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# Local Politics in the Migration between Vietnam and Cambodia: Mobility in a Multiethnic Society in the Mekong Delta since 1975

Shimojo Hisashi\*

This paper examines the history of cross-border migration by (primarily) Khmer residents of Vietnam's Mekong Delta since 1975. Using a multiethnic village as an example case, it follows the changes in migratory patterns and control of cross-border migration by the Vietnamese state, from the collectivization era to the early Đổi Mới reforms and into the post-Cold War era. In so doing, it demonstrates that while negotiations between border crossers and the state around the social acceptance ("licit-ness") and illegality of cross-border migration were invisible during the 1980s and 1990s, they have come to the fore since the 2000s. Despite the border being legally closed in the 1980s and 1990s, undocumented migration as a livelihood strategy was rampant due to the porous nature of the border. In the 2000s, the border began to be officially opened to local people and simultaneously function as a political boundary to regulate belonging and identities. The changes in migratory patterns indicate that the mapping and establishment of a national border alone is not enough to etch it in the minds of people, especially minorities who have connections with people in the neighboring country. Rather, a border "hardens" through continuous negotiations between state actors, who become suspicious of influence from a foreign country, and cross-border migrants, who become dependent on the state for their needs.

**Keywords:** cross-border migration, licit-ness, illegality, collectivization era, post-Cold War era, Khmer, Vietnam, Cambodia

## Introduction

This paper examines the history of cross-border migration by (primarily) Khmer residents of Vietnam's Mekong Delta since 1975. Using a multiethnic village in a coastal province of Vietnam as an example case, it follows the changes in migratory patterns and control of cross-border migration by the Vietnamese state, from the collectivization era

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(1975–86)<sup>1)</sup> to the early *Đổi Mới* (renovation) reform era (1986–mid-1990s) and into the post-Cold War era (from the late 1990s). In so doing, it demonstrates that although migrants have crossed the border to take advantage of political and economic differences between Cambodia and Vietnam as a livelihood strategy for decades, the Vietnam-Cambodia border has begun to effectively function as a political boundary to regulate their belonging and identities only since the early 2000s. This regulation of cross-border migration is a result of a new political calculus on the part of (1) local residents, who have become dependent on the Vietnamese state for economic and religious needs, (2) local governments in the delta, which are suspicious of human and information flows from Cambodia, and (3) the Vietnamese state, which officially protects ethnic Khmer.

Ambiguities and the political instability of the boundary between Vietnam's Mekong Delta and Cambodia have abounded since before colonization. Nguyen Phuc Anh began to govern the delta at the end of the eighteenth century and eventually unified almost all provinces of today's Vietnam under a single state, officially declaring the foundation of the Nguyen Dynasty in 1802. The Nguyen Dynasty indirectly began to govern the Mekong Delta through local political leaders, but it lost control of many parts of the delta when Khmer rebellions against the centralization erupted in the 1830s (Kitagawa 2006, 182–183, 190, 221–222; Vũ Đức Liêm 2016, 89–91). As Vũ Đức Liêm observes, the Nguyen Dynasty attempted to demarcate boundaries (*giới*) by digging canals such as the Vinh Te canal, which is located not far from today's national border, and to translate those physical markers into cartography. It did not, however, differentiate provincial boundaries from the national border when managing the “Khmer world” (Vũ Đức Liêm 2016, 93), and in that sense it can be said that the modern national border did not emerge during the Nguyen Dynasty. In the late nineteenth century, the delta and Cambodia were integrated into a federation of states known as French Indochina.<sup>2)</sup> Although the administrative line drawn between the two regions during the French era began to work as a national border in 1954, intensification of the Vietnam War during the 1960s, when several political forces collided,<sup>3)</sup> brought disorder to the borderland (Chandler 2008, 242–249). Even during wartime, people created many open-air marketplaces along the border in areas uncontrolled by the states (Lê Hương 1970, 10), and people migrated from Southern Vietnam to Cambodia to seek a higher Buddhist education or livelihood.

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1) The naming of the era is based on local naming practices; those in my field site call the era *thời tập đoàn* (collectivization era), rarely using the term *thời bao cấp* (rationing era), which is generally much better known.

2) On the migration between French Cochinchina (Southern Vietnam today) and the Protectorate of Cambodia by Khmer monks, see my paper in Japanese (Shimojo 2015).

3) These were the South Vietnamese and Cambodian governments, the United States, the National Liberation Front, and the Khmer Rouge.

However, as the Vietnam War expanded into Cambodia, notably in 1970—when the Norodom Sihanouk regime was overthrown in a coup by general Lon Nol, whose army units massacred hundreds of unarmed Vietnamese civilians near Phnom Penh on the dubious grounds that they were allied with the Communists (Chandler 2008, 251)—a large number of Vietnamese citizens in Cambodia returned to Vietnam.<sup>4)</sup>

Following the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, conflict between the unified Vietnamese government and the Khmer Rouge increased political tensions in the borderland. These tensions eased when Vietnam invaded Cambodia and established a pro-Vietnam government in Phnom Penh in 1979. Starting in 1975, the Vietnamese socialist economy stagnated, making it difficult for people to make a living. This, combined with the easing of border tensions, spurred people in the delta not only to flee Vietnam by sea as “boat people” but also to migrate overland to Cambodia and then to Thailand as refugees, laborers, or traders to access means of livelihood. Migration continued throughout the 1980s and increased in the early 1990s, when the economic boom in Phnom Penh under the governance of the United Nations offered promise in the face of the social dislocation and economic difficulty caused by *Đổi Mới* reforms and a new market-oriented economy in Vietnam.

According to Evan Gottesman (2003, 165–168), during the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, the Vietnamese military established checkpoints along the border; and anyone from Vietnam who attempted to flee to Thailand via Cambodia was detained, disciplined, and forced to return to Vietnam. Gottesman also notes, however, that cross-border smuggling may have been secretly permitted by both the Hanoi and Phnom Penh governments during the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. Indeed, we know that Cambodian timber and rubber were smuggled into Vietnam, and beer and Vietnamese electric generators were smuggled into Cambodia (Gottesman 2003, 311–314). Research conducted for this paper confirms that from 1979 through the 1990s local migrants crossed the border using informal routes to avoid checkpoints, suggesting that border control was ineffective and undocumented migration occurred during that time.

It is generally assumed that the decollectivization and market liberalization stimulated by *Đổi Mới* reforms in 1986 eased economic difficulties in Vietnam on the whole, though there were still many poor in rural areas, especially areas with high ethnic minority populations, and the gap between the rich and the poor tended to widen (see Vo Tri Thanh and Pham Hoang Ha 2004, 83–84). According to Philip Taylor (2004), the result of decollectivization and land liberalization policies was that increasing numbers of Mekong Delta farmers had to sell their land and thus had—and still have—less access

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4) The official number of Vietnamese citizens in Cambodia decreased from 400,000 in 1969 to 210,000 in 1970 (VNCHBKHTQG 1973, 387).

than ever to the profits from the delta's agricultural economy.<sup>5)</sup> Taylor also mentions briefly that many farmers in the delta, especially Khmer people who missed out on many benefits of the liberal reforms, sought work in the urban centers of the delta, or in nearby cities such as Phnom Penh and Ho Chi Minh City (Taylor 2004, 237, 245, 252). Taking into consideration these arguments over *Đổi Mới*, this paper puts into focus the pattern of those who, failing to cope with the rapid penetration of the market economy, began to migrate to Cambodia in order to seek a livelihood.

Andrew Hardy observes, "at the heart of the *Đổi Mới* transition lay the process of land decollectivisation and it was this, above all, that undermined the state's control over population mobility" (Hardy 2003a, 124). While Hardy's (2003a; 2003b) research focuses mainly on the contemporary history of government-sponsored and spontaneous internal migration from the northern Red River Delta to Vietnam's highlands, Iwai, Ono, and Ota analyze migrations from the Red River Delta to the floodplain of the southern Mekong Delta since the *Đổi Mới* reforms (Iwai *et al.* 2016). This paper deals with cross-border migration between Southern Vietnam and Cambodia as an extension of such internal migrations.

