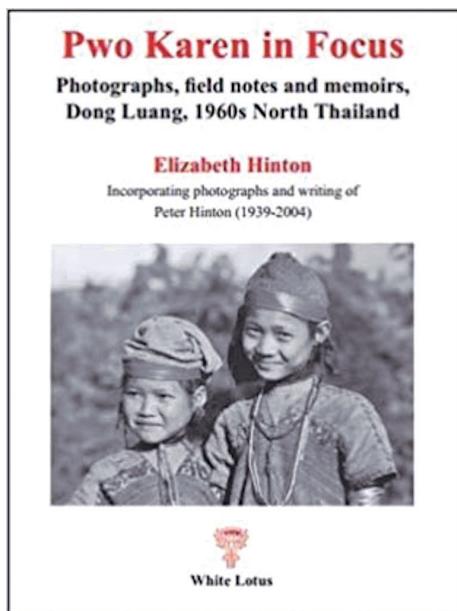


*Pwo Karen in Focus: Photographs, field notes and memoirs, Dong Luang, 1960s North Thailand* by Elizabeth Hinton. Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2017. ISBN: 9789747534863. US\$22.



This book brings us back to the time of 1968-1969, during which Peter Hinton (1939-2004) and his wife Elizabeth lived in Dong Luang, the Pwo Karen village of Mae Sariang district in Mae Hong Son province. Peter chose this village, where the couple lived for sixteen months, for his field research on swidden agriculture. He had lived in Chiang Mai since 1966, working as a Research Advisor at the Tribal Research Centre with support from an Australian aid project. After two years, he left to conduct fieldwork for his PhD which he was pursuing at the University of Sydney. Elizabeth was not trained in anthropology, but with her curiosity, open mind and the close relationship she was able to foster with Dong Luang villagers, especially the women, she gained deep insights into Pwo Karen culture: this later

enabled her to publish articles and a book on Pwo Karen dress (1974), music (1999) and folktales (2009). When Peter passed away in 2004, he left behind numerous high quality ethnographic photographs taken in Dong Luang. Elizabeth then thought of making use of these photographs to share some of their experiences with the public. The result, in her own words, is this book of 'photographic ethnography and memoir,'(viii).

The book is divided into six parts, organized according to the availability of photographs and field notes. The primary focus of the book is the agricultural activity related to Peter's research which later became his unpublished thesis, *Karen Subsistence: the limits of a swidden economy in north Thailand* (1975). Illness is another important focus of the book. Speculating beforehand that he might encounter sick villagers, Peter prepared medicine and acquired some knowledge on medical treatment to be able to help the villagers. There are not many photographs of the ill or their treatment, but details from field notes give a vivid picture of various symptoms and traditional treatment methods. Field notes on this issue were mostly written by Peter and Somphob, Peter's Thai research counterpart who studied Karen medicine for his MA dissertation under Peter's supervision. Besides these two main focuses, rituals associated with agriculture and passages of life are also detailed.

The start of the book, *Part one: Our Karen beginnings*, explains how Peter came to choose Dong Luang as a study village, the couple's house while in the village and foundation history of the village. Photographs in this part include village locations, and portraits of Pwo Karen villagers and their activities. *Part two: The rice fields and their spirits* and *Part five: The harvest* mostly detail agricultural activities that range from dry

and wet rice field preparation, harvest time and paddy being loaded into rice barns. The spirit propitiation rituals organized in the fields are well described and illustrated. Parts three and four deal with many kinds of spirits, and illnesses mostly thought to have been caused by malevolent spirits, as well as details of funeral ceremonies. The last part of the book provides accounts of activities that took place after the rice harvest and before the start of the new season. New Year ceremonies led by the village priest are also well chronicled. The short *Epilogue* is important as it provides commentary on how the village has changed after more than half a century.

