A Far Cry from the Aurea Mediocritas:
Cambodian Education as a Structure and a Crisis

by

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Initially borne out by my personal experiences in Cambodia, this paper aspires to shed light on the adversities of those less fortunate than myself. I attempt to make use of the skills I’ve learned during my time with the College of Social Studies to deconstruct and thoroughly analyze the ongoing Cambodian education crisis and its structural inefficiencies. I hope that it will inspire the many CSS cohorts to come and encourage the exploration of the issues beyond the Western spheres of our curriculum.

For granting me the opportunity to study and learn these skills, I thank my mother and father. Standing as two stable pillars of my life, they embody the degree of success, happiness, and balance I one day seek to attain. They have shown the utmost patience and empathy throughout my college career, for which I am eternally grateful. I am also thankful and grateful for my sister, a fierce rival in doing our family proud but ever the source of light and hope in my eyes. I would also like to thank my grandmother and late grandfather for inspiring me as an individual and reminding me of the role in which I have in our family and society.

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Adversities present opportunities to enrich one’s self-identity. Take them as they come with tenacity, aggression, and a grain of salt. Certainty of one’s self, not to be confused with confidence in one’s self, is the true measure of maturity. That’s Wes is for. Use it.
What if you could quantify someone’s pain and sorrow?
What variables would you use to quantify such emotions?
  What would that figure be for this year?
  What figure would that be for history?
  Would it really matter?

Would anything change?
INTRODUCTION

EDUCATION: THE BITTER GOURD OF CAMBODIA

“The roots of education are bitter, but the fruit is sweet” – Aristotle

The roots of the modern Cambodian education system are indeed bitter. For most, the fruit is bitter as well. The modern Cambodian education system has witnessed genocide, three civil wars, four instances of colonization and nine political regimes over the last two centuries. Crystallized over the ruins of these past regimes, the current Cambodian education system stands as the tenth establishment in the modern era (defined in this paper from 1800 to the present). Though its purpose and role in society has changed over the rise and fall of different regimes, all forms of the modern Cambodian education system have failed to establish a uniform standard of quality, accessibility, and sustainability. In its current form, it is not different in its failures. Stifled by structural inefficiencies and fundamental biases, the current Cambodian education system finds itself in a crisis. Surrounded by considerable income inequality, quasi-authoritarian power dynamics, and corruption, Cambodia’s education system faces a panoply of societal adversities. While these factors are present in most developing nations in South East Asia, Cambodia’s intriguingly dark modern history merits a unique analysis to a commonly seen regional issue. This paper aims to provide insights on the origins, structures, and data surrounding the structural inefficiencies and biases within the education system and its ongoing crisis.
On the surface, the education crisis Cambodia faces is not dissimilar to education crises occurring in other developing nations. These states are also plagued with income inequality, disproportionate power dynamics, and inefficient economies held up on the backs of unskilled, often uneducated, labor. Cambodia’s situation deviates from this stereotype in that during the Khmer Rouge’s three-year genocide, its middle-class, nobility, and educated portions of its society (roughly a third of the entire population), had been completely deleted from its demographic. The modern history of the Cambodian education system can be separated into two periods, 1800 to 1976 and 1979 to the present. These two periods can be considered to be pre-genocide and post-genocide, cleaved by the Khmer Rouge’s genocide between 1976 and 1979. The devastating effects of the genocide impacted Cambodian society to the point where socio-economic roles, political structures, and culture created significant structural changes.

Currently, Cambodia finds itself in the midst of an unprecedented economic growth phase. Slowly but surely it has transitioned itself from a chiefly agrarian economy into a more service and industrialized one. However, this shift will require a continued increase in the value of its current human capital. With its education system being the primary driver to increasing Cambodia’s human capital, its role in Cambodia’s transition out of poverty into a middle-class nation is critical. However, an education crisis, built upon those of past regimes, has continued to persist. This paper will look to prove the specific structural inefficiencies of the current system as well as fundamental societal factors related to the education crisis. To assess the complex factors surrounding the current Cambodian education crisis, an
interdisciplinary approach involving historical, political, qualitative, and quantitative analyses will be utilized. The results of these analyses will suggest that the current education crisis is structurally tied to historical relationships in pre-genocide and post-genocide periods, the reconstruction of political structures in the post-genocide period, the resources disbursement methods of the current system, and the current education system’s discrimination against decentralized agrarian communities.

**Actors: The Winners, Losers, and Accomplices**

To wholly grasp the depth and range of the ongoing crisis, it is necessary to understand the core actors involved. This paper will simplify the key actors within the education system to be the Cambodian elite, the decentralized agrarian lower class, and foreign influencers.

*The Winners: The Cambodian Elite*

Today’s Cambodian elite, spanning across all provinces as traders, financiers, politicians, and industrialists, look to continue their dominant role in Cambodian society. Controlling the economy, national budgets, political positions, and higher education institutions, the current Cambodian elite have been able to securely manipulate their political, financial, societal, and cultural surroundings to preserve their power. Traditionally operating as wealthy nobility during monarchial and colonial regimes from 1800 to 1953, the 1954 Geneva conference transformed the Cambodian elite to take the form of western educated politicians and businessmen, the winners in today’s society. Not only had the Geneva conference mandated a
political shift from a monarchy to a democracy, but it also succeeded in redefining the Cambodian upper class’s eligibility to be deemed part of the elite. With the advent of political parties, these members of the upper class are able to mix, match, and bond, allowing the mélange of wealthy, powerful families and individuals to nestle into the core of the modern Cambodian society.

Requisites for the modern Cambodian elite are wealth, political connections, a sphere of influence in society, and asserting authority through illegitimate means. So what makes a member of the Cambodian elite any different from a member of a “first-world” country’s elite? It is the general acceptance and commonplace role of corruption and cronyism in Cambodia’s society that enables the modern Cambodian elite to successfully preserve its platform. In addition to the societal acceptance of these illegitimate methods of enforcing their authority, the Cambodian elite has been able to take advantage of Cambodia’s bureaucratic political structure. Though Cambodia’s UN-implemented democracy grants the Cambodian populace de jure power, the modern elite hold de facto power, using both the exploitable bureaucratic political structure and their varied spheres of influence to their advantage.

The Losers: The Decentralized Agrarian Lower Class

Cambodia has always been a traditionally agrarian nation. The marriage between its dominant Buddhist culture and its agrarian lifestyle has endured for the last seven centuries and stubbornly resists the forces of economic growth and industrialization today. The aforementioned cultural marriage has effectively stifled the lower class, either in agriculture or industry, from wholeheartedly embracing
Typically residing in the rural or remote towns and villages of Cambodia, the majority of the agrarian lower class is not directly ruled by the centralized bureaucracy. The political bureaucracy operates as an exhaustive multi-level structure, relying upon appointed officials to carry out the duties of higher offices. Only reaching down to the provincial level, and at times district level, rural and remote villages are far from their direct control. As a result, government aid does not flow directly to these small towns and village. Geographically and economically limited, the agrarian lower class residing in areas beyond the district level is at a distinct disadvantage. With most of this demographic limited to sparse or no schooling, urbanization and the shift away from subsistence agriculture is increasingly difficult. Increasing competition for unskilled industrial or service sector labor has increased the value of education amongst workers. However, numerous barriers in the form of corruption, informal schooling fees, and competition with wealthier classes, confront those willing to pursue education as a means of exiting their socioeconomic status. As a result, the Cambodian decentralized agrarian lower class finds itself as the clear losers of the current Cambodian education system.

Today, Cambodia has begun to shift its economic mainstays away from agriculture to industry and service sectors. As of 2015, the Cambodian service sector has grown to dominate 43.6% of the national GDP with industry capturing 27.9% of the national GDP. Agriculture holds about 28.6% of the national GDP, down from 90% in 1985. While this stark change in the composition of the GDP is a testament to Cambodia’s fast-growing transformational economy, it is not totally representative

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2 Ibid.
of the long-term development of the nation. Though the agriculture sector represented a little more than a quarter of Cambodia’s GDP, almost half of its workforce (48.7%) is dedicated to agriculture.\textsuperscript{3} While the increase in the services sector has driven the need for educated laborer, almost 75% of Cambodia’s workforce is very much unskilled.\textsuperscript{4} To continue to feed its rapidly growing GDP, Cambodia’s workforce must continue to move from agriculture into industry and service sectors of the economy. Currently, financial, societal, cultural, and geographic issues stop rural or remote farmers and unskilled industrial laborers from adjusting to this transition. This paper will explore the historical relevance of Cambodia’s agrarian lifestyle, the lower class’s first-hand experiences with the education system, and the obstacles they face within the system.

\textit{The Accomplices: The Foreign Influencers}

Between 1431 and the present, Cambodia has experienced less than five cumulative decades of independence from a direct foreign sponsor or authority. In the 20\textsuperscript{th} century alone, Cambodia had been under the authority or sponsorship of the French Colonial Empire, the Soviet Union, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the United States, and the United Nations. Foreign influencers have played a significant role in shaping the power dynamics between the working class and the traditional elite, constructing Western political and ideological structures, and even the goals of the nation in a geopolitical context. While the modern Cambodian elite has adapted to preserve their dominance in almost every facet of society, foreign influencers have

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.
played a sizeable role in the elites’ evolution, seemingly as unintentional accomplices. Much of the foreign influences imposed upon Cambodia throughout its modern history have been in a neo-colonial context, often at the expense of the uneducated lower class. Unable to thoroughly install their political and ideological arrangements into the Cambodian society, the Cambodian elite’s acclimation and exploitation of hastily introduced foreign structures were often a fait accompli. Such was the result of the democracy clause introduced by the 1954 Geneva conference, the 1979 People’s Republic of Kampuchea bureaucracy, the mandated 1993 UNTAC (United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia) elections, and the ongoing millions of dollars in foreign economic aid earmarked for Cambodia’s “economic development”. Had Cambodia not been under the iron sway of multiple foreign factors in such rapid succession over the latter half of the 19th century, it may not find itself in the education crisis it is in now.

Core Literature and Relevant Research

This paper incorporates a selection of literature in both pre and post-genocide periods through political, historical, official, and unofficial lenses. While prior literature on the dynamics surrounding the contemporary Cambodian education is limited, this paper draws heavily from three core sources of literature attributed to David P. Chandler, David M. Ayres, and Thomas Clayton. Additionally, James C. Scott and Belinda Archibong provide an intriguing combination anthropological and economic approaches key to the cultural and political factors of the crisis. Other sources take the form of official government and non-government organization
reports, providing empirical data on the current education system and its bureaucratic structure and processes. Additionally, individual interviews were conducted to provide qualitative evidence to be compared and contrasted with the aforementioned data and case studies. At various capacities this paper will draw upon the stated literature, data, and studies to assert that the uneducated lower class have consistently been at a distinct disadvantage.

David P. Chandler’s *The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War, and Revolution since 1954* masterfully details modern Cambodian history, primarily from 1954 up until 1979. This pre-genocide timeline documents the shift of traditional roles of the Cambodian elite, uneducated lower class, and foreign influencers into a modern political landscape. Chandler not only provides valuable insights on the historical context of key flashpoints during this timeframe, but also provides insights on the personalities of major political leaders such as Prince Norodom Sihanouk, General Lon Nol, and Pol Pot. Furthermore, Chandler was able to obtain eyewitness accounts and interviews during this critical timeframe in modern Cambodian history. Such detailed historical context allows this paper to trace the political landscape, societal goals, and foreign influences prior to Pol Pot’s three-year genocidal regime.

David M. Ayres’ *Anatomy of a Crisis: Education, Development, and the State in Cambodia, 1953-1998* provides a broad historical account of the specific education systems and policies in the seven regimes that existed between 1953 and 1998. Drawing from a range of secondary sources, personal experiences, and conducted interviews, Ayres provides similarly detailed education frameworks across the seven political regimes. His broad lens approach aims to convey education as “central to the
tension between modernity and tradition”. As Cambodia finds itself unavoidably wedged between the forces of modernity and tradition, Ayres’ perspective is relevant to the context of this paper by providing a heuristic platform for the central theme of this paper.

Thomas Clayton’s “Cambodians and the occupation: responses to and perceptions of the Vietnamese occupation, 1979-1989” provides a detailed account of the Vietnamese Occupation. Arguing that Cambodia’s reconstruction was elevated to the world stage during the Cold War, Clayton’s article is able to document the roots of Cambodia’s current bureaucratic system. Central to the current elite’s preservation of authority, the Vietnamese-constructed bureaucratic system effectively enabled Vietnam and the Soviet Union to micromanage Cambodia’s reconstruction. Providing a chiefly political perspective, Clayton is able to bring to light the relevance and purpose behind the bureaucratic system that influences Cambodia today.

James C. Scott’s *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* is an analogue for the struggle between Cambodia’s uneducated lower class and the modern elite, discussing the people’s of Zomia and their resistance against the state. Referring to the hill tracts of continental Southeast Asia (Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and Bangladesh) as Zomia, Scott argues that the “resistant inhabitants” of the region have been able to survive and see their resistance to be a “more virtuous and freer” lifestyle than those living in State-recognized “sedentary populations”. By extending this analogy to the Cambodian

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education system, this paper similarly explores the drawbacks of actively resisting the modern education system as well as the forces surrounding it. Similar to Scott’s literature, Belinda Archibong’s study on the long-term impacts of pre-colonial institutions on public infrastructure services in Nigeria, provides insights on how Cambodia’s modern history has influenced today’s education system. Archibong concludes that the federal disbursement of public aid and services are contingent upon the historical relationships of the past pre-colonial and pre-independence regimes of Nigeria. Similar to that of Cambodia’s issues with the education systems, decentralized communities that failed to cooperate with the autocratic regimes were underprovided for by the current Nigerian government. This supports this paper’s findings of decentralized agrarian communities located in remote or rural areas receiving limited or no education aid from district or provincial authorities.

Other forms of research and literature will be introduced in the appropriate chapters. This paper consists of four chapters; the first employing a historical examination of pre-genocide Cambodia’s political and education systems, the second featuring post-genocide Cambodia’s political and educational reconstruction, the third analyzing published Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS) Education Strategic Plans, Financing and Budgeting processes, and Save the Children case studies, and the fourth introducing interviews with current and previous Cambodian students.
Chapter Outline and Contributions

The layout of this paper is constructed such that the multiple factors that were manifested in different periods in modern Cambodian history are cumulatively analyzed. Chapter One provides broad historical context during the pre-genocide period, emphasizing the evolving roles of westernized education, the elite, the uneducated lower class, and foreign actors. Particularly central to the theme of pre-genocide Cambodia is the *jih joan* culture, which largely influenced the rejuvenation of a westernized education system. *Jih joan*, translated to mean “kicked and trodden on”, refers to the cultural mindset of colonial Cambodia, specifically the trauma and subjugation of the national identity. This mindset also explains why the centralized bureaucratic political structures are so effective in keeping the modern Cambodian elite in power. *Jih joan* also explains the strictly hierarchical nature of Cambodian society, specifically the docility and submissive nature of the lower class. Primarily drawing from Chandler and Ayres, the track record of failed education ventures and their surrounding conditions are revealed. Grasping the causes for these failures as well as the cultural nuances surrounding the pre-genocide society is key to understanding the effects of the post-genocide political structure on the current education system.

Chapter Two provides detailed historical context throughout the post-genocide period, emphasizing the importance of foreign political structures and ideological policies through three different regimes. This chapter traces the evolution of the current power-holding Cambodian elite, its political dominance, and its role in catalyzing the current education crisis. Through understanding the piece meal
construction of Cambodia’s bureaucratic political structure, the lasting flaws of each political regime thereafter become apparent. It is the cumulative nature of each regime’s crises that has resulted in the current systems’ structural inefficiencies. Relying upon Ayres and Clayton’s accounts, this chapter will aim to establish the connections between Cambodia’s reconstruction in the post-genocide period and its current flawed education system.

Chapter Three uses empirical evidence obtained from the Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) and reports from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Save the Children (STC) organization. First, NGO’s such as UNESCO and STC were able to provide fieldwork on individual schools, finding that an urban public school was able to successfully operate totally independent of the MoEYS’ disbursement program. Belinda Archibong’s study on biased government aid toward decentralized communities is able to draw valuable parallels to these findings. Second, the budgetary accountability and fiscal planning processes employed by the MoEYS are examined. With an inside look on the bureaucratic organization of the MoEYS, the structural inefficiencies at the heart of the current education crisis is clear. Finally, the MoEYS’ Education Strategic Plans (ESP) detailing a report on the education statistics, issues, projections, initiatives, and goals for a four-year period is analyzed. By cross-referencing the ESP’s from 2009-2013 and 2014-2018, one is able to gauge the performance of the MoEYS by its own projections set four years earlier.

Chapter Four provides qualitative evidence to support the empirical evidence presented in Chapter Three. By interviewing seven current and former students, this
Chapter employs an anthropological approach to explaining the qualitative flaws of the education system. Interviewed subjects of different backgrounds provide personal accounts revealing a host of varying education barriers. Factors such as geography, political participation, and primary occupation significantly impacted the accessibility, quality, and experience of the students. The accounts of former students were also compared to current students, highlighting societal and cultural changes over a roughly 30-year age gap. Finally, literature from Scott and Archibong provide comparisons to Nigeria and the centralized hills of South East Asia as alternative explanations regarding the implications of Cambodia’s education system and potential theoretical solutions to its current crisis.

