CROSS-CURRENTS
EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

Templates of "Chineseness" and Trajectories of Cambodian Chinese Entrepreneurship in Phnom Penh

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Abstract

In the 1960s, William Willmott described Cambodia as a plural society in which different ethnic groups occupy different places in the economic structure. The Chinese made up the economic class, active in trade and commerce, and formed a definable ethnic community, both socioculturally and politically. Since Willmott's seminal studies, Cambodia's ethnic Chinese have endured the destruction and repression of both private enterprise and Chinese sociocultural life (1970–1990), followed by a revitalization of Chinese business. Through ethnographic case studies, this paper explores the relationship between "Chineseness" and business life in trajectories of Cambodian Chinese entrepreneurship in Phnom Penh. How do entrepreneurs deploy notions of Chinese business? The author argues that Chinese family businesses, trust-based networks, patronage arrangements, and cultural representations have indeed been greatly revitalized over the last few decades, but that they also remain challenged in certain contexts. Moreover, such revitalization has taken a fundamentally different form from Willmott's description. Practices of Chinese business can no longer be ascribed to an ethnic Chinese "community" in Phnom Penh. Rather, as the latter has become increasingly multiform, Chinese business has developed into a template at the deployment (or neglect) of a broader category of Cambodian Chinese entrepreneurs.

Introduction

> "Near the small hill (*phnom* in Khmer) that gives the city its name, the richer inhabitants of Phnom-Penh live in large villas, standing in spacious grounds along quiet, shady streets. Just to the south of the *phnom*, the city takes on a completely different aspect as one moves into the business district. Walking through its streets, even the most casual observer cannot help but be aware that a large part of the city's population is Chinese." (Willmott 1970, 1)

Thus begins William Willmott's seminal study on Cambodia's ethnic Chinese in the early 1960s. Willmott continues to describe the business district that is rendered as Quartier Chinois on

colonial city maps: names of shops are displayed in Chinese, schoolchildren learn Mandarin, people sell and read Chinese novels or newspapers, and various Chinese dialects are spoken (Willmott 1970, 1). What has changed in Phnom Penh since Willmott's field study? Is Chinese enterprise and cultural life still as prevalent there as it was in the 1960s?

Wandering around the bustling business district fifty years later, I find that Willmott's description still holds, to a large extent. The district is still largely composed of shophouses in which Cambodian Chinese[1] entrepreneurs run small family businesses in retail or mechanics, names of businesses are often displayed in both Khmer and Chinese, inside the shops Chinese shrines honor ancestors or assure good luck in business, and children still learn Mandarin at the famous Duanhua School. The most tangible difference is that today fewer people speak Chinese or read Chinese newspapers.

But there is another, less tangible, difference. This becomes apparent when a *tuk-tuk* driver starts talking to me. He tells me that he studied at university for two years but had to quit his studies for financial reasons. He has been a *tuk-tuk* driver for several years now. Ethnicity is one of his favorite topics of conversation, and after he expresses his opinions about the Thai and Vietnamese presence in Cambodia, I ask him how he feels about his country's ethnic Chinese population. This is what he says:

> The Khmer-Chen, they are more Cambodian than Chinese already. But they are serious people. They never relax; they do business the whole day. It is good to have a Khmer-Chen in your family; these families are not poor like mine. Maybe if someone in my family had married a Khmer-Chen then I would have been able to finish my study. [*tuk-tuk* driver]

I then ask him whether he could drive me around Phnom Penh's Chinese district, but he claims the city does not have a Chinatown. He acknowledges that most businesses are run by Cambodian Chinese, but he says that simply makes it a Cambodian business area, not a Chinatown. "Most people in Phnom Penh are Cambodian Chinese anyway," he adds.

Willmott described Cambodia as a plural society in which one's place in the economic structure depends on one's ethnic background (1967, 9). Within this plural society the Chinese "not only form a distinct ethnic community, they also form, by and large, an economic class: the commercial middle class" (1967, 94). In relation to Willmott's notion of plural society, the

anecdote of the *tuk-tuk* driver above indicates two things: first, the label "Chinese" has become problematic, as there is no longer an ethnic "community," and second, notions of Chinese business success are highly conspicuous in contemporary Cambodian society.

This particular view of Chinese business in Phnom Penh is rooted in the history of Cambodia's ethnic Chinese. Chinese business and sociocultural life have been an integral part of Cambodian society for centuries (Willmott 1998, 144). During the precolonial kingdoms, the Chinese dominated trade and commerce, often maintaining patron-client relationships with the monarchy. The French protectorate (1863–1953) and the subsequent rule of King Sihanouk (1953–1970) saw the delineation and repression of Chinese business and identity as nationalism emerged and the Chinese were perceived as threatening to Cambodian sovereignty. During the various regimes between 1970 and 1990, Chinese enterprise and cultural expression was completely uprooted, and many ethnic Chinese died or fled the country. Things started to improve in the early 1990s, when Chinese education and language were reestablished and private enterprise became the dominant mode of economic endeavor. After two harsh decades of repression and outright destruction, the discourses and practices of ethnic Chinese business seemed to be reemerging, in parallel with the rise of a capitalist, globalizing economy. In this paper, I examine how this resurgence of ethnic Chinese business relates to Willmott's notion of plural society. Can Cambodia still be described as a plural society? And have Phnom Penh's ethnic Chinese—despite two decades of forced assimilation, refuge abroad, and the uprooting of business networks—reclaimed their former status as the economic middle and upper class?

Whereas little has been written on ethnic Chinese entrepreneurship in Cambodia specifically, there is an extensive debate on ethnic Chinese business in Southeast Asia and beyond (Redding 1990; Fukuyama 1995; Ong and Nonini 1997; Yeung 2004; Hamilton 2006; Dahles 2010). Although it is outside the scope of this paper to compare the Cambodian case to that of other Southeast Asian countries, the regional debate does provide valuable context by distinguishing characteristics that are ascribed to the "Chinese way" of doing business. Academics have pointed toward a particular "Chinese capitalism" to make sense of ethnic Chinese business acumen and success in Southeast Asia. Redding (1990, 184), for example, argued that Chinese businesses have their roots in a Confucian cultural tradition based on paternalism, personalism, and defensiveness, and that by means of family ties and *guanxi*

networks—built on reciprocal social relationships and informal trust—Chinese entrepreneurs are able to expand their economic might and escape state disciplining. Moreover, such family and ethnic loyalties supposedly accommodate transnational networks among various Southeast Asian and mainland Chinese business communities (Fukuyama 1995, 92). Other scholars have fiercely repugned such culturalist readings of a presumed fixed ethnic culture that propels entrepreneurial behavior, questioning the predominance of the family business model, trust-based ethnic networks, and the Confucian culture that supposedly underpins these relationships (Kwok Kian Woon 1998; Gomez and Hsin-Huang Hsiao 2001; Gomez and Benton 2004; Tong Chee Kiong 2005; Can-Seng Ooi and Koning 2007).

