

Investors, Managers, Brokers, and Culture Workers: How the “New” Chinese Are Changing the Meaning of Chineseness in Cambodia

Pál Nyíri, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam

Abstract

China has become the largest source of capital in Cambodia. Managers of state enterprises that construct hydropower plants and roads—as well as private investors and managers in mining, agricultural land concessions, and garment manufacturing—wield increasing influence and are beginning to shape labor practices. In this situation, mainland Chinese migrants are no longer seen by the Sino-Khmer as the marginal and suspect outsiders that they were twenty years ago. Rather, for both the increasingly entrenched Sino-Khmer elite and the struggling Sino-Khmer middle classes, they are a source of business opportunities or jobs. The Sino-Khmer have emerged as middlemen both between Chinese capital and the neopatrimonial Cambodian state and between Chinese managers and Khmer labor. This role is predicated upon a display of Chineseness whose form and content is itself rapidly changing under the influence of an increasing number of teachers and journalists who come from the mainland to run Cambodia’s Chinese-language press and schools. This paper will attempt to make sense of the facets of this change.

The influx into Cambodia of capital from China, which began in earnest in 1999 and accelerated in the mid-2000s, has fundamentally altered what could be termed the political economy of Chinese ethnicity in Cambodia, and with it the relationship between Chinese Cambodians and new migrants from China. China has topped the Council for the Development of Cambodia (CDC)’s foreign investment chart most years since 2004. Investment from China accounted for nearly half of all foreign direct investment in Cambodia between 1994 and June 2009. China’s Ministry of Commerce says that the combined total of direct investment, engineering procurement contracts (*chengbao gongcheng*, not included in investment figures), and what it calls “labor cooperation” projects by companies from China reached nearly seven billion dollars by June 2010 (Office of the Commercial Counsellor, 2010a and 2010b). Over six billion dollars of that comes from the latter two categories, both of which reflect the dominance of the construction sector in Chinese investment. These projects—dams, irrigation projects, roads, bridges, and real estate—are contracted out mainly to state-owned companies from China, and they employ a large amount of Cambodian labor,

most of it via private Chinese and Cambodian subcontractors.¹ The construction of Kamchay, the first hydropower plant to be completed, has, according to the contractor, employed a total of over ten thousand people (*Zhongguo Jingjiwang* 2011). While the capital invested in garment manufacturing and plantations has been far smaller, the impact of investment from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China on employment in these sectors has been significant. According to the CDC, Chinese agricultural investments—land concessions to fell timber and grow rice, cassava, and other cash crops for export—have employed some 140,000 Cambodians, although the reliability of this figure is questionable (see Wang Ying 2010). The garment industry is the country's largest employer after the government; in the period between 2000 and 2008, it is said to have employed over 355,000 Cambodians (Tong 2010), overwhelmingly women. Managers of state enterprises that construct hydropower plants and roads—as well as private investors and managers in mining, agricultural land concessions, and garment manufacturing—are wielding increasing influence and beginning to shape labor practices.

The last systematic studies of Chinese migration to Cambodia, carried out some twenty years ago by Penny Edwards and Chan Sambath, recorded an antagonistic relationship between Sino-Khmers and more recent Chinese migrants, with the former seeing the latter as marginal and suspect outsiders associated with small-scale illicit trade (Edwards 2002). While petty entrepreneurs continue to make up the largest segment of new migrants—figures for this migration are notoriously unreliable, but Zhuang Guotu's (2008) estimate of fifty to a hundred thousand in 2008 appears realistic—they are now in a far better position to insert themselves as providers of flows of capital, information, and culture from mainland China and brokers between these flows and the sizable Chinese-Cambodian population, which is central to the Cambodian economy (Nyíri 2011).

Meanwhile, for both the increasingly entrenched Chinese-Cambodian elite and the struggling Chinese-Cambodian middle classes, capital from China creates business opportunities or jobs. Many Cambodian Chinese and Sino-Khmer² compete with, but also rely on, new Chinese migrants to act as middlemen, both between Chinese capital and the neopatrimonial Cambodian state³ and between Chinese managers and Khmer labor. This role is predicated upon a display of Chineseness whose form and content is itself rapidly changing under the influence of an increasing number of teachers and journalists who come from the mainland to run Cambodia's Chinese-language press and schools.

This paper, based on four short (one- to two-month) periods of interviews and ethnographic fieldwork focusing on new Chinese migrants in Phnom Penh, Battambang, and Kampot between 2007 and 2011, attempts to make sense of the facets of this change. Its central argument is that, unlike in earlier historical periods, the public articulations of what it means to be Chinese are now increasingly shaped not by Sino-Khmer cultural elites but by transnational relationships centered on China as a new friend of Cambodia. Desirable attributes of Chineseness include an entrepreneurial acumen that works to support cooperation between the two friendly governments and the possession of cultural and linguistic skills that conform to the standards of Chinese culture as understood in the People's Republic of China.

This argument complements existing studies on the revival of Chinese ethnicity in Southeast Asia, which have tended to focus on the revitalization of local Chinese heritage in the context of more permissive ethnic politics and on new local forms of Chineseness among the young (e.g., Hoon 2008). Beyond the regional context, this study may contribute to a broader debate on the global transformations of the meaning of Chinese ethnicity in conditions of increasing investment and migration from China in societies with longstanding ethnic Chinese populations (cf. Tjon Sie Fat 2009), including those in the West where scholars have so far emphasized the effects of and resistance to ethnic labeling (e.g., Parker and Song 2007; Chan and Hsu 2008; Lee and Zhou 2004; Kibria 2003). Both of these discussions have been hampered largely by “methodological nationalism” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003) that limits analysis to national frameworks and impedes recognition of similar patterns that occur in different social settings. While the processes described here are the product of particular economic, political, and historical contingencies that occur in Cambodia, they serve as a reminder that transnational connections have to be taken into account if we are to understand the development of ethnicity.

