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Introduction

Lorraine Paterson

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MEDIATING CHINESENESS IN CAMBODIA

Introduction

LORRAINE PATERSON

Cornell University

In recognition of his cornerstone work on Chinese communities in Cambodia, we dedicate this special issue of Cross-Currents to William E. Willmott.

— Lorraine Paterson and Penny Edwards, Ithaca and Berkeley, November 2012

In 1981, social anthropologist William Willmott declared, “Today, no-one identifies themselves as Chinese in Kampuchea [Cambodia]” (1981:45). He certainly had the authority to publish such a statement. Having conducted sustained fieldwork on Chinese community formation in Cambodia from 1962 to 1963, Willmott offered an unprecedented examination of social structures, political organization, and patterns of identification among urban Chinese in his monographs, *The Chinese in Cambodia* (1967) and *The Political Structure of the Chinese Community in Cambodia* (1970). However, subsequent to his research, Chinese communities suffered terribly during the repression of the Lon Nol government between 1970 and 1975 and the atrocities of the Democratic Kampuchea regime. Willmott thus declared Chinese communities—and a willingness to identify as Chinese—destroyed. This understandably pessimistic vision turned out to be unfounded; the next extensive research done on Chinese in Cambodia by Penny Edwards and Chan Sambath in 1995 showed Chinese communities rebuilding. However, the descriptions of these communities showed a complexity of identity formation—from recent immigrants, “the raw Chinese,” to the five “traditional” Chinese dialect groups—that differed markedly from the indexes of identity applied by Willmott in his initial analysis. Academic ideas of how Chineseness should be configured had shifted and complicated; ascribing identity had become increasingly problematic.

For Willmott, in his groundbreaking research in the early 1960s, there had been no shifting categories and no interrogation of conflicting concepts of Chineseness. As he succinctly states in his reflections in this special issue, “For most of us [doing research on overseas Chinese], Chinese identity was simply a methodological issue.” In other words, designation of ethnic identity was simply a matter of getting the process right. In Willmott’s case, he defined as Chinese “all those who participated in the Chinese associations available to them.” He juxtaposed this designation of identity with that of the Cambodian census of 1961, which registered anyone who spoke Chinese language or possessed Chinese nationality as ethnic Chinese. This census was recorded on punch cards that Willmott lugged back from Cambodia in his suitcase to feed into a large mechanical sorter at the London School of Economics. In this issue, Willmott shares the wonderful memory of sorting through boxes of these cards as “how demographic research was done then.”

This special issue spans an era from when scholars considered Chineseness a merely methodological proposition and punch cards recorded definitive ethnicity to a contemporary context in which the nuances of Chinese identity formation are contested, interrogated, and constantly reconfigured. As Penny Edwards remarks in her piece, “Endnote—Sojourns Across Sources: Unbraiding Sino-Cambodian Histories,” these changes in research reflect both shifts in sociopolitical environments affecting expressions of Chineseness and attendant changes in research access, as much as new directions in a field of study.

In the past decade, new studies have emerged that both build on and challenge Willmott’s pioneering work of the 1960s at a time when configurations of Chinese-Cambodianness and the Sino-Cambodian relationship itself have come under fresh scrutiny and renewed interest. On the fiftieth anniversary of Willmott’s return from fieldwork, it seemed appropriate to revisit his fieldwork in the context of two linked panels at the annual meeting of the Association of Asian Studies (AAS) in Toronto in March 2012. With the assistance of Penny Edwards and Erik Davis, under the auspices of the Thailand, Laos, Cambodia Studies Group (TLC), William Willmott was able to attend the panels and reflect on his research in Cambodia from the vantage point of decades later and to engage with younger scholars in the field and comment on their work.

