

**Education under Occupation:  
Political Violence, Schooling, and Response in Cambodia, 1979-1989**

*Thomas Clayton  
University of Kentucky*

**Political Violence**

One hundred and twenty thousand Vietnamese troops crossed the border into Cambodia on December 25, 1978. As they sped toward Phnom Penh on roads built by the United States during the Vietnam War, they experienced little resistance from the forces of the Khmer Rouge, then the ruling power in Cambodia. The ease of the invasion was surprising, given that it had been planned as a response to fierce attacks on southern Vietnam by the Khmer Rouge. Neither the Khmer Rouge nor their international patron, the People's Republic of China, however, seriously contested the invasion and, in the words of Cambodian refugee Pin Yathay (1987), the Vietnamese "harvested Cambodia like a ripe fruit" (p. 237). Phnom Penh fell to the invading forces on January 7, 1979, and by June of that year most Khmer Rouge had been driven out of the country into neighboring Thailand (see Kiljunen, 1984; Porter, 1981).

The invasion and subsequent ten-year occupation of Cambodia by the Vietnamese introduced a complex tension to the country. On one hand, Cambodians had suffered under the Khmer Rouge for nearly four years and, as a result of brutality and a series of disastrous initiatives intended to restructure society, between one and two million had died (see Clayton, 1998b). For many survivors, the Vietnamese invasion meant, first and foremost, the cessation of Khmer Rouge terror. In fact, nearly all of the many Cambodians with whom I talked about the invasion described the Vietnamese as saviors without whom they would surely have died. Perhaps the most impassioned assessment was offered by a Ministry of Education official in 1994. During the Khmer Rouge regime, he told me, "we prayed every day for someone to come and rescue us, [but] only Vietnam came to help us. I tell you honestly, in three months more of Khmer Rouge rule, we would all have been killed. [I] will never forget, and please, don't you forget. Everyone prayed, but only the Vietnamese came."<sup>1</sup>

Beyond physical rescue, the Vietnamese invasion brought Cambodians salvation from the Khmer Rouge's policies of social destruction. Following their assumption of power in 1975, the Khmer Rouge had closed social institutions such as markets, temples, and schools and, in many cases, demolished their physical and human infrastructures. Between 1975 and 1979, for instance, it is estimated that 90 percent of all school buildings were destroyed and that 75 percent of all teachers, professors, and educational administrators were killed (Hirschhorn, Haviland, & Salvo, 1991; Ministry of Education, 1990). Into this void, the Vietnamese sent literally thousands of development personnel, a significant number of whom worked in education. One Cambodian educator explained with a striking metaphor the gratitude and relief with which he and many others--overwhelmed by the prospect of reestablishing the system of education with most senior colleagues dead--welcomed the Vietnamese advisors. "At that time," he told me, "we were as if submerged under water. [The Vietnamese] came to us and held out a stick. [We] knew that we needed to grasp the stick or we would die."

While releasing Cambodians from the Khmer Rouge and rebuilding social institutions such as education, the Vietnamese also introduced structures to the country directed at least as much toward their own, as to Cambodian, interests. To use the distinction suggested by Gramsci (1971) and Althusser (1971), these structures comprised both coercive or repressive state apparatuses and hegemonic or ideological state apparatuses. The occupying army, reaching a strength of 220,000 at its peak, served a coercive function by its mere presence. Less obvious structures included the border region security project. In an effort to contain the Khmer Rouge, the Vietnamese initiated a forced-labor program to clear the jungle on the Thai border and expose incursions; thousands of Cambodians died while thus conscripted (Chandler, 1993; Lucioli, 1988; McBeth, 1985). Many Cambodians who opposed this or other Vietnamese policies were imprisoned (Martin, 1986), including one of my informants who served a two-year prison sentence for voicing views he termed more "liberal" than those endorsed by the Vietnamese, and Pen Sovan, the first prime minister of the post-Khmer Rouge government, who was removed from office in 1981 and incarcerated in Vietnam until 1989 (Kiernan, 1982; Vickery, 1986).

