

Interview with Grant Evans¹

The interview was conducted by Boike Rehbein² on March 1, 2009

Q: Why did you get interested in Laos?

A: In terms of it becoming an academic interest, it was on the horizon in the 1970s. But well before that there were two other factors, firstly the increasing orientation of Australia towards Asia and secondly, of course, the Vietnam War. The earliest time I remember being interested in things Lao was in the early 1960s after the Kong Le coup when I started reading *Time* magazine. Articles in the magazine reported on the coup and asked about the consequences, e.g. would US President Kennedy intervene or would he not intervene? Around the same time, my father brought home the book *The Ugly American*, which I still have. The novel is based on a fictitious country called Sarkhan, which is a mixture of Laos and Thailand. The book which styled itself as fiction based on fact delivers a reflection on the consequences of American foreign aid – the stupid, clumsy things the Americans were doing, causing them to lose to the communists, I suppose. The book appeared in 1959 and I read it around 3 years later at the early age of 14, and it left a rather strong impression on me. It brought up questions on development and foreign aid and, of course, Laos even though I do not remember how I visualized it. All of this was prior to what we now call the Vietnam War, which came on top of it in the mid 1960s. The issue that arose then was the possibility of conscription, the possibility of going to Indochina and getting killed there. My brother-in-law was conscripted after marrying my sister and then went off to Vietnam, so one had to think about it.

Q: How did this translate into an academic interest?

A: I entered university in 1968 and was involved in something we might call a peace movement and we were reading about Vietnam. Of course, Laos floated into the picture occasionally. In retrospect, we knew very little on the entire issue right until

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the end of Australian involvement in 1972 – but we asserted the little we knew very strongly. After 1975, all of this drifted away, and I started to do a PhD thesis on the Southwest Pacific involving fieldwork in Papua-New Guinea. It was partly a critique of leftist views of colonialism based on a more sophisticated new-leftist view of colonialism. Indochina remained in the background with issues like refugees and the Khmer Rouge in the news, but I focused on the Southwest Pacific. Then it all came back into the picture, partly through prompting by my friend Kelvin Rowley, after Vietnam had invaded Cambodia and China had invaded Vietnam. We had to ask: Why was the red brotherhood at war? In 1979, Kelvin suggested that we go to Indochina to do a book on this question. I had other things to do but I had always been interested in the area and topics like nationalism and communism. So we came to this part of the world, first to Thailand where Kelvin did interviews with refugees at the Cambodian border, while I interviewed refugees from Luang Phrabang in Chiang Rai. Then we travelled to Hanoi. After that, I travelled to Cambodia, then back to Hanoi and finally to Laos. Kelvin had to go back to Australia but he remained the driving force behind the book *Red Brotherhood at War*. He focused more on Cambodia, while I focused more on Laos. So I came to Laos in the beginning of 1980. The next thing that happened was the ‘yellow rain’ allegations involving the Hmong. While we were working on the book *Red Brotherhood at War*, I started coming back to Laos to do research among Hmong refugees in camps along the border. I also went into Laos and there I spoke with Pheuiphanh Ngaosyvath who was head of department two of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and explained to him that this was an issue they could not ignore and had to address. I asked him if they would let me do research inside of Laos. He understood the international implications because he was a recent returnee from the Sorbonne. The book *Yellow Rainmakers*³ took me further into Laos and then I became interested in all the debates on Laos as well as communism and development. The issue that was of particular interest to me was collectivization. So I stopped all my research on the Pacific, put all the papers I had collected into plastic bags and started working on this part of the world. I just kept two books, one on tropical geography and one on rumour. The topic of rumour plays an important role in the ‘yellow rain’ book and many years later I wrote a long article on a rumour that swept through Hong Kong in the early 1990s.

³ Grant Evans, *The Yellow Rainmakers*, London: Verso. 1983.

Q: So you had already abandoned any radical fantasies before coming to Laos?

