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# The Village of the Deep Pond: Ban Xa Phang Meuk, Laos; The Old Man: A Biographical Account of a Lao Villager

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**The Village of the Deep Pond: Ban Xa Phang Meuk, Laos.; The Old Man: A Biographical Account of a Lao Villager.**



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The remainder of the monograph is a narrative describing the various publications on Asia by Filipinos arranged according to discipline and by the various regions of Asia, such as Southeast Asia or East Asia. Most of the annotations are uncritical, although in his conclusion Bauzon notes that the quality of many of the works ranges from "mediocre to poor."

*Asian Studies in the Philippines* could have been greatly improved if the author had included more than a description of the courses offered on Asia. What are the qualifications of the faculty teaching these courses? What are enrollment figures for courses on Asia? How many students have earned graduate degrees with a focus on Asia? What is the nature of the library collections (at least for the major universities) on Asia?

According to this monograph, Japanese—offered through the Japanese Studies Program at Ateneo de Manila—is the only Asian language taught in the surveyed institutions, excluding the University of the Philippines. At the University of the Philippines, Japanese, Chinese, Burmese, Indonesian, Malaysian, and Thai are offered. We need to know more. What is the student enrollment in these language courses? Are they offered each semester or only on demand? How many students have done theses and dissertations on Asia? Were they based on library resources in the Philippines or field research in Asian countries? What is the significance (present and future) of Asian programs in universities outside the capital that offer no Asian language instruction?

*Asian Studies in the Philippines* is disappointing; given this, it is also overpriced.

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**The Village of the Deep Pond: Ban Xa Phang Meuk, Laos.** By FRED BRANFMAN. Edited with an Introduction by JAMES A. HAFNER and JOEL M. HALPERN. Amherst: University of Massachusetts at Amherst, International Area Studies Program, 1978. vi, 47 pp. N.p.

**The Old Man: A Biographical Account of a Lao Villager.** By FRED BRANFMAN. Edited with an Introduction by JOEL M. HALPERN and JAMES A. HAFNER. Amherst: University of Massachusetts at Amherst, International Area Studies Program (Asia Studies Committee Occasional Papers Series No. 4), 1979. iv, 49 pp. N.p.

The first of Fred Branfman's two papers presents observations recorded in the late 1960s on the economic structure and activities of a village close to Vientiane. The second provides an account of the life of a village man of seventy.

Little has been published about life in rural Laos. Well-written material in English on village life there could be useful not only to scholars, but also to sponsors and service-providers who work with refugees from Laos. Thus the publication of these two works is timely.

In *The Village of the Deep Pond*, Branfman presents us with a brief description of the village, its people, and their near-subsistence way of life. Landholding patterns, agricultural production activities, other farm and non-farm work, family income and expenditures are described.

The information provided about the landholding patterns in this village and

about the acquisition of land in the area by absentee landlords and by the nearby teacher training school is interesting. Like much of the information presented in this paper, however, it appears to have been gleaned from conversations in the village rather than specifically researched.

The only clear statement which the author makes about the methodology employed to obtain the data presented is, "In the end one learns from the villagers simply by happening to be there when they decide to talk about what is important to them" (p. iv). Although it is indeed useful to be present on such occasions, it is but one of many ways to successfully gather information in a Lao village. The author does mention "a survey of the 60 households," but provides no information on how the survey was conducted or by whom. Much of the potential usefulness and validity of the data presented in this paper is lessened by the lack of information on how it was obtained.

Of equal concern is the attitude expressed by the author toward the village people themselves. At one point he says that he found the people of Xa Phang Meuk "easy to like and admire," but the phrases he uses to describe them in his concluding remarks ("complain bitterly," "gossip and carry tales," "a rather fearful and lonely people," "unwilling and unable to avail themselves of these opportunities") seem less than sympathetic. Observations about the strengths of the people of this village would have been most welcome in the conclusion.

The second paper begins with a brief description of one village man's early years, followed by sections on the lives of his six children. Then the ways in which he has earned his living, aspects of his religious life and practices, some of his political views, and the views other villagers have of him are described. Finally the author's interpretation of this man's personality is presented.

