

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

Sojourns Across Sources: Unbraiding Sino-Cambodian Histories

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There was a hiatus that could not be called silence because while they did not speak there was passing between them the vivid dialogue of the unexpressed.

- Nadine Gordimer (2007, 101)

History is not the sort of animal you can domesticate.

- Antonio Tabucchi (2011, 89)

Late one evening in March 1886, a court official named A Gi was stabbed to death in the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh, the capital of the French protectorate of Cambodia. A Gi was the head of the Hainanese Association in Cambodia. He had recently rallied to the French protectorate, gaining the colonial government's confidence through regular meetings and falling from the favor of Cambodian king Norodom I in the process. His murder chilled Francophile dignitaries across the capital. "The mandarins are terrified," wrote France's representative in Cambodia, Lieutenant-Colonel Badens: "They say that those who have taken France's part will meet the same fate" (Badens 1886, 2).

Rumors were rife. Was this a revenge killing? A Gi had apparently refused his daughter to both King Norodom and Prince Duong Chakr. Was it the political assassination of a turncoat? A Gi was known as a collaborator with the French. Or was this an economic crime? A Gi had run fishing concessions in Bapnum and Prey Veng. Three days after the murder, an anonymous tract was posted on the door of A Gi's house. It warned:

The Chinese A Gi was killed because of serious personal enmity. The same will happen to [the mandarins] A Pok and A Hui, who are living in the palace of the Second King [Sisowath] in the North. A Pok is a bad man who is "eating" lots of money [taking lots of revenue]. He insults monks. A Hui is involving himself in

the affairs of the Second King's palace and demanding money. He cheats everyone, and never returns money entrusted to him. (Badens 1886, 2)

Or was A Gi the casualty of a feud between the two Khmer royal houses of the Norodoms and Sisowaths? Sisowath had also taken France's part, commanding colonial troops in movements against the rebel prince Sivutha. Was A Gi, like A Pok and A Hui, in some way connected with the Second King? Or was this a Chinese affair, and A Gi the victim of intracongregational rivalry? Both the Hainan and Hokkien dialect groups had established active associations in Phnom Penh by 1884. In separate accounts, two French observers noted "frequent disagreement" between the two "rival" Chinese associations in the capital.¹

A Gi's murder remains one of Cambodia's many unsolved mysteries. We do not know if the protectorate's suspicions were confirmed, or whether his killers were ever brought to justice. The multiple possible motives for this crime reveal the varied roles of Chinese in Cambodia, both as economic intermediaries, as brokers of political power, and as interlocutors between colonial and indigenous authorities. The scenario offers a valuable freeze-frame of elite life and highlights tensions between competing areas of loyalty. It also speaks to the multiplicity of roles that Chinese have played and still do play in Cambodia and the multiple narratives that surround them.

In her introduction to this volume, Lorraine Paterson sets the scene for the articles featured in this special issue and provides the context from which they emerged. This endnote works to a reverse formula, seeking if not to unweave them then to point to the impossibility of coherence and the inchoate nature of any project to document the past. Rather than braiding together the common threads of our contributors' articles to signal the thematic coherence of this volume on "mediating Chineseness," I gesture toward loose ends and unstitched seams, to the in-between spaces and the possibilities they represent for developing new approaches to the articulation, study, and mediation of "Chineseness" in Cambodia.

I take this line to encourage not a tightening of the bolts between emergent studies but a widening of the compass outside of national framings and across the grain of disciplines. My goal here is to point to the ambiguities and complexities surrounding questions of ethnicity and to work with some of the formulations offered by our contributors: templates and trajectories (Verver), the surreal nature of experience (Mertha), public framings and private meanings (Nyíri). The papers in this volume are unified by a thread of empirical inquiry that focuses

attention on the shifting stakes of performing or claiming an identity at any given moment. The personal reflections of two of our contributors (Jeldres and Richardson) on their experiences point to the constraints of archives and the elusiveness of story.

By way of homage to William Willmott, this essay shadows in genre if not in rigor his memoir essay. It reflects on my own research journey in early 1990s, some thirty years after Willmott's fieldwork in the early 1960s. It considers the contradictory narratives of inclusion and exclusion of Chinese from notions of the Khmer nation and reflects on the narrators and narrative power of such stories. Writing this essay has encouraged me to reflect on the impact of my experiences as a student in China in the 1980s on this work and of my 1990s fieldwork on my later reading of colonial archives. In that sense it is a chain letter. Writing retroactively of one's own journey can imply a coherence that was never there. My research on Chinese in Cambodia was conducted in 1991, 1992 to 1993, and 1995. I came across the tale of A Gi in the course of my later doctoral research on the colonial genealogies of ethnonationalism at the French colonial archives at Aix-en-Provence in 1997. I had come to colonialism in part through the work of Willmott (1967). And I arrived in those archives with a research sensibility shaped by my time in the field in Cambodia that might best be described as peripheral vision. But I was still journeying between two maps: one shaped by my own youthful presumptions and a fixity of purpose that my experiences on the ground helped to unravel, and one still in the making.²

