

Cambodia Watching Down Under: A Thirty-Year Retrospective

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ABSTRACT—: With *Cambodia Watching Down Under* published by the Institute of Asian Studies then under the direction of Dr. Khien Theeravit at a time when the push for conflict resolution to the “Cambodia problem” reached a critical mass, three decades later this article looks back at the reception and impact of the book in a double sense. First, the question is posed as to the relevance of the book already made partly redundant by the signing of the landmark Paris Peace Agreements on Cambodia of October 23, 1991, several months after publication. Second, the article reflects upon the major thesis of the book around ideological distortions carried in the western (Australian) media in reporting on such conflict situations as Cambodia and, with reference to book reviews, commentaries, etc., leading into an attempt to gauge how this thesis has been received practically down to the present (inter alia, offering didactic lessons for a younger generation of scholars, news gatherers, and media practitioners seeking to enter this field wherever they are).

Keywords : Cambodia, Australia, media, scholarship, promotion-reception-impact

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Introduction

In October 2021, the 30th anniversary of the Paris Peace Agreements on Cambodia was celebrated at various sites or fora, deservedly, as it brought into being the process leading to a United Nations intervention in Cambodia, refugee resettlement, the creation of a relatively peaceful atmosphere and the conduct of elections, albeit flawed, down to the present political outcome around the authoritarian Hun Sen regime but with the monarchy restored. While the Vietnamese-installed People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) setup could take credit for rolling back the rump Democratic Kampuchea (DK) regime to the jungle and liberating the country from one kind of tyranny, it still was not at peace. Notably, DK still held a seat in the United Nations and with its army by far the strongest component in the so-called Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) conjoining, respectively, the Khmer Rouge (KR) faction, a Sihanoukist faction, and forces loyal to the elder Cambodian statesman, Son Sann coming under the banner of the **Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF)** (and with each faction supporting armed forces and camp followers residing along the Thai border, of which the DK or Khmer Rouge faction was militarily dominant).

Located 48 kilometers inside eastern Thailand, Sa Kao refugee camp was set up in October 1979 with Thai authorization and United Nations support, accommodating a large proportion of Khmer Rouge and dependents. Later that year Khao-I-Dang, located 20 kilometers north of Aranyaprathet was opened but still under Khmer Rouge domination and with a camp population rising to over 180,000 in March 1980. Such camps included Nong Chan set up in 1983 just inside the northwestern Cambodian border and a staging ground for the KPNLF. Established in January 1985, Site II, 70 kilometers northeast of Aranyaprathet and 4 kilometers from the Cambodian border was then the largest refugee camp in Southeast Asia, with a camp population rising to over 198,000 between 1989 and 1991, pending repatriation of remaining refugees to Cambodia in mid-1993 and with many having departed for new homes in the United States, Australia

and elsewhere.

In July 1991 or three months prior to the Paris Agreements, *Cambodia Watching Down Under* (CWDU) was published by the Institute of Asian Studies (IAS), then under the direction of Dr. Khien Theeravit.² With a focus on Australia and Australian politicians and media reporting on Cambodia, the authors sought to explain how the Australian domestic debate on Cambodia was conditioned by domestic politics although at the same time not ignoring the international setting. Arguably, CWDU was the first and only book published during this crucial period to endorse an internationally brokered solution. Press reporting aside, it would only be years later that dedicated book on the Paris Peace Conference and process appeared (Lizée 1999).

To present the chapter rollout in CWDU and with the titles eloquent of the general content, Chapter 1 [Gunn] was titled, “The Anglo-Saxon Democracy and the Southeast Asian Neutral: Australia and Cambodia (1950-1975).” Chapter 2 [Lee and Gunn] was titled, “The Making of a ‘New Standard Consensus;’ The Vietnam War’s Cambodia Legacy and Australian Media Politics [Part One].” This chapter was matched by Chapter 3 [Lee], “The Sideshow that won’t go away: The Vietnam War’s Cambodia Legacy and Australian Media Politics” [Part Two]. Then followed Chapter 4 [Lee], “The Politics of Aid to Indochina;” Chapter 5 [Gunn], “Australia and the Cambodian Genocide Question;” and Chapter 6 [Lee]; “Reflections on Changes in the Kampuchean Stalemate (1986-1989): A Return to the ‘Killing Fields’ or ‘Marketplace’ Solution? The book concluded with an Epilogue [Lee and Gunn], “The Evans Plan on Cambodia (1990): An Australian Solution?”

2 Gunn, Geoffrey C. and Jefferson Lee, *Cambodia Watching Down Under: A Critical View of Western Scholarship on Cambodia since 1975* (IAS monograph No. 047, Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 1991). In writing this article I acknowledge receipt of documents from Mr. Jefferson Lee (Order of Timor), some of them reaching back 30 years. I also welcome his more recent comments upon Michael Vickery’s writings which I have partly taken on board.

