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Red service-intellectual: Phouk Chhay, Maoist China, and the Cultural Revolution in Cambodia, 1964–67

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This article examines the phenomenon of Cambodian intellectual curiosity about China through the social experiences of Phouk Chhay, a prominent leftist activist-critic and Pol Pot's one-time secretary. Amid Phnom Penh's urban radical culture, Phouk transformed from rural student to Communist guerrilla. He associated with Communists, formed pro-China student associations, and through his networks, went on trips that left lasting impressions. This study draws from issues of the Cambodian-Chinese newspaper Mianhua ribao (Sino-Khmer Daily) and several forced confessions to tell a story of becoming that examines community and network in charting the course of 'China-curiosity' as intertwined with Phouk's life trajectory.

Bae mit mien chumhar padevoat, mit, thvoe avey ka kaet dae

(If you have a revolutionary position, comrade, you can do anything)

Communist Party of Kampuchea slogan

'Long live Mao Zedong Thought' and 'China is the world's revolutionary peoples' most dependable friend' proclaimed two issues of *Mianhua ribao* (Sino-Khmer Daily), a Chinese-language newspaper operated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)-backed Battambang Overseas Chinese Party Organization (Madewang qiao dangzuzhi). *Mianhua ribao* was founded in Battambang in 1956, two years before the formalisation of diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Cambodia.¹ The newspaper operated as the 'official propaganda outlet

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¹ 'Mao Zedong sixiang wansui [Long live Mao Zedong thought]', *Mianhua ribao* (MHRB), 2 July 1966;

(*shishi tingmin yu Zhongguo dashiguande xuanchuan meiti*) of the PRC Embassy in Phnom Penh until Sihanouk shuttered it in 1967. In this capacity, it published Chinese-language articles for Cambodian Overseas Chinese (*huaqiao*) and provided invaluable information on China's support for, and genuine fraternal relations with, neutral Cambodia.²

By the early 1960s, warm China–Cambodia relations increased *Mianhua ribao*'s popularity among Cambodian Chinese communities. As its readership increased, so too did enthusiasm for the Cultural Revolution. CCP intelligence officer and *Mianhua ribao* journalist and president Vita Chieu (a.k.a. Zhou Degao, 1932–2020) recounted that 'the Red Guards' individual fanaticism for Mao extended to Cambodia through the transmission of the Overseas Chinese community's "homeland mindset" and the Little Red Book flooded the urban and rural areas of Cambodia.' This radicalism extended outside *huaqiao* communities, and spread to a few important, like-minded activists, students, and Buddhist monks.³

Some scholars have claimed that radical thought from China did not fit or resonate with Cambodian radicals.⁴ Others have not consulted the relevant Chinese-language sources to link Maoism or the Cultural Revolution to Phnom Penh's radical 1960s, which is one reason why most studies tend to cover this era solely in brief compass. Also problematic is that some scholars have tended to throw around the terms 'Maoism' and 'Maoist' to describe future Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) members without problematising the terms or their usage in the Cambodian context.⁵

As a 'political phenomenon that is valuable in itself' and 'a series of political practices and intellectual attitudes that, while similar and connected to the Chinese

and 'Zhongguo shi shijie geming renmin zui kekaode pengyou' [China is the world's revolutionary peoples' most dependable friend], *MHRB*, 1 Oct. 1963.

2 See 'Zhong-Jian liangguojia zongli fabiao lianhe shengming: Jianpuzhai fengxing zhongli zhengce, ying shoudao yiqie guojia zunzhong [Joint statement by the Chinese and Cambodian premiers: Cambodia's pursuit of a policy of neutrality should be respected by every country]', *MHRB*, 25 Aug. 1958; and 'Geguo yao huode zhenzheng duli he jiefang jiu bixu kuoda fandui Meidimen zhanzheng [To achieve true independence and liberation, all countries must oppose the wars of US imperialists]', *MHRB*, 12 Oct. 1965. On the CCP's revolutionary cosmopolitanism in archipelagic Southeast Asia, see Seng Guoquan, 'Revolutionary cosmopolitanism and its limits: The Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese in Singapore, Medan and Jakarta compared (1945–1949)', *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 16, 1 (2020): 1–30. On local Chinese in Cambodia, see William Willmott, *The political structure of the Chinese community in Cambodia* (London: Bloomsbury, 1970).

3 Vita Chieu, *Wo yu Zhonggong he Jiangong chise huaren jiemi: Jiangong ruhe xingwang* [My story with the Communist Parties of China and Kampuchea: A record of the rise and fall of the Communist Party of Kampuchea], trans. Zhu Xueyuan (Hong Kong: Tianyuan shuwu, 2006), pp. 36, 45. Vita Chieu was acting president for over twelve years (early 1950s to mid-1960s).

4 Serge Thion, 'The Cambodian idea of revolution', in *Revolution and its aftermath in Kampuchea: Eight essays*, ed. David P. Chandler and Ben Kiernan (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, Monograph Series no. 25, 1983), p. 22.

5 See Sacha Sher, *Le Kampuchéa des 'Khmers Rouges': Essai de compréhension d'une tentative de révolution* [Kampuchea of the 'Khmer Rouge': An attempt to understand a revolutionary effort] (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004), pp. 30–32; Henri Locard, *Pourquoi les Khmers Rouges?* [Why the Khmer Rouge?] (Paris: Vendémiaire, 2013), pp. 8, 38–43; Karl D. Jackson, 'Intellectual origins of the Khmer Rouge', in *Cambodia 1975–1978: Rendezvous with death*, ed. Karl D. Jackson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 241–50; and Craig Etcheson, *The rise and demise of Democratic Kampuchea* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1984), p. 164.

experience, were also specifically situated',⁶ Maoism rose as a radical force in 1960s Phnom Penh as part of a larger 'China-curiosity': a fascination with the Chinese revolutionary experience and radical social transformation. 'New China,' CPK intellectual Suong Sikœun later reflected, 'occupied a special place in our hearts and in our thoughts, symbolised by Mao, the graceful dancers of the Beijing Opera, the fantastic acrobats of the Sheng Yang circus, or the fabulous magicians of Shanghai.'⁷ How the PRC and Maoism materialised as such a curiosity in the collective imaginations of those *outside* the Paris-trained core of the CPK intellectual thrust, and how this curiosity evolved into an ideological discourse that Cambodian radicals took seriously, lies at the centre of this article's focus.

I explore the life experiences of political economist and home-grown revolutionary, Phouk Chhay (CPK alias *Touch*, 1936–77), to argue that his life, networks, and sojourns chart the rise of China-curiosity, then Maoism, in Cambodia and independently from Pol Pot's faction of the CPK. I examine *becoming* and the central roles of *community* (topographical dimensions of community) and *network* (cultivation of networks not predetermined by *community*) in pushing Phouk towards radicalism. The son of poor peasants, Phouk neither studied in Paris-based Marxist reading cells, nor joined the French Left as his mentors Hou Yuon (1930–75) and Hu Nim (1930–77) did.⁸ Nevertheless, he became radicalised in Phnom Penh between 1964 and 1967, capitalising on China's popularity among radicals. He soon became 'strongly anti-Sihanouk, pro-Cultural Revolutionist', and eventually took to the jungle.⁹ The aim is to fill the vacuum between his time as a radical critic and his transformation into a hardened Communist who served as Pol Pot's personal secretary. Phouk's career trajectory and writings instead reflect that of someone who wanted to put his knowledge and energies at the service of someone powerful, but whose views made him a threat and victim despite his efforts.

The article seeks, by way of *social topography* and *intellectual travelogue*, to understand the broader reception of Maoism in Cambodian intellectual circles through Phouk's life trajectory.¹⁰ I explore the topographical dimensions of his early life and the networks that he fostered in 'China-curious' associations. To highlight the potential link between the topographical dimensions of Phouk's home province of Takéo and his thinking, I chart the course of China-curiosity among Cambodian radicals by making broader sense of Phouk's life, referring to associations in which he participated, and tracking Cultural Revolution enthusiasm among Phnom

6 Fabio Lanza, *The end of concern: Maoist China, activism, and Asian Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), pp. 10, 20.

7 Suong Sikœun, *Itinéraire d'un intellectuel Khmer Rouge* [Itinerary of a Khmer Rouge intellectual] (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2013), p. 57.

8 Phouk Chhay, 'Seknae reaykar choun Angkarbak [Report to the Party Organisation]', S-21, Tuol Sleng prison, 15 Mar. 1977, p. 2.

9 Ben Kiernan, 'Pol Pot and the Kampuchean communist movement', in *Peasants and politics in Kampuchea, 1942–1981*, ed. Ben Kiernan and Chanthou Boua (London: Zed, 1982), p. 271. See also Chieu, *Wo yu Zhonggong he Jiangong chise huaren jiemi*, p. 15; and Don O. Noel Jr., 'Cambodia politics II: The man to get', National Archives of Australia, Canberra, Alida Patterson Fund, Document A1838 3016/2/1 Part 17.

10 This article owes its inspiration to Yeh Wen-hsin's *Provincial passages: Culture, space, and the origins of Chinese communism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

Penh *huaqiao* — a large part of *Mianhua ribao*'s target audience.¹¹ On Phouk's substantive involvement, I examine his capacity to articulate on behalf of these associations, and vice versa, as the organisations in which he participated have gained greater significance with his martyrdom. In giving substance to his life's significance, I trace threads between his life trajectory and two under-studied, yet important, China-curious associations: the Khmer Students Association (Association Générale des Etudiants Khmères, AGEK; Khmer: Sameakom Nissae Khmer); and the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Phnom Penh-financed Khmer-Chinese Friendship Association (Association d'Amitié Khméro-chinoise, AAKC; Khmer: Sameakom Mittpheap Khmer-Chen; Chinese: Gaomian-Zhongguo Youhao Xiehui).¹² By exploring Phouk's experiences, networks, writings, sparsely documented 1965 China trip, and subsequent flight to the *maquis* (band of CPK guerrillas in liberated zones), his life and ideological shift emerge as microcosms of one faction of an emergent Cambodian Communist movement in the 1960s.

Approaching becoming: Methodology and sources

The natural topographical features of Phouk's life were linked inextricably to his social world and ideological growth. The *social topography* of his life after he moved from his birthplace left lasting imprints on him, as the people with whom he interacted guided his *Weltanschauung* into a radical one. This article proposes topography as going hand-in-hand with *network* in our subject's ideological transformation from apolitical student to radical activist to CPK guerrilla. It takes into account the spatial dimensions of rural versus urban in examining the rise of activism, then China-curiosity and Maoism, as radical currents in Cambodia's global 1960s, all the while acknowledging that many social and political factors set the backdrop for such a radical foment to unsettle extant structures and hierarchies. The features we discuss in the first section highlight Phouk's early poverty and set the stage for his later shift towards radical thought as a China-curious activist, student, and academic. Phouk's passage through cultural and ideological spaces in a Phnom Penh beset by an urban radical subculture among students and intellectuals in response to government suppression and systemic corruption forced him to confront socioeconomic inequality and the allure of China's alternative modernity most acutely.

The sources under analysis include the forced confessions from the Pol Pot era, which, aside from bearing a striking resemblance to self-criticism (*ziwo piping*) and thought reform (*sixiang gaizao*) sessions in China, have 'deep roots in the ontology' of Khmer Buddhist concepts of 'self-renunciation and self-examination'. The CPK's 'cult of confession' intended such processes to be 'act[s] of symbolic self-surrender, the merger of the self or individual with the environment and the maintenance

11 In the radical 1960s, Khmer intellectuals did not remain fixed in one ideological camp; rather, they could, and often did, trend leftward or rightward over time, as some became Communists (Phouk Chhay) and others (Soth Polin) became rightists (despite using leftist rhetoric); Siti Keo, pers. comm., Berkeley, 8 Oct. 2018. See also Siti Keo, 'Writing the postcolonial city: Phnom Penh and modernity during Sangkum Reastr Niyum, 1955–1970' (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2019).

12 Some describe AGEK as 'pro-Peking', 'pro-Communist', or 'pro-China'. Khatharya Um, *From the land of shadows: War, revolution, and the making of the Cambodian diaspora* (New York: NYU Press, 2015), p. 93; Philip Short, *Pol Pot: The history of a nightmare* (London: John Murray, 2004), p. 154; and Sher, *Le Kampuchéa des 'Khmers Rouges'*, p. 127.

of an ethos of total exposure ... for the flourishing of existential guilt'.¹³ As such, these 'confessions' amount to hundreds of pages extracted under torture and 'reflect the boastful, evasive, or exculpatory views of the torturers themselves'.¹⁴ We must corroborate Phouk's claims about his life and career in his 'confessions' with other sources, scrutinising them for their content and admissions of crimes against his own Party.

Besides yielding explicit links between 'expressions of self-criticism and thought reform as part of the S-21 prison routine', the forced confessions contain biographical details and reflections on life events (experiences that are documented elsewhere but lack depth and detail). Phouk's forced confessions and reports from March to May 1977 — like those of his fellow prisoners at the CPK's S-21 security prison — were handwritten and the centrepiece of half-day (sometimes several days-long) intensive interrogations.¹⁵ Yet such 'confessions' yield valuable insight and information on Phouk *before* his CPK participation, which is why we use them; not as sources for his fall from grace within the Party, but to capture his emergence into the CPK's orbit. Complementary sources include Phouk's 1965 (published 1966) political sciences doctoral dissertation, and issues of the bilingual AAKC's *Quarterly Review (Revue Trimestrielle, RT)* and *Mianhua ribao*.¹⁶ Altogether, these heretofore-overlooked sources allow us to track Phouk's shifting ideology from his early life as a poor youngster in a rural backwater to his becoming, in Ben Kiernan's words, 'the most influential Cambodian admirer of the Chinese Cultural Revolution'.¹⁷

Becoming Phouk Chhay: Early life and social topography, 1936–58

Aside from brief accounts, little is known about Phouk's life or the forces that pushed him towards the *maquis* in 1970. Those few accounts note only that he was a political economist, radical writer, teacher, and after his China trip and arrest, a member of the CPK's pro-China camp alongside AAKC comrades Hou Yuon and Hu Nim.¹⁸ Cambodian head of state Norodom Sihanouk (1922–2012, prime minister 1955–70) identified him in a meeting with student leaders as 'a progressive leftist

13 Kosal Path and Angeliki Kanavou, 'Converts, not ideologues? The Khmer Rouge practice of thought reform in Cambodia, 1975–1978', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 20, 3 (2015): 312, 326.

14 David Chandler, *Voices from S-21: Terror and history in Pol Pot's secret prison* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 112.

15 Angeliki Kanavou and Kosal Path, 'The lingering effects of thought reform: The Khmer Rouge S-21 prison personnel', *Journal of Asian Studies* 76, 1 (2017): 89, 95–8.

