

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

Surrealpolitik: The Experience of Chinese Experts in Democratic Kampuchea, 1975–1979

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Abstract:

The literature on Chinese assistance to Democratic Kampuchea (1975–1979), has tended to be divided into two approaches. The first rests on the argument that the Chinese revolutionary state—particularly the more radical phases such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution—provided both a blueprint and an inspiration for the Cambodian revolution. This approach suggests that Chinese experts in Democratic Kampuchea were akin to revolutionary comrades-in-arms who shared an ideological affinity as they worked alongside their Cambodian counterparts. The second approach focuses on a state-to-state level of analysis in which the human element is ignored altogether. In this article, by contrast, the author argues that the Chinese experience in Democratic Kampuchea was structured and constrained by the contradiction of technical imperatives in a milieu of deadly political infighting, as well as by the many institutional shortcomings on both the Cambodian and the Chinese sides. The author uses the petroleum refinery project at Kampong Som (Sihanoukville) to illustrate his argument.

No life in Cambodia was more comfortable than that of a Chinese diplomat in Phnom Penh. The embassy was cool in the hot season. There was a swimming pool large enough for exercise and ample space for the staff. The mission had its own Chinese chef, and food was flown in weekly from Peking.

—Elizabeth Becker, *When the War Was Over*¹

On January 22, 2010, the Chinese ambassador to the Kingdom of Cambodia, Zhang Jinfeng (张金凤), announced that the People’s Republic of China (PRC) had never politically engaged with Pol Pot or the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) regime (1975–1979), arguing instead that Chinese assistance was humanitarian and limited to “food, hoes, and scythes.”² Chinese Cambodia scholars are somewhat less disingenuous, but they nonetheless tend to gloss over the “contradictions” (矛盾) in China’s policy towards Democratic Kampuchea: “We were very much opposed to [非常反对] their domestic policy but supported their foreign policy.”³ Such a

clinical separation is convenient but misleading. China's alliance with Democratic Kampuchea was a strategic necessity that came out of the larger Sino-Soviet split and China's increasing nervousness about Vietnamese behavior. China undertook physical infrastructure developments on Democratic Kampuchean soil in response to these security concerns, drawing from Democratic Kampuchea's labor pool, an arrangement inexorably linked with the brutal domestic politics of Democratic Kampuchea.

Indeed, Democratic Kampuchea survived as long as it did as a result of Chinese military and nonmilitary aid and assistance. One can make the argument, as many have done, that Beijing provided this aid and assistance because of shared revolutionary ideals and cold *Realist* calculations, or because DK provided the PRC with its first real client state. Indeed, China instigated the first-ever full-scale war between socialist states by attacking Vietnam after Hanoi invaded Cambodia in late 1978. It is, however, important to point out that China's engagement was far less cynical than that of many other countries, particularly after 1979, when the United Nations (UN), led by the United States, granted the exiled Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) regime a seat in the UN and isolated the Vietnamese-sponsored People's Republic of Kampuchea until the Vietnamese withdrew a decade hence.⁴

In looking at the Chinese experience in Democratic Kampuchea, the question I am most frequently asked is: what did the Chinese experts on the ground know about the killings that were taking place at the time? Several analyses imply that Chinese advisers in Democratic Kampuchea, by doing nothing or by somehow benefiting from DK policy, were somehow complicit in the horrors of what was occurring in DK. Henri Locard implies that the ambassador, as "dean of the diplomatic corps," enjoyed a unique and influential perch in Phnom Penh and served as the node through which radical Maoist policy was disseminated into DK:

There were thousands of Chinese technical experts living in the country, mainly working in industry, transport and energy. But there must have been also a number of military advisors, all weapons being provided by China which had built a vast secret air base, with two runways near Kampong Chhnang at Phum Krang [Leav]. Since the army was so much involved in the repression it is difficult to imagine the Chinese were completely unaware of what was going on in the country. This cannot be demonstrated—nor disproved—until all archives are opened.⁵

Existing Chinese accounts of the waning days of DK, and of subsequent exile in the countryside, provide breathless descriptions of the revolutionary élan of the retreating CPK leadership and rank and file, and of something akin to a new Long March. The (frankly) embarrassing sycophantic tone also contributes to the view that Chinese observers were personally approving of DK policy.

My own work suggests that this was not the case. Although my interviewees—retired Chinese technicians who managed infrastructure projects in Democratic Kampuchea—tended to become a bit guarded when discussing this, it became clear that they did not, nor could not, know the extent of the killings that were taking place, even as they were aware that *something* sinister was afoot. Certainly, the CPK was not exactly subtle when it came to “disappearing” somebody: in the space of just six weeks from August 16 to September 28, 1977, for example, the following people associated with the Kampong Som oil refinery, port, and power units were arrested and sent to be tortured at S-21 (the notorious Tuol Sleng prison in Phnom Penh) and subsequently executed:

- Tann Vichit (a.k.a.) Oeun, Kampong Som Port Helicopter Pilot
- Khuon Kuon (a.k.a Rong), Kampong Som Port Group Chief
- Sun Chhy, Kampong Som Port Group Chief
- Phal Chhun (a.k.a. Chhuon), Kampong Som Port Group Chief
- Tit Tam (a.k.a Phat), Kampong Som Port Group Chief
- Kim Tuon, Kampong Som Port Group Chief
- Hin Kheng, Kampong Som Deputy Port Group Chief
- Sok Chieng (a.k.a. Phal), Kampong Som Deputy Port Group Chief
- Lon Chun (a.k.a. Nhim), Kampong Som Deputy Group Chief
- Ou Tech, Kampong Som Deputy Group Chief
- Peang Thean (a.k.a. Khieng), Kampong Som Deputy Group Chief
- Say Sy, Kampong Som Deputy Group Chief
- Ou Tech, Kampong Som Deputy Group Chief
- Hem Lan (a.k.a. Dim), Soldier at Kampong Som Power
- Uk Thea, Economic Chief Battalion 42 Regiment 4 at Kampong Som Port
- Moeun Chan (a.k.a. Koeun), Soldier Unit 3 Regiment 3 at Kampong Som Port
- Kheng Khen (a.k.a. Chey), Kampong Som Port Group Chief
- Srey Khun, Soldier at Kampong Som Energy Port
- Khim Than, Kampong Som Port Squad Chief
- Ong Choeun (a.k.a. Chum), Kampong Som Port Group Member
- Nem Em (a.k.a. Roeun), Kampong Som Port Group Member
- Vooun Khann, Soldier at Kampong Som Port
- Peou Kun (a.k.a. Prit), Soldier at Kampong Som Port
- Meak Khan (a.k.a. Chhan), Soldier at Kampong Som Port
- Nam Muon (a.k.a. Rann), Soldier at Kampong Som Port⁶

