WEAVING INTO CAMBODIA
Trade and Identity Politics in the (post)-Colonial Cambodian Silk Weaving Industry

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Glossary of silk weaving terms

Alkali: a chemical silk weavers use to soften the silk yarn

Charobab: An ikat woven sampot with silver and golden metal threads.

Cocoon: a pupal casing made by moths, caterpillars and other insect larvae.

Dye stuff: natural or chemical materials silk weavers use to colour the silk yarn.

Ikat weaving: a silk weaving technique in which the weaver creates various patterns and colours before the weaving process.

Kaben: a measure term silk weavers use to indicate the length of the silk cloth. In Khmer lexicon one kaben is about four metres.

Kiet: Red, purple or indigo coloured silk head clothes worn by Cham/Malay women

Koli: an weight indicator silk weavers use. One koli of silk yarn means two kilogram silk yarn.

Krama: a garment with many uses, including as a scarf, bandanna, to carry children and to cover the face.

Loom: a machine or device for weaving thread or yarn into textiles.


Pidan: a type of silk cloth used in Cambodian weddings, funerals or Buddhist ceremonies as a tapestry.

Sampot hol: an ikat woven skirt with a variety of designs such as birds, flowers, Buddha temples, or boats.

Sarong: An ikat woven skirt made of silk yarn dyed in different colours.

Sericulture: the rearing of silk worms for the production of raw silk.

Warping: preparing the warp by rolling all the warp-yarns on to a beam, under the same tension, strictly parallel to each other and in a certain order.

Yarn: a long continuous length of interlocked fibers suitable for use in the production of textiles.
Preface

This dissertation has its origins in a 2000 master thesis called ‘Verweven handel – een studie naar de organisatie van zijdevweven in Cambodja’ (Zwart 2000). Conducting fieldwork in Cambodia, Zwart found that the Cambodian silk industry was dominated by indigenous Khmers, the dominant ethnic group in this country. Zwart also discovered that the cloth the Khmer weavers produced, were further distributed to Khmer Diaspora communities in the United States, France and Australia. Prof. Dr. Heidi Dahles was fascinated by the existence of an indigenous Khmer-dominated silk industry departing from Cambodia and crossing borders to Khmer diaspora communities all over the world (ibid.). Her interest in the Cambodian silk weaving industry was kindled by the expectation to find an economic sector based on Khmer ethnic linkages. Such an economic sector would contest the the idea that industries and business networks in Southeast Asia are often dominated by ethnic Chinese traders and merchants and not by indigenous Southeast Asians. Related to this idea is another dominant narrative stating that many Southeast Asian ethnic groups, including the Khmers, keep the market arena at arm’s length for religious reasons. So, how did Zwart (2000) come to the conclusion that the silk industry in Cambodia is controlled by indigenous Khmers and not by the powerful ethnic Chinese diaspora?

To answer this question Prof. Dr. Heidi Dahles incorporated Zwart’s master study into her research programme entitled ‘Organizational Cultures in Transborder regions. A comparative research on processes of identity formation and local management industries in organizations
operating in Southeast Asian growth triangles’. This research program departs from the assumption that identity, religion and culture do matter in the business arena and counters the existing idea that business, especially when it crosses national borders, no longer has anything to do with a shared ethnic background, identity or religion. As the neo-liberal capitalist idea holds, it is all about money, opportunities, windfall positions and profits, and not about ethnicity.

In this dissertation I will attempt to argue against the neo-liberal argument that doing business is purely a rational and profit-oriented affair. I will try to illustrate that ethnic backgrounds, religious orientations and cultural repertoires do matter in the organization of the Cambodian silk weaving industry. Although this dissertation deals with the ethnically complex Cambodian silk weaving industry, it focuses predominantly on the presence and absence of Khmer and Chinese identities among the actors in this industry. It has never been my ambition to write a monograph of the Cambodian silk weaving industry, but merely to illustrate how ethnic identities are socially constructed and exhibited in the silk weaving industry. A focus on the interplay between Khmer and Chinese identity is legitimate because most of my informants explicitly displayed these two identities and not other ones, such as a Cham, Thai or Vietnamese identity. It must be stated, however, that Cham, Tonkinese, Malay and Javanese people have also introduced silk weaving techniques in Cambodia and still manufacture silk cloth. For this reason, I would like to encourage scholars to also examine the ethnically complex character of the Cambodian silk weaving industry from a Cham, Vietnamese or Javanese perspective.

Writing this dissertation was a long process and could not have been completed without the help of many significant others. First I want to thank the NWO-ASPASIA research program and the faculty of Social
Sciences of VU University Amsterdam for generously funding my fieldwork in Cambodia. I also want to thank colleagues and friends in Cambodia and Vietnam for their assistance, advice, expertise, company and introduction to crucial informants. I specifically mention Sophal (for being a good friend and interpreter), Sopheap (for your funny Khmer language classes and support all year long), Dr. Penny Edwards, Dr. Tim Winter, Dr. Philip Peycam, Dr. Michael Vickery, Dr. James K. Chin, Dr. Philip Taylor, Dr. Li Tana, Dr. Kim Sedara, Dr. Leakthina Chau-Pech Ollier, Boris Dongelmans, Seng Bunly, Kikuo Morimoto, Roger Henke, Leeshai Lemish, Pak Sokhom, Simon Tha, Gabriela Byrde, Stephen Le Comte, Suon Prasith, Lin Jia Xu, Un Bunna, Shamin Toy, Hor Soneath, Albert Farats, Bun Heng Kor, Suy Chan Sitha, Thdam Suosday, Sompen Kutranon, Men Sinoeun, Sari Laakson, Madhurja Kumar Dutta, Teruo Jinnai, Nina You, Bich Ngoc (interpreter in Vietnam), Frank (interpreter in Vietnam) and of course all my informants, the silk weavers and traders.

Once back in Holland, I had to transform my data into a scientifically acceptable dissertation. Having an energetic and extravert personality, I had some problems locking myself up eight hours a day for almost two years. Luckily I was able to ‘produce’ company myself and halfway through my writing process I got company from a beautiful son, Teun. Although he caused some sleepless night, my days became less lonely from that moment onwards. Very important in this period was also the practical and moral support of Gerrie and Yvonne, who took care of Teun with a lot of love and patience. I want to thank Joanne too for baby sitting and assisting me completing the lay out of this dissertation. Crucial family support came from Ben too who lend me money in order to survive the Dutch social service system.
 Academically and socially inspiring were my colleagues of the department of Culture, Organization and Management of the faculty of Social Sciences of VU University Amsterdam. I want to mention in particular: Juliette Koning, Sytze Kingma, Kees Boersma, Carel Roessingh, Esther Zwart, Henk van den Heuvel and Theo Kamsma. I also want to thank my editor, Saskia Stehouwer. She not only converted my text into an academically acceptable dissertation, but was a pleasant person to work with as well.

Then of course I want to thank my promoter and co-promoters; Prof. Dr. Heidi Dahles, Prof. Dr. Oscar Salemink and Dr. John Kleinen. I will start with Prof. Dr. Heidi Dahles. We spent a lot of time together discussing this dissertation and travelled to conferences in China and Cambodia. Heidi, you are an intelligent and experienced social scientist and I have learned a lot from your working skills, analytical precision, and you have shown me what it takes to become a skilled social scientist. You were also a great mental coach and in periods of struggle and low self-esteem you gave me the confidence I needed to finish this dissertation. The help of Prof. Dr. Oscar Salemink and Dr. John Kleinen was also of great value. With their enormous expertise on the history of Vietnam and Cambodia they were in particular critical about my historical sections. Thanks to their critical readings, this dissertation has become more accurate and with historical depth.

Last but certainly not least I want to thank my wife Marjolein. She quitted her job as a psychologist in Holland for one year and decided to join me in Cambodia. Her support in Cambodia was enormous. She archived my fieldwork data, wrote down my interview sessions, created a domestic atmosphere and organized meals and karaoke sessions for Cambodian friends. Back home she was also a great moral support. To Marjolein I dedicate this dissertation.
Introduction: An elder silk weaver at work

In a corner under her wooden house in Veal, a large weaving town in Takeo province in the southeast of Cambodia, Sotheap, an elderly lady, sits at her spinning wheel routinely plying yarn. Like many women of her age she cuts her hair short and wears a sampot hol⁠¹, a silk skirt with flower motifs, and a white Chinese blouse. Sotheap shares the space under her house with many other family members, two weaving looms, an oxcart, racks of drying farm produce such as sweet corn and tobacco, her poultry, and three cows. Her in-married son-in-law, a farmer from a neighboring village, is busy preparing a second wooden frame loom (kei thbanh) for his eldest daughter. While spinning the yarn Sotheap gives instructions to a young grandchild who ties silk threads on an old wooden spinning wheel (rohat) to create patterns such as flowers, frogs, raindrops, or Buddha statues. She does this time-consuming job after she returns from school to relieve her mum, the main weaver of the family. Mum spends ten hours a day sitting on a wobbly wooden bench, bowing deep over a large wooden frame loom. Sotheap explains that her efforts are crucial for the family and that all family members will service her to finish the sampot in time, as a prolonged period of drought has impeded the family from harvesting their crops for the third year in a row.

Sotheap is a fantastic storyteller and while she is talking about her life as a silk weaver her emotions shift from great enthusiasm and joy to anger and fear. She

¹ The Khmer term hol refers to a variety of designs on silk skirts, such as birds, flowers, Buddha temples, or boats. Hol also refers to the ikat silk weaving technique in which the weaver creates various patterns and colors before the weaving process.
enjoys telling about how she roamed through forests and wastelands together with her mother to collect dye-stuff from the bark of the kapok tree, the tamarind tree, the areca palm or the ebony tree. In these days (the 1940s) silk weavers did not buy white chemical dyes from a middleman (chmaon kandal) but made natural dyes themselves. As a young kid she learned from her mother that the strength and the color of the yarn enhanced the prestige of the family and were secrets she should never pass on to strangers. She also remembers very lively how her mother grew mulberry plants in the backyard of their house and taught her how to feed the leaves to young silk worms. Feeding the worms was extremely labor-intensive, as the young silk worms needed to be fed until they would stop eating and change color (mostly when they were around ten days old). Having done this she had to move the worms to compartmentalized trays in a shed behind her house where the worms would spin themselves into cocoons. For the next two weeks it was her duty to safeguard the cocoons against insects and to ensure that the worms did not start to chew their way out of the cocoons. If the cocoons had the size of her finger her mother ordered her to place them in a special pot filled with boiling water, soap and alkali to remove the gummy sericin. Her mother was afraid to place the living cocoons in the boiled water herself, as monks in the pagoda had forbidden her to kill animals. Afraid to lose merit at her old age her mother outsourced this job to her, because she was still young and would have enough time left to make merit.

Sotheap was taught silk weaving by her mother and elder cousin in the beginning of the 1960s, during king Sihanouk’s nationalist ‘Sangkum Reastr Niyum’ regime. Finishing her first sampot hol at the age of thirteen, she knows for sure that she was the youngest weaver in Cambodia ever to accomplish that. In the 1970s, during the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979), she and her family were ordered to work in a textile factory in Battambang, a town in the Northwest of Cambodia. Talking about the civil war brings back painful memories of Khmer Rouge atrocities, as her husband, two daughters, one son and many distant kin members were killed. Almost thirty years later, she still remembers the terrible smell of the dead bodies thrown into deep wells just behind the village she was transported to. In 1979, shortly after the defeat of
the Khmer Rouge by Vietnamese troops, Sotheap returned to her home in Veal, where she resumed the family’s silk weaving activities. She still feels indebted to the middleman who provided her, a widow with children, with credit to buy a new loom. With this loom she was able to earn enough money to feed her family under the extreme post-war conditions. Every fortnight she rode her bike for five hours from Veal to the markets in Phnom Penh to barter her silk products for rice.

In the mid-1990s her life finally took a turn for the better. She and her eldest daughter had proven themselves skilled and reliable weavers to Chen (literally the ‘Chinese’, as the middleman is called) and he rewarded them with a second loom. For Sotheap the second loom came at the right time, as her eldest granddaughter had reached the age to be able to weave sampot hol herself. With more productive hands around, Sotheap can spend more time on her religious duties in the local pagoda to make merit for a better life in the future. Looking back at her life as a silk weaver not only brings back memories of joy and pride, but also of painful backbones and fingers that grew crooked, and of fear and anger towards the middleman. Sotheap shivers when she tells how Chen roams around on his motorbike to check the colors she applies and the clarity of her patterns. Sotheap fears his judgment, as Chen has the power to lower the price of her products.

Talking about Chen, Sotheap suddenly said that her grandmother was Chinese as well. Her mother once told her that her grandmother had come to Cambodia a long time ago and had married a Khmer farmer. When she was a kid her parents never talked to her about grandma’s background, afraid that she would not hold her tongue to pro-Mao Sihanouk state cadres. Upon her revelation Sotheap hastens to add that she herself is not a Chen but a real ‘Khmer’ and a devoted Buddhist. However, to prove her Chinese background, Sotheap invites me inside the house to show me a small Chinese shrine. In front of the shrine she tells me how her daughter fell seriously ill ten years ago and went to the krueu (medical doctor) in her village. Dissatisfied with his advice she turned to a Chinese fortune-teller at Saiwaa market who explained to her that it was saen
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*kbal tuk*, the Chinese month of the ghosts, and that her daughter’s sickness was caused by the angry ghosts of her (Chinese) ancestors. Since that year, Sotheap has followed the fortune-teller’s advice, burning incense and offering fruit during *saen kbal tuk*. Next, Sotheap turns to a corner of her house to rummage in an old carton box from which she lifts a pair of black hand-woven farmer’s pants (*kho kansaen*). These pants look like traditional Chinese garments, which are often worn at religious events in rural China. ‘These are my grandfather’s,’ she explains, ‘he used to wear them at weddings or when he visited the pagoda.’

*Cambodian silk weaving: an example of Khmer modernization*

A striking example of Khmer modernization is said to be the booming postwar Cambodian handloom weaving industry that can be traced back to the courts of Angkor\(^2\). Especially the hand-woven ceremonial dress, the *sampot hol*, is defined as typically Khmer and provides Cambodia with a cultural asset invested with great ethnic pride (cf. Dahles and Zwart 2003). As the story goes, the ‘hol’ silk weaving techniques have been passed down from family to family from the 12\(^{th}\) century onwards. The mulberry trees necessary to feed the silk worms and the weaving looms necessary to manufacture the silk skirts were destroyed by Pol Pot soldiers in the 1970s. By means of a happy ending, peace building organizations rescued the Cambodian silk weaving industry from its downfall and ‘restored’ it again in the 1990s.

A prominent aid worker who is said to have rescued the Khmer silk weaving techniques is the Japanese silk expert Kikuo Morimoto. As an apprentice of the Japanese art of *yuzen* – silk dying for kimonos – this Japanese silk expert came to Cambodia in the mid-1990s and invested much effort into re-establishing the silk production and revitalizing the

\(^{2}\) The 12th century Angkor empire was the largest kingdom that ever existed in Southeast Asia and included present day Thailand, Cambodia, Lao PDR and Vietnam.
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silk weaving techniques that were said to have been destroyed by the civil war (Dahles and Ter Horst 2006: 124). To accomplish this, he bought five hectares of forest in the area adjacent to the ancient Angkor Wat temples, where he raised mulberries and produced natural dyes with the help of sixty skilled silk yarn producers from Tani, a river town near the Vietnamese border. Moreover, Morimoto contracted two experienced weavers from Takeo province to pass on their silk weaving techniques to younger weavers. This way it was his ambition to protect the authenticity of Cambodian silk weaving techniques and patterns, which had been passed on from mother to daughter from the age of Angkor onwards (Morimoto 1995). Morimoto’s efforts to revive Cambodian silk weaving techniques also caught the eye of the international jury of the prestigious Rolex Award, with which Morimoto was honored in 2004, establishing his reputation as the initiator of post-war silk weaving in Cambodia as a traditional Khmer craft (Dahles and Ter Horst 2006: 124).

Jean Delvert (1961) showed that silk weaving was mainly carried out along the banks of major rivers in Cambodia: along the Mekong River to the north of Phnom Penh; along the Bassac River in Kandal province to the southwest of Phnom Penh; and in the southernmost provinces bordering Vietnam. Smaller areas of textile production also existed in the north of the country, in villages in Battambang province and around Siem Reap. In these days silk weaving villages in Cambodia’s rural areas were local affairs and could easily be identified by the presence of mulberry trees providing food for silkworms. The silk weavers cultivated their own mulberry trees, looked after their own dye-stuff, reeled their own silk yarn, and wove their own sampot whereas Chinese middlemen peddled their commodities to the markets (cf. Delvert 1961).

Silk weaving villages still exist in the rural areas of Cambodia, but the mulberry trees are said to have been destroyed during the Khmer Rouge
regime and silk yarn is now imported from abroad. Today silkworm cultivation takes place in the Vietnamese Central highlands, involving Kinh immigrants from the Northern Red River Delta region (Braun 2000). From the Vietnamese border town Tan Chau silk yarn is further distributed to wholesalers and retailers in the Phnom Penh markets. Rural middlemen in turn re-distribute the silk yarn to the weavers and return the finished *sampot* to the Phnom Penh outlets (cf. Dahles and Ter Horst 2006). From there, *sampot hol* are further distributed to Cambodian Diaspora communities in Australia, France and the United States (Dahles and Zwart 2003).

The dependence on Vietnam for raw silk, and on Cambodian Diaspora communities as export channels raises questions that pertain to debates about how the once village-based Cambodian silk weaving industry transformed into a transnational business network. Before the 1970 civil wars, the silk trade was said to have been dominated by ethnic Chinese living in Cambodia. However, during the war many Chinese died or fled the country (Dahles and ter Horst 2006: 125) which caused a void in the silk trade. Once peace was restored, so the story goes, this void was filled by Khmer women establishing themselves as silk vendors. Zwart, who conducted ethnographic research among women traders at the Phnom Penh markets for three months in 2000, did not come across any reference to ethnic Chinese identity among the market traders, wholesalers, middlemen or weavers. On the contrary, Zwart (2000) claims that the women she interviewed had established contacts with silk weaving villages and middlemen along family lines and ethnic ties that were identified as explicitly Khmer.

The observation of an all-Khmer-dominated silk weaving industry seems to confirm Joel Kotkin’s (1993) ‘ethnic advantage’ theory and the view proliferated by many stakeholders that the silk weaving industry is
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modernizing within the parochial boundaries of Khmer ethnicity. The claim of ethnic Khmer dominance in the silk trade (Zwart 2000) is also in line with academic studies conducted in the Upper-Mekong region, where open borders are said to have liberalized trade relationships and strengthened the power of ethnic groups living and trading across borders (cf. Walker 1999). This applies in particular to the Khmer people, as - due to the shrinking territorial power of the Angkor kingdom and the atrocities of the 1970 civil wars - the number of ethnic Khmers living outside the Cambodian kingdom must equals the number living within the country easily.

Traditional modernity

At present, after years of civil wars, Cambodia is witnessing a series of transitions from socialism to liberalism and from economic isolation to a free market economy (Ollier and Winter 2006: 2). As any war-stricken nation that tries to forget its violent past, Cambodia has turned to its glorious era, linked to the 12th century temple complex of Angkor. Whether one arrives at the airport of its capital city Phnom Penh or at the ‘new’ international airport nearby the tourist town of Siem Reap, images of this triple-towered temple complex provide the visitor with a warm welcome. Wherever one goes to in Cambodia, ‘the stones of Angkor’ are everywhere: on the national flag, on banknotes, on stamps, on cafés, on craft labels, public buildings, and newspapers.

Although the Cambodian state has liberalized its markets, has embraced a multitude of economic flows, and certainly does not defy capitalism, it always has and still does glorify the 12th century material world of Angkor as its engine of modernity. This has been the case even during colonialization. Although the French colonialists neglected modern values of citizenship, liberty, economic prosperity and equality, they did use the Angkor Wat temple complex as a religious totem pole to unite the plural
Cambodian ethnoscape under French tutelage. The French installed Prince Norodom Sihanouk as king in order to prevent Buddhist notions of political subjection to become replaced by the communal one they feared most: Marxism. Afraid as they were of the revolutionary power of the Khmers, French colonists deliberately bypassed them and preferred ethnic Vietnamese and Chinese to oil the wheels of their administration and economy (Chanda 1986). Perhaps for this reason the Khmers were portrayed as noble, peaceful and ascetic people (Cooper 2001, Edwards 1999, Norindr 1997) who simply lacked capitalist skills; skills that the Vietnamese and the Chinese had in abundance.

What the French feared most came true when they gave the kingdom its independence back in 1955: the ‘noble’ Khmers turned into aggressive revolutionaries at lightning speed. During Pol Pot’s Marxist attempt to transform Cambodia into an agrarian utopia, hundreds of thousands of ‘foreign’ subjects most appreciated by the French – capitalists, artisans, intellectuals - were hunted down and killed by teenage soldiers (Ong 2003: 18). The Khmer Rouge leadership praised the Khmers for their labor skills instead of their ascetic qualities, because they had built the system of irrigation canals, dams, and reservoirs of the 12th century Angkor kingdom, and were thus seen as the most suitable workers to complete Pol Pot’s ambitious agricultural project. Even after Cambodia’s transition from communism to socialism, state leaders continued to celebrate the Khmers for their material power and imagined the monuments they had built as socio-political totem poles of ethnic homogeneity (Edwards 1999). Unlike the Khmer Rouge regime the Vietnamese-backed Khmer People Republic (KPR) accepted the private sector and introduced solidarity groups (krom samaki); i.e., production units of seven to fifteen families, united in a common endeavor to raise food or to produce goods. In particular the trade relationship between the
state and the peasantry was to be improved and consolidated in accordance with the socialist motto (cf. Gottesmann 2003).

In the 1990s supranational and international donor organizations tried to ‘liberate’ Cambodia from its Marxist/socialist legacy, in order to change it into a modern, democratic, capitalist, neo-liberal nation. After nearly two decades of isolation the future was about regional integration and about embracing the multitude of cultural and economic flows that this process would bring along (Ollier and Winter 2006: 8). In lieu of an effective state a broader civil society, comprised of bilateral donors, multilateral banks, and numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs), had the aim to liberate Cambodia (ibid.). This ‘liberation process’ involved a process of ‘NGOization’, which again drew upon culture for achieving development goals and economic prosperity (ibid.:11). As Ingrid Muan (2001) noted, the stones of Angkor and the noble Khmer also became the focal point of post-conflict ‘restoration culture’ missions. In other words, whether Cambodia was in transit from colonialism to communism, communism to socialism, or socialism to capitalism: Angkor and the Khmers have always been central themes of modernization.

A marginal Chinese narrative
In Cambodia the ‘hol’ silk weaving techniques and patterns are seen as symbols of Khmer modernization, merging the Cambodian national and Khmer ethnic identity into one tightly knit and homogeneous ethno-national identity. Yet, both the authenticity claim of the ‘hol’ silk weaving techniques and the hypothesis of ethnic Khmer dominance on both a production and trade level is at jeopardy if we give the case-study around the elderly silk weaver Sotheap a closer look. Only at first sight does Sotheap’s story deal with her being a ‘good’ Khmer, a faithful Buddhist and loyal Cambodian citizen, reflecting the national pride and fear the
Cambodian state injects into its subjects. On a second level though, her story contained references, albeit marginal ones, to Chinese ancestors, Chinese signs and her submission to an ethnic Chinese middleman. In other words, a gap exists between the ethnic Chinese business networks she is a member of and the narratives of her Khmer authenticity promoted by everyone in Cambodia. This raises the following questions: how to interpret the narrative that Khmer traders filled the void that ethnic Chinese middlemen left behind after the civil war was over (Kleinen and Mar 2004)? What to think about the story that the ‘*sampot hol*’ is an authentic Khmer dress? And how to understand the narrative that Cambodia is modernizing within the boundaries of Khmer identity?

To answer these questions it is helpful to first call to mind the long-lasting historical presence of Chinese communities in Cambodia, and examine under what conditions they migrated to Cambodia. The earliest Chinese reference to the kingdom comes from the Chinese emissary K‘ang T’ai, who together with Chu Ying was sent on a tribute mission to Funan somewhere between 245 and 250 A.D. (Hall 1981: 27). At the end of the 13th century a second written Chinese account on Cambodia appeared, by the Chinese emissary Zhou Daguan who had observed the Angkor Kingdom for more than a year. The Chinese community in Cambodia expanded further in the 15th century, also due to the arrival of many sea-born merchants, such as Zheng He, Wang Chi, Kapitan Li Tan and Mac Cuu (cf. Frost 2003). The era of French colonialism (1863-1955) saw the arrival of even more Chinese immigrants. In his seminal study ‘The Chinese of Cambodia’, William Willmott (1967) describes the arrival of five language groups in the colonial period; i.e. the Teochew, the Cantonese, the Hakka, the Hokkien and the Hainanese (Edwards 2003: 13). The Teochews were prominent in business and trade; the Cantonese were specialized craftsmen; the Hainanese dominated the food and catering industry, the Hokkien followed careers in the officialdom
In other words, historical reports point at a long-lasting dominance of the Cambodian trade by the ethnic Chinese and not the Khmers, questioning the narrative of Khmer modernization. However, why do the ethnic Chinese play such a powerful role in the Cambodian economy, but a marginal one when it comes to the production of culture? Also, why do the Chinese in Cambodia not attempt to assert themselves and contest the grand Khmer narrative through counter-narratives? One possible reason could be found by alluding to the recent history of the ethnic Chinese in Cambodia and the repressive measures that were taken against them. In 1953, king Norodom Sihanouk launched an ethno-nationalistic citizenship law aiming to promote national unity based on Khmer supremacy (Ovesen and Trankell 2003: 195). Under this 1954 citizenship law the ethnic Chinese were forced to become Khmers (col khmae)\(^4\) to prove their familiarity with Khmer manners, customs and traditions, and to forget about their Chinese background (ibid.). General Lon Nol (1970-1975) accentuated the ethnic homogeneity of Cambodia even more, asserting that all ethnic groups in Cambodia belonged to the ‘great Khmer race’. During the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979) rigorous attempts were made to extinguish all marks of heterogeneity and to

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\(^3\) In his 1971 study ‘Les Chinois du Cambodge Littoral’ Roland Pourtier also emphasized a rural Chinese identity, portraying the Chinese predominantly as pepper and fruit planters living in the ethnic Chinese enclaves Kampot and Ha Tien.