A middle ground between these opposing arguments is found by acknowledging the dynamic nature of ethnic Chinese business culture. Characteristics like personalism, informality, family business, patronage arrangements, and trust-based networking are features that may be rooted in Chinese cultural values but have evolved and adapted to the Southeast Asian context (Yeung 2004; Hamilton 2006; Dahles 2010). In other words, ethnic Chinese entrepreneurship is dually embedded in historically developed practices of Chinese business organization, on the one hand, and in the Cambodian sociopolitical and economic context, on the other. As such, practices and discourses of ethnic Chinese business can only be understood as historically developing within the specific environment of Cambodia and are thus constantly in flux. As the empirical cases below illustrate, the (dis)articulation of "Chineseness" in business life by individual entrepreneurs is indeed highly intertwined with the rapidly changing societal context.

The findings presented in this paper stem from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, between October 2010 and December 2011. During this period, I interviewed some thirty Cambodian Chinese entrepreneurs. Additional empirical material includes observations, textual documents, and interviews with company staff and representatives from government, research institutes, and business associations. The Cambodian Chinese entrepreneurs are largely of Teochiu background and are from families that have been in Cambodia for two, three, or sometimes four generations. I selected and approached interviewees through a combination of snowball sampling and purposive sampling; I found interview candidates through previous interviewees and acquaintances in Phnom Penh, but at the same time made attempts to develop a sufficiently diverse group of interviewees in terms of business

size, sector, age, and gender. My interviews focused on the entrepreneurs' Chinese background, personal and family history, and business biography; the structure of their company; and their business activities and networks. In this paper, I draw on a small selection of these interviews and offer three case studies that illustrate a variety of business and family histories and illuminate the ways in which entrepreneurs reflect on the relevance of their Chinese background in business endeavors. Rather than attempting to generalize about ethnic Chinese and their businesses in Phnom Penh, I show how divergent social and business experiences are all rooted in the historical and contemporary experiences of Cambodia's ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs.

My discussion opens with a brief history of Cambodian Chinese business and identity. This is followed by three empirical case studies, each sketching the biography of an entrepreneur's personal and business background, highlighting the "Chinese elements" within these biographies. Subsequently, I review how Chinese business is (dis)articulated by my interviewees, how such articulations can be positioned in socioeconomic developments in Phnom Penh, and what has happened to plural society.

Figure 1. Dancing squad belonging to a Chinese school leaving a company that has just been blessed during Chinese New Year. Photo taken by the author.



Historical Context: The Rise, Repression, and Revitalization of Ethnic Chinese Business

In this section, I provide the context within which expressions of "Chineseness" in business life must be understood. We can discern three broad periods that characterize the shifting position of Chinese business and identity in Cambodian society.

Migration and Delineation, Pre-1970

In the fifteenth century, migrants from southern China started settling in Cambodia. As Khmer society became involved in regional and world trade, a symbiosis arose between Chinese traders and merchants and the mainly agrarian Khmer (Willmott 1967). Southeast Asian monarchs preferred the Chinese, who had extensive networks and did not pose a political threat, over natives to arrange maritime trade (Kuhn 2008, 10). In 1863, the French rendered Cambodia a "protectorate" and, motivated by a need for cheap labor and economic middlemen, stimulated mass emigration from southern China (Edwards 2009, 181–182). While the French enjoyed "a romantic obsession and a paternalistic relationship with the majority Khmer," they perceived the Chinese as "little more than a necessary evil whose thrift and industry would oil the wheels of colonial capital" (Edwards 2009, 181–182). The French organized surveillance and revenue collection by means of Chinese *congrégations* that represented each of the five dialect groups—Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochiu, Hainanese, and Hakka. Willmott (1998, 145) outlines how these dialect associations formed the cornerstones for business relationships, occupational specialization, marriage arrangements, and cultural expression. A 1935 law decreed that a Chinese migrant could only become a legal subject in French Indochina once he or she was accepted in one of the subethnic *congrégations*, the president of which was responsible for its members' moral conduct (Barrett 2012, 25). The boundaries between Khmer, Vietnamese, French, and Chinese were further perpetuated by assigning each a different quarter in Phnom Penh, in order to create "racially segregated milieux within which each of these groups could thrive uncontaminated by the degenerative influences of other groups" (Edwards 2007, 55–56). Fearing the alliance between Chinese business and the Khmer monarchy, the French banned the Chinese from landownership (i.e., farming) and certain occupations (Willmott 1967, 72), thereby steering the urban Chinese toward the tertiary sector. The majority of the Chinese in Phnom Penh

at this time were not particularly wealthy, and they managed to survive as small boutique owners, porters, or tailors (Muller 2006, 52). Others served as contractors for the king as well as for the French in areas such as construction and trade (Muller 2006, 52). Particularly profitable was revenue farming; the government granted monopolies for the gambling industry, the opium trade, or large-scale fishing to Chinese businessmen against an annual fee (Muller 2006; Cooke 2011).

It appears that the French period laid the groundwork for the eventual ethnic divide. The rise of pan-Chinese nationalism in Cambodia, as opposed to the sway of dialect and hometown compatriotism (Kuhn 2008, 29–30), can be seen as another emblem of this divide. In the capital, Phnom Penh, Chinese students learned Mandarin instead of Khmer, Communist propaganda spread through Chinese schools, and Chinese newspapers were established (Edwards 2009, 197–199). As a result, it appears that "Chineseness" became more clearly delineated from "Khmerness" toward the end of the colonial period.