The Chinese were told that a person had “disappeared” (这个人不见了) or that they had been “cozying up to Vietnam” (亲越). Years later these Chinese technicians bandied about other euphemisms that suggested they had an inkling of what was afoot: “recalled to Phnom Penh” (说要去金边/要调你到金边), “the big forest” (森林大), “particularly large coverage” (覆盖面特别大), “digging a pit” (挖个坑), “burial by your entire family” (全家都给你埋了), and so on. They would hear such expressions when Cambodian colleagues—such as the original director of the oil refinery—stopped showing up for work.⁷

But the question of how much the Chinese knew is largely beside the point. Not only were the Chinese unable to do anything, but they *knew* they were helpless in the political maelstrom of DK rule because they had barely escaped with their own lives and careers intact years before in China. These Chinese technicians in Democratic Kampuchea almost certainly felt an uncomfortable sense of *déjà vu*: many of them were members of what had been for decades a politically targeted class in China and had been on the receiving end of suspicion, if not actual political and mass action, going back at least to the 1957–1958 Anti-Rightist Campaign. By the Cultural Revolution (1966–1977), they were collectively referred to as the “stinking ninth category” (臭老九) and were humbled even by the institutional structure in which they lived and worked. According to one retiree, during the Cultural Revolution the experts were no longer considered technicians; they were “service workers” (服务员).⁸

In addition, they were powerless to argue against what in their professional opinion were harebrained projects, doomed to failure. For example, in 1965, Beijing approved plans to expand Hunan Province’s Changling (长岭) refinery from an annual capacity of 1.5 million tons of crude oil per year to 250 million tons. With the onset of the Cultural Revolution, fears grew that the refinery could make a tempting target to U.S. bombing sorties if the Vietnam conflict spilled over into China. As a result, revised plans for Changling called for constructing the refinery in a cave through a network of underground tunnels. Because of the extreme flammability of crude oil and refined petroleum, the chances of disaster were a near certainty. But there was nothing the engineers could do. Finally, in a stroke of good luck, a fire broke out on June 1, 1967, providing the engineers with a case to present to the State Council, which vetoed the “cave” part of the project after almost a year of deliberations and infighting.⁹

Now these experts were being sent from a country (China) where they had been on the political receiving end of some of the most bizarre policy making on record to a country (Cambodia) that was enacting an even more surreal set of policy goals. Compounding this was the fact that their functions in DK were based on their scientific and engineering skills, which surely seemed out of place in a state where the entire intellectual class had not simply been exiled to undertake hard labor—they had been killed. The Chinese seemed to handle this by focusing overwhelmingly on nonpolitical matters, such as the technical tasks at hand, as well as by helping individual Cambodians when they could. They also avoided getting ensnared in what they called the internal affairs of DK.

And since they knew well what being on the wrong end of a political purge was like, they tended to show as much compassion and humanity to their Cambodian colleagues as was possible without raising the suspicion of DK cadres. Former CPK soldiers press-ganged into building the Chinese-supervised Krang Leav airfield project in Kampong Chhnang Province recalled the Chinese as being constructive in their advice, and, when DK cadres were not looking, giving the Cambodians extra food rations and cigarettes.¹⁰

Conditions on the Ground

The experience of Chinese technical experts in Democratic Kampuchea was complex and often contradictory. Some Chinese technicians fondly recall a Cambodia very different from that portrayed by other foreign observers (and by many Chinese, whose epic criticisms of DK seem to have receded over time). Some waxed nostalgic as they recalled walking into any store in Phnom Penh and simply taking as many bottles of beer and Coca-Cola as they wanted. They did not fully realize that because the CPK had emptied the cities immediately after the fall of Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975, urban areas throughout Cambodia were in a state of suspended animation—that these beverages had been sitting there undisturbed for *years*. Conditions were in some cases quite comfortable, certainly relative to elsewhere in Cambodia, but also relative to what many of these workers could expect in China at the time. The workers enjoyed air-conditioned rooms, paved roads, fresh seafood, and so on.

Since they were considered foreign experts, the technicians were treated quite well. Working abroad was considered a prestige assignment. In addition, the Chinese experts were paid double by combining the 300 RMB they made each month abroad with their original

salaries, which they were allowed to keep. According to a Chinese technician who was there, this arrangement was partly intended to incentivize the Chinese to avoid talking about issues of national security.

All food outside of the embassy was provided free of charge by the Cambodians, and meals often consisted of large shrimp and fish. In addition, cooks were brought over from China to prepare food at the project sites. However, the Chinese were still displeased by the lack of certain foods they were used to, particularly *mantou* (steamed buns) and vegetables. On their annual trips back to China to visit their families, they would bring back canned vegetables and other necessities. Many local Cambodians, one source acknowledged, were bitter about the presence of Chinese experts who were eating a lot of good food.¹¹

Accommodations were much better than these Chinese workers and experts had enjoyed in China at the time¹², and even today they muse about just how highly developed Cambodia was (referring to the colonial- and Sangkum-era building and infrastructure projects that had survived the 1970–1975 civil war).¹³ In areas where viable infrastructure remained, such as Kampong Som, the Chinese resided in the original accommodations of the French employees of Elf Aquitaine oil company (now Total). They were separated into building complexes consisting of a semicircular conference room, an activity room, and about sixteen bedrooms, which were air-conditioned at night. There were two floors, with eight bedrooms on each floor. Four people would occupy one bedroom (largely by choice—the Chinese were so used to being grouped together that they felt ill at ease by themselves), with twenty or more people in each building complex. Electronic appliances like televisions, radios, washing machines, telephones, cassette players, and movie projectors—truly luxury goods in China at the time—were all readily available. There were also baskets of music tapes around that they could listen to.