Willmott’s seminal scholarship acts as the framework to the articles in

this special issue, emerging as they do from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, including history, political science, anthropology, and sociology. This range of disciplines allows for a multiplicity of scholarly approaches that reflects the expansion of interest in this area from the period of Willmott's pioneering study, underscoring the breadth and complexity of the China-Cambodia relationship and encompassing notions of ethnic identity, political engagement, rapid economic development, and strategic mediation of concepts of Chineseness within Sino-Khmer communities. The articles draw on a variety of sources: interviews in both China and Cambodia as well as ethnographic, historical, and archival research. Following Willmott's lead, we invited two contributors to this issue to offer personal reflections from their vantage points as participant-observer: Julio A. Jeldres (in his capacity as official biographer to Norodom Sihanouk) and Sophie Richardson (whose essay recounts her time doing doctoral research in China on Sino-Cambodian relations).

A central theme or thread linking these papers relates to the ways states, communities, and individuals work to mediate notions of Chineseness. The contributors explore the benefits—or the risks—attached to the claim of being Chinese in Cambodia and how cultural markers have shifted over the last fifty years. In other words, how is the idea of being Chinese constructed, contested, and otherwise made anew? In addition to exploring configurations of identity, this special issue also examines more broadly the Sino-Cambodian relationship. In a rapidly changing Cambodian societal context, several of the articles interrogate the ways in which this relationship has been framed. Sino-Cambodian relations hold both contemporary importance and historical resonance, extending far beyond the bilateral relationship itself and illustrating China's engagement with the developing world more broadly. Indeed, in reflecting on the relation of these ideas to wider regional and global contexts, it could be argued that Cambodia provides a unique field site and case study for the exploration of new cultural identities, given its strategic location, rapid regime change, revolution that emptied urban areas, and subsequent demographic and sociopolitical flux and adaptation. These articles explore the Cambodian context, but many of the contemporary—and indeed historical—processes described are applicable to other contexts.

In the opening article of this special issue, William Willmott reflects

on his time as a researcher in Cambodia. Similar to many of his generation, Willmott chose to work on the overseas Chinese because mainland China was closed to researchers. In the process of selecting a research site, bureaucratic obstacles steered him (eventually) to Phnom Penh, which led to his groundbreaking research on the Chinese communities there. Willmott's initial applications for research permission in the New Territories in Hong Kong and Malaya were both refused. Such Cold War politics often dictated the research sites of academics in the 1960s, but ironically this turn of events benefited the generations of scholars who have used Willmott's work as the formative scholarship on the field of the Chinese in Cambodia.

Given China's contemporary economic rise in the region and the role of Chinese advisers dispatched to assist on large-scale projects in Cambodia, Andrew Mertha's groundbreaking article explores the role of Chinese experts working on Chinese-supervised projects during the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) period, undoubtedly the most controversial assistance given to Cambodia by China in the twentieth century. In exploring this role, Mertha also interrogates whether this Chinese assistance was ideologically driven or derived from unsentimental pragmatic considerations.

The role of China and Chinese advisors during the DK period has long been a source of interest for scholars, but it has proved extremely difficult to research. As Sophie Richardson writes about China-Cambodia connections during the DK period, "Sorting out what ought to have been reasonably objective information, such as aid shipments, was and still is, notoriously difficult." However, Mertha managed to interview—for the first time—Chinese experts who participated in the building of the petroleum refinery of Kampong Som in coastal Cambodia from 1976 to 1979.

The figure of the "Chinese expert" is at once amplified and deconstructed in Mertha's article. Mertha manages to illustrate the human aspect of these experts, many of whom had suffered through previous political persecution in China as well as ill-conceived, politically driven development projects bordering on the surreal. Hence the conditions of Democratic Kampuchea did not strike them as strangely as they otherwise might have. Indeed, Mertha depicts a range of individuals constrained by political and regime circumstances and frustrated at times by obstacles to their plans for implementing technical progress. Highlighting their personal experiences of political purges in China prior to their Cambodian advisory roles, Mertha

argues that these advisers showed compassion to their Cambodian colleagues in these extremely difficult circumstances, always being careful not to rouse the suspicions of DK cadres. Mertha also shows how, instead of moving to an agrarian utopia, these advisers were (ironically enough) moving into a more modern future than the China they had left behind: a world of air conditioners, good salaries, and unlimited bottles of Coca-Cola. The extent to which Mertha's respondents understood the broader context of this privilege (that the bottles were available because the shop owners had been purged from the capital) remains a matter for conjecture, but as Penny Edwards reflects in her endnote, the hierarchical structure of their experience was not dissimilar to the privileges offered to, and the segregation imposed upon, foreign experts in China.