To complement coercion, the Vietnamese erected a sophisticated hegemonic apparatus dedicated to the dissemination of ideas congruent with their vision for the country. That vision, which the Vietnamese had been pursuing intermittently since Ho Chi Minh established the Indochinese Communist Party under orders from the Soviet Comintern in 1930, was to draw Cambodia into the international socialist revolution and to create a like-minded communist ally in Indochina (Engelbert & Goscha, 1995; Kiernan, 1985). Education served as the primary mechanism of this hegemonic mission civilisatrice. As several informants commented in nearly identical language, in the 1980s "All education, from primary school to higher education, conveyed Marxist-Leninist philosophy." In the following section, I discuss educational development in occupied Cambodia; for the purpose of brevity, I limit my discussion to the tertiary level, where the socialist orientation of schooling emerged perhaps most transparently.

### **Schooling**

International educational assistance to Cambodia after the defeat of the Khmer Rouge provides a study in the politics of development. The United States, its Western allies, the People's Republic of China, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, opposed the Vietnamese occupation and the extension of Soviet influence in Indochina and, as a result, erected an embargo on aid that might be used to strengthen the new Cambodian government. U.S. influence emerged clearly among United Nations agencies, with those holding emergency mandates (Unicef, for instance) operating in Cambodia, and those with development mandates (United Nations Development Programme, for example) failing to initiate programs (Mysliwiec, 1988). Conversely, Vietnam and its allies in the Eastern bloc, intending the establishment of a friendly communist regime, provided significant amounts of assistance under the terms of the Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation and other bilateral agreements (Haas, 1991; World Bank, 1992). In education, assistance took the form of advisors to the Ministry of Education, university professors, physical plant repair, books, equipment, and curricular materials, and scholarships by the thousands for advanced study at universities in Eastern-bloc countries.

The first higher education institute established after the Vietnamese invasion, the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry, and Pharmacy, opened in December 1979. From 1980 to 1983, between 10 and 20 doctors from the Vietnamese Ministry of Health assisted the few surviving Cambodian doctors in completing the medical training of students who had been enrolled before the Khmer Rouge regime; when new students began medical studies in the mid-1980s, the faculty established a six-year program. By 1983, enough Cambodian doctors had been trained to staff the institute fully, and the agreement with the Vietnamese Ministry of Health lapsed.

For the first few years after the establishment of the Teachers' Training College in July 1980, approximately 40 professors from the Vietnamese Ministry of General Education offered instruction to Cambodian students who had begun their tertiary education before 1975. Graduates of the three-year program (expanded to four years in 1988) assumed positions as teachers in Cambodia's high schools. In 1981, 16 graduates of the Teachers' Training College went to Vietnam for graduate studies. When they returned in 1983 and joined as faculty those domestic graduates who had begun assuming teaching positions in 1981, the relative number of Vietnamese professors declined; all Vietnamese faculty had been replaced by 1987.

In all, 2,650 Cambodians completed degree programs between 1983 and 1989 in the Soviet Union, East Germany, Vietnam, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Cuba. The School of Languages, opened in Phnom Penh in February 1981, supported these international ventures by providing language instruction to those slated for international education. Fifteen Soviets, two East Germans, fifteen Vietnamese, and one Cuban staffed the school's one-year intensive Russian, German, Vietnamese, and Spanish language programs throughout the occupation.

The Khmer-Soviet Friendship Higher Technical Institute opened in September 1981. The Soviet Union supplied the institute with professors, books, materials, equipment, and physical plant repairs. Approximately 56 Soviet professors taught the Institute's five-year courses in Civil Engineering, Electronic and Electrical Engineering, Industrial Chemistry, Agro-Hydrology, and Mines, Mining, and Geology throughout the 1980s. Though Cambodians were sent to the Soviet Union for advanced training, they had not returned to faculty positions at the Institute when the occupation ended in 1989.