Although large numbers of Chinese had entered Cambodia since the 1920s, Chinese immigration ceased after Cambodian independence in 1953 (Willmott 1967, 15). King Sihanouk installed a naturalization law that made it possible for the Chinese to "become Cambodian" if they stayed in the country for five years, showed proficiency in Khmer morale and language, and paid a substantial amount of money (Willmott 1967, 80–81). Still, in the words of Gottesman, Chinese domination in the economic sphere "presented a near impenetrable wall" (2003, 19). The ethnic Chinese community formed the economic middle class in Cambodia; in Willmott's calculation, over 80 percent of Chinese worked in the commercial sector (1967, 63–64). However, the community became more multiform as the *congrégation* system collapsed and was replaced by an interlocked spectrum of voluntary organizations, representing varying interests and loyalties (Willmott 1967, 90–91). Younger Cambodian-born Chinese spoke both Mandarin and Khmer and, Willmott suggests, were split between Cambodian and Chinese nationalism (1998, 146). In retrospect, the Sihanouk era, despite attempts to remain neutral and steer clear of Cold War pressures, saw the development of an ethnocentric Khmer imaginary that alienated both the Chinese and the Vietnamese. King Sihanouk feared the influence of the Sino-Khmer commercial elite and attempted to nationalize Chinese-controlled commerce and banking (Gottesman 2003, 171; Slocomb 2003, 12–13), thereby eliciting ever-increasing bribes from

Chinese businessmen to get carte blanche from the king's officials (Gottesman 2003, 20–21; Osborne 2004, 112–126).

Destruction and Concealment, 1970–1990

As Cambodia was drawn into the Cold War with devastating effects, and General Lon Nol overthrew Sihanouk in 1970, a right-wing government was installed that cut ties with China and allied itself with the United States and South Vietnam. During this time, fears of ethnic Chinese loyalty toward China were stoked. Chinese schools and newspapers were closed, shops were set on fire, and merchants were killed. In addition, the Chinese had to carry identity cards and pay special taxes (Willmott 1998, 147). According to Edwards, Lon Nol blamed the Chinese and Vietnamese for spreading Communist propaganda and destroying Khmer morale and traditions, thereby forcing Chinese culture and language into secrecy (2007, 252; 2009, 200–201). These ethnic groups were no longer seen as part of the Khmer racial imaginary.

During Lon Nol's reign (1970–1975), the Communist Khmer Rouge gained strength in western Cambodia. While the Khmer Rouge hardly distressed the ethnic Chinese in these "liberated zones" from 1970 to 1973, the situation deteriorated in 1974 when forced assimilation began and the Khmer Rouge started to portray the Chinese as capitalists opposed to the Communist revolution (Edwards 2009, 202). The Khmer Rouge grew stronger and eventually overtook Phnom Penh in April 1975. Ethnic Chinese were forced to "become Khmer" in terms of housing, dress, language, and food (Edwards 2009, 203). The worst persecution occurred in the two years before the Vietnamese invasion, when paranoia swept through Pol Pot's regime. According to Kiernan (1986), half of the ethnic Chinese population in Cambodia died during the regime, a strikingly high death rate relative to that of Cambodia's total population, of whom, Chandler (1991, 1) estimates, one out of eight perished. In addition, many ethnic Chinese fled the country before and after the Khmer Rouge, and through Thai border camps ended up in Europe, Australia, or North America (Ong 2003; Wijers 2011).

In December 1978, the Vietnamese army invaded Cambodia, founded the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), and stayed for a decade. A government was installed, made up of Cambodians who had fled to Vietnam during the Khmer Rouge, among them Hun Sen, Cambodia's strongman since 1985 and its current prime minister. According to Gottesman, the

Vietnamese deemed the Chinese poisonous imperialists whose commercial culture needed to be confined (2003, 170–172). Nevertheless, private (ethnic Chinese) businesses flourished and state-led enterprises failed to take root. Connecting with ethnic Chinese traders on the Thai side of the border, Cambodian Chinese merchants had started to engage in petty trade in goods from Thailand and dominated the business scene in the early 1980s (Widyono 2008, 199; Slocomb 2010, 214). The frustrated PRK elite planned (unsuccessfully) to construct a state-run urban economy, cripple Chinese business, and even evacuate the Chinese from Phnom Penh (Gottesman 2003, 176–182). The hallmark of PRK policy toward the ethnic Chinese, and the PRK's intended license for repression, was "Circular 351," which instructed state officials to investigate the lives of the Chinese, including their ties with China and their language abilities (Gottesman 2003, 183). Targeted Chinese withheld information, bribed cadres, and anxiously hid Chinese cultural symbols to avoid discrimination in business or, worse, deportation (Edwards 2009, 207–210). Gottesman (2003, 186) posits that, in the mid-1980s, Marxist-Leninist ideology served only the party elite's imagination, while the actual economy depended on private Chinese enterprises. Circular 351 ultimately failed, as both ethnic Chinese and Khmer resisted the policies, being fed up with Communism and knowing that commerce, rather than the state, feeds the people (Gottesman 2003, 187).

As the Cold War drew to a close, the United Nations came to Cambodia, and after the transitional period that led to the 1993 elections, tensions withered away. The Vietnamese withdrew, the relationship with China improved, festivals and religion were allowed once again, and King Sihanouk returned. Chinese schools in Phnom Penh reopened, and Chinese New Year was celebrated again starting in 1991 (Willmott 1998, 148).

Revival and Ambiguity, Post-1990

The past twenty years have witnessed a rebirth of Chinese cultural expression and business in Cambodia. Regional trade networks were restored, and small- and medium-sized businesses have flourished (Slocomb 2010, 297). People who had fled abroad started to return and set up firms, ties between China and Cambodia improved greatly, and a Cambodian Chinese business elite reemerged. At the same time, boundaries between ethnic Khmer and Chinese and between different Chinese dialect groups have become blurred. More ethnic Chinese speak

Khmer than before 1970, and Khmer learn Mandarin, since it is increasingly the language of business in Cambodia and beyond (Edwards 2009, 212). However, Edwards holds that the economic specializations of the dialect groups have largely remained the same (2009, 215).

As the Cambodian economy has been rebuilt from the ground since 1990, led by Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party (CPP), Cambodia is making the transition from Communism to (market-driven as well as state-controlled) capitalism, and from isolation to regional and global economic integration. Also, a "narrow pact between business and political elites" has emerged through which businesspeople are given protection and certain monopoly rights in exchange for loyalty and support for the CPP political elite (Hughes and Un 2011, 17–18).

Prominent Chinese families have reappeared as the driving force of the economy, many of them having relatives in government and in the Cambodian Chamber of Commerce, which is largely made up of ethnic Chinese (Gilley 1998). Because the ethnic Chinese in Cambodia have followed various paths of migration over the decades, entrepreneurial networks and resources span across the region and even the globe. Furthermore, the opening up of China to the world economy has induced the resurrection of ties between the ethnic Chinese in Cambodia and their "motherland." Due to Hun Sen's pragmatic, capitalist-oriented view of rebuilding the country, as well as Cambodia's lack of an indigenous private sector, foreign investment is encouraged. China is the major patron, having invested $8.8 billion from 1994 to July 2011 (People's Daily Online 2011), and along with Chinese investments and business delegations comes the promotion of Chinese culture and language in Cambodia (Marks 2000).

