Book Review


Take a young American medic fascinated by the socio-cultural diversity he discovers among his patients back home in Minnesota, give him a basic training in cultural anthropology, and send him to Laos for a couple of years to practise his medicine among both Lao lowlanders and Hmong hillmen. Say, also, that your medic has a predilection for research and an abiding interest in the use and abuse of narcotics, which brings him back to Southeast Asia, again and again, over the next dozen years. This is Dr Joseph Westermeyer, and when a full-length book on opium use in pre-Communist Laos appears under his name we may surely expect an important contribution both to medical and to anthropological knowledge. Poppies, Pipes, and People (the title should be good for sales) does not disappoint. Here we have a finely woven tapestry of ethnographic and medical information on the growers, the sellers and, most particularly, on the users, of opium. And we are introduced to the concerns, the successes and the failures of those people and agencies who seek to wean the narcotics-abuser from his addiction.

To do full justice to this book, the reviewer should — like Dr Westermeyer — have professional competence both in medicine and in the anthropology of northern Southeast Asia. Such credentials I cannot claim; I therefore deal with this fascinating book as one who has worked in a nearby area, northern Thailand, and with a people who are both poppy-growers and opium-users, the Tibeto-Burman-speaking Lahu, but not as one who has professional medical expertise. If, consequently, my review leans too heavily towards the socio-cultural aspects of Dr Westermeyer’s work and treats insufficiently with the medical, readers may none the less rest assured that the author’s well-established reputation in the field of drug-abuse research and his several important prior publications on the subject (many included in the bibliography of the present book) ensure that Poppies, Pipes, and People will receive deserved attention in the relevant medical journals. As another medical man, Dr Peter Bourne, writes in the “Preface” to Dr Westermeyer’s book, this work “provides a microcosm of information that cannot help but immeasurably broaden the perspective of anyone working in this field [of substance abuse].”

Dr Westermeyer has to introduce his readers — many of whom, like this reviewer, will not be medically trained — to a highly technical field of investigation. He does so in pleasantly flowing prose which enables the reader to move easily from chapter to chapter and from socio-cultural to medical considerations and back
again. The test is peppered, also, with many a vivid vignette of characters our author met — and mostly enjoyed — during his years in Laos. There are the Hmong hillmen: the elderly patient just brought in to Dr Westermeyer's hospital, the poppy farmer, the opium merchant, the arthritic farmer, the opium suicide, the lonely school teacher. There is the Vietnamese patriarch, the Lao pedicab driver, the French drug dealer, the Australian world travellers, the American peace corps worker and, yes, even the European social scientist. And then there are the owners and patrons of various opium dens, belonging to several different ethnic groups. Such vignettes, as the author rightly tells us, provide "touchstones to reality", giving us a feel for the rich texture of life in Laos as it was until the final Communist take-over in 1975.

The bulk of Dr Westermeyer's book falls nicely into four parts. After telling us about himself and his research methods (Chapter 1), he begins the first major part with an introduction to the ethnic diversity of Laos (Chapter 2) and the agro-economics of poppy cultivation and the opium trade (Chapter 3). Seven chapters dealing with the use and abuse of narcotics comprise the second major part of the book. The third part consists of two chapters on the treatment of addiction; finally, there are three chapters which focus on the wider context of opium, including a chapter on other drugs (Chapter 13). I shall comment, briefly, on each of these four major parts.

To allow us to see some order in the ethnic complexity of Laos, Westermeyer uses the threefold modern "folk" classification of the politically-dominant lowland Lao people. According to this, the major constituent elements in the country's population are the Lao Lum, the "Low Lao", the Lao Theung or "Lao-on-the-Top", and the Lao Sung or "High Lao". On ethno-linguistic grounds, only the Lao Lum, the dominant valley-dwelling and Tai-speaking people, are actually Lao. The Lao Theung, who live at elevations higher than the lowland population, but lower than the Lao Sung, comprise dozens of distinct ethno-linguistic groups speaking Tai, Mon-Khmer, Tibeto-Burman, and Austronesian languages. The Lao Sung or "High Lao" comprise the two heavily-sinicized hill peoples; Hmong (called Meo by others) and Iu Mien (whom outsiders know as Yao).

Most of Dr Westermeyer's patients and informants were either lowland Lao or Hmong hillmen, and his ethnographic introduction to these peoples is much better than that to the Lao Theung groups. But can Hmong really be described as "subsistence farmers" (p. 26), when they produce such an important cash crop as opium (p. 73)? Also, it is surely far too simple to categorize the Hmong as an "animist" people (p. 27), a label which distinguishes them not one whit from the Lao, whose traditional world-view is likewise profoundly animistic, despite their Theravada Buddhism?

In connection with the Lao categorization of many different peoples as "Lao Theung", I presume this is why Dr Westermeyer sees the Lahu people I studied in Thailand as "a people comparable in many respects to the Khammu in Laos" (p. 43). Lao certainly would include both among the Lao Theung. But this masks such important facts as the Lahu being Tibeto-Burman-speakers and the Khammu, Austroasiatic; and, perhaps more importantly, the Lahu being recent arrivals from southern China and the Khammu the survivors of an ancient, pre-Tai, population.