\(^4\) The term ‘col khmae’ comes from the term ‘coul ciet’, which literally means “enter the nation”, “to be naturalized” or to “change one’s citizenship”. ‘Col Khmae’ literally means “enter the Khmers” in the sense of “becoming Cambodian”. This because under the 1954 citizenship law different terms relating to nationality (Cambodian) or ethnicity (Khmer) does not exist. A Cambodian national automatically becomes an ethnic Khmer.
adjust ethnic groups to Khmer-style housing, dress and food (cf. Edwards 2003).

Yet, the recent history of Chinese oppression in support of nationalist agendas has come to an end and does not explain why in some contexts – such as on the wholesale markets in Phnom Penh – Chinese identity is proliferated by silk traders. Moreover, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, the ethnic Chinese in Cambodia are allowed to express their Chinese identity again and Chinese schools, associations, temples, newspapers, housing styles and festivals have revived like never before (Edwards 2003). This also holds for the middlemen in the silk weaving villages, but the elderly silk weaver Sotheap, and as we will see in this thesis, many others along with her, identifies herself predominantly as Khmer. Why is that so?

To come to terms with this somewhat paradoxical situation it is necessary to leave behind primordial notions of ethnicity and instead depart from the assumption that ethnicity is a social construction which obtains meaning in specific social and historical contexts. Having established this approach to ethnicity, the question is in which contexts people define themselves either as Khmer or as Chinese. In this regard we should remember that the Cambodians have been hegemonized by many regional and global powers for centuries and are used to dealing with many different codes of conduct, values and belief systems, as well as multi-layered discourses (Hsiao 2002: 111). Living as minorities in a hegemonized nation the ethnic Chinese might also have deployed what Frost (2003) calls ‘transcultural bodies’, in which their being an ethnic Chinese, a mixed, a national or an indigenous person, comes to the fore depending on the social and political context in which the diasporic subject is positioned. The dilemma in this thesis thus revolves around the marginal role of the ethnic Chinese in the grand narrative of Khmer
modernization, with the objective of finding out in which occasions and in whose company they choose to discuss their Chinese background. After my conversations with a Cambodian silk weaver who surprisingly started talking about ethnic Chinese identity, this theme came to constitute the leading thread in a research on processes of modernization and ethnicization in the Cambodian silk weaving industry.

Towards the next chapters

In this introduction I have outlined the gap between the ethnic Chinese identity of the silk weavers and traders and the Khmer modernization narrative that traces silk weaving back to the 12th century temple complex of Angkor. The aim of chapter one will be to ‘produce’ theoretical knowledge on how we can interpret this gap between the grand Khmer narrative celebrated by many stakeholders, and the re-emerging ethnic Chinese one. As indicated, the contribution of Chinese labor is considered of crucial importance for the country’s economy, with the silk industry as a clear illustration of this. Culturally however, the position of the ethnic Chinese in Cambodia can be compared to that of their counterparts in Thailand who show a high degree of assimilation (Dahles and Ter Horst 2006). One may therefore raise the following question: On which occasions and for what reasons do the powerful ethnic Chinese in Cambodia either attempt to assert themselves, or succumb to the ‘grand’ Khmer narrative?

In chapter two I will give a brief overview of the history of Cambodia and critically assess the bureaucratic myth that Cambodia is an all-Khmer nation. This chapter will show how in particular the Marxist/Maoist-inspired *Khmer Rouge* regime (1975-1979) attempted to primordialize the Cambodian subject, with devastating effects. Even today the impact of the *Khmer Rouge* regime is noticeable in Cambodia, as it is still one of the poorest nations of Southeast Asia. But as this chapter will illustrate, the
Cambodian economy is showing signs of recovery, and one of these signs is the rise of an indigenous silk weaving industry.

In chapter three, I will deconstruct the ‘grand narrative’ of Khmer modernization and describe under what diasporic conditions and motivations silk entrepreneurs transplanted their business into Cambodia. This chapter attempts to describe how the sampot hol arrived in Cambodia in the late nineteenth century. Following the sampot hol through time and space this chapter will problematize the narrative of Khmer modernization and illustrate the important role ethnic Chinese migration plays in the contemporary modernization process of the silk weaving industry.

In chapter four I will attempt to explain in more detail how descendents of the ethnic Chinese are currently modernizing the Cambodian silk weaving industry. In so doing I will elaborate on the ‘hol’ silk weaving techniques first, and describe how labor-intensive it is to manufacture a sampot hol. I will go on to illustrate how the silk weaving industry is organized in terms of production and trade relationships. This will make clear that the Cambodian silk weaving industry is not a village-based household industry anymore but has become a transnational business network that starts as a ‘worm’ in Vietnam and ends up as a sampot in the United States.

In chapter five I will offer ethnographic descriptions of silk producers and traders negotiating their identity in the Cambodian silk weaving industry. Embracing a material view on the subject it is my ambition to show how a small but powerful wholesalers elite came to control the cross-border silk yarn trade along Chinese business ethics, and how they expected a similar organizational style from the middlemen they subcontracted. In
addition I will also attempt to illustrate under what material conditions ethnic Chinese silk traders expect a Khmer identity token from ‘their’ silk weavers.

In chapter six I will get into the gap that exists between the re-emerging ethnic Chinese modernization process and the marketing of silk products as ‘authentically’ Khmer. Following the business career of a former silk weaver, this chapter will describe the reasons why the ethnic Chinese silk traders in Cambodia do ‘not’ counter the grand narrative of Khmer modernization.

In the concluding chapter I shall attempt to bring together the ‘conflicting’ modernization narratives that exist in Cambodia and link them to the theoretical framework. Interpreting empirical data I gathered during my fieldwork period against the background of theoretical debates I have outlined about ethnic Chinese migration conditions and the ability of ethnic Chinese to shift strategically between competing narratives of modernization, I shall attempt to answer the central research question.
Chapter 1
How to Dress the Khmer?: A Theoretical Exploration

‘A Klee painting named ‘Angelus Novus’ shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one perceives the angel of history. His face is towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress’.

(Walter Benjamin, 1940)

Introduction
Until now most studies conducted on Cambodia have denied its multi-ethnic composition and have not paid attention to narratives of Chinese economic domination, let alone to their role in the cultural domain. Discussing modernization in Cambodia often means glorifying the brave Khmer warriors of a far away past and forgetting about all the other cultural stuff. In their attempt to find the ‘noble’ Khmer, many previous efforts to study Cambodian modernization have led to painful confessions of how difficult it was to find traces of Khmer modernization. In a famous and often cited PhD thesis ‘Svay - a Khmer village in Cambodia’, the American anthropologist May Ebihara (1971) had the ambition to present

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5 Linking Cambodia with the ‘Angelus Novus’ is not my intellectual property. In their edited bundle ‘Expressions of Cambodia’ Leaktna Chau-Pech Ollier and Tim Winter (2006) already used Paul Klee’s painting to characterize contemporary Cambodian culture.
a detailed anthropological study of the Khmer peasant culture. Her intention was to study a lowland, rice-growing Khmer village (because she was convinced the Khmer comprised the dominant part of the nation’s population), which had a Buddhist temple (because she was convinced that 90 per cent of the Cambodians were Buddhists). However, in her foreword May Ebihara describes how difficult it was for her to find a ‘real’ Khmer village, and after long discussions with her supervisor she came to the conclusion that only one region, a region somewhere south of Phnom Penh, pseudonymically called Svay, matched with the ethnic and religious composition she had in mind. Other regions were discarded because they had large minority groups such as ethnic Chinese or Vietnamese that practiced, in her words, somewhat a-typical economies (ibid.).

The question that intrigues me is not why scholars have the ambition to write books on Khmer economies or Khmer Buddhism, but why they still feel this special urge to write only about Khmer forms of modernization and to depict Chinese or Vietnamese forms as a-typical. What then distinguishes ethnographers from pre-colonial missionaries, colonial administrators, postcolonial state leaders and post-conflict peace builders, who all had and have the tendency to link Cambodian culture back to the 12th century ruins of Angkor.

*Chinese migration to Southeast Asia*

In the ‘grand narrative’ the Cambodian silk weaving industry is portrayed as a traditional form of Khmer modernization that can be traced back to the ancient temple complex of Angkor. Yet, the ethnic Chinese background of the silk producers and traders questions this narrative and makes it worth to theorize under what conditions ethnic Chinese migrated to Cambodia. While documentation on the growth of a Chinese community in Cambodia is scarce, stories of early Chinese immigration
live on in the rich oral tradition, in Cambodian place names, and in Khmer folklore (Edwards 2003: 8). Early French reports recount how successive waves of Chinese migrated to Cambodia in the first, sixth, thirteenth, eighteenth and twentieth centuries (cf. Coedes 1942; Malleret 1959; Pelliot 1903).

According to Wang Gungwu (1991) the successive immigration waves of Chinese to Southeast Asia can be divided into four major patterns: huagong (Chinese coolies), huaqiao (Chinese sojourners), huayi (Chinese re-migrants) and huashang (Chinese traders and craftsmen). Although precise figures are not available, in the 1990s the total number of Chinese living overseas was estimated to be 37 million spread over 136 countries (cf. Ma and Cartier 2003). Among migration scholars, however, it is widely accepted that modern Chinese emigration began with the arrival of Europeans in Southeast Asia in the early 1500s under whose patronage the Chinese became the dominant middlemen group in the colonies. During the early colonial age ethnic Chinese filled many roles for the Europeans, including those of middlemen trading with the indigenous population, tax farmers and clerks (Kuhn 2006: 164).

Initially the Chinese ‘government’ depicted their migrants as pirates, traitors and deserters who were ungrateful to China, to their homeland, their parents and ancestors (Edwards 2003: 9). This hostile attitude changed in the mid- to late nineteenth century due to China’s defeat by foreign powers in the Opium Wars and the demand for coolies by these foreign powers in the colonized Southeast Asian countries (ibid.). In 1860 the Qing government signed conventions with Britain and France, which recognized the rights of Chinese subjects working overseas (ibid.:10). Especially the late Qing reformers Sun Yatsen and Kang Youwei are said to have actively encouraged Chinese sojourners to migrate to Southeast Asia and send their remittances back to their families in the southern
Chinese provinces. In particular the 1911 Revolution - which saw the abandoning of traditional ways of thinking, such as Confucianism and the adaptation of Western styles of governance - unleashed an enormous flow of coolies to Cochinchina and Cambodia (ibid.).

Philip Kuhn (2006: 163), however, questions the argument that state conventions were the push factors of migration, and argues that Chinese migration to Southeast Asia or elsewhere has always been about individually calculated business affairs of families trying to monopolize overseas market niches. Rather than seeing wars, poverty or state biopolitics as prime movers of Chinese migration, Kuhn (ibid.:167) says we should see the crowded, commercially vibrant society of late-imperial China as a gigantic arena of trade relationships in which trade families and craft families were conditioned to respond to various kinds of business opportunities abroad. Not state policies, but the fact that labor was the most marketable resource for a family with too many males in relation to its cultivable land unleashed strategies of migration to earn money elsewhere (ibid.). This was the case because the remittances sent home by these traders added an economic margin critical to family survival in the poor and war-stricken Chinese hinterlands (ibid.). The challenge for these men, according to Kuhn, was to find a niche, a niche that had economic value for the new host nation and would fill the pockets of their family at home as well (ibid.: 168).

In a related vein Steven B. Miles (2006: 220) has shown how many Cantonese families in the seventeenth century Pearl River delta have sent sojourners both upriver along the West river basin, and abroad to Vietnam and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. According to Miles this was due to their geographical position along riverbanks and the riverine opportunity they had to search for lucrative markets in other river deltas, both at home and abroad (ibid.: 224). In particular families from Nanhai
and Shunde county are said to have adopted migration as a family strategy to conquer overseas markets, win civil degrees and pursue land there (ibid.: 221). Studying Shunde and Nanhui county genealogies Miles comes up with a new perspective on the migration of the Cantonese diaspora; not only overseas migration, but riverine migration along the West river basin appears to have been a main route to Southeast Asia as well (ibid.: 225).

The rise of transnational trading and business networks
It is well documented that the arrival and settlement of ethnic Chinese ‘niche seekers’ gave rise to new commercial elites in Southeast Asia, the so-called ‘middlemen minorities’. According to Light and Gold (2000: 6) Howarth Paul Becker (1956) was the first scholar who devoted an entire chapter to the ‘dual ethnics’ of ‘middlemen trading people’. Becker saw these middlemen trading minorities as ‘strangers’ living both inside and outside the social structure of a local society. Because of their ‘dual position’, he argued, they were valuable business partners, because they could conduct business in an objective manner and extend credit only to those who were able to pay (ibid.). Light and Gold (2000:5) continue that it was Max Weber (1969) who coined the term ‘pariah capitalism’, referring to the diasporic position of European Jews who continued a commercial livelihood through the practice of sojournning. Weber saw the European Jews’ tendency to engage in trade as inextricably related to their status as ‘strangers’ in society. The Jews, he argued, developed particularistic resources that supported and enhanced their business activities. These resources included entrepreneurial values, beliefs, institutions, and social networks through which the children of middleman merchants easily moved into mercantile roles, continuing the tradition of their family and people (ibid.).
At present, it is heavily debated whether these ‘middlemen minorities’ still organize their trade ventures within the boundaries of a shared ethnicity. The cultural argument goes that producers and traders are still attached to a strong and tightly integrated diaspora (cf. Wu 2001). The reason for this is that their reciprocal relationships are embedded in a Confucian value system that emphasizes harmony and consensus, trust and responsibilities towards the lineage (cf. Fukuyama 1995; Kotkin 1993; Redding 1990). This trust system has been referred to as *guanxi* (good connections), a trust mechanism that facilitates quick decisions and makes the family enterprise adaptable to rapidly changing situations (Clarke, Yue and Von Glinow 1999: 174).

Premised as it is on equal relations of reciprocity, *guanxi* appears not to diffuse ‘non-economic’ norms of filial duty but seems to be a trust-regulated system reevaluated over the course of a relationship (cf. Burt 2005; Yang 1994). In what Clifford Geertz (1963, 1978) cited in Burt 2005:105), dubbed as a process of clientelization gossip mechanisms are often used to collect information about future business partners. In particular in uncertain situations gossip mechanisms contain elements of evaluation or interpretation of a certain person (ibid.) and can be seen as stories that are crucial to build and maintain *guanxi* relationships. Mayfair Yang (1994) explains how entrepreneurs use gifts and favors to cultivate personal relationships (*guanxi*) and create relationships of mutual dependence this way. Besides economic advantage Yang (1994) argues these gifts also ensure political security for an entrepreneur and are seen as crucial means to get trade licenses, tax discounts or police protection.

Because those active in *guanxi* networks are often distant kin, neighbors, former schoolmates or people with the same surname or dialect, most
ethnic Chinese guanxi networks are seen as family firms, a building block Southeast Asians seem to miss. In this regard Tania Murray Li (1998) and David Szanton (1998) note that Malay and Javanese youths are reluctant to submit to family authority, at least when it comes to economic affairs. For Malay and Javanese youngsters, in sharp contrast to the Chinese, the family is not an enterprise, but the independent responsibility of their parents. As a result, the cultural argument holds that Southeast Asian families cannot rely upon the nuclear family as a business resource and for this reason can never increase their stocks, turnover and profit margins (Hefner 1998:13).

The economic argument states that there is nothing ‘ethnic’ about the business success of the ethnic Chinese middlemen minorities over their Southeast Asian counterparts; they are simply better in dealing with capitalist principles such as money handling, risk taking, innovation and opportunity seeking (Hefner 1998: 18). As the ‘early start’ argument of Maurice Freedman (1979) goes, Chinese immigrants to Southeast Asia came from a society in which the tools of commerce were already widespread before the Chinese began their migration (ibid.). The most notable items in this toolbox, he says, were familiarity with the use of money and the existence of institutions for managing investments and credits. With this knowledge at hand the ethnic Chinese were able to adapt more quickly than the natives to the commercial opportunities of pre-colonial and modern Southeast Asia (ibid.).

Departing from ‘an organizational imperative perspective’ Chang and Tam (2003: 27) argue that Chinese business success has always been based on the adage ‘being at the right place, at the right time’. This is because ethnic Chinese already took advantage of booming Asian economies in the early colonial period by establishing niche businesses within the colonial economy (Zwart 2006: 35). This structural position is
said to have given them an ‘early start advantage’ over other competitors and enabled them to cooperate with western companies investing in the region. To supply western companies with cheap labor and raw materials the capitalist argument holds that Chinese entrepreneurs had to flatten their organization style and morph traditional elements into something hybrid that resembles neither ethnic Chinese capitalism nor indigenous identities (cf. Yeung and Olds 2000).

Somewhere in-between the cultural and capitalist argument one can find the ‘embeddedness’ argument pinpointing at the interplay between state structures, capitalism and culture (Dahles 2004; Granovetter 1985; Hamilton 2000; Hefner 1998). As Mark Granovetter (1985) already aimed to show, there is a higher level of social interaction in the market place than both cultural and capitalist scholars acknowledge. In this respect Jamie Mackie (1998: 129-146) indicated that immigrants to Southeast Asia have always been recruited to a variety of organizations, including kinship networks, dialect group associations, chambers of commerce, and mutual aid organizations. In particular ‘revenue farms’ are said to have absorbed immigrants into a multi-purpose social network and provided them with access to housing, employment, business contacts and capital (Wilson 2004: 65-66).

Politically oriented scholars also promote the ‘embeddedness’ of ethnic Chinese capitalism in state structures, because success in their view depends on someone’s ability to bond with government officials for the procurement of rents (Gomez 1999; Khan and Jomo 2000). Gomez (1999) proposes to add the ‘state patronage’ element to the culture-versus-capital debate, because many ethnic Chinese companies received support from government officials to guarantee their existence. These rents include monopoly profits, subsidies and transfers, are organized through political mechanisms and are also meant to keep competitors at
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a distance (Khan and Jomo 2000: 5). Rent-seeking activities can range from bribing or even coercion at the extreme end to perfectly legal political activities such as lobbying or arranging charity donations (ibid.).

In classical economic definitions government rents are seen as illegal and unproductive practices that hamper economic growth in the region. Khan and Jomo (2000) in contrast argue that rents in many Southeast Asian economies are essential for maintaining social order, and necessary for economic growth. In this regard Andrew Wedeman (2003) observed how economic growth in China depended heavily on the ability of entrepreneurs to bond with the officialdom. On a more local level, Prasenjit Duara (1988) and Mayfair Yang (1994) found that the success of gentry-merchants in rural China depended heavily on their ability to seek rents by the local officialdom. Even wealthy ASEAN members such as Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand have provided many examples of how business tycoons have fused with the dominant political parties (Case 2000, 2002, 2003). In brief, political-economic scholars argue that the state is still a significant stakeholder in promoting capitalism in the region and that rent-seeking must be seen as a crucial part of Chinese and Southeast Asian modernization.

Identity politics
To their credit, each of the above approaches to business networks explains the structure and continuation of economic cooperation within and across borders. All four arguments (cultural, economic, institutional and political), however, suffer from the same flaw, because they do not take into account the diverse experiences of migrants (Ma and Cartier 2003: 5) and thus have no explanation for the heterogeneity that exists within ethnic groups. Often ethnic Chinese business networks are seen as a homogenous ethnic group, which stems from the idea that shared homelands are bonding factors of ethnicity (cf. Pan 1998). But as
Skeldon (2003: 54) has noted, mainland Chinese were not even a uniform group within China itself, but attached themselves variously to ethnic groups, sub-ethnic groups, and speech groups. Emphasizing the diversity of the ethnic Chinese, Wang Gungwu (1991) indicated how different ‘classes’ of ethnic Chinese migrated to Southeast Asia and how some ended up as coolies on pepper plantations, others as craftsmen in workshops and again others as traders in rural areas.

As for Cambodia, the American anthropologist William Willmott (1967) argues that a distinction has to be made between Chinese coolies and traders in terms of assimilation. Sojourning between their families at home in China and the plantations in Cambodia, Willmott argued that ethnic Chinese traders (often referred to as ‘compradors’) established far-flung networks and preserved a distinct Chinese identity. In reversal, settling in Cambodia and intermarrying with local Khmers, ethnic Chinese coolies are said to have adopted the Cambodian language, culture and religion. Edwards (2003), however, nuanced Willmott’s speculation of assimilation and argued that Chinese immigrants in Cambodia created ‘hybrid’ or ‘creolized’ cultures. The hybridity of ethnic Chinese identity, she says, is best symbolized in the deity Bentougong, a Chinese deity cult that is widely practiced by ethnic Chinese and Khmers throughout Cambodia. Defining the identity of ethnic Chinese as hybrid, Edwards echoes Homi Bhabha’s (1994) notion of ‘in-between identities’ that are alike and different from their parents’ culture at the same time.

But while historians and sociologists have described communities of locally born Chinese in the 19th and 20th century in terms of ‘hybrids’ or ‘creolized’, largely by studying the domestic culture, outside the household these same ‘creoles’ and ‘hybrids’ engaged in a variety of public activities through which they continued to identify themselves as authentic Chinese (Frost 2003). In particular transnationalism scholars
have observed the significance of multiple affiliations and social identities and pointed at the co-presence of ‘double’ identities (cf. Glick Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton 1992). Studies on ethnic Chinese identities in Thailand indicate that the Sino-Thai – though still capable of speaking Chinese dialect – stand out in their display of Thai identity, in particular in public. Their identity is a double one, although they usually claim that the Thai part is stronger (Chantavanich 1997: 249; Suryadinata 1997: 12-13). Chinese identity, then, constitutes an addition to their cultural repertoire illustrating an advanced proficiency in applying the appropriate paradigm to the appropriate occasion (cf. Dahles and Ter Horst 2006). As has been pointed out by Dahles (2004), quoting Hsiao (2002), abilities like these characterize, for example, diasporic and other communities of practice, in which members ‘shift between many different paradigms with no conflict’.

The concept of transnationalism depicts identity as a ‘process’ by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement (Glick-Schiller et al. 1992). In such definitions the homeland is ‘original’ and the diaspora is a sort of variation of this ‘authentic form’ (cf. Pan 1998). According to Lavie and Swedenburg (1996) however, the essential identity marker for the ethnic Chinese is not China anymore, but mainly the countries they have been residing in for generations. Ien Ang (2001: 35) also points at an increasing disengagement with China as an identity marker of Chineseness and warns us that many ethnic Chinese do not want to return to China at all. Ethnic Chinese identity, she says, has nothing to do with ‘homeland nostalgia’ anymore, but has become a ‘cultural toolkit’ containing resource potential. This is a vision shared by Wang Gungwu (1991), who argues that early Chinese traders did not have a notion of ethnicity at all, only a concept of Chineseness they used to strengthen business ties. Or, as Ien Ang (2001: 35) puts it:
‘Chineseness’ has become an open signifier invested with resource potential, the raw material for the construction of syncretic identities suitable for ‘living where you are at’.

**Materialism**

In brief, identity is not something primordial but must be seen as a social construct that can be used symbolically and seems transposable from one domain to the other. Yet, and that is a shortcoming in many analyses on strategic shifting identities, what makes ethnic Chinese identity the open signifier with resource potential that can be used strategically depending on its context and situation? While scholars praise the multi-layered, flexible and strategic ‘character’ of the ethnic Chinese, they are not very explicit as to what they mean with context, situations and politics. As Steven B. Miles (2006: 222) complains, transnationalism scholars have documented the history of emigrant and host communities well but have neglected to write about migrants’ experiences in the networks that link them. This is why Philip Yang (2006: 174) suggests it is much more useful to conceptualize transnationalism as a mode of immigrant labor market incorporation that provides immigrants with an alternative to gain employment and social mobility in the receiving society.

As indicated in the introductory chapter, many of the silk weavers and the silk traders are descendents of ethnic Chinese migrants who set up their businesses along river banks in Cambodia. Their situational context is predominantly one of reeling silk yarn, manufacturing silk skirts, subcontracting kin members, getting discounts and marketing the finished skirts on the market. The entire labor process, however, is not in the hands of the silk weavers anymore; nowadays, a division of labor exists between silk weavers who produce the *sampot hol* and middlemen
and wholesalers who import the silk yarn and peddle the finished product in the market place. Approaching the Cambodian silk weaving industry as a labor market and linking labor relationships to identity, gives credit to a vision neglected by transnationalism scholars but celebrated by Marxist scholars for decades: materialism. Coining the concept of ‘historical materialism’ Karl Marx (2000 [1867]) departs from the assumption that in order to exist human beings collectively work on nature to produce the means to live. Not all human beings do the same work however; there is a division of labor in which people not only do different jobs, but also live from the work of others by owning the means of production. As Marx has put it in the preface of ‘A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy’ (1977 [1859]:21):

‘In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousnesses’.

It is a central claim of theories inspired by Marxism that improved production methods created unequal divisions of labor and downgraded the position of the worker (Inglis and Hughson 2003: 402). This is because production and trade relationships became an interplay of two opposed classes: capitalists who controlled the great mass of productive powers and workers, who controlled no such powers, except their own capacity for labor (Marx 2000 [1867]). Capitalists in these unequal
production relationships had the means to set up enterprises and produce new thoughts, while workers owned nothing and had to sell their labor to the capitalists (ibid.). As Marx (ibid.:149) states:

‘A spinner treats spindles only as implements for spinning, and flax only as the material that she spins. She must seize upon these things and rouse them from death sleep, change them from mere possible use values into real and effective ones’.

