

## CHINESE CAMBODIAN FROM WIKIPEDIA, THE FREE ENCYCLOPEDIA

*"The Khmer Rouge reduced the numbers of the sino-cambodian from 430,000 in 1975 to 215,000 in 1979"*

Chinese Cambodians are Cambodian citizens of Chinese descent. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, they were the largest ethnic group in Cambodia; *there were an estimated 425,000. However, by 1984, there were only 61,400 Chinese Cambodians left.* This has been attributed to a combination of warfare, Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese persecution, and emigration.

In 1963, William Willmott, an expert on overseas Chinese communities, estimated that 90% of the Chinese in Cambodia were involved in commerce. Today, an estimated 60% are urban dwellers engaged mainly in commerce, with most of the rural population working as shopkeepers, processors of food products (such as rice, palm sugar, fruit, and fish), and moneylenders. Those in Kampot Province and parts of Kaoh Kong Province cultivate black pepper and fruit (especially rambutans, durians, and coconuts). Additionally, some rural Chinese Cambodians are engaged in salt water fishing.

Most Chinese Cambodian moneylenders wield considerable economic power over the ethnic Khmer peasants through usury. Studies in the 1950s revealed that Chinese shopkeepers in Cambodia would sell to peasants on credit at interest rates of 10-20% a month. This might have been the reason why seventy-five percent of the peasants in Cambodia were in debt in 1952, according to the Australian Colonial Credit Office. There seemed to be little distinction between Chinese and Sino-Khmer (offspring of mixed Chinese and Khmer descent) in the moneylending and shopkeeping enterprises.

The French system of administering the Chinese Cambodian community was terminated in 1958. During the 1960s, Chinese community affairs tended to be handled, at least in Phnom Penh, by the Chinese Hospital Committee, an organization set up to fund and to administer a hospital established earlier for the Chinese community. This committee was the largest association of Chinese merchants in the country, and it was required by the organization's constitution to include on its fifteen-member board six people from the Teochiu dialect group, three from the Cantonese, two from the Hokkien, two from the Hakka, and two from the Hainanese. The hospital board constituted the recognized leadership of Phnom Penh's Chinese community. Local Chinese school boards in the smaller cities and towns often served a similar function.

In 1971 the government authorized the formation of a new body, the Federated Association of Chinese of Cambodia, which was the first organization to embrace all of Cambodia's resident Chinese. According to its statutes, the federation was designed to "aid Chinese nationals in the social, cultural, public health, and medical fields," to administer the property owned jointly by the Chinese community in Phnom Penh and elsewhere, and to promote friendly relations between Cambodians and Chinese. With leadership that could be expected to include the recognized leaders of the national Chinese community, the federation was believed likely to continue the

trend, evident since the early 1960s, to transcend dialect group allegiance in many aspects of its social, political, and economic programs.

Generally, relations between the Chinese and the ethnic Khmer were good. There was some intermarriage, and a sizable proportion of the population in Cambodia was part Sino-Khmer, who were assimilated easily into either the Chinese or the Khmer community. *Willmott assumes that a Sino-Khmer elite dominated commerce in Cambodia from the time of independence well into the era of the Khmer Republic.*

The Khmer Rouge takeover was catastrophic for the Chinese community for several reasons. When the Khmer Rouge took over a town, they immediately disrupted the local market. According to Willmott, this disruption virtually eliminated retail trade "and the traders (almost all Chinese) became indistinguishable from the unpropertied urban classes." The Chinese, in addition to having their livelihood eradicated on the whole, also suffered because of their class. They were mainly well-educated urban merchants, and thus were characteristic of the people whom the Khmer Rouge detested. Chinese refugees have reported that they shared the same brutal treatment as other urban Cambodians under the Khmer Rouge régime and that they were not discriminated against as an ethnic group until after the Vietnamese invasion. Observers believe that the anti-Chinese stance of the Vietnamese government and of its officials in Phnom Penh makes it unlikely that a Chinese community of the same scale as before the Khmer Rouge can resurface in Cambodia in the near future.

## THE CHINESE IN CAMBODIA.

WILLIAM E. WILLMOTT.

Vancouver, Publications Centre, University of British Columbia, 1967. technical notes, 19 tables. \$5.00 (cloth). *Reviewed by* RICHARD J. COUCLIN *University of Virginia*

Cambodia reemerged as an independent nation in 1954, after almost a century of French colonial rule, with the literate world knowing much more about her ancient past than the modern society. French scholars especially had reconstructed in fine detail the ancient Khmer kingdom of Angkor but, with a myopia curious even for colonial research, had all but ignored the present state. If there is a resulting dearth of literature on contemporary Cambodia, there has been almost nothing on Cambodia's important Chinese and Vietnamese minorities.

The publication of Willmott's slim study helps to fill part of the gap in our appreciation of both the Chinese minority and of the Cambodian majority, inasmuch as any minority study always brings the majority into sharper focus. Willmott spent the year 1962/63 in Cambodia, mostly in the capital of Phnom Penh, in research for his doctoral dissertation in social anthropology from the University of London. This book is based on the introductory sections of that dissertation. Being an introduction, it is basic, flat, and synoptic; being part of a dissertation it is occasionally pedantic but also well researched, systematic, and rather grimly thorough. Given the present state of our knowledge, one could scarcely hope for a better or more up-to-date foundation for more complex analyses that should now begin to appear.

The book has six chapters dealing with the demographic features of the Chinese in Cambodia, their ethnic status, economic position, legal status, community social organization, and "emerging and merging elites." These topics are treated

historically, so that taken together they provide a cogent survey of Cambodia's history from precolonial times to the present, with the Chinese as the appropriate point of reference.

