**Selling Symbols: Tourism, Heritage, and Symbolic Economy in Battambang, Cambodia**

By

Matthew J. Trew

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
(Anthropology)

at the
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN - MADISON
2019

Date of final oral examination: 11/5/2019

The dissertation is approved by the following members of the Final Oral Committee:
Katherine Bowie, Professor, Anthropology, University of Wisconsin - Madison
Maria Lepowsky, Professor, Anthropology, University of Wisconsin - Madison
Nam C. Kim, Associate Professor, Anthropology, University of Wisconsin - Madison
Anne Hansen, Professor, History, University of Wisconsin - Madison
Ian G. Baird, Associate Professor, Geography, University of Wisconsin - Madison
Erik Davis, Associate Professor, Religious Studies, Macalester College

Dedicated to my parents, Rowland and Susan,
who saved a boy and taught him to never grow up.

“The greatest moments in life are not concerned with selfish achievements but rather with the things we do for the people we love and esteem.” - Walt Disney

## Acknowledgements

The list of people I need to thank far exceeds what I can possibly hope to write in a mere few pages, and I wish to express my deepest gratitude to everyone who supported me on this journey. This research was generously supported by the Fulbright-Hays program, and to all who helped me through that process I am forever in your debt. One name that must be singled out for thanks is that of my advisor Katherine Bowie. As a renowned scholar of Thailand, Katherine stepped outside of her comfort zone when she accepted me as her student, and I hope with all my heart that she feels that her gamble has (finally) paid off. The best thanks I can give for all the patience and guidance she has shown me over the years is the promise that, if I am ever in a similar position, I will do everything I can to continue her legacy of supporting the study of Southeast Asia's many underrepresented regions.

The other members of my committee have also been immensely helpful to me. Maria Lepowsky was always willing to assist me even when she was already overextending herself with her numerous other students, and I am thankful for her constant reminder to consider not only where my work is going, but where it came from and for whom it speaks. Anne Hansen pushed me towards more exacting standards of inquiry, which helped me as a first-generation graduate student refine my scholarship and feel less out of place, and she has always shown passionate support for my regional focus in Cambodian Studies. Erik Davis is arguably the leading voice amongst the newest generation of Cambodian Studies, and his provocative questioning and strongly held opinion that scholarly research must serve purposes beyond the academy have deeply shaped the goals of my research (and what I hope to achieve in my overall career). Nam Kim was probably curious when I asked him to join my committee, given that I am

not an archaeologist, but his thoughtful blending of present-day cultural perspectives with the deeply analytical study of the past helped me think about how to tell the story of the past made present in Battambang. To boot, he is one of the nicest people you will ever meet, especially in an academic setting, and I am grateful for his compassionate friendship. Last, but certainly not least, I wish to thank Ian Baird for his willingness to push back at my ideas in the hopes of improving them. Although I needed to swallow my pride at times, Ian often caught errors that I overlooked and helped me be more self-critical in a manner that improved not only this research, but my approach to cultural study as a whole. My thanks to the many other professors and colleagues at the University of Wisconsin - Madison who influenced me, and to the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (and Dr. Mike Cullinane most of all!) for all the support.

Special thanks must be made to my undergraduate advisors at the University of South Carolina as well. I blame Karl Heider for my love of Southeast Asia, as it was through his ethnographic film classes that I was first introduced to the region. As one of Karl's last two undergraduate students before his retirement, I have tried to carry his legacy forward and to push back against the status quo as he always encouraged me to do. And to the late Hal French, my Zorba-roshi, with whom I traveled the world and took so many college credits that I often joked that I "majored in French," I miss you and hope you are proud. Your compassionate wisdom and advice to "just sit" whenever I need to work through a problem is what got me through this process.

To the great proponent of Southeast Asian languages, Frank Smith, I say thank you for the years of feedback and mentorship. Your passion for language and resulting skills are beyond anything I could hope to achieve, and you often do not receive the respect you deserve in

academic circles. I learned more about Southeast Asian culture by sitting with you at countless street side bars and food stalls across the region than I ever did through formal study, and I want you to know that your voice is one I take seriously when it comes to the interpretation and assessment of Southeast Asia. I also wish to thank Nek Kruu Sokhary Khun, Lok Kruu Kheang Leang, Nek Kruu Chhany Sak-Humphry, Nek Kruu Sisotha Oeur, and Nek Kruu Sokunthearath Kep for all of their instruction in Khmer language and culture.

There are too many colleagues at Wisconsin, Toronto, and South Carolina for me to thank individually, so I say thank you to all for enduring this experience with me. And especially to my fellow students who marched and slept on hard floors for weeks on end during the 2011 union action in Madison - thank you for showing me the best of America. Solidarity.

To all my acquaintances in Cambodia (and especially Battambang), I say *aw kun*. Thanks to Reaksmey Khem, Raymond Zepp, and Dewey International University for serving as a home base during the early phases of this research. Thanks also to the community that helped make the years of this research fly by - to Pisal, Lorn, Caroline, Sopheavy, Frankie & Fraser (for all the company, pizza, and picklebacks), Robert & Morrison, Helmut, Paul, and everyone else! Battambang is forever a part of me, and I will always consider it home because of all of you.

Most of all, I wish to thank Visal Sorn, my oldest friend in Battambang, my 'little sister', and the best research assistant on the face of the earth. Without you and your incredible ability to befriend anyone and everyone, this research would never have been possible. You and your family accepted me as one of their own and have always taken care of me, and I hope I can return the favor in part through this work. Visal and I both lost our fathers during this research,

and so I hope she knows that this dissertation represents his legacy through her efforts as much as it represents my father's through mine. Thank you, bamboo train girl.

Finally, to my family, I am endlessly grateful. To my beloved partner Sarah, who endured every moment of the frustration and grumpiness that comes with graduate school with grace and patience, I love you and couldn't have done this without you. Literally - I spent months searching for a theoretical framework for this study, and it was you who, in a mere five minutes of searching, discovered the source material that led me down this path! For encouraging me to blend my personal interests with my professional ones, and for waiting patiently for my return even when a medical emergency prevented you from joining me in the field, thank you. Together, we can overcome any obstacle.

To my parents, Rowland and Susan, I owe you everything. You adopted me and sheltered me from what could have been a much more difficult childhood. You encouraged me to get out of my comfort zone and explore the world, which helped me overcome my childhood shyness. You supported me even when my work made unreasonable demands on those around me. My father, the first generation of my paternal lineage born in North America, was not able to go to graduate school like he wanted because of the financial realities of his era. My completion of this phase of study is not just my accomplishment, but his. We finally made it, pop. And to my mother, whose strength and determination kept my family going through every hardship we faced as immigrants, I love you and thank you. We would not have survived if you and dad weren't so strong as a couple. Your five decades of marriage are an eternal source of inspiration and admiration. I hope I've made you proud, as honoring your legacy means more to me than any degree or accolade.

## A Note on Khmer Language Transliteration

The Cambodian language, Khmer, is a notoriously difficult language to transcribe using English letters. Most standard systems for transliteration are phonetically inaccurate, choosing regularity of character representation over sound accuracy, in part because there are sounds in Khmer that we do not regularly use in English. Although I would prefer to use phonetically accurate spellings and would defend experimenting with spelling (even if it meant spelling inconsistently) as an accurate expression of the fluidity of language and sound, I am not linguist enough to attempt such a feat here. Therefore, for most Khmer words, I adhere to the standard spellings used by Cambodians when they write their language in English and provide footnotes where appropriate to describe pronunciation. Occasionally these spellings diverge in popular usage from the academic systems typically employed in Khmer transliteration, which I justify as my attempt to reflect how Khmer language is represented in the many English-language tourist materials that are of concern in this dissertation (and which are not always consistent). In all cases of conflict, I attempt to stick with the spellings used by my Cambodian acquaintances, as I find local usage more appropriate for this type of ethnography than a scholarly romanization system. For nonstandard usages of regionally-important words like “Banon” instead of “Banan,” “Nieng Rumsai Sok” instead of “Nieng Rumsay Sok,” or “Sangkae” instead of “Sangker,” I consulted with my Cambodian research assistant and other residents of Battambang to determine spellings they feel can accurately represent their wishes for how their terms should be spelled.

There are two exceptions in which I purposefully ignore their wishes: the spelling of “Battambang” and the usage of the term “Khmer Rouge.” In many conversations, my English-speaking Khmer acquaintances in Battambang have been consistently adamant that foreigners

should spell “Battambang” phonetically as “Batdumbong” in order to better reflect the Khmer pronunciation and spelling. My Khmer friends have also argued that scholars should use the term Khmer Krahom/Krahorm to refer to what we usually describe in English as the Khmer Rouge (thus replacing the French word for “red” with the original Khmer term). Both of these requests are made to decolonize the transliteration of the Khmer language and to better represent Khmer opinions. While I agree with these requests and hope to make these changes in future writings, I am sticking with the common international terminology for this work because this dissertation will be disseminated largely through academic settings for readers who may only know the popular terms for Cambodian-specific issues. I hope my Khmer friends will forgive me this intentional oversight.

For a few terms, I purposefully utilize a different spelling in order to elucidate an issue or avoid a problem. For example, I spell Wat Kdul with a “u” because the typical spelling with an “o” brings the word phonetically close to an anatomical term that would not be appropriate to use in relation to a holy space. In instances where my spelling differs from standard usage, I have provided footnotes to explain my reasoning for the alternative spelling. All errors in spelling or transliteration are, of course, my own.

Regardless of English spelling, I provide footnotes with the original Khmer script in all cases where Khmer is used so that readers need not guess which terms I am attempting to spell. Despite my best efforts to use consistent formatting, readers may notice some unevenness between lines whenever I use Khmer script due to the manner by which Khmer language stacks characters. I beg the patience of the reader on this issue and with all issues related to my usage and understanding of the Khmer language.

## Table of Contents

**Acknowledgements ……ii**

**A Note on Khmer Language Transliteration ……..vi**

**List of Figures and Visual Content ……x**

**Abstract ……..xi**

**Introduction……1**
- Tourism Growth in Contemporary Cambodia ……6
- Tourism as an Analytical Framework ……8
- Tourism as Leisure Debated ……11
- The Quest for Authenticity ……12
- The Hero's Journey ……15
- Disneyization ……20
  - Theming ……22
  - Dedifferentiation of Consumption and Merchandizing ……24
  - Performative Labor and Nationalism ……25
- Tourism and Heritage ……27
- Theming and the Urban Sphere ……30
- The Symbolic Economy ……38
- Research Background ……43
- Chapter Previews & Goals ……49

**Chapter 1 - The Story of Battambang ……57**
- Angkor and its Aftermath ……64
- The 'Colonial' Eras ……71
- The French ……82
- Democratic Kampuchea and its Aftermath ……87
- Battambang Today ……90
- The Tourism Cycle ……94
- Tourism Problems and Initiatives ……..101
- The Tourism That Isn't ……..105
- Battambang's Immediate Goals ……..112

**Chapter 2 - Dark Tourism in Battambang ……..……114**
- The Third Life of the Khmer Rouge ……..117
- Sailing Ship Mountain ……..119
- The Well of Shadows ……..127
- Local Reactions to Dark Tourism ……..131
- Breaking Cambodia's Curse ……..134

The Killing Dam ……..138
The Decline of Dark Tourism ……..142
Dark Anthropology ……..145

**Chapter 3 - The Evolution of Thematic Tourism in Battambang ……..143**
Twenty Years Apart ……..147
Sex Tourism ……..150
Restaurant Names & Religious Aims ……..158
Ecotourism and the Environment as Analogy……..163
UNESCO and the Samsung Problem ……..171
The Battambang Winery ……..176

**Chapter 4 - Art Tourism, Past and Present ……..183**
The Origins of Cambodian Art? ……..185
Buddhist Tourism and Khmer Literature ……..187
The Power of Rock and Roll: Music Tourism in Battambang ……..191
The Flowing Voice: Interview with a Dead Man ……..195
Monuments and Tourism ……..199
The Gallery and Café Crowd ……..204
Interviews with Artists ……..210
Phala, the Self-Taught YouTuber ……..211
Rangsei, the Fashionista ……..214
Lorn, the Pragmatic Philosopher ……..218
The Phare Ponleu Selpak Fine Arts School and Circus ……..223
Cambodian Hollywood ……..227
Summarizing Battambang's Artistic Legacy ……..231

**Chapter 5 - Past Alliances, Tourist Futures: Battambang and its Relationship with Thailand ……..233**
The Director's Grand Plans ……..236
Deny the Thai ……..243
Death of a King ……..252
Shadows of Siam ……..255

**Chapter 6 - Behind the Curtain: Stories of Power and Identity ……..254**
Women, Resistance, and the Battle of Banon ……..262
The Death of a Bike Shop ……..275
An Interview About LGBTQ Tourism ……..285
Tourism's Consequences ……..291

**Conclusion ……..293**

**Works Cited ……..300**

## List of Figures and Visual Content

Figure 1 - Domestic tourists taking selfies and making offerings to Ta Dambong Krañyoung….61

Figure 2 - Battambang's central location between major cities, past and present ……70

Figure 3 - Khmer-Thai royal family tree (as of early 2016) as connected by the House of Aphaiwong ……76

Figure 4 - Map of Battambang City in 1907 ……86

Figure 5 - Figure 4 - Simplified map of downtown Battambang City ……91

Figure 6 - Important sites around Battambang that will be discussed in later chapters …..114

Figure 7 - Phnom Sampeau at sunset ……..120

Figure 8 - Macaques playing on guns leftover from the Cambodian Civil War (Phnom Sampeau) ……..124

Figure 9 - Memorial Stupa at the Well of Shadows ……..129

Figure 10 - Khmer New Year Fun at Kamping Puoy (the Killing Dam) ……..141

Figure 11 - The Samsung Problem ……..174

Figure 12 - Chantol and myself displaying some of Battambang's wine ……..180

Figure 13 - Voy Ho, very much alive, posing with memorabilia from his musical heyday …..195

Figure 14 - Statue of *Lōk Okhna* Suttantaprija Ind along the Sangkae River, downtown Battambang City ……..201

Figure 15 - Shoes left outside during an exhibition at one of Battambang's art galleries …..207

Figure 16 - Chhum Aphaiwong's Sala Khet, built ~1906 CE……..241

Figure 17 - Carving of Chhum Aphaiwong at Wat Kdul ……..257

Figure 18 - The Banon tourist police shack that Vibol and the vendors helped build …..273

**Abstract**

Over the past two decades, international tourist visitation to Cambodia has grown an astounding 2,178%, and the country now serves more than 5 million foreign visitors per year. Cambodians are also traveling within their own country much more frequently, creating new forms of domestic tourism that influence regional development. While the nation continues to struggle with the consequences of such rapid expansion, the growing number of tourists also provides opportunities for smaller urban spaces to compete with Cambodia's larger cities through the creation of region-specific tourism industries. Such is the case in the northwestern provincial capital of Battambang City, where local residents and their provincial government are attempting to establish a 'symbolic economy' based on tourism that can tempt tourists away from well-trod tourist attractions found elsewhere in favor of regional offerings. In so doing, Battambang City can compete with larger cities like the national capital of Phnom Penh for tourist income while also promoting narratives about regional history and identity that challenge the nationalist discourse asserted by the central Cambodian government.

To establish a symbolic economy, residents of Battambang are utilizing two key aspects of the Disneyization process: theming and performative labor. In Battambang, themes are reinforced through the postmodern presentation of the urban landscape. In this work, I detail several themes at work in Battambang and demonstrate how themes are changing to reflect the local government's goal of becoming Cambodia's "Charming City." Tourists of all origins engage with themes such as dark tourism, the 'wild' frontier, or the opulent timeliness of Indochina, but often do so following different narratives. So too can a single location represent multiple thematic possibilities and different narrative interpretations based on touristic desires.

Through the analysis of specific themes and the touristic narratives that are negotiated by locals and guests interacting within them, as well as the performative labor provided by local residents, Battambang City's symbolic economy emerges as a complex form of place-based storytelling that allows locals to promote the region as resistant to outside influence, even if that influence comes from within Cambodian borders.

## Introduction

I first encountered the wonders of Cambodia as a small child in the late 1980s. My family traveled many hundreds of kilometers from our Canadian home and boarded a small steamship, the *Mekong Maiden*, for a journey up the Mekong River in search of adventure amongst the overgrown jungle ruins. The *Maiden* was a small ship, capable of seating perhaps twenty souls in a carefully arranged half-moon surrounding the constantly grunting steam-engine in the center of the boat. The engine was hot to the touch and each passenger had to remain vigilant so as not to accidentally brush up against it while the boat navigated uncertain waters. Overhead, a bolt of tan canvas that stretched perilously across makeshift poles provided some protection from the raging sun, although only the occasional breeze helped relieve the suffocating humidity. Our captain was a thirty-something American man in the employ of the Jungle Navigation Co. Ltd. who insisted on the moniker 'Skipper Dan', which seemed befitting of his jungle-green safari attire and flop hat. Skipper Dan assured us we had nothing to worry about and that our journey would last three months or "as far as we could get," a statement that inspired little confidence.

The *Maiden* soon found her way into some overgrowth where large, wet jungle leaves reached across the water towards the boat. I will never forget the smell of the water - not unpleasant, but with a distinct sharpness from the soil along the riverbanks. Animals occasionally peeked through the leaves and revealed themselves to our sight, notably a large crocodile that Skipper Dan named Ginger because, as he quipped, "Ginger snaps." Much of the journey continued in this manner, with Skipper Dan dispensing satirical commentary on the many wonders that passed by.

After what felt like no time at all, the *Maiden* followed a series of sharp bends that revealed a weathered stone structure downriver. Skipper Dan informed us that we were approaching the ruins of Angkor in northern Cambodia and warned us to be careful as this particular temple seemed to have partially collapsed across the river, blocking any alternative but to risk sailing directly through the precarious ruins. The Skipper's face tightened as he gripped the helm while leaning on a cargo box to steady himself for this unexpected challenge. A sudden silence fell across our group and, as we passed through the stone entrance, I made eye contact with a large stone face carved into the temple's exterior that was in the process of being reclaimed by the jungle vines. The face, taller than I was, seemed to be looking back at me with an impish grin, beckoning me towards an uncertain fate. Darkness immediately followed, swallowing the boat and cutting us off from the brightness of the outside world.

Skipper Dan activated a small handheld lantern that was tied to the front of the *Maiden*. In that moment, a whole new world revealed itself to our group. The light from the lantern, though weak and unsteady, revealed something glittering in the distance. As we approached with the lantern, sparkles danced across every visible surface, including the incredulous faces of my shipmates. Golden artifacts covered in jewels lay scattered about the ruins, displaced by whatever monumental shift caused the temple to collapse long ago. Alas, this treasure was not destined to become ours. Just as soon as we realized the potential of our discovery, we heard a hissing that alerted us to new dangers. Panning across the trove of precious artifacts, our eyes caught sight of a large snake sitting atop the jewels - a king cobra. The serpent raised itself as we neared and opened its hood, hissing violently at our intrusion. Soon, more cobras revealed themselves until the entire cache was shielded by a wall of poisonous fangs. Disheartened,

Skipper Dan turned us away from the treasure, preferring to locate an exit from the bowels of the temple, perhaps with the intent to return for the loot at a later time.

Just as thoughts of desperation began to creep into our minds, a glimmer of light appeared in the distance, widening as we approached. An exit was near, causing elation among our group. As we sailed back into the sunlight, we turned to gaze upon the fallen stones that nearly trapped us within. This story, for certain, would be impossible to believe for any who had not lived through it with us. As if to reward us for our survival, the exit emptied into a hidden pool with a small waterfall, a paradise hidden from the outside world. In this pool, numerous Asian elephants were spraying each other with water while they bathed. Skipper Dan turned and, in an expressionless deadpan that belied his anticipation of the punchline, remarked, “Go ahead and take pictures, folks, they’re all wearing their trunks.”

***

A few minutes later, after disembarking back at the dock, my parents asked where I wanted to go next. “Frontierland,” I replied, "I want to ride Big Thunder Mountain!” Just as I was once a jungle explorer, I now envisioned myself a cowboy who needed to conquer the nearby runaway mine train - a role that necessitated a quick exit from the now thematically inappropriate jungle decor of Adventureland. Still, the memories of my first encounter with Cambodia on the Jungle Cruise attraction at Walt Disney World’s Magic Kingdom in Orlando, Florida, never left me. The boat ride may have taken only ten minutes and perhaps did not occur with the exact detail of my childhood imagination as described above, but was nevertheless the beginning of a lifelong fascination with the people and culture of Cambodia.

Although this purposefully-sensationalized account of my childhood introduction to 'Cambodia' as a themed tourist space teems with generalization and inaccuracy, it also formed the foundation for how I encountered the real Cambodia when I finally journeyed there as an adult in 2009. Truthfully, I cannot deny that my initial internalization of Cambodia as exotic and mysterious continues to affect how I interpret my experiences there. Even through years of living in Cambodia and experiencing all of the boredom, pettiness, and normalcy that presents itself through long-term engagement with any human society, I will never be able to fully remove the sense of wonder I feel when engaging with the Cambodian people and environment. Foreigners who study Cambodian culture are subject to similar biases - indeed, many scholars from around the globe have expressed to me the same youthful fascination with the vine-covered face of the Bayon Temple that so captivated me a child![1]

Although we carry the responsibility of being aware of and openly critiquing our biases for all of the stereotyping and Orientalism therein, we must also acknowledge that these feelings are not entirely baseless (Said 1979). Cambodia and places like it have long captured the imagination of outsiders and will always continue to do so because the environment, history, architecture, language, and countless other factors, even if understood as perfectly routine in local society, are so radically different and aesthetically appealing to those unfamiliar with Cambodian daily life. Consider the words of American explorer Harry Hervey, who in 1925 visited the ruins of Angkor and, parallel to my own childhood feelings, wrote, "I beheld the

---

[1] Nor should I discount the powerful desire to right the wrongs of the Khmer Rouge, as I have never met a scholar of Cambodia who does not embody a genuine love of the Cambodian people and a vocal desire to use their work in search of justice (in whatever form it takes) to a populace that has unfairly endured far more suffering than should be possible for a single lifetime.

towers of Angkor Wat thrusting up in the rain like guttered candles; and after so long a time of dreaming I felt I was merely gazing at an enlargement of the picture that had begun its thrilling tyranny in my boyhood" (Hervey 2014: 49). My argument is not that foreigners such as myself should be forgiven their biases and generalizations, but instead that these biases can, through thematic tourism, prove great agency and ingenuity amongst the local people who manipulate such tourist emotions for their own benefit.

All anthropologists and ethnographers are, to some degree, tourists, even if not engaged with the practice of mass tourism (Ochota 2017). They are thus subject to what sociologist John Urry and geographer Jonas Larsen term "the tourist gaze," a manner of viewing and engaging with the world that assumes and categorizes difference between the self and the Other (Urry and Larsen 2011). As Urry and Larsen summarize, "People gaze upon the world through a particular filter of ideas, skills, desires and expectations, framed by social class, gender, nationality, age and education. Gazing is a performance that orders, shapes, and classifies, rather than reflects the world" (Urry and Larsen 2011: 2). By acknowledging the bias of my own tourist gaze and using it as the basis for examining the gazes of mass tourists to Cambodia, I will show that tourism in Cambodia is not a simple picture-taking experience but a form of storytelling told from the first-person perspective of each individual tourist. I will also demonstrate that when compared demographically, particularly regarding national origin, these individual tourist narratives shape certain predominant genres or 'themes' that differentiate appeal across global groups, helping to grow Cambodia's tourism economy. By focusing on thematic tourism and narrative as opposed to a purely statistical examination of tourist development, this study argues foremost that Cambodians are not simply subject to the tourist gaze, but are engaged in an ongoing

conversation with tourists to shape the manner by which Cambodia is presented and consumed through tourism. Whether responding to foreign tourist imaginaries or creating the narrative for to suit their own motivations, Cambodians involved in tourism are actively involved in the narrativization of Cambodian history and culture as it is experienced by countless travelers from home and abroad. This process in turn gives them great power in directing the future interpretation and experience of Cambodia.

**Tourism Growth in Contemporary Cambodia**

According to the World Bank, global tourism rates grew a respectable 129% between 1995 and 2015, 34% from 2009 to 2015 alone despite fears that the Great Recession might negatively impact tourists' willingness to travel (2017 "International tourism: Global"). Southeast Asia is rated as the fastest growing region of the world for new tourist arrivals, with Cambodia in particular experiencing a dramatic and rapid rise of tourism arrivals over the past twenty years (2014 "Table 6.14"). After an initial offering of 220,000 tourists in 1995, some 5,012,000 international travelers visited Cambodia in 2016, - a 2,178% growth attributable to the opening of the country following years of war (2017 "International tourism: Cambodia"). The most significant period for tourist expansion in Cambodia began in 2009, the same year I first set foot on Cambodian soil, when 2,162,000 tourists visited the nation - a number that had previously held mostly steady for several years. Since then, tourism rates have more than doubled, and growth rates of over 500,000 additional arrivals per year are estimated for the foreseeable future, bolstered in part by the European Council on Tourism and Trade awarding Cambodia the title of World's Best Tourism Destination for 2016 (Hou 2016).

Most tourists to Cambodia seek to explore the legendary temples of Angkor, especially the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Angkor Wat, the world's largest religious structure (2016 "Angkor"). But as more and more tourists visit the region, they increasingly seek new experiences in regions where most previous tourists did not go. As the tourist crowds expand, the potential for smaller sites to grow and establish tourism economies increases exponentially. This work is a study of one such site: the provincial capital of Battambang City in northwestern Cambodia.[2] With a population of approximately 197,000 people, Battambang City is often called Cambodia's "Second City," even though it occasionally ranks third in population behind Siem Reap depending on the statistical sourcing (see Chen 2011; Sawe 2017). Since 1998, Battambang has focused on tourism as a method of urban development and is now one of the fastest growing regions in the country (Manet 2017). An important city that serves as a gateway of sorts between Cambodia and Thailand, Battambang's history differs greatly from that of Phnom Penh and thereby provides the city a unique method of appealing to tourists. Although much smaller than the capital, the growth of the tourism industry is helping Battambang compete with Phnom Penh through tourist visitation and the resulting growth of its international reputation.

Battambang is a compelling case study because of its unique history and domestic appeal. Indeed, an important aspect of Battambang's tourism industry is the role that Cambodians themselves play in tourist development, both as vendors and tourists. The region also counters many of the trends present in the greater Cambodian tourism industry, yet remains successful and growing. For example, 32.6% of all tourists to Cambodia now come from China, but only 4-5%

---

[2] Both the province and its capital city are named Battambang. I attempt to specifically write "City" when addressing the urban space, but even when I do not it should be understood as related to this region's main sphere of action.

of visitors to Battambang hail from China. Instead, France is the predominant group with nearly 20%, thanks largely to the abundant French Indochinese architecture prominent in area. I argue that locals are crafting a symbolic economy through the relationships they negotiate with tourists, who want to experience certain narratives but are also open to suggestion. Locals thus carefully manipulate the region's unique appeal to both grow their tourism economy as separate from trends in greater Cambodia while also extolling a sense of regional independence and political resistance, in essence infusing tourism narratives with their own regional identity. To date, Battambang is a critically understudied area of the Kingdom of Cambodia, and it is through tourism that I hope to expand upon discussions of history, creativity, nationalism, and other concepts that are understood differently in Battambang than other areas of the country.

**Tourism as an Analytical Framework**

Tourism is a highly active area of social engagement and can dramatically influence the development of many areas of culture, including politics, economics, and communal emotions like nationalism, amongst others. As early as 1963, anthropologist Theron A. Nuñez, Jr. made the argument that "tourism may bring about rapid and dramatic changes in the loci of authority... [thus] it is a legitimate and necessary area of culture research" (Nuñez 1963: 352). Tourism is now seen as a primary conduit of globalization, and we cannot categorize tourism as solely a matter of individual leisure, as early scholars once did (see Smith 1989; Graburn 1989). As sociologist Adrian Franklin and geographer Mike Crang state, "Tourism can no longer be bounded off as a discrete activity, contained tidily at specific locations and occurring during set aside periods" (Franklin and Crang 2001: 7). Through media influence and other constant

reminders, tourism has become a part of daily life.

Furthermore, because tourism is such a strong avenue for globalization and intercultural communication, understanding tourism can be a gateway through which humans learn about other cultures and eventually reshape their own identities. As anthropologist Valene L. Smith writes, “Tourism can be a bridge to an appreciation of cultural relativity and international understanding,” if proper time and attention is paid to how tourism operates in society (Smith 1989: 9). Indeed, postcolonial theorist Joanne Sharp states, “Tourism is probably the most important mediation of otherness in terms of our sense of experience of difference” (Sharp 2009: 94). These tourist-led experiences of otherness continue to grow, particularly through themed tourism, and it is through these exploratory processes of touristic curiosity that humans not only imagine their community, but those of others (see Salazar & Graburn 2014). Sociologist Mark Gottdiener argues that these tourist experiences not only introduce many of the pros and cons of otherness, but also shape our national consciousness. He writes, “Both national cultures and local environments [are] increasingly altered by the growing influence of franchising and theming“ (Gottdiener 2001: 2). Thus, tourism acts as what anthropologist Nelson H.H. Graburn refers to as a “barometer of the dynamics of culture change” and should not be dismissed as merely the realm of entertainment (Graburn 1983: 2).

The growth in tourism is also allowing certain societies to replace their previously industrial-based economies with a different mode of production and consumption, and thus tourism can become the method through which communities survive economic adversity (see Lukas 2007: 6). The shift from factory-based industry to tourism can dramatically restructure social organization. Graburn offers three primary modes for observing interactions within a

tourist economy (Graburn 1983: 1). First is the relationship between tourists and those they leave behind in their home societies that do not undergo the tour, but who make up the tourist's more permanent community. Second is the relationship among tourists as a distinct group from those being visited. Third is the relationship between tourists and the people being visited, bringing up questions of authenticity and the impact of tourism on other societies. As tourist economies grow and tourists increasingly interact with foreign cultures, they undergo personal transformations that reshape their relationships with their home communities as well as leave behind traces of their presence in the communities visited, thus changing cultures worldwide. These three zones of interaction will be present in later discussions in this work.

The main problem with many popular understandings of tourism is that they focus too much on tourism as a purely capitalist process in which goods and experiences are consumed by paying guests, thus establishing a tourist economy. While this viewpoint is valid, it is only half the story. Gottdiener argues that tourism research must take the process of production – in terms of environments, goods, performances, and even ideologies – more seriously, and thus remember that tourism is also a highly symbolic experience that begins in the minds of individual tourists and their hosts (Gottdiener 2001: 5-6; see also Thurot 1983). I argue that this area is where anthropology can benefit the scientific exploration of tourism most effectively. Although other fields like sociology and geography can and do explore touristic production at various levels, the methodology of anthropology is best positioned to more deeply explore the individual emotive and symbolic productive modes of tourism because of the emphasis on long-term, highly personalized participant observation. As Graburn once summarized, "Though there are studies of motivation, attitudes, and behavior before, during, and after particular tourist trips, there have

been no in-depth studies of the place and influence of tourism on life trajectories, educational and lifestyle choices, and world view. We need studies of the place and function of tourism within the life cycle of individuals, vis a vis self-awareness, identity and aspirations, as well as attitudes about other peoples and places in the world" (Graburn 1983: 2, emphasis removed).

**Tourism as Leisure Debated**

In the influential 1977 study *Hosts and Guests*, anthropologist Valene L. Smith defines a tourist as "a temporarily leisured person who voluntarily visits a place away from home for the purpose of experiencing a change" (Smith 1989: 1). While I agree with the assertion of "experiencing a change," to be discussed shortly, the concept of leisure is problematic in terms of more recent conceptions of tourism. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "leisure" as the "use of free time for enjoyment," and the term certainly carries connotations of relaxation and ease in common parlance (OED 2014). Indeed, Graburn writes, "A major characteristic of our conception of tourism is that it is not work, but...is supposed to renew us for the workaday world...Tourism is a special form of play involving travel" (Graburn 1989: 22). While play is certainly involved in many forms of tourism, these statements are too generalized for new conceptions of tourism.

For example, voluntourism - in which tourists use their limited vacation time to perform labor for needy societies, building homes, teaching English, etc. - is on the rise. Voluntourism is a controversial subject because many voluntourists have been accused of wanting to play the hero in a country depicted as poor and helpless. The actual effectiveness of the given aid is also questionable (see Dykins 2014). In these cases, the tourists still engage in some form of partially

recreational travel or "play" for the purpose of making a change – both in terms of changing the world around them, and feeling accomplished for it – yet are certainly not doing so with leisure in mind. Although Smith and Graburn's conceptions of tourism have been standard for many decades, I reject the leisure concept in favor of a conception of tourism that highlights the tourist's individual narrative as the primary motivating factor for travel. In other words, tourists are first-person storytellers sharing narratives of themselves within exploratory contexts.

**The Quest for Authenticity**

Before I can provide my interpretation of the tourist experience, I must first address the influential work of geographer Dean MacCannell, who states that tourism is ultimately a "quest for authentic experiences" (MacCannell 1973: 593). MacCannell adapts sociologist Erving Goffman's assertion that society is split into two parts – the seen (public performance) and the unseen (private lives) (Goffman 1959; MacCannell 1973: 390). Because humans consider the intimacy of the unseen the 'real' expressions of human life, MacCannell argues that that which is considered most authentic is that which allows the outsider to see into the unseen private lives of the performer (MacCannell 1973: 591-592). In other words, people want to witness and experience the messy, private spaces of human life, and therefore tourism is predicated on the ability to see how people live and behave in their 'real', private lives. Of course, members of tourist societies know that tourists wish to see into these private lives, and thus they establish forms of their private lives specifically for public performance and consumption while obscuring the messier and arguably more accurate aspects of their private selves. Thus, authenticity is blurred because the seen and unseen overlap and are interpreted as each other. As MacCannell

states, “Touristic consciousness is motivated by its desire for authentic experiences, and the tourist may believe that he is moving in this direction, but often it is very difficult to tell for sure if the experience is authentic in fact” (MacCannell 1973: 597).

Authenticity, then, is not a matter of promoting an accurate depiction of a culture, but instead of *creating* an accurate depiction of what the tourists *expect to see* (see Sharp 2009: 95). Geographer Mike Crang thus concludes that any appeal to authenticity in tourism is “quixotic” at best, and challenges whether or not the “quest for authenticity” truly is the primary motivation for tourists (Crang 1996). At this point it is worth noting that MacCannell uses a similar argument to critique the ethnographic process at large, questioning whether or not the ethnographer is also attempting to seek out the desired authentic depiction of culture, albeit using a more cautious and critical approach (MacCannell 1973: 592). The ethnographer’s reply to such an accusation would likely be an argument that the goal of ethnography is no longer to depict culture as it is, but to ask how it came to be the way it is within its sociohistoric context. In other words, we are more interested in how people reflect on the world than how an outsider might describe a group’s daily behavior. Similarly, while authenticity is undeniably a crucial aspect of producing tourism, I do not believe that tourists seek out the ‘real, authentic’ lives of others for that purpose alone. Authenticity is but one aspect of a much larger personal narrative that drives tourists to explore the imagined history of their world.

The quest to create authenticity is useful, however, when it provides new perspectives on social agency. In the case of Cambodia, I argue that local tourism operators are keenly aware of what tourists want to see as ‘real’, even if those imaginaries dip into the realm of the stereotypical or inaccurate, and often choose to portray their culture specifically for consumption

by the tourist gaze. This ability to *choose* is what demonstrates how local actors forge positions of power within an otherwise colonial practice. In this work, I attempt to show that tourism is far more complicated than just being ‘bad’ or ‘good’, but often involves many negative and positive consequences constantly overlapping, if precariously, in meaningful ways. In so doing, even when promoting a stereotype, agentive locals often infuse tourist imaginaries with their own truths, meaning that tourist performance can still result in more accurate forms of representation when controlled by the people on display.

Furthermore, the manner by which locals choose to portray themselves is itself a gateway into alternative cultural perspectives. Tourism scholars Michael Hitchcock, Victor T. King, and Michael Parnwell have argued that authenticity differs greatly in 'western' and Southeast Asian cultures (Hitchcock, King, and Parnwell 2010c). As they state, “In Western conceptions it is the material evidence that is the measure of what is or is not authentic, and great effort is invested in discovering and preserving what is deemed to be original and either charting or rectifying what has happened to it over time” (Hitchcock, King, and Parnwell 2010c: 265). Whereas ‘Westerners’ are concerned primarily with these physical artifacts and forms, Southeast Asian communities often see these physical sites as transmitters for the more important emotional and folkloric expressions taking place in human memory. In other words, Southeast Asian people “use a computer analogue, in which the material culture is regarded as hardware and the human ability as software,” which balances the physical and metaphysical importance of an ‘authentic’ enterprise (Hitchcock, King, and Parnwell 2010: 265). For these reasons, this study aims to rework an understanding of tourism away from 'western' assumptions about tourist consumption towards the symbolic methods by which tourist sites act as places of cultural broadcast in

Southeast Asian contexts.

**The Hero's Journey**

My definition of tourism as travel and experience for the purpose of embodying a personal narrative is intended to combat the lack of agency found in earlier definitions of tourism. For example, Smith identifies five major types of tourism: ethnic tourism, an exploration of indigenous peoples and their exotic appearance; cultural tourism, based on an attraction to old world styles and the supposed paradise of rural life prior to the pollution of urbanization; historical tourism, in which people relive the 'glories of the past' through archaeological ruins and other ancient sites; environmental tourism, based on nature and the "alien scenes" of other ecosystems; and recreational tourism, where activities like golf, swimming, or even sex tourism, attract people who want to physically operate in a different cultural context (Smith 1989: 4-6). While these categories certainly do exist as multiple genres for tourist attractions, Smith's conception is worded in such a way that tourists are merely responding to the powerful draw of tourist sites. Tourist sites can certainly attract guests for a variety of emotional reasons, but I believe tourists have more agency than just as reactors to outside stimuli. This work is an attempt to reframe tourism as a narrative-based study more than a site-based study, in which individual sites are conduits of narrative experience more than just an inanimate subject of the tourist gaze. In other words, sites matter, but not as much as the narratives tourists tell themselves while visiting them. Landscape, then, is not the ultimate goal of the touristic journey, but the medium through which the narrative is experienced - still important to tourism, but more a conduit than a boundary.

For that reason, in this work I worry less about a strict definition of tourism as an action (which I consider too contextual to be confined to any singular form), but instead focus on the tourist's desire to craft personal narratives of experience in which tourist sites provide thematic structure that operate like different genres of media from which the tourist may live out his or her own individual fantasies. We should thus consider thematic tourism a form of storytelling based on the sensory experience of symbolic meaning that is enacted through travel. As anthropologist Scott A. Lukas states, "Though many people do enjoy the forms of entertainment that take place within themed venues, the primary purpose of these spaces is...to play on human desires" (Lukas 2007: 2-3). Thus, although leisure may be involved in the tourist experience, it operates within a much larger imaginative structure of a themed narrative.

Defining the tourist experience as based on personalized thematic narratives also allows for the inclusion of many of the other prominent conceptions of tourism discussed above, but without excluding certain activities as non-tourism simply because they do not fit a strict definition. For example, Dean MacCannell writes, "Tourists enter tourist areas precisely because their experiences there will not, for them, be routine" (MacCannell 1973: 601). I further argue that treating different themes like narrative genres expands tourism to include a wider array of experiences that separate the tourist from the 'routine' genre of 'home', even if the tourist remains near their home when undergoing those experiences, as is typical in the 'staycation' form of tourism that is increasingly popular as wealth disparity grows.

Geographer Joanne Sharp further argues, "The experience of travel is thought by many to transform a person through the exposure to difference," echoing Valene L. Smith's earlier comments that tourists "experience a change" (Sharp 2009: 95; Smith 1989: 1). Nelson H.H.

Graburn goes so far as to state that tourism is a form of pilgrimage in which the tourist undergoes near-religious rites of passage, a sentiment with which Dean MacCannell agrees (Graburn 1989; MacCannell 1973: 589; see also Pfaffenberger 1983). In fact, Graburn writes, "The common forms of rites of passage...are socially sanctioned rituals of life's progress, but the touristic forms are usually self-imposed (and thereby more exceptional and often personally meaningful)" (Graburn 1983b: 12-13, my emphasis; see also Harrison 2003)".[3]

Understanding tourism as structured by a form of narrative allows for an examination of how tourism operates in stages, both in terms of production of thematic space and of personal consumption by tourists and tour operators alike. Even Dean MacCannell agrees that tourism operates in a structured, near-Chaucerian narrative manner when he writes, "The tourist set-up is formulaic by definition. The true heroes are those who leave home not knowing where they will end up, never knowing whether their eventual end will connect meaningfully to their origins, knowing only that their future will be made of dialogue with their fellow travelers and those they meet along the way" (MacCannell 2003: 4). Likewise, Nelson H.H. Graburn refers to tourism as "The Sacred Journey" in which "people believe they are free to exercise their fantasies" (Graburn 1989; Graburn 1983b: 29). Terminology like "hero," "sacred," and "fantasy" all hint at the epic form of narrative and how tourists envision themselves as primary characters in the tourist adventure of their choosing – agents who use the symbolic sites and resources available to create their own personal story.

The study of tourism should thus begin not with an analysis of the sites at hand, but of the

---

[3] Anthropologist Brian Moeran provides an excellent discussion of how this drive for "discovery" shapes Japanese tourism brochures and marketing in the article "The Language of Japanese Tourism" (Moeran 1983: 104).

types of tourist narratives that are related to those sites. One method for analyzing a tourist hero narrative is to use mythologist Joseph Campbell's famed Monomyth structure, more commonly known as The Hero's Journey, as a comparative model (Campbell 2008). The Hero's Journey is an analysis of mythic narrative structure that breaks down epic stories into individual formulaic pieces that can shape narrative experiences in a wide variety of media. The Hero's Journey has been the basis of everything from important works of literature to George Lucas's famed space opera *Star Wars* to the rides at Disneyland, and is thus deeply rooted in the themed tourism industry (see Berger 2013).[4]

Campbell argues that each epic story is composed of similarly functioning parts. For example, the narrative begins with the 'Call to Adventure' in which the hero is called to seek out an exotic and sometimes dangerous adventure. In tourism, the role of marketing and advertising may play this role. Next, the hero must cross the 'Threshold' that separates their real world with the mythic world where their story will take place. National gateways, airport customs, hotel entrances, attraction entrances and exits, are but some of the many 'Thresholds' that tourists experience that firmly place them in the new world of their narrative. A 'Transformation' follows in which the hero struggles, conquers an obstacle, and gains insight. The stress of travel, culture shock, and the challenge of meeting new foreign friends or experiencing a specific cultural action play this role in tourism. Finally, the hero 'Returns' home to their real world with some form of 'Gift' that reminds them of their journey in the mythic space from which they are now separated. Photographs, souvenirs, and other forms of memory-making often fulfill this purpose.

---

[4] George Lucas himself reiterated this connection regarding Campbell in a private discussion with an audience of anthropologists, including myself, at the November 2018 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in San Jose, California.

Regardless, the hero (and the tourist) is forever changed by their experience. As Graburn summarizes, "We hate to end vacation, and to leave new-found if temporary excitement; on the other hand, many are relieved to return home safely and even anticipate the end of the tense, emotion-charged period of being away. We step back into our former roles, often with a sense of culture shock. We inherit our past selves like an heir to the estate of a deceased person who has to pick up the threads, for we are not ourselves. We are a new person who has gone through re-creation" (Graburn 1989: 27).

There are many more steps to the Hero's Journey, many of which are problematic when applied too generally to non-'western' cultures, but my point is not to rigidly adhere to Campbell's ideas. Instead, I argue that these various conceptions can help in the interpretation of how tourists describe the motivations and experiences of their personal tourist narratives if reconfigured for their personal perspectives and backgrounds. Tourists may have many motivations for travel that do not necessarily feel like adventure or heroism at first glance. For example, ethnographic travel is often undertaken for the purpose of education or cultural communication and is not necessarily motivated by an internal narrative about playing Indiana Jones or James Bond. Nevertheless, this type of educational travel still involves passing a 'Threshold' from the known to the unknown, both in terms of place and learning, and undergoing a form of 'Transformation' into a new person – a wiser individual who 'Returns' with the 'Gift' of knowledge that forever changes that person. The Hero's Journey is only a method for understanding how personal narratives and tourist spaces overlap, not a boundary that favors more active forms of tourism over others. In this understanding, the Hero at the heart of the tourist's narrative can be an adventurer, a scholar, a monk, a mourner, or a variety of other

archetypes so long as the tourist undergoes their journey for the purpose of a first-person narrative that, in turn, can be more or less explicit to the individual. My goal is to not force Campbell's framework onto the lives of tourists in the field, but to show how guests in Battambang create their own tourist narratives using symbols that are meaningful to them as individuals.

**Disneyization**

To better demonstrate my ideas in action, I turn now to the case study that first allowed me to encounter Cambodia in my childhood and that will now provide the methodological framework for my research: the Disney theme parks. Tourism and Hospitality specialist Sue Beeton argues that because tourism studies is so new and misunderstood, it is in desperate need of "exemplary" case studies that "go beyond the technical aspects of methodology, producing insightful work that can be used to demonstrate not only appropriate use of the mode but also...illuminate [future studies]" (Beeton 2005: 42). Disneyland is arguably the most famous case study of thematic tourism, and is referenced in nearly every piece of academic literature on tourism, from the earliest studies of tourism in the social sciences to more recent publications. Disneyland was not only involved in the rise of tourism as a cultural form, but also established the structure for how tourism is produced and consumed around the globe.

At first glance, Disneyland seems like an inappropriate analogy for this research because it is a designed and arguably 'fake' space with little connection to the outside world.[5] However,

---

[5] In Disney parlance, there is no such thing as 'fake'. Disney designers and employees prefer to differentiate between 'real' and 'Disney real', which implies that staged settings and experiences can still be authentic. Such conceptions are worthy of further exploration elsewhere.

sociologists Alan Bryman and Stephen M. Fjellman argue that Disneyland is so closely associated with American culture that most people now consider it more realistic than the outside world, and visit it as a form of pilgrimage to a utopian America (Bryman 2004; Fjellman 1992: 10). French sociologist Jean Baudrillard described this phenomenon as "hyperreality," which links capitalist consumption and symbolic meaning through staged authenticity (Baudrillard 1981). Thus, tourist sites like the Disney Parks are intended to 'feel' better than reality by playing to tourist fantasies for legitimacy, a sort of mystification that many tourist sites attempt to emulate. The challenge is not to compare foreign sites to Disneyland directly, but to ask how they become sites of similar meaning within their own cultural contexts.

Disneyland opened in 1955 and quickly helped establish thematic tourism as a cultural form from which an analytical framework can be derived. Bryman argues that since the Disney Parks are the most successful form of thematic tourism, they can provide the methodology for how thematic tourism operates around the globe. Taking inspiration from (and in many ways inverting) George Ritzer's famous McDonaldization concept, Bryman calls the method for establishing thematic tourism "Disneyization" (Bryman 1999; Bryman 2004). Disneyization is "the process by which the principles of the Disney theme parks are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world" (Bryman 1999: 26). Importantly, Bryman emphasizes the difference between Disneyization and the more well-known concept of Disneyfication, which refers to the simplistic 'cute'-ifying process that reduces and sanitizes historical complexity in ways considered unacceptable to scholarship (Bryman 1999). To clarify, Disneyization is an entirely different and less saccharine concept focused on thematic tourism as a model instead of as a cultural filter, and thus should not be seen as infantilizing or

reductive. Bryman splits Disneyization into four main parts, all of which are further explored in the paragraphs below: 1) theming, 2) dedifferentiation of consumption, 3) merchandising, and 4) performative labor (including both customer service and the internalization of thematic values) (Bryman 1999: 29, 40). This four-part model provides the foundation for my research on how thematic tourism is produced and consumed in Cambodia.

**Theming**

Of the four steps in Disneyization, theming is by far the most familiar to academic research and the most prevalent throughout this work, largely drawing from sociologist Mark Gottdiener's *The Theming of America: American Dreams, Media Fantasies, and Themed Environments* and the collected volume *The Themed Space: Locating Culture, Nation, and Self*, edited by sociologist Scott A. Lukas (Gottdiener 2001; Lukas 2007). As Lukas states, "Theming is a motivated form of geographical representation in which meaningful connections are made among unifying ideas, symbols, or discourses" which uses "an overarching theme, such as western, to create a holistic and integrated spatial organization of a consumer venue" (Lukas 2007b: 1-2). In other words, theming involves the application of a symbolic theme in order to create environments that tourists wish to visit. These themes often utilize postmodern urban design, a principle that relies on the manipulation of time and space to combine a variety of unrelated cultural symbols that share a theme but are not necessarily factually connected in history into a singular pastiche presented as "authentic" fact (see Paradis 2007: 65). As Dean MacCannell summarizes, "The central drive of postmodernity is to stop history in its tracks, and the central drive of postmodern tourism is to discover places that seem to exist outside of

history" (MacCannell 2003: 26). Thus, theming often presents history in an ahistorical way.

As Scott A. Lukas writes, "Theming has become such a commonplace aspect of our everyday lives [that] we are often unwilling or unable to effectively understand the consequences of theming in our lives" (Lukas 2007: 2). Mark Gottdiener agrees and calls theming "pervasive," stating that, "our daily life occurs within a material environment that is dependent on and organized around overarching motifs" (Gottdiener 2001: 3). Bars, restaurants, hotels, even individual homes are regularly themed to appeal to the taste of customers or inhabitants. Gottdiener even posits that theming is so overused that it may have reached its limits in society, although I would argue that the decade and a half since he first made such a claim has proven just the opposite: theming is now spreading to new areas around the world, with significant changes in social organization taking place as a result (Gottdeiner 2001: ix).

Theming is designed to cater to the tourist seeking change specifically because the process of theming is itself a transformation "from bounded cultural object expressive of place, culture and the like to a more micro-focused dimension that is specific to groups of people, the individual, and modes of subjectivity" (Lukas 2007: 3). Theming a space is risky because it might exclude tourists who do not wish to explore that specific theme, yet, theming is not a rigid and singular process. As Mark Gottdiener summarizes, "Motifs may take on a range of meanings according to the interpretations of the individuals who are exposed to them. The range of responses can include everything [or even] no response at all – that is, a failure of the symbolic content to stimulate" (Gottdiener 2001: 5). Thus, themes must be specific enough to attract targeted demographics, but broad enough to allow for individualistic and culturally relative interpretation even by those outside the focus group. By carefully crafting these themes into

tourist spaces, Disneyization establishes "fantasylands where the elements of real 'lived-in experience' are transformed into the status of myths" (Albers and James 1983: 135).

Cambodia's tourism industry is based directly on this type of thematic appeal and subsequent room for individual interpretation. Cambodia markets itself using the slogan "Kingdom of Wonder," and advertisements bearing the phrase can be found at nearly every airport, border crossing, major hotel, restaurant, or popular travel website. Much like how Disneyland's themed lands attempt to stimulate the imagination of tourists using themes that frame specific storytelling genres but remain broad enough to incorporate the individual desires of the guests - *Adventure*land, *Tomorrow*land, *Frontier*land, etc. - Cambodia's slogan invites the guests to define "wonder" for themselves and, through the tourist experience, come to envision Cambodia as a Wonderland that will fulfill their wildest imaginations.

**Dedifferentiation of Consumption and Merchandising**

The middle two steps of the Disneyization process are considerably easier to understand than theming, and thus I will only touch on them briefly. Dedifferentiation of consumption simply means to make sure that your tourist enterprise benefits multiple parties, thus establishing an economy in which multiple businesses may benefit from the thematic source (Bryman 1999; Bryman 2004). Using Disneyland as an example, profits are not made purely from ticket sales. The Disney Parks also provide income for a variety of nearby businesses, including owners and servers of dozens of restaurants, operators and staff of the hundreds of hotels nearby, even taxi services to and from the parks each day. Important tourist sites in Battambang similarly provide income for a wide range of businesses. For example, Battambang's famous bamboo train

attraction provides profit to the track operators who maintain the railway, to vendors who sell food and beverages at various stops along the track, to tuk-tuk drivers who cater to guests wishing to visit the train, to hotels and restaurants nearby that provide accommodation and directions to the attraction, and even to certain police officers who skim off the top of everyone else. These networks are complicated, but it is by using tourism to create a web of income and not just a single line of profit that tourist economies are sustained.

Profits are also made through theme-specific merchandizing. The Disney Parks are masterful at themed merchandising and literally invented the 'exit through the gift shop' model of design. Each attraction has its own shop that sells themed attraction-specific merchandise, raking in billions of dollars in profits each year. In Cambodia, merchandising is less direct, but still apparent. Cambodians sell *krama* scarves to tourists as emblems of local culture, distilled alcohol with rubber snakes and scorpions inside to represent the exotic wilds of Asia, jewelry made from landmines as a unique way of incorporating beauty and tragedy into a purchasable commodity, and a variety of other products that utilize the many themes found in this part of 'exotic Asia'. In Battambang specifically, merchandizing can also serve to distance the region from the rest of Cambodia through the purposeful promotion of products bearing regionally important icons such as the Sala Khet or the local god Ta Dambong Krañyoung (see Chapter 1). In my research, I explore the growth of these income networks to show how the tourist economy is stabilizing and expanding throughout Cambodia's northwest.

**Performative Labor and Nationalism**

Bryman's final element of Disneyization, performative labor, brings up an important

theoretical question: what impact does tourism have on the internal values of the individuals involved in tourist production? Early research on tourism, such as Valene L. Smith's *Hosts and Guests*, argues, "The major stimulus for the development of tourism is economic" (Smith 1989: 6). This comment is true in some respects, but is vulnerable to Gottdiener's earlier critique that too much focus and finality is given to the capitalist consumption involved with tourist enterprises. Tourism can also be seen as a highly cultural project in which personal identities are shaped by thematic experiences. As Scott A. Lukas writes, "Theming is a form of simulation...Simulation, whether occurring in a theme park, casino, or restaurant, is always a political project – one tied to varied dimensions of ethnicity, gender, and other master statuses" (Lukas 2007: 8, 12-13). Therefore, my research explores both the role of customer service and the internalization of related values in regards to tourism, including the nationalist motivations that become increasingly present in tourism over time. In this sense, Bryman's conception of performative labor is an expansion of Arlie Hochschild's discussions of "emotional labor" and the role of emotion in the labor force (Hochschild 1983).

While Bryman predominantly intends to discuss customer service as a stabilizing factor in thematic tourism, I also extend his performative labor argument into other realms of personal experience (Bryman 1999; Bryman 2004). As Lukas predicts, "A future trend of theming is to establish connections between the material aspects of theming and the immaterial features of culture and self that are localized in the individual" (Lukas 2007: 13). Tourism and related activities can dramatically shape personal and national identity. For example, although not specifically about tourism, Richard Handler's work in Canada shows how the creation of culturally symbolic costumes, music, and dances fueled the development of nationalism in

Quebec at such a heightened level that nationalistic violence became possible (Handler 1988). The mechanisms of tourism are similar to these symbolic expressions and also possess the ability to influence nationalist ideologies. Anthropologist Brian Moeran makes similar connections by analyzing the language of tourism as it both reflects and actively shapes Japanese nationalist imagery. As he writes, "The tourist literature is an excellent guide to fundamental changes that are taking place in Japanese society" (Moeran 1983: 105). In terms of Cambodia, tourism can act as a conduit for pride and other feelings of nationalism, while simultaneously creating new standards for cultural behavior regarding hospitality.

**Tourism and Heritage**

Part of what makes tourism such a politically charged arena in Cambodia is that so many cultural sites are emblems of Khmer heritage.[6] Theming heritage sites for tourism is a growing and lucrative trend in Southeast Asia, but risks creating tensions between locals and national governments (see Miura 2010: 103). Geographers Gareth Shaw and Allan M. Williams explain that these tensions arise because heritage tourism is a "history-making business" which "commercializes the past" (Shaw and Williams 2002: 203; Hitchcock, King, and Parnwell 2010: 3). Oftentimes, these commercialized histories "oversimplify the complex relationships

---

[6] [6] The ethnic majority of Cambodia are known as Khmer/ខ្មែរ (pronounced "khmī," "khmai," or "khmae"). An easy trap for scholars of Cambodia is to use the terms "Khmer" and "Cambodian" interchangeably, which risks ignoring the many other indigenous groups and ethnicities present in the country (see Baird 2016). Although those minority groups are present in Battambang, my study focuses primarily on the activities Khmer majority. I attempt to use the term "Khmer" specifically in relation to them and "Cambodian" when referring to the totality of the populace, even when not specifically discussing minority issues. I would argue, however, that the roles that other ethnic groups play in tourism is fertile ground for future research.

surroundings a site's history [to] portray the sites as remnants of a cultural group that no longer exists in the present day," or even draw a line between the people of the past and people today regardless of cultural change (Hitchcock, King, and Parnwell 2010c: 268-269).

Archaeologist Ian Glover further explains that when history is commoditized in this way, heritage sites often become vessels for a form of history that attempts to "legitimize and strengthen the position of the state and its dominant political communities" (Glover 2003: 16-17). An example would be anthropologist Mark Johnson's analysis of the World Heritage Site of Hue, Vietnam as a state-enforced national narrative, in which Johnson concludes that archaeological sites provide current guests a way of journeying into the utopian past regardless of the truth of that past (Johnson 2010: 182-185). He states, "Whatever the view of Hue's artistic and architectural culture may have been previously, it is now officially promoted as one of the pre-eminent sites not just for the preservation of Vietnamese high culture in the past, but just as importantly for renewing national arts and culture in the present and future" (Johnson 2010: 178). A similar assertion can be made about Battambang's cultural and artistic legacy (see Chapter 4).

The increasing popularity of archaeological sites applying for UNESCO World Heritage status demonstrates how many of these nationalist ideologies seek international legitimacy. As anthropologist Kieko Miura explains, "the [World Heritage] programme has become a significant political tool used by the states to promote their own national agenda, pride and international image" (Miura 2010: 126). Miura argues that Southeast Asian states are particularly concerned about Heritage Status, and offers several case studies for examination. The most important to her argument is also the most important for Cambodia – the World Heritage Site of Angkor Wat in

Cambodia. She quotes Sok An, the Chairman of the National Tourism Authority of Cambodia, as explaining that designating Angkor Wat as a World Heritage Site was crucial for Cambodia's international identity because, "If the Khmer had no Angkor, nobody would recognize us" (Miura 2010: 111). Although Sok An places a nationalist spin on his argument, Miura reveals that the World Heritage designation also allowed many "covert agreements" to be made that profited the national government through the selling of land near Angkor for hotel and tourist business development (Miura 2010: 115-116). Thus, heritage tourism can dramatically impact both economics and nationalism and should not be seen as merely catering to the financial aspects of life.

Sometimes, as in Battambang's case, these heritage sites and their re-written histories serve the purpose of overthrowing imposed colonial histories, thus bolstering local nationalism and independence (see Hitchcock, King, and Parnwell 2010c: 264). Historian Nigel Worden analyses the Malaysian heritage site of Melaka as a form of resistance to colonialism, arguing that both Malay and non-Malay people in Malaysia see the site as a symbol of their unique identities that were oppressed by Europeans (Worden 2010). These resistance narratives serve both nationalist and economic purposes, as the ideas of uniqueness that heritage tourism supports also "create cultural otherness and distinctive tourism products that stand out in the marketplace" (Hitchcock, King, and Parnwell 2010: 19). In this sense, nationalism is a form of theme-specific merchandising that certain members of society wish to consume by visiting and experiencing specific sites.

**Theming and the Urban Sphere**

The challenge of my research is not only found in the balancing of popular narrative and historical truth, but in the act of treating an urban space like an ethnographic subject. The city of Battambang is itself a character in my writing, such that describing it with any type of set terminology can feel restrictive and disingenuous.[7] Still, there are several ways of conceiving of the city in relation to its history and emerging tourism industry. In the 1999 book *Theorizing the City: The New Urban Anthropology Reader*, anthropologist Setha M. Low introduces several urban-specific theoretical frameworks that position urban spaces as thematic categories instead of as geographically or financially separate, in essence replacing groupings like First, Second, and Third World cities with more culturally relative frameworks (Low 1999). These categories include a focus on Modernist and Post-modernist Cities, which are the most relevant of Low's categories for my research.

According to Low, a Modernist City is a site where a colonial power attempted to develop an urban environment to make it "modern" in terms of both spatial design and cultural assimilation (Low 1999; see also Fox 1977). Anthropologist James Holston demonstrates this principle through an analysis of how the Brazilian government emphasized removing street cultures in urban spaces in favor of controlled, indoor life during the establishment of the

---

[7] Indeed, many local residents of Battambang prefer to refer to it merely as "Battambang Town" and not a "city" when using the English language, in part because the Khmer word for city, ក្រុង/*krong,* has only been officially applied to the region starting in 2011. Cambodians are far more likely to refer to Battambang's capital as ខេត្ត/*khet/khait*, which means "province" but can, in this context, also refer to the urban center of a province. For my purposes, I call the province's capital Battambang City because it is the official name now promoted by the Provincial Department of Tourism in English-language advertisements, and also because I am of the opinion that the space has grown in size and activity such that it merits usage of the term "city."

planned capital of Brasilia (Holston 1999). In Battambang, a multitude of external political influences imposed competing forms of modernism that can still be read through the city's architecture and design. The Siamese centralized the city around the grandiose Governor's Mansion while simultaneously pushing for the adoption of Thai language and currency (Chhoung 1994; see Chapter 5). Later, the French took over the mansion and built a central market nearby to monitor financial interactions, shifting the city center away from feudal authority towards a capitalist market in ways both physical and metaphorical. Even today, I would argue that the central Cambodian government in Phnom Penh attempts to control Battambang through several recently-constructed 'modern' universities in the downtown area that are each sponsored by a government minister, and which offer discounted education rates to rural residents in exchange for the placement of government officials within the university administration. Thus, the analysis of a colonial city, such as Battambang, in terms of social control and aspirations to modernity constitute Low's conception of the Modernist City (see also Pellow 1999; Ghannam 2002; Holston 1990).

Post-modern Cities, on the other hand, are thematic spaces that alter time and space to create idealized urban sites less for control than for public appeal. Tourism plays a large role in this development, and therefore the post-modern urban model is the most important category for my research. As explored earlier, post-modern urbanism manipulates history, time, and space to patch together elements of society that seem connected but are not necessarily related in fact. For example, civic scholar Charles Rutheiser argues that Atlanta has recently attempted to create socially significant places in areas previously not considered meaningful through careful urban design and revitalization, essentially inventing a history that never existed to make a space more

attractive (Rutheiser 1999; see also Cooper 1999). In regards to tourism in Battambang, the various colonial periods of the area's history allow officials and tour guides to pick and choose what elements of history they wish to share based on their desired presentation of self.