In Cambodia in the 1990s, the dearth of those Chinese social organizations examined by Willmott in the early 1960s led me to mediate my understandings of Chinese histories in Cambodia through a medley of orthodox and unorthodox sources. First, print and visual media: official records, news, schoolbooks, memoirs in Chinese, Khmer, French, and English, and photographs. Second, monumental and material culture: schools, temples and tombstones, spirit houses, and ancestral altars. Third, vocal resources, including oral history, and lyric and spoken language. Permeating text, photograph, song, lyric, and architecture was the thread of performance, marked by the promise of passing, the threat of discovery, and the steady move toward a public recovery and embrace of ethnic identity that marked the mid-1990s onwards.

Textual Encounters

The stories that encircled the tale I first set out to tell—that of China's relationship with the Communist Party of Kampuchea, the subject of my master's thesis at Oxford University

(Edwards 1992a)—were flat and uninteresting reports of comradely banquets and friendship visits between the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) and the People’s Republic of China (PRC), interspersed with triumphalist accounts of revolutionary glory even while the CPK was shrouded in secrecy.

My source materials were faded copies of the *Renmin Ribao* (People’s Daily), stacked in Pusey Lane at the Oriental Institute. I clipped, collated, and contextualized. A sample of findings includes: a April 17, 1976 essay “The Cambodian Peoples’ March from Victory to Victory,” whose author, a crew member of the Guangdong Ocean Shipping Office, docked at port in Democratic Kampuchea (DK) on a vessel named “The Red Flag” to eulogize the political vigor, rapid development, and lush verdure of Kampuchea on the first anniversary of the Khmer Rouge conquest; a telegram in the same issue from Mao Zedong to Khieu Samphan, Pol Pot, and Nuon Chea congratulating Cambodia on its “correct line” radical path; and an editorial that declared:

Even in places where a Superpower (i.e., the United States) has been defeated and forced to retreat, and another greedy and ambitious Superpower (i.e., the Soviet Union) strives to capitalize on the opportunity, the peoples of every country in Asia [will] smash [their] expansionist schemes. (*Renmin Ribao*, April 17, 1976, 1).

I mapped all three articles in a timeline against the Sino-Soviet split but more specifically against the Tiananmen Incident of April 5, 1976, in which, on the orders of the radical Gang of Four faction, supporters of Deng Xiaoping who gathered in Tiananmen Square were bloodily suppressed for paying tribute to the recently deceased Zhou Enlai (whose friendship with Sihanouk is the subject of Julio Jeldres’s essay in this volume). I hypothesized that Cambodia had served as something of an offshore political laboratory—a form of *champ d’expérimentation*, to borrow colonial architect Ernest Hébrard’s words—in which radicals could project and test a fast-tracked, offshore revolution (Edwards 1992a). And so it went on. My studies found a welcome interval in the Cornell Southeast Asian Studies Summer Institute (SEASSI), where I learned foundational Khmer in the summer of 1991 and took a seminar in Cambodian culture taught by anthropologist Judy Ledgerwood.

Here began the slow unfolding of my plans to pursue a doctoral thesis in international relations and the start of my trajectory toward considering the origins of ethnic nationalism in Cambodia. What diverted me from the rhetoric of *surrealpolitik* (see Mertha, this volume)—

whose columns, writ in language as uninspiring as the architecture of the institutes in which I resided in 1980s China—was a collection of Chinese language writings by Cambodian and Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong.³

It was Ledgerwood who encouraged me to delve deeper into the experiences of Chinese in Cambodia and directed me to Willmott's work. From Willmott's 1981 essay "The Chinese in Kampuchea," I learned that Cambodia's Chinese population had roughly halved between the Khmer Rouge takeover in 1975 and its fall in 1978. If accurate, his demographic analysis indicated that the Chinese had suffered the greatest proportionate loss of any ethnic group under the DK. Twinned with this demographic data was the analysis that social status was the primary causal factor for this loss; these people were not persecuted as Chinese per se. However powerful the stereotype, Cambodia's ethnic Chinese could not all have been urban dwelling and capitalist; yet, possibly due in part to the sites selected by scholars and journalists, something of a consensus seemed to emerge among scholarly, political party, and government definitions from the 1960s through the 1980s that categorized Cambodia's Chinese and Sino-Khmer population as middle class, capitalist, and urban. It puzzled me that such labeling could stick even as the "traditional" roles of Chinese had become violently unstuck during the DK regime and its aftermath. My reading of Chinese survivor accounts, and other published Chinese memoirs that I subsequently came across, led me to query these assumptions.