As no current literature exists on the multi-faceted nature of the current Cambodian education crisis (from 1998 onwards) from a multi-disciplinary standpoint, this thesis aspires to raise awareness on the increasing urgency of the situation. With the Cambodian elite unlikely to alleviate or address the structurally biased bureaucratic system, only well-connected, or corrupt individuals will be able to take advantage of the educated system. As such, agrarian lower class laborers in decentralized regions find themselves wedged between harsh economic conditions and a biased education system. Until the majority of the nation, particularly these decentralized communities, can self-address the requisite conditions for successfully engaging the education system, the education crisis will continue persist. Those left in the void “best find a way”.

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7 In reference to the title of Andrew Hem’s Painting in Chapter One.
CHAPTER I

A Subjugated People’s History – Jih Joan

“As by three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; Second, by imitation, which is the easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest.” - Confucius

Fig. 1. Hem, Best find a way. 2009. From: http://www.andrewhem.com/work2009/best-find-a-way/

Fig. 2. Hem, This woman’s work. 2010. From: http://www.andrewhem.com/work2009/best-find-a-way/
Andrew Hem’s pieces titled *Best find a way* and *This woman’s work*, presented in figures 1 and 2 respectively, represents the enduring Cambodian phrase, *jih joan*. The Khmer phrase translates to “ridden on and kicked” and has been used to describe much of Cambodia’s history since the fall of its Angkor empire in 1431 to Ayudhya raiders.⁸ Hem’s parents fled the Khmer Rouge genocide and immigrated to California, raising Hem in Los Angeles. Despite the geographical separation from Cambodia, Hem’s paintings are able to convey the almost innate *jih joan* culture. The use of maudlin blue and dark grey colors to set the context of both paintings combined with the lost expressions of the paintings’ subjects express the deep-seated sentiment. Hem only uses brighter colors toward the center of his paintings, highlighting the main subjects, both young women, as well as the horizon. By using this coloring scheme, the viewer’s attention is centered on Hem’s main subjects, the young mother holding her two children in figure 1, and the young girl in figure 2. The viewer’s eyes then shift to the backdrop, as both paintings depict shanty housing typical of Cambodian neighborhoods.

*jih joan* culture epitomizes the trauma and subjugation forced upon generations of the Cambodian people. So long has it been since Cambodia had some semblance of independence and peace, that a culture of forgetfulness has been imprinted into its society. Even today, Cambodians overlook the greatness that once graced their ancient lands and disassociate its remnants, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site

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Angkor Wat temples, with a once *Cambodian* kingdom.\(^9\) It is this culture that functions as an underlying issue within the history of Cambodia’s education system. The degree of social fragmentation, identity crises, violence, and destruction has complicated the efforts to reform Cambodian education policies, infrastructure, standards, and expectations. The concept of *jih joan* can still be felt amongst the Cambodian community and can be seen in its current sense of apathy toward the current school system. The generations of subjugation have seemingly carried on to the current lower class as it remains docile and patient against a prospering elite class.

Cambodia is a nation plagued by complex social, economic, and historical issues that have gone unaddressed and ignored by the current Cambodian government. While its urban-based education centers do show progress, Cambodia is largely unable to integrate the rest of its countrymen into its long-term plans. According to a strategic education plan published by the Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, the Royal Government of Cambodia plans to “transition from a lower-middle income country to being an upper-middle income country by 2030 and a developed country by 2050”.\(^{10}\) In order to reach its ambitious goals, the government understands that its success will depend upon the Cambodian population “having the right knowledge and relevant skills reflecting our cultural and ethical heritage”.\(^{11}\) Currently, the failure to set a sustainable and clear standard toward reaching the “right knowledge and relevant skills” whilst catering to Cambodia’s complex “cultural and ethical heritage” makes the aforementioned goals

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\(^{11}\) Ibid.
exceptionally challenging. Cambodia’s unique historical context remains the foundation for much of the education system’s underlying problems.

It is important to grasp the extent to which the turbulent transitions in Cambodia’s history have profoundly compromised its sense of identity and delayed its progress. Is Cambodia capable of handling the cultural pressures and financial responsibilities associated with developed nations? Such a feat is not a natural transition for Cambodia, a nation that has yet to rebuild its confidence and identity. In its lifetime, it has yet to survive a political regime for more than 20 years. Its high turnover in political leadership has also impacted its ability to maintain a stable education system. Currently, Cambodia’s education system is in flux. The nation has struggled to recognize and commit to the perceived potential of education put forth by the educational planners, politicians, social scientists, and economists throughout the world.\textsuperscript{12} Due to its uniquely dark history, Cambodia faces a tension between pursuing its development geared toward westernized modernity and its own traditional underpinnings.\textsuperscript{13} At the root of this tension and crisis lies a deep-seated track record of a “patron-client” system of interpersonal relations between Cambodians and their rulers. This hierarchical tradition created an environment conducive to the series of political turnover throughout modern Cambodian history.

This chapter aims to highlight key changes in the overall purpose of the Cambodian education system and its evolution toward westernized education goals. These goals would shift away from Theravada Buddhist traditional schooling practices to a politicized European-schooling curriculum. The Buddhist schooling


\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
systems were not intended to be mandatory or universalized but accepted as a stepping stone into adulthood prior to the 19th century. The transition between the 19th and 20th century saw the French increasingly attempt to change Cambodian education preferences with homegrown Cambodian leaders trying to heavily influence the education system to cater to their political ideologies. It was this transition into the education system that founded major structural issues observed in the current Cambodian system.¹⁴

**Pre-Colonial Cambodia**

Between the 9th and 14th centuries, Cambodia, then called the Khmer Empire, was considered on multiple occasions to be the mightiest state in classical Southeast Asia.¹⁵ The Angkorian period, referring to the Khmer Empire’s period of dominance over the region, began in 800 A.D. with King Jayavarman II declaring himself the “god-king”.¹⁶ Then associated with the Hindu religion, the mighty Khmer Empire was responsible for the temples of Angkor Wat, the largest religious monuments in the world, as well as infrastructure on a grand scale including hospitals, roads, and thousands of hectares of irrigation works.¹⁷ While it enjoyed success until its apparent decline in the late 14th century, the Khmer Empire eventually fell to rival Ayudhya

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¹⁴ Such structural issues will be discussed in detail in the following three chapters.
(also spelled “Ayutthaya”) invaders in 1431. It is from this point onward that the phrase *jih joan* has been used to characterize Cambodia’s history.

This amnesia of historical pride can be blamed, to some extent, on the absence of archives between 1431 and 1800 with even the Cambodian royal chronicles failing to mention little more than garbled phrases about the great Angkorian period. The forgetfulness also speaks to the strength and sustained oppression doled down from its two neighboring states, Thailand and Vietnam. Cambodia is geographically wedged between these two populous and “antagonistic” nations, which were responsible for its “intense sufferings”. Since the fall of its great empire, Cambodia, with its ethnic singularity, was easily enslaved and captured in a “looming time of powerlessness”. It was not until gaining its independence from the French Colonial empire in 1953, that Cambodia was able to end its centuries-long *jih joan* era of exploitation and colonization. While the years after 1953 would not see the end of Cambodia’s suffering, its servitude to imperialistic colonization was over. However, even after its independence, French elements remained ingrained within Cambodian society. Their educational influences dominated the Cambodian curriculum even after gaining independence from the French in 1953.

The 19th century marked an important starting point for quick turnovers in culture, authority, religion, and purpose. Southeast Asia in the 19th century was comprised of the Rattanakosin Kingdom in Siam (modern-day Thailand) on Cambodia’s Western border, Laos to Cambodia’s North border, and the Annam

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19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
Empire (modern-day Vietnam) to Cambodia’s East border.\textsuperscript{22} While the Khmer Empire was primarily associated with Hinduism, Cambodia has been considered a chiefly Theravada Buddhist nation since its defeat to Ayudhya (Thai) invaders. However, its frequently antagonistic neighbor to the East, Vietnam, is chiefly a Sinicized Confucian culture, splitting Cambodia into two cultural zones.\textsuperscript{23} As a result of repeated incursions from both its antagonistic neighbors, Cambodia’s current capital city, Phnom Penh, served as the general “cultural fault-line” between these two different cultures.\textsuperscript{24} On three occasions the Siam armies invaded Cambodian territory in 1811, 1833, and 1840 while 1834 through 1847 saw significant portions of Cambodia’s territory controlled by Annam forces.\textsuperscript{25} Tired of spending resources to fend off frequent Annam incursions, the Siamese empire relinquished the Kingdom of Cambodia to the protection of the French Colonial Empire in 1847 until formally trading away Cambodia to the “imposition of the French hegemony” in 1863.\textsuperscript{26} Given the volatility of the 19th century, Cambodia was unable to distinguish its own identity and values from that of its two warring neighbors, taking on a hybrid personality so as to adapt to the convenient aggressor in power.

Prior to French colonization in the latter half 19th century, Cambodia had its own education system explicitly linked with its religious institutions. Going as far back as the 7th century, traditional Hindu oriented schools aimed to educate a portion of the male population through religious instruction. These education traditions were

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
formed during the Khmer Empire, marking the Cambodian people among the first in Asia to adopt religious concepts and socio-political institutions. After the Ayudhya Empire overtook the Khmer Empire, Ayudhya Buddhist authorities created the Buddhist education system based upon “shaping the youth with Buddhist principles about individual life, family, civil society, and at least some basic literacy and numeracy skills”. While such education benefits were only available for the elite members of society, there is evidence of basic education extending up to secondary and collegial levels, with the highest learning degree honored with the title *Pundit*. This selective education curriculum was typically financed through contributions from local villages and communities similar to that of the Chinese schooling systems in the 15th century.

With the tradition of education systems primarily limited to local communities, it can be inferred that the educational standards and experiences varied greatly across different cultural and ethnic regions within the Cambodian kingdom. This form of scattered, region-specific, sometimes community-specific education infrastructure persisted up until the French colonization in the late 19th century and early 20th century. With the education system being chiefly dictated by varying communities, regions, and authorities, no real political implications can be seen with regards to the education system being used to establish political legitimacy. The goal for education was also not to be universalized but to be encouraged by local

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28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 92.
30 Ibid., 91.
communities as a vital part of one’s journey toward adulthood and embodying cultural traditions. It sought to perpetuate existing culture, society, and monarchial hierarchy unlike westernized nations that stressed the political importance of literacy and philosophy.

**The French Protectorate**

Early in its tenure as a French Protectorate, Cambodia’s traditional Buddhist education system remained in place. Periodically, the French saw fit to target small pockets of the elite Cambodian community to serve in its administration. The Buddhist temple schools served only to sustain Khmer traditional culture rather than sustain the French political authority. Operating at this capacity, the French “spent almost nothing on education in Cambodia”. The sentiment for maintaining the status quo was mutual as it was unlikely that traditional Cambodian intellectuals would easily accept change. While not universally applied throughout the population, the Buddhist education methodology served heavily to preserve seemingly ancient Ayudhya traditional values and resisted any French attempts to Romanize scripts, which was the case in French controlled Vietnam. Nevertheless, the resistance toward change from the traditional education system unknowingly assisted French motives as it sought to uphold its *mission civilisatrice*; impressing reciprocity,

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32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.,93.
dependence, and docility.\textsuperscript{34} Perhaps the only notable legacy the French rule instilled in Cambodia was the concept of education as a means to social mobility.\textsuperscript{35} For the small pockets of the Cambodian elite that were subject to French schooling, this notion of using education as a tool left them with a “hint of egalitarianism and modernity” that would challenge the traditional Cambodian hierarchy over the following decades.\textsuperscript{36}

French Indochina operated under an underlying theme of assimilation, which essentially sought to eliminate “parochial cultures” such that French Indochina colonies could be culturally undifferentiated.\textsuperscript{37} Under this banner, France had decided to haphazardly bundle five fundamentally distinct states into their own “loose union”.\textsuperscript{38} Unlike Vietnam and northern Indochina, the French policies of assimilation were surprisingly negligible in Cambodia. They were unable to establish a coherent policy of indirect rule that would efficiently benefit both themselves and the Cambodian population. As a result, much of the French rule operated under the status of direct interference “stopping short of the mass of the people”, indicative of the schools established in the protectorate’s early years.\textsuperscript{39} Such systems typically catered to select French residents, Cambodian elite, Chinese merchants, and Vietnamese immigrants recruited by French administration members.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{34} Tatiana Garaknai, Meredith McCormac, Kerstin Tebbe, “Education and Fragility in Cambodia”, in the \textit{International Institute for Educational Planning research papers}, (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2009), Pg. 21.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., Pg. 22.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 19.
Until the appointment of Albert Sarraut, the “local worlds” of Cambodia’s peasantry continued to be educated at the Buddhist wat.\textsuperscript{41} Sarraut, a noted proponent of France’s assimilation doctrine, developed an educational scheme in 1918 that aspired to implement standardized basic schooling system across French Indochina.\textsuperscript{42} Just as flawed as the assumptions were for the concept of assimilation, the Sarraut curriculum ignored the religious, cultural, geographic, and demographic differences between the countries in Indochina. The French sought to reform traditional temple school systems, as these were seen as “inadequate” and “in a state of degeneration” in addition to being incompatible with the Western notion of formal schooling.\textsuperscript{43} Initially, the newly implemented schools found that few children attended for more than three years before going back to the traditional temple schools. It became quickly apparent that the peasantry was largely apathetic to the French curriculum prompting an analyst to declare, “it is natural for [Cambodian peasants] to think that a peasant’s son can acquire little information at the state school, where much French is taught but no agriculture”.\textsuperscript{44} Recognizing the costs associated with forced the French curriculum, a new initiative in 1924 sought to “modernize” the temple education system to blend colonial ideas with native institutions.\textsuperscript{45} Thus, using the existing teaching staff and infrastructure, very little financing was needed to roll out the new mission. Since this “triage-mode” of “transformation” was intended to be a temporary measure, very little was done to actively continue its improvement.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 25.
Tracking the statistics of Sarraut’s legacy confirms the aforementioned statements. Between 1918 and 1933 the educational development system produced just 18 Franco-Khmer public schools that offered the full Westernized primary level of education. During the same period, the vastly popular temple schools that had undergone minor levels of “modernization”, logged 225 schools. 46 Five years later in 1938, the temple schools had increased to 908 while the Franco-Khmer schools remained stagnant with the same 18 schools. 47 Enrollment statistics showed that while Franco-Khmer primary school numbers increased by 150 percent, the modernized temple schools received almost 500 percent increases in their enrollments. 48 To assuage the appeal of the temple schools, the French created a “Certificate of Complementary Primary Studies” to succor the legitimacy of the westernized curriculum. Even so, only 294 students of nearly 60,000 students passed the exam. 49

Another attempt to popularize the Franco-Khmer system was full secondary education offered for the first time in 1935 as well as granting Collége Sisowath full lycée status. 50 Regardless, Cambodian students who were serious about further studies typically travelled to Saigon, Hanoi, or Paris. The key failures of Sarraut’s initiatives stemmed from not only a lack of commitment, but also an inability to cut off traditional forms of instruction. In Vietnam, the French were able to quickly Romanize the Sino-Vietnamese scripts as well as provide education to rural

47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
minorities. Conversely in Cambodia, the Sanscritized Khmer script was left enciphered and the “modest minority” populations, uneducated.  

Ironically it was only with the arrival of the Imperial Japanese forces that Cambodia’s “embryotic nationalist movement” ushered in a new surge of energy toward its education system. As it became clear that the peasantry throughout French Indochina were becoming discontent with the lack of development and colonial taxes, the French saw fit to align themselves with the presence of a royal monarch. On April 24th, 1941, Norodom Sihanouk was crowned the King of Cambodia in an attempt by the French administration to “engender indigenous loyalty”. The French also opened a new university named Collége Norodom Sihanouk in another effort to associate themselves with Cambodian traditional values and culture despite their staunch belief in the previous assimilation doctrine. By providing more venues for secondary education, the French had inadvertently exposed the few privileged Cambodian elite access to Cambodia’s rich and magnificent history of the Angkorean Empire. Such was the impetus of the independence movement that would eventually spark a united goal toward an independent Cambodian education system.

The French regime had widely varied impacts on the Cambodian population. For the elite who were able to gain access to secondary and collegiate institutions

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52 Ibid.
53 Tatiana Garaknai, Meredith McCormac, Kerstin Tebbe, “Education and Fragility in Cambodia”, in the International Institute for Educational Planning research papers, (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2009), Pg. 21.
54 Ibid.
across French Indochina and even Paris, the concept of social mobility was imprinted and nationalistic inklings revived through classical studies of the great Angkorean Empire. For the peasantry, France would be known for halfheartedly implementing a foreign education infrastructure and attempting to undermine traditional educational authorities. Regardless of whether or not it was effective, France was able to disrupt the temple schooling system, which had thrown the country into a circular loop, perpetuating the notion of taking “the children from the rice fields and giving them back to the rice fields”. By introducing another option that could be, in theory, used to escape the helpless cycle of rural poverty, a sense of power and social cohesion could be attained. As the French officially handed over the education system to Sihanouk’s indigenous government, the Cambodian elite studying abroad returned back to Cambodia to enjoy comfortable civil service positions as well as local business positions. While most of these “intellectuals” sought to exploit these new openings, a pocket of dissenters had taken issue with the very nature of the new Khmer social system. Among these radicals was Paris-educated Saloth Sar, later to be known as Pol Pot.