Investment from China and the Economic Position of the Sino-Khmer

By the 1990s, when new migration from China began to expand, Cambodia's ethnic Chinese had largely recovered their central role in the economy of urban Cambodia as importers, wholesalers, and retailers of goods and services, but in an economy of severe scarcity that was compounded by continuing guerrilla warfare. From the mid-1980s, despite restrictions on private business, Sino-Khmer entrepreneurs played a crucial role in supplying the country with foodstuffs and daily necessities, as well as cigarettes and liquor from

Thailand and Singapore, which were imported largely through informal channels reluctantly tolerated by the authorities (Tan 2006,139–141; see, e.g., Verver 2010). The infamous Circular 351, under which people of Chinese descent were discriminated against in job allocations, may have contributed to the renewed concentration of the Sino-Khmer in private business and, thus, over time, ironically hastened the reemergence of a wealthy elite identified as ethnically Chinese. After the Vietnamese withdrawal in 1989 and the legalization of private business, this commerce expanded rapidly. As shops reopened, business was reidentified with Chinese ethnicity through markers such as couplets in Chinese characters or small altars to the god of wealth, whether or not the proprietors could actually read or speak Chinese. In 1990, when the party-state permitted—indeed, instructed—Chinese associations to operate again, Chea Sim, president of the legislature both then and now, told members of the preparatory committee of the new Cambodian-Chinese umbrella organization: “Most Khmers want to be government officials; they don’t like business and are not good at it...You should unite and liaise with your relatives and friends overseas, attract foreign investment and become a bridge to developing the economy” (Yang 2003). This deal—encouraging Chinese Cambodians to pursue wealth in return for support of the ruling party—has been at the basis of the Cambodian People’s Party’s policies toward the ethnic Chinese ever since.

Meanwhile, the goods on sale included an increasing range of imports from China. As early as 1991, “Chinese thermos flasks, electric rice cookers, radios, clocks, pans, toilet paper, soap, talcum powder, tea, clothing, and a host of other commodities were the most chic and ‘modern’ items on sale in Phnom Penh’s Central Market” (Edwards 2002, 271). As in other “transitional economies” around the same time—for example, in Eastern Europe—it was this demand for low-priced Chinese consumer goods that propelled the initial wave of new migrants from the People’s Republic of China (cf. Nyíri 2011). By the mid-1990s, these migrants were “engaged in various facets of the economy, from small-scale service and retail industries such as restaurants, the sex and entertainment industry, hotels and bookselling, to dentistry and ... medicine” (Edwards 2002, 273). Unlike in Eastern Europe (Nyíri 2007) or neighbouring Laos (Tan 2011), the bulk of retail remained in the hands of Chinese-Cambodian entrepreneurs, who had access to real estate and were familiar with official procedures and patronage networks necessary for running a business. Except for a few niches, services and catering, too, remained a Chinese-Cambodian activity, with mainland Chinese-run restaurants generally identified as a specific niche catering mostly to Chinese customers.

But as the Cambodian economy expanded and the dominance of mainland Chinese as suppliers in all of its sectors—from construction materials to fertilizer—grew, reliable partnerships with them became increasingly important for Chinese-Cambodian businesses. For Sino-Khmer businesspeople at various levels, contracts with mainland Chinese entrepreneurs or matching Chinese investors with Cambodian business opportunities—and the personal and political connections these required—became increasingly attractive as the country was flooded with Chinese capital.

Mr. Wu's⁴ career exemplifies the increasing reliance of what can be described as a struggling Chinese-Cambodian middle class on these economic flows. Born near Chaozhou in China, he was brought to Cambodia by his father in 1945, when he was seven months old. His wife is a Cambodian-born ethnic Chinese who used to teach Chinese at Phnom Penh's Duan Hoa School. Under the Khmer Rouge, most of Mr. Wu's family was killed, and the rest dispersed; a younger sister now lives in Toronto. He has three children; one of them, a daughter, runs a modest hotel in Phnom Penh.

For the past twenty years, Mr. Wu has been doing subcontracting for construction projects. He prefers to work with companies from China, since they pay better, although they are strict about quality. He “doesn't want to touch” Cambodian government projects, because it is hard to get paid and the officials often change their mind about the amount. He has also done a project for a Korean company but found that the Koreans were strict but paid little. He tries to get what he calls “small jobs,” worth a few hundred thousand dollars—such as digging canals, lining reservoir walls, laying concrete, and building small bridges—for large, multimillion-dollar constructions such as dams, roads, and irrigation systems, financed by aid or loans from China and carried out by Chinese state enterprises as general contractors. Mr. Wu does not always deal with these companies, however, since many projects are already subcontracted to other, often private companies from China, which in turn subcontract those processes that do not require special skills to local businessmen such as Mr. Wu. He then recruits and supervises between fifty and two hundred local workers to execute the work under the inspection of technicians from China. Typically, each construction project employs several such teams; at a given point in one particular irrigation project, there were two other labor subcontractors in addition to Mr. Wu, both from China, but they too had to rely on Chinese-Cambodian recruiters to get laborers.

Figure 1. Mr. Wu and his workers at the construction of a reservoir in Battambang Province, July 2011. Photo by author.



Personal relationships are decisive in winning such subcontracts, so Mr. Wu spends much of his time trying to find informal ways to get to know managers in positions of authority at construction projects. Simultaneously, he offers his services as a scout to businessmen from China who are interested in agriculture, identifying opportunities that suit their interests, arranging visits, taking care of contracts and approvals, and sometimes recruiting agricultural labor. One of his new ventures is a partnership with a manager from an ethanol factory in Jiangsu Province to plant a hundred hectares of cassava in Banthey Meanchey. Wu provides the workers, Jiangsu the capital, and experts and seedlings come from Thailand. Mr. Wu first met this manager while on a trip to Jiangsu to buy road machinery: he has traveled there eight times in the past few years.

Investments from China also generate employment for Chinese Cambodians who can speak at least some Chinese. Most graduates of the Duan Hoa School in Phnom Penh—Southeast Asia's largest Chinese school, with over ten thousand students—find jobs with Chinese-owned garment and shoe factories as interpreters or clerks. Chinese-invested construction companies and their contractors also hire interpreters and prefer to have Chinese-speaking drivers. So the school runs three postsecondary courses, in accounting, computers, and translation. The role of these Chinese-speaking employees is much more than technical: managers from China believe that, due to their Chinese culture, they understand the expectations of management regarding labor discipline and behavior. They are therefore expected to function as cultural brokers of sorts, ensuring that Khmer workers comply with management instructions and do not make trouble.