Based on his study in the 1960s, Willmott estimated the number of Chinese in Phnom Penh at 135,000, or 33.5 percent of the population (1967, 16). Today, however, bounding the category "Chinese" has become a dubious undertaking for various reasons. First, identification with "Chineseness" is far from self-evident given different paths of migration, including centuries of emigration from different provinces of southern China to Cambodia, emigration from Cambodia to other parts of Southeast Asia and the West around the Khmer Rouge period, and remigration in recent decades. Second, generational differences pose another complication, with differences in Chinese and Khmer language abilities and patterns of (inter)marriage. Lastly, notions of "Chineseness" must also be seen in interaction with the Cambodian national imaginary, embodied in the notion of "Khmerness." Cambodia has historically been squeezed in

between its two powerful neighbors, Thailand and Vietnam, and this has spurred rhetoric on Khmer national power and purity (Hughes 2004, 199–201). The Chinese currently figure less as "others" in these nationalist accounts, although Edwards notes that Khmer in Phnom Penh distrust the Chinese because they dominate the Cambodian economy, and that therefore the ethnic Chinese steer clear of politics (2009, 220–221). In any case, for reasons like these, the category of "ethnic Chinese in Cambodia" is both hybrid and flexible.

Reviewing the three broad periods of the rise, repression, and revitalization of "Chineseness" in Phnom Penh, Filippi (2010, 6) concludes that the history of the Chinese in Cambodia can be compared to "the swing of the pendulum." He argues that the position of the Cambodian state toward the ethnic Chinese moved from a laissez-faire attitude in the precolonial period, to various forms of repression and destruction until the end of Vietnamese rule, and back to a reassertion of Cambodian Chinese life over the last two decades: "the loop appears to be looped and, as if a 130-year history (1863–1993) had been put a parenthesis, it appears that we covered the whole cycle to be back to the period preceding the French protectorate... Cambodian Chinese life reasserts itself" (Filippi 2010, 7).

This turbulent history provides the context within which expressions of "Chineseness" by entrepreneurs must be seen. Importantly, the pendulum mentioned above always runs the risk of swinging the other way once again, and thus the reemergence of Cambodian Chinese life should not be perceived as conclusive. If anything, the history of the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia has proven that the relative absence of ethnic tensions is a fragile societal construct that may be challenged in politically uncertain or volatile times. Ethnic relations within society are not merely a matter of self-presentation but also of representation on the part of ethnic "others" and especially the state. As Yao Souchou warns, the "Chinese subject eventually has to face something like communal acceptance which, harsh and unreasonable [as] it often is, is not so easily dismissed" (2009, 255). That being said, within the current sociopolitical state of affairs in Cambodia it seems unlikely that societal discourse will turn against the ethnic Chinese. Rather, the pressing question at hand is how, over the last two to three decades, expressions of "Chineseness" in business life have resurfaced. The cases on Cambodian Chinese entrepreneurship that are elaborated in the following section aim to answer this question. I explore how in Phnom Penh the relationship between "Chineseness" and business life is

currently (dis)articulated by Cambodian Chinese entrepreneurs, and how such (dis)articulation can be interpreted in light of personal and family trajectories.

Figure 2. The Chinese tradition of burning paper money in Phnom Penh. Photo taken by the author.



Cases: Trajectories of Cambodian Chinese Entrepreneurship in Phnom Penh

I describe three cases to illustrate the diversity of Chinese business in Phnom Penh, attempting to position each case in its proper context. I explore how my interviewees' entrepreneurial trajectories have developed in congruence with their personal and family histories. Finally, I tease out the "Chinese elements" within these business histories, reflecting on practices of entrepreneurship and on what the interviewees themselves have to say about the relevance of their Chinese background in business life.

Case One: Madam Heng

Madam Heng[2] is one of Cambodia's most well-connected businesswomen. She owns and manages businesses in a wide range of sectors, from import-export to tourism to industrial development. Madam Heng was born in the 1960s in Sihanoukville Province, and she was a

teenager when the Khmer Rouge took over. Her family was split up, and she was put in a labor camp in the mountains near Kampot with other children. She was one of the few in the camp who survived. When finally the Vietnamese had chased out the Khmer Rouge, she found out that her father and two siblings had died. She reunited with her mother, sister, and younger brother, and they started growing rice, which they used to brew white wine. "The Vietnamese fought Pol Pot very successfully, so in the evening, they all had a party with our wine," Madam Heng recalls.

Because there were no men in Madam Heng's family, her mother married her to a man from the region. At first, Madam Heng stayed at home selling noodles while her husband worked as a fisherman, but a more promising opportunity soon arose. Large ships started coming in from Singapore, selling electronics, liquor, and cigarettes on Koh Rung Island, some twenty kilometers offshore. The large ships belonged to a Cambodian Chinese businessman who went to France during the war, and to Singapore afterward. Cambodians with small boats, like Madam Heng's husband, bought the goods on the island, which they would in turn bring to the Cambodian shore to sell. "At first, we could only buy a little," Madam Heng remembers. "But this businessman [man] saw we were trustworthy people, so he would give us the merchandise in advance, and we would pay him back later when we had sold it to middlemen from Phnom Penh who came to the coast." Madam Heng decided to stop selling noodles and move to Koh Rung Island. She stayed on the island for five years.

> At that time, the ships from Singapore could not come to the Cambodian coast directly. It wasn't safe because there was Vietnamese and Cambodian military and no government structure, so they came to the island. Every night my group of men would take small boats and go to Sihanoukville to sell the products. My name was very well known on the island; people helped me and I would cook rice for everybody in the evenings. [Madam Heng]

Around 1987 the political situation stabilized and the ships from Singapore were able to reach the Cambodian coast directly, so Madam Heng moved back to the mainland. She opened a warehouse in Phnom Penh and became a wholesaler. She teamed up with the Cambodian Chinese from Singapore to distribute alcoholic drinks, and in 1996 they became the sole distributor for some large international brands. While the import business was profitable, Madam Heng diversified, and she has since moved into real estate development and the tourism sector.

She also went to Japan with a delegation of the Ministry of Commerce and teamed up with a Japanese entrepreneur to develop an industrial zone in the outskirts of Phnom Penh. Companies from all over Asia build factories in the zone, where everything is provided, from infrastructure to water and electricity.