The geopolitical context was the push back with Western and ASEAN endorsement of the CGDK against the PRK at a time when tens of thousands of Vietnamese occupation forces still remained inside Cambodia. With Thailand hosting hundreds of thousands of Cambodian refugees and with the component armies of the CGDK engaged in armed resistance against Vietnamese occupation forces, the “Cambodia question” had long been stalemated in the UN especially as the positions of CGDK and its backers, notably the Western countries alongside the Association of Southeast Asian Nations versus that of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam supported by the Soviet Union were widely divergent. Various peace initiatives had been hosted by, variously, Japan, Indonesia, and the US (especially initiatives taken by Congressman Stephen Solarz around demilitarization and neutralization). Notably the second Jakarta Informal Meeting (JIM) held on 19-21 February 1989 was attended by representatives of the four Cambodia factions along with Vietnam which – importantly - accepted the notion of an “international control mechanism” for Cambodia. One of the more studied plans coming to the fore was the “Evans Plan” named after the Australian Labor Foreign Minister, Gareth Evans, itself drawing upon the Solarz initiative. With the question of Khmer Rouge disarmament as demanded by Hanoi a major sticking point on one side, and the withdrawal of Vietnamese forces a crucial demand on the part of the CGDK, it was obvious that the matter could only be solved by a major international conference. Initially, a Conference on Cambodia was convened in Paris at the invitation of the French government and held in two sessions, the first from 30 July to 30 August 1989, and the second from 21 to 23 October 1991. At the first session of the Conference, Cambodia was represented by the four Cambodian Parties and with Prince Norodom Sihanouk, representing Cambodia at the second session of the Conference.

With Cambodia notorious as an arena where engaged “experts” first committed themselves to a position, say in endorsing the Khmer Rouge-led guerrilla struggle against the Western-backed Khmer Republic (the “Lon Nol regime”), endorsing DK once installed, embracing the liberators, only to change

their minds, can it be said that the authors of CWDU fell into the pattern? Or contrariwise, could the broader debate such as engaged nation-state actors be framed around competing political ideologies, namely communist totalitarianism versus rules-based order or even liberal democracy matched by electoral politics? Although Gunn and Lee were never “canonized” (or damned) as part of the Standard Total Academic View (STAV) of Cambodia as pronounced in the widely circulated University of California, Berkeley dissertation written by Sophal Ear (1995), still this essay seeks to refute any such inuendo or association such as appear in some reviews and discussion.³ Moreover, as this essay will demonstrate, contrary to some loose writing and “hearsay,” CWDU never saluted a Khmer Rouge (KR) victory in April 1975 nor offered a defense of the DK regime as did some of the STAV scholars (and they are named below). With one chapter (Gunn) canvassing an independent genocide tribunal, CWDU hardly touted a KR revival and return to power outside of the CGDK, as some sources mischievously alleged. With CWDU getting behind an internationally guaranteed peace process as with an epilogue on an “Australian solution,” a reference to the timely “Evans Plan” calling for a UN-backed interim government in Cambodia, the book hardly endorsed a made-in-Hanoi solution (or a KR restoration).

Thirty years on, this article seeks to analyze how CWDU was received at the time of its publication, namely in the months

3 In March 1978, writing on Cambodia under the auspices of the Department of Government, University of Queensland, the author produced an essay titled, “The Vietnam-Kampuchea Conflict: An Autopsy.” Although unpublished, would it have merited “canonization” under Sophal Ear’s criteria? As a classroom exercise, I doubt it. With its testing of five propositions, variously history, preservation of territorial integrity and sovereignty, historical ideological competition, intra-Party conflict in DK, and war of proxy, concluding with the statement “with each having relative value in understanding the conflict,” this was not a polemic nor was it semiotics. Sources range from Burchett and Caldwell mostly on history, to Rousset, Leifer, Lacouture, T.M. Carney, R.M. Smith, to the journalist Nayan Chanda, and with at least ten journal cites including Vietnamese and Chinese. As my essay noted, I was then unable to procure a copy of Ponchaud (1976) or Porter and Hildebrand (1976). I was then ignorant of the Sydney-based *News from Kampuchea* which first surfaced in April 1977.