16 Phouk Chhay, 'Le pouvoir politique au Cambodge: Essai d'analyse sociologique, 1945–1965' (Political power in Cambodia: A sociological analysis, 1945–1965) (PhD diss., Université Royale de Phnom Penh, 1966). Unpublished original: 'Les elites politiques du Cambodge contemporain (1945–1965)' [The political elites of contemporary Cambodia]; Ministère de l'Information (MI), *Revue trimestrielle de l'Association d'amitié khméro-chinoise/Sameakom Mithpheap Khmer-Chen* (hereafter RT AAKC) 1 (Jan. 1965), pp. 1–47, NAC, Document no. 5973, Box no. 687; and MI, 'Tossaanavdeit Sameakom Mithpheap Khmer-Chen' [Review of Khmer-Chinese Friendship Association] (2 (Sept. 1965), pp. 1–45, NAC, Document no. 5973, Box no. 164.

17 Ben Kiernan, 'Pol Pot et le mouvement communiste Cambodgien [Pol Pot and the Cambodian communist movement]', in *Khmers Rouges!: Matériaux pour l'histoire du communisme au Cambodge* [Khmer Rouge!: Materials for the history of Cambodian communism], ed. Serge Thion and Ben Kiernan (Paris: JE Hallier-Albin Michel, 1981), p. 225.

18 Suong, *Itinéraire*, pp. 489–90; Marie-Alexandrine Martin, *Le mal Cambodgien: Histoire d'une société traditionnelle face à ses leaders politiques, 1946–1987* [The Cambodian evil: A history of a traditional society facing its political leaders, 1946–1987] (Paris: Hachette, 1989), p. 114; and Norodom Sihanouk,

intellectual and Red', and imprisoned him on suspicion of 'treason and an attempt against the security of the state' in 1967.¹⁹ After leaving Phnom Penh for the jungle, Phouk served for a time as Political Commissar of the Southwest Zone armed forces, and then as CPK Standing Committee Minutes Secretary. Between the Lon Nol coup and the CPK takeover, he was among those in the National United Front of Kampuchea (Front uni national du Kampuchéa, FUNK; Khmer: Ronsersa Ruobruom Cheat Kampuchea) under Sihanouk's nominal leadership.

The scholarly consensus on Phouk's exact role within the CPK is that he was a 'Maoist', though there is an absence of explanations of how or why (and what 'Maoist' means to this effect). Sorpong Peou notes that during the Cambodian Civil War (1967–75), Phouk was one of 'the Maoists', 'a mass-based group' of CCP allies (based in the south, southwest, and north). Besides not taking a firm stance against the Vietnamese, Peou continues, they stressed the role of peasants in revolution and 'favored partial rustication and limited autarky'.²⁰ Aside from characterising this faction's ideology as, in effect, identical to Pol Pot's agenda, Peou's description is curious for a few reasons. He incorrectly lists this group as based in CPK military chief 'Brother Number Five' Ta Mok's Southwest Zone ('the zone of Pol Pot-ism par excellence' and the 'power base of the Pol Pot central government').²¹ Also, while Phouk served Ta Mok, he did not occupy a significant executive position or influence Ta Mok ideologically.

Other scholars fit Phouk and like-minded Cambodian intellectuals in the same camp. Thu-huong Nguyen-vo includes Phouk's name among those 'legal cadres in Phnom Penh', although no CPK member was ever 'legal' under Sihanouk, and there were no cadre positions in the city before the 1975 evacuation. Like Peou, he argues that this group comprised the Southwest Zone stalwarts, and 'had a Maoist outlook' despite the absence of Chinese support.²² Timothy Carney identifies Phouk as an activist leader, FUNK Committee member, and Southwest Zone figure, but does not label him as Maoist.²³ Ben Kiernan, Craig Etcheson, and Wilfred Burchett do, though, by identifying the main factions as the 'Pol Pot group' (Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, Khieu Samphan, and others) and 'pro-China/Cultural Revolution group' (Hou,

Les paroles de Samdech Norodom Sihanouk [The words of Samdech Norodom Sihanouk] (Phnom Penh: Ministère de l'Information, 1969), pp. 677, 679.

19 Gloria Emerson, 'After prison in Cambodia an intellectual needs to talk', *New York Times*, 13 Apr. 1970.

20 Sorpong Peou, *Intervention and change in Cambodia: Towards democracy?* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2000), p. 113.

21 Michael Vickery, *Cambodia 1975–1982* (Boston, MA: South End, 1984), p. 93. A 1973 report by Ith Sarin named the Southwest Zone's 'most important personalities as Chou Chet, Phouk Chhay, Sieng Po Se, Thuch Rin and Mok'. Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot came to power: Colonialism, nationalism, and communism in Cambodia, 1930–1975*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 340; and Vorn Vet, 'Confession of Vorn Vet', (Nov.–Dec. 1978), p. 23, *Monash Collections Online*, <http://repository.monash.edu/items/show/1319> (accessed 27 May 2020).

22 Thu-huong Nguyen-vo, *Khmer-Viet relations and the third Indochina conflict* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1992), p. 64. On the Southwest Zone, see Meng-Try Ea, *The chain of terror: The Khmer Rouge Southwest Zone security system* (Phnom Penh: DC-Cam, 2005).

23 Timothy M. Carney, 'Continuity in Cambodian communism', in *Communist party power in Kampuchea (Cambodia): Documents and discussion*, ed. Timothy M. Carney (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Data Paper no. 106, Department of Asian Studies, Cornell University, 1977), p. 9.

Hu, and Phouk), with the latter comprising a peasant-oriented ‘mass-based group’ that held sway in the south, southwest, and north.²⁴

Before labelling Phouk as Maoist, or uncovering precisely what role he played in the CPK, it is important to trace his *becoming* a Communist. To this end, one ought to consider the path he took from rural backwater to the radical urban circles of Phnom Penh, and the effects on him as he passed through these spaces. Phouk was born in 1936 to mixed Sino-Khmer lineage in Svay Prey village, Samraong district, Takéo province, not far from Lake Bat Rokha in the same province in which Ta Mok (1926–2006), famed Democratic Kampuchea (DK) survivor Dr Haing Somnang Ngor (*Wu Hanrun*, 1940–96), and Ngor’s brother, the former Cambodian Minister of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries, Ngor Hong Srun (Chan Sarun; *Wu Heshun*, 1951–), were born.²⁵ Takéo is over 3,300 square kilometres, covering Cambodia’s southern region to the west of Kampong Speu and Kampot provinces and northeast of Kandal province. Takéo lacked a ‘rebel tradition’ that through oral storytelling may have influenced Phouk. Nevertheless, some of Cambodia’s first rebels, notably those who initiated the Revolt of 1885–87, were from there.²⁶ The French commander in Takéo, Captain de Jamowski, reported having to eliminate sophisticated jungle forts ‘with two *enceintes*, outworks, and palisades’.²⁷ French efforts to curtail rebellion and empower themselves, however, spurred discontent among Khmers, with some becoming nationalists (including Son Ngoc Thanh, 1908–77, from Trà Vinh in Vietnam, hero of nationalist Khmer students).

A predominantly lowland area, it remains important for agriculture. The annual inundation of the Tonlé Dathom (Great River, the Mekong) and waters from the Tonlé Bassac (Bassac River), in Phouk’s time much like today, kept the area rich and fertile until the dry season. Officially a province by 1907, Takéo’s inhabitants relied on fisheries, tobacco, cotton, palm sugar, and rice production to survive. But

24 Kiernan, ‘Pol Pot and the Kampuchean communist movement’, pp. 228–9; Etcheson, *The rise and demise of Democratic Kampuchea*, p. 164; and Wilfred Burchett, *The China-Cambodia-Vietnam triangle* (Chicago: Vanguard, 1981), p. 66. There was extensive overlap among groups because of the collective nature of the CPK Party Centre. Members in one group also contributed to another. Largely because of the fundamental difficulty of identifying clear factional boundaries within the CPK Party Centre, such groupings are, to some extent, imposed by scholars. Marginal factions included ex-Khmer Issarak and Pracheachon members, and pro-Sihanouk, pro-Vietnamese affiliates.

25 Kalyan San, ‘Phok Chhay before becoming a prisoner of the Khmer Rouge’, *Searching for the Truth*, 5, May 2000, p. 8; and Solomon Kane, *Dictionnaire des Khmers Rouges: Édition révisée et augmentée* [Khmer Rouge dictionary: Revised and expanded ed.] (Bangkok: L’Institut de recherché sur l’Asie du Sud-Est contemporaine, 2011), p. 336.

26 ‘Rapports périodiques, politiques et économiques. Résidence de Takéo [Periodic political and economic reports of the Residence of Takeo]’, 1 Nov. 1885, Archives National d’Outre-Mer (ANOM), Résidence Supérieure du Cambodge (RSC) 356. A rebellion in Takéo was led by an *achar*, an older layperson and veteran of the 1885 Revolt, in November 1898; see ‘Complot contre la sureté, Takéo, 1898 [Conspiracy against security, Takeo 1898]’, ANOM RSC 404. Prince Norodom Yukanthor’s son refers to armed uprisings in 1899 in his 1938 letter to the French President, ANOM NF INDO, Carton 47, Dossier 568. See also ‘Renseignement sur la situation politique de la sous-résidence de Takéo [Information on the political situation of the Takéo sub-residence]’, Takeo, 14 Oct. 1885, NAC, Document F. 65 12657; and Milton Osborne, *The French presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), pp. 214–15, 22–3.

27 ‘Correspondance du Sous-Résident de Takéo [Correspondence of the Sub-Resident of Takeo]’, Jan.–July 1886, NAC, RSC E.03 File no. 11211, Box no. 981.

Phouk's family, like so many others in post-First World War Cambodia (as a French protectorate), was very poor, and at the mercy of the country's unpredictable weather. Indeed, the Mekong was as much a deliverer of salvation as it was of despair: unseasonal flooding or droughts often spelled the end for farmers' yields, and in some cases, disease.²⁸ Such disasters forced Takéo peasants of Phouk's time to work as 'coolies' in agricultural (usually pepper) plantations or to flock to forests to survive on 'wild food'.²⁹ Those who could not find work either moved to the cities, or resorted to forced labour or crime. A 1938 incident recalls when a five-mile-long canal for the Takéo provincial water supply 'was dug by hand, exclusively by penal labour'.³⁰ The situation was thus very dire for Phouk's family and neighbours.

The French era in Takéo set the stage for Phouk's childhood in poverty and stacked the deck against his upward social mobility. Naturally, there was little opportunity for improving one's lot in the pre-colonial era, but French neglect intensified rather than alleviated rural poverty. Colonial authorities' unwillingness to develop infrastructure cut the capital (Phnom Penh) off from rural areas. This forced 'elaborate detours via Cochinchine' to reach Takéo and Kampot. But colonial neglect allowed Khmers to preserve local customs without significant French interference, although French distaste for the local character was apparent. A 1908 Résidence Supérieure report from Takéo noted that Khmer functionaries there possessed an 'extraordinary indolence', whereas village chiefs 'always show indifference, insouciance, and bad-will'.³¹ French condescension towards Khmers, especially regarding their work ethic, extended into the economic sector. Colonial officials oriented the protectorate's economy toward extracting profits and away from economic restructuring. The lone exceptions were in rubber and corn cultivation to meet French quotas.³²

The Great Depression of the 1930s ravaged the agricultural sector and affected Phouk's family directly.³³ The Indochinese economy, including Cambodia's national economy, was linked inextricably to France. Commodities values, overseas markets for rice, rubber, and consumer goods all plummeted, and development projects ceased outright. Phouk's birth father, Hou Chour, and his mother Neang Hun (remarried to Phouk Song, hence Phouk's namesake) had relied on Takéo's natural resources, but what they cultivated had now depreciated. Despite rural life remaining largely static, the French introduction and consolidation of private property, which reshaped the land tenure system in an arguably capitalistic direction, led to the concentration of

28 Li Changfu, *Zhongguo zhiminshi* [A history of Chinese colonisation] (Shanghai: Shangwu shuju, 1946), pp. 74, 101. On Phouk's early life details, see Phouk, 'Seknae', pp. 3–4. On Takeo under French rule, see John Tully, *France on the Mekong: A history of the protectorate in Cambodia, 1863–1953* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002), pp. 163–4.

29 'Rapports politiques et économiques du Cabinet de la Résidence Supérieure, 1905–1907 [Political and economic reports of the Cabinet of the Residence Superior, 1905–1907]', ANOM RSC 426.

30 Tully, *France on the Mekong*, p. 272, citing *La Presse Indochinoise*, 7 Mar. 1938.

31 'Extraits des rapports politiques des Résidents destinés au 2ème Bureau (affaires indigènes) [Extracts from the political reports of the Residents intended for the Second Bureau (indigenous affairs)]', 1906–10, ANOM RSC 415.

32 Michitake Aso, 'Rubber and race in rural colonial Cambodia (1920s–1954)', *Siksacakr: The Journal of Cambodia Research* 12–13 (2010–11): 127–38; and Penny Edwards, 'The tyranny of proximity: Power and mobility in colonial Cambodia, 1863–1954', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 37, 3 (2006): 429, citing Georges Groslier, 'La fin d'un art [The end of an art]', *Revue des Arts Asiatiques* 6, 3 (1929–30): 179–80.

33 Phouk, 'Seknae', p. 3.

land in wealthy and middle peasant control. This limited poorer peasants from cultivating soil for their own betterment.³⁴ The rural economy under French rule forced countless workers to sharecrop, till lands as indentured servants, or flock to the cities as jobless coolies ‘haunt[ing] the passenger arteries [to] compete for the pity’ of urbanites. Usurers thrived on those who stayed behind by capitalising on poverty and human desperation, while Khmer urbanites confronted Chinese and Vietnamese predominance in commerce.³⁵

Phouk’s education was shaped by local and foreign influences under colonial rule, which ameliorated his chances to enter the Khmer political class. Students received instruction in reading, writing, and arithmetic in ‘modernised’ *wat* (pagoda) schools, with a select few winning entry into French *collèges* and *lycées*. Generally, these pagoda schools did not prepare their student body for entry into prestigious *collèges* or *lycées*. They were, more accurately, ‘dead ends’ if families had designs on their children pursuing post-secondary education and entering the civil service. More typically, upper class students, or those from political families, enrolled in one of the government-run *écoles franco-cambodgiennes* at the primary level, where they could train to become subordinates to colonial administrators.³⁶

Typical of Khmer boys his age and class, Phouk stayed in a *wat* because his family could not afford to send him to a prestigious school. He did not attend formal schools until the age of ten despite passing the entrance exams.³⁷ Phouk’s cohort is unknown, but monastic life had a lasting influence on the very CPK leadership that became his contemporaries later on. Pol Pot (born Saloth Sar), for one, was a novice monk at Wat Botum (formally Wat Botum Vaddey Reach Vireah Ream), where he spent a year (he claimed six, an exaggeration) when he was fifteen years old. At the *wat*, Pol Pot learned the importance of ‘disciplined personal transformation, rebirth, and enlightenment’, ideals that remained with him until his Paris years.³⁸ It is not a stretch to surmise that Phouk left the *wat* having learned much of the same material. CPK Vice-Premier of Foreign Affairs Ieng Sary (1925–2013) was another would-be CPK figure who spent time as a monk. He relocated from his birthplace in Nhan Hoa village, Châu Thành district, Cochinchina, to Prey Veng where a monk took him ‘under

34 Hu Nim, ‘Les services publics économiques au Cambodge (Economic public services in Cambodia)’ (PhD diss.: Université Royale de Phnom Penh, 1965), pp. 83–4, 92–5.