Like most of Cambodia's business elite, the so-called Oknha,[5] Madam Heng is a well-connected businesswoman. She has a high position in the influential Cambodian Chamber of Commerce, and she supposedly has close links to senior officials in various government institutions. As explained earlier, there is a long history of patronage arrangements between ethnic Chinese businesspeople and Khmer political power holders in Cambodia. Within the relatively small business and political elite today, these kinds of arrangements are in full swing; the business community of Oknha is loyal to the ruling CPP party and the entrepreneurs get preferential treatment in the form of land concessions, monopolies, and other perquisites. Although some of the Oknha can be considered nouveux riches, this group of entrepreneurs mostly belongs to the generation that came of age during the 1980s and early 1990s. Like Madam Heng, these predominantly ethnic Chinese Oknha typically started out in the informal sector, importing goods that were desperately needed in the ruined country, and diversified their businesses from there. Within Phnom Penh, this group of well-connected entrepreneurs is often portrayed as "typically Chinese" for their informal business practices, connections to government, and tightly controlled—often family-run—companies.

Madam Heng is proud of her Chinese background and feels she needs to express it to honor her late father. She is one of the founders of the Heng Association in Cambodia, an extended family association of Cambodian Chinese who trace back their roots to a Mister Heng who lived in southern China over three thousand years ago. Recently, the gathering of the Heng International Association, which is the umbrella association for the various branches spread over Southeast Asia and the United States, was held in Phnom Penh. The 2,200 people gathered enjoyed Chinese food, were entertained by dances and songs, and made donations to the Cambodian Red Cross. The closing speech was given by special guest Bun Rany—the wife of the prime minister and head of the Cambodian Red Cross—with whom Madam Heng sustains a close relationship.

In the particular case of Madam Heng, a rediscovery rather than a revitalization of "Chineseness" has taken place. Madam Heng is a typical victim of her time. She is of Teochiu descent, but because she grew up during the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese occupation, she speaks very little Teochiu and no Mandarin. She has never been able to attend a Chinese school and had no (extended) family connections to deploy when she started her company in the 1980s. Nevertheless, she has managed to maneuver herself into the mainly Teochiu business elite of Phnom Penh and "rediscovered" her Chinese roots.

The Heng Association allows Madam Heng to articulate her Chinese background in two ways. First, the association connects her with the regional Chinese business network. Some of her fellow Hengs are successful businesspeople in other areas of Southeast Asia, such as Singapore or Manila, and she hopes to work with them in the future. Although she does not speak their language, their shared family background—imagined or real—is seen as a basis for trust. Second, upon closer look holding the Heng Association meeting in Phnom Penh was a way for Madam Heng to enhance her status within Cambodian society. By inviting the prime minister's wife and making substantial donations to the Cambodian Red Cross, she perpetuated her position within the business-cum-state elite.

Madam Heng's self-identification with her Chinese background reinforces the idea that expressions of "Chineseness" are interlinked with the Cambodian sociocultural context. She believes that Chinese are prone to business success: "Chinese are very hard-working, like me, and don't spend a lot of money but save it for later. We think about the future of our family so that they have money or a business. Business is in our blood." Like many interviewees, she is proud of her Chinese background and believes that it helps her business, while at the same time she admits that she feels Khmer, not Chinese.

> I feel Khmer, but everybody calls me Chinese. I speak a little Teochiu dialect, but I cannot read or write, and I don't speak Mandarin. I've been in China, but only for holiday. My mother and father are from Cambodia, I am from Cambodia, so how can someone call me Chinese, right? I know I have Chinese blood, but people in the government have Chinese blood also, but they are called Khmer. If you do business, you are Chinese; if you work for the government, you are Khmer. [Madam Heng]

The stereotype of Chinese business versus Khmer government is one I frequently heard from my interviewees. One interviewee, for example, explained this supposed distinction by pointing toward differences in the career goals between Khmer and Chinese. He claimed that, traditionally, Khmer people want status and power and therefore strive to work in government positions, whereas Chinese people want money and independence and thus seek to run their own businesses. Although these cultural notions persist, and most of Phnom Penh's entrepreneurs are indeed of Chinese descent, the ethnic differentiation between Chinese business and Khmer officialdom no longer holds. Many businesspeople of Madam Heng's generation do not speak Chinese and portray themselves as Khmer. Moreover, it has become normal for Cambodian Chinese to work for the government; many of the key ministerial positions in Cambodia are filled by people from Chinese backgrounds.

All in all, this case illustrates Madam Heng's flexibility in ethnic identification she negotiates notions of Chinese business success that are omnipresent in Phnom Penh, while at the same time affirming her "Khmerness" in terms of loyalty and belonging.

Case Two: Phanith and Kiri

Phanith and Kiri[3] are friends and business partners who have worked together since they left school. They are in their late thirties now. They first worked as tour guides in Phnom Penh, showing their hometown to Taiwanese tourists. Through this job, they got to know a Taiwanese investor who set up an advertising agency in Cambodia, and they started working for him. In 1997, however, political turmoil scared away the investor, and Phanith and Kiri decided to strike out on their own. They borrowed some money from their mothers and set up a CD shop in central Phnom Penh. They rented a building and sold copied CDs, mainly from international artists. After their business had been open for about a year, Cambodians began to accept the new technology, and Phanith and Kiri started to make money.

Business went well, and they decided to move on and open a restaurant: a burger shop inspired by fast-food chains like McDonalds that were (and still are) not present in Cambodia. Phanith and Kiri took advantage of the absence of such international franchises, and they now have three well-known chains, totaling twenty-five outlets in Phnom Penh, selling burgers, coffee, and pizza. Sensing the desires of Phnom Penh's youth, a couple of years ago they

launched a website offering online gaming and a forum for youth culture. At the time, people thought they were crazy for developing the website because Internet bandwidth was so expensive, but prices have dropped immensely and the website is a great success. Phanith and Kiri's latest business venture, which opened recently, is a cinema in the city's busiest shopping mall.

Both Phanith and Kiri are of full Chinese descent; their grandparents moved from China to Cambodia. Phanith is from an artistic family; his grandfather was the head of a traveling Chinese opera company from the Shanghai region that performed for Chinese communities throughout Asia. Having travelled the region during his youth, Phanith's father eventually settled in Cambodia and got married. He survived the Khmer Rouge and opened a small mechanics workshop afterwards. Phanith's mother taught Chinese secretly at home because it was forbidden during Vietnamese rule. As Phanith explains, during the 1980s the Chinese in Cambodia experienced a great deal of discrimination.