prior to the Peace Agreements and, latterly, in the wake of the Agreements and through the years of UN intervention and even down unto the present. This is not just a narcissistic exercise, but it also seeks to set the record straight against misrepresentations of the truth entering some reviews and commentaries. At a minimum, a 30-year take should offer some detachment, just as the article acknowledges a shift over time from attention upon the “covert” political agenda of CWDU to the “overt” thesis embodied in the book around the ideological distortions created by media reporting in a conflict situation. This can be seen with the very first reviews of CWDU canvassing geopolitical issues, as with Vickery (1992) and Rowley (1992), pending a revival of interest in the media framing of events and ideological distortions as with Clarke (1999) and, as with Wijers (2018), engaging the question of “how geopolitics helped frame media reporting.” First the article discusses the reception and impact of the book, especially with reference to Australia. Second, the academic reception of CWDU is canvassed finding some less than academic and misleading commentary in an ideologically charged environment, whereas a final section seeks to track over a longer time frame – practically down until the present - a revived interest in the media theme consonant with the subtitle to CWDU, namely “A Critical View of Western Scholarship and Media on Cambodia.”

I/ Reception and Impact

One thing is for sure, after a certain burst of attention one or two years after publication, normal practice for an academic monograph, CWDU, began to fade as measured by reviews, citations, mentions, or commentaries. In any case, its shelf life practically expired within months as diplomatic and media attention switched to major issues attending the Paris Agreements and, in later years, as even Cambodia dropped off world media attention. Nevertheless, I would contend that the impact of the book was greater than the number of citations especially as it fell into the hands of policymakers, aid workers, academics, and diplomats at the right time.

Bangkok was strategic as a place of publication of works on Indochina and with IAS well known to the author as an academic center of excellence and with a vigorous publication program that would come to include monographs on Indochina.⁴ In fact, returning to Bangkok from a visit to Vientiane in February 1981 at a time when I was researching my doctoral dissertation around the broad themes of “Vietnamese communism and Lao nationalism” submitted to Monash University, Australia - and at a juncture when Laos was no less isolated to the outside world than Cambodia - I was invited by Prof. Khien Theeravit to present a seminar at IAS, duly attended by senior students, faculty, and local Thai media.⁵

In retrospect, it is credible that in the period even prior to the first academic review, every foreign embassy in Bangkok with a watching brief on Indochina would or should have had a copy. The diplomatic corps during that period was the prime audience, not academics, and not journalists. Likely as well, arriving UN personnel and aid workers sought to acquire a copy (just as arriving UN staff in East Timor ten years later sought to acquire books on that nation) (e.g., Gunn and Lee 1994; Gunn 1997). According to the University of New South Wales (UNSW), Special Collections record, the Australian Force Commander of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) from 1992 to 1993, General John Sanderson, held a copy of CWDU as well and it resides in his archive.⁶

The Australian Promotion of CWDU

As announced in the official UNSW bulletin, UNIKEN (27 September 1991), on 17 October 1991 a staff-student seminar

4 Such works would include Phuwadol Songprasert and Noppawan Chongwatana, *Thailand: A First Asylum Country for Indochinese Refugees* (IAS Monograph No.038, 1988).

5 I then published the general arguments presented at this seminar in the local English language media. See author, “Laos: More negative than positive perspective abound,” *The Nation* (11 February, 1981, p.16).

6 Guide to the Papers of John Murray Sanderson [MSS 359], University of New South Wales, Special Collections. Box 26, Item 143. <https://www.unsw.adfa.edu.au/special-collections/guide-papers-john-murray-sanderson-mss-359>

was scheduled by the UNSW Law School to debate the book bringing together representatives of the Student Representative Council (SRC), along with legal experts, historians, and political scientists. Still, it would appear that book launches in Melbourne and elsewhere, such as discussed below, would have more impact in promoting CWDU in Australia to a general public, not excluding public figures. Meantime the SRC issued a statement deploring the move in Australia to privatize education and to sideline Asian studies simultaneous with a push to develop business links with Asia. The statement also commented upon the irony that, in the absence of press interest in Australia, the authors of CWDU were obliged to look offshore Australia to Asia to actually publish a book exposing the “dirty laundry” of Australia’s educational, political and media links with Asia. The statement also introduced one of the CWDU authors (Lee) as the editor of the UNSW student newspaper, *Tharunka* (1974), and with 20 years support of the UNSW student union and with himself a student union councilor from 1972-76 (UNSW (SRC) Report, 1991).

Outside of UNSW, the book was launched on 27 October in Sydney, on 23 November in Melbourne, with the Canberra launch slated for 5 December. As Noël St. Clair Deschamps (1908-2005), former Australian ambassador to Cambodia (1962-69) commented at the Melbourne launch (23 November 1991):

As the authors of this book show, Australia has become a major centre of Cambodian studies and ‘Cambodia Watching’ at many levels – academic, political and journalistic, and more recently among the aid organisations and the churches... This book deals with the blossoming of interest and study of Cambodia, its welfare, its personality, its history... and shows the roles these various strands have played, and on occasion, the reversal of opinion on significant elements of the Cambodian tragedy and Australian-Cambodian relations... This is a valuable book, covering the past 30 years... to clarify complex events, explain the origin and development of specific Australian opinion, and the formation and discarding of orthodoxy and consensus

– particularly in the media... In building up their analysis the authors are scrupulously fair to alternative opinions... and present...remarkable in-depth analysis of the media and ongoing events... (Lee, Brochure: Press release, undated).

