

Evans, Grant. *The Last Century of Lao Royalty: A Documentary History*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009. pp. 430+xv. [This review first appeared in the *Aséanie* vol. 23 (Juin 2009): 226-228; it has been reprinted here with their permission.]

Reviewed by

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Ever since having a chance to sit and talk with Grant Evans in 2005 in Vientiane, I have eagerly anticipated this book. This major “documentary history” of the last century of Lao Royalty has been in development for many years. It has been well-worth the wait; however, it is not what I expected. Thinking I would be reading a straightforward political history of the Lao Royal family in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I approached this book for its information. I planned to read it, in Heidegger’s terms, as a “document,” not a piece that would “work” on me (i.e. spurn thought, rethink assumptions, etc.) . I was wrong. This is a provocative, often non-linear, even emotionally moving study of not just the politics, but the rituals, “symbolics,” and internal conflicts of the Lao Royal family. Furthermore, it is not just told through descriptive prose, but through hundreds of photographs, translations of interviews, rare documents, memoirs, portraits, case studies, and even political cartoons. As the author states in the introduction, this is a “recovery of memory,”(3) and he states that “more formal histories of Lao royalty are hopefully in the process of being written by others. Although I have written a short history of Laos, my interests are fundamentally anthropological.”(4) This anthropological approach to history writing is illuminating, because it takes individual voices (memoirs, interviews, rumors, family photographs) and their emotional content seriously. It is not a history of great men and big ideas, but of misgivings, mistakes, contradictions, constructed memories, apprehensions, and anxieties.

The archive of the former palace of Luang Phrabang is not opened to foreigners yet and so Evans carried around a handheld scanner for years in the field collecting

photographs, stories, documents, and reflections to add to the more formal political and social history of Laos since the late nineteenth century. The bureaucratic fact that Evans had to scurry around the peripheries for years, rather than start in the archival center, is, I believe, what makes this book so valuable. Of course the readers learns much about King Sisavang Vong, Prince Phetsarath, King Sisavang Vatthana, Princes Souphanouvong and Souvanna Phouma, but his anthropological method allowed him to concentrate on many influential people that have been left out of previous studies including Phaya Khammo Vilai, Princess Savivan, Prince Boun Oum na Champassak, Ouan Ratthikoun, Tiao Khamman Rattana, Chao Sai Kham, among others. He also includes a chapter where three very different vignettes and rare documents and interviews are offered. Chapter Seven on King Sisavang Vatthana contains a description of the “Harvest Festival” of 1968 by Harlan Rosacker (given in a personal communication to Grant Evans) in which the ambassadors of the Soviet Union, Australia, and South Vietnam were entertained, played cards, and had cocktails at King Sisavang Vatthana’s gardens north of Luang Phrabang with “U.S. government employees”. These are important historical moments during the cold war which wouldn’t make it into many studies. Besides this description, this single chapter also includes a short history of Chaleunsilp Phia Sing, a courtier to the king who was also an accomplished chef, royal master of ceremonies, choreographer, painter, and poet; as well as, an interview by Evans with a servant of the king who was witness to his arrest by the communist party in 1975 (see pp. 222-224). Including short documents like this adds vibrancy to this history and allows multiple voices to be heard. In this way, Evans expands the very idea of royalty outside of close blood relations and formal titles. He includes descriptions of the work of people whose work allowed the royalty to sustain itself during a very turbulent colonial and post-colonial period up to 1975 (and beyond outside of Laos). These include seemingly minor figures who played important roles like Prince Souk Vongsak, and those brought under the parasol of royal power like the Hmong representative Touby Lyfoung and Princess Khamla from the Phuan aristocracy. He even has an entire section on (Prince) Tiao Somsanith who is still struggling in 2009 to revive the art of gold-thread embroidering in France.

The diplomatic historian need not worry, of course there are chapters on Princes Souphanouvong and Souvanna Phouma. However, these are stories easily found in bits and pieces elsewhere. Instead, let me highlight two particularly interesting chapters which include information not found easily. Chapter four, The Front Palace and Maha Ouparat Tiao Phetsarath, offers a biography of perhaps the most important royal intellectual of the twentieth century including rich descriptions of his meetings with foreign dignitaries and his travels replete with rare photographs and other primary documents. However, it also includes a 1957 interview with him, S.E. Katay's D. Sasorith's speech at the prince's funeral, a description of his family's inheritance dispute, and even a description of the "Rituals for the Phi Cult of the Vang Na in Luang Phrabang" by Khamman Vongkot Rattana (translated by Evans from a 1971 issue of the *Bulletin des Amis du Royaume Lao*) followed by short studies of Tiao Seng Sourichan, Tiao Khampong Vongkot, and others. Chapter 13, Royal Portraits, is, in my opinion, the most important of the entire book. It includes interviews (and rare photographs) with some of the last royal witnesses to major events in the twentieth century including Princess Khampin who became a Buddhist nun, Princess Savivan, Princess Manilai, Princess Ouanna Rangsy, and Prince Soulivong conducted either in France or Laos. These candid conversations not only are important historical accounts, but also reveal the ways in which the royal family has either struggled to remain in Laos or have led complicated and bittersweet decades outside of Laos. Evans has done a great service traveling across the globe recording these stories.

This book is not solely about particulars though, Evans offers in the introduction and scattered at different points in other sections of the book a broader reflection on the place of the Lao royalty in the history of twentieth century royalty in general. He makes short, but important comparative references to the Cambodian, British, and Thai royal families. He also shows the differences between the Champassak and Luang Phrabang royal family's respective reactions and fortunes over the last 100 plus years. This shows the diversity of attitudes towards royalty in Laos, as well as erode the historical timelessness and integrity of both the "nation" of Laos and the Lao royalty. As part of these comparative exercises in the introduction, though, I would have liked to

learn more about the very idea of royalty as an historical phenomenon in Southeast Asia. I did not expect and would not think necessary a literature review of the oft-cited theories of Wolters, Mus, Tambiah, and others on the nature of Southeast Asian charisma and power, but was eager to read more about what, if anything, made the nature of Lao royalty (legalistically, historically, ritually, aesthetically) seriously distinct from Thai and Cambodian royalty. Of course, there are sections on the unique royal style of silk, the royal “symbolics” displayed at the That Luang festival, royal funerals, and weddings. These details offer a rare glimpse into the daily personal, political, and ritual lives of many members of the royal family over time, but a greater attempt to compare these activities to similar religious rituals and political actions of the Chakri or Sihanouk family would have been illuminating. This does not take away from the depth and breadth of this book though. Indeed, these additional comparative exercises may have taken Evans too far afield and unnecessarily added to what is already a massive tome. So little has been written about the Lao royal family compared to the Thai and Cambodian (and Burmese for that matter) royalty, that Evans may have made the right choice and concentrated on the Lao. The Lao are often referred to as the “little brother” (*nong*) of the Thai and their rituals, cultural aesthetics, literature, architecture, etc. is seen as derivative of the Thai and Khmer. Evans reveals that there is much we can learn from the history and choices of Lao royal family and this history outside of its connections to and relationships with its neighbors.

I have not enjoyed a book in the field so thoroughly in a long time. The photographs, clear prose, organization, translations, and wide ranging evidence makes this book essential for any student of Laos and ideal for undergraduate and graduate courses on Southeast Asian history, Cold War Politics, Global Marxism, Royal History, and Southeast Asian performance and culture.