Beginning in the late 1990s, Vietnam gradually returned to international society, accelerating its market economy. Subsequent economic growth during the 2000s witnessed an explosion of industries around Ho Chi Minh City, which began to absorb the rural population. Reflecting this pattern, some people who had moved to Cambodia returned to their home in Vietnam due to its improving social and economic situation. In tandem with this phenomenon, control of migrants crossing the Vietnam-Cambodia border intensified and became more firmly institutionalized from the 2000s, as the government became more suspicious of the human and information flows from Cambodia.

One notable exception to this pattern is the regulation of Khmer monks from Vietnam crossing the border to study in Cambodia. This movement has been strictly regulated since 1975, due to Vietnam's concern over those monks being influenced by the environment of anti-Vietnamese politics in Cambodia, as Taylor's ethnographic studies observe (Taylor 2014, 59; 2016, 282–285).<sup>6)</sup> While Taylor's research stresses Khmer monks'

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5) In Khanh Hau village, Long An Province in the Mekong Delta, where several Japanese scholars conducted intensive fieldwork in the late 1990s, the farmland shared by the agricultural collectivization was returned to the former owners by *Đổi Mới* reforms, resulting in large numbers of landless households. Among them, not only the original landless households but also some others became landless because the process of land inheritance between generations did not catch up with the rapid population growth over 40 years (Iwai 2001, 121).

6) When Buddhist and secular educational institutions were revived and restructured in the 1990s in Cambodia, many Khmer monks from Vietnam resumed undocumented travel to Cambodia for study, but the Vietnamese government attempted to restrict them from going (Taylor 2016).

migration to and from Cambodia, this paper focuses on the interaction between lay-people's migration and state control, whose pattern is different from that of the monks.

Timothy Gorman and Alice Beban (2016) reveal that contemporary migrant workers from Vietnam cross the Cambodian border as farmers to cultivate shrimp, and Sango Mahanty (2019) analyzes traders circulating between Vietnam and Cambodia to buy and transport cassava. According to these studies, in order to mitigate their legally unstable position or to facilitate the transnational trade of cash crops, these border crossers voluntarily attempt to establish ties with state actors, such as border guards, military personnel, or local authorities.

Some migrants circulating between both countries today survive by making use of the social insurance provided to the poor in Vietnam and the economic boom of Cambodia's borderlands. In so doing, they rely not only on the state's insurance programs but also on middlemen in their homeland to arrange official documents such as passports and ID cards.

By explaining the historical changes in cross-border migration trends, this paper betters our understanding of why migrants from Vietnam have come to depend more on state actors since the 2000s. The paper is structured as follows. The first section presents an overview of the migration between Vietnam and Cambodia while reviewing some literature on borders and migration. After explaining the field site of P. village in the second section, the paper details the patterns of undocumented migration during Vietnam's collectivization era (1975–86) in the third section, and during the early *Đổi Mới* reform era (1986–mid-1990s) in the fourth section. The fifth section discusses the circulation of migrants and Vietnamese regulation of the border and migrants in the post-Cold War era (from the late 1990s). In examining the changing migration trends and state regulations, this paper concludes that while interactions between border crossers and the state around the social acceptance (or “licit-ness”) and illegality of cross-border migration were invisible during the 1980s and 1990s (when undocumented migration was rampant despite the border being legally closed), they have come to the fore since the 2000s, when the border was institutionally opened to local people.

## **I Creation of a Border**

In Southeast Asian historical studies, it is assumed that since the mapping and demarcation of modern national borders, the formation of the state and creation of nationhood have been actively pursued (Thongchai 1994). The border gradually emerges in people's imagination of a nation through migration control policies such as exclusion or greater

scrutiny (Osada 2011). Given this “hardening” of borders, some studies focus on how migrants strategically take advantage of social and economic differences on either side of the border, engaging in sophisticated cross-border smuggling using various, often corrupt, networks (Tagliacozzo 2005; Ishikawa 2010).

Itty Abraham and Willem van Schendel (2005) refer to the borderland as both a “licit” and an illegal space. They define licit activities not as permissible by law, but rather in contrast to the popular sense of “illicit” activities; in other words, licit activities are legally banned but socially sanctioned and protected. The borderland is a space formed by the intersection of multiple competing authorities and enforcements. Neighboring states often hold different views on both the law and licit-ness. As a result, what is considered licit, or what may be allowed on one side of the border, may be considered strictly illegal and not allowed on the other side. As people cross borders to work in sweatshops and brothels to avoid labor regulations or the vice police, strategic interactions or “border games” ensue between border enforcers and unauthorized border crossers (Abraham and Schendel 2005, 22–23).

In light of the border and migrant studies mentioned above, the case of P. village in Vietnam raises the question of how concretely migrants have etched the national border in their minds as a “boundary” to differentiate their own society from the society on the other side of the border. Many people in P. village migrated to Cambodia during the 1980s and 1990s to escape economic difficulty. This undocumented migration was not fully controlled by either of the two states, whose lax governments did not trace the mobility of border crossers after their initial border crossing or during long stays. This enabled the people in P. village to continue to recognize their own homeland and Cambodia as a mutually connected cultural and economic space, even after the establishment of the Vietnam-Cambodia border. Border crossing through informal routes was frequent at least until the 1990s, as border crossers relied on backstreets along the border, long-distance family or relative networks, personal experiences, and middlemen preparing land or sea transport. The cases from P. village demonstrate that the Vietnam-Cambodia border was not clearly “etched in the minds of people” as a boundary to regulate mobility or identities, and it did not strictly function as a political institution, as it was virtually porous and permeable until the late 1990s. Schendel (2005, 52) notes that the permeability of a border can differ along its length based on physical features, intensive policing of a particular section, cross-border agreements, and the varying degrees of physical or linguistic difference between borderlanders on either side. Due to a combination of these factors, the Vietnam-Cambodia border was very porous, and although not strictly legal, migration between the countries was habitual and licit, in that it was socially sanctioned among P. villagers and even overlooked and tolerated by the states.



However, the Vietnamese state has paid increasing attention to this undocumented migration and lack of border governance, especially since the early 2000s. Today the Vietnamese government pays particular attention to Khmer people crossing the border, due to the sensitivity of the territorial politics of the Mekong Delta, which in Cambodia is still called Lower Cambodia (Kampuchea Kr[a]om) and considered a territory taken by Vietnam. In the late 1970s, the Pol Pot regime raided the borderland on the Vietnam side with the aim of reclaiming the Mekong Delta (Chanda 1986, 96–98). However, the political presence of Khmer in the delta was temporarily forgotten when the pro-Vietnam government was installed in Phnom Penh after the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia. Following Vietnam's withdrawal of troops from Cambodia, the Vietnamese government lacked the ability to prevent local residents from crossing the border, and serious political problems relating to the border, migrants, and Khmer ethnicity did not surface until the late 1990s. However, since the early 2000s, as people, goods, and information from Cambodia have continued to flow into Vietnam, the Vietnamese government has become concerned that if the Khmer people have more contact with Cambodian society, previous political issues might resurface. The regulation of migrants from P. village, many of whom identify as ethnic Khmer, is closely connected with Vietnam-Cambodia border governance. As explained below, only since the 2000s have interactions between unauthorized migrants and territorial states around the licitness and illegality of cross-border migrations started to make themselves visible. This has happened even in P. village, which is located quite far from the border.

## II Methodology and Field Site

This paper is based on oral histories and ethnographic data collected in P. village (*xã*)<sup>7</sup> between December 2010 and March 2012. I lived and conducted fieldwork in the village for 15 months, collecting ethnographic data about society-state relations in everyday lives and oral histories of people's survival strategies to avoid subsistence crises during wartime, the collectivization era, the early Đổi Mới reform era, and the post-Cold War era. I also conducted several one- to two-week research trips in the borderlands of Cambodia and Vietnam, as well as Phnom Penh, to gather information related to migration trends.