35 Tully, *France on the Mekong*, pp. 266–8, citing *La Presse Indochinoise*, 28 Nov. 1935. As one observer noted, ‘Insofar as it was in the hands of Chinese, the whole commercial structure of Cambodia has crashed. There is practically nothing left of it ...’. Charles Robequain, *The economic development of French Indo-China*, trans. Isabel A. Ward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 43, citing M. Ganay, *Bulletin du Comité de l’Indochine*, 22 June 1933.

36 Geoffrey Gunn, *Monarchical manipulation in Cambodia: France, Japan, and the Sihanouk crusade for independence* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2018), pp. 52–6.

37 Phouk, ‘Seknae’, p. 3; and Suong, *Itinéraire*, p. 489. French neglect meant that a *lycée* ‘was not established in Phnom Penh until the 1930s, but a handful of young aristocrats, like Sihanouk, generally [went] to Saigon or Hanoi [to study]’. Thion, ‘The Cambodian idea of revolution’, p. 14.

38 David P. Chandler, *Brother Number One: A political biography of Pol Pot* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1999), p. 6. On Sar’s Buddhist views while he was in Paris, see Matthew Galway, ‘From revolutionary culture to original culture and back: “On New Democracy” and the Kampucheanization of Marxism-Leninism, 1940–1965’, *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 24 (2017): 139–43, citing Saloth Sar, ‘*Reacheathibtey ry brachathibtey?* [Monarchy or democracy?], *Khemara Nisit* [Khmer Student] 14 (Aug. 1952): 39–47.

his wing' as a teen. Then there was Phouk's fellow Takéo native, Ta Mok, whose father was a senior monk at Phnom Penh's Wat Moha Montrei, where he became a novice monk at Wat Trapeang Thom before failing his entrance exams at the École Supérieure de Pali. Lastly, Phouk's future AAKC mentor, Hu Nim, lived in a local pagoda following his father's death, then at Wat Unnalom, along with Khmer nationalist Son Ngoc Thanh.³⁹

At fourteen, Phouk won admission to French private schools precisely to escape the poverty that he had experienced before, even winning a bursary from a US-based CIA proprietary, the Asia Foundation (founded in 1954). Phouk enrolled at College Reach Samphea in Kampot province in 1952, then at Lycée René Descartes in Phnom Penh, where he studied from 1956 to 1958. He moved to Phnom Penh penniless, without relatives to help him settle, and no older siblings to keep a watchful eye on him in a place that was increasingly under possible surveillance of the authorities of Cambodia's first head of state, Norodom Sihanouk.⁴⁰ Phouk was very fortunate to get into the *lycée*; his previous teachers had expelled him for participating in a demonstration against the provincial governor whom he had branded a 'French lackey'.⁴¹ In the *lycée*, however, education entailed an immersion in and respect for all things French.⁴² Virtually all instructors there were Frenchmen. This ensured that the next generation of elite Cambodians, Phouk included, had their minds shaped by French thought, achievements, and culture. Such factors, of course, had the effect of turning many of these institutions into hotbeds of progressive and radical ideas.

French immersion was tantamount to a 'proper' education in Cambodia, and Phouk identified as a true intellectual in the French mould. 'I consider myself an intellectual because I have read so much ... most of all I know the great French classics: the writing of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Montesquieu, Chateaubriand, and Emile Zola', he noted in a 1970 interview. His French education, at this stage, did not necessarily provide the requisite 'push' towards radicalism or politicised critiques of the ruling status quo. He graduated just before the radicalised Khmers began to teach there. 'I had no interest in politics at all at this time', he mentioned in his March 1977 confession, though seven years before he had exclaimed, 'I loved Prince Sihanouk when I was a student and admired him because he worked for our independence.'⁴³ Such admiration did not survive past his student years.

39 Ian Harris, *Buddhism in a dark age: Cambodian monks under Pol Pot* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013), pp. 37–9.

40 Phouk, 'Seknae', pp. 2–3; and Gunn, *Monarchical manipulation in Cambodia*, p. 407. On the Asia Foundation and its CIA ties, see 'Memorandum from the Central Intelligence Agency to the 303 committee', 22 June 1966, in *Foreign relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume X: National security policy*, ed. David S. Patterson (Washington, DC: US Department of State, 2001).

41 Kane, *Dictionnaire des Khmers Rouges*, pp. 335–6.

42 On the colonial era approach to instruction, see M. Humbert-Hesse, 'Rapport general sur l'enseignement au Cambodge [General report on teaching in Cambodia]', 10 Jan. 1923, RSC ANOM 304. Humbert-Hesse was the Director of Primary Education in Cambodia at the time. On French education policy, see Thomas Clayton, 'Restriction or resistance? French colonial education development in Cambodia', *Education Policy Analysis Archives* (1995): 9–10; Jean Delvert, *L'œuvre française d'enseignement au Cambodge* [French education work in Cambodia] (Paris: France-Asie, 1956), pp. 125–7, 309–20; and R. Morizon, *Monographie du Cambodge* [Cambodia monograph] (Hanoi: Imprimerie d'Extreme-Orient, 1931), p. 181.

43 Emerson, 'After prison in Cambodia'; and Phouk, 'Seknae', p. 3.

Phouk's entry into the educated elite despite his humble origins and subsequent activism nevertheless defied the colonial status quo of favouring urban-based elites for instruction. His family's position as one of countless rural poor instilled in him a sense of the unforgiving and racist nature of colonial rule, the duress of peasant life, and the triumph of hard-earned upward social mobility. This social topography left a lasting imprint on him as he sojourned from his backwater hometown to the gradually radicalised urban foment of Phnom Penh, where he pursued an advanced degree. Phouk's time in Phnom Penh as a student, and the networks that he fostered with like-minded peers, grounded his nascent fascination in defiant figures from his French education. It also empowered him with a new vocabulary, syntax, and critical interpretive paradigm to contextualise his and other Cambodian families' impoverishment.⁴⁴

Becoming a service-intellectual: Academics, networks, and nascent China ties, 1959–65

Sihanouk's staunch neutrality and dependence on foreign aid during the 1950s led him on a path to prevent the rise of radicalism while ignoring local conditions or development needs.⁴⁵ He used American aid, in particular, to portray his Sangkum Riyastr Niyum (Popular Socialist Community, 1955–70) government's 'achievements' through films, magazines, public displays, and exhibits. His Party held the capital city, Phnom Penh, as 'an oasis of peace' irrespective of the fact that Sangkum modernisation policies — and the resultant economic misconduct, indebtedness, and unemployment — ultimately widened the gap between rich and poor, city and countryside.⁴⁶ Sangkum propaganda, Sihanouk's critics noted, ignored the plight of Cambodia's peasants who 'instantly understood that the glossy images of industrialization, international meetings, and film openings, had little relation to their everyday lives in rural Cambodia of the 1950s and 1960s'.⁴⁷

Most peasants neither lived comfortably nor owned mid-to-large plots (less than a hectare, or under 2.5 acres, per household), and relied heavily on paying in surplus or borrowing money from usurers to pay for tools to till the land.⁴⁸ But despite the dire situation, most peasants supported Sihanouk. As David Chandler describes, peasants were largely 'reluctant' to involve themselves in a mass movement after Cambodian independence because of their 'individualism, conservatism, Buddhist ethics, and [...] that nearly all of them owned their land made them unlikely

44 On this phenomenon with other CPK figures, see Matthew Galway, 'Boundless revolution: Global Maoism and communist movements in Southeast Asia, 1949–1979' (PhD diss.: University of British Columbia, 2017).

45 'Briefing papers for Saccio visit', 20 Nov. 1959, in RG59: General records of the Department of State, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, Office of Southeast Asian Affairs: Cambodia files 1958–1963, Box 2; and Vorn, 'Confession', p. 7. See also 'Confidential memo from Ambassador Trimble to the Secretary of State', 1961, in RG59: General records of the Department of State, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, Office of Southeast Asian Affairs, Cambodia files 1958–1963, Box 5.

46 Keo, 'Writing the postcolonial city', p. 116; and David P. Chandler, *The tragedy of Cambodian history: Politics, war, and revolution since 1945* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 181.

47 Ingrid Muan, 'Citing Angkor: The Cambodian arts in the age of restoration' (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2001), pp. 247, 252.

48 Matthew Galway, 'Specters of dependency: Hou Yuon and the origins of Cambodia's Marxist vision (1955–1975)', *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 31 (2019): 142–3.

candidates for Communist recruitment'. Frustration over harder living conditions and a widening gap between rich and poor, urban and rural, evolved gradually from a passive association of government (*reachkar*) with corruption (*puk roluy*) in the early 1960s into revolt towards the end of the decade.⁴⁹

But before the Samlaut Rebellion served as the climax of rural frustrations, problems on the political front focused Sihanouk's attention squarely on the nation's capital. As Cambodia entered the 1960s, Sihanouk's quest to maintain power invoked strident criticism and protest from Khmer students who were 'unhappy about the violence done to democracy and liberty [...] and angered by the denial of political pluralism'. Sihanouk had initially encouraged Khmer youth to 'become politically active' in early 1964 demonstrations, as his anti-imperialist policies had captured many students' imaginations. But as time wore on, and his government's policies caused considerable strain on urbanite and rural worker alike, students and activists found new heroes in those ministers who had devoted their careers to the peasant. Hou Yuon, Khieu Samphan and Hu Nim stood out as 'positive role models', particularly among Sino-Khmers.⁵⁰

Sihanouk tried to appease disgruntled students, activists, and progressive urbanites by co-opting such rivals, 'Young Turks' as he called them, into his own Cabinet 'by offering them honey and candy in the form of an under secretary's portfolio'.⁵¹ This concentration of political power only emboldened his critics. Sihanouk's radical opponents, namely Hou Yuon, Khieu Samphan and Hu Nim, grew increasingly popular among the poor as well as among students and intellectuals, and armed themselves with a pro-peasant agenda modelled after the one in China. Meanwhile the 1966 elections 'marked the ascendancy of the Right' in Cambodian politics.⁵² Thereafter, Sihanouk's increasingly intimidating threats, the subsequent flight of the leftist ministers to the *maquis* in 1967, and the large student demonstration led by Phouk Chhay in response, all provide the *mise en scène* for emergent radicalism.

Phouk's radical 'turn' began when he was studying law and political science at the Royal Khmer University (now Royal University of Phnom Penh; Khmer: Sakulwutyealai Phoumeant Phnompenh) from 1959 to 1965, and teaching part-time at the private Lycée Chamrœun Vichea. While working at the latter, he met Hou Yuon and Uch Ven, who at the time were popular leftist politicians in the National Assembly. Both had won the favour of the emergent anti-royalist student movement in Phnom Penh in the early 1960s and popularised Marxism in student circles.

Hou Yuon obtained his PhD in economics at the Université de Paris in 1955, and was a Communist intellectual. He joined the Cercle Marxiste in the early 1950s, a secret cell within the Paris-based nationalist Khmer Students Association (Association des Étudiants Khmers, AEK) with links to the French Communist Party (Parti Communiste Français, PCF)-established *groupes des langues* (c.1949) for foreign students from different backgrounds. A talented student who 'best

49 Chandler, *The tragedy of Cambodian history*, pp. 125, 166 (on Samlaut). On CPK leadership of the revolt, see Kiernan, 'The Samlaut Rebellion, 1967–68', in *Peasants and politics in Kampuchea*, p. 166.

50 Chandler, *The tragedy of Cambodian history*, pp. 142–4, 160.

51 Martin, *Le mal Cambodgien*, p. 115.

52 Um, *From the land of shadows*, p. 93.

understood Marxism' of his cohort, Hou wrote a dissertation in 1955 in which he applied Marxist theory creatively in a highly detailed analysis of Cambodia's rural sector.⁵³ His work influenced future CPK comrades Khieu Samphan (1931–) and Hu Nim (1932–1977), both of whom wrote economics dissertations that reflected Hou's imprint. Although accounts identify Hou as one of the CPK's 'principal leaders' and the lone advocate for free-choice cooperatives, he did not become an important figure in the DK regime due to his 1975 execution. He was nonetheless an influential figure, as his popularity as a government minister gave some representation to the faceless and invisible Angkar (Organisation), and his 1955 proposals became early framings for DK.⁵⁴

The second influence, Uch Ven (1931–73), was also a noted leftist and president of a teacher's association at the Lycée Chamrœun Vichea. A clandestine member of the Khmer People's Revolutionary Party (Konabaksaa brachachun Padevat Kampuchea, KPRP), the CPK's predecessor, Uch studied Law at the Université de Montpellier from 1943 to 1953. Like Yuon, he participated in the Cercle Marxiste, and after completing his degree, he returned home to teach at Chamrœun Vichea and work as secretary of L'Institut Bouddhique de Phnom Penh (Buddhist Institute). Uch's urging prompted Phouk to leave his teaching post, study politics, and join the revolutionary movement: 'After knowing Brother Uch Ven for a while, I started to take an interest in politics and wanted to join the revolution. I considered Brother Uch Ven as my *revolutionary mentor*.' Uch also provided Phouk with documents that 'contained Party leaders' messages', which piqued his curiosity, though he admitted years later that he abstained from joining the movement because he lacked a 'revolutionary vision' and had not 'read or studied enough'.⁵⁵

To rectify the matter, Phouk pursued an advanced degree in political economy under the supervision of French political-legal economists Gérard Farjat and Rémy Prud'homme, and French-schooled Cambodian Dean of Law Phung Ton (1926–77). Phouk defended his doctoral dissertation before the Université Royale's Faculty of Law and Economics in 1965. The very first of its kind from a sociological perspective, Phouk's dissertation presented a political and sociological reflection on contemporary political elites (1945–65). It focused on the origins and nature of power by examining developments of, and in, class structures through centuries of Cambodian political change. Phouk's thesis argued that Cambodia had been, and still was, ruled by a minority of leaders who by birth, co-option, or opportunism,

53 Galway, 'Specters of dependency', pp. 126–61. See also Sacha Sher, 'Le parcours politique des Khmers Rouges: de Paris à Phnom Penh, 1945–1979 [The political course of the Khmer Rouge: From Paris to Phnom Penh, 1945–1979]' (PhD diss., Université Paris X-Nanterre, 2001), p. 85; Suong, *Itinéraire*, pp. 489–90, 515–16; and Kiernan, *How Pol Pot came to power*, pp. 181, 204.