The presence of Chinese technicians in Cambodia in DK also intrigued me. If the role of Chinese technical experts has not been properly documented until now through the work of Andrew Mertha, then their interaction with the local Chinese population has been studied even less and remains a topic for more substantive future exploration. The Chinese memoirs I read at Cornell and later paint a picture of the PRC technical advisers as distancing themselves from and denigrating ethnic Chinese in Cambodia. When approached for help by ethnic Chinese, these memoirs allege, PRC advisers would typically respond with such statements as "This is how capitalists end up" and "You have sucked Cambodia dry; you are blood-sucking capitalists," or by holding up placards with slogans such as "All Overseas Chinese are evil creatures." Ethnic Chinese were singled out at mass meetings and rallies, for criticism and chants against the "Overseas Chinese exploiting class" were commonplace (quoted in Cheng 1981). The disjuncture between these recollections and those offered by Mertha's respondents is not necessarily a result of dissimulation or exaggeration by the custodians of these memories.

Rather, it presents a further indication of the divergence of experience across the terrain of the DK regime and the variance between representations and translations of ideology. Beneath the templates and public framings ran individual trajectories that shaped private meanings.

At least some Chinese technicians in the era of *surrealpolitik* examined by Mertha appear to have blurred distinctions among first-, second-, and third-generation Chinese in Cambodia. Further, they seem to have viewed ethnic Chinese through the anti-overseas Chinese (华侨) discourse of Cultural Revolution China, where overseas Chinese joined with landlords, rich peasants, criminals, counterrevolutionaries, rightists, and capitalists as one of the Seven Black Elements, and as a repository of the Four Olds (old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits).⁴ The presence in the PRC of returned overseas Chinese (归侨) from Southeast Asia would have heightened the PRC visitors' sense that ethnic Chinese in Cambodia were part of an international quasi-criminal conspiracy linked to the Kuomintang and Taiwan.⁵

In Paris, the Committee on Rescuing Khmer Chinese, founded in December 1977, appealed to the Beijing government to intervene on behalf of Chinese in Cambodia and was met with the exhortation to "be patient" (Suryadinata 1985). Chinese-language memoirs and the secondary literature converge on one point. PRC advisers evaded requests for help from those ethnic Chinese in Cambodia bold enough to speak out and make their plight clear to a population that, from the 1950s to the 1960s, they had been encouraged to see as brothers.

I went from Cornell to Cambodia in the summer of 1991 on a five-week internship with a British charity, the Cambodia Limb Project, in a Phnom Penh then still under curfew. In my search for more sources, I came across a Khmer middle-school primer in which jagged black-and-white silhouette images of the Khmer Rouge, a Vietnamese-backed liberating army, and a verse designed for rote learning berated the evil Pol Pot-Khieu Sampan-Ieng Sary clique and its Chinese backers. I could situate the textbook in its geopolitical context: published at the height of Sino-Soviet antagonisms, when the Vietnamese-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea explicitly linked China and Pol Pot in a policy that continued to discriminate against Chinese on political grounds. Only later would I see the textbook as being linked to domestic discriminatory policy against the Chinese, as encapsulated in the 351 Circular of 1982 that was later documented in detail by Evan Gottesman (2004). Only later would I understand the textbook and the policy as a form of shadow play; how the story of what it means to be Chinese, what losses Chineseness might entail, resonates and gains traction with each iteration. The schoolbook was a

primer for schoolchildren about how one can and must say “no” to Chineseness; the 351 circular was a primer for officials as to how to visit appropriate consequences on those who either say “yes” to Chineseness or who fail to disguise their heritage.

I returned to Oxford where I completed my master’s degree in May 1992 and journeyed to Cambodia the following month to take up an appointment as an analysis and assessment officer for the Information and Education Division of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). I found signs of change and sensed that ethnic Chinese in Cambodia were more ready to embrace their identities openly. I heard Chinese spoken, by PRC diplomats and delegates, by Taiwanese investors, and by members of Chinese associations, which were now in the early stages of reclaiming space, both physically and socially.

My job involved voter education, as well as summarizing and identifying the main messages in the political reporting of the four main factions to the Cambodian Peace Process. One of these factions was the Khmer Rouge, which continued to broadcast its visions of a pure Khmer nation, full of anti-Vietnamese vitriol, from its clandestine radio station. My time in China stood me in good stead. At the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute in 1982 to 1983, a class in newspaper readings (报刊) had trained me in the idiom of socialist international relations. But the Khmer Rouge was not alone in conflating notions of national legitimacy and racial purity. These themes threaded through the media of the other three parties to the peace process: the State of Cambodia, the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC), and the Khmer People’s National Liberation Front (KPNLF), whose repertoire I was also assigned to analyze, alongside the Xinhua News Agency and Hong Kong-based, PRC-affiliated newspaper *Ta Kung Pao*. On April 17, 1992, *Ta Kung Pao* accused the DK of “deviating” from the “correct path” and condemned its campaign of violence against ethnic Vietnamese as “narrow nationalism.”