P. village is located 150 km from the Cambodian border on the east bank of the Bassac River in Soc Trang, a coastal province in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. Soc Trang

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7) Although *xã* is often translated as “commune,” this paper translates *xã* as village, because the people in P. village do not distinguish between the terms *làng* (natural village) and *xã* (the smallest administrative unit), treating both as the same.



**Table 1** Populations of Vietnam, Mekong Delta, Soc Trang, and P. Village

Population of Vietnam (2009)	Population of Mekong Delta (2009)
Total: 85,846,997 (100%)	Total: 17,191,470 (100%)
Khmer: 1,260,640 (1.47%)	Khmer: 1,183,476 (6.88%)
Chinese: 823,071 (0.96%)	Chinese: 177,178 (1.03%)
Viet: 73,594,427 (85.73%)	Viet: 15,811,571 (91.97%)
Population of Soc Trang (2009)	Population of P. village (2011)
Total: 1,292,853 (100%)	Total: 14,649 (100%)
Khmer: 397,014 (30.71%)	Khmer: 11,622 (79%)
Chinese: 64,910 (5.02%)	Chinese: 258 (2%)
Viet: 830,508 (64.24%)	Viet: 2,769 (19%)

Sources: BCĐTĐTDSVNQTƯ (2010, 146, 223); Công văn UBND Xã P, Bảng Tổng hợp toàn số, khẩu, 2011

is home to many ethnic Khmer who have remained connected with Cambodian society through their language and Theravada Buddhism even after national border demarcation in the mid-twentieth century. The ethnic Khmer have lived together and intermarried with ethnic Chinese and Viets (ethnic Kinh, the majority in Vietnam).<sup>8)</sup>

According to Vietnamese government statistics from 2009, ethnic Viets (Kinh) are the largest ethnic group in the Mekong Delta, accounting for about 92 percent of the population; ethnic Khmer account for around 7 percent and ethnic Chinese just 1 percent (see Table 1). Within the delta, Soc Trang is ethnically diverse, with 64 percent of the population ethnic Viet, 31 percent Khmer, and 5 percent Chinese. The province is also recognized as having the largest Khmer population in Vietnam and the largest Chinese population in the delta. Within Soc Trang Province, P. village has a higher percentage of Khmer residents. Government statistics from 2011 show that 79 percent of P. village is ethnic Khmer, followed by ethnic Viet (19 percent) and ethnic Chinese (2 percent).<sup>9)</sup> In my survey, according to the ethnicity registered with the government, of the 395 people living in “Samrong ward (*khu*),”<sup>10)</sup> Q. hamlet (*ấp*), P. village, 390 were ethnic Khmer, 3 were Viet, and 2 were Chinese. However, 170 of the 390 people registered as

8) The people in P. village use the term “Viet” rather than “Kinh.” Based on the local context, I use “Viet” in this paper.

9) Công văn UBND Xã P, Bảng Tổng hợp toàn số, khẩu, 2011.

10) Samrong ward, which is located in Q. hamlet (*ấp*) of P. village, is the focus of this study. Although it is not an official place name, in my fieldwork I used this name for convenience of explanation. Q. hamlet is officially separated into three wards. Samrong ward encompasses most of ward 2 and part of ward 3. At the time of my household survey (December 2011–January 2012), Samrong ward had 663 residents (713 including people traveling to work outside of the ward). I lived in an area known in the Khmer language as “*Phno* (dunes) located on the fringe of the Samrong trees.” Thus, I named the study area “Samrong ward.”

Khmer had Chinese (154), Viet (13), or both Chinese and Viet (3) kinship ties among their parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents on their father's, mother's, or both sides. Intermarriage between different ethnic groups is common, and as a result many villagers today identify themselves as ethnically mixed, or *métis* (in Vietnamese [VN], *lai*; in Khmer [KH], *cat*), and speak multiple languages.

Most residents of P. village maintain connections with Cambodian society through the Khmer language and Theravada Buddhism. Despite its distance from the Cambodian border, the village has two Khmer temples, from which monks, since at least the early twentieth century, have traveled to temples in Cambodia to undertake higher religious and secular education or to engage in meditation practices (Shimojo 2015, 24–33). The majority of villagers have relatives and acquaintances who travel to Cambodia for work, and many routinely cross the Vietnam-Cambodia border.

Examining changes in the local politics of P. villagers' migration patterns enhances our understanding of the Vietnam-Cambodia border and cross-border migration for two reasons. First, the mobility of ethnic Khmer, who are the majority in P. village and in Cambodia, often leads the Vietnamese state to give importance to regulating the border and cross-border migration. Second, the village's location far from the border exemplifies broader changes in migratory patterns in the Mekong Delta more accurately than a location on the border, reflecting which state (Cambodia or Vietnam) or which economic center (Phnom Penh or Ho Chi Minh City) historically attracted people in the delta in response to the economic and political conditions of each era. Analysis of societies located in the borderlands, where people routinely cross the border for their economic and social needs, may not reveal such historical migratory patterns.

### III Migration during the Collectivization Era (1975–86)

#### III-1 *Refugee Migration*

Refugees who fled Vietnam from 1975 to 1986 during collectivization were generally regarded as “boat people” who crossed the ocean (*vượt biển*). However, many migrants in P. village evacuated over land, relying on their local knowledge of Cambodian society to move from Vietnam to Thailand via Cambodia. The number of such people from P. village increased after early 1979.

Following the reunification of North and South Vietnam, the socialist regimes of Vietnam, China, and Cambodia entered a new phase in their interrelations, shifting from an outward “fraternal” cooperation (in support of Communist revolutionary movements) during the Vietnam War era to “fratricidal” conflict in the post-Vietnam War era. The

Pol Pot regime spread anti-Vietnam sentiments, insisted on claiming territorial rights to the Mekong Delta, and frequently collided with Vietnamese military personnel stationed in the borderlands. Ultimately, Vietnam invaded Cambodia in December 1978 and occupied Phnom Penh in January 1979. To support the Pol Pot regime, China invaded Vietnam in February 1979, fighting in the Sino-Vietnam borderland (Elliott 1981, 8–10; Evans and Rowley 1984, 39, 45–57; Chanda 1986, 231–262; Kimura 1996, 76–90).

Due to the two international wars, ethnic Khmer and Chinese, and métis Khmer- and Chinese-Viets in P. village—whose loyalty to Vietnam was now suspect—were placed in a politically sensitive situation. In addition to the worsening of China-Vietnam state relations, most had lost their livelihoods due to the Communist government’s promotion of collective farming and redistribution of land, its direct purchase of food, and its establishment of a rationing system. Landlords, rice merchants, millers, and shopkeepers who had engaged in the production and distribution of exported rice were forced to close their businesses.

In response to the political and economic situation, some people decided to flee by land. Com (a Chinese-métis Khmer), a family member of a once-rich landlord in P. village, described the journeys of his younger brother and sister:

In Vietnam at that time, people were forced to participate in labor service [VN: *công tác*, KH: *polakam*], but they had no work of their own and no way to earn money. My younger brother crossed the Cambodia border and arrived in Thailand in 1979. He moved from Thailand to the Philippines by boat, and in the end he migrated to Canada. My younger sister and her husband arrived at a refugee camp in Thailand via Cambodia and migrated to Canada. Her husband had been engaged in the “revolution’s work,” but he had a difficult life.<sup>11)</sup>

As Com’s brother-in-law’s case reveals, the refugees included those who had participated in the “revolution’s work” as cadres of the new government, indicating that economic difficulty was a more serious factor than political positions when deciding to flee. Having local knowledge of Cambodia was also an important factor for those choosing to flee by land. Com’s eldest stepsister, Sang (an ethnic Khmer), pointed out that her younger brother had been sent to Phnom Penh as a South Vietnamese soldier during the Vietnam War, and therefore he was familiar with the city.<sup>12)</sup>

Upon Vietnam’s successful invasion of Cambodia, tensions in the borderlands caused by the international conflict rapidly eased and more people fled overland, defying the border and making use of their own language and past experiences.