In addition to younger people who acquired their Chinese education after the reopening of Chinese schools in 1992 and see employment with Chinese companies as a vehicle of upward mobility, some older Chinese Cambodians who went to school before Lon Nol banned Chinese education in 1970 are also employed in such jobs. Mrs. Vorng, a former Chinese teacher, used to work as an interpreter at a Thai-owned garment factory before moving on to another factory owned by investors from Hong Kong, where she worked for ten years. Like most other investors in this sector, the owners had previously run a garment factory in China but moved some of their production to Cambodia due to lower wages and more favorable customs regimes when the garments are exported to Europe and North America. The line workers in these factories are Khmer women, but middle management, technicians, and upper clerical workers are brought from mainland China. Mrs. Vorng was one of three local supervisors who had been hired because they could communicate with the local workers. Eventually, however, she found the pressure to mediate between management and the workers, who frequently struck for higher wages and delivered faulty products, to be too much. Now she works as a maid.

At the other end of the spectrum are wealthy Chinese-Cambodian businessmen who cultivate clientelistic relations with the party-state elite and have privileged access to natural resources (Hibou 2004; Bayart 2005; Mengin 2007, 25–29). Some made their initial fortunes in the informal foreign trade in the late 1980s; others fled the Khmer Rouge and returned to Cambodia after the UN intervention. Many of them hold the noble title *oknha* (sometimes translated into English as “lord”), granted by the king. This title requires the payment of at least two hundred thousand dollars to the state (Xing 2008, 373), but its holders have official tax privileges and informal authority. At the top of this group are tycoons who combine formal political power—for example, as senators for the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP)—with great wealth and informal but widely rumored connections to Hun Sen and other top leaders and the military. Such *oknha* are in great demand by investors from China, particularly those who wish to acquire land concessions, since such concessions, by law, require a majority stake of a Cambodian company. As a manager of the Cambodian office of a mainland Chinese state enterprise put it: “The first thing Chinese companies do when they get here is find a backer (*kaoshan* 靠山), like an *oknha*, who will help them get through various difficulties, liaise with government officials, and so on. Whether or not you will later have to share profits—that varies. But first you have to pay.” A particularly well-known example is Senator Oknha Lau Meng Khin, who holds stakes in high-profile mainland

investments that range from a controversial 200,000-hectare timber concession granted to Wuzhishan, an affiliate of a state agricultural company from China, to the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone, developed by a private garment manufacturing company from China, and the highly contested real estate development on the site of Boeung Kak Lake in Phnom Penh.

These *oknha* also play a role in the distribution of concessional loans from China. This is significant because more than half of current infrastructure projects in Cambodia are backed by concessional loans from one of China's two policy banks, making China one of the largest sources of development assistance in Cambodia. The loans are made directly to Chinese enterprises, and the initiative to finance a particular project generally comes from one of these, in consultation with Cambodian ministries (Sato et al. 2011). The *oknha* play a crucial role as brokers between the two sides, but in practice they are also frequently responsible for identifying the projects in the first place.

Oknha Keth, now around seventy, was born in Cambodia, the son of a Cantonese businessman of some standing who was also chairman of the board of overseers of one of the Chinese schools. His parents took him back to China for the first time in 1964 to visit relatives. He remembers being "scared to death," finding no food in the evening and no flush toilets. ("I held it back for a week.") In 1971, Keth moved to Hong Kong to join a relative and eventually became a partner in a toy factory. After a few visits to Cambodia, he finally moved back in 1998 with his Hong Kong-born wife. Since then, he has been involved in a dizzying array of business projects, starting with real estate, and accumulated a diverse collection of titles: adviser to a senior general (which gives him the right to use a Cambodian diplomatic passport) and chairman or director of several national sports and cultural organizations.⁵

When I first met Oknha Keth in 2008, his company was a contractor for a flood control project in Prey Veng Province and the same irrigation project in Battambang Province that Mr. Wu later worked on. Oknha Keth's position in the contracting chain, however, was much higher than Mr. Wu's: he said he had been involved in negotiating the eighty-million-dollar low-interest loan from Eximbank, one of China's two policy banks. The ribbon at the inaugural ceremony of the project was cut by Xi Jinping, the heir apparent to China's top leadership. His company also supplied construction materials for a highway project and was awarded a contract for the geological surveys for planned mines in Kompong Thom and the Kamchay and Atay dams, all of them financed with funding from China. As the company had

no surveying capabilities, it further contracted out these jobs to a company from China. Also, the company was involved in developing an enormous seaside resort project, with a total acreage of fifteen square kilometers and a pledged investment of 3.8 billion dollars, reportedly by China International Travel Service via a front company. Finally, it had a contract for supplying X-ray arms smuggling detection equipment to the Sihanoukville port, this most likely financed through Western aid and in turn subcontracted out to a company in Beijing. All of these projects had Chinese state enterprise partners and were financed with Chinese or Western loans or grants.

Oknha Keth's company also held a 60,000-hectare timber concession, which was being worked by a private company from Shanghai, and was involved in two massive real estate developments: a 2,700-hectare development, to consist largely of government offices, outside Phnom Penh, and a luxury residential development in Tak Khmao, the area across the Mekong from Phnom Penh where one of Hun Sen's residences is located. In these projects, companies from China were to supply the water and electrical systems but were not involved in financing. Finally, Oknha Keth was co-owner of a garment factory with ten thousand workers and had a number of large interior decoration contracts for large multinational and Cambodian companies.