> Cambodia was Communist but we belonged to Vietnamese and not Chinese communism, so the Chinese here were not allowed to speak Chinese. The best way to become a local was to change your name, so that is why many people like me have a Chinese and a Khmer name... We were discriminated against at that time. When I walked outside, my face looking like this, they called me a Chinese and punched me or whatever. [Phanith]

As his grandfather is from the Shanghai region and not from southern China, where most of the Chinese in Cambodia emigrated from, Phanith's Chinese family name is unique in Cambodia. Kiri, however, like the majority of ethnic Chinese in Cambodia, is of Teochiu descent. His parents run a bakery with two outlets in the city. Kiri's elder brother and younger sister now run the family business, but Kiri never aspired to work there.

> For twenty years they've been doing the same thing, no innovation. I wanted to develop myself and see the outside world. I don't want to do the same things all the time; being in the bakery at night and selling in the day. I can close my eyes and do it. I told my parents that I want to have my own life outside the family. [Kiri]

Phanith and Kiri both speak multiple Chinese languages. They learned Mandarin at the well-known Duanhua Chinese School in Phnom Penh, Teochiu from their parents, and Cantonese

from being tour guides for Taiwanese tourists and from dealing with Malaysian Chinese businesspeople. Their language skills come in handy, as they frequently do business with ethnic Chinese: they started their career working for a Taiwanese investor, the food supplies for their restaurants are mostly from Malaysian Chinese companies, and back-up support for the computer game that they offer online is from China.

> I would say that if I didn't speak Chinese I wouldn't be here today. I learned a lot from the Taiwanese guy, all the tricks for business, the Chinese mentality. And when I speak Chinese with businesspeople, it is easier. When there are Malaysian Chinese I speak Cantonese with them. It feels closer, like friends. [Phanith]

In addition to the benefits of speaking Chinese, Phanith believes that in Cambodian society "being Chinese" has an extra advantage.

> The majority of businesspeople in Phnom Penh are Chinese. But you can see that people who are more or less Cambodian, if they are businessmen they will trace back their background and say they are 25 percent Chinese also: "Because my grandmother's side is a little bit Chinese." There is credit inside being Chinese. "We are all Chinese men, so I will not cheat you," they say. [Phanith]

The above quote by Phanith supports the idea that identification with "Chineseness" is often a matter of flexibly positioning oneself. "Being Chinese" inheres a connotation of being successful, so entrepreneurs tend to stress their Chinese roots. Such flexibility in ethnic identification is enabled by the blurring of "actual" ethnic boundaries between Khmer and Chinese. As another Cambodian Chinese interviewee says:

> You cannot find a real Cambodian. Even if a person is dark of skin, the person could very well be partly Chinese. One of our fruit sellers, she is very dark but she only speaks Chinese. People would think she is Cambodian but she is not. And then people with a pale skin like me do not even speak Chinese. [Theary]

Both Phanith and Kiri clearly believe they owe their business success in part to Chinese language and culture, but they also stress that they have adopted "international standards." According to Kiri, their style of business can best be described as mixed; they have tried to take the good elements of both Chinese and Western business culture. Their most recent project, the cinema, is an example of how they have distanced themselves from an informal "family-style business" and

adopted such "international standards." Unlike their other companies, which they jointly own, the cinema is a multishareholder company. They could have put in all the investment themselves, but they wanted more shareholders so they could prepare the cinema to become an enlisted company on Cambodia's recently opened stock exchange. They hope to achieve this in three to four years, and they already have put in place a clear accounting structure, have the company audited annually by an international accounting firm, and hold regular shareholder meetings.

Another "Western" aspect of their company, according to Phanith, is that they stress "teamwork and sharing ideas. Chinese don't share much but do everything themselves." In any case, both entrepreneurs feel very different from what they label the "typical Chinese businessmen."

> The mindset is different. The typical Chinese man, they made those millions because during their time, they had their own way of making money, legal or illegal, by some other way. For us, we do business by international standards, more professionally I would say, with clear accounting and so on. They don't do that, maybe only the younger generation. Most of them say: "I have enough money. Why do I need someone to come and interfere in my house?" [Phanith]

Phanith and Kiri clearly disclose ambiguity in how "Chineseness" is relevant in their business lives. On the one hand, Chinese culture is seen as a business asset, and the entrepreneurial trajectory of Phanith and Kiri shows this. They both speak several Chinese dialects, and this has connected them to other businesspeople of Chinese descent in the region. Several interviewees claimed that Chinese education diverges from the standard Cambodian curriculum not only in language training; whereas Cambodian schools teach moral and behavioral rules, Chinese education is supposedly more oriented toward dealing with numbers and businesslike settings. In addition to education and language, there are other Chinese cultural features that interviewees point to as being beneficial in business life. Kiri mentioned trust, and others mentioned thrift, striving for independence, and family loyalty. People generally agree that speaking Chinese, being from a Chinese family, and having a Chinese education propels entrepreneurial behavior and is beneficial in business life.

On the other hand, Phanith and Kiri distance themselves from the "typical Chinese businessmen" and advocate what they see as a more professional style. They do not want to have

anything to do with family business practices or informality in business conduct, nor do they want to belong or be indebted to those wealthy businessmen who constitute the Oknha. For Phanith and Kiri, as for many younger generation entrepreneurs, Chinese business has a negative connotation. Practices like family business, informal networks, and patronage arrangements with the state are seen as belonging to the older generation, to those businesspeople with little education who have struggled through the years of war and repression and built up their businesses from scratch since the 1980s.

On the one hand, discourse on Chinese business success is highly conspicuous in Phnom Penh, and in that sense, a revitalization of Chinese business is surely apparent. At the same time, however, business practices that are deemed the "Chinese way" are also challenged by middle- and upper-class entrepreneurs. This development is partly due to international agencies, investors, and NGOs who advocate notions like transparency, accountability, and "good governance." It is also a result of generational change; a gap has emerged between the older and younger generations in terms of upbringing and preferences in business practices. Phanith and Kiri illustrate this clearly, and in the following case this generational gap is visible as well, albeit in the particular setting of a family business.

Case Three: Kosal

Kosal's parents own a company that produces and sells mattresses. The family has a factory in Phnom Penh and a shop on one of city's busiest boulevards. They employ around seventy people currently, and they sell the mattresses they produce to individual customers, to middlemen from the provinces, and to large hotel and condominium projects.

After the Khmer Rouge, Kosal's parents started producing and selling rice wine, from which they made little money. They were able to save some capital, though, and in 1987 they bought a shophouse. They started buying mattresses from middlemen who imported them from Vietnam. Because of the UN personnel who came to Cambodia in the early 1990s, they made good money and were able to save and buy plots of land. After they did this for a decade, a Singaporean businessman approached them and asked whether they were interested in producing the mattresses themselves. They went to Singapore and decided to do it, so they bought the machine and built a factory. The company has been growing since and hit a peak during the real

estate boom around 2005. Over the last fifteen years, they have expanded their factory and introduced new production lines, diversifying their assortment of mattresses and adding related products like pillows and bedsheets.

