In their introduction to this penetrating and comprehensive account of changes occurring within Cambodian economy and society, editors Caroline Hughes and Kheang Un outline a process of change: from a situation in which markets were an occasional although useful part of everyday life to a situation in which people consider markets and their ability to engage with them successfully to be the central part of their lives. This change represents the spread of an advanced form of capitalism across a region in which the majority of people had been living pre-capitalist lives and, in true Schumpeterian fashion, means the spread of creative destruction across the land with all the chaos and opportunism that represents.

John Walsh

Projects: Elite and Mass Patronage", which may be mobilized not just to deliver outputs and win elections, but also “possibly promote wider systemic change”. This is a more nuanced approach to the often dismissive approach to client-patron relationships and helps to explain how the system is able to reinvent itself with respect to these conditions. That is because the system fundamentally relies upon personal relationships and the trust that can be generated by these and, as a result, leveraged for use in other areas. This paper supplements Michael Sullivan’s earlier contribution on ‘China’s Aid to Cambodia’, which also featured the prominent role of CPP and allied institutions and considered the use of existing and emergent networks in bringing about economic change without necessarily leading to progress in social conditions.

Labour migration

Other papers focus more particularly on negative effects of both economic change and attempts to bring about changes in Khmer society. Annouka Derks endeavours to provide a balanced view of the export of Cambodian workers, principally to the industrial sectors in Thailand in which high (although variable) demand for labour continues, and which are considered unattractive at the salaries offered. She describes particularly the fishing and fish processing industry in and around Rayong on the Thai Eastern Seaboard where there are, indeed, large numbers Khmer workers. In fact, these workers are able to benefit to some extent from solidarity with their neighbours, who are mostly people in the same condition; migrant workers in other parts of Thailand face the additional problem that they are often alone in a community and, during the regular outbursts of noisy Thai nationalism that have taken place in recent years, are reluctant to make their identity known to anyone around them. In any case, labour exporting is subject to the usual range of parasitical intermediaries – some would see them as facilitators – who have so often grown from their experience as migrant workers themselves. These are systems from which it is increasingly difficult to break out and end the strengthening spiral of exploitation.

While all the papers are appropriately grounded historically, it is notable how little attention, relatively speaking, is given to the Khmer Rouge (or Democratic Kampuchea) period and the warfare and misery of the still recent past. Even though many young people exhibit little appetite for determining exactly what happened and most people involved tend to prefer to maintain silence over their roles, those events at the very least marked a distinct change in ownership and governance systems that affected all forms of economic relations and activities. Even so, this is a well-planned and constructed book that will be of considerable use to anyone interested in contemporary Cambodia and the transformative nature and extent of social and economic change in that country.

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