The histories of Cambodia that are available to readers of English are, for the most part, political histories and given the dramatic upheavals that such histories record, the primacy of politics should not be surprising. In the final year or two of the twentieth century, however, Cambodia entered a period of peace. For the first time in 30 consecutive years, Cambodians were not at war with one another or with their neighbours; more optimistically, there seemed to be no reason or likelihood that Cambodia would again be seriously threatened externally or dissolve into civil conflict. By the turn of the century, Cambodia was an autonomous, sovereign state with a democratically elected government, sharing membership of groupings of like-minded states such as the United Nations Organization and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. In 2004, Cambodia fulfilled all the requirements for entry to the World Trade Organization.

It is timely, therefore, to look beyond politics and to study the economic history of Cambodia in order to examine the trends in the country’s economic evolution that might give insights into its further development.

This is not a groundbreaking endeavour. There are already valuable analyses that serve as important reference points for the history of the modern Cambodian economy. The earliest of these, for my purposes, is by Charles Robequain. His monograph, *The Economic Development of French Indo-China* was published in its first French edition in 1939, its aim as stated in the author’s preface being “to show the changes effected in the economy of Indo-China as a result of the French occupation.”¹

There is little in the text, unfortunately, which refers specifically to the then Protectorate of Cambodia and its own economy within the union of the five states comprising French Indo-China. It was the seminal work of Jean Delvert, *Le Paysan Cambodgien*, researched and documented during the ten years after 1949, which formed the basis of further studies on the Cambodian economy.² The collection of maps and figures, details of soil types and weather patterns, observations of the agrarian calendar, and so on, concerning almost five hundred communes throughout the country is still the most valuable baseline study for current research on the rural economy. The third is *L’Économie du Cambodge* by Rémy Prud’homme,
a French academic who taught at the Faculty of Law and Economics of the Royal University of Cambodia during 1965 and 1966. He called his work “a tool for understanding the Cambodian economy, nothing more.”

It describes a modernising, post-independence economy at its peak, but by the time he completed his analysis, in October 1967, he had already noted a stubborn tendency to stagnation in the economy of the Sangkum Reastr Niyum, the Popular Socialist Community, which was directed by the Cambodian monarch turned executive chief, Prince Norodom Sihanouk. Until the arrival of fact-finding missions of the United Nations, the World Bank and bilateral agencies in the late 1980s, Rémy Prud’homme’s analysis was the last of its kind.

Delvert and Prud’homme (and no doubt Robequain before them) lamented the lack of bibliographical resources, not to mention reliable statistics for their studies of the Cambodian economy. “Little has been written about the geography of Cambodia,” Delvert noted, “and almost everything that has been published is old (prior to 1910) … [M]onographs and archival documents disappeared in great number between 1945 and 1954, particularly at the time of the Japanese coup de force (9 March 1945).” Prud’homme complained that there were hardly any precise analyses of regions or sectors and continued, “The statistical sources, without which these studies are not possible, are insufficient in both quantity and quality.” Delvert found the Bulletin Economique de l’Indochine invaluable, and Prud’homme was able to make good use of the results of the 1962 official population census that were published in 1966. A curious omission from Prud’homme’s bibliography is the 1959 doctoral thesis of Khieu Samphan entitled The Economy of Cambodia and its Problems with Industrialisation which must surely have been accessible to researchers in the 1960s. Khieu Samphan was awarded his doctorate from the prestigious University of Paris and it is unlikely that Prud’homme would have been unaware of the dissertation. After all, Khieu Samphan was not only an elected deputy of the National Assembly in 1962 but was also a secretary of state for trade. He was a controversial character on the Phnom Penh political scene as were his leftist allies in the Assembly, Hou Yuon and Hu Nim, who had also produced doctoral theses on economic issues that stressed the plight of the peasantry, with particular emphasis on their diminishing access to land and exploitation by local merchants. Perhaps Prud’homme thought it wiser to be circumspect and avoid charges of political bias especially since, in 1967, these three Cambodian economists had fled Phnom Penh and joined the guerrillas in the maquis. Inexplicably, Prud’homme made no bibliographical reference to the French language twice-weekly publication of the Cambodian Chamber of Commerce. Between 1942 and the end of March 1974, this economic journal repro-
duced laws and other official notices, provided information about exchange rates, shipping manifests and international markets, and offered statistical analyses of the Cambodian economy. Given the prestige of the Chamber of Commerce and its proximity to government, the bulletin’s sources were practically guaranteed. In view of these omissions, therefore, Prud’homme’s “tool” had limitations.