Other Chinese technicians made do with less plush accommodations. Those working on the Krang Leav airfield lived in a foreign experts building about three kilometers east of the site—that is, outside of the city of Kampong Chhnang—and not far from the field kitchen and barracks housing the Cambodian labor pool.¹⁴ Although one could see the residence from the airfield, the Chinese workers had no contact with the Cambodian workers except on site. Every morning at 7:00 a.m., four or five small buses would arrive and take the hundred or so Chinese workers to various sections, including the control tower, an airstrip, a garage for cars, a concrete

road to and from Kampong Chhnang, a timber processing site, and a testing ground for assessing the correct pressure for the concrete.¹⁵

When the experts visited Phnom Penh, they stayed at places like the Number 5 Guesthouse, two people to a room, with air conditioning and mosquito nets, and they ate at the embassy. Although the Chinese were more or less free to walk around the empty city of Phnom Penh unsupervised by the CPK (they were informed that they did so at their own risk), they were strongly inclined to adhere to the 两人通行制 (“reciprocal supervision”) policy, in which workers posted overseas automatically watched over, supervised, and even reported on one another, minimizing opportunities to be alone. In such a system, accounts by two (or more) individuals could be checked against each other for consistency in case any “problems” arose. In an environment where an individual’s loyalty could be put into question, this became a means of *voluntary* self-protection as well: a single person would have nobody to vouch for them, whereas traveling in packs of two gave both the security of having an alibi.¹⁶ This policy was followed in other foreign countries, not simply in Democratic Kampuchea.

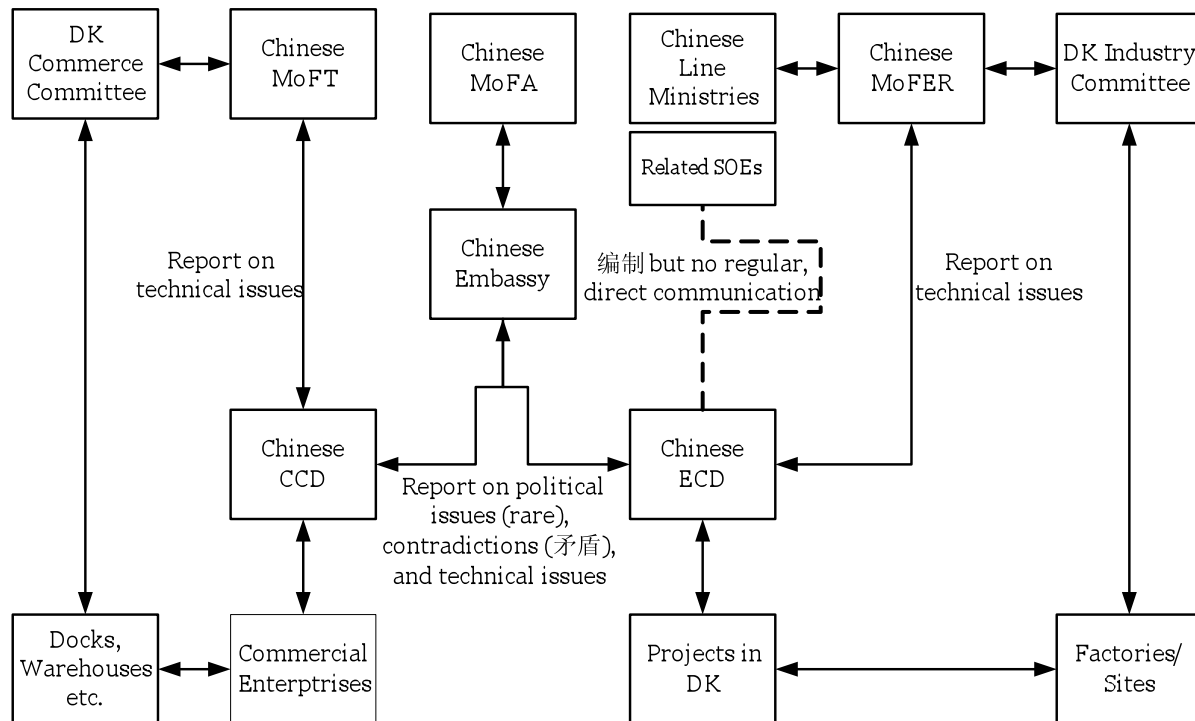
A weekly flight from Beijing to Phnom Penh carried Chinese experts and diplomats to and from the two cities. It also brought Chinese movies, which the Chinese expatriates would play every week. Although estimates of the number of Chinese advisers in Democratic Kampuchea range from one to fifteen thousand, the actual number appears to be on the lower end.

The Embassy

The lifeline of these workers was the Chinese embassy in Phnom Penh. Indeed, much of the information about the status of a given project was localized, albeit within a complex network of units housed in the Chinese embassy. Although the ambassador was commonly regarded as being in overall charge (全权领导) of the embassy, in reality his job was particularly challenging because his subordinate units had other superiors in China as well, mitigating his authority. He had direct control over the diplomatic sections, which functioned to collect data on the situation in Cambodia (收集情况). In the bureaucratic vernacular of my interviewees (which I adopt here) the aid projects were organized at the embassy level into one of three “consultation

departments” (参处): one for economics (经参处), one for commerce (商参处), and one handling military matters (军参处).¹⁷

Figure 1. Authority and Communications Framework, Chinese Experts in DK.¹⁸ Compiled by the author based on interviews conducted in Beijing and Luoyang in 2011.