Branfman tells us that this man is "looked up to as a wise elder who has been in the *wat* and understands traditional and religious customs" (p. 31). He is consulted on important matters by the villagers, treats the sick, recites prayers, and performs other duties at religious and traditional ceremonies. Given this man's acknowledged position in the village, the author's later statements that the man is "probably resented as a close ally of the *nai ban*," "does not seem particularly popular," is considered "rude and vulgar," and "didn't have a good heart," seem unnecessarily negative.

Usually the author refers to this man simply as "the old man"; sometimes he calls him "Po Tou Douang." Such forms can be appropriate within the context of the family or the village; however, referring to him as "Nai Bounmy" (Mr. Bounmy) in this paper rather than as "the old man" would have lent more dignity to his portrait.

A summary of the accomplishments of this man would have been appropriate. The son of a pioneer, he himself cleared his own land, gradually expanding his holdings. He provided an adequate living for his wife and family, helped raise six children and a grandson, supported the local temple and the Buddhist religion, and served as a leader in maintaining traditional customs and practices in his community. One wishes that the author had given these accomplishments greater emphasis.

Since, as the introduction informs us, most of the material on this man's life was obtained from "a long series of conversations," it is important to know how, when, and in what language the information gathered from these conversations was recorded. "Cold notes" can present serious problems for interpretation; consequently one would like to know the approximate time gaps between the original conversations, the recording of the information gathered, and the writing of this manuscript.

There are many typographical errors and inconsistent and incorrect transcriptions

of Lao words in these two papers. One should have "Phoumi Nosavan" rather than "Phoumi Nosarian" for the general's name; *kin* rather than *keen* for "to eat"; and *acan*, not *acharm*, for "instructor."

It is hoped that future works on Laos which this author or others might offer us will be the result of more thorough, methodologically sound investigations, and that they will give us more sympathetic presentations of the life of village people in Laos.

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**Public Policy and Population Change in Singapore.** Edited by PETER S. J. CHEN and JAMES T. FAWCETT. New York: The Population Council, 1979. 228 pp. Index. \$6.95.

Is Singapore an Asian nation whose recognized success in dealing with its population problem can be considered relevant for other developing countries, or is the city-state of "Singapore, Inc." simply an irrelevant outlier, of little more than academic interest to development planners elsewhere?

In their main stated aim of providing a comprehensive overview of Singapore's population policies and programs, and of considering demographic factors as both causes and consequences of other national developments, the editors of this monograph, Peter Chen and James Fawcett, are largely successful.

The approach used to achieve this success was to select individuals (almost exclusively Singaporean nationals) to contribute thirteen chapters dealing with different aspects of population and its relationship to other public policy factors. Through initial and concluding chapters, the editors summarize and synthesize the main themes in the book, thereby also compensating for some of the unevenness and occasional repetition that inevitably accompany a collection of semi-independent contributions.

The monograph is divided into three major subdivisions concerning the general societal context of the country's population policies; then the effects of population policies both on the organization and implementation of family planning and related services and on the populations toward which these policies are aimed; and finally on the interactions of population and other developmental sectors.

Those seeking a fuller understanding of the Singapore population scene than has been afforded in less comprehensive reviews will be pleased with several of the contributions. Notable is Kenneth Wee's discussion of the legal aspects of population policies, which goes beyond the evolution and current status of specific laws affecting contraception and abortion to present also the legal basis for Singapore's well-known set of fertility disincentives. This includes a thoughtful discussion of the balance between the "human rights" costs of overt government discrimination in housing, education, and other aspects against individuals and families versus the societal benefits anticipated from such actions.

The article by A. and J. Wong covers in some detail the breathtakingly rapid socioeconomic growth of the past decade. Rather than simply presenting this as a triumph of national goal-directed planning, the authors raise important questions about the relationship between such economic growth and social progress in noneconomic spheres. The Wongs rightly ask whether continued emphasis on sustaining high levels of economic growth might not already be giving rise to other societal stresses,