Seeing cities as processes instead of locations is crucial in the post-modern critique of urban anthropology. I argue that Battambang became a modern city under the colonial Thai and French but is becoming a post-colonial city that is manipulating time and space to present a unique urban experience that will attract tourists. The tension between modern and post-modern urbanism is still evident in Battambang through the negotiation of the government's nationalist desires in developing Battambang, and local tourist-based development that might emphasize a different history from the national government. I will further explore these tensions in later chapters.

One important consideration to these political negotiations is Battambang's position at the edge of the greater Cambodian nation. Erik Harms' 2011 study of Saigon demonstrates how the rich urban core and the peasantry of the rural fields blend together at the city's "edge," defined as "the anomalous interface of the rural countryside and the urban fringe" (Harms 2011: 2). In one scene, Harms describes how a woman who lives on the city's "edge" will dress "rural" to sell village-type foods in the city, but then dress "urban" when visiting her familial village in order to portray her higher status. Through this example, Harms argues that the modernity assumed to be inherent in urbanism is actually a matter of performing a lifestyle, not a natural consequence of evolution or progress. In terms of thematic tourism, these shifting performances of history and space are used to attract tourists and support an economy without diluting 'natural' history.

Battambang is itself on the "edge" of Cambodia, where it acts as a Cambodian province but one that is culturally distinct from the rest of the country because of its proximity and history with Thailand and other foreign powers. Similarly, many of the inhabitants of the city likewise change their behavior depending on whether they are near the urban core, the site of most tourism interactions, or if they return to their villages outside the city. They also change their behavior if they move away from Battambang and travel towards the centralized governmental space of Phnom Penh. In essence, this argument ties to Bryman's Disneyization model by arguing that performative/emotional labor can affect the conception of a space as large as a city. This research will explore these performances more fully to show how tourism blurs the distinction of urban and rural in the region, while also highlighting the performative aspects of political life.

If urbanism is dependent on personal performance, the question remains as to how rural spaces become urbanized, particularly in the face of development. Sociologist AbdouMaliq Simone examines new urban developments in Africa and Saudi Arabia as processes of encouraging modernity narratives through the symbolic acts of economic and infrastructural development (Simone 2004). Building a new urban space may seem to be based on altering roads, buildings, and infrastructure to promote economic efficiency, but Simone argues that these changes mean little if the people themselves do not see themselves as urban and modern (again, a form of performative/emotional labor). Creating a new urban center relies on filling the city with new inhabitants, leading individuals to question their social structure and personal beliefs. Rarely will people absorb the desired urban narrative put forth by the nation-state, instead blending it with their own conceptions of who they are. Only when these two perspectives settle on a

culturally accepted form of urban identity do ‘cities’ emerge on the landscape. Simone argues that many newly developed urban centers, particularly in Africa, have not yet successfully found this balance, and thus many new urban developments are cities “yet to come,” if not yet fully cities. Put more simply, Simone is challenging the assumptions involved in labelling one area a ‘city’ and another not, arguing that ‘cities’ are culturally constructed and highly relative phenomena. As Battambang City continues to grow as an important Cambodian city, it faces the question of what type of city it wishes to be, and thus the desired narratives of locals versus the national government often clash.

Simone’s argument might be considered an expansion of the work of geographer Terence G. McGee, who performed some of the earliest and best-known urban studies in Southeast Asia. McGee’s 1968 work *The Southeast Asian City: A Social Geography of the Primate Cities of Southeast Asia* argues that ‘modern’ urbanization and development projects are unnaturally suited to the Southeast Asian landscape and the [then-called] Third World (McGee 1968). McGee goes so far as to argue that modern development will result in the decline of traditionally powerful Southeast Asian cities, forcing them to become “pseudo” cities that undermine what urbanism once meant in Southeast Asia regarding the centralization of power around primarily cosmological hierarchies (McGee 1968; see also McGee 1971; McGee 1995; Tambiah 1973; Wolters 1982). McGee has been criticized for focusing too much on the division of the Third World and the First World, but nonetheless he provided an early argument for different types of urbanism that authors like Simone have updated for a more culturally relative age (see Dick & Rimmer 1998).

The blurring of ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ categories also leads to a discussion of the ‘urban

village' concept. Made popular through the work of journalist Jane Jacobs and others in the 1960s, the 'urban village' describes the desire to maintain village-like settings and spaces within urban development so as not to lose a sense of traditionalism (Jacobs 1961). Valuing decentralization and environmental protectionism, the urban village model emphasizes maintaining village-type neighborhoods and housing complexes within urban spaces in order to improve the quality of life in the city.

Recent work, such as Melissa L. Caldwell's 2010 essay, "Moscow Encounters: Ethnography in a Global Urban Village," attempt to update the urban village model for a post-modern, highly globalized world. Caldwell argues that Moscow not only includes areas that aspire to resemble village lifestyles, but that Moscow's development aims to display the entire city as a global urban village, in which Moscow separates itself from other global cities by appealing less to the hyper-modernity seen in places like Singapore or Tokyo and instead "[evoking] nostalgic sensibilities about a traditional culture rooted in a peasant heritage and in intimate community" (Caldwell 2010: 56). The development of urban spaces using rural symbolism is an increasingly popular phenomenon, as global tourism competition is creating a need for cities to distinguish themselves through symbolic appeal instead of relying solely on industrial production. Thematic tourism operates through similar methods, and can lead to the establishment of entire economies supported through symbolic consumption, as I will soon discuss.

Urban study from the mid-1990s to the present has turned towards viewing urban spaces not so much as purely economic developments, but as arenas for identity construction and negotiation. Architect Dolores Hayden argues that urban spaces are forms of public history, and

thus demolition and reconstruction movements (common occurrences in urban cores) often result in public battles over what types of memory should be preserved (Hayden 1997). Hayden insists that public spaces, particularly buildings, form part of the cultural landscape that establishes an area's history. By exploring the collective and individual memories associated with a building or a space, the landscape is seen as a socially meaningful arena for human interaction instead of just a signifier of an area's chronology. Furthermore, by introducing new people to these buildings, social memory grows and changes. To Hayden, buildings are not just markers of the past but forms of shifting historical meaning now and in the future.

Hayden's primary example is from her own Los Angeles-based community history project, The Power of Place. Through this lens, she demonstrates that projects like new sidewalks or the demolition of old buildings for urban revitalization can dramatically shift public memory and cause aspects of social history to be forgotten. She is adamant that old structures serve important social purposes, and thus urban development studies should focus on which buildings are *not* replaced just as much as those that are. The hows and whys of such development decisions paint a broader picture of how modern urban identities are founded on historic cultural narratives. For my research, these questions are crucial. As Battambang develops into a premiere tourist destination, decisions are being made about how to alter the landscape. Some buildings and spaces are repainted to their imagined former glory, others are replaced with more modern structures, while others are ignored entirely. In this work, I analyze the conscious decisions made by those in power to preserve certain types of memory or symbolism that add to what makes Battambang's urban identity unique from other urban centers, which in turn boosts its tourist appeal.

Anthropologist Michael Herzfeld performed a similar analysis of the community of Monti in Rome during a recent redevelopment (Herzfeld 2009). The redevelopment was intended to help draw tourist business focused on Monti's magnificent old churches and plazas. However, the town also includes a large red-light district and working class areas associated with crime. Herzfeld describes how the redevelopment of Monti attempted to downplay or remove the undesirable aspects of the town, which led to a clash with inhabitants over their lifestyles. In a sense, Herzfeld is capturing the dilemma at the heart of many large urban neighborhoods that undergo tourist revitalization.

Herzfeld's primary concern is with "restructuring," a process of rejuvenating space towards symbolic appeal. For example, in order to keep its authority as a grand historical city, Rome must play the part by not demonstrating too much of its inner struggle with poverty and class divisions. Buildings must be well organized and pristine in order to both attract tourist capital as well as reinforce Rome's reputation within the Italian nation. However, the restructuring process brings different worlds into conflict over the same spaces. In order to repossess and rejuvenate spaces, residents are being evicted and denied access to their homes and businesses. This denial of access creates a sense of disconnection to culture in that the lives that establish the neighborhood's identity are replaced in favor of corporate endeavors. Herzfeld connects these capitalist interests with Rome's position as a World Heritage Site, arguing that to maintain such a status they must promote Rome's reputation at the expense of people's identities. Therefore, the restructuring process is actually creating the social problems that it seeks to hide.

Herzfeld's work is noteworthy for several reasons. First, Herzfeld is able to show how smaller neighborhoods within larger cities create and sustain unique identities within the urban

sphere. Furthermore, he discusses the relationship between urban aesthetic and the lives that support the façade, showing that even staged arenas are supported by real lives. Finally, Herzfeld provides a richly detailed ethnography that connects individual lives with the desires of the nation-state. In my research, I similarly question these connections and show how choices for revitalization, and the process of emphasizing some aspects of urban space while hiding others, embodies post-modern narratives that tourists wish to consume.

Both Hayden and Herzfeld imply that urban development is becoming less focused on the production of commodities or economic efficiency and more about promoting specific urban sites as unique amongst the world's great cities. I agree, and predict that the future of urban anthropology will expand on how urban sites use local symbolism to compete for international tourist attention.

**The Symbolic Economy**

The methods by which emerging urban areas use symbolism to connect with the international tourist market are foundational to this work. Today, much urban research is performed in large, global cities such as New York or Paris because these sites are easier to identify and accept as 'urban', meaning that smaller or more culturally relative forms of urbanism are often overlooked (see Kemper 1991). Although significant strides have been made to fill the gaps between villages and cities, the favoritism showed to large cities remains. My research seeks to use tourism and its connections to post-modern urbanism to demonstrate how smaller urban sites are finding competitive ground with larger metropoli (see also Rodman 2001).

The primary method that allows for such competition is the establishment of what French economic theorist Jean-Joseph Goux calls the "symbolic economy" (Goux 1990). An adaptation of political economy, the symbolic economy relies on the consumption and exchange of symbols and experiences to structure the income of a community (see also Scott 2001). As Goux writes, "Value is presupposed by formal identity...even if barter, no circulation, no apparent bargaining dramatizes the counterbalancing and commutation. Supplementary in all senses and all registers of the word, the interplay of signs, objects, and symptoms appears as governed by values" (Goux 1990: 9-10). In other words, non-physical aspects of a community are still valuable commodities that, in tourist-based societies, can create a sustainable economy (see also Scott 2001).

The symbolic economy is the primary connection between tourism and urban studies, as it is an argument not only for the establishment of tourism as a cultural institution but also a demonstration of how entire communities can support themselves through tourist enterprise (see also Moeran 1983). This connection is made explicit through the work of cultural sociologist Sharon Zukin. Zukin's 1995 book *The Cultures of Cities* was one of the first attempts to analyze how symbolic economies are created in relation to both urbanism and tourism, in this case through the redevelopment of real estate and public spaces in New York City. As she summarized, "What is new about the symbolic economy since the 1970s is its symbiosis of image and product, the scope and scale of selling images on a national and even a global level, and the role of the symbolic economy in speaking for, or representing, the city" (Zukin 1996: 8). Her conceptual reconfiguration of the symbolic economy provides some foundation to why I connect Battambang's urban development with the promotion of city space through tourism.

More recent works that analyze symbolic economies may take place within cities but are

part of a greater narrative on thematic tourism as opposed to remaining predominantly about urban studies. For example, sociologist David Grazian has examined the symbolic economy of blues music in Chicago (Grazian 2004). Although certain neighborhoods of Chicago are known for their blues music, the survival of the symbolic economy of blues relies more on the consumption of symbolic blues experiences rather than any specific location. Grazian argues that what is considered most important to paying tourists is the ethnicity of the musicians, who must be African American in order to be considered authentic blues experts, and the context in which they play. Bars need to be dark and smoky, such that managers sometimes leave cigarettes burning to create a hazy atmosphere. Bars often also specialize in fancier alcoholic creations that are usually named after famous blues musicians in order to create a symbolic experience, regardless of whether or not the musicians themselves actually prefer these beverages (Grazian 2004: 34-35). One musician reflected on these staged elements of the bar and claimed that Chicago has become the "Disneyland of the blues," and that this type of staged theming has led to much greater income for musicians and bar owners in the area (Grazian 2004: 38).

Symbolic economies also demonstrate the blending between tourism and pilgrimage. Southeast Asian studies scholar Marc Askew analyzes how local pilgrimage to Thai temples is providing income to related activities and communities (Askew 2008). He writes, "The construction of [Thai] religious sites, their marketing and patronage, can be depicted as a 'symbolic economy' surrounding religious sites. It is a system driven by a popular (and scripturally-legitimized) imperative to focus devotion, merit-making and boon-seeking on sacred objects, and a concomitant imperative among institutions and enterprises to reproduce continually material symbols that in turn require financial offerings to permit maintenance and

further reproduction through the elaboration and expansion of ritual" (Askew 2008: 92). Askew also asserts that where 'western' capitalism is often seen as a detriment to religious sites, in Thailand it is quite the opposite. Thai temples are able to gain money not only for religious purposes but also for the community surrounding pilgrimage sites, and thus capitalism and religion are more positively connected (see also Schedneck 2015). Similarly, in Battambang important religious or historical sites are revived and restored to appeal to these sources of income and establish a symbolic economy.

These smaller scale case studies of how symbolic economies operate hint at a much larger application of tourism as a model of urban development, which is more fully explored by sociologist John Hannigan in *Fantasy City: Pleasure and profit in the postmodern metropolis* (Hannigan 1998). In many respects, Hannigan's work is the combination of many of the concepts discussed above – urban development, post-modern urbanism, and symbolic desires. Focusing on what he calls "landscapes of pleasure," Hannigan compares various entertainment organizations – Las Vegas casinos, theme parks, 'shoptainment' sites like the Mall of America, etc. – to demonstrate that urbanism often relies on the creation of thematic "fantasy cities" that appeal to the dreams and desires of guests (Hannigan 1998: 65). These sites strongly emphasize post-modern urbanism to manipulate time and space in order to present desired narratives of history and space that encourage guests to open their wallets and spend money on the consumption of these thematic spaces and experiences. Given enough time and capital, tourist spaces can eventually create entire urban spheres in which cities are based on the consumption of fantasies and symbols.

In Battambang, these fantasies often rely on depictions of specific moments in the

region's history, especially given the multi-layered colonial history of the region. In this sense, Battambang is what economist G.J. Ashworth and geographer J.E. Tunbridge call a "tourist-historic" city, in which history is the primary symbolic commodity being consumed by tourists (Ashworth and Tunbridge 2000). As Ashworth and Tunbridge write, "The tourist-historic city is, or can be viewed as: 1) both a form and a function. It is a particular sort of urban morphology but also, and increasingly, an urban activity. 2) both a particular type of city and a specialized morphological-functional region within a city. 3) both a particular use of history as a tourism resource and a use of tourism as a means of supporting the maintenance of the artefacts of the past and justifying attention to the historicity of cities" (Ashworth and Tunbridge 2000: 3). In other words, historic cities can utilize their pasts to sustain their futures by creating symbolic economies centered on historical narratives. Battambang operates in this manner, using its various historical periods as sources for multiple streams of touristic income.

Sociologist Daniel Bell and political scientist Ayner De-Shalit best summarize the importance of creating symbolic economies in urban development when they argue that cities are now seeking to establish and emphasize their unique "spirits" as a manner of competing for tourist interest with other international sites (Bell and De-Shalit 2011). They compare nine different cities including Jerusalem, Singapore, Hong Kong, Beijing, Oxford, Berlin, Paris, Montreal, and New York City, presenting each city in terms of what specific quality is promoted by the city's residents. For example, Bell and De-Shalit argue that residents of Jerusalem emphasize that their religious convictions are stronger than residents of other cities, drawing in religious pilgrims and tourists seeking enlightening experiences of religiosity. Montreal residents, on the other hand, pride themselves in their bilingualism and European stylistic

preferences, marketing themselves as a form of little Europe within North America. Bell and De-Shalit conclude that the symbolic importance of cities is on the rise, and urban development is increasingly concerned with finding something unique to attract guests.

In Battambang, urban development is similarly motivated by the desire to stand out from the crowd, to attract tourists, and to establish a symbolic economy through post-modern historical manipulation. As Battambang emerges from many decades of colonial control and conflict, it is faced with the decision of what type of city it shall become. This research will show that the urban development of the region is helping the city establish an international reputation while influencing local identity and regional pride through the creation of a symbolic economy, which in turn allows the city to compete with other, larger Southeast Asian urban spaces for tourist attention.

**Research Background**

Over the past decade, I have spent a cumulative two years worth of time living and working in Battambang City. Although I began my Khmer language study in 2008, I did not set foot in Cambodia until 2009 and spent only one evening in Phnom Penh before going directly to Battambang on the recommendation of a friend. I ended up staying there as an educator for nearly a year, living in an apartment complex with several Cambodian families while teaching courses in anthropology and the humanities at one of the area's universities. I returned in 2011 for several months of advanced language training in Phnom Penh, and bookended that visit with significant stays in Battambang, including a homestay period with some friendly villagers. My longest and most recent stay was a year of research that lasted from November 2015 to

November 2016, with support of the Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Award. On that visit, I stayed in the Tiger Lily Hotel on the eastern bank of the Sangkae River that bisects Battambang City, an establishment that caters primarily to Cambodian tourists and businesspeople, so that I could keep my finger on the pulse of domestic tourism traffic patterns. I chose Battambang as a research site over the much-more famous tourism destination of Siem Reap not only because of my relationship with the city, but because Battambang is just now stepping into the international tourism market. Siem Reap has been well established for years, and so returning to Battambang provided me the opportunity to see a symbolic economy be made and remade from the ground up - a rare opportunity in this rapidly globalizing world.

I also provided free consulting and educational services for various touristic organizations around town. For example, in 2016, after many years of building relationships with both Khmer and French instructors at the school, I was invited to present a lecture on my research at the Phare Ponleu Selpak Fine Arts School and Circus, which features heavily in Chapter 4. The school had been wanting to perform a show about regional history for several years but felt that acquiring the historical knowledge necessary to compose such a performance was too time consuming to be worth their efforts, and thus my lecture was intended to provide them with options for further exploration.

Over the next several months, I worked closely with the school's dance and movement instructor to craft *Mjah*/"The Master," which is due to be staged once it secures funding from

Phare's donors.[8] This show contains numerous symbolic assertions of Battambang's relative independence during the *Lōk Mjah* period - an intentional message specifically requested by the school's founders - as told through largely non-verbal circus performance and dance. While a full discussion of the dynamics of writing a circus show based on my ethnohistorical research is best saved for future publications, our collaboration gave me unprecedented access to the inner workings of the school.

I also occasionally consulted directly with Battambang's provincial government. Throughout this work, I discuss two men whom I will refer to solely by their titles, the former Governor of Battambang and the Director of the Provincial Department of Tourism. My relationships with both are based on my ability to assist them in making connections with non-Cambodian guests. The Governor is no longer in power, but during my research he often invited me to tourism strategy sessions and other formal events. The Director, on the other hand, regularly asked me to visit him at his office, restaurant, or hotel to talk about tourism or to have a drink as friends. I hesitate to claim that my input made much impact on either of them, as my role was often symbolic and I was typically asked to attend events, such as giving a speech at the 2016 International New Years party, purely as a representative of the English-speaking community. Nevertheless, I enjoyed access to the inner workings of the Battambang government that few non-Cambodians ever see.

Part of my positive relationship with the provincial government is predicated on services

---

[8] *Mjah* is my romanization of ម្ចាស់, which is otherwise often spelled "mchas" or "mchah" (the final *s* is silent in most Khmer words). I am using the spelling that I and my co-authors agreed upon when we wrote the show, and I will continue using it throughout this work in other contexts where it appears.

I could perform for them that benefitted both them and me. For example, the Director often lamented that he could not gather accurate statistics about tourism visitation in the region because of a lack of trained employees fit for the task. As a social scientist with a working knowledge of sociological statistics, I volunteered to gather that information for him as a gesture of goodwill, although obviously those figures were greatly helpful for my research as well. From January 1st to December 31st, 2016, I coordinated a gathering of data from three of Battambang's most important tourist sites: Phnom Banon, Phnom Sampeau, and Ek Phnom, all of which are discussed in later chapters. Each location requires a ticket for purchase, so the Director and I arranged for the ticket sellers to require each guest to log their age, country of origin, group size, and self-determined gender on an otherwise anonymous form. I then visited each site on a weekly basis to gather the numbers and record them, resulting in over 20,000 data points that allow me to evaluate average age, percentage of market share by nationality, typical group size, and a variety of other comparative figures. Following the calculation of the data, I compared the statistics with my ethnographic observations from time spent at each site to fill in gaps and comment on any errors made by me or the ticket staff. Although the numbers are limited in scope until a future year when I can repeat the experiment in order to compare past and future data, these figures still serve as the first formally-collected long-term tourism data in Battambang Province and provide insight into the operation of tourism throughout Battambang in 2016.

Much like these statistics, this study as a whole should be seen as a glimpse into the world of tourism in Battambang and not its totality. No single work could possible contain every perspective, experience, or interpretation of Battambang's symbolic economy, and I would not

dare to attempt such a feat. Instead, this study is intended to show how the symbolic economy of Battambang City is being shaped by locals as they engage with foreign imaginaries. I try to include as many firsthand accounts of tourism operators living and working in Battambang City to balance my own biases as an outsider and a tourist, although many more perspectives remain for further exploration.

This research set out to frame tourism as a system of symbolic interaction, not purely as an economic form. In some sense, I want the reader to see tourism as a manner of viewing the world that many people structure and restructure on a daily basis, and which affects every aspect of their lives. Of course, the business of tourism is still an important part of this discussion, but Battambang City is an effective example of how tourism can represent much more than just money: nationalism, heritage, social healing, power struggles, and so on. Such a framing of Battambang's symbolic economy is not just an academic exercise for me, but a reflection of my own roots and way of viewing the world.

Although I was born and raised in a little town in Ontario, Canada, my family relocated to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina when I was nine years old. We shuffled between South Carolina and Florida for a few years (hence my Disney obsession), but it was in Myrtle Beach where I eventually attended high school and which I still visit regularly to see my family. I consider Myrtle Beach as much my hometown as the place where I was born, existing liminally as both Canadian and Carolinian. Unsurprisingly, like most residents of Myrtle Beach, tourism to me is more than a business but something that is deeply rooted in how I interact with the world. In some sense, I value tourism as an important human right deserving of consideration alongside shelter and sustenance on the hierarchy of needs, a perspective I would argue is common to many

who live the life of tourism on a daily basis.

To put this claim in perspective, I should explain that Myrtle Beach, South Carolina is one of America's most popular tourist destinations. The city proper has only 33,908 residents but serves over 20 million tourists every year, an astounding statistic in any analysis (2018 "QuickFacts"; 2018 "Industry Research").[9] Put another way, with 156,978 rental rooms available in the area, there are almost five hotel rooms for every resident of the city (2018 "Industry Research"; 2018 "Myrtle Beach"). With such an intense dependence on tourism, every local is involved in the tourism industry in some way, whether it be the cab driver whose business relies on hotel and airport guests, or the tree trimmer who must cut the abundant palmetto trees into clean and fashionable designs so that guests find the area attractive.

I was no exception to this rule, working my first job at a local golf course (one of nearly 100 in the area that give Myrtle Beach claim to being the Golf Capital of the World), before working in a variety of restaurants ranging from local pizza shack to beachside tiki hut to poolside bar to member's only exclusive dinner club (complete with white butler gloves and neatly pressed vest). I spent many years serving platters of food to hungry guests, scooping golf balls at the driving range, valeting cars worth more money than my own house, and shaking out cocktails to barflies while wearing disturbingly loud Hawaiian-print shirts. Like most residents of Myrtle Beach, despite all of the horrible aspects of the job and many judgmental remarks locals make about tourists, I have come to love tourism and find it fulfilling in areas beyond my

---

[9] To be fair, the metro area surrounding Myrtle Beach provides an additional 430,000 nearby residents, most of whom commute into town to work in the tourism industry every day. My point remains valid, however, that Myrtle Beach is a place where most of the population is focused on tourism even in places that do not immediately appear to be involved in the tourism industry.

bank account. Tourism is a way of interacting with the world beyond your immediate community, and can thus be a valuable way of opening up the mind to new experiences. I see this attitude emerging in Cambodia as well, even in the gloomier areas of the industry, and I want to reflect those feelings in this research as much as possible. Through the consideration of such perspectives, much inspiration can be found even in places of the world whose histories are tragic and whose present is yet unstable.

**Chapter Previews & Goals**

In short, this research will discuss how residents of Battambang are reframing regional history to highlight specific themes that appeal to tourist desires while still leading guests towards a desired narrative goal that benefits the local community. To some degree, I want to flip the idea of tourism as a colonial imposition on its head and demonstrate that, while sometimes still a struggle, tourism can also serve to empower and embolden local actors. Some of that focus will be on financial security, but so too will I discuss the messy politics and problem solving that occur in the daily life of tourism planners and workers. In each chapter that follows, I follow the development of tourism in Battambang over time in relation to the changing themes that shape the growing symbolic economy. Beginning with dark tourism in the post-Khmer Rouge era, I demonstrate how the tourism of death has slowly been replaced by new themes of ecotourism, post-modern luxury tourism, and art. I then discuss aspirations for future tourism in Battambang, as well as some of the challenges facing tourism vendors in the region. In most cases, I discuss the differences in how national groups interact with the themes past and present, with a particular focus on foreign versus domestic tourism. Often, themes operate in both realms simultaneously

but are managed and interpreted differently based on national origin, so I compare these perspectives through real-life stories of tourists and tourist operators. In every chapter, I provide at least one case study of people working within the tourism industry to show how tourism is being marketed and consumed, as well as the realities of daily life in an emerging tourism economy.

Chapter 1 begins with a short summary of major historical eras in Battambang's history in order to demonstrate the rebellious and independent 'character' of the city. As most of the themes present in Battambang's growing symbolic economy are related to specific periods of history, this section provides foundational knowledge for later chapters. This section is also crucial for understanding how and why residents of Battambang utilize tourism as a means of asserting regional independence. In the latter half of Chapter 1, I discuss the current political machinations of tourism in Battambang City's government, introducing those figures who are most central to the development of the region. At the heart of this chapter is the argument that Battambang, while part of the current Cambodian nation-state, is historically much more independent than previous histories have detailed. Battambang serves as a challenge to standard Cambodian conceptions of nationalism and ethnicity, instead demonstrating that there are places that have remained historically sovereign Khmer territories while actively resisting inclusion in the borders of the Cambodian kingdom. I argue that these tensions remain today, but instead of being openly fought in political arenas are now espoused through new symbolic means, in this case the use of tourism to promote a regional identity that differs from the greater national narrative.

Chapter 2 focuses specifically on the legacy of the Khmer Rouge and the rise of dark tourism in Battambang. Dark tourism, or the tourism of death, is one of the earliest forms of tourism to take root in Cambodia following the violence of the 1970s-1990s. Still, it is slowly receding in importance as locals emphasize new themes and manners of engaging with spaces of trauma. In this section, I argue for a reconceptualization of the Khmer Rouge beyond simply the genocidal regime that lasted from 1975 to 1979. Instead, I discuss the 'third life' of the Khmer Rouge as a terrorist organization that loomed over Battambang from 1979 to 1998, a history that most of Cambodia did not experience. I then highlight the potential that this reconceptualization holds for the region's dark tourist industry, while also debating the role that tourism can play in communal healing. In so doing, I argue that local actors can 'normalize' dark tourism spaces within their own cultural contexts. Through careful restructuring of the narrative, then, locals can shift dark tourism's emphasis away from sensationalized voyeurism towards a more educational and therapeutic experience.

Chapter 3 is an exploration of recent changes in Battambang, from my first arrival in 2009 to present. In a sense, this chapter aims to address what is happening now that dark tourism is receding in importance. I use the metaphor of the frontier to explain the themes of wildness and isolation that dominated visitation to the region in the not-too-distant past, while showing how these motifs have given way to new themes of ecotourist awareness and luxury experience. I also include a brief discussion of sex tourism to argue that local actors generally accept sex work as an important aspect of the tourism economy, all the while restructuring sex work away from the seedy brothels of the past to a more subtle, courtesan-style engagement that better reflects the city's desired symbolic narrative. Chapter 3 also details some of the conflicts occurring over

UNESCO's World Heritage program as it pertains to Battambang's recent application for inclusion as a World Heritage City. This chapter hinges on the argument that locals are rewriting old themes in favor of new ones that better promote regional identity for an international tourism market.

Chapter 4 focuses on art tourism and is the longest chapter in this work, in part because it should be conceptualized as two halves of a single conversation. Art tourism is immensely important for Battambang's development, and the region makes claim to being the home of true Cambodian art, both traditional and contemporary. The spaces associated with art in Battambang are visited by both domestic and foreign tourists, albeit for wildly different thematic reasons. The first half of this chapter focuses on the domestic art tourism industry, questioning how Cambodians conceptualize and experience art in relation to cultural tourism at large. This section identifies literature and music as important outputs of Battambang's artistic community over the years, and which now draw guests to important sites around town. The government has even made steps to recreate the imagery of these artistic influences for the purpose of attracting domestic tourists through urban beautification and redevelopment. The second half of this chapter turns to foreign tourists and so-called 'modern' art, namely painting and performance art, with emphasis on the messy politics present in the art community and the problems that persist in establishing modern art as a touristic theme. I also discuss the important role that the Phare Ponleu Selpak Fine Arts School and Circus plays in the art community, as well as the regional influence of Hollywood actress Angeline Jolie.

Chapter 5 turns to arguably the most important period of Battambang's regional history: Siamese influence in the *Lōk Mjah* era (1797-1905 CE). Although this section moves further

back in the region's historical timeline, it highlights hopes for future growth of a tourism industry that caters to modern Thai residents. This chapter introduces my conception of the Deny-the-Thai movement, which is employed in the tourism industry to obscure the region's history in favor of narratives that downplay Siamese influence in order to appease nationalistic interests. At the same time, however, the region's relationship with Siam/Thailand is precisely what separates Battambang from other well-trod tourist sites, giving potential for new thematic tourism based on those connections that other Cambodian sites cannot match. This chapter further clarifies Battambang's position as a post-modern city by detailing the manner by which history is rewritten, remade, and re-experienced for locals and tourists alike.

Chapter 6 is a conversation about the interplay of tourism and power and how these ideas are negotiated in an emerging symbolic economy. In essence, this chapter is a peek into the world of tourism that most guests never see. Using two stories from outside the scope of the tourist gaze, one of a young woman and her colleagues as they come into conflict with the government at an important tourist site, and one of a young man struggling to establish his tourism business in a post-colonial and increasingly digitized landscape, I demonstrate that tourism is both subject to the ideologies of the past while also providing avenues for challenging them. I also discuss the potential for LGBTQ tourism in this chapter to demonstrate that tourism can help create social space for marginalized groups and thus challenge societal norms regarding gender and power. I then conclude the work with a short chapter that highlights other future possibilities for tourism in the region.

To summarize, there are several key points I aim to make throughout this work, which can be divided between 1) observations of the tourism industry at large and 2) important claims about Battambang itself. For the former category, I argue the following:

1) Symbolic economies can be an effective method for helping smaller urban areas compete with larger ones, but only in contexts where history and narrative are such that effective themes can take root to attract tourists.

2) Tourism is not merely a matter of money, but can affect every aspect of life, be it language, emotions, beliefs, religions, or more. Tourism is not so much a formula as it is a manner of viewing and communicating with the world.

3) Pulling from the above claim, local peoples are not simply victims of tourism, although they may often be victimized by its processes. Local peoples can, and often do, utilize tourism to promote their own ways of viewing the world and, in the process, redefine themselves on both national and international scales.

4) Disneyization is not a negative or 'fake' process, but a technique for presenting a viewpoint in an experiential manner. When used appropriately, Disneyization can bolster the economy while also inspiring people to explore history and culture in deeply meaningful ways.

5) Tourism can also serve as an avenue for resistance and political change, even when it appears to be purely a capitalistic enterprise.

As for regional specific arguments, I claim the following:

1) Battambang is an immensely important, if often overlooked, region in Southeast Asia that does not fit neatly into discussions about Greater Cambodia. To a large extent,

Battambang has historically behaved and continues to behave as an independent community that should be treated as a part of Cambodia while simultaneously remaining conceptually at arm's length from it.

2) Throughout its history, Battambang has regularly fought to maintain its regional sovereignty against outside influence, including resisting the current government based in Phnom Penh, which is viewed by most locals as merely another form of colonialism.

3) Tourism in Battambang, and indeed Cambodia at large, is not predicated on foreign arrival regardless of such political claims. Although the rise of Chinese tourists and other nationalities is important and requires deep study, the tourism industry in Cambodia is ruled by Cambodians themselves - both in terms of vendors who shape the system and in terms of domestic tourists who are not categorized as tourists by the local government but are nevertheless the major players, financial and otherwise, that determine new directions in development (Kimsay 2019).

In the following chapters, I address these issues through historical analysis, case studies, conceptual debate, and even folkloric interpretation. Nor should I discount my role as tour guide, as there is a degree to which ethnography always serves to introduce guests to the experience of a culture beyond mere theoretical analysis. Although I will not quip puns like Skipper Dan, I ask the reader to embrace that how they view Cambodia may sometimes be sensationalist and based on stereotypes, but that often these interpretations are precisely what locals want you to see for reasons both financial and political. Dig a little deeper into those perspectives and you quickly discover a world of important claims to regional and individual identity that greatly illuminate who residents of Battambang claim to be in the current era. For my part, I am glad I stepped off

the *Mekong Maiden* and back on to dry land, as the real experience of Cambodia is far more wondrous and inspiring than anything even Walt Disney could design.

## Chapter 1
## The Story of Battambang

Once upon a time, in what is now northwestern Cambodia, there existed a small kingdom ruled by a cruel and tyrannical king. The king abused his people, took their crops for himself, and enslaved anyone who dared complain. The kingdom was filled with woe and the people prayed to the spirits for salvation. One day, a young man went out to the fields to tend to his herd of cows. Seeking respite from the heat of midday, he led his cattle to a nearby creek to drink and rest under the shade of a tree. When the man bent to drink from the river, he saw a staff made of dark *krañyoung* wood under the water, having been imbued with magic and placed there by the spirits in order to alleviate the people's suffering.[1] The man took the staff and soon discovered that he could control his cows using the staff's magic, and deduced that no one could resist the will of whoever wielded the magic staff.

Desperate to save his people, the young man challenged the tyrannical king and defeated him in battle using the power of the staff. The people declared the young man their new king and celebrated his victory and their newfound freedom, thanking the spirits for sending the magic staff to them. But the new king was wise despite his young age and knew that many adversaries would try to take his magic staff for themselves. In a dream, the young king foresaw a vision of his own death at the hands of the former king's son, who was riding on the back of a flying white horse. Fearful of this omen, the young king decided to eliminate his competition.

---

[1] *Krañyoung/Krañhoung/*ក្រញូង wood is sometimes translated by residents of Battambang as "ebony" because artistic portrayals of this legend usually depict the staff using a dark black color. However, *krañyoung* wood is actually the word for "rosewood" (the genus *Dalbergia),* especially the rare and highly trafficked Siamese rosewood (*Dalbergia cochinchinensis)*, which is reddish brown in color and emits a pleasant odor.

Knowing that the former king's son was bedridden and sickly, he ordered that the prince be abandoned deep in the forest to be taken either by wild animals or the malevolent spirits known to live there. And so, the former prince was left to die in the forest whilst the new king began his rule.

For a time the kingdom prospered, but no one can resist the corruption of absolute power and eventually the new king began using the magic staff to expand his kingdom and force his subjects to obey his every whim. The people's suffering intensified such that they longed for the return of their former king, and once again they prayed for salvation from the spirits. Yet, while the former king was indeed dead, his son did not perish in the deep forest as was intended. As he lay dying in the shadow of the trees, the spirits sent the prince a white horse whose glowing white flesh contained the power to cure him of all his maladies. Once recovered, the prince determined to challenge the new king and restore his family's rightful place on the throne. He mounted the white horse, which began to fly into the air and out of the forest towards the palace.

When the new king witnessed the spectacle of the flying white horse with the prince who was supposed to be dead on its back, he remembered his dream and the omen that foretold of his own death. Panicking, he grabbed his magic staff and hurled it at the flying horse in desperation. The spirits, disapproving of the new king's cruelty, caused the magic staff to miss the prince and land back in the river from whence it came. Without the power of the magic staff, the new king quickly fell to the prince, who retook his rightful place on the throne and once again freed the people from the oppression of a cruel ruler. The kingdom remained at peace for many years and

the region became known as *Battambang* or "The Land of the Lost Staff."[2] The river where the staff was found and lost again became known as the *O Dambong* or "The Stream/Creek of the Staff" and people still occasionally search its depths for the magic staff, believing that it can restore Cambodia to a position of prominence that the country has not known since the time of Angkor.[3] Indeed, many residents of Battambang claim that the loss of the magic staff was the primary cause for the decline of the Angkorian Empire so many generations ago.

The young man who found the staff and became king only to fall from grace is now revered as the powerful *neak ta* or "spirit god" Ta Dambong Krañyoung, which means "He With the Rosewood Staff" (see Tambiah 1975).[4] Ta Dambong Krañyoung is often described as the patron saint of Battambang, and visitors arriving in Battambang City from Phnom Penh must pass a roundabout with a large statue of the *neak ta* at its center. This imposing figure, which stands over ten meters in height, depicts Ta Dambong Krañyoung as a shirtless, muscular young man seated on his knees while holding a conical drum with his magic staff perched on top. His skin is painted black to represent both his divine status and the dark rosewood of which his magic staff is composed, and he sports a fanciful and elaborate mustache - both additions stemming from the brief period of French rule in Battambang in the early 1900s. In recent years,

---

[2] *Bat*/បាត់ = "to lose", *Dambong/Dumbong*/ដំបង = "staff, stick, or cane." Most often spelled in English as Battambang, but also sometimes Batdumbong or a variant. Occasionally translated as "The Place Where the Staff/Stick Was Lost."

[3] *O*/អូរ = "stream or creek"

4 Ta/តា is often used as a respectful term for "grandfather," but can also indicate ancestors or, as in this case, neak ta/អ្នកតា.

string lights have been added to amplify certain features, such as the ornate staff and the crown atop his head, at night.

Every Cambodian province has a *neak ta* that serves as the regional spirit of authority, but no province derives its identity so directly and consistently from its *neak ta* as does Battambang with Ta Dambong Krañyoung. Even in tourist advertisements found throughout the nation, where other regions are depicted in association with their most famous tourist sites - Siem Reap with Angkor Wat, Phnom Penh with the royal palace, for example - Battambang is always represented by the imposing figure of Ta Dambong Krañyoung. Indeed, I would not hesitate to argue that Ta Dambong Krañyoung is the foremost *neak ta* in all of Cambodia, although I must qualify my assertion as being influenced by the obvious bias of my regional focus. Nevertheless, the imposing statue sends a clear message to all who approach Battambang City: beware, for you walk now in the land of powerful spirits.[5] Most Cambodians who visit Battambang City, whether from the Battambang region or not, acknowledge this authority by stopping at the statue to pay their respects to Ta Dambong Krañyoung, and there is always a group of worshippers at the base of the statue making offerings for his blessings (see Figure 1). Indeed, Battambang's

---

[5] The other main entrance to Battambang City (on the north side) has a similar roundabout with a multi-story statue of the Hindu god Vishnu, known locally as Preah Noreay/ព្រះនរាយ៍ន៏, at its center. Although these two figures 'bookend' the entrances and exits to the city and could be perceived as equal in power, Vishnu is locally treated in most respects as subservient to Ta Dambong Krañyoung. Some people claim that Ta Dambong Krañyoung may be an incarnation of Vishnu in the cycle of death and rebirth, although not everyone agrees on this point. Nevertheless, there are two indisputable truths about these figures: 1) Ta Dambong Krañyoung is by far the more prestigious and revered deity in this region, with the Vishnu statue needing noticeable refurbishment and rarely receiving offerings from supplicants even on holy days, and 2) It is not possible to enter Battambang City without crossing under the shadow of one of the supernatural beings, thus reasserting my ultimate point about Battambang being a land of spiritual power and divine presence.


Figure 1 - Domestic Tourists Taking Selfies and
Making Offerings to Ta Dambong Krañyoung

association with powerful spirits has driven visitation to the region for many centuries, even before the growth of the international tourism economy as we know it today.

The legend of Ta Dambong Krañyoung stands as a Southeast Asian parallel to the European story of King Arthur, Excalibur, and the Lady of the Lake, and in a similar manner serves to articulate the political and spiritual origins of a contested region. As such, this legend

is foundational to any understanding of Battambang or its people. As historian David Chandler has written, Cambodian history is not purely a matter of facts but a process of storytelling that involves blending written records with the copious legends that abound within the nation (Chandler 2008b). Battambang is one such place where every place name tells a story, and thus a recounting of regional history is better done lyrically than too formally. To that end, I see the legend of Ta Dambong Krañyoung as a metaphor for Battambang's history and identity. Within the story are the core elements of Battambang's reputation that have risen time and again over the years: the desirability of the area, often in relation to its natural resources; the region's susceptibility to outside powers vying to control it, which is consistently met with determined resistance from the people; and the pervasive belief that Battambang is a land of magic so powerful that it can alter the fate of all Khmer people, not just those that live in the region.

To that end, this chapter is not intended to serve as a definitive history of the Battambang region but embraces the power of metaphor and myth in creating the past. While in-depth examination of Battambang's history is an important future project, it exceeds the temporal and financial restrictions of this current endeavor. Instead, I use tourism as a framework to view the contemporary *presentation* of Battambang's history by those that live and operate within that worldview. As thematic tourism depends upon narratives into which visitors may insert themselves, such an approach allows for a comparison between historical facts and created realities presented as historic, which are arguably more important for sustaining a symbolic economy. In short, this work is not about the world as it is but instead focuses on the worlds that travelers wish to see, hear, smell, taste, and touch in senses both physical and metaphorical.

Still, given that there is no dedicated historical study of Battambang's unique history that encompasses the full span of its existence, I feel obligated to attempt to syncretize some of the existing sources with the innumerable oral histories related to me by various figures over the past ten years of my research activities in Battambang. Following a brief summary of Battambang's history in this chapter, I explore each historical period in more depth in the chapters that follow based on the form of tourism being examined in relation to the historical period which most closely correlates to it (for example, I discuss the relationship between dark tourism and the Khmer Rouge period of 1975-1998 in Chapter 2, or art tourism and French influence in the 1930s in Chapter 4). In so doing, I demonstrate how the symbolic economy of Battambang is structured by its unique regional history while also commenting on the forms of tourism that took place in the region in each passing era.

Such an approach also guards against accidental exoticization of the region by placing change as it relates to myth-making at the forefront of the argument. The largest problem with popular presentations of Cambodia, including my accounting of the Jungle Cruise at the start of this work, is that it portrays the region as timeless and unmoving in a manner that evokes Orientalist colonial attitudes (Said 1979; see also Chandler 2008: 3). By discussing the many forms of urban identity that Battambang has portrayed throughout its history, I hope to frame the city as a process instead of a place - one that is still very much negotiating its identity in relation to the desires of its inhabitants.

These local desires, in turn, hold great sway over touristic imagination, and so by discussing the manner by which past eras are framed by current discourse, I hope to highlight the agency of local peoples. In other words, tourists - domestic and foreign - want to hear the

mythologized, dramatic version of history, and thus the presentation of history to tourists is founded upon such manipulations of reality. Knowing this concession in advance frames Battambang's history as a constructed narrative, which is far more realistic to its daily operation than a recitation of dates and occurrences. Recognizing that in most cases it is *not* simply the tourists constructing myths to impose on the people but, instead, the residents of Battambang who themselves wield the power of mythologizing regional history for their own benefit reframes historical construction as an agentive method by which local peoples create and recreate their own places of meaning throughout time. In this sense, understanding Battambang's history is not as important as understanding how residents relate their history to outsiders. For at the heart of my work is the argument that Cambodians are not purely victims of a colonizing touristic enterprise, although there are certainly many instances where such victimization occurs, but are in reality the co-creators and inventors shaping the historical and cultural narratives that tourists consume as part of the symbolic economy.

I now turn to an examination of Battambang's major historical periods, followed by a summary of how Battambang operated at the time of my research. In these two sections, I hope to paint a picture of how Battambang and its tourism industry developed into the city I knew during my research, and thus introduce the reader to the historical, political, and cultural dynamics that continue to shaped and continue to shape the region.

**Angkor and its Aftermath**

The earliest histories of Battambang are only now emerging, as the archaeological record of the region is spotty at best. Given that most emphasis for archaeological research in

Cambodia is placed on sites that have some perceived political or economic benefit, such as the Angkor temple complex or other faraway sites that are promoted by the UNESCO World Heritage program, Battambang has remained somewhat off the radar for dedicated research of this kind.[6] The significant danger represented by the thousands of landmines that decorate Cambodia's northwest also pose a significant archaeological challenge but, hopefully, future work will convince the appropriate authorities that Battambang's regional history can put a unique spin on the greater heritage narrative and that there are many sites worth examining in this part of the country. Still, there are some ongoing projects that provide a window into the development of human occupation in Battambang.

An as-yet unfinished archaeological project at Laang Spean, "The Cave of Bridges," approximately thirty kilometers southwest of Battambang City has revealed a long history of human activity in this area (Mourer 1970).[7] Burials and artifacts uncovered at Laang Spean indicate human usage of mountain caves in this region reaching back over 70,000 years (Heng 2015; Forestier 2015). Skipping ahead several millennia, the finer details of Battambang's position in the greater Angkorian Empire (802-1431 CE) are also somewhat unclear, although it was during this period that Battambang formalized into a singular region similar to how we conceive of it today. Prior to Angkor's unifying influence, Battambang existed as a series of small kingdoms representing a considerable ethnic and religious diversity, including the Cham kingdom of Malyang (Wolters 2002: 135). These kingdoms initially resisted the influence of

---

[6] An ongoing study by archaeologists Miriam Stark and Alison Carter at Prasat Bassaet, one of the region's ancient temples, is a shining exception and, I hope, the beginning of further exploration of the region's past.

[7] ល្អាងស្ពាន

Angkor until they were defeated in battle by King Jayavarman I of the Kingdom of Chenla (r. 640-681 CE) and later amalgamated by the first Angkorian King, Jayavarman II (r. 802-835 CE) (Wolters 2002). The establishment of the urban space now known as Battambang City is often attributed to Jayavarman VII (r. 1181-1218 CE), although it is likely that the city was an expansion of an earlier settlement that served an important trade role. Tradition holds that it was this era of warring kingdoms into which Ta Dambong Krañyoung was born and the magic staff first appeared, with some locals drawing parallels between the staff's unifying powers and the influence of Angkor. Indeed, some locals have told me that the prince on the flying horse may have been Jayavarman VII himself, although the logistics of such a conception are difficult to clarify.

Although Battambang appears to have been simply another province of the greater Angkorian Empire, myths and legends between these two regions indicate that the residents of the Angkorian capital held a special reverence for Battambang and likely visited it in a form of pilgrimage-tourism. Beyond the association of Angkor with the magical powers of the staff mentioned above, another legend claims that a race of giants built a massive stone road across the great Tonle Sap lake that separates these two regions so that Angkorian kings and pilgrims could visit Phnom/Prasat Banon, a mountain temple some twenty kilometers south of present-

day Battambang City that has long been said to have magical healing waters.[8] This myth is so prevalent that in 2002 an underwater archaeological team led by Christophe Pottier waited for the dry season when waters were low to examine the remains of the large black 'road' that is still visible from the surface of the lake on a clear day (Pottier et al. 2012). They found that the 'road' is a naturally-occurring phenomenon composed of authigenic calcite, although they conceded that its visual appearance does indeed resemble a giant road and that such a myth was born of it is not surprising.

Although the road is fictitious, the fact that actual archaeological research occurred to test this story demonstrates the commonality of these beliefs, and it is interesting to note that the myth is far more common in the Siem Reap area than in Battambang. That these stories are so specific as to mention Phnom Banon by name, given that it is arguably one of the most sacred sites in Battambang, is a convincing argument that Battambang and Prasat Banon were considered powerful places of spirits and magic by ancient peoples who may have traveled to the region to access the region's spiritual resources.

Domestic tourists continue to flock to Phnom Banon at almost any time of year, and foreigners are increasingly visiting the mountain as well. Sitting atop an imposing staircase running up the slope of a steep 400 meter hill, construction of Banon Temple began in the late

---

[8] Banon is my preferred spelling of បាណន់, which refers to both the ancient ruins and the surrounding district in which it is located. បាណន់ is often also spelled Banan, but I prefer Banon because the first vowel in បាណន់ (◌ា) differs from the second vowel (the naturally paired vowel to consonant ណ), and since they are not pronounced the same I feel that they should not be represented by the same English letter. Furthermore, Phnom Banon/ភ្នំបាណន់ and Banon Temple/ប្រាសាទបាណន់ are technically different things, with the temple sitting on top of the mountain (*phnom)*, but in local parlance these two terms are often used interchangeably to refer to the entire temple complex and surrounding cave sites. For my work, I use Phnom Banon to refer to the entire touristic complex and Banon Temple specifically for the ancient ruins atop the hill. Banon is also used as the official name of the district that surrounds and includes the mountain, even covering the mountain of Phnom Sampeau and the Battambang winery that I discuss in other chapters.

11th Century on the order of Udayadityavarman II (r. 1050-1066 CE) and finished in the 12th Century by the renowned builder of Angkor Wat, Suryavarman II (r. 1113-1145/1150 CE) (Aymonier 1999). Like Angkor Wat, Banon Temple is a depiction of the peaks of Mount Meru from the Hindu tradition and it is sometimes described as a miniature copy of Angkor Wat on the peak of a hill. Keeping with the local peoples' penchant for asserting regional history as the true genesis of Khmer culture, many residents of Battambang believe that Banon Temple was the original glorification of Mount Meru and that Angkor Wat was built as a copy of Banon on a larger scale. Such claims are easily debunked through archaeological analysis, but still speak to the importance placed on Banon by residents of the region. The mountain is also considered the home of Nieng Rumsai Sok, an adaptation of Preah Thoroni, the earth goddess who witnessed the enlightenment of the Buddha, which likely served to attract pilgrims in previous eras just as it does today (Guthrie 2004; Trew 2020). In any case, oral tradition holds that religious tourists from across Southeast Asia traveled to Banon for religious purposes long before the arrival of Europeans.

Banon's historical importance is echoed in the written record of visitation to Phnom Banon in the 19th and early 20th Centuries. Many famous European explorers and historic figures visited Phnom Banon on their travels through Cambodia, including Henri Mouhot, whose account of Angkor Wat led to the European obsession with Cambodia, and the German ethnographer Adolf Bastian, whose writings later influenced Carl Jung, Franz Boas, and Joseph Campbell. Many of these visitors kept written journals that include short entries about Banon, with Mouhot describing Banon Temple as containing "a lot of taste in the composition, craftsmanship in the construction and artful details" (Mouhot 2001: 16; Bastian 2005). French

archaeologist Étienne Aymonier further documented Phnom Banon as being littered with carvings of the Buddha and a small figure holding a stick that is almost certainly Ta Dambong Krañyoung, demonstrating the syncretic nature of Cambodian religion (Aymonier 1999: 82). These writings further the argument that pilgrims established a form of religious-based domestic tourism industry existed at Banon before and during the Indochinese colonial period, and I would argue that Phnom Banon remains the post spiritually important location in all of Battambang.

Beyond Banon, the legacy of the Angkorian Empire can also be felt at Battambang's other famous ruin: Ek Phnom.[9] Ek Phnom is the older of the two sites, having been built by Suryavarman I (r. 1006-1050 CE) in the 11th Century (Chandler 2008: 48-51). Dedicated to the veneration of Krishna, this ancient temple is often overlooked by foreign tourists because it is in a bad state of disrepair. Domestic tourists, on the other hand, visit Ek Phnom somewhat frequently. The temple is the center of Battambang City's Khmer New Year party that occurs every April, and tens of thousands of people come to the temple every year to picnic, drink, and party. For that one week, Battambang's quietest tourist attraction becomes its most raucous. Younger couples also regularly visit Ek Phnom in search of quiet places for more intimate rendezvous, in part because the temple's development and usage as a tourist site makes all of the ruins' shadowy corners accessible to visitors, but its lower visitation numbers also mean it is often near-empty.

---

[9] Ek Phnom is the most common English spelling for ឯកភ្នំ, which is also occasionally spelled Aik Phnom, Eik Phnom, and Aek Phnom. The pronunciation of ឯក sounds like "ike" as in "bike" without a "b," and the "h" in "Phnom" is silent (same as it is with Phnom Penh). ឯកភ្នំ/Ek Phnom is often translated as "First Mountain" but can also mean "Solitary Mountain" or "Single Mountain," which I consider better translations given that the temple is a bit remote and located on a flat plain with no mountains in sight.

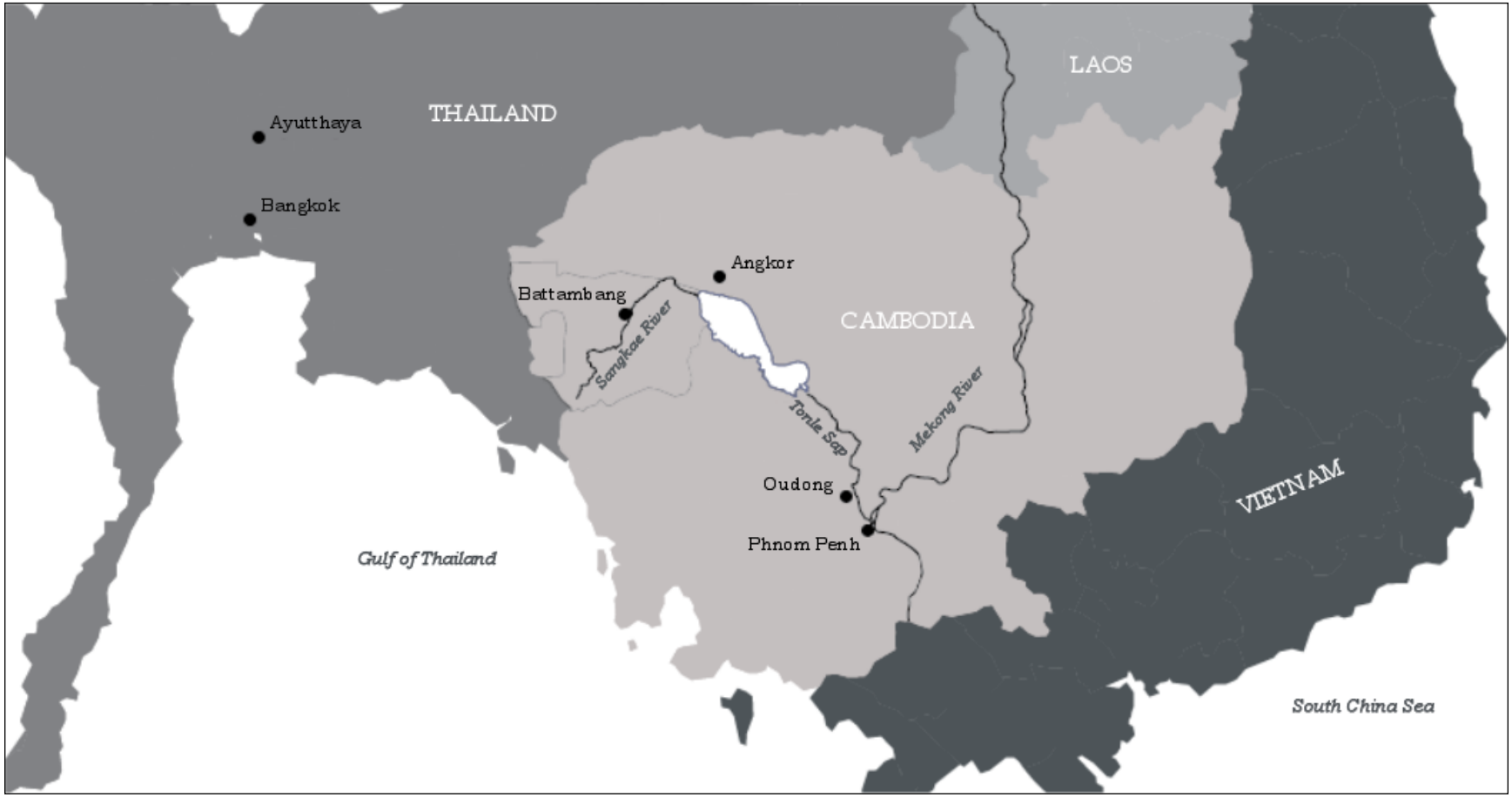


Figure 2 - Battambang's Central Location Between Major Cities, Past and Present

**The 'Colonial' Eras**

Not much is known about Battambang in the centuries following the fall of the Khmer Empire in the 15th Century. The region likely remained an important center of agriculture and trade as it was located between the major religious and political centers of Ayutthaya, Angkor, and Oudong, (and later Bangkok and Phnom Penh) with convenient access to the great Tonle Sap lake and its connecting river systems (see Figure 2). Indeed, most historical accounts of Battambang emphasize the area's markets as a notable part of regional identity, and early explorers like Bastian commented on its abundant agricultural trade (Bastian 2005: 95-112). Even the first ethnographic account of Cambodian village life, the 1968 monograph *Svay, a Khmer Village in Cambodia* by Japanese-American anthropologist May Ebihara, contains only one reference to Battambang that serves to specifically identify the region's "large per capita land holdings and market orientation" (Ebihara 1968: 6). Battambang's position at the crossroads between several large urban areas and the resulting trade economy, in addition to its higher than average agricultural production, were without doubt major factors that led to the intense colonial competition for control of the region that began in the 18th Century.

Following the decline of Angkor, the Khmer Empire found itself at the mercy of its neighbors. For many centuries, kingdoms in current day Vietnam and Thailand jockeyed for power over the Khmer monarchy and its territories. Royal marriages, puppet governments, and other political influences kept one nation or the other in control while the Khmer leadership became nearly powerless in their own land. Governance of Battambang was wielded as a negotiating tool during these political battles, and in 1795 control of the Cambodian northwest was granted to Siam (modern day Thailand), ostensibly in exchange for Siamese support of Ang

Eng as ruler of Cambodia (Chandler 2008: 142-143; Leclère 1914: 399-400). This region, which is sometimes called Inner Cambodia, contained the current provinces of Battambang, Sisophon, and Siem Reap (including the Angkorian temple complex), as well as several territories east of Angkor. Interestingly, the Siamese did not place their administrative center for this region near Angkor but instead chose Battambang as the seat of regional authority, renaming the province Phra Tabong (see Chandler 2008: 142: see also Bastian 2005).[10] So began Thailand's long struggle to retain influence in Battambang, which would continue even after they returned Angkor to Cambodia centuries later.

The exact nature of Siam's political influence in Battambang during this period is highly debatable, and I discuss it in more depth in Chapter 5. Officially, the region became a tributary state of Siam and made annual offerings to the Siamese monarchy, but the Siamese struggled to hold sway over the day to day operations of Battambang life. Instead of sending a Siamese emissary to rule over the territory, the Siamese monarchy appointed Baen Aphaiwong, a minor

---

[10] **พระตะบอง** in Thai. Interestingly, the Thai translation seems to be a misinterpretation of the Battambang origin story. The Thai name focuses less on the legend and more on the specific figure of Ta Dambong Krañyoung by utilizing the term *Phra*/**พระ**, the Thai equivalent of the Khmer term *Preah*/ព្រះ, which is an honorary title indicating holiness. Thus, the Thai name for the region is actually an honorific meaning something akin to "Lord of the Staff" and loses the original meaning of Battambang as "The Land of the Lost Staff." Even the official seal for Phra Tabong Province under the Thai continues this misinterpretation, as it depicts Ta Dambong Krañyoung standing as a fierce warrior holding his staff menacingly above his head as if he is about to smite his enemies. While the Khmer do likewise portray him as youthful and muscular, Cambodian supplicants usually emphasize his charm or his humility more than his bravery or aggressiveness. Khmer depictions almost always show him in a more humble pose on his knees, and he is sometimes depicted in his pre-magic form as a young cow herder in poor clothes. To me, the Thai depiction seems much more emphatic of his power as a singular deity, whereas the Khmer version portrays him more as a "playboy" or trickster from humble origins, although such depictions may be a result of the attempt to tie Ta Dambong Krañyoung's staff with the Sword of Victory.

The Thai also renamed Sisophon and Siem Reap. They became part of Phibunsongkhram/**พิบูลสงคราม** Province, with a third province called Nakhon Champassak/**นครจัมปาศักดิ์** to the east. The borders of these historic territories do not align with Sisophon or Siem Reap's current orientation, and stretched upwards towards Laos through areas now belonging to other provinces.

Khmer royal from Takeo province in the southeast, as protector of the region (Sam 1996; Chandler 2008: 120; Chhoung 1994: iii). The House of Aphaiwong continued to rule Battambang until 1907, and although they are often portrayed as cruel and exploitative, they are often credited with minimizing Siamese influence over the area (Chhoung 1994: 44).

In some sense, Battambang has always exemplified the "galactic polity" or "mandala state" models of Southeast Asian community organization, perhaps never more so than during the *Lōk Mjah* period (Tambiah 1973). As summarized by historian O.W. Wolters, "[In a mandala state], one king, identified with divine and 'universal' authority, claimed personal hegemony over the other rulers in his mandala who in theory were his obedient allies and vassals…Mandalas would expand and contract in concertina-like fashion. Each one contained several tributary rulers, some of whom would repudiate their vassal status when the opportunity arose and try to build up their own networks of vassals" (Wolters 1982: 27-28). Sometimes depicted using overlapping concentric circles, the mandala state centralizes power in the body of a ruler whose power fades with distance (not unlike a drop of water as it dissipates), meaning that locations between two powerful rulers - such as was the case with Battambang - may pay tribute to both but be loyal to neither. In this way, the *Lōk Mjah* could pledge political allegiance to Siam, ethnic allegiance to the Khmer, and yet utilize this liminal position to establish his own form of sovereign rule. This negotiation and its legacy is what allows residents of Battambang to assert themselves as independent from Cambodia yet still proudly Khmer, even though in the current linguistic framework, Khmer ethnicity is inseparable from nationality (see Edwards 2007; Baird

2011).[11] As one friend stated, switching to English to be able to express herself clearly, "We children of Battambang are Khmer, but we are not always Cambodian."