Material Culture

In his 1981 paper, Willmott estimated that the Chinese population of Cambodia had halved and that Chinese collectives, communities, and associations had disappeared. Ten years on, in 1991, it seemed to me from my first impressions of Phnom Penh that the Chinese population had all but vanished. No Chinese shop signs were visible on the streets. Mao Tse Tung Boulevard, celebrated in the Chinese memoirs I had read as a road built with Chinese

community funds to celebrate Zhou Enlai's historic 1956 visit to Cambodia, had been renamed. All public markers of a Chinese past seemed to have been erased. At the Central Market I saw abundant evidence of bristling commerce with China, supplied through the arteries described in this volume by Michiel Verver and Pál Nyíri and elsewhere by Danielle Tan (2006). There was an informal "Chinese" section of the market, where gold traders and jewelry makers did business. They would emerge later, in the UNTAC period, as primary money changers.

The closest I came on that summer trip to Phnom Penh to documenting China's involvement with Cambodia, beyond the predominance of chrysanthemum motifs on thermos flasks and acrylic blankets in the central markets, was on a visit to the Military Museum in Phnom Penh. Here were monuments to the hostile relations between China and the Vietnamese-backed regime of the People's Republic of Kampuchea and its successor, the State of Cambodia. I climbed up onto a Chinese tank and peered through the open hatch to find the skeleton of the Khmer Rouge driver. Close by was a Chinese Jeep, labeled with its battalion number. Trophies of war.

In a small photo kiosk on Monivong Boulevard, not far from Phnom Penh's Central Market, I found a monument of a different sort. Tucked away in a glass cabinet was a family portrait: a crew-cut boy in shorts, his sister, mother and father assembled for the camera with an air of gay solemnity. Alongside the photo, Chinese characters spidered across a note. *Son lost. Last seen in Phnom Penh, April, 1975*, I read. Then a contact name and address. That moment has stayed with me. The family trapped in paper with neat white borders, the paper trapped behind glass in a double silencing coupled with a subtle plea. There were other silent monuments to the place of Chinese in the city's past. Visiting the grounds of a Khmer Buddhist temple not far from the military hospital in the city's western district, I found a burial plot with numerous Chinese inscriptions on tombstones.

I returned to Cambodia again in 1995, for a three-month appointment as head of the Chinese Research Unit of a United Nations Development Project entitled Interdisciplinary Research on Ethnic Groups in Cambodia. I worked with the talented Cambodian anthropologist Chan Sambath, who subsequently wrote a report on the Chinese experience in the DK for the Documentation Center of Cambodia (1999) and completed his master's thesis on Sino-Khmer identity for Concordia University (2005). We focused our study on Chinese and Sino-Khmer in villages, communes, and district towns and covered nine provinces. We framed our methods

against those of Willmott (1967), adapting them to the changed environment, supplementing interviews with explorations of the cultural landscape.⁶

In the mid-1990s, tombstones were among of the few remaining vestiges of overtly Chinese culture. Many, while faded or overgrown, remained to tell the story of those who rested in a peace denied those countless Cambodians dispatched to shallow or watery graves in the years of the Khmer Rouge regime. Temples, schools, and graveyards, scarred by substantial war damage, all material emblems of Chinese spiritual and cultural values, have an added dimension as roots to the Cambodian land and stone archives of a community's passage through time. These cultural institutions, financed by local communities, were not the outcome of some grand design. They were manifestations of feelings and beliefs, magnets of history and memory, whose ghosts were beginning to emerge from twenty years of bombing, desecration, and neglect to serve as the nodal points for the renaissance of Chinese communities across Cambodia.

The war was still not over in 1995, and banditry was still not uncommon. In Kracheh, en route to one village, we passed a burned-out car that was no museum relic, but was still smoking. In Kampot, a province that once hosted salt and cement works and other Chinese projects in the 1960s, and which forms one of the field sites for Pál Nyíri's paper, at the base of Pnum Sa, villagers led us to partially hidden shrines at which worship of the Chinese deity Bentougong had continued by Khmers, Sino-Khmers, and Chinese throughout the DK period. Here and at Srok Sotr Nikum in Siem Reap, where the Khmer Rouge was still active, we found amulet papers affixed to household doors. These papers, whose blessing by a spirit medium through the bloodletting ritual described by Willmott in his memory-essay that opens this volume, acted as evocative sites and signs of participation in Chinese cultural practices by villagers irrespective of their ethnic identity. What bound these sites and practices together, alongside belief, was story: the stories I was told about the recent past as I was led to these shrines in the wood, the stories that some saw fit to confide in me and others to hide, and the bigger story marked out on the landscape by the tracery of warfare. Some stories involved ghosts: I must be careful not to arouse the spirits of the ghosts whose tombstones I wish to inspect; I must ask for the permission of the resident spirit or make an offering before taking a photograph of the mural in a spirit house.

