (2009) mixed anthropology and history, as he alternatively highlighted and filled in the gaps in knowledge and lapses in memory about Laos and its past. While these later works do not address peasant studies or development sector issues directly, they provide important contextual grounding for a more complex understanding of where these issues are located within the broader landscape of Lao society and economics.

Grant, despite studying a nation dominated by the development rhetoric of government and the development funding and actions of myriad international agencies, mostly stood apart from the sector and offered his informed commentary from the sidelines. As the development sector continues its quest for solutions to improve the lives and livelihoods of people in rural Laos, development policy makers and practitioners alike would reap dividends by investing time to not only familiarize themselves with Grant's vast body of research on Laos and its socio-economic development, but to actually engage with it.

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