The Last King-Prince

With the French colonial rule formally over, the education system under King Sihanouk began with great optimism and renewed international goodwill. Between Sihanouk’s coronation in 1953 and his dethroning in 1966, four main motifs can be found in the pre-genocide Cambodian education system. The first and perhaps one of

57 Ibid., 31.
the most dominant motifs was that of the French Westernized influence upon the future curriculum, ever challenging the circular values taught by modernized temple schools. Another motif, equally as important, was the passion and energy the new King put into furthering the expansion of the existing education system. While his motives for “interfering in all spheres of educational policy” was mainly political, so as to cement his legacy, Sihanouk did statistically improve Cambodia’s education system. Closely tied to Sihanouk’s personal motivation behind expanding the education system was the “Cambodianization” motif, which served to stress Cambodia’s independence from the French by providing Khmer textbooks and teaching materials but also keeping the French language as a required secondary language in all primary schools. The last motif involves the further development of Cambodian nationalism, ranging from advocates of the hierarchical pre-colonial structure to those who stressed the ideals of egalitarianism, chiefly from disenchanted intellectuals returning from higher education abroad. The final motif would serve to derail the progress of the educational expansion as Sihanouk, described by a senior US government official as a “selfish, arrogant, personable, pragmatic, and a highly egocentric individual”, would become increasingly distracted by the growing leftist communist groups in the 1960s.

Norodom Sihanouk only retained the title of King for just two years before he abdicated his throne to his father in 1955. After the 1954 Geneva conference, which

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58 Tatiana Garaknai, Meredith McCormac, Kerstin Tebbe, “Education and Fragility in Cambodia”, in the International Institute for Educational Planning research papers, (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2009), Pg. 22.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
served to conclude the First Indochina War, it was decided that Cambodia was to have a national election, completely voiding the power Sihanouk had garnered from the French allegiance to the Cambodian nobility. In an effort to retain his relevance and legacy, he founded his own political party, the Sangkum Reastr Niym or People’s Socialist Community. The Sangkum was populated with characters from both left and right of the political spectrum. Sihanouk’s wide-netted strategy may aimed to scoop up enough of the mainstream polity into his party so as to reduce any major political discontent outside of his control as well as to guarantee his position as Prime Minister. His strategy succeeded in that only Sangkum affiliated politicians won seats in Cambodia’s National Assembly through four different election cycles (1952, 1955, 1958, and 1966). Sihanouk controlled the agenda of the Sangkum and all its affiliates, setting an ideology based upon Buddhist Socialism, closely tied to the traditional religious Cambodian culture. This ideology came to rest on the right side of the political spectrum, contradicting the Marxist socialistic view of abolishing private ownership and encouraging collective ownership. Sihanouk fundamentally believed along the lines of Buddhist values, arguing that citizens should not be “dispossessed of the fruits of their labor.”

These seemingly contradictory political beliefs would only serve to distract Sihanouk from his crusade to expand the Cambodian education system. His education policies and practices were largely failures. Additionally, he was unable to deliver on

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63 Ibid., 34.
64 Tatiana Garaknai, Meredith McCormac, Kerstin Tebbe, “Education and Fragility in Cambodia”, in *the International Institute for Educational Planning research papers*, (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2009). 34.
65 Ibid., 24.
66 Ibid.
the economic prosperity and national glory he campaigned for in 1953. At the root of this failure lay the tensions between modernity and traditionalism. Two main criticisms can be drawn from Sihanouk’s failed push toward educational and economic development. The first criticism targets Sihanouk’s unrealistic ambition to transform Cambodia’s education system into one rivaling that of distinguished, historic educational institutions in Western nations. Using the French Western model, Sihanouk aspired to expedite modern educational development while simultaneously disintegrating almost six centuries of monastic traditional schooling. Moreover, the French model that had been so haphazardly implemented during the colonial rule was equipped to train a “small indigenous administrative elite”, not an entire nation with strong convergent values. To make matters worse for Sihanouk, communist groups had begun to increasingly vocalize their disapproval of his legitimacy and policies.

The second criticism revolves around the poor financial planning and limited economic capabilities of Cambodia. Sihanouk’s rapid expansion, while leading to rapid enrollment from 432,649 students in 1956 to 1,160,456 students in 1969, was only possible through rapid expenditures to the education system. With little financial wherewithal to predict the substantial increases in costs, Sihanouk’s expansion favored quantity over quality. Consequences included poorly constructed schools, inadequately trained personnel, overcrowding of facilities, and a shortage of teaching materials. While the concept of social mobility and using education as an opportunity to escape generations of agrarian lifestyles was more accepted, there was

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a shortage of jobs for the rapidly increasing “educated” population. Discontent with the entire system among the rural agrarian communities, communist activists gained strong support from Cambodia’s countryside population. Even UNESCO in 1958 emphasized that the education system administrators should “temper the rate of infrastructure expansion”.⁶⁹

As one of Sihanouk’s main tenets revolved around rapid development to substantiate his legacy as a “modernizing monarch”, the Prince seldom acknowledged the recommendations of international organizations like UNESCO.⁷⁰ The Sangkum, Sihanouk’s self-proclaimed party, had grown to be reviled over the course of the 1960’s as it became apparent that the public had not chosen to constantly re-elect Sangkum members. Sihanouk’s reluctance to relinquish his power and his legacy had introduced the seeds of corruption that would dictate much of Cambodian culture into the 21st century. Both sides of the political spectrum had begun to murmur tones of revolution and violence as Sihanouk’s reign increasingly came to represent the “pre-colonial notions of helplessness, human imperfection, and hierarchy”, all-important undertones that sparked the education crisis.⁷¹ The Communist movement headed by alienated intellectuals from the end of the colonial period, like Saloth Sar, would band together in the rural communities to form the Khmer Rouge. Right wing elites unsatisfied with Sihanouk’s selfishness and ignorance filled the National Assembly looking for any opportunity to undermine his rule. On March 18th, 1970 a military coup led by right wing leaders General Lon Nol and Sihanouk’s cousin Prince

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⁷⁰ Ibid., 65.
⁷¹ Ibid.
Sisowath Sirik Matak deposed Sihanouk and established a new republican government.\textsuperscript{72}

**The Coup and Collapse**

General Lon Nol’s rule lasted until 1975 and essentially re-branded Sihanouk’s policies, still using a platform of traditional culture to assert his legitimacy. Lon Nol left no particular legacy but rather oversaw the continuation of lingering issues such as social fragmentation, corruption, nepotism, and marginalization of the opposition. Economic downturn and increased violence put the nation on the brink of “simultaneous civil and regional wars” while the education system saw a “complete breakdown”.\textsuperscript{73} Lon Nol had announced to keep Sihanouk’s “pledge for development and reliance on education” but did little to achieve such the promise.\textsuperscript{74} Schools began to close and military recruitment tapped into the disrupted student population to address the outbreak of violence. Teachers had gone on strike to protest meager and often late salaries and corrupt actions taken by the administration such as the sacking of the Dean of the Law faculty due to his perceived opposition to the new rulers.\textsuperscript{75}

The new right-wing regime found itself literally fighting a war on two fronts. It faced civil war within the nation’s borders as rebel Communist leader, Saloth Sar, had become the head of the Communist Party of Kampuchea as Pol Pot. Pol Pot, now the leader of the Khmer Rouge sought to violently end Lon Nol’s regime relying upon

\textsuperscript{72} Tatiana Garaknai, Meredith McCormac, Kerstin Tebbe, “Education and Fragility in Cambodia”, in the *International Institute for Educational Planning research papers*, (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2009), Pg. 23.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.
the enraged rural peasantry to rise up in a Maoist revolutionary fashion. Vietnam had also simultaneously launched incursions into Cambodia’s Northern and Eastern border in an effort to dodge US troops. Lon Nol’s administration essentially oversaw the collapse of the Cambodian educational system. After inheriting the growing issues cultivated throughout Sihanouk and the Sangkum’s reign, Lon Nol was incapable of quelling the education crisis. With no intention of going beyond rhetoric and empty promises, the forgettable regime watched its education system crumble into civil war and violence.

The Democratic Kampuchea and the Khmer Rouge

As Lon Nol’s Khmer Republic crumbled before Maoist Khmer Rouge troops in April 17th, 1975, the school systems had almost entirely stopped classes. Either teachers had been killed, schools destroyed, or students evacuated. Phnom Penh, the nation’s capital, had completely ceased all education services for the last month due to the “specter of fighting, grenade attacks, and curfews”. Under these conditions, the new Khmer Rouge regime, officially titled the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) had begun. Their central aim was to purge the nation of its past failures, literally and metaphorically cleansing the society of jih Joan. Officially calling themselves the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK), the Khmer Rouge targeted sources of individualism, nepotism, Buddhism, urbanism, money, property rights, and the nobility and monarchy. All these were considered these to be shameful markers of the

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77 Ibid.
Jih joan era. The CPK leaders, headed by Saloth Sar, now called Pol Pot, differed from Sihanouk and Lon Nol in that they had no intention of restoring Cambodia’s glorious past but instead strove to create an entirely new legacy, a new nation-state without western dependence and free of capitalism. This witch-hunt for western associated institutions led to the destruction of the education system established by the French, Sihanouk, and briefly Lon Nol.

The radical leftists who emerged from schooling in Paris and Vietnam adopted their ideologies from a common goal to “emancipate themselves from the oppressiveness of native social institutions and the dead-weight of tradition”. Ironically, such a mission involved relying heavily upon rice production, the chiefly traditional agrarian mode of production for self-sufficiency and economic reconstruction. Without any reliance on trade or any form of westernized industrial production, the CPK would require the entire population to perform manual labor in the fields to sufficiently feed the nation. The costs of such an inefficient and obsolete mode of production would not only claim thousands of lives, but also the future lives of the generations to come. Pol Pot proudly declared, “there are no schools, faculties or universities in the traditional sense … because we wish to do away with all the vestiges of the past”. He did so in the most barbaric manner possible, committing genocide as well as physically destroying these so-called vestiges.

81 Ibid., 101.
82 Ibid., 104.
Laid out in the CPK’s four year plan that aimed to establish “socialism in all fields [from] 1977-1980”, Pol Pot laid out three central tenets of the Democratic Kampuchean education system.83 These three tenets revolved around “elimination of culture”, “mastery of self-reliance”, and “an emphasis on physical labor”.84 Little detailed analysis was provided, substantiating the CPK’s rejection of the formal education setting. However, a vague outline was provided for a standardized formal education. It involved three years of primary school, three years of secondary school, three years of “technical” secondary school, and tertiary education in “technical subjects”.85 Such subjects consisted of reading, writing, arithmetic, national geography, natural science, physics, base chemistry, the history of “the revolutionary struggle of the people” as well as “the party’s politics, consciousness, and organization”.86 Almost no details were given about the quality of the teaching or even the curricula of the subjects offered. No mention of educational financing to address infrastructure needs after the civil war or training programs for teachers were ever included in the CPK’s Four Year Plan. Regardless, the Four Year Plan was put on hold and eventually cancelled due to the in-fighting and purges within the CPK.

The Democratic Kampuchea peaked in 1976, merely a year after formally taking power, only to quickly fall due to the paranoia-driven persecution and execution of its own members, including senior and veteran party members. The internal party turmoil sent countless enemies of the state to the infamous S-21 or Tuol Sleng, a security and interrogation (mostly torture) center. At these makeshift torture

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84 Ibid.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid., 107.
centers, prisoners would be processed, tortured for their often-baseless crimes, and then sent off to the bloodied “killing fields” (which have yet to be properly and respectfully excavated and cleared of human remains) for execution. Through 1977 to 1978, almost 15,000 other previous revolutionaries aligned with the Party were sent to almost certain death, including the vast majority of the initial CPK administration.87 The CPK had single handedly deleted all progress made before their short four year reign of terror and plunged Cambodia into a dark age in every sense of society, ironically thrusting the once-promising nation back several centuries.

With the death toll inflicted at the end of the regime estimated to be between 750,000 and 3,331,678 Cambodians, the Khmer Rouge succeeded in obliterating multiple facets of the previous society and instilling an atmosphere of terror, “deep-seated sense of distrust” and a culture of anxiety and silence.88 For the schools that did survive the destructive forces of the DK, the quality of their education was mediocre at best. With only certain pockets of rural communities able to survive, school facilities formed makeshift shelters, small wooden huts (formerly stables), or “open-walled” schools under large trees.89 Children who were able to find these havens of education were mostly in terrible condition, as most had to travel far from their families, severely fatigued from hard labor, and chronically malnourished.90 Moreover, only small urban-based schools headed by party intellectuals truly received the CPK’s ideological curriculum. There was no widespread revelation that

88 Tatiana Garaknai, Meredith McCormac, Kerstin Tebbe, “Education and Fragility in Cambodia”, in the International Institute for Educational Planning research papers, (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2009), Pg. 23.
90 Ibid.
inspired the nation’s youth to join Party lines, rendering the destruction of the majority of the schools for naught. The CPK’s brutal and genocidal tactics robbed them of all sense of political and social legitimacy ensuring that their radicalized education policies did not extend past their demise in January of 1979. The increasingly frequent Vietnamese incursions seized territories in Eastern Cambodia before finally defeating the Khmer Rouge’s genocidal regime. By this point the CPK had splintered off into several different revolutionary movements, easing the Vietnamese forces’ task of ending the Cambodian tragedy.

After the DK, Vietnam would mastermind and control the newly formed People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) until 1991 followed by several Cambodian coalition groups leading directly to today’s ruling regime. For the purposes of this paper, the era following the DK marks a crucial era of political reconstruction that has served to make up a large portion of the education system as it is today its current state of crisis. It is without question that Cambodia’s history, as outlined throughout this chapter, has had a significant impact upon today’s society, and in turn, influenced the current education system. Concepts such as *jih Joan* and the agrarian communities reliance upon Buddhist values epitomize a central theme of the clash between modernity and tradition in today’s education crisis.

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CHAPTER II

The Reconstruction of a Collapsed Nation: Legacies of Three Ideological Regimes

“Cambodia is not going to be bought by anyone.” – Hun Sen

Following the downfall of Pol Pot’s reign of terror, three distinct political eras directed Cambodia’s reconstruction. These eras not only faced challenges brought by the destruction of Pol Pot’s regime, but also faced challenges that had been present in the pre-genocide era. The most enduring of such lingering issues was the dissonance between Cambodia’s traditional agrarian culture and the newer, foreign concept of westernized education. At the heart of why pre-1979 regimes had failed to create lasting education legacies, was a lack of understanding as to the purpose of education and its long-term incentives. The regimes during the post-1979 reconstruction had to face this fundamental disconnect as well as navigate through an unprecedented geopolitical landscape. The structure, ideology and leadership of today’s Cambodian government and education system are the direct result of reconstruction attempts by both Eastern bloc interests (Soviet Union and Vietnam) and Western bloc interests (the United Nations and the United States). Caught in the crossfire between the USSR and US superpowers, Cambodia’s reconstruction phases were inconsistently designed as each political era functioned under different foreign interests. Inconsistent ideological agendas throughout three distinct political eras combined with both lingering and immediate post-genocide challenges severely impacted the future of Cambodia’s education system. With such adverse conditions, the reconstruction eras
were only able to produce an education system marginally better than those of the pre-genocide systems. Such is the basis for Cambodia’s current education crises.

The reconstruction effort began in 1979 as Vietnamese forces and non-Sino affiliated “Hanoi Khmer” (the Marxist/Leninist faction of Cambodian Communists) ousted Pol Pot’s soldiers.92 Constructed under a new communist ideology aligned with Soviet/Vietnamese interests, the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) was the first political era to succeed Pol Pot’s Maoist regime. From 1979 to 1987 the PRK, under explicit Vietnamese instruction, attempted to re-develop Cambodia. After nearly a decade of development strategies described by some to have served “a vaguely sinister Vietnamese enterprise”, Soviet/Vietnamese authorities would abandon the PRK prompting the creation of the State of Cambodia (SOC). Without foreign support, the short-lived SOC struggled for nearly six years until the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) stepped in to insert its democratic political structure.93 Today’s Cambodian political structure resembles a democratic yet centralized bureaucratic model, merging both Vietnamese and UNTAC influences. This hybrid model incorporating a bizarre combination of the Soviet-Vietnamese centralized bureaucracy and the UN-sanctioned democracy memorializes the failed attempts to rebuild and modernize Cambodia’s education system.

While remnants of their structures survive within to this day, Thomas Clayton and David Ayres identify several core crises throughout both PRK/SOC and UNTAC

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supervised reconstruction efforts. The PRK’s core crises, a “crisis of quality”, a “crisis of orientation”, and a “crisis of timing”, not only vastly limited the PRK’s political legitimacy, but also failed to re-establish a successful national education system. The succeeding SOC and UNTAC supervised eras would inherit these crises as well as challenges brought by the disruptive transitions between eras. The cumulative nature of these crises considerably stifled the growth and stability of the education system throughout Cambodia’s reconstruction. The problems facing today’s education system are largely caused by the aforementioned crises. This chapter aims to highlight the political origins of the PRK, SOC, and UNTAC’s education challenges and its lasting impacts on the current Cambodian education system.

The People’s Republic of Kampuchea

The PRK’s legacy lies in its early years, from 1979 to 1987 when the grips of both Vietnam and the Soviet Union clenched hard to maintain their spheres of influence in Indochina. The Soviet Union essentially claimed Cambodia by funneling hundreds of millions of dollars in direct aid annually and through Vietnam. Inserting its military aid as well as commanding Vietnamese forces, the Soviet Union was able to exert both hard and soft power, trumping US and UN soft power often in the form of emergency aid. A geopolitical tug of war fought through huge monetary channels jumpstarted Cambodia’s non-existent economy and infrastructure, providing more

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than enough financial strength to rebuild itself to its former pre-genocide state. However, thorough Vietnamese/Soviet micromanagement during the construction of the PRK deliberately sought to retain Cambodia as a dependent state. While Cambodia did receive unprecedented inflows of cash and aid from its newfound Communist allies, its makeshift economy was inefficient and dangerously reliant upon Vietnam. Though the PRK regime did oversee Cambodia’s reconstruction, its centralized bureaucratic structures strictly served the purposes of its Eastern bloc investors. It is this outdated bureaucratic structure that has prevented meaningful long-term progress from occurring in the decades following the PRK. The PRK was installed as a short-term solution for Cambodia’s communist allies and was never intended to suit Cambodia’s long-term needs. These political motives prevented the PRK from building an education system best suited to its traditional backgrounds, prolonging the fundamental disconnect present in pre-genocide regimes.