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11) Interview with Com (born 1950), male, Chinese-métis Khmer, farmer, living in P. village, March 6, 2012.

12) Interview with Sang (born 1936), female, Khmer, farmer, living in P. village, January 12, 2012.

### III-2 *Circulating Migration*

Beginning in 1979, migrant workers and traders as well as refugees repeatedly passed thorough the porous border. Some people in P. village circulated repeatedly between Vietnam and Cambodia. Rat, an ethnic Khmer, said:

After the liberation, I didn't engage in collective farming because it was troublesome. After the Pol Pot regime collapsed in 1979, I traveled every two weeks between Phnom Penh and P. village as a *ku rouf* [painter]. I sold pictures for 5,000 riel each until I stopped going to Phnom Penh one year later. In Vietnam fertilizer and agricultural chemicals were scarce and the land was not fertile, but business was free in Cambodia. I passed through Kompot in Cambodia via Ha Tien by car to go to Phnom Penh. I didn't cross the formal border but entered Cambodia by an informal route.<sup>13)</sup>

Although *ku rouf* in Khmer means "painter," strictly speaking Rat was not a painter. To earn money in Cambodia, he collected pictures of deceased people from bereaved families and brought those pictures to a painter in P. village. The painter created portraits of the deceased, and Rat then returned to Cambodia to sell them to the bereaved families.

Rat went to Cambodia not only because the restrictions on private activities in the black economy there were comparatively lax, but also because he was accustomed to Cambodian society. He had been to Phnom Penh as a monk to study Pali at Unalom Temple for a year in the late 1960s, as many Khmer monks in the delta had in the past. Rat could also take advantage of the informal car route connecting P. village with Phnom Penh via Ha Tien and Kompot (see Fig. 1) that was being created at the time. Rat's narrative shows that repeated border crossing was possible because of the porous border.

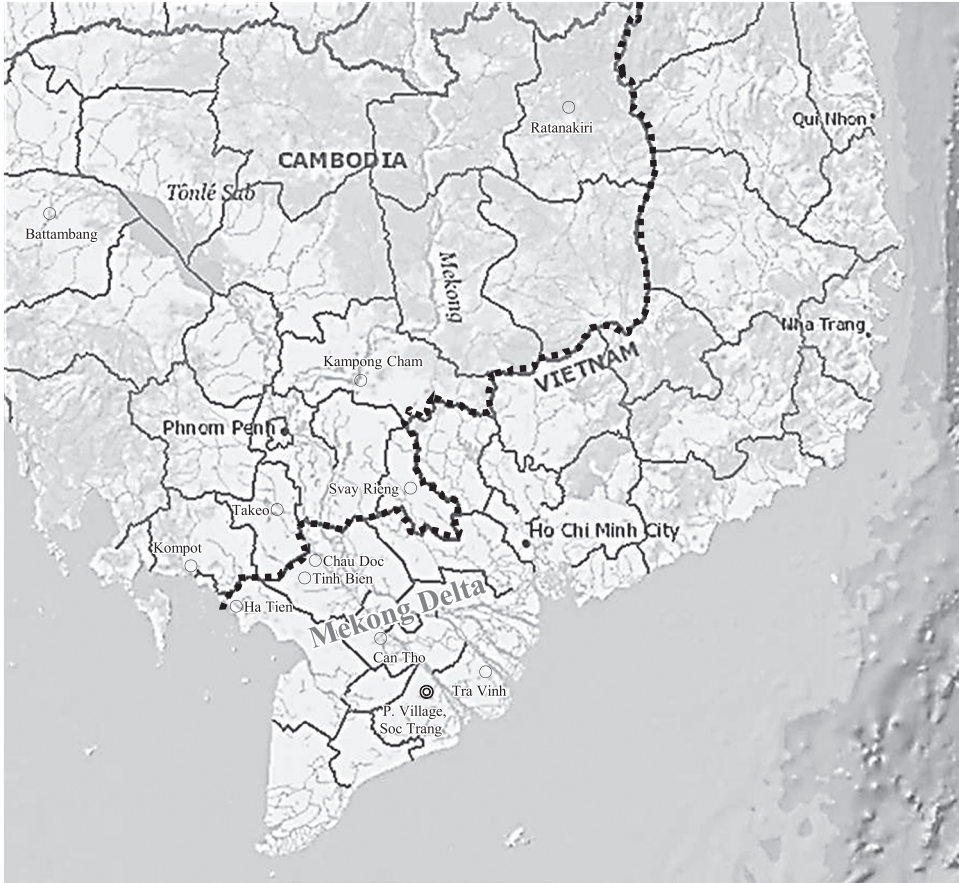
In the mid-1980s, some people even migrated to Thailand via Cambodia to engage in undocumented work. Han said:

I went to Thailand by car without a passport to work as a laborer [KH: *kammakor*], from 1986 to 1992. First I stayed in Phnom Penh for half a month, and after that I moved to Thailand. I did physical labor like loading and earned about 20 baht per day. The pay was a little bit better in Cambodia than in Vietnam at that time. Both Vietnam and Cambodia were under Communist rule, but Thailand was a liberal country. I stayed in Surin Province, Thailand, and I worked on a cassava farm for 20 baht per day. I could understand 80 percent of the Surin Khmer dialect. I don't know which road I used to cross the border, because I just went along with others and got into a car. I was a manual laborer [KH: *si chhunual ke*]. Vietnam was very poor, and furthermore, we were obligated to participate in labor service for one month per year. Although I had farmland in 1985, we only produced one annual rice crop, which was not profitable.<sup>14)</sup>

It was possible for P. villagers, many of whom could speak Khmer, to work not only in

13) Interview with Rat (born 1948), male, Khmer, farmer, living in P. village, February 28, 2012.

14) Interview with Han (born 1951), male, Chinese-métis Khmer, farmer, living in P. village, February 22, 2012.



**Fig. 1** Mekong Delta and Vietnam-Cambodia Border

Source: Esri, GEBCO, DeLorme, NaturalVue | Esri, GEBCO, IHO-IOC GEBCO, DeLorme, NGS.

Cambodia but also in Surin Province, Thailand, where many ethnic Khmer resided. Han's narrative reveals that groups of migrant workers from Vietnam crossed the border via informal routes with the help of mediators who prepared transportation for workers' groups to Cambodia and Thailand.

The two narratives above show that people from Vietnam went to Cambodia seeking less intervention in their lives and a freer economic space. After the Pol Pot regime was driven out of Phnom Penh in 1979, many people in the delta, especially Khmer speakers, crossed the Vietnam-Cambodia border to escape difficulties in their lives brought about by state policies. Migration from Vietnam to Cambodia and Thailand during collectivization, not only to escape the political situation but also to partake in cross-border trade and migrant work, was possible because in the face of political chaos,

the state powers could not control the porous border and the human flows searching for informal routes and work. During this time, although cross-border and internal migration was legally banned or restricted, it was socially licit in P. village and carried on across informal routes stretching from the village to Cambodia and on to Thailand. In that sense, the Vietnam-Cambodia border at the time did not function as a political apparatus to regulate interactions between migrants and the state or to functionally regulate the licitness or illegality of migrations.

#### **IV Migration during the Early *Đổi Mới* Era (1986–mid-1990s)**

##### *IV-1 Withdrawal of the Vietnamese Military from Cambodia*

At the beginning of the 1990s, the political situation in Cambodia began to change, prompted by the withdrawal of the Vietnamese military from that country. For a decade, Vietnam and the pro-Vietnam government in Cambodia (the Cambodian People's Party) had fought with Pol Pot's guerrillas and other anti-Vietnam forces that were supported by China and several Western countries. However, after mediation by the Soviet Union, which hoped to normalize its relations with China, Vietnam began to withdraw its military from Cambodia in June 1988, completing its withdrawal in September 1989 (Kimura 1996, 222–232; Gottesman 2003, 336–350). After the withdrawal, the political situation in Cambodia began to rapidly and drastically change. In 1991 the pro-Vietnam government and anti-Vietnam forces in Cambodia concluded the Paris Peace Accords. In 1993 the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) implemented a parliamentary election, which resulted in the establishment of the Kingdom of Cambodia and major changes in the country's politics and economy. By 1989 the Cambodian People's Party government had all but abandoned the socialist economic system, and in 1993 the new Kingdom of Cambodia government officially introduced a market economy system (Gottesman 2003, 280–300; Amakawa 2004, 4–14).