In most of these projects, then, Oknha Keth's company invested little or nothing; instead, it simply inserted itself as a broker between two steps in the process, often both carried out by actors from China. Its ability to do so was probably due to Oknha Keth's perceived or real connections to powerful patrons in Cambodia ("We talk to Hun Sen directly and we might even be able to get the price down to three hundred dollars" per hectare, he says about a particular real estate project), but perhaps also aided by the fact that it created the semblance of local contracting. (In the case of the land concession, this was, in fact, required by Cambodian law.) Indeed, Oknha Keth's directorship of a high-profile national sports organization ensures him regular television publicity and control over a particular government monopoly. Yet the same position also comes with the obligation to find investors to finance prestigious government sports projects that need to be ready for the Southeast Asian Games in 2017. If he succeeds in finding foreign investors, the contracts may bring him large profits; if, on the other hand, he fails, he may have to spend his own capital and risk falling out of official favor: the revenue farmer's dilemma, a quandary emblematic of a broker straddling the worlds of state power and private capital.

Migration from China and the Political Orientation of Chinese Organizations in Cambodia

The November 1990 decree allowing ethnic minority associations was ushered in by Chea Sim's invitation to eleven Chinese-Cambodian businessmen, whom he encouraged to form an association that came to be known as the Association of Chinese in Cambodia (ACC, *Jianhua lishizonghui* 柬华理事总会; Tan 2006, 188). This organization was to function as an umbrella of the five dialect-based associations (*huiguan* 会馆) that had existed in the French colonial era and were being revived. Local Chinese associations that formed across the country in the first years of the 1990s were gradually absorbed into the ACC as local chapters. The ACC had had precursors under the French and during the period preceding Lon Nol's closure of Chinese organizations, but it also fit into the party-state's administrative model of "democratic centralism," in which the central government set up a single interlocutor for every constituency, from women to the disabled. Indeed, Chea Sim, himself an ethnic Chinese, was at the time in charge of what in Leninist parties is known as "united front work" (outreach to constituencies outside the party).

A creation of the party-state, the ACC has remained untouched by the trappings of multiparty democracy, similar to the way in which many of the *oknha*, despite their royal trappings, retain allegiance to the former Communist Party. While the ACC's leadership enjoys a very public closeness to the CPP—the walls of its premises are adorned with photos of its chairman, Oknha Duong Chhiv, together with Hun Sen, and an article in its daily newspaper quotes Information Minister Khieu Khanharith as saying that Hun Sen "is pleased to see a Chinese paper published by his own people" (*Jian Hua Daily* 2010)—Oknha Duong cautions Chinese Cambodians that they "shouldn't meddle with politics" (*bu gao zhengzhi* 不搞政治) or get involved in the disputes of Cambodian parties. "We ought to contribute to the prosperity of the economy and the stability of the society here; only then will the government approve of the role of the Chinese" (Xing 2008, 375). In the early years, ACC leaders, mindful of recent repressions, probably avoided direct relations with the Chinese government. But soon, in 1995, Li Ruihuan, a member of the Chinese Communist Party's Politburo, on a visit to Cambodia, addressed "ethnic Chinese representatives" and told them: "You are our ... married daughters. But you should enter local society and make an effort to develop the Cambodian economy. Cambodia is your second home country." Considering that being Cambodian-born is a prerequisite for membership in the ACC, and that only fifteen years

earlier the Chinese government had assisted the Khmer Rouge in the persecution of Chinese Cambodians, these remarks may seem inappropriate. The fact that Li was allowed to make them and that they were subsequently publicized in Cambodia's reborn Chinese-language press signaled, however, that both the Cambodian and the Chinese governments now wished to interpellate Cambodia's ethnic Chinese and expected them to assist in the development of friendly relations. In the words of an ACC publication, "while contributing to the rebuilding of Cambodia, [the association] became a bridge to foreign trade, enjoying the ever-strengthening trust of successive governments, and became a huge people's organization with a unified structure of leadership, the kind of which is rarely seen around the globe" (Yang 2003). Another article describes the ACC as "the highest leadership organ of overseas Chinese and ethnic Chinese in Cambodia" (Qiu 2003). Indeed, no other Southeast Asian electoral democracy has a quasi-official body that unites all ethnic Chinese organizations. Among the ACC's honorary advisers are two government ministers, as well as Lau Meng Khin and four other *oknha*; Oknha Duong reportedly said that he wished to invite yet more government officials in order to ensure government support (Xing 2008, 375).

Just as the ACC is regarded as the single representative of Chinese Cambodians, the Cambodian Chinese Chamber of Commerce, founded in 1996, is seen as speaking for the investors from mainland China, including state-owned as well as private companies. Lastly, the China Hong Kong Taiwan & Macau Expatriate & Business Association (*Jianpuzhai Zhongguo Gang-Ao-Tai-qiaoshang zonghui* 柬埔寨中国港澳台侨商总会) is treated as the representative of ethnic Chinese businessmen from Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Singapore. In addition, new migrants from mainland China, most of whom do not come from migrant areas that traditionally "served" Cambodia, have also established native-place-based associations. Three of these—all of them grouping migrants from Zhejiang Province—had no antecedent in pre-Lon Nol Cambodia because migrants from that province were absent. But the Cantonese association (*Jianpuzhai Guangdong Tongxianghui* 柬埔寨广东同乡会), founded in 2011, seemingly replicates one of the five dialect-based associations grouped into the ACC. Its chairman, who arrived in Cambodia in 1999 and runs a modest restaurant on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, explains that his association unites Chinese citizens. Another difference is that, to a large extent, the associations of new migrants around the world are essentially conduits of transnational political activities: they serve to maintain contacts with the official instances of the native county or province and with peer associations around the globe, and thus to accrue status and business contacts in China and in

the transnational arena for their leaders (see Nyíri 2001). Indeed, the first public activity of the new Cantonese association was to send a delegation to the Sixth World Congress of Cantonese Associations (*Shijie Guangdong tongxianghui lianyihui* 世界广东同乡会联谊大会) in Bangkok. In the process, these organizations affirm their Chineseness through a discourse and symbolism that centers on the People's Republic of China (PRC). For example, the Zhejiang association organized an essay competition to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the PRC and Cambodia.