The book is not academic in nature in trying to answer specific questions and analyzing the findings with certain concepts, but rather a photographic ethnography which lets the photographs explain Pwo Karen livelihood and culture. Unfortunately, photographs are printed in two-dimensional black and white which limits the understanding and appreciation of colorful cultural practices and scenic landscapes. For example, the description, “As the rice plants sprouted in the swiddens, the dark earth was covered with greenery...”(129), cannot fully come to life through the black and white upland rice field photograph. However, the memoirs of what really transpired, how Peter and Elizabeth engaged with village activities and their feelings, give readers relatively clear ideas about what the village and the villagers were like nearly half a century ago. Indeed, the memoirs are the valuable part of the book because they reflect the experiences of the anthropologists and their day-to-day relations with the villagers, thus opening more space for readers’ interpretation and also creating more avenues for research methodologies. This makes the book different from other ethnographic books written by travelers, officials and other researchers working among the Karen before Peter’s time. Although some of those previous works describe ethnographic and cultural details, they rarely describe from whom and how they gain the information as beautifully as Elizabeth has.

I believe that the book contributes to the knowledge of a Pwo Karen village of the late 1960s in an unconventional way. Although Dong Luang had an exotic appeal in its traditional lifestyle evident through their rice agriculture, traditional costumes, thatched-roof bamboo houses and their practice of traditional rituals, the village however was neither romantic nor peaceful. It was marked with many tensions and tragedies. For instance during Peter and Elizabeth’s stay, a former village priest lost his legitimacy as one group of villagers broke away to set up a new independent hamlet. A few years later, the priest committed suicide for reasons unknown to Peter and Elizabeth. Additionally, local opium addicts would sometimes come to steal rice from the villagers’ fields. The book also shows that despite lack of road access, Dong Luang was not isolated from other Karen and non-Karen villages. Some of Elizabeth’s informants had gone to the lowlands to be ordained as Buddhist monks many decades before the 1960s and had integrated some of the Buddhist elements in their traditional rituals.

In terms of research methodology, Elizabeth herself admits that there were some limitations in conducting ethnographic research which she realized only shortly before leaving the village. It so happened that her informants mostly comprised the headman, his wife and their relatives: they belonged to a clan of the village founder who were better off than most villagers. Thus, the author could describe only a part of the picture,

leaving out information relating to poorer families and newcomers. Elizabeth's reflexive approach is also manifested in her writings about Peter's interaction with the villagers when the latter got angry after their chicken became infected by Peter's chicken brought from the lowlands. There is also a vivid account about how the Pwo Karen treated their illness in traditional ways and rejected help from Peter which left him rather disappointed. Furthermore, Elizabeth also wonders if the way they built their house in a higher place than the village priest might have contributed to the villagers' discontent with the priest.

The book is successful in showing how ethnography in the highlands of northern Thailand was undertaken in the 1960s and highlights some lessons learnt from that work. It is set against the background of a time when the Thai government launched studies on hill tribes to develop policies and strategies in order to gain loyalty from the villagers to eradicate opium production as well as to lift up the villagers' standard of living. The conventional research design of the time was to study each ethnic group separately so that the details of their social structure and culture could be known and used for the development of proper policy. The problem with this type of research was that researchers focused more on internal relations and cultural practices within one village and in doing so, neglected issues in relations with others outside the village including the state, which were actually important factors in the changes that later occurred in the village. Another important thing students of ethnography have to understand is that the conditions for conducting ethnography in conventional ways have changed from the one described in the book. Villagers are more mobile: young people leave the village for study/work in other towns and cities, and people go out daily to sell agricultural produce and buy consumables from the market. They are also now divided into diverse groups based on new adopted religion and other interests following government and private projects. Furthermore, villagers care less about the outsiders who come to collect data in the village as their time is mostly consumed by their cash cropping, and newfound commercial and leisure activities thanks to the arrival of new technologies.

Overall this book is valuable, especially for students of Karen studies, as it provides a data base and resources for further study. Elizabeth leaves us with many questions, which she may not be able to answer. The answers, if found, may be key to understanding the present development taking place in Dong Luang. It would be interesting to revisit the place, re-examine and rethink about Karen studies, based on earlier descriptions by anthropologists.

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