

Grant Evans, *The last century of Lao royalty; A documentary history*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009, xiv + 430 pp. ISBN 9789749511664. Price: THB 1850.00 (hardback).

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When Grant Evans, one of the few Westerners to have conducted continuous research in socialist Laos since the 1980s, published his first volume on the country, it dealt with agricultural collectives. Fifteen years later in 1998, the same author's *Ritual and the politics of remembrance* showed how memories of the Lao monarchy, abolished in 1975, were increasingly informing post-revolutionary Laos despite continuing official silence about the circumstances of the royal family's death in a 're-education camp'.

Evans' latest book, more ironically still, is entirely dedicated to these memories of Lao royalty. It is a lush and beautiful volume containing hundreds of well-reproduced historical photos, mostly in black and white, together with transcriptions and translations of documents, memoirs, interviews, newspaper articles, letters and other original materials, some of them easily available elsewhere, but many published or translated from Lao and French for the first time. There are contributions from anthropologists like Joel Halpern, Charles Archambault and Catherine Choron-Baix, alongside selections from the memoirs of Prince Phetsarath and reports by various foreign ambassadors. Evans himself provides a lengthy introduction and some shorter texts in between, all of them thoroughly intelligent, well informed and insightful. He is less interested in the grand turning points of history than in social life and ritual. Nor does he focus exclusively on the rulers of Luang Phrabang, who became kings of Laos with the country's independence in 1953, although the portrayal of their family takes up the major part of the book. The politically marginalized but economically influential rulers of the southern polity of Champassak are also represented, as, more briefly, are the descendants of the Phuan principality on the Laos-Vietnam border. Servants and court officials are also portrayed.

Very much in this book depends on how one reads it, as Evans lets the material speak for itself. Academic readers will find a plethora of interesting data here, although inevitably the information provided remains incomplete. Interviews with surviving members of the court give insightful impressions of court life, although they lack the length and detail on which in-depth analyses could be based. For general interest readers, and especially for many Lao, this is a loving memorial of an era gone by.

The image these documents convey of the Lao royals is a curious mixture of accessibility and strict hierarchy, of pragmatism and socio-cosmic integration of the country. Princes went to schools together with commoner kids, and King Savang Vatthana enjoyed farming. Nevertheless, royals had to be addressed in 'royal language', and family relations were often exclusive, as most princes married cousins, nieces, even half-siblings, at least as first wives (the last king being the first one to take a single spouse). As the offspring of these relations was distributed across the entire political spectrum - including the figurehead of the socialists, 'Red' Prince Souphanouvong - Lao history in this politically highly charged period appears almost as a family affair. The book suggests that royalty, while conservative and sometimes corrupt, was mostly benevolent and accepted by a majority of Lao and many other ethnicities in Laos. As the Pathet Lao maintained the appearance that they did not plan to abolish the monarchy until a few days before they actually did so, it seems that the Laotians

were cheated out of this representation of national integration by international forces and a small party elite. Even now, Evans does not hesitate to write, '(t)he monarchy could be invited to return, and there is no doubt that most Lao would welcome it' (p. 41). However, he deems it unlikely to happen.

While *The last century of Lao royalty* does not aspire to be the single authoritative source on this period of Lao history, it is a highly important contribution to its study. It also provides excellent material for the study of royalty in the context of the twentieth-century transformations of nation-states.