Vietnam provided all professors, texts, and curricula to the Economics Institute, opened in September 1984. Approximately 35-40 Vietnamese professors from the University of Economic Sciences in Hanoi staffed the institute, offering five-year courses in Agricultural Economy, Industrial Economy, Commerce, Finance, and Economic Planning; these professors had themselves studied in the Soviet Union, East Germany, or Hungary. In the mid-1980s, several graduates from the Economics Institute traveled to the Soviet Union for advanced academic training. When they returned in 1986, they began teaching the Institute's introductory classes. The proportion of Vietnamese professors further declined in 1989, when the Institute retained as faculty the 20 top members of the first graduating class.

The Agricultural Institute opened in January 1985. Consultants from the Ukrainian Agricultural Academy prepared the curriculum and provided textbooks, and approximately 56 professors from this and other Soviet agricultural institutes taught the four-and-a-half year courses in Agronomy, Forestry, Fisheries, Veterinary Medicine, and Agricultural Mechanics. Some students from the Agricultural Institute traveled to the Soviet Union for advanced training in the mid-1980s. As at the Technical Institute, however, these Cambodians had not yet returned by 1989, and the faculty thus remained entirely Soviet throughout the occupation.

By 1990, Cambodia's institutes of higher education had graduated 977 doctors, dentists, or pharmacists, 2,196 senior secondary teachers, 1,481 foreign language specialists, 474 technical engineers, 400 economists, and 184 agricultural engineers. It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of Vietnamese and Eastern-bloc assistance in producing this first generation of tertiary graduates. When I asked one Cambodian educator, for instance, if Cambodians themselves could have rebuilt the system of higher education, he replied with an unequivocal no, "because [we] didn't have trained staff yet after the genocide of the Khmer Rouge regime." Another Cambodian responded similarly. "It was as if we had to wait for someone to come and help us," he told me, "because, at that time, we had no intellectuals."

Vietnam's important humanitarian contribution cannot, however, be disconnected from that country's hegemonic mission civilisatrice in occupied Cambodia. In fact, according to an educational policy statement written by Vietnamese advisors for the Cambodian Ministry of Education, "technical training" in medicine, economics, agriculture, and other fields assumed only secondary importance to "political" education:

The main objective of higher and technical education is to provide good political training and good technical training. Political training for all the staff should promote an ideology concerned with [the] objectives of socialism. [We] need to recognize that the most important thing pertains to political training and ideology of students. (Problems of Higher and Technical Education, 1983; my emphasis)<sup>2</sup>.

To ensure mastery of the "objectives of socialism," tertiary students were required to complete five courses, taught for the most part by Cambodians trained in Vietnam. "Marxist-Leninist Theories" intended "to endow in students the concept of the evolution of mankind toward socialism" (citations in this paragraph are from the document, Ideological and Political Training in Higher and Technical Education, 1984). In "World Revolutionary History and the History of the Cambodian Revolution," students were taught about the Soviet "October Revolution and the revolution of the three countries of Indochina to illustrate the history of the Cambodian revolution." "The Situation and the Role of the Revolution and the Policy of the Party" attempted to "build in [students] the right political consciousness." In "Moral Education and the Revolutionary Way of Life," students were to acquire "the spirit of being the master of the collective, the spirit of job responsibility, and the nationalist and internationalist spirit to support the interests of the people and the nation." Finally, "Attitude to the Common People" aimed to "improve the attitude of the intellectual revolutionary toward the common people" (for a detailed discussion of political education during the occupation, see Clayton, forthcoming b).

According to one informant, through political training the Vietnamese sought to "change [Cambodian's] brains to the new ways of thinking associated with socialism." Another informant presented this transformation in less pejorative terms. Political education, he concluded, would "form the new man" who "would be willing to fight against imperialism and capitalism." In other words, the Vietnamese intended to persuade Cambodians of the efficacy of their vision for the country through the mechanism of education. Early in the occupation, Vietnam promised to withdraw from Cambodia as soon as the new government gained enough strength to stand on its own (Haas, 1991). When their primary coercive force--the occupying army--had gone home, however, there would continue to exist in the country a hegemonic apparatus dedicated to Vietnamese interests.