As Richard Browinoski, former ambassador to Vietnam between 1983-85 and head of Radio Australia (1990-91) (and later in his career a professor in media and communications, in Canberra and, then at Sydney University), stated during the Melbourne launch of 23 November 1991.

What this book is about is media interpretations and events in Cambodia...The authors have a fascinating theme through this book. But where do they stand on the issues? ... Cambodia Watching helps me to understand the media debate/... My impression is, it's not about the issues, but about the media, how they represent the issues and the effect they had... For any scholar of press relations it's an important book (Lee, Brochure: Press release, undated).

At the Sydney launch, as one of the authors (Lee 1991) stated, "We reflect with some acidity on the whole gamut of Australian journalism, aid workers, refugee community leaders, academic, diplomats and assorted trouble shooters who have sought to enter the political stage of Australia's contribution to the Cambodian peace dilemma. We expect some flak in return." As Lee recalls, his major publicity coup was to sell a copy of CWDU to Senator Evans at the October 1991 dinner at UNSW to launch the locally hosted and newly created Asia-Australia Institute, a "think tank" and forum which, until closing its doors in 2004, sought to advance Australia's image in Asia. He also sold copies to such other politicians engaging the Cambodia question (Senators Schacht and Valentine). Moving on to mid-1994, and with the stock of CWDU running out in Australia, Lee produced a pamphlet hailing the book as "too hot for some Australian 'academic' publishing houses to handle," a "collector's item" and "backgrounder to the current peacekeeping operations by Australia" (Lee, 1994). It is true that, for whatever reason UNSW Press declined to publish or co-sponsor the work – notwithstanding

my former status at this institution as lecturer in Australian-Asian relations (1985-87) - leaving to IAS the complex task of editing an English language text.

II/ Academic Reception of CWDU

Chronologically, the first scholarly comment upon CWDU appeared in the US publication, *Indochina Chronology* (July-September 1991) describing the work as “serious and well done,” notably in seeking to sort out the “Watchers” or the “walking wounded” academics, journalists and think tankers who endorsed Pol Pot, and now troubled from living with the fact. As the review continued, “It makes embarrassing reading for most of the Watchers, dismaying reading for the rest of us...” Linked with the late Douglas Pike, bane of the anti-war movement in the United States, *Indochina Chronology* was fast off the mark, and every subsequent commentary, review, or citation follows on from and does not precede the Paris Peace Agreements. The first academic book review of CWDU to appear in Australia was that by Derek Burke writing in the *South Australia Institute of Teachers Journal* in December 1991. Besides lauding the book’s usefulness to students as with its “interdisciplinary” character and range of source material, it laments only the small coverage given to the demise of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and its impact on Cambodia and Vietnam, and I concede that this was true (Burke 1991).

The Michael Vickery Worldview

With Michael Vickery (d. 2017), a seasoned Cambodia expert known for his linguistic skills and deep knowledge of the country, spanning prehistory and modern politics, his corpus of studies has, undeniably, deeply enriched my own understandings of modern and classical Cambodia. With his commentary appearing in June 1992, in a newsletter issued by the Anthropology Department of the Australian National University, titled “Cambodia After the ‘Peace’,” it is clear that he was writing after the Paris

Peace Conference. As indicated, the article originally appeared as a “samizdat” dated December 1991 and was reprinted with permission. In an age prior to web blogs, Vickery was hyperactive in circulating his views in multiple forms and fora. As he wrote, “Read carefully, the new peace agreements seem designed to ensure further destabilization, rather than lasting peace.” Going on to denigrate the Australian “Redbook” (or Evans Plan) of February 1990, “whose authors thanked U.S. Congressman Stephen Solarz and Prince Norodom Sihanouk.” In a singular turn of phrase, as Vickery remarked, “No more ardent enemies of Phnom Penh, outside of the Khmer Rouge leadership, could be imagined.” Concluding this section, he wrote that the argument presented by Gunn and Lee in CWDU, namely, that all moves by Australian politicians regarding Cambodia have been conditioned by domestic politics” should be heeded. While Vickery adroitly summed up one of the core arguments of CWDU, and the authors should be grateful, he also demonstrated that he could twist words.

