

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