In other words, and this is an important theme in Marx’ sociology, the labor process turns into a process by which the capitalist ‘consumes’ the labor power of the worker in a twofold way. First because the capitalist sees to it that the work is done in a proper manner, and that the means of production are used with intelligence, so that there is no unnecessary waste of raw material, and no wear and tear of the implements beyond what is necessarily caused by the work (ibid.). Secondly, by the purchase of the worker’s labor power, the capitalist incorporates him as a living ferment, together with the lifeless constituents of his product (ibid.:150). As a consequence, Marx argues, human labor itself converts into a commodity, because the wage the worker receives from the capitalist does not exceed the investments of the capitalist and certainly does not correspond with the ‘surplus value’ he receives on the market place, an exchange value Marx dubbed as ‘exploitation’.

According to Marx ‘exploitation’ is an inevitable aspect of capitalist societies, because capitalists will compete with each other, and as competition between capitalists grows so does the misery of the workers. Yet, competition between capitalists gradually leads to the concentration of accumulated capital in fewer and fewer hands and class distinctions between the few haves and the majority of have-nots are inevitable. As Marx (2000 [1867]: xiv) argues, while the number of exploited workers swells and their poverty increases, so does the intensity of their wrath.
against their oppressors. In ‘The Communist Manifesto’, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1848) already suggested a course of action for a working class revolution to overthrow the ruling capitalist class and bring about a classless society. Though the bourgeoisie has played a progressive role in destroying feudalism, it also created a contradiction within capitalism between the forces of production and the relations of production. As Marx and Engels described it (Marx and Engels 1967 [1848]: 5):

‘The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It … has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous “cash payment” … for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation … Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones … All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind’.

Marx and Engels defended communism as a theory to overthrow the capitalist class and outlined a set of demands including the abolition of landownership, a progressive income tax, centralization of the means of communication, and the expansion of the means of production owned by the state. The implementation of these policies, Marx and Engels believed, would eventually lead to a stateless and classless society in the hands of those who deserved it, the workers.

But as the case-study organized around the elderly silk weaver Sotheap indicates, after the Khmer Rouge regime was overthrown by Vietnamese troops, she returned to her village and was able to resume silk weaving
due to the financial assets of the middlemen in her village, a gesture she still is grateful for. Simultaneously, however, she fears the quality inspections of her middleman, because he has the power to lower the exchange value of her commodities. Contrary to the Khmer Rouge rebels, however, the silk weavers do not bear a grudge against the ‘exploiting’ practices of the ethnic Chinese capitalists, but seem to accept them as part and parcel of their position in the labor process. That again raises questions pertaining to theoretical debates on why peasants, in this case the Cambodian silk weavers, do not strike against their middlemen, but seem to accept the rather low exchange values of the sampot.

The logic of subsistence
Whereas Marx developed his theories on historical materialism, capitalist modes of production and class struggle in 19th century industrial towns in Great Britain, Cambodia consists predominantly of peasants, and modernizes in a rural way. The agricultural sector in Cambodia is still of critical importance and provides the livelihoods of the majority of the population (Mekong River Commission 2003: 145-146). In fact, some ninety per cent of the Cambodian population depends upon agricultural crops, fisheries, livestock or handicrafts production for its living (ibid.). The silk weavers do not form an exception to this rule and the production of sampot is often an important asset alongside other rural activities such as rice growing, pig raising and fish farming.

As for his emphasis on the urban exploited worker, Johnson (2004: 4) argued that Marx was convinced that the peasantry class had no existence in the modern era and would eventually disappear due to the rise of industrialism and capitalism. Marx' vision of the disappearing peasantry class, Johnson continued, was shared by thinkers such as Kautsky and Lenin. Like Marx, he writes, these two Russian thinkers
characterized peasants as simple, undifferentiated and barbaric people who were unable to shape history and block the development of civilization (*ibid.*). Today, Johnson (2004) argues that this vision is still shared by western development organizations paying too much attention to industrial development and a capitalist mode of production to modernize an economy (*ibid.*: 5). From the colonial period onwards the American model of integration of agriculture and industry, also called the Green Revolution, was designed in Southeast Asia to incorporate it into an emerging capitalist world order and to promote the development of the capitalist farmer (*ibid.*). Overall, however, this strategy failed as only a minority of peasants became capitalists and the vast majority remained petty producers, depending upon state subsidies and public and private financing for both their production and consumption needs (Johnson 2004: 5). Alvin So (1986: 76) argued that Marxist thinkers overlooked the extent of commercialization of agriculture in China before its incorporation into the capitalist world-system. While studying the economic development of silk districts in the Pearl River Delta, So (1986) illustrated that the Chinese gentry-class did not adopt a capitalist mode of production but opted for the petty producer path of commercialization. According to Johnson (2004:4) Alexander Chayanov (1966) argued that a petty mode of production must be distinguished from a capitalist mode of production because there is no appropriation and realization of surplus value or accumulation of capital. This is because the distinctive economic behavior of the subsistence-oriented peasant family results from the fact that, unlike a capitalist enterprise, it is a unit of consumption as well as a unit of production (*ibid.*).

According to James Scott (1976: 13-14), paraphrasing Chayanov (1966), many of the seeming anomalies of peasant economics arise from the fact that the struggle for a subsistence minimum is carried out in the context
of a shortage of land, capital, and outside employment opportunities. James Scott argued that it was Chayanov who has shown how the proportion of the year spent in crafts and trades increases as the land available to the peasant family diminishes (ibid.). According to Chayanov (1966), the continued application of labor to poorly compensated farming or handicrafts must thus be seen as a product of the low opportunity costs of labor for the peasant and the high marginal utility of income for those near the subsistence level. For this reason, he says, it also makes sense for the peasant to continue to apply labor until its marginal product is quite low and at the same time allow others to extract high return from their predicament (ibid.).

This is also the reason why James Scott (1976) complains that Marxist approaches to exploitation have been too one-sidedly materialistic (ibid.:165), because exploitation in peasant economies is not just a problem of income but mostly a question of peasant conceptions of social justice, of rights and obligations, and of reciprocity (ibid.: vii). Other than industrial societies, Scott argues that peasant societies maintain a 'subsistence ethic' that prefers safety and reliability to long-run profits (ibid.:13). The landlord in these unequal labor relationships takes the risk of cultivation and gives financial assistance to his tenants. The tenant as a consequence is considered 'an inferior member of the extended family' of landlords in these societies, a position he, to a certain extent, accepts (ibid.)⁶.

⁶ In 'The Rational Peasant: The political economy of Rural Society in Vietnam', however, Samuel L. Popkin (1979) attacks the position of James Scott by proposing a rational choice alternative he dubs as political economy. According to Popkin the peasant is not so concerned with maintaining the status quo as moral economist such as James Scott would have us believe. Rather, he says, the peasant is always concerned with maximizing his or her utility and is willing to gamble and take risks in order to secure a higher social level. Therefore, his argument continues, peasant's behavior is always guided by economic rationality.
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A traditional modernity
The above materialist view asks attention to relationships between identity, unequal production relationships and the logic of subsistence within peasant societies. As the research has shown, silk traders identify themselves as ethnic Chinese, whereas silk weavers, albeit member of the same ethnic group, identify themselves as Khmers. Yet, linking identity with production relationships and subsistence logic alone does not explain why the powerful silk traders, as capitalists, market the silk products conform the culture of ‘their’ workers, the Khmer weavers. As indicated in the introductory chapter, there is a gap between the grand Khmer narrative of the silk weaving techniques and its ethnic Chinese origin, a gap the ethnic Chinese silk traders do not seem to counter. This again questions theories on how the ‘grand narrative’ of Khmer modernization should be interpreted in Cambodia against the background of an ethnic Chinese dominance of the silk industry.

According to Marx, as cited in Inglis and Hughson (2003: 23), the state is supposed to secure the interests of the few capitalists, and deploy ‘ideologies’ that mask the true, class-based exploitative nature of society. To accomplish this the economic and political elite has created a cultural superstructure, alienated from, and out of control of, the people who operate within it; a situation Marx described as ‘commodity fetishism’. Marx, as cited in McLellan (1984:184) expressed this form of alienation as follows:

‘The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas’.
According to David Howarth (2000: 19) Antonio Gramsci (1971) deployed the concept of hegemony to explain a more sympathetic interplay between material organization and ideology. Howarth (2000: 89) borrows from Gramsci (1971) the insight that ideologies have a validity which is also psychological, and create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position and obtain commonsensical conceptions of the world. Howarth also agrees with Gramsci that different classes and ethnic groups must come to share a common set of political objectives based on a new set of beliefs and practices, an outcome Gramsci (1971) refers to as 'winning hegemonies' (ibid.). To stabilize new systems of meanings Howarth (ibid. 111) borrows from Ernesto Laclau (1990) the insight that class or ethnic differences must be silenced by 'empty signifiers'. Examples of 'empty signifiers' are myths by which Howarth (2000: 11) means that states have created social imageries that are designed to make sense of dislocations. These myths, however, are not only traumatic in the sense that they threaten identities, but are also productive in the sense that they serve as the foundation on which new identities are constituted Glynos and Stavrakakis (2004: 207).

According to Gilloch (1996:9) the multiple functions of myths and positive connotations of 'ideologies' have also been a key feature in the work of the German theorist Walter Benjamin. Gilloch agrees with Benjamin that myths are fallacious stories which serve to explain and account for natural occurrences, catastrophes and other phenomena with reference to superhuman beings, spirits, demons and magic (ibid.). As a consequence, Gilloch continues, they stand in opposition to true knowledge and involve human powerlessness in the face of unalterable natural laws and the subordination of reason (ibid.:10). This again, he concludes, is caused by the fact that human beings worship their own
products in ‘commodity fetishism’ and are governed by the unchanging rhythms of the machinery they must serve (ibid.).

It is a central claim of Baudrillard (1998 [1970]) too that we have become ‘victims’ of a postmodern world dominated by simulated experiences and sign values, a situation he refers to as hyper-reality. This ‘hyper-real’ world, he says, is dictated by the needs of consumption, advertising campaigns and companies seeking to sell their wares and services. Baudrillard thus points at a new sort or new sorts of ‘commodity fetishism’ and argues that the rise of the ‘consumer society’ means that we have come to live more and more under the silent gaze of the mythical objects we want (ibid.).

Yet, whereas writers such as Marx and Baudrillard depict ‘commodity fetishism’ only negatively as a form of ‘alienation’ or ‘gaze’, Gilloch (1996), and I agree with him, uses the term myth also as a metaphor that can contain positive elements (Gilloch 1996: 12). In his writings on Paris Walter Benjamin, as cited in Gilloch (1996:12), characterizes the commodity culture of nineteenth-century metropoles as a dream world and the materialization, albeit in a distorted form, of genuine desire and aspirations (ibid.:13). According to Gilloch it has been one of Benjamin’s central claims ever since that the modern must not to be understood as the end point of a continuous, linear, development or as the culmination of human endeavor and achievement (ibid.). On the contrary, Gilloch continues, modernity is merely the nothing-new that struts boastfully around the city streets in the borrowed garb of the latest fashion; it is the always-the-same dressed up as the ever-new (ibid.:14). That is also why Walter Benjamin coined the term traditional modernity, because modernity, in the words of Gilloch (1996: 14), has not progressed beyond
‘prehistory’, but instead constitutes a perpetual relapse into the always-the-same of myth.

Another reason why Gilloch (1996) embraces Benjamin’s concept of ‘traditional modernity’ is his concern with the rescue and preservation of ‘traditional’ artifacts, and with their subsequent re-use or re-functioning in the pressing political struggles of the moment (ibid:14.). As indicated in the introductory chapter, the Royal family, the Cambodian state, the Cambodian diaspora, peace-building organizations and the ethnic Chinese silk traders are concerned with the rescue and preservation of the ‘hol’ silk weaving techniques as well, and market the sampot hol as a remnant of an ancient Khmer tradition. As the Khmer modernization narrative goes, the origin of the ‘hol’ silk weaving techniques lies in ‘glorious’ ruins of Angkor, its destruction in the ‘evil’ Communist 1970s and its revival again in the ‘liberal’ 1990s. In particular development agencies such as the Japanese ‘Institute for Khmer Traditional Textiles’ and the French ‘Artisan d’ Angkor’ claim the rescue of the Cambodian silk weaving industry and blame Khmer Rouge revolutionaries for the destruction of this once glorious Khmer weaving tradition.

Using Walter Benjamin’s (1940) explanation of Paul Klee’s painting ‘Angelus Novus’ Ollier and Winter (2006: 7) outlined how the postwar Cambodian state worships its past relics and anticipates on a consumption desire for Khmer authenticity for its progress. Drawing upon the empirical research of a team of international scholars they articulated how a postwar cultural economy has emerged in Cambodia framed around two ‘traditional’ themes; the Angkor Wat temple complex and the Khmer Rouge revolution (ibid.). As Winter (2006: 49-50) observes, within Cambodia’s post-conflict tourism industry, the face of Jayavarman VII, the builder of Angkor, adorns souvenir books,
postcards, CDs and glossy magazines and serves to commemorate him as a megalomaniac leader of an exalted monumental culture. In a related vein Timothy Dylan Wood (2006: 181-192) illustrates how the Cambodian state branded Pol Pot’s place of dead, Anlong Veng, as a popular tourist destination as well. Advertising the death of Pol Pot, however, the celebratory tone framed around the ‘glorious’ leader Jayavarman VII was replaced by an understanding and explanation for the most ‘evil’ Communist revolution ever in Southeast Asia, the one led by Pol Pot.

Conclusion
In this chapter I have outlined theoretical debates on diasporic migration conditions, ethnic Chinese business networks, identity politics and materialism in an attempt to construct a theoretical framework that will guide us towards an understanding of the gap that exists between the ‘grand Khmer narrative’ of Khmer modernization and the long-lasting dominance of the ethnic Chinese. Economically, ethnic Chinese dominance is accepted in Southeast Asia; culturally, however, their position is marginal and shows a high degree of assimilation (Dahles and Ter Horst 2006). It is not my ambition to bring to the fore ethnic Chinese dominance in the economic domain of the silk weaving industry and disqualify the Khmer modernization narrative as ‘phantasmatic’ or ‘imagined’. Yet, I will use ethnic Chinese ‘marginality’ as a starting point to problematize narratives of Khmer modernization and ethnic identities in Cambodia and illustrate the economics and politics behind it. Of course there is nothing new about the social construction of myths and cultures in Southeast Asia, but the role of the ethnic Chinese in this regard has not yet been considered. Hence, grounded in an anthropological tradition and addressing the themes of diasporic migration conditions, ethnic Chinese business networks, identity politics
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and materialism, this thesis revolves around the following research question:

‘How does the ethnically complex organization of the silk weaving industry relate to diverging modernization narratives and which interests do these narratives serve in the contemporary Cambodian nation state in general and its silk industry in particular?"

To operationalize the central research question, the following sub-questions will be used:

1. Under which historical conditions did Chinese silk traders and weavers transplant their business to Cambodia (chapter three)?

2. How is the contemporary silk weaving network organized in terms of production and trade relationships (chapter four)?

3. How do silk producers and traders negotiate their identities within the economic domain of the silk weaving industry (chapter five)?

4. Why do ethnic Chinese silk traders and other crucial stakeholders (the state, NGOs and local communities) market silk weaving products as authentically Khmer (chapter six and conclusion)?
Chapter 2
Cambodia: A Plural Society Against All Odds

Introduction
In the dominant narrative silk weavers are considered loyal Khmer citizens, devoted Buddhists and folkloristic producers of high Khmer art working in an unaffected tropical landscape (cf. Delvert 1961; Forest 1980). John Kleinen (2005), however, has warned us that such (colonial) perceptions of rural hinterlands are rather romantic and lack the insight that they are always constructed within a constantly changing political environment. Kleinen also argues that underneath the image of Khmer ethnic pride, Cambodia hides a burden that stems from an extremely violent past (Kleinen and Mar 2004).

In the following pages I will illustrate how the Cambodian subject became multi-layered; continually adapting to foreign lifestyles, codes of conduct and cultural repertoires. The reason for this was that from the fall of Angkor in 1433 onwards the once mightiest kingdom of Southeast Asia shrunk to a vassal state under the command of Vietnamese, Thai and French troops. Next, I will also illustrate how the Cambodian state coped with this hegemonizing past and how it deployed a form of chauvinism, which could best be labeled as ethno-nationalism. In particular the Maoist-inspired Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979) considered the multi-layered Cambodian subject as a burden and ‘forced’ the Cambodians to become Khmers (col khmae). Tragically, however, Pol Pot’s attempt to primordialize the nation failed dramatically and even today the
The psychological, economic and cultural destruction of Cambodia is still visible. Yet, albeit one of the poorest nations of Southeast Asia, Cambodia is modernizing itself, one of the signs of this being the rise of an indigenous silk weaving industry, as this chapter will show.

The dominant discourse about Cambodia

Officially, ninety per cent of the Cambodian population is considered ethnic Khmers, descendants of the Angkor Empire, the largest Southeast Asian kingdom ever that extended over much of Southeast Asia and reached its zenith between the 10th and 13th centuries (cf. Chandler 1993). No one knows for certain how long the Khmers have lived in what is now Cambodia, where they came from, or what language they spoke before the era of Christianity (ibid.: 9). We do know that the inhabitants of present-day Cambodia spoke languages related to present-day Khmer, a language that is not typically Cambodian but related to the wider mon-Khmer family, a language system that is widely scattered over mainland Southeast Asia, and that is also used in some parts of India (ibid.). Still, the most beloved and embraced narrative of origin about Cambodia is the one known as Indianization, whereby elements of Indian culture, i.e. Hindu epics, Buddhist legends, ideas of universal kingship, a vocabulary of social hierarchies, iconography, astronomy, musical instruments and Sanskrit writing systems, were absorbed into Cambodian culture from the third century A.D. onwards (Chandler 1993: 11).

The narrative of an Indian Khmer is strengthened by a legend that can be traced back to the marriage of an Indian Brahman named Kaundinya, who married a Khmer dragon princess, nagi. This origin myth was first recorded by Chinese officials, who named the territory Funan, a maritime oriented state that stretched over contemporary Southern Cambodia and Cochinchina (ibid.:13). According to French historians such as George Coedes and Louis Malleret, the Funan empire came under attack by
another Khmer-speaking dynasty named Chenla, a vassal kingdom of Funan, occupying what is nowadays northern Cambodia and Southern Laos (ibid.:14). Responsible for this overthrow was the young warrior Bhavavarman, the eldest son of the Chenla ruler, Viravarman. The son of Bhavavarman, Isanavarman I, who succeeded him in c. 611, extended his power westwards towards the region that was later to become the center of the Angkor monarchy (Hall 1981: 105-107).

The ‘golden age’ of Khmer civilization was the period between the ninth and thirteenth century. Under Jayavarman VII (1181-ca. 1218) Cambodia extended its territory in a series of successful wars against its close enemies the Chams, the Vietnamese and the Thai, as far as what is nowadays the bay of Bengal (ibid.:105). Particularly important for the success of the Angkorean Khmers was an elaborate system of canals and reservoirs, which made possible an early ‘green revolution’ providing the country with large surpluses of rice (ibid.:116). Possibly because the glorious Angkorean kingdom was a successful agrarian one, the Khmers see themselves quintessentially as peasants, and their primary crop, paddy rice, as an important identity marker for their individual identity (Chandler 1993; Vickery 1986).

In Cambodia the adagio also goes that a Khmer is a Buddhist. Since the late 13th century Theravada Buddhism became the ‘Wheel of Life’ for the Khmers and today the temples are still the spiritual and symbolic centers of Khmer ethnic identity. In religious texts Theravada Buddhism is a tolerant, non-prescriptive religion in which each individual takes full responsibility for his own actions and omissions. Theravada Buddhism is based on three concepts: dharma (the doctrine of the Buddha); karma (the belief that one’s life is rewarded on the basis of the sum of one’s good actions); and the sangha, the ascetic community within which man can improve his karma (Keyes 1995: 84-86). Women are not allowed to
join the *sangha* and, perhaps for this reason, men are considered more ascetic and other-worldly than their female counterparts in Cambodia.

**The arrival of foreign hegemonizers**

Following Jayavarman VII’s death Cambodia experienced six centuries of gradual decline due to his violent relationship with several neighboring powers (Hall 1981:459-466). In the 12th century A.D., the Chams, a Hindu kingdom, fought a series of wars with the Angkorian Khmer in the west. This kingdom controlled the lands between Hue, in central Annam, and the Mekong Delta in Cochinchina, gaining prosperity from maritime trade including piracy (*ibid.*: 201-210). The Chams never conquered Cambodia, among others because they were conquered themselves by the Vietnamese in 1471 (Ovesen and Trankell 2003: 204). Many Cham fled to Cambodia and settled along the Tonle Sap and Mekong rivers, as well as in Battambang, Pouthisat, Takeo, Kampong Cham, Kampong Thum, and Kampong Chhnang provinces (Collins 1996). Today two separate groups can be distinguished within the Cham ethnic category; first the Cham people, who trace their ancestry to the Champa kingdom and speak both the Khmer and the Cham language, which both belong to the Austronesian family (Ovesen and Trankell 2003: 204-205). A second group is referred to as ‘Chvea’, which is the Khmer word for Java, suggesting a penultimate origin in the Malay-Indonesian area. The ‘Chvea’ prefer to call themselves ‘Khmer Islam’ – stressing their linguistic and national belonging and their separate religion (*ibid.*). Together they number about 230,000 and can be found mainly in Kampong Cham, Kampot and a region north of Phnom Penh (*ibid.*).

According to the nationalist history of Cambodia the Vietnamese began an historic period of expansion from 1000 AD onwards and conquered the eastern rim of the Khmer empire, comprising central present-day Vietnam (Champa), southern present-day Vietnam (Kampuchea krom)
and large parts of present-day eastern Cambodia (Clayton 2000: 46). In accordance with the nationalist argument, the Vietnamese emperor Minh Mang (1813) ordered 10,000 troops into Phnom Penh, at which point Cambodia, became a Vietnamese colony (ibid.). Besides occupying Cambodia the nationalist argument also goes that the Vietnamese supported their position with a hegemonic *mission civilisatrice* and imposed a variety of cultural and language policies on Cambodians in all social strata (ibid.: 47). The Cambodian king Chan for example was required to visit a Vietnamese temple in Phnom Penh, to wear a Vietnamese mandarin costume and to bow for the Vietnamese emperor (Chandler 1993: 126).

Although the Vietnamese withdrew from Cambodia in 1841, today some 600,000 (five per cent of the total population) Vietnamese live in Cambodia (World Factbook 2005). Especially the Cambodian border provinces Prey Veng and Svay Rieng have a significant Vietnamese rice farming population who have settled there in search of land. Most Khmers regard the Vietnamese as intruders (*youns*) and in recent Cambodian history the Vietnamese expansion across the borders has been a recurrent theme in anti-Vietnamese Khmer propaganda (Ovesen and Trankell 2003: 195).

In the fifteenth century another nationalist argument goes that Thai troops successfully attacked the Western rim of the Khmer empire and were responsible for the fall of the city of Angkor in 1433. A new Khmer capital was established at Udong, a city south of present-day Phnom Penh, but its monarchs could survive only by entering into what amounted to vassal relationships with the Thai and with the Vietnamese (Chandler 1993; Hall 1981). In 1767 the Thai capital of Ayutthaya was besieged and destroyed by the Burmese, but the Thai quickly recovered and soon reasserted their domination over Cambodia (Hall 1981: 465).
The youthful Khmer king Ang Eng (1779-96), a refugee at the Thai court, was installed as monarch at Udong by Thai troops. Like its Vietnamese counterpart in the East, Thailand annexed Cambodia's three northernmost provinces and the northwestern provinces of Battambang and Siemreap, hegemonizing them under a Thai cultural sphere of influence (Chandler 1993, Hall 1981).

Nevertheless the argument goes that the postcolonial Cambodian governments only regarded Vietnam and China as the big threats to Cambodian political, economic and territorial sovereignty, and not Thailand (Ovesen and Trankell 2003: 195). The reason for this, according to Ovesen and Trankell (2003), is that the main cultural divide running through Indochina is the one separating mainland Southeast Asia into the 'Indianized' states of Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, and Sinicized Vietnam. As their cultural argument goes, the Confucian culture of the Vietnamese and Chinese is often perceived as 'foreign', while the attitude of the Khmers towards the 'Buddhist' Thai culture is significantly more positive (ibid.).

When the Cambodian king Norodom signed a protectorate treaty with the French in 1863 Thai and Vietnamese territorial expansion finally came to a halt. The French demonstrated less economic interest in Cambodia than in Vietnam, and the country mainly functioned as a strategic buffer for Vietnam against English colonial interests in Thailand (Osborne 1969). But like all the other Cambodian colonizers, the French did believe in their sacred mandate to civilize and educate the world (Norindr 1997: 5). Convinced of their cultural ascendance over the Cambodian people, they exclusively promoted their own history and culture (ibid.). Cambodia, in the French mind, was regarded as an empty space, a void that could legitimately be exploited and colonized (ibid.). French language schools, French art institutions, French administrations, French
monuments, French buildings, French markets, were all hegemonic practices meant to portray Cambodia as a backward nation and attempts to deny its existence as a sovereign nation (Edwards 1999).