In a review published in September 1992 in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (JSEAS), Vickery made the most of friendship with the then journal editor to double or even triple the standard word count for a review allowing him to extend to colorful language, trivia, and extended detours sufficient to announce his publications and letters-to-editors. Yet, as a review it skips entire chapters as, for example, Chapter 5 on “Australia and the Genocide Question” (Gunn), and the Epilogue on the Evans Plan (Gunn and Lee). As Lee pointed out in a communication to the author, the problem with the Vickery review is that he ignored the existence of the CGDK entirely. Yet, matching the salience of CGDK to the Paris Peace Agreements, CWDU includes 69 mentions, ASEAN (86 mentions), and Evans and his peace plan (200 mentions). Vickery is so fixated upon defense of the PRK that he ignored Prince Sihanouk (yet we have 202 mentions). As Vickery concedes, CWDU “is not entirely unhelpful,” although not especially to those unfamiliar with Australian media and Labor Party politics. This is true. CWDU is an Australian book published in Asia. As Vickery then declaims, “There are really two themes in the book, one overt, one covert.” As he continued,

“The more important covert theme is not ‘Cambodia Watching’, nor analysis of the media, but the illegitimacy of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), since 1989 State of Cambodia (SOC), and Vietnam’s overthrow of its predecessor Democratic Kampuchea (DK).” This is not surprising because Vickery himself had emerged as the leading Western defender of the Vietnamese-backed regime in Phnom Penh and he defended this vigorously. As he adverted, “For Gunn and Lee the legitimate government of Cambodia is still DK, that is the ‘Khmer Rouge’” though “The point is never argued but assumed as self-evident.” Yes, it was evident that, however controversial or even immoral, DK held the UN seat and without it there would never have been an international settlement. The second theme, Vickery adverted, was “the overt one,” namely that the Australian media, and scholarship was dominated by a pro-PRK tendency, “to the extent that DK could not get a fair hearing in Australia, nor be restored to its legitimate place as government of Cambodia.” It is true that in some circles, a pro-PRK voice found its way into newspapers etc., but it is preposterous to make claims that CWDU “barracked” for DK or China. What CWDU does show is that pro-Australia Labor Party scholars, aid workers and journalists were somewhat successful as a “lobby” in tilting the Canberra government towards the PRK, albeit without falling out with the US-ASEAN consensus. (p.39). As some have described, this was a middle-of-the road position. Vickery is annoyed that he could not place pro-PRK articles in the Australian press because “right-wing extremists, had regular columnists in the major newspapers.” Looking back after the Paris Peace Agreements, as Vickery crowed, the authors of CWDU should be “embarrassed” since the Vietnamese have withdrawn, and the DK has gotten the best possible deal out of the peace agreements “and the goal of the Australian, and other, leftist supporters of the PRK, straightforward recognition of that government, has been defeated.” As he continued, “The peace agreement which was signed in October 1991, to the extent it was influenced by Australia, represents a victory for Gunn’s and Lee’s friends; and the Australian influence is real.” Backhandedly then, CWDU is awarded honors for pushing ahead the Peace Proposal. The authors of CWDU could not better wish for a better accolade.

Condemnation by Hearsay: Dan Duffy writing in Vietnam Generation

Chronologically, the next quasi review of CWDU appeared in April 1992. Written and published by Dan Duffy in his Irving Stone-style broadsheet, *Vietnam Generation* (bearing the names of many prominent American academicians on its masthead), it mixes fact with fiction, especially as he never saw a copy of the book, although likely receiving a few faxed pages from an Australian contact red-ringed for his reference, leading him to pronounce, “My SEASS contacts all tell me that they hear that the book is a Maoist Pol Pot tract. None of my contacts had actually seen the book.” Clearly such an admission would invalidate any attempt to review a book. As he continues in search of evidence of a Maoist tract, “But I can see that the authors rail against ‘the anti-Maoist left in the U.S.’ and what they call ‘the left-liberal Washington Post.’” As Duffy continues in an attempt to marginalize our authorial integrity or credentials, “It’s interesting here that neither author claims to have ever visited Cambodia, or to speak or read any of the languages of Indochina.”⁷ But if he didn’t read the book, how did he know, and did it matter anyway for a book on Australian politics and media? As he carries on, “[Laura] Summers and Khien don’t speak Khmer either. I’m told.” Some hearsay! Some malicious innuendo! Describing Khien Theeravit as “Thailand’s leading Khmer Rouge supporter” and a misnamed Summers, the then leading UK expert on Cambodia going on to produce a prodigious corpus of writing and analysis on Cambodia, “a Democratic Kampuchea supporter from the United Kingdom,”

7 My own understanding of events playing out on the Vietnam-Cambodia border following on the installation of the DK regime, namely deadly cross-border incursions by KR forces drew upon my interviews in mid-1976 with Vietnamese refugees recently arrived in Songkhla having departed Phú Quốc Island by boat. Related to me in French, their reports were particularly graphic of destructive impacts upon local communities – events only unraveled by journalists years later. In their own words, the Phú Quốc refugees fled Cambodian communism not Vietnamese. But, unlike any of the STAV group and perhaps an experience only shared by several journalists, in mid-1974 I witnessed close hand a devastating KR raid on a village in Seam Reap province, an attack that left no structure intact with the effect of driving surviving villagers out of the district (see Gunn and Lee 1991: 35; Gunn 2018: 7-8).