The change in the military power balance, political pluralization, and the introduction of a market economy in the early 1990s further motivated people in P. village to attempt to cross the border to escape economic difficulties.

##### *IV-2 Undocumented Migration of the Poor into Cambodia*

During the period of political change in Cambodia, the number of migrant workers from P. village seeking to escape economic difficulties increased to levels higher than the 1980s. The villagers I interviewed said that in the early 1990s the Cambodian economy was better than the Vietnamese economy, and that a significant number of Vietnamese



**Table 2** Reasons for Migrating to Phnom Penh from Samrong Ward, 1979–2011 (unit: one person)

Year/Purpose	Work (including accompanying parents as a child)	Trip (including a visit to family or relative)	Military service	Obscure	Total
1979	0	0	1	0	1
1980	1	0	1	0	2
1981	1	0	1	0	2
1982	0	0	0	1	1
1983	0	0	0	1	1
1984	0	0	0	1	1
1985	1	0	0	1	2
1986	2	0	0	1	3
1987	1	0	0	0	1
1988	1	0	0	0	1
1989	1	0	0	0	1
1990	2	1	0	0	3
1991	2	1	0	0	3
1992	9	0	0	0	9
1993	7	0	0	0	7
1994	7	0	0	0	7
1995	7	0	0	0	7
1996	7	0	0	0	7
1997	7	0	0	0	7
1998	7	0	0	0	7
2000	6	0	0	0	6
2001	7	2	0	0	9
2002	7	2	0	0	9
2003	4	0	0	0	4
2004	4	1	0	0	5
2005	4	1	0	0	5
2006	3	3	0	0	6
2007	3	0	0	1	4
2008	3	2	0	0	5
2009	3	2	0	0	5
2010	4	7	0	0	11
2011	3	0	0	0	3

Source: Based on the author's survey conducted from November 2011 to January 2012.

Note: Sample size: 37 people in Samrong ward, Q. hamlet, P. village.

citizens lived in Phnom Penh. In Samrong ward, Q. hamlet of P. village, the number of migrants going to Phnom Penh to work was markedly increased from 1992 to 2002 (see Table 2). To determine how and why people went to Phnom Penh, I analyzed the oral histories of several people in P. village who had made border crossings.

The main reason why people migrated to Cambodia was their inability to cope with the rapid development of the market economy in Vietnam after the initiation of Đổi Mới in 1986. Đổi Mới reforms brought private economic activities that had been part of the



black economy during the Collectivization Era out into the open. As people began to engage in a wider range of crop productions, commercial production was diversified. In P. village, the cultivation of watermelon was popular at the end of the 1980s. According to an official monograph published by the communist party in Soc Trang province in 1988, trucks from Ho Chi Minh City and Can Tho would gather at P. village just before *Tet* (the lunar new year), and merchants would purchase watermelon produced in the village (Vũ Lân *et al.* 1988, 61).

Than, a Khmer-métis Chinese villager who lived in Samrong ward, Q. hamlet of P. village, told me that he cultivated watermelons from 1988 to 1990. He and his wife transported the harvest by bus to sell in Ho Chi Minh City. The variety of watermelon he grew was large but did not taste very good, so he could sell the fruit only as decoration for the *Tet* celebration. Since he could harvest only once per year, Than found it increasingly difficult to make sufficient profit from this endeavor and eventually stopped. After that he mortgaged his farmland to Hang, who was also a resident of Samrong ward, for 100 kg of rice at twofold interest before going to Phnom Penh (rice was desired because it was a valuable currency during the economic dislocation of the time).<sup>15)</sup> Although some people, such as Than, attempted to produce new agricultural products, they did not receive any state support in the form of technical assistance, investments, loans, etc. Thus, they were at high risk of failure or becoming dependent on private moneylenders such as Hang, who often charged high interest rates.

Than said that he went to Phnom Penh for a year and a half from 1991 to 1992 with his wife and youngest daughter. Without a passport, he crossed the border not through a border gate but via an informal route. He worked as a traveling wharf laborer in a town near Phnom Penh, loading commodities onto a ship and traveling on the ship to Saigon, where he unloaded the items, and then repeating the cycle.<sup>16)</sup>

People moved to Cambodia also to be closer to relatives. According to Than, his adopted brother (his parents' adopted child) had lived in Phnom Penh since 1982, so Than went to Phnom Penh relying on his relationship with his brother. His brother earned enough to live on, working in a factory manufacturing bottle lids. Than said that when he lived in Phnom Penh, he met many ethnic Viets who had migrated from Vietnam.<sup>17)</sup>

Don, another P. villager, went to Phnom Penh with his family to work during the 1990s due to food shortages, insufficient profit from agriculture, and lack of agricultural

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15) At that time, Hang had enlarged his farmland by claiming the land of another debtor who was unable to repay his debt. Interview with Than (born 1955), male, Khmer-métis Chinese, member of P. village people's committee, living in P. village, February 22, 2012.

16) Interview with Than, February 22, 2012.

17) Interview with Than, March 1, 2012.

expertise. He explained that he had sold all of his land because his wife was sick and his five children were very young.<sup>18)</sup> According to his acquaintance, Don sold his land because, like many other villagers, he had failed in his watermelon cultivation enterprise.<sup>19)</sup>

Thus, Don went to Phnom Penh to escape the economic difficulties experienced by farmers in rural villages in the Mekong Delta and to take advantage of the economic boom in Cambodia. Under UNTAC, Phnom Penh offered a significant economic incentive that attracted poor wage laborers: US dollars were used by the foreign militaries stationed there, and the value of the US dollar was much more stable than that of Vietnamese *đồng* or Cambodian riel.

Don's wife said that during the 1990s only agricultural wage labor such as rice harvesting was available in Vietnam. The average daily wage of a manual laborer in Cambodia was 5,000 riel for a woman and 8,000 riel for a man, but it was just 4,000 riel in Vietnam.<sup>20)</sup> In Phnom Penh, Don's wife took care of housework while Don worked as a carpenter for 150,000 *đồng* per day.<sup>21)</sup> According to Don's wife, the potential earnings in Phnom Penh meant that not only Khmer people born in Vietnam, but also many ethnic Viets, lived in Cambodia.<sup>22)</sup>

The final reason why Don's family chose to go to Phnom Penh was that Don's older sister had moved there before the Pol Pot regime was established,<sup>23)</sup> although, according to Don,<sup>24)</sup> she died during the Pol Pot era. Don's wife explained that one reason they chose not to go to Ho Chi Minh City was because they had no acquaintances there. Thus, Don's family chose to go to Phnom Penh to work because the city was not an unknown place. The experience of Don and others highlights the importance of family or acquaintance networks in choosing the routes migrants traveled along and their destinations.

During the 1990s, like the 1980s, circulating migrants traded commodities and worked in the borderlands of the two countries. Con, who lived in P. village, told me that in the early 1990s there was no work in Vietnam and wages were extremely low, even in Ho Chi Minh City. To earn money, he traveled repeatedly between Cambodia and Vietnam from 1992 to 1993. His father, Rat, as mentioned above, also repeatedly crossed between Cambodia and Vietnam as a *ku roup* (painter) around 1979, after the collapse of the Pol Pot regime. Con said that he also went twice a month to Takeo Province in Cam-

18) Interview with Don (born 1953), male, Khmer, carpenter, living in P. village, September 9, 2011.

19) Interview with Than, February 22, 2012.

20) The exchange rate at the end of December 1992 was USD1 = 2,310 riel (Tomiyama 1993).

21) The exchange rate at the end of December 1992 was USD1 = 10,505 *đồng* (Murano 1993).