Postcolonial processes of ethnic homogenization
Because of his concern with territorial independence, Cambodia’s first postcolonial ruler, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, launched a Khmer nationalist discourse aiming to promote national unity and counteract the perceived dominance of Vietnamese and Chinese elements (Ovesen and Trankell 2003: 195). In the 1960s he devised an ethnic classification scheme to which certain non-Khmer ethnic minorities, such as the Vietnamese and Chinese, were excluded as foreigners (ibid:196). To distinguish them as such a law was promulgated in 1954 conferring Cambodian citizenship on children at least one of whose parents is a Cambodian citizen (ibid.). The 1954 citizenship law excluded from Cambodian nationality ethnic Vietnamese, Cham and Chinese residents who were either not born there, were born before 1954, or were born there after 1954 but not of a Cambodian partner (ibid.). Such people could gain citizenship only by ‘becoming Khmer’ (col khmae) through undergoing ethnic tests proving their fluency in the Khmer language and their familiarity with Khmer manners, customs and traditions (ibid., cf. Edwards 2003). That is also why many ethnic Chinese in Cambodia refer to themselves as ‘khmae-yeung’ (we Khmers), where Khmer indicates not ethnic origin but attachment to the Khmer nation. And that is also why they are often described as having ‘col khmae’ (entered the Khmers) even where they have joined Chinese associations or retained other outward markers of Chinese identity (Edwards 2003: 3-4).

7 By means of the 1954 citizenship law Sihanouk also encouraged indigenous minority groups in the north-eastern provinces of Rattanakiri and Mondulkiri to replace their clan identity and ‘become’ a Khmer.
In the 1970s general Lon Nol took over Sihanouk’s power during a coup d’état but at the same time stressed Cambodia’s ethnic homogeneity, asserting that all ethnic groups in Cambodia belonged to the great Khmer race (Edwards 2003:24). Although most ethnic Chinese had become Khmers Lon Nol shut down Chinese schools and newspapers, and disciplined Chinese and Vietnamese to get rid of their customs, morals and their communist way of thinking (ibid.). The 1975-1978 Khmer Rouge further racialized the Khmer body as a dark-skinned peasant and downgraded the ‘white’ ethnic Chinese as bloodsucking capitalists and communist spies. During Pol Pot’s regime all marks of heterogeneity had to be abolished, and millions of people were relocated in distinct working areas (Thion 1988:250). In these working zones ethnic Chinese were forced to ‘become Khmer’ in housing, language dress and food (Becker 1986: 255). To resist ‘Khmerisation’ was to threaten the founding principles of the Khmer Rouge regime and in the eyes of some Pol Pot cadres ethnic dissent was a crime equaling political dissent. Tragically, between 1975 and 1978 more than half of the 400,000 ethnic Chinese in Cambodia were killed for their class, intellectual or business background (Kiernan 1986:18-29).

In January 1979, backed by the Vietnamese army, the People Republic of Kampuchea state took over power and carried out a policy of unity and equality among the people of all nationalities living in Cambodia (Ovesen and Trankell 2003:198). As article 5 of the PRK constitution reads:

‘All nationalities must love and help each other. All acts of discrimination against, oppression of a division among the nationalities are prohibited. The State takes care of ethnic minorities so that they can rise to the common level. The State pays special attention to the development of economy, education, culture, social affairs, health and communication in the mountain regions and remote areas’ (in: Ovesen and Trankell 2003:198).
However, going against the foreign policy agenda of the PRK Ben Kiernan (1985) has argued that manifestations of Chineseness were still repressed, because the surviving Chinese population in Cambodia was recast as a fifth column for PRC interests and supporters of the Pol Pot regime. Stephen Heder (1981:19), who conducted 1,500 interviews with Cambodian refugees between December 1978 and November 1979, also reported that Vietnamese troops had restricted the movement of Chinese around Cambodia, barring their entry to the towns (cf. Edwards 2003). During the PRK regime the Chinese in Phnom Penh were also denied the freedom to celebrate Chinese New Year, practice ancestor worship, or to honor Chinese shrines (ibid.: 31). PRK discrimination against the ethnic Chinese continued after the issue of circular ‘351’ in 1983, a nationwide registration of Chinese businesses (ibid.). Like Sihanouk and Pol Pot’s policy of ethno-nationalism the ‘351’ registration campaign defined Chineseness on the basis of skin color, clarity of Khmer pronunciation, or display of cultural artifacts such as Chinese couplets or ancestral shrines in the home (ibid.). Afraid of becoming labeled as ‘351’, many Chinese staged an overtly Khmer identity, married a local Khmer and stopped speaking Chinese in public (ibid.). Symptomatic for the anti-Chinese sentiments was a famous ‘351’ joke among Khmers that there was a run on toothpicks as the Chinese had bought them all to prop their eyes open (ibid.).

The establishment of the State of Cambodia (SOC) in 1989 finally led to a gradual relaxation of restrictions imposed on the Chinese, in line with changes on the international political scene (ibid.:32). The Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia in 1989, the attendant healing of the Sino-Soviet rift and a concerted effort by the international community to secure peace in Cambodia led to direct meetings between Beijing and Phnom Penh during the October 1990 peace talks in Jakarta (ibid.). After
this meeting the SOC restored the rights of ethnic Chinese to practice religious customs and to celebrate Chinese festivals; in 1991, Chinese New Year festivities were officially allowed for the first time since 1975 (ibid.). From that period onwards Cambodia witnessed a huge revival of Chinese associations and temples with branches in every province, district and village. After the general elections in 1993, which resulted in the coalition government of the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) and the Sihanouk royalists, FUNCINPEC, the National Assembly also adopted a new Constitution for the Kingdom of Cambodia (Ovesen and Trankell 2003: 200). But although it acknowledges cultural differences between its ethnic minority groups, the 1993 Constitution still, like the 1954 one, marks the ethnic Chinese as Khmers and refuses to depict Cambodia as a multi-ethnic nation (Ovesen and Trankell 2003:200):

‘Every Khmer citizen shall be equal before the law, enjoying the same rights, freedom and fulfilling the same obligations regardless of race, colour, sex, language, religious belief, political tendency, birth origin, social status, wealth or other status’.

A painful reality

After centuries of being attacked by neighboring powers and two civil wars in the 1970s nothing is left of the glorious Angkor empire and Cambodia has become a tiny little state comprising an area of 181,040 sq km, bordering the Gulf of Thailand, situated in between Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos (World Factbook 2005). When I arrived in Cambodia in 2003 it was caught in a year full of political deadlocks, the outbreak

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8 Despite a convincing victory of Prime Minister HUN Sen’s CCP party, neither of the two rivaling parties, the Royalist FUNCINPEC party and the democratic Sam Rainsy Party, agreed to form a coalition. After eight months of negotiation FUNCINPEC did join CCP to form a cabinet. This to the anger of the left winger Sam Rainsy, who accused the Royalists of taking two million dollars of bribe money to form a cabinet with Hun Sen.
Cambodia: A plural society against all odds

of SARS and anti-Thai riots\(^9\) in Phnom Penh, a year that also saw the
sacking of the Thai Embassy and the closure of the Thai-Cambodian
border (Southeast Asian Affairs 2004: viiii). And although the kingdom of
Cambodia became the tenth member of the Association of Southeast
Asian Nations (ASEAN) in April 1999, this did not bring about the desired
socio-economic changes, technological innovations, improved
infrastructure, good governance, trade relationships, rapid urbanization,
foreign investments, demographic transformations and increase of the
GNP.

This means that after a decade of Soviet help, fifteen years of UN aid and
five years of ASEAN membership, Cambodia is still one of the poorest
nations in the world, and, behind Burma and Bangladesh, among the
poorest in Southeast Asia. This means that with an average income of
260 dollar a year (Mekong River Commission 2003:64), forty per cent of
the population lives under extremely poor conditions, while most other
Southeast Asian nation states have graded their average GNP figure up
to 1000 dollars or more (Chia 2003). Because of the extremely poor
health services, inadequate nutrition and strenuous physical labor
Cambodians seldom reach an age older than fifty-four years (ibid.: 50),
whereas most Southeast Asian countries are currently experiencing a
growth in the proportion of their population of 65 years and older (Hugo
2003: 108). Health conditions for children in Cambodia are also among
the worst in the Asia, due to a number of factors including low birth
weights and diseases such as malaria, diarrhea and dysentery. UNICEF
studies point out that literacy rates are worrisome in Cambodia as well,
as seventy per cent of the population is not capable of reading. In
particular women are denied access to schools, as peasant families prefer

\(^9\) This contradicts with the cultural argument of Ovesen and Trankell (2003: 195) that Cambodians favour
Thai people over Vietnamese.
to keep their daughters at home because of the important role they play in domestic and household economic activities (UNICEF 2002).

Sadly, the 1970s civil wars still have profound implications for the gender, size and age structure of Cambodian families, as many women lost their husbands in the Pol Pot working camps and became the sole breadwinners of their households. Most of the female-headed households can be found in urban areas, because rural women raising their children on their own are more likely to lose their land due to poverty, which forces them to move to urban areas in search of work. As a result of Pol Pot’s peasant revolution, fertility rates declined dramatically in the 1970s and bounced back with a ‘baby boom’ after peace was restored in the 1980s. As a consequence the average size of the contemporary family is 5.4 persons, and fifty per cent of its members are twenty-five years or younger (Mekong River Commission 2003: 45-46), an age-size structure that is in sharp contrast with the declining fertility rates in other parts of Southeast Asia (Hugo 2003:112).

In many other Southeast Asian economies the state has restructured its postcolonial economic space with a sharp increase in the growth of non-agricultural labor force and the contribution of non-agricultural activities to gross domestic product (De Koninck 2003:191-230). Cambodia, however, like Laos and Burma still depends heavily on its rural

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10 Officially, however, Cambodia privatized its land system in 1989 and Prime Minister Hun Sen promised that all those whose main occupation was agriculture would receive land according to their household size. In the last decade, however, significant socio-economic changes such as refugee repatriation, urbanization and an increasing population growth changed the composition of stakeholders asking for land titles (Chan and Sarthi 2002). Following the law of the market, only people with adequate financial resources and/or political access were able to obtain proper land certificates from their respective Cadastral Office. In many areas a proper certificate costs up to US$ 300-400, mainly in the form of unofficial payments to officials and representatives spread across different departments. Predictably, many Cambodians obtain their land titles through lower administrative levels by means of unofficial application receipts, which means that their land titles are not necessarily tenable by law.
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hinterlands with an urbanization rate of ten per cent (Mekong River Commission 2003: 48). Whereas farmers in other countries have modernized their agricultural equipment and cultivate multiple crops, the majority of peasants in Cambodia still ploughs their paddies with ox-carts and practice a subsistence style of farming. Living conditions for the peasants are humble and most of them do not have a latrine, access to water or access to commercial energy from the state supplier Electricité du Cambodge, which in turn gives them limited opportunities for agricultural processing and non-farming activities (Sarthi, Kim, Chap and Meady 2003).

Another factor that limits the non-farming activities of peasants is their lack of access to productive land. In Democratic Kampuchea private landownership was prohibited, but after the war Cambodian leaders were still not eager to privatize plots. In 1989, the government of Cambodia officially re-privatized its land and re-distributed small parcels to rural households. In practice, however, only about ten per cent of the households have been granted ownership certificates and many only have temporary certificates. This is mainly due to the land-grabbing activities of a small Cambodian upper class in Phnom Penh who are eager to buy fertile land as investment for their capital (Chan and Sarthi 2002). Therefore, Cambodian farmers only have about one hectare per household and female-headed households only have half a hectare. In comparison, in the 1960s under Sihanouk, the average landholding was 2.2 hectares with 84 per cent of the households farming on one to six hectares.

Yet, despite the incredible amount of casualties\(^\text{11}\) and the extremely poor human indicators, both economic and political development have moved

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\(^\text{11}\) Mortality levels under the Khmer Rouge regime have been the object of an enduring scholarly debate. It is widely accepted, though, that most people in the working zones were not killed but died from hunger.
on since the ill-fated 1970s (Sjöberg and Sjöholm 2006:495-517). Democratic elections have been held, the press is reasonably free, the presence of NGOs, both national and international ones, is noticeable, foreigners are investing in the economy again and Cambodia has become a member of both the ASEAN and World Trade Organization (ibid.). After the 1993 elections, held under the auspices of the United Nations Transitional Authority (UNTAC), Cambodia also started up a relatively successful change from a centrally planned economy into a market-based one. From the mid-1990s economic growth climbed, from five per cent in 1994 to seven percent in 1996, but it fell down drastically again to a freezing point due to renewed political unrests in 1997\textsuperscript{12} and the fall of the Thai \textit{bath} during the Asian financial crisis (Sok 2004: 5).

As a consequence of Hun Sen’s 1997 \textit{coup d’état}, ASEAN suspended Cambodia’s membership, the UN declared its seat vacant and foreign donors and investors withdrew their personnel and money. Since major investments in Cambodia came from the Asia Pacific region and ASEAN, the crisis created a ‘credit-crunch’ for Asian entrepreneurs and caused a decline in investment (Sokhom 1999:2). To make things worse, the 1997 Asian crisis also had strong effects on Cambodia’s foreign trade, because the crisis devaluated in particular Eastern Asian currencies. This again

\textsuperscript{12} 1997 was an extremely violent year in the political arena. On march 31 a grenade was thrown into a group of Sam Rainsy supporters demonstrating outside the National Assembly. In July Prime Minister Norodom Ranariddh, while being busy closing a peace deal with leftover Khmer Rouge revolutionaries, got attacked by the second prime Minister Hun Sen. On 5 July, troops loyal to Hun Sen (CPP party) clashed with those loyal to the Prince (Funcinpec party) and heavy fighting erupted on the streets of Phnom Penh. Following Hun Sen’s coup in Phnom Penh, remnants of Funcinpec forces formed an alliance with the last of the Khmer Rouge at the Thai border. Again, there were serious fights at the Thai border, but Hun Sen’s troops flexed their muscles successfully and secured their power take-over in Cambodia. At the moment of writing Samdech Hun Sen is still Cambodia’s ‘Strongman’.
led to an increase in Cambodia's import and a drop of its exports because the fall of the dollar made it unprofitable to export processed products such as timber and rubber to overseas markets (Kao 2000).

Flirting with the Chinese again

Lacking an indigenous private sector prime minister Hun Sen realized that the economy depended heavily on the investments of foreign entrepreneurs and visited mainland China in April 2004. That month he spent six days visiting Beijing, Shanghai, Hainan and Guangzhou and proudly announced that he had signed sixteen agreements with China for aid and loans (Asia Times 2005). In the Chinese Cambodian newspaper Sin Chew Daily China is mentioned as the largest foreign direct investor providing around US$217 million to Cambodia (China Daily 2005). Most Chinese investment can be witnessed in the garment sector\(^{13}\), which accounts for around 95 per cent of the country’s exports and provides employment for 200,000 people in about two hundred factories (Falcus and Frost 2003).

Beside the garment factories many Chinese entrepreneurs run electric power plants, pharmaceutical factories, cement factories, sugar refineries, banks, hospitals, restaurants, hotels, or discos (Frost 2003). Stimulated by the new foreign investment law adopted by the National Assembly on 4 August 1994,\(^{14}\) Cambodia’s protected export status, its cheap working force and perhaps its large ethnic Chinese diaspora already controlling the business arena, some 22,000 Chinese

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\(^{13}\) For a detailed study on the Cambodian garment industry: Derks, A. (2005).

\(^{14}\) This law on investment guarantees that investors shall be treated in a non-discriminatory manner, except for land ownership; that the government shall not undertake a nationalization policy which adversely affects private properties of investors; that the government shall not impose price controls on the products or services of an investor who has received prior approval from the government; and that the government shall permit investors to purchase foreign currencies through the banking system and to remit abroad those currencies as payments for imports, repayments on loans, payments of royalties and management fees, profit remittances, and repatriation of capital.
entrepreneurs landed at Pochentong airport in 1995 alone (cf. Edwards 2004). During the last decade, Chinese entrepreneurs invested enormous sums of money in the Cambodian tourist industry as well, opening up hotels, restaurants, karaoke bars and souvenir shops in the touristscapes Phnom Penh and Siem Reap (Sok 2004: 29-46). As one of the oldest polities in the Southeast Asian region Cambodia can claim a rich cultural heritage, in particular thanks to the Angkor Wat temple complex. Interestingly, this cultural icon attracts mainly tourists from eastern Asian countries such as China, Korea, Taiwan and Japan, reaching a peak of one million visitors in the year 2004 (ibid.).

But despite the flourishing Chinese-controlled garment and tourist industries, bilateral and multilateral donors such as the World Bank, USAID, Asia Foundation and UNDP watch Hun Sen’s flirtations with China with growing suspicion and question the sustainability of these foreign investments for long-term economic development (ibid.). In the donors’ argument the Chinese garment industry is only located in Cambodia because of its favorable export quotas and tax exemptions with the United States and the European Union.¹⁵ They are skeptical about the future of the 200,000 Cambodian textile workers now that the WTO Agreement on Textiles and Clothing has expired in 2005 (ibid.).

The Chinese-controlled tourist industry is seen as vulnerable as it is foreign-managed and closely related to uncontrolled global effects such as the outbreak of SARS, the bird flu, terrorist attacks or the Tsunami. The donors wonder what will happen to the seventy thousand Cambodians working in the tourist sector when the bird flu breaks out (ibid.) or if terrorists would bomb a hotel in the touristscape of Siem Reap. To develop the economy and provide enough jobs for the enormous

¹⁵ The garment industry in Cambodia has greatly benefited from favorable trade agreements with the US and the EU such as the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) and the Generalised System Preference (GSP).
amount of young newcomers, the foreign experts agree that the Cambodian government has to fashion its own economic environment in the future, in which domestically rooted industries must create jobs for this enormous flow of Cambodian youngsters (ibid.).

In general UN development reports are rather pessimistic and tend to see factories and mechanized forms of agriculture as the only answers to low GDP figures and other poor development indicators. From their arrival in the 1990s onwards aid organizations and international donors overwhelmed Cambodia with reports about its being a poor, traumatized, violent, corrupt and bankrupt nation, and offered meta-solutions on how to stabilize the country again. However, when the economy continued to stagnate and health and education indicators did not improve, the global rescuers seemed hurt in an almost narcistic way and passed the responsibility back to the Cambodian government again. In a devastating Worldbank report (2004) researchers mentioned corruption coupled with non-transparent regulations and bureaucratic red tape as the main factors that impeded small entrepreneurs in the private sector from growing naturally. In the same report they argued that one hundred million of donor dollars were not used that year to repair roads or to build schools, but instead disappeared into the pockets of the political elite. That same year, following the outcomes of this report, a furious Worldbank President James Wolffensohn threatened prime minister Hun Sen on national television, saying that Cambodia would be withdrawn from the donor list if he did not tackle his corruption problems.

But despite fifteen years of UN rescue operations and billions of dollars of aid money, Cambodia remains an ugly duck of ASEAN and excels in extreme social-demographic indicators of poverty. It is striking that aid organizations do not blame themselves for their poor performances but instead keep on blaming the corrupt, feudal and patrimonial practices of
the Cambodian government. Also, aid agencies wish to see flourishing domestic industries, but at the same time seem to frown when witnessing ten people under a house weaving a silk skirt on a wooden handloom. Attacking the narrative of Western modernization as the only stairway to heaven, Kenneth Pomeranz (2000) argued that the backbone of China’s contemporary economic success has always been its labor-intensive, rural hinterlands. In Chinese versions of modernization rural and labor-intensive industries have always accounted for the bulk of Chinese economic growth and have always been characteristic signs of Chinese development.

Silk weaving: a Cambodian blessing?
In the dominant discourse silk weavers are considered loyal Khmer citizens and devoted Buddhists, who have sat enlightened behind their loom from the 12th century onwards. In such kinds of ethnic categorizations Cambodia is a rural, all-Khmer and strictly Theravada Buddhist nation. Beyond the surface of such neat ethnic categorizations however hides a painful reality of foreign hegemonization, civil wars and subsequent extremely poor human indicators. From the fall of the Angkor empire in the fifteenth century onwards Cambodia has been invaded by the Cham, Siamese, Vietnamese and colonized by the French. As a consequence the Cambodian subject has had to adapt to many codes of conducts and deploys a multi-layered identity.

However, from Cambodia’s independence in 1953 onwards, postcolonial governments, undoubtedly traumatized by having been hegemonized for such a long period, considered the multi-layered Cambodian subject as a burden. The most extreme regime to wash out this hybridity was the Maoist-inspired Khmer Rouge. In an iconoclastic fury against the hybrid Cambodian subject they eliminated Vietnamese Lon Nol supporters, Chinese capitalists, French Sihanouk followers and Cham ethnic
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minorities. The result of their ‘cultural revolution’ was devastating for the physical and emotional infrastructure of Cambodia, and wretchedly, the country sank even deeper into its misery than ever before. Tragically, beyond the image of Khmer ethnic pride thus hides the reality of a poor nation having no confidence in itself at all. Or, as my interpreter once commented on this lack of confidence;

‘What Cambodia is? Just look at the map. It looks like a scared Rabbit. That is what we are, scared rabbits.’

Yet, and this is a positive comment I want to make at the end of this chapter, although many Cambodians lack confidence in themselves their economy is slowly modernizing. Albeit depicted as ‘backward’ by western donors and aid organizations, the booming indigenous silk weaving industry must be seen as a rural form of modernization. In fact, numerous weaving studies in Asia (Arterburn 1982, Frederico 1997, So 1986, Pomeranz 2000) have shown that labor-intensive rural industries are positive signs of development and specific forms of modernity produced in relation to domestic and regional forces, moralities and class struggles. Far from seeing ten people busy around a loom as a form of backwardness and a lack of proper technologies, these scholars have pointed out that we must see it as a means to proliferate new products, innovate new techniques and a way to conquer new market segments (ibid.). Therefore we can listen to the somewhat pessimistic discourses of international donors defining Cambodia’s rural, labor-intensive and rent-seeking economy as a huge impediment for growth, or opt for taking into account the more optimistic discourse of Kenneth Pomeranz (2000) who argued that labor-intensive and rent-seeking economies can flourish well and must perhaps be seen as Asia’s rural answers to western forms of urban modernization.
Chapter 3
Weaving Into Cambodia: Deconstruction of a myth

Introduction
Both popular and academic scholars have defined the Cambodian silk weaving industry as an authentic form of Khmer modernization having its roots in the 12th century court of Angkor (Dahles and Zwart 2003; Green 2003; Morimoto 1995). In chapter one, however, we have seen that Sotheap’s Chinese grandmother taught her silk weaving techniques and many other silk weavers also identified themselves as Chinese who had ‘become’ Khmers (col khmae). As the interview fragments presented below imply, too, there is more to outward claims of Khmer ethnic affiliation than meets the eye.

Meet Pheach Tot (77) from Prey Chambak village:

‘I was taught silk weaving by my mother and grandmother. I remember very well how they grew mulberry trees in the garden of our house and fed silk worms. My mother was koncen (Chinese Cambodian) and my father Khmer. My mother never talked about her Chinese descent because she was afraid for Maoist spies who had good connections with Mao. I remember how my mother once told me (that) if I ever had to escape I had to go to Malaysia, because Chinese have a good living there. Every August my mother celebrated saen kbal tuk (The Hungry Ghost festival) and in April, during Cheng Ming, she worshipped her ancestors at our family

Interview, 16 December 2004
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grave just outside the village. She never worshipped Khmer New Year, only Chinese New Year. I do celebrate Khmer New Year and Phcum Ben, too’.

Meet Seng Leang Chou (64) from Chum Baik village: 17

‘I was taught silk weaving by my mother. My mother did not raise silk worms herself but bought silk yarn in Kampot Province. There were many silk reelers there, they were Chinese people. My mother was a Khmer yeung18, just like every other silk weaver in the village. Yes, we are all like that. During Pol Pot I was never afraid for my Chinese descent, because Pol Pot only killed rich people, not poor people like me’.

Meet Leam Sinith (58) from Veal Village: 19

‘My mother was a silk weaver and my father a farmer. They were Chinese and also spoke a Chinese dialect. I do not know that language, they never taught me that, because that was too dangerous. My mother was very busy and often helped my father in the fields. In her spare time she wove sampot hol and taught me how to weave them, too. My mother bought silk yarn from a woman in Toul Rolork nearby mount Chisor. She is now the owner of the Neary Khmer silk shop. Before Pol Pot my parents only celebrated Chinese festivals and during the Lon Nol period I often wore Chinese clothes, a Chinese shirt, a black farmer’s pants and a sampot hol. I still wear a sampot hol and a Chinese shirt, but I do not know very much about the Chinese culture anymore’.

17 Interview, December 2004
18 In Cambodia ethnic Chinese sometimes also identify themselves as ‘Khmer yeung’, meaning ‘we Khmers’. According to Penny Edwards (2003) they want to show their affinity with Cambodia and Cambodian society this way.
19 Interview, November 2004
Meet Chea Rot (66) from Krang Phnum village:20

‘When I was a kid my grandparents never talked about their Chinese background. I knew they came from China, but did not know why they left China. My mother told me they were afraid that I would talk about their background and betray them. I do have a picture of my grandfather wearing an army uniform. He died during Pol Pot. One day I went to the Chinese textile factories in Phnom Penh and showed the manager the picture. The manager told me I could be very proud of him because he had a high position in the army’.

This chapter aims at answering the first research question: ‘Under which diasporic conditions did Chinese silk traders and weavers transplant their business to Cambodia’? In so doing, I will first deconstruct the grand Khmer narrative and counter the wish of many national and global stakeholders that ethnic Khmers have been in possession of dying and silk weaving techniques already from the Angkorean period onwards. In fact, precisely because Khmer women did not possess ikat silk weaving techniques, Chinese silk weavers were able to fill this market niche and establish themselves along the Cambodian riverbanks.