The company is very much a family firm. It was started by Kosal's parents, but now, Kosal says, "they are sort of retiring."[4] They now leave the smaller decisions up to their children. Currently, both of Kosal's sisters do sales and administration in the shop, his brother-in-law runs the factory, his brother does mechanics, and Kosal himself does supply and finance. Also, a large part of the raw materials are imported from a granduncle who owns an import-export company in China. They place an order with this granduncle—a brother of Kosal's grandmother who migrated from southern China to Cambodia—and he, in turn, places an order with the suppliers in China and arranges the shipments. Kosal claims that it helps that their main supplier is family; they can trust him more than an outsider, and they are certain that he would never inflate the price. On the other hand, because he is family the business transactions remain informal.

> [My parents and granduncle] hate paperwork. Especially between family, for the Chinese families in Cambodia, contracts between family members are a big taboo. They think that if you do that it's a sign that you don't trust each other. I try to tell my parents that if it comes to money everything has to be written out on paper, but for my granduncle we make an exception; he would probably be offended if we wrote things down. [Kosal]

Kosal is twenty-seven years old now, and he has spent five years studying in Japan. He was offered a job there that he liked, but he didn't take it because he felt obligated to come back to Phnom Penh to help his parents run the mattress company. Working for the family business has been challenging ever since.

> You come out [of business school] with no practical experience, but a lot of ideas in your head, and you're trying to apply [these ideas] to the existing business that they've been running in their own way for twenty years. They just don't think that my ideas will work. They say it will probably work outside Cambodia, but that Cambodia is not the same... They think I need more experience, doesn't matter if what I'm doing is efficient or not. They used to wake up at five o'clock in the morning and they want me to do the same thing. But I just don't think it's efficient, and besides, it's stupid if you earn so much money to wake up at five in the morning. [Kosal]

Kosal wants to expand the business and, moreover, to prepare it for his generation to take over. However, he feels that everything needs to be better organized to get the company ready for such steps. Kosal explains how he has been struggling to change his parents' ways.

> The problem is that my parents don't want to discuss the situation with anyone who is an outsider, they don't want to spend money, and they keep doing everything themselves. We run the whole factory with just three people, up to micromanagement, every day. We have no structure whatsoever, and in the process things get totally lost... I am now working on a system to keep track of everything. Before, my parents had no clue. They paid for the same thing twice and they would never even know. But it's sort of working now. My parents now start to ask me, "How much do I owe this person?" or "How much does this material cost?" They're more receptive because they've seen some results. [Kosal]

Despite the struggles that Kosal faces within the family business, he also sees the benefits of working with family, particularly in trusting one another and in quick decision making on a daily basis. Besides, he says, growing up in a Chinese family makes a businessman.

> Khmer-Khmer [Khmer without Chinese descent] don't mind working for someone else, but not in a Chinese family. If you're raised in a Chinese family, you are definitely raised to be a businessman. You're not raised to be working class. Your parents instill that into your brain. Why work for other people when you can be your own boss? That's part of the success of Chinese. And also, what people say is that we're persevering. I guess because our grandparents that came from China, they had a terrible life back in China and had to give everything to make it better. [Kosal]

Most businesses in Phnom Penh are family-run businesses, and there are few companies that do not have any family involvement. Even in cases where family members are not directly involved in the daily running of a company, at least some family resources or relationships have been exploited in setting up and developing the company.

It is hardly surprising, then, that family-structured business is the predominant model for Cambodian Chinese entrepreneurship in Phnom Penh. Most businesses were set up around two decades ago, when few financial and material resources were available, state institutions were weak, and the environment for entrepreneurs was uncertain at best. Within this context, the family business model proves useful in various ways. It allows the family to oversee dealings within the company, control the management of different departments or branches, and stock up

capital for reinvestment and diversification of its business activities. Moreover, because of complex migration histories, many Cambodian Chinese families in Phnom Penh have extended family members in China, other parts of Southeast Asia, or the West. As we saw in the case of Kosal's family, such a relationship proved useful for the supply of goods, and in other cases transnational family ties were deployed for investment, expertise, or education of the younger generation. As such, the family as a nexus for business conduct has handed Cambodian Chinese entrepreneurs the resources and relationships to exploit business opportunities over the last two decades. In addition to such resources and relationships, there is a consensus among interviewees that Cambodian Chinese families draw on cultural notions like trust, filial piety, and loyalty that are particularly beneficial in running a business. All of these are more or less visible in the narrative of Kosal.

Figure 3. Chinese altar inside a shopping mall in Phnom Penh. Photo taken by author.



Family business among the Cambodian Chinese in Phnom Penh, it can be concluded, has surely been revived. Nonetheless, the family business model is also being challenged, and the factory of Kosal's family is an example of this. The younger generation has started to take over from the older generation that set up the family businesses, and this generation is questioning whether the "old Chinese ways" are still suitable as the business makes the transition to the future and the Cambodian economy slowly starts to diversify. Driven by younger entrepreneurs like Kosal who have been educated abroad and did not experience the hardship of setting up a company in difficult times, informal dealings and networks are starting to make way for more transparent and formalized management structures and business transactions.

Discussion: Plural Society Revisited

The three cases discussed here unambiguously illustrate that Cambodian Chinese have reclaimed their dominant status within Phnom Penh's private sector. After decades of repression, both private enterprise and Chinese culture are appreciated once again. As a result, the ethnic Chinese have pioneered the development of the small and medium enterprise sector by setting up trading and production firms, restaurant, and stores, and they have established the lion's share of the politically well-connected "business groups." Moreover, the social mechanisms underpinning these entrepreneurial trajectories largely derive from family, ethnic, or patron-client ties based on personalized and informal trust. Both Chinese business practices and societal discourses that link "Chineseness" to economic success are omnipresent in contemporary Phnom Penh, and as such Chinese business has certainly been revitalized. As Dahles and Ter Horst argue, regarding the case of the Cambodian silk trade, "These practices and presentations may develop into an institution that is both a model of and a model for conducting business" (2012, 212).

However, I have also shown that the revitalization of Chinese business is far from a unilinear or univocal process. On the one hand, Chinese business has become a trope representing success and wealth. On the other hand, depending on personal and business backgrounds, it is challenged or downplayed in various ways, two of which merit elaboration.

