

Researching Sino-Cambodian Relations: Some Personal Reflections

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Note: The views below are the personal opinions of the author and in no way represent the opinions of Human Rights Watch.

I have been asked to share some reflections on the challenge of researching Sino-Cambodian relations in China, particularly with regard to the era before the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). The bulk of the research for my dissertation and book, *China, Cambodia, and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence* (Columbia University Press 2009), drew on both interviews and archival sources. I will first discuss here the eighty-plus interviews conducted for this project.

My initial goal was not just to find out why Chinese policy makers had pursued the choices they made; it was also to ascertain why they had not chosen other options that, in some senses, might have been more expedient or efficient. So the interviews had to be long and detailed, and I needed interviewees who would be able to remember not only what they chose to do but what their other options had been. As I formally started this research in Beijing in August 2002, it became clear that finding people with that ability, willingness, and recall—between twenty and forty years after the fact—was going to be difficult.

The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) does not make it very easy to know which diplomats served at which posts during particular periods of time. There are gazettes of MFA personnel, although those were published only sporadically until the late 1980s, so I depended almost entirely on retired diplomats I had previously met to introduce me to their former colleagues, as well as on a few associations of retired diplomats. The latter in particular turned out to be an invaluable conduit. Many of these people were extremely generous with their connections and their time; arguably one of my best research days included lunch with a half

dozen retired diplomats who had served across Southeast Asia between roughly 1960 and 1980—lunch went on for four hours as they reminisced.

In some instances the spouses or grown children of the retired diplomats assisted in their discussions with me. While I did not feel it appropriate to cite information provided by family members, some of their descriptions of key political players or of life as a Chinese diplomatic family provided important contextual information about the circumstances in which these people had worked.

One inherent challenge of interviews, of course, is that it can be hard to know whether the stories people are telling you are the truth, particularly when those stories concern unpleasant events about which your interviewees clearly still have strong feelings, or when you challenge or probe their stories for inconsistencies. In some ways, the conversations were made easier because I was asking for a frame of reference—why people had chosen *X* rather than *Y*—but even in extremely polite, naïve, graduate-student-sounding Chinese, it was hard to avoid the implied subtext. Some were extremely defensive, particularly on the subject of Chinese state support to the Khmer Rouge; others were not shy about saying it had been a terrible decision. Two of those I interviewed from this period were clearly very upset to be discussing their time in Cambodia in the mid-1970s; one of them broke down crying and could not finish. A few other interviewees decided mid-conversation that I must be an agent of the United States government sent to gather damning details about Chinese policy; despite this erroneous assumption none halted the interview.

But, remarkably, virtually all of those I interviewed that year—about sixty people who had served in Southeast Asia at some time between 1950 and 2000—were able to provide quite a bit of detail about how they and the Chinese government perceived the situation and players in Cambodia and the region, and why they chose the policies they did. I feel genuinely privileged to have heard about their lives and experiences, which had been tied up with some of the most pivotal events for China in the post–World War II era. One of the other challenges was relying on people as sources: the last of the only four people I interviewed who had actually served in the Chinese embassy in Phnom Penh during Democratic Kampuchea died in 2009.

Archival sources proved no less challenging. There is, of course, the reality that a great deal of information remains in archives maintained by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other Chinese government agencies and is almost totally inaccessible even to diplomats; that

information might easily rebut much of what I and others now think we know. To some extent I tried in interviews to hedge against this possibility by asking about how people had reported back to Beijing or recorded discussions, and in a few instances my informants shared copies of documents that demonstrated general consistency between what they were telling me and what had been recorded at the time. But who knows what the official records actually say? I stand in awe of those scholars, such as Chen Jian, who have managed to get access to this kind of documentation. I also encourage others to try to find this sort of documentation in provincial Academies of Social Science archives, or, if one is very lucky, in the possession of various Cambodian-Chinese Friendship Association offices outside of Phnom Penh.

In the early 2000s, even top-notch academic institutions like Beijing University and the National (Beijing) Library remained poorly funded and hampered by rudimentary cataloging systems. They were computerized, but also quirky: I will never forget the first time I entered “Jianpuzhai” (the Chinese name for Cambodia) into the catalog at the Beijing University Library and got a reply of “no entries.” In addition, what one finds in the catalogs is rarely matched by what is on the shelves. So for key journals, including those focusing on Southeast Asia or those published by the MFA, for example, I simply went through every edition ever published looking for references to Cambodia. While this had some advantages—it was a particularly good way to discern political trends—it was also enormously time consuming.

Sorting out what ought to have been reasonably objective information, such as aid shipments, was and still is notoriously difficult. Some statistics are available, but they are published by different agencies for different time periods and cover different projects. Moreover, announcements about any given package were often reported several times, making it easy to overestimate the actual amounts. Suffice it to say that it is something of a relief to see the frustrations I experienced over a decade ago with respect to Cambodia offered up now about the much-discussed topic of Chinese aid to Africa—I take minor reassurance in the fact that these difficulties were not just a function of my own incompetence.

Finally, trying to gather data and construct an objective narrative about events from sources subject to extreme political pressure presented its own limitations. Some who write about China’s involvement in Southeast Asia in the 1960s and 1970s seem to overlook what was going on in China at the time, and one is starkly reminded of why this is the case when given access to rooms of old editions of Chinese academic journals on Southeast Asia. There are editions

through mid-1966, then a few in 1968 and 1970, then virtually none until 1977 or 1978. I came to find the journal numbers a depressing indication: even if no journals had been published, the later editions bore the numbers as if the journal had been consistently published, making it easy to determine just how much knowledge had been lost. One or two of the best Chinese observers of political developments in Southeast Asia—who cannot have been more than forty when writing in the 1960s—did not publish again after 1968.

It is my hope that a number of these realities have changed and that a description of these difficulties will not dissuade people from doing further work; rather, I hope it will help future scholars to surmount the challenges. The pre-UNTAC era remains an extraordinarily interesting chapter in modern history that deserves ongoing attention.

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