54 Suong, *Itinéraire*, pp. 39–41; and Hou Yuon, 'A statement by Hou Yuon on 30 September 1974 on the 23rd anniversary of the fighting in Amlaing District', trans. Sophal Ly, *Searching for the Truth* 25 (2002): 3–5. On Cambodian–Vietnamese Communist relations, see Dmitry Mosyakov, 'The Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese communists: A history of their relations as told in the Soviet archives', Yale University Genocide Studies Program, Working Paper no. 15 (2004), p. 49. On Hou's lasting influence, see Galway, 'Specters of dependency', pp. 126–61.

55 Phouk, 'Seknae', pp. 3, 8. Phouk's enthusiasm for joining the movement is likely something that he embellished to please his captors. Uch Ven may have disclosed information to him as they were close and disliked Sangkum. Suong, *Itinéraire*, pp. 59, 515; and Vorn, 'Confession'.

held *all* political power in the country: ‘Cambodia has always been led by a minority of leaders holding the *pouvoir de commandement*.’ This minority elite ‘constitute[d] the ruling aristocratic elite, and today our leaders are invested in and selected for the State, by the State, and if necessary, controlled and dismissed by the State.’ It was therefore necessary to politicise the masses, because it was by ‘relying on the people’ that radical patriotic forces could engender ‘forms of struggle for the preservation of national independence, peace, prosperity and happiness of the people’.⁵⁶

As is evident, Phouk’s work owed to a range of influences, including the early-1950s writings of French political scientist Maurice Duverger (1917–2014). Duverger’s position that the ‘state is strong when the masses are informed and can judge for themselves and go to action consciously’ informed Phouk’s endorsement of a strong state, but a strength predicated on mass consciousness.⁵⁷ His optimism about the possibilities for what his study identifies as an emergent cohort of intellectuals to effect reform within Sihanouk’s regime represented an extension of Duverger’s claim. It also contained his optimism about the ‘cultivated and intelligent’, albeit defunct by 1957, Democratic Party (Krom Brachathibtey), which Phouk urged was the only ‘coherent’ option for voters.

Until its 1957 dissolution, the Democratic Party had the Khmer intellectual elite’s backing, though much of the commercial sector lent its support to the Liberal Party.⁵⁸ The Democratic Party included young radical officials, schoolteachers, urbanites, and students, and had heavy support from the commercial bourgeoisie and monks. Well-known members included customs official and leftist Ea Sichau; linguist, Cercle Marxiste host, and Pol Pot’s mentor in Paris, Keng Vannsak (1925–2008); radical politician Phung Ton; playwright Eang Thun Hak (1926–75); and Sangkum Foreign Minister Norodom Phurissara (1919–77). Although it lacked ‘a solid base’ to rival Sihanouk’s Sangkum, Phouk noted that many ‘different social classes were enthusiastic towards modernization, independence, liberty, progress, and democracy’.⁵⁹

Outside of pinning his star to the Democrats, exposure to the Marxist-Leninist canon during Phouk’s mentorship paired with the US intervention in Vietnam and American opposition to Sihanouk to shape how he interpreted Cambodia’s positionality in the broader frame of US imperialism. A protégé of noted Cambodian leftists by 1960, a year since beginning his post-secondary studies, Phouk embraced their critical Marxist stance and made it central to his dissertation. Influential sources that he cites include Communist theorists Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, VI Lenin, Liu Shaoqi,

56 Phouk, ‘Le pouvoir politique au Cambodge’, pp. 208–9. He cites Maurice Duverger, *Institutions politiques de droit constitutionnel* [Political institutions of constitutional law] (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1960); and Maurice Duverger, *La participation des femmes à la vie politique* [The participation of women in political life] (Paris: UNESCO, 1955).

57 Duverger joined the Italian Communist Party in 1989 and maintained membership when it became the Democratic Party of the Left in 1991.

58 Keo, ‘Writing the postcolonial city’, p. 35.

59 Phouk, ‘Le pouvoir politique au Cambodge’, pp. 35, 145, 188, 207. He cites Thiounn Thioum, ‘Le pouvoir monarchique au Cambodge [Monarchical power in Cambodia]’ (PhD diss., Université de Paris, 1952); and Phung Ton, ‘La crise Cambodgienne [The Cambodian crisis]’, (PhD diss., Université de Paris, 1954).

and Mao Zedong (through Hu Nim's 1965 dissertation).⁶⁰ These and other radical texts, notably essays by Mao, were readily available in French translation by as early as the 1950s in post-independence Phnom Penh to provide radicals with a critical interpretive paradigm to understand Cambodian inequality and underdevelopment. As Suong Sikœun recalled:

I threw myself into reading Mao Zedong's works, the only Marxist books available in Phnom Penh ... We built a small library where we found, among others, 'On New Democracy', 'On Contradiction', 'On Practice', 'On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People', [and] President Liu Shaoqi's 'How to be a Good Communist' ...⁶¹

For Phouk, these names guided him on matters of 'class ideology and revolutionary transformation', and informed his calls to address socioeconomic inequality with 'radical reconstitution'. He also quotes Mao's one-time groomed successor, PRC Chairman Liu Shaoqi, who pointed out that any man who belongs to a social class is guided by the ideology of that class: 'Man is guided in his words and actions by his ideology, which is often inseparable from his conception of the world.'⁶² Such influences and recognition of the ruling Sangkum's unwillingness to participate in a fair democratic process ultimately played a role in Phouk's turn to activism.⁶³

Phouk's interest in radical ideas and ties to Hou and Uch soon brought him into contact with government agencies, then progressive ones that challenged state corruption. The most instrumental of these connections was Hu Nim, an influential politician who worked within the National Assembly in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and who was 'open' about his criticism of Sihanouk's Sangkum. Corruption under Sihanouk was 'functional'; civil servants did not command good salaries and bureaucrats Left or Right could not do anything substantive to reform the system. Sihanouk even admitted to 'great corruption' in all aspects of Cambodian political life, but recognised his powerlessness to stop it, as it emanated from the royal family's inner circle and government downward.⁶⁴ Hu's deftness at balancing criticism of Sangkum with calls for reform while maintaining Sihanouk as head of state left a lasting imprint on Phouk, who followed Hu's lead as a public intellectual and open leftist. Contact with Hu led him to the 'leader of the urban Khmer left in the 1960s', Poc Deuskomar (?–1972), who was part of the CPK Phnom Penh City Committee of future DK deputy prime minister Vorn Vet (1934–78).⁶⁵ Poc encouraged him to apply for the MFA and indirectly initiated his career as a leading radical activist and thorn in Sihanouk's side. Although Phouk eventually resigned from his post due to rampant corruption within the MFA, his knowledge, work experience, and

60 On the Maoist nature of Hu Nim's dissertation, see Galway, 'Boundless revolution', pp. 179–255.

61 Suong, *Itinéraire*, p. 57.

62 Phouk, 'Le pouvoir politique au Cambodge', pp. 2–10, 109. He references a French translation of Liu Shaoqi, 'Pour être un bon communiste [How to be a good communist]' (Beijing: Editions en langues étrangères, 1965), p. 38. See also Gunn, *Monarchical manipulation in Cambodia*, p. 56.

63 On this criticism, see Phouk, 'Le pouvoir politique au Cambodge', pp. 207–8.

64 Osborne, *Sihanouk*, p. 159.

65 Kiernan, *How Pol Pot came to power*, pp. 30, 276. Poc's precise dates of birth and death remain a mystery. See also Vorn, 'Confession', pp. 9–13.

role as founder (with Uch Ven in 1964) of the China-curious AGEK made him a hot commodity and a 'person of interest' simultaneously.⁶⁶

Sihanouk's concerns were not unwarranted: Phouk's AGEK was a legal organisation linked to clandestine pro-Communist groups led by Vorn Vet's CPK Phnom Penh City Committee.⁶⁷ In this capacity, AGEK linked youths, students, and graduates across Cambodia's public and private schools, notably the Université Populaire (technical), Institut de Pédagogie, Lycée Kambu Both (pro-Democracy group), and Chamrœun Vichea. Several prominent leftists taught at these schools: Pol Pot, who taught at Lycée Kambu Both after returning from his studies in Paris (without a degree) in 1953; Ieng Sary (1957); Hou Yuon (1955); and Khieu Samphan (1959), who taught 'purely political' courses that unabashedly 'vilified the Khmer monarchy [as] traitor-kings', especially King Suramarit (Sihanouk's father, who died in 1960) and Sihanouk. These radical teachers came together and opened Lycée Kambu Both's doors 'to all dissidents, teachers, and students alike ... [to] learn Marxism through courses taught by future Khmer Rouge leaders'.⁶⁸ Under Phouk's leadership, AGEK tapped into this radical foment and united students and teachers with similar mindsets, most of whom were anti-establishment, newly radical, and seeking to end Sihanouk's reign. As Sihanouk's suppression of leftists intensified in 1967, Phouk organised an AGEK-led protest of 15,000 students from Phnom Penh and Kandal to denounce imperialism and reactionaries and to demand the release of several incarcerated workers, peasants, students, and intellectuals.⁶⁹

In 1961–62, Phouk ran with this status and began his career as a public intellectual and contributor for leftist newspaper *La Dépêche du Cambodge*, later renamed *La Nouvelle Dépêche* (*The New Dispatch*). In his forced confession, he claimed to have lambasted Sangkum in an article for neglecting Cambodian farmers and not providing sufficient employment for the nation's intelligentsia.⁷⁰ However, it was unlikely that he published anything in print with such a strident tone. A 1970 article on Sihanouk's deposition by Lon Nol, however, made 'sweeping economic and social criticisms',⁷¹ noting that the 'time of personal rule, based on absolutism, individualism, favouritism, and terror is thus overthrown'. Education, Phouk urged, had suffered at the expense of Sihanouk's grand design, referring to the Cambodian leader as an 'excellent demagogue'. Phouk charged that Sihanouk expected that his 'children' would 'accept heavy burdens to build schools' to which they could not afford to attend, whereas poor peasants had 'no chance at all' of access to secondary education.⁷² Such strident criticisms, Phouk recounted, led Sihanouk to demand that

66 Phouk, 'Seknae', pp. 4–6.

67 Ibid., pp. 6–8; and Vorn, 'Confession', pp. 9–10. Phouk notes a 'secret coordinating committee' was established in January 1966 to 'convey Party directives to AGEK, the Kampuj'bot Associations, [and] railwaymen's, dockers', and state industrial workers' groups'. Short, *Pol Pot*, p. 521.

68 Martin, *Le mal cambodgien*, pp. 111, 161. On Communists at Chamrœun, see Vorn, 'Confession', pp. 10–11.

69 *Réalités Cambodgiennes* [Cambodian realities], 19 May 1967, p. 3.

70 Phouk, 'Seknae', p. 3.

71 David M. Ayres, *Anatomy of a crisis: Education, development, and the state in Cambodia, 1953–1998* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), p. 75.

72 Phouk Chhay, 'The social and economic heritage of the old regime', *New Cambodge* 1, May 1970, pp. 50–52. Also in Ayres, *Anatomy of a crisis*, p. 75.

Phouk 'head his own official organisation of young intellectuals [the Royal Khmer Socialist Youth, in which Phouk was deputy commissar-general], for he was afraid that the students association [he] founded [AGEK] might be a threat or lead to a division.' 'It was his way of trying to control me,' Phouk later remarked.⁷³

Phouk's leadership of AGEK and post in the MFA then brought him into the orbit of local Communists with China ties, and increasingly closer to the CPK. He leveraged the latter and his friendship with Hu Nim (who had 'close contact' with Chinese representatives) to connect with the PRC Embassy in Phnom Penh. Such ties led him, Hou Yuon, and Hu Nim to found, with Beijing's blessing, the AAKC (established in Beijing in 1961, but officially in Phnom Penh in September 1964).⁷⁴ 'Brothers Khieu Samphan, Hou Yuon, and Hu Nim' — Phouk's proclaimed 'revolutionary mentors' — joined the AAKC's inaugural committee.⁷⁵ Phouk served as general secretary, Hu Nim as vice president, and Khieu Samphan in the press and periodicals sub-committee.⁷⁶ The AAKC was also the Phnom Penh branch of the Beijing-based China-Cambodia Friendship Association (Jian-Zhong youhao xiehui; Association d'Amitié Chinois-Cambodgien, AACC), which facilitated AAKC member visits to China in 1965.⁷⁷ Phouk and Hu took advantage of this to visit Beijing, and as both recalled, the visit and what they witnessed in China reified their existing curiosity.

Becoming a Red Khmer: Beijing, Phnom Penh, and the AAKC, 1965–67

Links to China soon led Sihanouk to become suspicious of the AAKC leadership. Initially supportive of the association, Sihanouk once served as its unofficial president and approved of China–Cambodia cultural diplomacy. Delegations from Cambodia met with PRC representatives by grace of benefactor donations of 2,000–5,000 riels (Sihanouk donated 50,000 riels, while 20 unnamed Chinese 'figures' donated 60,000 to the AAKC fund). The association, which numbered 500 members, 11 honourable members, and 29 benefactors by 1964, met to iterate both states' commitment to honouring mutual sovereignty, economic ties, mutual respect, and achievements. CCP Marshal Chen Yi participated in the third AAKC meeting to honour Cambodia's tenth anniversary since independence.

But what happened during AAKC meetings? An edition of the AAKC *RT* details several activities at the 1964 meeting: reading personal telegrams of congratulations by

73 Emerson, 'After prison in Cambodia'; and Phouk, 'Seknae', p. 6.

74 Phouk, 'Seknae', pp. 5–6. On Beijing's support for the AAKC, see 'Jian-Zhong youhao xiehui zhangcheng cao'an [China-Cambodia friendship association draft charter]', *MHRB*, 29 May 1961. Hou Yuon was acting First Secretary General-Adjunct in May 1961, whereas Hu Nim was a councillor at this stage. 'La naissance de l'Association d'amitié Khméro-Chinoise [The birth of the AAKC]', *RT AAKC*, 1 (Jan. 1965), p. 15.

75 Phouk, 'Seknae', p. 9.

76 *RT AAKC* 1 (Jan. 1965), p. 6; *Le communisme en Asie du sud-est* [Communism in Southeast Asia], *Communisme* 14 (Paris: L'Age d'Homme, 1987), p. 54.

77 *MHRB* announced a Cambodian delegation that included Sihanouk and his wife, Monique, visiting China in September 1964: 'Jianpuzhai zhengfu daibiaotuan shoupi chengyuan zuo fu Zhongguo: Jiang zai Sui [Guangzhou] denghou tong yuanshou huihe zai fei Beijing [The first arrivals of the Cambodian government delegation will wait in Guangzhou and then fly to Beijing]', *MHRB*, 25 Sept. 1964. See also 'Xihanuke qinwang he furen dao Guangzhou [Prince Sihanouk and wife in Guangzhou], *Renmin Ribao* (*RMRB*) [People's Daily (China)], 27 Sept. 1964.