Much of the knowledge about the *Lōk Mjah* era is derived from *Battambang During the Time of the Lord Governor*, a 1974 book by secondary school teacher Tauch Chhoung, which is an invaluable historical account of that time period that is nevertheless broadly painted with a Khmer-centric nationalism that was typical of 1960s and early 1970s Cambodia. Although separating nationalistic rhetoric from historical fact is difficult, Tauch Chhoung writes pointedly about how Battambang never accepted Siamese influence - rejecting attempts to install the Thai language through Buddhist schools and even minting their own regional currency depicting the image of Ta Dambong Krañyoung instead of using the standard Thai Baht (Chhoung 1994: 69-70, 98, 101).[12] As he summarizes, "While Thailand could interfere in the domain of administration, it could not interfere with the Khmer mind in Battambang - which was purely

---

[11] The most common word for Cambodia in use is *srok Khmer/*ស្រុកខ្មែរ, literally "the land of the the Khmer."

[12] For many years, I was unable to verify if Battambang truly did create their own coinage as there seemed to be no existing currency of that type in the antique shops that specialize in old coins, nor does such imagery appear in any of the volumes on Cambodian numismatics. That is, until one day when I was walking through a hotel lobby that had a series of decorative posters on the wall that explained and demonstrated aspects of Khmer history for the benefit of foreign guests of the hotel. One poster was about historical coins, and at the extreme bottom right of the display, under a header that read "Coins of Unknown Origin," was a photograph of a coin bearing the image of Ta Dambong Krañyoung. I took a photo of the poster and went around asking elders in the community, including some individuals who worked at the antique shops, if they knew the coin and, upon seeing it, they confirmed that it was in circulation when they were children. Several of them claimed that Ta Dambong Krañyoung coins are considered particularly powerful spiritual items and are worn as amulets, although they are now so rare that they are considered sacred relics by families and rarely worn or traded. I have yet to hold one of these coins in my hand, but I am confident that they did indeed exist - although, perhaps minted during the 1940s when the Thai briefly controlled the region instead of the 18th Century.

Khmer" (Chhoung 1994: 99). Tauch Chhoung's book is still widely read in Battambang today and his opinions about Battambang's resistance to Siamese politics and culture are continuously sustained through popular narrative.

The House of Aphaiwong is a melodramatic dynasty whose stories far exceed the limitations of this work, but they do represent why residents of Battambang continue to assert their own regional authority over that of Phnom Penh. The title Aphaiwong was granted to the family by the Siamese monarch and can be translated as "the Fearless Dynasty," "the Invincible House," or even "the House of the Undying."[13] Baen Aphaiwong was said to be a politically shrewd warlord who poisoned his rivals in Phnom Penh before making a deal with Siam to control Battambang (Sam 1996: 5). He also formed a militia that posed enough of a threat that the Siamese king opted to control him through flattery and the gift of regional land holdings instead of risking direct conflict. Members of the Aphaiwong family became intertwined with Siamese politics, culminating in the 1924 marriage between King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) and his fourth wife Khruaekaeo Aphaiwong, who became known as Princess Suvadhana.[14] Through this union, many residents of Battambang believe that even today the royal family of Thailand is descended from the House of Aphaiwong.

I have even heard people claim, in various combinations, that the current Thai Queen Mother Sirikit and/or her husband, the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej, were born of the Aphaiwong lineage and, therefore, not actually Thai but Khmer. A quick genealogical

---

[13] *Aphai*/អភ័យ means "fearless," whereas *wong*/វង្ស is a suffix indicating lineage, family, or, in this case, dynasty. Most residents of Battambang who know English translate the name as "the family that cannot be defeated." Translated from Thai, it is usually written Abhaiwongse.

[14] Originally, **เครือแก้ว อภัยวงศ์** and later **สุวัทนา**.

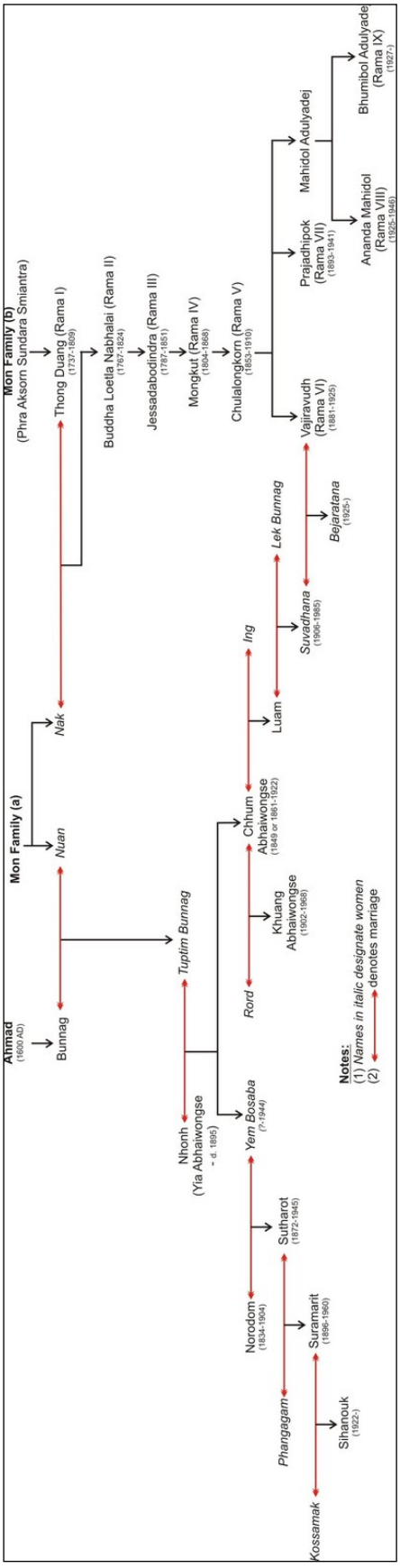


Figure 3 - Khmer-Thai Royal Family Tree (as of early 2016) as Connected by the House of Aphaiwong
(Source: https://sokheounpang.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/khmer-siam-family-tree.jpg)

examination shows this claim to be untrue, as Suvadhana had only one child, the Princess Bejaratana Rajasuda, who never married or had children. However, Princess Bejaratana is a visible link between the current Thai and Khmer monarchies, having been cousin to both Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej and Khmer King Sihanouk, and thus similarly connects their children, current Kings Vajiralongkorn and Sihamoni (see Figure 3). In this way, Battambang connects Thailand and Cambodia as both a physical crossroads between the two nations and a symbolic one through royal heritage.

That Battambang would assert its royal influence in Thailand is daring enough, but not nearly as brazen as their own claims to regional rule. Baen Aphaiwong and his successors were granted the title of *Lōk Mjah*, a term commonly translated in English as "Lord Governor." In my estimation, the word "governor" is far too soft an interpretation for this term, implying mostly political control as a stand-in for a higher authority. In reality, the term *mjah* is regularly used in Khmer speech to mean "boss" or "master," and given that the *Lōk Mjah* was given absolute control over all land in Battambang and could enslave debtors, I find "Lord Master" to be a better representation of the power the position held.[15]

More interesting than *Lōk Mjah*, however, is a rarely used but significant secondary title granted to the position: *Sdech Krañ.*[16] *Sdech Krañ* is an exceptionally difficult term to translate

---

[15] *Lōk Mjah*/លោកម្ចាស់ is often spelled *Lōk Mjas*. *Lōk/*លោក is an honorary term indicating high status, as can be translated as "Sir" or "Lord" in this context. *Mjah/Mjas/*ម្ចាស់ means "boss" or "master."

[16] ស្តេចក្រាញ់. In this case, the "ch" at the end of *Sdech* is cut off mid-sound by pushing the tip of the tongue into the back of the upper front teeth. It is *not* pronounced with the "ch" sound of a word like "cheese" or "cherries."

in English, and does not appear in even the most thorough of Khmer dictionaries. Its closest equivalent, for which it can be considered an alternative spelling, is *Sdech Trañ*, which is an ancient title for a type of feudal lord. One possible interpretation of this term is "General," as the title has military implications. Such a translation would not be inappropriate in this case because the House of Aphaiwong was housed in a mansion within a *kompaeng*, a term for "wall" or "rampart" that can indicate a fortress-like structure.[17] The Aphaiwong's *kompaeng* was known to be a walled citadel that housed soldiers along with artisans and political advisors, and even today the complex has two cannons, albeit likely younger replicas, at its gate that hint at the former military usage of the space. Yet, the historical account of the *Sdech Krañ*, while emphasizing his military might in crushing rebellion, relies far more on the political maneuverings of a peerage system, and thus I hesitate to apply such a heavily militaristic definition to this title.

Instead, I look to the first part of the term, sdech, which on its own can mean "king" or someone of high rank within the royal family. Calling the *Sdech Krañ* purely a "king" would be hyperbolic considering his tenuous position between the Siamese and Khmer royal families, but it is not unfair to say that he held enough independent sovereignty to behave as a king within Battambang's borders, somewhat akin to a "Grand Duke" in the European context. While I will adhere to the primary title of *Lōk Mjah* and my translation of "Lord Master" for the remainder of this work, the royal implications of the secondary title *Sdech Krañ* remain a key issue, as residents of Battambang often stress that they were never controlled by Thailand because they had their own Khmer sovereign to rule them. The House of Aphaiwong thus allows residents of Battambang to conceive of themselves as descended from a mostly independent sovereign

---

[17] *Kompaeng*/កំផែង

lineage, and even as constituting a small kingdom, that is Khmer in identity but separate from greater Cambodia and its royal house.

From his garrison in Battambang, then, the *Lōk Mjah* ruled over the rest of Inner Cambodia as a feudal kingdom. All lands belonged to the *Lōk Mjah* and all laborers paid tribute to him in exchange for the right to work the rice fields. His word was absolute, and resistance was met with severe reprisals (Chhoung 1994; Sam 1996). Several generations passed in this way until the rule of Chhum Aphaiwong, by far the most famous (or infamous, depending on who you ask) and controversial member of the House of Aphaiwong. Most of Tauch Chhoung's historical account of the *Lōk Mjah* period focuses on Chhum Aphaiwong, who is alternatively portrayed as an aggressive warlord and as a great lover of the arts (Chhum 1994; see also Bastian 2005). Most residents of Battambang hold mixed feelings about Chhum Aphaiwong, as it was he who organized Battambang City into its current configuration (even though the current buildings are French replacements built years later) and is responsible for the construction of the Sala Khet, Battambang's greatest surviving example of early 20th Century architecture, as well as several important temples (see Chapter 5). But Chhum Aphaiwong also levied heavy taxes on the people and was considered an abusive ruler in the vein of Battambang's great origin myth.

Far more important, however, is that Chhum Aphaiwong is blamed for the loss of Battambang's independence, although in truth he was not directly involved with the political maneuverings that ultimately resulted in Battambang becoming part of French Indochina. As the 19th Century became the 20th, Battambang had remained apart from Cambodia for over one hundred years - a fact that anguished Cambodian King Sisowath. In 1906, the King traveled to Paris and made an emotional plea to the French using an analogy with which the French could

sympathize, “Give me back my Alsace-Lorraine!” (Tully 2002: 425; Edwards 2007: 20). The French responded by trading the territories of Chanthaburi and Trat back to Siam in exchange for Battambang and the remaining elements of Inner Cambodia in a 1907 agreement that finally ended the 1893 Franco-Siamese War (Chandler 2008: 183; see also Strate 2015).

The French had controlled greater Cambodia since 1867 and were seen to be a destructive force by residents of Battambang. Under the *Lōk Mjah*, Battambang had access to Siamese educational and religious resources. Although Tauch Chhoung makes much of the populace resisting Thai language and cultural influences, it is also clear that the people enjoyed the benefits of open intellectual trade with Bangkok (Sam 1996). This trade included many of the reforms enacted by Siamese King Mongkut (Rama IV), who modernized his nation’s educational and religious systems and established the Thammayut sect of Theravada Buddhism. Although there are few Thammayut temples remaining in Battambang (and many local religious figures I interviewed were uncertain as to how much sway the Thammayut order ever held in the region), Siamese influence still increased educational and religious training in the region such that Battambang become synonymous with scholarship. Even today, numerous religious schools attract hundreds of monks from around the nation each year to study and train, and people speak highly of Battambang’s educational system which, despite its post-Khmer Rouge weaknesses, is relatively strong compared to elsewhere in Cambodia. Thus, French presence threatened both Battambang’s infrastructure and the sovereignty claimed by locals.

For his part, Chhum Aphaiwong was placed in an unenviable position. The French offered to allow him to continue in his current position in a reduced role. He could help govern the region but would not be permitted to rule as a feudal lord, as all lands would belong to the

French and appropriate taxes needed to be paid, nor could he continue the cycle of debt and indentured labor for which the *Lōk Mjah* era was known (Palmer Briggs 1946). While speculative, it seems likely that his voice would not have been taken seriously by the French and his role would have been mostly symbolic. Such must have been his concern, as he declined the offer to stay and instead moved his house to Prachinburi, Thailand, thus ending the House of Aphaiwong dynasty in Battambang (Jariyasombat 2017). Today, the name Aphaiwong - particularly that of Chhum Aphaiwong - is often wielded with disdain in Battambang City, not unlike how Americans speak of Benedict Arnold. To many residents, Chhum Aphaiwong is seen as a cowardly traitor who refused to fight against the French, even though doing so would have resulted in epic bloodshed throughout the territory and a guaranteed defeat at the hands of the French.

Still, residents of Battambang do not entirely reject their connection to the House of Aphaiwong, as it symbolizes regional independence and even allows them to imagine authority over Thailand itself. Chhum Aphaiwong's son Khuang eventually became the Prime Minister of Thailand three times between 1944 and 1948, meaning that for several years a descendant of Battambang effectively ran the Thai government. Interestingly, Khuang Aphaiwong is popularly portrayed (eg. on his Wikipedia page) as ethnically Thai despite having been born in Battambang to a famously Khmer family in 1902 (Sam 1996: 9). Such perceived slights are not lost on the people of Battambang, who instead argue that Khuang Aphaiwong is proof that the House of Aphaiwong, which to them is inseparable from Battambang regardless of its relocation, is so powerful that it could control even the great Siamese nation that replaced their own Khmer

Empire. In this way, popular discourse asserts Battambang as a significant power player in Southeast Asia that is Khmer in identity but separate from the Cambodian nation-state.

**The French**

The narrative surrounding the 1907 return of Battambang to French-controlled Cambodia differs greatly depending on who you ask (see Strate 2015 for a Thai perspective). The 'official' government narrative, and the one to which most Cambodians (publicly) adhere, is celebratory. As Chandler summarizes, "The number of pages in Sisowath's chronicle devoted to the return of Battambang and Siem Reap suggests that the compilers, like the French, considered this to be the most important event of the reign, even though the king had little to do with it" (Chandler 183). Such was the symbolic importance of the exchange that a mural commemorating the return was created at Wat Phnom in Phnom Penh, which depicts the three lost provinces as *apsara*-like maidens bringing gifts to a seated King Sisowath. With cupped hands, the maiden representing Siem Reap presents the King a small replica of an Angkorian temple, whereas Sisophon offers the bounty of the harvest, and Battambang holds out the magical staff of Ta Dambong Krañyoung.[18] Metaphorically speaking, the monument could be interpreted as Siem Reap returning Cambodia's heritage, Sisophon its livelihood, and Battambang its spiritual and religious authority, and it remains an important place of veneration and picture-taking for Cambodians and tourists alike (Chandler 2008: 183; Chhoung 1994: 131).

---

[18] A similar monument can be found at a roundabout in downtown Battambang, albeit with the women as fully-realized statuary figures that stand guard around a shrine space instead of a mural.

In Battambang, however, the return to Cambodian control was anything but a smooth process. As historian John Tully describes, "When the French marched into the territories in 1907, they might have expected to be welcomed as liberators. Were they not reuniting the 'lost provinces' with Cambodia? Did they not bring Cambodian administrators with them? Did they not abolish slavery and attempt to rationalize the web of taxes and *corvée*? Yet, they were met with a revolt that lasted several years and cost many hundreds of lives." (Tully 2002: 428). The rebellion against the French was partially aided by the Siamese, who wished to retain control of the region, and took nearly two years to finally end, although it would not be the last of the fighting between Battambang and France. Still, by 1920, Battambang "developed into the country's most prosperous [territory], providing the bulk of Cambodia's rice exports and sheltering, idiosyncratically, the greatest number of landlords in the country as well as the highest number of immigrants from elsewhere in Cambodia and from the Cambodian speaking portions of Cochin China" (Chandler 2008: 185).

Despite the growth and diversity gained in this period, the residents of Battambang willingly returned to Thai control in 1941 after the Japanese military aided Thailand retake the territory (Chandler 2008: 6, 202-203). From 1941 until the end of World War II in 1945, Battambang was again formally under Thai control but this time in tandem with the Japanese military, who used the jungle terrain and oppressive Cambodian climate to train their soldiers for battle against the Americans in the Pacific. Historical sources about this period of Battambang's history are difficult to find, save for a useful memoir by Singaporean citizen Geoffrey Tan. In 1942, fifteen-year-old Tan was sent to Battambang to build railroads and barracks for Japanese soldiers. He describes Battambang as a place out of time, and gives a description that is still

mostly accurate today. "The town was quite small," he writes, "with three parallel streets, each about 300 meters long and interconnecting side streets. The centre of attraction was the market and the food stalls. Despite the war, a lot of foods were available. The town appeared not to have been affected at all, except for the presence of a few Japs" (Tan 2001: 56-57). After witnessing the brutal treatment of laborers by Japanese soldiers, Tan and his friends eventually concealed themselves as Cambodian peasants and escaped back to Singapore via the railroad.

Tan's account matches the memories of many elders with whom I spoke about Battambang in the early 1940s. Several of my informants were teenagers at the time of the war and commented that they barely knew a war was happening at all, particularly one on such a massive scale. They told me that the Japanese established military compounds throughout the area, with one individual marching me out through the fields of her village to a rice paddy that she claimed was once a Japanese training ground. Japanese soldiers are universally remembered as strict and harsh, although they are also admired for their deep religiosity. As one village elder remarked, "The Japanese soldiers prayed often, especially to their swords. That is why whenever an old Japanese sword is found [in the rice fields], people pay a lot of money for it. We believe the swords are powerful magic and that is why the Japanese prayed to them."[19] Depictions of Japanese soldiers carrying such swords are carved into the walls of Wat Kdul, a *Lōk Mjah*-era temple discussed in Chapter 5.

Following the war, Battambang was again returned to Cambodia as part of Japan's concessions during the negotiation for peace. Yet, once again, Battambang did not willingly return to Cambodian control. John Tully describes the French being actively concerned about a

---

[19] Owning and/or selling historic Japanese swords is now illegal in Battambang.

resurgence of violence in the area, and peace talks were necessary before an agreement was finally signed in Washington, D.C. on November 17th, 1946 by Khuang Aphaiwong, the Prime Minister of Thailand and son of the former *Lōk Mjah* (Tully 2002: 429-431). An oft-related story is that the French threatened to block Thailand's entry to the United Nations unless Battambang was returned to Cambodia, to which Thailand acceded. Still, even with the agreement, several Christian missionaries were killed on the streets of Battambang, two French officials were stabbed at a market, French constructions including bridges were destroyed, and a Vietnamese village outside of town was burned down and its population slaughtered, with the bodies cast into the river to float through Battambang for the French to witness (Tully 2002: 431).[20] On a later occasion, a protest against the French government amassed a crowd of over 1,000 people.

Tully offers numerous possible explanations for the violence: anti-Catholic sentiment, which is possibly a symbolic gesture of anti-Frenchness due to the French association with Catholicism, anti-Vietnamese ethnic tensions that have long been present in Cambodia (and remain today), and/or influence by Communist groups and the anti-French Khmer Issarak, both of whom were active in the area at the time. I suspect a combination of all of these elements caused the violence, but with one notable addition: the desire for independence. Although drawing parallels between past and present moods is difficult, if not impossible, current residents of Battambang often describe the period before the French as Battambang's heyday - a time when Battambang governed itself, even if paying tribute to a foreign power. In the rhetorical

---

[20] I have corroborated the story of floating bodies from the upstream village with several Battambang elders who were children at the time of the incident. They claim dead bodies floated into the river and the waters turned red from all the blood, which led the French to order a curfew for a few days.

questions posed above, Tully asks why Battambang residents refused to celebrate Cambodian administrators taking over the reins of Battambang. In my interpretation of Battambang's history and the sentiment surrounding it, the answer is that those incoming Cambodians were not *from* Battambang, but instead were government officials from Phnom Penh seen as yet another outside colonial force vying for power over Battambang.

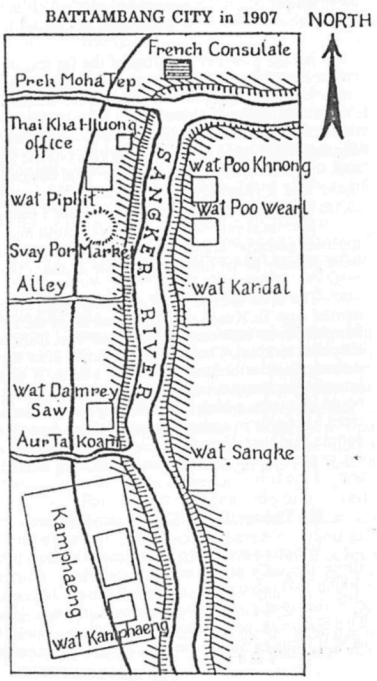


Figure 4 - Map of Battambang City in 1907 (Chhoung 1994: 38)

Still, although the French era of influence in Battambang was greatly abbreviated compared to the rest of Cambodia, its legacy is one which must be carefully understood as consisting of both positive and negative influences, particularly in light of the themes utilized by the modern tourist market. Although the *Lōk Mjah* was responsible for the organization of Battambang City's heritage district, as evidenced by a map of the area made by the French upon their arrival in 1907, it was the French who built the buildings that are now cited by tourism officials as evidence of Battambang's colonial past (see Figure 4). Numerous buildings from the *Lōk Mjah* period still stand, but it is fair to say that the French colonial architecture of the heritage district is the primary architectural draw for photo-hungry tourists, and a major aspect of the region's marketing campaign. I discuss the politics of Siamese denial in Chapter 5.

**Democratic Kampuchea and its Aftermath**

In 1953, Cambodia finally broke free from France and entered a period of independence. This period is remembered fondly by residents of Battambang today, who often refer to the period in nostalgic terms. With its history, art, religious depth, and architecture, Battambang was quickly celebrated in pop culture as a shining example of what an independent Cambodia should be. During this period, legendary singer Sinn Sisamouth wrote dozens of songs about Battambang, often describing its environment in romantic terms. For example, one of Sisamouth's most famous songs, "Champa Battambang," describes Battambang as the "center of my heart," "the cycle of my destiny," and "my only breath that always gives me hope." The song uses Battambang as a metaphor for a long lost love, but is alternatively understood to represent the soul of the Cambodian nation, as if Cambodia cannot be whole without Battambang (echoing King Sisowath's earlier plea to France). "Champa Battambang" remains one of the most popular songs in Cambodia, constantly reminding the populace of Battambang's romanticized positioned at the center of the Cambodian heart, and was even the subject of the award-winning 2018 Cambodian-American film *In the Life of Music* (Mony 2019). As a result of such romantic depictions, tourism to Battambang grew greatly in the 1950s. I discuss the role that music of the Independence Period plays in tourism more in Chapter 4.

The peace and relative prosperity of the independence period did not last long. In the late 1960s, the American war in Vietnam began spilling over the borders into Cambodia. Although Battambang is on the western border of Cambodia and was one of the furthest areas from Vietnam, it would suffer greatly as a result of the conflict. In 1975, the Cambodian government collapsed and the leftist guerrillas known as the Khmer Rouge took power. Led by their leader

Pol Pot, who hid behind the anonymity of *Angkar* or "the Organization," which served as the public face of the Khmer Rouge leadership, the Khmer Rouge proceeded to enact a genocide that destroyed countless lives and upended much of Cambodian life.[21] The Khmer Rouge and their aftermath are discussed in countless other scholarly and popular works, and my intention is not to repeat the narrative of their violent regime (see Kiernan 2004; Hinton 2005; Chandler 2008; Mertha 2014; Zucker 2011). Instead, I aim to discuss what makes Battambang's encounter with the Khmer Rouge unique and how that differing narrative operates within the tourism economy.

Most histories of the Khmer Rouge focus on the period between 1975 and 1979 when the Khmer Rouge were in power (Marston 2011: 11). Following the ouster of the Khmer Rouge from Phnom Penh in 1979, the regime scattered and the country began to rebuild - at least, most of it other than Battambang. Many of the remaining Khmer Rouge soldiers retreated to the Battambang region and continued their guerrilla war for nearly two more decades (see Chandler 2008). The Khmer Rouge transformed from genocidal regime into terrorists who repeatedly attacked and harassed the inhabitants of Battambang City and the surrounding province until a ceasefire was finally achieved in 1998. The additional years of conflict with the Khmer Rouge separate Battambang from the national narrative regarding the regime, and had serious consequences for the development of the region. Battambang's experience under the Khmer Rouge provides an alternative manner of experiencing the legacy of genocide in Cambodia that is unique from the rest of the country, attracting new tourists in a controversial form of dark tourism, which I detail later in Chapter 2.

---

[21] អង្គការ

Tourism related to the Khmer Rouge is but one of the many changes that have occurred in Battambang since 1998. Over the past two decades, the region has experienced explosive and sometimes uncontrolled growth in numerous sectors. Battambang is once again a renowned area for agricultural production, and the region serves as an economic hub that connects Thailand and Cambodia. Foreign investment, especially the growing and controversial presence of Chinese developers, has led to a variety of new businesses, such as concrete factories and water purification plants (2017 "Anhui"). But beyond all else, the most significant change is the dramatic expansion of Battambang's tourism industry.

From 1979 to 1998, foreign visitation to Battambang was virtually impossible. Access was strictly limited to persons working with aid groups, and the roads in and out of the province were nearly impassable due both to potholes and the threat of the Khmer Rouge. Tourists began arriving immediately after the province was declared safe for travel, but the tourism industry did not boom until approximately 2011. For the first few years, the roads remained in horrid condition and the town's infrastructure was not yet satisfactorily able to meet the demand presented by crowds of foreign guests. Furthermore, the town was all but unknown to foreigners and seemed to offer few attractions that could tempt tourists away from major cultural sites, especially considering the difficulty of reaching the area.

Conditions changed for several reasons. First, the region began growing its international reputation as tourists began speaking highly of unique features of the area - the colonial architecture, the traditional villages that differ so greatly from the sprawl of Phnom Penh, and quirky attractions like the bamboo train. Secondly, while tourists were (and still are) attracted to Cambodia primarily to visit the Angkorian temples of Siem Reap, many tourists were

experiencing ‘temple fatigue’ after a few days traversing the ruins and were looking for something that could break the monotony. Battambang began to insert itself into the conversation as an alternative to staring at grey stones all day utilizing many methods that occupy most of the discussion in the following chapters.

**Battambang Today**

Battambang’s history sets the stage for the discussions that follow in later chapters, which largely examine how post-modern tourism is created through the manipulation and presentation of the past made present. But before I can show how the past is recreated for tourists, I must first describe Battambang as it existed at the time of my research in 2016 (with updates regarding what has happened in the short years since), particularly with regard to the complications of the tourism industry. Battambang is a growing city, but the heritage district - which is where much of the action of this research takes place - remains similar to how it was described in the past by figures like Tauch Chhoung and Geoffrey Tan. The city is divided by the Sangkae River, with the heritage district and most of the city being located on the west bank and the east bank containing mostly newer developments, save for some historic temples (see Figure 5). Three streets run parallel to one another along the western bank and are simply called Roads 1, 2, and 3 (with Road 1 being closest to the river). Alleys run between these streets, now called Roads 1.5 and 2.5. Part of Road 1.5 was once known as “buffalo alley” due to the free roaming cows and water buffalo that would graze nearby, and is now home to several restaurants and other businesses that openly reference the road’s former usage. Road 2.5 is the busiest street for tourists and contains most of the restaurants and art shops for which Battambang City is known.

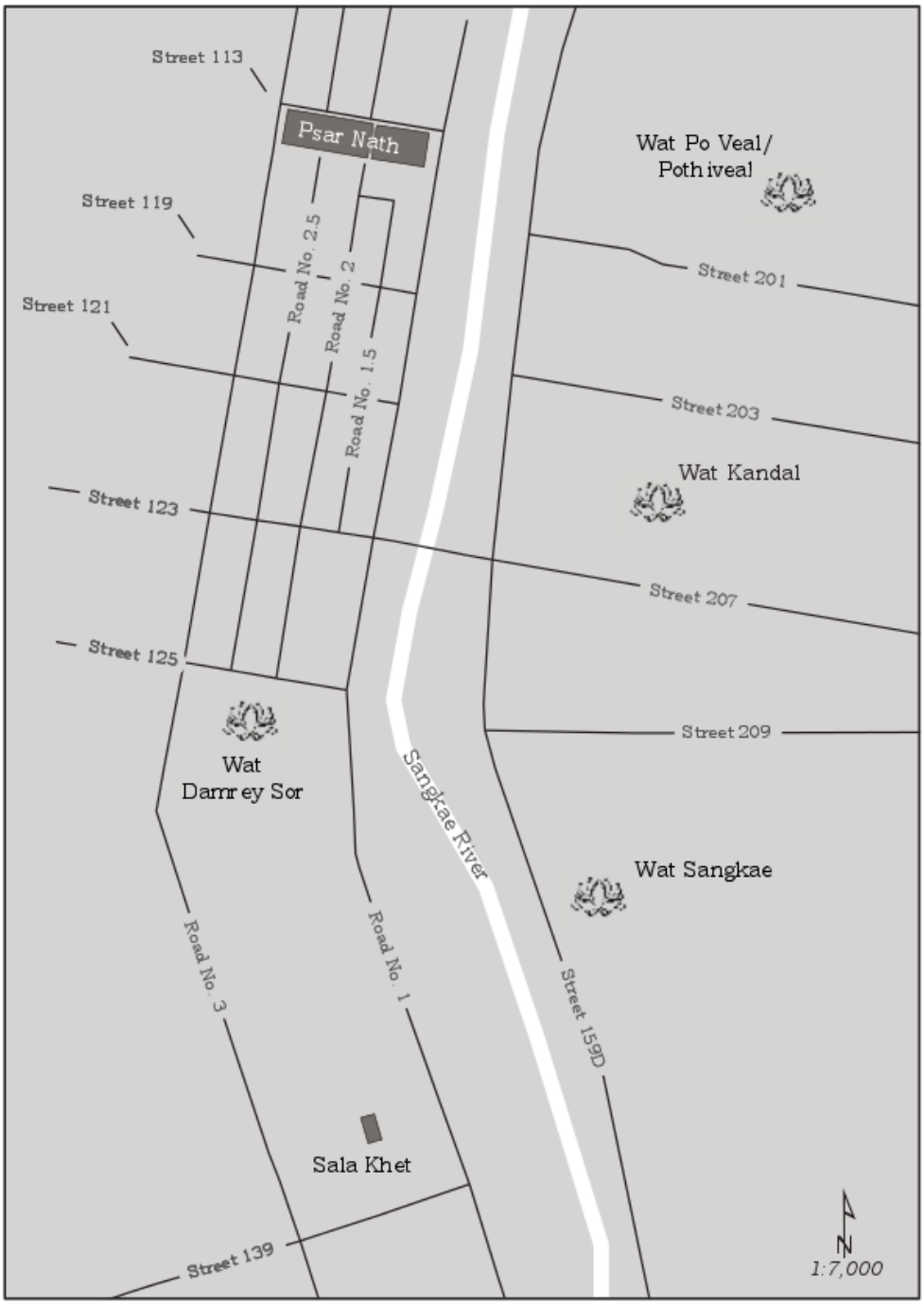


Figure 5 - Simplified map of downtown Battambang City

Perpendicular to Roads 1-3 are a set of streets that stretch from the river's edge towards and, in some cases slightly beyond, Road 3. Thus, downtown Battambang City is a simple grid system that is extremely easy to traverse on foot or by bicycle, moto, or tuk-tuk. The most famous of these cross-streets is Street 121, which I privately refer to as The Great White Way, both because it has been built up with electrical lights and signage for tourists, and because it is where you are most likely to find Euro-American visitors (who are, of course, not exclusively white).

This street contains a multitude of popular restaurants that run the gamut of international cuisines and include the renowned White Rose and its neighboring unnamed Chinese noodle shop, two of the most famous restaurants in this part of Cambodia. On this street you can eat Khmer street food, Chinese dumplings, French crepes, American-style doughnuts, and much more. The intersections of The Great White Way with Roads 1-3 are always sites of social interaction, particularly where the Way crosses with Roads 2 and 2.5. Here you can find a Chinese language school for the area's affluent children, as well art galleries, massage parlors, and cooking classes. At sundown, this area becomes a bustling place of social activity, and often my fieldwork consisted of little else than sitting down at an outdoor restaurant or on a street cart stool and conversing with the passersby. Yet, in those moments, the pulse of Battambang's increasingly cosmopolitan self are felt most clearly.

At the northern end of the heritage district is Psar Nath, the central market.[22] Built on the site designated as a market space during the *Lōk Mjah* period, the current market was designed by the same French architecture team who were responsible for the more famous Psar Thmei in Phnom Penh (Grant Ross 2000; Biljard 2011: 46). To the south end of the heritage district is the

[22] ផ្សារថ្មី

Sala Khet, former mansion of *Lōk Mjah* Chhum Aphaiwong, as well as the historic post office, the Battambang Provincial Museum, and a garden near which vendors sell street food at night. While Battambang extends far beyond those areas, some of which we will explore later, the heritage district is the beating heart of the city and the center of its tourism industry, acting as the hub of thematic tourism in a similar manner to how Sleeping Beauty Castle anchors the hub of Disneyland from which guests may venture out into other genres of exploration.

The political geography of Battambang City can also be mapped throughout the heritage district. The Sala Khet ("Provincial House") is actually two buildings with the same name. The original Sala Khet was built in the early 1900s to house the *Lōk Mjah* and his court. It remains what is most commonly known as the Sala Khet, although it stood empty for many years until it became a museum in 2018. Sharing its ground slightly to the north is the modern Sala Khet, which is more often referred to in English as the "Governor's Office." This taller building houses the current governor, as well as offices, conference halls, and meeting rooms for usage by the government when it sees fit. Notably, this building is also where Prime Minister Hun Sen often meets with and addresses local administration when he is in town, as the complex is surrounded by a large iron fence with a guard gate.

Directly across the street, outside of the walled grounds of the Sala Khet, are the offices of the Provincial Department of Tourism and its Director. Although a small cramped space, the office occupies an old French colonial building that was once the regional headquarters of Norodom Ranariddh's FUNCINPEC party and is the closest of any administrative office to the Sala Khet. In fact, the keys to the original Sala Khet are not held in the Governor's Office but by

the Director. These factors demonstrate the symbolic importance of the Provincial Department of Tourism and of the Director himself.

Both the Director and the Governor at the time of my research appear numerous times in this study to represent tourism politics and legislation.[23] The Governor was immensely popular and played much of a servant leadership role. Tall, with short cropped hair and glasses that made his eyes seem small and soft, the Governor is a reserved man who I never once heard raise his voice, although everyone listened attentively whenever he spoke.

The Director, on the other hand, was appointed head of the tourism department before the Governor arrived in Battambang. Despite his immense political influence, the Director is a much more controversial figure with a contentious relationship with much of the local population (2016 "Thom"). Although I feel he is not given due credit for the initiatives he created that have a positive impact on the tourism industry, his negative reputation is a factor that constantly hovers over my discussion of tourism development in the local government, and the tension between these two men underscores much of my later discussion of government tourism initiatives.

**The Tourism Cycle**

Like most tourism-dependent societies, Battambang follows a tourism cycle that causes foreign visitation numbers to wax and wane throughout the year. Much like my American hometown of Myrtle Beach, which depends on high income during the summer beach season to

---

[23] Like most ethnographers, I utilize pseudonyms and other tactics to anonymize most of my informants, save for the usage of titles to describe these two public figures.

sustain the town through the ghost town conditions of the winter months, Battambang's tourism cycle functions much like the process of respiration. Beginning in August, tourists start arriving in greater numbers and the city inhales the life-giving resources they bring with them. In late April, following the annual New Year celebration earlier that month, the city exhales as tourist arrivals slow, with people spending their money carefully until they are nearly stretched thin, anxiously awaiting the next inhale. Although the city is never entirely devoid of tourists and certain businesses can still make respectable profits in the slow months, most businesses must carefully strategize spending to ensure survival through the slower months. The same can be said of nearly any tourism community, although the particulars of the tourist season are unique to Battambang in this case.

Within the cycle of tourism are several important holidays that complicate the matter. Cambodia enjoys an abundance of holidays throughout the year and many of them are cause for travel amongst the Cambodian populace. National holidays are one method for encouraging domestic tourism, particularly at times when the flow of foreign tourists is ebbing (Vannak 2017). The two most important holidays for tourism in Battambang are Khmer New Year, which occurs every April, and the Pchum Ben 'Hungry Ghost' festival that occurs in the fall (Chandara & Sokhorng 2015; 2017 "Cambodia: Tourists"). Both holidays last much longer than the calendar implies, often resulting in at least a full week off from work for most Cambodians. While Khmer New Year is becoming an increasingly popular holiday for domestic travel, both holidays are usually occasions for Cambodians to visit their family homes, often returning to the villages from urban areas if they have moved away for work. Similarly, both holidays involve large parties and increased spending on food and general revelry. While not strictly tourism in

the sense of visiting a site for the purpose of entering the self into the experience, these holidays make use of the tourism infrastructure - transportation, restaurants, hotels, etc. - and often include people visiting places with their families to engage in many similar activities to foreign tourism.

Other important celebrations include International New Year (December 31st), the Ohm Tūk Water Festival in October, Valentine's Day (February 14th), and increasingly Christmas (December 24th-25th). The primary difference between these holidays and the two major ones listed above is that, beyond the ritualistic differences, these holidays are centered around the downtown urban core. International New Year and Ohm Tūk, in particular, result in massive parties of over 100,000 people (overwhelmingly Cambodian nationals) cramming the waterfront of Battambang City's heritage district. Other major Cambodian holidays, particularly religious holidays like Kathin (often October) and Vissak Bochea (April/May), are important but far less public and do not result in the same masses of tourists as do the other holidays. The most controversial holiday is Victory Over Genocide Day, which occurs every January 7th. The holiday celebrates the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979 and is often used as a political tool by Prime Minister Hun Sen, who likes to take credit for his role in influencing the Vietnamese to disrupt the regime. Residents of Battambang despise January 7th both because they often dislike the pro-Hun Sen narrative and because they were not liberated from the Khmer Rouge until long after 1979, meaning that January 7th holds no symbolic importance to them. Still, the time off often encourages Cambodians from elsewhere to travel to Battambang and engage in touristic activities (Chan 2018b).

These holidays also help to disperse income made from tourism from urban to rural areas and vice versa. During International New Year and Ohm Tūk, hundreds of thousands of dollars are spent in the heritage district of Battambang City by visitors who travel from nearby villages or even distant provinces for the celebration. Later, during Khmer New Year and Pchum Ben, the vendors who work within the city often travel to those same nearby villages and distant provinces to visit relatives, ensuring that the cycle of spending affects each area over the course of the year. As several of these holidays fall within the leaner months of foreign tourist season, the holiday schedule keeps money flowing throughout the community in a manner that, with careful planning, helps everyone make ends meet.

Income is also bolstered by the increasing numbers of foreign tourists traveling to Cambodia in recent years. These foreigners do not behave homogeneously, however, and there are significant differences in tourist behavior divided largely by nationality. In 2009, the largest group of foreigners visiting Cambodia were the Vietnamese with 14.63% of the market share (2009 "Tourism Statistics"). However, this statistic is misleading because it relies on a tally of foreigners who purchased a tourist visa at the border - which anyone visiting the country for less than thirty days does whether they are tourists or not. For example, many business travelers will buy a tourist visa if their work trip only constitutes a short stay because a business visa is much more expensive and intended for longer stays. Furthermore, national statistics differ greatly from the lived reality of Battambang, in which my statistical analysis of regional tourism sites revealed that the Vietnamese made up only 0.3% of the tourism arrivals to Battambang in 2016.

Similarly, although the Chinese have since displaced the Vietnamese as the top tourist group, Chinese tourism is not yet well established in Battambang nor is it a primary concern for

the government (see Winter et al 2009; 2017 “China overtakes”; 2018 “Chinese tourists”). Although the Chinese do travel through Battambang and occasionally stop there as part of package tours, they are almost always guided by Chinese-backed tourism companies that are not based in Battambang and adhere purely to Chinese-owned businesses. To the Director, pursuing Chinese tourists is not worthwhile because their money goes solely to the Chinese or to those with whom they do business, and there are not yet many avenues for Cambodians to satisfactorily profit from them (Connor 2019).

As of 2016, Chinese nationals represent only 4-5% of Battambang’s tourism industry and are primarily representative of the packaged day tour, not the thematic experiences which the region is employing to attract longer term guests. However, the Chinese are an inevitability in Cambodia and have continued to spread throughout the country, dramatically increasing the number of Chinese tourists and businesses that cater to them in almost every province. As Prime Minister Hun Sen cozies up to the Chinese in an effort to distance Cambodia from America and other western nations, Cambodian tourism increasingly relies on Chinese visitation (2017 “China Cashes”). Although the Chinese play only a small role in this current study of Battambang’s tourism industry, they will eventually represent their own strain of thematic tourism that will require reevaluation.

Instead of the Chinese, tourism in Battambang is dominated by the French, who represent approximately 20% of the tourism market. French interest in Battambang can be traced to the legacy of French Indochina and the fact that Battambang City’s heritage district is considered one of the most pristine collections of Indochinese architecture still standing in Cambodia. As I discuss in Chapter 5, much of the city’s organization and most important buildings are actually

from the earlier Siamese-supported *Lōk Mjah* period, but locals purposefully promote an ambiguity about their provenance so as to appeal to the tourists who wish to experience old Indochina, something most French tourists openly admit influences their decision to travel to Battambang. Most of these foreign guests are unaware that Battambang was controlled by the French for a significantly shorter time than the rest of Cambodia.

Other significant nationalities include the United Kingdom with 14.5%, Australia and the Netherlands each with 9%, and Belgium with 7.5%. The USA is rather low in the rankings, averaging about 4.6%. Beyond these statistics, the largest tourism group in Battambang remains the domestic market of Cambodian travelers, estimated to represent some 80% of the tourists in Battambang depending on the month (Vannak 2018).[24] This figure is not supported by statistical research, but is the official estimate given by the provincial government and with which I agree based on my observations.

Visitors to Battambang usually travel by bus or long-range 'taxi', which is often an older Toyota Camry into which up to eight people cram themselves.[25] From Phnom Penh, the bus ride averages about six hours, whereas a speeding taxi can arrive in only four. From Siem Reap, the bus takes three hours and a taxi only two to two and a half. Foreign guests have several options for reaching Cambodia en route to Battambang, either via the Phnom Penh airport (by far the most popular option), the Siem Reap airport, or by bus through one of the border crossings (the

---

[24] Unlike the other nationalities, domestic Cambodians are not included in official tourism statistics, and thus the 80% estimate is separate from addition bonding the other nations. In other words, all other nations may add up to 100% of official tourism in Battambang, but constitute only 20% of actual visitation to most regional tourist sites, with domestic tourists representing the majority 80%.

[25] Recently, newer vehicles like Lexus SUVs have become available, making the experience far more enjoyable.

Poipet/Aranyaprathet crossing with Thailand to the north being the most popular entrance by land) (2018 "Airports in Cambodia"; 2018 "Cambodia Airports"). The Director has been attempting to promote some new border crossings that go directly from Thailand into Battambang Province, but most foreign tourists remain unaware of these options and tour bus companies are not yet utilizing them (Chakrya 2017). Battambang operated its own regional airport for commercial flights before the Khmer Rouge (and sporadically throughout the later 1990s), but while the tarmac and control tower still exist, the runway is now only occasionally used for military transport (Nhean 2018). Instead, crowds gather on the airstrip at night for picnics, social gatherings, and to race souped-up cars and motorcycles. The Governor talked often about reopening the airport, but to date no plans have gone forth to bring that vision to fruition.

Although the roads are much better than a decade ago and Battambang is accessible from the major tourist locations around Cambodia in at most half a day, attracting foreign visitors to Battambang remains a challenge. Many tourists who rely on word of mouth or outdated travel guides (for which old internet information has proven troublesome) hear tales of how difficult the roads are to Battambang and avoid the place. Even those that know that the roads have been repaved still hesitate to visit the region because they do not want to sacrifice half a day of their vacation to travel. The Governor considers the difficulty in attracting tourists to Battambang the largest obstacle for developing the region, and he (accurately) believes the problem to be one not only of overcoming the region's prior reputation for inaccessibility but also that foreign tourists often only stay in Cambodia for a short time and are thus unwilling to explore beyond the major tourist sites. For many years following the fall of the Khmer Rouge, most tourists visited

Cambodia as part of a tour of mainland Southeast Asia. Typical package tours offered (and still offer) a tour of Vietnam, Laos, and/or Thailand with only a handful of days in Cambodia, usually only to visit Angkor Wat. The Cambodian government has actively sought to increase the length of stays for tourists, and the Governor likewise hopes to entice travelers to devote the majority, if not all, of their journey to Cambodia by providing alternatives to the offerings in Siem Reap and Phnom Penh. In that sense, every theme and tourist attraction in the chapters to follow should be understood as providing alternatives unique to Battambang that aim to help tourists envision Cambodia as a primary focus for travel, thus benefitting more people than just the residents of Battambang in a manner of dedifferentiating consumption indicative of Disneyization.

**Tourism Problems and Initiatives**

The Governor and the Director agree on one important issue: Battambang should be developed with tourism in mind because it is a prime candidate for success in that industry. Both men are involved with an ongoing application to have Battambang City's heritage district listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site - a designation they believe will radically transform Battambang. Although the city's history and architecture almost certainly fit the requirements for UNESCO status, the government is still disorganized and unprepared to manage a heritage site. In early 2016, for example, even while UNESCO observers were in Battambang for meetings about how to proceed with the applications, the website for Battambang's Provincial Department of Tourism had expired due to lack of usage and redirected the user to a pornographic website. Additionally, as I will discuss further in the next chapter, much of the heritage district's colonial buildings are covered in electronic signage for shops and restaurants,

and the government continues to struggle with how to restore these buildings to their former glory.

Nor are there any reliable data that demonstrate trends in Battambang's tourism industry, an important part of the appeal to UNESCO. The Director often lamented his inability to gather tourist statistics due to financial limitations and a shortage of labor. Additionally, the few attempts he has made to gather statistics have been stymied by dishonesty. In one such example, the Director performs a monthly survey to determine how many guests have registered at each hotel. Few hotel operators accurately report their figures, fearful that doing so would result in demands for increased kickbacks or bribes (a concern not without precedent). The Director estimates that the figures he receives are as little as 40% of the total number of guests actually in Battambang at any given time, a number I was able to confirm by interviewing several hotel operators privately. These types of problems are common for statistical research in the region. Finally, the few studies provided by the central government are also deeply flawed, as they follow strictly bureaucratic requirements for defining "tourism" and often ignore on-the-ground engagement. There remains no trustworthy study of tourism statistics in Battambang, and even my own survey is limited by a reliance on untrained aides and needs a comparative follow-up study in order to be conclusive.

Another significant factor that complicates tourism development in Battambang is a lack of communication between foreign business leaders in town and the Provincial Government. Although foreign expatriates are a relatively small percentage of the population of Battambang, they own an abundance of businesses in the heritage district - especially near the Great White Way and Road 2.5. Aside from the Director, who speaks excellent English but purposefully

avoids most foreigners living in Battambang because he does not see them as being necessary for the growth of tourism in the region, almost no one involved with the Provincial Government speaks English. Some of them can speak limited French, but the foreign community in Battambang is rather strictly divided between English and French speakers and the French have not shown much interest in involving themselves with the government. Many members of the English community, on the other hand, often lamented their lack of status to me. One hotel operator exclaimed, "We do so much for this town. We put Battambang on the map for foreigners to come here, but no one ever involves us in tourism meetings or event planning. The city should be grateful to us and ask for our advice in how best to develop tourism." This claim is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the importance of foreign tourism to Battambang, which is necessary for attracting UNESCO but is not nearly as profitable as focusing on domestic tourism (see Di Giovine 2008). Generally speaking, though, the complaint is correct - the Governor and the Director had little regard for the opinions of non-Cambodians and assumed that if they developed tourism in Battambang along thematic terms pleasing to Cambodians, foreigners would simply follow along.

After a large meeting to discuss plans for the 2016 International New Years party to which only two foreigners were invited - an Australian representative of a local university with close ties to the Director, and myself - the English community decided to form their own organization to discuss how to better engage with the city government. Three meetings took place over 2016 and were immediately problematic. Much of Battambang's English and French communication occurs via an email chain (or LISTSERV), and an email was sent out to the entire community about the meeting. The email said that the meeting would only be conducted

in English, which immediately drew complaints from the French and Cambodian community, and an inquiry from an English-speaking Cambodian tour shop owner about whether or not he could attend was met with a public rejection. I spoke with the tour shop owner afterwards, who was livid over the arrogance displayed by the group. As he summarized, "This is why the government does not care about foreigners. They do not care about us first."

The first meeting took place in a restaurant and had low attendance. The immediate issue of concern was the response to the email, and the group eventually agreed to allow anyone who wanted to attend to do so, although they insisted that the meetings should remain in English using the argument that more people would know English than any other language. The meeting proceeded to discuss the ultimate goal of the group: to earn the respect and attention of the local government by offering their services to assist in the tourism development of the city under the banner of a shared community in which everyone was invested. The second meeting took place a month later on the patio of a local hotel and was attended by far fewer individuals. A Khmer man and his French wife attended and contributed to the conversation, which mostly focused on how to be more active in planning future festivals.

While many excellent ideas about creating multilingual pamphlets for tourists that explained the festivals, as well as setting up booths to represent local shops, were discussed, the meetings stalled at how to approach the government. When the suggestion arose to nominate both a foreign and Cambodian spokesperson for the group to make contact and create dialogue with the government, it was immediately dismissed. No one wanted to volunteer for such a timely position, and it was clear that few people believed having a Cambodian national on the team was necessary. One attendee even argued that the government officials should know

English well enough to deal with them, even after I told them that no one in the governor's office could speak it (the suggestion of talking to the Director having already been outright rejected because of previous negative encounters some business leaders had had with him). The second meeting ended with decent ideas, but not with an organized plan for accomplishing them.

The third meeting took place in a local cafe and was exceptionally well attended. Several individuals complained that the second meeting was not well publicized, explaining why no one showed up. However, the larger size quickly proved to be a net negative as everyone began talking over everyone else. As there was no appointed moderator, since the creation of such a position would result in bickering over who should be in charge, the meeting was rarely put to order. When conversation did ensue, the resolutions of the previous meeting were mostly overturned by those who were not involved in making them and the meeting devolved into petty arguments over whose ideas were better that reflected the gossipy and harshly competitive nature of the expatriate community. Although a few good ideas did arise, such as restarting publication on an English language 'zine' to inform visitors about local goings on, nothing came of it. The meetings quickly fizzled out and people settled back into their regular routine. As it stands, the government remains relatively uninvolved with the foreign community, and the foreign community makes little effort to engage with officials on terms familiar to Cambodian business culture.

**The Tourism That Isn't**

To this point, I have focused on Battambang as it appeared and operated during my research in 2016. But the symbolic economy in Battambang is also interesting to analyze in

terms of what was (and often is still) not emphasized by local actors despite the potential that exists. As later chapters focus primarily on how locals shape tourism past and present, I want to take a brief moment now to remark on aspects of tourism that do not receive much attention from locals despite future tourist potential.

The most obvious gap in tourism is the marketing of regional cuisine. Despite the global popularity of food-related tourism (especially in the era of photo-friendly social media), regional cuisine is not a major concern for most local tourism operators even though Battambang does have food traditions and unique dishes for which the city is known (Bunthoeun 2019; Carruthers 2019). For example, exclusive to Battambang is *songwak*, a type of smoky-sour steamed fish wrapped in banana leaf that is cooked nightly along the bank of the Sangkae River. Cambodians from all over the nation readily identify the particular cooking style and flavors of *songwak* as belonging to Battambang, but local businesses are hesitant to advertise the dish to tourists because it is considered a light snack by Cambodians and not an entrée. In speaking with the Director about food tourism and the potential to market *songwak*, he dismissed such ideas because "*Songwak* is not enough for a meal and I do not want tourists to be hungry. Besides, foreigners do not know how to eat Khmer food.[26] It is too difficult for them." Such categorizations of foreigners as not having the ability to eat Khmer food are typical in Cambodia and are often used to justify why non-Cambodians, including the neighboring Thai and Lao, dislike Cambodian cuisine. In this case, regional cuisine is not yet envisioned as a touristic

[26] His exact words for "do not know" use the Khmer word *che/*ឆេះ, which in this usage means "cannot handle or stomach," a common phrase in Cambodian for this type of topic.

device, although I suspect many tourists would be interested to compare Battambang's speciality foods like *songwak* to those they can find elsewhere.

Food tourism is also hindered by the Deny-the-Thai movement, discussed in Chapter 5, as there are many Thai influences on the cuisine of Battambang that are downplayed by the local population. Authors Robert Carmack and Morrison Polkinghorne, who are known for their knowledge of Southeast Asian cuisine and their award winning cookbook *The Burma Cookbook: Recipes from the Land of a Million Pagodas*, argue that Battambang's spice palette is strikingly similar to that of the Thai and provides a much more exciting feast for the tastebuds than foods from other regions of Cambodia (Harrelson 2015; Carmack & Morrison 2014). As Carmack summarizes, "In my opinion as a chef, Chanthaburi [Thailand] may have different food, but the palette is so similar to Battambang – a type of sweet common to both places that you don't find much elsewhere. They pair well, which is not always true of other places." The potential thus exists to market regional dishes based on this relationship, either as a direct reference to the *Lōk Mjah* era or simply to illustrate the blending of cultures in a contested region. Unfortunately, given the active efforts to downplay Thai influence in any arena, such a campaign seems highly unlikely (see Chapter 5).

Another potentially lucrative and important avenue for tourist development is appealing to Cambodians abroad (Vannak 2016). During my 2016 research period, I befriended Phatry Derek Pan, a thirty six year old Cambodian-American man who had returned to Battambang to serve time as an ordained monk at Wat Kampong Perl, where his father had also been ordained many years ago. Pan is also the founder and CEO of Khmerican, an online community with nearly 90,000 members devoted to Cambodians who live outside of Cambodia. Of particular

interest to Pan are the children of refugees or people who, like himself, were born in the refugee camps outside of Cambodia following the fall of the Khmer Rouge. As Pan summarizes, "I've visited most Khmer communities in the USA, and my feeling is that 65-70% of Khmer-Americans come from Battambang. It's an overwhelming amount that have roots in Battambang, for sure. One theory is that because Battambang is closer to the Thai border and the refugee camps, people from here could get to freedom more easily. But beyond that, I really don't understand why the majority of Khmer identify so strongly with Battambang…and it is quite a strong connection." Pan believes that many of these Cambodians abroad want to return to their homeland to reconnect with their heritage and culture, especially among the youth who have never visited, and he personally leads tours to the country for those individuals whenever possible.

Pan believes that Battambang could one day become the main hub for Cambodians abroad to return and visit their ancestral homeland. For one, many of the individuals who left have family still living in Battambang that they have not seen since the 1970s or 1980s. Such reconnections are powerful motivators for visiting the region. Additionally, the Khao-I-Dang Holding Center, where many members of the Cambodian diaspora were held before being permanently resettled elsewhere, sits just within the Thai border some two hours drive from Battambang, making it possible to do a day trip there from Battambang and back. Pan himself visited the camp in such a manner and remarked on Battambang's potential for becoming the center of tourism devoted to returning refugees, although he is currently developing other aspects of his business elsewhere since his disrobing from the monkhood.

Battambang already has more interaction with the Cambodian diaspora than most other areas of the nation through Cambodian returnees. Over the past several years, and worsening under the forty-fifth President, the government of the United States of America is expelling Cambodian descendants for crimes committed in their youth (2017 "Made in Khmerica"). Many Cambodian-Americans must navigate the precarious landscape of being a poor minority in America where gang activities are common. Unfortunately, many Cambodian Americans are not considered full citizens of the United States because they entered as refugees, meaning that convictions for crimes can be used against them as justification for deportation. Because so many forced returnees share familial connections with Battambang, they often relocate to the region so that they can receive assistance in guiding their way through a country that most have never visited before. Although no official statistics exist, members of the local Cambodian returnee population estimate that Battambang is home to approximately 300 such individuals, about half of the total number of returnees in Cambodia.

Cambodian returnees usually struggle to adapt to the Cambodian way of life and face significant prejudice from locals, as they are often seen to be 'gangsters' because of their past crimes. The Battambang government actively shuns them and blames them for violence. During my most recent fieldwork in 2016, for example, two returnees got into an argument at a local bar that resulted in a knife fight that killed one of the men (2016 "Anut"). A sombre mood took over the town for several weeks as the police hunted for the killer, and gossip spread quickly about the danger presented by Cambodian returnees (Chakrya 2016). The local news sensationalized the account to imply that these men were forming local gangs and planning to commit mass violence, although witnesses to the scene said it was a simple bar fight between two men that

escalated to an unfortunate degree. At one point, a member of the governor's office told me that Cambodian returnees "aren't even real Khmer" because they do not speak the local language fluently and are often covered in "gangster tattoos," which have negative connotations in traditional culture.

Yet, while conflicts involving returnees such as this unfortunate incident do rarely occur, these generalizations ignore the positive role that many returnees play in shaping Battambang, especially regarding its tourism economy (2017 "Exiled"). As liminal individuals who embody both Cambodian and foreign languages and cultural attitudes, returnees are prime candidates for creating tourism businesses that help connect different cultural perspectives. A shining example of this type of effort is Ry, a forty year old man whose family left Cambodia for California as refugees and who became a good friend during my 2016 research trip (Crane 2016). In his youth, Ry joined a gang and became involved in violent activities, ultimately being arrested for carjacking, burglary, and drug dealing. He served a total of eleven and a half years in prison before being released and trying to turn his life around. Unfortunately, because he was categorized as a refugee, his conviction came back to haunt him.

As he describes,

> "One day ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement) called me and told me to report to their office to be deported. I gave away my things and told my family, and eventually went to the office. They kept me in a detention center for two months and then sent me back, warning me that they'd shoot me if I ran. When I got [to Cambodia], the police picked me up at the airport and brought me to their station and yelled at me about how inconvenient I am and a burden on society and all that. Honestly, I don't even know what all they said because they spoke Khmer so fast. When they let me go, I was lost and depressed because I didn't know anyone here and had no money. I was just walking down the street one day and before I knew it, I was in a country I'd never been to before. All because of a stupid crime from when I was a kid, and I served my time for it but that doesn't seem to matter in America. It's like if they brought you to Russia one

> day and said, 'Oh, you've never been to Russia, you don't speak Russian, too fucking bad' and drop you off forever. It's bullshit."

Ry moved into an uncle's house in Battambang and spent several years in a state of depression. "But one day, I figured, fuck it, I'm here and I'll go crazy just thinking about it all day, so I decided to get off my ass and do something." He was allowed to work in the kitchen of a friend's restaurant and learned how to make food. Eventually, he found a passion for making sandwiches and decided to buy a street cart to push around town and sell food. His business was successful for a time, and he started making sandwiches that other shops did not offer, such as his specialty Cuban (Wilson 2016). After about a year, another friend hired him to be the cook at a local hostel, with the understanding that Ry could operate his part of the business independently. He eventually earned enough money to open his own shop on one of the heritage district's busiest streets. His sandwich shop has some of the highest TripAdvisor scores of any local business, and his restaurant attracts people from all over the world.

Ry's efforts have helped create a multinational space where people mingle and enjoy cuisine not easily found in other parts of Cambodia, adding layers to the city's kineticism. Additionally, he is friendly and loves good conversation, and many guests learn about important social issues like the deportation problem by talking to him. In this way, Ry can advocate for other returnees through food diplomacy and help educate tourists about the realities of Cambodian daily life. Through individuals like Ry, the Cambodian diaspora and returnees from abroad are also important figures contributing to Battambang's symbolic economy.

**Battambang's Immediate Goals**

Currently, Battambang is awaiting the results of UNESCO's assessment of the city for World Heritage Status, which may take several years to arrive. In the meantime, the Battambang government has set its sights on a more localized goal: direct competition with the southern provinces of Kep and Kampot. Kep and Kampot are considered some of the best off-the-typical-tourist-route locations in Cambodia, and are also renowned for its well-preserved French Indochinese architecture. The Governor considered Kep and Kampot Battambang's most immediate competitors and often singled them out by name as a standard Battambang needed to surpass. In a way, the Governor was shrewd to think this way. Phnom Penh is far too large a metropolis for Battambang to compete against directly in terms of sheer numbers, and nothing in Cambodia will ever vie for tourist power with Siem Reap because Angkor Wat is the primary tourist draw in the country and most certainly will remain so. Kep and Kampot, on the other hand, are smaller areas that are less well known to non-Cambodians and require some travel to visit. Unfortunately, both Kep and Kampot are much closer to Phnom Penh and border the ocean, meaning they offer beaches and fresh seafood to tourists - things Battambang cannot do.

The Governor's solution for overcoming the appeal of Kep and Kampot was to emphasize Battambang's cleanliness and historical complexity. As southern provinces, Kep and Kampot were not part of the Siamese acquisition of Inner Cambodia and, therefore, do not benefit from the historical and artistic narratives that are tied to that period of history. In the Governor's mind, beaches are fun but can be found elsewhere (such as in Cambodia's most popular beach town of Sihanoukville), whereas the experience of Battambang's unique history can only occur in one place. As we shall soon see, his stance has been borne out through the

growing appeal of Battambang as a major tourist destination, although it would be difficult to yet claim that Battambang has surpassed Kep and Kampot permanently. Regardless, the following chapters demonstrate how the people of Battambang have wielded their historical narrative to promote aspects of tourism found nowhere else, often with great success.