The crisis of quality presented itself immediately after the January 1979 liberation of Phnom Penh. Due to the dire situation, schooling could not be immediately resumed. Instead, the 1979/1980 school year began on September 24th, 1979 due to the loss 75% of its teaching staff, 96% of its higher education students, and 67% of its primary and secondary students.95 The cumulative destruction of approximately nine years, including both the civil war preceding the DK and the genocide that occurred under the DK, levered extreme human and infrastructure costs. Buildings such as the Royal University of Agriculture were turned into munitions factories while smaller schools such as the case for Chao Ponhea Yat High School, later known as the infamous Tuol Sleng “S-21” torture facility, were

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converted into stables or prisons.\textsuperscript{96} Economics and history books were used as toilet paper or fire starters in rural agrarian communities while soldiers used torn government documents to roll their cigarettes in urban centers.\textsuperscript{97} In an interview with David Ayres, one former high-ranking education official admitted that he had “pilfered all the paper [he] could find so his wife could wrap the produce she was selling at the market”.\textsuperscript{98} Any other print media that had survived under Sihanouk’s Kingdom of Cambodia had been converted by the new PRK regime to be pulped for a much-needed supply of new paper.\textsuperscript{99} Students who had survived the genocide were poor, malnourished, diseased (from dysentery or malaria), and orphaned.

In the four months between January and April dedicated individuals, independent of the PRK’s efforts, secretly taught in their own villages from memory. Crude schools were formed in empty buildings with one desk, one book, and “a stub of a pencil” allocated to seven or eight children at a time.\textsuperscript{100} Such was the condition of schooling up until the new school year in September of 1979. These conditions indicate the severity of the quality crisis as the PRK began its reconstruction. After the PRK finally launched its education system, its teacher to student ratio was 1:53 with newly enrolled students heavily outnumbering a largely unqualified registry of teachers (less than a third had formal qualifications).\textsuperscript{101} In additional to lacking qualifications, the teaching staff lacked motivation and passion as most were in poor

\begin{footnotes}
\item[97] Ibid.
\item[98] Ibid. Interview conducted by Ayres, Phnom Penh, December 1996.
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physical health and still psychologically traumatized from the genocide that occurred less than half a year ago. Schools took place under trees (but were discontinued as soon as the rainy season began), or in abandoned buildings surrounded by mass graves and heavily mined areas. Even the PRK Teacher Training Center lacked furniture. The Soviet and Vietnamese authorities took advantage of the broken state of Cambodia and installed its centralized bureaucratic system. By establishing a centralized bureaucracy, decisions for each ministry, department, and province could be managed through their advisors.

To regulate and mold the PRK to Soviet/Vietnamese specifications, as many as 12,000 Vietnamese “expert advisors” oversaw the reconstruction of the Cambodia to ensure a new era of “Socialist workmen”. The initial staffing for the new ministry of education and many other government positions consisted of unqualified primary and secondary teachers or workers with little to no policy experience. For example, Chan Ven, a former high school physics teacher with no administrative or planning experience, took office as the first minister of education. Ministry officials like Chan Ven simply followed the development agendas put forth by their Vietnamese advisors. In multiple interviews conducted by Clayton in 1999, informants stated that “all authority… rested with the Vietnamese” and typically the situation resembled, “each office [consisting of] a Cambodian official and a Vietnamese expert to tell him what to do… one room, two chairs”.

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heavily skewed power dynamics, the new standards of education quality, access, recruitment and training of teachers, school districts, curriculum, and language barriers were not to be determined by the Cambodian PRK officials, but their assigned advisors. The 1979 state of the education system warranted a triage-like effort from the PRK that never truly aimed to permanently fix the widespread quality crisis. A combination of the other crises of orientation and timing would detract from full-fledged efforts to sustainably improve the education system.

A second crisis, the orientation crisis, arose from the intense geopolitical tension between Western and Eastern bloc powers. Cambodia found itself wedged between the Western and Eastern bloc’s last South East Asian Cold War front. Decidedly claimed by the Soviet/Vietnamese forces, a small cadre of the “Hanoi Khmer”, the Marxist-Leninist Khmer Rouge that had fled to Vietnam to escape Pol Pot and Lon Nol’s purges, were chosen to establish the PRK. The Hanoi Khmer leadership consisted of chiefly Heng Samrin, Hun Sen, Pen Sovan, and Chan Sy. Aligned with Vietnam from as far back as 1946, these four would be the main anchors to tie Cambodia’s redevelopment to the Vietnamese/Soviet cause.\footnote{Thomas Clayton, \textit{Cambodians and the occupation: responses to and perceptions of the Vietnamese occupation, 1979-1989}, (\textit{South East Asia Research}, Vol. 7, No.3, November 1999), 349.} The newly formed PRK, having explicitly sided with Soviet-oriented ideology, drew much criticism and scorn from the United States and other Western bloc countries, resulting in a ASEAN and US a trade embargo against Cambodia. The ASEAN and US allied nations stayed true to their trade embargo but did contribute over $335 million of emergency aid between 1979 and 1981.\footnote{Ibid., 343.} The Soviet Union contributed anywhere between $100 million in economic aid to up to $350 million in military
assistance a year throughout the early to mid-1980s.\textsuperscript{108} The Vietnamese, having also received $2 billion from the Soviet Union annually, recycled about $125 million of aid to Cambodia annually throughout the 1980s as well.\textsuperscript{109}

Vietnamese advisors aimed for the PRK’s education system to not only reconstruct but also legitimize their brand of Socialism. These advisors acutely stressed concepts such as “Khmerization”, “ruralization”, and “cultural identity” to be integrated into the new Socialist curriculum. The Vietnamese “big bosses” would eventually settle on a curriculum combining “revolutionary history”, morality, and “practical activities” with pre-existing Sangkum/Lon Nol curriculums.\textsuperscript{110} While these policies were ratified under the PRK regime, few Cambodians completely understood the purpose of creating a “new socialist man” or the concept of “ruralization” as a policy. Nevertheless, Vietnamese advisors advocated a quantity-at-the-cost-of-quality approach from 1979 through 1985. Primary schools grew by almost 20% in two years time while classes, pupils, and staff increased by over 40%.\textsuperscript{111} Secondary school growth rates were over 225% across the board as the new education administration hastily increased outlets of socialist propaganda.\textsuperscript{112} Such priorities where in line with the PRK’s core agenda to legitimize the new socialist state. Through these shortsighted and biased lenses, the PRK continued to forge an education system predicated on the interests of a larger geopolitical drama rather than on the best long-term interests of Cambodia. Expectedly, the new PRK curriculum proved to be

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 138.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 137.
ideologically foreign to the Cambodian community. Once again, under different circumstances and under a different political regime, the challenge to identify and correct the fundamental disconnect present in all previous regimes proved too much. It would take until the early 1990’s under the UNTAC regime for the “socialist worker” themed curriculum to be completely replaced.

The crises of quality and orientation proved to be impediments that worsened the third crisis, a crisis of timing. Interestingly, the rehabilitation of the new PRK education system was pursued with more attention and energy than other policy sectors such as the national health system, equally debilitated. Rather than addressing the former two crises in a thorough and sustainable manner, the new regime was determined to force unwavering and hurried attempts to redevelop the education system. Vietnamese advisors saw fit to prioritize the rapid rehabilitation of the education system in an effort to quickly solidify socialist legitimacy among the Cambodian people. Since the UN denied the PRK a seat to represent Cambodia in protest of its Eastern-bloc ties, Vietnam and its advisors faced enormous pressure to prop up the PRK to an internationally adequate standard, at least on the surface. Until then, the UN would ironically grant seats to the ousted Democratic Kampuchea (Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge) in an effort to punish and dilute Vietnam’s legitimacy in both the regional and global scale. This urgency to construct a globally presentable state would exacerbate the crises of quality and orientation.

Domestically, the crisis of timing also applied to domestic concerns, as Cambodia would once again find itself on the brink of another civil war. Two main

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rebel groups continued to fight against the PRK along the Thai border, the ousted Maoist faction of the Khmer Rouge led by Pol Pot’s Maoist Khmer Rouge, and FUNCINPEC, a royalist resistance movement led by Norodom Sihanouk. China sought to support the weakened Maoist Khmer Rouge (still led by Pol Pot) in an effort to “bleed” Vietnamese resources and Cambodian energy. The royalist FUNCINPEC received US aid in the form of weaponry, uniforms, ammunition, and covert military advisors used throughout the Vietnam War, displeased by the PRK’s allegiance to Soviet Russia and Vietnam. In a bizarre joint effort, both Sihanouk’s FUNCINPEC and Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge merged to form the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK). Thus, both domestic and international pressures were affected by the PRK’s development and guidance under Vietnamese advisors. Poor timing combined with foreign ideological orientations in post-genocide conditions prevented any meaningful long-term progress for the education system.

The Fall of the PRK and the Rise of the SOC

In 1988 Soviet support for the PRK’s socialist mission began to weaken with Mikhail Gorbachev’s appointment as the new Soviet leader. It seemed that Cambodia’s political approach, specifically within the education system, would shift to yet another state ideology. New Prime Minister Hun Sen, one of four chosen “Hanoi Khmer” members and formerly the PRK’s foreign minister, would

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permanently shift the internal political power structure. Under Hun Sen’s tenure, power would now rest in the hands of younger PRK ministers, former DK officials, and other officials without the “revolutionary backgrounds” tracing back to the early 1950’s.\textsuperscript{116} President Heng Samrin’s speech at the Fifth Party Congress appeared to acknowledge the PRK’s failure and preached to “[make] every effort to complete economic restoration, reorganize production, and build socialist education and culture”. The statement signaled that the new leadership recognized the PRK’s failure to execute its initial plan to blatantly exploit the country’s reconstruction for geopolitical gain.

By 1989, Hun Sen and his PRK had significantly decreased its reliance on Vietnamese military and political advisors and struggled to support Cambodia’s economy. The once abundant waves of Soviet economic aid had been reduced to a trickle, forcing the once proud Socialist-oriented PRK government to pursue moderate market-economy reforms.\textsuperscript{117} The PRK’s original CMEA and Soviet-bloc brethren had begun to gradually abandon the once highly controversial state, leading Hun Sen’s administration to question the relevance of continued ideological loyalty. With the entirety of the PRK regime seemingly in the hands of Hun Sen and his selected counterparts, changes had to be made to account for the uncharacteristic shift in economic policy. Once again, tumult from Cambodia’s foreign political sponsors sustained a new crisis of orientation that would challenge a poorly established education system.


\textsuperscript{117} Ibid. 144.
In April 1989 the PRK Assembly turned a new leaf calling itself the State of Cambodia (SOC), formally leaving the Vietnamese socialist ideology behind. Abandoned by its previous sponsors, the SOC era would mark a six-year identity crises in state ideology, economic policy, and education policy. To the education system, the change from the PRK to the SOC sparked confusion as the new principles adopted in the 1989 Constitutional amendments were in direct contradiction with the original hardline socialist curriculum. This confusion was captured by some schools hoisting the new SOC flag while others kept their pictures of Stalin or Ho Chih Min hanging at the head of blackboards.  

Final examinations given to final-year (in both upper secondary and higher education levels) students still reflected core PRK socialist principles such as “scientific Marxist-Leninist” curricula with no trace of the recent political shift. Through 1990, final-year students were expected to be wary of their examinations using outdated curricula material. A combination of both quality and orientation crises would continue to stifle any long-term progress within the SOC’s education system.

While confusion over a sudden pivot in school curricula persisted for upper secondary and higher education students, the State Plan in 1989 addressed lower levels of education. For the first time post-1979, Hun Sen endorsed the “strong stimulation of private kindergartens” and openly asked for “international institutions for assistance”. The State Plan would also call to repeal a ban on learning English and French in an effort to facilitate and ease the nation toward Westernized values.

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119 Interview conducted by Ayres with teachers in Bak Touk Secondary School, Phnom Penh, December 1996. 147.
and the inevitable foreign investment to come. This newfound leniency had also been
a pragmatic move for the new SOC regime as Hun Sen had stated that the new
government had to “lighten the government’s burden, together with the assistance of
international organizations, and to permit the opening of private schools”.\textsuperscript{120} He also
admitted the need to make “urgent reforms of the curriculum of general education at
all levels, improve teacher competencies, and strengthen educational quality and the
management capacity of the ministry”.\textsuperscript{121} The nearly 180 degree change in
ideological orientation can be seen as a desperate measure to pander to Western bloc
nations for similar levels of support Cambodia had received earlier in the decade from
the Soviet Union and Vietnam. Moreover, the lack of consistency regarding the
purpose and ideological agenda behind the SOC’s education system threatened
undermine the legitimacy of the PRK’s education legacy. This new crisis of
orientation would serve as the crucial start of an ideological schism between older
generation survivors (mainly farmers) who embraced the Soviet/Vietnamese
communist ideology and post-1979-born youth who would support democratic values
in the coming decades. This socio-political disconnect will be explored in the fourth
chapter.

The PRK/SOC regime marked an important period of modern Cambodian
history as it oversaw the growth of a new political elite that currently holds power in
the current administration. It also oversaw a geopolitical proxy war that would only
serve to skew Cambodia’s natural political trajectory and stunt its recovery. The
Soviet/Vietnamese stake in the steroid-like growth of the education system, while

\textsuperscript{120} Hun Sen, “National Assembly Transcripts”. Cambodian National Archives (April 1989).
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
providing a jumpstart to an unprecedented education crisis, sparked a crisis of its own through an ill-executed grow-by-any-means strategy. Through a decade of persistently poor conditions, a sense of skepticism and apathy arose amidst multiple ideological orientation changes, particularly among poorer agrarian communities. It would seem that the PRK’s education reconstruction succeeded in restoring a political structure to oversee the restart of a formal education system, but failed in that it stopped short of ensuring its stability and sustainability. While it would change its ideological stances to garner Western interests, its political structure remained heavily bureaucratized. The race to rebuild an education system as a means of sustaining future generations of “socialist workmen” failed, leaving behind a legacy of poor education infrastructure that would require imminent attention in the future.

The United Nations Transitory Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC)

Despite the change to a chiefly Cambodian administration, Cambodia’s education system would still be subject to the “immediate political priorities of those with higher authority than [Ministry of Education] policy-makers”.\textsuperscript{122} Constant political instability prevented the new SOC regime from focusing on their stated nation-building goal. Four warring political parties provided plenty of instability and unease during the SOC’s four years until another UN mandated election cycle in 1993. These four warring factions represented each of the dominant political parties since 1953. Hun Sen’s Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) represented the latest PRK/SOC Soviet/Vietnamese-influenced socialist government, Ranariddh’s

FUNCINPEC represented Sihanouk’s Royalist brand of government, the Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party (BDLP) represented Lon Nol’s traditionalist republican government, and finally the People’s Democratic Kampuchea represented Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge party. Naturally, with all four political factions competing for recognition across their regional strongholds, tactics of intimidation and violence were regularly employed. Uses of such tactics were regularly disruptive to the education system.

Chronic political instability through the UNTAC period allowed for the continuation of the education quality crisis that had initially occurred under the PRK regime. Poorly trained teaching staff, poorly distributed teaching aids/materials, high drop-out rates, low test scores, inadequately maintained school structures, and large discrepancies between public and elitist private schooling at both the primary and secondary levels were still present after a decade of PRK/SOC supervision.123 Conditions were bad enough to attract global media coverage generating a number of international multilateral organizations such as the Asian Development Bank, United Nations Development Program, UN Secretary General’s Office, the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and UNICEF to begin producing reports and proposals. However, with UNTAC uncertain of the political landscape following the mandated 1993 elections, the torrent of reports and proposals had minimal impact on the actual reality of the situation. The elections would not only decide the next round of Cambodia’s leadership, but also determine whether or not the current Cambodian

population would adopt a Westernized democratic model after decades of varying degrees of adopting leftist political ideologies.

The significance and aftermath of the mandated 1993 elections determined the base roots for the current education system. An unexpected narrow FUNCINPEC victory immediately prompted Hun Sen’s CPP to declare the elections invalid and corrupt, eventually forcing a dual Prime Minister coalition government with Ranariddh (representing FUNCINPEC) seated as the first prime minister and Hun Sen (still representing the CPP) seated as the second prime minister. Despite the questionable circumstances regarding the formation of the new coalition government, UNTAC declared its Cambodian mission to be a success. Academics and global media outlets agreed, reporting the “successful” elections to be a promising new solution for the chronic “Kampuchean problem”, a thorn in the side of the UN’s peacekeeping efforts in South East Asia.\textsuperscript{124} By establishing a democratic state, UNTAC and the Paris Peace Agreements aspired to reconnect the ailing nation to the international economy.\textsuperscript{125} However, just as the Geneva Conference had underestimated the situation in 1953, the ingrained traditional political culture of a one-party state adjusted poorly to UNTAC’s mandated process of re-democratization. By 1997, the Kingdom of Cambodia would revert back to its singular “democratic ways”, toting both the PRK/SOC’s centralized bureaucratic structure and its unsolved education crises.