PRC Ambassador to Cambodia Chen Shuliang (1962–67); a viewing of ‘*Lin Tsu-Hsi*’ (1959, *Lin Zexu*), which ‘relived the story of the Chinese people’s struggle against the English aggressors during the 1840 Opium War’; a photography exposition on Chinese art commemorating the PRC’s fifteenth anniversary; a performance by a PRC circus troupe; reading groups in French; and gift exchanges between cultural delegations.⁷⁸ Other activities included an artifacts exhibition and guided Royal Palace tour, ‘Cambodia helps itself’ (*Le Cambodge s’aide lui-même*). AACC President Ding Xilin (1893–1974), who had presided over a 1957 Chinese artistic delegation visit to Cambodia, attended as part of an AACC delegation visit to Phnom Penh.

At this stage, indeed, Chinese officials had done nothing but stand up for Sihanouk internationally for his neutrality.⁷⁹ Favourable economic treaties and political diplomacy over the first dozen years of Cambodia’s independence were emblematic of China’s support for Sihanouk and China’s pledge of non-interference.⁸⁰ An Agence Khmère de Presse (Khmer Press Agency, AKP) broadcast on 11 November 1964 transcribed his glowing review of the ‘flourishing flowers of Sino–Cambodian friendship’ on his visit to the Khmer–China Friendship Textile Factory in Kampong Cham and the opening ceremony at the Kossamak–Liu Shaoqi Cement Factory, which honoured the PRC leader and Sihanouk’s mother. Ding referred to both as ‘symbols of Sino–Cambodian friendly cooperation’, which encapsulates the spirit behind the AAKC; so too did the vocal support for the ‘Patriotic and just war of the Cambodian People’ against US imperialism — at this point still a cold war — that *Renmin ribao* printed earlier that year.⁸¹ Sihanouk himself contributed to both

78 *RT AAKC* 1 (Jan. 1965), pp. 4–9, 14, 16–21, 46–7. On Ambassador Chen’s congratulations, see ‘Chen Shuliang dashi jianghua: Zan Jianrenmin qinlao jianguo [Ambassador Chen Shuliang praises Cambodian people’s industrious approach to developing the country]’, *MHRB*, 10 Sept. 1964. The same year, Mao received the Cambodian ambassador to the PRC Sisowath Sirik Matak (*Xisuowa*) for an afternoon discussion in early February. ‘Mao Zedong zhuxi jiejian Jianpuzhai zhuhua dashi [Chairman Mao Zedong receives Cambodia’s ambassador stationed in China]’, *MHRB*, 9 Feb. 1964.

79 See ‘Zhong–Jian renminde xintiaodong zai yiqi [The hearts of the peoples of China and Cambodia beat together]’, *MHRB*, 10 May 1960; ‘Rang Zhong Jian youyi zhihua yongyuan shengkai [Make the Chinese–Cambodian friendship flourish forever]’, *MHRB*, 7 Jan. 1961; and ‘Liu Shaoqi zhuxi fuhan Shiyantu yuanshou zhichu: Jian renmin fan–Mei douzheng bisheng [Liu Shaoqi states in reply to Cambodian Head of State Sihanouk: The Cambodian people’s opposition to US imperialism surely to succeed]’, *MHRB*, 29 Mar. 1964. Another newspaper, Singapore-based *Shenghuo ribao* [Life Daily], also expressed support for Cambodia’s neutrality: ‘Zai huanyinyan Xihanuke qinwang huishang [At the banquet of Prince Sihanouk]’, *Shenghuo ribao*, 18 Aug. 1958.

80 ‘Zhongguo zeng Jian junshiwuzi: Yijiao yishi longzhong juxing [China donates military supplies to Cambodia, ceremony held]’, *MHRB*, 16 Mar. 1964; ‘Zhongguo zhengque zhixing JianZhong maoyixieding [China and Cambodia finalise a trade agreement: Chinese experts’ approach will be noninterference in Cambodian domestic affairs]’, *MHRB*, 10 July 1964; and ‘Jian diantaping ZhongJianyouhao tiaoyuezhounian: ZhongJian jinmiyouyi shuoming wuxiangyuanze bing mosiwang [Cambodian radio broadcast on the anniversary of bilateral treaty: Inseparable Sino–Cambodian friendship united in commitment to five principles unto death]’, *MHRB*, 22 Dec. 1961. Sihanouk described the China–Cambodia bond at Bandung as a friendship brought about by ‘destiny’. See Norodom Sihanouk and Bernard Krisher, *Charisma and leadership: The human side of great leaders of the twentieth century* (Tokyo: Yohan, 1990), pp. 48, 82–3. Sihanouk made ‘five official visits to Beijing in eight years’: Zhang Xizhen, *Xihanuke jiazou* [The Sihanouk family] (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenpian chubanshe, 1996), p. 114.

81 ‘Zhichi Jianpuzhai renminde aiguo zhengyi zhanzheng [Support the patriotic and just war of the Cambodian people]’, *RMRB*, 17 Mar. 1964.

RT editions in January and September 1965 with essays that spoke to the importance both nations placed on Khmer–Chinese friendship. He even named the newly built avenue from Phnom Penh city to Pochentong (now Phnom Penh) Airport ‘Mao Zedong Avenue’ in 1965.⁸²

By 1967, Sihanouk’s enthusiasm for China–Cambodia exchanges was dead. He often blamed ‘Communists’ for any serious opposition to his regime and, in turn, foreigners (Vietnamese and/or Chinese) for instigating ‘red Khmers’. The AAKC’s increasing radicalism led Sihanouk to oppose the AAKC. He targeted the AAKC for its politicisation by China and expelled radicals linked to the association (Hu Nim and Hou Yuon specifically) from the National Assembly. He then disbanded the AAKC, citing Chinese interference, though in September he held a meeting in Chrey Vien, Kampong Cham, to listen to locals who objected to the move. In Sihanouk’s view, or at least what he claimed to perceive at the time, the Samlaut Rebellion by disgruntled peasants in Battambang province, student demonstrations, and criticism from leftist presses in Phnom Penh were contributing factors to his heavy-handedness.⁸³

Most of all, Sihanouk declared that China had shattered its treaty of friendship with Cambodia by interfering in Cambodian affairs. This ‘serious change’ in affairs was the CCP’s disregarding of its pledge of peaceful co-existence and the five principles that had been in force since Bandung. ‘China has changed [its] policy since the Cultural Revolution [began],’ Sihanouk charged. The PRC Embassy in Phnom Penh, in particular, operated as mission control for the production and dissemination of Cultural Revolution propaganda. It was right at the centre of all the action, distributing Maoist propaganda and urging local Chinese to ‘emulate the Red Guards’. It handed out money to the AAKC and involved itself publicly in local politics. For instance, after a May 1967 edition of the Phnom Penh newspaper *Khmer Akreach* decried the Cultural Revolution and accused the Embassy of subversion, the Embassy responded in defence of local Chinese participation in activities ‘that venerated Chairman Mao and demonstrated patriotic devotion to the motherland’, and claimed that the true subverters were Chiang Kai-shek supporters. A second response followed that again defended Overseas Chinese in Cambodia who ‘display[ed] their ardor for Mao by reading books and hanging portraits’: ‘This is the right of every Chinese ... [for] only those patriotic Chinese nationals who listen to Chairman Mao’s recommendations can constantly apply the friendly policy of the Chinese Government towards Cambodia.’⁸⁴ *Mianhua ribao* also played a fundamental role

82 ‘Gongtong zhiyuan pujian Mao Zedong dadao [Jointly support the construction of Mao Zedong Avenue], *MHRB*, 25 Dec. 1964; and Qiang Zhai, ‘Zhong-Jian “teshu guanxi” de xingcheng, 1954–1965 [The making of a special relationship between China and Cambodia, 1954–1965], *Nanyang wenti yanjiu* 1, 153 (2013): 12.

83 Hu Nim, ‘Chamlay Hu Nim Haphoa Krasuonkhosaneakar Ampi Bravot baksa seheyah [Confession of Hu Nim, alias Phoas, Minister of Information, on his time with the CIA], Tuol Sleng prison, 2 May 1977, p. 16, DC-Cam, Document no. D00067. For the fullest account, see Kiernan, ‘The Samlaut Rebellion’, pp. 166–205.

84 Melvin Gurtov, *China and Southeast Asia: The politics of survival* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), pp. 77–8.

in disseminating CCP propaganda, including the ‘Follow the achievements of Comrade Lei Feng’ (*xuexi Lei Feng tongzhi qi zhexie*) campaign that occurred after the model citizen’s premature death in 1962.⁸⁵

Local Chinese were active participants, encouraged by the Embassy, in stirring the Maoist pot in Phnom Penh. Their support for the fledgling Cambodian Communist movement followed. Already ‘well organised and with established ties to Beijing’, they served as a crucial link between the PRC capital and the emergent CPK.⁸⁶ Sihanouk began to criticise local Chinese for their involvement in radical activities. First, he lambasted the Cultural Revolution as ‘an erroneous policy’ and deplored the Red Guards for having ‘won contempt and not admiration’.⁸⁷ He targeted local Chinese who were, by his charge, committing crimes and consorting with the dreaded Vietnamese Communists. Such dealings, he continued, were a threat to Cambodia’s national sovereignty and economic prosperity. Sihanouk’s claim ignored the fact that the Vietnamese Communist Party was exceptionally wary of the Cultural Revolution, which to some extent pushed Hanoi closer to Moscow. Its leaders, too, were less than enthusiastic about cooperating with Cambodian Chinese proselytising Cultural Revolution ideology.

Nevertheless, in subsequent days, Sihanouk accused Sino-Khmers ‘who ... have remained very Chinese at heart’ of ‘busily circulating Communist publications in the schools, propagandising Communism in newspapers, movies, and the arts, and putting up wall posters Red Guard-style that were insulting to the Sangkum’.⁸⁸ His government then placed heavy sanctions on Chinese language schools, and imposed government control over existing curricula, teaching methods, and language training to curtail the rising popularity of Maoism. Sihanouk also deported Sino-Khmers for criminal activity, with his police placing the Sangkum’s panoptic gaze squarely on those he believed were potential, or at least suspected, Chinese leftists.⁸⁹ Ever the neutralist, however, Sihanouk took precautions not to blame China explicitly. After all, China was still an important economic and diplomatic ally to Cambodia. But the situation in Phnom Penh among local Chinese did not cool.

Sihanouk also claimed that a number of Khmer were ‘aiding’ China. He named Phouk Chhay as ‘*the fiercest amongst this small handful of people who aid China*’ and Hu Nim as ‘*the most dissolute and dishonest*’ among them. Then, at a 5 October 1967 press conference, Sihanouk threatened Hu Nim and Phouk Chhay openly: ‘In front of the people, I told [them] I would prepare two files ... I warned them that if they did not go to China, and if they continued their [activities], I would produce these files and they would have to face the military tribunal.’⁹⁰ Naturally, as we encounter

85 Chieu, *Wo yu Zhonggong he Jiangong chise huaren jiemi*, p. 36.

86 Zhou Zhongjian, ‘Zhanhou wushinian Jianpuzhai huarende quzhelicheng [The twists and turns of Cambodian Chinese in the fifty years after the war]’, *Nanyang wenti yanjiu* 1 (1996): 25.

87 Lee Khoo Choy, *Golden dragon and purple phoenix: The Chinese and their multi-ethnic descendants in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2013), p. 283.

88 Norodom Sihanouk, *Les paroles de Samdech Norodom Sihanouk* [The writings of Samdech Norodom Sihanouk] (Phnom Penh: Ministère de l’Information, 1969), pp. 328–9.

89 Chieu, *Wo yu Zhonggong he Jiangong chise huaren jiemi*, p. 44.

90 Kiernan, ‘The Samlaut Rebellion’, p. 181. Emphasis added. On Sihanouk’s citing Chinese interference, see Carney, ‘Continuity in Cambodian communism’, in *Communist Party power in Kampuchea*, pp. 14–15.

next, Phouk and his AAKC comrades drifted further towards radicalism and fled to the *maquis*.

Phouk Chhay's China connections through AGEK and AAKC paired with a white-hot political climate in Phnom Penh and the Cultural Revolution's popularity in radical circles to push him from activist-critic into radical Communist. His 1968 arrest for his activities as AGEK's president, and Sihanouk condemning him to death, serve as fitting climaxes. His release thereafter (in September 1969) led only to him joining the CPK, until his 1977 execution by his torturers in S-21.⁹¹ But before his two periods in jail, Phouk's home had been Phnom Penh, a networking boon for him. The once unimposing, flood-prone capital was by the mid-1960s a powder keg waiting to explode.

By the time of his 1965 graduation, Phouk Chhay was one such opponent who, although not calling for revolution, was a leading activist-critic in a city rife with radical foment. Phouk's AGEK avoided contesting Sihanouk despite the Phnom Penh student movement's 'anti-Sihanouk' orientation.⁹² It instead organised performances at the Chatomuk Auditorium (Salasanniseit Chatomuk), where Phouk and his peers 'conduct[ed] political activity through art'.⁹³ As the Phnom Penh movement's de facto leader, Phouk also spearheaded the abovementioned 1967 student demonstration after Hou Yuon and Khieu Samphan disappeared (presumed murdered by Sihanouk's police). Officially, the demonstration was to celebrate International Worker's Day. But it expanded rapidly after supporters of Khieu in Saang 'went to the National Assembly to demand, in the name of the people, the names of those responsible so that the government hands over the two deputies dead or alive'. Four days later, students at Choeung Chnok College in Hu Nim's district 'killed three of their teachers'. On 5 May, Kampong Cham mill workers, their supervisors, and local students from the University of Kampong Cham 'organised a demonstration, with banners and loudspeakers, accusing [Prime Minister] Lon Nol of kidnapping and for the presumed execution of Khieu Samphan and Hou Yuon'.⁹⁴

Sihanouk soon grew wary of AGEK and initiated a crackdown on radical associations. In 1967, he ordered AGEK's closure for 'subversive activities' after it recruited hundreds of 'militants', and branded its leader, Phouk, as 'a Red' at a meeting of student leaders in Phnom Penh.⁹⁵ Phouk was 'very shocked' at these developments: 'his [Sihanouk's] voice was being broadcast as he spoke to us. But I did not dare to dispute it or defend myself. My mother heard the broadcast and was very disturbed to hear my name.' Phouk was not the threat that Sihanouk envisioned. Although a vocal

91 Phouk, 'Seknae', p. 10; and Suong, *Itinéraire*, p. 490.

92 Hu, 'Chamlay', p. 14; and 'Confessions of Tuon Sok Phalla, alias Keuan (CMR167.3/TSA T3), Responses of Tuon Sok Phalla on contacts between Khuon and Phok Chhay' (11 Feb. 1977), pp. 1–6, cited in Stephen R. Heder, *Cambodian communism and the Vietnamese model Volume I: Imitation and independence, 1930–1975* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2004), pp. 103, 221. Hou and Hu 'work[ed] independently' of the underground CPK, 'but with other radical and reformist intellectuals in Phnom Penh to organize students, teachers, civil servants, technocrats, businessmen and workers against the Sangkum regime. They were tapping some of the same social and political currents the Party was trying to use as a recruiting base.'