The present situation is very different in terms of sources. For an analysis of the Cambodian economy in the year 2005, taken as a convenient cut-off point, there is an abundance of statistics, reports, analyses, prognoses and so on of the Cambodian economy. A reliable general population census was conducted in 1998, and in addition to this essential resource, the National Institute of Statistics conducted regular socio-economic surveys, produced statistical yearbooks and, in 2003, published the results of a survey of industrial establishments in the country. In addition to these official sources, there are the publications of respected in-country research organisations such as the Cambodia Development Resource Institute and the Economic Institute of Cambodia, as well as reports of international financial institutions (The World Bank and Asian Development Bank) and those of Cambodia-based international and local non-government agencies.

The important point to be made about all the sources discussed above is that they are more or less static portrayals of the Cambodian economy. Robequain and Delvert do depict economies that are in the process of dynamic evolution and to this extent they are economic histories. Nevertheless, their period of study is set within rather short time-frames. Current studies of the Cambodian economy, almost without exception, lack historical hindsight. Weaknesses in economic structures and institutions are commonly attributed to general destruction caused by three decades of conflict, and historical analysis rarely goes beyond this simple reference. War and revolution most certainly did severely damage the Cambodian economy, but to what extent did these historical events change the underlying structures and relations of production, the patterns of the economy? What role did economic factors play in instigating war and revolution? An economic history should offer probable explanations, if not definitive answers, to questions like these.

The aim of this monograph, therefore, is to study the patterns and structures that persist in various aspects of the economy as well as in policy and planning approaches so that Westerners who engage with the Cambodian economy whether for investment, development or for academic purposes, or to deliver humanitarian assistance, might better understand the point in time at which they are intervening and appreciate the Cambodian people’s experience and past efforts to modernise their country’s
economy. This is a general history of the Cambodian economy, not a technical economic treatise. It focuses on a series of deliberate efforts over the course of the twentieth century to shape Cambodia’s economy into a preferred mode or according to a preferred ideology.

Cambodia, of course, was not unique in making these attempts, although the circumstances it faced and measures it adopted to overcome them were typically extreme. Other countries in the region, Indonesia under Sukarno, for example, pursued policies not dissimilar to those adopted by King Sihanouk in the post-colonial phase. With less rigour than Democratic Kampuchea, after 1975 the other states of former Indochina, Vietnam and Laos, also applied Marxist economic principles to revive their economies from near-total collapse caused by war. Since the early 1990s, and especially since the 1997 Asian financial crisis, Cambodia, along with most of the member states of ASEAN, has been required to comply with the neo-liberal reform measures dictated by The World Bank/IMF. Cambodia’s economic development, therefore, has taken place within the broader context of regional economic change and development. It is hoped that this study will make a contribution to the existing scholarship on the economic history of Southeast Asia and thereby assist Cambodian scholars to make critical comparisons and draw conclusions that will deepen our understanding of the way the economy functions and how it inter-relates with other regional economies.

While conscious of the pitfalls that the various approaches to the recording of such an economic history entail, I have chosen to adopt a purely temporal approach. Following an introduction that describes the fundamental features of physical and human geography, levels of human development and benchmarks of economic activity in Cambodia around the year 2000, the history of Cambodia’s modern economy is traced from the latter half of the French Protectorate, to the post-independence (first) Kingdom of Cambodia, through the Khmer Republic, the revolutionary regimes of Democratic Kampuchea and the People’s Republic of Kampuchea, to around the midpoint of the third legislature of the Second Kingdom of Cambodia, that is, approximately the year 2005. Generally speaking, therefore, the time span of modern economic development in Cambodia coincides with the twentieth century. Within each of those already defined political eras, the economy is regarded from the viewpoint of the same socio-economic categories, including administration and governance, population, human development, economic activity, foreign trade, aid, investment and debt, as well as public finance, banking and credit. The concluding chapter considers some of the challenges facing the Cambodian economy in the twenty-first century.