A: Well, my interest was both academic and political. Kelvin and I had never been part of movements like the Maoists, for example, but rather something that might be described as the New Left, which had a stronger intellectual orientation. We already had a critique of nationalism, as opposed to the Maoists. But a central question in *Red Brotherhood at War* was why did the whole thing go sour? We were primarily against war, so we were interested in the question why the Vietnam War was succeeded by a war between communists. Of course, the answer was nationalism. And when we came to all of these countries we brought with us an anti-Stalinist perspective involving a critique of central planning, political repression, atrocities etc. All of these issues merged in my first research in Indochina. We had the theory, but the one thing we did not have was, of course, the experience of being here. Because to experience full-on communism is kind of a shock actually. If you went to Thailand, which was formally a military dictatorship at the time, life was pretty relaxed and easy. I had been to New Guinea, East Timor and other places before coming to Indochina. But landing in Hanoi was strikingly different. The first thing you realize is the pervasiveness of the state. This, of course, was the period of high Stalinism. And the entire region was in a state of emergency and high alert. Compared to Vietnam and Cambodia, arriving in Laos was much more relaxed in spite of the tensions with China and Thailand, the refugees, the Hmong situation, etc. But it was still strictly controlled and the only place foreigners were allowed to stay was the Lane Xang Hotel. Fortunately, one of the few other guests in the hotel was a journalist from the Japanese Communist Party newspaper, *Akhahata*, and I was able to tag along with him to a Tai Dam village not far from Km 52. Other than that, we could not move much. All roads had barriers and police checkpoints. And there was no research being done. Indeed, this was completely out of the picture. The foreign ministry completely controlled what I was doing. It was a strange atmosphere. People were whispering to me, "Can you get me out of here to Australia?", and these sorts of things. Of course, I had experienced this in Vietnam and Cambodia before coming to Laos. This entire experience of high communism was very important and had a strong impact on me. At this point, I decided to throw my old thesis away and

do my thesis on Laos. And the thing that interested me most was collectivization, both as a theoretical issue and in terms of fieldwork.

Q: So how did this research develop?

A: The first problem to be solved for my fieldwork was to convince the Lao to allow me to actually do fieldwork. I had already convinced Pheuiphanh and had done some fieldwork for *The Yellow Rainmakers*. The result was rather favourable to the Lao. They did not fully understand it or even read it but they seemed to think, "Oh, so you can put together a rather sophisticated argument combating Cold War propaganda." This especially intrigued Pheuiphanh, who had gotten his PhD from the Sorbonne. So he took a chance. I told him that I wanted to do some fieldwork after I had already studied some of the cooperatives up in Xieng Khuang. But I now had to do some sustained fieldwork, which was virtually impossible to do at the time up in the mountains. So I thought about a place close to Vientiane. And this worked out because Kaysone Phomvihane had just given a speech on Don Dou village being sort of an exemplary cooperative village. In my memory, that is the reason why I chose that area in Hatxayfong district. The idea was to compare cooperatives set up in three different villages, and that is what I did. So the issue was to convince Pheuiphanh to give me the *laissez-passer* and then I had to go out there every day by motorbike for a couple of months. They asked me if I had anybody to go with me. There actually was this one Lao who had come back from Australia and was working in a state mining company at the time. Friends back in Australia hooked me up with him. He took time off to work as my assistant and interpreter as my Lao was still pretty basic back then. Even today you need someone to accompany you when you do research in the villages. But I got lucky, and this guy, Phuvieng, was interesting and he was interested in theoretical issues.

Q: The rest of the story is described in *Lao Peasants under Socialism*.⁴

A: Right. The interesting thing was how quickly the official account of the cooperatives collapsed. It was like a Potemkin village situation. They claimed that everyone was enthusiastic and everyone was behind the party. But after only two days in the field that story had disintegrated. The village of Don Dou had already had

⁴ Grant Evans, *Lao Peasants Under Socialism*, New Haven: Yale University Press. 1990.

several delegations paraded through it, from North Korea, Vietnam and elsewhere. Journalists who went there for a couple of hours could be told almost anything you like. But if someone comes back the next day and the next day, it becomes more difficult to sustain the facade. People then had to adjust their stories. So if you asked them, “Why is this person not in the cooperative?”, they had to be honest about it and tell you why he was not. From village to village the story was slightly different. Don Dou was a village of people that mostly had come from other parts of Laos and Northeastern Thailand, while the other villages were more established. So they had different attitudes to one another, different histories and different attitudes towards the land.

Q: If we look at your early books from a contemporary perspective, could we still learn something from them even though they were somewhat topical in nature?

A: As far as *The Yellow Rainmakers* is concerned, I still find the issue of rumour most interesting. Even though I did not do it as well as I would like to have done, I still think what I wrote is of enduring interest. And it is an interesting exercise in academic problem solving. But because it is topical in that it relates to the Cold War setting, many people will probably not go back to it. As far as the *Red Brotherhood at War* is concerned, there again I would change many things but the abiding interest of the book is the discussion of communism and nationalism.

Lao Peasants under Socialism is much more theoretical and there are several interesting theoretical issues in it, in particular the discussion of the nature of cooperation. If you want to organize cooperation in units larger than the family, how do you do it? Thus the epigram I took from Marx and Engels right at the start of the book: “The setting up of a collective economy is predicated upon the development of machinery, upon the utilization of natural resources, and of many other productive forces...” 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. Interestingly, last year there were discussions in Laos on reviving cooperatives – not state cooperatives of course, but marketing cooperative as a form of organizing agriculture and undertaken voluntarily. As we

know from Europe, there have always been cooperatives of various sorts in agriculture. And I discuss this toward the end of the book. All of these arguments from the book remain of interest. Furthermore, the book retains its interest as a documentation of the period. There is no other book like this on that period in Laos.

