

A BOOK PUBLISHED in Laos which is not a document from the ruling revolutionary party or a report from a foreign aid organization is a rarity indeed. This attractive little volume, *Xieng Mieng: The Cleverest Man in the Kingdom* (Vientiane Times Publications), about the consummate trickster Xieng Mieng is therefore most welcome. The many tales of this fictitious character from the days of the Lan Xang kingdom are well-known to most Lao in different folklorist versions. This volume, though, is a compilation of stories told to Steve Epstein, an American living in Vientiane, when he wanted to help his students practice their English by taking part in an annual Xieng Mieng story-telling contest, which is held most appropriately on April Fool's Day.

The theme is always the same: Xieng Mieng, an ordinary man, outwits the king and wealthy merchants in a way that shows that intelligence and moral character are more important than social status. The humor is down-to-earth and clearly reflects the traditions of a fun-loving culture which likes to mock snobbery and ostentatious pretensions. In the old days, it was a way of ridiculing an authority which could not otherwise be criticized too openly.

In Mr Epstein's modern version of Xieng Mieng, our hero reads the *Vientiane Times* and it explains that story-telling was the favorite pastime in days when there were no televisions, satellite dishes, and videos. And it is in that context that the publication of this

book should be seen: Xieng Mieng story-telling is becoming rare and the younger generation is not interested.

But *Vientiane Times* Editor Somsanouk Mixay expresses a strong desire to preserve this old tradition in his introduction: "My grandfather told my father these tales and my father told



me. It is my hope that Lao children will tell their grandchildren and as long as there are Lao eating sticky rice and living on the banks of the Mekong, these stories will continue to be told and to delight." By launching it in English—and promoting it as a school textbook for the many young Lao who now eagerly want to learn foreign languages to excel in business and personal careers—the publishers evidently want to make sure that Xieng Mieng will not be forgotten.

—Bertil Lintner