In migration studies, rather abstract notions such as population pressure, land scarcity and colonialism are normally depicted as movers of Chinese migration (Kuhn 2006:163-172). This gives the impression that the early Chinese immigrants were naïve opportunity seekers, who after having arrived in a new host land, looked around what to do and started a whatever so arbitrary business. But as Philip Kuhn (2006:167) has noted, late imperial China was mainly a crowded, commercially vibrant society in which families were conditioned for centuries to

20 Interview November 2004
respond to various kinds of opportunities and niches. Millions of Chinese families transplanted their businesses across the border, and the institutions they created to handle these activities were the sojourner's guilds, the branch temples, the secret societies and the revenue farms (ibid.:167). These institutions not only functioned as social welfare nets for immigrants, but also as vacancy banks informing co-villagers about niches on the mainland. This way the silk weavers in Southwest China learned that the urban Khmer elite was desperately looking for a new silk dress in the late nineteenth century and that French silk industrials sought for skilled silk reelers and weavers twenty years later.

By describing under what pre-colonial and colonial conditions the Cantonese silk weavers transplanted their business into Cambodia, this chapter provides a description of the ways in which the sampot hol transformed into an authentic symbol of Khmer ethnic pride. Colonial theorists took a rather negative position and depicted the sampot hol as a false French imagination interpreting it as a product of the Angkor Khmers (Edwards 1999; Muan 2001). Like the French colonists, however, these scholars did not recognize the involvement of the Chinese. Following the insights of Antonio Gramsci (1971), Chantal Mouffe (1979, 2000) and Ernesto Laclau (1977, 1990) this chapter argues that the marginal position of the ethnic Chinese in the cultural domain must not be seen as a burden, but as a ‘winning hegemony’ (Gramsci 1971) of the Khmer and Chinese elite, who both had, and still have, very good reasons to depict the sampot hol as authentic Khmer.

The origin myth of the ‘sampot hol’
By far the most comprehensive work written on the Cambodian silk weaving industry comes from the Australian textile scholar Gillian Green. On several occasions (Green 2003, 2004) she argues that Khmer women
have always woven silk *sampot* on simple backstrap looms and that Khmer kings imported wider and patterned silk clothes from Siam and India. Comparing traditional Indian clothes with Khmer costumes on the Angkorean bass reliefs, Green (2004: 23-24) argues that the Khmer elite derived both weaving techniques and finished textiles from India. While Chinese sourced silk clothes were most likely available to the Khmers, Chinese costume styles as visualized on the walls of Angkor were not adopted by the Khmers.

Although it is true that woven textiles from Gujarat, the Coromandal Coast and Bengal were in great demand by the wealthy Southeast Asian elite in these days, Anthony Reid (1988: 90-96) has argued that Chinese textiles were greatly wanted all over Southeast Asia. Reid also explained that the Indians were mostly famous for their cotton woven textiles and the Chinese for their silk woven *sampot* (ibid.: 93). The textile expert Michael Howard (cf. 1999) argues that Chinese silks were imported to Cambodia in ancient times, but only in limited quantities for elite use, and shared a market that included a large amount of cloth woven by neighboring Cham.

Moreover, why should early Khmer kings not accept a Chinese costume? Khmer kings accepted foreign commodities as long as these would strengthen their position as *chacravartin* (ruler of the world)\(^{21}\). This was because the ‘temporary’ status of Khmer rulers, as reincarnations of Shiva, was based on a worldview that another ruler with more *karma* in store could easily take in his divine position at any moment. As a consequence early Southeast Asian kings were eager to earn *merit* to strengthen their position as *chacravartin* and grabbed all possible trade

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\(^{21}\) Martin Stuart Fox (2003) has argued that six Funanese embassies were sent to China during the third century CE to promote trade, particularly in Chinese luxury products such as silk clothing and regalia desired as status symbols by Southeast Asian elites to legitimize their power.
contacts and commodities to please, feed and dress their subjects (cf. Stuart-Fox 2003; Reid 1988). In addition, early Khmer rulers borrowed from India their statecraft principles and a Sanskrit text, the *Arthasastra* explains that neighboring kingdoms, in Cambodia’s case Siam and Annam, should always be distrusted as potential enemies, while enemies of enemies, in this case Malaysia and China, should be treated as friends. Therefore, would it make any sense to argue that Khmer rulers only accepted Indian textiles and closed their border for the import of Chinese textiles, notably the largest textile supplier in the region?

**Sericulture in ‘The Dark Age’ of Cambodia**

If we presume that the Khmer kings only imported silk clothes from India and closed their borders for Chinese *sampot*, does that mean they adopted silk weaving techniques from the Indians as well? Although it is true that the *Khmers* borrowed from India their religion, language and statecraft principles, this does not imply that they also borrowed all other things. While Gillian Green suggests that Khmer women adopted silk weaving techniques from the Indians, she could not strengthen her case with drawings on bass reliefs of Khmer women sitting behind a weaving loom, and found only one written account of 12th century Chinese emissary Zhou Daguan, about a Khmer Leou\(^{22}\) woman weaving a *sampot* on an archaic backstrap loom. Surprisingly enough, Green fails to mention a very explicit observation of the same Chinese emissary that the *Khmers* at that time were not able to raise mulberry plants at all and lacked techniques to weave silk *sampot* (Daguan 1993 [1297]). Michael Howard (1999) argues that the Khmer learned to weave *sampot* from Cham and Tai speaking people settling in Khmer territory (*ibid*).

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\(^{22}\) Khmer Leou is an umbrella term for all kinds of hill tribe people in Cambodia.
In establishing an ethnic linkage between contemporary weavers and the Angkor Court, Gillian Green (2003) fails to consider the impact of the extremely violent pre-colonial context of Cambodia. Like all other followers of the main discourse, she holds the 1970s civil wars responsible for the destruction of the silk weaving industry. However, these advocates Khmer roots of contemporary silk weaving do not take into consideration that Cambodia has been a battlefield since the twelfth century and that Khmer kings mobilized thousands of Khmer warriors yearly to protect their kingdom against foreign intrusion. In pre-modern days Khmer greatness was mostly based on territorial conquest and a narcissistic commemoration of past glory in the shape of monuments (SarDesai 1997:30). At its peak the Angkor Empire extended from the tip of the Indochinese peninsula northward into Yunnan and westward from Vietnam as far as the Bay of Bengal (Acharaya 2000).

Prior to the French protectorate in 1863, periods and zones of peace were an exception in Cambodia and Khmer kings continually had to mobilize over a hundred thousand men to protect their kingdom, which in practice was the majority of the male population (Tarling 1992: 461-2). If the wars went badly and the odds were against the families at home, rivaling armies could bring enormous damage to the paddies, poultry, cattle, and agricultural equipment, and usually burned down every village (ibid.). How could households with husbands and sons always on duty ever set up an extremely labor-intensive enterprise such as silk weaving? How could pre-modern Khmer women, often widows with young children, cultivate paddies, raise their children, clean the house, prepare food, cultivate mulberry trees, reel silk yarn, spin the yarn on wheels, prepare the warp table and weave sampot on their own?

Moreover, while pre-modern discourses emphasize mythical stories and often mention nothing about their material base, mulberry plants had to
be cultivated, raw silk had to be reared and silk *sampot* had to be woven on looms. As I will indicate in the next chapter silk rearing and weaving is an extremely labor-intensive job and one needs a lot of productive hands around to get it done. To cultivate mulberry trees for instance, one needs to be skilled to cultivate them on dikes and irrigate them during the dry season. Although the mulberry tree is not a very demanding tree, it does take a full year to grow, which means it must survive the monsoon rains and the extreme heat during the dry season. Although it has been observed that Khmer farmers cultivated multiple crops and Khmer kings built impressive water reservoirs, agronomists in the 1980s challenged the view that the multiple crops witnessed by the Chinese emissary Zhou Daguan were the result of the highly celebrated Angkorian irrigation system. In Van Lier’s opinion for example, these reservoirs did not help but instead hindered the drainage of water towards the fields and led to the degradation of soils, the leaching and deprivation of the required nutrients, the silting up of reservoirs and the deforestation of slopes (in: Mabbet and Chandler 1995: 152). From his perspective, multi-cropping - including the cultivation of mulberry trees - could not be the result of an advanced Khmer irrigation system.

Another argument levied against the multiple-crop version of the irrigation hypothesis is the supposedly centrally managed Angkorian scheme to grow multiple crops, while there was plenty of land available for the much more common and effective ‘slash and burn’ agricultural system (in: Mabbet and Chandler 1995: 153). Unlike in the overpopulated deltas in Vietnam and China, however, there was plenty of

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23 It must be stated though that since the 1990s French, Australian, and Cambodian archeological teams have countered Van Lier’s irrigation thesis. Using traditional methods such as ground survey in conjunction with advanced remote-sensing applications, these research teams came to the conclusion Angkor did have an advanced irrigation system that made possible multiple cropping. See: Evans et al (2007).
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land available in Cambodia (see also: Fischer 1964)\(^2\). That makes one wonder why Khmer farmers would build dikes and irrigation systems to cultivate multiple crops, while they could easily avoid this time-consuming and labor-intensive farming system by simply cultivating other plots next door? Therefore, taking into account the critique on the working of Angkor’s irrigation system, and the fact that plenty of land was available for the more common ‘slash and burn’ farming system, the question can be raised how mulberry trees could ever have been cultivated by the Khmer at all.

**Sericulture in ‘The Age Of Commerce’**

As for the modern period (1500-1850), Gillian Green (2003: 45) mentions that no single *sampot* survived the courts of Angkor and that information about silk weaving in Cambodia is hard to find. Again, this is only partly true, because she fails to analyze existing sources about the unavailability of silk yarn and clothes in Cambodia. In the ‘Age of Commerce’ (1450-1680), Cambodia, like many other Southeast Asian states, moved its capital from inland Angkor to riverine Phnom Penh, due to the arrival of the Ming fleets, and even emerged as one of the flourishing port polities in mainland Southeast Asia (cf. Ishii 1998). During this period traders peddled textiles, silk yarn and dye-stuff to Southeast Asian ports, because of the demand for silver, luxury agricultural goods such as pepper, cloves, nutmeg, sugar, and benzoic, and forest products such as deerskin, sandalwood, sappanwood, camphor and lac (Reid 1993: 32).

Especially during the reign of Yongle (1402-1424) an impressive number of fleets dispatched from the Chinese coastal areas to Southeast Asian,

\(^2\) Charles Fisher (1964) also outlined in this book that the Khmers lacked irrigations skills in the pre-modern era.
Indian, Persian and even African countries, transporting hundreds of thousands of Chinese merchants (Stuart-Fox 2003:80). Anticipating the arrival of the Chinese junk traders it became much more strategic and lucrative for the Cambodian king to move his palace southwards. Hence, the capital of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, like other capitals in Southeast Asia came to be organized on the basin of a large river or groups of rivers, located at a point where kings could control the movement of Chinese people and goods and levy taxes on their products (cf. Stuart-Fox 2003; Vickery 2004).

The real peak in Chinese maritime textile trade is often ascribed to one brave admiral, Zheng He, a Muslim eunuch still deified by ethnic Chinese in Cambodia as ‘Sanbaogong’, which literally means ‘The Three Jewel Lord’ (Edwards 2003: 16). At the time of his arrival in Cambodia Phnom Penh was a constantly busy thoroughfare thronged with the comings and goings of foreign merchants. The Chinese constituted there, as everywhere, the most active and commercially shrewd, if not the most numerous, ethnic group (Igout 1993: 5-6). For this reason Phnom Penh, like many other Southeast Asian port cities, enclosed real Chinatowns inhabited by Chinese merchants (huashang) and their workers, often co-villagers.

One century later, Chinese silk yarn and other consumption goods were also imported through Ha Tien, a Chinese-ruled port polity situated in the Southern province of Kampot. This harbor is said to have been the place where Cantonese merchants sold their silk yarn directly to the local population, often fellow ethnics (Chin 2004: 63), so that in Chinese Cambodian folklore this harbor came to be known as ‘Tuk Meas’ (‘The Golden Boat’), referring to the off-loading of Chinese merchandise in return for cargos of gold (Edwards 2003:8). Not only in Cambodia, but all over Southeast Asia, foreign imported silk yarn came to replace the local
production. This to the satisfaction of the local silk weavers, because silk yarn production is a slow and tedious job (see chapter four) and the availability of commercial silk yarn gives them the possibility to increase their silk weaving production.

Far away from the gazing eyes of the Chinese authorities, Ha Tien became a mainland Chinese harbor for Cantonese and non-Cantonese merchants under the leadership of another great sailor, captain Mac Cuu (Chin 2004: 63). Establishing regular trade relationships with many southern Chinese ports and Western merchants, Mac Cuu and later his son Mac Thien Thu provided a growing local Chinese community in Cambodia with all kinds of everyday consumption goods and raw materials such as lacquer ware, silk goods and dye-stuff. On their missions the Mac Cuu lineage bought local Cambodian products such as betel nut, tin, blackwood, nutmeg, clove, deerskin, dried shrimps, rattan, pepper and sappanwood (ibid.). This way they managed to build such great wealth and fame in Cambodia that Mac Cuu was appointed provincial governor of Kampot province by the Khmer king (ibid.).

The observation that Chinese silk yarn and other luxury goods were imported to co-ethnics in Cambodia seems to point at the existence of a foreign weaving industry and questions the availability of Cambodian-produced silk yarn. The non-existence of a Cambodian silk yarn industry becomes even more explicit in trade reports of Chinese junk traders to the then-ruling Japanese Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1868) (Ishii 1998: 2). The Japanese historian Yoneo Ishii (ibid.) argued that the Tokugawa rulers, fearing the spread of Catholic faith into their country, forbade Western merchants, often Christians, to enter their country and trade with them. But despite their xenophobic stance against Catholicism (ibid.), the Tokugawa rulers made systematic efforts to collect political and market information, allowing Chinese junk traders and some VOC
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ships to enter the port of Nagasaki. The Tokugawa rulers expected reports from the Chinese merchants about the activities of anti-Manchu rebel groups in and around the Chinese empire, and the political and economic situation of remote polities such as nowadays Thailand, Indonesia and Cambodia (ibid.).

Although Cambodia was in a state of complete disorder with kings, ex-kings and princes bidding for the support of Siam or Hue, it nevertheless attracted some thirty-seven junk traders over forty-four years to procure cargoes for the Japanese market, making it one of the most important Southeast Asian ports (ibid.:154-5). Between 1641 and 1663, during the reign of Cambodia’s only Muslim King, Raja Ibrahim, Cambodia even surpassed Siam in the dispatching of junks to Nagasaki, and offered an alternative to Siam\(^\text{25}\) for the procurement of sappanwood and deer hide, both in great demand on the Japanese market. And thanks to its regular trade with Guangnan (Cochinchina) it could furthermore provide Tonkinese raw silk to the Chinese merchants, which was also highly valued in Japan (Cooke and Li 2004).\(^\text{26}\) But many Chinese trade reports contain the message that raw silk was not produced in Cambodia, deconstructing the discourse of the existence of an ancient Khmer sericulture tradition.

\(^{25}\) At that time Siam was at war with the Burmese.

\(^{26}\) Cooke and Li (2004) wrote extensively about this Vietnam-Cambodia trade, which was dominated by Vietnamese and Chinese traders.
Weaving into Cambodia

Table 1: Chinese junks from Southeast Asian ports to Japan (1651-1724)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Tongking</th>
<th>Hoi An</th>
<th>Cambodia</th>
<th>Siam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1651-1660</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1661-1670</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1671-1680</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1681-1690</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1691-1700</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1701-1710</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1711-1720</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1721-1724</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Reid (1993:18)

Reports of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British and French merchants confirm the non-existence of a Cambodian sericulture industry and reveal that raw silk was only produced in the Vietnamese Red River delta, but not further south in Cochinchina and Cambodia. The English merchant Quarles Brown, for instance, set up an import-export company for the East India Company at Lovec (near present-day Phnom Penh), not because war-stricken Cambodia was an interesting manufacturing site, but as a kind of ‘second Canton’, in order to buy unlimited amounts of Tonkinese and Chinese raw silk (Lamb 1970: 28).

The French silk merchant Pierre Poivre (Li and Reid 1993) observed how the lower Mekong region was an interesting stopping place to buy Tonkinese, Chinese and Japanese silk, but not an attractive production area itself. Coming from a wealthy silk merchant family from Lyon, Pierre Poivre, like many other French merchants, first arrived in Cochinchina as a novice with the French Société des Missions-Étrangères. But after having left the mission station he started to pick up his old trade profession and peddled silk yarn with merchants in Canton and Macau. Next, a war broke out between China and France and Poivre lost an arm.

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27 Cochinchina was the name of the seventeenth-century territory comprising present-day Southern Vietnam.
Weaving into Cambodia

and wrote his ‘Memoirs about Cochinchina’ for the East India Company in 1744. These memoirs reveal that Poivre was very satisfied with the climatological possibilities for mulberry planting and the quality of silk yarn in Cochinchina, but that the Cochinchinese, like the Cambodians, lacked skills to reel it and did not know how to prepare natural dyes (ibid.).

Again a century later, we find an even more specific account from a British cartographer, John Crawfurd (1822), who observed that Tonkin and Annam were important silk producing areas and that the only region not producing silk yarn in Indochina was Kamboja (in: Lamb 1970: 260).

Finally, reports exist from the Vietnamese emperor Minh Mang about the deficient sericulture techniques of the Khmers. In the 1840s the Khmer court was strongly divided with kings, ex-kings and princes indiscriminately paying their tributes to the Chakri dynasty (in Siam) and the Hue court (in modern Vietnam) (Hall 1981:459-466). The two Cambodian neighbors were at daggers drawn with each other with the aim to incorporate Cambodia, and eventually the Western provinces of Battambang and Angkor fell into the hands of the Siamese, and the eastern provinces of Kampot, Takeo, Kandal and Prey Veng were ‘assimilated’ by the Hue court. After having incorporated eastern Cambodia into Vietnamese territory Minh Mang changed the name of the region around Phnom Penh into Tran Tay (‘Western Commandery’) and remapped Cambodia into thirty-three provinces all carrying Vietnamese names (ibid.). However, Minh Mang had more in mind than merely conquering a few neighboring provinces; he also wanted to integrate the ‘barbaric’ Khmers into the civilized ‘Confucian’ world (Chanda 1986: 51). A nineteenth-century Vietnamese general even described Minh Mang’s civilization mission as the policy of ‘slowly eating silk worms’, pointing at
the Vietnamese appetite for eating silk worms and obviously the Khmers’
dislike of this habit. In order to teach the Khmers how ‘to eat silk worms’,
Minh Mang resettled Tonkinese farmers from the overpopulated Red
River delta into the newly gained Cambodian territory to teach them the
Vietnamese language and hairdressing, and how to reel silk yarn (Beck
2004; Chandler 1993).

The arrival of the Cantonese silk weavers
Previously, we have seen how Chinese and European merchants looked
for silk yarn in Cambodia in vain and how the Vietnamese emperor Minh
Mang settled Tonkinese silk farmers in eastern Cambodia ‘to teach
Khmers how to eat silk worms’, illustrating the non-existence of an
indigenous silk industry in Cambodia. However, not one of these
observations explains the Chinese roots of contemporary silk weavers, or
makes clear why the contemporary silk weaving industry has Chinese
roots instead of Khmer ones. The Pol Pot regime was often mentioned by
silk weavers as an important stopping place for oral history, as the
parents and grandparents of the weavers did their utmost to hide their
Chinese identity, while secretly passing on their Chinese language skills.
Many silk weavers explained that in the 1975-78 Pol Pot working villages
it was extremely dangerous to exhibit any other than a Khmer peasant
identity, as it could be a reason to get killed.

To understand where the ancestors of Sotheap came from and why they
migrated to Cambodia we cannot rely on the oral histories of
contemporary silk weavers but must travel back into the history of the
nineteenth-century Southern Chinese weaving regions Shunde, Nanhai
and Hsiangshan. These territories were the cradles of silk weaving in
nineteenth-century China and most likely the places where the ancestors
of the Cambodian silk weavers originally came from. In the mid-
eighteenth century the southern Chinese silk districts were by far the
largest silk regions in China, and mulberry trees grew there as far as the eye could see. The American anthropologists Howard and Bushwell (1925), cited in So (1986: 78), mentioned that 1,440,000 of the total number of 1,800,000 farmers in Shunde County alone were engaged in some phase of sericulture and mulberry planting. The Shunde county silk farmers cultivated their paddies in Guandong province near the port of Canton, which formed part of an excellent water transport system. To prevent their mulberry trees from flooding, large ponds were dug and the excavated soil was thrown around the ponds to raise the ground level. These elevated plots were known as 'sang-chi' ('polders') and were planted with mulberries, while fish was grown in the ponds. This created a brilliant ecological system, as the fishponds supplied fertilizer for the mulberry trees and the mulberry leaves in turn furnished food for the fish and enabled the mulberry planters to harvest mulberry leaves three or even four times a year (ibid.: 85).

The mulberry polders annex fishponds were not the property of the mulberry farmers and silk yarn reelers, but were leased from the local gentry class. There are some contradictory definitions on what a gentry-class entails. Marxist scholars see the gentry class as an economic group that owns land and collects rent as a form of livelihood. Alvin So (1986:85-88) also sees the gentry class as an educated status group or a group of people who hold important positions in the imperial bureaucracy and exercise political influence. Studying a silk district in Southwest China he observed that the gentry class aspired to a status of ‘gentry–merchants’, combining pursuits in Confucian education, degree-seeking and commerce (ibid.). But while the gentry merchants in Shunde county owned the polder farms, they chose not to interfere in the silk production, which means that the management of the silk labor process was entirely in the hands of the peasant class (ibid.). To attract farmers to cultivate mulberry trees on their plots the gentry-merchants provided
credit for mulberry seedlings and silkworm-rearing instruments such as baskets, spinning racks and chopping knives, and sent silkworm-rearing teachers. By means of the so-called ‘petty-producer path’ the gentry-merchants got rich collecting rents from the mulberry plots and the mulberry leaf markets they owned (*ibid.*). These markets were only open for Cantonese wholesaler guilds and a no-go area for foreign merchants.

In ‘On Colonialism’ Karl Marx (1972) illustrates how the Chinese government appointed Cantonese merchant guilds (*cong hongs*) to trade with foreign merchants, and limited the export of raw silk with 140 *piculs* per vessel. The Cantonese merchants purchased raw silk and textiles from the silk markets in the Pearl River delta and had organized themselves into guilds and associations (*cong hongs*) based on native place relationships. Some of the *cong hong* guild members were specialized to trade with European merchants, others to trade with northern Chinese ports and again others to trade with mainland Southeast Asian ports (*ibid.*). Although foreign merchants had export firms in Canton, these became the property of the *cong hong* merchant guilds, preventing them from leaving the factories and entering the public markets in Canton. The trade of Chinese silk yarn to the foreign merchants was further limited by price monopolies imposed by the Cantonese merchant guilds, which foreign merchants had to accept without objection (*ibid.*).

Although most profit went into the pockets of the gentry class, life for the silk peasants was fairly good in those days. Spinners in the Pearl River delta could earn thirty to fifty per cent over the cost of raw materials, while spinners, who also wove silk clothes, could expect to make a profit of 300 per cent (Cliver 2004: 5). However, a number of national and global events caused a decline in the livelihoods of the Southern Chinese
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silk farmers from the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards, and led to their exodus to Southeast Asia. First, market conditions worsened and competition became fierce during the reigns of the Jiaqing (1796) and Daoguang (1821-1850), when the global price of raw silk increased dramatically and affected the net incomes of both the weavers and spinners (ibid.: 6). As net profits fell and markets shrank, silk merchants began to withdraw from the silk trade and rural households started to weave for their own consumption.

The development of other silk regions in Central China (Guizhou, Shaanxi and Hubei) also had a negative effect on the strong market position of the silk farmers in the Pearl River delta (ibid.). The loss of the First Opium War (1841-2) resulted in the opening up of other treaty ports such as Shanghai and the cede of Qing control over the imperial custom administration. In Shanghai, British and French merchants could set up their own factories and trade with silk farmers in the Central Chinese hinterlands without the interference of the old ‘cong hong’ system in Canton (So 1986: 63). Subsequently, the silk regions around Shanghai (Chekiang and Kiangsu) became the new cradle of silk production in China, which led to enormous amounts of unemployed silk peasants and traders in the Pearl River delta (ibid.: 64).

Another devastating factor for the livelihoods of the silk farmers was formed by the military conflicts and violent uprisings during the Qing dynasty in the nineteenth century, which plagued the silk trade and reduced agricultural production. The Red Turban Rebellion (1851-1864) for instance resulted in an estimated twenty million deaths, devastating the silk-producing villages along the Pearl River delta (ibid.). Towards the end of their reign the Red Turban rulers also ordered their soldiers to cut down the mulberry trees, a catastrophe for the Pearl River
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sericulturalists (*ibid.*). To make things worse, the low-lying mulberry plots also became subject to severe floodings, a direct result of the lack of repair of the embankments after the peasant rebellion (*ibid.*: 82-83).

The politically and economically turbulent 1850s, caused by the Opium Wars and internal peasant rebellions, led to an exodus of Cantonese silk merchants, landowners and silk spinners to mainland Southeast Asia (*ibid.*: 195). Examining Pearl River genealogies, especially those from Shunde County and Nanhai, Steven B. Miles (2006: 220-246) pointed out that many families from this region had sent sojourners both upriver along the West river basin, and abroad to Vietnam and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, already during the Ming period (1368-1644). Miles argued that the core delta counties of Nanhai and Shunde, and to a lesser extent Dongguan, Panyu, and Xinhui were the main migrant departures, an observation that corresponds with William Willmott’s analyses of the Cambodian silk weaving regions.

