

## Prof Dr Grant Evans 1948-2014 - the Loss of a National Treasure



Australia and the Lao PDR both suffered a terrible loss last Tuesday (16 September), when Dr Grant Evans passed away in Vientiane after a short battle with cancer.

Widely regarded as one of the finest scholars on contemporary South-East Asian studies, Dr Evans was very much a founding father in the field of Lao studies.

As one of the few scholars dedicated to the Lao PDR and the small country's history, politics, culture and society, his loss leaves a void that won't easily be filled.

He was the author of several insightful books, including *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance: Laos Since 1975* (1998), *The Short History of Laos: The Land In Between* (2002), and *the Last Century of Lao Royalty: A Documentary History* (2008).

I sought him out when I arrived in Vientiane in January, having read several of his publications. I experienced what his friends and associates have enjoyed many times over the years – a spirited, engaging and highly informed conversation about the Lao PDR and its people over a glass or two of good wine.

Ever willing to share his unique insights, Dr Evans was able to map out Lao politics and decision making for a newcomer like me in a completely accessible and entertaining way. His dry humour was infectious. He had a healthy scepticism about government and diplomacy.

I was not the first foreign diplomat, academic or business person he had helped find their feet in Vientiane.

When Australia's Oxiana first came to Laos in 2000 to build the Sepon mine, Grant Evans was the first person they approached to better understand the country's history, people and culture.

While the mining industry did not fit well with his political and social philosophy, Dr Evans provided quality advice to help the company develop a world-standard operation at Sepon that continues to contribute much to the Lao PDR's economic development.

Dr Evans, after much cajoling over many years, did once visit the Sepon mine. He might never have become an advocate for the mining industry, but friends report he did come to understand and respect the benefits responsible miners could bring to a developing nation like Laos.

He was also an invaluable source of advice for the Australian Government's aid program in the Lao PDR.

Dr Evans was born in country South Australia in 1948, and earned his PhD in anthropology at Melbourne's Latrobe University in 1983.

He edited the communist newspaper *The Tribune* for a time, and became involved in New Left politics before launching a career as a researcher and scholar of South-East Asia.

Dr Evans was a Professor of Anthropology at the University of Hong Kong for 20 years. He moved to live permanently in Vientiane in 2005, where he was formally associated with the Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) as a senior research fellow.

Although he commenced parenthood relatively late in life, friends say Dr Evans took to it like a duck to water. More recent conversations tended to revolve around the pleasures of parenthood, rather than dynamics at play in the Lao National Assembly.

Grant will be missed greatly by friends and colleagues alike. His passionate commitment to Lao studies, his accessibility and support for young scholars, and his elegance, personal warmth and great humour represent a powerful legacy.

Our thoughts are with his wife Keomany and his young daughter Elizabeth, born in February 2013.

*John Williams*  
*Australian Ambassador to the Lao PDR*