The economics consultation department (ECD) reported everything to the ambassador, including technical information about the progress of the project as well as any political issues that arose. The ECD also reported technical issues to the Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations (对外经济联络部/MoFER), which had a vested interest in how the projects were going, since it was bankrolling them. When the ECD reported to the relevant ministries, such as the Ministry of Petroleum, it did so through the MoFER. Trade appears to have been handled through the commerce consultation department (CCD), with a similar bifurcation of primary contact through the ambassador and secondary contact—in this case, to the Ministry of Foreign Trade (对外贸易部/MoFT).¹⁹ The MoFT presumably did not handle military purchases and trade, as there were separate accounts for military and nonmilitary assistance from China to Democratic Kampuchea (via the military consultation department).²⁰

The ECD, therefore, was the point unit on the ground for all projects being undertaken in the country in question. In extreme cases, if there was an unforeseen technical problem that occurred on the ground, the team leader would make a report to the ECD as well as to the foreign affairs bureau of the ministry to which the project was attached. The latter would then try to resolve the issue by giving directions to the specific enterprise or institute planning and executing the project, for example, to send an extra person or an extra piece of equipment. When there was an emergency, or if an unforeseen need arose regarding technical issues, there was no method of direct communication between those on the ground and their actual host units under the ministries' foreign affairs bureaus.²¹

Through the embassy, a team of five or so people at a project site (总资委员), with individuals representing the various enterprises and institutes in China, would meet regularly. Their discussions included both technical and “social” or “political” topics, such as highlighting exemplary, model workers, or, by contrast and rarely, cases of malfeasance. They rarely discussed domestic Chinese or international politics (exceptions were the increasing tensions with Vietnam and the results of the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee in December 1978). They also discussed the leadership changes of their Cambodian counterparts, particularly as they kept disappearing, affecting the project.²²

Figure 2. Chinese Dignitaries and Foreign Experts, Chinese Embassy, Phnom Penh, September 1978. Note in the middle of the first row (from left) Hu Yaobang, Yu Qiuli, and Wang Dongxing. Source: Anonymous photographer (photo on file with author).



But the main content of these discussions was technical in nature. When Cambodian cooperation was needed, if it was a small problem (such as tensions between Chinese and Cambodian workers²³), the team leader could simply contact his Cambodian counterpart to resolve the issue locally (this raised a set of challenges, as the Cambodian manager of the oil refinery project at Kampong Som was nineteen years old!). If the problem was more challenging, the team leader would go through the ECD (or, alternatively, through their aforementioned DK counterpart), which, in turn, could raise the issue with the DK Ministry of Commerce directly.²⁴

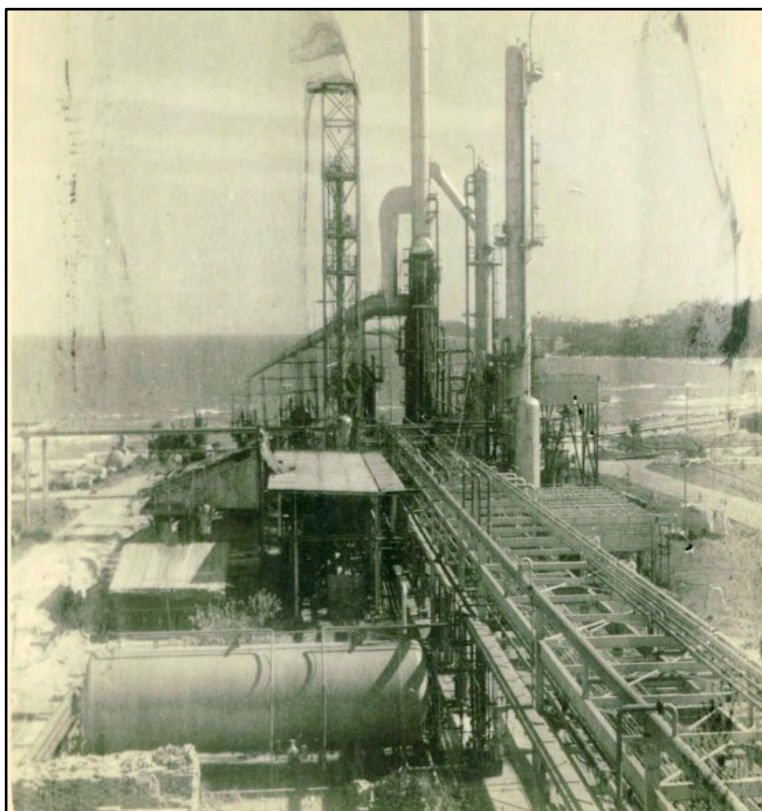
In addition, each of the on-the-ground representatives of the enterprises and institutes directly attached to a specific ministry were required to submit a weekly report to the ECD on the progress of their project, a description of any problems they were facing, and a list of what they needed from China. Although only one of these representatives would meet with the liaison at the ECD, the others would be available to answer any specific questions (that is, all of them would make the weekly visit from the project site to the Chinese embassy in Phnom Penh). The ECD liaison for a given project was a single individual who was assigned to a series of such projects (there were several such individuals within the ECD). Occasionally, the on-the-ground representatives would meet with the ambassador himself. The ambassador would inform them of the situation both in China and in other countries. He would also take the opportunity to commend exceptionally good performance, as well as to alert others to undesirable behavior, such as inappropriate behavior with local Cambodian girls.²⁵

The Case of the Petroleum Refinery at Kampong Som

In the late 1960s, the French company Elf Aquitaine concluded a joint venture agreement (a 65/35 percent investment) with the Royal Government of Cambodia on an oil refinery at what was then called Sihanoukville, in southwest Cambodia.²⁶ The refinery opened on November 14, 1968, and began processing by the end of the year.²⁷ After the 1970 coup that deposed Sihanouk, the oil refinery became a target for antigovernment rebels opposed to the Khmer Republic. The facilities lay unused until the CPK victory in 1975. Just a month after the fall of Phnom Penh, Kampong Som briefly gained notoriety again when U.S. bombers strafed the petroleum refinery in the last act of the *Mayaguez* incident, which was the final battle of the U.S. war in Indochina.²⁸ On August 18 of that year, China and Cambodia had signed an economic agreement that entailed aid projects like the oil refinery. In December, the two sides signed a more specific agreement.