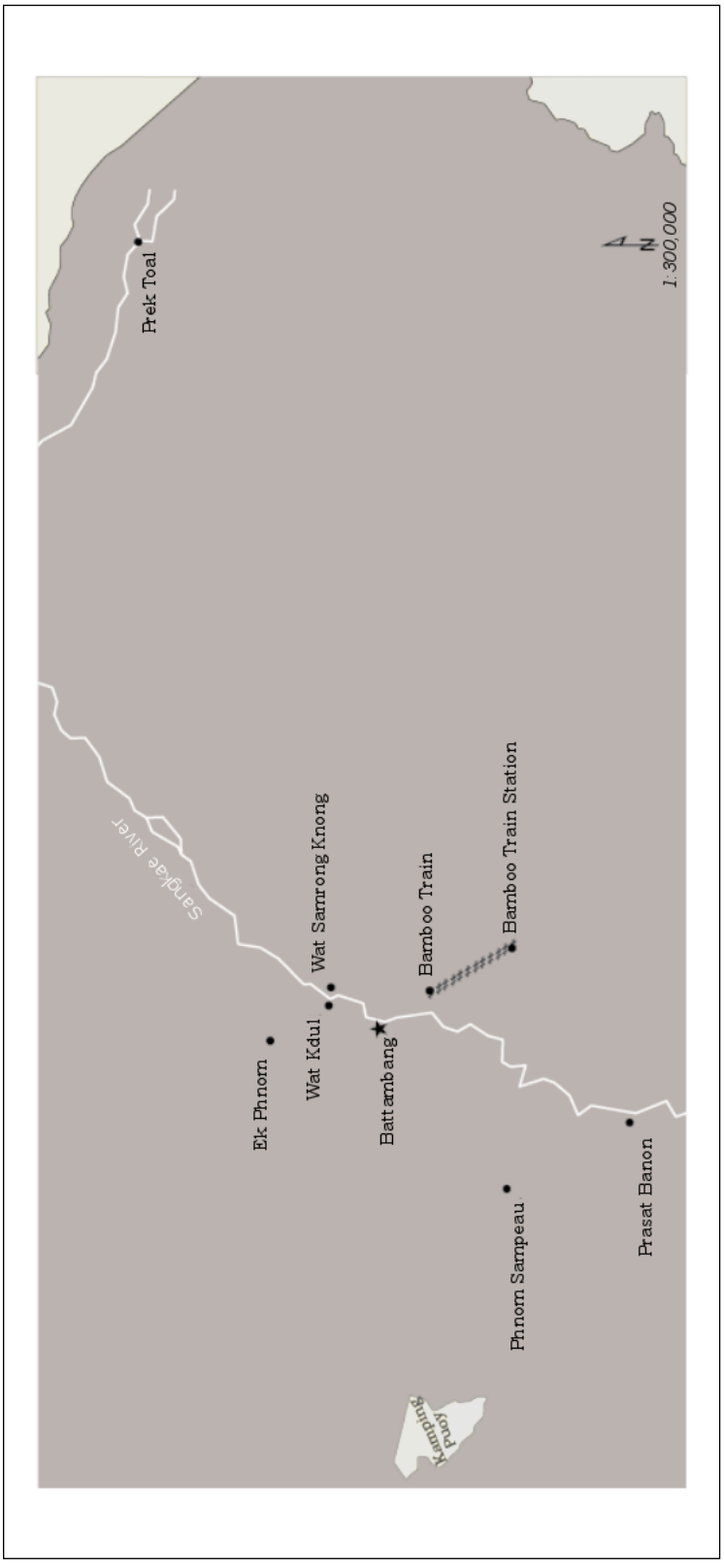


Figure 6 - Important sites around Battambang that will be discussed in later chapters

## Chapter 2
## Dark Tourism in Battambang

Although tourism in Battambang is changing from the wild ways of old to more luxurious experiences, many guests traveling to Cambodia are still fascinated by the violent legacy of the nation's past. The genocidal Khmer Rouge regime and the civil war that continued for years afterwards left numerous mass graves and sites of conflict across the country that tourists regularly visit. The most famous sites are Tuol Sleng Prison, a former high school turned detention center where some ~17,000 people were tortured and interrogated, and the Choeung Ek Killing Fields where the victims of Tuol Sleng were killed and buried in mass graves, both in Phnom Penh (Violi 2012: 46).[1] More recently, the cremation site of Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot in Anlong Veng along the country's northern border with Thailand has also become a popular tourist destination for locals and foreigners alike. Locals pray to the ghost of Pol Pot to intervene on their behalf and ensure them good luck in the lottery, while foreigners go in part to photograph local veneration of the dead extremist (Fitch Little & Muong 2015; Titthara 2016). All of these activities are forms of 'dark tourism', a term that encompasses a wide range of activities involving tourist visitation to sites of death or tragedy, and which is responsible for some of the earliest tourism in Cambodia (Stone 2005; see Vonow 2016).

Dark tourism is a highly controversial practice, particularly at sites related to genocide and murder (Deluyas 2016; Reid 2016). Journalist Elizabeth Becker, who was one of the few foreign journalists permitted to enter Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge regime and whose colleague was murdered in her hotel on December 22nd, 1978, following a private interview

---

1 Tuol Sleng - ទួលស្លែង, Choeung Ek - ជើងឯក

with Pol Pot, describes how one of the first official acts by the newly created Minister of Tourism in 1993 was to establish dark tourism at Tuol Sleng. Dark tourism, then, is the primary thematic trend for Cambodian tourism in the post-Khmer Rouge era and, as such, is where my exploration of tourism narratives must begin. Becker is unabashedly critical of dark tourism in Cambodia, calling it "utter desecration" and accusing Cambodia's leaders of "[breaking] the cardinal rule of respect" towards the dead (Becker 2013: 107). Her comments echo similar feelings from foreign tourists I have encountered across Cambodia, who sometimes feel that visiting such sites is disrespectful and uncomfortable. Nevertheless, many tourists, domestic and foreign, continue to flock to Cambodia's dark tourist sites regardless of such feelings and the practice is unlikely to disappear anytime soon.

My research shows that, although awkward and uncomfortable for many Cambodians who lived through the decades of violence, dark tourism is often seen as an important educational tool amongst the Cambodian populace (Carruthers 2017). Most elders with whom I spoke about these practices actively hope their descendants will visit such sites in order to learn what happened to them, as formal education about the Khmer Rouge is lacking in the nation's schools. These sites are also encouraged in part because most Khmer Rouge survivors are unsure of how to discuss those events with their children. While many younger Cambodians express a desire to know how their parents and grandparents survived, they often hesitate to ask questions because they feel that discussing the Khmer Rouge could cause their parents mental anguish. On the other hand, elders do not often volunteer much information about their past either because the subject is difficult to broach or because they interpret their children's lack of questions as disinterest. Therefore, many elders express hope that the younger generations will

visit and learn from these sites in ways that are easier and more direct than conversations at home.

While I agree with Becker that the government often exploits dark tourist narratives for financial gain, I am unwilling to fully condemn the practice of dark tourism because I also see acceptance and hopeful expectations amongst the local populace. The problem, in my opinion, is not with dark tourism as a practice but with the mismanagement of dark tourism in these particular places (Carruthers 2017). Changing perspectives away from policy and governance towards the daily lives of those working and interacting with dark tourist sites reveals that, awkward or not, sites of death have great potential to positively affect those who encounter them (Crane 2016b; Bennett 2018). In this chapter, I argue that understanding how foreign guests interact with Cambodia's dark legacy in eras past and present allows for a better appreciation of the manner(s) by which local agents are reshaping tourism towards newer, more positive themes (as reflected in the following chapters).

**The Third Life of the Khmer Rouge**

Regardless of the swirling opinions of critics, dark tourism is undeniably a significant aspect of the Cambodian tourism industry. Though tourists are now often prioritizing other, less historically violent experiences above dark tourism, no discussion of Cambodian tourism is complete without some attention paid to such sites. In Battambang, however, dark tourism is predicated on a different narrative regarding the Khmer Rouge than is found in most official versions of Cambodian history. In the common discourse about Cambodian history, the Khmer Rouge regime is portrayed as a period of occupation from April 1975 to January 1979, at which

point the Vietnamese military entered Cambodia and broke the Khmer Rouge's stranglehold on the nation (Kiernan 1996). While most scholars acknowledge that the Khmer Rouge fled north and continued a guerrilla war until the 1990s, they still focus largely on the period of direct control and mass extermination in the 1970s, and for understandable reasons. That period is, after all, a shocking and psychologically challenging riddle as to how humans could do such things to each other. But such focus also downplays the influence that the Khmer Rouge wielded over certain areas of the country even after 1979. Such narratives are easy to marginalize, as the capital of Phnom Penh was reopened for business relatively quickly after the regime fled the city in 1979, a timeline that is sometimes inappropriately applied to Cambodia as a whole.

The story is told much differently in Battambang, where the Khmer Rouge continued to harass and attack Battambang City and other strategic sites until 1998. When the Khmer Rouge abandoned Phnom Penh in 1979, much of the remaining leadership and their loyal soldiers fled to the mountainous and mineral rich territory of Pailin, then the westernmost part of Battambang Province. The approximately eighty kilometers between Pailin and Battambang City became a no-man's land where any traveler risked stepping on a landmine or being caught in a crossfire between the Khmer Rouge and the national military.

Occasional violence occurred within Battambang City as well. Most notably, a grenade was thrown into the Golden Village Theatre during a film screening in 1992, killing several people and injuring dozens more (see also 1990 "Attack"; Erlanger 1989).[2] The danger presented by the Khmer Rouge's proximity to Battambang and the occasional violence that

---

[2] Ironically and as if history is going full circle, the Golden Village is the same theatre which was repainted and used as a backdrop in Angelina Jolie's movie *First They Killed My Father*, itself about the fall of Phnom Penh to the Khmer Rouge (discussed in Chapter 4).

resulted kept Battambang preoccupied by the Khmer Rouge long after 1979. Although the Khmer Rouge morphed from an oppressive regime into a poorly-defined terrorist organization, their threat kept Battambang off-limits to most outsiders for a full 19 years after Phnom Penh began its restoration. For this reason, amongst others, Battambang's rapid transformation into a tourist destination is all the more remarkable - the city has built a symbolic economy that competes ideologically (if not financially) with Phnom Penh despite the larger metropolis having nearly twice as long to develop. To be clear, dark tourism is not the preferred narrative for the provincial government to promote in its tourism campaigns. Nevertheless, the unique framing of Battambang's historical interaction with the Khmer Rouge - as a recent terrorist war as opposed to a genocidal regime a generation removed - allows Battambang's dark tourist sites to expand upon and provide fresh appeal to dark tourist themes found elsewhere.

**Sailing Ship Mountain**

Although there are numerous Khmer Rouge sites in Battambang Province, the two most prominent for dark tourism are Phnom Sampeau and Wat Samrong Knong, colloquially known (in English) as Sailing Ship Mountain and the Well of Shadows respectively.[3] When I first arrived in Battambang in 2009, Phnom Sampeau was arguably the most popular tourist destination in the area for foreigners, in large part because of the mountain's well-advertised connection to the Khmer Rouge. At first glance, Phnom Sampeau appears to be a geological anomaly - a one hundred-meter-tall craggy mountain surrounded by flat rice paddies and only the

[3] Phnom Sampeau - ភ្នំសំពៅ, often spelled Sampov; Wat Samrong Knong - វត្តសំរោងក្នុង, often spelled Samroung.

Figure 7 - Phnom Sampeau at Sunset

occasional small hill for as far as the eye can see (see Figure 7). Befitting this imposing visage, Phnom Sampeau is the primary dark tourist destination in Battambang. During the reign of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s, Phnom Sampeau was desecrated as a killing site for prisoners. The numerous caves and air shafts that once astonished religious devotees were converted into mass graves as the Khmer Rouge found it more cost effective to throw prisoners to their deaths from atop these tall caves and let their bodies gather inside the mountain than to pay for expensive ammunition. The bones of the victims that collected in these caves later

became a contentious issue when the Khmer Rouge fled west and established the Provisional Government of National Union and National Salvation of Cambodia (PNGUNSC) in 1994.

This unrecognized government led by former Khmer Rouge commanders established its capital in Pailin, then a part of Battambang Province, some 80 kilometers west of Phnom Sampeau, with the mountain directly between their headquarters and Battambang City. As investigations into the Khmer Rouge heated up in the 1990s, eventually becoming the Khmer Rouge Tribunal (formally the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia or ECCC), Phnom Sampeau became a compromising cache of evidence against the Khmer Rouge. An oft-repeated story claims that Ieng Thirith, wife of the Khmer Rouge's "Brother Number Three" Ieng Sary, began offering cash rewards for anyone who could steal the bones from Phnom Sampeau and bring them to her in Pailin for destruction. For this reason, the remains of the dead at Phnom Sampeau were gathered and placed in mortsafes - large cages with padlocks - where they remain today.[4]

Stepping into a space of torture and mass death is a powerful experience anywhere such forms of tourism exist, but there is something particularly disturbing about the bone-filled cages of Phnom Sampeau that captivates tourists. Seeing the skeletal remains of victims who died as tortured prisoners still locked up in cages even in death is an ideologically and emotionally challenging experience, and one that promotes much debate amongst tourists and locals. The obvious complaint is that the remains should be put to rest and not showcased as a tourist experience, and indeed it is not uncommon to witness hesitant tourists engaging in a form of

---

[4] Her efforts to destroy evidence did not help Ieng Thirith or her husband. They were eventually arrested and put on trial at the ECCC, but both died in custody prior to the conclusion of their trial.

mental debate about whether or not they can ethically photograph such a scene (although most people eventually do). On more than one occasion have I interviewed tourists at these sites who decry the practice as "inappropriate" or "uncomfortable," even while they are themselves engaged in it. As one British woman in her twenties remarked to me at the Killing Cave of Phnom Sampeau before rushing back to her tour bus, "I don't know if I should be here. These bones are someones' aunts and uncles and brothers and sisters. Aren't they angry that I'm paying to see their dead relatives? I know I would be. I'm very uncomfortable."

Efforts have been made to respectfully arrange many of the bones in a small stupa - a mound-like structure often utilized in Buddhism to hold important relics. This stupa can be locked with a glass door and padlock to protect the remains, but the door is often left open during the day. While some remains are still locked in other cages, the transportation of many of the bones to the stupa helps Cambodians venerate the dead in an appropriate religious setting, and indeed the most prominent killing cave at Phnom Sampeau now has a three-meter golden reclining Buddha and a large prayer mat near its stupa for those wishing to perform rituals or prayers for the dead. Monks from the nearby wat and other helpers from around the district regularly monitor and clean the site, ensuring that even with the presence of tourists the caves are still appropriately cared for as Buddhist spaces.

In part due to this care and attention, I find that objections to such places being popular with tourists is far more likely to come from foreign visitors than Cambodians themselves. Cambodians often claim that dark tourism at Khmer Rouge sites like Phnom Sampeau can be highly educational for both foreigners ignorant of Cambodian history and local youth who did not experience the trauma that their parents and grandparents endured. Furthermore, because

most of the remains are unidentified and many Cambodians do not know where their loved ones are buried, mass killing sites like Phnom Sampeau serve as a specific location for people to visit in order to pray for their dead even when the remains are unidentified. As summarized by one such visiting mourner, a Cambodian woman in her mid-60s, "I cannot prove that my family died here, but I believe they are here because I feel close to them when I come here. I come here to be with my family" (Trew 2020; see also Levine 2010).

Beyond the killing caves, Phnom Sampeau is also one of the few places where tourists can physically interact with the legacy of the post-Democratic Kampuchea civil war that occurred primarily in the Cambodian northwest in the 1980s and 1990s. Another popular local story details that when the Khmer Rouge were forced out of Battambang City following the collapse of their regime, a small troop of rebel soldiers took refuge on a steep hill near Phnom Sampeau. Because the brush was too dense and the hill too steep to make a reasonable charge without risking serious casualties, the Cambodian military decided to set up an outpost on Phnom Sampeau because it offered a clear vantage point over the hill. The conflict soon escalated and the military brought in heavy artillery and shelled the hill, eventually forcing the Khmer Rouge holdouts to surrender.

Although most similar weaponry was removed long ago from other sites of conflict, two massive cannon remain on the path to Phnom Sampeau's peak - an 85 mm divisional gun D-44 and a 76 mm divisional gun M1942 (ZiS-3), both Soviet-made anti-tank guns from World War II (see Figure 8; Swanepoel 2015: 6). The guns are somewhat hidden by dense brush and sit atop concrete foundations pushed back from and slightly above the main road. As such, many tourists pass by the guns without noticing them. Those that do, however, are often fascinated by the

Figure 8 - Macaques Playing on Guns Leftover
from the Cambodian Civil War (Phnom Sampeau)

immense size of the weapons - both of which require multiple people to operate - and that it is possible to touch them and even swing their barrels from side to side. The guns are also popular with young Cambodians who scratch their names into the paint with love notes or other messages, and also serve as a jungle gym of sorts for curious macaques who love to climb and dangle from the weapons.

Phnom Sampeau provides a unique opportunity for guests to interact with this lesser-known period of Cambodia's violent past, but the association of the mountain with violence and death is also having an unintended consequence: the rise of suicide tourism. At certain sites around the globe, the combination of tragedy, narrative, and spirituality can merge into a compelling attraction for those seeking to end their own lives which, in turn, can promote macabre new forms of dark tourism. Such is the case at Aokigahara, also known as the Sea of

Trees or the Suicide Forest, at the northwestern base of Mount Fuji in Japan (Takahashi 1988). According to Japanese folklore, Aokigahara has long housed spirits of death and been considered a liminal space between life and death. Dozens of suicides are committed in the forest every year such that signs begging people to reconsider their actions and seek help are now prevalent in the area. The forest's reputation as a place of death and suicide has also spurned a new movement of dark tourists that visit the area, perhaps hoping to glimpse the items left behind by those entering the forest with no intention of exiting.

While I would not argue that suicide tourism occurs at Phnom Sampeau as frequently or with the same level of nuance as Aokigahara, the site's association with suicide, abandonment, and bad spirits is certainly on the rise. In late June/early July of 2016, several tragic events occurred at Phnom Sampeau that illustrated how powerful a symbol of death the mountain can be in the Cambodian imaginary. First, a minor government official from one of Cambodia's southern provinces shot himself at the top of Phnom Sampeau in a bloody spectacle that consumed local news and gossip for several days. He left behind a note claiming financial and marital trouble, which further stated that he wanted to die far from his home so as to lessen the social stigma that might hurt the rest of his family. Although I could not verify the note's contents due to the police investigation, a member of the provincial police department told me that the note was quite detailed and claimed the man wanted to join with the spirits of his dead relatives, leading the police to conclude the high likelihood that some of his family were either from Battambang or were moved to Battambang and killed during the Khmer Rouge regime.

A few days later, a man and a woman simultaneously jumped to their deaths from the top of Phnom Sampeau. Little public information was released about this event, but locals

speculated that they were either a young couple whose parents disapproved of their relationship or perhaps newlyweds having trouble conceiving a child and under extreme pressure from their families. Regardless, it was a tragic event, especially so soon after the previous suicide.

A week later, a newborn baby only a few days old was found abandoned on the path leading to the top of Phnom Sampeau. The baby had been wrapped in a cloth and tossed in some bushes. The police were uncertain if the intention was to murder the child, given how deep in the bushes the baby had been abandoned, or if the parents hoped others would discover and care for it. Regardless, the infant was quickly treated for its injuries and allegedly adopted by a local couple, and to my knowledge the parents of the child were never located.[5] Officials speculated that the parents could have been a young, unmarried couple acting as tourists in order to abandon their baby in a public area with lots of guests that could help obscure their identity. Without a statement to clarify their intentions and reasoning, I cannot speculate as to further symbolic reasons as to why they chose Phnom Sampeau as the preferred place to leave their child to potentially die.

These events shook the Battambang social scene for several weeks and spurned innumerable conversations that reaffirmed Phnom Sampeau's reputation as a place inhabited by evil spirits. While foreign tourists were left mostly unaware of these events and continued visiting the mountain, Cambodian tourists began avoiding Phnom Sampeau. Vendors who work at the mountain's base reinvested in protective amulets and performed rituals to detoxify their workspaces. Police began patrolling more carefully for potential suicides, and regular sweeps were made of the various nooks and crannies of the cave system. Although no other suicides

---

[5] No evidence connecting the baby to the suicidal couple was found.

have been publicly reported since 2016, Phnom Sampeau is still considered a place of negative consequences and watched carefully by authorities.

For this reason, young Cambodian couples no longer visit the mountain alone. As one teenage couple I met in the city summarized, "Phnom Sampeau is dangerous for love. Evil spirits do not want love and happiness. If two people go there together, the spirits will make them fight until they are no longer in love, or worse." While not quite reaching the extremes of Aokigahara's reputation as the Suicide Forest, Phnom Sampeau's tragic past has led to a growing reputation as the place where love goes to die. While foreigners are often unaware of this stigma (and regularly visit the site in romantic partnerships), a new wave of dark tourism is possible should those beliefs become more well-known abroad, as the beliefs that discourage domestic tourists from visiting are precisely those that might intrigue foreigners to visit in the future.

**The Well of Shadows**

The second major dark tourist site in Battambang is less renowned than Phnom Sampeau, but arguably more revealing. Located just northeast of Battambang City center, Wat Samrong Knong is a 300 year old temple complex tucked behind a forest off the main road, approachable either from a bumpy dirt path through some picturesque fields or by a newer paved road at its rear that passes through a village known for its sweet rice desserts. Some ~10,000 people were killed in this area by the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s, and the Wat Samrong Knong temple complex itself was used as a detention and torture center (Im & Seng 2016). The victims were buried in a mass grave in a well in a corner of the property, above which now stands a tall stupa filled with skulls similar to that at Chhoeung Ek and Phnom Sampeau (see Figure 9). The

stupa's base is decorated with carvings of the various atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge - including a scene depicting the heavily debated act of cannibalism - in a style eerily similar to the depictions of the life of the Buddha that adorn most wats. An inscription gives the site its common name and reads in Khmer and English:

> The full extent of Cambodia's tragedy will never be known.
> The remains of some of the victims of this genocide may
> never be recovered, nor their murdereds [sic] identified.
> But the gentle and forgiving Khmer, an energetic and
> optimistic people, will now walk confidently through
> the will [sic] of shadows to reclaim their ancient culture
> and restore this beautiful land, to become again,
> the legendary paradise of celestial apsaras.[6]

The wat also features a one-room "Torture House Museum" depicting the tragedy of the Khmer Rouge, complete with life-size figures of Khmer Rouge soldiers committing atrocities, and has some sensationalist language in its inscriptions - particularly the section describing cannibalism - but these features are somewhat hidden from the main walking path that circles the temple grounds.

Despite these dramatic depictions, the Well of Shadows itself is striking in how routine and commonplace it can seem when surrounded by the daily activities of locals living and working nearby. Wat Samrong Knong is popular with groups of Cambodian teens who love to practice skateboarding on the temple's steps (a hobby that, surprisingly, does not seem to bother the monks much), and visitors are more likely to encounter boisterous youth than solemn mourners. Directly next to the stupa at the Well of Shadows is a school for young children, and

---

[6] Apsara/អប្សរ is often translated as "angel," "fairy," or "celestial maiden." They are divine female figures not unlike the Greek muses who represent art, dance, and beauty. They are most commonly depicted as topless figures dancing, and are commonly found as bas-reliefs at the Angkorian archaeological complex and in other forms of Khmer art across the centuries.


Figure 9 - Memorial Stupa at the Well of Shadows

the students often play games on the monument's base during break time. I was conflicted when I first saw the groups of children playing soccer and badminton with a tower of human skulls in the background, but quickly learned that neither they nor their teachers worried much about the impact it would have on them. If anything, the temple grounds were considered safer than many other areas of the village and the teachers hoped the children might subconsciously absorb some knowledge about their heritage in the process.

While Cambodians visit the Well of Shadows to pray and make merit for their loved ones as they do at most known Khmer Rouge sites, foreigners usually visit Wat Samrong Knong as part of a tour to see other nearby sites. While the temple is easily accessible by bicycle or short drive from Battambang City, it is not well-marked on maps and is overshadowed in dark tourist advertisements by the more gruesome images of Phnom Sampeau. As such, most visitors these days only stop at the Well of Shadows as part of a larger package tour - one that often includes a visit to the ruins of Ek Phnom and/or the rice paper village nearby, where the Well of Shadows is included largely because it is easily accessible via the road leading back from those other sites to the city center. Ecotourist-friendly bicycle tours, as discussed in Chapter 3, are a popular option for these types of visits to the Well of Shadows.

Similarly, pamphlets and posters advertising Phnom Sampeau in 2009 heavily promoted the killing caves as a primary reason to visit, often accompanied with images of skulls in cages. In 2016, tourist advertisements were far more likely to emphasize Phnom Sampeau's incredible views of the surrounding countryside and rarely featured images of the bones, instead favoring photos of the dramatic exodus of millions of wrinkle-lipped bats that occurs from a cave in the side of Phnom Sampeau every sundown (Trew 2020). While dark tourism will likely always play an important role in Cambodia's symbolic economy, dominant themes are changing to better reflect new tourist demands in the evolving symbolic economy. These changes are easier to observe in a smaller urban space like Battambang City than in the metropolis of Phnom Penh and clearly indicate that, much like the wild west motif, dark tourism is increasingly having to

compete with emerging trends like ecotourism and luxury tourism.[7]

**Local Reactions to Dark Tourism**

Dark tourism is somewhat predicated on the idea that certain spaces exist in the world where the line between the living and the dead becomes blurred, where tourists can more actively engage with tragedy and loss than in other settings. Authenticity is derived somewhat by blurring the lines between the realms of the living and the dead. Given that most dark tourist sites occupy this liminal zone between life and death, it should come as no surprise that dark tourism has blossomed in Cambodia. Aside from Cambodian history providing a tragic sequence of events that stimulates the imagination of dark tourists, Cambodian spiritual beliefs also heavily emphasize that the spirits of the dead can interact with living beings, often in negative ways. As historian David Chandler explained in a seminal publication about Cambodian spirits, a stark dichotomy exists in Cambodian belief between the village and the forest where the forest is considered a dangerous, uncertain place of spirits and the village a safer space for living beings (Chandler 2008b; see also Edwards 2007: 143). Thus, certain ritualistic precautions must take place when humans venture from one zone to another, and spirits must be appeased whenever the boundaries are violated.

Dark tourist sites, particularly places where religious spaces were transformed into killing sites like at Phnom Sampeau and Wat Samrong Knong, are a complication of this juxtaposition.

---

[7] Both the Killing Caves of Phnom Sampeau and the Well of Shadows were both recently added to the online version of the *Atlas Obscura*, a compendium of bizarre and off-the-beaten-path tourist sites that is popular with people interested in dark tourism (Enemark 2019; Enemark 2019b). The *Atlas* is growing in popularity, and I would not be surprised if a second wave of dark tourist interest in Battambang resulted at least in part as a result of their inclusion.

Both Phnom Sampeau and Wat Samrong Knong sit between the village and the outside wilds, and both are dedicated Buddhist spaces - Wat Samrong Knong literally being a Buddhist temple and Phnom Sampeau having two temples atop the mountain and another at its base. But these religious spaces were also horrendously violated and became places of indiscriminate mass slaughter, and thus were spiritually contaminated. When the Khmer Rouge fled, these temples and surrounding spaces were still considered sacred ground but were now laden with the restless spirits of the thousands of victims whose blood was spilled there. In this way, mass graves and Khmer Rouge killing sites might be considered a third category of spirit-space alongside the forest and village, albeit a manufactured one that exists somewhere between the safe land of the pious living and the dangerous realm of the dead (see also Arensen 2017).

Although in most cases I consider thematic tourism a type of pilgrimage (and often vice versa), based on the work of Nelson H.H. Graburn and Dean MacCannell, I make an exception for dark tourism and contend that pilgrims who visit these places to mourn and make merit for their departed loved ones have different motivations than a dark tourist (Graburn 1989; MacCannell 2003). If dark tourists are analyzed in terms of theming, then they are motivated by the desire to enter and experience a thematic realm - that of death and decay. Arguably, these experiences also help guests appreciate history and spirituality in a more visceral sense than simply reading from a book. Cambodian pilgrims to mass graves, on the other hand, are rarely attempting to *enter* or *experience* the realm of death, particularly with the same sensory and emotional stimulation expected by tourists, but instead are there to grieve and heal as both individuals and as a community. While nothing prevents Cambodians from visiting these sites for dark tourist purposes, most dark tourists in Cambodia are typically foreign-born. Yet, the

spiritual dangers posed to pilgrims and tourists alike by entering into an area of spiritual violation are similar. The methods used to purify and appease restless spirits can thus be seen as attempts to make safe passage for any who tread upon those grounds, whether they are domestic or foreign, Buddhist or of another faith.

In my time spent at Wat Samrong Knong, I befriended Venerable Panha Virom, a forty-five year old monk who was born and raised in the Samrong Knong area. He was ordained in 1989 and is one of four trained monks who tend to the needs of Wat Samrong Knong, where he has been stationed since 2008/2009. As he described the temple's history, "When I first came [to Wat Samrong Knong], there wasn't a nice stupa like now. People had collected the bones from the mass graves and put them in a simple hut with no walls. The monks before me tried to dig up the bones, but it was difficult to know exactly where people were buried, so there might still be some we have not found." Eventually, the local community received financial support from the Cambodian diaspora and some NGOs to build the stupa that now attracts visitors to the temple. The stupa was completed in 2008 after several years of planning and fundraising.

Like most Cambodians with whom I interacted at dark tourist sites, he stressed the educational value of keeping these places open for visitation (see also Carruthers 2017).

> "Foreigners have stronger feelings about the killing than we Khmer do," he claimed. "They are scared of that history and it makes them sad. It makes us sad too, but we have lived through this history and survived a long time. We know that what happened before is an important memory, but only a memory. I do not worry about Khmer who lived through the Khmer Rouge and how they feel about this place because they already know what happened. But I worry very much about young Khmer children. Many young Khmer do not believe the Khmer Rouge actually happened. We want them to come here and see the bones for themselves to see the evidence of that history, but even then some children accuse us of only pretending by using animal bones and saying they are human. That is frustrating, and that is why we sometimes ask old people who were imprisoned by

> the Khmer Rouge to come talk to children here. But that is difficult because young children do not want to listen to sad stories."

I asked if he was bothered by the young children from the school next door playing and having their recess at the stupa. No, he said, because they need to learn Cambodian history, even the bad parts.

**Breaking Cambodia's Curse**

As discussed in Chapter 1, tourism is calendrical in nature. The same is true of dark tourism, which has seasons like any other themed space or experience that draws attention from visitors. In Cambodia, foreign tourist season at dark tourist sites - what I would categorize as the true dark tourist season based on the framework of guests specifically wanting to inhabit the narratives of dark tourism - follows the ebbs and flows of regular tourist season. When there are more tourists in the area, then dark tourist sites are busier and more popular. Because dark tourism is in recession in Battambang, there is no true season in which dark tourism is the primary motivator for guest arrival, it is simply part of the broader tourism economy of the area. In this sense, dark tourism's viability in Battambang is therefore dependent on the success of other forms of tourism, such as ecotourism and the popular bicycle tours that sometimes include a stop at Wat Samrong Knong. At least in Battambang, dark tourism is a secondary consideration for most foreign tourists, although it retains enough thematic distinctiveness and influence to warrant a separate discussion.

Cambodians, on the other hand, mostly visit dark tourist sites at proscribed times of year, and rarely do they conceive of their visits as dark tourism when they do. As mentioned above,

most Cambodians are not dark tourists engaged in the narrative emersion of the themed space, although nothing necessarily prevents such an industry from developing domestically in the future. Instead, Cambodians visit dark tourist sites primarily for ritualistic purposes, particularly during the Pchum Ben, Kathin, and Khmer New Year festivals, when merit must be made for ancestors. While such visitation would rightly be considered religious tourism in the sense that pilgrims are attempting to embody the religious narratives of those experiences, it would be improper to view the macabre as the principal motivating factor as it is in dark tourism. In truth, even during my research, I only saw groups of Cambodians visiting the killing sites regularly during these festivals and almost never at other times.

The exception to this calendrical cycle is the power of the dead to influence luck at any time of the year. I would occasionally encounter Cambodians at dark tourist sites invoking the spirits for aid with the lottery, school exams, or childbearing, but even these types of visitors were rare and not spread evenly between all sites. I never met any such luck-seeker at the Well of Shadows, although I know by reputation that they do sometimes visit just as they do at most dark tourist sites across the nation. Phnom Sampeau, on the other hand, is home to a popular fortune teller, who sits near the bone stupa in the main killing cave and helps visitors change their fates (Trew 2020). While holidays and festivals are his busiest times, it is not uncommon to see domestic tourists appealing to him for aid or guidance at any time of year. Perhaps the sensory experience of standing in the caves, with rays of light streaming in from the holes in the ceiling and the remains of the dead all around, provides a far more theatrical environment that appeals to guests seeking to divine the future, or perhaps the folkloric legacy of the mountain means that spirits are far more powerful and/or likely to intercede on behalf of the living.

Regardless, a constant stream of domestic tourists and pilgrims do visit Phnom Sampeau in search of aid from the departed.

To me, dark tourism and religious pilgrimage at dark tourist sites are not necessarily sad reminders of the tragedy of the past, but instead proof that Cambodians are utilizing their resourcefulness to overcome the economic, emotional, and cosmological obstacles of recovery after years of conflict. This view is admittedly unpopular amongst foreign commentators who largely prefer the argument that Cambodian history is so traumatic that the nation will never recover, financially or emotionally, without the intervention of enlightened foreigners who can restore justice. Journalist Joel Brinkley, who covered the flight of the Khmer Rouge from Phnom Penh in 1979, summarizes these feelings in his controversial 2011 book *Cambodia's Curse: The Modern History of a Troubled Land*. Describing Cambodia as "a society still living in the Middle Ages," Brinkley argues that Cambodia is a place where so many tragedies have occurred in succession that the nation is haunted by its own past, cursed to repeat itself in a cycle of self-destruction (Brinkley 2011: 7). His arguments, which often drip with the prejudiced ideology of the colonizer, do not take into account methods by which Cambodians have taken advantage of their available resources to restructure their society without foreign aid. Whether it is comfortable for outsiders to accept or not, dark tourism is one of the methods by which Cambodians utilize their existing resources to help their economy while giving them spaces to visit and mourn their dead, a fact that was even truer in the immediate aftermath of the departure of the Khmer Rouge. For all of the pain such experiences cause, they are also important to the healing process for many survivors, religiously and emotionally.

Nor is dark tourism necessarily the "utter desecration" that Elizabeth Becker describes. While it is true that famous, commercialized dark tourist sites like Tuol Sleng in Phnom Penh are exploited by officials looking to make a quick buck or score political points, many lesser known regional sites like Phnom Sampeau and the Well of Shadows are not manipulated for economic benefit in the same way (Ledgerwood 1997). If anything, dark tourism is declining because it is *not* seen as a viable source of future profit. Furthermore, dark tourist sites are not all about money - they also provide an important educational and emotional lesson for guests seeking to enter them.

In my research, I have encountered numerous tourists who feel sadness and even shame when leaving dark tourist sites, but who often also express a desire to impact the world for the better as a result of their visit. As one Quebecois Hare Krishna pilgrim I met near the Well of Shadows told me, "To see death face to face is not to celebrate death, but life. I travel the world to see places of death because it reminds me to live and to help others live as well." Even non-religious tourists regularly display signs of positive reflection and transformation after visiting Battambang's dark tourist sites, for example bypassing donation bins on their way into the killing caves only to stop and give on their way out. They make efforts to ask their guides about their own experiences during the Khmer Rouge, which often elevates those relationships beyond the employee and the client, sometimes resulting in long-lasting friendships kept alive through social media long after the tourists return home. And many tourists feel that they can better appreciate the beauty of Cambodia despite its problems *because* they faced the reality of the Cambodian past, as hard as it may be to experience.

**The Killing Dam**

Although Phnom Sampeau and Wat Samrong Knong are the two most prominent dark tourist sites in Battambang, a third site is beginning to receive more attention and is worth briefly discussing: the Kamping Puoy dam, sometimes sensationalized in English as 'the Killing Dam'.[8] The dam is an interesting example of the overlapping nature of symbolic economies because the increasing tourism at Kamping Puoy is not entirely dark in nature, nor are the dark aspects of it that prominent yet (despite its nickname). Instead, the tourism occurring there is a mixture of thematic variables that are divided between domestic and local tourisms. Furthermore, tourism to the dam is more dependent on the calendrical tourist cycle than the other sites because of these tourist motivations. Most importantly, Kamping Puoy is an excellent example of how Cambodians agentively rewrite their sad history, literally using the landscape in new ways to emphasize a positive future instead of an unfortunate past.

Kamping Puoy began as one of the large-scale irrigation projects enacted during the Khmer Rouge regime, intended to maximize agrarian production (Kiernan 1996: 239). Due to its reputation for agriculture, many of the residents of Phnom Penh and other areas that the Khmer Rouge evacuated in 1975 were moved to the Battambang region to work the land, one reason why Cambodians all over the country maintain complicated relationships with the region and its populace. Hoping to better control the flow of water and create ample reserves so that more crops could be produced even in dry times of year, the Khmer Rouge forced the people to build a large reservoir with a small concrete dam at Kamping Puoy just under thirty kilometers west of

---

[8] កំពឹងពួយ. Kamping Puoy is pronounced similar to "camping," with the accent on the second syllable, and "buoy" with a harder unaspirated "p" sound instead of a "b."

Battambang City. The project was not a smooth one, however, and approximately ~10,000 people are believed to have died during the construction of the dam, hence the moniker the Killing Dam.[9]

Today, the dam is still in operation although not entirely in the manner in which it was intended. On one side, a large reservoir stretches towards a distant mountain range, rising and falling with the annual rains. On the other side, a spillway allows the government to drain the reservoir and provide water to nearby paddies. The reservoir provides enough water that local paddies produce two rice yields a year instead of one, but the increased production also often increases political tensions. Conflicts between rice farmers and the government over when and how much water is dispersed are frequent, and some farmers in the area complain that the dam does more harm than good due to the pressure two yields place on the land.

The dam is not yet well known to foreign tourists, although its reputation is growing. Travel guides do not always include the dam in their discussions of the Battambang region, and those that do are often dismissive. For example, the ever-popular *Lonely Planet* contains only one paragraph about Kamping Puoy and concludes that "there's little to see" (2019 "Kamping"). Foreigners rarely visit Kamping Puoy because of its lack of renown, and those that do visit are often either solo-adventurers who use the dam as a turnaround target for a day-trip on bicycles or motos, or who are involved in a bus tour that is only making a brief stop, sometimes for as little as an hour-long picnic, on the way to Siem Reap or Phnom Penh. Although tourists are often told the dark history of the Killing Dam by their guides on these types of visits, I would not

---

[9] Although similar in number, these 10,000 victims are not the same as those who perished at Wat Samrong Knong, as discussed earlier.

categorize most visitation as dark tourism-based. Far more important to tourists are the magnificent views the dam provides of the birds and other animals that live near the reservoir, meaning that in this case ecotourism often takes precedence over dark tourism even if they are somewhat mixed.

Cambodians, on the other hand, flock to Kamping Puoy en masse, but not for dark tourist purposes. While most Cambodian visitors know the tragic history of the Kamping Puoy dam, they do not visit to mourn their dead or experience places of death. Instead, they want to have fun, and it would not be inappropriate to conceive of Kamping Puoy as more of a water park than an agricultural project. Although far from the Khmer Rouge's original intention, the reservoir they created makes for excellent swimming and inner tubing. Guests can even rent a rowboat for 10,000 riel ($2.50 USD) and enjoy several hours of playtime. Weekends, especially in the rainy season, are always a busy time at Kamping Puoy for picnics and lots of splashing.

Cambodian holidays are particularly popular at Kamping Puoy, but strangely not the festival most associated with death - Pchum Ben. While Pchum Ben sees increased visitation at the other dark tourist sites, Kamping Puoy is more or less abandoned during that festival as people prefer to visit their local wats and perform rituals closer to home. On the other hand, Khmer New Year, which occurs every April, throws Kamping Puoy into a chaos that is not dissimilar to the stereotypical Spring Break atmosphere that my hometown of Myrtle Beach enjoys every year. For that one week out of the year, Kamping Puoy transforms from a quiet swimming hole to a massive street party with thousands of people laughing, dancing, and otherwise celebrating (see Figure 10). As Khmer New Year is typically celebrated by people running around spraying each other with water and baby powder, Kamping Puoy is a somewhat

Figure 10 - Khmer New Year Fun at Kamping Puoy (the Killing Dam). Note the inner tubes.

logical place to visit during the holiday. The water, after all, is the main attraction of the dam, making it easy for revelers to splash and powder each other with decreased risk of inadvertently angering someone not wanting to play.

The Khmer New Year party at Kamping Puoy is one of the best kept secrets in Battambang. I spent several days during the 2016 New Year celebrations at the dam and never once saw another foreigner amongst the crushing masses of Cambodian faces. While some foreign tourists complained that Battambang City felt somewhat subdued for one of Cambodia's biggest festivals, they remained unaware that the real party was taking place down the road at the Killing Dam. The event was so large that police were stationed at checkpoints stretching nearly

two kilometers down the road from the dam's main entrance, and parking was a logistical nightmare with motos and cars constantly zooming in every direction.

The Kamping Puoy dam is a fascinating site that will need to be revisited after some time has passed to allow its reputation to grow. If dark tourism is being subverted by other tourisms, or becoming an extension of them, then I expect that more foreigners will travel to Kamping Puoy due to a growing desire to see the environment or to enjoy playing in the water. Cambodians, for their part, see little contradiction in visiting the Killing Dam for leisure instead of mourning. To me, Kamping Puoy is another excellent example of how Cambodians reframe the world around them for positive ends. They are not unaware of the deaths at Kamping Puoy, and they continue to mourn those losses, but they also choose to recognize that having fun is an important aspect of daily life. As one reveler said to me, "People died everywhere in Cambodia. If we never visited places where the Khmer Rouge killed people, we would never go anywhere. We cannot cry every time we come to visit [Khmer Rouge sites like Kamping Puoy]. No, we need to smile and laugh and play because we are human too." If anything refutes Brinkley's assertions about Cambodia being "cursed," it is places like Kamping Puoy where Cambodians have actively chosen to turn negatives into positives, regardless of outside aid or opinion.

**The Decline of Dark Tourism**

One truth that resonates throughout this chapter is that dark tourism is in decline in Cambodia. To be clear, I do not mean that dark tourism is disappearing - sites like Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek are far too famous for that and will likely always be important places for tourists to come face to face with death. No, I mean that dark tourism is no longer as potent a

tourist narrative as it once was, thanks in part to the rise of other forms of tourism. As luxury tourism and ecotourism, in particular, expand, dark tourism becomes less of a factor for tourist motivation. Yes, tourists will likely always visit these places, but fewer and fewer tourists are claiming dark tourism as one of the primary reasons that they choose to visit Cambodia instead of somewhere else.

One reason for the decline of dark tourism is the rise of Chinese tourism. As discussed earlier, the Cambodian government has emphasized Chinese tourism such that it now dominates much of the tourism landscape. Most Chinese tourists visit in group tours that are heavily controlled by specific organizations involved with powerfully-connected Cambodian businessmen. Those group tours rarely stop at dark tourism sites, and some have speculated that Chinese tourists do not wish to seek the legacy of the Khmer Rouge because of the role that China played in supporting Pol Pot's regime (Narin 2019; Introvigne 2018).

Other foreigners, such as Europeans and Americans, retain an interest in dark tourism, but also find themselves in search of other types of experiences. The main issue is not that dark tourism is weakening as a theme but that there are now more themes of interest for foreign guests to pursue - hence why dark tourist sites are usually now part of larger tours with a broader focus. Average tourist age is increasing, meaning that not only are solo backpackers now competing with more couples and groups, but that tourists generally have more money than they once did. With that money comes the expectation for better service, for a higher standard of experience, and more leisurely activities. Thus, while tourists still visit places of death, they also expect to be able to visit spas, upscale restaurants, and ornate hotels without the burden of guilt. As these

other forms of tourism take precedence, dark tourism recedes into the background as one of those things you do while in Cambodia, but not the main reason to go there.

But there is one group that complicates the entire matter because they do not fit neatly into either the foreign or domestic tourism categories: the Cambodian diaspora. Many Cambodians who fled the Khmer Rouge and settled in other countries feel disconnection with their homeland, and it is not uncommon for them to attempt to visit Cambodia to help heal the wounds of separation. Often, they try to visit and possibly involve themselves in the memorials to the dead. But there is a disconnect between in-country Cambodians and the diaspora in how they interact with dark tourist sites. Cambodians who grew up in Cambodia and have been interacting with these spaces regularly have attained their own forms of acceptance, as I have described above. Cambodians from outside the country have not had these opportunities and often need to grieve for their own healing. This division leads to tension at dark tourist sites. As Ven. Panha described,

> "Cambodians who did not grow up here do not behave as most Cambodians do when they see these places. They behave like foreigners. They are sad and sometimes angry. I once saw a Cambodian woman from France yell at some European tourists that they should not be taking pictures of the Well of Shadows because it was disrespectful. She turned red-faced with anger. But that belief is opposite of what we believe here in Cambodia. I like when tourists take pictures so they can remember history. But I do not judge that woman because I know she has not experienced the same things we have experienced, so she has strong feelings."

Tense or not, dark tourist sites are somewhat dependent on the Cambodian diaspora for financial support. For example, at entrance to the killing caves of Phnom Sampeau are a series of gates covered in the names of people who donated money to the building and preservation of the stupa and surrounding temple grounds. Most of the names are Khmer, with some listed

alongside places like Dallas, Texas and Lowell, Massachusetts. This influence is felt potently in Battambang, where most of the Cambodian diaspora originated. Donations help preserve these spaces and have the benefit of accruing merit for the dead on behalf of the diaspora, but they also sustain the dark tourism that occurs at memorial sites. That is the bargain that must be made - these sites must be preserved to honor the dead, but preservation will also attract tourists. Most in-country Cambodians have made their peace with this arrangement and prefer to believe that the potential for positivity outweighs the more controversial aspects of tourism at the places where their families died.

**Dark Anthropology**

My understanding and discussion of dark tourism is related to the rise of what anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner terms "dark anthropology, that is, anthropology that emphasizes the harsh and brutal dimensions of human experience, and the structural and historical conditions that produce them" (Ortner 2016: 49). Ortner argues that anthropology has taken a dark turn in response to neoliberalism and other influences, meaning that our focus as a field has increasingly been on the downtrodden and the depressing (albeit for legitimate reasons). Dark tourism is, on the one hand, one of the more traumatic dark experiences for an anthropologist to study, yet it also serves as a counterpoint to dark anthropology. To me, the study of dark tourism is as much a lesson in resilience and healing as of trauma and tragedy, and might yet prove to be the key endeavor that restores dark anthropology as a hopeful enterprise. At least, so it is in Battambang, where dark tourism should be understood as a process of engagement and reflection on the bonds that bring humans together even in the darkest of times.

# Chapter 3
# The Evolution of Thematic Tourism in Battambang

Ask almost anyone who visited Battambang between 1998 and 2010 and they will describe a small, utopic town using words like ‘charming’, ’quiet’, ‘peaceful’, and ‘sleepy’. They might also use words indicating a certain amount of untamed lawlessness such as ‘wilderness’, ‘ghost town’, or ‘off the beaten path’. When I first began visiting the region in 2009, such descriptions were appropriate. The town was exceptionally quiet even near the busiest of roads - a rarity in modern Cambodia - and it was possible to walk down the middle of any street without much worry of dodging traffic. At the time, one of my Australian friends lived in the heart of the heritage district at the intersection of Road 1.5 and the Great White Way. Many wonderful evenings were spent sitting on the curb, drinks in hand, watching the sunset be replaced by the multitude of stars that are visible in places with little electric light. On one occasion, my friend remarked, “It’s just like the American west from the movies. I half expect to see a tumbleweed blow by with John Wayne trotting behind on a horse.”

Indeed, it is through this analogy of the Wild West and the purposeful shift away from it towards that of the Charming City that I write this chapter. Here I focus on the visible and dramatic thematic changes felt over just ten years of tourism development in Battambang City. What once was the sleepy and somewhat dangerous frontier is now much faster paced. No longer is it possible to sit on my friend’s curb and watch the stars - an abundance of new street lamps makes them no longer visible from mid-town - and there is far too much car and foot traffic to enjoy such serene moments anymore. But the loss of certain thematic motivations does not mean a loss of the thematic system in its entirety. New themes have risen to replace the old, and

Battambang is now a place that offers a balance of nature-based ecotourism and opulent luxury tourism, with these concepts sometimes overlapping one another.

**Twenty Years Apart**

When the Khmer Rouge finally laid down their arms in 1998 and Battambang became safe to visit, tourism began almost immediately, albeit slowly. A few intrepid individuals began to make their way to Battambang to explore this previously inaccessible region. Reaching Battambang was difficult due to the exceptionally bad condition of the roads, and there are many stories of potholes that could swallow entire cars, rocks that could destroy a vehicle's undercarriage, and spinal pain caused by the arduous journey. Although these conditions kept most tourists away, another way of thinking is that those tourists who did undertake the trip must have had powerful thematic motivators for doing so. In my interviews with several individuals who remembered visiting Battambang at that time - some of whom never left and many of whom came back as tourists two decades later - the thematic draw of the frontier is made clear.

"I first came to Battambang in 1996 and had to be evacuated because of a Khmer Rouge attack on the city," says Steve, an American aid worker in his sixties who was living in Phnom Penh at the time and now works in Battambang as an educational consultant.

> "I came back in 1998 when it was safer. I worked in Phnom Penh, but when I heard that Battambang was safe to travel, I thought 'Wow, I could be one of the first non-Cambodians to visit that place in decades'. So I hired a taxi and took off for a few weeks. We almost didn't make it because of the road. The car was just an old sedan that had no seatbelts or air conditioning. We'd hit these big rocks and hear a loud 'Bang!' and I'd swear something fell off the car. But somehow we made it after many painful hours."

Steve stayed at the Royal Hotel near Psar Nath, the only hotel available in the city at the time and still one of the most popular tourist hotels even today.

> "Back then, the Royal wasn't as nice as it is today. I remember that at night, a security guard would sit in the lobby with a tiny television that had a VHS player. He'd watch pornography on VHS and didn't care much about what anyone thought about it. They also had a channel that attached to the VHS player so you could watch the same video he was watching in your room. You'd never see that now, but that was how it was back then. I guess the clientele was different, not so many [foreign] tourists like now."

Asked to describe the town, Steve talked about its disorganization. "The market [Psar Nath] was still there and looked almost the same as it does now, except the shops didn't have as much fancy foreign stuff for sale. There were a lot less people, and the roads weren't all paved yet. The only place you could eat was the Calypso [aka the White Rose Restaurant, see Chapter 6]. It was beautiful, though, and I fell in love with it. That's why I came back years later." Steve told me he didn't see any other foreigners at the time of his visit, and he greatly enjoyed how "fresh" the city felt compared to the big city. He also said that he didn't visit many of the tourist sites that are popular today because they were not promoted to tourists yet.

> "I never heard of the bamboo train, and getting to Banon was difficult because of road conditions and landmines. I did visit Ek Phnom, but it was in even worse shape then than it is now so I didn't stay long. I wasn't really interested in those places, though. We were voyeur tourists back then. I wanted to go to Samlot [in southwestern Battambang Province] because that's where the Khmer Rouge were. It was all about seeing as much tragedy as possible. It felt dangerous and exciting, even though they had stopped fighting by that time."

Steve's attraction to the more dangerous aspects of Battambang - the *wild* part of the Wild West analogy - is a reflection of the same thematic desires that drive so many dark tourists to Cambodia, albeit in an earlier and less structured form. As he describes tourism in Battambang in 1998,

> "Back in the late 1990s, I signed up to spend a year working in Samlot where all the leftover Khmer Rouge were living. Khieu Samphan [one of the highest ranking Khmer Rouge officials] was there and I got to know him, he was quite open about speaking about the Khmer Rouge. Once, these French tourists came and told me that they came to meet 'real' Khmer Rouge. They met one of the cadres and blurted out, 'What was it like to kill hundreds of people?' Obviously, the cadre was upset, but that's what tourists were like back then. They came to this region for the spectacle of violence and death you could still find here."

Another early Battambang explorer with whom I spoke, a mid-forties German man named Axel who now lives in Phnom Penh and speaks fluent English, related a similar mixture of danger and excitement. "Battambang was something most tourists never saw," he said. "I came here in 1998 because no one else was coming. I wanted to see mystery, adventure, and tragedy. Adventure was the real motivation for visiting. The Khmer Rouge weren't far away, so it was like we wanted to get as close to them as we could, to put our head in the lion's mouth so to speak. I was in my early twenties and that kind of stupid idea was exciting to me."

Much like Steve's earlier comments about falling in love with Battambang's beauty, Axel also claimed that early Battambang held a seductive sway because of its simplicity and lack of urbanization.

> "Battambang was so quiet. No cars, no shouting, not like today. There wasn't much electricity, and at night the old buildings would be so beautiful in the moonlight. I can't describe why, but it captured me. It was so romantic. I love all of Cambodia, but I always make time to come to Battambang when I can. Battambang is my way to cleanse myself of Phnom Penh. It's my way to escape the seediness of the city. Maybe that sounds judgmental, but Battambang is a much more genuine place than Phnom Penh. Phnom Penh is a migrant town. Battambang is a Khmer town."

Both Axel and Steve bemoaned the changes taking place in Battambang of late, and both specifically cited having "too many people" - in this case, too many *foreign* people - as a major risk to what makes the region special. Today, the city retains its reputation for being quaint, but

the numbers are dramatically growing. Whereas the Ohm Tūk Water Festival of 2010 had maybe 10,000 guests, the 2016 edition had almost 150,000. Tourists no longer need stay at cheaper hotels with security guards and their VHS tapes, but have an assortment of options from hostels to expensive boutique hotels, even a renovated French colonial villa that rents rooms. Restaurants serve cuisine from around the world including Spanish tapas, French crêpes, and Canadian poutine. Yet, the city still relies on its reputation for being small, peaceful, and 'untouched' as a major aspect of its tourist appeal.

In 2011, the Battambang government, in consultation with the Provincial Department of Tourism, rolled out a marketing campaign that relied on a new slogan: "Battambang - The Charming City." Today, banners with the slogan (in English and Khmer) are hung across major thoroughfares, posters adorn market walls, and tourist pamphlets advertising the city use the slogan wherever they are found (mostly limited to Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, but beginning to appear in places like Bangkok). I asked the Director how he defined "charming" in relation to the city's appeal and he replied that the city was cleaner, older, and better organized than Phnom Penh. The strategy is built on the idea that Battambang offers what bigger cities cannot: authentic experiences of past Cambodian life (whether colonial or pre-colonial) at a slower pace than can be found elsewhere, and with fewer distractions.

**Sex Tourism**

The shift from the Wild West to the Charming City immediately brought several controversial aspects of tourism into the realm of public debate. The most notable of these was sex tourism, a long-controversial aspect of Cambodian tourism that takes on a different form in

Battambang than in Phnom Penh or Siem Reap. Unlike in larger cities, the sex industry in Battambang is not a highly visible enterprise. Whereas pornography is often sold openly on the streets of bigger cities like Bangkok or Phnom Penh, visitors to Battambang will never encounter such material for sale unless they know which shops provide it and which coded language to use in requesting it. The exception is with tuk-tuk and moto drivers, who often target foreign men walking around the city at night with offers of drugs or girls. Still, in such cases, a simple wave of the hand is enough to end the conversation. Even if the offer is accepted, it still requires a trip to the town's outskirts or a special delivery of a girl to the guest's hotel room to proceed. There is no downtown district catering to foreign tourists for sex as there is in Phnom Penh, and guests will not be pestered by tuk-tuk and moto drivers with the frequency found in other Cambodian cities.

Most sex work in Battambang is relegated to specific areas: either karaoke bars covered in flashing red and pink neon lights that dot the city, or on a stretch of road on the outskirts of the city where tourists rarely tread. Tourists might visit karaoke bars for fun, and it is well known that almost all of the female attendants at such clubs will likely have sex with guests for a fee, but sex work is not the primary business at hand in these establishments. Most guests enjoy the communal drinking and croaking renditions of "Hey Jude" more than the sex work, and the majority of groups that frequent these bars go primarily to solidify business relationships and celebrate teamwork.

On the obscured road, on the other hand, most sex workers are actually employed at beer gardens where guests can drink and dance to live Khmer music. Women sit in two rows of chairs at the front of the entrance, creating a tunnel of ladies that guests walk through to enter the

establishment. Most of the women wear uniforms designating sponsorship from one of Cambodia's competing beer companies - red for Angkor Beer, blue for Tiger Beer, for example - and are there to ensure that revelers never see the bottom of their beer glasses. Again, while most of these women will leave with guests for a fee, their primary job is to promote their sponsor's brand of beer and sex is not an every-night occurrence for most of them. As dance halls, most guests visiting these spaces would rather boogie on the dance floor than in the bedsheets.

In both cases, these establishments do not cater to foreign tourists as a matter of course. While plenty of foreign NGO workers and tourist groups visit karaoke bars for the camaraderie, and may even visit a beer garden on extremely rare occasions, foreign tourists are not the primary demographic for these institutions. Instead, they cater to powerful Cambodian businessmen who are either visiting town or are traveling through Battambang on the way to or from Thailand or Phnom Penh. Indeed, it is the increasingly common presence of rich Asian businessmen that powers the sex industry in Battambang, which takes the appearance of entertainment more than sex work - not unlike the more traditional aspects of Geisha culture in Japan (see Dalby 2008). Thus, sex tourism in Battambang should be understood more through flashy entertainment businesses like nightclubs and karaoke bars brimming with fine-suited Cambodian men than the tired stereotype of seedy brothels filled with European pedophiles.

Rumors of more recognizable hostess bars of the type common throughout Southeast Asia swirl through Battambang on occasion, but nothing has yet come to fruition. At one point in 2016, a top-ranking officer of the local military garrison proclaimed that he would build a multistory luxury nightclub that would include nude dancing and private rooms for sexual encounters as a way to reward and entertain high-ranking officials and Cambodian elites. At no

point were foreign tourists a desired target for this enterprise, and the foreign expatriate community mostly remained blissfully unaware of the plans for this more provocative bar space even during the two or three months in which intense debate occurred throughout the local Cambodian populace as to the appropriateness of such a business. While some government officials with whom I spoke supported the idea of the bar, arguing that sex tourism holds untapped potential for the increasingly wealthy Cambodian (male) populace, the idea ultimately fell through because of concerns that too much sex tourism at once could endanger the city's attempted rebranding to become the Charming City. While a sex bar of this type seems almost inevitable given that having mistresses is ubiquitous amongst powerful Cambodian men, the city's policymakers are aware that they must prioritize the establishment of a positive reputation for other thematic factors that can better sustain the symbolic economy.

Until then, sex work will continue to occur outside of the sight of most foreign tourists, at least in Battambang. Cell phones have made sex work easier in this regard, as most men seeking a liaison simply need to call for a girl from the safety of their hotel rooms - either to the operator of the hotel or to a tuk-tuk driver, for starters. Most hotels cater to this type of sex work by providing 'off-the-books' hourly rates of about $1-2 USD per hour, although these prices are never publicly advertised. In my hotel, the Tiger Lily, which caters primarily to Cambodian businessmen, such visits were frequent. I often witnessed middle-aged Cambodian men escorting young women into the back rooms for a brief tryst, and the hotel's manager, Sann, openly discussed that aspect of his business with me.

According to Sann, hourly stays provide a significant portion of his business depending on the time of year. Most hourly clients are either thirty to forty-something Cambodian

businessmen who are visiting Battambang for work or young Cambodian couples in their teens or early twenties looking for intimacy away from the prying eyes and gossip of their home villages. Regarding the former, Sann insisted that not all businessmen who visit the Tiger Lily for an hour or two do so for sex. Many guests come for a quick shower and/or rest after their arduous journey to the city, especially those who must continue onward to other destinations later that day. While I suspect that Sann was attempting to obscure the exact amount of sex tourism that occurs at his hotel in order to avoid such information becoming too public, which would inevitably result in police arriving to demand bribes in exchange for turning a blind eye, I can verify that many such day guests use Battambang as a way station between major cities, as they have always done in this region.

Cambodian youth, on the other hand, are far more motivated by sex when utilizing hourly rates. Most of these teens and young adults are not necessarily purchasing temporary time with sex workers, although that does occur, but instead are often looking for a place to be intimate with their significant others. As the villages surrounding Battambang City are small and prone to gossip, few places provide enough privacy for young couples to become physically affectionate - sexually or otherwise. Hourly hotels in the urban sphere are perfect spaces for allowing young Cambodians to extract themselves from village life and spend time together in ways considered publicly inappropriate. The city is far enough away from the villages and sufficiently anonymous through its population density to allow couples these moments together with relatively little risk. Accordingly, Sann claims that most of the hotel's hourly-rate income comes from these young couples that expect discretion in exchange for their preciously saved dollars.

These youthful trysts are becoming more lucrative thanks in part to the rise in popularity of Valentine's Day on February 14th. Once considered an obscure and even inappropriate foreign holiday by the local populace, Valentine's Day is now one of the most popular holidays amongst young Cambodians. In 2016, Valentine's Day was celebrated across Battambang with vendors selling roses and teddy bears on nearly every street corner, while all of the most popular tourist locations were overrun by young couples on dates. To a certain degree, the holiday has become an acceptable time for young couples to publicly express their affection (within reason) for a day. After an afternoon of romantic picnics and sweet nothings whispered into the wind, many of these young couples utilize hourly hotel rates for more physical affirmations of their mutual affection. Hotel managers like Sann eagerly anticipate the income spike they now experience on Valentine's Day, and are even beginning to offer special package deals offering in-room wine and flowers for the holiday. Unfortunately, Valentine's Day's popularity is also causing an increase in rape and domestic violence, as many young Cambodian men feel entitled to sex on the holiday regardless of their partner's feelings (McCoy 2015; Sotheary 2016). Thankfully, public campaigns to educate youth about consent are becoming regular occurrences around Valentine's Day, and the holiday is a mostly positive experience for young couples in Battambang. Whether Valentine's Day's growing popularity in Battambang is a result or the cause of these youthful hourly rendezvous is unclear, but there is little doubt that the holiday will continue to grow in popularity and provide much sex-based tourist income in the years to come.