Although Mertha is examining a period unlike any other, he still argues incisively that there are contemporary lessons to be learned about how China's foreign assistance projects are often "at the mercy of institutional constraints among Chinese bureaucracies as well as the state apparatus of the recipient country."

Both Mertha and Richardson relied on the memory of interviewees about a period for which archival records remain inaccessible to researchers. Yet, Richardson found that the accounts of the approximately sixty Chinese diplomats she interviewed, individuals who had served in Southeast Asia at some time between 1950 and 2000 and were willing to speak candidly and publicly about their experiences, coalesced with precision regarding why Chinese policies were enacted in the ways they were. This consistency allowed Richardson to conduct her research, despite periodically having to tactfully deal with the emotional distress of her informants as they relived their memories of China's involvement in the DK regime.

In his article, Julio A. Jeldres shares his perspective on—and research into—the relationship between Sihanouk and Chinese premier Zhou Enlai. Jeldres's unique perspective illuminates a close relationship between two political and public figures—one a communist head of state and the other a monarch. From Zhou's appreciation of Sihanouk's French-Khmer cooking to Zhou's prescient warnings from his deathbed that the DK regime needed to "proceed with much caution," Jeldres gives an intimate interpretation of relations between the two leaders and a personal perspective on the way the relationship between China and Cambodia was configured during

the 1960s through the mid-1970s. Echoing the observations of Mertha and Richardson, Jeldres also expresses frustration at being unable to access the official records of this time in order to further elucidate the Zhou-Sihanouk relationship.

The articles by Michiel Verver and Pál Nyíri in this issue both reveal that being viewed as ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia is increasingly positioned as an asset rather than a detriment. But how does that work in the case of Cambodia? And what versions of Chineseness offer the greatest strategic traction there?

Verver's article examines how entrepreneurial Chineseness is being configured in contemporary Phnom Penh. By examining three case studies that illustrate varied business and family histories, Verver explores dynamic and fluid notions of how Chineseness can be constructed, linking it to aspects of Chinese business practices often discussed in comparative regional contexts. One frequently analyzed issue, which Verver also interrogates, is how social capital is said to supersede contractual trust in Chinese business affairs. Indeed, much has been made in regional contexts of the paramount importance of social capital as the currency in which business transactions are conducted within Chinese business communities. Verver demonstrates some of the ways this plays out in Phnom Penh by exploring how the global impulses of streamlining and professionalization within Chinese family enterprises are changing the very nature of doing business. By documenting generational changes, he also illustrates how younger Chinese entrepreneurs do not want to associate themselves with what are now considered nepotistic Chinese business practices. Strategic positioning of ethnicity and the flexibility of Chinese identity are also explored by Verver in the case of Madam Heng, a Phnom Penh businesswoman. Despite having no Chinese language skills, Heng maneuvered her way into the mainly Teochiu¹ business elite of Phnom Penh and has been expertly rediscovering herself as Chinese ever since.

In turn, Pál Nyíri's article interrogates the versions of Chineseness that a figure like Madam Heng can rediscover in contemporary Cambodia in his analysis of the "new" Chinese and the modes of Chineseness they promote. The disproportionate commercial success of the Chinese and the transnational business operations of Chinese companies have sometimes led to predictions of a new regional form of supranational Chinese identity that transgresses national boundaries and surpasses local authorities. Nyíri offers

a fascinating twist on this equation in his analysis of the Cambodian case, a process he refers to as “retransnationalization.” This term denotes a crossing of national boundaries, but certainly not of the nation itself. In his article, Nyíri argues that genres of Chineseness in Cambodia are increasingly mediated through modes informed by the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Concentrating on the role of recent Chinese migrants in different spheres—business, education, and journalism—and in different Cambodian sites, Nyíri critiques the ways in which the transnational relationship centered on China as a new friend of Cambodia shapes the public articulation of Chineseness. Nyíri argues that this kind of symbiotic relationship has been enabled because the ruling parties of the two countries—the Cambodian People’s Party and the Chinese Communist Party—both embrace an almost parallel party-state-nation rhetoric. As a result of this, Nyíri argues, public articulations and private meanings of being Chinese in Cambodia have shifted to exclude certain expressions of Chineseness. Although some scholars, notably Prasenjit Duara, may refer to a “resinicization,” or revival of Chinese ethnicity in Southeast Asia influenced by the growing power of China, in the Cambodian case the singular mode of being Chinese is to reconnect to a particular territory—the PRC itself.

