

Grant Evans (1948–2014)



Grant Richard James Evans passed away on 16 September 2014 at his home in Vientiane, Laos. With his passing, the field of Lao Studies has lost its foremost scholar: the author of many books, articles and papers focusing primarily on social anthropology and history, but also including politics and economic development. Grant is survived by his wife of ten years, Keomany Somvandy, his daughter and only child, Elizabeth Dawn (Aranya) Evans, aged two, his older sister, Yvonne MacMullan, and her three children.

Grant was born on 11 October 1948 in Berri, South Australia, son of Clement Evans, an air force officer. His mother, Dawn, originally from South Africa, was also in the airforce. Finishing secondary school at Mildura High School, Victoria, he continued his education at La Trobe University where he was involved in New Left politics. As he said in interview in 2009, “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.”¹ However, he soon became interested in the fracturing of the communist movements in Southeast Asia, and made a first research trip to Laos in 1980. He received his Ph.D. in Anthropology in 1983. Like so many Australian students who studied Laos after 1975, Grant’s early publications reflected his left-wing interests and mark the beginning of his academic career.

Grant accepted a position at the University of Hong Kong in 1986, first as Lecturer and later as Reader, eventually retiring in 2008, but retaining Emeritus status. During this time he produced several books on Laos, including *Lao Peasants Under Socialism*, published by Yale University (1990), *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance* (1998), and a collection of papers, *Laos: Culture and Society* (1999), as well as a number of articles.

While in Hong Kong, he also helped to edit several wider studies of the anthropology of Asia: *Asia’s Cultural Mosaic: An Anthropological Introduction* (1993), widely used as a textbook, *Hong Kong: The Anthropology of a Chinese Metropolis* (1997), and *Where China Meets Southeast Asia: Social and Cultural Change in the Border Region* (2000).

Later in his life, Grant’s interests shifted somewhat, focusing more on history. His *Short History of Laos* was published in 2002 and, interestingly, was translated into the Lao language and published in Thailand two years later with financial assistance from the government of Sweden. Ultimately, perhaps his most unique and valuable contribution to Lao studies, *The Last Century of Lao Royalty: A Documentary History*, was the result of many years’ research and visits to surviving members of the Lao royal family now residing in various countries around the world. The book the volume was well-received by many Lao people, especially older generation intellectuals.

On retirement from Hong Kong, he took up residence in Vientiane, where he became a senior research fellow at the École française d’extrême-orient.

After retirement, Grant decided to revisit the early history of the arrival of the Lao and other Tai groups in Southeast Asia. The first instalment of this project, “The Ai-Lao and the Nan Chao Kingdom,” was published in the *JSS* in 2014 and calls attention to the overlooked importance of Nan Chao, not only for its mistaken locus of Tai origins, but more importantly for its relevance as a Southeast Asian kingdom long neglected by serious study. The second instalment was presented as his keynote address to the 12th International Conference of Thai Studies in Sydney in April 2014.

Smiling and gracious host to numerous soirees and lawn parties at his idyllic residence on the Mekong, Grant brought together diverse personalities, Lao

¹ The full interview by Boeke Rehbein is at www.laostudies.org/system/files/.../JLS-v2-i1-Jan2011-rehbein.pdf.

intelligentsia, visiting and resident foreign researchers, students, long-lost childhood friends and members of the local business community. The Lao cuisine was always exceptional thanks to his wife, Keo, and the conversation always lively, constantly nurtured by Grant's good humour. He will be sorely missed by those of us who were privileged enough to know him personally as well as by those who knew him only through his academic writing.

James Chamberlain

Kathryn Sweet adds.

Grant gave generously of his time and expertise to the disparate array of Lao studies scholars who followed in his wake. While some have commented on the potentially scathing directness of his feedback, he could also be incredibly subtle in the way he offered opportunities and support. It was several years before I realized he was mentoring me and had been doing so for some time. It was not until he passed away that I became aware of how many others he had also mentored. I take comfort that Grant passed away at his home in Laos, the country he devoted his life to studying. He did a lot for Laos, even if many in Laos do not know it.

Simon Creak adds.

On socialism, Buddhism, monarchy, nationalism, post socialism, semiotics, memory—one cannot write on any of these topics in Laos without first reading Grant. Like all anthropologists-at-heart, Grant never stopped working. He was always good for informed reflection on all manner of topics—from the everyday to the esoteric. He was wonderfully generous in providing sources and ideas, not to mention honest and sometimes bracing appraisal. He was a great writer with that rare ability to pack complex ideas into elegant sentences.

Nick Enfield adds.

Grant Evans was many things, and he will be well remembered for them all. As a friend, he was a down-to-earth and caring comrade. As a mentor, he gave generously of his advice, his deep knowledge, his sprawling connections. And as a colleague, he achieved that uncanny mix of gentleman and pugilist. One could bring an idea to Grant for his consideration, and suddenly find oneself intellectually punched in the face by this impeccably silk-shirted man. Never with ill intent. Always with a view to honing, improving, getting our facts and our ideas straight. Grant was no lazy thinker and he would settle for no less in the rest of us. Like so many others, I am eternally grateful for his dedication to connecting, nurturing, and challenging an

extensive and diverse community of thinkers and doers in the cultures and societies of mainland Southeast Asia.

Trasvin Jittidecharak adds.

I got to know Grant in 1994 when Silkworm licensed his book *Lao Peasants under Socialism* from Yale University Press. He persuaded me to add a new preface which was not easy in the era before desktop publishing. He sent a photograph of a Lao peasant to be used on the cover. From that time on, we became friends. When Grant was collecting information for *Last Century of Lao Royalty*, he traveled with a portable scanner, which had just become commercially available, so he could scan photographs without separating precious mementos from their owners. The amount of material grew massive. He asked me, "Do you think it would be worth your investment?" I replied, "Grant, you have put so much work into it. I have to publish it. We will preserve Lao history for the Lao." He was good to work with. He always constructed the book in his head first, and when it came to the actual writing, it just flowed.

Grant learnt Cantonese in Hong Kong. One of his favorite courses to teach was Chinese culture, and as part of the course he would take his students to different restaurants. He enjoyed good white wine and good music. One day he called me out of the blue from Hong Kong, asking me to deliver flowers and a birthday card to a friend. I joked to my staff that his bachelor life was perhaps coming to an end. A few months later, our office had the honor of welcoming him and his beautiful "friend."

Our last encounter was at Bangkok Hospital on August 6, 2014. Grant will always be affectionately remembered.

Several studies of Grant Evans' work will appear in a special issue of the *Journal of Lao Studies*, edited by Boeke Rehbein, to appear shortly.