### **Response**

A considerable literature in comparative education links educational assistance, hegemony, and the international movement of real and symbolic capital (see, for example, Arnove, 1980; Ginsburg, 1991; Mundy, 1998). Little attention in this literature, however, has been given to the responses of subordinate actors. As I have argued elsewhere, most comparative education studies operate under the assumption that the recipients of educational assistance are "mystified" by dominant ideologies and internalize them, often to their detriment, without mediation or struggle (Clayton, 1998a). Much like the Malaysian peasants studied by Scott (1985) or the Appalachian miners studied by Gaventa (1980), however, the Cambodians with whom I talked about the occupation betrayed little mystification about the hegemony they faced daily.

At least some Cambodians accepted the invitation of political education and "changed their brains" during the occupation. Two former political education teachers in particular struck me as having consciously evaluated the promises of the new ideological order and found them genuinely attractive. Speaking for his students but also himself, one teacher told me that "students learned the material well, and I think they believed it." In response to my question, the other teacher answered, "Yes, they believed," and he continued: "They loved justice, and they hated the exploitation of capitalist regimes. They did not prefer capitalism and corruption. They didn't like poverty. Finally, they wanted to work with the party against the Khmer Rouge." These two teachers worked willingly to promote socialist principles in Cambodia and, even as they themselves converted to this new way of thinking, interpreted a genuine impact on students.

Other Cambodians resisted socialist ideology, though their forms of resistance held little potential for transformation of occupation relations. When I asked one informant if political education had been effective, for example, he replied that it had not been. In fact, he continued, students avoided socialist ideology by "frequently sleeping during the classes." This same informant told me a story of his own participation in political education during advanced training in Vietnam and of another form of resistance practiced by Cambodian students:

In 1988 I was in Vietnam, and we were watching the World Cup match between the Soviet Union and West Germany on television. Some of us wanted the capitalist team to win. The true believers wanted the Russian team to win. When

Russia lost, one who had supported that team became physically ill. The rest of us were afraid to root for the capitalist team. We were worried about supporting the capitalist team. We were happy when the team won, but we could not show our happiness.

While some Cambodians converted to socialism during the occupation, and others demonstrated "everyday" forms of resistance to socialist ideology, yet other Cambodians merely gave the impression of having adopted new ways of thinking. As one informant put it, these Cambodians "changed their faces," not their brains. Several high-ranking members of the government, for instance, actively advanced socialist principles as political education teachers during the occupation. For many of my informants, this participation amounted to the exchange of ideological loyalty for positions of power in the communist regime. As one informant explained, "In communism, he who supports socialist ideology gets the high positions in the government, gets fancy cars, gets nice villas." Another concluded that "men who wanted to become powerful" professed the most fervent belief in socialism in the 1980s.

The majority of Cambodians who "changed their faces," however, did not collaborate for personal gain, but pragmatically accepted socialist ideology because they saw themselves as having little choice to do otherwise. As one informant commented, "We didn't have any choice: We had to become socialist." Another Cambodian explained in more detail. "We had to accept [socialist] ideas," he told me. "The students had to accept these ideas. [They] were exposed to these ideas throughout their school careers. They had to accept them. There were no other philosophies to adopt. There was only the one: Marxism-Leninism."

Several Cambodians who had been tertiary students during the occupation hinted toward the constraints that informed their pragmatic acceptance of socialist ideology. Recognizing that graduates were expected to be socialists first and doctors, teachers, and other professionals second, these Cambodians attended political education classes diligently and studied hard. As one informant explained, "If they did not learn [socialist ideology] and pretend to believe it, they would not be able to pass the exams, and they would have no future." Another informant commented similarly that students "did not believe the socialist principles we learned in the curriculum [but] answered according to these principles as outlined in the lectures or else they would have received a zero mark on exams." For these students, acceptance of socialist ideology stood, simply, as a precondition to participation in education and success after graduation.