Tension over the public acknowledgement of sex work in the Charming City seems likely to increase in the near future, due in part to the public perception of Battambang as a pristine and nostalgic space. The international reputation of Battambang City as the authentic heart of

Cambodia which the government is so desperately trying to create means that sex work is likely to remain covert for the near future. Unfortunately, this same romanticism that surrounds Battambang and that motivates so much of the domestic tourist market can also result in the objectification of local women. If Battambang is so pristine and beautiful, so too must its women be, goes popular logic. Famous romantic figures like the singer Ros Sereysothea or the tragic heroine Witheavy from the famed novel *Pgaa Sraporn* (see Chapter 4) only add to the allure of the region's women.

In November of 2015, I was enjoying an evening at a friend's restaurant when I encountered a group of eight Cambodian men ranging in age from approximately their late twenties to late forties. The men, just beginning what I am certain became a night of debauchery, called me to sit and drink with them when they overheard me speaking Khmer. They soon revealed that they were from Kampong Speu Province to the south and had traveled to Battambang "for the pretty girls." When I asked them why they regularly made such a long journey to Battambang for sex when Phnom Penh is much closer to Kampong Speu and has more readily available spaces for sex work, they quickly proclaimed that "Battambang's women are the most beautiful in Cambodia. All the women in Phnom Penh are old and tired, but here they are still young and perfect. Battambang is much more modern than Phnom Penh when it comes to girls."

While they never sufficiently explained their usage of the term "modern," I came to believe that they meant that Battambang is a more ideal version of what they expect Cambodian society to be and, thus, Battambang's women are more definitively Khmer in their appeal. The irony is that most sex workers operate in provinces far from their homes in order to maintain

discretion and prevent shaming their families, so most women working in Battambang are from other provinces. Still, over the years I have spent in Battambang, I have encountered several similar groups of local men who openly discuss Battambang's women in this way, and it is clear that many Cambodian men see Battambang as a preferred destination for sex tourism.

Ultimately, sex tourism in Battambang is a subject still needing further exploration. During my research periods, I spent some time talking to current and former sex workers that I met through common friends or the local anti-trafficking NGO. However, as a white male of some status, I could not fully enter the world of sex tourism without risking my reputation, both in terms of my academic career and the more immediately concerning local culture in which I found myself. While many Cambodians often told me that, as a young unmarried man, I was expected to desire encounters with sex workers, too much interaction - even non-sexual, publicly sanctioned contact - could tempt negative consequences from other aspects of society with whom I still wanted to communicate. Therefore, I cannot claim to present an in-depth examination of Battambang's sex industry so much as I can simply describe the scenarios common in the region. My hope is that someday these women will be given the opportunity to speak for themselves in order to overturn many negative stereotypes about their profession, but at the current time I can only summarize that sex tourism in Battambang is A) based almost entirely on domestic, not foreign, business; B) seen as not entirely at odds with the Charming City theme by those with the power to make policy decisions; and C) not beholden purely to the trafficking narrative.

**Restaurant Names & Religious Aims**

In many cases, the Charming City initiative means a total restructuring of the thematic narrative meant to appeal to the tourist imaginary, usually to emphasize aspects of heavenly luxury instead of tenuous uncertainty. Business development has also reflected these thematic changes. Ten years ago, one of the most popular restaurants for foreign guests was the Smokin' Pot, a double entendre that catered to younger backpackers with an affinity for marijuana. The restaurant still exists, but is now known more as a family cooking school than for the debauchery of old, and is far less popular than a decade ago. The meaning of the restaurants' very name has shifted to a secondary definition to conjure images of family gathering around a steaming pot of simmering food.

Today, guests are more likely to visit Here Be Dragons, a hostel and bar that serves decent beer and food on the cheap. Jen and David, the late-30s British owners of Here Be Dragons, are quite forward with their reasoning for naming their business along thematic lines. "We wanted a name that harkened back to the days of exploration and adventure. Although most people often just call us the Dragon, we didn't want a dragon-themed place, we wanted it to be about something more mythical." Their restaurant's menus depict Cambodia using an old-fashioned seafarers map with a mythical dragon located over Battambang, and Chinese-inspired dragons adorn the walls of the bar. At the time, the bar was also embracing the popularity of the hit fantasy show *Game of Thrones*, the plot of which involves dragons, and had several themed menu items and cocktails named after the show. Again, these businesses emphasize Battambang City as a place waiting to be explored, implying a certain wildness and personalization of the experience that reflects the above comments about building a personal relationship with space.

Several business names more directly reflect the Charming City initiative, although I would hesitate to claim that they did so purposefully. Ambrosia Cafe on the Great White Way references the nectar of the gods to highlight the quality of the food, but the name also inadvertently reinforces the idea of Battambang being a timeless land of spirits. Sunrise Cafe and Cafe Eden are also popular restaurants that use nature imagery to evoke paradise. In both of these cases, the names also refer to the fact that they are sponsored by Christian NGOs. Still more businesses, such as the Green Mango Café, Ganesha Guesthouse, or Madison Bar invoke various aspects of "charm" - in this case, the area's famous agriculture, the nation's syncretic religion, and memories of one of the most popular dances from Cambodia's independence period.[1] In considering names such as these, it is important to remember that, unlike Phnom Penh with its multitude of businesses, Battambang City is a compact place with far fewer options. Foreigners searching for information about Battambang will not find hundreds of selections, but will instead see these same names again and again. Thus, the symbolic importance of these names takes on greater meaning in terms of painting a picture of the city that appeals to tourist imaginations.

Of the thematic tourist spaces named above, several are tied to Christian missionary organizations. For over a century, Battambang has been a target of concentrated Christianization efforts from outsiders (2018 "Spotlight"; 2019 "Adventist"). In 1790, a tall steepled cathedral was built on the northern end of Battambang City that was considered one of the finest examples

---

[1] The "Madison" was a popular American dance in the 1950s and 1960s with which most older Cambodians remain obsessed. In 2015, the Union of Youth Federations of Cambodia in Siem Reap was officially listed as holding the Guinness World Record for largest Madison dance, with over two thousand people performing it at once (2015 "World's Largest").

of French religious architecture in Southeast Asia until it was destroyed by the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s (Ponchaud 1990). Today's Battambang has an abundance of American and Korean Christian organizations as well as a large Mormon temple recently built near the statue of the Ta Dambong Krañyoung statue. Missionaries are a common sight around town, and they often stand on street corners advertising free English lessons (using religious textbooks, of course).

The most recent excitement about non-Buddhist religious presence in Battambang came in August of 2017 due to the inauguration of a large Bahá'í House of Worship on the outskirts of the city (2016 "Cambodia temple earthworks"; 2017 "A new dawn"). The building is a signifier of Battambang's association with religiosity, as it is one of only ten Bahá'í Houses of Worship in the world. Designed by Cambodian architect Sochet Vitou Tang, who is Buddhist, the building blends traditional Cambodian motifs, such as the shape of the lotus flower and the typical curved pagoda roofs, with a modernist-style circular sanctuary for religious adherents of Bahá'í (2017 "Spirit and aspirations"). The building is considered one of Battambang City's new architectural wonders, although it is designed to function primarily as a base of operations for missionaries and local followers of the Bahá'í faith. Still, tourists interested in architecture venture out to see the Bahá'í temple with regularity.

The intermixing of missionaries and a growing tourist population results in an ideological battle for the Cambodian 'soul', in which different groups attempt to attract more tourists to assist them through the guise of voluntourism. The Buddhist majority has responded in kind through the promotion of Vipassana meditation retreats targeted at tourists. Located at the base of Phnom Sampeau, the Dhamma Latthikā Vipassana Meditation Center hosts three, ten, and twenty day meditation sessions in the Vipassana style, which emphasizes breathing techniques and a

focus on impermanence as a form of mindfulness, all at no charge to the visitor. The meditation center can accommodate up to 134 long term guests every two weeks and requires an online application to be selected for one of the slots that tend to fill up quickly.

The Vipassana Center attracts hundreds of guests to the Battambang region every month. Many of these guests are now choosing to visit Battambang City before or after their session at the Center, which boosts other forms of tourism. Their presence also challenges the more conservative teachings of other missionaries, as the Vipassana Center stresses a form of interfaith mindfulness that de-emphasizes adherence to theology. To that end, the Vipassana Center is immensely popular with domestic tourists and residents of Battambang, undoubtedly because it stems from Buddhism and meditation is far more familiar to them than other types of religious practice. Local support could also be interpreted as a form of resistance to outside religious influences through religious tourism.

All of these people influences blend together in Battambang City and create a kinetic feeling of spirituality and religious engagement throughout the city. Through social media, word of mouth, and carefully targeted marketing schemes by religious businesses, this engagement has helped Battambang grow an international reputation as the place to visit if you want to experience Cambodian spirituality, past and present (2019 “FEBC”). The study of religion is in itself a motivating factor for visitation, and I witnessed several busloads of school children visiting Battambang to engage with Buddhism during my time there.

I also spoke with Duong, an educator who lives in Siem Reap and organizes historical religious tours for students across Cambodia. Duong was a former teacher at the Buddhist school at Wat Dumray Sor and is intimately familiar with the Buddhist legacy in Battambang. Although

not all of his tours visit Battambang, he emphasized that Battambang is an important place for students to visit if they are interested in the development of Buddhism in Cambodia. “We often say that Buddhism in Battambang is very strong,” he explained. “Buddhism is stricter in Battambang than other places. In many provinces, you will see monks wearing shoes and listening to music on cellphones. But many monks in Battambang will not wear shoes or use technology like that. They like to do things the old way. Battambang is the place to go when you want to learn about the original Buddhism of Cambodia.” As the Governor openly hopes to increase student group tourism to various historical sites in Battambang, these religious group tours provide a starting point for further expansion of the study of the region’s past.

The point to be made here is that Battambang has a growing religious tourism industry that is part of the Charming City initiative that distances the city of today from the underdeveloped, dangerous, pornography-riddled town of twenty years ago. Spirituality as a theme is more an umbrella term than a specific motif of tourist engagement, but the manner by which religious organizations in Battambang vie for attention and insert themselves into the tourist economy is indicative of how the symbolic economy can stand for far more than income and financial stability. The number of tourists visiting these organizations and the manner by which they are attracted to the city indicate a battle over Cambodian spiritual beliefs that, in this case, happens to be tied into a larger tourist industry. Tourism is not simply a matter of money, but also of hearts, minds, and in this case, souls.

**Ecotourism and the Environment as Analogy**

Not only is the new symbolic economy of Battambang's "charm" based on changing the reputation of the city from the Wild West to something moralistic and spiritual, for the government also seeks to clean up the city in a far more literal sense. One of the Governor's obsessions during his time in office was cleaning the city of garbage, something he could be witnessed personally attending to almost every night as he walked around the market area on his evening stroll. In official meetings, he stressed that one of the biggest complaints tourists make against Phnom Penh and Siem Reap is the sight and stench of trash and sewage, plus the overwhelming crush of too many people. In response, he spoke frequently about making Battambang the cleanest city in Cambodia, a mission with which his interests aligned with the Director. Nearly every planning meeting about public events or tourism sites in either of their offices focused largely on garbage collection and waste management. The Governor regularly hired workers who would walk the city for days after any major festival wearing orange vests and cleaning up the considerable trash thrown on the ground by partygoers.[2] The Director would likewise sometimes form trash cleanup task forces, often composed of his own employees from other tourism sites, to clean up different tourist locations around town. Their combined efforts resulted in the city receiving the 2015-2018 "Clean City" Award from the Cambodian government, signs for which were displayed proudly around town in both Khmer and English so

---

[2] The amount of garbage decorating the streets and gardens of Battambang City following a large city party is truly indescribable. For at least a week after any party, the city looked like it was hit by a tornado. Yet, the Governor's clean up team always did an admirable job of restoring the city to its relatively clean state within about a week of any event.

that tourists would know of the city's achievement (and thus hopefully influence its reputation as a desirable location to visit) (Rong 2014; Chan 2016).[3]

Being a "clean city" is a point of communal pride for locals, and Battambang is generally much cleaner and well organized than other Cambodian cities, a fact that is often commented upon by tourists and locals alike. Local pride in being a clean city extends beyond literal garbage, however, and becomes a form of anti-Phnom Penh (and thus, in this interpretation, anti-colonial) symbolism. Battambang residents often insult Phnom Penh by talking about the trash and sewage in the big city as compared to the clean, beautiful streets of Battambang. As we shall see, this talk of pollution is used as a metaphor to criticize corrupt government officials from the capital who cozy up to powerful foreign influences (especially those of the Chinese or Vietnamese). Although Battambang officials are just as likely to take bribes and enact other general forms of corruption as their Phnom Penh counterparts, due to distance and lack of direct contact they are far less likely to ingratiate themselves with the Vietnamese, and so talk about Phnom Penh's garbage versus Battambang's cleanliness becomes a metaphor for ethnic prejudice the Cambodians have against the Vietnamese and their ties to the central Cambodian government.

Pollution is not the only anti-Phnom Penh metaphor derived from the environment. Arguably the most important metaphor in use in Battambang is that of food, rice in particular. Battambang has long been called the 'rice bowl' of Cambodia because of the increased yields of high quality foods produced there, a fact that the Khmer Rouge tried to exploit through

---

[3] Hilariously, the award signs installed in 2015 proclaimed Battambang the winner of the award through 2018, leading to much speculation as to how the government could foresee the future enough to issue an achievement award so far in advance.

environmental manipulation (Perigois 2018; Chandler 2008: 185; Delvert 1961: 356). Today, Battambang produces approximately one-third of all rice grown in Cambodia, and it is generally considered higher quality than rice grown elsewhere (Kea et al. 2017: 16).

In a manner similar to how they speak of trash, residents of Battambang also often insult the rice found in Phnom Penh as a way of criticizing the central government. One associate, a professional woman in her late twenties who often travels to Phnom Penh for business, told me "Phnom Penh rice is disgusting. It is not clean and fresh like Battambang rice. I go to Phnom Penh two or three times every month and I never eat the rice there. It is disgusting and I would not put it in my mouth!" Insulting Phnom Penh's rice implies the same type of polluting influence as with the garbage metaphor, but also has symbolic meaning due to the act of eating. Taking bribes is often referred to in the Khmer language as "eating" money, but instead of using the regular 'human' words for "to eat" (*ñyam* or *hōb),* the phrase employs the term *sii*, a variant of the term for eating often reserved for animals, social inferiors, or abstract concepts regarding consumption.[4] The implication that the people of Phnom Penh "eat" dirty rice, then, is that the officials of Phnom Penh are consuming the tainted offerings of foreign governments instead of prioritizing Cambodian needs.

These metaphors intersect with tourism because Battambang City aggressively advertises its high quality agriculture and overall cleanliness. Along with the Cleanliness Award billboards around town, each major festival usually includes several booths promoting regionally-produced agricultural goods with signs in both Khmer and English describing the higher quality foods found in the region. Furthermore, bike tours that stop to see the rice fields or mango groves so

[4] *ñyam* - ញ៉ាំ, *hōb* - ហូប, *sii* - ស៊ី

that guests can take pictures of the beautiful Battambang landscape are increasingly popular and allow tour guides to promote Battambang as a cleaner, more productive region for Cambodian agriculture.

As for the other criticism of Phnom Penh and Siem Reap beyond cleanliness - overcrowding - Battambang remains at risk of suffering similar problems if tourism continues to grow at such fast rates without regulation. Local officials are acutely aware of this risk, although they still seek to grow tourist numbers at any cost. Instead of strategizing a desirable upper limit for tourist visitation to the region, the Governor and the Director instead want to spread tourists around Battambang so as not to overcrowd any single area. Of particular concern is the heritage district, which is the focal point for most guests coming to the Battambang region and consists of narrow alleys and roads that can easily fill up with people. There has already been discussion about closing some of these downtown roads to vehicular traffic because of the high numbers of tourists that walk them, but enforcing such an edict would be difficult and displease local business owners. Instead, the preferred strategy is to encourage guests to stay in lodging away from the city center through the promotion of ‘authentic’ homestays, in which guests can rent rooms inside villagers’ homes and live with them for a short time (Spiess 2019). The Director stressed to me that with the global rise in popularity of the website Airbnb, which allows people to rent out their own homes at far more competitive rates than major hotels, foreign tourists are likely to be attracted to homestay options, which are often cheaper than hotels and involve a more interactive experience with Cambodian life.

Aside from living and eating with Cambodian families (experiences which many, but not all, homestays offer), some homestays are opportunities to sleep in a unique environment that

few tourists can experience (see Hong 2019). For example, the floating village of Prek Toal is a few hours by boat east of Battambang City, and it is possible for tourists to sleep in a wooden home on floating pontoons where dinner is served by women who approach in canoes to sell and cook food. Closer to town, the Director supported the renovation of one of the 'ancient' houses of Wat Kō so that it could offer a homestay, which he is now aggressively promoting. In this case, tourists can sleep in a pre-French colonial traditional wooden stilt home (built approximately ~1900 CE) that was once occupied by both high ranking officials of the *Lōk Mjah*'s court and later the Khmer Rouge. As one German man who was staying at the Wat Kō house with his family told me, "I can stay in a hotel anywhere, but only here can I live like this - the real Cambodian way." Although still in its early stages of development, homestays and the appeal of living authentic Cambodian life (if only for a short while) are expected to increase profits while encouraging guests to explore areas outside of Battambang City, thus lessening the touristic pressure placed on the heritage district.

These efforts can also be seen as a way of promoting ecotourism, a form of tourism that emphasizes experiencing the natural world in an environmentally conscious manner instead of focusing primarily on urban sites and the many disposable resources found therein (Fennell 2008). Ecotourism is a major influence over the Battambang symbolic economy because it is a theme with which Phnom Penh, despite its many resources, simply cannot compete. In many ways, much of Battambang's "charm" is tied to its lessened reliance on pollutants and an increased awareness of human impact on the environment. As a massive metropolis of over one and a half million people, Phnom Penh is marked by an urban sprawl that stretches many kilometers across its territory. The major tourist sites in the downtown area are surrounded by

urban businesses, paved roads, and concrete buildings, and the city's pollution is infamous. Although Sisowath Quay along the Mekong River is Phnom Penh's touristic hotspot, and it *is* possible to take a boat tour of the river, Phnom Penh has experienced too much urbanization to offer many easily accessible ecotourist experiences.

Battambang, on the other hand, is surrounded by verdant rice paddies, lush forests, and (relatively) clear rivers, and is home to many NGOs that work to clean the country of garbage. Plastic Free Cambodia, for example, works to rid the country of plastic waste and actively partners with tourist businesses such as bike tour shops to provide reusable water bottles and refilling stations where tourists can quench their thirst without buying single-use plastic bottles. Given its size, these types of social enterprises are often much more visible to tourists in Battambang than in Phnom Penh. Furthermore, the government of Cambodia recently announced that Battambang will become one of the first cities in Cambodia to implement a smoke-free policy in its tourism sector by 2020, a change meant to reduce pollution and improve health while attracting more health-conscious tourists to the region (Sotheary

Ecotourism is immensely popular with both foreign and domestic tourists and is increasingly helping to spread money throughout the province. For example, the bird sanctuary of Prek Toal on the edge of the great Tonle Sap lake is receiving far more tourists than ten years ago. A scenic boat tour leaves from Battambang City and traverses the Sangkae River northward until it crosses through Prek Toal before eventually arriving at Siem Reap. The entire journey takes approximately eight hours (six hours to Prek Toal) depending on the water conditions, and

guests are exposed to the sun for most of the trip.[5] Although an unpopular option because it is more expensive and takes far longer than renting a taxi to Siem Reap, it is now becoming trendy thanks to the social media-worthy photographs the route offers and the opportunity to stay and shop in Prek Toal. Similar emphasis on the forest preserve of Samlot to the southwest of Battambang City is expected in the future, although as a nature preserve it requires more complicated navigation of the legal system.

Another popular attraction is the Thousand Islands water park. Found about an hour west of Battambang City past Phnom Banon, the Thousand Islands is a small water reservoir that contains several small islands. Guests can rent a stilt hut on one of the islands, or even the island itself, for an afternoon of swimming and outdoor fun.[6] Food for an afternoon picnic can be ordered via cellphone, which is then delivered to the island in a small boat. The area is immensely popular with Cambodian locals and domestic tourists, especially during holidays. Most foreign tourists skip the Thousand Islands because of its distance from the city, but the Director is attempting to promote it through social media using picturesque photographs and English descriptions of available activities. As tourists continue to express an increased interest in environmentalism and ecotourism, sites like Prek Toal and the Thousand Islands provide new thematic options that promote tourism to Battambang without risking too much overcrowding of any one area, all while expanding the symbolic tourism economy to new areas of Battambang (Carruthers 2016).

---

[5] The boats usually have a roof with rolled up plastic sheets that can be unraveled to protect guests from rain or the heavy waves of the Tonle Sap, but most guests opt to sit with no cover on the roof so they can see and photograph the birds and fishing villages as they pass by.

[6] The Thousand Islands has the only zipline in the Battambang area, which lets guests zip over the water until they eventually let go for a big splash.

Closer to town, Battambang's famous bamboo train continues to serve hundreds of tourists daily in a manner that promotes environmentalism and the recycling of materials. Called the "*norry*" by locals, the bamboo train is a flat bamboo cart that is balanced on detachable wheels that are powered by an external engine, all of which can be taken apart and put back together in less than a minute.[7] Originally created using the recycled pieces of military equipment following the fall of the Khmer Rouge, the train utilizes the old Indochinese railroad to provide guests an exciting journey through the Battambang countryside at speeds up to forty kilometers an hour. Even in times of year where foreign tourist arrivals slow, domestic tourists flock to the bamboo train to enjoy a fun day in the sun, smelling the sweet grasses that grow alongside the tracks and watching the sunset over the rice paddies. That the bamboo train has become the number one tourist attraction in all of Battambang over the past decade is indicative of the growing importance of ecotourism, as the experience immerses the guests in the Cambodian environment all while minimizing pollution and waste.

The fastest growing ecotourist activity for foreign tourists, on the other hand, is the bicycle tour. In 2010, a group of Australian expatriates living in Battambang decided to open a tour shop that would rely on bicycles instead of fuel-burning cars, motos, or tuk-tuks. Their mission was to provide local youth with jobs based on environmentally sustainable practices, using the draw of ecotourism to attract guests and provide income. Their shop, Soksabike, which is a portmanteau of a typical friendly greeting in the Khmer language, *soksabai* ("health and happiness"), and the word *bike* for bicycle, is now one of the busiest and most renowned shops of any type in Battambang City. Tourists typically arrange for a half-day or full-day tour, which

---

[7] *Norry* - ណ្ហរី

involve seeing rice paddies, temples, traditional handicrafts or foodways in some of the area's smaller villages, or a variety of other potential experiences. Soksabike's success has inspired numerous competitors, and there are four or five bicycle tour companies in operation in Battambang City at any given time.

**UNESCO and the Samsung Problem**

Battambang's transformation into The Charming City is part of a larger process regarding Cambodian cultural heritage. Receiving World Heritage Status from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is one of the most important political processes in Cambodia because it boosts the economy through tourism while bringing visibility to a people often ignored on the world stage (Chantha & Samrang 2017). World Heritage Status is a point of pride for Cambodian people and a tool utilized by the government for nationalistic purposes. In this way, UNESCO's approval can be both a blessing and a curse. World Heritage Status has obvious benefits for the economy and for the preservation and promotion of history, but can also be manipulated in ways that cause prejudice, strife, and sometimes violence. Regardless of the consequences, UNESCO World Heritage Status is much coveted by Battambang leaders who see the designation as a manner of asserting the region's authority, with the added benefit of increasing their personal wealth. I interpret such desires as a revealing paradox in that attaining World Heritage Status would greatly please Prime Minister Hun Sen and his base in Phnom Penh while also being predicated on the assertion that Battambang's heritage is unique from that of Cambodia, requiring an acknowledgement of the separation between the two areas (see the Deny-the-Thai argument in Chapter 5).

The plan to list Battambang as a World Heritage City has been in motion since at least 2011 when negotiations began in earnest to court UNESCO (2017 "UNESCO"; Meng 2017; Narin 2017; Sotheary & Vannak 2017). The Governor and the Director both believe that Battambang's history is deserving of special attention and hope that UNESCO will radically transform Battambang through tourism and investment into one of Cambodia's leading cities. However, UNESCO's evaluation for World Heritage Status is an arduous process that takes years of consideration (Vannak 2018; Manet 2019). Furthermore, as anthropologist Michael A. Di Giovine has explained, UNESCO bases much of their evaluation on the narrativity of a specific location, particularly in terms of how a place's narrative appeals to tourists (Di Giovine 2008). Thus, in order for a city like Battambang to be designated a World Heritage Site, it must present its history in a manner that guests can experience through the senses - in other words, it must theme the historical narrative. Government officials are using the colonial history of Battambang as the basis of their appeal to UNESCO, albeit in a carefully negotiated manner that emphasizes the legacy of French Indochina and downplays or erases the other influences (in no small part because UNESCO is based in France). I discuss this erasure more specifically in Chapter 5.

The largest problem facing Battambang's UNESCO application at the moment is the presentation of its colonial architecture. Battambang has more than 800 surviving colonial buildings, more than anywhere else in Cambodia, although many of them are poorly maintained (Vannak 2018b). The government regularly repaints several of the most important buildings, such as the Sala Khet, the Post Office, and the Bank of Battambang along the riverfront, in the brilliant yellow and white typical of Indochinese buildings, and they are undeniably striking. More problematic, however, are the dozens of colonial buildings that form the core of the

downtown area that are not directly in the government's control. While the heritage district is rife with tourists and tourist-related businesses, it also contains dozens of hardware stores, electronics shops, furniture retailers, and other businesses pertaining to daily life in the city outside of the tourist industry. Most of these shops do not maintain their exterior to emphasize the building's history, but for practical reasons of appealing to customers. They are also covered in signage that obscures most of the finer details still present on these heritage buildings.

The signs are a constant headache for city officials. Cambodia is a place where quality is intermixed with status, and status is highly performative and often ostentatious. To flaunt wealth and, by implication, promote the quality of a store, it is common for a shopkeeper to hang not just one but many shop signs, some of which may be exact duplicates of one another. These signs overlap and intermingle in a tangled mixture of electrical cables and neon lights that obscure most of the heritage district's old buildings. The issue of shop signage became known as "the Samsung Problem" amongst government officials in reference to one particularly egregious phone shop that displayed three copies of the exact same blue Samsung sign with no organized arrangement, haphazardly stacked atop one another (see Figure 11).

In my conversations with the Director, he often lamented the Samsung Problem and voiced a desire to remove the signs. At one point, he considered ordering shopkeepers to take down the signs under threat of police action, justifying such punitive measures as necessary for the betterment of the country. He ultimately decided against such a course of action because he was concerned about negative backlash prior to the general election of 2018. As the 2013 election caused protests and riots throughout the country, and considering that Battambang is traditionally a center of oppositional power, the Director was concerned that any action on his


Figure 11 - The Samsung Problem

part might provoke a backlash against Prime Minister Hun Sen and/or the Cambodian People's Party, of which the Director is a member. Although two years remained before the election at the time of our discussion, the Director was wary of giving the opposition any reason to make trouble that could endanger the UNESCO application or himself.

When I asked the Director about his feelings on this issue, he clearly demonstrated how tourism and cultural heritage play a powerful role in political governance. "It is better until after the election to remove the signs," he said. "The people will re-elect the Prime Minister and then the CPP will be able to develop Battambang however it wants. These people [local business owners] do not understand about tourism or why we want to remove the signs. We must make

them do what is best for everyone, but it is better to wait until after the election so it will be easier for everyone." His sentiments show a certain disdain for the local populace, which he sees as incapable of the foresight he attributes to himself, but also a respect for the power of the community. His comments imply that tourism is the justification for keeping the government in power, as only the visionaries of the CPP (like himself) can see a better future for Cambodia. To that end, while the Director dismisses the people's role in developing the area, he recognizes that they have the power to prevent his own success. Tourism is a political process that can make or break Battambang's political system, a fact the Director well knows.

Heritage can also be a spiritual issue as well, as old buildings are associated with the spirits of the past. In a November 2015 meeting, the Governor described painting the heritage buildings in yellow so that they look good in both daytime and nighttime, but positioned his argument in terms of appeasing the spirits. To him, restoring the heritage district is as much a matter of respecting traditional Cambodian religion as it is a political tool. As he summarized, "Protecting old buildings protects the spirits also," and it is important to stress that the heritage district should be read not only as an economic zone, but also a place of spiritual transformation.

The 2018 election finished in a controversial manner, with the Prime Minister and the CPP taking every parliamentary seat and standing unopposed after using legal measures to delegitimize the opposition prior to the vote. Still, the shop signs remain hanging throughout Battambang. While I am sure the Director would love to order the removal of the signs, a more diplomatic approach is necessary to appease UNESCO. In some sense, to successfully remove the signs and restore the colonial buildings to their former glory, the Director must create Bryman's fourth step of Disneyization, performative labor, that values the role of heritage in

future development more than the capitalist temptation of instant profitability. As he summarizes, "The people do not yet understand why these buildings are important. They want to tear them down and build new shops. But when we are a UNESCO World Heritage City, then they will be proud to say 'I am from Battambang'." Of course, the people of Battambang are already proud of their heritage and believe themselves special amongst the Cambodian populace, but UNESCO can help turn those feelings into financial profit through the Disneyization process. In so doing, the Director wants the performative labor of the area to resonate internationally instead of just locally.

**The Battambang Winery**

The change away from the Wild West of Battambang's past and its lessened reliance on temple trekking as an attraction for adventurous tourists is also resulting in a rise in luxury tourism (Carruthers 2016b). In most of Cambodia, luxury tourism is a direct consequence of the soaring number of Chinese tourists. So many casinos and Chinese-related luxury hotels have been built along Cambodia's southern coast, for example, that a recent news article asked if the resort town of Sihanoukville is now a Chinese city instead of a Cambodian one (Filfield 2018; 2016 "Cambodia's twin track"). Chinese tourists bring immense wealth to Cambodia and, as I have described elsewhere, prefer to spend their money on businesses with direct ties to Chinese businesspeople (Moor 2016). Such patterns are problematic and have resulted in a backlash against Chinese tourism exclusivity and so-called "zero dollar tourists," who bring much wealth to the country but leave little of it in Cambodian hands (Khidhir 2019).

Battambang has not yet suffered these same problems, and the forms of luxury tourism developing there differ greatly from elsewhere in Cambodia. Although a few Chinese-friendly hotels exist around Battambang, Chinese tourists do not currently make up a significant share of the region's tourism market, as previously mentioned. Even without Chinese investment, however, luxury tourism is rapidly rising throughout Battambang, albeit based on highly European motifs instead of Asian ones. Indeed, you will not find a casino in Battambang City (the only known one to operate from a hotel closed over a decade ago), but will find hotels dripping with Indochinese design and cuisine. For example, La Villa is an old French colonial manor that has been converted into a high end boutique hotel and restaurant that is popular with Euro-American diplomats, such as former American Ambassador William A. Heidt who stayed there whenever he came to town. The downtown Bric-à-Brac Boutique also attempts to create an atmosphere of Indochinese opulence, whose owners summarized to me, "When people travel to Burma, they want to see the British legacy. In Indonesia, they often want to see the Dutch legacy. Here, they want a more Gallic experience, and we try to provide that French colonial feel."[8] The town also hosts an array of tapas bars and higher end speciality restaurants, including a former gin bar and an array of coffee houses. Guests can even arrange for a picnic at the Sala Khet, complete with seating, French charcuterie, and plenty of wine.

These types of luxury experiences usually cost more money than a typical budget-conscious backpacker is willing to spend, save for perhaps on booze and coffee. In this way, foreign-based luxury tourism in Battambang is predicated on experiencing the city as a colonial

---

[8] Arguably, this statement unintentionally reflects the Deny-the-Thai strategy I discuss in Chapter 5, as the Siamese legacy is far greater than that of the French in Battambang's history, albeit not yet in the minds of tourists.

official from before the Khmer Rouge. The tourism statistics I gathered over 2016 provide evidence as to why luxury tourism is taking such a route. For one, the average guest age is increasing. Whereas most tourists were in their early twenties a decade ago, tourists now average an age of 32. Guests aged forty or above constitute 25% of the tourism arrivals, a figure that continues to grow at the expense of younger visitors. Additionally, solo backpackers are giving way to touring couples and families. Only 24% of guests travel alone, whereas 47% come as couples and 6.5% travel in groups of more than five. In other words, foreign tourists to Battambang are increasingly likely to be older married couples or families than young solo adventurers, and therefore have more money to spend and more time to enjoy spending it.

The data also show that nearly 20% of all foreign tourists in Battambang are French. From my numerous conversations with French tourists, it became clear that many French guests are motivated by the desire to experience their former territory and behave as if they still control it. As one slightly-inebriated Frenchman once proclaimed while drinking next to me at my favorite bar, “This place is so beautiful because of us, but these people [the Cambodians] are not grateful. When we were the bosses, we built many beautiful buildings. When they were the bosses, they destroyed them all!” More than once have I engaged in similar conversations with French tourists that indicate to me a form of colonialism through touristic imagination, and so it makes sense for Battambang to be a place experiencing more European influences for luxury tourism than Chinese, as it is the city most associated with surviving French Indochinese architecture.

French tourists are not the only ones craving more pampered experiences, however, and domestic tourism is also seeing new forms of luxury tourism taking root. In one particular

instance, these two groups collide with wildly different interpretations of the luxury experience: the Chan Tay Chhoeung Winery. Located on the road to Phnom Banon approximately thirty minutes by moto or tuk-tuk from Battambang City, the Chan Tay Chhoeung Winery is the only winery in all of Cambodia. After the Khmer Rouge laid down their arms in 1998, local entrepreneur Chan Tay Chhoeung decided he wanted to try farming grapes to make wine as a way of differentiating his livelihood from his competitors (Phearun & Retka 2017). As he described, "I knew nothing about how to make wine, so I gathered many books about wine. Any book about wine, I would buy. Sometimes, I would ask my friends to bring me books about wine if they went to other countries."

Unfortunately, most of the books he collected were in French or English, languages he could not read, and so he could only study the pictures. He started his winery and, after a few years of trial and error, eventually was able to use the internet to help him translate some of the writing and fine tune his process. Today, he owns three large grape fields in different parts of Battambang as well as a dedicated tasting center, where he currently offers red and white varietals, non-alcoholic grape juice, brandy, and an assortment of grape-based products such as jellies and even herbal medicines. The winery is a popular place for tourists of all kinds to stop, and guests are allowed to freely roam the grape fields before stopping by the tasting center, where Chan Tay Chhoeung's chatty wife Chantol regales guests with their origin story before pouring ample samples (see Figure 12).

What makes the winery fascinating, however, is not that it attracts foreign tourists, but that it has become a Cambodian symbol of luxury. In fact, most European guests I encountered during my many visits to the winery derided the wine as swill (and, to be honest, I also find it

Figure 12 - Chantol and myself displaying some
of Battambang's wine

rather harsh tasting). One French resident of Battambang who operates a wine import store is particularly critical and once told me that he does not stock their products because he does not actually consider the products 'wine' - "only grape-flavored alcohol." Yet, the winery can barely produce enough bottles to satisfy domestic demand, and regularly sells out within days of newly bottled batches. Cambodian guests buy wine by the case, often packing the trunks of their cars with as much as they can buy (at $15 USD per bottle). Many of these Cambodian guests are domestic tourists who want to take the wine back home to gift to their friends, not unlike the Japanese cultural practice of gifting *omiyage* after a trip (Park 2000). Festival times are particularly busy, and Chantol once boasted, "Before major festivals, so many people want to buy our wine that the cars block the road for many kilometers!"

That wine from Cambodia's only winery has become a luxury good is unsurprising and speaks to the manner by which colonialism continues to affect Cambodian social stratigraphy. After all, even Chan Tay Chhoeung admits that he wanted to make wine because French officials used to drink it when he was a boy and he associates it with class and wealth. The wine's label also bears the image of the nearby Prasat Banon, and can thus serve as proof of one's journey to Battambang's holy mountain in the same way that a tourist souvenir can. In this way, a single bottle of Cambodian wine is highly semiotic and serves as an identity marker for status and affluence while also conveying the ongoing legacy of colonialism and tourism. Despite being below par by European tasting standards, the Cambodian winery has even received praise from the Cambodian monarchy, and the tasting center proudly displays photos of Chan Tay Chhoeung personally serving his wine to King Sihamoni.

The popularity of the Cambodian winery with local residents and domestic tourists is undeniable, and demand for the wine even forced Chan Tay Chhoeung to build a larger welcome center in a new location in 2016. From an analytical standpoint, the Chan Tay Chhoeung winery proves that luxury tourism in Cambodia is not entirely dependent on Chinese or Euro-American interests, but is something for which there is significant demand in the domestic tourist realm as well. As the Cambodian middle and upper classes begin to travel more frequently, they want to engage with tourist commodities in the same manner as foreign tourists, and a bottle of Battambang's wine allows them to share tourist narratives while also promoting pride in their nation for matching the offerings typical of wealthier foreign nations. To me, the Battambang winery is a hotspot where domestic tourism trends are born out far more visibly than most other areas of the country.

In summation, this chapter focuses on many different tourist themes at play in the attempt to create a new sense of ‘charm’ in Battambang City, but all are created through the aspirations process of changing the city’s reputation away from the Wild West towards that of Cambodia’s Charming City. Tourists no longer visit the city to get close to the Khmer Rouge, although they do still seek closeness with past realities in increasingly opulent terms. Sites that once held a specific thematic meaning may now serve an entirely different experiential narrative that is of even greater benefit to the local economy. In this way, what was once considered a dangerous adventure is now becoming internationally renowned for timelessness, luxury, and charm. By carefully theming themselves in this way, residents of Battambang are shifting the manner by which outsiders interact with this region away from the controversial practices of old towards a newer, more sustainable form of symbolic economy.

# Chapter 4
# Art Tourism, Past and Present

Battambang is the artistic heart of Cambodia - at least according to the tourist pamphlets that tout the legacy of art in northwestern Cambodia (Sasson & Tasing 2017). Indeed, countless advertisements online and in print emphasize Battambang as being "intrinsically linked" to art as part of what makes the region unique, and few people, including locals, ever question the veracity of these claims (2018 "A Guide"). Yet, the history of art in Battambang is a far more complicated matter than such assumptions indicate, and much of the resulting art tourism is predicated on highly-'Westernized' conceptions of what constitutes 'art' that ignore local understandings of what the term has meant historically. In this chapter, I will show that there are actually two predominant forms of art tourism in Battambang: a highly publicized modern art movement that appeals primarily to foreign tourists, and a less public but still-extensive network of nostalgic experiences and cultural tourism for Cambodian tourists seeking to connect with the artistic legacy of the region.

Art tourism is undoubtedly one of the most important thematic narratives for tourism in Battambang (2019 "Art tourism"). In fact, of all the various touristic appeals that have risen and fallen over the years that I have been traveling to the region, art is the only theme to remain consistently cited by tourists as a primary reason for their visit. Several well-known art galleries can be found in the city, and nearly every café and restaurant serves as both a dining room and a showplace for numerous paintings, sculptures, photographs, and other mixed-media art pieces that are almost always for sale. Art parties are thrown at these establishments regularly, wherein dozens of local artists, expatriates, and curious tourists gather for snacks, drinks, and the opportunity to talk with the featured artist about their newest showing. These galleries and the

numerous parties and shows associated with them serve a crucial role both for theming the city as artistic and creative, and for attracting tourists using such thematic appeal.

Yet, these spaces and the form of art tourism practiced therein reflect a carefully curated history that privileges 'Western' understandings of visual art, not the aspects of Battambang's artistic history that draw Cambodian tourists to the region. While Battambang residents have long created beautiful paintings and sculpture, the concept of a formal gallery that acts as a marketplace to schmooze with like-minded aficionados and spend small fortunes on statement pieces is a much newer concept supported primarily by foreigners, both expatriates and tourists (see Abbe 2014). Traditionally speaking, older Battambang painters specialized in Buddhist art that adorned the walls of local temples or in statuary that reflected important religious icons, folkloric heroes, or local elites. Even in more recent times such as the pre-Khmer Rouge period of the 1950s and 1960s, the most famous painters in Battambang were known more for their large, handprinted movie advertisements than for 'modern' visual art (Muong & Fitch Little 2016). Instead, Battambang's artistic reputation originated largely from other forms of art, namely music, literature, and performance art - all of which still draw thousands of Cambodian visitors to the region every year. Although these issues are more indicative of cultural tourism at large than simply 'art' tourism, they are nevertheless categorized by most locals as part of the same thematic appeal, and so I discuss them in tandem here.

Nearly all residents of Battambang, foreign or local born, are greatly concerned with being the exemplary creative city for the entire nation and with satisfying the thematic narratives about art in Battambang that have been so long espoused that their validity is no longer easily discernible (2019 "Enjoy Art"). But proving that Battambang is an historically important artistic

city requires a thoughtful examination of what is considered ‘art’ and who has the agency to define such a term. On the one hand, contemporary ideas about visual art, especially paintings and other capitalism-dependent artistic commodities, can only be traced with any certainty to the 1990s and the establishment of the Phare Ponleu Selpak Fine Arts School and Circus, to be discussed in the latter half of this chapter (2017 “Inside the studio”). On the other hand, if we understand art to be locally defined as a cultural process that uses a variety of media to express complicated ideas of identity, folklore, religion, and politics - perhaps using the Khmer word for art, “*selpak,*” which encompasses many forms of creative enterprise - then yes, there can be no doubt that Battambang has long exemplified and been a catalyst for traditional Cambodian art.[1]

**The Origins of Cambodian Art?**

Nestled into the hillside of Phnom Teak Trang about thirty-eight kilometers to the southwest of Battambang City hides the unassuming cave of Laang Spean (Mourer 1970: 128). From the exterior, the cave appears as a large, black ovoid shape on the side of a mountain that seems almost out of place in the flat fields of rice surrounding it.[2] From the inside, however, Laang Spean is a treasure trove of beauty, history, and creativity. French archaeologists Cécile and Roland Mourer began the first study of Laang Spean on July 28th, 1965, finding a flint point

---

1 សិល្បៈ

2 Laang Spean/ is Khmer for “the Cave of Bridges,” so named for a large rock ‘bridge’ that connects two exposed parts of the ceiling and serves as a dramatic backdrop to the scene. Although the word spean (ស្ពាន) can be translated with either the singular or plural form of “bridge,” and despite only the one massive ‘bridge’ being visible upon entry, the most commonly employed translation uses the plural form “bridges.” To be consistent with local English translations, I retain the plural “Cave of Bridges” form here.

that hinted at the promise of greater materials below (Mourer 1970: 128). The Mourers soon discovered a rich collection of pottery, stone tools, and animal remains that indicated extensive usage of the cave by early settlers to the area. Unfortunately, the violent events of the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s prevented the Mourers from further studying the cave and the site became virtually inaccessible to researchers until recent years, when Khmer archaeologist Heng Sophady and his French colleague Hubert Forestier returned in 2009 to examine the site (Kijewski 2018). Heng and Forestier now lead excavations every February in partnership with the French-Cambodian Prehistoric Mission (Paviour 2016; Pert 2018; Forestier 2015).

I visited Laang Spean several times throughout 2016, meeting with Heng and Forestier during one of their February excavations. During that encounter, Heng described finding a Hoabinhian-era stone covered with an etching of an arrow colored in red ochre, which he claimed "could be the first case of art in Cambodia" (Paviour 2016b). At the very least, Heng asserted, the cave proves a long history of human creativity in this region of Cambodia. Obviously, Battambang Province as it is currently defined did not yet exist in those early eras of artistic innovation. We must therefore avoid attributing any causal relationship between regional identity and artistic legacy in this case, although the region's lush landscape may have held some aesthetic appeal beyond subsistence to early inhabitants. Regardless, from an archaeological standpoint, modern Battambang Province may have some incidental claim to the historical origins of art in Cambodia.

**Buddhist Tourism and Khmer Literature**

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Battambang is considered by many Khmer to be the 'Buddhist heart' of the nation and still maintains an unusual density of temples in both Battambang City and the surrounding countryside. This fact is significant when you consider that Buddhist tourism and religious pilgrimage have occurred throughout much of Battambang's history. Most temples are decorated in bright colors and intricate designs, as is typical most everywhere in Cambodia, although the particular style of each temple differs from the next in a manner that helps distinguish it from the others. In a sense, these temples have been competing with each other for visitor attention since long before the arrival of Europeans, with art helping to disseminate a sense of uniqueness and spiritual authority for each temple. I turn now towards the relationship between art, cultural tourism, and religious spaces, as these concepts are still deeply linked in the minds of domestic tourists to the region, albeit in ways that merge religious and secular narratives to create new forms of symbolic meaning.

Most temples are covered in brightly colored paintings depicting the life of the Buddha and/or religious morality tales, although some temples are more unique than others. Wat Ek Phnom, a more modern temple located adjacent to the ancient ruins of Ek Phnom, contains several murals depicting the Buddha interacting with officials dressed in attire reminiscent of the *Lōk Mjah* period of the 1800s, while Wat Somonos near Ek Phnom displays paintings of folkloric figures meeting colonial officers from France (Zepp 2006). With so many temples in a relatively small area, each temple must use specialized adornment to help attract worshipers, pilgrims, and curious tourists. Anthropologist Marc Askew has analyzed similar competition in the Buddhist tourism of Thailand and aptly concluded that, "The symbolic economy in

contemporary Asia is a reticulating accumulation process that spawns new monuments and revives old sites, generating an ever-proliferating spectacular landscape that perpetuates competition for visitation, income and fame" (Askew 2008: 92). Variations on temple art can oftentimes be interpreted as part of this competitive process.

In Battambang, Buddhist tourism - by which I mean both religious pilgrimage and non-religious visitation to Buddhist spaces - is predicated on a multitude of factors including historic reputation, perceived spiritual potency, and fame in more artistic contexts. In most cases, however, art plays a role in temple tourism around Battambang City, and I found that most Cambodians that travel to Battambang visit specific temples as much for secular reasons as spiritual, with particular respect to the influence of literature and music.

For example, many Cambodians travel to Wat Kandal to experience the setting of one of the nation's most famous novels. In truth, Battambang might rightly be called the birthplace of the modern Khmer novel. While epic poetry and sacred texts have long been recorded on palm leaf bindings at Buddhist temples, the first prose work of Cambodian fiction purposefully published as a book for mass consumption is attributable to Battambang native Rim Kin (Johnson 2008; Smith 2008: i). Rim's 1938 novel *Sophat*, a tale of a young man destined for love and conflict, literally begins with a train ride from Sisophon (then part of Battambang Province) to Phnom Penh. In this way, Battambang has been associated with modern Cambodian literature since its first written pages.

More influential than Rim Kin's novel, however, is the work of celebrated author Nou Hach, who also hails from Battambang. Nou Hach is considered the premiere Cambodian author, and his 1947 novel *Pgaa Sraporn/The Wilted Flower* was still the best selling Khmer novel as of

2006 (Johnson 2008).[3] Nou Hach, and *Pgaa Sraporn* in particular, continue to influence tourism in Battambang in unexpected ways. The climax of *Pgaa Sraporn* occurs when Witheavy, a young maiden who has fallen in love with the protagonist Bun Thoeun, becomes ill and slowly dies, only to be cremated and buried at Wat Kandal near the center of Battambang City.[4] The emotional final scenes drip with vivid descriptions of Witheavy's final moments and the temple in which she is put to rest.

Given the popularity of the novel and the melodramatic nature of the prose, it is unsurprising that Khmer tourists seek to enter themselves into the novel's narrative when they visit Battambang and Wat Kandal. As one woman of about fifty years of age who hailed from Pursat said when I encountered her outside of Wat Kandal's gate, "Witheavy's story is so sad but so beautiful. When I come here, I think of her." This attempt to 'enter' and experience the fictional story in a tangible manner is complicated by the fact that most of the Khmer tourists I encountered at Wat Kandal consider *Pgaa Sraporn* a true story. In one instance, an acquaintance of mine who lives near Wat Kandal happily outlined his entire family tree in order to prove that he is a descendant of Witheavy herself, despite the novel being a work of fiction (although how much of the story may be based on Nou Hach's personal experience is harder to determine).

For their part, the monks that attend to Wat Kandal are happy to promote the story of *Pgaa Sraporn* and the tourism that results from it. As Venerable Keo Sampong, a 43 year-old monk who has lived at Wat Kandal since 2001, summarized,

---

[3] ផ្កាស្រអែពោន in Khmer. The second "r" in "sraporn" is silent.

[4] Wat Kandal/វត្តកណ្តាល translates literally as "Center Temple."

> "I am so happy to see foreign tourists visit our wat. They are guests and they come to appreciate our home. They come because they are curious about things that they don't have in their culture. Sometimes they wear improper clothing or do improper things, but we cannot blame them. They do not know our rules. As humans, everyone has the freedom to believe differently from each other and they are following the behavior of their own cultures. Some people are happy, some are charming, and some are silent. If they behave incorrectly, we help correct them. If they don't listen, that is a problem, but we will not make trouble for them because of our beliefs. Their ignorance is enough punishment."

Many of the elder monks, including Ven. Keo, will even give tours of the wat to show where different segments of Witheavy's climactic story took place. During one of my visits, Ven. Keo showed me a building where Witheavy was allegedly cremated, now rebuilt as a kitchen. Beaming, he said that the entire community of monks at Wat Kandal are proud to be known for the story of *Pgaa Sraporn* and that it helps them stand out as unique from the multitude of other temples in the area, two of which are within five minutes walking distance on either side of Wat Kandal. "In 2002, some people came here to make a movie about *Pgaa Sraporn*, and even now a lot of music videos are filmed here," he exclaimed with pride. "We're on TV often, not many wats can say that."

None of these secular tourist activities replace the religious motivations many Cambodians have when visiting Battambang's Buddhist sites, but instead serve to supplement those reasons. Most visitors who travel to Wat Kandal to connect with the story of *Pgaa Sraporn*, for example, are ethnic Khmer who are Buddhist by an overwhelming margin. Visiting Wat Kandal provides an opportunity to explore a beloved story while also reaffirming Buddhist beliefs - in some cases, literally mixing the two, as adherents often offer prayers for and ask for divine intervention from the spirit of Witheavy. One woman in her early 20s who I met through a mutual acquaintance told me that she prayed to Witheavy to help her become pregnant with her

first child. As she said, "Many people pray to Ta Dambong Krañyoung for help, but I thought, 'He is a man! What does he know about becoming pregnant!?' Instead, I wanted to pray to Witheavy. She died young, but she can understand the feelings of young women. So maybe she could help me have my baby because she also wants to have a child."

In short, although my discussion focuses mainly on the more secular purposes that Cambodians visit Battambang's religious spaces, I only do so to stress that Buddhist tourism is far more complicated than simply seeking pilgrimage to a site for purely religious purposes. In most cases, tourist motivations involve a combination of historical and artistic purposes. Cambodians who visit Battambang's Buddhist sites understand that Buddhist spaces thematically represent more than just prayer. In other words, for most Cambodians visiting Battambang, Buddhism exists as a multilayered thematic experience that combines religious imaginaries with artistic ones because of the region's artistic heritage.

**The Power of Rock and Roll: Music Tourism in Battambang**

Ven. Keo's comments about the power of digital media, particularly the music videos that are so popular with Cambodian audiences, bring me to my next point: although literature is immensely important to Battambang's art tourism market, music is by far the most powerful force that attracts Cambodian tourists to Battambang. Battambang has a long history with traditional music, such that Tauch Chhoung even focuses much of his history of the Thai Protectorate period on the *Lōk Mjah* Chhum Aphaiwong's love of music, theatre, and dance - stressing that the *Lōk Mjah* kept and trained a highly-regarded dance troupe and accompanying musical group in his personal residence (Chhoung 1996; see also Bastian 2005). Although the

*Lōk Mjah* is gone, music certainly continues to be associated with the region, in part thanks to the Cambodian Rock and Roll Renaissance of the mid-twentieth century.

The most famous singer in Cambodian history is unquestionably Sinn Sisamouth, sometimes touted as the 'Cambodian Elvis' and/or the 'King of Khmer Music', who dominated Cambodian airwaves during the 1950s and 1960s. Although Sisamouth hailed from Stung Treng to the northeast, his family lived for a time in Battambang and he retained a fervent love for the area for his entire life. In one counting, Sinn Sisamouth wrote and/or performed over eighty songs about Battambang - all of which have been compiled into one lengthy dedicated playlist on YouTube, a compilation that shows that Cambodians are not only aware of his love of the province but also prioritize listening to it separately from his other beloved works.

Unlike Sinn Sisamouth, Ros Sereysothea, one of Cambodia's most famous female singers and Sisamouth's frequent collaborator, *did* originally hail from Battambang and her music is also strongly associated with the region. Both Sisamouth and Sereysothea disappeared during the Khmer Rouge regime, but Ros Sereysothea's family still lives in Battambang today. Similarly, Pan Ron, whose risqué lyrics and psychedelic singing style helped her gain fame in the 1960s, is also originally from Battambang. Battambang's influence over Khmer rock and roll continues today with Battambang born musicians like rapper Ngoun Chan Devith and rock star Chhom Nimol, lead singer of the Los Angeles-based Cambodian American psychedelic indie group Dengue Fever (Muong 2016).

The rock and roll renaissance of the 1950s and 1960s is used by the Provincial Government to attract Cambodian tourists in more directly planned thematic ways as well. Aside from Sinn Sisamouth, two famous songwriters define Battambang's relationship to Khmer rock

and roll: Kong Bunchhoeun and Voy Ho, both of whom wrote songs for Sinn Sisamouth as well as recording their own. Both Kong Bunchhoeun and Voy Ho are famous for being multitalented artists, musicians, and poets, with Bunchhoeun being the more widely praised of the two. In one of his most famous songs, "The Ten Coconut Trees," Bunchhoeun describes the picturesque scene of coconut trees lining the serene banks of Battambang's Sangkae River. In November of 2015, the Governor ordered a renovation of the riverfront, which at the time was mostly concrete and tile left exposed to the sun. The center of his renovation was the planting of ten coconut trees of the type described in Bunchhoeun's song. When I asked the Governor why he authorized the tree planting, he smiled and stated simply, "I love the words of Kong Bunchhoeun, and others do too." The implication was clear: Cambodians want to match the mental images stirred by Bunchhoeun's music with a tangible reality, and thus the city needs to provide the sensory experiences that tourists expect.

Unfortunately for Bunchhoeun, he was forced to flee Cambodia after writing a book that fictionalized the real-life account of his niece's affair with a powerful government official that resulted in her being attacked with acid and facially disfigured. She now lives in the United States of America as a refugee, while most of Bunchhoeun's family live in Norway. Kong Bunchhoeun himself died in Norway on April 17th, 2016 (2013 "Brahwat"). Despite his exile, the Cambodian government did not interfere with traditional burial rituals performed for him at Battambang's Wat Kandal, where he ordained as a monk in his youth.

I attended his Seven Day Ceremony a week after his death, making offerings of robes to the monks in order to make merit for Bunchhoeun's spirit. Several famous musicians and artists traveled to Battambang from all corners of Cambodia for the ceremony, including thirty-five year

old Seng Dara, a popular radio DJ and historian of Cambodian music. After the prayers finished, Seng and I found some time at a shaded table in the corner of the wat to talk about Bunchhoeun's legacy. Seng called Battambang "the homeland of the great musicians and songwriters of the old regime of Cambodian music."[5] He continued, "Kong Bunchhoeun became famous because he could do everything - music, movies, novels, art, poetry, all of it, and always with a lot of detail. No doubt Battambang was the most important place for him given how beautifully he writes about it."

After I asked for an example, Seng continued, "When Cambodian people think of Kong Bunchhoeun, we immediately think about 'The Ten Coconut Trees', which is my favorite song too. In it, he describes his 'honey', but we know he's not really talking about a woman. Cambodians understand the song is a metaphor. He is talking about Battambang, and it is such a descriptive and beautiful song." When asked about how Kong Bunchhoeun impacted him personally, Seng dramatized how Bunchhoeun left a lasting legacy that defines the image that Cambodians have of Battambang today. "I live in Phnom Penh," Seng said. "Sometimes when I look at the Mekong River, especially in front of the Royal Palace, all I see is too many people and too much garbage. So I start dreaming of the Sangkae River in Battambang. Bunchhoeun's poetry is that perfect - he makes me believe that Battambang is everything that Cambodia should be."

Seng believes that many Khmer people share his opinion of Bunchhoeun and of Battambang as a result of Bunchhoeun's music, and not exclusively the older generations alive in the 1960s. "Look at me, look at the others who came all this way for this ritual. We are young,

---

[5] My interview with Seng Dara was conducted in English at his request.

not old! We heard about this ritual on Facebook, YouTube, and other places on the internet. We all love Kong Bunchhoeun so much that we came from all over Cambodia to respect him. No one invited us; they didn't have to. We just came on our own from all distant provinces to honor him because he is deep in our hearts. I came because my heart led me here." In closing, I asked Seng about his opinion as to why Cambodian tourists from distant provinces visit Battambang as tourists. "Battambang makes the Khmer people happy," Seng said. "Battambang helps us relive memories from the old days, when things were good."

**The Flowing Voice: Interview with a Dead Man**

My interview with Seng Dara did not exclusively focus on Kong Bunchheoun but also included a discussion about Voy Ho, a much less well-known name outside of Cambodia. "You cannot understand Cambodian music, especially music from Battambang, unless you compare both Voy Ho and Kong Bunchhoeun," Seng said, "but unfortunately, [Voy Ho] died during the Khmer Rouge and no one knows much about him anymore." As I was mostly familiar with Voy Ho from some of his more famous songs such as the raunchy "Three Bachelors," I spent several months searching for any information I could find about him or his family, only to unwittingly stumble into a politically tense situation that reveals much about the complicated nature of governmental control over historical narratives and how that control falters in the face of popular opinion.

The people of Battambang told me the same thing everywhere I went: Voy Ho died during the Khmer Rouge. Sometimes the story was made complicated by the suggestion that Voy Ho was stricken with a disease that changed his skin color and led to his murder out of fear of

outbreak, but the basic structure of the tale was always the same: like so many other great Cambodian artists, Voy Ho disappeared during the Khmer Rouge and was never seen again. With no reason to doubt this claim given the commonality of such events during the 1970s, I was shocked one day when I was casually discussing Cambodian music over beers at a Cambodian friend's house in central Battambang City only to have him rebuke me and proclaim, "Voy Ho is not dead! He is my neighbor!"

I immediately asked for an introduction, which led to a prolonged search to find the man who was supposedly Voy Ho, the great Battambang poet and musician. Several months after our initial conversation, my friend called me unexpectedly and with great excitement proclaimed that he knew Voy Ho's location and that the famous singer had agreed to meet with me. According to my friend, Voy Ho was in hiding because he feared government persecution, and so I could only meet him on condition that I keep his location a secret. Swearing such an oath, I quickly ventured off into a mountainous region of Cambodia a few hours from Battambang, having no idea if I would indeed meet the real Voy Ho.

My search eventually brought me to a doorless wooden shack at the end of a dusty path in a small village perched atop a heavily-forested mountain range. When I approached, a portly elderly man appeared and introduced himself as Voy Ho, legendary Khmer musician and supposed dead man. He did indeed have a noticeable skin disease, with blotches of deep purple and blood red across his skin and a large tumor growing from his face, which he would later claim as part of the reason he allowed rumors of his death to persist. He would rather be remembered as a dead idol from the 1970s than a disfigured old man needing assistance, he

admitted, although it was clear in our conversation that he still wanted his writings to be valued by Cambodian society (see Figure 13).

During our talk, Voy Ho shared a nostalgic tale about his relationship with Kong Bunchhoeun that highlighted the role Battambang played in their music.

> "Kong Bunchhoeun was my senior," he explained. "I am from the generation that learned from him. I wrote more songs than he did, but I learned so much from him first. I wrote over 100 songs about Battambang because I was inspired by him and his love of Battambang. I remember when [Kong Bunchhoeun and his wife] were having marital problems and he wrote 'Ten Coconut Trees'. He gave that song to Sinn Sisamouth to sing but Sisamouth had the flu and could not sing it without sounding awful! Watching my friend struggle with that song inspired me to write a song about Battambang also, and so I wrote about the Sangkae River where I first met the woman I was in love with at the time. Both songs were very sad, so [Bunchhoeun] decided to write a happier song about Battambang girls being so beautiful that even famous artists could not draw them. He got in a little bit of trouble for that song when a famous painter took him to court and accused him of looking down on him! It was such a fun and crazy time back then."

With such a close relationship to a man who later became known for his scathing critique of the Cambodian government, it became much clearer to me why Voy Ho was hiding himself from exposure, especially given the political situation at the time.

Even the name Voy Ho is only a stage name that he chooses not to use in public so that he can more easily hide himself, even if the facial tumor makes total anonymity a struggle. The name "Voy Ho" translates as "The Flowing Voice," a description he was given by a teacher because, as he himself described, "I can write beautiful poetry quickly and naturally. It is not because my voice is beautiful but because I can make a song about anything I see." To prove his point, he suddenly improvised a song about me traveling halfway across the world to visit him, and we enjoyed some time laughing and testing his impressive poetic skills. He also opened a leather chest and showed me collections of sheet music for songs he had written, including some


Figure 13 - Voy Ho, very much alive, posing with memorabilia from his musical heyday

handwritten original copies from his collaborations with Sinn Sisamouth and others, the survival of which stunned me nearly as much as his own. “They were all my friends,” he said solemnly, “Sinn Sisamouth, Ros Sereysothea, they were all such good friends.”

Soon our conversation turned to talking about strategies for inspiring creativity in Cambodian youth, and I eventually asked him his opinion of Cambodians who visit Battambang in search of such inspiration. In some sense, I was curious if he felt that Cambodians could pursue their own form of art tourism in Battambang that served more to revitalize Cambodian artistic traditions than to adapt purely to Euro-American standards. He wholeheartedly agreed that tourism in Battambang can serve that purpose and praised Battambang both for its historical role in inspiring Cambodian creativity and its physical and political distance from Phnom Penh.

"Battambang is the most attractive, civilized, and moral place in Cambodia," he boasted. "Historically, Battambang people have always helped each other because they could not rely on Phnom Penh or anyone else to help them. So they understand those values better than other Khmer people."

Battambang's struggle to maintain its unique identity during the periods of Thai and French influence are what make Battambang so important for young artists, he continued.

> "Battambang produces so much poetry and literature because foreigners tried to control us many times. Our history is complicated, but because of that complicated history we had education and culture that other Cambodians did not have, and so Battambang became the center for Khmer creativity. It also helps that Battambang is the most beautiful place in Cambodia! Our history encouraged creativity and the environment gave us inspiration, and that's what you need for art."

