



EAST-WEST CENTER
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EAST-WEST CENTER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Puongpun Sananikone Interview Narrative

2-26-2007 interview in Honolulu, Hawaii

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The **East-West Center Oral History Project** strives to capture the Center's first 50 years as seen through the eyes of staff, alumni, and supporters who have contributed to its growth.

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Puongpun Sananikone
2-26-07 interview in Honolulu, Hawaii

Personal Background

I was born and raised in Vientiane, Laos. I attended primary and secondary school in Laos. I spent my senior high school year as an American Field Service (AFS) foreign exchange student in Grosse Pointe High School in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, in 1962-63 school year.

There was a nation-wide exam and I was one of the six students selected, and we were assigned to various places in the U.S. I was assigned to Grosse Pointe, Michigan, and lived with a wonderful Irish-American family for a year. So I consider myself part-Irish. (laughter)

I had a wonderful time. It really has a very profound impact on my life. That was my first exposure to the Western world. I had the most caring and most wonderful host parents, with whom I never lost contact until they passed away in the late 1990s.

To me, they were Mom and Dad. And I received a wonderful education at Grosse Pointe High School, and that's what led me to the rest of my educational career in the U.S.

I then went back to Laos, spent a year there working with the USAID Mission in their rural education program division.

Life at EWC

Arrival, Mid-1960s

A year later in 1964, I was given a chance to apply for and was awarded the East-West Center scholarship. I came to Hawai`i in the fall of 1964, and studied at the University of Hawai`i and graduated in 1968 with a bachelor's degree in economics.

It was here at the EWC that I met my wife, [*Thanh Lo*] who was a fellow grantee from Vietnam. Following my graduation, I returned to Laos briefly and went to the University of Colorado for my graduate studies and completed my M.A. in Economics.

Mid-1960s

In hindsight, it [*life at the East-West Center*] was a whole new world, a fascinating and life-changing experience. I remember my first roommate was from Samoa: FeliVa ' a Mageo.

In spite of our initial cultural unfamiliarity with each other, it didn't take us very long to bond, and became very good friends. Although I haven't seen him since late 1968, I remember him fondly.

It was here at the Center that I became acquainted with other peoples and cultures of Asia. I suddenly realized that although we grew up in Asia, we knew more about Europe -- in my case, France and England -- than we knew about our fellow Asians. It was at the Center that I became very aware and far more knowledgeable about my fellow Asians. As a result of the unique multi-cultural living at the EWC, I was able to forge life-long personal friendship with my fellow EWC grantees from the U.S., South Pacific and other Asia countries.

Well, of course, in those days, among the "burning issues" of the day was the Vietnam War. But my recollection is that things were pretty harmonious, as most of us were fascinated by this new cross-cultural "experiment" we were participating in. There was a lot of enthusiasm; there was more excitement, anticipation and participation than there were controversies.

I found out later, in the early '70s, at the peak of the Vietnam War, things were much more controversial at the EWC. But in my time in the mid- to late 1960s, I think we focused more on exchanging cultures, and what we would call today "bonding" among ourselves. (laughter)

Well, a lot of my EWC peers in those days ended up marrying their fellow grantees from another country. I am still in contact with most of them, and I truly believe that cross-cultural marriages work.

I'm also aware that in some cases, that they don't work, but in most of the cases that I have contact with, they have worked very well in fact.

Actually, the East-West Center programs helped to maximize contacts among us. In those days, the EWC programs focused almost entirely on students. For example, in those days, I remember Jefferson Hall was open from all sides, and we had to go there to eat, downstairs, and we also had to check our mail, because in those days, we have no e-mail. A lot of cross-cultural activities took place there.

There were certainly no cell phones nor long distance calling cards. And there was a lot of cross-cultural activities, and pretty intense socializing, sometimes, almost in excess. But we did take studies very seriously.

We did have to meet academic requirements to keep our grant. There were few who did not and they got sent home, even. But overall, we took both our studies and cross-cultural activities very seriously.

Life After EWC

Professional Career

Upon graduation in 1971, I then went back to Laos and was offered a job with the Royal Government of Laos as the Director General for Socioeconomic Planning, which was a department of the National Commission for Planning. My primary responsibility was to do macroeconomic planning for the whole country. I was also the designated person to work with major foreign aid donors, both the multilateral donors like the Asian Development Bank, World Bank, United Nations, as well as bilateral aid donors like the U.S., Japan, France, Australia, Canada, etc. That period was '71-75, at the height of the Vietnam War.

In 1975, following the political change, I accepted a job with the Asian Development Bank as a Loan Operations Officer for Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and Thailand. After three years of working there, I accepted a job with a major U.S. international consulting firm Louis Berger International, which is head-quartered in New Jersey, the East Coast of the United States. There, I was in charge of project operations in Asia, with special emphasis on Southeast Asia and some South Asian countries like Nepal and Bangladesh. I worked for eight years with Louis Berger International, eventually becoming their director for Asia and their chief economist for the company.

In 1984, I accepted an offer from Hawaiian Agronomics International, which was a major consulting company specializing in agriculture and rural development, and came back to Hawai`i. By this time, the rest of my family had left Laos and moved to Hawai`i, so the additional motive in moving back to Hawai`i is to join the rest of the family who had

been there and relocated here. Our ties with Hawai'i go way back, and are very deep and personal -- half of our eight siblings have gone to school in Hawai'i.

After having worked with Hawaiian Agronomics International (HAI) for about four years, a group of associates and myself negotiated a management buy-out of the company in 1987 and re-organized it into a much broader-based company called Pacific Management Resources, or "PacMar" for short. While our company now continues to do the same consulting work in agriculture and rural development, we have diversified into much wider range of sectors with focus on the "transitional economies of China, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia." I spend almost half of my time traveling on project-related work in these countries these days.