By 1995, imagery and language about the Chinese experience was moving definitively from shop interiors, darkrooms, and underground schoolrooms into the public sphere. Following the resumption of the first Chinese newspaper in Phnom Penh in the early 1990s, and the

expansion of Chinese media noted by Nyíri in his paper, family photos from the 1960s began to circulate in missing persons announcements (寻人启事) in the Chinese dailies. Most shared a common time and place of loss—April 1975, Phnom Penh. Out from that hub, the contact addresses of the seekers formed a haunting constellation spanning Sydney, Toronto, and Ho Chi Minh City.

In tandem with this vocal assertion and public expression of Chineseness, other histories remained forgotten or elided. The military museum had long since been disbanded. At the “Killing Fields” museum of Choeng Ek, scattered among grassy tufts, in between sites fenced off under thatch and bamboo structures, and marked with recently installed wooden plaques as “mass graves,” were the broken remnants of Chinese tombstones. Before its conversion to a DK killing field, Cheoung Ek was a Chinese cemetery. Where elsewhere, tombstones and burial plots emerged as contested sites in real estate and ownership, this pre-DK history was erased from the site notices.⁷

Speech Acts

If 1990 marked the move to official policies of freedom of ethnic and cultural association, Chinese was still not widely spoken in Phnom Penh. But there was still much to listen for. Gossip, stories, jokes, wordplay, puns, repertoire, place names, remembrance all coalesced, jostled up against the *bildung* of text, image, and monument. I had not then heard about the run on toothpicks in Cambodia: all the Chinese had taken to prop their eyelids open, the better to pass as Khmer, the joke ran at the height of the 351 campaign.⁸ Passing as Khmer had become a survival tool in the Khmer Rouge regime and then again in the early years of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea. For those who could not pass—those who spoke no other language but Chinese—survival had depended on the lenience of authority figures. Small wonder that few in 1991 were willing to openly converse in Chinese, or to share any claim to a Chinese heritage or name, with an outsider.

Two years as a foreign exchange student in China in the 1980s and six months as an editor with the Beijing Foreign Languages Press had given me some exposure to the rhetoric of the Chinese Communist Party and to a system of privilege mirrored later in the DK’s “special treatment” of Chinese experts studied by Mertha. The special treatment (优待) of foreigners in the PRC included access to an exclusive Beijing Friendship Store and air-conditioned hotels off

limits to the vast majority of Chinese but frequented by high-ranking cadres and their kin. In 1980s Beijing, as elsewhere, foreign experts at the Foreign Languages Press enjoyed state-subsidized, spacious accommodations, special seating, and recognition at municipal and state functions such as National Day. To be a foreigner in China in the 1980s was a constant performance. In Beijing, I had learned by heart such songs as “How glorious it is to be an oil-worker” (天不怕，地不怕，哪里有石油，哪里就是我的家 / I don’t fear heaven, I don’t fear hell, where there is oil, there shall I dwell) and “No Communist Party, no New China” less from any political sensibility than because singing was an essential part of social relations. This exposure only became relevant later when I read a luminous essay by the anthropologist John Marston entitled “Khmer Rouge Songs.” In it were these lines: “*In one hand holding a gun, in the other a hoe, defending and building the motherland...*” (Marston 2002).

The lyrics were identical to those in a Chinese Cultural Revolution song. They took on more sinister meaning in the Khmer version due to the widely reported use of hoes as instruments of battery and execution by Khmer Rouge cadre. The lines resonated with me both because I had read them in an article—the crew of the Guangdong Ocean Shipping had been “deeply moved” on docking in Phnom Penh by “the sight of the Cambodian patriotic army and people, in one hand holding a gun, in one hand a hoe, sparing no effort in rebuilding their homeland” (*Renmin Ribao*, April 17, 1976)—and because I could imagine hearing them, sung with revolutionary bombast, at such venues as the Great Hall of the People in 1980s, in one of whose provincial incarnations I had inflicted my rendition of some or other song on a captive audience. It was the first and only time that my singing has earned applause; my political pitch was perfect. I was a foreigner (外国人) dressed in khaki pants and the jacket that had become, through some act of sartorial snatching, known as the Mao Suit in the West, but in China as the garb of Sun Yat Sen, the founder of the 1911 republic. I dyed my hair black, braided it. On several occasions, I passed as a Uighur from Xinjiang and was once barred from entering a foreign diplomatic compound. I experimented with passing, knowing always that the stakes were low. I was a foreigner protected from any reprisals for boundary crossing by the inflexibility of my British citizenship.

