

# Scholarly Article Excerpt: Lao Literature from 1975 to the Present

From 1975 to the present, literature has continued to serve a political role in Laos. Following the communist victory, facilities for the production and distribution of revolutionary literature were greatly improved as the center of the Lao Patriotic Front moved from rural Sam Neua province to the nation's capital. In the early years after the revolution, the cost of paper and printing was subsidized by the Lao government and the Soviet Union. Books were distributed free or at minimal cost, and individual print runs often ran into the tens of thousands.

Lao authors dating from this period to the present can be divided into three categories. The first category includes writers such as ຈັ້ນທິ ເດືອນສະຫວັນ and ສະວັນທິນ ບູຍານະວິງ who originally served the revolutionary cause in the liberated zones prior to the communist victory. The second category consists of established authors from the old regime who have continued to use their literary skills in the service of the new Lao society. ອຸທິນ ບຸນຍາວິງ is a prominent example of this group, which also includes ດາຣາ ວິຣະວິງ (ດວງຈຳປາ), ດວງເດືອນ ວິຣະວິງ (ດອກເກດ), ເສັນ ມິຣະໄມ (ເສຣີພາບ). The third category is made up of a younger generation of writers who began their literary careers in the years immediately preceding the revolution or afterwards. Authors include ບຸນທະນິງ ສິມສາຍຜິນ, ໄຊສຸວັນ ເພງພິງ, and ວິເສດ ສະເວງສິກສາ.

Lao writers from 1975 to the present generally work as civil servants. In the first decade after the revolution, many authors worked for the State Printing House, where they translated communist and socialist literature into Lao while composing their own fiction. At present, the majority of Lao authors are reporters for government newspapers and magazines. Writing fiction is one part of their overall duties.

In the late 1980s, following Gorbachev's policy of glasnost (openness) and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Lao government initiated a series of economic and social reforms known collectively as ຈິນຕະນາການໃໝ່ (New Imagination). Taking advantage of the resulting liberalization, for a short period of time Lao authors to a certain degree made use of fiction to offer constructive critical observations on the state of Lao society and culture. In recent years, however, as a result of severe government control, authors have avoided political analysis in their writing (except in the

service of government policy), or have sent their works to be published in Thailand, or in some cases have stopped writing altogether.

Market demand is increasingly affecting the content of contemporary literature. Lao authors, no longer subsidized by the government, are struggling to meet the rising cost of publishing. The number of book-length collections averages approximately ten per year with an average print run of two thousand copies. The large majority of poetry and fiction is published in newspapers and literary magazines. As literature comes to depend on public appeal, romance and general entertainment are rapidly gaining in popularity.

A significant difference between the ancient and modern literary traditions of the Lao is the extent to which each has been incorporated into Lao consciousness and culture. Whereas traditional literature was composed and performed in areas inhabited by the ethnic Lao for several centuries, modern Lao prose fiction has existed for only half a century and has yet to possess either a large audience or a wide range of composers.

## Videos: Interview with an Important Lao Author

### Multimedia Lessons Nineteen and Twenty

Here are two short interviews with one of the most important figures in Lao literature today.

ດວງເດືອນ ວິຣະວິງ (nowadays she more often goes by the family name ບຸນຍາວິງ, which is the name of her late husband, ຊຸທິນ ບຸນຍາວິງ). In the interviews, she discusses the influence and inspirations she absorbed

as a writer, the state of literacy and writing in Laos today, and she offers advice for young aspiring Lao writers today (that's you folks!). Today, ດວງເດືອນ, besides continuing to write herself, runs an important publishing company and bookstore, ດວກເກດ ບຸກ (located in ວຽງຈັນ), which publishes the work of many young Lao writers, as well as work by older, now deceased authors such as her father, ມະຫາສີລາວິຣະວິງ.



## Audio Tracks 13 and 14: Discussing Lao Literature

Below, you'll find some terms useful in analyzing and discussing modern Lao literature, which you should be fairly easily able to apply to a discussion of the literary excerpts included in this chapter. Be sure to memorize the majority of these terms, as they will be essential in discussing literature that you've read with your instructor or conversation partner, as well as educated Lao people in general.

### Audio Track 13: General Literature Vocabulary



ວັນນະກຳ literature

ແກ້ໄຂ to edit

ວັນນະຄະດີ literature

ເນື້ອໃນ theme

ບົດ article; classifier for articles

ຫົວຂໍ້ເລື່ອງ theme

ແຕ່ງ to compose

ວິເຄາະ to analyze

ໜັງສືເລື່ອງ novel

ປັບປຸງ to revise

ນິຍາຍ fiction

ສາລະຄະດີ nonfiction

ວິຈານ to review or critique

### Audio Track 14: Specific Features of Literature



ການອຸປະມາ metaphor

ສັນຍາລັກ symbol

ເປັນຕົວແທນ to represent

ເປັນຕອນ to be serialized (such as a novel published in episodes in a magazine; each episode is a ຕອນ)

ອິດທິພົນ influence

ຈິນຕະນາການ imagination, creativity

ແຈ້ງແຈ້ງ to express

ປະເພດ genre

ກະວີນິພົນ [written] poetry