On June 9, 1976, a Chinese investigation group (考察组) of technicians was sent to Kampong Som to start drawing up plans for the oil refinery.²⁹ China was to renovate and expand the oil refinery in Sihanouk Bay and provide all equipment and facilities for its construction (成套设备), which was slated to be finished by 1980. In terms of manpower, the original plan was to send 446 people over to Cambodia, and these were meant to be mostly management level or technical experts. In reality, they had to send skilled workers as well.³⁰

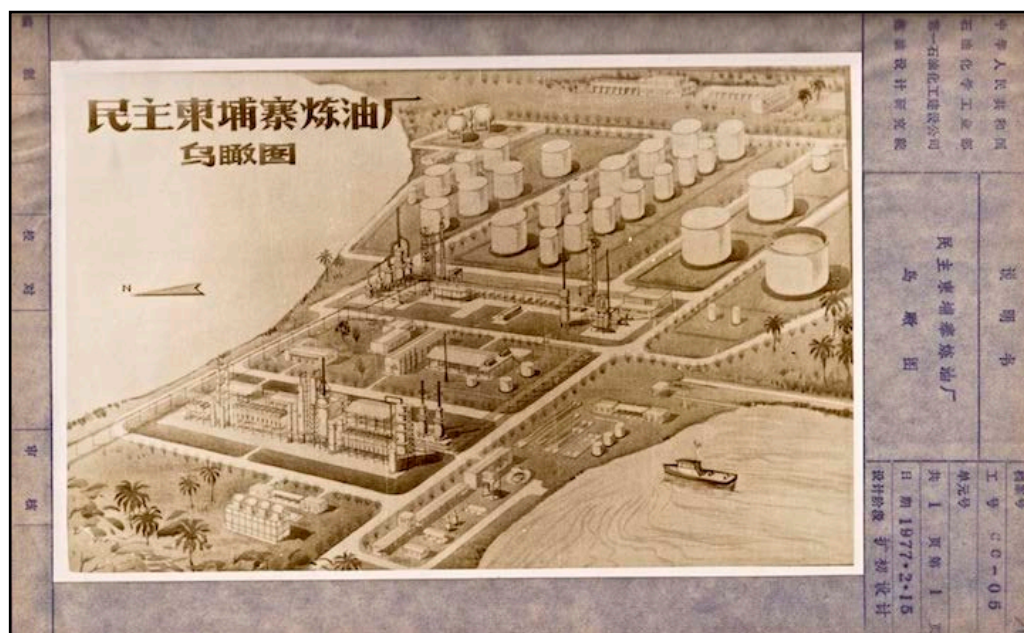
Figure 3. The Petroleum Facility at Kampong Som. Source: Anonymous photographer (photo on file with author).



A Chinese technician noted that the expansion of the facilities required extra equipment for catalytic cracking (催化裂化). This is because they were also switching the processing technology, which had been premised on processing crude oil from Qatar, to refining equipment that could process oil from China's Daqing (大庆) oil fields. Although China claims that this was Chinese technology, it actually came from Cuba. The Cubans had somehow obtained blueprints

of the facility from the Americans, and since they had sets, they decided to share one with the Chinese. The Chinese followed the blueprint diligently in producing the equipment.³¹

Figure 4. Chinese Schematic for the Kampong Som Refinery, Feb. 1977. 民主柬埔寨炼站厂 (Democratic Kampuchea Oil Refinery Station), 工厂总说明 (Plant Description), 扩初设计 (Development Design), 第一册 (Volume 1), 中华人民共和国石油化学工业部 (Ministry of Petroleum and Chemical Industry of the People's Republic of China), 第一石油化工建设公司炼油设计研究院 (The Number One Petrochemical Construction Company Refinery Design Institute), -九七七年二月. Source: Cambodian National Archives, Box Number 7.



But the project was beset by problems. An on-site worker summed up the situation at the oil refinery in brusque and dire, but nonetheless accurate, terms that matched the general mood of workers who had been working on the project on a long-term basis:

It has been three years since we have been working on this refinery. We have to recover the operating room, but there have been so many problems, especially with electricity. Also, the supply chain from China to here has simply been disconnected. The Cambodian side seems to refuse to learn about what we are doing. We also need to train translators. The Cambodians who should be in charge of production are poorly educated, and too young. The techniques and methods of operation for oil refinery are unique, and workers need a basic industrial knowledge base.

This provides just an inkling of the problems plaguing the oil refinery project and the Chinese experts at Kampong Som.

A Hardship Assignment

For many Chinese, working in DK was a hardship assignment. Many of the Chinese were from design or construction institutes in areas of northern China, such as Luoyang and Lanzhou, and thus they were not used to the extreme heat and humidity of Cambodia. And although the food they were provided was infinitely more nutritious and better tasting than the watery gruel their Cambodian counterparts consumed, it was very different from what they were accustomed to eating at home. Not surprisingly, therefore, a number of the Chinese experts also became ill, many with dengue fever. The *hanmahuang* (韩蚂蟥), a bee-like insect, was also a particular nuisance, providing painful stings that could not be avoided by the knee-high boots worn by the Chinese.³²

Since many of the experts were on long-term assignments of a year or more, they were anxious about a number of issues. First, a number of them lost spouses or other family members back home, and this raised the issue of who would look after their children. At a meeting at Kampong Som on December 1, 1978, one of the technicians reported that

in the past year, five of the workers have had close family members who have died back home. One [worker] knew that his wife was sick when he left China to come here. Now his wife has died, he has four children (the eldest is nineteen), and his eighty-year-old mother takes care of the house. A[nother] comrade...also has a wife who has died, leaving three children, but his work has not been affected. There is also a comrade...whose father has died, but he doesn't know it yet. The father of [another worker] in the Lanzhou group has also died. Others who have had parents-in-law pass away include [three more workers] in the Lanzhou group.