22) Interview with Don's wife (born 1954), female, Chinese-métis Khmer, homemaker, living in P. village, February 29, 2012.

23) Interview with Don's wife, February 29, 2012.

24) Interview with Don, March 4, 2012.



**Fig. 2** Landscape of the Vietnam-Cambodia Borderland Visible from Tinh Bien District, An Giang Province  
 Sources: Left: Satellite photo obtained from DigitalGlobe, Earthstar Geographics | NOSTRA, Esri, HERE, Garmin, METI/NASA, USGS.  
 Right: Photograph looking toward the Vietnam-Cambodia border taken by the author at the location of the white spot in the photograph on the left.

bodia, near the Vietnam-Cambodia border, by local bus (*xe đò*) and collected pictures of deceased people by going door to door. Without a passport, he crossed the border either near Cam Mountain in Tinh Bien District or Sam Mountain in Chau Doc city in An Giang Province (see Fig. 1). His maternal uncle had migrated to Cambodia in the 1980s and worked as a goldsmith in Takeo Province.<sup>25)</sup> Con stayed at his uncle's house.

The photographs in Fig. 2 are of the area surrounding a rice packaging factory located near the border in Tinh Bien District, An Giang Province in Vietnam, which is adjacent to Takeo Province in Cambodia. The borderland is located in a vast floodplain area, which is often inundated during the rainy season. The photographs show that there is no natural geography or official facilities to prevent people from crossing the border. In terms of intensive policing (Schendel 2005, 52), the Vietnam-Cambodia border, notably the Tinh Bien-Takeo borderlands, was more porous and permeable for people in P. village during the early *Đổi Mới* era than during the collectivization era. In addition, because internal migration was tolerated by the government after *Đổi Mới*, more and more people relied on informal and licit routes that had been continuously developed in several places since pre-*Đổi Mới* times, and where licit middlemen and networks prepared ships or land vehicles to enable cross-border migration.<sup>26)</sup>

25) Interview with Con (born 1973), male, Khmer, guard at a junior high school, living in P. village, March 4, 2012.

26) The people whom I have interviewed so far mentioned Tinh Bien (a vast floodplain, see Fig. 2), Ha Tien (a port city on the Gulf of Siam), and Long Binh (a city along the Bassac and Binh Di Rivers) as popular informal border crossing areas during the 1980s and 1990s. These areas today have official border gates through which almost all people can cross with a passport.

IV-3 *Economic Attraction of Phnom Penh in the Early 1990s*

Whereas some people, such as Than, Don, and Con, relied on connections with family or relatives to go to Cambodia, others went based on their own experiences. For example, Thu, a Chinese-métis Khmer woman from P. village, had lived in Phnom Penh with her late husband from 1968 to 1973 or 1974, during the Vietnam War. After the initiation of *Đổi Mới* she was too poor to keep her land, so she sold it and returned with her five children to Phnom Penh, where she lived from 1992 to 2010. Without passports, Thu's family took a local bus with what little money they had and crossed the border via an informal route in Tinh Bien District. When the family arrived in Phnom Penh, Thu found that all of her husband's brothers had died during the Pol Pot era, and therefore she had no acquaintances left in the city. According to Thu, the prices of commodities in Cambodia in the 1990s were higher than those in Vietnam, but wages were better because Cambodia was economically more liberal. In 1993, when the United Nations established UNTAC, US currency became widely used in Cambodia. Thu opened a kiosk and sold food, while her children worked as laborers. She said that many ethnic Viets lived in Phnom Penh at that time. According to her, ethnic Viets, who comprised a larger population than Kampuchea Krom (Khmer born in Vietnam),<sup>27)</sup> spoke the Khmer language fluently and operated street stalls in the city.<sup>28)</sup>

During the early 1990s, people migrated to Cambodia because it offered better economic opportunities (including relatively higher wages). Although economically motivated, such migration relied on long-distance family or relative networks and personal experiences. The number of people crossing the border from Vietnam to Cambodia increased sharply in the early 1990s due to the rural economic depression in the Mekong Delta and political and economic transformation in Cambodia. Finally, undocumented border crossings were not fully controlled by the government because border governance at that time had not been sufficiently developed, and people noticed that many points along the border were still porous, especially in Tinh Bien District. Depending on family and other networks, and past memories and experiences connecting the two countries,

27) In 1970, when the Cambodian civil war broke out, the number of "Vietnamese citizens" in Cambodia decreased sharply from 400,000 to 210,000 (VNCHBKHPTQG 1973, 387). The number of "Vietnamese" was just 8,200 in 1981, when the Vietnamese military invaded, but had increased to 95,600 by 1995 (Usuki 2013, 26–28). It is unclear whether "Vietnamese" in some of the surveys conducted at that time referred to ethnic "Viets" or "Vietnamese citizens," including ethnic Khmer born in Vietnam. Furthermore, it is unclear whether people who migrated from Vietnam without possessing passports were counted in these statistics. However, what is certain is that the number of people classified as "Vietnamese" was increasing.

28) Interview with Thu (born 1947), female, Chinese-métis Khmer, seller of cheap candy, living in P. village, February 24 and March 3, 2012. In 2010 Thu moved back to P. village, where she set up a small business selling candy.

people created informal and socially licit routes stretching out from their village toward the border and beyond.

## V Migrants and Border Control in the Post-Cold War Era (from the Late 1990s)

### V-1 *People Circulating Legally between Vietnam and Cambodia*

As mentioned above, the political and economic situation in Vietnam began to change in the 1990s. Vietnam joined ASEAN in 1995, resulting in the removal of an embargo on external assistance, trade, investment, and loans entering the country. The main reasons for this change were the United States beginning to lift its economic sanctions on Vietnam after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1991, the lifting of the US embargo on Vietnam in February 1994, and the US normalizing its diplomatic relations with Vietnam two weeks after the latter joined ASEAN (Kimura 1996, 283–285; Elliott 2012, 147–155). Vietnam became increasingly accessible to international society, and it became easier for Vietnamese who had moved overseas to return home to live.

The flow of people from P. village changed in line with the transformation in international politics. The major destination for people from P. village gradually changed from Phnom Penh to Ho Chi Minh City, the economic center of Vietnam, as the economic lure of Phnom Penh weakened. As shown in Table 3, the number of workers from Samrong ward migrating to Ho Chi Minh City and the surrounding suburbs was markedly increased between 2001 and 2011. Many of the migrants found work at timber- or fruit-processing companies, industries that were growing rapidly around Ho Chi Minh City. In contrast, the number of workers migrating to Phnom Penh was low between 2003 and 2011 (see Table 2). However, the number of people traveling to Phnom Penh to visit family members increased between 2001 and 2010, suggesting that although the transnational relationship between P. village and Phnom Penh remained, the number of people moving to Phnom Penh for economic purposes was decreasing.

In P. village, I often saw middle-aged or elderly people staying in the village for a few days or months but then suddenly leaving without notice. They would come from Cambodia and spend their time at a coffee shop engaging in enthusiastic chitchat with villagers regarding current news and rumors from Cambodia. They stayed with their children who lived in the village.

Some P. villagers earned enough to live in both countries by making strategic use of each country's unique political and economic situation. For example, Son, who was staying temporarily in P. village in August 2011, told me:

**Table 3** Migrant Workers from Samrong Ward in Ho Chi Minh City and Its Suburbs by Type of Work, 1997–2011 (unit: one person)

Year/Type of Work	Agriculture	Company Processing Timber	Company Processing Fruits	Brickmaking	Driver	Other Wage Labor	Total
1997	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
1998	0	2	0	0	1	1	4
1999	1	3	0	0	2	0	6
2000	0	3	0	0	2	1	6
2001	0	3	0	1	2	4	10
2002	0	4	0	2	2	2	10
2003	0	4	0	0	2	2	8
2004	2	4	0	0	3	3	12
2005	0	4	0	0	3	3	10
2006	0	7	0	0	2	2	11
2007	0	5	0	2	2	3	12
2008	0	7	0	2	2	4	15
2009	0	4	1	2	1	2	10
2010	0	6	1	2	1	5	15
2011	0	5	0	2	1	2	10

Source: Based on the author's survey conducted from November 2011 to January 2012.