93 Martin, *Le mal Cambodgien*, p. 109. See also Hu, 'Chamlay', p. 14.

94 Ben Kiernan, 'Le révolte de Samlaut, 1967–1968', in Thion and Kiernan, *Khmers Rouges!*, p. 109.

95 Martin, *Le mal Cambodgien*, p. 114.

critic, China-curious radical intellectual and ranking member in leftist student associations, it never occurred to him to launch a genuine anti-government movement at this stage in his life. ‘I was not really against him [Sihanouk],’ Phouk recalls, ‘but I began to realise that you could not speak honestly to him. He did not wish to hear.’⁹⁶

AGEK and AAKC held anti-imperialist viewpoints that due to their close affiliation with China were also anti-revisionist, whereas Sihanouk preferred to maintain ties with both Beijing and Moscow. Sihanouk did not wish to allow the Chinese to undermine his ties with Moscow and potentially jeopardise Soviet aid. He had no reason to oppose Moscow on ideological grounds and disapproved of Chinese propaganda to that end in Cambodia. Around the same time, Hu Nim had finished an economics dissertation in which he referenced Mao’s works extensively.⁹⁷ Although it is a stretch to say that Phouk was Maoist by this point, he was unarguably anti-imperialist and, as the AAKC remained in operation, becoming increasingly intrigued by China.

China-curiosity would only grow stronger among Cambodian radicals by the mid-1960s in Phnom Penh, as Cultural Revolution enthusiasm spread rapidly among local Chinese. Cambodia’s *huaqiao* (7.5 per cent of the population) had formed over generations ‘an intrinsic and important part of the Cambodian plural society’, and the PRC Embassy in Phnom Penh, the AAKC, five Chinese language newspapers (notably *Mianhua ribao*), and Chinese trainers to the Cambodian military all contributed to Phnom Penh’s radical atmosphere.⁹⁸ Beijing contributed to propping up *Mianhua ribao* and, by extension, enthusiasm for the PRC, rather directly. Many Cambodian *huaqiao* originated from Chaozhou, so Beijing sent its deputy mayor, Wang Kunlun, to lead the Guangdong Chaozhou Opera Troup to perform the drama *Meeting among the reeds* (*Lu Lin Hui*) in Phnom Penh in the winter of 1960. Wang then published a lengthy poem in *Mianhua ribao*, and as Vita Chieu intimates, Wang’s ‘literary style gave a face to *Mianhua ribao* and won over many new readers’.⁹⁹

Cultural Revolution-style fervour followed, as China’s ‘Red Guard diplomacy’ between October 1967 and May 1968 spread like wildfire. A Phnom Penh-based newspaper reported that Overseas Chinese held demonstrations outside the Soviet embassy and elsewhere, Mao badges were popular among soldiers, and Chinese-language newspapers published Cultural Revolution propaganda frequently. Chinese aid experts waved ‘freely available’ French-language versions (no Khmer

96 Emerson, ‘After prison in Cambodia’.

97 French-language editions available to Khmer students in Paris included: Mao Tsé-toung, *La nouvelle Démocratie* [On New Democracy] (Paris: Editions sociales, 1951); or Mao Tsé-toung, *La nouvelle Démocratie* (Beijing: People’s Press, 1952). On Communist reading groups, see Kiernan, *How Pol Pot came to power*, p. 120; Chandler, *Brother Number One*, pp. 26, 33; and Short, *Pol Pot*, p. 50. On French versions of Mao’s works as *Cercle* materials, see Sher, ‘Le parcours politique des Khmers Rouges’, pp. 78, 121.

98 On the *huaqiao* in Cambodia, see William Willmott, *The Chinese in Cambodia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), pp. 10–11.

99 Chieu, *Wo yu Zhonggong he Jiangong chise huaren jiemi*, p. 36. Wang’s poem was entitled ‘Third Daughter’s resentment’ (*San Niang Yuan*), which references the *Lu Lin Hui* drama wherein the main character, Jiang Shi, heeds his mother’s demands and tells his wife, Pang Sanniang, to return to her parents’ home. She does so, and then one day, meets Jiang among the reeds of a river as she searches for fish to give to her mother-in-law.

editions existed at that time) of *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong* (*Mao zhuxi yulu*). Little Red Books ‘abounded among high school students and younger Buddhist monks’.¹⁰⁰ Khmer youths wore Mao badges, and students ‘emulate[ed] the Red Guards’ by posting large wall posters that criticized the Sihanouk government.’ One local Chinese teacher in Phnom Penh, Huy Huynh, taught Mao Zedong Thought at his high school, and the government threatened the closure of Chinese community-run schools for doing the same.¹⁰¹

China’s Red Guard diplomacy unsettled previously fraternal China–Cambodia relations during the first decade of Cambodian independence. ‘Long Live the China–Cambodia Friendship’ (*Zhong-Jian youhao wansui*) proclaimed an issue of *Mianhua ribao* the day after Sihanouk’s arrival in Beijing in 1964.¹⁰² Mutual interest in each other’s cultures led to the AACC’s formation. In fact, the relationship was so warm that it saw the establishment of two China-curious friendship associations between the two non-aligned countries, the first of which was the AACC (founded in Beijing, December 1960).

At that stage, the AACC’s formation raised no red flags for the neutral Sihanouk.¹⁰³ He was pro-China, but not ideologically Maoist. As long as China supported his neutrality and granted aid, he had no reason to feel alarmed. His good friend, Zhou Enlai, provided reassurance on a May 1960 visit to Phnom Penh to meet with Chinese community representatives. After arriving, Zhou ‘emphasized the importance of following local law and reassured the Cambodians that the new [PRC] embassy would not be encouraging the creation of a “fifth column”’.¹⁰⁴

That same month, Zhou also declared the PRC government’s firm support for Cambodia at a welcome meeting in Phnom Penh. He reiterated that China would, as always, support Cambodia’s right to defend its independence, and by the end of his visit the two sides issued a ‘Joint Statement’ that condemned the use of force by any of Cambodia’s neighbours. Per the Joint Statement, neither country would infringe on each other’s sovereignty and would not participate in a military alliance (namely with the US) against the other.¹⁰⁵ It was only when the Cultural

100 Chandler, *The tragedy of Cambodian history*, p. 347.

101 Short, *Pol Pot*, pp. 179–80.

102 “‘Zhong-Jian youhao wansui’: Huan husheng xiangche yunxiao [‘Long live the China–Cambodia friendship’: Cheers rang through the heavens as Prince Sihanouk reaches Beijing yesterday]”, *MHRB*, 28 Sept. 1964.

103 See ‘Zhong-Jian youhao guanxi dashiji’ [Chronicle of China–Cambodia friendly relations], *MHRB*, 1 Jan. 1961; Norodom Sihanouk, ‘Message de SAR le Prince Norodom Sihanouk à la radiodiffusion chinoise’ [Message from HRH Prince Norodom Sihanouk to Chinese broadcasting], 1956, NAC, Box 689, ID unknown, pp. 1–2; Norodom Sihanouk, ‘Pour nous, Cambodgiens, la Chine est bien notre amie numero un [For us Cambodians, China is definitely our number one friend]’, in MI, *RT AAKC* 1 (Jan. 1965), p. 8; Pei Jianzhang, *Zhongguo renmin gongheguo waijiaoshi*, 1945–1966 [Diplomatic history of the People’s Republic of China, 1949–1956] (Beijing: Shijie zhishi Chubanshe, 1994), pp. 147–52; and Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiaobu waijiao shipian, *Zhongguo waijiao gailan* [Overview of Chinese diplomacy] (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 1987), p. 59.

104 Zheng Xinbin, ‘Jianpuzhai Huaqiao jiji zhichi dangdijianshe [Cambodian Overseas Chinese actively support local construction]’, *Dongnanya yanjiu ziliao* 1 (1965): 48, cited in Richardson, *China, Cambodia, and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence*, p. 50. See also ‘Zhou Enlai zongli jiejian zai Jianpuzhaide Huaqiao [Premier Zhou Enlai received by Overseas Chinese in Cambodia]’, *Xihuashe*, 7 May 1960, on Zhou addressing Cambodian Chinese.

105 Qiang Zhai, ‘Zhou Enlai yu Zhong-Jian hezuo guanxide jianli [Zhou Enlai and the establishment of

Revolution led the CCP to pushing Maoism in Cambodia, where Sihanouk and his administration did not welcome it, that the China–Cambodia relationship cooled. In the Cambodian head of state’s perspective, the CCP’s behaviour in Cambodia from the onset of the Cultural Revolution represented a betrayal of Sino–Cambodian friendship.

The AACC was an important precursor to a Cambodia-based, China-curious iteration in which Cambodian radicals could convene, share ideas, and participate in cultural diplomatic exchanges. Many of Phouk’s mentors served in the AACC in important capacities. Khieu Samphan, for one, was on its press and periodicals sub-committee, which brought him into contact with correspondents for Xinhua News Agency (Xinhuashe), China’s state agency.¹⁰⁶ This was important because, well into the early 1990s, most Xinhuashe offices were located in Chinese embassies, and enabled associations to foster commercial ties with other countries and expand Chinese interests outside existing relations. The AACC fostered ties with Vietnam and Laos through cultural diplomacy, and moved to Cambodia thereafter.¹⁰⁷ AACC President Tsi Ya-Min anointed its Phnom Penh branch, the AAKC, and the inauguration of its *Quarterly Review*, in this spirit. He declared, ‘May our warm hearts accompany the birth of the AAKC’s *Review*, and the fighting friendship between the Chinese people and the Khmer people grow and strengthen daily in the common struggle against American imperialism and for the defence of world peace.’¹⁰⁸ PRC Vice Minister of the Ministry of Culture and Vice Chairman of the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship Ding Xilin (1893–1974) also declared that the ‘China–Cambodia friendship was eternal (*ZhongJian youyi wanguchangqing*)!’¹⁰⁹ Soon, the AACC and AAKC leaderships met regularly with Chinese and Cambodian government representatives to participate in bilateral delegations, with Phouk Chhay participating in his ranking capacity as an AAKC leader.

The AACC and AAKC made significant political overtures. At the AACC’s First National Congress in 1961, its leadership issued an official statement — parts of which *Mianhua ribao* published in a 29 May issue — that ‘indicated something of a political agenda, as it congratulated Cambodia’s neutrality, peace, and independence

cooperative relations between China and Cambodia]’, *Nankai xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* 1 (2014): 27–8; and Zhai, ‘Zhong-Jian “teshu guanxi” de xingcheng’, pp. 7–8. On the 1960 Joint Statement of support, see ‘Zhong-Jian liangguo lianhe shengming zi Jinbian qianzi [China and Cambodia sign joint statement in Phnom Penh]’, *Xinhuashe*, 9 May 1960. See also ‘Zhou zongli qian wanhui jizhe: Qianze qin Jian daoyu xingwei, zhichu Jain ru shou qin ce Zhongguodingyu zhichi [Premier Zhou Enlai to a reporter at an evening event condemns the aggression against Cambodian islands and points out that if Cambodia is aggressed upon, China will support it]’, *MHRB*, 10 May 1960; and ‘Zhong-Jian youyi qingshen sihai [The China–Cambodia friendship is as deep as the sea]’, *MHRB*, 11 May 1960.

106 Timothy Carney, ‘Unexpected victory’, in Jackson, *Cambodia, 1975–1978*, p. 32.

107 Sophie Richardson, *China, Cambodia, and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 50, 52.

108 Tsi Ya-Min, ‘*Prasapousa chophear ne Sameakom Mittpheap Khmer-Chen* [Blessings to the Khmer–Chinese friendship association]’, *RT AAKC* 1 (Jan. 1965), p. 9.

109 Ding Xilin, ‘*Prasapousa chophear ne Sameakom Mittpheap Khmer-Chen*’, *RT AAKC* 1 (Jan. 1965), p. 10.

and condemned the “imperialist forces” of Thailand and Vietnam.¹¹⁰ In the AAKC’s first year in Phnom Penh (1964), members Khieu Samphan, Hu Nim, and Hou Yuon encouraged Sihanouk to ‘strengthen the relationship with Beijing’.¹¹¹ A 22 October 1965 issue of *Peking Review* (*Beijing zhoubao*) provides evidence of an October 1965 AACC delegation led by AAKC Vice President Hu Nim, which was welcomed by then-CCP First Vice Chairman Liu Shaoqi and Premier Zhou Enlai. Hu Nim’s banquet speech, which *Peking Review* transcribed, shows where both associations stood politically and ideologically:

US imperialism and its stooges are not all happy to see a close a friendship between Cambodia and China. But this is a good thing. *Future developments will further prove the correctness of Chairman Mao Tse-tung’s thesis that the East wind is prevailing over the West wind.* The anti-imperialist forces of the East are bound to defeat the imperialist forces of the West.¹¹²

Sihanouk did not condemn Hu Nim’s comments, but he later attacked Hu publicly for his China ties and targeted him specifically through ‘increasingly threatening invective’.¹¹³ Such opening volleys prompted Hu to flee to the *maquis* in October 1967 to join the Cambodian Communist movement.

Hu Nim’s mentee Phouk Chhay joined him on this visit to China in 1965 at the urging of the AACC-AAKC in the spirit of cultural diplomacy.¹¹⁴ Both visited Beijing as heads of a youth delegation, and Phouk may have visited Beijing again (alone) in 1966 on his way to other Communist countries. By his own account in a 1970 interview, he visited Moscow, Havana, and Prague in 1966 as part of a ‘Government delegation’.¹¹⁵ The fact that Phouk visited all of these countries in the same year shows clearly that Sihanouk was trying to maintain a balance between the Chinese and Soviets, as Cuba and Czechoslovakia were both in the Soviet camp.

Phouk’s ‘confession’ also noted that his employer, Chau Seng, sent him to Havana as part of a journalists’ delegation in July 1966. He recounts that he returned to Phnom Penh with writings by Che Guevara and other Cuban revolutionary

110 Richardson, *China, Cambodia, and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence*, p. 50; and ‘Jian-Zhong youhao xiehui zhangcheng cao’an’.

111 Justin Corfield, *Khmers stand up! A history of the Cambodian government, 1970–1975*, Monash University Centre of Southeast Asian Studies Papers on Southeast Asia no. 32 (1994), p. 38.

112 ‘Premier Chou on Sino-Cambodian friendship’, *Peking Review*, 22 Oct 1965, p. 15. Emphasis added. Zhou visited Cambodia months earlier to an ‘enthusiastic welcome’. ‘Zhou zongli zuochen di Jian shou kongqian relie huanyin [Premier Zhou arrived in Cambodia yesterday morning and received an unprecedented warm welcome]’, *MHRB*, 6 May 1960.

113 Carney, ‘Biographical sketches’, in *Communist Party power in Kampuchea*, p. 64. On warm China–Cambodia relations between 1954 and 1965, see Zhai, ‘Zhou Enlai yu Zhong-Jian hezuo guanxide jianli’, pp. 24–32.