For the new education system, the Kingdom of Cambodia’s National Education Seminar in January 1994 outlined the new regime’s objectives to

\textsuperscript{124} Joakim Ojendal, “Democracy Lost? The Fate of the UN-implanted Democracy in Cambodia”, \textit{Contemporary Southeast Asia}, Vol. 18, No. 2 (September 1996). Pg. 194.
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid.
universalize nine years of basic general education, modernize and improve the quality of the education system, and focus on “training development” with specific requirements for both employers and workers. The effort to engage post-education career possibilities also marked a change from the PRK/SOC agenda as it provided an opportunity to create a sustainable cycle of domestic economic independence. The mission had been attempted in different words, by different regimes, in different circumstances, but ultimately failed to address the same fundamental disconnect, just as all previous education systems had.

Initially guidelines and national budgetary objectives laid out by the National Education Seminar were a beacon of hope and optimism during UNTAC’s tenure in the new coalition government. However, a pattern of decreasing budget allocations toward the education system emerged after UNTAC’s departure. With 1994 national budget allocation toward education at just 9%, the two prime ministers initially agreed to allocate 15% of the national budget toward education by 2000. Yet, in December 1996 it was discovered, and later admitted by the minister of rehabilitation and development, that the national budget for the education sector had remained consistently below 10% of the national budget and the goal of attaining even 12% by 2000 would not be achieved. The failure to meet their earlier commitments apparently had also been brushed off as the new 1997 national budget showed the allocation toward education at a lowly 8.11%, down from 1996’s 11.83%.

127 Ibid., 172.
128 Ibid., 173.
allocation.\textsuperscript{129} Without UNTAC to oversee the coalition government, political tensions between FUNCINPEC and the CPP diverted attention away from the persisting education crisis. David Ashley, an UNTAC official, observed that Cambodia had been divided into “two separate and competing party states operating within every ministry, province, military command and police commissariat”.\textsuperscript{130} The priorities of both prime ministers were to obtain power rather than serve their government to pursue the mandated commitments to development, economic reform, and educational restructuring.

In conclusion, the UNTAC regime did indeed succeed in offering Cambodia a solid framework that provided possible solutions to decades of educational problems but fell short in its implementation. UNTAC aimed to address the major crisis of education quality, specifically within staffing, infrastructure, teaching material availability, and outdated curricula. Had it been given a chance to succeed, UNTAC’s framework might have provided an adequate short-term solution. However, due to political instability and regular violence and corruption, female students, ethnic minority students, rural students, and future students continued to receive little or no opportunity to engage in the education system. Finally, UNTAC’s democratic pluralistic approach failed fantastically on July 5, 1997 when second prime minister Hun Sen launched a violent military coup resulting in the execution of over 40 FUNCINPEC officials.\textsuperscript{131}


Despite considerable financial, administrative, and political support from a variety of foreign nations, the state of the Cambodian education system hardly changed over the course of almost two decades. Three core suppressive factors that have remained constant throughout these three reconstruction periods are accountable. First, the PRK’s centralized bureaucratic model survived the reconstruction periods and exists in Cambodia’s current political and administrative structures. Its inefficiencies, thoroughly explored in chapter three, only serve to delay communication and resources from the central government to various provinces. Second, the 1979 “Hanoi Khmer” political cabal functions as the origin of today’s CPP and top political leadership. Among these figures is Cambodia’s current prime minister, Hun Sun, a self-engineered autocrat who has served more than 25 years under various leadership roles due to the exploitable-by-design PRK/SOC bureaucratic model. Finally, the strong traditional Buddhist agrarian culture that survived the French colonial regime, the Khmer Rouge purges, the PRK/SOC, and UNTAC period, provided resistance against the unstable ideological orientations during the multiple education reconstruction efforts.

Today’s education system faces the challenges brought by a cumulative combination of these three factors. Chapter Three will quantitatively examine the effects of the PRK/SOC bureaucratic structure and its budgeting and fiscal planning system on the current education system. Chapter Four will investigate qualitative factors unseen in Chapter Three’s analysis, chiefly focusing upon the impact of Hun Sen’s regime and the Cambodian cultural norms on the education system.
CHAPTER III

Evaluating the MoEYS Structure, Policy, and Results

“Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence” – Carl Sagan

Since its independence from the French in 1953, the mantra of “quantity-over-quality” underscores the foundational issues within the Cambodian education system.

Each regime, seemingly ashamed of its predecessors, saw its success aimed toward finally restoring the pre-colonial Cambodian legacy. Prince Norodom Sihanouk attempted to pull his agrarian nation into the 20th century through rapid educational expansion and embracing westernized ideals. Lon Nol’s military coup followed by Pol Pot’s Democratic Kampuchea would look to start new legacies in an equally expedited pace. Today, Cambodia under a Hun Sen-led regime finds itself chasing rapid progress through rushing through careful UNTAC and global organizations’ instructions and recommendations throughout the 1990’s. Through careful analysis of the MoEYS’s Education Strategic Plans and their budgetary processes, it can be concluded that a lack of flexibility due to excessive compliance measures have curtailed the education system’s progress over the last two decades. It also concludes that though it has the financial capabilities to address the lack of uniform accessibility, quality, and affordability, the Cambodian government has yet to deviate from its persistent underfunding of the MoEYS.

The current problems plaguing the complex budgetary processes and structures have stalled attempts to advance the perennially ailing education system.
While Cambodia has human resources it has yet to completely discover or utilize, the current regime is no different in modernizing and re-branding itself at a furious pace. The chief reason behind the Cambodian education system having evolved so poorly over the past century is the lack of consistency towards its policy and goals. High turnover in regimes guaranteed little consistency and effectiveness in both political legitimacy and education.

Most switches in policy were expected to take place within two years, summoning an urgency leading to the common “quantity-over-quality” trend seen throughout the modern history of Cambodia’s education system. Upon closer examination of today’s education financing and budgeting processes, Hun Sen’s regime is no different. Using publicly available Education Strategic Plans for 2009-2013 and 2014-2018 combined with a variety of UNESCO and NGO studies, it can be concluded that Cambodian authorities have yet to address the qualitative issues underlying mediocre quantitative efforts. The MoEYS continues to make optimistic projections, expecting consistent incremental progress across enrollment, repetition, and drop out rates. However, its data shows inconsistent and at times, weakening results despite incremental nominal increases in the MoEYS budget.

By cross referencing the Education Strategic Plan for 2009-2013 (written in 2010), and actual targets provided in the Education Strategic Plan for 2014-2018 (written in 2014), notable areas of underperformance can be seen. Furthermore, using data from official MoEYS reports, UNESCO reports, and the Save the Children organization’s independent fieldwork analysis, this chapter will examine the budgetary and fiscal planning processes and their results to highlight areas lacking
accountability. By improving accountability and reforming budgetary and fiscal planning processes, the MoEYS could track considerably better results and keep true to its overall mission.

**The Cambodian Education System Structure**

The MoEYS is one of the largest civil ministries comprised of six levels of authority. At the top of the ministry sits the Minister, the Secretary of State, and the Under Secretary of State. Directly below the top officials are its advisors and appointed cabinet, which during the Vietnamese occupation would unofficially dictate the policy of the top-level ministers. However, since 1989, the cabinet and advisory roles no longer hold such power. At the third level sits four department heads comprised of the General Department of Higher and Technical Education and Vocational Training, General Department of Youth and Sports, General Department of Education, General Department of Administration and Finance, and finally a General Inspectorate office. Below this central level of department offices sits 21 technical departments that coordinate with 24 provincial and municipal education offices headed by a host of directors, deputy directors and their own technical offices for each district. As appointed state officials, there is no accountability mechanism between the Cambodian populace and the officials. This lack of accountability mechanisms is just one aspect of the structurally flawed MoEYS structure.

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133 Ibid., Pg. 19.
Below the provincial and municipal offices are the district education offices, which supervise the primary schools in the district as well as providing technical guidance to secondary schools in the province.\textsuperscript{134} At the grass roots levels are the individual schools that must implement Ministry guidelines and communicate with its district offices for assistance, aid, support, or instruction. Such a structure is not only prone to delays but also creates a one-way flow of communication. The heavily

bureaucratized structure prevents qualitative information and feedback of district and provincial issues from influencing future policy and financial planning providing only a quantitative form of feedback (in the form of enrollment rates, resource expenditures, wages, etc.) to the General Department offices and the MoEYS leadership.

The MoEYS oversees a twelve-grade school system consisting of six primary school grades (1-6) for ages five through eleven, three lower secondary school grades (7-9) for ages eleven through fourteen, and three upper secondary school grades (10-12) for ages fourteen through seventeen. This twelve-grade system assumes a nine-year basic education portion and a three-year upper secondary portion or an option to pursue an equivalent three-year program in technical education and vocational training. Upon completing the upper secondary grades, students aspiring to enter higher education options such as University and Institute programs must take a standardized entrance exam. These university or institute programs include the Faculty of Medicine, Pharmacy and Dentistry, the Institute of Technology of Cambodia, the Royal University of Agriculture, and National Institute of Management. However, amongst these sectors of the education system, the Cambodian Government, tracing back to the Sihanouk regime, heavily prioritized the primary education system. Closer examination of the Education Strategic Plans during the empirical evidence portion of this chapter will confirm that today’s budget also significantly prioritizes primary education.

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136 Ibid.
Due to the concerted effort to funnel resources into the Primary Level of education, primary schools are by far the most numerous in the country in almost every education statistic while lower and upper secondary schools are significantly lacking. As a result, primary schools are the most accurate form of evaluating the status of the nation’s education system as a whole due to available data across Cambodia’s provinces. The limited number of secondary schools, which tend to be confined to urbanized areas, are not representative of the secondary education statuses, if any, in rural or remote districts. According to 2014 numbers provided by the MoEYS’s Education Strategic Plan 2014-2018, Primary Education is allocated 53% of the overall education budget while the other 47% is split amongst the Lower and Upper Secondary Education, Non-formal Education, and Higher Education.\textsuperscript{137} Higher Education holds only 13% of the education budget indicating the skewed landscape of Cambodia’s education situation. Of the entire 2014 national budget, the MoEYS received 16.3% or 2% of the national GDP, still unable to hit the 20% allocation goal set during the UNTAC period.\textsuperscript{138} Low national expenditures toward education translate to heavier burdens of parent and community contributions and inadequate incentives for teaching staff.\textsuperscript{139}

While community funding has unfortunately been a significant portion of village supplementary education budgets for centuries, the recent trend in government education expenditures present an opportunity to wean local communities relying

upon villages for funding. In 2010 to 2012, education budgets have been underspent by about $20 million a year signaling the budgetary processes and execution to be inefficiently allocated, improperly run, and bogged down by compliance requirements. The current education system could be more efficient, qualitatively improved, and a step closer to sustainability with the same amount of expenditures. An in-depth analysis of the budgeting process, funding vehicles, and reforms over the past decade show the many areas of concern and signs of improvement.

The Budgetary Processes and Financial Planning

Cambodian budgetary processes consist of a remarkably complex host of accountability mechanisms to the point of inefficiency. Its structure is reminiscent of the Vietnamese occupation from 1979 through 1989, a period during which Hun Sen ascended up the political ranks. Today in his regime, individual schools must receive funding from three different entities, the MoEYS, its provincial government, and local community donations in an unnecessarily bureaucratic and hierarchical fashion. The time frame for the budget process spans eight months, beginning in May and ending in December with the approval of the new year’s budget law. Upon implementation of the budget law, the disbursement process begins with a chain of command requiring approval to be communicated to up to 20 different authorities and

140 Save the Children in Cambodia, “Program Based Budget Reform and Community Participation in Primary Education in Cambodia”, (2015). Pg. 7.
offices before budget expenditures are transferred for use.\footnote{Duy Pheng, Hang Sovonn, Yos Soly, “Financial Management of Education Systems: Educational Financing and Budgeting in Cambodia”, \textit{International Institute for Educational Planning – UNESCO}, (2001). Appendix 4.} This overly complex structure is particularly detrimental to the education system, which relies upon the MoEYS to pay teaching salaries, recurring maintenance packages, and a host of non-recurring charges. In most cases, local schools, particularly in rural and remote locations are unable to effectively function whilst waiting for a response up the chain of command.

Consider a scenario where a school might have to immediately repair damage done by flashfloods caused during the rainy season, requiring an unanticipated non-recurrent expenditure. An advance on non-recurrent expenditures would require collaboration between 18 different authorities and offices, a process that might take as little as three to four months, or as long as eight months. Even in the case of the advance reaching the school within three months, the school administrators might have already used recurrent budget finances for teaching wages and supplies to make the repairs. This would leave teachers without pay for an indefinite amount of time and the school without certain teaching materials. Such a case of delayed aid and support is commonplace for many rural and remote schools, particularly those alongside the Thai border in the Battambang province. The state of operations in such areas are so poorly run that Battambang families have begun to migrate across the border into Thailand in search of better schooling situations.\footnote{Save the Children in Cambodia, “Program Based Budget Reform and Community Participation in Primary Education in Cambodia”, (2015). Pg. 34.} While recent reforms have moved to decrease the cumbersome process for resources in some regions, rural and remote regions have yet to resolve such issues.
Even in urban situations, funding through the disbursement process cannot be relied upon throughout the school year. In the Save the Children 2014 Report, a case study was conducted on a public primary school positioned in the well-off city of Siem Reap. Siem Reap is located in the northern part of Cambodia famous for its Angkor Wat temples, a main source of the city’s revenues. The primary school, Wat Bo, is considered to be a major success story not only within the Siem Reap districts, but also nationally.\(^{144}\) Run by the same principal since 1994, Wat Bo has exponentially increased its student capacity, growing its initial student population from 412 children to 5,465.\(^{145}\) Its teaching staff has also grown almost ten-fold up from eleven teachers to 120.\(^{146}\) It has expanded its infrastructure in almost every aspect, providing private vans for student transport, increasing the number of classrooms, housing an infirmary as well as its own teaching incentive program.\(^{147}\) What makes Wat Bo’s ascendance from a small public school to a significantly larger private-like school, however, is not the increased government program-budgeting initiatives, or the complex bureaucratic compliance processes of the MoEYS. In fact, the case study found that the individual efforts of Wat Bo’s administration members were behind much of its success.

Wat Bo’s annual budget is roughly around US$40,000, with 30% provided by the MoEYS, 50% provided by the local community and the remaining 20% from its own revenues (obtained by renting spaces in its compound to a local caterer,

\(^{144}\) Save the Children in Cambodia, “Program Based Budget Reform and Community Participation in Primary Education in Cambodia”, (2015). Annex 3: The Case of Wat Bo.
\(^{145}\) Ibid.
\(^{146}\) Ibid.
\(^{147}\) Ibid.
Stationary and book shops). In addition to the MoEYS’ comically low 30% funding for a public primary school, Wat Bo reported that it in 2012 it only received about 75% of its allocated funds due to “problems in fund disbursement”. The well-documented success of Wat Bo is attributed ability to wean itself off unreliable MoEYS allocations. The principal (unnamed in the official report) cites gaining trust from the parents to be key with regards to engaging the community and receiving a consistent flow of contributions. Wat Bo has succeeded in proving that its services do indeed provide better education as a result of increased community funding and its use of donations have been transparently managed. Setting this precedent has allowed the continual funding of half the entire school’s budget through donations. Another reason for Wat Bo’s success is its ability to engage the local community. Community engagement not only allows parents to visually observe the fruits of their donations, but also provide parents with an opportunity to voice their opinions. While all public schools are required to have an “open house” at the beginning of the year, Wat Bo provides a larger window to promote parental participation. The school allows for an entire “open house” month to accommodate parents whose occupations may conflict with the traditional timeframe. In addition, Wat Bo also incentivizes parent-school interaction at these meetings by giving attending parents “priority status” for their children enrolled in school that year.

149 Ibid.
150 Ibid.
151 Ibid.
152 Ibid.
These relatively simple resolutions have resulted in 99% of parents engaging with the school at least once a year.