Another issue that occupied the thoughts of Chinese overseas workers in DK had to do with their “place in line” with regard to promotions and other benefits doled out by their work units (单位) back home. The work unit was the economic, political, and social center for these workers (and, indeed, for workers of this generation, it remains so today). Thus, these overseas workers feared that benefits for which the work unit had a monopoly in China at the time—such as housing, promotion, and pay raises—might be denied them and given instead to those who

were physically present in China (and could offer suitable inducements to decision makers in the upper management of the work unit).

Anxiety about the situation back at home, frustration with the actual projects on the ground in Cambodia, and their supine political position all contributed to Chinese foreign experts' anxiety in DK. But a more direct—and continual—source of frustration had to do with the actual working conditions and the unrealistic expectations foisted upon them.

The Quality of the Cambodian Workers

One of the most difficult challenges faced by the Chinese workers on site had to do with the quantity and quality of Cambodian workers. The number of workers on site was insufficient; the Chinese had assigned 380 people to work on construction and recovering the facility and 54 people to be in charge of production required, and these numbers were not being met because of the high rate of absenteeism on the Cambodian side. Moreover, the Cambodian workers that *did* show up for work did not inspire confidence. The frustration of one Chinese expert is almost tangible:

After being in Cambodia for a year, we have no clue what we have to do. We just mend roads, dig dirt, and we have no idea if we should be doing any of this because no one tells us anything. We have been digging a warehouse of dimensions 1.7 by 3.724 meters, and as we dig in the pits, the Cambodians are up there laughing at us.

Another worker complained that the Cambodians “don’t seem to be worried [about completing the project on time] because they seem to have their own thoughts and ideas that make little sense to us” (東方不着急 因为它有它的想法咱也不清楚).

Such criticism was not unique to the Chinese side. At the commercial port in Kampong Som, the increase in goods to be off-loaded demonstrated that the port facilities were inadequate. There were problems with lifting the goods from the docked ships. The cranes at the dock were sometimes stretched to their limit by individual loads of more than three tons. The derricks on the ships posed additional problems. The aging Chinese fleet had derricks that were broken or otherwise inoperable. In other cases, tensions arose because the DK workers did not stop during periods of rain (or during the regularly scheduled breaks taken by the Chinese). The DK workers wanted to work in the rain because some commodities were still safe when they were off-loaded

from ships when it was raining, while Chinese crews were afraid that the precipitation would damage the derricks.³³

Figures 5a and 5b. Chinese Experts and their Cambodian Counterparts at Kampong Som.

Source: Anonymous photographer (photo on file with author).



Figure 6. The Krang Leav “Chinese” Airfield, Campong Chhnang. Source: Photograph taken by the author, March 2010.



This was certainly not the case at all locales. For example, in the Krang Leav airfield in Kampong Chhnang, which was being constructed under Chinese management, there was no shortage of workers: ongoing political purges ensured a steady supply of slave labor for the project. Some of this may have to do with the fact that, because of its strategic position with regard to shipping and the oil refinery, Kampong Som was under direct control of Phnom Penh. Yet the center never achieved a coherent strategy for managing Kampong Som, and as a result, there seemed to have been a not insignificant degree of autonomy, whereby workers could—and did—exercise their ability to simply refrain from showing up for work, much to the chagrin of the Chinese.

Another problem that was not limited to Kampong Som but was endemic throughout the country had to do with the fact that these workers were extremely young, many of them in (or just barely out of) their teens. This was a deliberate result of the sociopolitical engineering at the heart of CPK doctrine and governance. Rather than training future leaders, the Communist Youth League put them to work in important positions throughout the political system because their youth meant that they were unsullied by nonrevolutionary backgrounds.

Moreover, at Kampong Som (and elsewhere) the Cambodian site leadership was deemed “not very capable” by the Chinese. They could not keep up with the Chinese on technical matters. Even worse, according to their Chinese colleagues, they did not seem to care about or take the project particularly seriously. One exasperated Chinese worker complained: “There is a problem with gloves. How come some people aren’t wearing their gloves? There’s an issue with safety here. What if someone fell on the work site, got hurt or died? What would happen? Do labor safety laws count for anything? Not even basic ones?” If the Cambodians would not be killed for engaging in such criticisms, they would probably have readily agreed.

One of the biggest problems had to do with the dearth of interpreters. Given the technical nature of the project, simply employing bilingual ethnic Chinese Cambodians was insufficient to the task. According to an embassy official, “because [the project] concerns technical issues, a normal translator might not even be useful.”³⁴ And there were problems with the supply chain of materials provided by the Cambodian side; even the very basic items that the DK side had been tasked with providing were simply unavailable and ultimately had to be imported from China.

Uncertainty about Who Was in Charge

In a December 12 meeting at Kampong Som, a number of these issues were largely—almost flippantly—dismissed out of hand by a Chinese embassy official:

We need to prepare for production. Although there is no exact deadline, we need to be clear about the goal. The point is to recover production after construction. Secondly, we don't need that many personnel, but they all need to be good. Thirdly, the issue of expenses for stationery [and] tools for drawing and documentation was brought up to our Mainland work units, but they told us to resolve it on our own. Fourthly, when it comes to the Cambodian workers, we need to think about how many Cambodians are needed to start production work at the refinery.