First, informal business dealings are increasingly challenged, and for many interviewees Chinese business has a negative connotation, representing unprofessionalism and "old ways." This is illustrated by the stories of Phanith and Kiri, who distanced themselves from the "typical

Chinese businessman" and endorsed a more "professional style," and by Kosal, who is attempting to change his parents' informal management style. Also, while business networks clearly retain an ethnic component, the entrepreneurs go beyond such trust networks to do business with a variety of Asian and Western partners, like the Japanese in Madam Heng's case. Notably, the revitalization of Chinese business over the last two to three decades has taken place in parallel with other socioeconomic developments that have shaped business life. When the Vietnamese grip on the Cambodian economy loosened in the late 1980s, informal business practices like ethnic networking, family business, and patronage arrangements were very useful in an insecure business environment that lacked formal state institutions, financial and material resources, and a general trust among people. However, as the sociopolitical situation stabilized in the 1990s and Cambodia entered the regional and global economy, resources and opportunities for entrepreneurs have broadened. Business networks, value chains, and investments have become globalized, younger generations study and work abroad and feed their experience back into the Cambodian economy, and state institutions start to accommodate the formalization of business dealings. As one would expect, entrepreneurs have adapted to these novel circumstances, and as a result business dealings that are labeled "Chinese" increasingly exist next to novel ways of networking and organizing.

Second, "Chineseness" is not merely positively associated with business success but also downplayed in certain contexts. Madam Heng illustrates this nicely. Like her, Cambodian Chinese entrepreneurs often claim that business is "in their blood," while at the same time they express amazement that they are labeled "Chinese" and stress that they perceive themselves as Khmer and "belong in" Cambodia. Note how a seeming paradox is disclosed that essentializes "Chineseness" as intrinsically linked with ethnic descent *and* presents it as a flexible category and a matter of personal positioning. However, this paradox makes perfect sense within Cambodian societal discourse; Chinese business has come to stand for success and wealth, of which interviewees are proud, though such pride is not supposed to detract any loyalty from "being Cambodian." This stressing of "Khmerness" for some—particularly those of Madam Heng's generation—may result from a burdensome legacy of discrimination during the 1970s and 1980s combined with contemporary pressures to conform to Khmer nationalist discourses, while for others "being Cambodian" and appreciating Chinese roots present no conflict at all.

In any case, the relative flexibility in the (dis)articulation of "Chineseness" must be seen within historical developments. The category of Cambodian Chinese has become very diverse, and the boundaries between Khmer and Chinese have blurred as a result of complex migratory trajectories, forced assimilation during the Khmer Rouge, Khmer-Chinese intermarriage, and generational change. Moreover, the Cambodian Chinese business community has been embraced by the political elite, and it seems unlikely that while Hun Sen is in power this flexibility in ethnic identification will be undermined to make way for more essentialized representations that would alienate the ethnic Chinese. The state depends on ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs for job creation and investment, the CPP itself has incorporated many ethnic Chinese Oknha who provide financial support to the party, and many high government officials are of (partial) Chinese descent.

Taken together, the broadening of "Chineseness," as well as the broadening of entrepreneurial opportunities and resources, has altered the character of ethnic Chinese business in Phnom Penh. Within contemporary societal discourse on Chineseness, entrepreneurs seem to have the leverage to present themselves as Chinese as well as Khmer/Cambodian, and to be proud of as well as to distance themselves from Chinese business practices. Revisiting the question presented at the outset of this paper, it seems that a "possibility of difference" rather than a "predicament of difference" (Ang and St. Louis 2005) has emerged today. Willmott deployed the notion of "plural society" coined by Furnivall to describe a "society made up of different ethnic communities, each of which occupies a particular place in the economic structure" (1967, 9). Needless to say, at that time the Chinese occupied the spheres of trade and private enterprise. Before and during the French period, Willmott argues, Cambodian plural society was held in place not through violence but because "the nature of economic ties between Chinese trader and indigenous peasant are such that mutual advantage demands their continuation and elaboration" (1967, 96).

The legacies of the plural society that Willmott described are visible today, although plural society as such has disappeared. Practices and discourses of ethnic Chinese business have revitalized greatly since the 1980s and become firmly embedded in Phnom Penh's socioeconomic life. However, ethnic Chinese business has reappeared in a form that is fundamentally different from the description provided in Willmott's studies of fifty years ago.

Characteristics of Chinese business organization and entrepreneurship no longer reside within a clearly definable Chinese community that has its own social structure and dominates the sphere of commercial activity. Over the last half century, the Chinese community has dissimilated into a broader category of Cambodian Chinese that is highly multiform in terms of ethnic identification, descent, language abilities, migratory history, business and management style, and so forth. "Chinese business" has become a template, a model of business conduct within Cambodia's socioeconomic life that is at the disposal of this broader category of Cambodian Chinese. This template of "Chineseness" is descriptive as well as prescriptive; it both describes practices of Cambodian Chinese entrepreneurship and prescribes the cultural notions associated with it. Chinese business, if you will, has become disembedded from a definable Chinese community and, over the last two to three decades, reembedded in Phnom Penh's socioeconomic sphere, which is largely made up of Cambodian Chinese entrepreneurs.

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Notes

1. I use the labels "Cambodian Chinese" and "ethnic Chinese" interchangeably throughout this paper, disregarding the term "Sino-Khmer." Willmott (1967, xii) distinguished a broader category of Sino-Cambodians, Cambodian citizens of Chinese descent, from a narrower category of Sino-Khmer, people of mixed Chinese-Cambodian descent. However, acknowledging that ethnic identification is a process of social construction and political representation rather than a straightforward reflection of descent, this categorization becomes problematic. Because "Cambodian" marks citizenship whereas "Khmer" marks ethnic belonging and cultural "authenticity," the present-day implication of Willmott's distinction is that a Chinese without Cambodian descent can never be Khmer—that is, culturally Cambodian. Moreover, because "the ethnic Chinese in Cambodia" has become a flexible category that only acquires meaning through the situated representation by societal actors, I prefer to use the relatively broad label "Cambodian Chinese."
2. The names of all interviewees have been changed. I interviewed Madam Heng on November 4, 2010 in Phnom Penh.
3. I interviewed Phanith on August 8, 2011 and Kiri on August 16, 2011, both in Phnom Penh.
4. I interviewed Kosal on February 22, 2011 in Phnom Penh.
5. Formally, the title "Oknha" is bestowed by the king on individuals who made contributions

to Cambodian society valuing in excess of $100,000, while in practice it often is "the preserve of businessmen interested in formalizing their relationship with the State (and by extension the CPP)" (Ear 2011, 72–73).

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