Involvement in EWC, EWCA, Board of Governors

[Editor's note: Sananikone was appointed to the East-West Center Board of Governors in 2003. He became the first alumnus to be elected chairman of the Board in 2008 and was re-elected to a second term in 2009.]

I served briefly on the board as the designee for the governor [*Linda Lingle*], and then a year later, I was appointed as a regular board member. In some ways, this is a continuation of my participation in the East-West Center-related activities. I've served on various EWCA [*EWC Association*] committees and boards prior to this. I was active with the EWCA international board, including being EWCA Chair in late 1980s.

Yes, the international EWCA Executive Committee. I look at my service on the current EWC Board of Governors as well as all previous boards as a lifelong commitment to pay back the East-West Center and the State of Hawai'i for the gift of life-changing

education and cross-cultural experience. And I intend to continue this commitment for the rest of my life.

EWC's Impact

On Career

I would say that the most important value that I got out of my cross-cultural experience at the EWC is life-long bonds of friendship across the U.S. and the Asia Pacific region. In doing international consulting work as I do, I am much more equipped because of my EWC experience, perhaps, than other professional peers and competitors of mine who have not had similar experience in being able to see issues from a cross-cultural perspective. And in overseas consulting work that I do, you often encounter very complex contentious issues that require cross-cultural understanding and sensitivity to resolve. And I think in that regard, the Center experience has given me a real comparative advantage.

The Mission

Before I arrived, I wasn't that aware of the depth and scope of its larger mission. It was an opportunity to go get a college education.

But soon after I got here, I realized this is a very new and unique opportunity. There were other foreign students who have gone to schools on the mainland and other places; they might have something called the "international house" where they would see each other once in a while. But to be able to live together full-time with people of different nationalities and cultures was special -- and in those days, I think the Center made it a point to make sure that physically we were placed in such a way that we did not spend

that much time with our own nationals at the Center. We had roommates that came from different countries.

Over time, we developed a strong shared sense of belonging, a "sense of mission" to reach out to each other, to make an effort to cross the cultural divides. And it was that experience that made me realize that we are part of a very large mission, that over the long-term could make the whole world a better place to live in.

This "sense of mission" over the decades has become a personal conviction inside me. I believe the EWC's mission is more relevant to the world today than it has ever been.

Although looking back over the different decades, I think there might have been debates about whether we should have more emphasis on one program or the other -- on education or research, and short-term training, etc. I think overall, the mission has remained the same, and even more relevant today.

Under various administrations of the East-West Center, there were perhaps different emphases being put on one programmatic sector or others. In recent years, especially under Dr. Charles Morrison's leadership, there is a good balance of various programs, various components that serve the East-West Center mission. For example, I believe today there is an excellent balance between research and student programs.

In fact, I think today, the East-West Center has a much more diversified and broader mix of programs which helps to ensure its relevance to the changing priorities and new challenges facing the world. In this regard, I think the Center is stronger today than it has ever been. And especially under President Charles Morrison.

You know, looking back, I think the Center in recent past, especially in the 1970s, has been subjected to what I would consider a premature evaluation and unfair criticism. The

Center's mission really is long-term in nature. Key among its goals is to create "human agents" for positive long-term change. Like any development project -- even short-term development projects, there is a gestation period. When you endeavor to create long-term change, the really meaningful time to measure that change is really a generation-long process. For example, in my view, the first meaningful period for measuring the impact of the EWC experience on the lives of the 1960s generation is now, not in the 1970 decade.

You know, 40-plus years later. It takes that much time for this grand "project" to run its course. So to really measure the impact of the East-West Center for my time earlier than now could give you misleading results. It's easy for an impatient evaluator to say, "Hey, it's been five years -- how come I don't see an impact yet?"

But even if you do simpler, non-institutional projects like irrigation or highway, which is a lot simpler -- these are physical change -- you still have to go through a gestation period of 10 or 15 years to see its planned impact. When you try to create social change, you try to create institutional change, especially when you try to build a multinational institution to promote long-term change, you need to avoid the temptation to draw premature conclusions about its effectiveness.

EWC's Impact on 1960s Alumni

The alumni I keep in touch with, I think they've been outstanding in everything they do. There is a passion almost equivalent to a religion, a "religion-like" belief among my fellow EWC grantees in the East-West Center mission.

Looking Ahead

I think if we sustain the East-West Center -- and hopefully, we diversify and increase its financial resources so that it has stability -- it has long-term stability. As the world becomes more inter-dependent, international relations become more complex, institutions like the EWC will play leading roles in doing what it's doing; in fact, in many ways, it's already doing that.

But if we double or quadruple its resources, being able to diversify its base of support so that it has assured long-term stability, I think its effectiveness will increase many folds.

For this current Board of Governors, anyway, I think I can speak for my colleagues: We are very aware that the key challenge we are facing is to help ensure the success of the East-West Center by finding new and innovative ways to diversify and expand its funding source of support. It's not easy, but it's a challenge that we are taking up. I have the honor to chair the Resource Development Committee, and we are working hard both at the EWC Foundation and the Board of Governors at that.

I think the world, in the long-term, if it's to survive as we know it, has got to find better ways to create more institutions like the East-West Center.

Or to support institutions like the East-West Center, not just in the Asia Pacific region, but in other areas like the Middle East, where we cultivate in each human being the ability to see things from the other person's perspective, to promote mutual acceptance, tolerance and mutual respect. I am optimistic. I am optimistic about the future of the East-West Center, and I am optimistic about the future of the world.