There are also two appendices, one on the process of estimating the Chinese population used by Willmott and the other on the 1961 Cambodian census, plus a useful bibliography of studies in French and English on overseas Chinese.

This reviewer found the book's index inadequate; users should be warned not to rely on it completely. Persons familiar with the Chinese in Southeast Asia will find similarities and some refreshing contrasts so far as Cambodia is concerned.

*The Chinese there form less than eight percent of the total population but, as elsewhere in the region, have a dominant position in the nation's economy.* They control almost all internal trade and a substantial portion of manufacturing as well, constituting a kind of "middle class" that provides a vital economic link between the Khmer villager and the outside world.

Such a controlling role in the economy has been enough, in other countries of Southeast Asia, to trigger harsh and often unreasoned hostility on the part of the majority people and the government, but not in Cambodia. Indeed, according to Willmott "*relations between the majority population and the Chinese are probably better than in any other country in Southeast Asia*" (p. 40). The reasons for such positive attitudes, like the reasons elsewhere for extreme hostility, lie outside the Chinese community and in the larger society: the presence of the sizable Vietnamese minority "upon which can be vented much of the antagonisms generated by national and ethnic group feelings"; the nature of French colonial rule, which by oppressing Cambodians and Chinese alike helped to bring them together; and the assimilation record of the Chinese (good) as compared to the Vietnamese (poor), as Cambodians interpret that record.

It seems likely that the present war in Vietnam has further rasped Cambodian-Vietnamese relations and thereby served the interests of the pro-Communist Chinese community, still another irony of our Vietnamese policy that should surprise no one. This reviewer would raise one question about the picture of the Chinese community presented by this study. Willmott believes that the Chinese in Cambodia number some 425,000 persons who exercise a controlling role in Cambodia's trade, manufacturing, and commerce. Yet Willmott's chapter on the social organization of the Chinese community makes no mention of any Chinese Chamber of Commerce, elsewhere the key institution of the overseas Chinese economic and political structure, nor does he mention the existence of any trade associations, labor unions, political associations, or secret societies, which 1216 *American Anthropologist* [70, 1968] one would expect to find, given Chinese economic interests and involvement. If such pivotal organizations are indeed missing from the Cambodian scene, then this fact by itself merits some explanation.

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## CAMBODIA AND CHINA.

There are other factors that make a close Sino-Cambodian relationship possible. The most important, as I will discuss shortly, is the role of Cambodia's ethnic Chinese. Although persecuted by the Khmer Rouge, historically Cambodia's Chinese have been relatively well-integrated members of society. They have miraculously

rebounded from a 20-year period of repression that began with legalized discrimination under Lon Nol from 1970 to 1975, deteriorated into horrific ethnic cleansing under the Khmer Rouge *that reduced their numbers from 430,000 in 1975 to 215,000 in 1979*, and continued as official discrimination under the Vietnamese from 1979 to 1989. They now once again dominate commerce, just as they generally have since the 15th century, when Phnom Penh evolved as Cambodia's capital based on its status as a trading port dominated by Cantonese Chinese.[9] Historically, Cambodia's indigenous Chinese were not rice farmers like most Cambodians, but rather the buyers to whom the farmers sold their surplus, and the merchants who sold everything else of use in an agricultural society. They are once again returning to these functions, and their economic capacity is being multiplied by an influx of Chinese investment, both official and private, that would be the envy of any developing country.

Another factor enabling a Sino-Cambodian relationship is King Sihanouk. Cambodia has enjoyed a unique and special position in Chinese foreign policy since Zhou Enlai befriended Sihanouk at the Bandung Conference in Indonesia in 1955. After diplomatic recognition in 1958, Cambodia became the first noncommunist country to receive official aid from the PRC. The honeymoon continued until 1967 when two facets of Chinese foreign policy collided in Cambodia.

-One, support to communist insurgency, in this case the Khmer Rouge, was clandestine and duplicitous. When armed revolt began in April 1967, Sihanouk at first suspected the North Vietnamese, but within a month he had decided that the Chinese were the real force behind the Khmer Rouges (a name he coined).

-The other facet, a spillover from the Cultural Revolution, was an open anti-Sihanouk leftism promoted by the Chinese Embassy in Phnom Penh that led Sihanouk to almost sever relations in the summer of 1967.[10] That was just a bump in the road, however, because in 1970 China housed Sihanouk when Lon Nol overthrew him, and in 1979 China embraced Sihanouk when he was again forced into exile. Sihanouk maintains a residence in Beijing, and he is careful to ensure that he is always seen as supporting China.

China's support of the cultural revival of Cambodia's Chinese community has focused primarily on the promotion of the Chinese language. In 1970 there were over 200 Chinese schools in Cambodia, serving approximately 150,000 students. The five largest of these schools were in Phnom Penh. They were called public schools because school boards administered them, but tuition was still required. The remainder were purely private institutions. Students at these schools either did not pursue a Cambodian education, or pursued it half-days. *In 1970 Lon Nol ordered all Chinese schools closed because of the perceived role that they played in spreading subversion (an ironic decision given that Lon Nol and his wife were Chinese-Cambodian, and Lon Nol had Taiwanese advisors from 1972 to 1975).*

The Vietnamese who occupied Cambodia from 1979 to 1989 continued the ban on Chinese culture, and it was not until Prime Minister Hun Sen issued a decree in 1990 permitting multilingual education and allowing minorities the right of association that reviving Chinese-language education became possible.[19]