There was also, however, a remarkable—even startling—admission: “since we are not sure who is in charge of operating the refinery (是工业委员会还是动力委员会管理), we should try and find out.” That is, three years after the project broke ground, the Chinese embassy was unclear about which committee—the DK industrial committee (Ministry of Industry) or the DK power committee (Ministry of Power)—had jurisdiction over the oil refinery.³⁵

On the one hand, this is somewhat understandable, given both the generally opaque nature of the DK power structure and its functional governing structure, as well as the power shifts occurring as a result of the latest set of purges and centralization of certain bureaucratic responsibilities. And, as mentioned above, it is true that Kampong Som had a direct, centralized authority relationship with Phnom Penh.³⁶ Yet it is extraordinary that the Chinese side remained largely ignorant of which DK institution was its partner in developing the Kampong Som oil refinery.

The reasons for needing to know who was in charge on the Cambodian side are both obvious and manifold. As summarized at a meeting among technicians on December 13, 1978:

Cambodian leaders are starting to take up a leadership role in managing the refinery. Based on the agreement, this is what is supposed to be done, since Cambodia is the country that owns the refinery. Therefore, they should take more steps to cultivate talent in this area, because it would set a good foundation for the proper management of this refinery in [the] future. We are currently only training a few individuals. This is not working. Without a proper mechanism, we don't have a permanent set of workers to train, and linguistic differences make training difficult. This would make future production even more complicated. Oil refining

techniques, tests, equipments and meters are all complicated. The Cambodian side needs to come up with a leadership system, and we would be happy to assist and act as consultants. Next year, according to the [1976] agreement, work on the refinery will reach its peak. The Cambodian side needs to invest more people in this operation.

Specifically, the problem was how to link these individuals to the leadership structure in Phnom Penh. And the Chinese were at sea; in the words of a Chinese technician, “working here seems like fighting a war on the bottom of the ocean.” According to another Chinese expert, “Originally, the DK power committee (动力委员会) would come once a month. Now, they don’t have translators, and we don’t know what attitudes they have towards the refinery. There is also a big problem with labor. There are ten people who are supposed to grind the dirt, but they just sit there. Can we bring this up with the power committee so this is brought to their attention?”

Things were not much better at the site level. According to one of the Chinese:

We need to talk about the following issues with the Cambodians. First, the Cambodian workforce may have four hundred people. However, they do not have strength, they are mainly girls, and [they] do not have equipment or labor insurance. The labor force is not stable and often fluctuates. Our people often have to do all the work. The Cambodians must also have a leadership, organizational hierarchy for the installation work. They need a person to be the leader, and we can be the advisers. There has to be planning and management. Without a strict organization, we cannot complete this project. In order to learn techniques and management skills, we also need translators. We are also worried about whether or not the Cambodians can guarantee the provision of local materials for construction. Next year is the peak of construction, so they need to make sure they supply enough materials.

This was echoed by another Chinese colleague: “The biggest problem is the leadership problem from the Cambodian side. They have no command system...There are also transportation [problems] where the equipment or materials would arrive at the port but wouldn’t get to the refinery until a month later due to ground transportation issues.”³⁷

On December 14, 1978, there was a meeting at the refinery, attended by members of the on-site technical team, representatives from the embassy’s ECD, and visiting Chinese technical experts charged with evaluating the situation on the ground. The discussions revolved around how they were going to solve the problems with the Cambodians, their trouble in finding out who was in charge, and who could solve their problems for them. They were unable to come up

with much more than the fact that the power committee was not really powerful (基础差), because its main function was to distribute the oil, but little else. This problem would persist until the very end of the Chinese foreign aid experiment in Democratic Kampuchea.³⁸

Coordination Problems in and from China

The problems discussed above were considerable, but they were also particular to the Cambodian case, as evidenced by the fact that the Chinese had to bring not only technical experts but also their own workers, and by the bizarre notion that the Chinese, after two years in DK, were still unsure who they needed to communicate with on the Cambodian side. Moreover, these problems do not explain the larger issue of coordination that lay at the root of the systematic variation in the effectiveness of Chinese overseas assistance.

On December 22, 1978, three days before the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia, a group of Chinese technical leaders presented a report based on more than a month of survey work at the refinery site. The report noted that

when it comes to the supply of materials, [coordination] has been lax. The work that needs to be done now needs to be done mostly by the Chinese. Therefore, when the supplies do not arrive on time, or if they are incompatible, we cannot do our job properly...Please tell the superiors back home...The commerce unit has already stamped this request, and the MoFE wrote back and said that the embassy needed to send a full request. Now we only have a small jeep and it is not going to do the trip. In addition, there is the problem of lacking water bottles. Please try and solve these problems for us.³⁹

Arguments over the scarcity of resources as well as the seemingly unequal distribution of resources dominated the conversation, as did complaints about subpar coordination:

The companies that send people have no idea how to organize and manage these people. The Cangzhou Thirteen Huajian Company certainly has no clue. So much has been invested that this is clearly not a joke. It seems more like a war, but a war that we're losing. The mission is simply not clear... we have no clue what is going on and what we have to do.⁴⁰

This worker also underscored the problem with the quality of the technicians and skilled workers sent from China, suggesting that it was not necessarily the best or the brightest who were being sent to Democratic Kampuchea:

Those sent from the mainland were not sent according to national standards, and therefore the quality of people is quite low. We're not going to give specific examples, but the company and everyone knows this is the case too...now, even those who are in charge of the project have no idea how to fight this war.⁴¹

The result was a kind of surreal state of suspended animation in which there was no clear line of responsibility and nothing seemed to function properly, if at all:

People come but don't have critical equipment like a water pump. The cars come and break down after a month. When we work, we just surround the bulldozer, clueless as to what to do. We can't construct this way or that because the responsibilities are not clearly delineated, whether from within or from the outside. There are so many difficulties in building this refinery. There are two hundred some people from Thirteen Huajian, but the work is not coordinated at all...We need to be clear about who needs to do what, and when the equipment comes, we need to get our act together.⁴²

Adding to the growing bonfire of discontent, another comrade chimed in:

Machines, equipment and small tools should have arrived, like rulers and pencils. When we have no pencils, we just have to use nails instead. Even during the high tide when the equipment was coming in, we didn't even have an oil pump. We should really work on finishing this properly. Otherwise, we are not going to get a return on our investment. As far as bread-and-butter issues of daily living, the design people (Luoyang) requested that the mainland send some pickled vegetables. No more fish, please! They want vegetables.⁴³

The complaints about bureaucratic politics had extended to food and eventually also included gripes about entertainment: the Lanzhou technicians were dissatisfied with the movies they were being shown for entertainment and wanted to choose new ones (there was particular grumbling from other quarters later on that team leaders should not have veto power over what movies were brought over from the mainland).