Cambodians' pragmatic response to hegemony emerged most clearly in a conversation with a former Ministry of Education official who had worked closely with the Vietnamese in the 1980s in opening the institutes of higher education. During the occupation, this man told me, "We were interested in rebuilding the country, not in serving a foreign ideology." When I then asked why, if Cambodians were not interested in socialism, so many at the Ministry of Education had cooperated with the Vietnamese by participating in political education themselves and by supporting the heavy emphasis on political education in schools, this informant looked at me as if I were a simpleton. We cooperated, he told me, "because we were unable to connect with countries of the West at that time due to the embargo [on development aid and because,

as a result, there] simply was no other possibility of assistance for us with which to rebuild the country." In other words, this and other Cambodians, dedicated to finding a way to provide education for Cambodian youth but severely constrained by the embargo that foreclosed the possibility of assistance from the West, pragmatically accepted socialist ideology as a necessary condition to the receipt of educational resources from Vietnam and other Eastern-bloc countries.

### **Monument to a defunct ideology**

In 1989, as a result both of pressure from the West and of diminishing support from the Soviet Union, Vietnam withdrew from Cambodia, leaving a fragile but functioning government. Recognizing in Soviet perestroika and the similar *dôi mu'o'i* in Vietnam the failure of the international socialist revolution, the newly independent Cambodian government moved toward a multiparty political system and a free-market economy. Following the United Nations-sponsored elections in 1993, the United States and other Western countries established diplomatic and development aid relations with Cambodia (see Heder & Ledgerwood, 1996).

The period between the Vietnamese withdrawal and the election proved very difficult for Cambodian education, particularly at the tertiary level. Along with troops, most Vietnamese educational advisors and professors departed in 1989; Soviet professors withdrew shortly after, when the Soviet Union collapsed. In some cases, higher education institutes filled teaching vacancies with recently graduated Cambodians. In other cases, however, students sent overseas for advanced study had not yet finished their courses, and institutes faced overwhelming constraints. The Agricultural Institute closed briefly in 1990, and the Technical Institute might have closed had the United Nations not brought 28 Soviet teachers back in 1991.

Even while engaged in these struggles to maintain viability, the Ministry of Education initiated reforms congruent with post-occupation ways of thinking. Most significantly, between 1989 and 1991, Cambodians eliminated the system of political education in place during the occupation and canceled courses in Marxism-Leninism. As one Cambodian explained in 1994, after the Vietnamese withdrawal and the turn away from Eastern-bloc systems and practices, "we did not want to continue with communist dogma [that] was not important for our students."

One symbol of Cambodia's ideological history stands on Pochentong Road in Phnom Penh. As a parting gift in 1989, the Vietnamese built on this spot a magnificent Political Training College dedicated to the continuing promotion of socialist ideology in Cambodia. With its polished wood and terrazzo, its sweeping facade, and its spacious commons, the college is by far the most impressive educational facility in the country. When I visited in 1994, I was surprised to find the college empty and suffering for lack of maintenance. With the cessation of political education in 1989, my companion told me, the facility had never been used. When I marveled at the building and expressed amazement at the effort expended by Vietnam in the service of a now-defunct ideological system, my companion just shrugged. "It's all gone now," he concluded.

## Notes

1. I collected data for this article in 1991, 1992, and 1994. During a 13 months' residence in Phnom Penh, I interviewed more than 50 Cambodians, most of whom had worked in education in the 1980s. My informants included current or former teachers, professors, and administrators in general and higher education, bureaucrats in the Phnom Penh Municipal Department of Education and the National Ministry of Education, educators attached to other ministries, and Cambodians with relevant knowledge in other government posts. All direct quotes from Cambodians, as well as most information about the system of education in the 1980s, come from these interviews.
2. For the text of this document, as well as the document "Ideological and Political Training in Higher and Technical Education" (referred to below and also written by the Vietnamese for the Cambodian Ministry of Education), see Clayton (forthcoming a).