The first public celebration of Chinese New Year for twenty years was authorized in 1991, but the superficial impression gained on this—my first visit to Phnom Penh—was of an atmosphere of anxious anticipation rather than instant celebration. My sole success in attempts to

find a conversation partner in Mandarin Chinese was a soft-spoken exchange with two sisters from Vietnam who traded tea and other prettily packaged goods in the Central Market. In Chroy Changvar peninsula, at the Kien Klang Rehabilitation Center for amputees from the Cambodian People's Armed Forces, I met one man in his twenties who identified himself as Sino-Khmer, or "*koungkat*." Moves were already underway to reopen the Dunahua Chinese school, but Chinese was still being taught, privately, underground, as it had been in the 1980s. That teachers and students would take that risk, in an era when the political costs outweighed any commercial benefits, indicated that the stakes were high.⁹ Ethnicity had found outlets for expression through areas deemed nonthreatening by State of Cambodia leadership in specific instances, yet important enough to mobilize around. Some of the earliest Chinese associations, formed at the grassroots level in 1989 outside of Phnom Penh, were funeral associations.

When I returned to Cambodia in 1992, I found a gentle reassertion of, a scoping out of room for, the negotiation of ethnic identity. Part of my job at UNTAC involved voter education and liaising with Phnom Penh's ethnic Chinese community. In July 1992 I located the official leadership of the Chinese community in the cramped, dim offices of the recently formed Chinese Nationals Association of Cambodia in a rundown building near the Old Market in Phnom Penh. The association's representatives, all men, were polite, genteel, and eager to converse in Mandarin. But they seemed unsure of their role in the forthcoming election. Did they have the right to vote? They were not sure. They also reported their problems in trying to reclaim a building, in which they held their current offices, from a number of Cambodian families who had taken up residence there and voiced their concern that they might be removed from these buildings. Our meeting was punctuated by embarrassed smiles and instructions from older representatives to a younger boy "not to raise" these problems. On probing, they revealed a lack of certainty about their citizenship rights and even their "nationality." Some were marked as "Chinese" on the identity cards issued by the government and were concerned that as Chinese they had no right to vote in the elections. There was a cautious assertion of Chinese identity, under official auspices.¹⁰

From 1992 to 1993, I traveled widely in Cambodia with UNTAC and noticed a definite opening up and willingness to assert Chinese identity as compared to 1991. From stallholders in the coastal town of Sihanoukville to small-time restaurateurs in Battambang, people were eager to try out the rusty Mandarin that many had learned at Chinese primary and secondary schools in

the 1960s, only to neglect and hide their knowledge of it for two decades. Taiwanese and Singaporean businesses were operating in Phnom Penh, and Chinese acupuncture centers, hotels, and restaurants were opening up, all presenting new opportunities and incentives for Chinese conversation. Ethnic Chinese and Sino-Khmers were among the returnees from France, Canada, Australia, and elsewhere who were coming back to Cambodia to reconnect with their roots, to play their part in the transition to peacetime, to try out business opportunities, and to search for missing relatives.

My work for UNTAC and for the Ethnic Chinese Research Unit in 1995 was complicated by the absence of any recent history of disinterested social research—research not affiliated with the interests of any political regime or party. My two and a half years in the PRC, when foreigners' interactions with Chinese were closely monitored and restricted, had taught me to be circumspect in my questioning, to expect levels of self-censorship in any answers I received, and never to use a tape recorder.

The socioeconomic status of a highly visible sector of the Chinese population had slanted scholarly assessments of the plight of wealthy urban Chinese to the view that Chinese had been persecuted on the grounds of class. The oral histories that Chan Sambath and I gathered, in Khmer and Chinese, in 1995, contravened this view. Divergent narratives indicated a plethora of experiences and an inconsistency across Cambodia's terrain with regard to the treatment of Chinese. Testimonies ranged from memories of hard labor for speaking Chinese to tales of tolerance; one first-generation interviewee had been treated well in Kracheh despite still not knowing any Khmer. In Chhup in Kompong Cham, respondents gave independent and complementary accounts of a massacre of twenty-nine ethnic Chinese families who had been rounded up and buried alive in a mass grave in 1978 for speaking Chinese. The village was adjacent to a rubber plantation, a site staffed, like the oil refinery examined by Mertha, by Chinese technical experts.

In a private meeting with a member of the Chinese delegation to UNTAC who had studied Khmer under Son Sen at the Institute of Pedagogy in the 1960s, I witnessed a rueful reminiscence not dissimilar to that described by Sophie Richardson in this volume. He had traveled widely from 1976 to 1978 as an interpreter for the Chinese embassy in Cambodia and confirmed that he and other members of the senior delegation and the senior Cambodian leadership were not shielded from atrocity; those who traveled saw signs of acute distress as they

traversed Cambodia by train or by car. And for all the primacy of the iconoclastic imagery of burned-out cars and bombed-out cities, people did travel. People were in circulation. Chinese experts came across Sino-Cambodians. Here was a glimmer of experience, and in it a countermemoir that buttressed some of the claims I had read in the published Chinese memoirs referred to earlier. Another shard. Not part of any systemic collection of evidence, but an impression that helped me to shape others.

