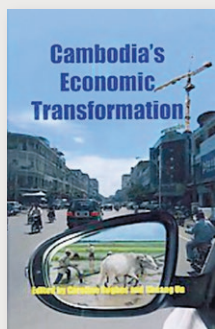


New markets

In their introduction to this penetrating and comprehensive account of changes occurring within Cambodian economy and society, editors Caroline Hughes and Kheang Un outline a process of change: from a situation in which markets were an occasional although useful part of everyday life to a situation in which people consider markets and their ability to engage with them successfully to be the central part of their lives. This change represents the spread of an advanced form of capitalism across a region in which the majority of people had been living pre-capitalist lives and, in true Schumpeterian fashion, means the spread of creative destruction across the land with all the chaos and opportunism that represents.

John Walsh



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Cambodia's Economic Transformation
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THESE CHANGES AFFECT all aspects of society, ranging from the relations of production to the relations between people and the representatives of the state and back down to the familial level. In a provocative and amusing concluding chapter, Erik W. Davis brings an anthropological view to the gift-giving practices of the annual Pchum Ben hungry ghost festival: when city-dwellers, including factory workers, return to rural villages to commemorate the feast, they are greeted with calls of 'Preta' – a term referring to those tormented souls who must be propitiated with gifts but whose altered physiology provides them with pin-hole mouths wholly unable to distinguish between good and bad sustenance. Davis suggests that this is a satirical reversal of the current situation – it is the city-dwellers after all who are bringing back money and consumer goods for their family members – which reflects the deeper truth that throughout history people have emerged from the cities and temples to draw upon the blood of the peasant farmers. If there is a perhaps simplistic conclusion to be drawn from the book as a whole, it is that, notwithstanding all the thoroughgoing changes

brought about by the Great Transformation, power-wielding elites have been able to use them to re-create and re-embed in society the means of extracting resources for their own ends.

Doing business

The principal themes of most chapters in the book concern the ways in which local or national actors adapt themselves to changes in external conditions. Sophal Ear, for example, in a chapter entitled 'Growth in the Rice and Garment Sectors', argues that the nature of the competitive environment depends on the extent to which important local and well-connected elites (who may be considered members of the high-status Oknha class) are already active in the sectors concerned or else are prepared to accept rents from inward-investing corporations and individuals, as joint venture partners. In an Oknha-dominated sector, pretty much the best that can be hoped for is to develop a profitable market position before it must be sold to a local Oknha or representative of such a person. In 'The Privatization of Cambodia's Rubber Industry', Margaret Slocomb continues with her fascinating and important research into the history of that industry since colonial times, and her conclusions seem almost like a melancholic farewell to the trees; recent research has suggested that, despite the large concessions granted to investors in rubber, Cambodian authorities do not consider the sector to offer much potential for the future.

Several subsequent papers address the issue of the importance of Prime Minister Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party (CPP) to the workings of just about every institution in the country. Of particular interest in this regard is David Craig and Pak Kimchoeun's paper 'Party Financing of Local Investment

Projects: Elite and Mass Patronage', which may be mobilized not just to deliver outputs and win elections, but also "possibly promote wider systemic change". This is a more nuanced approach to the often dismissive approach to client-patron relationships and helps to explain how the system is able to reinvent itself with respect to these conditions. That is because the system fundamentally relies upon personal relationships and the trust than can be generated by these and, as a result, leveraged for use in other areas. This paper supplements Michael Sullivan's earlier contribution on 'China's Aid to Cambodia', which also featured the prominent role of CPP and allied institutions and considered the use of existing and emergent networks in bringing about economic change without necessarily leading to progress in social conditions.

Labour migration

Other papers focus more particularly on negative effects of both economic change and attempts to bring about changes in Khmer society. Annuska Derks endeavours to provide a balanced view of the export of Cambodian workers, principally to the industrial sectors in Thailand in which high (although variable) demand for labour continues, and which are considered unattractive at the salaries offered. She describes particularly the fishing and fish processing industry in and around Rayong on the Thai Eastern Seaboard where there are, indeed, large numbers Khmer workers. In fact, these workers are able to benefit to some extent from solidarity with their neighbours, who are mostly people in the same condition; Khmer migrant workers in other parts of Thailand face the additional problem that they are often alone in a community and, during the regular outbursts of noisy Thai nationalism that have taken place in recent years, are reluctant to make their identity known to anyone around them. In any case, labour exporting is subject to the usual range of parasitical intermediaries – some would see them as facilitators – who have so often grown from their experience as migrant workers themselves. These are systems from which it is increasingly difficult to break out and end the strengthening spiral of consumption.

While all the papers are appropriately grounded historically, it is notable how little attention, relatively speaking, is given to the Khmer Rouge (or Democratic Kampuchea) period and the warfare and misery of the still recent past. Even though many young people exhibit little appetite for determining exactly what happened and most people involved tend to prefer to maintain silence over their roles, those events at the very least marked a distinct change in ownership and governance systems that affected all forms of economic relations and activities. Even so, this is a well-planned and constructed book that will be of considerable use to anyone interested in contemporary Cambodia and the transformative nature and extent of social and economic change in that country.

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