114 Richardson, *China, Cambodia, and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence*, p. 52. On precursor events to the AACC’s founding, notably a treaty of mutual non-aggression and diplomatic exchange, see ‘Zhong-Jian youhao guanxi xinde lichengbei: Zhong-Jian youhao he hubuqinfan tiaoyue shengxiao [China–Cambodia friendly relations reach a new milestone: China–Cambodia friendship and nonaggression treaty takes effect]’, *Xiamen ribao*, 4 May 1961; and ‘Zhu Zhong-Jian renmin youyiru ri yue yongheng [Wish the friendship between the Chinese and Cambodian peoples springs eternal]’, *Xiamen ribao*, 4 May 1961.

115 Emerson, ‘After prison in Cambodia’.

materials that he regarded as having currency in the Cambodian historical situation. Guevara's writings on guerrilla warfare, in particular, struck a sympathetic chord with his AGEK comrades Chhun Sok Nguon, Tuon Sok Phalla, Mav Run, and Mao Sakhan, who Phouk names in his 'confession'. Evidently, in mid-1966 Phouk was at least entertaining the idea that a stronger Leftist opposition would be necessary to challenge Sihanouk, and searching actively among famous revolutionary writings for inspiration.¹¹⁶

Phouk's trip to China in 1965, above all other sojourns, reified his China-curiosity of years past. Sources that discuss his trip are scarce, but his 1977 'confession' states that he returned to Phnom Penh enthused by what he witnessed in Beijing. 'I have to admit that at this time [1965–1966] my revolutionary vision was not very clear, but when I witnessed the Chinese implement the Cultural Revolution I began to believe and love their way of doing things ...'¹¹⁷ Phouk does not discuss what precisely about the Cultural Revolution's implementation captured his imagination; he only spent time in Beijing and, thus, would not have witnessed its rural effects. It was likely the mass enthusiasm and criticism of the Soviets that spurred it.

Importantly, though, Phouk states in his 'confession' that his interest in Maoist China was individualist, and in contravention to the CPK's political line: 'my thought and feelings contradicted the party directions'.¹¹⁸ It is entirely possible that his affinity with a foreign ideology had fallen out of vogue in the CPK by the time of his second imprisonment, at their hands. As his jailor, Kaing Kek Iev (Comrade Duch) reflected, the CPK's thought was *Polpotist* rather than Maoist because under Pol Pot's leadership the ideology centred on him. Polpotism, he elaborates, broke from Marxism-Leninism's emphasis on proletarian leadership (in practice) and re-interpreted Maoist class analysis into recognising only workers and peasants.¹¹⁹ This may explain why CPK figures like Hou Yuon, Hu Nim, Phouk Chhay, and Keo Meas all became targets in the CPK's *Vernichtungsschlacht*.¹²⁰

A less enthusiastic account of a 1970 visit to China by Phouk's contemporary Suong Sikœun provides some indication of what Phouk may have witnessed during his visit and, possibly, inspired his fascination. As Suong recounted, his

stay in Beijing coincided with the latter stage of the Cultural Revolution. Often, huge demonstrations led by hundreds of thousands of people roamed the streets of the Chinese capital. These overexcited human masses shouted slogans that praised the glory

116 Phouk, 'Seknae', 18 Mar. 1977, p. 16; and 20 Mar. 1977, p. 21. Also cited in Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), 'Phok Chhay: Democrat or communist?', https://www.eccc.gov.kh/sites/default/files/documents/courtdoc/2015-06-11%2012:05/E3_1878_EN.PDF (accessed 18 May 2020). Suong Sikœun also visited Havana in January 1971 as part of a Cambodian journalists' delegation. Suong, *Itinéraire*, pp. 122–6.

117 Phouk, 'Seknae', 15 Mar. 1977, p. 9.

118 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

119 Alexander L. Hinton, *Man or monster? The trial of a Khmer Rouge torturer* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 114.

120 See Stephen R. Heder, 'Khmer Rouge opposition to Pol Pot: "Pro-Vietnamese" or "pro-Chinese"', in *Reflections on Cambodian political history: Background to recent developments*, ed. S.R. Heder (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, 1991), p. 8, quoting Keo Meas documents (25 Sept. 1976), pp. 8–10.

of Mao and launched invective against ‘US imperialists’, Soviet socialist-imperialists and revisionists’, and ‘bourgeois elements infiltrating the Party’.

This description of China’s appeal also yields some insight on why Cultural Revolution-era China captured Cambodian radicals’ collective imagination:

For Cambodian revolutionaries, China represented a model and an inspiration. Like Cambodia, China belonged to the poor, developing Third World, with a predominantly peasant population. Thus the path of the Cambodian revolution to reach final victory could not be different from that of Chinese revolution, which triumphed on 1 October 1949.¹²¹

Although nearby Vietnam represented a more suitable, and realistic, model because of its similar size and shared colonial experience, China’s model appealed because there was no historical baggage.

Suong’s account bears a striking resemblance to Hu Nim’s description of his 1963–64 visit as a journalist for the Sihanoukist daily *Neak Cheatniyum* (The Nationalist), whereupon the Beijing-based AACC urged him to found the AAKC. He visited again in 1965 for 15 days as the leader of a delegation of AAKC members, including Vann Tip Sovan, Sam Chaing, Ol Chan, Svay Borei, Phy Thean Lay, and Eap Kim Phan. His ‘leftist activities’ soon captured the attention of prominent Chinese political figures, and he met with Premier Zhou Enlai and President Liu Shaoqi.¹²² Afterward, Hu wrote favourably of Maoist China in his 1965 dissertation, and an *RT* article he possibly penned himself lauded Mao’s leadership and characterised US imperialism as that of a ‘paper tiger’.¹²³ As Hu recalled, the Chinese ‘felt [so] secure with my activities’ that the AACC in Beijing sent their director, Ding Xilin, to ‘participate in the inaugural ceremony of our association, which was held in the Theater of Phnom Penh’.¹²⁴

Also a Beijing visitor, Phouk’s future boss Pol Pot visited in December 1965–January 1966 as a delegation leader of the CPK’s predecessor organisation, the Worker’s Party of Kampuchea (Konabaksaa polokor Kampuchea, WPK). He stayed at the Asia-Africa-Latin America Training Centre (Ya-Fei-La Peixun zhongxin), although beyond that detail, as with Phouk’s trip, much is unknown. Pol Pot recalled that the CCP welcomed him warmly.¹²⁵ Mao praised a translated version of his

121 Suong, *Itinéraire*, pp. 115–21. For another account of a CPK figure’s visit to Beijing, see Huot Sambath, ‘Confessions of Huot Sambath’, pp. 9–12 (10 Sept. 1976) *Monash Collections Online*, <http://repository.monash.edu/items/show/1292> (accessed 27 May 2020).

122 Hu, ‘Chamlay’, pp. 12–13. See also ‘Visite de la délégation de l’association d’amitié Chine-Cambodge [Visit of the AACC delegation]’, 4–12 Sept. 1964, in MI, *RT AAKC* 1 (Jan. 1965), pp. 23–47.

123 ‘A son excellence monsieur Leng-Ngeth, Président de l’association d’amitié Khméro-Chinoise [To his Excellency, Mr Leng Ngeth, president of the AAKC]’, Beijing, 2 Dec. 1964, in MI, *RT AAKC* 1 (Jan. 1965), p. 40; and Ding Xilin, ‘Nouvelles victoires du Peuple Cambodgien (New victories of the Cambodian people)’, in MI, *RT AAKC* 1 (Jan. 1965), p. 46. Leng Ngeth was the former Cambodian ambassador to Beijing, and although he was the AAKC President, Hu Nim led the Association.

124 Hu, ‘Chamlay’, p. 12. See also Ding Xilin, ‘Nouvelles victoires du Peuple Cambodgien’, in MI, *RT AAKC* 1 (Jan. 1965), pp. 46–7.

125 Pol Pot, interview with Cai Ximei, Phnom Penh, May 1984 (unpublished); and Zhang, *Xihanuke jiazu*, p. 154.

Cambodia programme, and CCP Politburo member Kang Sheng touted him as the ‘true voice of the Cambodian revolution’ and a force against the ‘reactionary’ Sihanouk.¹²⁶ ‘Our Chinese friends,’ Pol Pot said, ‘whole-heartedly supported our political line, for they were then battling revisionism at a time when classes were struggling with each other at the international level.’ He returned to Cambodia in 1966 enthused by a visit that strengthened his ideas about Maoist armed struggle, and committed to the Chinese brand of revolution.¹²⁷

It is not a stretch to say that Phouk left China equally impressed by his hosts, and the deteriorating Sihanouk–China relationship provided the impetus for radicalisation. Much had transpired since Sihanouk declared that China was ‘our number one friend, and the number one friend of all peoples of Asia, Latin American, and Africa’.¹²⁸ Sihanouk now blamed the rise of radicalism on China’s interference in Cambodian domestic affairs, was ‘distressed by news that the Little Red Book was popular’, and imprisoned or ordered the execution of China-curious students.¹²⁹ He also became suspicious of Chinese journals, which declared that Cambodian workers now ‘believed in Chairman Mao’, while Zhou Enlai’s plea for Chinese ‘to display their pride of the Cultural Revolution and their love for Chairman Mao’ caused local Chinese in Phnom Penh to mimic Cultural Revolution fervour.¹³⁰ Aware of the Beijing link to leftist intellectuals in Paris and Phnom Penh, Sihanouk urged China to cease its interference in Cambodian domestic affairs. He targeted the AAKC specifically for ‘organis[ing] an exposition, and certain guides whom it recruited for visitors unjustly criticized our regime’.¹³¹ All signs pointed to a government crackdown, and Phouk Chhay and his AAKC comrades must have known that they now had targets on their backs.

Après ça, le déluge: Phouk Chhay becomes a communist guerrilla, 1967–77

On 1 September 1967, Sihanouk ordered the AAKC’s dissolution, accusing it of consorting with the CPK as its fifth column. The next day, the Head of State accused ex-AAKC leaders Phouk Chhay, Hu Nim, and Hou Yuon of spearheading pro-China

126 John Byron and Robert Pack, *The claws of the dragon: Kang Sheng — the evil genius behind Mao — and his legacy of terror in People’s China* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), pp. 356–7. Pol Pot spoke to his hosts through an interpreter because he did not speak Chinese. ‘Renwu jieshao: Bo’er Bote, Qiao Senpan, Ying Sali (Introduction: Pol Pot, Khieu Samphan, and Ieng Sary)’, *Dongnanya yanjiu ziliao* 1 (1979): 92; and Galway, ‘From revolutionary culture to original culture and back’, pp. 144–5.

127 ‘Excerpts from the document entitled “Pol Pot presents the Cambodian Party’s experiences to Khamtan, the Secretary General of the Communist Party of Thailand: Informal talks held in August 1977”’, trans. Thomas Engelbert [Hanoi: Thu Vien Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 1977], p. 23. On the Pol Pot–China connection, see Galway, ‘From revolutionary culture to original culture and back’, pp. 132–58.

128 Sihanouk, ‘Pour nous, Cambodgiens, la Chine est bien notre amie numero un’, in MI, *RT AAKCI* (Jan. 1965), p. 8; and ‘Gaomian renmin he Zhongguo renmin laobukepode youyi he tuanjie wansui: Xihanuke qinwang fabiao heci zhuhe woguo guoqing [Long live the unbreakable Cambodian and Chinese peoples’ friendship: Prince Sihanouk delivers a congratulatory message to celebrate China’s national day]’, *RMRB*, 30 Sept. 1964.

129 Chandler, *Brother Number One*, p. 83.

130 Chieu, *Wo yu Zhonggong he Jiangong chise huaren jiemi*, p. 37. See also Chandler, *The tragedy of Cambodian history*, pp. 169–70.

131 Sihanouk, *Les paroles*, p. 363.

demonstrations and anti-government activities. Sihanouk named China and Hu Nim specifically:

At present I find that China has made a serious change because she has given up peaceful coexistence and the five principles. China had changed her policy since the Cultural Revolution. There have been a number of Khmer who aid China ... The most dissolute and dishonest is Hu Nim.¹³²

Despite Hu's pledge of loyalty, which he delivered to rebuff allegations that he and other leftists had initiated the Samlaut Rebellion, Sihanouk responded by branding Hu as a Communist and urging him to flee to the jungle. He also rejected Hu's plea for the AAKC's restoration.¹³³ Phouk responded to Sihanouk's strong-arm tactics by organising the aforementioned protest.

One of his employers, *La Nouvelle Dépêche*, took to the offensive against Sihanouk's move against a powerful country with strong Leftist credentials. As news of the AAKC's ban reached Beijing via Xinhua on 4 September, CCP officials in charge of AACC delivered a cable that, besides celebrating the AAKC's anniversary, stated 'in barely veiled terms' that Sihanouk's government was 'reactionary'.¹³⁴ As the cable read:

Imperialism, revisionism, and reactionism [all] fear and hate this friendship and solidarity, seeking a thousand and one ways to sow discord and sabotage. In doing so they stupidly 'lift a rock to drop on their own feet' ... They are bound to fail.

Chau Seng, then Economics Minister and editor at *La Nouvelle Dépêche*, or Phouk himself, published the Chinese telegram a mere three days later on 9 September.¹³⁵

At that, Sihanouk's patience snapped. His once-trusted friend in China, as he saw it, had undermined his authority. China's 'extraordinary interference' in Cambodia's sovereign affairs by sending its now-defunct organisation 'militant greetings' on its anniversary, he charged, served only to exacerbate the situation, as the Samlaut Rebellion was under way and the PRC's popularity among radicals instilled in Sihanouk a fear of 'ideological invasion'.¹³⁶

Hardly one to stand pat, Sihanouk fired Hu Nim from his ministerial post and ordered Phouk Chhay's arrest in October 1967, which delivered the final push towards Phouk's radicalisation. Sihanouk also shuttered all non-government, radical, and Chinese-language newspapers, including the Xinhua bureau in the Chinese Embassy, which left only the state-run Agence Khmère de Presse (AKP), and he recalled the entire Cambodian Embassy staff in Beijing. In a futile, but noble effort, Hu petitioned on behalf of his constituents for Sihanouk to reinstate the AAKC.

132 Kiernan, 'The Samlaut Rebellion', p. 181. See also Chieu, *Wo yu Zhonggong he Jiangong chise huaren jiemi*, pp. 44–5. Another Chinese source insisted that renewed Sino-Cambodian relations would 'give the gift of struggle'. Zhang, *Xihanuke jiazou*, p. 161.

133 Chieu, *Wo yu Zhonggong he Jiangong chise huaren jiemi*, p. 45.

134 Short, *Pol Pot*, p. 180.

135 Kiernan, *How Pol Pot came to power*, p. 263.

136 Sihanouk, *Les paroles*, pp. 674–7, 718. See also Hu, 'Chamlay', pp. 17–18; and Tie Ge, *Zhulang meihe: Hongse Gaomian shilu* [Waves through the Mekong River: A faithful record of the Khmer Rouge], vol. 2 (Hong Kong: Ming Pao, 2008), pp. 487–503.