Q: One thing that distinguishes your work from most other books on Laos is that you relate Laos to a bigger picture both in a theoretical and in a geographical sense. What difference, do you think, does that bigger picture make in the assessment of what is happening in Laos?

A: I think it is impossible to write on Laos without being well read about elsewhere and other issues. If you wished to write on socialism in Laos, you had to read stuff on Europe and on China. There was simply nothing on Laos that you could read. To get some sort of theoretical comparative perspective, you were compelled to go beyond Laos. And the bulk of anthropological work has been done elsewhere too. Even if you want to study the specificity of Laos, you would never understand it by just looking at Laos.

Q: You are implying that there is something specific about Laos. What could it be?

A: If we take nations as relevant units of analysis, all of them are unique, especially since the project of the nation state is to make its unit unique. But there are all kinds of specificities below the nation state and above it. None of these levels has theoretical priority. For example it is impossible to study Lao Buddhism without studying the region. There are both local and regional manifestations of Buddhism, and now there are national manifestations as well. And it seems to me that all of these are historically conditioned. In all regional studies there is a tendency toward nationalism, to look only at the nation state. This can even amount to a kind of national chauvinism. For example, people writing on Laos usually know the literature on Thailand. This is not reciprocated by Thai scholars. There are good scholars of on Lao Buddhism, such as Archaimbault, but he is hardly acknowledged by Thai scholars. You find very few people working on Thailand who use Laos as sort of a natural point of comparison. Of course, there is often also an inverted chauvinism on the part of the Lao. One of the difficulties studying Laos is the ethnocentrism of the Lao. For ethnic Lao, the natural point of comparison is with the Thai

but for all the other ethnic groups not necessarily. For the Hmong the point of comparison would be with China because the majority of them are living there. Or if you are a Black Tai in Laos, you are part of the majority because you are put in the Lao Lum category and you speak a language that is cognate to speakers of the national language. If you are a Black Tai in Vietnam, however, this is not the case. And so on.

Q: You implied that the larger framework to understand socialist Laos was the Soviet bloc.

A: Yes, up until 1991 when the constitution was drafted. The constitution quite literally constituted the nation state and ended the Vietnamese 'neo-colonial' period. Compared to the Vietnamese neo-colonial period, the American neo-colonial period prior to 1975 was very ramshackle. Socialist Laos was very well organized compared to that as you had a large military presence and a very strict control of the party. The term neo-colonialism, a favourite of the Lao Party, is in fact not very appropriate and I use it here polemically. There are all sorts of informal controls in the contemporary world that can hardly be subsumed under this single term neo-colonialism – a category that I believe is more confusing than useful.

Q: If we now look at Laos, we can no longer understand it within the Soviet framework but we only understand it in the framework of a globalized world. Do you think that the new elites in Laos could only rise due to globalization or would they have appeared just on the basis of internal dynamics?

A: The key to it was the collapse of orthodox communism, and this is something that actually comes from the outside. If you go back to the high communist period, there was not much independent economic activity. What happened with the reforms in the few party-ruled states that remain, is that the party had to give up its monopoly of the distribution of goods. It still distributes political positions and some economic privileges but not to the degree it did in the past. And that is what happens with the "opening-up", as the socialist states call it: new forces become active and people are no longer totally dependent on the party-state to get rich and powerful. So the party loses its monopoly of power and privilege. And with foreign investment, the picture does become globalized. The other way it becomes globalized is through joining organizations like ASEAN, and its member states are committed to Laos' stability. In

other words, even if the Lao state wanted to collapse, they would not let it collapse. Finally, globalization has entered Laos in all the well-known forms, international organizations, NGOs, travel, media and so on. There is no going back. As a consequence, the dynamic here has become much more complicated. In the past, the Lao party maintained unity by distributing privileges relatively evenly and that has been a relatively simple exercise. This is no longer the case because the picture has become too complicated with many different international players on the scene – China, Thailand, Vietnam, South Korea, etc. So my prediction is that with the current economic crisis, for the first time some members of the elite may lose out, and that may lead to brawling over privileges within the party. In that sense, globalization has changed the game, even for the party itself.

Q: We know that research on Laos is not widely read within Laos. That is a bit different with your *Short History of Laos*, as it has been translated into Lao. What were some reactions from the Lao to it?