Examining almost six thousand Cantonese gravestones, twenty per cent mentioned the silk weaving regions Shunde and Nanhai as the birthplace (Willmott 1967: 20). Notwithstanding the fact that many graves did not specify any places of origin and that many silk farmers probably could not afford a grave stone (*ibid.*), this might indicate that some one thousand Cantonese silk spinners, weavers (often the same person) and traders came from the Southern Chinese counties Shunde and Nanhai, weaving themselves literally and metaphorically into Cambodia. According to Howard (1999), these Chinese played no role in the origin of *ikat* silk weaving techniques in Cambodia, as they adopted the weft *ikat* technique from Tai speaking people and used a Malay type of frame loom to weave textiles such as the *sampot hol* and the *phamung*. 
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Table 2: Cantonese in Cambodia by place of origin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Perc. of 5605 gravestones</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nanhai</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San-shui</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dong-guan</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hua-xian</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xin-hui</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bao-an</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shunde</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhong-shan</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hao-shan</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pan-yu</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yao-ming</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kai-ping</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tan-shan</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zheng-chen</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Si-hui</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qing-yan</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Thus, far away from the violent, poor and overpopulated Pearl River delta, the Shunde County silk breeders and weavers established ‘new’ mulberry plots in Cambodia, along the rivers Tonle Sap, Mekong and Bassac. Crucial were their former patrons, the Cantonese silk merchants and landowners, who recognized this demand for silk clothes and decided to invest in overseas mulberry ventures and to transnationalize their silk enterprises into Cambodia. It was relatively easy for the Cantonese silk merchants to start over in Cambodia again, because landlordism had never existed and 95 per cent of the Khmer peasants did not own more land than they could cultivate themselves.\(^{28}\) Familiar with land scarcity, overpopulation and landlordism the Cantonese silk

\(^{28}\) This was also because prior to 1904 land was owned by the king and there had always been plenty of uncultivated land available to prevent the development of an active land market.
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merchants must have been stunned by the availability of land and the lack of indigenous competition and seized the opportunity to lease thousands of hectares of mulberry plots from the king and restore their prestige as a powerful landlord class along the riverbanks of the Mekong.

**Map 1: Migration patterns Cantonese silk entrepreneurs to Cambodia**

The arrival of the silk merchants, spinners and weavers brought along a change in dress styles and the introduction of Chinese garments such as black pants, white sleeved shirts and the patterned *sampot hol* (cf. Muan and Daravuth 2003). The Cantonese dress makers arrived just at the right moment because the Khmer had been attacked for centuries by Vietnamese and Thai troops and their mighty kingdom, Angkor, had shrunk into a tiny and war-stricken vassal state (Hall 1981:459-466). During this downfall there had been little time, space and peace for
Cambodian families to produce a weaving culture themselves. Under continuous attack by foreign powers, losing their husbands on the battlefields, it must have been impossible for Khmer women to grow mulberries, feed the worms, reel the silk yarn and weave silk clothes themselves, even if they had the skills.

Lacking sericulture skills and a high dress culture themselves the Khmer elite adopted the *sampot hol* from the Cantonese silk weavers, who in turn recognized a good business deal. Chased away by Red Turban rebels and British merchants from their previous silk districts (cf. So 1986) the Cantonese silk elite had ambitions to start over again in Cambodia and was in need of land titles, officialdom degrees and most importantly, customers, to start up profitable silk enterprises again. The Khmer elite was willing to meet the Cantonese demands because, as liberated Khmers, they needed a symbol to mark their national independence. At stake was thus the establishment of a ‘winning hegemony’ (Gramsci 1971) in which the Khmer elite, as customers, got their much-wanted identity and the economic Cantonese elite, as producers, was provided with the opportunity to continue their silk businesses again. Not much later French observers witnessed how the Khmer aristocracy, like the Chinese gentry class, dressed themselves in a silken checkered *sampot hol* (cf. Edwards 1999, 2001). And in the 1870s king Norodom was portrayed in a silken *sampot hol*, illustrating that the Royal House had come to appreciate the silk *sampot hol* as an important dress (*ibid*.). The *sampot hol* as a Khmer elite symbol was born.

The arrival of French silk industrials
Just after the arrival of the Southern Chinese silk entrepreneurs French explorers came to Indochina to research, among others, the possibilities to obtain silk yarn from China. The procurement of Chinese silk yarn
was also of crucial importance to French silk industrials because the once-flourishing French sericulture industry had just been hit by a very serious disease called ‘pebrine’, which had ravaged the livelihoods of the ca. 70,000 silk farmers in Lyon (Frederico 1997: 30). To make things worse the disease could not be cured and the only way to minimize the risk for the French silk raisers was to buy silk eggs from non-disease-stricken areas such as China, Japan and Indochina (ibid.). Not surprisingly, especially the Lyon business magnates enthusiastically supported the conquest of Indochina as a backdoor route to China (Andrew and Kanya-Forstner 1976: 981).

At the end of the nineteenth century French naval officers explored a direct river trade route from Cambodia to the ‘soft underbelly’ of Southern China, with the aim to transform Indochina into a universal warehouse in between China and France (cf. Garnier 2000 [1884]). However, to the great disappointment of French naval officers such as Francis Garnier and Henri Mouhot, they could not cross the Khone waterfalls in Northern Cambodia and realized that Phnom Penh would never become the ‘Singapore of Indochina’ (cf. Osborne 1969). As a consequence, the commercial ambitions of the French industrials to compete with European and Chinese powers in Indochina were exchanged for protectionist policies, and France became the first western power to implement custom duties (Andrew and Kanya-Forstner 1976).

After the French had established a Protectorate over Cambodia in 1863 more regional studies were undertaken by colonial officials such as Yves Henry (1932) and Deloche de Campocasso (1923) to investigate the possibilities of sericulture in Indochina. These officials explored the Southern parts of Indochina and observed an already flourishing silk industry along the riverbanks of the Tonle Sap, Bassac and the Mekong. From their reports we know that native sericulturists in Cambodia could
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be found in the provinces of Takeo, Kampong Cham, Prey Veng, Kandal and Kampot. As Jean Delvert (1961: 283) observed in the 1950s;

‘Les khum sériciculteurs sont situés dans Takeo et le Sud de Kandal à la frontière de la Cochinchine. Les Cambodgiens n’élèvent plus le ver à soie sur les berges du Mékong. Le long des berges les cultivateurs sont vietnamiens ou parfois métis sino-cambodgiens, très sinisés’

The most specific account about the origin of the weavers comes from Yves Henry (1932: 432), who refers to the sampot hol as ‘dessins chinois originaux’. This is only partly true because, as said before, the Chinese did not introduce the weft ikat technique (the primary technique used to decorate the sampot hol) in Cambodia (cf. Howard 1999). Adopting the weft ikat techniques from Tai speaking people the Chinese silk weavers did manufacture a silken sarong that became very popular among the Cambodian elite, the sampot hol.

Buddhists do not kill silk worms
To explain the absence of the Khmers in the Cambodian silk industry the French surveyors argued that their Buddhist religion prohibited the Khmers from killing any animals, including silk worms. As Jean Delvert (1961:282) wrote:

‘Le Cambodgien répugne a élever le ver à soie: la religion bouddhique interdit en effet de tuer et il faut tuer le ver pour recueillir le cocon’.

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This dissertation focusses predominantly on ethnic Chinese involvement in the Cambodian silk weaving industry. It would be interesting to examine the history of Vietnamese involvement in the Cambodian silk industry, too. The Vietnamese scholar Tuan Hoang Anh (2007) already published about silk production in Tonkin and the trade of Tonkinese silk to Cochinchina and Cambodia as well.
Although it was not the labor force the French agronomists expected to see reeling silk, the possibilities to set up sericulture farms were propitious, as most minority groups, such as the Chinese, Vietnamese, Cham and to a lesser extent the Javanese cultivated mulberry trees in their backyard and reeled silk yarn under their house. Having such good future prospects in sight, many French planters decided to pack their bags and travel to Indochina to set up a mulberry plantation there. As for the procurement of credit, the largest bank in Lyon, Le Crédit Lyonnais, introduced so-called ‘silk accounts’ for these businessmen to set up mulberry plantations in the colony (Frederico 1997: 166-7).

However, the dream of the French colonialists to start a new silk enterprise in Indochina became a disillusion due to their inability to compete with the already ruling Cantonese merchant class in Cambodia, and, oddly enough, also because of resistance at home. With regard to the latter, Indochina, like many other Southeast Asian nations, has always been a relatively under-populated area and for this reason labor was a scarce commodity. To complicate the labor scarcity problem even more, French agronomists experienced that Khmer women did not boil silk worms and that it was impossible to subcontract female spinners from Southwest China, as Chinese immigration laws did not allow women to migrate to Southeast Asia. Not being able to attract skilled spinners from the overpopulated Southern Chinese areas, French planters had no choice but to ease the pre-colonially established silk spinners from their patrons, in this case the Cantonese gentry and merchant guilds (cong hongs). To accomplish this goal governor-general Jean Marie De Lanessan realized he had to make it very attractive for the ‘Cantonese’ silk spinners to ‘betray’ their fellow ethnic patrons, and thus introduced a bonus system in 1894 (Thompson 1968: 137).
However, the Lyon Silk Throwing Unions themselves did not accept any bonus systems in the colony as they were anxious to preserve the colonies as private markets for themselves and not to upgrade them as another business competitor (Andrew and Kanya-Forstner 1976: 981). The most ardent advocate of this point of view was the director of the Association of French Industry and Agriculture, Martial Merlin, who warned that colonial production must be limited to supplying the mother country with non-competitive products whereas otherwise it would become a dangerous opponent (Robequain 1944: 129). Next to the introduction of a bonus system the French planters also suggested the Indochinese government to lower the 1892-established ‘Meline’ tariffs, based on the belief that these were damaging colonial development and prevented native peasants from working for them (Andrew and Kanya-Forstner 1976: 985). Supporting the tax reduction idea, the French merchant Jules Blancsube (1886), cited in Gantes (2004: 231), also warned the French government at home:

‘Free trade gave Saigon prosperity; customs may ruin it’.

However, such a ‘free trade spirit’ annoyed the French government as well, which complained that the Indochinese colony had already become too expensive and should earn itself back. Therefore Paul Doumer (1902) rolled back De Lanessan’s liberal tax measures and, just like the Chinese moneylenders, imposed great burdens on the Cambodian peasants, converting the colony again into a profitable tax enterprise (in: Thompson 1968: 76-80). During Paul Doumer’s reign (1897-1902) the Cambodian peasants even paid the highest poll taxes in Indochina, supporting not only the French colonial budget but also the privileges of the Cambodian elite and aristocracy (ibid.).
Competing hegemonies

In other words, the successful attempts of the Lyon silk associations at home to prevent the implementation of colonial bonus systems and a relaxation of the 1892 ‘Meline’ Tariff system made it difficult for the French merchants in Indochina to compete with the Chinese merchants, who did provide ‘bonuses’ in the form of opium and gambling facilities and other kinds of lucrative credits. To make things worse, even those French planters who were able to attract native silk spinners, were confronted with ‘barbaric’ reeling methods and witnessed to their disgust how the Chinese spinners touched silkworms with their bare hands, and were living in rickety straw huts often filled with poultry and cattle.

To protect the silk worms against flies, insects and diseases such as the ‘pebrine’, the French were convinced they had to modernize the Cambodian sericulture methods ‘Pasteur style’. With the pebrine epidemic still fresh in mind, the French mulberry planters were convinced that the success of a silk planter depended on his or her ability to supply disease-free silk worms’ eggs, which again depended on the race of the silk worm and the mating system (Frederico 1997: 88). In line with their feelings of superiority over the ‘barbaric Orientals’ there was no doubt that the ‘Pasteur’ (cellular) mating system was far superior to any other native one. To improve the quality of the Indochinese silkworm-eggs and to satisfy the silk merchants in Lyon, the Pasteur method was introduced to the Cantonese silk breeders by Artistide Fabris, director of the French experimental school ‘la station sericole du Petit Takeo’ (Henry 1932: 432).

In the same period Yves Henry (ibid.: 443) also observed how financial support finally turned into favoring the French planters and how Lyon

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30 Louis Pasteur identified the organism responsible for the pebrine, isolated it and developed methods of treatment. However, for the French sericulture industry his efforts came too late.
investments rose significantly in Cambodia from 8,350 piasters in 1922 to 55,000 piasters in 1923 (table 3). Another thing that had a positive effect for the French silk industrials, was the uniform hiring procedure introduced by governor-general Varenne, the so-called contract system, that was to regulate the obligations between coolies and planters (Thompson 1968: 95). The contract system and the improved working conditions for the coolies had the aim to provide the French silk company in Cambodia and Cochinchina, *La Compagnie Des Soie du Cambodge et de la Cochinchine*, with a stable working force and, in theory at least, to compete with the Chinese planters in attracting labor.\(^{31}\)

**Table 3: French sericulture investments in Indochina (in piasters)**\(^{32}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Tonkin</th>
<th>Annam</th>
<th>Cochinchina</th>
<th>Cambodia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>39,991</td>
<td>34,240</td>
<td>636</td>
<td>8,606</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>39,487</td>
<td>38,200</td>
<td>664</td>
<td>8,350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>46,560</td>
<td>40,300</td>
<td>646</td>
<td>55,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1923</td>
<td>40,541</td>
<td>40,500</td>
<td>1,482</td>
<td>57,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>39,001</td>
<td>42,500</td>
<td>63,096</td>
<td>51,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>38,367</td>
<td>54,300</td>
<td>67,655</td>
<td>56,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>43,564</td>
<td>54,920</td>
<td>69,685</td>
<td>47,510</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>48,584</td>
<td>59,132</td>
<td>82,548</td>
<td>30,707</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>48,050</td>
<td>55,932</td>
<td>71,200</td>
<td>28,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>44,772</td>
<td>54,276</td>
<td>77,477</td>
<td>25,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>75,793</td>
<td>54,300</td>
<td>87,410</td>
<td>23,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>503,530</td>
<td>528,600</td>
<td>522,535</td>
<td>393,273</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Yves Henry (1932:443)

Luck turned even more in favor of the French when China ‘officially’ opened up its borders for female emigrants in 1911.\(^{33}\) Taking advantage

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\(^{31}\) Before the labor-improving methods of Sarraut and Varenne many coolies were job-hoppers and deserted to other planters regularly or migrated to plantations in neighboring countries.

\(^{32}\) Indochinese coin value. Twenty-five piasters equals one dollar of value.

\(^{33}\) Shortly after the 1911 Revolution - when urban intellectuals in China abandoned traditional ways of thinking, such as Confucianism, and adopted a Western style of governance, ideology and social structure instead - and undoubtedly triggered by a growing demand for female laborers all over Southeast Asia, the
of the changing gender moralities in China French planters were finally able to encourage the immigration of Chinese women to their plantations. This again led to another, now legal outflow of Cantonese silk spinners and weavers to Cambodia, who, contrary to the pre-colonial flow, were strictly hired to work for French planters (Edwards 2003; Robequain 1944). As Charles Robequain (1944: 40) has illustrated, in 1923 alone 23,777 Chinese women and 41,963 men entered Indochina, most of them settling in the Tonkinese, Cochinchinese and Cambodian river deltas.

But despite the financial impetus of the Lyon silk associations, the improved labor conditions, and China opening up its borders for female migration, *La Compagnie De Soie du Cambodge et de la Cochinchine* could still not compete with the Cantonese merchant guilds with regard to attracting laborers and silk yarn production. The reason for this was that the French lacked historical trade connections in the South China Sea and thus, like the ‘contract spinners’, came to depend heavily on the networks of the Cantonese silk elites, who had already established ‘a foothold’ in Cambodia decades earlier (Gantes 2004: 227). As a consequence, the Cantonese silk merchants in Cambodia, basically the competitors of *La Compagnie De Soie du Cambodge et de la Cochinchine*, controlled the influx of silk spinners and carefully checked the balance between their own working force and the French one. The French were only able to subcontract some 1,000 silk spinners in 1925, while another 4,817 reeled silk yarn for the Cantonese silk merchants (Henry 1932: 400). This might also explain why the French silk spinnery *Chag Angre* in Phnom Penh was only able to spin 4,000 kilograms of raw silk yarn for the Lyon silk merchants (*ibid.*), while the Chinese could produce about four times as much.

-Qing government in China eventually changed its emigration policies, unleashing an enormous flow of female coolies to Cochinchina and Cambodia.
Moreover, the ‘cooler spinners’ could not afford the overseas journey to Cambodia and the Cantonese silk merchants paid the trip in advance (Thompson 1968; Robequain 1944). Hence, it was not *La Compagnie De Soie du Cambodge et de la Cochinchine* that became the ‘patron’ of the immigrant spinners, but the Cantonese silk merchants annex ‘cooler brokers’, who held extensive power over them before they had ever reeled one kilogram of silk yarn for the French. And precisely because the silk spinners ‘belonged’ to the Cantonese silk merchants, they could forbid them to participate in the French experimental stations and prevent the planters from producing better silk yarn than their own spinneries in Phnom Penh did. This to the great frustration of the director of the French experimental station ‘Petit Takéo’, Artistide Fabris (1926), who saw his efforts to implement the Pasteur cellular mating system fail. Like his colleagues elsewhere in the colony, Artistide Fabris experienced how the organization of sericulture development programs, quality checks and silk egg inspections was already in hands of the Cantonese silk merchants and how they forbade ‘their’ fellow-ethnic silk reelers to participate in the French sericulture program (Thompson 1968: 137).

Also, unlike the Indochinese pepper and rubber industry, *La Compagnie De Soie du Cambodge et de la Cochinchine* did not possess large mulberry plantations itself, but depended on some 1,000 private plots spread over 235 villages in the Cambodian districts of Lovea, Kampong Speu, Kampong Thom, Taug Krasang, Soairieng, Samrong, Pursat, and Prey Veng, and the Cochinchinese districts around Tan Chau, Tri Ton, Mytho, An Hoa and Batri (Henry 1932: 400). This in turn ‘forced’ *La Compagnie* to subcontract Cantonese traders (‘compradors’) to distribute the silk yarn from the rural villages to the steam vessel *Messageries Fluviales* in Phnom Penh. These ‘compradors’, however played dubious multiple roles, as they were often co-villagers and moneylenders of the ‘French’
subcontracted silk spinners and lineage members of the Cantonese merchants and silk spinnery owners in Phnom Penh, too.

To make things worse, *La Compagnie des Messageries Fluviales* could not compete with the pre-eminence of the Chinese junks in the South Chinese Sea, either. In this period Chinese junks represented more than 56 per cent of the total traffic in Indochina and even much stronger maritime powers such as the Portuguese, the British and the Dutch were completely dependent upon Chinese traders for commerce with China, Singapore or Siam (Gantes 2004: 227). Lacking maritime power, historical trade connections in the South China Sea and access to the Southern Chinese silk regions for the attraction of labor (*ibid.*), the French colonizers depended heavily on the long-lasting and far-flung networks of the Cantonese coolie brokers annex silk merchants annex compradors annex exporters, which logically resulted in the fact that the Cambodian yarn harvest did not end up in Lyon warehouses, but mainly in courtyard houses in Canton, Bangkok and Singapore (Forest 1980: 304).

*The 1930 economic depression*

In the late 1920s, tragedy struck the Cambodian sericulture industry, due to the great economic depression and the Pacific war (1941-5), cutting off Cambodia from Western and Southeast Asian economies. Just when the French planters had arranged a foothold in the Indochinese sericulture industry in the late 1920s, it crashed through the combined effects of the late 1920s silk cocoon crisis and the Japanese monopoly on silk yarn import after the Franco-Japanese pact in 1941. To start with the great depression, the worldwide fall of the cocoon prices in the late 1920s led to the bankruptcies and liquidations of many Chinese and French silk merchants and the closure of French silk plantations, development schools and spinning mills in Indochina. Most experts
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blamed the extremely low cocoon price for the popularity of specific competing crops such as wine in France, tobacco in Spain, and jute, mango and rice in Bengal, while others thought the silk crisis had been caused by high rents, insufficient technical progress, diseases, change of tenure arrangements, and so on (Frederico 1997).

Whatever the reason might have been, the worldwide fall of the cocoon prices burdened the colonial budgets and as a consequence French planters were not able to pay their mortgages and laborers anymore and had to close their spinning workshops and mulberry farms. To make things worse, the regional budgets fell sharpest in Cambodia, followed by Cochinchina, Tonkin, Annam and Laos (Norlund 2000: 208). The French government entrusted the task to restructure the colonial economy to the most powerful colonial institution, the Bank of Indochina, which closed all unprofitable enterprises and seized every plantation it could (Brocheux 2000: 265).

But far more dramatic for the sericulture industry was the fact that the 1929 silk depression also decimated the presence of the Cantonese traders and wholesalers in Indochina, who, for lack of profitable business opportunities in Indochina, returned to their families at home in China. As Charles Robequain (1944: 43) illustrated, during the great depression the majority of the Chinese in Indochina left the colony, which crashed basically every industry in Cambodia, indicating once more who oiled the economic wheels in this kingdom. As a consequence, the Cambodian silk spinners who were tied to their landlords and felt the impact of their landlord’s difficulties as well, were no longer in demand. During the great crisis the production of Cambodian silk yarn decreased from 500 tons in
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1925 to merely 25 tons in the 1940s (Delvert 1961: 282)\textsuperscript{34} and the trade balance of silk eggs showed a negative spiral from the end of the 1920s onwards as well (Henry 1932: 438-444) (table 4 and 5).

Table 4: Cocoon and silk yarn production in Cambodia, 1921-1930 (in kg)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Cocoon</th>
<th>Silk yarn</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>13.245</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1923</td>
<td>31.088</td>
<td>1036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>46.455</td>
<td>1434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>86.027</td>
<td>3077</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>96.614</td>
<td>4152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>80.400</td>
<td>3232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>118.984</td>
<td>3670</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>133.123</td>
<td>8360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>123.579</td>
<td>5113</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Henry, Y. (1932:438)

Table 5: Trade balance Indochinese silk eggs (in 100kg)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Import</th>
<th>Export</th>
<th>Balance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1923</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>643</td>
<td>540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>562</td>
<td>326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>617</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>680</td>
<td>380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>-60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Henry, Y. (1932: 444)

The 1940 Pacific war

The living conditions of the silk spinners and weavers deteriorated even further after Hitler’s occupation of France. The completeness of the German occupation of France left Indochina virtually helpless to resist the Japanese troops, who mainly used it as a rice basket to feed their

\textsuperscript{34}Pierre Brocheux (2000: 257) has shown how the production of silk yarn in Tonkin and Annam also came to a halt, and that the export of silk yarn to the Metropole and China decreased significantly.
military troops in China and as a military base to attack other Southeast Asian nations from during the Pacific war (Andrus and Greene 1944: 351-88). On 22 May 1941, the Vichy administration in Hanoi had to recognize Tokyo’s protection over Indochina and was forced to hand over its trade autonomy to Japan (ibid.: 367).

The 1941 Franco-Japanese agreements not only led to the decline of Indochina’s trade with France, but also of other ‘traditional’ Asian trade partners (ibid.). Moreover, Japanese troops not only used Indochina as a military base but also disrupted French shipping lines, important Indochinese trade entrepots such as Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore and Manila, the river trade between Phnom Penh and Saigon, and the Haiphong-Kunming Railway line (ibid.: 364). As a consequence, with imports from China, Europe and America cut off and with Japan failing to send sufficient quantities of consumer and manufactured goods back to the colony, Cambodians experienced an era of high inflation, food shortages and extremely poor living conditions.

Still worse, after the German seizure of France and the subsequent shortage of clothes in the Metropole, French factory managers sold all their textile supply to their fellow countrymen at home, which in turn led to an enormous shortage of clothes in the colony itself (cf. Brocheux 2000). Silk weavers in Cambodia remembered this era as ‘the era of wearing the water jar’ (Muan and Daravuth 2003: 8), illustrating that incomes were so low and products so scarce during the Pacific war that they could afford only one set of clothing for all family members to share. Thus if visitors came to the house of the weavers the folk story goes that many family members had to hide naked in the house or use a water jar to hide their nudity (ibid.).
Living conditions improved for the Cambodians after the Japanese government finally started to import consumer goods, clothes and raw materials to satisfy the civilian demand in Indochina (Andrus and Greene 1944). Jean Delvert (1961: 83) observed how Japanese merchants had taken over the silk trade positions of the Chinese in Cambodia, importing forty tons of silk yarn in the 1940s. And on a global scale Giovanni Frederico (1997: 163) noted how Japanese silk yarn merchants from Yokohama had taken over power from the Chinese silk yarn merchants and catered many Southeast Asian and European markets with silk yarn.

*The revival of the 'sampot hol'*

Although initially not as strongly as in neighboring Cochin-China and other Vietnamese territories of Indochina, national consciousness was rising in Cambodia, especially among a handful of educated ‘Khmer Kroms’ 35 such as Son Ngoc Thanh, the future Prime Minister of the Khmer Republic from 1970 to 1975, Lon Nol, and politically active Buddhist monks such as Hem Chieu (Chandler 1992). In Khmer newspapers such as the *Nagaravatta* (Angkor Wat) a growing urban Khmer elite began to condemn French colonial policies, especially the favored treatment they gave to Vietnamese to fill Cambodian civil service and other administrative posts (Chanda 1986: 56). In the same newspapers elite Khmers also ‘re-introduced’ the *sampot* as a marker of Khmer nationality and stimulated Khmers to wear it again as an expression of their own indigenous identity (Edwards 2001). Protesting against decades of French colonial rule and the French suit as a symbol of oppression, a young Lon Nol dressed himself in a checkered *sampot hol*.