## References

- Althusser, L. (1971). *Ideology and the ideological state apparatuses. In Lenin and philosophy and other essays* (B. Brewster, Trans.) (pp. 121-173). London: New Left Books.
- Arno, R.F. (1980). Comparative education and world-systems analysis. *Comparative Education Review*, 24, 48-62.
- Chandler, D.P. (1993). *A history of Cambodia (2nd ed.)*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Clayton, T. (1998a). Beyond mystification: Reconnecting world-system theory for comparative education. *Comparative Education Review*, 42, 479-496.
- Clayton, T. (1998b). Building the new Cambodia: Educational destruction and construction under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-1979. *History of Education Quarterly*, 38, 1-16.
- Clayton, T. (forthcoming a). *Education and the politics of language: Hegemony and pragmatism in Cambodia, 1979-1989*. Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Center, University of Hong Kong.
- Clayton, T. (forthcoming b). *The shape of hegemony: Vietnam in Cambodia, 1979-1989*. Education and Society.
- Engelbert, T., & Goscha, C.E. (1995). *Falling out of touch: A study on Vietnamese communist policy towards an emerging Cambodian communist movement, 1930-1975*. Clayton, Australia: Monash University Centre of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Gaventa, J. (1980). *Power and powerlessness: Quiescence and rebellion in an Appalachian valley*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.



Ginsburg, M.B. (Ed.). (1991). *Understanding educational reform in global context: Economy, ideology, and the state*. New York: Garland.

Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks* (Q. Hoare & G.N. Smith, Eds. & Trans.). London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Haas, M. (1991). *Genocide by proxy: Cambodian pawn on a superpower chessboard*. New York: Praeger.

Heder, S.P., & Ledgerwood, J. (Eds.). (1996). *Propaganda, politics, and violence in Cambodia: Democratic transition under United Nations peace-keeping*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.

Hirschhorn, N., Haviland, L., & Salvo, J. (1991). *Critical needs assessment in Cambodia: The humanitarian issues*. Washington, D.C.: United States Agency for International Development.

Kiernan, B. (1982). Kampuchea 1979-1981: National rehabilitation in the eye of an international storm. In K.K. Huynh (Ed.), *Southeast Asian affairs, 1982* (pp. 167-195). Singapore: Heinemann Educational Books (Asia).

Kiernan, B. (1985). *How Pol Pot came to power: A history of communism in Kampuchea, 1930-1975*. London: Verso.

Kiljunen, K. (Ed.). (1984). *Kampuchea: Decade of the genocide*. London: Zed Books.

Lucioli, E. (1988). *Le mur de bambou*. Paris: Médecins Sans Frontières.

Martin, M.A. (1986). Vietnamised Cambodia: A silent ethnocide. *Indochina Report*, 7, 1-31.

Mundy, K. (1998). Multilateralism and world (dis)order. *Comparative Education Review*, 42, 448-478.

McBeth, J. (1985, August.22). Forced human bondage. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, pp. 38-39.

Ministry of Education. (1990). *Education: State of Cambodia*. Phnom Penh; Ministry of Education.

Mysliwiec, E. (1988). *Punishing the poor: The international isolation of Kampuchea*. Oxford: Oxfam.

Pin Yathay. (1987). *Stay alive, my son* (J. Man, Trans.). New York: Free Press.

Porter, G. (1981). Vietnamese policy and the Indochina crisis. In D.W.P. Elliott (Ed.), *The third Indochina conflict* (pp. 69-137). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Scott, J.C. (1985). *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

*Education under Occupation:  
Political Violence, Schooling, and Response in Cambodia, 1979-1989*

Vickery, M. (1986). *Kampuchea: Politics, economics and society*. London: Pinter Publishers.

World Bank. (1992). *Cambodia: Agenda for rehabilitation and reconstruction*. Washington, DC: Author.