When I asked him about Cambodian tourists visiting Battambang specifically because they were inspired by his writings and the writings of Kong Bunchhoeun, Voy Ho beamed and summarized,

> "I am happy that Khmer people want to see Battambang because of my songs. That is my legacy. My songs describe different places in Battambang, so I hope people feel transported to those places when they listen. I always wrote songs to encourage people to wonder about these places, and so if they are coming to explore them in real life, it means I succeeded."

**Monuments and Tourism**

My afternoon with Voy Ho in his mountain hideout re-affirmed a popular argument residents of Battambang often offer as explanation for their artistic importance, namely that the 'colonial' periods, especially the *Lōk Mjah* period, sheltered Battambang from the creativity-stifling policies imposed by the French. By the time Battambang was 'returned' to Cambodia in 1907, Battambang was home to a thriving educational system and many elite religious and

literary scholars. The most prominent of these scholars is *Lōk Okhna* Suttantaprija Ind, regionally known as *Lōk Acha* Ind, who was born in Kandal province but lived and studied at Battambang's Wat Keo for many years, eventually permanently settling in the province with his family. Historian and religious scholar Anne Hansen has written widely about Ind's influence as a regulator of Cambodian moral behavior and constructor of Khmer modernity (Hansen 2007: 4-5).

*Lōk Acha* Ind is revered in all regions of Cambodia for his knowledge and moral leadership, but the residents of Battambang hold him in special regard. Ind served as an advisor to *Lōk Mjah* Chhum Aphaiwong in the waning years of the *Lōk Mjah* period, counseling the *Lōk Mjah* on everything from religious behavior to military strategy. Although many Cambodians with whom I spoke, including members of the educated religious elite, lamented the difficulty in reading Ind's writings, he is still touted as an example of how Battambang's better education led to masterful poetry and prose that truly exemplify Cambodian creativity. For my purposes, the content of *Lōk Acha* Ind's writings, which are dense and scholarly, are less important than the manner by which he is promoted as proof of Battambang's creative authority.

In 2011, the Battambang government began erecting monuments dedicated to famous regional historical figures around Battambang City. Most prominent is a life-size statue of *Lōk Acha* Ind dressed in the formal attire of the *Lōk Mjah*'s court while holding a book and writing quill that was erected along the riverfront near the iconic downtown city market (see Figure 14). A smaller but shimmering black statue of the Hindu god Ganesha, the elephant-headed patron of arts and education, was built a few steps away. Placing these statues in relation to each other in such a visible area with an abundance of foot traffic is a clear indicator that the intention is to


Figure 14 - Statue of *Lōk Okhna* Suttantaprija Ind along the Sangkae River, downtown Battambang City

directly associate Battambang with education, science, and art. That the construction of these monuments occurred at the same moment as the city's rebranding as "The Charming City" is no coincidence - to many Cambodians, Battambang is associated with a nostalgic creativity that represents the artistic capabilities and traditions of the greater nation, and those feelings are part of what makes the city so "charming." These monuments serve to remind visitors of Battambang's artistic importance as much as its scholarly history, and also to help attract a selfie-loving public.

The effort to place monuments to Battambang's artistic legacy throughout the city is also continuing in unexpected ways, as the death of Kong Bunchhoeun led to a people's petition for a statue dedicated to the late renaissance man. Despite the political problems that Bunchhoeun's work presents to the government, the Governor approved the statue within days of the public request. Whether the Governor waited for or received approval from Prime Minister Hun Sen in Phnom Penh is unclear, but the Prime Minister did not interfere with the declaration either way. After some skepticism that the government would actually follow through with dedicating a statue to the legacy of a man who died in exile, the Governor made a compromise: the government would not fund the statue, but would allow it to be built at Wat Kandal *if* the people could raise the funds on their own (Sokhavuth 2016).

Quickly funded by an eager populace, the statue of Kong Bunchhoeun was completed and unveiled at the beginning of 2018. Kong Bunchhoeun's family was allowed to attend the ceremony, traveling from Norway to Battambang for the occasion, and the Battambang Provincial Department of Tourism promoted the statue through its Facebook account. In this way, the Battambang government clearly recognized that the potential to associate the region with Cambodian artistic excellence and profit from travelers coming to visit the monument far outweighed the danger of memorializing an outspoken critic of the government.[6] This statue is an excellent example of how the government of Battambang - largely composed of members of Prime Minister Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party - often asserts its own authority apart from the centralized Phnom Penh government, as I greatly doubt that the Prime Minister would have

---

[6] Another likelihood is that the local government did not want to upset the populace too much prior to the July 2018 elections, which were promising to be contentious in Battambang before the dissolution of the main opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party.

allowed the construction of such an oppositional symbol had it been placed so near to the Prime Minister's seat of power. In Battambang, however, the promise of tourism overruled political influence, at least in this particular case.

What becomes clear through these examples is that Battambang does hold great appeal for Cambodians that have a love of Khmer literature, music, and poetry. Cambodian tourists *do* travel to Battambang in large numbers, particularly during festival times, in large part to visit the "charming" places described in the music and stories of old Cambodia. The government of Battambang is clearly aware of this attraction, planting trees and building statues to emphasize the artistic importance of the city for the wider traditions of Khmer society, even going so far as to replicate specific lines of poetry and song to meet visitors' expectations. Yet, rarely are these efforts described in relation to the term 'art' - instead being categorized as merely nostalgic historical tourism. As we shall see, to most foreign visitors 'art' refers to other forms of expression based on 'western' ideals and understandings of the term, whereas Cambodians see these aspects of Battambang's appeal as part of the larger picture of what makes the region "charming."

The tourism that results from Cambodian visitation is subtler than the forms of art tourism promoted to foreign visitors. Cambodians do not buy paintings or statuary as often as foreign visitors, nor do many of these temples or idyllic spaces have gift shops or markets hawking tourist wares, but a notable impact is still felt by those operating the hotels, buses, tuk-tuks, restaurants, and other businesses catering to Cambodians wishing to live the Battambang life for a few days. In this way, the second step of Disneyization, dedifferentiation of consumption, is achieved even if the third step, merchandizing, is not. Although numerical data

can be difficult to ascertain, the amount of money gained through these tourism-related businesses is significant - far more significant than a foreigner buying an expensive painting, for example, because Cambodian tourists in Battambang outnumber foreigners by a ratio of roughly four-to-one. Therefore, although ‘art tourism’ in Battambang is often used to exclusively describe foreign visitation to the region, I argue that such assumptions are inherently blind to the multifaceted nature of what art can mean beyond the hegemonic ‘western' rhetoric in play in the region, and ignore how Cambodians connect with the thematic appeal of Battambang as the center of creativity in Khmer society.

**The Gallery and Café Crowd**

Since I first began visiting Battambang in 2009, art has been at the forefront for European and American interest in the region. As mentioned previously, and especially now that Khmer Rouge-based dark tourism is giving way to both ecotourism and luxury tourism, the desire to experience Cambodian art is the only constantly espoused explanation given by tourists over the years of my research as a motivating reason for their visit. Interestingly, it is not Battambang but Phnom Penh that is seen by most of Battambang’s local artists as where the ‘Cambodian art scene’ truly thrives, as the much-larger capital city has several famous galleries and art spaces where artists can turn a profit. Artists from Battambang often travel to Phnom Penh to exhibit their work in these spaces, and a show in the big city is considered a rite of passage for burgeoning young artists that, to some degree, indicates a certain acceptance into the wider world of Cambodian modern art (Sassoon 2017).

Yet, although Phnom Penh offers more exposure and prestige for Cambodian artists, much of the capital's artistic community is comprised of individuals from or tied to Battambang. Take a stroll through any of Phnom Penh's galleries or attend any art event in the city and there is a strong likelihood that a majority of the work on display will be labeled as belonging to an artist from Battambang. Art historian Pamela Corey even identifies Battambang-born Pich Sopheap as "the artist embraced by the global art world as the most 'contemporary' [Cambodian artist]" (Corey 2014: 70). One reason for such overrepresentation is the existence of Battambang's Phare Ponleu Selpak Fine Arts School, which trains hundreds of students in the arts and which I will discuss more thoroughly in its own section below. Another possible reason for Battambang's artistic influence in greater Cambodia is that the art scene in Phnom Penh is monitored and sometimes censored in ways less commonly enforced in Battambang. The distance between the capital and Battambang, both in terms of the approximately 300 kilometers between the two cities and of the historical and political differences that have often set these communities at odds, gives artists freedom to experiment in Battambang that is not always true of Phnom Penh.

The artistic community of Battambang, in terms of the 'Western' understanding of art as paintings and sculpture, is characterized by an interesting mix of rebellion, competition, and creativity. At any given time, there are twenty five to thirty full-time painters and sculptors who live and work in Battambang, although the figures fluctuate from time to time as people move to Phnom Penh and new graduates make their debut. Usually only a minority are women, although women are certainly active in the artistic community as teachers and patrons even when underrepresented elsewhere. Almost all of the artists are under the age of thirty five, with most

being in their mid to late twenties. Several of the painters also dabble in photography, while others are more interested in the growing potential for digital media.

The artists often each have their own studios where they live, work, and occasionally display their creations. However, most of the exhibition of art occurs at local galleries and cafés, particularly those businesses known for attracting English and French-speaking tourists (see Figure 15). For such a small downtown area, Battambang City has a high volume of such galleries - Make Maek, Battambang's first art gallery; the Sangker Gallery, arguably the most popular gallery in town[7]; Romcheik 5, which expanded with a new wing in 2018[8]; the Jewel in the Lotus in the Lotus Café; Tep Kao Sol, which specializes in the sale of prints and postcards of watercolors of Battambang sites[9]; Sammaki Art Space, which is now defunct but was famed throughout Cambodia as an unrestricted center for expression and learning during its heyday[10]; and many more (see Sullivan 2016; Wilson 2016). Each gallery has its own quirk that distinguishes it from the others. For example, Sangker Gallery hosts the most parties and has a second floor that constantly rotates exhibits showcasing new artists who specialize in nearly every medium while Romcheik 5 displays more violent and sexualized pieces about subjects like

---

[7] Sangker Gallery is named after the Sangkae River that runs through Battambang City. As noted earlier, Sangker is a common spelling of the river, but Sangkai can also be used in an attempt for a better phonetic pronunciation of the word សង្កែ.

[8] Romcheik Pram is named after the portion of the city in which the gallery is located, and means simply "District 5."

[9] Tep Kao Sol/ទេពកោសល្យ translates as "Talent" or "Genius," in the artistic sense of the word.

[10] Sammaki/សាមគ្គី translates as "Unity," a description of the community-driven nature of the art space.

Figure 15 - Shoes left outside during an exhibition
at one of Battambang's art galleries

the Khmer Rouge and sex that are less likely to be purchased by tourists, thanks in part to a private benefactor who finances the operation with less reliance on art sales.

Unsurprisingly, while all of the different galleries generally cooperate on the surface, with owners and operators often attending each others' events, they can also be quite competitive. The competition is felt most fiercely amongst the artists themselves, who are often loyal to one particular gallery more than the others. This tension can be explained by the stressful negotiation between economics and egos. While most artists claim to be in the art business to allow themselves to be creative and follow their artistic dreams, they must also contend with the financial realities of being an artist. Many of the galleries price their paintings at $500 USD or more, often large pieces over a meter tall that are prohibitively difficult to sell. Battambang is receiving a higher number of tourists now than ever before but few of them are willing to spend hundreds of dollars on large paintings that are difficult to ship back home or take on airplanes,

especially since part of Cambodia's appeal in the current tourist market is how cheaply it can be explored. I once spent several hours sitting on a bench in one of the city's most prominent art galleries purely to watch the manner by which tourists interacted with the art. While many of the visitors raved over the art, especially the more controversial pieces that dramatized issues of sexual freedom or the nation's legacy of violence, none of them made a purchase - not even of the smaller prints. As one Australian guest exclaimed while indicating a piece showing the severed head of a Khmer Rouge victim, "It's magnificent what they are creating here! Very emotional! But I can't exactly bring that home and put it in my living room, now can I? It's a bloody head!" With so many artists and so few buyers, every artist must constantly compete for tourist attention and sales.[11]

Furthermore, artists who do successfully sell paintings tend to price their next paintings even higher as a result of their success which, when put in competition with other artists attempting to keep up, ensures that prices are too high for such a small market. As one artist summarized, "When new painters begin painting, they want to try new styles to be different from everyone else. And if they succeed with that style, maybe by selling a painting or having a show that the newspaper writes about, then their sudden popularity makes them arrogant and not willing to cooperate with anyone else. Painters in Battambang often think they are better than everyone else. They do not understand that even as a painter, you must make a living. To do that, you must sell paintings at reasonable prices. But they want $500 USD for a painting or more,

---

[11] Battambang does have a Post Office in a beautiful colonial-era building just south of the Heritage District, but service is unreliable at best. While shipping a painting is possible, it would be costly, take an exceptionally long time in transit, and not be 100% guaranteed to survive the trip or even make it out of the country in the first place.

sometimes as much as $1000 USD! If you sell at that price, you will be lucky to sell even one painting every year, and so you must divide that money over all twelve months and that is not much. If you sell at a lower price, maybe $100 or $200 USD or even paper prints at $20 USD, you might sell many more paintings and have a better monthly income. But people will not do that. The truth is that the biggest problem for art [in Battambang] is that artists cannot convince themselves that they aren't the best and that their reputation isn't worth as much as they think."

The one-upmanship can be so extreme that one European artist living in Battambang once proclaimed to me that "There is no artistic community in Battambang! It is all a lie! There are only egos here, and the paintings they make are not good enough to be called art. If they wanted to learn together and help each other, maybe they could create a real community for artists, but right now the only artistic community that exists here is for tourists."

While I disagree with this broad generalization, this comment highlights two specific issues about the reality of art tourism in Battambang: First, dozens of foreign artists have established themselves in Battambang over the years, most leaving after a year or so, in an attempt to associate their work with the artistic reputation of the region or exoticize their personal narrative. Sometimes these foreign artists dominate the art scene, showcasing their own work in a way that completely ignores the contributions of Cambodian artists and treats the Battambang art market more like a new marketplace for foreign (read: 'Western') artistic styles and ideas. The danger here is that young local artists want to emulate these foreigners, sometimes replicating them outright, making it difficult to ascertain what separates 'Khmer art' from any other type of art - a complaint expressed by many tourists I interviewed in the galleries themselves. So, to a certain degree, the art market in Battambang may exist largely because

foreign artists sustain and define it as a unified and tangible art market that tourists can enjoy because they themselves want to craft personal narratives about being involved in and leading such a scene.

Second, local artists in Battambang rarely work together to promote the region as uniquely defined from the larger Cambodian art market or Phnom Penh. While tourists often visit Battambang specifically to see why the region is so famous for art, they are unlikely to establish a consistent art economy unless the region has a reputation for regular showcases and events that are unique to Battambang itself. Nearly every artist I interviewed during my time in Battambang expressed the desire to create an annual Battambang Art Festival or some such event, yet nearly everyone scoffed at the idea of reaching out to other artists for that purpose. Said one of the more prominent artists, "I would love to do [a festival], but the other artists would never do it unless they were guaranteed to make money. They would think their time is too valuable to waste."

**Interviews with Artists**

To best discuss the operational aspects of art tourism in Battambang, I now explore the lives of three artists who represent three different approaches to art and the art economy: Phala, a self-taught painter who has enjoyed much success in Battambang and Phnom Penh; Rangsei, a young woman who graduated from the Phare Ponleu Selpak Fine Arts School in Battambang but eventually quit painting to become a fashion designer; and Lorn, the male owner of Tep Kao Sol Gallery who is one of the most adept local artists when it comes to the commercial aspects of the job. Each of these individuals show why Battambang has such a strong reputation for artistic

creation, but also reveal the struggle of being an artist in a tourist economy that does not yet meet the needs of the growing community.

**Phala, the Self-Taught YouTuber**

I first met Phala over a meal of Chinese dumplings at a popular hole-in-the-wall restaurant off of Road 2 in the heart of Battambang City. Tall, skinny, with closely buzzed hair that is fading in spots, and an intense, searching gaze, he immediately came across as a unique and memorable personality.[12] Born in Battambang City in 1985, Phala's love of art began at a young age when his uncle, who painted billboards and cinema signs, showed him copies of famous paintings from "the Old Russian masters." As his family disapproved of art as a career choice and refused to help him pursue it, Phala proceeded to learn painting by searching the internet for instruction.

> "At first, I found paintings that I liked - usually Russian works like my uncle showed me - and I would copy them. Then I started finding instructions about art, so I would print those and make my own books with them. Unfortunately, I could not understand English, so I started to take English classes to help me learn how to read the painting instructions - even the free classes taught by the missionaries. I learned how to pray and pretend to be a Christian so they would teach me English, all so I could read those painting lessons I printed!"

Although he did eventually learn English, Phala said that his best instruction came around 2008 when the internet became more reliable in Battambang and provided him access to video tutorials via YouTube, the popular video-sharing website. "YouTube was the best," he explained,

---

[12] My discussions with Phala were conducted in both Khmer and English. He often preferred to use English when discussing himself, as he felt that practicing how to talk about his life and work in English was a necessary marketing and networking skill for his shows, particularly those shows abroad.

"because I did not have to read or understand English so much. Even when I could understand it, it was easier to watch someone paint and copy their actions. Those videos made everything so much easier!" After many years of reading and copying the images presented to him while experimenting with his personal style, Phala felt confident enough to move to Phnom Penh in 2011 to try to make a living as an artist.

Phala's time in Phnom Penh was short-lived, however, as he found the art scene frustrating and the city stifling for his creativity. Indeed, Phala's criticism of Phnom Penh was a constant topic in our conversations, and he often touted Battambang as a far more ideal space for artistic freedom than the big city. "I returned to Battambang because Phnom Penh has a dark energy. Everything is corrupt and there is too large a gap between the rich and the poor. Cambodians in Phnom Penh try too hard to be Cambodian. There is too much nationalism. In a way, the rich Cambodians of Phnom Penh are a new Khmer Rouge, except they use money to hurt people instead of bullets."

Phala also dislikes the "high art scene" of Phnom Penh, and believes it is far "too European" in style and too obsessed with the social aspects of art. "Artists in Phnom Penh always focus more on style than on beauty because they want to be popular at parties. Art should be about beauty and about telling life stories. Art should mix things you can see with things you can feel." Battambang, Phala believes, allows him to focus his art on his intended messages more than his perceived popularity because there is less pressure to conform. "Art is at the heart of Battambang City," Phala says, "and being a child of Battambang means that I can express myself through art in a way that people here understand is a way of knowing me and not just my business." Invoking the history of art in Battambang, Phala summarizes, "Battambang is a place

of memories, this is the reason why Khmer people love this place. My art is a way of sharing those memories with others and creating new ones. Making my art here means that my memories will never be forgotten."

Still, Phala understands that engagement with the Phnom Penh art market is necessary to make a living as an artist in Cambodia.

> "We cannot sell many paintings here in Battambang. It is because people are stupid with art prices here. A painting now costs four times more than it did in 2010, all because the artists of Battambang have a 'mob mentality'. Too many of them will have a show in Phnom Penh and sell their work for a high price, then they say that their art should cost that much everywhere because of how much work they did to create it. But when they try to sell their paintings for those same high prices [in Battambang], it makes everyone want to raise their prices so they can feel they are of equal status, even though none of the tourists here will buy them at that price. So now, I must go to Phnom Penh and do shows once or twice a year if I want to sell my paintings, it is the only way I can make money anymore."

Phala is fortunate in that his work is popular enough that he has been invited abroad to places like Singapore and Vietnam to show his work. "Singapore is the best," he says, "because it is a modern city with lots of money. I can make so much money in one show in Singapore that it pays for two or three years of painting in Battambang. But I cannot always get a show there, and most artists are not yet popular enough for that." In essence, a Battambang-based artist must work his or her way up the achievement ladder by having local shows that lead to exhibitions in Phnom Penh and eventually abroad, but not everyone has the patience or support necessary to make it that far. "There is art tourism in Battambang," Phala says, "but that does not mean that there is a sustainable art economy. We might have one hundred tourists at a local art exhibition but never sell even one painting. Being an artist here often means being poor and homeless for a long time, unless your family will support you, until you become more popular in other places."

In that way, Phala summarizes, being an artist in Battambang shows how dedicated local artists are to continuing the artistic legacy of the region. “It probably would be easier to live as an artist in Phnom Penh,” he says, “but then you might not be making true Cambodian art anymore. You certainly would not be a real Battambang artist, at least.”

**Rangsei, the Fashionista**

My first encounter with Rangsei was at a local art party for an exhibition about the environment and recycling, and we quickly became friends. She is an outspoken and intelligent young woman who left the traditional art scene in favor of designing fashion, a decision that left her willing to speak openly about the problems plaguing Battambang’s art market. Through her, I was able to better understand some of the more controversial aspects of art in Battambang, ranging from organizational support to depictions of sexuality.

Rangsei was born in 1989 near the center of Battambang City. Even from a young age, she wanted to express herself creatively. “Art is always in my dreams,” she said. “Even when I was young, I dreamed of becoming an artist. I never cared what kind of art I would learn, I only knew that I wanted to devote myself to art.” She was eventually accepted as a student at the Phare Ponleu Selpak Fine Arts School, where she initially wanted to study music, either piano or guitar. The music classes filled up before she could enroll, so instead she took some introductory painting classes and decided she wanted to pursue the visual arts. After two years of study, her parents divorced and she was forced to quit school in order to find work to support her family. She continued her education by using the internet, including YouTube, to help expand her skills as a painter, much like Phala.

Although she enjoyed some early success, including exhibitions in both Battambang and Phnom Penh, she never felt sure of her footing in the regional art scene and eventually quit painting altogether. Her explanation for her decision to quit is a mixture of personal criticism and disgust with other local artists. “I did not have much support from the art community,” she says. “It is not because I am a woman, although it is true that women must work harder than men to succeed in Cambodia. It is because artists in Battambang think only one thing: I am the best. They are all selfish. Nobody helps anyone else. Maybe 80% of the artists in Battambang care only about themselves and never think about improving their community.”

As proof of her accusation, Rangsei pointed to Sammaki Art Space, which at the time of our interview had recently announced that it could no longer afford to stay open and has since been shuttered permanently. The community art space was originally intended as a place for creativity and freedom of expression where artists could attend workshops and display their paintings without being financially beholden to an individual gallery owner or any rich foreigners looking to use their money to buy their way into the art scene.

> “There are at least thirty artists in Battambang,” Rangsei said, “and almost all of them went to Sammaki to learn new skills and display their paintings, especially when they first started painting. Most of those artists now try to sell their paintings for $500-600 USD each, but none of them will give even $10 a month to Sammaki to keep it open. If all the artists gave only a little, they could keep Sammaki open for a long time, but that is not how artists think here. Even if they started at Sammaki, once they have a show in Phnom Penh or sell some paintings for a high price, they will never help anyone else.”

Of course, the financial realities of being an artist in a far-off corner of Cambodia certainly influenced her decision to quit as well. “The problem with painting is that the materials - especially canvas and paint - are expensive. I was never confident enough in myself to risk all my money by buying those things. Painting is also time consuming, and there was too much

pressure to make money immediately so you could have food to eat and a place to live. I was never patient enough to make money with my art, all I could see was the need to spend money I did not have." In her opinion, new graduates and students, like herself, who left without finishing their education are immediately exposed to these pressures without warning. "[Phare Ponleu Selpak] teaches you how to paint in the style of the Europeans," she says, "but they do not prepare you for the life of an artist."

For her part, Rangsei has found new artistic life in the fashion world. Although Battambang City, like most Cambodian towns, has an abundance of textile and fashion stores that cater to Cambodians for everything from 'modern' fashions from Japan and Korea to wedding dresses, few clothing stores have sizes or styles that cater to foreigners wishing to buy Cambodian fashions, aside from some touristy traditional items sold in gift shops. Seeing this gap, Rangsei now designs and makes clothing for foreigners that blend traditional Cambodian styles with foreign ones, which she sells out of a shop in the market that she co-owns with her sister. "Foreigners love modern Khmer fashion," Rangsei asserts, "but they need much taller sizes than we do and nobody makes clothes like that except me. Making clothes is much cheaper than painting and gives me better income, and I can still be artistic, so I love it." When I asked her what constitutes 'modern Khmer fashion', she replied, "Whatever I say. Cambodians do not truly have their own modern fashion. Young women and men just want to look like their favorite Korean pop stars now, but I do not want to make clothes like that. Maybe it is because I like surrealism, but I try to make clothes that I like that are a little sexy but are still things a Khmer might wear, not a Korean." She can make at least $10 USD for every shirt she makes, and sells

between 5-10 pieces a week with more in the busy tourist months, much more than she could make selling paintings.

Our discussion of fashion also provided an opportunity to discuss the controversial topic of sexuality in Cambodian art, something that several tourists I interviewed at various galleries around the city said they found to be unexpectedly common in the city's galleries given how sexually conservative Cambodian culture tends to be. As Rangsei summarized,

> "Many Battambang artists like to draw sex or violence. Even I used to paint sex sometimes, and even some of my clothing designs are too sexy for Cambodian women. We show these things because we want to be strong and confident. In Cambodia today, young people can express themselves more freely than before, but we still have to respect Khmer culture. Most young people are having sex but cannot say so out loud because people will gossip, but if we did not have rules and gossip then everyone would only do whatever they want and that would be irresponsible and bad for society. So it is a negotiation. For artists, painting sex lets young people express those sexual feelings without fear of gossip, because in my culture the world of art is separate from the real world. You can talk about controversial subjects in art even when you cannot with your words. So painters show violence to talk about the Khmer Rouge or show sex to talk about women's rights and things like that. There is only one subject we do not paint: politics. We cannot risk making the government angry."

The subject quickly turned to sexuality, as Battambang City has long been known as a safer space for the LGBTQ community than Phnom Penh. Many, perhaps most, of the male foreign expatriates in Battambang are gay, as are many of the male Cambodian artists that work with them. Although I discuss LGBTQ issues in Battambang City in a later chapter, it is worth pointing out the connection between Battambang's dual reputations for artistic excellent and acceptance of LGBTQ lifestyles. Most residents of Battambang point to the art scene not so much as a catalyst for the LGBTQ community as a space where personal expression and freedom of being are openly encouraged. "In the art community of Battambang, no one cares if you are gay or lesbian or anything else," Rangsei says. "None of that matters here. Many of the artists in

Battambang are gay, men and women. They express those feelings through their paintings and use their art to show the world who they really are in a way that they cannot say out loud in their villages." In this way, painting sexuality can act as a way of 'coming out' to the public without having to voice such things, thus allowing Cambodians to occupy the liminal space of an openly-acknowledged LGBTQ person in a society where the vocalization of such feelings must take prescribed non-verbal forms to be considered acceptable. "I cannot say if the art community led to Battambang being a friendly place for gay people or if being a friendly place for gay people led to Battambang having such a famous art community," Rangsei says, "but I think these issues are certainly connected, and that is one reason why the art community in Battambang is so important for Cambodian society."

**Lorn, the Pragmatic Photographer**

My friendship with Loeum Lorn began so long ago that the details are difficult to recall, but our acquaintance has evolved over the years to a type of partnership. He and his French wife Caroline are always happy to talk with me about art, history, or any topic in particular, and we have journeyed together to some of the more obscure corners of Battambang Province in search of new landscapes for him to paint - including a memorable trip to Laang Spean during which we hacked our way through the overgrowth to enjoy a picnic at the then-empty site. Lorn is, in my opinion, the most pragmatic member of the art community of Battambang, and his willingness to balance his artistic needs with financial ones makes his gallery one of, if not the, most successful art businesses in town. Yet, for all of his successes, Lorn also recognizes the struggles facing the art community in Cambodia today, and feels that much opportunity is being squandered.

Lorn was born in 1982 in the center of Battambang City, albeit in a less affluent neighborhood than Phala or Rangsei. He never completed high school, although he often describes that period of his life with a sly wink and a carefully timed "yet." Lorn instead chose to enroll at the Phare Ponleu Selpak Fine Arts school in 1996, although he says that at that time he was still young and "playing around," which led to him leaving for a time. He ended up returning to Phare in 2000, finishing his studies in 2005, and eventually being asked back in the role of an instructor, which he continues part-time even today. As his shop provides him the income to paint full-time, he is one of the rare rags-to-(relative)-riches success stories of a student-turned-professional artist in Battambang, and has held exhibitions in places from Phnom Penh to Paris.

Tall, lanky, with the wisps of a not-fully-established goatee, and an ever-present greenish-tan Cuba Libre cap and *krama* scarf, Lorn embodies much of the physical stereotype of the dedicated artist. Fittingly, Lorn describes art in the manner of a philosopher. "Art is not only an occupation," he says. "Art is meaningful even if that meaning is hidden. If you look closely at a painting, you can learn many things about the person who created it and the things they want to tell you." Although he admits that he "only wanted to be famous" when he first started learning how to paint, he will now wax poetic about how art should be "valuable to society and help reveal what it must learn and become."

Lorn and Caroline operate the Tep Kao Sol Gallery on Road 2, not far from the famous White Rose Restaurant.[13] Originally a small one-story shop, they have since built one of the most refined art spaces in the city, now two-stories and filled with decorative lights, polished tiles, and

---

[13] By Lorn's own admission, Caroline does most of the work as the shop's manager while he is in his studio painting.

a wide variety of art styles on display. Although dedicated purely to Lorn's personal works, he is skilled at producing many different styles of art and his gallery is always vivid and lively as a result. He is always quick to greet guests if he is in the gallery, although he is often secluded upstairs in his studio while his wife manages the commercial side of the business. Fluent in French and Khmer, with decent enough English, Caroline is a bubbly personality who is always happy to escort guests through the gallery to answer their questions or help them become familiar with some of the scenes being depicted.

The gallery is itself designed to attract tourists to Lorn's commercialized art before leading them deeper inside where he keeps his more abstract pieces. Numerous watercolor paintings are displayed prominently in the front of the gallery and largely focus on places in Battambang and varying aspects of Cambodian culture. As he summarizes "Most Cambodian paintings are boring and look the same. Every painting is Angkor Wat, Angkor Wat, Angkor Wat. But Battambang is special too, and I can show that in my art. It's also a business decision, though. Almost no one paints Battambang, so I think tourists will buy my work because it's unique."

He has painted many striking local scenes, including cows walking the riverbank in front of the colonial architecture of Road 1 and a parade of monks walking through Wat Kandal, as well as a memorable painting of an Apsara dancer on a lime green background that sits behind his desk to the side of the gallery. More abstract paintings are found in other locations around the shop, and he sometimes switches his displays based on his mood. At least one section is usually devoted to his photography, as he is an avid still-life photographer and is known for a series of high-resolution studies of ice and water that was exhibited in Phnom Penh in 2015, one print of

which was selected by French Ambassador Eva Nguyen Binh to hang in the French Embassy (Nelson 2012). Unlike most of the galleries, however, Lorn sells not only his original paintings and photography prints, but also reproductions on paper and canvas in sizes ranging from poster to postcard. To my knowledge, he was the first Battambang-based artist to regularly sell reproductions of his work, especially the watercolors of local scenes that are so popular with tourists, in this manner.

Lorn's business is largely successful because of these reproductions, as he says that most tourists are far more willing to buy cheaper reproductions than large canvas pieces. He believes that part of their hesitancy to buy is because of the outrageous prices artists charge and because of the difficulty in shipping such large works. For these reasons, he began printing smaller copies that could be rolled or folded in luggage and framed later, which provides him enough income to keep the prices of his originals lower than his competitors - usually $250-500 USD. He also keeps a close relationship with the local post office for situations where he needs to ship large paintings, in the hopes that his friendship with the postal workers might ensure better and more efficient handling of his work.

Financial benefits are not Lorn's only motivation for selling his prints. He also understands the thematic nature of tourism and the desire that tourists have to connect with the places they visit, and he sees his prints as a conduit for allowing tourists to make their touristic narratives tangible.

> "I sell postcards of my paintings of different places around Battambang. When tourists buy the cards, they like to go to these places and take their own photos and compare those photos with the cards. In this way, they create their own relationship with the special places in Battambang. When they go home and see my cards on their walls or wherever

> they put them, they remember not only the experiences they had but also where they had those experiences."

So too can his postcards act as a form of marketing that attracts new tourists to the region. As Lorn explains, "My postcards are also advertisements for our beautiful city. When my cards are sent to people in foreign countries, they see the amazing places that their friends are experiencing and they become interested in seeing these beautiful places too."

Lorn is quite adamant that his postcards serve a greater purpose than simply bringing money to his little shop, as he sees his art as being truly representative of his hometown and the importance it has for him. As he explains, "Battambang is a very old and important city. It is also beautiful, so it is easy for me to paint it because I do not have to do anything to make it look beautiful. I can look at a place and see how to paint it using my emotions and memories." His work is also intended to preserve memories of Battambang in the face of rampant development, which under Cambodia's government often means thoughtless destruction. He often laments how Battambang's colonial architecture is being slowly destroyed by capitalist interests, but claims his paintings can represent Battambang the way that Cambodian people feel about the region even if they cannot see it that way anymore. Lorn summarizes his greater purpose with a simple mission statement: "My job is to support Battambang so that everyone can know our unique culture."

Lorn's comments about preserving the memory of Battambang are overoptimistic in the sense that Cambodians generally do not patronize the city's art galleries or buy the so-called 'modern' art available in Battambang. Although school groups sometimes tour the galleries, most Battambang residents simply cannot afford to buy art, and those that can have little interest in it.

> "The problem is that Khmer people do not understand the emotional value of painting," Lorn says. "Most rich people want Chinese prints of Angkor Wat for their homes instead of hand painted images made by a Khmer. Even those who do buy their art in Cambodia still only buy big paintings or carvings of Angkor Wat to show off their status and nationalism. When people see my paintings, they like them but do not understand them. They will ask me why I painted somewhere in Battambang that I can go see for myself, and they do not bother to look at my abstract paintings or photographs. To be honest, Cambodian art cannot survive with only Cambodian customers. We need foreigners to buy our art, and that means we need tourists."

**The Phare Ponleu Selpak Fine Arts School and Circus**

Several times throughout this chapter, I have mentioned the Phare Ponleu Selpak Fine Arts School and Circus as a type of shadowy force exerting its will over the city. To a certain degree, such a dramatic personification is accurate, as the Phare school is beyond doubt the most politically powerful and financially successful organization involved with Battambang's art community. Many artists fear and despair Phare for its ability to control their careers and pull political strings to make their lives more difficult if they do not show deference to the school's prominent position atop the art community's hierarchy. I have heard many firsthand accusations against Phare for alleged commercial exploitation of former students, and it should be noted that Phare is not particularly popular amongst artists even if those artists were trained at the school. On the other hand, Phare is also responsible for reviving much of Cambodian art, from music to paintings, in this region and beyond, and deserves recognition for the benefits it brings to Battambang and to Cambodia at large. While discussing some of Phare's more controversial aspects is necessary to fully understand how they operate, I still want to credit them with helping to create a vibrant community that serves the important function of promoting creativity and self-expression, issues that plague any post-conflict society.

Phare Ponleu Selpak translates as “the Brightness/Radiance of the Arts” and was born of in the refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodia border in the late 1980s/early 1990s.[14] Father Pierre Ceyrac, a French priest who was working in the camps, encouraged aid worker Véronique Decrop to teach art to the many children living there (Decrop 2014). After the camps were closed and the inhabitants returned to Cambodia, Decrop helped establish an art center in Battambang City, home to many of the refugee families before and after the Khmer Rouge regime. This art center later grew into the current Phare Ponleu Selpak School, which is operated by a conglomerate of French and Khmer administrators (some of whom were formerly the students of Decrop) and now accommodates hundreds of children who seek to learn a variety of art forms - music, painting, digital media, and even circus.

The most famous aspect of Phare’s school is the circus, which performs several nights a week in Battambang and is an incredible display of conventional circus acts like juggling, aerial silk, and rola bola as well as syncretic styles of clowning using both European and Cambodian motifs, traditional music, and Khmer dance (Rethea 2018). Tourists often arrive early and are given limited range to explore the school grounds, which includes a wooden stilt house that usually displays sketches and paintings from current students, a large cement building where tourists can watch acrobats practicing their juggling and tumbling, and a small café where guests can grab a drink or two before rifling through an assortment of for-sale artworks at a nearby gift shop. When showtime is near, the guests cross a grassy field towards a large circus tent covered in stringed popcorn lights in the rear of the grounds. Inside, wooden benches are arced around a peninsular stage that is raised a few inches off the ground. Most shows are preceded by a short

[14] ហ្វ្រាវពន្លឺសិល្បៈ

performance from some traditional dancers, which is then followed by an emcee explaining the school's history in broken English and French. The shows last about an hour, with the performers attempting breathtaking stunts mere inches from their captive audience, all while set to the musical accompaniment of a live band. Following the show, the emcee never fails to return with a tip jar to ask the audience for donations, and the audience is allowed to go on stage to take photographs with the sweaty but always exuberant performers before returning to their awaiting tuk-tuks and tour buses.

Phare's circus performances are usually emotional, risqué, and provocative (Siegel & Vater 2017). One show, "Tchamlaek," which means "Bizarre," follows the story of a frail elderly man who is possessed by a ghost that causes him to behave erratically, forcing his family to perform wackier and wackier stunts as they attempt to exorcise the malevolent spirit.[15] Another show, "Influence," is stunning in its forwardness, depicting a corrupt official dressed in the white linens typical of French Indochina abusing his workers before having a change of heart and literally using his strength to lift and hold his workers above him as an act of penance. At one point, "Influence" even depicts a man in a crown being tied with strings on his arms and legs and guided puppet-like by a masked demon, a provocative statement that I am surprised is allowed to continue in a nation with newly adopted lèse majesté laws. Most shows also push traditional gender boundaries by including gender fluid characters or same sex couples. In this way, Phare's performances are important opportunities for locals to challenge the cultural and political norms of Cambodian society, and it is not surprising that public performances are usually packed by an eager local audience as well as foreign tourists. In some sense, these shows are also a more literal

---

[15] "Tchamlaek" is Phare's romanization of ចម្លែក

form of performative labor in that they occasionally break with politically-approved narratives in favor of locally meaningful ones.

Unfortunately, the school also walks a fine line when it comes to funding, as it still relies on outside donations (largely from the European Union) to operate, and thus it cannot rile too many feathers too directly. One strategy for securing more financial independence, implemented before my 2015-2016 research period, was to build a second Phare circus in Siem Reap to attract a more reliable stream of tourists. The Siem Reap branch officially operates as a separate division from the Battambang campus and was outside the purview of my research, but I can say that it attracts a great deal more income and notoriety for the circus than could otherwise be gained in Battambang. Unfortunately, while Phare celebrated the success of their expansion, the populace of Battambang expressed uncertain feelings about this new competition. Up until that point, Phare Ponleu Selpak was one of the primary reasons why tourists bothered to travel all the way to Battambang. The unique experience of watching a circus show in the 'wilds' of Cambodia was a major draw for tourists, but with the addition of the Siem Reap campus, tourists needed only to hop into a tuk-tuk and travel across town after a day at Angkor should they seek a similar, if not as exotic, experience. In this sense, while profitable for Phare, the Siem Reap division runs counter to the city's other initiatives to attract tourists away from major tourist centers and towards Battambang.

In sum, Phare Ponleu Selpak's importance for art tourism in Battambang cannot be overstated. They are the originators of the modern art movement in the region, having taught most local artists how to paint and perform, and they are the first true art attraction that brought art-loving tourists to Battambang. In some sense, for a time Phare Ponleu Selpak *was* art tourism

in Battambang and has since spurned many new projects that continue to shape the city's tourist economy. Today, they are respected and feared by all in the art community as they fight for dominance over an increasingly competitive market. Yet, for all of their intimidating reputation, they are also struggling to establish themselves on the shaky new grounds created by the dramatic growth of the tourist economy.

**Cambodian Hollywood**

Another relatively new and growing element in Battambang's artistic scene is the film industry that is taking root in the region, catalyzed largely by Hollywood actress Angelina Jolie. Angelina, often referred to in Cambodia solely by her first name as I replicate here, has a long relationship with Battambang extending from her time filming the movie *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* at the turn of the millennium. On a break from filming in Siem Reap around the year 2000, she ventured to Battambang City, which at the time was barely a blip on the tourist radar and much more private and secluded than the hub to Angkor (Hong 2019). Angelina became enamored with Battambang, publicly expressing her admiration for the city numerous times, and even adopted her son Maddox from an orphanage in the area in 2002. A year later, she established the Maddox Jolie-Pitt Foundation (MJP), an organization devoted to helping rural communities and protecting wildlife in the nearby Samlot Protected Area. She is known to travel to Battambang regularly to consult with the MJP administration. An oft-relayed local joke claims

that if you see a helicopter flying overhead, it can only be Prime Minister Hun Sen or Angelina Jolie, but either way you should bow.[16]

For many years, residents of Battambang have casually spoken of the potential for the city to become the 'Cambodian Hollywood'. Many local artists shoot small films there, and there has long been a push for a more permanent film production studio in the region due to the impressive colonial architecture, wide expanses of open land on which to shoot, and various ecosystems that allow for a variety of filmic settings. Indeed, the town's preserved architecture led Angelina to choose Battambang City as a stand-in for Phnom Penh for her 2017 Netflix-sponsored film *First They Killed My Father*, based on the memoir by Luong Ung (Gecker 2016; Kimsay 2016). For an entire week in February of 2016, the downtown heritage district was almost entirely blocked off for filming. Hundreds of local residents, including many of the town's artists, were dressed in the black 'pajamas' and red scarves of the Khmer Rouge in order to play soldiers, and even I considered an advertisement to play a foreign journalist in the film. Old military equipment and vintage vehicles were shipped in, and the exterior of one of Battambang's abandoned theaters was repainted to match the decor of the 1970s. For one week, the Khmer Rouge again controlled the old district of Battambang in perhaps the most unbelievable, if unintentional, post-modern thematic experience tourists could possibly imagine - and indeed tourists did flock to the film set, laughing, joking, and snapping selfies with the 'Khmer Rouge'.

---

[16] She is also rumored to have bought a home on Road 2, but such gossip is nearly impossible to verify and seems dubious at best.

The scene was truly surreal, almost like a dark tourist's Colonial Williamsburg, as a stroll downtown meant passing hundreds of Khmer Rouge soldiers - some with prop guns, some in large military vehicles, some simply sitting about chatting in nearby cafés and shops while waiting for further instruction. The experience was so convincing and intense that many of the older generation that actually survived the Khmer Rouge barricaded themselves indoors until filming ended. More than one elderly Cambodian complained to me that week and afterwards of how the filming triggered symptoms of what is undoubtedly undiagnosed Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and many families were upset at how callously the film crew shrugged off concerns that the film would be psychologically disturbing for Khmer Rouge survivors (Wright 2017).

Angelina and her movie further impacted plans for future tourism development in Battambang beyond simply the creation of movies. Although the Governor met with Angelina numerous times before and during the shoot to help accommodate her needs, a small crisis occurred early in the filming when Angelina proclaimed that none of the hotels in Battambang were sufficient for her stay.[17] Her rejection of the area's lodging created a mild panic in the Governor's office, as she was supposedly threatening to stay at a nicer hotel in Siem Reap and instead commute daily to Battambang by helicopter. Terrified that Angelina would not stay in Battambang, costing the city significant media coverage and status, the government eventually arranged for her to stay at a private villa belonging to one of the wealthier residents of Battambang.

---

[17] Much of my information about this event comes from the Governor and his aides, or from the Director.

The incident dramatically altered the government's agenda following her departure because she allegedly promised the Governor that she would return to make more movies in Battambang. Taking her at her word, and indeed morphing the promise into the hope that she might build a full-time movie studio in the city, the Governor declared that new five star luxury hotels needed to be built around town before her return. In one meeting, he lamented that film stars like Angelina deserve and expect to receive only the finest treatment, and anything less than ultra-luxury would endanger the possibility of her establishing a film studio in Battambang. As he put it, "If she makes more movies here, she will bring other movie stars from Hollywood and other places. They must have a place to stay or else they will leave and go to another city instead." The real danger, as the Governor saw it, was not the loss of the films themselves, since most Khmer would never watch them anyway. Instead, the Governor feared the loss of tourism revenue that becoming the 'Cambodian Hollywood' might attract. "Tourists want to see where these films are made. We already see people coming here because of our Khmer movies, and foreign movies from Hollywood will bring much richer tourists here." Thus, Angelina's relationship with Battambang directly impacted the Governor's plans for establishing luxury tourism and five star hotels in the region.

Typical of most sycophantic government agendas, the sense of immediacy faded a few weeks after Angelina's departure. When the Governor stepped down from office, the five star hotel plans were tabled and their fate is currently unknown. I suspect they will eventually be built, especially since films remain an important part of the Battambang art scene. For example, the French-Belgian film *Le Temps des aveux*, known in English as *The Gate*, another Khmer Rouge period piece by Academy Award winning director Régis Wargnier, was also filmed in

Battambang in 2014, and local films continue to be made there on a regular basis. Battambang still aspires to be the 'Cambodian Hollywood', and Angelina Jolie and others like her may yet make that dream a reality.

**Summarizing Battambang's Artistic Legacy**

Unraveling the history of art in Battambang requires careful consideration of what is meant by art and the audience for whom the experience is intended, hence the significant attention that I give the subject here. The region unquestionably has rightful claim to being a site of artistic development, particularly in regards to the colonial periods that created a uniquely challenging atmosphere for cultural expression, and it certainly has impacted and continues to influence Cambodian literature, poetry, music, film, sculpture, and painting. Whether or not it will successfully become known as *the* heart of Cambodian art is yet unclear, although such is the goal of the local art community. What cannot be denied, however, is that both domestic and foreign tourists are drawn to Battambang for its legacy of creativity, and that locals use these connections to promote narratives about the region that often challenge the norm.

In this chapter, I have shown that Battambang's artistic tourism economy must be approached in two ways. First, while not traditionally acknowledged as art tourism, Cambodians are arriving in ever increasing numbers to explore a city and surrounding region that has occupied so much of their imagination over the decades. In literature, poetry, and song, Battambang has long stood out as a site of beauty and brilliance, a summation of what makes Cambodia special to the children born within it. As the Cambodian middle class grows and people increasingly seek to explore lands beyond the confines of their villages and cities,

Battambang will continue to benefit from its reputation as an idyllic protector of Cambodian creativity. Second, foreigners come to Battambang to experience the modern art movement, exemplified by paintings and circus performances. While the struggle to build the region's reputation into one that is automatically and instinctually associated with Cambodian art persists, the town does offer many opportunities for tourism based on art to develop and flourish. The experience of Cambodian art is key to both concerns, as themes are meant to be experiential narratives. With more consideration of Battambang's artistic heritage and promotion of such narratives, art as a touristic theme can continue to expand throughout the region in ways that, if properly positioned, can set Battambang apart from the art communities of Phnom Penh and Siem Reap. To that end, what Battambang wants to provide is the experience of Cambodian art, not just the commodification of it, which locals believe only they can offer.

# Chapter 5
## Past Alliances, Tourist Futures: Battambang and its Relationship with Thailand

By far the most complicated and misunderstood aspect of Battambang's regional culture is its relationship with Thailand. For 112 years between 1795 and 1907, plus an additional four years between 1941 and 1945, Battambang was officially under the control of the Siamese monarchy (modern day Thailand). Foreign scholars have categorized this period using an array of political terminology: "tributary state," "protectorate," "absorbed" territory, or simply a "province" of Thailand (Sam 1996; Chandler 2008; Tully 2002). Foreigners who live in Battambang are less specific, with many individuals simply glossing over the finer details and referring to it as the "Thai colonial" period. Others may be unaware of the Siamese influence entirely, perhaps because most of the surviving architecture in Battambang City's heritage district is from the short-lived French colonial period or at least easily blends in with Indochinese aesthetics. In any case, the sociopolitical specifics of this period are often invisible to most visitors to Battambang. Still, Battambang's historical relationship with Thailand is foundational to understanding why many Cambodians across the nation admire the region, as well as what the future may hold for Battambang's tourist economy. In this chapter, I demonstrate that future plans for tourism development in Battambang are not dependent on the Chinese as found elsewhere in Cambodia, but instead hinge largely on a careful thematic narrativization of Battambang's history as it relates to the time of Siamese influence and the *Lōk Mjah* in order to attract more Thai tourists to the region.

To be clear, Battambang is not overly friendly with Thailand. Historically speaking, quite the opposite holds true. As I discuss in Chapter 1, the people of Battambang resisted outside

control in many stages of their regional history, from rebelling against the Khmer Empire in ancient times to resisting centralized control by Phnom Penh officials today. The same is true of Siamese influence, the onset of which prompted fighting and violence. However, as I previously detailed, Battambang enjoyed a significant amount of autonomy during the reign of the *Lōk Mjah*, and the period is often considered a time of regional independence despite the tribute paid to the monarchy of Siam (see Chhoung 1996; Bastian 2005). In both 1907 and 1945 when Battambang twice returned to Cambodian rule, the announcement was met with violent resistance. Although there are numerous political and religious reasons for this resistance, I argue that Battambang residents found their living arrangements under the Siamese to be the closest approximation of independence when compared to subjugation under French Indochinese rule. For this reason, I do not refer to this period of time as Siamese but instead as the *Lōk Mjah* era, which implies a certain liminality between the Siamese and Cambodian nation-states that is primarily Khmer in ethnic character. The historical relationship between Battambang and Siam/ Thailand during the time of the *Lōk Mjah* is surprisingly deceptive as a result of these negotiations of power, and at first glance might seem to indicate a regional fondness for the Thai.

Yet, as Tauch Chhoung writes, even during the era of the *Lōk Mjah* the population of Battambang actively resisted Siamese assimilation through repudiation of the language, printing their own currency, and sometimes through armed conflict (Chhoung 1996: 69-70, 98, 101).[1] While it is true that most sources about the Siamese period of Battambang's history, including

---

[1] Indeed, the lack of acceptance for Siamese rule is precisely why I refer to this period of history as the *Lōk Mjah* era and not the era of the Siamese. Despite the oppression and harsh conditions, the residents of Battambang were far more keen to follow the *Lōk Mjah* than a non-Khmer ruler from outside Battambang's borders.

Tauch Chhoung's book, were created during an intense period of nationalist revisionism in 1960s-early 1970s Cambodia, the evidence suggests that the majority of people in Battambang never fully embraced their position as belonging to a Siamese state nor as subjects of the Siamese king (see also Sam 1996). Neither are they entirely comfortable identifying themselves as belonging to the Cambodian state even today, although they will adhere to such language when expected to do so. In this sense, paying tribute to the Thai monarchy was more a means to an end for the residents of Battambang than actual loyalty, and they remain vigilant about the possible need to resist the Thai again should tensions arise (Sam 1996: 9).

During my first visit to the region, hostilities over the control of the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Preah Vihear temple, which straddles the northwestern Cambodian border with Thailand and is claimed by both nations, reached a boiling point (see Hauser-Schäublin 2011). Anti-Thai sentiments were apparent around the entire nation but were particularly prevalent in Battambang where the Thai once held sway. The physical structure of Preah Vihear was not the main concern for Battambang residents, who instead believed that Thailand was only contesting Preah Vihear as an excuse to reclaim Battambang Province itself. The tension reached such levels that one evening I was woken at around three in the morning by a phone call from a friend who had moved to Battambang City from the Preah Vihear region. His family still lived near Preah Vihear and had informed him that soldiers from both nations were exchanging gunfire and that he believed an invasion was imminent. My friend insisted on creating a phone tree for the entire network of his friends and colleagues to communicate, and even arranged a rendezvous point for everyone to evacuate.

In the days after that scare, everyone remained on their toes because, as most of the population of Battambang City seemed to believe, if the Thai crossed the Cambodian border, they would most certainly head directly to Battambang and invade it in a matter of hours. While this scenario seems melodramatic in hindsight, it does demonstrate the general perception of Thailand to residents of Battambang: a threat stalking the borders of fertile, desirable Battambang. This perception thus creates uniquely tense conditions regarding the prospect of tourists visiting Battambang from Thailand, which is seen by some to be the future of regional tourist growth.

**The Director's Grand Plans**

When I first met the Director, our conversations focused largely on European and American tourism to Battambang. These limitations were born partly from the constrictions that typically surround discussions of tourism in Cambodia, where the term "tourism" is often seen to exclusively apply to foreigners, especially 'westerners'. As the rise of Chinese tourism continues to challenge these frameworks, I wanted to push the Director towards discussion of Asian tourism. I was initially expecting him to mention future plans for Chinese tourism, but instead he parroted the well-known fact that Chinese tourists almost always arrive on group tours arranged by organizations based in other cities, and thus he did not believe it would be profitable for himself or the city to attempt to develop such organizations in Battambang. Too much competition from better established organizations, he said. No, his interests lay elsewhere: in attracting Thai guests to Battambang (Chan 2017).

While I had planned to eventually discuss the potential of Thai tourism in Battambang, I was surprised by how quickly he stressed the importance of Thai tourists - in part because Thai tourists constitute such a small percentage of tourist arrivals to the region. Even after months of fieldwork at major tourist sites, I had encountered almost none. Many of my tourism vendor acquaintances frequently claimed that Thai nationals do visit, but only on special occasions and never as a habit. I quickly learned that, while Siamese travelers likely visited the region during the *Lōk Mjah* era, recent Thai tourism to Battambang is still developing in a rather subtle manner (see Sam 1996).

The Director is noted for being especially close to the Thai, in part because he attended a Thai university and learned the Thai language as a young man.[2] After being appointed the Director of Battambang Province's Department of Tourism, he used his connections with Thailand to create a working relationship with Thai officials. He is especially close to business leaders hailing from Chanthaburi Province, which shares a border with Battambang to the west of Battambang City. The Director sees these businessmen as potential investors who can bring economic opportunities to Battambang and to himself if wooed properly. For that reason, the Director often brings groups of wealthy Thais to Battambang as his guests - housing them in his own boutique hotel, plying them with alcohol at his riverside restaurant, and personally escorting them to the various sites of interests around Battambang. Even during the Preah Vihear conflict, when many of the borders to Thailand in this region were closed by the central government, the Director personally traveled to the border to escort groups of wealthy Thais into Cambodia 'off

---

2 In fact, his personal computer is set to a Thai language setting because Khmer is unavailable and he is not fully comfortable working in English.

the books'. Nor is he shy about having done so, instead speaking openly and with great pride about how his circumvention of the closed border kept Thai investors interested in Battambang, a consequence he believes the central government did not adequately consider when they restricted travel there.

After we became better acquainted, the Director started informing me when Thai groups would visit Battambang, but requested that I not interfere with his tours or attempt to interview his guests as it might make them distrustful of his intentions. I did see caravans of nice cars, often shiny new Lexus SUVs, bearing Thai license plates gathered at tourist sites from time to time. My contacts working at those sites would often later confirm that the Director had led a group of men around, usually culminating in beers and conversation afterwards.

The Director's interest in Thai tourists is twofold. First, he sees the wealth that Thai guests can provide as a way of expanding his own empire in Battambang (Moor 2016). As discussed previously, the Director has used his position to create a variety of businesses that cater to tourists, and then promotes them through the Department of Tourism. He personally profits whenever Thai businessmen or political leaders choose to invest in Battambang tourism because it often means investing directly in his own businesses, which are the Department's recommended business ventures. Future Thai tourists, then, are more likely to use his businesses instead of others because they are supported by Thai wealth. In his own way, the Director is attempting to create a network of businesses that cater to Thai tourists in order to monopolize that market, not unlike what Chinese-friendly businesses do with Chinese tour groups in Siem Reap or Phnom Penh. While Thai tourist numbers are not yet sufficient to claim that an

established market that caters specifically to them exists, the Director is working hard to make such a future a reality.

Secondly, the Director views networking with wealthy Thai as a means of increasing his own social status and regional control. That the Director attained his current position because he married into a powerful Khmer family is well known and often commented upon by his critics. His familial connections even granted him enough political protection to outlast the tenure of the former Governor, who was a vocal critic of the Director's inability to separate his personal business interests from his public duties and had indicated numerous times that he was considering replacing him. Thus, the Director is acutely aware that his ability to navigate the tides of social favor are what maintains his grip on Battambang.

But Battambang is not a place where the Director can easily network with the most powerful Cambodian elites, who usually live and work in Phnom Penh, nor would doing so necessarily benefit him. Getting too close to the central government might improve his social standing while actually weakening his ability to profit from the day to day business of running Battambang. Instead, gaining support from Thai elites from neighboring Chanthaburi is a manner of expanding his influence without risking too much attention from even more powerful Cambodians who may expect kickbacks or other concessions from him. Networking across the border allows him to control not just the money coming into Battambang, but also the people wishing to enter. Such is the importance of tourism that he personally campaigns for increased construction and usage of border crossings with Thailand to the west of Battambang City, which he hopes will attract more Thai tourists while redirecting other guests away from the long-used border of Poipet in Banteay Meanchey province to the north (Chakrya 217). The fewer steps

people need to take into Battambang, the more money the tourism economy - and, indeed, the Director himself - can make.

What is truly fascinating about the Director's desire to gain status by encouraging wealthy Thai to invest in Battambang is that the framework by which he relates to Thai people is still firmly rooted in the legacy of the House of Aphaiwong. He often proclaimed the greatness of the Aphaiwong family in our conversations, and was always quick to correct any possible insinuation that they were anything other than purely Khmer. He even dismissed the notion that the Aphaiwongs paid tribute to the Thai king by claiming that they did so only because they were cleverly playing the political field, not because they had any loyalty to or even fear of the Thai monarchy.

The manner by which the Director imagines the Aphaiwong family is a direct reflection of how he sees himself: a cunning strategist who concedes only what is necessary to maintain sovereignty and maximize profit and influence, and whose loyalty is never towards any monarchal or cosmological figure but instead firmly focused on solidifying and expanding his own dynastic power. Much like how Prime Minister Hun Sen often portrays himself in relation to the great historical and even mythological figures of Cambodia's past, the Director often relates himself as something like a second coming of the Aphaiwongs - a Khmer man with enough power that he can control and protect the region irrespective of the central government's wishes (Muong & Jackson 2016).

One method by which the Director establishes the connection between himself and the House of Aphaiwong is his direct control over the Sala Khet - Chhum Aphaiwong's famous mansion that, even today, is the most spectacular building in all of Battambang (see Figure 16).

Figure 16 - Chhum Aphaiwong's Sala Khet, built ~1906 CE

As the keeper of the keys to the Sala Khet, anyone wishing to enter the normally-locked mansion must seek the Director's personal approval. As a result, he often refers to the mansion as "mine."

In my first walkthrough of the mansion with the Director in January of 2016, the Sala Khet was a nearly empty and abandoned place. While the exteriors remained opulent, with a fresh coat of yellow and white paint that helped showcase the two elephant head decorations that adorn the walls on either side of the upper balcony, the interiors were quite another story. Broken windows were everywhere and animals had obviously taken to nesting in the home. The wooden staircase was covered in bird droppings and the place reeked of urine. What were once intricate patterns of white and yellow geometry on the delicate floor tiles were obscured by thick layers of dust and debris. The home contained no furniture except one wooden chair with an upholstered back that had been torn down the middle. The light fixtures remained, as did the chandelier in the main hall, but were rusting over. In one corner, some props for Angelina Jolie's upcoming movie *First They Killed My Father* were being stored until she arrived for filming in a few weeks.

"The Sala Khet is the only place big enough to hold all of her equipment," the Director explained, reducing the once great mansion to a mere storage unit. At one point, he explained, he had reached a tentative agreement with the Thai government for financial support to restore the roof of the Sala Khet, but the deal soon fell apart, leaving the building in tatters.

The shabby conditions of the formerly extravagant house did not diminish the Director's enthusiasm for his vision of transforming the Sala Khet into a museum dedicated to the House of Aphaiwong. He did not see the animal droppings, stained walls, or rusted ornamentations as obstacles, but instead envisioned the mansion in its fully restored glory. He would constantly rush over to one corner or another and excitedly describe his vision for how the space would look, not unlike if he was decorating his own dream home. "Here will be photographs of Chhum Aphaiwong," he said, "and I will place a statue of him here in the center of the room so that people can see him when they enter. That corner will have pictures of the Sala Khet from when it was new, and over there will be a collection of musical instruments to represent his love of music." He even provided me a hand drawn sketch he had made of the new layout.

I struggled to share the Director's optimism standing amidst all the ruin. But sure enough, in 2017, the Director opened the Sala Khet museum after some restoration. The animal remains were cleaned out, the windows fixed, and displays carefully arranged to display Battambang's history. Many of the displays are typical of Cambodian museums - the section on traditional instruments and music, for example, is rather generic and can be found at most museums in the country. The main hall, however, is practically a shrine to the House of Aphaiwong and to Battambang's differences from Phnom Penh. Large portraits of Chhum Aphaiwong, taken from commonly shared historic photographs, hang on the wall, and a golden bust of the former *Lōk*

*Mjah* sits in the center of the room, surrounded by white and pink flowers that are refreshed regularly. While the museum presents opportunities for foreign guests to learn about regional history beyond what they read in national guidebooks, the subtleties of this display may still be lost on those individuals who are unfamiliar with the symbolism of the Aphaiwong era. To Cambodians, however, the message is much clearer: this is the home of the last great leader of Battambang prior to its re-assimilation under Phnom Penh's control, and at the door stands the Director, who literally holds the keys to this regional history in one hand while extending the other to accept payment for the experience.

**Deny the Thai**

The Director's efforts to attract Thai tourists to Battambang sounds viable in principle, but he must also carefully navigate the often perilous and constantly shifting political expectations for Cambodian officials working with Thailand. Most of the time, Cambodia and Thailand claim a neighborly attitude of cooperation, but rarely does this friendship manifest itself easily in practice. Events like the battle over Preah Vihear and, more recently, accusations about former Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's alleged escape from Thailand through Cambodia, create a constant sense of distrust between the two nations (Sineat & Amaro 2017). This distrust is often reflected by how Cambodian people (particularly officials) discuss Thailand in private. In my experience, many Cambodians respect Thailand for its ability to resist colonization and also admire the manner by which Thailand engages with the world economically. Thai products, for example, are highly desirable in Battambang. One electronics shop owner even claimed that "Thai products are as good as Korean or Japanese products,

especially electronics and produce. They are valuable and more expensive [than other types of goods]. Chinese and Vietnamese products, however, are cheap and not as good."