Reflections on Refractions of History

The disruption of war shatters the linear comfort of a nationally contained archive. The “methodological nationalism” that Nyíri sensitively challenges in his article was simultaneously reinforced by the isolationism of the DK regime and challenged as some managed to flee. With the revolution rewriting history in flesh and blood, as the Democratic Kampuchea national anthem claimed, there was no need to worry about the records of the old regime. People were the new archive, and history was to be extracted from live subjects. Paper records were consigned to neglect in a hall behind the Bibliothèque Nationale. In the mid-1990s, the National Archive was reassembled thanks to assistance from the Australian government and the volunteer efforts of Peter Arfanis and Gregor Muller. It was here that Evan Gottesman located a copy of the infamous 351 Circular, after which new scrutiny was afforded the collection by the government of the Royal Kingdom of Cambodia.

In 1959, Khieu Samphan—now on trial in Phnom Penh for crimes against humanity—submitted his doctoral thesis to the University of Paris. In his dissertation, Khieu argued that the Chinese “played an important economic role in Cambodia” and made a clear distinction between the Chinese in Cambodia and “other ‘foreigners’...from Europe and America” (1979, 55). The latter, Khieu maintained, had “weak links to Cambodia” and could not be “integrated into Khmer society,” an argument that “did not pertain to the Chinese” (1979, 55). Some twenty years later, Khieu Samphan, as head of state and foreign secretary, presided over a regime that simultaneously embraced Chinese aid and technological assistance from the People’s Republic of China: welcomed Chinese experts in the fields of engineering, construction, medicine and photography; and upheld such agreements of “economic, scientific and technical cooperation,” while, as late as 1977, recognizing the “support and assistance of the fraternal Chinese people” (Vorn 1977). This foreign policy was twinned with an ideology that was both politically and

ethnically discriminatory against Chinese in Cambodia, with devastating consequences. By the start of the DK regime, Chineseness was at once a sign that one was of the “new” people or “April 17” people (urban, propertied, educated, and thus politically untrustworthy) and a sign that one was “outside” of the base people (the quintessential, original “*Kmae-daem*” or Original Khmer). Established political credentials—membership in the Party, active service in the Liberated Zones—mitigated against such suspicion; in the 1960s and early 1970s, a number of Chinese and Sino-Khmer joined up with the Khmer Rouge, lending support to the movement with active service as teachers.

The scattered narratives seemed to coalesce around one point: that Chinese in DK were persecuted simultaneously and connectively on ethnic and ideological grounds. Some Khmer Rouge ideologues read class as a definitive, inflexible, quasi-racial, territorially determined, and epidermically defined category whereby anyone recognizably Chinese in appearance, accent, dress, or diet was guilty of class enmity by association. This view was corroborated by the fieldwork Chan Sambath and I conducted in 1995, including interviews with rural Chinese in Kampot known in Khmer as “black Chinese” (*cen khmau*) who identify as Teochiu as well as Hainanese. Their swarthy complexions, rough hands, and rural origins had not spared all of them from discrimination in the DK era for their Chinese ethnicity.

Perhaps because of my own formation as a language student in 1980s China in a regime that cast foreigners and Chinese in a rigid binary of segregation and surveillance, and because of stories I heard from American, British, and Canadian Chinese about the treatment of overseas Chinese in China during the Cultural Revolution, I was uncomfortable with the notion that ethnicity can be so easily detached from other variables. Chineseness was not always a singular strategic choice, it seemed, but a process of identification by others, the ascription of identity by those who said “no” to ambiguity.

Chinese in DK were precariously poised at a historically unstable but categorically fixed nexus. Ethnonationalist Khmer visions situated them as outsiders; radical Khmer Rouge visions framed them as class enemies; and Chinese experts mediated encounters with ethnic Chinese through their own life experience, awareness of the political risks that receptivity to such encounters might entail, and by the ideological casting of all overseas Chinese as evil capitalists who were neither Khmer nor Chinese, neither Khmer Rouge nor Chinese Revolutionary, but members of an overseas Chinese community that had been collectively vilified as class enemies.

