



Fig. 1: Matthew Jagel at the rooftop Oscars party. (Photo courtesy of Shelby Elizabeth Doyle, 2012)

Researching the Mystery of Son Ngoc Thanh

Matthew Jagel

As I was wrapping up my Masters research on Filipino involvement in the war in Vietnam, I began to look toward research projects for a potential PhD. I knew that I wanted to continue examinations of under-studied aspects of the war in Vietnam, and at that time Northern Illinois University was a premier institution for all-things Cambodia. My dissertation advisor, Kenton Clymer, had previously written a two-volume series on the history of US relations with Cambodia, which certainly was an influence. In reading his work and the work of others like David Chandler or Ben Kiernan, a name that routinely popped up in semi-mysterious fashion was Son Ngoc Thanh.

Though many different factions of resistance to France sprouted up throughout the country, the unquestioned leader of Khmer resistance to France at the dawn of the Second World War was Son Ngoc Thanh. From the perspective of the United States, he was a communist sympathizer and a troublemaker. From the perspective of some Cambodians, he was their first independent ruler. The period of 1945-1975 saw dramatic changes both inside of Cambodia and in United States responses to political developments. These transformations can be directly connected to Son Ngoc Thanh's various political incarnations, where he morphed from agitator to leader to dissident. Son Ngoc Thanh went from being Cambodia's first prime minister to political outcast. The young king, Norodom Sihanouk, transformed himself from a royal figurehead to a political authoritarian. The United States gradually moved from an advisory and support role for France, as the last remnants of its colonial empire disintegrated, to the main geopolitical player in Southeast Asia in an effort to thwart the spread of communism. Son Ngoc Thanh turned from American adversary to ally. Further study seemed a worthwhile project to undertake, and it became the most intellectually challenging, frustrating, yet fulfilling endeavor of my academic career.

Although my research was not primarily on the Khmer Republic, it certainly factored in significantly, as its formation was in some ways the culmination of Son Ngoc Thanh's 30-plus-year political odyssey, which I document in my book, *Khmer Nationalist: Son Ngoc Thanh, the CIA, and the Transformation of Cambodia*.¹ The historians mentioned above, and others, had already done yeoman's work contextualizing the Khmer Republic in

modern Cambodian history, and studies such as Justin Corfield's *Khmers Stand Up! A History of the Cambodian Government 1970-1975* provided a focused analysis of the short-lived government.

Domestic research in the United States was supported with grants from the Northern Illinois University History Department. Scouring various presidential libraries yielded some fascinating finds, as did an extended stay at National Archives II in College Park, Maryland. Because many Khmer Republic sources no longer exist, seeking other avenues was essential. That could mean combing the archives of a journalist who was in Cambodia during the era, like those of T.D. Allman located at Harvard. It could mean revisiting the papers of an academic and research professional such as George McT. Kahin

at Cornell. Kahin conducted several interviews with key players in the Khmer Republic government, including Son Ngoc Thanh. David Chandler personally shared many resources from The David Chandler Collection at Monash University – he graciously provided commentary on draft chapters of my dissertation as well – which proved invaluable for understanding not only the Khmer Republic era, but also for tracing the historical arc of Son Ngoc Thanh's life and career.

Obviously, an extended trip to Cambodia was essential to complete the project. A Fulbright Fellowship and a Dissertation Completion Fellowship from the Center for Khmer Studies made such an undertaking possible, and great thanks to them. I knew going in that material on the Khmer Republic was going to be hard to come by, and that

the majority of my time would be spent in the National Archives of Cambodia. Hot and humid among dusty relics of the past, this was a home away from home (away from home) for a great deal of my time in Phnom Penh. The familiar site during rainy season of librarians scrambling to close the shutters to prevent complete saturation of the slowly decaying archival papers was always a site to behold. As expected, I did not find a great deal of material relating to the Khmer Republic here, although I did examine plenty of sources from the French colonial period and Sihanouk era which were of use in my overall research.

I had better luck at the Center for Khmer Studies (CKS) in Siem Reap, finding some useful materials, including Khmer Republic-era newspapers and photographs, along with an extensive library. The Documentation Center of Cambodia in Phnom Penh yielded a few interesting finds as well, although the vast majority of materials there relate to the Khmer Rouge. One of the most difficult aspects of researching Son Ngoc Thanh was the lack of "human touch," if you will, in the extensive tranche of materials I consulted. It was not until – after some digging – I made contact with some of his family members that I was able to provide more personal insight into the project. His grandson was gracious with his time and acted as an intermediary of sorts with other family members to get all my questions answered. While much remains murky about Son Ngoc Thanh, the family's contributions did help me put more of a human face on the man I had been reading about for over a decade.

One always faces unexpected obstacles in the research process, especially one of such a long duration as I spent in Cambodia. Unexpectedly realizing that my wife, who had joined me, was pregnant resulted in her returning to the United States. I took a break in my research to return for the birth of my son, making it back with about 36 hours to spare. I returned to Phnom Penh alone but with a fuller heart. My son would be ten months old when I finally returned for good.

Countless odd memories are stored, from wandering around Ta Mok's house with ex-Khmer Rouge in Anlong Veng to a surprise invite to a rooftop Oscars party [Fig. 1], complete with red carpet and camera-flashing paparazzi (and no, I do not remember how or why I was invited). There was the random party at the head of embassy security's house, complete with local Khmer fuzz-rock band, or seeing Dengue Fever at the Foreign Correspondent's Club (or FCC, which is sadly no more) and so many other fantastic experiences that augmented my time in Cambodia [Fig. 2].

Overall, it was a long, strange trip. From the outset, I was pretty sure there was a story to tell about Son Ngoc Thanh, I just did not know what that story would be. I had to follow the source material where it took me, and while my project is complete, his story certainly is not. Uncovering more specifics about his work with US intelligence sources, for example, certainly deserves further examination, and his many years in exile are full of gaps in the historical record. The Khmer Republic-era is similarly spotty, but as historians we do our best to synthesize source material and historically contextualize it, and oftentimes the sources lead us to unexpected places. My research experience in Cambodia was similar, as I had goals, but found myself in the unexpected throughout.

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Notes

- 1 Matthew Jagel, *Khmer Nationalist: Son Ngoc Thanh, the CIA, and the Transformation of Cambodia* (Cornell University Press – NIU Southeast Asian Series, 2023).

Fig. 2: Matthew Jagel (left) with cousin Tyler Jagel (right), seated on a bamboo train, Battambang. (Photo courtesy of the author, 2012)

