Introduction to The Village of Deep Pond, Ban Xa Phang Meuk, Laos

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THE VILLAGE OF THE DEEP POND,
BANXA PHANG MEUK, LAOS

By
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Introduction and Edited By
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and
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Fred Branfman is one of many Americans who have been drawn to Southeast Asia over the past several decades out of a concern for understanding its people and their cultures and by the desire to aid them in some small way in their search for a better life. These dual motives took him to Laos in 1966 as a member of the International Voluntary Service (IVS) where he worked as a teacher and advisor to the Lao Ministry of Education on educational planning and rural development. In contrast to many of the more institutionalized 'aid' programs which operated at a governmental level, his work with IVS was primarily with farmers, students and teachers. Through these contacts he sought to help them in upgrading the primary educational system. One of his main goals was to develop schools and curriculum which would integrate basic educational objectives with the most fundamental needs of the rural population, improved agricultural skills. This work took him from the cosmopolitan surroundings of Vientiane to the former royal capital at Luang Prabang, and into many distant villages in Pakse and Savannakhet in the south. By the late 1960's events in Laos and the intensifying conflict in Vietnam began to limit the effectiveness of his work in rural areas. He then returned to Vientiane to teach and later work as a correspondent for the Dispatch News Service. It was during this period that he undertook the study of Ban Xa Phang Meuk - The Village of the Deep Pond - which is discussed here. This study incorporates many of his earlier experiences in working with rural villagers as well as the broad knowledge of Laos which he developed during his service with IVS.

In addition to this previously unpublished excerpt from his longer study of the village he has written numerous reports for IVS on educational problems and development in Laos. While with the Dispatch News Service he was active in reporting the human dimension of the war in Indochina. In 1972 he also edited Voices from the Plain of Jars (Harper Colophon Books), a series of original essays, translations, and drawings by villagers of a region of Laos which had been heavily bombed between 1964 and 1969.

The editors of this study, James A. Hafner and Joel M. Halpern, are Associate Professor and Professor respectively in the Departments of Geology-Geography and Anthropology at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. Both have lived, worked and conducted research in Laos beginning in the early 1950's and extending through the spring of 1975.
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"I've always liked farming, I really enjoy it. During the dry season I fetch water, cut firewood, repair my tools. At the end of the dry season I look up in the sky ... ho! ... time to plant my upland rice and vegetables. So, I get out there in my paddy fields to plough them; standing behind my buffalos and pushing them along saying, 'tsk, tsk, tsk, tsk ... hey you, go straight ahead ... stop turning! Okay, stop now.' I work as I like. If I feel tired or the sun is too hot I stop for the day, come back to the house, rest and get some strength. Then, the next day I go back and soon the ploughing and transplanting is finished. Nothing to do now for a few months but rest up, fetch water, catch fish, and cut wood. Then I go harvest my rice and I'm all set for the next dry season. What I really like best about my life is that I don't have any boss to tell me what to do, I'm free! Young people today, though, are different. They want to get good jobs and make a lot of money. They want to study English so they can talk to you foreigners and travel. They want to live downtown, build nice houses, have cars. They don't like to work as hard as we do, they want an easier life.

I don't blame them. A lot of times I've wished my life was easier than it is. Having to walk so far, work so hard, .. hawai! It really makes me tired. And never any money. No money to get good medicine when you get sick, no money to buy nice food, not enough money to give to the wat and run religious festivals, no money for the poor farmer who works so hard but the big people who live downtown have all the money they need and don't do anything for it except to sign papers. Even though I enjoy farming, I wish our lives weren't so difficult, we weren't so sick and poor.

I'll tell you one thing though. Things were a lot better before. We were a lot freer. We could go anywhere we wanted to and nobody asked you, 'are you an Issara (Pathet Lao)!' These days...hawai! If you want to go anywhere people are always stopping you, wanting to check your identification card,
looking at what you have, asking you if you're an Issara. In the old days if they stopped you they were just being nice. They would ask, 'Yey, how are you Grandfather? What do you have there in your basket? Fish, eh? Well, that's nice. Good luck to you and go well.'

And our money these days is worth nothing. In the old days with a few kip you could buy a buffalo or a bicycle. These days with a few kip you can't even buy a glass of iced tea! In the old days if you worked for a few months you could make enough money to buy what you needed. But these days everything costs thousands and thousands of kip. You have to work a whole year before you can buy anything.

In the old days life was peaceful and simple. But these days ...hwai!''

... an old man of Ban Xa Phang Mewk
Foreward: Out of Silence

The sympathies and frustrations expressed by the old man of Ban Xa Phang Meuk in the previous statement echo widely similar statements heard elsewhere in the developing world. Change is an ever relentless process whether one is a small farmer in a distant culture or a middle-class neighbor in a comfortable suburb in urban America. In many developing lands these days the fires of change are burning brightly, but they also burn black. Vast changes are occurring, but it seems that for every improvement a former advantage may be lost or a new drawback is discovered.