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35 Khmer Kroms are indigenous ethnic Khmer minorities living in Southern Vietnam
In accordance with the 1940 Japanese adagio ‘Asia for the Asians’ a plethora of national movements appeared on the scene in Cambodia in the aftermath of the Pacific war, all bidding for independence, political reforms and the re-invention of an indigenous identity (Chanda 1986; Chandler 1992). Khmer Issarak revolutionaries were loyal to Son Ngoc Thanh and consisted mainly of indigenous leftists, Vietnamese leftists (especially Viet Minh), antimonarchical nationalists and ordinary bandit groups terrorizing villages in the Cambodian Vietnamese borderlands (ibid.). Supporters of the Democratic Party led by Prince Sisowath Yuthevong were mostly teachers, civil servants and politically active Buddhists (ibid.). A third group was formed by the liberals led by Prince Norodom Norindeth, representing the interests of the old rural elite, including large landowners, who were often still loyal to France (ibid.).

In the slipstream of these three national movements and the subsequent search for a postcolonial indigenous identity, a large handloom weaving industry came into existence in Cambodia catering to the increasing demand for indigenous clothing. In the late 1940s Jean Delvert (1961) not only observed the fall of the Cambodian sericulture industry, but also the re-birth of a growing indigenous handloom industry. Whereas in 1917 the French art scholar George Groslier found only sixty active silk weavers in Takeo (in: Edwards 2001: 394), Jean Delvert (1961: 282-284) came up with a number of 1850 hand weavers in Takeo and another thousand in Prey Veng and Kampong Cham manufacturing 32,000 sampot varying from hol and phamung to sarong.\(^{36}\)

To meet the ‘re-newed’ demand for sampot hol the Cantonese silk merchants returned to Cambodia and established business ties with

\(^{36}\) This number is probably higher, as Delvert did not survey Kandal province. In Kandal province William Willmott counted ‘many’ Chinese handloom weavers, all manufacturing silk clothes on the verandas of their houses.
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fellow ethnic silk spinnery owners for the procurement of silk yarn. These joint ventures were possible because after the ‘1955 Bandung Agreement’ Sihanouk allowed Chinese silk merchants to set up silk spinning factories on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. Against the colonial image of the greedy Chinese merchant we must surmise that without the ambitions and networks of these ‘greedy’ merchants there would have been no more sampot hol at all after the devastating period of the 1930s and ‘40s. In fact, their financial means and business contacts across the Cambodian borders were the factors that accounted for a revival of the silk industry in the 1950s.

The silk weaving industry continued to flourish after prince Norodom Sihanouk took over power in 1955, backed by the last French governor-general Decheux (cf. Osborne 1994). The flamboyant and eccentric king, however, took a more pragmatic position towards the sampot hol than the 1940 nationalists had done. In contrast to the 1940 nationalists Sihanouk re-defined the sampot hol as a female marker of nationalism, while he urged Khmer men, especially the urban elite, to wear trousers and suits in the French style. This way Sihanouk, a devout Buddhist and Francophile (ibid.), combined the female origin myth of the sampot and the French gender restrictions that had crystallized around this clothing style. Sihanouk legitimized his Janus-faced policy regarding the sampot arguing that western suits and pants were much more comfortable to wear at the office or in the factory, while the native sampot was more convenient to wear in the pagoda.

Sihanouk, however, not only stimulated the weaving of sampot for ceremonial purposes, but also in order to keep the weavers in their villages. After several rice crop failures millions of rural Cambodians migrated to Phnom Penh in the 1960s and upgraded the urbanization
level to its all-time peak of 12.5 per cent (Desbarats 1995: 143). To feed a growing urban population Sihanouk started to modernize his rural hinterlands and stimulate peasants to stay there (Sotharith 2000). Under Sihanouk’s Sangkum Reastr Niyum (‘Popular Community’) regime, farmers, in theory at least, were free to till their plot and to sell their products at the markets. To protect the peasants against Chinese moneylenders Sihanouk organized them in cooperatives and set up several dozens of large state-owned enterprises as well, to process rubber, paper, sugar, palm oil, cars, textiles and wood for the international market (ibid.).

Another reason why Prince Norodom Sihanouk wanted to boost the domestic silk weaving industry was to adjust the economy to one of the first global flows ever to arrive in Cambodia: tourists. In the 1960s the mysterious Angkor Wat temple complex attracted upper class people from all over the world (Osborne 1994). In luxurious hotels such as ‘Le Grand Hotel d’Angkor’ in Siem Reap, the ‘Independence hotel’ in Sihanoukville, ‘Hotel Casino’ in Bokor and the ‘Royal Palace’ hotel in Phnom Penh, the cosmopolitan elite enjoyed themselves with poker games, Johnny Walker whiskey and Khmer Apsara dances, filling their suitcases with silk scarves and sampot hol that were considered ‘authentic’ Khmer souvenirs (Challard 1966: 211). To meet the domestic and global demand for sampot hol, however, Sihanouk only stimulated the silk weaving industry and not the sericulture. Based on a ‘1955 Bandung Agreement’ with his Chinese political friend Zhou Enlai, he allowed Chinese foreign direct investors to set up silk spinning factories at the outskirts of Phnom Penh, and Chinese merchants to provide the Cambodian silk weavers with silk yarn from China, Japan and Vietnam. This flirt with the communist Chinese leadership, and allowing the import of products such as Vietnamese raw silk yarn annoyed
nationalists such as Lon Nol and Saloth Sar (alias Pol Pot), who accused Sihanouk of being in league with the colonial enemies (Chanda 1986; Osborne 1994). Also, the cold war was raging next-door between the communist Vietnamese in the north and the non-communist ones in the South, and in particular when the Vietcong started to use areas inside Cambodia as a sanctuary from which to launch guerrilla attacks into Southern Vietnam, Sihanouk’s position became precarious (ibid.). In March 1970, while Sihanouk was absent from Cambodia, his right-wing opponent General Lon Nol mounted a coup d’état and overthrew the Sangkum Reastr Niyum regime (ibid.).

The ‘sampot hol’: a trauma symbol
Sadly, the 1970 coup d’état ushered a decade of bitter political upheaval and finally gave rise to an extremely violent peasant revolution (1975-1978) under the leadership of Paris-educated student Saloth Sar, alias Pol Pot. Between 1975 and 1978 about 1.7 to 2.2 million died in the rural labor zones due to intentional killing, starvation or sickness (Becker 1986; Chandler 1992; Kiernan 1985). Though proclaiming the elimination of class distinctions, the Khmer Rouge regime constructed new value-laden socio-political distinctions between the ‘good’ base people (lower class peasants) and the ‘new’ people (the urban intelligentsia), with the latter group being in constant danger. Hence, numerous traditional customers of the sampot hol got killed in the Pol Pot working zones. Others escaped this cruel destiny by fleeing to refugee camps in Thailand or to overseas nations such as Australia, Europe and the United States. As Cathryn Aileen Poethig (1997) notes, more than 250,000 Cambodians fled to overseas nations and another 360,000 Cambodians to refugee camps in neighboring Thailand and Vietnam. After the Khmer Rouge regime was over in 1979 the sampot hol made its return in the Cambodian landscape and again the flexibility and far-flung
character of the Chinese business networks accounted for its return as a national symbol. Establishing business ties with the Tan Chau spinners in Vietnam thousands of silk weavers could continue their weaving enterprise in the 1980s and manufacture *sampot hol* again. In the 1980s some 5,000 looms were already clacking again (Pujebet and Peyre 2001) and wholesalers remembered very clearly how traders from Cambodian border towns such as Poipet, Pursat and Battambang walked or biked to Phnom Penh, catered their shops with Thai and Lao handicrafts and asked for indigenous woven *sampot hol*, *krama* and *sarong* for their return missions. Some traders even spoke of ‘a rush on’ and remembered that even second-hand *sampot* could be bartered lucratively against gold in these days. As the owner of *La Maison de la Soie* recalled:

‘After the Pol Pot war was over I bought handicrafts from Laos and Thailand and sold them to Russian aid workers. In the beginning nobody sold sampot, only later when traders asked me if I had sampot for sale I started to look around for them …These traders were Cambodians from Poipet, Pursat and Battambang and came by bike or some even walked to Phnom Penh …I do not know why, but these traders bought even second-hand sampot and paid good money for them …During UNTAC the sampot business became very lucrative …no, not because of the UN workers, they did not like our sampot, they only liked scarves from Lao and Burma, like the Russians …During UNTAC especially Khmer Americans bought a lot, they were working as translators for the UN, like me, I also worked for the UN as a translator … and when the Khmer Americans went home they bought a lot of sampot from my wife’s silk shop …Later when Sihanouk returned to Cambodia Cambodian women started to buy sampot hol again, too, this because the king ordered them to wear a sampot hol on national

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37 Interview February 2005
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television ...When UNTAC disappeared I became a sampot dealer as well and assisted my wife in her shop ...

Traders from Pursat, Poipet and Battambang asked after the ‘sampot’ because Cambodian refugees, among them many elite people, and thus the main ‘sampot’ customers, lived in the Thai border camps, and were desperately looking for sampot hol to dress themselves in the pre-Pol Pot style again. As Haing Ngor (1987) noted, the largest of the three Thai refugee camps, Khao I Dang, was a city inhabited for seventy per cent by the old Cambodian elite and a relatively normal town with hospitals, schools, workshops, markets, soccer fields, cafés, Buddhist temples and tailor shops (in: Poethig 1997: 59). Michael Vickery (1990) also qualified Khao I Dang as a relatively ‘normal’ middle class town, where life, including all the religious ceremonies such as Phcum Ben and Khmer New year, continued as usual (ibid.).

Interestingly, from the Thai border camps the Cambodian silk weaving industry also integrated into the global market by means of Cambodian Americans working for United Nations NGOs there. As Cathlyn Poethig (1997) has shown, the Thai refugee camps were open for Cambodian refugees who had successfully sought asylum in the US and gained American citizenship.38 After the fall of Democratic Kampuchea these naturalized Cambodian Americans, including monks, regularly traveled between the United States and the Thai refugee camps to work as aid workers, as translators for the UN, as political activists or simply to gather information about their relatives (Poethig 1997: 101). Once they had arrived in Khao I Dang, these Cambodian Americans could easily fill their suitcases with silken sampot, which again was great news for the Cambodian diaspora community at home, who had just organized

38 During and after the Democratic Kampuchea regime more than 250,000 Cambodians sought asylum in the US, Australia and France.
themselves in hundreds of ‘mutual assistance associations’ and desperately needed *sampot* and other religious artifacts to fulfill the cultural and religious needs of their communities (*ibid.*). In this regard Poethig (1997) also observed how these associations, and Buddhist temples, became the liveliest sites of the recovery of traditional Khmer arts, ceremonies and language in the United States. In her important book ‘*Khmer American. Identity and Moral in a Diasporic community*’, Nancy J. Smith-Hefner (1999) shows how Khmer American women wore silken *sampot*, while visiting weddings, Buddhist temples and *Phcum Ben* ceremonies in the United States.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have attempted to answer the first research question: What were the historical conditions under which the silk entrepreneurs transplanted their businesses into Cambodia? In order to answer this question I first deconstructed the grand Khmer narrative about the origin of silk weaving. In the dominant discourse the ‘hol’ silk weaving techniques are a Khmer invention, and sericulture techniques have been passed down within Khmer families from the ancient Angkor empire onwards. Early trade reports, however, articulated the non-existence of silk yarn in Cambodia and indicated that the ‘contemporary’ silk weaving industry is not a remnant of the Angkor kingdom, but a relatively young craft industry having its roots in Cantonese chain migration and a French desire to overcome the ‘pebrine’ silk worm crisis in Indochina two decades later. As for the origin of the silk weaving techniques in Cambodia, academic research (cf. Howard 1999) has shown that Tai speaking people probably introduced the *ikat* silk weaving techniques and the Chinese adopted these techniques from the Tai.
This chapter has shown, however, that the silk weavers accompanied Cantonese gentry-merchants, who had found a lucrative market niche in Cambodia: silk-making and weaving. The Cantonese gentry-merchants, confronted with Red Turban rebels in their previous silk districts (So 1986) recognized this market niche and deployed ambitions to start over again in the lower Mekong river deltas. Luck turned heavily in their favor, because after centuries of foreign domination the Khmer aristocracy was looking for a silk elite dress to celebrate their independence and distinguish themselves from the cotton sarong-wearing peasants (Edwards 2001). Since the Khmers did not possess sericulture and ikat silk weaving techniques the Khmer elite borrowed the Chinese sampot hol and traced their genealogy back to the courts of Angkor this way. This way the Khmer elite, as customers, got their much-wanted identity and the economic Cantonese elite, as producers, the opportunity to continue their silk businesses again.

Although the role of the Chinese in the Cambodian economy is widely accepted, Chinese involvement in the construction of its Khmer authenticity has been denied so far. Penny Edwards (1999) and Ingrid Muan (2001) argued that the sampot hol, and in a broader sense also Khmer culture, were invented by French colonial institutions and were adopted by the postcolonial Khmer elite as authentic Khmer. In their opinion, the French-managed ‘School of Cambodian Art’ (1918) framed silk weaving as an authentic art form that could be traced back to the courts of Angkor (Muan 2001).

Yet, going against the popular adagio that French colonialism was an important pull factor for Chinese migration, this chapter has shown the Cantonese gentry merchants out-competed the French silk industrials and had very good business reasons to sell the sampot hol as a marker of
Khmer authenticity. In fact, it was the continuous consumer demand for Khmer authenticity that made the Cantonese silk weavers decide to settle permanently in Cambodia. This was because after the Pacific war and the Khmer Rouge regime a demand for ‘authentic’ woven *sampot hol* came into existence again. This demand for authenticity worked well for the silk entrepreneurs because a Royal-supported silk dress guaranteed them a large clientele in Cambodia. Crucial in this regard was mostly the diasporic demand for *sampot hol* of the Khmer elite in the United States, France and Australia. Re-establishing trade contacts with their ‘old’ customers the silk entrepreneurs transplanted their silk businesses even further across the borders into overseas Diaspora communities.
Photograph: Cambodian silk weaver dressed in a black farmer pants (1921).
Source: Agence economigue de la France d'Outre-Mer (FR CAOM 30fi104/78)

Photograph: Two weavers preparing the loom in Kampong Cham (1921)
Source: Agence economigue de la France d'Outre-Mer (FR CAOM 30fi126/22)
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Photograph: Cambodian silk weaver working in front of her house (1931)
Source: Agence economigue de la France d'Outre-Mer (FR CAOM 30fi126/28)

Photograph: Mulberry plantation (1920) Source : Agence economigue de la France d'Outre-Mer (FR CAOM 30fi116/49)
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Photograph: silk weaver spinning yarn on a wheel (1949) 
Source: Agence economique de la France d’Outre-Mer (FR CAOM 30fi126/31).

Photograph: Three children preparing the ‘hol’ frame (1949) Source: Agence economique de la France d’Outre-Mer (FR CAOM 30fi126/32)
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Photograph: silk weaver tying 'hol' patterns (1949)
Source: Agence economique de la France d'Outre-Mer
(FR CAOM 30fi126/34)

Photograph: a 'hol' woven sampot (1949)
Source: Agence economique de la France d'Outre-Mer (FR CAOM 30fi126/35)
Chapter 4
From Worm to Sampot: Silk producers and traders in Cambodia

Introduction
In the previous chapter I discussed the conditions under which Cantonese silk weavers and traders transplanted their silk businesses to the Cambodian riverbanks. The current chapter will provide an answer to the second research question: how is the contemporary network of silk weavers and traders organized in terms of producer and trader relationships? Following the production and trade process from ‘worm to sampot’ this chapter will show that the Cambodian silk weaving industry is not a village-based household industry anymore, but instead a transnational business network that starts as a ‘silk worm’ in Vietnam and ends up as a sampot in the United States.

My approach to locate the various silk producers and traders spatially is based on the concept of ‘trade’ and ‘traders’ (Geertz 1963, 1978). The ‘trade’ conceptualization captures the silk weaving network as a production process, examining the geographical route of the silk threads from worm to sampot. Switching to the trader perspective I will illustrate how the different types of silk traders are linked by institutionalized vertical relationships that are both economic and social (cf. Dongelmans, Seng and Ter Horst 2005). Finally, this chapter has the ambition to update a 2001 French-conducted census of the silk industry. Having surveyed the silk industry from worm to sampot this chapter offer
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insights about the modernization of the silk weaving industry from the 1980s onwards. The reason for this is that national and global stakeholders offer a lot of ‘text’ about the authenticity of the sampot hol, but fail to give data on for example the number of silk weavers, their monthly incomes, why they prefer a position along the Mekong riverbanks, how labor-intensive it is to weave a sampot, and so on. But for a start, I will explain more about the ‘hol’ silk weaving techniques first and illustrate how labor-intensive it is to mold silk yarn into a finished sampot hol.

The labor-process

Although the ‘hol’ weaving technique suggests an indigenous style of weaving, it is in fact an ikat weaving technique, which refers to a resist dyeing process during which the weft threads (the vertical threads on the loom) are patterned before weaving. In their important surveys of Southeast Asian textiles Sylvia Fraser Lu (1988) and Robyn Maxwell (1990) indicate that ikat weaving is of great antiquity in the Southeast Asian region (cf. Howard 1999: 127). It has also been argued that the origin of ikat weaving techniques is still extremely diffuse. As Alfred Buhler (in: Howard 1999: 127), already said about ikat weaving:

‘The method has fallen completely into disuse in many places during the last few decades’.

Buhler also noted the possibility of multiple independent places of origin of ikat weaving, stating that the most likely places of origin are ‘China, India, British India and perhaps even western Asia’ (ibid.). In ‘The Dyer’s Art’, Jack Larsen (1979) re-analyzes the problem of the origin of ikat silk weaving, noting that there are old Chinese reports indicating that ikat weaving techniques were not used by the Chinese themselves but by various non-Chinese tribes of present-day South and Southwest China
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(Szechwan province) and probably of the northern parts of mainland Southeast Asia (ibid.: 128). Larsen then hypothesizes that *ikat* weaving techniques were being practiced in southern China by the sixth century AD, and that the technique spread south from these tribal cultures into other ethno-linguistic groups such as the Tai-speaking groups of northern Vietnam, Laos and northern Thailand and perhaps also the Khmer of Cambodia and Thailand, with India serving as a secondary center for this diffusion (ibid.: 129).

With regard to *ikat* weaving in Kanchipuram (India), Yvonne Arterburn (1982: 18) wrote:

'Much of a weaver's life, where he lives, with whom he lives, how he manages and deals with his family, house, household and friends is arranged so as to keep the shuttle and loom ever working'.

Handloom weaving, in particular *ikat* weaving, is an extremely technical and labor-intensive affair, and one needs a lot of productive hands around to finish the sampot in time. After the silk weavers receive the batches of silk yarn from their middlemen they must wash them in a clay pot full of boiled soda water and remove a gummy substance called sericin. They do this because the protean glue (sericin) that covers the yarn does not have a crystalline structure but an amorphous one, which causes the silk yarn to remain rough, stiff and dull. Usually, the weavers wash one ‘koli’ (two kg) of silk yarn at a time, which requires half a day of work (Pujebet and Peyre 2001). As You Hou, an elder silk weaver from Veal village, explained:

‘*In earlier days silk weaving was very intensive. We got up at four o’clock and searched for dye-stuff all day. My grandmother often looked after the...*’

39 I interviewed You Hou two times in November 2004
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silk eggs, my mother prepared the loom, my sister the hol frames and I had to wash the yarn to give it a bright color. I did not like that job because it took a lot of time. Today we buy silk yarn from a middleman, but the pressure is also much bigger now. Middlemen are very demanding and we have to finish our sampot in time, otherwise we lose our jobs. We work together with the whole family to accomplish that, sometimes even at night with candle lights. Yes, that is very tiring and after a busy period we are often sick’.

Coloring the yarn is another difficult and time-consuming job for the You Hou weaving family, as silk yarn (especially poor-quality-yarn) does not absorb the color easily, due to its dense protean composition. As You Hou already explained, in earlier days silk weavers roamed through forests to find their own dye-stuff, but today they use dye-stuff imported from Thailand. The whole dying operation depends on the required color intensity, but in general it will take four hours to color one ‘koli’ of yarn and another three hours to dry it (ibid.). You Hou remembered the following vividly40:

‘I was very glad we did not have to reel our own silk yarn and find our own dye-stuff anymore. Silk weaving has become much easier that way and I could also learn silk weaving that way. In the Sihanouk era many silk weavers stopped growing their own mulberry trees and started to buy Vietnamese silk yarn. Some silk weavers made their own dye-stuff from leaves of the indigo tree and I bought it from them. Nowadays I buy chemical dye-stuff from my middlemen.....No, it is not true that the quality of the dye-stuff is bad. I do not see the difference’.

After the silk yarn is colored You Hou must twist it on bobbins, which is necessary to arrange the yarn for the following weaving operations. This

40 Interview November 2004
is an extremely slow work as well, because of the rotation speed of the winder, mostly an old bicycle tire, and it takes more than sixty hours (see table 6).

Table 6: Time schedule of the weaving process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Division of labor</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>1 Kben</th>
<th>Duration (hours)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Degumming warp</td>
<td>2 kg</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winding warp</td>
<td>2 kg</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>66.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warping 1</td>
<td>2 kg</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyeing</td>
<td>2 kg</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warping 2 – drawing reed</td>
<td>Warp 1m</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Width</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warping 2 – Degumming weft</td>
<td>Warp 1m</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Width</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 kg</td>
<td>24.00</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.4 kg</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 color</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18 spools</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 warp</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>122.80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Pujebet and Peyre (2001)

In You Hou’s words⁴¹:

‘Often elder people like me wind the yarn on bobbins. This is because our eyes are very bad and we cannot weave patterns anymore. My father also wound silk yarn on bobbins, but that was because he was wounded in the Pol Pot war. He could not work in the fields anymore and helped the family at home’.

After the silk yarn has been wind on bobbins silk weavers must transfer the silk yarn onto a warp table consisting of two parallel sets of fifteen wooden sticks. To twist the yarn from the bobbins onto the warp table requires about two days of work, depending on the length and density of

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⁴¹ Interview November 2004
the warp (Pujebet and Peyre 2001). But the most time-consuming job is yet to come for silk weavers: preparing the heddle system for weaving. The raising and lowering of a portion of silk yarn by means of a heddle system, called warp yarn, is crucial because it creates an opening that permits the passage of a shuttle containing ‘weft’ silk thread (*ibid.*). To insert the warp yarn into the heddle system takes another two days and is often outsourced to non-kin members (*ibid.*). About this outsourcing job You Hou said42:

‘Only the poorest of the poor like to do this job. youngsters do not like it anymore. In earlier days we had to do it ourselves, but nowadays youngsters go to school. That is why we hire poor people from surrounding villages’.

As mentioned before, the ‘hol’ technique concerns a resist dying process in which the warp threads are patterned by a portion of weft threads tied to a beater above the weaver’s head (Green 2003: 83-86). These weft threads are different from the warp threads and are knotted and resist-dyed in bamboo tying frames before weaving. To resist the penetration of dye colors into the weft threads the weavers make use of strips of plastic tape (Pujebet and Peyre 2001). To create colored ‘hol’ patterns such as flowers, animals or Buddha’s, the weavers must continually knot and un-knot the plastic tape between the subsequent dye baths, allowing the background color to appear in those places that have not been knotted at all (Pujebet and Peyre 2001). You Hou explained the importance of this crucial weaving job as follows43:

‘Every family has its own design specialty. We are specialized in temple motifs based on stone carvings of old temples. Other families again in flower-motifs. It is important to have a specialty because the middleman

42 Interview November 2004
43 Interview November 2004
From Worm to Sampot

expects good quality from us. That is why I teach my grandchildren how to create temple patterns in the hol frame at a very young age’.

Silk weaving regions in Cambodia
The first scholar who mapped the silk weaving regions in post-war Cambodia was the Japanese textile expert Kikuo Morimoto. In 1995, after having worked for fifteen years in a Thai refugee camp, Morimoto was commissioned by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to investigate whether there were still any weavers left in Cambodia who were skilled in reeling and dying techniques. Traveling through eight provinces and fifty villages, Morimoto reported that some weaving villages had become active in the industry again, but that only seventeen ikat weavers deserved the title of master-weaver (Morimoto 1995). Six years later, two French agronomists surveyed the silk weaving industry again and found it to be much more active, including some ten thousand silk weavers producing all kinds of sampot in more than three hundred villages (Pujebet and Peyre 2001). In the year 2005 a third research team, of which I also formed part, witnessed how the number of looms had almost doubled to 20,000 (Dongelmans, Seng and Ter Horst 2005).

The Cambodian silk weaving villages are an amalgam of craft communities situated along the banks of the rivers Tonle Sap, Mekong and Bassac in the lower Mekong delta. This is not coincidental, as most of the present day silk weavers are descendants of silk cultivators from the Red River and Pearl River deltas (see chapter three). Arriving in Cambodia these early silk cultivators preferred a river farm in Cambodia,

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44 Morimoto set up workshops in the refugee camps and taught Cambodian refugees dye and weaving techniques.

45 However, to finish the sampot in time silk weavers divide their labor and outsource most preparation jobs to other family members, neighbors or villagers, which means that in total around 100,000 Cambodians are industrious in the production of hand-woven silk clothes.
because river deltas consist of natural levees that are formed by silt depositions and are extremely fertile grounds to cultivate crops such as mulberries (So 1986:18). A position near a river combined with profound irrigation skills guarantees access to water all year long, which gives these farmers the possibility to harvest mulberry leaves in the dry season and double or even triple their production (ibid.). Finally, the Mekong delta is situated on the northern margin of the tropical monsoon zone and is therefore affected by dry and cold northeasterly winds in the winter and subtropical heat in the summer, weather conditions that are favorable for growing mulberries and for sericulture (ibid.: 19).