But, although the distinction between the constituencies of “old” and “new” Chinese associations is frequently emphasized, in practice, the differences in the political fields within which they operate are narrowing. Increasingly, “old” associations also engage in transnational politics, maintain close relations with the Chinese embassy, and deploy references to a Chineseness infused with the state symbols of the contemporary PRC. Ahead of the Taiwanese presidential elections in 2008, “at the embassy’s suggestion,” the three large associations and numerous smaller ones joined in establishing the Cambodian branch of a global organization called Association for the Peaceful Reunification of China (*Zhongguo heping tongyi cujinhui* 中国和平统一促进会), established at the behest of the Chinese Communist Party’s United Front Department to garner support among Chinese overseas for China’s Taiwan policy (see Nyíri 2010, 54–56). Oknha Duong Chhiv is the chairman of the Cambodian branch. Booklets published by the ACC to celebrate its thirteenth anniversary in 2003 and the fifth anniversary of its newspaper, the *Jian Hua Daily* (*Jianhua ribao* 柬华日报; 2006), began with full-page congratulations from Chea Sim, Hun Sen, and the Chinese embassy, followed by those from officials of the central, provincial, and municipal governments in China, and contained photos of Oknha Duong with Hun Sen and Jiang Zemin, then chairman of the People’s Republic of China. There are photos from two “root-seeking voyages” to China, in Tiananmen Square, and from a National Day celebration in Canton. There are also chapters on the “ten great marshals” and “ten great generals” of the Red Army, familiar from the Chinese Communist Party’s official histories. In its regular editions, *Jian Hua Daily* devotes front-page articles to the PRC’s official celebrations. Although these references are not entirely new to Cambodia—in the 1960s, at a time of friendship with China, Mao Zedong Thought was taught at Chinese schools in Cambodia—it is nonetheless a stark departure from the usual politics of Chinese ethnicity in Southeast Asia, which tends to be formulated within the framework of local nation-state symbols.

In sum, the public politics of Chinese ethnicity in Cambodia is increasingly constructed not as a matter of celebrating ancestral origins or demanding rights in an officially multicultural society, as it is elsewhere in Southeast Asia, but rather within a transnational field that embraces the party-state-nation rhetoric of both the CPP and the PRC—which are, after all, similar. In this narrative, Cambodia’s ethnic Chinese are celebrated as conduits of economic and political ties between two friendly nations, to both of which they owe a certain allegiance. Indeed, much of *Jian Hua Daily*’s fifth-anniversary booklet is devoted to information for new migrants and investors from China, from the texts of the immigration and investment laws to tips on installing electricity. This suggests that, by 2006, the ACC and its media already saw themselves as brokers of information and investment between Cambodia and new capital from China. To this extent, it is perhaps more accurate to speak not of a “resinicization” (Duara 1997, 40) of Chinese Cambodians—a term sometimes used to refer both to the emergence of Chinese nationalism in Southeast Asia in the late nineteenth century and the revival of Chinese ethnicity today—but of their *retransnationalization*: a return to an identity politics in which, as at the turn of the twentieth century, being Chinese is defined in relation to a territorial Chinese state (cf. Karl 2002; Vasantkumar 2012, 438).

It goes without saying that, notwithstanding its claim to do so, the ACC and its component organizations do not represent everyone in Cambodia who is of Chinese descent. Younger, educated, urban Chinese Cambodians in particular are unlikely to be attracted by the organization’s formal banquets and the speeches of aging leaders. Nonetheless, the version of Chineseness articulated by the ACC is nearly hegemonic: there is no ethnically defined public sphere outside that which is dominated by it and the other organizations. There are no ethnic parties, and although the main opposition Sam Rainsy Party has a number of prominent politicians of Chinese descent, this is not part of its political persona, as the party’s hallmark is a combination of pro-Western and nativist discourse.⁶ There are no independent Chinese schools (all schools are run by ACC affiliates) or cultural organizations, and the only Cambodian-based Chinese-language media outlet that presents a somewhat different version of what being Chinese means is the local imprint of a Malaysian-based newspaper, *Sin Chiew Daily* (*Sin Chiew Jit Poh* 新洲日报). It is to a discussion of Chinese education and media that I now turn.

The Impact of New Migration on Language, Schools, and the Media

The revival of Chinese- and specifically Mandarin-language education among ethnic Chinese populations is a trend across those Southeast Asian countries where it has previously been restricted. Cambodia resembles Indonesia both in that the generation that was of school age between 1970 and 1990 grew up speaking the national language instead of some variety of Chinese, and in that the revival of Chinese education in the twenty-first century resulted in the spread of Mandarin among young people at the expense of Teochiu and other “dialects” spoken by their grandparents. But it appears that in Cambodia—where incomes are far lower and regular employment is hard to come by—the percentage of ethnic Chinese children enrolled in Chinese schools is far higher than in Indonesia. This is probably because Chinese schools are seen as providing a better education than Khmer-language schools but are far cheaper than English-language ones,⁷ and because knowledge of Mandarin is seen as an advantage in the job market. Hun Sen himself reportedly said: “If you know Chinese you’ll make a living easily” (Yang 2003).

For the parents of today’s young Chinese Cambodians, the language of the home was Teochiu and the outside language was Khmer. For the younger generation, the language of the home is Khmer and the aspirational outside languages are Chinese and English. English-language education, however, is accessible only to high-income families in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap; for others, the Chinese school becomes the preferred source of English education as well. In Kampot, for example, the Guangyu Public Chinese School (*Gongli Guangyu huawen xuexiao* 公立光宇华文学校) offers free kindergarten, Chinese-Khmer bilingual education, and English from the fourth grade. Kurlantzick (2007, 69–70) writes that it is because Chinese schools in Cambodia receive funding from China that they can, in effect, charge less than state schools where teachers often expect private payments. According to him, “a kind of feeder system has been created” where students “who do well in China-backed primary schools often can obtain assistance from China to continue studies in the People’s Republic, in either middle school, high school, or university.” In fact, both funding (in the form of teaching materials and visiting teachers’ salaries) and scholarships from China are very limited, but it is perhaps more important that they are a highly desirable, if exceptional, prospect to aspire to.