Funding from an engaged parental community has allowed the school to pay for teaching salaries, the main focus of MoEYS funding. Lack of timely and adequate funding from the MoEYS to the typical public school makes it immensely hard for the school administration to pay their staff on-time competitive salaries. Poorly incentivized, teachers move on to take other day jobs, preventing them from teaching regularly or passionately. Most teachers also resort to cutting the school day short and withholding information important to the national annual exam in order to charge for private tutoring, a comparatively stable source of income to actually teaching for the public school.\textsuperscript{153} Statistics such as teacher absenteeism, misbehavior, and illicit private tutoring are not recorded by the MoEYS and are typically not dealt with in a direct manner by local school administration. Wat Bo has tackled these crucial issues, despite their lack of adequate government funding, by embracing but regulating the concept of private tutoring and informal fees as a means of additional income for their teachers. The school principal at the beginning of the year will meet with the staff and agree upon the fees of the private tutoring as well as the time allocations throughout the school year.\textsuperscript{154} Typically the school has agreed to private tutoring off the school compound, and in the case of on-campus tutoring, services must be after school hours on Thursdays or during public holidays or vacations.\textsuperscript{155}

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Save the Children in Cambodia, “Program Based Budget Reform and Community Participation in Primary Education in Cambodia”, (2015). Annex 3: The Case of Wat Bo. 35.
\item Ibid., Annex 3: The Case of Wat Bo.
\item Ibid.
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Through regulation and a willingness to negotiate with its teaching staff, Wat Bo school administrators are able to make private tutoring, typically an adversarial issue between school administrators and teaching staff, an asset for their primary school. Private tutoring wages can add another 40% to their initial monthly salary allowing teaching staff members to stay focused on Wat Bo students and their well-being.\textsuperscript{156} The school additionally assists teachers who plan on obtaining higher education degrees, though all Wat Bo teachers have a bachelor degree.\textsuperscript{157} Wat Bo has a revolving fund of about $13,000 to help teachers pursue Masters degrees or assist poorer students in purchasing books or stationary. It is important to note that all funds are transparently managed without the principal having any direct access. By setting a precedent for transparency and success, a culture of honesty has been integrated to fight off common cases of intra-school corruption. When asked for his key to success for over two decades, Wat Bo’s principal responded that he strictly follows four principles, the safety of his students, making decisions for the welfare of his students, constantly seeking to increase the quality of teaching and learning, and finally supporting his teaching staff’s livelihood through alternative funding means instead of solely relying upon MoEYS funding.\textsuperscript{158}

Wat Bo’s success can ironically be used to point out the lack of progress in the overall Cambodian education scene. The only reason why Wat Bo, a public primary school, was able to attain such success and fiscal independence from the MoEYS was because of the unique devotion and wherewithal of its principal and

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{156} Save the Children in Cambodia, “Program Based Budget Reform and Community Participation in Primary Education in Cambodia”, (2015). Annex 3: The Case of Wat Bo.
\item \textsuperscript{157} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{158} Ibid.
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teaching staff. Such traits are not commonly found among other public school administrators or faculty. In fact, the STC case-study mentions of schools within the same district of Wat Bo whose “management has not been as impressive as [that of Wat Bo’s]”\textsuperscript{159}. Wat Bo’s geographical placement near the tourist town of Siem Reap also allows accounts for the relatively generous parent contributions. While this is not to say that the community is rich, most parents are indeed workers and small business owners who profit off of Angkor Wat’s tourism traffic. Rural and remote schools, typically supported by poorer agrarian communities, are unable to pay for the infrastructure, staff, or support systems present in Wat Bo. Not only should program-based budgeting be expedited to such regions, but also a closer inspection of individual schools is warranted to create need-based program-budget initiative. Schools located closer to city centers like Phnom Penh tend to revolve around communities who are more well off than those in remote villages in Battambang.

The case study of Wat Bo provides some insight as to what is realistic and possible within Cambodia. While Wat Bo’s success presents hope that one day all primary schools in Cambodia will be able to sustain such standards, it also shows that such resilience was only possible under almost un-reproducible circumstances. Wat Bo, largely to the credit of its principal, was able to foster a community stressing the importance of primary education, retain its valuably trained and educated teaching staff, free itself from financial dependence, and engineer a status of national and regional prestige. Its resilience, ironically, can be owed to the lack of dependability on behalf of the MoEYS. It is more than likely, equally passionate principals and

\textsuperscript{159} Save the Children in Cambodia, “Program Based Budget Reform and Community Participation in Primary Education in Cambodia”, (2015). Annex 3: The Case of Wat Bo.
school administrators are present throughout the public school system but are unable to reach any levels of success due to such poor budgetary planning and disbursement processes. The next section will show evidence that despite the increase in program-based funding and legislation declaring larger allocations toward the MoEYS, its fundamental goals and missions have been left unfulfilled.

A pattern of under-spending in provincial budgets and mediocre improvement, despite expectations of exponential improvement with incremental budgetary increases, can be seen in the MoEYS’ Education Strategic Plans from 2009-2018. Wat Bo took about 20 years of dedication, ingenuity, and community engagement to reach its current level of success. With the MoEYS’ funding playing only a minor role in its overall success, one must wonder whether the blame can be solely put on the MoEYS’s structure and fiscal habits. Fixing the structures within the MoEYS and its disbursement processes may alleviate difficulties faced by local public school administrators, but it by no means provides a permanent solution. A genuine devotion to the education of the Cambodian people at all levels, not just the primary level, must be felt from the top of the regime down to the students for meaningful change to occur. Such a process long outlives the MoEYS’ aspirations of seeing Cambodia as a middle-high income developed nation by 2050.
Empirical Evidence

This section will analyze key indicators provided by the MoEYS’s Education Strategic Plans for both 2009-2013 and 2014-2018. National economy factors such as Cambodia’s GDP growth rate, MoEYS budget growth rate, and national budget allocation percentages combined with education performance factors such as repetition rates, enrollment rates and dropout rates are compared. By analyzing targets set out by the 2009-2013 Strategic Plan and matching them to actual results provided in the 2014-2018 reports, it is possible to evaluate the effectiveness of the MoEYS over the course of four years. Despite increases in the MoEYS budget, evidence provided below will show no conclusive evidence toward efficacy of the current budgetary processes. Instead, targets set in 2009 are consistently underperformed or barely achieved.

![Education Percentage of National Budget](image)

Figure 2. MoEYS. "Education Strategic Plan 2009-2013" (2010), MoEYS. "Education Strategic Plan 2014-2018", (2014).
Cambodia’s GDP has been steadily growing since 2009 at an average rate of almost seven percent, one of the highest GDP growth rates in South East Asia. However, despite its growing GDP, the MoEYS has been allocated less of the national budget as shown in figure 2. Targets set by the 2009-2013 Strategic Plan clearly intended the allocations of the national budget to increase only to be steadily decreased since its circulation. Proof that the national budget has been increasing with the GDP growth rate can be seen in the increase of the MoEYS’s budget despite decreasing allocations between 2009 and 2012. While both the 2009 and 2014 Education Strategic Plans underline the importance of fiscally supporting Cambodia’s education system to achieve its 2050 goal to be a middle-high income nation, it seems that as its GDP increases, less fiscal support is given toward education. With the bulk

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of the MoEYS’s allocated funds intended for teaching salaries and maintaining basic infrastructure, the expectation for increased funding is to encourage the population to continue enrolling in school. Through retaining teaching staff and paying them more competitive wages, parents are to assume that teaching quality thereby increasing the incentives of sending their children to school year after year. Additionally by having up-to-date teaching materials and adequate teaching environments, the MoEYS’s budget designated for basic infrastructure will also increase incentives of keeping children in school. This reasoning has shown promise as seen in the case of Wat Bo primary school. Yet, figure two presents net admission rates and net enrollment rates to have produced marginal increases.

Figure 4. MoEYS. "Education Strategic Plan 2009-2013" (2010), MoEYS. "Education Strategic Plan 2014-2018", (2014).
Budgetary and compliance issues can be seen in the indicator labeled “% Education Budget Spent” in figure 3. Actual spending for the MoEYS’s budget hovers around 90% suggesting that at most 10% of the MoEYS’s budget was never used. The MoEYS’s inability to consistently disburse their allocated budget speaks to the unnecessarily complex budgetary process. With much to be desired from its admission and enrollment rates, it is unlikely that the MoEYS was unable to find appropriate uses for its budget, particularly toward the lower and upper secondary levels of education.
Figure 6. MoEYS. "Education Strategic Plan 2009-2013" (2010), MoEYS. "Education Strategic Plan 2014-2018", (2014).

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<tr>
<td>Net Enrollment Rate (Primary) Target</td>
<td>95.00%</td>
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<td>Net Enrollment Rate (Primary) Actual</td>
<td>94.80%</td>
<td>96.10%</td>
<td>96.10%</td>
<td>97.00%</td>
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Figure 7. MoEYS. "Education Strategic Plan 2009-2013" (2010), MoEYS. "Education Strategic Plan 2014-2018", (2014).

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<tr>
<td>Net Enrollment Rate (L. Secondary) Target</td>
<td>37.00%</td>
<td>42.00%</td>
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<td>Net Enrollment Rate (U. Secondary) Target</td>
<td>21.00%</td>
<td>22.00%</td>
<td>23.00%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Net Enrollment Rate (L. Secondary) Actual</td>
<td>32.60%</td>
<td>33.90%</td>
<td>37.40%</td>
<td>37.80%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Net Enrollment Rate (U. Secondary) Actual</td>
<td>19.40%</td>
<td>20.80%</td>
<td>20.10%</td>
<td>18.10%</td>
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Net enrollment rates across school levels indicate the lack of success for the MoEYS’s efforts to engage students and their parents for both lower and upper secondary schooling. While the MoEYS’s efforts in hitting target rates at the primary school level have been relatively successful, actual results for enrollment in both secondary levels were markedly underwhelming. Consistently low enrollment rates over the course of four school years not only show the MoEYS’s lack of strategy but also a sense of indifference toward secondary schooling. Low target enrollment rates combined with no clear strategy amounted to underperformance for both secondary levels of schooling.

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<th>Repetition Rates across Primary School</th>
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<td>2009 - 2010</td>
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<td>Repetition (Primary) Target</td>
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<td>Repetition (Primary) Actual</td>
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Figure 9. MoEYS. "Education Strategic Plan 2009-2013" (2010), MoEYS. "Education Strategic Plan 2014-2018", (2014).
Repetition rates across school level results were consistent with enrollment rates in that lower and upper secondary levels of schooling exhibited poor performance. As with figure four, actual results for primary school repetition rates tracked fairly closely to targeted repetition rates showing strong planning and efficient use of funds throughout four academic years. The discrepancy between lower and upper secondary repetition rate targets and actual results were highly misguided, as actual results were 17 times and 10 times higher than anticipated respectively. Once again, the MoEYS’s lacked a concerted effort toward addressing secondary school-related issues.
Completion Rates across Primary School

- **Completion (Primary) Target**:
  - 2009 - 2010: 85.00%
  - 2010 - 2011: 90.00%
  - 2011 - 2012: 95.00%
  - 2012 - 2013: 100.00%

- **Completion (Primary) Actual**:
  - 2009 - 2010: 83.20%
  - 2010 - 2011: 85.30%
  - 2011 - 2012: 89.70%
  - 2012 - 2013: 87.30%

Figure 9. MoEYS. "Education Strategic Plan 2009-2013" (2010), MoEYS. "Education Strategic Plan 2014-2018", (2014).

Completion Rates across Secondary School

- **Completion (U. Secondary) Target**:
  - 1: 28.00%
  - 2: 26.00%
  - 3: 30.00%
  - 4: 31.00%

- **Completion (Primary) Actual**:
  - 1: 83.20%
  - 2: 85.30%
  - 3: 89.70%
  - 4: 87.30%

- **Completion (L. Secondary) Actual**:
  - 1: 48.70%
  - 2: 44.40%
  - 3: 42.10%
  - 4: 40.60%

- **Completion (U. Secondary) Actual**:
  - 1: 26.10%
  - 2: 28.50%
  - 3: 27.80%
  - 4: 27.00%

Figure 10. MoEYS. "Education Strategic Plan 2009-2013" (2010), MoEYS. "Education Strategic Plan 2014-2018", (2014).
Completion rates across school level showed similar trends to enrollment rates and repetition rates in that primary school results were relatively promising compared to the consistently underperforming lower and upper secondary results. Primary school completion rates were nearly 90% over the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 school years but failed to consistently hit targeted rates of 95% and 100% respectively. Both secondary levels of schooling underperformed with lower secondary completion rates considerably deteriorating over the four-year period compared to upper secondary completion rates.

![Dropout Rates across Primary School](image)

Figure 11. MoEYS. "Education Strategic Plan 2009-2013" (2010), MoEYS. "Education Strategic Plan 2014-2018", (2014).
Dropout rates across school levels exhibited trends consistent with the above tables showing primary results to be the closest to hitting 2009 targets and secondary schooling underperforming considerably. The biggest disparity between actual and target results can be seen in the lower secondary dropout rates as upper secondary rates, as the mildly disappointing upper secondary actual results tracked somewhat closer to its projected figures. Higher dropout and repetition rates in lower secondary compared to upper secondary schools can be attributed the considerable drop off in enrollments between the two. Figure four shows that the enrollment rates for lower secondary school is almost twice that of the upper secondary school level indicating that those who repeat or drop out account for the smaller enrollment rates in the upper secondary school level.
Implications of Evidence

The data provided by MoEYS’s 2009 and 2014 Education Strategic Plans display five key trends. First, despite the growing GDP and increasing national budget, less financial support has gone toward the education system despite promises to increase the budget allocations to 20% back in 1999. Second, the MoEYS has barely managed to hit target figures for the primary level of schooling though it continually disbursed a disproportionately large portion of the national budget toward the MoEYS. Third, despite lower secondary and upper secondary school targets set noticeable lower, actual results failed to meet such standards and often with large disparities between the projected figures and actual results. Fourth, while disparities between target and actual results in upper secondary schools do not seem to be as critical as those in the lower secondary school indicators, the situation is still quite severe as the upper secondary student population is much smaller. Fifth, in conjunction with the majority actual results falling considerably shorter than 2009 projected targets, the MoEYS fails to spend ten percent of its own budget each year. Model schools like Wat Bo achieve considerable success without MoEYS dependence, indicating that the Cambodian education system has serious structural issues that have consistently stunted its growth over the last two decades.

The Save the Children Cambodia fieldwork report on its education sites confirms the aforementioned trends. It highlights the heavy burden individual schools must carry in order to stay open, particularly the administrative duties for accounting, compliance, and disbursement requests. In response, the MoEYS and the MEF

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161 Save the Children in Cambodia, “Program Based Budget Reform and Community Participation in Primary Education in Cambodia”, (2015). Pg. 8.
have sought to decrease administrative burdens and loosen the rigid budgetary structure via improving disbursements of the program based budgeting for school operating costs, increasing 2015’s budget, and promoting community engagement with sub-national administrations (commune councils and village authorities) to ease school administrative burdens.\textsuperscript{162} Due to the Budget Law for 2015, the MEF is prepared to grant the MoEYS a $61 million increase, equivalent to a 1% increase of the national budget (up from 16.2\% in 2014 to 17.07\% in 2015). The MoEYS and MEF have also introduced a seven-year transition into a post-audit program budget request and disbursement system from the current time-consuming pre-audit system.\textsuperscript{163} This transition also decentralizes budget management responsibilities from the national education office to the provincial education offices.\textsuperscript{164}

While change toward budgetary processes and bureaucratic structure have begun, little has been said about other fundamental issues such as the quality of teaching staff. Wat Bo’s success had been dependent on retaining its qualified staff through competitive wages and marrying parent, student, and teacher into a community such that is in the best interest for each party to participate in school life. The MEF’s $61 million increase for 2015 is still 3\% short of its pledged national budget allocation when compared to its 2014 target allocation, hardly enough to increase wages for primary school teachers across the country. Furthermore, neither the MoEYS nor MEF have discussed plans to make a concerted effort toward addressing the issues presented by unimproved lower and upper secondary schools.

\textsuperscript{162} Save the Children in Cambodia, “Program Based Budget Reform and Community Participation in Primary Education in Cambodia”, (2015). Pg. 7.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., Pg. 8.
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid.
The empirical evidence above provides a preliminary quantitative analysis regarding the quality of the Cambodian education system. Yet, it is unable to shed light upon the standards of the Cambodian school experience and how a primary school such as Wat Bo may differ from a primary school based in the capital city Phnom Penh, a primary school in Battambang, or a primary school in the port city of Sihanoukville. With geographical factors playing such a significant role in a student’s schooling experience, firsthand fieldwork or experiences are needed to understand a grass-roots perspective. The following chapter will aim to provide insight toward such geographical factors, socio-economic factors amongst students as well as family impact on student life. A qualitative approach to understanding the needs of the lower class will look to provide insights on forms of resistance against the structurally flawed education system.
CHAPTER IV

From the Children of the Golden Land

“I assess the power of a will by how much resistance, pain, torture it endures and knows how to turn it to its advantage” – Friedrich Nietzsche

There are several qualitative factors responsible for the current education system’s lack of progress. These deeply embedded factors have endured the political turmoil and chaos Cambodia has seen over the last century. Chapter One discussed the origins and evolution of these factors while Chapter Two stressed their presence in the education system’s bureaucratic structure, prolonging the “fundamental disconnect” between political regimes and their education systems. Chapter Three highlighted the quantitative and budgetary accountability figures shortcomings with the current system. This final chapter will use interviews with current and former Cambodian students to examine the relationship between government aid and factors such as size of towns, political participation, and dominant town occupation. These seven interviews conclude a major disparity in education accessibility, quality, and engagement between large cities and small villages. Additionally, the interviews were able to provide insights on the societal nuances and traditional structures of small village Buddhist agrarian lifestyles and the role they play in confronting the aforementioned disparity.
Interview Methodology and Limitations

Due to the potentially harmful consequences for the interviewed subjects, several obstacles were met while trying to accumulate a meaningful sample size. Through tapping into various Cambodian immigrant populations around the United States, a small, but diverse sample size of seven subjects agreed to be interviewed. The seven subjects were interviewed via online video interviews, direct phone calls, and proxy in-person interviews due to their diverse locations outside the United States. Each subject was asked a set of identical pre-determined questions regarding general information (length of residency in Cambodia, location, town/village size, main village occupation, main religion, type of leadership, and political involvement) as well as questions regarding their educational experience (level of schooling received, relationship with students and teachers, conditions of school, difficulty of curriculum, and the engagement/support from their family and community).