Sihanouk replied, in person, in Kampong Cham (Hu's electorate): 'You are no longer a Cambodian. You have completely betrayed the people by using [them] to oppose your state and nation. This is treason.'¹³⁷

Next, Sihanouk came for Phouk in a veritable *casus belli* since, at that point, Phouk identified with leftists but was not yet ready to band with the CPK because of his prominence. Sihanouk's order for his arrest pushed him over the edge. He was already rather tense. As Phouk recalls, before his October 1967 arrest he and his wife 'were told there might be an American invasion. The Government asked us to take all steps against an attack in Phnompenh by American bombers, so we built trenches.'¹³⁸ In fact, Sihanouk had ramped up surveillance of Phouk and, later, demanded his arrest.

On the night of 10 October 1967, Phouk was eating dinner with his wife and younger brother in his apartment when at 8.15 pm Sihanouk's police arrived and accosted him. He did not know why they came that night; he was then an employee in the credit department of a large Phnom Penh bank after leaving his ministerial post over his frustration with rampant corruption. He remembers,

It was, a strange moment in my life. The police captain even saluted me. He had about 30 men with him — in the hall and outside the building. My wife was paralyzed [with fear]. I was wearing a *sarong*, as I always do when I am home, and I asked if I could change my clothes. Then left.¹³⁹

Sihanouk remarked at a 1967 press conference that before departing, the 'pro-Red' Phouk 'burned' some documents to prevent them from seizure. As Sihanouk states further: 'He certainly burned extremely compromising documents ... It is true that he [Phouk Chhay] burned much of himself ... as a traitor.' Phouk waited another six months for sentencing before a military tribunal. Sihanouk was scornful of Phouk and his comrades for having 'considered [him] a dog, a poor fellow', and for having ridiculed him.¹⁴⁰ He charged Phouk with 'treason and an attempt against the security of the state' and condemned him to death, after which he was imprisoned for 23 months and 15 days in total at nearby Kirirom.

Phouk remained in solitary confinement and endured dreadful conditions:

The cell was like something from the Middle Ages, an ordinary person could not imagine it nor could I ever have dreamed that such places exist ... My ankles were chained together. I slept on the floor and the bedbugs fed upon me. There was no window, no light at all. I was awakened at 7 o'clock in the morning and given something to eat three hours later. The other meal — it was dinner — was at 4 pm. Then there was nothing else until the following day.¹⁴¹

137 Chandler, *The tragedy of Cambodian history*, pp. 170–71. See also Phouk, 'Seknae', 15 Mar. 1977, p. 10. The AAKC re-emerged as the Sangkum-run National Committee for Khmer-Chinese Friendship (Comité National pour l'Amitié Khmero-Chinoise) with Penn Nouth as president.

138 Emerson, 'After prison in Cambodia'.

139 Ibid.

140 Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Daily Report, 'Sihanouk conditionally extends UN mission', 27 Oct. 1967, FBIS-FRB-67-210, p. 0010.

141 Emerson, 'After prison in Cambodia'.

Phouk was released upon a late 1969 personal appeal of his wife to Queen Kossamak, a ‘deeply religious woman who [was] interested in doing kindly acts.’¹⁴² Phouk had pled to Kossamak some months after his arrest, in 1968, and in Sihanouk’s words, ‘[i]t is only out of deference to Her Majesty the Queen that he is being permitted to survive for now ... I refuse to authorise his release, and if he escapes from prison, he will be shot.’¹⁴³ Despite Kossamak’s appeal, Phouk only left Kirirom in either February or April 1970, and when he did he left as a different man.¹⁴⁴

Phouk could not return to work, and with both of his associations dissolved by government decree, he became dependent on others to survive. ‘I am very broke now,’ he recalled. ‘My wife works and my brother, an engineer for the Ministry of Public Works, lives with us and helps support us. I would like to work in the Government now and I have applied. But I need a little more rest. It is hard to return to normalcy and to wipe out the memory of what happened to me.’¹⁴⁵ Such was indeed the case, as Phouk never returned to normalcy after his release from prison. Despite Sihanouk goading him (and other ‘worth something’ leftists) to ‘come and take over if he thinks he can function as our [Cambodia’s] president’ and to ‘let Cambodia be red Cambodia’, he never had the chance to respond to the Prince’s challenge.¹⁴⁶

Indeed, Phouk’s release from Kirirom coincided with China’s denouncement of the right-wing Khmer Republic established by Lon Nol and the beginning of the CPK’s armed struggle to topple that government (1970–75). The PRC condemned Lon Nol’s CIA-backed bloodless coup in 1970, and severed relations with the Khmer Republic. The PRC Embassy in Phnom Penh, Vita Chieu recalls, ‘informed Overseas Chinese cadres that they had orders to go to the “Liberated Zones” to participate in the Cambodian revolution, and await Chinese and Cambodian parties to negotiate a future settlement of affairs’.¹⁴⁷ In a city now more polarised between extremes than ever, Phouk sided ideologically and politically with the CPK, whose benefactor had been the CCP after Sihanouk’s overthrow.¹⁴⁸ Phouk fled to the *maquis* in July 1970 and joined the CPK movement by May 1971. He initially lost contact with Uch Ven and Poc Deuskomar, who fled in 1968, but he met with Touch Phoun in April 1970, donated his savings of 20,000 riels from his time at the State

142 Ibid.

143 FBIS Daily Report, ‘Sihanouk stresses merits of neutrality’, 21 May 1968, FBIS-FRB-68-100, p. H2.

144 On Phouk’s February release, see ECCC, ‘Phok Chhay: Democrat or communist?’. On his April release, see Kiernan, *How Pol Pot came to power*, p. 313; and David P. Chandler, Ben Kiernan and Chanthou Boua, eds, *Pol Pot plans the future: Confidential leadership documents from Democratic Kampuchea, 1976–1977* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, Center for International and Area Studies, Monograph Series 33, 1988), p. 337.

145 Emerson, ‘After prison in Cambodia’. See also FBIS Daily Report, ‘Sihanouk defends executions of Khmer reds’, 4 June 1968, FBIS-FRB-68-111; and Kiernan, ‘Le révolte de Samlaut, 1967–1968’, p. 120.

146 FBIS Daily Report, ‘Sihanouk views Red takeover, corruption, US’, 29 Apr. 1968, FBIS-FRB-68-084.

147 Chieu, *Wo yu Zhonggong he Jiangong chise huaren jiemi*, p. 52. Vorn Vet recalled that Comrade Khmao corresponded with the Chinese and Vietnamese before Lon Nol’s coup. Vorn, ‘Confession’, p. 22.

148 Zhang Qing, ‘Huiyi xin Zhongguo diydai lingdaoren dui Jianpuzhaide bangzhu [Recollection of the assistance by the People’s Republic of China’s first generation leaders to Cambodia]’, *Around Southeast Asia* 2 (2003): 21–6, cited in Wang Chenyi, ‘The Chinese Communist Party’s relationship with the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s: An ideological victory and a strategic failure’ (Washington, DC: Cold War International History Project, Working Paper 88, 2018), p. 12. See also Galway, ‘Boundless revolution’, p. 146.

Bank and SONAPRIM to the CPK, and landed in the liberated Southwest Region. Once there, he liaised with ‘Brother Ser’ at Phnom Pis, and later the Region Central Committee sent him to join the Region’s revolutionary fighters in early 1971. ‘I stayed there for just a little more than three months, then the deputy of the Region Central Committee ordered me to stay in the South Region front line road #3 for a short time,’ he recalled. ‘After that,’ Phouk continued, ‘I moved to front line Road #5 and stayed there from early 1972 until the end of 1973. So I stayed for very long time [there].’¹⁴⁹ Phouk operated in the Party first as a Political Commissar, then as Pol Pot’s personal secretary and CPK Standing Committee Minutes Secretary, and as Political Commissar of the Southwest Army in January 1974. He mentions Pol Pot explicitly in his 1977 ‘confession’, stating that the CPK Central Committee ‘had educated me a lot, especially brother Pol Pot whom I respected and loved ... He always reminded me, and made me aware of things, and gave me guidance’.

After the CPK takeover in April 1975, Phouk’s experiences in the AAKC and ties to Pol Pot positioned him to assume the role of chargé d’affaires of China–DK relations. His command of politics and economics, moreover, paved the way for him to assume a post within the Central Committee Office 870 as a radio broadcaster and television operative (on economic affairs). His career trajectory was halted, however, with the CPK’s campaign to identify and smash (*komtech*) enemies, including intellectuals, under the paranoid Pol Pot regime period of DK (1975–79). CPK Party Centre’s suspicions around Kampong Cham student leader, Northern Zone secretary, post-liberation Minister of Commerce, and long-time ‘trusted associate’ Koy Thuon (a CPK member since 1960) put Party intellectuals on alert.¹⁵⁰

Phouk had good reason to fear for his life. The charge against Koy was that he was a dissident who had been ‘objectively’ consorting with foreign powers out of firm ideological conviction.¹⁵¹ He was also charged with setting up networks to betray the Party, and according to Hu Nim’s ‘confession’, Koy had informed him of such plans in 1975. The same confession implicated Phouk of doing the same at an AAKC gathering before the takeover.¹⁵² As CPK Purchasing Committee member and Party Centre Office 870 head, Sua Vasi (aka Dœun), cautioned Phouk:

Wait and see, brother Thuch [Koy Thuon] might be in trouble. *Angkar* no longer trusts him, and maybe he will be removed from office. So be careful, and most of all, act as if you know and hear nothing. Act as if you have never known him at all.¹⁵³

149 Phouk Chhay, ‘Ampi sakammopheap robsa khnhom nhoum now knongmonitir Angkar [On my activities in the office of the Organisation]’, S-21, Tuol Sleng prison, 5 Apr. 1977, pp. 11–12. On SONAPRIM, see Laura Summers, ‘The sources of economic grievance in Sihanouk’s Cambodia’, *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 14, 1 (1986): 16–34.

150 Gina Chon and Sambath Thet, *Behind the killing fields: A Khmer Rouge leader and one of his victims* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), pp. 107–10.

151 Kiernan, *The Pol Pot regime*, p. 350.

152 Hu Nim, ‘Planning the past: The forced confessions of Hu Nim (Tuol Sleng prison, May–June 1977)’, trans. Chanthou Boua, in Chandler et al., *Pol Pot plans the future*, pp. 245, 281. See also Chandler, *Voices from S-21*, pp. 62–3; and Koy Thuon, ‘Sakam mapheap kabot padevat rebos khnom (Koy Thuon) [On my (Koy Thuon’s) activities in betrayal of the revolution]’, Tuol Sleng prison, 5 Feb. 1977, pp. 3–7.

153 Phouk Chhay, ‘Ampi’, p. 3. Also quoted in Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot regime: Race, power and genocide under the Khmer Rouge, 1975–1975* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 320.

Despite his best efforts, Phouk's alleged ties to Koy and plans to betray the CPK by setting up a rival party — all false charges, of course — led to his detainment by Party authorities. For the second time in his life, Phouk was arrested (in 1976), but this time no amount of sympathetic or heartfelt appeals would secure his release.¹⁵⁴ At the gunpoint of his S-21 torturers, he detailed his life in the very 'confessions' that have been under the lens of analysis here. As a Party member, he had to describe his personal background, provide specific details about when he joined the movement, discuss his DK work assignments, and 'confess' to his involvement in treasonous activities as either CIA or Vietnamese agent (he lists both) in chronological order. Soon thereafter in 1977, his Tuol Sleng prison captors judged that his 'crimes' were too severe to be rehabilitated (often the case for Pol Pot critics, as Hu Nim and Keo Meas shared the same fate at S-21), and killed him on 6 July, the same day as Hu Nim.¹⁵⁵

Becoming a martyr: Concluding remarks

Phouk Chhay's life shows us one piece of the larger puzzle of China's popularity in Cambodian intellectual circles. His early life environment, social experiences, and career as an activist-critic and founder of China-curious associations provide useful connections between the People's Republic of China and Cambodia. A childhood in poverty, upward social mobility against all odds, and ties to leftists who sought to turn society — and the status quo — on its head all played parts in pushing an apolitical Phouk towards the CPK. Though he was not among the Paris-educated intellectuals who founded the Party and who first encountered Maoist works in the 1950s, Phouk was drawn to China out of appeal and necessity.

Does it make sense to talk about a 'pro-China wing' in the CPK when Pol Pot was also sympathetic to Beijing and, yet, eliminated several of his pro-Chinese rivals? This article has endeavoured to provide a genealogy of Phouk's ideological maturation, which stands as a microcosm of an emergent trend of China-curious radical thinking in Cambodia in the global 1960s. Instead of comprising a 'pro-China' or 'Cultural Revolution' wing in the CPK, Phouk's life story reveals that he and like-minded radical intellectuals who joined the Communists were, more accurately, a 'China-curious faction'.

Phnom Penh in the 1960s had the ideal atmosphere in which to radicalise, as China's brand of alternative modernity and autonomous socialist development held great appeal in contrast to Sihanouk's neutrality and the Sangkum's rightward autocracy. In fact, part of the CPK's ultimate success in rallying enough people to its cause and capture of state power in April 1975 was its harnessing of the radical foment of Phnom Penh for Communist gains. Yet Sihanouk's persecution of radicals, Phouk included, ultimately provided the final push. Although Phouk's life ended in tragedy, his 'confessions', though deserving cautious interpretation, highlight crucial links

154 For details of his arrest and alleged 'plots against *Angkar*', see Toch Kham Doeun, 'Confession of Toch Kham Doeun, alias Tauch', pp. 59, 77–8. *Monash Collections Online*, <http://repository.monash.edu/items/show/1310> (accessed 27 May 2020).

155 Phouk, 'Ampi', pp. 13–15; and Kiernan, *The Pol Pot regime*, pp. 352, 447, citing Hu, 'Planning the past', p. 227. On the CPK takeover of Phnom Penh (so described as a 'ghost town', *sicheng*) from the perspective of underground CCP spy Ng Xibeng (aka Tie Ge), see *Zhulang meihe*, pp. 648–73.

between the Cambodian Communist movement and China, and the life and death of the Cultural Revolution supporters within the Party.

Phouk's *becoming* a China-curious activist, then CPK guerrilla, was a gradual process that began with his surroundings and concluded with two stints in prison, the second of which ended with his execution. His *community* of increasingly politicised Khmers and *network* of radicals throw overdue light on the forces behind Maoism's emergence as an ideological discourse that intellectuals in Phnom Penh took seriously and engaged with in their perceptions of a future Cambodia. To discuss the CPK's intellectual origins without this link obfuscates a complex and multilayered story of origins in which Phouk played a significant part. Radical associations like AGEK and AAKC, moreover, allow us to understand the transformation of Hou Yuon, Hu Nim, and Phouk Chhay into avowed Communist guerrillas. Phouk Chhay was neither a CPK founder, nor did his written works underpin the brutal human experiment of Democratic Kampuchea from 1975 to 1979. Yet his life story yields important explanations for China's appeal in radical Cambodian circles, whose members formed the intellectual thrust behind the Pol Pot Regime.