Conclusion

What does the foregoing say about Chinese technicians and workers in Democratic Kampuchea, and by extension, in other foreign theaters of operation at the time? First of all, it underscores that while such opportunities afforded Chinese experts the ability to ply their trades, in reality they were frustrated not so much by political developments (at least not directly) but rather by organizational and institutional (read: bureaucratic) problems. Second, there appears to

have been little sense of socialist brotherhood; rather, Chinese workers seem to have expected a professional experience in which they might act as mentors to a rising class of technical workers in DK. In reality, DK incompetence was greeted with thinly veiled disgust on the part of the Chinese (although on a human level, they demonstrated a genuine amount of empathy for their Cambodian colleagues and helped them when they could). Finally, although these Chinese experts were almost certainly aware that some horrific political violence was taking place—given their own less lethal but nonetheless violent experiences in China—there was nothing they could do about it, except by discreetly mitigating the circumstances of the Cambodians they worked alongside, when their CPK minders were not looking.

In fact, Chinese foreign assistance projects, then as now, are often at the mercy of institutional constraints among Chinese bureaucracies as well as the state apparatus of the recipient country. This is important to keep in mind as we look back on China's past foreign policy behavior and analyze contemporary Chinese aid and assistance to the developing world. Although the situation in DK was fundamentally different than that which currently exists in any of these developing countries, the experiences of Chinese technicians in DK may also give us some insights into understanding and evaluating the experiences of their successors in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia today.

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Notes

1. Becker (1986, 285).
2. Kong Sothanarith, “China Played No Role in Khmer Rouge Politics: Ambassador,” *CAAI News Media*, January 23, 2010, <http://khemernz.blogspot.com/2010/01/china-played-no-role-in-khmer-rouge.html> (accessed August 15, 2012).
3. Interview 10BJ01, January 15, 2010. My interviewee suggested that China was objecting at the time not so much to the content of Democratic Kampuchean domestic policy (“all socialist regimes have these types of events [purges], even China”), but rather to the boast that Democratic Kampuchea would arrive at socialism faster than China.
4. In this article, I avoid using the term “Khmer Rouge,” or “Red Khmer,” in favor of the more precise Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK).
5. Locard (1995, 30).
6. Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-CAM), D-01456 (no. 148 TSL; no. 156 TSL; no. 159 TSL; no. 165 TSL; no. 172 TSL; no. 178 TSL D01456; and no. 181 TSL).
7. Interview 11BJ01A, October 16, 2011.
8. Interview 11LY01B, November 15, 2011.
9. Interview 11LY02, November 15, 2011.
10. Interview 12KC01-03, January 4, 2012.
11. Interview 11BJ01C, November 12, 2011.
12. A constant refrain was that the living conditions for the Chinese in DK were not only better than those for the Cambodians but also better than what they enjoyed in China. Air conditioning was almost unheard of in China, and basic foodstuffs and commodities like cooking oil were very difficult to find.
13. Ross and Collins (2006).
14. Interview 10PP02A, March 13, 2010.
15. Interview 12KC02, January 4, 2012.
16. Interview 11BJ01C, November 12, 2011.
17. Interview 11BJ01D, November 19, 2011.
18. This diagram excludes military projects.
19. Throughout the history of the PRC, the foreign economic relations bureaucracy and the foreign trade bureaucracies have intermittently been separated from or folded into each other. From June 1970 until March 1982, the MoFER was separate from the MoFT. After March 1982, they were combined into MOFERT (对外经济贸易部), now MOFCOM (商务部). Both of these were—and remain—separate from the MoFA (外事部).
20. Interview 11BJ01D, November 19, 2011.
21. Interview 11LY01C, November 16, 2011.
22. These matters were far more commonly parsed together through indirect means, such as the showing of previously banned movies, like *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (movies flown in weekly from China were the primary form of entertainment for Chinese workers and embassy staff).
23. Because of the lack of skilled Cambodian workers, China had to send its own skilled worker corps as well as technicians to Democratic Kampuchea.
24. Interview 11LY01C, November 16, 2011.
25. Interview 11LY01B, November 15, 2001.
26. Sonn and Locard (2007, 31).

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27. Sonn and Locard (2007, 33).
 28. Wetterhahn (2001).
 29. Interview 11BJ01A, October 16, 2011.
 30. Interview 11BJ01A, October 16, 2011.
 31. Interview 11LY02, November 15, 2011.
 32. Interview 11LY01B, November 15, 2001.
 33. Meeting Minutes from the Second Meeting of the DK Council of Ministers, May 31, 1976 (document on file at the Documentation Center of Cambodia).
 34. Materials associated with Interviews 11BJ01A-D.
 35. Materials associated with Interviews 11BJ01A-D.
 36. Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, Closing Order of Case File No.: 002/19-09-2007-ECCC-OCIJ, p. 24.
 37. Materials associated with Interviews 11BJ01A-D.
 38. Materials associated with Interviews 11BJ01A-D.
 39. Materials associated with Interviews 11BJ01A-D.
 40. Materials associated with Interviews 11BJ01A-D.
 41. Materials associated with Interviews 11BJ01A-D.
 42. Materials associated with Interviews 11BJ01A-D.
 43. Materials associated with Interviews 11BJ01A-D.

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