While all seven subjects were able to provide valuable insights, there were several limitations. Since five of the seven subjects were first generation immigrants to the United States and Singapore (some located in a Cambodian community in Rhode Island), their answers were obtained via a questionnaire and translated by a current Cambodian student fluent in English. Additionally, since a portion of the interviewed sample size is a no longer current student, they were unable to comment on the current education system. However, these former students were able to provide a comparison between the education system between 1970 and 1980 and the present system. Only, three of the seven interviewees were able to provide information on the current education system.
Though, all seven subjects provided diversity with regard to their location within Cambodia (or their hometowns prior to their immigration to the United States and Singapore), there were only one or two data points per town/province. Furthermore, it was difficult to connect with students or recent students who were currently engaged in the Cambodian education system due to logistical and language barrier issues as well as security concerns for both the interviewer and potential subjects located in rural or remote townships. Even for those who were first generation immigrants in the United States, conditions of complete anonymity were mandatory for fear of potential retaliation on their families or friends still in Cambodia. Understandably, their answers were brief and concise. Despite these limitations, the seven subjects were able to confirm the existence of several qualitative factors that went unmentioned in the MoEYS’ Education Strategic Plans, UNESCO reports, NGO studies and the STC fieldwork study. Moreover, the accounts and attitudes toward the education system provided by the four older subjects were remarkably similar to the accounts and attitudes under the current system provided by the younger subjects. Though the nation suffered through unprecedented loss and instability between 1975 and 1993, the preservation of the citizens’ mentality is a testament to the strength of traditional agro-centric, patriarchal, and hierarchical values.

This preservation of accounts and attitudes can be traced to three main components; incentive issues produced an agrarian lifestyle, inconsistency and variability of the education received across Cambodia’s provinces, and socio-economic schisms between the elite and farmer classes. Still primarily an agrarian
nation, all subjects listed “agriculture” as the main industry for which their township/province was known. The persistence of the agro-centric lifestyle plays a significant role in the dramatic drop in attendance rates seen between primary, lower and upper secondary levels of schooling as seen in Chapter Three. Essentially the same life cycle that existed during the French Colonial era, generations of Cambodian families dependent upon agriculture have been de-incentivized from spending time and money on pursuing an education. With no reason to leave the stable Buddhist agrarian lifestyle, insulated and decentralized farming towns and villages saw no incentive or urgency to disrupt their centuries old cycle.

Tied to this phenomenon is the variability in the education experience across the geographic regions in Cambodia. Depending on the size and location of the province, the interviewed subjects revealed substantial differences in quality of education, accessibility to education, and community attitude toward pursuing an education. These interviews were also able to expose a socio-economic schism between an elite class and the agrarian class. All subjects who had school experience past the primary level commented on the difference in work ethic and attitude between students belonging to upper-class families and those from lower class families. However, about half of the sample size lived in rural or remote regions that did not have access to secondary schooling. The implications of these accounts suggest that not only does pursuing upper levels of education require certain geographical and financial requisites, but also that participants enrolled in higher education are granted elevated social status regardless of their performance in these institutions.
Decentralized vs. Centralized: From the Fields and Cities

Cambodia consists of twenty-five provinces, eighteen of which border Thailand, Laos, or Vietnam. The interviewed subjects provided information on a variety of provinces across the country, specifically Battambang (Bàtdâmbâng), Kampong Cham (Kâmpong Cham), Banteay Mean Cheay (Bantéay Méan Cheây), Stung Treng (Stœng Tréng), Takeo (Takév), and Phnom Penh (Phnum Penh). Within these provinces, the subjects’ towns or villages varied in population from a couple hundred villagers to a city of over 25,000. The sizes of these townships typically portray the wealth and occupations of the community. Smaller rural and remote regions were almost entirely agrarian while larger townships like those in Battambang
and Kampong Cham include industrial labor parks as well as some white-collar jobs. Religious and cultural settings also differed across the geographic regions. While the national religion of the Kingdom of Cambodia is officially Buddhism, the nation is segregated into different religious and cultural zones, making it difficult to establish a clear sense of national unity. Provinces sharing the Thai and Vietnamese border are predominantly Buddhist, while those along the Laotian border identify as Hmong. Landlocked provinces typically represent a mix of these different cultures and religions including minority religions such as Taoism, Islam, Confucianism, and Christianity. The following sections will stress one of the central themes of this paper; the discrimination against decentralized agrarian communities in the current education system

**Small Townships (Towns located in Takeo and Stung Treng Provinces)**

For the purposes of this study, small townships are defined as communities with population less than a thousand citizens. Typically supported by poor agrarian lifestyles, small townships lack infrastructure, qualified staffing, and representatives to consistently advocate for government disbursements. Two subjects, an ex-Khmer Rouge soldier-turned-farmer and a housewife residing in Takeo and Stung Treng provinces respectively, were interviewed about their education experience in small-town environments.

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165 Female US based college student in online video discussion with the author, March 2016.  
166 Ibid.
Takeo, Population: Under 300 – An ex-Khmer Rouge Soldier

Once a Khmer Rouge soldier, the 43-year-old farmer currently resides in Prey Kabbas district in Takeo. Takeo is the southernmost province in Cambodia, borders much of Vietnam and is chiefly Buddhist. Refusing to speak about his time during as a Khmer Rouge soldier, the interview was strictly limited to his educational experiences in his small village. Conscripted into the Khmer Rouge regime at a young age, the ex-soldier had no schooling experience before or after the regime.\textsuperscript{167} Much like it had been during his youth, he remarked that his town currently has access to one lower secondary school in the neighboring town with one or two informal primary schools in his village. He stated that for those who did go to school, “there were too many students, and only one teacher and maybe a volunteer”.\textsuperscript{168} He explained that even if he had been granted the opportunity, he wouldn’t have attended school, stating, “it was a waste of time… school will get you nowhere. There was not much to teach, only basics”.\textsuperscript{169} For a small town with less than 300 citizens, the ex-soldier described his tight-knit township to be reliant on one elder, or community leader, to “protect us and make sure things were okay.”\textsuperscript{170} With seemingly no support from the district or provincial government, the small township lacks formal MoEYS funding to subsidize as well as incentivize its education system.

By far the smallest township in this study, the ex-soldier’s town demonstrates districts that are often overlooked by provincial MoEYS authorities due to their remote or rural locations. With one or two elders advocating on their behalf, the

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\item \textsuperscript{167} Cambodia-based farmer in proxy discussion translated by current US-based college student to the author, March 2016.
\item \textsuperscript{168} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{169} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{170} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
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farmer’s village would have to travel to a district or provincial office to request formal aid provided by the MoEYS. Given the organizational structure of the MoEYS presented in Chapter Three, it is likely that the elders of villages of this size do not bother with formal requests. Already limited by their reliance upon agriculture, most small-town youth are unable to break out of the agrarian lifestyle. Engaging in anything more than the primary level of education presents a serious economic disadvantage for their families, who are often struggling on meager farming incomes. In addition to an economic disincentive to engage in the education system, these close-knit communities tend to perpetuate 18th century Buddhist values such as strong familial values, respect for elders, and traditional gender roles. Such values often confine generation after generation within the same community, making easily preserving local cultural traditions. While such values are still strong today, growing income insecurity for traditional agrarian lifestyles has seen small-town youth leave their communities in search of other opportunities. For youth or adults living in near Thai or Vietnamese borders, it has become increasingly common to temporarily leave their home townships in an effort to support their families. Growing income instability across Cambodians reliant upon subsistence agriculture has also challenged traditional Cambodian gender roles.

Stung Treng, Population: Under 1,000 – A housewife to a Cambodian Farmer

The 43-year-old housewife lives in a town in Stung Treng, the northernmost Cambodian province along the Laotian border. The community is chiefly agrarian and poor with no formal administrative or government offices, relying upon community

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171 Singapore-based current student in online video discussion with the author, March 2016.
leadership. Much like the town in Prey Kabbas, the woman’s town lacked any political allegiance, as it was too small and poor of a community to be “concerned with political issues”\textsuperscript{172}. Despite living in a larger town that the ex-Soldier, the woman described her town to have no formal schools only “very few open walled schools”\textsuperscript{173}. These schools cater to approximately sixty people, mostly children ages 4 through 13 but also some adults sitting in to “catch up”\textsuperscript{174}. Lacking formal government support to provide publicly funded primary schools, the woman noted that these informal “open walled schools” were funded by community donations.

The woman’s accounts were able to provide some consistency as to the theory of small rural and remote villages being underfunded and poorly incentivized. Make shift schools, poor accessibility, and low retention rates amongst agrarian communities seem to be national issues rather than issues confined to a specific regional area, as both the ex-soldier and the woman’s towns were located in completely different geographic and cultural environments. The 43-year-old housewife was also able to provide valuable insights regarding the societal gender norms of rural and remote farming towns. The traditionally conservative and collectivistic lifestyles in small farming towns, often keep well-preserved traditional patriarchal values. The housewife was married at the age of fourteen and was also not permitted to attend any form of schooling due to her family’s economic shortcomings. She recalled her family only paying for her brothers’ primary schooling before also disallowing their education. More importantly, she described

\textsuperscript{172} Singapore-based current student in online video discussion with the author, March 2016.
\textsuperscript{173} Cambodia-based housewife in proxy discussion translated by current US-based college student to the author, March 2016.
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid.
her role to be predetermined and limited to caring for her husband and children, unable to pursue any other occupation. With the vast majority of small towns reliant upon poor agrarian lifestyles, families must choose to prioritize funding their children’s education. Due to its traditional patriarchal values, females are often left uneducated and confined to the housewife role. Interviews with current female students, residing in larger towns, will demonstrate that this imbalance and limitation has slowly shifted over the last three decades to be more tolerant of non-traditional female roles in society. However, it is probable that poor economic circumstances combined with traditional preferences still produce gender inequality in education toward females in small towns.

Considerations

Since both subjects had not received any form of schooling and were not of schooling age at the time of the interview, the conditions of their schooling experiences and community perspectives may have changed when compared to those of current students. Interviews with current students reveal that farming is no longer considered the only means of income. A fast growing GDP has seen young Cambodians from rural or remote areas flock to larger cities or cities across the border in either Thailand or Vietnam. While this may gradually translate to a weaker preservation of traditional, conservative values in small tight-knit communities, incentive issues still exist. For many Cambodian families residing in poor rural or remote farming towns, the time and money required for schooling in

175 Singapore-based current student in online video discussion with the author, March 2016.
176 Ibid.
“open walled schools” or formal public primary schools located in other neighboring districts prove to be costly. Smaller communities are also often comprised of tight-knit familiar relationships that are unlikely to stray far from their hometowns. Since a significant incentive issue still exists, it is likely that schooling in smaller communities are viewed with the same apathy as they had been during the 1960s and 1970s. Furthermore, without formal ties to the centralized government, the village elders must be in good standing with the district or provincial representative to consider requests for aid. With this decentralized structure adding more opportunities for corruption or biased authority, rural and remote agrarian villages find themselves at yet another disadvantage.

**Moderate-sized Townships (Towns located in Battambang and Banteay Mean Cheay)**

For the purposes of this study, moderate-sized townships are defined as communities with a population between 1,500 and 5,000 citizens. Larger than small townships but smaller than cities, moderate-sized townships often have access to better education. Large enough to merit a formal town government, district and provincial resources are more likely to reach these villages in a timely and effective manner. These larger towns also offer other means of income aside from the traditional small village-farming model. Two subjects, a Cambodian college student and a Singapore-based upper secondary student, were interviewed on their education and experiences in these moderate-sized townships.

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Banteay Mean Chey, Population: ~3,000 – Current high school student in Singapore

Having lived in Banteay Mean Chey until the age of 14, the current Singapore-based high school student attended both primary and lower secondary schooling in her town. The town of roughly 3,000 adheres to a similar agrarian lifestyle as those in the smaller townships and is primarily Buddhist. However, its larger town size allows additional incoming-earning opportunities in that merchants, government officials, and teachers are all equally, if not, more accepted occupations over the traditional farming role. This larger diversity in opportunities forms a mild socio-economic schism not present in smaller townships and villages. While small farming villages maintain a fairly one dimensional social hierarchy predicated upon respect for elders, larger towns with merchant and government positions add another dimension to the social hierarchy. This additional social stratification has lead to increased incidences of corruption, cronyism, and migration within the community.

The interview subject described the town to have one public lower and upper secondary school, one main primary school, and several unfunded “open-walled” primary schools similar to the ones described in the previous interview. Attending the main government subsidized primary and secondary school, she described the quality of teaching to be higher in the primary school. She explained that the primary level of schooling was comprised of predominantly older, experienced teachers who were unable to take qualification exams while younger teachers, able to take and pass qualification exams, taught at the secondary schooling level. The student perceived this to be a positive factor in that the older, experienced teachers provided an

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178 Singapore-based current student in online video discussion with the author, March 2016.
enjoyable primary school experience for their students, increasing the chances of their enrolment in secondary school. The student also commented on the changing perceptions regarding the importance of education, stating that younger generations are more willing to pursue education as a means of escaping the agrarian lifecycle. With two dimensions of social hierarchy present in these larger towns, education is being recognized as a means of exercising social mobility. Natural factors have also boosted today’s youth movement away from the fields. Unreliable weather and increasingly infertile farming grounds have significantly lowered profitability for farmers to the point where delayed teaching salaries are preferable to the unpredictable farmer’s income.\textsuperscript{179} Both social and natural forces have gradually changed perceptions on the value and purpose of engaging in the education system.

\textit{Battambang, Population 1,500-2,800 – Current Cambodian-based college student}

The 30-year-old student, having resided in his town for all his life, describes his town population to be between 1,500 to 2,800 citizens. Smaller than the town in the Banteay Mean Chey province, this Battambang town lacked official government offices and was controlled by “just independent families with multiple unelected elder leaders”.\textsuperscript{180} Whilst no official government positions exist, the few families who monopolize the village leadership, effectively function as liaisons between their community and larger district and provincial authorities. As such, with disbursements channeled through these elite families, instances of corruption and nepotism occur.\textsuperscript{181}

\textsuperscript{179} Singapore-based current student in online video discussion with the author, March 2016.  
\textsuperscript{180} Cambodia-based college student in proxy discussion translated by current US-based college student to the author, March 2016.  
\textsuperscript{181} Ibid.
With only one public secondary school in his town, several self-funded primary schools must compete for community donations as well as government disbursements distributed by the few independent families. In possession of disbursement resources, these few independent families function on a similar social dimension as appointed government officials in larger towns. Much like in Banteay Mean Chey, younger generations who aspire to leave the stagnant farming class willingly engage with the education system in the hopes of finding jobs outside of the town.\textsuperscript{182}

According to the 30-year-old, the informal community primary schools are similar in quality and in form. Rather than taking the form of “open walled schools” seen in small, village-sized communities, these informal primary schools often take place in a teacher’s house.\textsuperscript{183} At these make shift schools, the teacher lectures through one textbook to children of all ages, once a week.\textsuperscript{184} The lack of a formal curriculum and defined age group results in scenarios where lower primary school students must comprehend upper primary curriculum. The student commented, “my father told me to understand 4\textsuperscript{th} grade material in the 1\textsuperscript{st} grade so that I wouldn’t waste the tutoring fees”.\textsuperscript{185} Often informal primary school teachers travel in a teaching circuit, moving from one village to another, providing their lecture services in exchange for fees. These independent travelling teachers also charge students for providing testing materials and at times, answers to these tests.\textsuperscript{186} Without official MoEYS funding able to reach these informal primary schools, corruption and bribery have been

\textsuperscript{182} Cambodia-based college student in proxy discussion translated by current US-based college student to the author, March 2016.
\textsuperscript{183} Female US based college student in online video discussion with the author, March 2016.
\textsuperscript{184} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{185} Female US based college student in online video discussion with the author, March 2016.
\textsuperscript{186} Singapore-based current student in online video discussion with the author, March 2016.
accepted as necessities in these moderate-sized towns. Such factors go unseen in the MoEYS’ Education Strategic Plans presented in Chapter Three.

Considerations

In villages and other small towns, a formal authority or political entity is not necessary to fulfill the needs of the community. However, with larger towns, an elite class comprised of independent families has come to represent the community authority and assume the position of the community’s official government liaison. While technically operating as a decentralized community, these independent families often engage in corrupt or illegitimate transactions with the centralized district or provincial officials as a means of bartering for aid. Not only does this decreased the effectiveness of disbursements but also limits the intended target recipients to those connected with the independent families who wield community authority. This added social dimension evolves moderate sized community power dynamics from those of a typical one-tiered traditional village. While social mobility in single tiered village systems promises comparatively limited advantages, the addition of a higher social class and community grants purpose to the concept. It can be argued that by adding another social dimension, moderate-sized villages have begun to disrupt the centuries-old traditional farming lifestyle by adding merit to engaging in the education system.

However, a lingering economic barriers prevents the majority of the populace from wholeheartedly embracing the education system. While the Education Strategic Plans show optimistic primary school enrolment rates at 90%, these rates only apply
to MoEYS funded schools. Informal primary schools in small villages and towns are not factored into the national statistics, as they are not subsidized by the MoEYS. Until the MoEYS addresses these informal schools, small villages and towns will rely upon community funding and corruption to fund the basic education system. Due to being highly dependent upon informal tutoring fees, only a selective portion of the agrarian community will be able to afford lessons to qualify (either through coaching or bribery) for secondary school entrance exams.

**Large Towns and Cities (Located in Kampong Cham and Phnom Penh)**

For the purposes of this study, large towns and cities are defined as communities with a population of more than 5,000 citizens. With official government positions to formally manage MoEYS disbursements, large towns and cities typically possess higher accessibility to education as well as higher quality of education. With a large population, politics is considered a necessity due to “people’s voices wanting to be heard”. In addition to increased political interest, larger towns and cities do not follow the traditional agrarian model. The ultimate schism between the elite and lowest socio-economic classes compete in this environment. Particularly evident in the higher education institutions, these socio-economic schisms expose the instances where the education system has been used as a means of preserving the elite class. Two subjects, a head monk and a current Cambodian-based higher education student, provide valuable perspectives toward education in large towns and cities.