Duffy turns ignorant and slanderous. As he carries on, “DK is the team with the piles of little skulls on their jerseys. To reply in kind – and apologies if there are good Americans - many Khmer would probably retort that the US is the team which wears bomb insignia on their lapels (and they would not have to read William Shawcross (1979), *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon, and the Destruction of Cambodia* to find out why).

Rowley's Lobby Analysis in the Australian Journal of International Affairs

The Melbourne-based academic Kelvin Rowley, co-author with the late Grant Evans of the pro-Hanoi work, *Red Brotherhood at War* (1987), was the next to enter this space with his review of CWDU in the *Australian Journal of International Affairs* (May, 1992). As he interpreted, Gunn and Lee claimed to conduct an exercise in “deconstructing and de-mythologising” the Cambodia problem as it is presented in the mass media, asserting as well that their study provides evidence for “a theory of dominant ideological framework in capitalist democracies linking media and state.” In fact, as Rowley asserts, “the book is an attempt to rationalise the failure of the Khmer Rouge to fight their way back to power in Cambodia.” [This is a mischievous assertion and can nowhere be demonstrated from inside the text or any other of our writings.] More generally, he asserted, “Gunn and Lee use the idea of ‘media analysis’ as a way of carrying out a political polemic while desperately avoiding dealing with what actually happened in Cambodia. Misinterpreting media analysis/knowledge production, he declared, “Semiotics replace empirics.” As he carried on, “Their fantasy about the Australian Cambodia-watching Lobby is an attempt to conserve the deeper fantasy-world of academic Maoism.” Rowley’s “Lobby” written with a capital L is a fiction, however, especially as we range widely over a diverse group of “Cambodia Watchers” including such non-Australians as Vickery, Chomsky, and Shawcross. To be sure, as Rowley explains, the sub-groupings of journalists, academics and aid workers are “not mutually exclusive” and include the Canberra intelligence community and even right-wing newspaper columnists and

other opinion-makers, just as there are many crossovers among them. But, pace Rowley, this circle cannot be described as a single monolithic “Lobby” targeting Canberra. In fact, we would be hard put to describe members of the pro-DK News from Kampuchea group as a “lobby.” CWDU does mention an “aid lobby” but that is perennial, all NGOs lobby for cash or influence (p.186). In fact, the “Cambodia Watchers” pushed all ways. On another tack, Rowley claims that Gunn and Lee lamented Pol Pot’s overthrow as “Under his rule Cambodia was breaking out of the capitalist world-system. When the Vietnamese invaded in 1979, it was to re-impose the imperatives of the world system on Cambodia.” This argument comes close to the views expressed by some of the STAV scholars, as named below. CWDU set down no such interpretations of DK rule, much less economic blueprint (although such as analysis does point a spotlight at some of the sweatshops feeding global supply chains in Phnom Penh today). As Rowley also acknowledges, Gunn and Lee “modestly” leave their ideological framework, “largely unstated.” Well, that is good political science but the subtext chapter by chapter reveals a concern for a peaceful outcome via international intervention, an outcome that sees the rebirth of an autonomous Cambodia, justice via an international tribunal, and nowhere was CWDU averse to the restoration of the monarchy. As Rowley noted, CWDU carried a preface by Khien Theeravit, misleadingly - and maliciously - described as “an academic defender of Thai foreign policy when Thailand was championing the Khmer Rouge cause.” Such a description comes close to personal denigration, an *ad hominem* attack. All we can say is that Thailand in concert with the CGDK defended its sovereignty. Finally, as Rowley declaims, “Gunn and Lee express a mystical faith in the ‘unstoppable’ power of revolutionary nationalism in Asia.” Yes, one or other of the two authors is a scholar of revolutionary nationalism in Asia, but that is all.