One of the most striking features of Nyíri’s argument is the way it harks back to the turn of the twentieth century, an era in which identity politics for overseas Chinese were configured by the nation-state itself, in relation to China as a territorial entity. Nyíri’s argument demonstrates that as some flows become more global, others become more narrow and circumscribed. Regional cultural flows and dialects, to quote two examples, are marginalized and their modes of claiming Chineseness undermined by a Chinese ethnicity and identity constructed by the PRC itself. New Chinese immigrants (新移民) are the pivot on which this process rests. If the sojourning Chinese have historically been brokers, Nyíri argues that in Cambodia they are now trading on a new form of PRC-molded Chineseness and a language that reproduces mainland Chinese usage. The influence of these immigrants reflects a marked change since Edwards and Chan’s research of the mid-1990s in which “raw,” newly arrived Chinese were viewed with deep suspicion.

Nyíri’s article raises the question of the extent to which the Cambodian experience of retransnationalization is indicative of trends in Southeast Asia more generally. He refers to some factors that prime Cambodia for

such a pattern: “poverty, authoritarian politics, a clientist economy, political closeness to China, and decimation of its traditional Chinese community institutions.” However, despite these particular Cambodian contexts and contingencies, the processes Nyíri describes articulate the need to take into account specific kinds of transnational connections. Nyíri’s article thus contributes to a broader debate on the global transformations of the meaning of Chinese ethnicity in conditions of increasing investment and migration from the PRC into societies with long-standing ethnic Chinese populations.

If “rise, repression, and revitalization” is the narrative by which Chinese communities in Cambodia are often characterized, these revitalization processes take a myriad of forms (many of which these articles explore). However, as should also be evident, rapid changes in contemporary Cambodian society make definitive statements on issues of Chinese identities problematic. Indeed, new discourses and configurations of Chineseness constantly emerge at this stage of late capitalism, overshadowed by the economic strengthening of the PRC. It is to these potential new directions that we now turn.

Addendum to the Introduction: New Directions

PENNY EDWARDS

University of California, Berkeley

During the two linked panels at the AAS meetings in 2012 from which the papers in this special issue were drawn, many younger scholars showed ways for scholarship to move forward and indicated future possible avenues for research. Some of the papers link in interesting ways to recent scholarship not represented in this volume. For example, Verver’s findings are corroborated in the work of Erik Davis, an anthropologist of religion whose extensive ethnographic research on funeral rituals led him to note patterns of inclusion. Davis argues that the association of such “traditional” Chinese practices as rice throwing with wealth and middle class behavior have in the

past decade become an integral part of funeral processions for Khmers desirous of expressing a particular social status.²

This acquisition of Chineseness for social status is a potential new avenue of research and is but one example illustrating the marked changes that have occurred in the status of being Chinese in Cambodia in recent years. Whereas Chinese tombstones were neglected in the 1990s, and some cemetery associations in the provinces lamented their fight to cling to their sacred terrain, now tomb plots are hot real estate, at the heart of a thriving business.³ Whereas Chineseness was once ideologically constructed, now ethnicity is assigned by a reverse formula: “If you do business, you are Chinese; if you work for the Government, you are Khmer.” This discourse is not so dissimilar from that mediating the treatment of Chinese in the DK regime: “If you are Chinese, you are capitalist; if you are Khmer, you are not.” In both cases, there are variations to such extreme formulations, yet the stereotypes persist.