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187 Female US based college student in online video discussion with the author, March 2016.
Kampong Cham, Population 25,000 – Head monk based in Rhode Island

Having resided in the city of Kampong Cham for 29 years, the head monk who now leads a Buddhist temple in his Rhode Island Cambodian community, provided valuable insight regarding education in the city. Though much larger in population compared to the small villages and moderate sized towns, Kampong Cham does not have many formal public primary or secondary schooling options with only one public high school. Instead it home to a handful of private primary and secondary schools mainly accessible to the elite or upper echelons of the socio-economic ladder. Kampong Cham’s large population ensures the existence of a richer elite than would be found in moderately sized towns and small villages. This diversity in socio-economic standing guarantees political connections and instances of cronyism to be an important factor. When describing the competency of the leadership, the monk commented, “it was not a smooth leadership due to [their lack of] education caused by the civil war (Khmer Rouge regime). He also commented that older male members in the city often held the political positions. Being one of Cambodia’s urban centers, Kampong Cham’s urban population is more stratified than that of moderate-sized towns. With the income disparity markedly noticeable, experiences in its education systems can differ widely.

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189 Ibid.
190 Ibid.
191 Ibid.
192 Ibid.
Easily the largest city in Cambodia, Phnom Penh shares Kampong Cham’s escalated power dynamics and stratified socio-economic classes when compared to the small villages and moderately-sized towns. With the majority of the upper class residing in the capital, accessibility to all levels of education from primary to higher education is superior to most other cities in Cambodia. To maintain their upper class socio-economic status, these families’ demand for education is much higher than that of the agrarian community, financially and socially. This greater demand drives greater inequality between education experiences in public and private schools within Phnom Penh and nationally. Primary and secondary levels of schooling present three channels of education, public, private, and informal tutoring. Those not privileged enough to afford private schooling will attend public schooling with inevitable teacher/material fees. Those unable to find or be accepted to public schools must rely upon the informal tutoring systems found in smaller towns and villages. Since higher education options require a series of exams, those educated in private or successful public schools are more likely to score highly than those in overcrowded public schools or informal schools. This results in a skewed student demographic for the nation’s higher education institutions.

Affordability also acts as another barrier for diversifying the higher education student body. Often communities will pool together money for one or two students to attend a higher education institution. For those fortunate enough to merit an informal community scholarship, they must adapt to a new learning environment with

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193 Female US based college student in online video discussion with the author, March 2016.
194 Cambodia-based college student in proxy discussion translated by Female US based college student for the author, March 2016.
more academic rigor and wider socio-economic gaps present in smaller towns and villages. The Cambodian university student interviewed was able to afford his education through his brother who currently works as a laborer in the United States. With a portion of the students on community scholarship, he commented, “any one can leave if they need to”, referring to instances of students leaving to help or support their family. In terms of the curriculum and teaching staff, the student stated, “many teachers came from outside the country, such as America, Thailand and Australia… we respect the teachers a lot.” However, he also commented on the challenge of the curriculum in his university, stating, “I lack experience and knowledge [to keep up with other richer private schools students], [I] have to make the effort to follow up on the teacher.” When asked about his classmates the student remarked that most worked hard but richer students are able to “get away with anything or do anything they want”. Competing with such students, some of whom may have literally bought their way into the institutions, community funded students must also face immense pressure to succeed as well as face unfamiliarly challenging curricula.

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195 Cambodia-based college student in proxy discussion translated by Female US based college student for the author, March 2016.
196 Ibid.
197 Ibid.
198 Ibid.
199 Ibid.
Considerations

Between 2011 and 2015, Cambodia’s GDP has grown at an average rate of 7.26%.\textsuperscript{200} As it continues to grow, its largely agrarian workforce has begun to slowly shift in distribution. In 2014, exports such as garments and footwear increased by 11.0% and total merchandise by 14.0%.\textsuperscript{201} Increased manufacturing and services such as tourism have increased the value of education, the general consensus held by all youth interviewed in this study. While the idea of leaving the traditional agrarian lifestyle and community and seeking higher education in urban settings has become increasingly accepted, the nation’s education system does not seem equipped or agile enough to accommodate this phenomenon. It is unlikely that an outdated bureaucratic education system favoring the upper spectrum of the socio-economic classes can adequately facilitate such progress. A system that has taken the last three decades to suit the needs of the elite will face tremendous growing pains in the near future. Its bureaucratic structure containing a multitude of checkpoints for authority and enforcement, easily wields control to the point where aforementioned travelling teachers must be in good standing with the village government officials to be able to teach in their town.\textsuperscript{202} There remains a stark difference in quality, accessibility, and engagement across centralized and decentralized areas. It will likely be the case that the education system, initially borne out of the need to expand the competency and opportunities of the Cambodian population, will continue as a biased system.

\textsuperscript{202}Singapore-based current student in online video discussion with the author, March 2016.
Comparisons to Nigeria

Belinda Archibong’s 2014 study on long-term impacts of pre-colonial institutions and geography on access to public infrastructure services in Nigeria presents a similar scenario with regards to decentralized communities suffering from lack of federal provisions. Similar to Cambodia, Nigeria has gone through a complex colonial era followed by years of post-independence violence. After freeing itself from a lengthy British colonial rule (from 1885 to 1960), only to be subjected to an autocratic military government from 1966 to 1999, Nigeria too, has experienced demographic-shaping violence, akin to the genocide under the Khmer Rouge regime.203 Though its population is roughly ten times the size to that of Cambodia, its themes across decentralized communities and a biased public infrastructure system is analogous at its core.204

As a federation, Nigeria’s democratically elected federal government hosts 37 administrative states that are each state subdivided into 774 Local Government Areas (LGAs).205 Under the LGAs are the ethnic traditional leaders who advocate for their local communities. With federal oversight essentially limited to the LGAs, it is entirely up ethnic traditional leaders to cooperate with the LGA authorities to gain access to federally disbursed aid.206 In the context of the Cambodian education system, this resembles the relationship between independent families or elder village leaders and municipal or provincial officials. Unsurprisingly, Archibong’s study finds

204 Ibid., 7.
205 Ibid.
206 Ibid., 24.
that “centralization has had a negative effect on access to federally administered, high state control goods when cooperation failed between ethnic state and autocratic federal government leaders in the kind of cooperative federalist regimes”.

In other words, the federal government’s reliance upon LGAs to disburse its public services and aid has resulted negatively for communities under individual LGAs. Archibong attributes this negative affect to the “presence of too many actors” leading to the “subsequent high incentives for corrupt activities in the absence of accountability mechanisms from the federal government and where staff are often underpaid or not paid at all.”

Archibong concludes by citing a 2008 Afrobarometer Nigeria survey, which resulted in nearly 60% of respondents advocating for an increase in their ethnic traditional leader’s influence in their local government. Much like Nigeria, the disbursement of the MoEYS’ earmarked education aid lies upon the personal relationships between local village and town leaders and municipal or provincial officials. Drawing from the seven interviewed subjects, it is apparent that the smaller, geographically remote villages have weaker ties to urban-based municipal and provincial offices. The result, much like that of Archibong’s study, is a negative effect on the accessibility of public services to those villages who do not “cooperate” or forge relationships with municipal or provincial appointed officials. Once again, we find that the bureaucratic structure, seemingly detached from the decentralized

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208 Ibid., 1.
209 Ibid., 46.
210 Ibid., 28.
communities, favors certain families and communities while functioning as a barrier for the vast majority of rural or remote agrarian communities.

Anthropological Perspectives and Cultural Nuances

Aside from an obvious socio-economic schism, a genealogical schism also exists in Cambodia. The MoEYS as well as other NGO’s have neglected to detail these cultural nuances. Referenced by both female students (one in Singapore and the other in Rhode Island), ancestry and pedigree hold significant weight in Cambodian society. Labeled as the Cambodian “top” and the Cambodian “bottom”, those with mixed ancestry comprise the former while those with several generations of Cambodian ancestry comprise the latter.211 The mixed ancestry Cambodian “top” are first or second generation Chinese, Thai or Vietnamese Cambodians and identified by typically “fairer” skin.212 This portion of the population is curiously stereotyped to consist of higher quality genes such as intelligence and advantageous family endowments such as wealth or power.213 The Cambodian “bottom” typically represents the majority of the agrarian population in small towns of villages and are considered to be “less intelligent” and “poor”.214 This genealogical stereotype was said to have emerged following the Khmer Rouge’s purges, where much of the “pure-blooded” Cambodian bloodlines including intellectuals, businessmen, merchants, and

211 Female US based college student in online video discussion with the author, March 2016.
212 Singapore-based current student in online video discussion with the author, March 2016.
213 Singapore-based current student in online video discussion with the author, March 2016.
214 Ibid.
nobility were executed. By quite literally eliminating these groups in Cambodian society, the assumption that these “genealogical traits” were not passed down and limited to a select few. Thus, those with mixed ancestry were considered to have “inherited” the ancestral preference of being recognized as the Cambodian “top”.

While seemingly arbitrary to the Cambodian education system, unspoken societal rules provide powerful, intangible qualitative effects to the education experience, considering the importance of elder village officials forging a relationship with municipal or provincial officials. With select members of the Cambodian population receiving preferential treatment with possibly financial or political advantages, complete manipulation via corruption and intimidation is possible. Not only does this perpetuate the current elite from preserving its position in society, but it also prevents the growth of students attempting to exit the traditional agrarian lifestyle. Additionally, traditional gender roles are also still prevalent, despite gradual deterioration over the last few decades. One of the interviewed current students stated, “women don’t need to be schooled”, indicating that while major steps have been taken by both the MoEYS and international organizations to increase gender equality in the schooling system, such patriarchal views persist. As gender equality continues to remain as one of the MoEYS’ initiatives, further erosion of outdated gender roles will occur.

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215 Female US based college student in online video discussion with the author, March 2016.
216 Ibid.
Decentralized Communities as Zomian Tribes

Structurally disadvantaged by the education system, what does the future hold for these decentralized agrarian rural communities? James C. Scott’s literature on the hill tribes of Zomia and their historical struggle from appropriation of surrounding states provoke thought on alternative perspectives and paths for these communities. Scott’s *The Art of Not Being Governed* details the history of the unclaimed indigenous peoples of the central highlands of continental South East Asia as they adopt a variety of “state-repulsion” tactics. While not going so far as to imply that decentralized agrarian rural communities are entirely analogous to nomadic hill tribes in the Cambodian education context, humoring such a comparison provokes important questions over the current and future state of education in these areas. Zomian hill tribes resemble the small Cambodian communities in that they are more or less independent and well insulated from the reaches of the state. Both communities are able to survive under such conditions through the comfort of tradition and cyclical lifestyles, uninterrupted by the intrusive impositions of statehood. However, the key distinguishing factor between the two lies in their intentions and motivations behind their independence. While the tribesman may have continued to evade captivity to avoid the monotony of a sedentary lifestyle and allegiance to a state, the same cannot be said for the agrarian Cambodian communities. We can only be sure of their perennial discrimination from the education system.

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Though describing the Zomian hill tribes with great admiration, Scott is pessimistic about their ability to withstand the future pressures. Scott attributes these pressures to shrinking indigenous areas and the growing populations of neighboring states. For the Cambodian communities, soil erosion and erratic weather deteriorating the fertility of their lands have forced these agrarian communities to face similar urgent pressures. Poor farming conditions coupled with Cambodia’s exposure to globalization and industrialization appear to signal the end for the centuries-old agrarian tradition. In the light of these pressures, how might these agrarian communities engage in the education system in addition to sustain their traditional livelihood? Chapter Three’s analysis on Wat Bo, an independent public primary school does provide a possible alternative for access to a successful education system without MoEYS influence. “Open-walled” schools and driven teachers who taught their destroyed communities following the 1979 liberation from memory are a testament to the resilience of local communities detached from the centralized government. While these instances of success in the face of structural adversity provide hope for communities with available resources, such solutions cannot be expected to be a sustainable option for Cambodia. As the issue is structural and increasingly urgent, drastic measures must be taken to cater to the disadvantaged communities.

This chapter has proved that there are markedly different education opportunities at all levels of schooling in different types of residential settings. With clear disadvantages and advantages for each, it is apparent that the current education system lacks consistency in accessibility, quality, infrastructure, and experience.
Small towns and villages, primarily reliant on the traditional Buddhist agrarian lifestyle, have little education infrastructure and acknowledged value. However, these small townships are typically able to avoid the reach of political manipulation. Moderate townships are able to offer slightly greater accessibility, infrastructure and quality but are more prone to political manipulation and socio-economic disparity. Large cities like Kampong Cham and Phnom Penh are able to offer the highest accessibility, infrastructure, and quality only for the express purpose of political manipulation to preserve the reigning elite’s power. Education experiences in these cities are markedly different across the different socio-economic classes, once again, exposing the lack of consistency in Cambodia’s education system. As Cambodia struggles to reconcile its economic growth and shifting workforce, the education system must be subject to change.
CONCLUSION

“Ignorance has always been the weapon of tyrants; Enlightenment the salvation of the free” – William Richardson

This paper provides evidence of the structural inefficiencies in the current Cambodian education system and its biases against decentralized agrarian communities. Using previous literature on the history of pre-genocide and post-genocide Cambodia, particularly on the reconstruction of its political bureaucratic structure, the results of cross-referencing methods and individual interviews are able to confirm consistent underperformance in several key education metrics. Furthermore, the personal accounts of current and former students of the education system shed light on the biases toward small, rural or remote, agrarian villages. These accounts conjoined with Belinda Archibong’s study on selective Nigerian public services allocations identify a major flaw in the current system, specifically the heavy emphasis on relationships between the provincial or municipal offices and unofficial village or town leaders. Not only does this structure consistently limit generations of poorly educated villages to their geographic and demographic conditions, but it also incentivizes corruption and creates unnecessary social stratifications within the community.

Through using a historical approach to better understand the roles and purposes of the Cambodian education system, this paper is able introduce the unique circumstances produced by Cambodia’s modern history. Having witnessed ten regime changes over the past two centuries, insights as to what specific factors accumulated
to manifest in the current education crisis are gained. Closely tied to this historical analysis, the post-genocide 1979 reconstruction phase and the two regimes that followed, solidify the importance of both historical and political contexts. By detailing the specific and accumulated core issues in the PRK, SOC, and UNTAC education systems, the key structural inefficiencies in the current system become clear. The organizational structure of the current MoEYS and its budgetary processes embody the structural inefficiencies as well as one of the many obstacles faced by the decentralized agrarian communities. Given that Cambodia is in the midst of a transitory process from a developing nation towards a more industrialized one, these structural flaws, particularly within the education system, must be addressed. Much like the Zomian tribes described by James C. Scott in Chapter Four, the comparable urgency of the Cambodian education crisis adds another complex dimension to the sufficiently complex issue.

This paper highlights the interdisciplinary nature of the fundamental flaws of the current education system with the purpose of demonstrating the severity and depth of the ongoing crisis. Additionally, by employing a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to provide evidence of structural inefficiencies and ingrained societal complexities, aspires to underline target areas for future solutions. By identifying specific points of inefficiency or bias, it is the author’s hope to cultivate further literature on the political, economical, and societal implications of the continuation of the Cambodian education crisis. By considering the role of international factors such as globalization as well as the increasingly interconnected nature of the world economy, further literature may find that these factors will trump
the considerable dominance of the Cambodian elite and forcibly change the fundamental structures propping up its education system.

While this paper contributes to the thin literature on the current Cambodian education system using an interdisciplinary framework to analyze the complexities of its crisis, it is unable to provide comprehensive, exhaustive evidence toward the depths of the education systems’ structural inefficiencies and biases. To strengthen future literature on the education crisis, detailed accounts of the education system across different levels of authority, geography, and demography must be obtained. The unstable and potentially hazardous nature of the current society would considerably increase the difficulty as well as complicate the methodology of collecting such evidence. However, it is important to gain a larger sample size from more diverse backgrounds than provided in this study to make accurate conclusions about the education system and its crisis. While each public school, informal school, or community lacking schools must be approached on a case-by-case basis, this paper hopes to provide the general obstacles and biases faced across Cambodia. However, it is unequipped to submit possible solutions to the system or even its fate in today’s world.

For global organizations such as the UN and other NGO’s, policy implications of this paper lie in the lack of oversight on the disbursement processes of aid as well as its long-term effect on the education system. This paper is also critical of the UNTAC oversight in implanting its mandated democratic political structure. Joakim Öjendal’s “Democracy Lost? The Fate of the U.N.-implanted Democracy in Cambodia”, offers further criticism regarding the legacies of “planted democracies”
in South East Asian countries. By suggesting that centuries of hierarchical structures have innately programmed its population or distinct “Asian Values”, Öjendal argues that Cambodia’s democratization held two “warning signs”: the “big bang nature of the process” and the “underlying structure in the society”. He explains the “big bang” process to be the sudden “planting” of the democratic political structure, concluding that such a sudden process introduces economic decline, lack of social cohesion, failing institutions, undemocratic elite behavior, military activity, and “lack of international will to defend the new-born democracy”. Commenting on the Cambodian society, he states factors such as an over-sized and underpaid military, corruption and nepotism in the civil administration, the “lack of educated and competent people to be willingly recruited for the civil services”, emerging socio-economic cleavages, and rural-urban divisions, foreshadow instability. Published just three years after the mandated UNTAC elections of 1993, much of Öjendal’s observations hold true today. The long-term affects of the UN’s “planted democracies” on the current Cambodian society in the 21st century may be another potential area of exploration related to the contributions and findings of this paper. The ultimate aspiration of this paper is to signal the persisting Cambodian education crisis in its current education system with the hopes of catalyzing meaningful solutions. Though modern Cambodian history has become familiar with the perennial failures of its education systems, today, an urgency exists that warrants structural change.

219 Ibid. 196.
220 Ibid., 196-197.
221 Ibid.
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