A: Generally, reactions from inside Laos were very positive, from all kinds of people. Several people told me they started reading it and simply could not stop before they had finished it. The main question addressed to me was: “How do you know all of this?” They were puzzled by how one could get access to such broad information. They enjoyed reading the book, I think, because they are starved of information. They know that the party line does not tell the whole story and my book filled in some of the blank spots. Another positive reaction derived from the fact that the book does not hit you over the head with Party politics. Some people have picked me up on small details and have told me that the name of a person in a picture is not quite right, etc. But there has been no real critique of the book. Of course, there was one major negative reaction to the book. When I applied for a new visa in 2007 through the Ecole française d’extrême-orient, the foreign ministry rejected the application because I had written material critical of the Lao government. So, I cannot officially do research in Laos now. It was a risk to have the book translated but the reactions have been very positive. Maybe even the people in the Foreign Ministry who rejected my visa application are secretly reading it with pleasure.

Q: How does the new book *The Last Century of Lao Royalty* relate to the history book?⁵

A: The new book is a direct outgrowth of the book on *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance*.⁶ This earlier book had several motivations. One motivation was that I had been working in Laos long enough to be surrounded by young people who could not remember what I remembered, and I was surprised to realise that I myself had become a repository of memory. A second one was to document and analyze the distortion and manipulation of memory by the new regime. There is an important section on Lao royalty in the book, and as I had been interviewing people and saw pictures on their walls concerning royalty I slowly started to think I should do a book on it. But I still had not decided what kind of book to write. So even while writing the book on *Ritual and Remembrance*, I started gathering material for a future book on the Lao royalty. I finally gave the manuscript, which turned out to be a documentary history, to Silkworm Books in 2005.

Q: When you handed the manuscript to Silkworm did you think it may be risky to publish a book on Lao royalty, possibly even more risky than publishing the *Short History* in Lao? But this may have changed.

A: I think it has changed in several fundamental ways. As I argued in *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance*, after the collapse of communism all kinds of elements from the royalist regime come back into the picture by default. No one was more shocked than me when the statue of Fa Ngum was erected. I could not have predicted this event even from my own book. Here were people carrying out rituals implying the presence of the king or at least of his spirit. Another argument of *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance* had to do with Luang Phrabang and its 'museumisation'. Once you create a heritage city, that heritage carries a whole lot of baggage with it. So, with a reversion to old style nationalism many aspects of the royal past could not help but re-emerge. My book, I suppose, is just one manifestation of this. But another element came into play with the first ASEAN meeting here in Laos in 2005. This is when Laos was truly fully recognized as a

⁵ Grant Evans, *The Last Century of Lao Royalty: A documentary history*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books. 2009.

⁶ Grant Evans, *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance: Laos Since 1975*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books. 2008.

modern nation state by the others, and in a sense by the Lao government itself. All the insecurity and vague sense of illegitimacy that had been there beforehand disappeared. Therefore, it could allow discordant themes to come to the surface because they could be interpreted as some kind of manifestation of tradition. And this is where my book on Lao royalty comes in. Lao can look at it and confront their heritage. There is nothing in the book that is problematic or threatening. And there is nothing that is threatening the LPDR in reality either. I think that is good. Hopefully, the relaxation will lead to an expanded space for discussion. These days there are public discussions in the Monument Books store in Vientiane. This was completely unthinkable even a few years ago. The authoritarian state has become more liberal. But it has a long way to go.

Q: The current economic crisis might become a trigger for a political crisis.

A: Unlike in China, there is no real threat to the leadership from below. In Laos, we will not see people marching to the party headquarters and burning it down – at least not for another 20 years. The main threat to stability in Laos is the elite itself. This is where all of these regimes have been vulnerable. All the regimes in Eastern Europe collapsed from the top down. It really depends how elite differences work themselves out here in Laos.

Q: There are an increasing number of publications by young scholars on Laos. What would you recommend to young academics starting to work on Laos now?

A: Yes, there has been terrific work by young sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, ecologists and others on Laos. It is increasingly becoming a rich field. But there are three glaring absences in the field. There is very little historical work. Given the huge lacunae in Lao history, it is a pity that so few historians are working on Laos. You name any period of Lao history, there is virtually nobody working on it. And that includes archaeology. There is a lot to be learnt from archaeology here given the sparsity of written sources. Another area that is absolutely fundamental is politics. Since Joseph Zasloff retired, there has been no political scientist working on Lao politics. And by politics I also mean the Lao military. You and I can have a general discussion on Lao politics now but we are short of the empirical details. I do not understand why there is no interest because there many people working on Thai

politics or on Vietnam but there is nobody on Laos. Finally, there are no economists. Ever since the book by Yves Bourdet in 2000,⁷ no serious book on the Lao economy has come out. As for anthropology, most anthropologists working on Laos do not know enough history. The discussions on minorities are insufficiently comparative, and people do not adopt the wider perspective that we talked about earlier. Of course, it still is difficult to do research in Laos, and government restrictions often dictate the areas and approaches chosen. For example, a lot of research is often conducted in conjunction with an aid project, and so on.

⁷ Yves Bourdet, *The Economics of Transition in Laos: From Socialism to ASEAN Integration*, Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar. 2000.