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Chinese in Cambodia

By Caroline Finlay

Foreigners travelling to Phnom Penh in the mid 19th century didn’t find a sleepy Khmer fishing town. Instead, they happened upon thousands of bustling Cantonese traders. Their legacy in the Sino-Khmer population continues as these long settled immigrants dominate the oil and tourism industries and own countless shop fronts in Cambodia’s cities, while newly arrived mainland Chinese invest in garment production and construction.

In the 1800s, French colonials allowed Chinese-run businesses to flourish. William Willmott, a mid-century expert on Chinese communities, claimed the ethnic Chinese controlled 92 percent of Cambodian commerce in the mid 1900s. They traded in urban areas and worked as shopkeepers, moneylenders and traditional healers in rural areas, while Chinese farmers controlled Cambodia’s lucrative Kampot pepper industry.

The golden Sino-Khmer era came to an abrupt end when the Khmer Rouge sent urbanites to the killing fields and the ensuing economic collapse destroyed the businesses of rural Chinese-Khmers. The Vietnamese, who were invaded by China in response to their ousting of the Khmer Rouge, were deeply suspicious of the Sino-Khmer population, and although ethnic Chinese Cambodians made up a tiny fraction of the population of Cambodia, they accounted for half of Cambodian refugees fleeing to the US in the 1980s.

The tides have turned, though, in the wake of Hun Sen’s bloody 1997 coup and the subsequent severing of diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Chinese investment has soared, with Chinese nationals opening up hundreds of garment factories, construction projects and mines, and are often seen by Cambodian businessmen as preferential to Western investors who tend to push human rights issues and transparency.

Ethnic Chinese-Khmers are making a comeback as well, establishing a council of “Oknha,” or Lords, a title purchased from the Cambodian Royal family and often bestowed on Chinese-Khmer businessmen. The two most influential Oknha are Sok Korn, the president of Sokimex, and Sorn Sokna, his vice chairman. Together they control at least 35 percent of Cambodia’s petroleum industry and ticket concessions at the Angkor Wat, among other huge tourism and development projects. New generation Oknha Kith Menh is challenging old attitudes on Westernization and has partnered with Australia’s ANZ bank. He also owns telecommunications company Mobitel and the only legal football gambling outfit in Cambodia, Cambo Six.

In an article published two years ago in The Cambodia Daily, Chinese Chamber of Commerce president in Cambodia, Jimmy Gao, said Chinese investment is “a question of what Cambodia needs now,” and that the Chinese “are suitable to a tough position, because we were so poor 20 years ago,” and acknowledged that Sino-Khmers can act as a bridge between the two communities.

The good has come with the bad, though, as the Chinese mafia is apparently investing in Cambodia, famous for providing foreign tourists with easy access to drugs and sex. In 2004 Pierre Legros, then director of the NGO Acting for Women in Distressing Circumstances, said that the “Malaysian-Chinese mafia” are behind the sex trade in Cambodia, and that “organized crime is applying pressure on the Cambodian government.”

Good or bad, the Chinese are on the rise in Cambodia, and Chinese language study is increasing in Phnom Penh, with the subject recently added to the national curriculum at the university level. As reported in the Phnom Penh Post earlier this summer, the Duan Hoa Chinese School, for primary and secondary students, has 7,000 mostly ethnic Chinese pupils. Ethnic Khmers and Vietnamese also study there “to learn Chinese so they can join the family business or find work in a private company—especially working in factories or in the tourism industry as many Chinese investors are coming to Cambodia now,” school administrator Kim Hean told the paper.
"The Chinese New Year is the busiest time of the year in Phnom Penh because foreigners come to Cambodia from Korea, China and Vietnam to escape the holiday," says Jim Heston, a long-time Phnom Penh resident and bar owner. How much longer they can flee by coming to Cambodia, no one can say.

Caroline Finlay is a writer for Southeastern Globe, an English-language publication in Cambodia, and has also written for Global Voices.

Tags: Cambodia, Sino-Khmer