Sophal Ear and the Khmer Rouge Canon 1975-1979

Writing in an unpublished University of California honors dissertation (albeit given an extra half-life with the advent of digitization), as Sophal Ear (1996) explains, having first read

Malcolm Caldwell, the British academic murdered in Phnom Penh on December 23, 1978, soon after meeting Pol Pot, he realized that an entire “community” of Cambodian scholars served as the Khmer Rouge’s “most effective apologists in the West.” True, but however misguided or misled in their understanding of KR behavior leading into the evocation of “killing fields” as was already being exposed by some media, they were also critical of US policy reaching back through the “Vietnam War” and so they should have been. These he labels STAV scholars, and he names them; Summers, Caldwell, Hildebrand and Porter, Chomsky and Herman, Chandler (“briefly”), and Kiernan (“deservedly”).

As Ear (1996) declaimed, three works reveal how different facets of the STAV have previously been explored, namely, the first, an essay by William Shawcross (1983); the second, an essay by Stephen J. Morris published in the *National Interest* (Summer 1989); and the third, Gunn and Lee’s CWDU. As explained, Shawcross focused on the Chomsky-Herman thesis, Morris tackled Cornell University’s ties to the Khmer Rouge, and Gunn and Lee offered an “exhaustive though curiously insensitive view of the Australian connection to Democratic Kampuchea.” Whatever that comment means, Ear also cited CWDU to explain how, following the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1979, many of these activists, scholars, and academics were forced to choose between supporting the Vietnamese communists or DK, or what Gunn and Lee termed the “two-sided switch,” including the split within the left-liberal camp in the US at an even earlier date. In particular, Ear cites CWDU on the Sydney-based News from Kampuchea, noting as well the Gunn and Lee proposition that News was published “as a catalyst to the Barron-Paul book *Murder of a Gentle Land* (1977),” described as “the first English-language book to lambaste the Khmer revolution for its brutal excesses.” As Ear fills in, with News endeavoring “to deconstruct distortions and bias in western press coverage” on DK, it was joined by Chomsky and Herman in letters-to-the-editor, etc. In the Conclusion to Chapter 5, as Ear writes, the early works of the STAV scholars are today “remembered only in a footnote.” Though “the standard total academic view they shared cannot be

forgotten,” their mistake was to romanticize peasant revolution without asking the peasants themselves. Ear is setting a high moral tone, but in chiding Gunn and/or Lee for describing the “*Killing Fields*” movie produced in 1984 as “banal” or “lacking originality, freshness” [Websters] as opposed to what was already universally known among Cambodia Watchers almost ten years after the events it invokes, he cannot have read chapter 5 of CWDU (Australian and the Genocide Question) at all where I assert that “auto-genocide became a characteristic of the regime especially after 1977” (p.196). To parody Rowley, in this discussion, “Semiotics replace empirics.” Unabashed, in a prefatory note Ear offers thanks for assistance to, inter alia, Kiernan, Summers, and especially, Chandler, or precisely the STAV scholars he takes down. Still, it is a good read.

III/ The Turn to Media Analysis/Knowledge Production Analysis

With Lee (1995) going on to publish *Reporting Cambodia in the Australian Media: 'Heroic' Journalism or 'Neo-Colonial' Distortions?*, he also helped to redirect interest back to CWDU's subtitle, namely media analysis/knowledge production. Such is evident in the Hong Kong University dissertation on the Cambodia conflict of 1979-91 produced by Judith Clarke (1999), an Australian journalist who covered the resistance from Bangkok and the border for *Asiaweek*. Going on establish an academic career in Hong Kong, Clarke (1995: 321-24) found that “news tends to follow and reinforce the views of those in those in power until those views change.” News accounts may distort events. Nevertheless, she argues, news and interviews with journalists can be a valuable source for historians just as books written by journalists have a special place as “first drafts of history.” In her dissertation, Clarke (1999: 38) is also concerned with the reporter-source relationship and, crucial to establishing the truth, how facts become news and so setting a (hegemonic) frame a la Gramsci. Specific to Cambodia, Clarke (1999: 15) cites Lee (1995: 48n) on the ideological split besetting journalists covering the conflict and “the study

which follows is to see how they coped.” With clarity, Clarke (1995: 331-32) summed up a major thread in CWDU, namely the way that Australia stood apart from other countries engaging Cambodia insofar as the concerned debate on the issue between left and right reached into the corridors of power. In Australia a left view had primed a number of scholars and journalists as with Wilfred Burchett along with news media to support a PRK-Hanoi view and with the incoming Labor government in 1983 moving Australian policy to the left on Cambodia under foreign minister Bill Hayden (until replaced in this position by Gareth Evans). By the mid-1980s, opposition Liberal Party foreign affairs spokesperson Andrew Peacock had taken up the attack on Hayden. In parallel fashion, the two big newspaper groups in Australia, Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp. and the Fairfax press, had taken opposite sides. From the Australian example, she concludes that, “The ‘hegemonic’ frames imposed by governments can thus be seen to work in the international news that concerns them.”