School curricula are supervised by the ACC and its member organizations, and schools receive high-profile donations from *oknhas* close to the CPP. The Guangyu School, for example, was rebuilt in 2002 with funds from Lau Meng Khin. In school narratives

surrounding such events, students are exposed to a discourse of Chineseness that posits the PRC as their ancestral homeland, in whose friendship with Cambodia they, the students, are to play a privileged role: a proposition that translates into the economic reality of jobs linked to investments from China upon graduation. In 1995, the ACC secured an agreement with the China Overseas Exchange Association (*Zhongguo haiwai jiaoliu xiehui* 中国海外交流协会). This organization, affiliated with the Chinese government's Overseas Chinese Affairs Bureau (the Qiaoban 侨办), helped develop the schools' curricula and supplies them with some textbooks, both for Chinese-language study and for other subjects, such as mathematics. According to Xing Heping (2008, 370), this was intended to unify the curricula of Chinese schools, to promote the simplified characters used in mainland China (but already introduced to Cambodia in the 1960s), and to "create conditions for gradually bringing Chinese education in Cambodia onto the same track (*jiegui* 接轨) as mainland China's." Chinese government scholarships for teachers to participate in trainings or full courses of study at Chinese universities carry prestige, and those teachers who return from such trainings are regarded as more qualified. (The teachers at Cambodia's Chinese schools rarely, if ever, have tertiary qualifications.) In addition to the teachers seconded by the Qiaoban as a form of supporting Chinese-language education overseas, the schools have been employing as teachers an increasing number of migrants from China, most of whom are university graduates but lack any qualifications in teaching. A former engineer from northeastern China, who came to Cambodia in 2000 and was immediately hired by the Chongzheng School of the Hakka *huiguan*, said in 2008 that two-thirds of the teachers at that school were from China, which he attributed to what he said were the higher achievements of their students than those from Duan Hoa, which belongs to the Teochiu *huiguan*. His salary was about three hundred dollars a month, about twice that of Cambodian teachers. At Duan Hoa itself, according to local teachers, between thirty and forty out of the two hundred teachers were from China. In addition to these, the school was expecting three Qiaoban-sponsored teachers from Guangxi Province.

The schools use other textbooks in addition to those from the Qiaoban, including those developed by China's Chinese Language Office (the Hanban 汉办) for teaching Chinese as a foreign language, as well as some published in Malaysia. In any case, both the curricular and extracurricular activities of the schools accelerate the shift of the linguistic medium of Chineseness from the diverse community languages associated with particular

territorial origins to the official language of the Chinese state. During my visits to the Teochiu *huiguan*'s Duan Hoa School in Phnom Penh in 2008, the television in the reception room, where students were enrolling, was tuned to China Central Television's Chinese-language satellite news channel, with several teachers watching. One of the teachers was expecting a letter of acceptance for a scholarship at a university in Guangxi, which he referred to, in Mandarin, as "the letter from the [home] country (*guonei* 国内)": a choice of words reflecting a profound influence of mainland Chinese usage.

The evolution of Cambodia's Chinese-language newspapers mirrors that of Chinese schools. Of the four newspapers operating in Cambodia in 2011, *Commercial News* (*Huashang ribao* 华商日报), the oldest and largest (though only claiming a circulation of six thousand), was founded in 1993 and is owned by Oknha Pung Kheav Se, the owner of Canadia Bank and a real estate magnate who has developed a reputation for his support for Chinese schools and charitable activities among Chinese Cambodians since he returned from Canada in the early 1990s. *Jian Hua Daily* belongs to the ACC and is financed by Oknha Duong Chhiv; *Sin Chiew Jit Poh* is Malaysian-owned; and *Phnom Penh Evening News* (*Jinbian wanbao* 金边晚报)⁸ is published by the Cambodian Chinese Chamber of Commerce and was initially cofinanced by the chamber and a state-owned enterprise from Guangxi that manufactures agricultural machinery and set up a sales office in Cambodia. (The chamber hoped to attract other mainland Chinese investors to join the financing in return for an advertising and networking platform.)

The *Phnom Penh Evening News*, launched in 2010 with a target market of businesses and migrants from China, is the youngest of the four papers. A journalist from a government paper in Liuzhou, the city in Guangxi where the machinery manufacturer is based, was invited to be editor in chief, but he returned to China after less than a year. He was followed by his former deputy, who, in addition to a third young journalist, had also arrived from Guangxi. The rest of the staff are locally recruited Sino-Khmers, whom the paper sometimes sends to China for trainings. In addition, journalists from China sometimes come for short-term stays. Next to stories about Chinese investments and aid projects and local stories written by the staff, the paper carries news and entertainment items picked up from mainland Chinese news agencies and Internet portals such as Xinhuanet, people.com.cn, and Sina.com.cn. In 2011, the paper ran a series about the history of the Chinese Communist Party, no doubt timed for its ninetieth anniversary celebrations.

While such a profile—a high share of content from the Chinese Internet, reluctance to go beyond topics and opinions accepted by mainland China’s censors, and reliance on migrant entrepreneurs for advertising revenue—is typical for media run by new Chinese migrants anywhere (see Nyíri 2007, 124–127; Nyíri 2010, 56–58), Cambodia’s two “local” Chinese newspapers are also becoming increasingly similar. This is due to a growing number of mainland Chinese journalists and editors, trainings in China offered to local journalists, and a rising share of content from mainland Chinese sources that are accelerating a shift away from a distinctive local Chinese usage toward that of the People’s Republic. In 2000, the older of the two local papers, *Commercial News*, hired a migrant from China as its editor in chief. “Severe shortage of human resources” locally is the reason his Cambodian-Chinese deputy gives for this decision. Yet in fact, this editor, Liu, is not a professional newspaperman; although he published a novel in his youth, he first came to Cambodia in 1998 to import clothing. His appointment seems to be driven by a general preference for individuals with tertiary education from China to locals, who generally have only secondary education, for jobs that require cultural skills, creativity, or technical competence. These individuals are also seen as representing an “authentic” Chinese culture with which locally born Chinese are increasingly out of touch and need to be reacquainted.