Still, these same Cambodians remain uneasy about Thailand's larger aspirations towards Cambodia, and often paint the Thai as being envious of traditional Khmer culture. These feelings are heightened in Battambang because of Thailand's former influence in the region. While much of Cambodian propaganda has claimed that Thailand is envious of the Angkor Wat complex and wants to copy or claim it for themselves, as they did during the era of the *Lōk Mjah*, residents of Battambang generally believe Angkor Wat to be a secondary concern for the Thai. Instead, they believe that Thailand desires Battambang above all else because of its cultural and agricultural importance. As evidence, locals often point to the fact that even when Thailand did control Angkor in the 18th Century, they placed it under the protection of the House of Aphaiwong in Battambang. Furthermore, when Thailand was later negotiating the return of those territories to Cambodia, they offered to concede Angkor but initially asked to keep Battambang (Tully 2002). For these reasons, Battambang's relationship with Thailand is in a constant state of flux balanced between an optimism derived from economic opportunity and an historically motivated pessimism about Thailand's true intentions in the region.

These concerns were on full display one sunny afternoon when I was sitting with the Director and some of his colleagues at his waterside restaurant along the Sangkae River. The Director had invited me to spend the afternoon drinking beers with him, a common method of doing business and improving professional relationships, and we were discussing his plans for the renovation of the Sala Khet museum. While we were viewing some documents on his computer, a Khmer-language notice popped up on his Facebook account that depicted a tuk-tuk

vehicle and the words “tuk-tuk” with an X through it and “remork” with a thumbs up. The same announcement later appeared on my own online accounts, in both Khmer and English, as it gained momentum and was re-posted across social media by locals and tourists.

When he saw the notice, the Director rolled his eyes and explained the situation to me. The announcement was a new policy from the central government in Phnom Penh that instructed Cambodians (and tourists) to no longer use the term “tuk-tuk” to refer to the ubiquitous motorcycle taxis hauling covered wagons that are popular across Southeast Asia, which also serve as the primary means for short-distance travel for both tourists and locals. Instead, the government demanded that the official word now be “remork” - a less common term that was en vogue prior to the onomatopoetic term “tuk-tuk” taking root. As head of the Provincial Department of Tourism, he knew that the proclamation was forthcoming but had not considered it important enough to advertise in Battambang. As he said, “People will still call it ‘tuk-tuk’ even if ‘remork’ is better.”

Despite his (rightful) pessimism about the efficacy of the change, he maintained strong feelings as to the importance of switching the terminology. “The purpose of changing these words is to remind everyone that Cambodia is not Thailand. ‘Tuk-tuk’ is a Thai word, and tourists brought it here. It is not a Khmer word. We do not want to just accept Thai language in Cambodia, and the Thai style of ‘tuk-tuk’ is different from the Khmer anyway. So it is better if we use our own word like ‘remork’.”[3] Of course, “remork” is a localized spelling of the French

---

[3] Thai-style tuk-tuks are usually one solid device sharing a canopy, with the moto installed directly into a chassis that holds the seats. Cambodian-style tuk-tuks are not as fancy, and usually consist of a covered wagon with seats attached to a moto by a towing connection. In this way, Cambodian tuk-tuks more literally tow the guests, as the cart and the moto move independently with the moto guiding the cart.

word *remorque*, which means "trailer" or "towing." When I asked the Director about the irony of rejecting one 'colonial' word for another, he shrugged off my concerns. "At least France actually colonized Cambodia once. If we use the French language, it is because of our history. If we use Thai, that is not our history and so there is no purpose to that language." In his statement, the Director was embarking on what I came to privately call the Deny-the-Thai strategy, where Cambodians (especially residents of Battambang) rewrite the Thai period of provincial history in favor of a narrative that stressed regional independence or, in this case, a more preferable colonial legacy.

I encountered the Deny-the-Thai strategy several times and in numerous locations during my research. For example, one of the Director's pet projects is the development of the 'Ancient Houses' of Wat Kō. Wat Kō is a famous temple just south of Battambang City's center, and the surrounding district is home to many well-preserved traditional Khmer houses from the *Lōk Mjah* and French Indochinese periods.[4] The houses were preserved because Wat Kō district was the birthplace of Nuon Chea, the Khmer Rouge's "Brother Number Two," and he and other Khmer Rouge leaders occupied the homes in this area during and after the regime.[5] As a marketing device, the Director insists on referring to these homes as "ancient," even though the

---

[4] Wat Kō/វត្តគរ means "the kapok pagoda" in reference to kapok trees that grow in this region. However, many guests who know only rudimentary Khmer sometimes mistakenly call this temple the Cow Pagoda because the Khmer term for "kapok," *kor*/គរ, is phonetically similar to *ko*/គោ, the word for "cow." Usually it is spelled "kor," but I use "kō" here for phonetic purposes.

[5] Nuon Chea's house is still visible from the main road through Wat Kō, although there are no signs marking its location and it is not advertised. Tourists are generally entirely unaware of its existence, even though they must pass it to visit the Ancient Houses. There are no current plans to promote it as a dark tourist site, in part because another family now occupies the home.

100-140 year old homes are much younger than the 1000+ year old temples that are more typically described as "ancient" in Cambodia.[6] By his own admission, he believes that sensationalizing the age of the homes will attract more tourists, who he views as being primarily interested in traditional Khmer culture.

Indeed, all of the emphasis in marketing these old traditional homes to tourists is placed on their age, with a secondary consideration on their ecotourist appeal. One of the homes even now operates a small homestay, where tourists can pay to spend the night sleeping in the former homes of old Battambang officials and the Khmer Rouge leaders who later occupied them. Yet nowhere in the advertisements for these experiences is any reference to the Thai or their history in this region, despite most of these homes being built by members of Chhum Aphaiwong's court during the *Lōk Mjah* era. At best, vague reference is made to the homes as being from the "colonial" period or using similar aesthetics without specifying exactly what colonial period they represent.[7]

Another incident further demonstrated the powerful rejection of Thai influence in Battambang, albeit far more for economic reasons than narrative ones: the clash over vendors at the 2016 Battambang City Ohm Tūk Festival. For major festivals that involve public celebrations such as New Years (both Khmer and International versions) and Ohm Tūk, Battambang puts on a

---

[6] Interestingly, these homes are almost exclusively advertised as "ancient" solely in English. The Khmer word for "ancient," *boran*/បុរាណ, is absent from nearly all Khmer advertisements for these homes. Instead, Khmer language advertisements usually only use the words for Wat Kor/វត្តគរ and house (*pteah/*ផ្ទះ), and rely on the area's reputation to fill in the gaps for knowledgable Cambodian guests.

[7] Similar claims are made about old buildings and architecture in Battambang City's heritage district, where pre-French buildings are often left purposefully vague in their provenance.

street party that encircles the Sangkae River from the two bridges north and south of the heritage district and around the opposite bank, creating a three kilometer circled walking path that passes much of the downtown area's famous architecture and historic sites. These festivals can attract hundreds of thousands of guests, mostly Cambodians from other provinces who are using their holiday to visit Battambang. Such large crowds necessitate the erection of temporary vendor stalls all around the looped thoroughfare to provide food and merchandise for these exuberant guests. Often, the Provincial Department of Tourism, which is responsible for hiring vendors and organizing the stalls, will bring in vendors from other territories in order to fill every available stall space around the walkway . Usually, these outside vendors come predominantly from Thailand, with assistance crossing the border from the Director, and bring with them styles of street food and branded clothing items not regularly available in town.

The 2016 Ohm Tūk Festival, however, saw conflict over the hiring of vendors because the Director raised the prices of each vendor stall from $20 to $110 USD per day, with a minimum four day rental for the festival. Local merchants revolted and refused to pay the higher price, and several claimed that they would barely break even if they were to invest that much money in their stalls. The Director responded by hiring more Thai vendors, boasting that he would happily take Thai money if the Khmer were unwilling to pay. As Thai merchants generally have less trouble raising the initial capital to invest in a stall space, they were more willing to pay the Director's new prices.

The backlash was not entirely about money, however. Many residents of Battambang in the days before the festival saw the influx of Thai merchants as a direct attack on the Cambodian traditions that the event represents. As one angry vendor stated, "Ohm Tūk is our ancient Khmer

tradition. You can see these races [carved into the stones] at Angkor. When people come to the city to watch the boats, they should see Khmer faces, not Thai faces." Some people began swearing they would boycott Thai products unless the situation was fixed, although such hyperbole did not take off as any type of formal movement. Much of the anger was aimed squarely at the Director, who was accused of selling out his culture for Thai money. He did not help the situation by refusing to negotiate with vendors, instead spending his time on the phone in his office or at his restaurant frantically trying to convince his Thai contacts to send more merchants, often expressing the opinion that only he had a clear vision for the future and that the residents of Battambang needed to bend to his wisdom.

Ultimately, the Director lost the battle. In order for Thai merchants to truck their wares into Cambodia and set up shop for a week or more in Battambang City, they first needed to be approved to cross the border. For previous festivals, the Director simply ushered them towards the border between Chanthaburi and Battambang, over which he holds significant sway. Using this leverage, and likely some form of financial incentive to higher ups, the Director has long been able to secure Thai merchants for his festivals while personally profiting from vending fees. In October of 2016, however, the Director somehow lost his leverage. About a week before the festival was slated to begin, right as fervor about vending fees was reaching a heated peak, Thai merchant trucks suddenly stopped arriving in Battambang City. With only days to go before the festival began, I took a walk around the route and found over half of the stalls - well over 100 slotted spaces - empty.

The Director panicked. For nearly two days, he ran about his restaurant shouting into his phone as he tried to figure out why none of his vendors were arriving for the festival. He soon

discovered that all trucks carrying cargo from Thailand through Battambang border checkpoints were being stopped for ‘inspections’ of indeterminate length. Fuming, the Director told me that some powerful military official was overriding his own authority, although he refused to divulge (or simply did not know) the identity of the culprit. After a few days, Thai trucks began arriving in Battambang City again - a sign that the Director had capitulated, almost certainly paying bribes to allow the cargo trucks to pass ‘inspection’.

While money, bribery, and corruption are the obvious motivators for why this conflict took place, the resolution did have an interesting side effect with clear implications for Thai-Battambang relations: the lowering of vendor fees for Cambodians. Although the Director refused to discuss the issue with me, likely motivated by a desire to minimize his loss of face, I spoke with many Cambodian vendors during the festival who gloated about defeating his demands. Apparently, the $110 USD per day fee was reduced to a flat $100 fee for all four days (in other words, $25 USD per day), which allowed Cambodian vendors to once again fill in the available slots at the festival. Although no names were ever mentioned, they claimed that appealing to officials that dislike the Director’s iron-fisted tactics, of which there are many, led to a workaround solution that forced his hand. Much like at the Battle of Banon discussed in Chapter 6, the Director’s demands could not overpower the will of the people to utilize their connections in order to ensure that they benefitted from tourism.

I also suspect that the Director’s threats to hire only Thai vendors were unrealistic and that he likely struggled to find enough Thai merchants willing to deal with possible disruptions at the border for this event. In total, Thai vendors made up less than 20% of all the vendors stalls - still an impressive number, totaling about forty different stalls or so - but most stalls were

occupied by Cambodians from Battambang and nearby areas. While Thai products, such as clothing, electronics, and street food were available, the most popular stalls were those advertising local Battambang produce, particularly oranges and mangoes, as well as several clothing merchants who were selling shirts with the likeness of Ta Dambong Krañyoung with the phrase "Child of Battambang," a popular fashion statement for youth in the City throughout much of 2016 and beyond.[8]

To be fair, such a conflict is possible anywhere in Cambodia where powerful elites feel slighted or want to profit from a large public gathering. But in Battambang, where tourism is in its infancy and growing precariously quickly, and where regional identity is made concrete through local interpretations of their past relationship with Thailand, these events signified far more than simple bribery. No one was opposed to Thai vendors or tourists coming to Battambang so long as the Khmer character of Battambang remained intact and predominant. Most people even embraced such foreign influence after a time, but would not allow Thai wealth or power to dominate Battambang's politics or symbolic economy. At this point, it bears repeating that Battambang's relationship with Thailand is unlike anywhere else in Cambodia and that the region's Khmer character does not necessarily mean a Cambodian national character in part because of this relationship. Events such as the conflict over Thai vendors are never simple matters of regional economics. In Battambang, the need to deny the Thai influence on regional identity and historical narrative is always at play.

---

[8] កូនបាត់ដំបង or *kōn Battambang*, which is the typical way residents of Battambang refer to themselves.

**Death of a King**

The fight over Thai presence during the 2016 Battambang City Ohm Tūk Water Festival has an extra layer of complexity that is awkwardly stated but no less true: regarding tourism, when Thailand suffers, Cambodia benefits. In recent years, the Cambodian government has greatly emphasized new methods of travel and new flight connections to dozens of countries across Asia and Europe so that prospective visitors can more easily access Cambodia (2016 "Cambodia, Finland"; 2016 "Cambodia doubles airport"; Chan 2018; Chandara 2016; Joy 2016; Kay 2017; Kimsay 2019; Liao 2018; Manet 2017; Sokhorng 2016; Ngamsangchaikit 2017; Pisei 2018; Vannak 2017). A side effect of these new connections is that tourists have fewer layovers in other nations that might detract from tourist focus. Prior to these initiatives, most visitors traveling to Cambodia needed to pass through one of Bangkok's airports. By eliminating most need for that layover, officials hope to balance the equation by tempting travelers away from Thailand towards longer stays in Cambodia (Lew 2017). In this way, Thai and Cambodian tourism are linked - as visitors often combine a visit to both nations into one trip, spending more or less time in one nation instead of the other. Thus, when Thailand has national emergencies or public conflicts, which have been common due to political instability over the past decade, tourists often balance the equation by spending less time in Thailand in favor of longer stays in Cambodia.

Such was the case on October 13th, 2016, when King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) died after ruling Thailand for seventy years. A wave of sadness overtook much of Southeast Asia, even in Battambang, as most people recognized the long reign of the monarch and his influence in the region. Some residents of Battambang who (incorrectly) believed the Thai monarch was a

direct descendent of the House of Aphaiwong claimed that his death was a great loss for Battambang specifically, although such opinions were unofficial and only shared among friends. For most people in Battambang, life simply carried on, if a bit more gossipy than usual, and no public mourning took place. Furthermore, many locals saw the loss of the King of Thailand as a golden opportunity and braced for the influx of tourists they were sure would come following the king's death.

I spoke with several locals - both Cambodian and Euro-American expatriates - who operated hotels, restaurants, and other tourist-related businesses. Those who have lived in Battambang long enough recalled that tourism spiked in the region following bombings that took place in Bangkok in February of 2012 and August of 2015, as tourists lost confidence in the safety of their visits to Thailand and sought to enjoy the remainder of their holidays elsewhere (Sokunthea & Paviour 2016). Given its proximity to Bangkok and the fact that many guests were planning to visit Cambodia anyway, Battambang became a logical place for many guests needing to improvise a few days of their vacation (Sokunthea 2016). Similarly, when Suvarnabhumi Airport was occupied by the People's Alliance for Democracy (the so-called 'Yellow Shirts') in November of 2008, many guests traveling to Southeast Asia chose to bypass Thailand entirely and visit Cambodia instead. As Thailand was already considered somewhat controversial to visit following a 2014 coup by the Thai army and was now entering a declared mourning period for the late king, including a much-discussed online news story that quickly spread across social media showing Bangkok stores selling only black clothing and mourning attire, business owners in Battambang were expecting a tourist exodus from Thailand that would quickly flow into their bars and hotels (England 2016).

They were right. The 2016 Ohm Tūk Festival, held only days after the death of the king, saw far greater crowds than any festival for any holiday during the entire year previous. True, many of these revelers were Cambodians wanting to enjoy Battambang for a few days, but there were also much higher numbers of foreign guests than I had ever seen at previous Ohm Tūk festivals. In talking to many of the foreign partygoers, their motivations were confirmed: most of them had indeed left Bangkok because of the king's death. As one twenty-two year old Australian woman claimed, "Thailand was fun, but when the king died it was very depressing. Everybody was sad, a lot of businesses closed. I understand why [the Thai] feel that way, but I'm on vacation and want to have fun, so I thought Cambodia would be a better place to be. I heard about this party and took the bus here from Siem Reap this morning." Another girl of similar age from England even confirmed the black clothing being a motivator. "It's no fun seeing black everywhere," she said. "I want to wear bright clothes and I can't do that in Thailand right now. I hear you can't even buy other colors right now. I mean, he's not my king, so why should I have to be depressed about it?"

Local business owners confirmed the tourist surge as well. Several hotel owners I spoke with told me that they had no vacancies, and the Director feared that the city might have difficulty accommodating all of the guests. I visited several foreigner-focused businesses and they too were forced to find creative solutions to the surge. One hotel even offered split rooms, hostel style, at discounted prices for guests willing to share their room with strangers. Restaurants were packed and bus companies had to schedule additional departures to meet demand. To clarify, the king's death did not impact the tourism economy of Thailand in the long term; with its larger population and far more established tourism economy, Thailand is better

prepared to weather such incidents (Li 2016). What was only a small loss for Bangkok, then, was a massive gain for Cambodia, and these effects were most visible in a developing secondary economy like Battambang. While the tourist surge following the death of King Rama IX lasted only a week or two, it demonstrates a stark reality for tourism in this region: when Thailand loses, Cambodia wins.[9]

**Shadows of Siam**

As I discuss in Chapter 4, architecture is one of the major draws that attracts tourists to Battambang City, and it is unsurprising that promotional narratives about the city's heritage buildings heavily employ the Deny-the-Thai strategy by omitting direct references to Siamese power. However, signs of Thai-Battambang relations can be found in architecture if you know where to look, and may serve as important symbols for the growth of Thai-based tourism in the future. Aside from the Sala Khet, which is undeniably of the *Lōk Mjah* era, two other buildings in Battambang City are deeply connected to the Siamese period: Wat Kdul about five kilometers north of the Sala Khet on the road to Ek Phnom, and Wat Damrey Sor in the heart of the city near the Sala Khet. Wat Kdul is less visited by tourists, and most people only stop there because it is on the way to other sites. Those tourists that do stop are usually attracted by the unusual colors that decorate Wat Kdul, including several gorgeous black and gold columns that are intricate,

---

[9] In other cases, I would argue that because both nations are visited in sequence by many tourists, it would be right to claim that when Thailand wins, Cambodia wins, or vice versa. After all, more numbers for one often means more numbers for the other. In this case, however, the overall numbers for visitation to Southeast Asia are not the concern, but instead the balance between the two nations takes precedence. Much like a ship listing to one side, tourist pressure is unequal for a short time until things return upright.

imposing, and unique. However, closer inspection of Wat Kdul reveals much about the Siamese legacy in Battambang.

The murals of Wat Kdul chronicle local history and serve as a register of the many foreigners who have influenced the region. Originally built on the order of Chhum Aphaiwong in the early 1900s, the wat contains numerous statues and bas-reliefs adorning the walls of the temple's various buildings that depict figures of different nationalities that have visited and occupied Battambang in different eras. On one tan-yellow building in the back left of the temple grounds, for example, can be found carvings of a female French doctor, a Japanese soldier, and a traditional Khmer herbalist. A nearby gate depicts two Indian soldiers dressed in the garb of the French Foreign Legion, swords at their sides. Yet another gate shows a man with a mustache who, according to the head monk, is an Arab soldier who fought for the French in the World Wars. The most important statue, though, is that of Chhum Aphaiwong himself, dressed in the European-inspired formal attire of the *Lōk Mjah*, medals dangling proudly on his chest (see Figure 17). The statue of Chhum Aphaiwong is the most complete depiction of any *Lōk Mjah* in Battambang, and even the Director did not know of it when I asked him.

Even more intriguing than the statue of Chhum Aphaiwong are two carvings above Wat Kdul's *vihear*. Above the entrance on one end is the image of Ta Dambong Krañyoung's magical *dambong* staff lying on its carrying drum. On the other end is a sword, also lying across a drum. The sword represents the Sword of Victory, one part of the the royal regalia of Thailand that is used during coronations. The sword was a gift given to the king of Siam by Baen Aphaiwong prior to his appointment as the original Lord Master of Battambang. Most tourists never look up and see these symbols, nor would they recognize them if they did so, but a careful reading of the

Figure 17 - Carving of Chhum Aphaiwong at Wat Kdul

design of Wat Kdul shows that during the time of the *Lōk Mjah* both the power of the Siamese king and the spiritual authority of Battambang were meant to protect and guide religion and morality in tandem. These are the types of locations which may yet entice Thai tourists to explore their legacy in Battambang, as it is literally written on the wall waiting for someone to notice.

The other notable surviving temple from the *Lōk Mjah* era, and by far the more famous and revered of the two, is Wat Damrey Sor. Wat Damrey Sor translates as "Pagoda of the White Elephant" and is known throughout Cambodia as an important place of worship.[10] Many

[10] វត្តដំរីសរ, often written in English as Wat Dumray Sor with Dumrey and Sar as potential alternate spellings.

Cambodian folktales involve albino animals (described as *khliech* in Khmer, despite the other Khmer word for white, *saw*, being in the temple's name) that are endowed with special abilities.[11] Albino elephants are especially prized, and are often claimed to have healing properties. Various legends surround the origin of the temple's name, all of which have to do with a white elephant being found in a forest on the grounds that now house the temple.

One afternoon in April of 2016, I sat down with seventy eight year old Sao Mai, who has served as the *achar* of the temple since Battambang was declared safe for travelers in 1998. Tall but fragile from age, Sao is a sweet man who speaks softly but with much patience. His version of the temple's origin story blends the elephant legend with the House of Aphaiwong. "In the old times," he said, "this area was nothing but forest. A monk named Ruong lived here so he could find quiet to meditate. He was a famous healer and used the plants of the forest to make medicine. He built a small place here so that he could heal people. Later, the Aphaiwong family took control of Battambang and all the land belonged to them. The forest here was close to where the *Lōk Mjah* lived, which is now the Sala Khet. For many years, the Aphaiwongs kept their animals in this forest. One of their animals was a white elephant that could heal people. One day, Chhum Aphaiwong's favorite wife, Srey Ing, became so ill that she could not even hear the sound of a dog barking without crying. Chhum Aphaiwong brought her to Wat Kanteoung near his house and prayed. He promised to build a new temple for the Buddha if Srey Ing was healed. He continued to pray until she was better, and then kept his promise by building the *vihear* of Wat Damrey Sor on the spot that both Ruong and his family's white elephant lived. That was around 1904 or 1905. Unfortunately, Srey Ing soon became sick again and died, and [Chhum]

[11] ឃ្លៀង

had her cremated and buried here at Wat Damrey Sor. She is still here even today." He gestured vaguely behind him towards the direction of the *vihear*.

The story of Srey Ing's death is well known in Battambang, and Cambodians from near and far come to the temple to pay their respects to her. Locals often visit on religious days to pray, while Cambodians from other provinces regularly visit because they are familiar with at least one of the legends about the white elephant (statues of which are aplenty at Wat Damrey Sor). The temple's convenient location near the heritage district and the Sala Khet also make it an easy stop for passersby of any nationality, and it experiences higher foot traffic than most temples in the area. Even when they are unaware of the story of Srey Ing or the temple's connection to Chhum Aphaiwong, visitors of all nations flock to see the temple's colorful statues and ornate decorations, making Wat Damrey Sor one of the most popular spots for photography in town.

Wat Damrey Sor is also the center of Thai visitation to Battambang, though their schedule is inconsistent and difficult to predict. Although I never encountered a Thai visitor there, Sao Mai and other monks with whom I spoke told me that Thai guests regularly come to pray for Srey Ing and the Aphaiwong family, even sending me photographs of one such visit when I was out of town. Because of the story of Srey Ing, Wat Damrey Sor is somewhat considered the home temple of the Aphaiwongs, even though the current temple was not constructed until the last years of their rule. For this reason, descendants of the Aphaiwongs travel to Wat Damrey Sor to make rituals and pray for their ancestors. Some locals view the Thai descendants of the House of Aphaiwong's return to Battambang as proof that even Thai royalty respect Battambang's most

powerful dynasty. Officials like the Director hope that these types of place-based historical spiritual connections can be cultivated into a more sustained form of tourism in the future.

To date, Thai tourists constitute only a small percentage of inbound tourists in Battambang - a paltry 0.8% as of 2016. In order to successfully establish Thai tourism to Battambang, the Director and the local government must carefully craft a historical narrative that appeals to the Thai while still promoting regional nationalism. Whether the answer is in ancestry, religion, architecture, folklore, or other factors, the road ahead is uncertain but full of potential. Should Battambang establish a successful tourism industry that thematically caters to Thai guests, it may yet rewrite Thai-Cambodian political relations (at least in that region) during future conflicts. Success may be a long ways away or never arrive at all, but concerted effort is already being made to attract tourists to Battambang as a bridge between between Cambodia and Thailand.

# Chapter 6
# Behind the Curtain: Stories of Power and Identity

Tourism is not simply a transaction between the traveler and the local catering to him or her, but an entire system of meaning where values change to reflect and respond to the whims of the tourist market in ways both desired and undesired. Through the interaction of locals and visitors, the symbolic economy and the performative labor used to sustain it come into direct conversation with issues of identity. While I have discussed power throughout this work, I have largely done so from the perspective of powerful male figures like the Governor and the Director. But what of the local actors on the ground? Those figures who work in tourist sites and engage with visitors every day must navigate a complicated network of power relationships to sustain their businesses, and in turn often find that the symbolic economy affords them new forms of power they did not previously enjoy. Through the competitive nature of the emerging tourism industry, individuals engage in a negotiation of power and precarity that greatly shapes their personal identities, all outside the view of the paying guest. I now pull back the curtain on these hidden processes to demonstrate how tourism and identity put into conversation by locals when tourists are no longer watching.

In this chapter, I will tell two stories of power in the tourist economy of Battambang City. The first story relates to women's agency in the tourism economy and largely focuses on a conflict between the Director and a group of female tourism operators at a popular tourist site. The second is a tale of a young male entrepreneur who navigated a complicated network of post-colonial paternalism in an effort to establish himself in a global economy. Following these stories, I conclude with a brief discussion of the future potential for LGBTQ tourism in

Battambang as an example of how the interplay between local and foreign actors can provide safe spaces and new opportunities for identity exploration to previously marginalized individuals. The interplay of agency and industry are major themes of this chapter, particularly with respect to how they interact with the already tenuous nature of new tourism. Although this chapter focuses neither on theming nor a specific historical period, it is important to highlight the effects that tourism and a symbolic economy can have on the hearts and minds of tourism operators, as well as show how tourism operates beyond its facade. As someone who grew up in a tourism-dependent community, I know how just how impactful tourism can be on the determination of personal identity, and I want to highlight some of the ways that these identities are negotiated in a growing economy.

**Women, Resistance, and the Battle of Banon**

Women play a key role in tourism across the globe, and perhaps nowhere is their impact felt so distinctly yet kept from the public eye quite like in small developing economies like Battambang (see Sinclair 1996; Ferguson 2011; Apostolopoulos 2001). While many tourism-related businesses such as hotels, restaurants, gift shops, and tourist stalls utilize family connections to fulfill staffing requirements and contain profits, there is a noticeable reliance on females more than males in the city's service sector. Most male children are sent to one of numerous 'universities' to learn a career that will bring the family income and prestige - banking, for example, is particularly popular at the moment. While females often attend these same universities, most of them cannot attain the same careers as their male counterparts and

oftentimes have their educations interrupted by the expectation that they will provide labor to the university itself (Sassoon 2016).

Consider that during my time as an instructor at one of the city's most well-regarded universities, many of my female students were expected to earn their scholarships by providing secretarial services for the school, sometimes even being called out of class to answer phones or file papers (despite my, and other teachers', protests), while male students were never expected to perform labor for their financial aid or interrupt their classroom learning. Even if females finished their education (often years behind their male counterparts), they found themselves at the mercy of sexist hiring practices. Males and females who completed their banking degrees together, for example, could often later be found employed at the same bank - the men in nice suits, working in high paying administrative and investment-related positions, and the women in form-fitting dresses and alluring makeup, answering phones and greeting customers at the door. As a result, it is common to find many women either abandoning their collegiate education in favor of working for their families or avoiding university in the first place. Thus, whereas men are often expected to spread beyond the family to establish careers in business positions outside of the sight of most tourists, women often work directly for their family businesses in positions that are far more visible to tourists.

Despite the gender inequity, women do what they often do in such biased scenarios: they create their own forms of influence and agency. In Battambang, women's power can be found firmly routed in the tourism sector, as women dominate most tourist businesses and can negotiate

with powerful men by threatening to stop performing tasks that men are mostly unwilling to do.[1] Some women have used these positions to become powerful influencers at all levels of politics - for example, the owner of the famous White Rose Restaurant, one of the oldest and most respected eateries in Battambang City.[2] The White Rose began some decades ago as a small restaurant of little visual distinction on a busy street corner of the Battambang Heritage District. Operated primarily by a Khmer woman known simply as Grandma White Rose in an attempt to supplement her family's income, the restaurant was popular with Cambodians for providing a cozy eatery and consistently good food. When foreign aid workers and tourists began arriving in the late 1990s, the White Rose quickly gained a reputation for serving authentic Khmer food and passable French-inspired fare at reasonable prices, and the upper dining room soon became a popular meeting place for aid groups and UN workers.

The reputation gained in the late 1990s and early 2000s led the White Rose to become the most profitable restaurant in the downtown area, and it eventually underwent a massive renovation in late 2016 that redecorated the restaurant in trendy fairy lights and dark woods in a style more appealing to hip young backpackers. The White Rose remains incredibly popular with both domestic and foreign guests, perhaps the only restaurant in Battambang City where people of all nationalities mingle freely and evenly. The popularity and significant income that the White Rose now commands gives Grandma White Rose immense power. She is often invited to

---

[1] While working in tourism is not itself considered low class, many customer service positions, particularly those involving manual labor and/or time spent outdoors (where the darker skin caused by exposure to the sun signals poverty and loss of face to many Khmer), are.

[2] The White Rose is sometimes called the Calypso by non-Khmer guests, a mispronunciation of the Khmer words for "white rose" - កុលាបស, often Romanized as "kolap sor" but where "sor" is pronounced more like "saw."

government meetings to share her opinions as a VIP on subjects ranging from tourism to economic development - meetings she makes a point to attend in person and often without her husband. Few decisions are ever made on tourism development in the area without her approval, and she has used this influence to bolster her own business and intimidate competitors whenever necessary.

Women also use tourism to exert influence and agency in other, more subtle ways. As most women do not have the clout, experience, or publicity of Grandma White Rose, they must use less visible methods for controlling their businesses and their lives. These techniques were on full display in Spring of 2016, when a conflict occurred at Phnom Banon between the women who operate the site's many tourist businesses and the Provincial Department of Tourism. I came to understand and witness this conflict through the eyes of Chamroeun, a spunky twenty-two-year-old woman determined to control her own destiny regardless of what society deems best for her.

I first met Chamroeun in early 2016 when she was twenty two. She is quite tall for a Khmer woman, skinny but not unhealthy, with long black hair that she always wears in a ponytail. She has large bright eyes that light up at every joy life brings her, and she perpetually displays a large toothy grin on her face, laughing and smiling at every opportunity. Everything about Chamroeun reads bright and happy, with a dash of youthful rebellion. Her free-spirited attitude is somewhat atypical for young adults in Battambang City, and her willingness to break with more conservative social norms certainly served her well in the conflict that I began referring to as the 'Battle of Banon'.

Chamroeun owns a small food stall at the base of Phnom Banon approximately thirty minutes west of Battambang City. As discussed earlier, Phnom Banon is an important religious site in the region, arguably the most spiritually potent and significant site for traditional beliefs in all of Battambang. Despite its importance and popularity as a pilgrimage and tourist location, there are still only a few businesses that cater to visitors at the mountain, all of which are found at the base of the staircase leading up to the ancient temple ruins. There are approximately twenty-five women who operate food stalls, small gift shops, and juice stands on either side of the brick walkway that leads to the staircase, accompanied by an ever changing number of young children and family members who support their businesses based on need, availability, and time of year. Only one man works full-time at Banon: an elderly fruit vendor who does not operate a full stall, only a small push cart with an umbrella.[3] Chamrouen's father Kosal also occasionally helps his wife manage a series of wooden huts that jut out over two small ponds at the mountain's base. These huts can be rented by the hour for relaxation or picnicking and are popular with large student or business groups who come to spend the afternoon lounging in the shade. By Kosal's own admission, Kosal's wife does most of the work while Chamroeun operates her own stall apart from her parents.

Chamroeun's restaurant is one of the closest in the line of shops to the Banon staircase, a fact that helps her make between $15 and $100 USD per day, depending on the season. After

---

[3] One other male is present at Banon nearly everyday, but he is an elderly former police officer who cannot afford full-time care and is only there to be near his daughter in case of emergency. She helps give tours of the nearby countryside, so he will often use his limited French to help her attract customers, but rarely moves from his hammock underneath her makeshift tarpaulin on the mountainside due to frailty. For that reason, neither his daughter, Chamroeun, nor myself consider him a full time worker.

expenses, she retains about 30% of her income as profit, although she receives some financial support from her husband, a European man over twice her age who visits Cambodia two or three times a year to see her. Importantly, her shop is near an iron hand-powered water pump at the base of the mountain. The pump is often used by tourists to wet their faces or scarves after ascending and descending the imposing staircase, but is also utilized by the various shops to provide water for cleaning dishes and other duties. Chamroeun considers herself lucky to be so near the pump, as it means less effort spent lugging heavy water jugs and dirty dishes to and fro.

However, Chamroeun's placement near the pump and, in her estimation, the survival of her business was threatened by the local government in early March of 2016. Before then, Chamroeun and her fellow shop owners each paid a 10,000 riel (~$2.50 USD) fee every month to the Provincial Department of Tourism to operate their stalls. The fee was minimal, so neither she nor the other women found it inconvenient. But one day, Chamroeun later told me, a man from the Department came and announced that the fees would stop because the land would be reclaimed by the Department for development of Banon's tourist market area. I later confirmed this encounter in a discussion with the Director, who claimed his goal was to "clean up the trash" around the mountain and to plant a beautiful garden that tourists could enjoy. At first, he implied that all of the tourist stalls would be permanently closed and replaced by stalls staffed by his own workers, ostensibly to guarantee that the profits would trickle upwards directly to him. However, he later admitted that he did not have the support necessary to train so many new workers and conceded that the stalls should continue being operated by the women.

In light of this shortcoming, he offered a straightforward compromise: all of the stalls could remain in operation, but they would be physically relocated to a spot near the parking lot

far away from the gardens and the water pump. Each stall would be given a a 4x6 meter allotment, and the owners of each stall would be required to decorate their businesses in a similar style to maintain their visual appeal and general upkeep. Furthermore, every shop would be required to pay 150,000 riel (-$37 USD) for usage of the land.[4] To a certain degree, these changes were acceptable to the vendors. As Chamroeun summarized, "They said they want to make a garden here. If they make it beautiful and take care of it, I don't mind moving so much. But if they are irresponsible and let it get dirty and filled with garbage, then it is unfair to us." The increased fee was a serious issue, in part because the Department's communication was unclear and there was uncertainty over the exact financial figures and timing of payments. A second problem was the distance from the water pump, as nobody wanted to carry water over such a long distance. Nevertheless, plans progressed to the point where each vendor received an assigned allotment and were told the move would happen "sometime after Khmer New Years," and most of the women felt resigned to their new fate.

Everything fell apart right before the holiday began. At the end of March 2016, government officials went to Banon to talk to the vendors. The vendors anticipated some discussion regarding the move, but were expecting most of the focus of the meeting to revolve around plans for the Khmer New Years celebrations that occur in mid-April and provide a significant boost for everyone's business. "In previous years," Chamroeun explained, "the Department came and made arrangements for New Year with us. They brought extra police to

---

[4] This fee was a bit unclear, as at different times the Director implied that he could not decide if he should charge by the month or the year or on the exact amount to charge. He often used 150,000 riel per year as a standard in my conversations with him, although some vendors remained uncertain about whether the fee would be 150,000 riel per month or per year throughout the conflict.

help with the crowds, and helped us make spaces for people to play traditional Khmer games, listen to music, and eat food. It is a big party. We cannot do it with only thirty of us, so we need the government to help organize everything so that we can all benefit."

The meeting was anything but expected. Instead of discussing the celebration, the Department announced that the vendors would be moved *before* Khmer New Years, and that all stalls must immediately close until given instruction to reopen. They also revealed that because the move would prevent the stalls from operating during the holiday, outside vendors would be brought in to set up temporary shops for the thousands of guests who were expected during Khmer New Years - vendors who were directly paying the Department for the privilege of working during such a lucrative week. The announcement was a blatant attempt by the Provincial Department of Tourism to ensure that all of the vendors in operation during the holiday worked for or directly benefited the government, thus lining the pockets of officials like the Director, and Chamroeun and her friends knew it. The meeting ended with screaming, yelling, and threats - the women of Banon promising to fight the government if necessary, and the government intimating violence against anyone who dared defy them.

In the aftermath of that meeting, I spoke to both the Director and the women of Banon separately. The Director argued that the women of Banon were incapable of handling the thousands of guests on their own, despite the many years of having done exactly that, and therefore he was *required* to bring in his own people to provide "necessary" services for festival guests. He called the women "disrespectful" of his efforts to improve the area, and he argued that

they had no right to be "on [his] land" except for his patient tolerance of their presence.[5] The women, in turn, called him "rude" and said that he had a reputation for laziness and greed. One woman stated, "He only comes here once or twice a year and always says he is cleaning the area of garbage. But he never cleans it. We clean it. When he comes, he orders his workers to clean for one or two hours to take pictures, but he never does the work himself. How can we trust what he says about cleaning if we have never seen him clean?" For weeks, the arguments raged on, but the Department held back any show of force and avoided a physical confrontation.

As time went by with little progress being made, everyone began to worry about the festival. With only weeks to spare, no one had yet outlined the plans for the Khmer New Years celebrations, and everyone from Chamroeun to the Director began vocally fretting about the consequences of inaction. A temporary ceasefire was drawn in the week before the holiday, as the Director and the women all realized that everyone would lose out on profits if they did not make appropriate festival arrangements. The Director mostly ignored the women during the event but let them operate their businesses without interference while keeping his own workers away. The women ignored him in turn but helped make space for the government to build a stage for musical performances, among other small event spaces. By everyone's account, the celebration was a success but only a shell of what it should have been.

The temporary détente did provide an unintended benefit for Chamroeun and the women of Banon in that it allowed them time to reorganize their strategy against the Department's

---

[5] The Director often spoke about government property as his own, interchanging personal possessive pronouns with third person indicators for the government. It became hard to assess if it was purely egocentric behavior or if his privileged position with the government afforded him actual legal control over certain spaces.

interference. They turned to a third party that they knew could influence the outcome of the conflict on their behalf: the tourist police. Banon typically has two or three tourist police officers on hand at any given time, usually the same group in place for six to twelve month assignments before being rotated out to a different tourist site. At the time of this conflict, there were two primary police officers, both men - the senior officer Vibol and one deputy, both of whom have since been reassigned to other locations.

Vibol and I became acquainted several months prior to the Banon conflict and considered ourselves friends, and he rarely hesitated to freely complain about the inner workings of the tourism industry around me. A major concern for him was the open hostility between the tourist police and the Provincial Department of Tourism. Technically, the tourist police were considered a branch of the provincial police department, a separate unit from the Provincial Department of Tourism. However, the Director insisted, in my discussions with him and to Vibol directly, that the tourist police should be under his direct control so that he could better regulate tourism at all levels. The problem was that the Chief of Police openly disliked the Director and over the years they had developed quite a rivalry. As such, they constantly bickered about authority, influence, money, and other issues in their struggle over who should command the tourist police. When one gave an order, the other would override it, and so on.

At the time of the conflict, the tourist police were actively hostile towards the Provincial Department of Tourism and made no secret of their preference to remain loyal to the police department. The biggest concern was that the Provincial Department of Tourism was responsible for paying the tourist police to monitor tourist sites and recently decided to cut pay. According to Vibol, the Department was offering only $100 USD per month to each officer, with no additional

supplement to cover the gasoline necessary for the police to travel the long distance to and from Banon seven days a week, fifty two weeks a year with no days off even for holidays.

This new salary, which was about one-third of the previous arrangement, was so absurdly low given the working conditions that, after several public arguments with Department officials, the tourist police at all major Battambang locations stopped going to work. Although everything was kept quiet from the newspapers and the wider public, it was clear that a sort of silent strike was occurring between the tourist police and Provincial Department of Tourism with the tacit support of the Chief of Police. Their absence resulted in at least one case of violence in which two drunk partygoers started a brawl that left one man bloodied and beaten, which would have otherwise been broken up by the police. Following that violence, the Director agreed to return to the previous pay rate and end the silent strike, undoubtedly because he could not risk bad publicity damaging the area's reputation for safe tourism.

The tension between the police and the Department caused irrevocable damage in the relationship between both parties that was shrewdly exploited by the women of Banon during their own conflict with the Department. As the vendors at Banon interacted with the tourist police on a daily, face-to-face basis, they prioritized supporting the police and strengthening their relationship with them at the precise time that the Department's influence was waning. Just prior to the police walkout, Chamroeun collected financial donations from all of the vendors and asked her father Kosal to build a sturdy metal shack that could serve as a sort of office for the police, complete with large windows, cooling fans, and a television. As the tourist police previously sat outside on a large root at the base of a tree near the entrance to Banon, the proposal was

enthusiastically received by the officers.[6] Kosal, Vibol and his deputy, and several of the younger women personally built the shack by hand in an act of both physical and symbolic cooperation (see Figure 18). The women also provided free sugar cane juice to the hardworking officers, as well as the occasional piece of fruit and lots of free conversation with a political savvy that might be called sugar cane diplomacy.

When the Khmer New Year celebration ended and the police returned to their positions, the government again began to speak of moving the vendors in order to renovate the base of Banon mountain. But this time, the women of Banon turned to Vibol and his deputy, who the


Figure 18 - The Banon tourist police shack that
Vibol and the vendors helped build

[6] The electricity was tied into Kosal's restaurant, a sign that he was willing to pay for the comfort and entertainment of the police when the Department refused to pay for necessary expenditures like transportation costs.

Director expected to serve as the enforcement arm of his edicts. Instead of obeying orders to muscle the women out of their lots, Vibol openly questioned the Director's intentions. As Chamroeun summarized, "The government said we had to pay them new fees and move and asked the tourist police to enforce their rules. But the police get nothing from these new 'taxes' and were not happy that we were upset, so they asked for specific evidence of how the money would be used to develop tourism at Banon. The Director never responded. He just wanted to take all of the money for himself, and because the police said they wanted proof and could make everything public by talking too much, the Department became quiet."

Vibol later summarized his reasoning for defying the Director to me. "These people [the women vendors] built our police office," he said, "and do all of the cleaning of the garbage. Last year, they paid to install special lights so that tourists would not be injured in the dark. The Department does nothing. These people give everything they have to Banon, but the Department only wants to take from Banon. I felt that the Director wanted to trap these people by moving them and taking the money for himself. I could not understand how that plan would benefit this area or the people of Cambodia, so I asked him to explain. He did not explain, so we did not enforce his rules."

In short, these women were acutely conscious of how to manipulate the gender norms of Cambodian society in order to protect themselves and their businesses. As Chamroeun later admitted,

> "The Director would never listen to a woman. Even twenty women, he would ignore us. But if we are friends with the right man who can argue with him, then we can win. The Director cannot lose to a woman or else he will lose respect and maybe his job, but he can lose to a man if that man is powerful too, like the Chief of Police. We wanted to show the police that we protect Banon, and that means we benefit the tourist police too.

> When the police understood that we benefit them more than [the Department], they could argue with the Director and defeat him without anyone losing respect."

In this way, the women of Banon asserted a type of political and economic authority that they are not always afforded in other arenas of Cambodian life. While the conflict appeared on the surface to be a clash between the all-male tourist police and the Provincial Department of Tourism, the chess pieces were expertly wielded behind the scenes by a cohort of women whose businesses provide the lifeblood for the tourist economy of Phnom Banon. Although tourism does not always provide a public means by which women can act with agency, women can and often do use Battambang's tourist economy to assert their influence outside of the gaze of the very same tourists from whom they derive their authority. Tourism is not the panacea for Cambodian gender inequality, but the increased interaction with a diverse array of international guests will no doubt continue to benefit women as they steer the tourist future of the nation.

**The Death of a Bike Shop**

Chamroeun and her colleagues won the Battle of Banon in part because of their collective efforts. But what of the individual entrepreneur? Starting a tourism business in Battambang is a difficult task for Cambodians regardless of gender because they must combat the powerful colonial legacy of the region as it pertains to international business culture. To demonstrate this struggle I turn to the Eco Bike Tour Company, which was established by twenty-five year old Narith, a former student of mine with whom I reconnected some seven years after I left his school. After his graduation, Narith became a journeyman employed in a variety of businesses. His parents operate a phone shop in Battambang City, and for a time he helped with their

business. After a family tragedy caused the family to desperately seek new income, Narith decided he could better help his family by taking a job on a fishing boat in Thailand. Due to the proximity, working in Thailand is a popular option for Battambang males of Narith's age, but the risks are also high: most men, like Narith, cross the border into Thailand illegally, are paid poorly (by Thai standards) for grueling manual labor in which injuries or even death are common, and are often exploited by their bosses with the threat of exposure to the Thai authorities (2016 "Cambodians Travel").[7] As Narith explained, "I saw people die every day. That work makes you big and strong, and a lot of people drink and do drugs there too. If someone didn't like you, they'd just kick you into the ocean and let you die. It happened almost every day."

After many difficult months being subjected to police harassment and ethnic prejudice, Narith returned to Cambodia because his older brother fell ill and his family needed assistance with their shop. As fate would have it, Narith's brother made an unexpectedly quick recovery, so Narith decided to find another job outside the phone shop in order to have two sources of income for the family. Being a fisherman had changed Narith from the scrawny student I knew into a short but stout figure, very strong in the legs and upper body. Having witnessed the rise in popularity for bicycle tours in Battambang City and believing himself to have the right fitness for the job, Narith applied and was accepted as a bicycle tour guide by the area's leading bike tour company, Soksabike.

---

[7] Another friend who also worked as an illegal fisherman in Thailand was unable to pay his boss's bribes and was kidnapped, turned over to the police, and held until his family paid USD $2,000 for his release. The whole fiasco actually cost his family far more money than he ever made for them. Such is the risk of working in Thailand illegally.

Narith worked for Soksabike for several years and learned the bicycle tour business well, from repairing bicycles to knowing what sites different types of tourists would most enjoy. Still, as much as he relished the exercise and the work, he did not respect the leadership of Soksabike because he felt that Cambodians were being denied leadership roles within the organization. “We had different bosses at Soksabike,” he explained. “Australian, British, American, and one very rude Japanese woman. Every time they needed a new boss, they always hired a foreigner. I often told them that they should teach a Khmer to be the boss, but they never listened to me.” As I quickly learned when I was his teacher, Narith is a prideful young man who dislikes being subservient to the opinions of others, particularly when he cannot assert the masculine dominance he assumes belongs to him due to the gender norms of his society. After a few years, his distaste for being subject to foreign (in this case, female) leadership reached its boiling point. “I fought with my boss one day because she would not listen to me about Khmer culture. She did not respect us, so I quit. I decided to open my own bike tour shop and hire only Khmer people. We must lead the development of our city. If foreigners develop our city, then it is colonization again.”

Narith decided to name his shop Eco Bike Tour because he felt the word “eco” would attract foreign guests, thus showing an awareness of the importance of thematic tourism and branding. “Most tourists in Battambang who want to do a bike tour are foreign, usually not Asian people. Asians will hire a car or bus, but western people like bicycles and exercise. I know that young foreigners believe in sustainability, and ecotourism is important for protecting the environment . So I wanted to use the word “eco” in the shop name so that foreigners would know

that my shop promotes sustainability and protects the environment."[8] He rented a shop on Road 1.5 down the street from Soksabike and paid a former classmate to design a logo for the shop - a green flower slowly unfurling itself.

On a typical bicycle tour with Narith, which I joined on occasion, he focused on the natural environment and traditional ways of living. On his half-day tour (his most popular option), he led guests to a variety of businesses with which he had a convenient prior arrangement: they would receive $1 USD for every tourist on the $12 USD tour in exchange for not servicing other bike tours. His most popular tour was a four and a half hour, twenty five kilometer "fruit and fields" tour that emphasized the environment and skipped the dark tourist site of Wat Samrong Knong, despite directly passing the Well of Shadows (see Chapter 2). The tour began with a visit to a village near Ek Phnom temple that is known for making rice paper. Narith then brought his guests through a dirt path intersecting some rice paddies where they could photograph rice at the various stages of growth. The tour then continued to a family that dries bananas to make banana crisps, and then crossed the Sangkae River to visit a set of wooden huts where rice wine is made. The farthest stop was the 'Battambang Cheese Factory', a fish market where the smelly fermented fish paste known as *prahok* is concocted. The trip then cut near Wat Samrong Knong to a hut where sticky rice is wrapped in wood for a delectable treat. In each place, Narith invited guests inside the village homes to witness the items being made, whether it be the mesmerizing action of rice paper being dampened, rolled thin, and hung between wooden racks to dry, or the sickeningly sweet and sour aroma of treated rice lying in the sun to ferment and become alcoholic. The guests would also receive a sample of each product to

---

[8] He often switched to English when discussing concepts like 'sustainability' and 'ecotourism'.

try and extra to bring home. Photographs were freely allowed, and Narith often took photos with his guests in the hopes of building a social media reputation for himself and his business.

In my experience of participating in his bike tours, I found Narith to be an ideal candidate for this type of profession. Not only is he athletic and an excellent repairman, but he is also genuinely interested in the history of the region and knows how to weave historical detail, folklore, and random facts into a story that is engaging and informative. He also speaks excellent English as well as passable Thai, although the latter language is not (yet) a major tourist language for the region. His then-girlfriend (now wife) has a Master's Degree in business, a rarity for a Battambang woman, and is excellent with numbers and the more administrative aspects of the business. The location of his shop was right in the heart of the heritage district near many popular restaurants and tourist businesses, perfectly placed to maximize his shop's exposure to foot traffic. Finally, Eco Bike Tour also rented either 'city' bicycles for $2 USD per day or mountain bikes for $5 USD per day, both of which were extremely popular with the more environmentally conscious tourists seeking a self-guided experience. Considering the circumstances and the clear tourist demand, his shop seemed like it would be a huge success, and yet it struggled to find a foothold throughout all of 2016.

I spent many afternoons sitting with Narith in his bike shop watching him repair bicycles and strategizing how to promote his business. He was particularly obsessed with crafting the perfect website and increasing his TripAdvisor rating. TripAdvisor.com is an immensely powerful promoter of tourism worldwide, and in Battambang a TripAdvisor rating can make or break a tourist business (see Miguéns et al 2008). Reaching a high enough score with enough positive reviews to earn the TripAdvisor Certificate of Excellence is considered by many locals

working in the tourist industry as the pinnacle of tourist approval, and shops that have earned it often hang their certificates for guests to see. Many shops also place TripAdvisor stickers in their shop windows to reassure foreign guests that they are a quality tourist shop and, therefore, trustworthy. Unfortunately, TripAdvisor plays coy about how exactly they determine who deserves the Certificate aside from three basic requirements: 1) maintain a rating of at least four out of five stars, 2) be listed on TripAdvisor for at least one year, and 3) have a minimum number of reviews (2019 "Frequently"). The exact number of reviews is unspecified, and TripAdvisor claims to use an "algorithm" based on location and number of guests to evaluate the success of a business.

For Narith's bike shop, these tasks were a significant challenge. Firstly, he needed to actually convince his guests to leave him positive TripAdvisor reviews. Some shops around town pander to guests by offering discounts or coupons to anyone who leaves a positive review, and Narith considered doing the same. He could not earn those reviews, however, without establishing a presence on TripAdvisor and thereby satisfying the second requirement. Unfortunately for Narith, TripAdvisor does not accept just any business submitted to them as legitimate, and they are extra careful when scrutinizing Cambodian businesses. On several occasions, Narith and I worked on submitting his shop for TripAdvisor's consideration only to be met with additional, previously unmentioned requirements.

First, they wanted his business email address, but then rejected it because it was located in Cambodia and was from a lesser known Internet Service Provider. They suggested using a trusted email service such as Gmail, but then nearly rejected that account as well because the Cambodian phone number associated with it did not match the submission form's character limit

for inputting numerals. Later, they claimed he needed to prove he was a legitimate business before letting his shop have a page on their website, despite his argument that he needed to appear on their website in order to reach his clientele and properly legitimize his business. They then said he could provide them with a business website to evaluate, but most website hosting companies cost more money than he could raise, having spent his money on retail space (at $120 USD per month) and necessary bicycle equipment. We spent many hours looking at website solutions, which he either rejected as too expensive or too unprofessional.

Narith's struggle to establish a TripAdvisor account is indicative of the paternalistic legacy of colonialism that exists in the international tourism market. For one, TripAdvisor's treatment of Narith demonstrates a certain disdain for non-'westerners' in online tourism. True, people all around the globe, including Cambodia, successfully use TripAdvisor for their businesses, but it was clear that TripAdvisor was far more cautious trusting applications from Cambodian businesspeople than those from elsewhere. I later used TripAdvisor to establish a tourism page on behalf of the bamboo train and had no problems doing so, receiving verified status in a single day, even though that attraction is also located in Battambang. The only noticeable difference was that my contact information is based in the United States of America and was thus instantly verifiable, whereas Narith's Cambodian information was clearly seen as dubious to TripAdvisor. While the situation necessitates a 'your-experience-may-vary'-type disclaimer, Narith certainly felt he was being prevented from promoting his business while the foreigner-run Soksabike down the street did not encounter such issues. In a society where men are supposed to take command of business, Narith struggled with the constant rejection of faceless foreigners who held, for him, an unacceptable amount of power over his life.

To make matters more complicated, Narith lacked confidence in his ability to promote his business. Although he speaks excellent English, like most Cambodian English speakers he is less proficient with writing. He often wrote advertisements which I or his other English-speaking friends would correct. These corrections regularly confused him because he wanted to emphasize certain buzzwords that he knew would attract tourists, such as "ecotour" or "sustainable," but did not trust the variations of those terms when placed in grammatical contexts that changed the spelling or altered the words. He would hesitate when corrected if he did not trust the language of his advertisements, which usually resulted in him eventually throwing out the suggested edits and starting the cycle of frustration all over again. Often, these rejections had as much to do with his displeasure at relying on the advice of others (here, English-speaking foreigners) as it did with his comprehension of the material.

Even when he did approve of an advertisement, Narith struggled with disseminating information about his shop to tourists. Lacking a website and/or a listing on TripAdvisor, foreign guests were prevented from booking his services in advance (an increasingly common practice in the area, and a service Soksabike *does* provide). Beyond those concerns, he also found that advertising his business locally was next to impossible. Although a few small English-language tourist brochures are printed somewhat irregularly to advertise local shops to guests, the cost of even a small ad in these printouts was prohibitive to Narith. Indeed, most advertisements in those publications are for foreign-run businesses, which have the capital to buy ad space and the connections with the English-speaking editors necessary for conducting such affairs. Additionally, Narith felt that the editors of these publications could be manipulative and he did not trust them, stemming from an incident in which the publisher of one of the largest tourist

brochures demanded a percentage of Eco Bike Tour's profits in addition to the ad cost (a staggering $150 USD per month) in return for ad space.

At one point, Narith considered placing flyers in tourist hotels and restaurants, only to be rebuffed numerous times when he approached those businesses. Soksabike already advertises in the most popular of these businesses and most owners did not want to ruffle their feathers. Narith speculated that Soksabike pays them for the right to advertise, thus blocking any competition from doing the same. Without the social and financial capital to spread his message to foreigners online or in print locally, Narith's bike company business crawled forward at an excruciatingly slow pace. On most days, he sat in his bike shop repairing the bicycles waiting for tourists to walk by. A typical day saw maybe three or four people interested in renting bicycles for the afternoon. Maybe two to four times a week he'd lead a half day tour, depending on how many tourists were in town at the time. Occasionally, a huge group would arrive unexpectedly and he'd lead as many as twenty people around, but most days he sat there without any customers at all.

After nearly two years of fighting, Narith gave up his bike shop in early 2017. He returned to his family phone shop and joined his brother as shop co-manager, allowing their father to retire. He makes steady income, enough to finally marry his girlfriend, and recently became a father. However, he laments not being able to make his bike shop a success. To Narith, Soksabike is a perfectly fine business but only if the majority of the employees, especially the administration, are Khmer. He sees their success in the ecotourism industry as a form of colonialism, for although they bring money and reputation to the Battambang region, those resources are also strictly controlled by foreigners who pay themselves much more than their Cambodian employees. Additionally, Narith believes that taking charge of tour businesses allows

Cambodians the opportunity to both learn about their history and teach it to others. As he once presciently asked me: “If only foreigners are teaching about our culture, then how can we know who we are?”

To me, the life and death of Eco Bike Tours is indicative of many facets of the symbolic economy beyond the obvious prejudice. The shop is an excellent summary of the growing demand for ecotourism and environmentally-based thematic tourism, but it is also a story about the difficulty in being an entrepreneur in Cambodia today. Many of Narith’s problems were born from a lack of social influence within the foreigner community, and there are few options for a Cambodian businessperson like him to make headway in those directions without the direct aid of a foreigner. Money, also, is a significant challenge because the hundreds of dollars needed to build websites and advertise can be impossible to raise for many locals. Such financial difficulties have led to a rise in microfinancing options, which Narith openly considered but (wisely) decided against. As geographer W. Nathan Green and anthropologist Jennifer Estes have described about the precarious nature of microfinancing in Cambodia, many of these loans are granted at extremely high interest rates with quick repayment schedules (Green & Estes 2018). Getting involved with microfinancing likely would have cost Narith far more than what his business could have gained. For others in the tourism community, such a path is tempting but no less dangerous.

Soksabike continues to dominate the bicycle tour scene in Battambang City today, although other competitors have been more successful than Narith in establishing themselves. New routes with different itineraries and the need to satisfy the growing crowds of tourists (which are beyond Soksabike’s ability to adequately cover), have helped other bike tour shops

succeed. With the recent birth of his first child, Narith is unlikely to try again with his bike shop. He prefers the steady income of the cell phone business so that he can provide for his growing family. However, he recognizes that if he were not in a position where he needed to protect the interests of others, he would gamble again with the tourism industry. “I can make a lot of money with my phone shop, but nothing compared to what tourist businesses earn. I enjoy tourism and think it is important for my city and my country, and it is also a good way to become powerful. Maybe if I get enough money, I will buy Soksabike and become a powerful man too.”

**An Interview About LGBTQ Tourism**

Considering the sexism present in my previous two examples, I want to conclude this chapter by discussing an issue that demonstrates positive change occurring throughout Battambang over the past decade or so: the establishment of LGBTQ-friendly experiences and social practices. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the art market has allowed LGBTQ artists to express themselves in ways deemed more socially acceptable by a traditionally conservative society, which has in turn softened many judgmental perspectives on these issues. The connection between art and sexuality, while tempting the overgeneralized application of stereotypes, is undeniable in Battambang. Although gender and sexuality are not co-dependent topics, it is worth mentioning here that tourism is opening up new avenues for the expression of non-binary genders. Similarly, the slow development of LGBTQ tourism holds the potential to directly challenge some of Cambodia’s more conservative gender structures in ways desired by many LGBTQ Cambodians.

While I do not wish to downplay the many challenges still facing the LGBTQ community in Battambang, there has certainly been a noticeable change throughout the region regarding the acceptance of such communities. As one twenty-two year old transman from the outskirts of Battambang City told me,

> "Yes, there are many people who believe gay behavior is not appropriate for Khmer culture, but the problem is not so bad anymore.[9] In Battambang, nobody cares too much if you are gay, especially the younger generation. Most of the time, we do not have to fear people knowing who we really are. Cambodians love other Cambodians more than they hate gay people. Maybe most people are just too tired of war to want to fight anymore, even against things they do not like. I do not know the reason why, but now is a good time to be gay in Battambang."

Some restaurants and hotels even purposefully hire primarily LGBTQ staff in order to protect and promote the community, albeit often tacitly, meaning that even a short visit to Battambang City is usually enough for tourists to meet lots of young Cambodians who are not shy about their sexualities or gender identities. However, there is little evidence of LGBTQ Cambodians from elsewhere visiting Battambang regularly as a type of tourism, at least not yet.

On the other hand, the foreign expatriate community of Battambang has long been known to include numerous LGBTQ individuals. In fact, when I first journeyed to Battambang in 2009 when the expatriate community was much smaller than it is today, most expatriates at the time were men, often aged forty or above, with male Khmer partners. Some of those relationships were layovers from the previous era of sex tourism that plagued Cambodia which, in the Battambang region, focused more on foreign men seeking younger male partners instead of young girls. In my first few years in the area, a backlash against such predatory behaviors and

---

9 Appropriate or not, "gay" is often used by Cambodians as a catchall term for all LGBTQ individuals, regardless of sexuality. It is usually pronounced in English to signify such a usage, such as in this case where it applies to more than just homosexuals.

resulting police crackdown drove most of the remaining ‘sexpat’ community out of town, replacing them with NGO workers and families. Today, the expatriate community is much more diverse and includes a broad range of LGBTQ people in positive, consenting relationships.

Still, with such an accepting community, the potential for Battambang to emerge as an LGBTQ tourist destination is something that many residents, local and foreign, acknowledge. While I am unwilling to paint LGBTQ tourism as its own form of theming due to such experiences reflecting deeper identity issues beyond transient imaginaries and desires, themed tourism can still attract LGBTQ tourism if the presented themes appeal to the wider LGBTQ tourist market. In Battambang’s case, LGBTQ tourists are attracted to the same themes that drive the tourism industry at large, so long as there is a public understanding of Battambang as a non-judgmental and safe space for LGBTQ individuals. With such promotion becoming more prominent thanks to social media, Battambang is poised to likely become an LGBTQ destination in the years to come.

To better explore this potential, I visited the Bric-à-Brac Boutique in downtown Battambang City to talk with the proprietors, Robert Carmack and Morrison Polkinghorne. Aside from running one of Battambang’s most successful foreign-oriented businesses, Robert and Morrison are also a loving and respected gay couple who are somewhat seen as counselors for local youth struggling with their own identities. Given their centralized location and social immersion within the art community and foreign businesses around town, Robert and Morrison were willing and able to describe the role LGBTQ tourism plays in the present and possible future of Battambang City.