In the China of the 1970s and 1980s, news media and publishing houses worked to convey a different image. Atrocity stories of arbitrary execution, evisceration, and sexual violence by republican forces and imperialist aggressors against Cambodian villagers, Khmer Rouge guerillas, and sympathizers were translated into Chinese and published in Beijing in April 1978. The volume included radio plays and stories from 1971 to 1975 detailing the youth movement, life in the provinces closest to Vietnam, and acts of revolutionary valiance in Phnom Penh (Ma 1978). Its preface, written by the People's Literature Publishing House editorial department, predicted that PRC readers would warmly welcome the opportunity to study from the heroic example of Cambodian people and troops through real-life vignettes and celebrated in particular the spirit of self-sacrifice (忘我精神). Printed in crisp black ink, couched in a language stamped with the authority of revolutionary legitimacy, these stories have none of the immediacy and poignancy of the oral histories shared with Chan Sambath and me by Chinese, and Sino-Khmer survivors of the Khmer Rouge in the mid-1990s.

Chinese in Cambodia were thus multiply displaced. Their categorization as both ideological and ethnic outsiders resulted, for many, in policies of extreme and arbitrary punishment, ranging from the aforementioned live burials in Chhup to excruciating torture at Tuol Sleng interrogation center aimed at yielding confessions of involvement in Kuomintang-led conspiracies so as to justify the paranoia that fueled such purges at the grassroots level. The acceptance into the Democratic Kampuchea Party of Sino-Khmers, some of whom—like Khieu Samphan—rose through the ranks to become top cadres complicated analysis further. Was ethnicity ideologically negotiable? To what extent was a renunciation of Chineseness possible? In what circumstances, to paraphrase Ien Ang, can one *not* say “no” to Chineseness? (1998).

The papers in this special issue of *Cross-Currents* all show how stories of what it means to be Chinese, and how Chineseness is interpellated, change over time. When they were sitting in the oil refinery bemoaning their lack of steamed buns (馒头), the Chinese experts who are the subject of Mertha's essay became part of the uneasy story of China's involvement with the Khmer Rouge that survived in the minds of many Cambodian Chinese. The stories they were reading were those that circulated in the Chinese press. Further, as Mertha reminds us, they came to Cambodia with their own stories of survival and escape, and their time in the oil refinery was also marked by enforced periods of separation; they were, in the PRC's own way, servants of the

revolution, agents of production, not allowed to return to their loved ones. Theirs was the obligation of sacrifice.

Against the harsh realities of the oil refinery, and the roster of those purged, there circulated such lyrics as *How glorious it is to be an oil worker*, and Chinese translations of “Kampuchean Revolutionary Stories.” To what extent can we sever what was happening in Cambodia from such narratives in the PRC, or the presence of the technical experts in Cambodia from the stories that circulated in memoirs to Paris and Hong Kong? To what extent are the spirits that haunt the Cambodian landscape mediators and negotiators of a citizenship that is at once embedded and embodied in the spirit medium rituals studied by Willmott in 1963, narrated by temple custodians and villagers to Chan Sambath and me in 1995, and whose orbit, as Erik Davis (forthcoming) has shown through ethnographic work conducted in 2005, stretches from Pailin to Kampot?¹¹

At the end of it all, I am back where I began, in a bricolage. Cutting, copying, collating: searching for a context that will never be fully revealed because history is forever vagrant, and always mediated by different experience. Still stuck between two maps, but through the journey with other scholars that is at the heart of any collective enterprise such as this volume, equipped with a new set of coordinates.

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Notes

1. See Boulangier (1887, 36) and Delaporte (1880, 31). The Congregation system was not established until the following decade, in 1891. Also see Willmott (1967, 69).
2. The cartographic motif is taken from Eavan Boland’s evocative 2011 memoir.
3. The pivotal essay was Yu Liang (1981). Later I read Cheng Jin (1981), also published in Hong Kong.
4. As one Chinese refugee recalled: “Indonesian Chinese were capitalists to be overthrown, Malaysian Chinese were spies, and those from Thailand obviously Kuomintang agents” (cited in Godley 1989, 347).
5. Hau (2011, especially 156-158).
6. The findings were not published in book form by the Center for Advanced Study until 2009; I presented a summary at the 48th Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies in 1996, (Edwards 1996).
7. Observation based on author visits to Cheoung Ek, August 1991 and July 2004.

8. From 1979 to 1985, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) conducted a nationwide registration of Chinese in Cambodia. The 351 campaign often prescribed Chinese ethnicity on the basis of skin color, accent, or external cultural markers. The price of the 351 tag ranged from job loss, forced relocation, and discrimination in land allocation to hard labor and imprisonment. For the best discussion of Party Circular 351, issued in 1982, see Gottesman (2004, 182-187). See also Edwards (2009).
9. As Fang Qiaosheng later wrote: "In the 1980s, Chinese language education was seen as a criminal activity, [but] private teachers (*jiating jiaoshi*) still braved punishment, teaching Chinese in secret, and heads of families risked being labelled '351' households rather than let their sons and daughters become illiterate in Chinese" (1995, 1).
10. See Edwards (1992b).
11. On embedded citizenship, see Ong (1999, 94).

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