Liu acknowledges that the media coverage of China has changed the way second- and third-generation Chinese Cambodians see the country: “If we didn’t present it in this [positive] way, they might never go back [to China], they might think it is still a poor place.” As much as half of the paper is devoted to coverage of China, with news items taken exclusively from Xinhua, the official Chinese news agency, whose political vocabulary would have been unfamiliar to a Cambodian readership a few years earlier. In addition, some articles are clearly contributed by writers trained in the mainland. For example, a long feature from an October 2007 issue that Liu gave me in manuscript, which praised the Chinese engineers and workers who were constructing Highway 7 from Kratie to the Lao border, was written as if for readers in China rather than Cambodia, stating, for example, that “Cambodia lies in the tropics.” Three or four years ago, the paper switched to simplified characters, partly to cater to an increasing share of recent migrants, partly for the students who learn simplified characters at school, and partly because the typesetting system they use is from mainland China.

The other “local” Chinese newspaper, the ACC’s *Jian Hua Daily*, also has recent migrants from China on its staff. One of them, a junior editor, came to Cambodia right after

graduating from university because he was unable to find a job in China and had an aunt living in Phnom Penh. As the official newspaper of an organization that is in some ways part of the Cambodian party-state, *Jian Hua* sees its editorial policy as the following: to “strengthen positive propaganda, dampen the effect of negative news” and “regard questions that are sensitive or whose nature has not yet been determined (*wei dingxing de* 未定性的)... follow the Royal Government’s position and attitude ... correctly guide discourse ... play the role of a bridge in foreign trade” (*Jian Hua Daily* 2006, 234). At the same time, the young mainland Chinese editor told me that the paper would not publish any material that was “against China’s interests,” and that regular dinners with officials from the Chinese embassy provided informal guidance on what these interests were to aid in covering particular news stories.

The view that new migrants should, because of their assumed patriotism toward China and their familiarity with China’s contemporary realities, be instruments of such “resinicization” has been held by the Qiaoban for some time, and, in a 1996 policy document, it called on “strengthening guidance” for publishers of Chinese newspapers overseas (Nyíri 2010, 56). At least in Cambodia, ethnic Chinese appear to have naturalized the view that recruits from China, as both more professional and more authentic, are better able to lead Chinese cultural industries: in the view of a young Cambodian-Chinese teacher at Duan Hoa School, Chinese Cambodians “may be okay as journalists, but they don’t have the level of language needed for an editor in chief.” More generally, when I asked Chinese Cambodians to talk about new migrants, I often heard them describe them as “people who are skilled in something, like cosmetics, or accounting, or management.” This view reflects a monumental shift from Edwards’ observation in the early 1990s, when Chinese Cambodians did not see new migrants as “real Chinese” and were concerned with the newcomers’ negative impact on their own image (Edwards 2002). It also, incidentally, facilitates a recent development in which Chinese media overseas have been targeted by the Chinese government as practice terrain for its ambitions to build some state-owned Chinese media into influential global brands through exports of media content, joint ventures, and acquisitions (State Administration of Press and Publications 2012). In 2010, China News Agency founded a World Chinese-Language Media Cooperative Alliance with the goal to “increase the cohesiveness and impact” of Chinese-language media (MqVU 2011).

The picture that emerges from the evolution of Chinese education and media in Cambodia is not simply one of political realignment based at least partly on the economic

interests of major sponsors and of the Cambodian party-state itself. More significant is the trend that local options of articulating a Chinese identity—focused on dialect-group identities, ties to ancestral homelands, and worship of particular gods—are once again, as in the early twentieth century (Skinner 1957; Wang Gunwu 1981), increasingly marginalized or pushed back into the private sphere in favor of a standard way of public speaking and feeling that is imported from China. And even the cults of gods may be “retransnationalized” in ways that create direct links to religious centers in China instead of the old ones to the ancestral homeland. One of Oknha Keth’s current projects is fundraising, among Chinese worldwide, for a Guanyin temple in Jiangsu Province, which houses a relic of the bodhisattva Guanyin.

Toward New Ways of Being Chinese in Cambodia

The political economy of Sino-Cambodian relations in the past decade and a half has set in motion flows of capital, information, and people that caused a shift in the public framing and, at least to some extent, the private meaning of being Chinese in Cambodia. Closely related to the way that the Cambodian government and official media are embracing China as a friendly nation that is helping Cambodia to develop, local ways of being Chinese are being questioned and devalued. Chineseness as defined by the official and mass-media discourses of mainland China is increasingly framed as the norm. A narrow elite of Cambodian-Chinese organizational leaders and compradore *oknha* bourgeoisie has engaged in overt political transnationalism. Oknha Keth, who holds both Cambodian and Hong Kong Chinese citizenship, is a prime example. He frequently travels to China using a Cambodian diplomatic passport with government delegations. But he is also an executive member (*lishi* 理事) of the quasi-official Association for the Peaceful Reunification of China, the secretary-general of its Cambodian branch—whose president is Oknha Duong Chhiv—and a returning delegate to its global conventions, as well as a board member of the Guangdong Overseas Exchange Association, affiliated with the provincial Qiaoban. His office is adorned with photos taken with King Sihanouk in Beijing and with former Chinese leaders Jiang Zemin, Zhu Rongji, and Li Peng in Phnom Penh. In this high-profile transnational political activity, Oknha Keth appears to represent both sides alternately or at once.

For a much wider segment of Chinese Cambodians and Sino-Khmers, Chinese ethnicity has become a resource that can help garner economic advantages, but it is also—once again—a sometimes involuntary ascription. At a function organized by the Garment Manufacturers Association to celebrate the opening of the Beijing Olympics in 2008, I

overheard the French-educated Sino-Khmer wife of one of the association leaders quip, in French, “I used to be French, but now I am Chinese.” In a very different setting, I witnessed a conversation between a waitress at a Kampot bar and her customers, Chinese technicians working on a dam construction. The waitress described herself as Khmer and said she only started picking up Chinese from the dam workers at the bar, but her customers corrected her, insisting she was a “fourth-generation overseas Chinese.”

New Chinese migrants themselves—their lifestyles, worldviews, and ways of relating to Cambodia and China—are also part of the shifting meaning of being Chinese in Cambodia today. In view of the recent history of this new migration, it is difficult—and beyond the scope of this paper—to speculate about the ways in which they might articulate their position in Cambodian society. For now, most new migrants see themselves as being in Cambodia temporarily and, as in other poor countries, are reluctant to raise their children there. So far, their social networks remain distinct from those of Chinese Cambodians. Nonetheless, there are numerous entanglements between the two groups that go beyond economic exchange or cooperation, as exemplified by Mr. Zhang’s case.