The socialization of ethnicity can also be seen in language use, which is another potential area for research. Chinese loanwords have existed in Khmer for centuries, but more recently Chinese has begun to upstage French and English loanwords in a new vogue adopted by rural as well as urban Chinese: for example, use of the Chinese 姐 (*jie*) for big sister (Khmer, *bang*) and 姨 (*yi*) for auntie (Khmer, *ming*), in what novelist Vaddey Ratner describes as the “rapidly changing linguistic landscape of everyday Khmer.”⁴ Further scholarship could determine the extent to which these trends—the expansion of language and ritual to adopt Chinese words and practices—reflect increased tolerance toward Chinese, or the view that because Chinese are economically superior there is an attempt to assume a higher status by Khmers using these familial terms among themselves.

Nyíri demonstrates how a new layer of state involvement is guiding these new forms of expression. As he explains about recent Chinese migrants in Phnom Penh, Battambang, and Kampot, new articulations of Chineseness require not only demonstration of an “entrepreneurial acumen” but also “the possession of cultural and linguistic skills that conform to the standards of Chinese culture as understood in the PRC.” Verver shows that there is room for maneuver outside of this standard, yet Nyíri highlights the enhanced impact of global articulations, driven by the PRC, on the rearticulation of local forms of Chineseness. Nyíri cites, and Paterson emphasizes above, the

structural factors at play in Cambodia that created a partial vacuum into which these articulations could glide. Although Cambodia provides a particular societal context for such flows, possible comparisons may emerge beyond the example of Thailand considered by Nyíri.

As Burma opens up politically and economically, juxtaposing it with the Cambodian case might present fruitful comparative possibilities. There was no comparable decimation of Chinese culture in Burma, where some Chinese clan houses, temples, and associations in Rangoon present unbroken histories going back to the 1920s. Similarities exist, however, between the two countries in the form of extended isolationism, authoritarianism, state-sponsored violence, and ethnonationalist visions of nation dubbed by the anthropologist Gustaav Houtman as “Myanmafication” (1999). Economic parallels, Chinese aid relations, and access to deep-sea ports that render the country strategically important to China, coupled with similar trends in new migration over the past decade, all point to Burma as a potential case study for the comparative exploration of pattern and processes of identity formation.

In the case of Cambodia, the arena for identity formation is expanded and complicated by both the role of new migrants from China and the role of returning Chinese and Sino-Cambodian migrants from France, Canada, and elsewhere (the subject of Danielle Tan’s ongoing research). We might think of this process as a form of “re-*aspora*,” where countries that prompted refugee flight by ethnic Chinese, after political transitions and cessation of conflict, emerge as sites of resettlement. In most such cases, however, the “re-*aspora*” negotiates reentry into Cambodia from third spaces, host countries where members of this “re-*aspora*” have secured citizen and residency rights and have accumulated some level of financial as well as social investment.⁵ And, as these articles show, these social ascriptions of ethnicity might run counter to self-identifications but might simultaneously encourage particular public expressions of ethnicity.

The new research featured in this special issue takes its place alongside the nuanced ethnographies of Danielle Tan and Erik Davis and the findings presented by PhD candidates Sovatha An and Allan Shih-lun Chen on the AAS panel honoring Willmott. This new scholarship signals the revalorization of research on Chinese within a changing field of Cambodia studies and at the intersection of different disciplines. Conversant with a new body

of scholarship on the Chinese diaspora, fluent in multiple languages and disciplinarily diverse, it is to this cohort of scholars that we look to pave new roads for future research as iterations of Chineseness in Cambodia continue to be discredited and deployed, recreated, and reconfigured.

LORRAINE PATERSON is assistant professor of Asian Studies at Cornell University.

PENNY EDWARDS is associate professor of South and Southeast Asian Studies at the University of California, Berkeley.

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NOTES

1. The Teochiu are Han Chinese from Guangdong Province; a high proportion of Sino-Khmers are of Teochiu origin.

2. Erik Davis, private communication, Phnom Penh, 2006. See also Davis (forthcoming).
3. Author's private conversation with a Cambodian seeking to secure an appropriate resting place for a deceased Sino-Cambodian in-law, Phnom Penh, 2006.
4. Vaddey Ratner, private communication, October 10, 2012.
5. For more on these groups, see Tan (2006).

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