In their own words, Robert and Morrison did not relocate to Battambang because of what Robert called "the gay thing." Instead, Morrison says, "We agreed to move here for two reasons: First, the incredible colonial architecture, which we love. Second, the support for the arts. Those were big issues for us in coming here. That's what made us decide to stop being tourists and start being residents." In other words, Robert and Morrison's visit to Battambang morphed into a full-time lifestyle specifically because of the thematic opportunities presented by Battambang's artistic past and present, which are not inherently tied to their sexualities. Still, they acknowledged that their business is also an opportunity to provide a positive and accepting space for LGBTQ guests.

> "95% of our clientele are straight couples," Robert says, "but we accept anyone who wants to come. As a gay couple, we know it can be embarrassing and frustrating traveling abroad. We've had hotels refuse us rooms when they discovered we were two men wanting only one bed. Sometimes it can feel like the travel experience is not worth it if you have to constantly defend who you are, so we try to avoid that here by providing a place for anyone to come experience a city that we love. Ultimately, though, we're a gay *owned* business, not strictly a gay business."

Despite the city's growing LGBTQ community, Robert and Morrison are still tentative about Battambang's potential as an LGBTQ tourist destination. "We do not consider Battambang to be a leading gay city in Cambodia," Robert says. "Siem Reap has a much more established gay community and more activities of interest for [foreign] gay tourists. Battambang is not a city to be a tall poppy. To be gay and successful here, you still have to keep your head down." Nevertheless, the potential for a more accepting community is possible, they say. As Morrison joked, "There's something in the water here, though, in that there's a lot of gay men out here. I do think if Cambodian people feel insecure about being gay, it's much easier for them to come

here than somewhere like Phnom Penh. It's a smaller population with a higher number of gay people, for one thing, so it's a more visibly gay place for them to live."

Such an appeal may yet drive the change from the old 'sexpat' tourism of old to a more positive LGBTQ tourist environment. As Robert summarized, "There are two types of LGBT tourist in Cambodia: sex tourists or 'sexpats' which, let's admit it, still exist but are becoming less prominent, and gay tourism that's about gay people feeling safe and comfortable when traveling to a place. In many ways, security and safety are what propels gay tourism nowadays." This sense of safety is the potential edge that Battambang holds over larger cities like Phnom Penh or Siem Reap. The smaller community with less crime and violence, when mixed with highly attractive thematic experiences like art and architecture, means that Battambang could become a prominent LGBTQ destination if the city's reputation for safety becomes more well-known abroad. Robert and Morrison recognize this potential and have advertised their boutique hotel in LGBTQ-oriented travel publications such as the Siem Reap Gay Guide and TravelGayAsia.com. More LGBTQ tourism will be good for everyone, they claim, because it will cause more interaction between gay and straight communities, so long as respect is maintained for Cambodia's more conservative cultural beliefs.

Unfortunately, not all attempts to expand Battambang's LGBTQ appeal have been as successful as the Bric-à-Brac Boutique. In the late 2000s, a same-sex French couple attempted to open a gay bar in Battambang City's downtown district next to some of the region's longest-running and most popular hotels. Raunchy stories about public nudity, drugs, and pedophilia at the bar quickly spread throughout the town's gossip circle. Soon, the police closed the bar citing concern over minors consuming alcohol, despite Cambodia being fairly lax with its alcohol

legislation most of the time. While the veracity of such claims, or of the many bawdy rumors about the bar, are difficult to ascertain in hindsight, many locals believe that the police closed the bar because foreign gay men are still treated with suspicion around Cambodian youth, and thus the truth did not matter in the face of public perception. While such caution is somewhat prudent given that Cambodia has an unfortunate history of child abuse by foreign pedophiles, such accusations can also be applied as unfair punishment towards the LGBTQ community and the foreign-born community at large.

Cambodia employs tourists to combat sex trafficking by posting notices across the country, especially at border entrances, that encourage guests to call special hotlines should they suspect sex trafficking or pedophilia be taking place. These signs are contentious amongst the tourist community, as they have the positive benefit of fighting sex crimes that have long haunted the nation but are also highly visible and thus constantly remind tourists about those same sex crimes, essentially a form of negative marketing. More seriously, such hotlines serve as a means by which residents can attack each other should they so choose. Particularly amongst the foreign immigrant community, people have been known to call in accusations against their competitors or personal rivals. In fact, the director of a local anti-sex trafficking organization once told me that they received so many false phone calls from expatriates accusing other men of misbehavior without providing evidence that the police have begun to threaten false callers with jail time of their own. I have personally witnessed several men be accused of pedophilia by their enemies, including a notable case in which the leader of a Christian mission successfully ran a gay music teacher out of town by spreading rumors that the teacher was abusing his students during their lessons, despite those lessons usually occurring in the heavily frequented public courtyard of a

local school in broad daylight. While several pedophiles and sex criminals are known to still live and operate in Battambang, most accusations of pedophilia are made falsely and in ways that unfairly target the LGBTQ community. Most tourists will never experience such issues directly, although they may inadvertently cause these problems if they misreport interactions they do not fully understand. To their credit, the Cambodian police are actively attempting to stop misplaced rumors. Nonetheless, until the public association of LGBTQ lifestyles with pedophilia is lessened, the potential for LGBTQ tourism cannot be fully realized.

**Tourism's Consequences**

Tourism has consequences, both good and bad. These consequences extend far beyond the financial world and reach into the lives of those participating in the symbolic economy. Many people who live and work in symbolic economies find their own self-identity changing to reflect the attitudes of their business, what I would argue is the most extreme form of Bryman's performative labor. This chapter examined the negotiation of power and identity in an emerging economy in order to demonstrate the range of possibilities that occur when locals actively engage with outsiders through symbolic narrative. In Battambang, this range is marked on the one hand by a colonial legacy of racism, paternalism, and dismissal in the eyes of the 'legitimate' foreign establishment. Locals must likewise fight to establish their own legitimacy in the eyes of those who control the mechanisms that promote international tourism. In a post-colonial situation like Battambang, this struggle can cause local tourism entrepreneurs like Narith to question their position in the hierarchy of power, especially where discrimination is implicitly gendered.

On the other hand, tourism can also provide avenues for local actors to establish agency and exert power in ways considered unacceptable in other spheres of life. Like Chamreoun and her cohort, women often utilize tourism to assert power and create spaces over which they are, arguably, in control even when their direct political power is uncertain. So too can tourism provide space for locals to explore their identity in ways that cannot be easily replicated in more conservative rural settings. LGBTQ tourism in Battambang, while not yet sufficient to claim as its own independent symbolic narrative, will still undoubtedly continue to challenge Cambodian gender and sexuality norms as it grows. To me, as someone who grew up in a tourism-based economy, albeit as a member of the privileged white male majority, these examples show how performative labor transforms people as much as it helps them sustain themselves. Customer service, at its core, is not merely an act of pleasing the guest; so too can it become an internalized value system in which issues of identity are negotiated through the interactions between the guest and the host.

## Conclusion

The symbolic economy of Battambang is comprised of numerous thematic strands that, when combined, demonstrate the kinetic importance of tourism in a developing region. John Hench, one of Walt Disney's closest compatriots who designed many of Disneyland's most famous attractions, once reflected on the importance of movement in tourism (Hench 2008). Disneyland is designed to feature a series of what Hench and his designer colleagues came to call "wienies," named after Walt Disney's inability to resist a good hot dog. In theme park lingo, a wienie is something that attracts guests and pulls them like a visual magnet towards new touristic spaces ripe for exploration. In Battambang, the design concept of the wienie can be applied in metaphorical ways. Regional history, new dark tourist narratives, Indochinese luxury experiences, art and architecture, and even the natural Cambodian environment are all psychological wienies that attract guests to Battambang in ways that other cities struggle to match. These wienies are, in turn, carefully crafted by local peoples who are responding to and reframing tourist desires to serve their own needs.

In this dissertation, I have served as a tour guide of sorts, leading the reader through Battambang's history as it pertains to tourism development and the establishment of post-modern tourism experiences. In Chapter 1, I detailed Battambang's unique regional history in order to show how each era has been turned into a form of thematic experience to attract guests and allow them to explore, all while learning the values promoted by local peoples. I also traced the development of tourism in the region. In its earliest years, Battambang was likely a place of religious pilgrimage and folkloric power. As Battambang became subject to outside influence, the nature of visitation to the region became more complicated. In the time of the *Lōk Mjah*,

trade and travel between Battambang and central Siam encouraged new waves of educational and religious visitation. These influences later inspired artistic movements, literature, and forms of scholarship whose historical legacy continues to attract tourists to the region.

With the French came uncertainty and violence, but also more engagement with foreign visitors. French colonization continues to affect the region's symbolic economy due to the legacy of paternalism between foreigner and Cambodian. Following the ultra-violence of the Khmer Rouge, however, Cambodians resourcefully utilized their existing resources to rebuild their tourism industry. Dark tourism became a means of supplementing income while also giving space for survivors to mourn and heal. These forms of tourism continue to help Cambodians educate foreigners on historical events that are relatively unknown outside of the country. I concluded Chapter 1 by detailing the Battambang of today as a place of rapid development, where tourism has taken route over the past decade in ways that demonstrate the power of symbolic economy.

Chapter 2 turned to the first stage of tourism development across Cambodia in the post-Khmer Rouge era: dark tourism. I argued that dark tourism need not be seen as an invasion of privacy or a type of desecration, but can be a form of healing and education. I further argued that dark tourist sites in Battambang speak to a third phase of the Khmer Rouge that is often overlooked in scholarship: the terrorist years from 1979 to 1998. Battambang's dark tourist sites thus hold the potential to educate people on a period of Cambodian history that is often overlooked.

Dark tourism is giving way, however, to new forms of thematic tourism. As Cambodia no longer needs to rely primarily on the narrative of the Khmer Rouge to assert itself internationally,

locals are reframing their country as a place of wonder and exploration. As I detailed in Chapter 3, these actions are seen most clearly through the Charming City initiative, in which the wildness of the region's past is being de-emphasized in favor of a more utopic portrayal of the city. To demonstrate this charm, locals are now emphasizing the natural environment and luxury experience as primary attractions for tourists. For many foreigners, these themes are steeped in a post-modern, post-colonial form of experience in which guests can enjoy the splendor of Indochina with none of the guilt. For domestic tourists, on the other hand, these themes are no less important, although they are experienced in ways that cater to Cambodian desires - such as with the Battambang Winery, where wealthy Cambodians transform wine from an old French status symbol to a marker of Cambodian prosperity, ingenuity, and refinement. Ecotourism is also on the rise, and the language of cleanliness is often used to criticize the central government all while bolstering the regional tourism industry.

Underlying these changes are the forms of cultural tourism that support Battambang's symbolic economy, which was the focus of Chapter 4. Battambang has long been associated with creativity, and the literature, music, and performance of Battambang's past continue to shape the landscape of the region today through domestic tourism. Likewise, the establishment of an art tourism economy in the late 1990s attracts foreigners seeking authentic Cambodian expression to the region. Although both domestic and foreign tourists engage with art, they do so in wildly different ways that speak to the negotiation between locals and visitors as to what symbols are considered meaningful. In Chapter 4, I argued that art tourism should be understood both in terms of foreign-friendly visual art, but also through the cultural tourism practices that attract domestic tourists to Battambang in search of the nostalgic, paradisiacal city depicted in songs

and poems of old. In this way, I questioned the hegemonic usage of the word "art" in relation to Battambang's tourism industry to argue that "art" existed in the region long before Europeans arrived with their easels and paintbrushes.

Battambang is also reaching into its past in order to develop its future, as locals want to court Thai tourists to the region for their wealth and prestige. In Chapter 5, I discussed the Provincial Department of Tourism's plans to develop the region for Thai tourism as based on the region's shared history with Thailand. While Battambang's history provides the narrative connections that can facilitate such development, the presentation of history must be carefully negotiated. Residents of Battambang desire Thai tourism but wish to maintain control over the historical narrative, and thus they employ strategies to deny Thai influence in the region while still hoping that symbols and locations meaningful to shared regional history will attract future Thai guests. Through the careful presentation of the House of Aphaiwong and aspects of Battambang's religio-cultural landscape, local officials hope to attract wealthy Thai tourists to the city without offending nationalist sensitivities regarding that period of regional history.

Finally, in Chapter 6 I emphasized how tourism is an identity-making process for those who engage in building the symbolic economy outside of the view of tourists. As the symbolic economy continues to grow, women are finding new avenues for exerting agency over themselves and their businesses, as visible in the Battle of Banon. On the other hand, local entrepreneurs like Narith must also navigate the legacy of colonialism in order to engage with the international tourism market, which sometimes challenges concepts of masculinity and power and eventually leads to failure, as with the Eco Bike Shop. Still, tourism is having numerous important effects on Battambang's gendered landscape, and is helping provide space for LGBTQ

to live public lives in ways they could not in years previous. These negotiations will continue into the future, and I would not be surprised to find future Battambang as one of the more socially progressive regions of the country.

So far, Battambang's symbolic economy has been growing rapidly but remains reasonably stable. Nevertheless, the town runs the risk of becoming too popular which can attract unwanted attention from the central government and disrupt administration. Foreigners who have lived in Battambang for years express fears that too much tourism will ruin the charm of the Charming City, and local Cambodians too do not want their city to become crowded like other major cities throughout the nation. To prevent such outcomes, the city must carefully control its thematic appeal. Battambang will never overtake Phnom Penh or Siem Reap for tourism income and does not, in fact, need to do so. Remaining small and exclusive can work to the city's benefit, so long as it retains enough thematic strands to diversify tourism arrivals and provide a higher quality service.

Furthermore, the city's relatively small size is itself indicative of the influence of the symbolic economy. Battambang City could never compete with Phnom Penh in terms of industry, nor could it rival Siem Reap in terms of sheer tourist numbers or attractions. Yet, Battambang's reputation is on the rise even as tourism is beginning to recede in other, larger cities. Some of this success is due to the variation in thematic appeal that Battambang provides to guests. After all, the recession in tourism is largely due to a decrease in Chinese arrivals. With a low dependence on Chinese tourism, Battambang is far less affected by the ebbs and flows of Chinese tourism than is Siem Reap. But we should not discount the reality that Battambang is continuing to succeed in part *because* it is small. Phnom Penh and Siem Reap have been accused

of becoming overcrowded and unpleasantly chaotic, which is hurting tourism. Battambang still maintains its reputation as a charming, authentic Cambodian city away from the noisy crowds. Thus, Battambang City serves as proof that smaller urban sites can effectively utilize the symbolic economy to compete with larger cities for tourist visitation and reputation. Furthermore, smaller cities like Battambang can actually use their size as an advantage against their larger competition if they carefully consider issues of theming and heritage as integral to the narrative-building process.

In summation, this work has presented numerous themes that help build a symbolic economy that helps Battambang assert itself economically and politically. Art, death, nature, adventure, these things are consumable forms of attraction that help the city receive not just income but reputation. This reputation is proving to be of far greater value than money as Battambang becomes more associated with its appealing features. In his work on Disneyization, sociologist Alan Bryman discusses the rare occurrence in which successful theming can itself become a brand (Bryman 2004). In other words, particular types of themed experience can become so well associated with a particular brand that the mere mention of a product stirs the imagination in deeply sensory ways. Bryman offers Disney itself as an example of such synergy, remarking that when you mention Disneyland, people can immediately sense that experience, whether it be the feeling of laughing giddily on the Mad Tea Cups or the taste of pineapple Dole Whip.

This type of synergy is precisely what Battambang aspires to establish, and it is well on its way to achieving that goal (Chan 2017b). The Charming City is more than a moniker; it is becoming a lifestyle due to successful theming, experiential dedifferentiation, merchandizing,

and performative labor. Through Disneyization, Battambang City's symbolic economy is more reliant on not only the mention of specific attractions, but on stirring feelings because of the imagined reality of the city itself. Much like how older Cambodians often become nostalgic at the mere mention of Battambang, tourists of all types are beginning to feel a romantic allure at the thought of visiting the region, thanks largely to the predominant themes I have discussed that operate within it, and which is unlike how they imagine any other region of Cambodia. In short, Battambang may never be able to compete with Phnom Penh or Siem Reap in terms of sheer numbers, but it can compete with many of mainland Southeast Asia's major destinations precisely because Battambang *itself* is now becoming an experiential theme. While such theming relies on the proliferation of the tourist gaze, it is also true that this theming is created by local people who believe Battambang to be a glorious, rebellious place unique to itself. As local residents shape Battambang into what they want it to be through tourism and related activities, we outsiders come to believe in the story they have to tell and increasingly want to become a part of it ourselves.

**Works Cited**

1990. “Khmer Rouge Report Attacking Battambang.” *The New York Times*, January 8. https://www.nytimes.com/1990/01/08/world/khmer-rouge-report-attacking-battambang.html.

2009. “Tourism Statistics Report.” Ministry of Tourism, Kingdom of Cambodia.

2013. “Brahwat Nipon Kong Bunchhoeun/The Biography of Kong Bunchhoeun.” *Borisot Khmer*, May 11.

2014. “Table 6.14 - World Development Indicators: Travel and Tourism.” The World Bank. http://wdi.worldbank.org/table/6.14

2015. “World’s Largest Madison Dance.” Guinness World Records, April 15. https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/largest-madison-dance.

2016. “Angkor Wat continues to lure foreign tourists.” *The Phnom Penh Post*, July 6.

2016. “Anhui Conch joint venture to build US$230m cement plant in Cambodia.” *GlobalCement*, June 17.

2016. “Anut Jun Khmer Amerik Phuk Srahwung Jak Knong Slap/Drunk Khmer-American stabs man to death.” *KohSantepheapMedia*. https://kohsantepheapdaily.com.kh/article/150646.html.

2016. “Cambodian Diaspora Urged to Invest Back Home.” *The Khmer Times*, March 20.

2016. “Cambodia doubles airport capacity with pair of expansions.” *Global Competition Review*, March 17.

2016. “Cambodia, Finland sign aviation pact.” *The Khmer Times*, July 21.

2016. “Cambodia temple earthworks completed.” *Bahá’í World News Service*, March 8.

2016. “Cambodians travel en masse to Thailand in search of jobs.” *Radio Free Asia*, April 26.

2016. “Cambodia’s twin track: casino law, more Chinese tourists.” *GGRAsia*, February 12.

2016. “Thom Klin Mun So La-a Jeñ Pi Knong Monti Tesojaw Khait Battambang/Large Stink from the Battambang Ministry of Tourism.” *Kampuchea Thmey Daily*.

2016. "Tourism Statistics Report - Year 2016." Ministry of Tourism - Statistics and Tourism Information Department, Phnom Penh.

2017. "'A new dawn is breaking': House of Worship inaugurated in Cambodia." *Bahá'í World News Service*, August 31.

2017. "Cambodia: Tourists increase during Phchum Ben festival." *VietnamPlus*, September 22. https://en.vietnamplus.vn/cambodia-tourists-increase-during-phchum-ben-festival/118302.vnp.

2017. "China cashes in on Cambodian Anti-American Sentiment." *Sputnik*, October 15. https://sputniknews.com/asia/201710151058258254-china-benefits-from-antiUS-sentiment/.

2017. "China overtakes Vietnam to become biggest tourist source of Cambodia." *XinhuaNet*, May 16. http://www.xinhuanet.com//english/2017-05/16/c_136288223.htm.

2017. "Exiled from U.S., Cambodian Felons Use American Know-How to Get Ahead." *WXXI News*. https://www.wxxinews.org/post/exiled-us-cambodian-felons-use-american-know-how-get-ahead.

2017. "Inside the studio helping Cambodian artists put their talents to profitable use." August 3.

2017. "International tourism, number of arrivals: Cambodia." The World Bank: Yearbook of Tourism Statistics, World Tourism Organization. http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ST.INT.ARVL?locations=KH&page=6

2017. "International tourism, number of arrivals: Global." The World Bank: Yearbook of Tourism Statistics, World Tourism Organization. http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ST.INT.ARVL?page=6.

2017. "Made in Khmerica: the US-raised Cambodians deported to a foreign home." *The Khmer Times*, August 25. https://www.khmertimeskh.com/79741/made-khmerica-us-raised-cambodians-deported-foreign-home/.

2017. "Myrtle Beach-Conway-North Myrtle Beach, SC-NC." DataUSA. https://datausa.io/profile/geo/myrtle-beach-north-myrtle-beach-conway-sc-metro-area/.

2017. "Spirit and aspirations of a people: reflections of temple's architect." *Bahá'í World News Service*, August 30.

2017. "UNESCO team checkes Battambang." *TTR Weekly*, June 15. https://www.ttrweekly.com/site/2017/06/unesco-team-checks-battambang/.

2018. “A guide to Battambang’s art galleries.” Bric-à-Brac.asia/a-guide-to-battambangs-art-galleries.

2018. “Airports in Cambodia expect 10 million passengers in 2018.” *The Bangkok Post*, December 18. https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/1596450/airports-in-cambodia-expect-10-million-passengers-in-2018.

2018. “Cambodia Airports handles 8.8M passengers, ready for future growth. *The Phnom Penh Post*, April 27. https://www.phnompenhpost.com/supplements-special-reports/cambodia-airports-handles-88m-passengers-ready-future-growth.

2018. “Chinese tourists make up bulk of arrivals.” *The Phnom Penh Post*, October 16. https://www.phnompenhpost.com/business/chinese-tourists-make-bulk-arrivals.

2018. “Industry Research” Myrtle Beach Area Convention & Visitors Bureau, Research & Statistics. https://www.myrtlebeachareacvb.com/industry-research.

2018. “Myrtle Beach Area Tourism Economic Update” Myrtle Beach Area Convention & Visitors Bureau, Research & Statistics. https://www.myrtlebeachareacvb.com/news/myrtle-beach-area-tourism-economic-update.

2018. “Spotlight: Gospel and the art of A/C maintenance.” *The Christian Chronicle*, May 31.

2018. “Tourism Statistics Report.” Ministry of Tourism, Kindgom of Cambodia.

2018. “QuickFacts: Myrtle Beach, South Carolina.” United States Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/myrtlebeachcitysouthcarolina/PST045218.

2019. “Adventist Center of Influence opens in Battambang.” *Adventist News Network*, February 4. https://news.adventist.org/en/all-news/news/go/2019-02-04/adventist-center-of-influence-opens-in-battambang/.

2019. “Art tourism an opportunity for socio-economic growth.” *The Economic Times*, March 4. https://brandequity.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/advertising/art-tourism-an-opportunity-for-socio-economic-growth/68257302.

2019. “Enjoy art, pop culture, and traditions in these five emerging destinations in Southeast Asia.” *Coconuts Bangkok*, September 11. https://coconuts.co/bangkok/lifestyle/enjoy-art-pop-culture-and-traditions-in-these-five-emerging-destinations-in-southeast-asia/.

2019. “FEBC Announces Plans to Beam ‘Good News’ to Cambodia’s Post-Genocide Generation.” *MissionsBox.com*, August 1.

Abbe, Gabrielle. 2014. “Le Développement des Arts au Cambodge à L’Époque Coloniale: George Groslier et L’École des Arts Cambodgiens (1917-1945). *Udaya: Journal of Khmer Studies* 12, pp. 7-39.

Albers, Patricia C. & William R. James. 1983. “Tourism and the Changing Photographic Image of the Great Lakes Indians.” *Annals of Tourism Research* 10, pp. 123-146.

Apostolopoulos, Y., S. Sönmez, & D.J. Timothy. 2001. *Women as producers and consumers of tourism in developing regions*. Westport: Praeger Publications.

Arensen, Lisa J. 2017. “The Dead in the Land: Encounters with Bodies, Bones, and Ghosts in Northwestern Cambodia.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 76 (1), pp. 69-86.

Ashworth, G.J. and J.E. Tunbridge. 2000. *The Tourist-Historic City: Retrospect and Prospect of Managing the Heritage City*. New York: Pergamom.

Askew, Marc. 2008. “Materializing Merit: The symbolic economy of religious monuments and tourist-pilgrimage in contemporary Thailand.” In *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods*. Edited by Pattana Katiarsa. New York: Routledge, pp. 89-119.

Aymonier, Etienne. 1999. *Khmer Heritage in the Old Siamese Provinces of Cambodia*. Bangkok: White Lotus Press.

Baird, Ian G. 2011. “The construction of ‘indigenous peoples’ in Cambodia.” In *Alterities in Asia: reflections on identity and regionalism*. Leong Yew, ed. New York: Routledge, pp. 155-176.

—-. 2016. “Indigeneity in Asia: an emerging but contested concept.” *Asian Ethnicity* 17 (4), pp. 501-505.

Bastian, Adolf. 2005. *A Journey in Cambodia and Cochin-China (1864)*. Bangkok: White Lotus Press.

Baudrillard, Jean. 1981. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Beeton, Sue. 2005. “The Case Study in Tourism Research: a Multi-method Case Study Approach.” In *Tourism Research Methods: Integrating Theory With Practice*. Richie, B.W., P. Burns, and C. Palmer, eds. Cambridge: CABI Publishing, pp. 37-48.

Becker, Elizabeth. 2013. *Overbooked: The Exploding Business of Travel and Tourism*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Bell, Daniel & Avner De-Shalit. 2011. *The Spirit of Cities: Why The Identity of a City Matters In A Global Age*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bennett, Caroline. 2018. "Dark tourism: why atrocity tourism is neither new nor weird." *The Conversation*, November 7. *http://theconversation.com/dark-tourism-why-atrocity-tourism-is-neither-new-nor-weird-106229.*

Berger, Adam M. 2013. *Every Guest Is A Hero: Disney's Theme Parks and the Magic of Mythic Storytelling*. Orlando: BCA Press.

Biljard, Simone. 2011. *Battered Beauties: a research on colonial markets in Cambodia.* Delft: Delft University of Technology.

Bond, George D. 1980. "Theravada Buddhism's Meditations on Death and the Symbolism of Initiatory Death." *History of Religions* 19 (3), pp. 237-258.

Brinkley, Joel. 2011. *Cambodia's Curse: The Modern History of a Troubled Land*. New York: PublicAffairs.

Bryman, Alan. 1999. "The Disneyization of society." *The Editorial Board of The Sociological Review*, pp. 25-47.

Bryman, Alan. 2004. *The Disneyization of Society*. London: SAGE Publications.

Buntheoun, Chhut. 2019. "Food tourism key to boosting national economy: experts." *The Khmer Times*, August 22. https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50635865/food-tourism-key-tboosting-national-economy-experts/.

Caldwell, Melissa M. "Moscow Encounters: Ethnography in a Global Urban Village." In *Urban Life: Readings in the Anthropology of the City*, edited by George Gmelch, Robert V. Kemper, & Walter P. Zenner. 2010, fifth edition. Long Grove: Waveland Press. Pp. 55-71.

Campbell, Joseph. 2008. *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*. Third Edition. Novato: New World Library.

Carmack, Robert, & Morrison Polkinghorn. 2014. *The Burma Cookbook: Recipes from the Land of a Million Pagodas*. Bangkok: River Books Press.

Carruthers, Marissa. 2016. "New law to govern rise of ecotourism in Cambodia." *TTGAsia*, October 3.

—-. 2016b. "Cambodia in prime position for luxury tourism growth." *TTGAsia*, December 13.

—-. 2017. "The dark side of dark tourism." *TTG Asia*.

Chakrya, Khouth Sophak. 2016. "Suspect still at large in fatal Battambang stabbing." *The Phnom Penh Post*, September 5.

—- 2017. "Battambang to get second international border crossing." *The Phnom Penh Post*, September 26. https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/battambang-get-second-international-border-crossing.

Chakrya, Khouth Sophak & Alessandro Marazzi Sassoon. 2016. "Water shortage fears grow amid record heat wave." *The Phnom Penh Post*, April 22.

Chan, Sok. 2016. "Clean Cities for Tourists." *The Khmer Times*, December 14.

—-. 2017. "Cambodia eyes share of Thai tourist market." *The Khmer Times*, June 20. https://www.khmertimeskh.com/8972/cambodia-eyes-share-of-thai-tourist-market/.

—-. 2017b. "Tourism branding 'falls shorts'." *The Khmer Times*, June 22. https://www.khmertimeskh.com/14246/tourism-branding-falls-short/.

—-. 2018. "Cambodia, Nepal to ink aviation deal." *The Khmer Times.*

—-. 2018b. "Occupancy rates soar as national holiday draws closer." *The Khmer Times*, April 12. https://www.khmertimeskh.com/301892/occupancy-rates-soar-as-national-holiday-draws-closer/.

Chandara, Sor. 2016. "Air service agreement inked with Mongolia." *The Phnom Penh Post*, March 5.

Chandara, Sor & Cheng Sokhorng. 2015. "Cambodians filling majority of hotel rooms this New Year's." *The Phnom Penh Post*, December 31.

Chandler, David P. 2008. *A History of Cambodia*. 4th ed. Boulder: Westview Press.

—-. 2008b. "Song at the Edge of the Forest: Perceptions of Order in Three Cambodian Texts." In *At the Edge of the Forest: Essays on Cambodia, History, and Narrative in Honor of David Chandler*. Anne Ruth Hansen & Judy Ledgerwood, eds. Ithaca: Cornell University, pp. 31-46.

Chantha, Lach & Bring Samrang. 2017. "Move over Angkor Wat, tourists flock to other Unesco site in Cambodia." *Stuff*, July 18. *https://www.stuff.co.nz/travel/destinations/asia/94850483/move-over-angkor-wat-tourists-flock-to-other-unesco-site-in-cambodia.*

Chen, Jennifer. 2011. "Battambang: Is Cambodia's Second City on the Verge?" *Travel + Leisure*, November 21. http://www.travelandleisure.com/travel-blog/carry- on/2011/11/21/battambang-is-cambodias-second-city-on-the-verge

Chhoung, Tauch. 1994. *Battambang During the Time of the Lord Governor*. Hin Sithan, Carol Mortland, and Judy Ledgerwood eds. Phnom Penh: Cedoreck.

Connor, Logan. 2016. "Millennials traveling to Southeast Asia for 'authentic' experiences." *Southeast Asia Globe*, August 1.

Connor, Logan. 2019. "'They only go to Chinese shops': why Cambodia's influx of mainland tourists is causing tensions." *South China Morning Post*, January 2. https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/society/article/2180257/they-only-go-chinese-shops-why-cambodias-influx-mainland-tourists.

Cooper, Matthew. "Spatial Discourses and Social Boundaries: Re-imagining the Toronto Waterfront." In *Theorizing the City: The New Urban Anthropology Reader*, edited by Setha M. Low. 1999. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press. Pp. 322-377.

Corey, Pamela. 2014. "The 'First' Cambodian Contemporary Artist." *Udaya: Journal of Khmer Studies* 12, pp. 61-94.

Crane, Brent. 2016. "This Former Gang-Banger is Banging Out Delicious Cubans in Cambodia." *Vice*, September 7.

Crane, Brent. 2016b. "Can 'Dark Tourism' Help Cambodia Heal?" *The New Republic*, September 15.

Crang, Mike. 1996. “Magic Kingdom or a Quixotic Quest For Authenticity?” *Annals of Tourism Research* 23 (2), pp. 415-431.

Dalby, Liza. 2008. *Geisha*. 25th Anniversary Edition. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Decrop, Véronique. 2014. “Actors.” *Udaya: Journal of Khmer Studies* 12, pp. 173-184.

Deluyas, Elyssa. 2016. “Dark Tourism: Why It’s Fine to Visit Disaster Zones on Holiday.” *Travelers Today*, October 12.

Delvert, Jean. 1961. *Le paysan cambodgien*. Volume 10 of Le monde d’outre-mer, passé et présent. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale.

Di Giovine, Michael A. 2008. *The Heritage-scape: UNESCO, World Heritage, and Tourism*. New York: Lexington Books.

Dick, H.W. & P.J. Rimmer. 1998. “Beyond the Third World City: The New Urban Geography of South-east Asia.” *Urban Studies* 35 (12), pp. 2303-2321.

Dykins, Rose. 2014. “Voluntourism – who are you helping?” *The UK Telegraph*, August 14. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/hubs/gapyear/11032507/Gap-years-Voluntourism-who-are-you-helping.html

Ebihara, May Mayko. 1968. "Svay, a Khmer Village in Cambodia." Dissertation: Columbia University.

Edwards, Penny. 2007. *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press.

Enemark, Michelle. 2019. “Killing Caves of Phnom Sampeau.” *AtlasObscura.com.*

—-. 2019b. “Well of Shadows.” AtlasObscura.com.

England, Charlotte. 2016. “Thailand is running out of black clothes after the death of King Bhumibol.” *The Independent*, October 18. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/thailand-king-death-black-clothes-shortage-running-out-bhumibol-adulyadej-a7367811.html.

Erlanger, Steven. 1989. “The Endless War: The Return of the Khmer Rouge.” *The New York Times*, March 5. https://www.nytimes.com/1989/03/05/magazine/the-endless-war-the-return-of-the-khmer-rouge.html.

Fennell, David. 2008. *Ecotourism*. New York: Routledge.

Ferguson, Lucy. 2011. "Promoting gender equality and empowering women? Tourism and the third Millennium Development Goal." *Current Issues in Tourism* 14 (3).

Filfield, Anna. 2018. "This Cambodian city is turning into a Chinese enclave, and not everyone is happy." *SFGate*, March 29. https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/This-Cambodian-city-is-turning-into-a-Chinese-12790148.php.

Fitch Little, Harriet. 2015. "B'bang 'train' approaching the end of the line." *The Phnom Penh Post*, October 24.

Fitch Little, Harriet & Vandy Muong. 2015. "Dark tourism in Anlong Veng." *The Phnom Penh Post*, August 8.

—-. 2015b. "Inside the secret museum." *The Phnom Penh Post*, September 26. https://www.phnompenhpost.com/post-weekend/inside-secret-museum.

Fjellman, Stephen M. 1992. *Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America.* Boulder: Westview Press.

Forestier, Hubert, et al. 2015. "The Hoabinhian from Laang Spean Cave in its stratigraphic, chronological, typo-technological and environmental context (Cambodia, Battambang province). *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 3, pp. 194-206.

Fox, Richard G. 1977. *Urban Anthropology: Cities in their Cultural Settings*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

Franklin, Adrian and Mike Crang. 2001. "The trouble with tourism and travel theory?" *Tourist Studies*. London: Sage Publications, pp. 5-22.

"Frequently Asked Questions About the Certificate of Excellence." TripAdvisor.com. https://www.tripadvisor.com/TripAdvisorInsights/w604.

Gecker, Jocelyn. 2016. "AP Interview: Angelina Jolie returns to Cambodia as director." *The Associated Press*, February 17.

Ghannam, Farha. 2002. *Remaking the Modern: Space, Relocation and the Politics of Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Glover, Ian. 2003. “National and political uses of archaeology in South-East Asia.” *Indonesia and the Malay World* 31, pp. 16-30.

Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City: Doubleday Press.

Gottdiener, Mark. 2001. *The Theming of America: American Dreams, Media Fantasies, and Themed Environments.* Cambridge: Westview Press.

Goux, Jean-Joseph. 1990. *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*. Jennifer Curtiss Gage, trans. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Graburn, Nelson H.H. 1983. “Editor’s Page.” *Annals of Tourism Research* 10, pp. 1-5.

—-. 1983b. “The Anthropology of Tourism.” *Annals of Tourism Research* 10, pp. 9-33.

—-. 1989c. “Tourism: The Sacred Journey.” In *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism*. Valene L. Smith, ed. Phildelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 21-36.

Grant Ross, Helen. 2000. *Battambang, Le Bâton Perdu*. Phnom Penh: 3DGraphics Publishing.

Grazian, David. “The Symbolic Economy of Authenticity in the Chicago Blues Scene.” In *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal, and Virtual*. Edited by Andy Bennett & Richard A. Peterson. 2004. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, Pp. 31-47.

Green, W. Nathan & Jennifer Estes. 2018. “Precarious Debt: Microfinance Subjects and Intergenerational Dependency in Cambodia.” *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography* 51 (1), pp. 129-147.

Guthrie, Elizabeth. 2004. *A Study of the History and Cult of the Buddhist Earth Deity in Mainland Southeast Asia.* Doctoral Dissertation: University of Canterbury.

Handler, Richard. 1988. *Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Hannigan, John. 1998. *Fantasy City: Pleasure and profit in the postmodern metropolis*. London: Routledge.

Hanson, Anne Ruth. 2007. *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia 1860-1930*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Harms, Erik. 2011. *Saigon's Edge: On the Margins of Ho Chi Minh City*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Harrelson, Erin Moriarty. 2015. "Tracking down deaf artists in Battambang." *Fubright National Geographic Stories*, June 17.

Harrison, Julia. 2003. *Being a Tourist: Finding Meaning in Pleasure Travel*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Hauser-Schäublin, Brigitta. 2011. "Preah Vihear: from object of colonial desire to a contested World Heritage Site." In *World Heritage Angkor and Beyond: Circumstances and Implications of UNESCO Listings in Cambodia*. Göttingen Studies in Cultural Property, Volume 2. Unversitätsverlag Göttingen, pp. 33-56.

Hayden, Dolores. 1997. *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.

Hench, John with Peggy Van Pelt. 2008. *Designing Disney: Imagineering and the Art of the Show*. New York: Disney Editions.

Heng, Sophady, et al. 2015. "Laang Spean cave (Battambang province): A tale of occupation in Cambodia from the Late Upper Pleistocene to Holocene." *Quarternary International* 416, pp. 162-176.

Hervey, Harry. 2014. *King Cobra: Mekong Adventures in French Indochina*. Bangkok: DATAsia.

Herzfeld, Michael. 2009. *Evicted from Eternity: The Restructuring of Modern Rome*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hinton, Alexander Laban. 2005. *Why Did They Kill? Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hitchcock, Michael and Nick Stanley. 2010. "Outdoor Ethnographic Museums, Tourism and Nation Building in Southeast Asia." In *Heritage Tourism in Southeast Asia*. Michael Hitchcock, Victor T. King, and Michael Parnwell, eds. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, pp. 72-82.

Hitchcock, Michael, Victor T. King, and Michael Parnwell, eds. 2010. *Heritage Tourism in Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

—-. 2010b. "Heritage Tourism in Southeast Asia." In *Heritage Tourism in Southeast Asia*. Michael Hitchcock, Victor T. King, and Michael Parnwell, eds. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, pp. 1-27.

—-. 2010c. "Heritage Futures." In *Heritage Tourism in Southeast Asia*. Michael Hitchcock, Victor T. King, and Michael Parnwell, eds. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, pp. 264-273.

Hochschild, Arlie. 1983. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hoefinger, Heidi. 2014. *Sex, Love, and Money in Cambodia: professional girlfriends and transactional relationships*. New York: Routledge.

Holston, James. 1990. *The Modernist City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hong, Raksmey. 2019. "Agro-tourirsm takes visitors back to a bygone era in Cambodian history." *The Phnom Penh Post*, April 4. https://www.phnompenhpost.com/travel/agro-tourism-takes-visitors-back-bygone-era-cambodian-history.

—-. 2019b. "The Battambang boutique hotel that has hosted A-list celebrities." *The Phnom Penh Post*, September 18. https://www.phnompenhpost.com/travel/battambang-boutique-hotel-has-hosted-list-celebrities.

Hou, Qiang, ed. 2016. "Cambodia named World Best Tourism Destination for 2016 by European Council on tourism." *Xinhua: Asia & Pacific Edition*, June 16.

Im, Sophea & Seng, Daravuth. 2016. *Wat Saroung Kong*. The Center for Justice and Reconciliation.

Introvigne, Massimo. 2018. "A Letter from Phnom Penh: Why Most Chinese Tourists Do Not Visit the Killing Fields?" *BitterWinter*, October 23. https://bitterwinter.org/a-letter-from-phnom-penh/.

Jacobs, Jane. 1961. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Random House.

Jariyasombat, Peerawat. 2017. “Tracing Prachin Buri’s Khmer influence and history.” *The Bangkok Post*, December 14. *https://www.bangkokpost.com/travel/1378575/tracing-prachin-buris*-khmer-influence-and-history#.WjK235vvVZ8.mailtok.

Johnson, Andrew. 2008. “Troubled Writing: The Rebirth of Khmer Literature.” *Expat Advisory Services*, June 25.

Johnson, Mark. 2010. “Aspiring to the ‘Tourist Gaze’: Selling the Past, Longing for the Future at the World Heritage Site of Hue, Vietnam.” In *Heritage Tourism in Southeast Asia*. Michael Hitchcock, Victor T. King, and Michael Parnwell, eds. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, pp. 173-201.

Joy, Steena. 2016. “Cambodia looking at direct air connectivity with India.” *Express Travel World*, January 21.

“Kamping Puoy - Lake in Battambang.” *LonelyPlanet.com*. Accessed 28 Feb 2019.

Katiarsa, Pattana, ed. 2008. *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods*. New York: Routledge.

Kay, Robert. 2017. “AirAsia adds Sihanoukville to its Cambodia routes.” *The Hawaii Reporter*, August 11.

Kea, Sokvibol, Hua Li, & Linvolak Pich. 2017. “Comparison of Cambodian Rice Production Technical Efficiency at National and Household Levels.” University of Battambang.

Kempadoo, Kamala, ed. 2016. *Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered: New Perspectives on Migration, Sex Work, and Human Rights*. Second Edition. New York: Routledge.

Kemper, Robert V. 1991. “Trends in Urban Anthropology Research: An Analysis of the Journal *Urban Anthropology*.” In *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development*. 20, Pp. 373-384.

Khidhir, Sheith. 2018. “Cambodia’s ambitious tourism plans.” *The ASEAN Post*, December 7. https://theaseanpost.com/article/cambodias-ambitious-tourism-plans.

—-. 2019. “Made in China: Zero-dollar tourists.” *The ASEAN Post*, July 22. https://theaseanpost.com/article/made-china-zero-dollar-tourists.

Khun, Sothal, Socheat Chea, & Samnang Huot. 2016. *Missing Objects from the Wat Po Veal and Battambang Provincial Museums*. Phnom Penh: The National Museum of Cambodia and UNESCO.

Kiernan, Ben. 1996. *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power and Genocide in Cambodia Under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-1979*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

—-. 2004. *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Communism in Cambodia, 1930-1975*. 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Kijewski, Leonie and Kong Meta. 2018. "Peeling back layers of prehistory in Battambang." *The Phnom Penh Post*, March 16.

Kimsay, Buth & George Wright. 2016. "Mixed feelings as Jolie starts filming in B'bang." *The Cambodia Daily*, February 12.

Kimsay, Hor. 2019. "More Cambodians travel for leisure." *The Phnom Penh Post*, February 13. https://www.phnompenhpost.com/business/more-cambodians-travel-leisure.

Leclère, Adhémard. 1914. *Histoire du Cambodge depuis le ler siècle de notre ère, d'après les inscriptions lapidaires, les annales chinoises et annamites et les document européens des six derniers siècles.* Paris: Librairie Paul Geuthner.

Ledgerwood, Judy. 1997. "The Cambodian Tool Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes: National Narrative." *Museum Anthropology* 21 (1), pp. 82-98.

Levine, Peg. 2010. *Love and Dread in Cambodia: Weddings, Births, and Ritual Harm Under the Khmer Rouge*. Singapore: NUS Press.

Lew, Josh. 2017. "Is Cambodia Poised to Become the Next Thailand?" *TravelPulse*, July 25. *https://www.travelpulse.com/news/destinations/is-cambodia-poised-to-become-the-next-thailand.html*.

Li, Tanya. 2016. "Tourists warned NOT to travel to Thailand - as government clamps down on 'entertainment' while the country mourns the King's death." *The Daily Mail*, October 14. *https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3837551/Tourists-warned-not-travel-Thailand-month-government-announces-crackdown-entertainment-mourn-King-Bhumibol-Adulyadej-s-death.html*.

Liao, George. 2018. “Cambodia Airways to operate 2 weekly charter flights between Siem Reap and Taipei from Oct 9.” *Taiwan News*, September 11.

Low, Setha. 1999. *Theorizing the City: The New Urban Anthropology Reader*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Lukas, Scott A., ed. 2007. *The Themed Space: Locating Culture, Nation, and Self*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

—-. 2007b. “The Themed Space: Locating Culture, Nation, and Self.” In *The Themed Space: Locating Culture, Nation, and Self.”* Scott A. Lukas, ed. Lanham: Lexington Books, pp. 1-22.

—-. 2007c. “How the Theme Park Gets Its Power: Lived Theming, Social Control, and the Themed Worker Self.” In *The Themed Space: Locating Culture, Nation, and Self.”* Scott A. Lukas, ed. Lanham: Lexington Books, pp. 183-206.

—-. 2007d. “A Politics of Reverence and Irreverence: Social Discourse on Theming Controversies.” In *The Themed Space: Locating Culture, Nation, and Self.”* Scott A. Lukas, ed. Lanham: Lexington Books, pp. 271-294.

MacCannell, Dean. 1973 Nov. “Staged Authenticity: Arrangements of Social Space in Tourist Settings.” *American Journal of Sociology* 79 (3), pp. 589-603.

—-. 2003. *Empty Meeting Grounds: The Tourist Papers*. New York: Routledge Press.

Manet, Sum. 2017. “Battambang to be next tourist destination.” *The Khmer Times*, January 31. *https://www.khmertimeskh.com/59882/battambang-to-be-next-tourist-destination/*.

—-. 2017b. “The airline helping connect Cambodia to the world.” *The Khmer Times*, July 3.

—-. 2019. “Ministry asks Unesco to speed up registration work.” *The Khmer Times*, April 23. *https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50597083/ministry-asks-unesco-to-speed-up-registration-work/*.

Marston, John A. 2011. *Anthropology and Community in Cambodia: Reflections of the Work of May Ebihara*. Monash Papers on Southeast Asia. Caulfield East, Vic.: Monash University Press.

McCoy, Terrence. 2015. “The country where Valentine’s Day is the most dangerous day of the year.” *The Washington Post*, February 12.

McGee, T. G. 1968. *The Southeast Asian City: A Social Geography of the Primate Cities of Southeast Asia*. London: Bell Press.

—-. 1971. *The Urbanization Process in the Third World: Explorations in Search of a Theory*. London: Bell Press.

McGee, T. G & Ira M. Robinson, eds. 1995. *The Mega-Urban Regions of Southeast Asia*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Meng, Siv. 2017. “Hope grows for three cities to be inducted into UNESCO list.” *The Phnom Penh Post*, April 20. https://www.phnompenhpost.com/post-property/hope-grows-three-cities-be-inducted-unesco-list.

Mertha, Andrew. 2014. *Brothers in Arms: Chinese Aid to the Khmer Rouge, 1975-1979*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Miguéns, J., R. Baggio, & C. Costa. 2008. “Social media and Tourism Destinations: TripAdvisor Case Study.” Advances in Tourism Research, Aveiro, Portugal.

Miura, Keiko. 2010. “World Heritage Sites in Southeast Asia: Angkor and Beyond.” In *Heritage Tourism in Southeast Asia*. Michael Hitchcock, Victor T. King, and Michael Parnwell, eds. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, pp. 103-129.

Moeran, Brian. 1983. “The Language of Japanese Tourism.” *Annals of Tourism Research* 10, pp. 93-108.

Mony, Say. 2019. “Cambodian-American Movie Brings Back Hope, Memories of Pre-Khmer Rouge Era.” *VOA Cambodia*, February 27. https://www.voacambodia.com/a/cambodian-american-movie-brings-back-hope-memories-of-pre-khmer-rouge-era/4806269.html.

Moor, Richard. 2016. “Cambodia’s Tourism Benefits from Chinese and Thai Visitors.” *Tourism Review*, November 21. https://www.tourism-review.com/cambodias-tourism-attracts-more-tourists-from-china-news5198.

Mourer, Cécile and Roland Mourer. 1970. "The Prehistoric Industry of Laang Spean, Province of Battambang, Cambodia." *Archaeology & Physical Anthropology in Oceania*. Vol 5 (2), pp. 128-146.

Muong, Vandy. 2016. "Khmer New Year brings success for Battambang rapper." *The Phnom Penh Post*, April 22.

Muong, Vandy & Harriet Fitch Little. 2016. "The man who painted Cambodian cinema's 'golden age'." *The Phnom Penh Post*, March 18.

Muong, Vandy & Will Jackson. 2016. "Hun Sen and the man who would be king." *The Phnom Penh Post*, January 9. https://www.phnompenhpost.com/post-weekend/hun-sen-and-man-who-would-be-king.

Naren, Kuch & Michelle Vachon. 2015. "Old Made New." *The Cambodia Daily*, June 20.

Narin, Sun. 2017. "Cambodia Seeks UNESCO Listing for Three Cities." *VOA Khmer*, August 2.

—-. 2019. "US, China Face Off Over Legacy in Cambodia." *VOA News*, February 9. https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/us-china-face-over-legacy-cambodia.

Nelson, Roger. 2012. "Prints reveal art of dharma." *The Phnom Penh Post*, April 11.

Ngamsangchaikit, Wanwisa. 2017. "Cambodian airline to study Japanese route." *TTR Weekly*, May 9.

Nhean, Moeun. 2018. "The forgotten legacy of Cambodia's abandoned airports." *The Phnom Penh Post*, April 27. https://www.phnompenhpost.com/supplements-special-reports/forgotten-legacy-cambodias-abandoned-airports.

Nuñez, Jr., Theron A. 1963 Jul. "Tourism, Tradition, and Acculturation: Weekendismo in a Mexican Village." *Ethnology* 2 (3), pp. 347-352.

Ochota, Mary-Ann. 2017. "What's the difference between explorers, anthropologists and tourists?" *The Guardian*, November 23. https://www.theguardian.com/science/2017/nov/23/explorers-anthropologists-tourists-benedict-allen.

Ortner, Sherry B. 2016. "Dark anthropology and its other: theory since the eighties." *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6 (1), pp. 47-73.

Oxford English Dictionary. Online Version. http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us

Palmer Briggs, Lawrence. 1946. “The Treaty of March 23, 1907 Between France and Siam and the Return of Battambang and Angkor to Cambodia.” *Far Eastern Quarterly* 5 (4), pp. 439-454.

Paradis, Thomas W. 2007. “From Downtown to Theme Town: Reinventing America’s Smaller Historic Retail Districts.” In *The Themed Space: Locating Culture, Nation, and Self.”* Scott A. Lukas, ed. Lanham: Lexington Books, pp. 57-74.

Park, Mi kyung. 2000. “Social and Cultural Factors Influencing Tourists’ Souvenir-Purchasing Behavior: A Compartive Study on Japanese ‘Omiyage’ and Korean ‘Sunmul’.” *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing* 9 (1-2), pp. 81-91.

Paviour, Ben. 2016. “Millenia of History Come to Life at Cave Site.” *The Cambodia Daily*, January 13.

—-. 2016b. “Ancient Skull Points to Possible Cannibalism.” *The Cambodia Daily*, April 9.

Phearun, Chhorn, & Janelle Retka. 2017. “Grape Expectations.” *The Cambodia Daily*, August 25. https://english.cambodiadaily.com/features/grape-expectations-134015/.

Pellow, Deborah. “The Architecture of Female Seclusion in West Africa.” In *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*, edited by Setha M. Low & Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga. 2003. Malden: Blackwell Publishing. Pp. 160-183.

Perigois, Jean-Francois. 2018. “In the tradition of Battambang.” *The Khmer Times*, March 2. https://www.khmertimeskh.com/111500/in-the-tradition-of-battambang/.

Pert, Charlotte. 2018. “Inside the cave containing some of the oldest evidence of humankind in Cambodia.” *The Phnom Penh Post*, March 30.

Pfaffenberger, Bryan. 1983. “Serious Pilgrims and Frivolous Tourists: The Chimera of Tourism in the Pilgrimages of Sri Lanka.” *Annals of Tourism Research* 10, pp. 57-74.

Pisei, Hin. 2019. “Direct flights to Indonesia to start.” *The Phnom Penh Post*, January 21. https://www.phnompenhpost.com/business/direct-flights-indonesia-start.

Ponchaud, Francois. 1990. *The Cathedral of the Rice Paddy: 450 Years of History of the Church in Cambodia*. Cambodia: Fayard.

Pottier, C.; Penny, D.; Hendrickson, M.; and Carter, E.A. 2012. “Unearthing an Atlantean myth in Angkor: geoarchaeological investigation of the ‘underwater road’ crossing the Tonle Sap Lake, Cambodia.” *Journal of Archaeological Science 39,* pp. 2604-2611.

Reid, Robert. 2016. “Is ‘Dark Tourism’ OK?” *National Geographic*.

Rethea, Pann. 2018. “Phare Ponleu Selpak wins travel app award.” *The Phnom Penh Post*, June 15. https://www.phnompenhpost.com/around-ngos-post-life/phare-ponleu-selpak-wins-travel-app-award.

Rim, Kin. 2008. *Sophat*. Annotated by Frank Smith. Self-published.

Rodman, Margaret. 2001. *Houses Far From Home: British Colonial Space in the New Hebrides*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press.

Rong, Tuy. 2014. “Battambang is the first clean city in Cambodia.” Battambang Municipality Announcement, March 3.

Rutheiser, Charles. “Making Place in the Nonplace Urban Realm: Notes on the Revitalization of Downtown Atlanta.” In *Theorizing the City: The New Urban Anthropology Reader*, edited by Setha M. Low. 1999. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press. Pp. 317-341.

Said, Edward W. 1979. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.

Salazar, Noel B., & Nelson H.H. Graburn. 2014. *Tourism Imaginaries: Anthropological Approaches*. New York: Berghahn.

Sam, Yang. 1996. “Battambang as a Tributary State: Religion and Society.” Paper presented at the International Conference on Khmer Studies (Aug. 26-30), Phnom Penh.

Sassoon, Alessandro Marazzi. 2016. “Gender divide in schools still wide.” *The Phnom Penh Post*, March 7.

—-. 2017. “Cheanick on the rules of life and art.” *The Phnom Penh Post*, September 29. https://www.phnompenhpost.com/arts-culture/cheanick-rules-life-and-art.

Sassoon, Alessandro Marazzi & Rinith Tasing. 2017. “The flower on the Sangke River: tracing the history of creativity in Battambang.” *The Phnom Penh Post*, November 17. https://www.phnompenhpost.com/lifestyle/flower-sangke-river-tracing-history-creativity-battambang.

Sawe, Benjamin Elisha. 2017. “Biggest Cities in Cambodia.” *WorldAtlas*, April 25.

Scott, Allen J. 2001. “Capitalism, Cities, and the Production of Symbolic Forms.” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 26 (1), pp. 11-23.

Schedneck, Brooke. 2015. *Thailand’s International Meditation Centers: tourism and the global commodification of religious practice*. New York: Routledge.

Sharp, Joanne. 2009. *Geographies of Postcolonialism*. London: SAGE Publications. Shaw, Gareth and Allan M. Williams. 2002. *Critical Issues in Tourism: A Geographical Perspective*. Second edition. Oxford: Blackwell Press.

Shaw, Gareth and Allan M. Williams. 2002. *Critical Issues in Tourism: A Geographical Perspective.* Second edition. Oxford: Blackwell Press.

Siegel, Laure & Tom Vater. 2017. “Circus shows temple tourists another side of Cambodia.” *Nikkei Asian Review*, June 17. https://asia.nikkei.com/Life-Arts/Life/Circus-shows-temple-tourists-another-side-of-Cambodia.

Simone, AbdouMaliq. 2004. *For the City Yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Sinclair, M. Thea, ed. 1997. *Gender, Work, & Tourism*. London: Routledge.

Sineat, Yon & Yesenia Amaro. 2017. “Yingluck Shinawatra escape via Cambodia mere ‘rumour’, officials say.” *The Phnom Penh Post*, August 28. https://*www.phnompenhpost.com/national/yingluck-shinawatra-escape-cambodia-mere-rumour-*officials-say.

Smith, Frank. 2008. “Introduction.” In *Sophat* by Rim Kin. Annotated by Frank Smith. Self-published, pp. i-v.

Smith, Valene L. ed. 1989. *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

—-. 1989b. “Introduction – The Nature of Tourism: A Definition.” In *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism*. Valene L. Smith, ed. Phildelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 1-20.

Sokhorng, Cheng. 2019. “New airport study set for 2019.” *The Phnom Penh Post*, April 23.

Sokhavuth, Tin. 2016. “Library, Statue to Be Built for Writer.” *The Khmer Times*, August 15.

Sokunthea, Hang. 2016. “Visitors to Cambodia Spike After Thai Terror.” *The Cambodia Daily*, August 18.

Sokunthea, Hang & Ben Paviour. 2016. “Travel Industry Downplays Bombing Fallout.” *The Cambodia Daily*, August 15.

Sopheakpanha, Sok. 2016. “Cambodian circus performers want more support.” *Voice of America*, April 28.

Sotheary, Pech. 2016. “Valentine’s Day ‘not for sex’, schools reminded.” *The Phnom Penh Post*, February 11.

Sotheary, Pech. 2019. “Battambang tourism sites to be smoke-free.” *The Khmer Times*, December 16.

Sotheary, Pech & Chea Vannak. 2017. “Unesco visits Battambang in heritage site bid.” *The Khmer Times*, June 13. https://www.khmertimeskh.com/8789/unesco-visits-battambang-in-heritage-site-bid/.

Spiess, Robin. 2019. “How luxury travel can easy damaging effects of overtourism.” *The Southeast Asia Globe*, May 31. https://southeastasiaglobe.com/overtourism-in-cambodia/.

Sreng, Leakhena. 2017. “From Battambang to Canada: Circus Performers Make It Big.” *Voice of America Cambodia*, February 4. https://www.voacambodia.com/a/from-battambang-to-canada-circus-performers-dream-big/3705109.html.

Stock, Kayla. 2018. “The Art of Dying as the Art of Living: Exploring Buddhist Death Meditation as a Path to Human Flourishing.” *Obsculta* 11 (1), pp. 61-74.

Stone, Philip R. 2005. “Dark Tourism Consumption - a call for research.” *e-Review of Tourism Research* 3 (5), pp. 109-117.

Strate, Shane. 2015. *The Lost Territories: Thailand’s History of National Humiliation*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press.

Sullivan, Nicky. 2016. “Galleries get a jolt from Battambang art scene.” *The Phnom Penh Post*, December 2. https://www.phnompenhpost.com/post-weekend/galleries-get-jolt-battambang-art-scene.

Swanepoel, Anton. 2015. *Battambang - 20 Must See Attractions*. Anton Swanepoel Books, Inc.

Takahashi, Yoshitomo. 1988. “Aokigahara-jukai: suicide and amnesia in Mt. Fuji’s black forest.” *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 18 (2), pp. 164-175.

Tambiah, Stanley J. 1973. “The galactic polity in Southeast Asia.” In *Culture, thought, and social action* by Stanley J. Tambiah. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 3-31.

—-. 1975. *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-east Thailand*. Cambridge: *Cambridge University Press.*

Tan, Geoffrey. 2001. *Escape from Battambang: A Personal World War II Experience*. Singapore: ARMOUR Publishing.

Thurot, Jean Maurice and Gaétane Thurot. 1983. *Annals of Tourism Research* 10, pp. 173-189.

Titthara, May. 2016. “Anlong Veng’s Legacy Disappearing.” *The Khmer Times*, June 27.

Trew, Matthew J. 2020. “Buddhists, Bones, and Bats: Thematic Tourism and the Symbolic Economy of Phnom Sampeau, Cambodia*.”* In *Buddhist Tourism in Asia*, Courtney Bruntz & Brooke Schedneck, eds. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press.

Tully, John. 2002. *France on the Mekong: A History of the Protectorate in Cambodia, 1863-1953*. Lanham: University Press of America.

Urry, John and Jonas Larsen. 2011. *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Vachon, Michelle. 2016. “Flying High.” *The Cambodia Daily*, May 21.

Vannak, Chea. 2016. “Cambodian Diaspora urged to invest back home.” *The Khmer Times*, March 20. http://www.khmertimeskh.com/print.php?cur=news&id=22969.

—-. 2017. “Holidays see record tourists.” *The Khmer Times*, April 19. https://www.khmertimeskh.com/14605/holidays-see-record-tourists/.

—-. 2017b. “Cambodia, Israel flight MoU.” *The Khmer Times*, September 5. https://www.khmertimeskh.com/81483/cambodia-israel-flight-mou/.

—-. 2018. “Domestic tourism on the rise.” *The Khmer Times*, May 16. https://www.khmertimeskh.com/490145/domestic-tourism-on-the-rise/.

—-. 2018b. “Unesco-recognition for Cambodian cities still faraway.” *The Khmer Times*, September 7.

Violi, Patrizia. 2012. “Trauma Site Museums and Politics of Memory: Tuol Sleng, Villa Grimaldi and the Bologna Ustica Museum.” *Theory, Culture, Society* 29 (1), pp. 36-75.

Vonow, Britanny. 2017. “Morbid Wanderlust.” *The Sun*, September 26. https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/2303847/dark-tourism-travel-popular-destinations/.

Weitzer, Ronal. 2017. “The Social Construction of Sex Trafficking: Ideology and Institutionalization of a Moral Crusade.” *Politics & Society* 35 (3), pp. 447-475.

Wilson, Audrey. 2016. “Burgers and Cubans in Battambang.” *The Phnom Penh Post*, September 23.

—-. 2016b. “Refreshed art space resets its approach.” *The Phnom Penh Post*, October 7.

Winter, Tim, Peggy Teo, & T.C. Chang. 2009. *Asia on Tour: Exploring the Rise of Asian Tourism*. New York: Routledge.

Wolters, O.W. 1982. *History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspective*. Singapore: ISEAS.

—-. 2002. “North-western Cambodia in the seventh century.” In *Classical Civilisations of South East Asia: An Anthology of Articles Published in* The Bulletin of SOAS. Vladimir Braginsky, ed. London: RoutledgeCurzon, pp. 120-149.

Worden, Nigel. 2010. “National Identity and Heritage Tourism in Melaka.” In *Heritage Tourism in Southeast Asia*. Michael Hitchcock, Victor T. King, and Michael Parnwell, eds. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, pp. 130-146.

Wright, George. 2017. “Angelina Jolie: A Divisive Star.” *The Cambodia Daily*, August 4. https://english.cambodiadaily.com/features/divisive-star-133235/.

Zepp, Ray. 2006. *Around Battambang*. Phnom Penh: Tean Thor Association.

Zucker, Eve Monique. 2011. “Trust and distrust in a highland Khmer community after thirty years of war.” In *Anthropology and Community in Cambodia: Reflections of the Work of May Ebihara*. John Marston, ed. Monash Papers on Southeast Asia. Caulfield East, Vic.: Monash University Press, pp. 79-103.

Zukin, Sharon. 1995, *The Cultures of Cities*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.