Having completed a PhD dissertation around refugee studies with reference to Cambodia, D.M. Gea Wijers (2015) went on to produce a book chapter, “Framing Cambodian Affairs: French and American Scholarship, Media and Geopolitics,” published in the edited collection by Albert Tzeng (2018). With Tzeng a theorist of “sociology of knowledge,” overall the book is concerned with social processes of knowledge production in Asian studies as in journals, conferences, and press, back to Orientalism, through the Cold War, and post 9-11. In her chapter, Wijers explains how geopolitics helped frame media reporting on Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese intervention periods. Turning to media portrayals of Cambodia, Wijers (2018: 121) asserts that, “Next to Gunn and Lee’s, *Cambodia Watching Down Under*, that directly addresses the subject, most academic publications only bear indirect reference to the ideological convictions that influenced reporting on Cambodian affairs.” With the obvious exception of Clarke (1999), objectively this is correct. As she asserts, it was the *Killing Fields* movie which provided the definitive evidence of “genocide” [or better, public acceptance of this fact]. Wijers (2018: 122) then goes on to say that, over the years, “fact-

based” reporting as with Kiernan, created a picture of violence orchestrated by “madman” Pol Pot, an “evil leader” and a “unique phenomenon.” Even so, as Wijers (2018: 122-23) declares, it still remains to explain the “uniqueness” of genocide in Cambodia. Striking a critical note, she believes that “auto-genocide” would be a more appropriate description, although also problematic given its criminal associations. In a section titled, “After the Khmer Rouge,” Wijers (2018: 127) approves the Gunn and Lee (actually Chomsky and Herman) contention that by filtering the news, the media were setting the agenda. Again, following the Gunn and Lee analysis, Wijers (2018: 131) declares that, after the [partial] opening of Cambodia to foreign access in 1979, disagreements arose on all sides of the press as to the intentions and “success” of the Khmer Rouge regime and the “true” nature of the genocide and devastation on the ground. Under a section entitled Third Wave Cambodia Reporting (1981-89), Gunn and Lee are again cited to make the point that, “talking about the ‘Cambodia problem’ evolved from the Vietnamese intervention of 1979,” leading into discussion as to which party could best bring post-conflict stability to Cambodia (Wijers 2018: 133). Here she changes pitch to acknowledge that filmmaker-journalist John Pilger was indeed sympathetic to the Vietnamese regime or otherwise he could not have gained access to produce his movie, *Year Zero*. Pace Vickery and especially Rowley, Wijers takes CWDU as a serious text with an important subtext around ideological distortions in media reporting on Cambodia, yet we wonder whether Wijers’ chapter will generate further discussion.

Conclusion

Reading between the lines on the promotion of CWDU in Melbourne, Sydney, and Canberra, then we may say with confidence that the book did give some pause to Australian policymakers on Cambodia in the lead up to the historic Paris Peace Agreements and, as this article has surmised, it may have connected with diplomats in Bangkok and arriving UN workers in Cambodia. In reality, the Canberra government could not ignore the messages conveyed in the book just as they struggled to keep

up with the flow of intelligence and the welter of potted diplomatic summaries alongside news flow. As CWDU also reveals, they wrestled with the moral dilemmas of acting or doing nothing. Yet Australia acted because, to repeat a leitmotiv in CWDU, domestic politics and media push demanded that the government of the day strike a position, however “middle-of-the road” (in the estimation of Judith Clarke). To add a general note, in reviews and commentaries, “Gunn and Lee” are invariably conflated as if the book had one author even though chapter authors are clearly identified as are the two jointly authored chapters. This lapse especially holds for Vickery and Rowley who, contrary to review protocol, evidently found it convenient to extract a single worldview from two authors with different backgrounds and careers with respect to researching and writing on Southeast Asia and Australia. The single exception that comes to light is Tosa Hiroyuki (1993) who, in his Japanese language publication with a focus upon “strategic triangles” as a frame of reference on Cambodian geopolitics, singles out chapter 5 (Gunn) as a source. For that matter, no review or citation looked back on chapter 5 (Gunn) in the first discussion on an extended definition of genocide to include crimes against humanity with reference to Cambodia and the modality of a future UN-backed genocide tribunal such as subsequently transpired in Phnom Penh with the setting up of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia. On a separate tack, with the possible exception of Lizée (1999), no future book or dissertation connected with or looked back upon our first-in-print discussion of the “Evans Plan.” Finally, in a digital age where disinformation competes with the truth, younger media practitioners entering this field may read salutatory lessons out of this retrospective on CWDU especially the importance, as stressed by Clarke, of the reporter-source relationship and, more so than ever, the imperative to verify news, sources, and information.

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