Note: Sample size: 57 people in Samrong ward, Q. hamlet, P. village.

From 1978 to 1979 I worked as a laborer in Ho Chi Minh City, but from 1983 to 1990 I migrated to Cambodia to work. In Cambodia, I sold bread as a day laborer. After that I returned to Vietnam, but even today I go to Cambodia every four or five months. At the moment I am staying in P. village for three or four days until my passport is renewed, and then I plan to return to Cambodia. Every time I cross the border, I do so in Tinh Bien District. There are three casinos in Ratanakiri [Cambodia]. One of them is managed by Prime Minister Hun Sen. The casino's customers come mostly from Vietnam, so my daughter works there because she can speak Vietnamese. I have no land in Vietnam, but I have 20–30 *công* (2.6–3.9 ha) of land in Ratanakiri.<sup>29)</sup> There are rubber tree plantations, and some foreigners are mining for gold there. In Vietnam, I can use medical services for free because I am recognized as a “poor household” by the government. Every time I get sick, I come back to Vietnam. When I have spent all of my money, I call my daughter and ask her to send me USD200–300.<sup>30)</sup>

Son survives thanks to the social insurance for the poor in Vietnam and the economic boom in the Cambodian borderlands. He went to Cambodia and worked as a laborer in an undocumented way at least until the 1990s, as did many villagers. As he recently verified his Vietnamese citizenship by getting a passport, he now simultaneously uses the preferential treatment for poor households in Vietnam while depending for money

29) *Công* is the local unit for measuring land; 1 *công* is about 0.13 ha.

30) Interview with Son (born 1952), male, Khmer (his father was born in Cambodia), wage laborer, living in P. village and Ratanakiri, August 11, 2011.



on his daughter who works at a casino near the border in Cambodia. Only foreigners are permitted to gamble at casinos in Vietnam, so many casinos have been built in the borderland on the Cambodian side, catering to customers from Vietnam.

### V-2 *Government Suspicion of Khmer Cross-border Migrants*

Why is Son recognized by the Vietnamese government as belonging to a poor household, and how can he use the Vietnamese social insurance system? Starting in 2001, Vietnam's government implemented policies to eliminate poor households, especially among ethnic minorities in the Mekong Delta.<sup>31)</sup> Today the local government in P. village gives high priority to social insurance policies for poor Khmer households. The government exempts these households from school expenses and provides housing or assistance for their living expenses.<sup>32)</sup> However, this special status is based on stereotypes and suspicion against Khmer within the Vietnamese government and society, which have historically considered Khmer to be poor. An official 1991 Communist Party document reports that ethnic Khmer do not receive enough of an education; therefore, some ethnic Khmer Communist Party members violate national policies because they do not understand the meaning of the ethnic and religious policies of the Party-state. The document also notes that the matter has had a negative impact on society, the economy, sentiment, thought, and politics.<sup>33)</sup> Therefore, the government now focuses on Khmer people in order to avoid such negative impacts. The document continues:

We must fight against the plots and means of the hostile forces who make use of historical issues, religious ethnic problems, and trifling mistakes, and distort plans, cause splits, stir up ethnic animosity, spread nasty rumors, and disrupt the implementation of the advocacies and policies of the Party-state.

We organize and support ethnic Khmer in Southern Vietnam who hope to cross the Vietnam-Cambodia border to visit their relatives and acquaintances based on state laws, while restricting border crossings between the two countries. That is, we take people's convenience into consideration while protecting public order in both our country and our neighboring country.<sup>34)</sup>

Thus, the Vietnamese government constructed a social insurance system for ethnic

31) Thủ tướng Chính phủ, Số: 74/2008/QĐ-TTg, Quyết định về Một số Chính sách Hỗ trợ giải quyết đất ở, đất sản xuất và Giải quyết việc làm cho Đồng bào dân Tộc thiểu số nghèo, đời sống khó khăn vùng Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long Giai đoạn 2008–2010, June 9, 2008.

32) Interviews with Than, January 13, 2011 and 7 March 7, 2012; Son, August 11, 2011; Cang (born 1950), male, Khmer, traditional medical practitioner, living in P. village, August 18, 2011.

33) Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, Ban Chấp hành Trung ương, Số: 68CT/TW, Chi thị về Công tác ở Vùng Đồng bào Dân tộc Khơ-mer, April 18, 1991.

34) Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, Ban Chấp hành Trung ương, Số: 68CT/TW, Chi thị về Công tác ở Vùng Đồng bào Dân tộc Khơ-mer, April 18, 1991.



Khmer in Vietnam, a border control system, and a system to regulate migrants in order to eliminate negative impacts on the Party-state. In addition, the government, which was not stable enough to realize its political and economic policies until the 1990s, has attempted since the turn of the twenty-first century to integrate ethnic Khmer into the nation-state and cut off influence from Cambodia with the provision of social insurance.

One day in 2011, while staying in Soc Trang, I interviewed an official who recounted the following incident:

In 2009, before you came to Soc Trang, Khmer monks launched a protest against the government in Soc Trang Province. The protest broke out when traffic police arrested two monks for the violation of riding on the backseat of a motorbike. That affair was distorted and spread by evil people, who manipulated the monks into starting the protest. This incident is referred to as the “August Affair” among police.<sup>35)</sup>

Informants mentioned that the Vietnamese authorities were wary of “evil people,” or members of political organizations formed by Khmer going from Vietnam to Cambodia who identified themselves as “Khmer Kampuchea Krom (Khmer of Lower Cambodia).” Using various forms of media, such organizations accuse the Vietnamese Communist government of ignoring historical problems, human rights violations, and religious oppression of ethnic Khmer in Vietnam.

Taylor analyzes the contesting narratives as follows:

Although these contesting claims on the Khmers of Lower Cambodia/the Khmer minority of Vietnam are held with equal passion, each is coloured by deep ambivalence. Many Cambodians suspect that the Khmer Krom have been subject to Vietnamese assimilatory rule for so long that they are no longer fully Khmer. For their part, Vietnamese officials lament the recalcitrance of a minority group whom they label pejoratively as backward, insular and marginal, and whose continuing identification with Khmer nationalist mythology threatens the integrity of the Vietnamese nation. (Taylor 2014, 252)

How do these nationwide contestations affect local politics? The government has begun implementing conciliatory policies toward ethnic Khmer as it has become more cautious of them. For example, according to residents in P. village, although the government formerly fixed the date of Kathen—a Khmer festival after the end of the rainy season in which laypeople offer donations such as new robes to temples—since 2009 the authorities have allowed each temple to decide its own date on which to hold the festival.<sup>36)</sup> Also,

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35) Interview conducted on September 7, 2011. I have anonymized the interviewee in order to protect the interviewee from political persecution.

36) Interview with Pho (born 1971), male, Chinese-métis Khmer, farmer, living in P. village, October 16, 2011.

during my stay in P. village, Communist Party members at the village, district, province, and even central government levels often visited Khmer temples during ritual ceremonies to donate large amounts of money.<sup>37)</sup>

While Vietnam's government emphasizes that it is considerate of the Khmer ethnicity and religion in Vietnam, it remains extremely cautious, even when people try to import items for religious activities from Cambodia. A good example is the process of importing books of the Buddhist Pali canon (the representative Buddhist scripture). Theravada Buddhist temples have imported the canon from Cambodia for a long time. Even today, there is no publisher that can print the canon in the Khmer language in Vietnam, so temple representatives must go to Cambodia to buy the books themselves. However, bringing any books into Vietnam is a complicated process and requires support from a local official. Ke, who works as chairman of the Buon Temple Committee in P. village, recalled that in 2006 or 2007 he was able to buy the canon, but:

It took a total of two months to get my passport and complete the procedure. Than [a P. village policeman] offered to help me. It was necessary to get permission from the district committee to start the procedure. If we had imported the Pali canon without permission, it could have been confiscated. My wife and I hired a car and went to Phnom Penh with another policeman, the wife of the Party secretary in the village, and two monks. Although I invited Than, he was too busy with work to come with us. We bought about 100 volumes in a large building in Phnom Penh.<sup>38)</sup>

### *V-3 Role of Middlemen in Negotiating between the Local Community and the State*

From 1998 to 2008, Than worked as a policeman and then as a member of the village people's committee, and he has been a clerk for the Buon Temple Committee for a long time. He was a monk in the Buon Temple from 1971 to 1975 and can read and write both Khmer and Vietnamese, so he was responsible for the exchange of documents between the temple and the local government. Because he had experience dealing with affairs of public order and administration, he was the temple's go-to person for government matters. He was also the preferred person for the temple to negotiate with the local government to obtain permission for religious activities and economic support from the secular authority. Than may be regarded as a middleman between his religious community and the secular authority.