Ban Xa Phang Meuk is a Laotian village only 9 kilometers north of Vietiane, the administrative capital of Laos. Its residents eagerly desire basic changes in their traditional way of life yet they have found that many of these changes have brought with them more discomfort than satisfaction. The people of the village wish for even more change than what has already occurred. They wish to be richer and have more control over matters which affect their lives. They want those who rule them to be more responsive to their needs, those who rank higher socially to be more egalitarian in outlook, and those with access to wealth to distribute it in such a way that material conditions in the village can improve. For the chaleum or progress and civilization which these villagers seek will depend on themselves as well as changes that are beyond their reach.
I found the people of Xa Phang Meuk easy to like and admire, but difficult
to feel intimate with. I enjoyed my stay in the village a great deal and found
people every bit as charming, beguiling, spontaneous, and fresh as did the most
romantic French anthropologists of the early 20th century. But I also found it
difficult to share feelings, and establish intimacy as I was far too ungraceful,
 loud, and analytical to ever completely feel at home in the village. At this
point in their history the people of Xa Phang Meuk are too concerned, fearful,
and perhaps disoriented to place very much confidence in any outsider, let
alone a white American. In a word, the truth of how villagers feel is hard to
get at. What truth there is in this description derives primarily from the
experience from which it resulted. Questionnaires, surveys, collection of data
will never reveal very much of the deeper thoughts and more intimate concerns
of the people of Xa Phang Meuk. One rarely gets glimpses of such things by
asking direct questions. It is not only that in the present political and
social climate direct questions are likely to make villagers uneasy but most
often result in answers which it is believed the questioner or government wants
to hear. But it is also that direct questioning is alien to village culture
and thought patterns. In the end one learns from the villagers simply by hap-
pening to be there when they decide to talk about what is important to them.
There is little use in trying to rush things. It is as if one were to try
to hasten the rains, delay the setting of the sun, or alter any of the other
natural phenomena which still directly govern so much of life in the village.

Words are not used the same way in the village as in the West. Silences
often tell more than conversations. Lack of activity is frequently more meaning-
ful than action. And a shrug of the shoulder or inflection often tells far
more than a 15 minute monologue. It is out of such perceptions that this study
has grown.
Introduction

Fred Branfman has a long and unique perspective on the people and events which have overtaken Laos. His residence in the country has spanned some of the most turbulent and enigmatic years this small land-locked nation in mainland Southeast Asia has probably ever experienced. Since he first lived in Xa Phang Meuk between late 1967 and mid 1969 a long period of political instability and conflict has ended, at least temporarily. In the summer of 1975, just months after the fall of South Vietnam and Cambodia, Laos became the last of these three former colonial states of French Indochina to enter a new period of political rule under Communist governments. For at least a quarter-century leading up to this transition, Laos had undergone frequent political and military conflicts involving factions within the country, from within the region, and major world powers. During this period both the lowland and upland Laotian populations had been regularly buffeted by warfare, disruption of traditional life-styles, dislocation from their homes, and by a growing influx of Western values and influences. The confrontation of these forces and traditional Lao culture was probably nowhere more evident nor traumatic than in the Vientiane plain.

The Village of the Deep Pond and its people are in many ways representative of traditional Lao society and the effects which change have had on these communities. Ban Xa Phang Meuk also represents the most recent if not the last general community study to have been conducted in Laos prior to the recent political changes in that country. Earlier studies of community life on the Vientiane plain done in the 1950's and early 1960's by Ayabe(1959), Kaufman(1956,1961) and Condominas(1959,1961,1962) bear testimony to the stability of the community even as signs of change were beginning to be observed. Ayabe's(1959) work is particularly useful in that it focused on the village of Pha Khao, a few kilometers
from Xa Phang Meuk but some ten years earlier than Branfman's study. The
closer survey of villages within the Vientiane plain made by Kaufman also
provides another basis for comparison and measurement of the process of
change. Of particular note in the Village of the Deep Pond is the effect
which 'westernization' and 'modernization' have wrought on community social
organization, economy, and values. Whether the wishes of the villagers of
Xa Phang Meuk for a more responsive government, a more egalitarian society,
and more equitable distribution of wealth will be realized is unclear at
this point. And yet, it may well be that the villagers' desire for progress
will result from changes effected in this new chapter in their lives.

The material which follows is based on an extensive and selective
condensation and editing of a longer manuscript prepared by Fred Branfman.
An effort has been made to retain as much of the author's informal style
and grasp of the nuances of village attitudes and behavior as possible.
The main focus in this brief monograph is on the economic structure and
activities of the village and its residents and their links to the nearby
administrative and market center of Vientiane. While the Village of the Deep
Pond is not a pioneering nor highly empirical study it does provide an impor-
tant reference point needed to gain some grasp of the processes of change and
modernization as they have been expressed in Laos. And, it may in the future
serve as a yardstick against which changes produced under the latest government
can be measured.

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