Mr. Zhang is Oknha Keth’s assistant and the secretary-general of a Cambodian national sports organization. A former county-level official in Hebei Province, he came to Cambodia in 2000 and at first taught at the Duan Hoa School. Since then, he has worked as an accountant for Chinese companies, most recently at an agency owned by Malaysian and Singaporean partners that also offers investment brokerage and is trying to attract more clients from China. Meanwhile, he has engaged in a variety of businesses on the side. He was a partner in a garment factory, started up a drinking-water plant, set up fruit stands in front of cinemas, and made and sold dumplings inside a popular bar. The profit from these ventures enabled him to send his son to study in Japan. Oknha Keth met Mr. Zhang at a function of the Hong Kong Business Association and offered him a job at one of the sports organizations he heads in the hope of strengthening the Cambodian team. (Although Mr. Zhang’s background in sports was merely that of an amateur, it was clearly seen as strong by Cambodian standards.) At the Asia Games in Canton in 2010, Mr. Zhang led the Cambodian delegation as coach for the sport seen as having the best chance of getting a medal at the games. While Oknha Keth himself practices flexible citizenship (Ong 1999) to engage in transnational political and business deals, his employee Mr. Zhang, a Chinese citizen, leads the Cambodian team at the most important regional sports event.

The pressures of a standardized framework of Chinese ethnicity, of reethnicization and retransnationalization, do not extend evenly. Those whose aspirations for a better life benefit from Chineseness as a resource will be subjected to it more strongly than others. As elsewhere in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Rim (cf. Szanton Blanc 1997; Ong 2005), Chineseness in Cambodia has long been linked to business as a form of strategic ethnicity (Willmott 1967), on which this is merely the latest twist. Young Sino-Khmers who, for example, work in the Western-funded NGO sphere, and for whom Chineseness is thus a private issue and not a resource, are less likely to be susceptible to the new discourse of what makes a Chinese person. For middling businessmen such as Mr. Wu, yearly trips to China may contribute to a different attitude to the country but not to a shift in the way they imbue their ethnic belonging with meaning. Nonetheless, as a new generation of Chinese Cambodians grows up, the new way of being Chinese will be more natural and harder for them to opt out of—even as young tourists from China begin to come to Cambodia to search for old Chinese ways of life, whose attraction lies precisely in being untouched by the changes wrought by Communist rule.

To what extent is the Cambodian experience of “retransnationalization” indicative of trends in Southeast Asia? Historically and demographically, Cambodia’s ethnic Chinese are closest to those of Thailand, with which Cambodia shares a Theravada Buddhism often said to have facilitated assimilation, and Vietnam, with which it shared French colonial and then state socialist politics of ethnicity. Scholarship on the revival of Chinese ethnicity in Vietnam, buoyed by an opening to international business but fraught with political suspicion and strictly regulated, is sparse. In Thailand, where hybrid forms of Chinese identity have been as prevalent as in Cambodia but where the state has been less interested in policing ethnic boundaries, the politics of Chinese ethnicity have recently been more entangled with the domestic struggle between “red shirts” and “orange shirts” than with relations to China. In other words, the complex and diverse picture that Chinese ethnicity presents in Southeast Asia is unlikely to disappear. The combination of Cambodia’s poverty, its authoritarian politics and clientelist economy, its political closeness to China, and the decimation of its traditional Chinese community institutions may be uniquely favorable to “retransnationalization.” Overall, however, the increased prestige of Chinese ethnicity across the region, noted already in 1997 by Szanton Blanc and linked both to the rise of “pop culture China” in the media (Chua 2001) and to the growing clout of the Chinese state, comes with

the spread of what might be called metropolitan and cosmopolitan cultural politics of Chineseness that challenge its local forms.

Today's PRC is, of course, not the first Chinese state that wishes to bring ethnic Chinese overseas under the symbolic umbrella of a deterritorialized and racialized Chinese nation. The late Qing's and the Chinese Republic's successful efforts at such "sojourn work" (Vasantkumar 2012), also focused on schools and newspapers, have been well documented (Wang Gunwu 1981; Duara 1997; Karl 2002). Their latest round goes back to the early 1990s, when the government of the PRC upgraded the Chinese overseas from friendly sources of investment—as it saw them in the 1980s—to a resource for cultural legitimation within a discourse of state nationalism (see Barabantseva 2011). What the latest mutations in the politics of Chineseness in today's Cambodia attest to, however, is the centrality of economic incentives and the mediatized "soft power" of a popularized Chinese culture, along with the relative marginality of state policies, in effecting such a transformation. If the first "transnationalization" of ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia was the result of an "influx of nationalist activists and ideology" (Duara 1997, 42), arising from the ferment of a decaying empire, then their current retransnationalization is primarily the work of investors, managers, and professionals who have unselfconsciously internalized the late socialist discourse of the Chinese nation.

Pál Nyíri is professor of Global History from an Anthropological Perspective at Vrije Universiteit. He thanks the anonymous Cross-Currents reviewers for comments that helped sharpen the argument of this paper.

Notes

1. The situation in Africa is similar. See, for example, Chen (2009).
2. While the former term indicates a Chinese ethnic identity, the latter refers to an awareness of Chinese ancestry that may translate into varying degrees of ethnic identification. I use these terms interchangeably.
3. The term "neopatrimonialism," introduced by Eisenstadt (1973), refers to societies in which patronage relationships linking members of the ruling elite to the population exist in parallel with formal bureaucratic state structures.
4. This and other names are pseudonyms.
5. Details of these organizations are omitted to ensure anonymity.
6. Nonetheless, these politicians sometimes play up their ancestry and praise China's historic help to Cambodia when speaking to Chinese media (e.g., Chen 2010).
7. The most prestigious Chinese school in Phnom Penh, Duan Hoa, ranged from forty to one hundred dollars per term in 2008.
8. See <http://www.jinbianwanbao.com>.

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