Dealing with religious affairs was not his only work. As a sideline, he also instructed others on how to obtain official documents such as passports and ID cards. When I lived in P. village, people returning from or migrating to Cambodia would visit Than's house

37) Author's field notes, September 26–27, 2011.

38) Interview with Ke (born 1940), male, Khmer, farmer, March 6, 2012. It can be assumed that Ke bought the Pali canon at the Buddhist Institute in Phnom Penh.

and ask him to arrange the documents they needed. Than said that his monthly salary from the village people's committee was only 830,000 đồng (USD41 in 2011) but he earned no less than USD50 per month through his side business.<sup>39)</sup>

The reason why Than could earn so much through this sideline is that the rate of literacy in the Vietnamese language among the villagers is very low, so most people are unable to deal with administrative procedures. The older people are, the more likely it is that they have received no public education.<sup>40)</sup> To avoid problems when dealing with administrative procedures, people are dependent on Than, who studied to junior high school level and is now a government official.

Than also has knowledge of administrative procedures relating to people who crossed the border without documents, such as those who moved to Cambodia from 1979 to the early 1990s without a passport or ID card and recently returned home. For example, Thu said that although she returned to Vietnam in 2010 after crossing the border without a passport in the early 1990s, she still had not received her Vietnamese citizen ID card as of 2012.<sup>41)</sup>

Although it seems that Thu does not have any intention of returning to Cambodia, many people still travel back and forth between the two countries. Because the local government exerts strict control over those crossing the border, migrants depend on middlemen such as Than who can help them obtain a passport and ID card. In fact, Than himself had been to Phnom Penh to work without possessing a passport in the early 1990s, and so he had a good understanding of the migrant's situation.

Both the local community and the state need middlemen like Than. If the Vietnamese government attempts to excessively restrict the flow of migrants, singling out the movement of Khmer people across the border, the state's legitimacy may be questioned, as it officially claims to be a multiethnic state that treats each of its 54 ethnicities equally. Excessive restrictions may upset residents who have historically been connected with Cambodian society through Theravada Buddhism. Mediated by local middlemen, cross-border migrants and the local government now negotiate over their belonging and identities regulated by the national border. In other words, after migrants and the state started to negotiate around the licitness and illegality of cross-border migrations, people had no choice but to be conscious of the border's existence and their nationalities.

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39) Interview with Than, February 8, 2012.

40) In Samrong ward, P. village, of the 419 people over 20 years old, 89 had never studied at a public school, 172 had studied in a primary school, and 111 had studied in a secondary school. Thus, the majority had never studied in a public school or had studied only up to primary school level (based on the author's survey conducted from November 2011 to January 2012).

41) Interview with Thu, March 3, 2012.

## Conclusion

Cross-border movement has long been accepted as a licit (formally illegal but socially acceptable) (Abraham and Schendel 2005, 22–23) activity by the local community in P. village and overlooked by both the Vietnamese and Cambodian states. Even after the Vietnam War ended and North and South Vietnam were unified, state power was too limited to control the flow of refugees and migrant workers across the border, mainly because political control in the borderlands became lax with the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia in 1979. The Đổi Mới reforms prompted the development of a market-oriented economy and a marked political transformation in both countries from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s. However, the process of rapid market liberalization coupled with the lack of social insurance policies in Vietnam also sent many peasants in Vietnam into economic difficulty. They fled life in Vietnam, traveling without a passport or documents via informal routes and across the porous border to Cambodia, where political changes and the rise of the market economy were more intense, to find work. Licit middlemen and transnational human networks facilitated their movement by preparing sea or land vehicles along these routes, which had developed and adapted since the pre-Đổi Mới era. Although it is generally assumed that the Đổi Mới reforms drastically improved people's livelihoods, this paper suggests the contrary. Without any official state support, people who decided to migrate due to the rural economic depression in Vietnam and the political and economic transformation in Cambodia had no choice but to rely on local moneylenders, family networks, and past experiences to secure livelihoods.

The situation changed in the early 2000s. Vietnam had joined ASEAN, accelerating its return to international society and the removal of many restrictions on the entry of foreign assistance into the country in the late 1990s. As a result, it experienced rapid economic development in the 2000s. Some people in P. village began to return to Vietnam from Cambodia due to the improving social and economic situation; others circulated between the two countries, taking advantage of better economic opportunities in Cambodia and the social insurance that the Vietnamese government began to provide. However, the establishment of greater political stability and a borderless market-oriented economy made Vietnam's government recognize the importance of ensuring control of the border.

To this day, many of those who returned from Cambodia do not possess passports or official ID cards because they crossed the Vietnam-Cambodia border during the 1980s and 1990s in an undocumented way. Local authorities in Vietnam continue their efforts to confirm the citizenship of these returnees, particularly because of the government's concern that Khmer nationalists in Cambodia might instigate unrest among ethnic Khmer

in Vietnam. Increasing amounts of information about Cambodia are reaching local communities in Vietnam through these returnees. Therefore, the Vietnamese government has recently attempted to regulate people's movements and improve their recognition of the state's territory by confirming citizenship and controlling the flow of information. At the same time, it is implementing insurance policies and conciliatory actions to appease ethnic Khmer.

These policies cut both ways. To deny the ethnicity and religion of the Khmer would call into question the legitimacy of the multiethnic state and produce discontent. Therefore, the government has no choice but to respect the ethnicity of Khmer in Vietnam while simultaneously denying the historical social ties between Khmer in Vietnam and Cambodia. For their part, local people are seeking out information and commodities from Cambodia and crossing the border as part of their everyday lives. The struggle between society and state reveals itself through middlemen who mitigate the concerns of both sides.

The situation in P. village reveals a dichotomy of social acceptance (licit-ness) and illegality with regard to migrants crossing the border. This dichotomy has recently become a political issue: as Vietnam's government intensifies its control of Khmer migrants who cross the border, the contradiction of the Vietnamese state territory and the principles underlying the government's ethnic and religious policies becomes more visible. Although the Vietnamese government has attempted to restrict the flow of migrants across the border and integrate them into the nation-state as an "ethnic minority," excessive regulation of migration would reveal the contradiction with the state principle to equally protect ethnic minority cultures, and in turn create discontent in society. On the other hand, local people must increasingly depend on state actors in order to make strategic use of the social and economic differences between Cambodia and Vietnam while avoiding excessive state control.

Today the Vietnamese state and border crossers continue subtle negotiations over the latter's belonging and identities, the duality of which has been socially sanctioned (licit) but is now becoming regulated by the national border, particularly through middlemen who mediate between the local government and migrants. Such negotiation was not visible during the 1980s and 1990s, when the border between the two countries was virtually porous despite being legally closed; it has become visible only since the early 2000s, when the political and economic situation of each country began to stabilize and mobility between the two countries was openly institutionalized and legalized. The changes in migratory patterns indicate that the national border, despite being mapped and officially established, is not always etched in the minds of people. This is especially true of minorities who have connections with people in the neighboring country. Rather,

the national border begins to be etched through everyday and continuous interactions between state actors, who become suspicious of influence from a foreign country, and cross-border migrants, who become dependent on the state for their needs.

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