The Cambodian river basin has a total population of ten million, which makes it an extremely densely populated area with ninety per cent of Cambodian population living in only one-third of its total land area (around 180,000 km²). The heavily populated lowland plains around the weaving villages are occupied largely by rice paddies and dry crops such as corn and tobacco, and cultivated by farmers who practice a subsistence style of farming (cf. Mekong River Commission 2003). In the past, weaving families in Cambodia, like other river basin weaving communes, practiced a mixed economy in which agriculture was supplemented with small-scale handloom woven silk clothes during slack periods of the agricultural cycle. Initially most of the silk clothes were manufactured for daily and ceremonial use and sold at a small scale by weaving women at nearby provincial markets. As said, after the Khmer Rouge regime was halted by the Vietnamese in 1979, the hand-woven sampot hol became a popular dress for the growing middle class living both in Cambodia and abroad, and this resulted in a booming sampot industry consisting of 20,000 silk weavers (Dongelmans et al. 2005: 47).
Silk weaving regions and their specialties

Takeo province, forty miles Southeast of Phnom Penh, is considered the cradle of silk weaving in Cambodia. Some ten thousand of the 20,000 (Dongelmans et al. 2005: 47) silk weavers are active there in a cluster of seventy-seven villages in Northern Takeo, a province forty kilometers South of Phnom Penh. The most densely populated silk weaving communes in Takeo province are Tang Yam, Kdanh and Tnaot, bordering Prey Kabas and Bati districts (Pujebet and Peyre 2001). Most weaving households in Takeo possess one or two looms (average 1.32) dedicated (94 per cent) to manufacture sampot hol (Dongelmans et al. 2005: 27).46 The looms are always placed in the shadow under the house, a space the weavers share with their cattle, poultry and all kinds of agricultural equipment. The Takeo silk weavers are known for their high quality sampot hol due to their ability to hammer the weft more than twice into the warp (ibid.: 22). Using this special weaving technique the sampot production in ’kaben’ is relatively low, although the sales price per sampot is considerably higher (ibid.). The Takeo silk weavers, like all Cambodian weavers, use wooden shaft frame looms (kei thbanh) that belong to the class of Southeast Asian looms classified as Malay or ‘western’ looms, referring to their origin in the western end of the Indonesian archipelago. Other areas where these looms can be found are Kelantan and Trengganu, the two northeastern coastal areas of the Malay Peninsula, and the Minangkabau region of central Sumatra (Green 2003: 65).

In general, the silk weaving process in Takeo is a women’s affair, while men cultivate crops in the gardens behind their house and take care of the cattle. In line with the relatively young post-Pol Pot population figure,

46 Although the Takeo weavers mainly manufacture sampot hol, the term ’hol’ does not exist in the Khmer lexicon. This gives textile scholar Gillian Green (2003) reason to believe, following Zoetmulder’s old Javanese dictionary, that ’hol’ is a Malay word meaning ‘embracing’, ‘grasping’ or ‘clasping’, in this case the weft threads with a tie prior to weaving.
sixty-five per cent of the silk weavers are between the age of 15 and 25, while forty per cent of the Takeo silk weavers is widow, unmarried or divorced (Dongelmans et al. 2005: 27). The head of the household is the master weaver and another woman, often the eldest daughter, will accompany her as a junior weaver. Because silk weaving is extremely labor-intensive Takeo weavers need a lot of productive hands to get the job done. Ninety per cent of the preparation jobs, such as washing the yarn, winding it on bobbins and tie-dying it in hol frames is outsourced to members of the natal compound (ibid.: 28-29). The only preparation jobs Takeo silk weavers outsource to non-kin members are extremely labor-intensive jobs such as the preparation of the warp table and the preparation of the heddles for weaving (ibid.: 35-36).

The Takeo silk weavers are relatively well-off and in case a weaver has enough productive hands around to help, and possesses profound weaving skills, she can manufacture four kaben of sampot hol per month and earn around forty dollars.\(^{47}\) Four per cent of the Takeo looms were inactive, mainly due to health reasons, in line with the observation that five per cent of the Takeo weavers has reached the age of 55 (ibid.: 2005: 38).\(^{48}\) According to Poree-Maspero (1938), the Takeo silk weavers are also known for the production of the black farmer pants (kho kansaen). These farmer’s pants are said to have been developed in the rural hinterlands of Southwest China (cf. Muan and Daravuth 2003) and were probably introduced in Cambodia somewhere in the 1930s. In the 1950s achar, elders of the Buddhist laity, wore white, collarless shirts and black pants, still the correct male dress for a Buddhist festival (Green 2003: 204). In the past, Takeo province, in particular the village Ang Kep Bok

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47 Depending on her weaving qualities and bargaining skills, a weaver earns ten to twelve dollar per kaben (four meters) sampot hol.

48 Other reasons mentioned were lack of credit, school-going children and out-migration to the textile factories in Phnom Penh.
From Worm to Sampot

(Green 2003: 329), was also known for its production of *ikat* woven religious wall hangers, with episodes of the life of Lord Buddha. Today some six hundred weavers in Takeo manufacture silk *pidans* for the tourist markets, a relatively low figure given the many efforts of NGOs to increase this number in the 1990s (Dongelmans et al. 2005).

*Kandal Province*

In Kandal province, another six thousand silk weavers can be found in the communes of *Koh Dach*, *Prek Luong*, *Prek Takov* and *Koh Ounhatey*, although ninety per cent of the Kandal *sampot* production comes from the Koh Dach ‘silk islands’ (*ibid*: 22). Unlike the Takeo weavers, the Koh Dach silk weavers lack ‘*ikat*’ weaving skills and only manufacture plain-woven *phamung* serving the taste of young female Cambodians in Phnom Penh for this dress (*ibid*.). The background of the Koh Dach weavers is rather diffuse, although the housing style and the name of the weaving style itself refer to Thai ancestry. Most of these silk weavers are internal migrants from other provinces and took up full-time silk weaving only during the last decade (*ibid.*). The *phamung* industry is not only a relatively young industry, but also the fastest growing one in Cambodia. In the slipstream of the *phamung* hype among young urban women in Phnom Penh, the Koh Dach island group experienced a spectacular growth in looms of almost three hundred per cent (*ibid.*). In line with the young age of the industry, the Koh Dach silk weavers are by far the youngest weaver group in Cambodia with 45 per cent of the weavers aged between 16 and 25 (*ibid.*: 27). On the Koh Dach islands even more

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49 Most noteworthy is the UNESCO project that started in the mid-1990s, introducing among other things the use of natural dyes. Despite UNESCO’s effort to stimulate the local economy by tapping weavers into the tourist market, Dongelmans, Seng and Ter Horst (2005) counted only 1113 silk *krama* weavers in the whole of Cambodia.

50 I did not study this region closely enough to be one hundred per cent sure of this. I did recognize a Thai housing style, and from the Japanese textile scholar Kikuo Morimoto I learned that the word *phamung* comes from the Thai lexicon. In Thai language *Pha* means ‘fabric’ and *Mung* means ‘purple’.
weaving enterprises are female-headed than in Takeo province, as 53 per cent of the weavers are divorced or unmarried. However, in case the weavers are married, husbands are not restricted to participate in the weaving process, as twenty per cent of the Koh Dach weavers are males (ibid.:28). Contrary to the Takeo weavers, men and women cooperate like an assembly line system working sixteen hours a day,\textsuperscript{51} which also explains the above average number of looms per family on Koh Dach (1.92). Since they are dedicating all their time to phamung weaving, most weaving households have leased or sold their agricultural land to wealthy city dwellers (ibid.: 32). Although the Koh Dach silk islands are an attractive tourist destination, only 401 of the 5973 weavers (7 per cent) are producing silken krama for tourists. The other 94 per cent manufactures phamung for the domestic and diasporic market, indicating once more the ‘indigenous’ character of this industry (ibid.:22). Around ten per cent of the Koh Dach looms appear inactive due to various reasons such as health conditions, lack of credit, outward migration to the Phnom Penh textile factories, competition of other economic activities, technical problems of the loom, or difficulties in hiring a junior weaver from within the natal compound (ibid.: 38).

In ‘mainland’ Kandal province, Cham and Javanese weaving villages can be found, manufacturing all kinds of silk clothes such as the sarong\textsuperscript{52}, the charobab\textsuperscript{53} and the kief\textsuperscript{54}. These silk clothes call to mind the arrival

\textsuperscript{51} The Koh Dach silk weavers also explained that men produce two kaben phamung (around eight meters) thirty per cent faster than women.

\textsuperscript{52} An ikat woven sampot made of silk yarn dyed in different colors. In particular middle class men like to wear this silk sarong at home as a casual dress. Silk sarong are also worn in ritual dances such as the Kansaeng Snae (Love Scarf dance), Ka-ngak Pailin (Pailin Peacock dance) and the Pouthau dance.

\textsuperscript{53} An ikat woven sampot with silver and golden metal threads. In the past this was the favorite dress of Kings and Queens. The Charabab was worn by royal dancers in all kinds of ritual dancings such as the Apsara dancing, the Money dancing and the Mekhala dancing. Today the Charabab is mainly worn during wedding ceremonies.

\textsuperscript{54} Red, purple or indigo colored silk head clothes worn by Cham/Malay women.
of two Austronesian groups in the fourteenth and fifteenth century respectively, and the tremendous influence they had on the Cambodian fashion system (Collins 1996). It has been argued that Malaysian Muslims influenced the Cambodian fashion system heavily after Khmer king Ramadhipati I married a Muslim woman and converted to Islam, adopting the Muslim name Ibrahim (cf. Kersten 2006). As the story goes, the converted Khmer king Ibrahim also employed Cham ikat weavers to work for him at the royal palace and to manufacture silk sampot for his staff to wear at court functions, consisting of a long tunic and a Malay ceremonial dagger, the keris (Uemera 2003). Allegedly these Cham court weavers were also responsible for the introduction of the ikat technology in other regions such as Takeo province and the most densely populated Cham region, Kampong Cham (ibid.).

Prey Veng/Kampong Cham

Thirty miles north of Phnom Penh, in a riverbank area overlapping Kampong Cham and Prey Veng province, another two thousand silk weavers can be found. Experiencing a spectacular economic growth of more than one hundred per cent, this region is the second-best silk climber after Kandal province. However, for various reasons, the Prey Veng weaving region can be considered the odd one out. Firstly, the

55 It goes beyond the scope of this thesis to examine which of these two early Muslim diasporas spread ikat weaving techniques into Cambodia, but it certainly deserves more scholarly attention. In his essay 'The Chams of Cambodia' (Phnom Penh, Center for Advanced Studies), William Collins (1996) clearly stated that Javanese Muslim traders came to Cambodia as early as the fourteenth century to set up commercial farms along river junctions such as Kleang Sbek. However, very little is known about this Muslim group, let alone their role in spreading ikat weaving techniques, compared to the other Cambodian Austronesian Muslim group, the Chams from Vietnam. The seafaring Cham, who settled at river junctions in Cambodia as well, have received much more scholarly attention, and are said to have introduced ikat weaving to the Khmers. Unlike the Javanese Muslims they did not come for trade and commercial farming but were forced to seek asylum after the Tonkinese king Le Thanh Tong (1477) had subjugated their kingdom into the larger Annamese Cochinchina territory. Unlike the Javanese Muslim, Cham Muslim established good political connections with the Khmer king, providing him with firearms technology and trade networks in the region in return for good ranks and land in Cambodia to settle.
Phnom Penh wholesalers identify Prey Veng as a black sheep, because middlemen do not buy silk yarn from them but directly from Vietnamese traders. For this reason wholesalers are skeptical about the Prey Veng middlemen and do not establish long-lasting credit relationships with them. Secondly, Prey Veng is also the cradle of a relatively new silk product, ‘the silk per meter’, monopolized by the owner of La Maison de la Soie, a new wholesale shop situated next to the Russian market. Dongelmans et al. (2005: ) observed that the production of ‘silk per meter’ has spread across five villages concentrated in the communes of Prek Anteak, Prek Chhey and Prek Runteas, and is providing work to 716 looms. Thirdly, although the number of looms doubled between 2001 and 2005, the Prey Veng households possess the lowest average number of looms per household (1.29) and about seven per cent of the ‘second’ looms have been subcontracted to non-kin weavers (ibid.: 29). The reason for this is that after the 2001 floods the Prey Veng youngsters left their natal compound in masses to find a job in the Phnom Penh textile industries, and it became very hard for the silk weavers to attract kin laborers. Fourthly, the out-migration of young kin-members to the textile factories in Phnom Penh has made the region a kind of old people’s home, with high age ratios (average 36) and many looms (twenty per cent) not clacking at all (ibid.: 27-28). An old people’s home or not, the Prey Veng weavers, contrary to the weavers in the other two silk weaving regions, manufacture sampot hol, phamung, sarong, krama, and ‘silk per meter’.

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56 For this insight I am indebted to Mr. Seng Bunly, who joined me on my fieldtrip to Prey Veng and came across middlemen telling him about their smuggling activities.

57 ‘Silk per meter’ products are phamung woven curtains, pillows and table clothes, and cater for the taste of western entrepreneurs (Dongelmans, Seng and Ter Horst 2005).

58 Based on my own interviews
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In Kampong Cham province, just across the Bassac river, the most famous weaving commune of Cambodia, *Prek Changkran*, is situated. The French art scholar Eveline Poree-Maspero (1938) observed that silk *sampot* from *Prek Changkran* were reputed for their superior qualities by the Cambodian Royal family and other elite, and still are today (Green 2003: 192). This opinion, according to Green, is confirmed by Bernard Dupaigne (1984) and Kikuo Morimoto (1995), and by Cambodians in diaspora favoring *sampot* from *Prek Changkran* over *sampot* from Takeo (in: Green 2003). In the same area, on the *koh Sutin* island group in the river Bassac, red or blue-checkered *krama* are manufactured, which can be seen all over Cambodia and that are worn in particular by the peasantry as a head cover, a loincloth (for bathing) or as a carrying bag (Morimoto 1995). In the past *Khmer Rouge* soldiers wore the cotton *krama* as an expression of their pure Khmerness, and for this reason *krama* weaving was the only weaving activity permitted during the Pol Pot regime (Green 2003; Muan and Daravuth 2003). In a rather diffuse way, the bulk of Cham weavers manufacturing *sarong* in this region disappeared. The typical Muslim *sampot*, the *sarong*, is still woven by ten per cent of the silk weavers in this region, but nowadays also by Cambodian women who identify themselves as *Khmers*, Vietnamese and Chinese. According to them, Cham weavers died or fled the country during the Pol Pot regime, or are too poor nowadays to set up silk weaving enterprises like they do. The few Cham weavers who are still active in the cotton *krama* industry came up with a different story and complained that they were excluded from the more expensive and labor-

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59 Gillian Green (2003) mentions this, and silk vendors from the Central Market confirmed this to me.

60 Under the reign of king Ibrahim and his conversion to the Islam, the province kampong Cham was named after the following dominant appearance of the Chams in Cambodia.

61 There is a scholarly debate going on in Cambodia about the causal relationship between Khmer Rouge ethnic politics and the high death toll among Muslim Chams. In ‘How Pol Pot Came to Power’ Kiernan (1985) argues that the massacre of Chams in the 1970s was a conscious ethnic act, while Michael Vickery (1984) takes a moderate position, arguing that Chams happen to live in the highest death toll working zones where most Khmers, Vietnamese and Chinese also died.
From Worm to Sampot

intensive ‘hol’ silk weaving industry by Chinese middlemen unwilling to provide them with credit and sell their silk clothes on the Phnom Penh markets.

Table 7: Demographic figures of the silk weavers per region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weaving regions</th>
<th>Takeo</th>
<th>Kandal</th>
<th>K.Cham/P.Veng</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of weaving looms</td>
<td>10,486</td>
<td>6,365</td>
<td>2,461</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looms per household (average)</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of the weavers (average)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female headed household (perc.)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender division of labor (in females)</td>
<td>95,9</td>
<td>75,8</td>
<td>99,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inactive weaving looms (perc.)</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>20.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Dongelmans et al (2005: 43)

Phnom Srok

Although it has been argued in popular and academic writings that the Cambodian silk weaving industry boomed in the 1990s due to efforts of NGOs and tourists’ taste for authentic Khmer products (Morimoto 1995; Dahles and Zwart 2003), the 2001 silk survey indicated that the industry already boomed in the 1980s, and the 2005 loom census I participated in revealed that only ten per cent of the sampot production was manufactured for tourist use. Most of the tourist production took place in a commune called Phnom Srok near Siem Reap, a popular tourist destination. The Phnom Srok silk makers and silk weavers are all subcontracted by western NGOs to manufacture high-quality silk pidan and silk scarves, catering for wealthy Angkor tourists’ taste for
indigenous souvenirs.\footnote{62} Especially the French NGO \textit{Projet d'Appui au Secteur de la Soie} (PASS) has persuaded many farmers in the Thmar Puok, Chongkal and Samrong districts to cultivate mulberry plants and reel their own silk yarn again (PASS 2004). Although PASS trained some 1,000 women in sericulture, their net production of only five tons of ‘golden’ silk yarn in the year 2004 remains rather marginal, especially compared to the 300 tons used by the indigenous industry in eastern Cambodia.\footnote{63}

Initially, most of the ‘golden’ Phnom Srok silk yarn was sold to another French NGO, the handicraft giant ‘\textit{Artisans d’Angkor},’ owning five souvenir shops in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap (Miedema 2005). To manufacture silken scarves, pillows and wall-hangers (\textit{pidan}) for wealthy Angkor tourists and galleries all over the world, \textit{Artisans d’Angkor} subcontracted some eight hundred silk weavers organized in twenty-two workshops (\textit{ibid.}). However, to serve the growing demand for Khmer handicrafts worldwide, the five tons of Phnom Srok silk yarn were no longer sufficient, and therefore \textit{Artisans d’Angkor} established business ties with ‘regular’ wholesalers in Phnom Penh for the procurement of Vietnamese silk yarn (\textit{ibid.}). This integration into the indigenous Chinese business networks and the use of Vietnamese silk yarn led to some consternation in the NGO handicraft world: how can one sell authentic Khmer products with Vietnamese imported silk yarn (\textit{ibid.})? Even more concern arose in the NGO world when the Silk Farm, the official government body meant to regulate the silk weaving industry in Cambodia, became the main shareholder\footnote{64} of \textit{Artisans d’Angkor} under

\footnote{62} In the mid-1990s the Japanese textile expert Kikuo Morimoto subcontracted some sixty skilled weavers from a former flourishing weaving region, Tani, in Kampot Province.

\footnote{63} To put the five tons into perspective, the wholesalers in Phnom Penh import some 400 tons that are necessary to cater for the silk weavers in Eastern Cambodia.

\footnote{64} This also means that \textit{Artisans d’Angkor} cannot be considered an NGO anymore, but a normal business organization.
the name *Apsara* and ended the cooperation with the other silk NGOs (*ibid.*).

To assemble their power and business interests against this ‘obscure’ business alliance, ten smaller NGOs in Siem Reap and Phnom Penh have clustered themselves under another umbrella organization called ‘The Silk Forum’, led by Cambodian expatriate Nina You. Though disappointed by the ‘Silk Farm-Artisan d’Angkor’ alliance this NGO group has the same mission, namely to offer jobs to the war-stricken Cambodians and to give them back their sense of pride and identity at the same time. Among the members of the ‘Silk Forum’ the most famous silk reviver, at least from an international point of view, is the Japanese NGO Institute for Khmer Traditional Textiles (IKTT), led by the charismatic textile expert Kikuo Morimoto. Nearby the Angkor Wat temple complex, this former UN worker has cultivated an additional five hectares of mulberry plants on his ‘Forest Of Wisdom’, and reels another ton of silk yarn per year. Like his French counterpart *Artisans d’Angkor*, Morimoto subcontracts some two hundred silk weavers, many of them migrants from the eastern Cambodian weaving regions 65. Following the organizational principles of the American silk reviver Jim Thompson in Thailand,66 Kikuo Morimoto has positioned his yarn spinners and silk weavers under his house in Siem Reap town in an attempt to restore the image of silk weaving as a monolithic rural household activity. In terms of discourses, it is this relatively humble and foreign-led Phnom Srok silk industry that crystallizes a Khmer ideology around the Cambodian silk

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65 In the mid-1990s the Japanese textile expert Kikuo Morimoto subcontracted some sixty skilled weavers from a former flourishing weaving region, Tani, in Kampot Province.

66 Jim Thompson was an American businessman who came to Thailand in 1945 and set up a weaving enterprise in Bangkok with the help of Cham weavers from Thailand. The international media still considers him as the main reviver of silk weaving in Thailand. In 1967 Jim Thompson suddenly disappeared during a holiday in the Malaysian Cameroon mountains, leaving many unanswered questions about the how and why of his death.
From Worm to Sampot

weaving industry and links the 20,000 Cambodian weavers back to the 12th century temple complex of Angkor.

The Tan Chau spinmery
Besides crystallizing Khmer discourses around the identity of the weavers and tracing the origin of the silk weaving techniques back to the temples of Angkor, the Phnom Srok stakeholders also framed stories around the downfall of the silk industry during the communist 1970 revolution. According to the official ‘downfall story’ Pol Pot soldiers were the ones who cut the mulberry trees and destroyed the looms in a kind of iconoclastic fury against the elite character of the hand-woven sampot hol. Supposedly, Khmer women could not reel their own silk yarn anymore and came to be dependent on the much-hated Vietnamese for the procurement of silk yarn. Hence, to map the Cambodian silk weaving industry correctly, I had to cross the border and search for the silk worms in the Vietnamese highlands. The reason for this is that when Cambodia was at war in the 1970s, the Vietnamese government cultivated 200,000 hectares of land in the Western Highlands suitable for the growth of long-term industrial plants such as tea, coffee and mulberries (cf. Salemink 2000).

In an attempt to change their economy from a bureaucratically centralized state company into a more decentralized market economy the Vietnamese administration handed over one million hectares of farmland from landlords to peasants in the Central Highlands and the Mekong River delta67. In the 1970s the Vietnamese government considered mulberry plants as a long-term industrial plant with the potential to develop the agricultural product processing industry in Lam Dong (Braun 2000). To stimulate skilled mulberry planters and silk yarn producers (mainly Kinh) from the overpopulated Red River Delta to

67 For a historical ethnography of the Vietnamese highlanders, see: Salemink (2003b).
migrate to the western Highlands, the Vietnamese government offered these mulberry planters one hectare of land, a fixed state income, free silk eggs and the possibility to sell surpluses to private markets (ibid.). In line with the socialist statecraft principles of the Vietnamese government, the silk farmers came to operate under close supervision of a state company called ‘Vietnam Sericulture Corporation’ (VISERI), which created jobs for 40,000 rural laborers and produced 2,000 tons of silk yarn each year.

But when I arrived in the western highlands in January 2004 I observed how the once-flourishing Vietnamese silk industry was in sharp decline. Although Lam Dong province was still VISERI’s largest producer of silk cocoons, the smell of tea and the sight of coffee beans drying on the pavement were signs that many farmers had already stopped reeling silk yarn many years ago and diversified into more lucrative crops such as coffee, tea and sunflowers. It appeared that in earlier years most farmers in the region were stimulated by VISERI to cultivate their land with mulberries, being offered them eight kilograms of free silk eggs every year. But three years ago ‘The Company’ suddenly stopped this practice and paid only a few hundred peasants to cultivate mulberries. Ten kilometers downtown, in Bao Loc city, a textile wholesaler complained that whereas VISERI stopped paying these farmers, they invested state money in roads, hotels and restaurants to attract tourists to the nearby Dambri Falls.

68 I am indebted to Frank Duong, who was my guide and translator for a week.
69 This information is based on an interview I had with Nguyet Hoang (30), a silk breeder from Lam Dong who was taught how to plant mulberries from her mother, a Kinh silk breeder from a town called Hau Tau near Hanoi. In 1975 her parents came to Bao Loc to start a farm there as they were offered three hectares of land. She took over the farm of her parents in the 1990s.
A young manager of the 2nd September silk filature in Bao Loc, one of VISERI’s eleven filatures, confirmed the decline of the sericulture industry in Bao Loc, but denied that most state money was used to stimulate tourism. According to him, VISERI did not stimulate farmers to reel silk yarn anymore because of the tough competition they faced with cheaper silk producing areas such as China and Uzbekistan. To prove his point the factory manager, dressed in a green army uniform, gave me a tour around his factory, pointed at the rickety reeling machines smelling of oil, and explained that the Vietnamese technology was too old-fashioned to compete with the modern silk reeling factories in China, Japan and Russia. While we were drinking coffee in his office the manager was very surprised to hear about the existence of a Cambodian handloom industry and admitted he had never heard of it. Perhaps caught by my disappointment he suggested to ask the same question to the owners of private filatures in Tan Chau, a border town in the lower Mekong region.

The filature owners in Tan Chau knew very well about the existence of a Cambodian handloom weaving industry, because from the 1920s onwards this region was supervised by the French filature ‘La Compagnie de Soie du Cambodge et du Cochinchine’ (Henry 1932). For more than a decade French steamliners of ‘La Compagnie des Messageries Fluviales’ ran between filatures in Phnom Penh and Tan Chau and redistributed their cocoons, mulberry leaves and silk eggs to French export companies around Saigon. In the narrow streets of this charming, multi-cultural transit town, an elder woman with an impressive silk trade career owns three filatures. Although the filature owner was very busy and on her way to a family meeting in Saigon when I visited her, she agreed to talk with me about her trading past, because I had come from far away to meet her.

70 Named after the date 2 September when Vietnam declared independence.
Once we were sitting comfortably on brown leather couches and were
drinking coffee, the ‘Silk Lady’ introduced herself as Mrs. Kieu (62) and explained how she had often joined her father on trade trips as a young kid. Her father, a Chinese immigrant, used to buy silk yarn from silk breeders in Mytho, Cho Moi and Lam Dong, and sold it to private companies and silk weavers all over the Mekong. At the age of fifteen she followed in her father’s footsteps and she knew practically every silk breeder, trader and market in the region. For more than thirty years she traded silk yarn to markets as far as the Thailand-Lao border town Sovanapaneth and the Vietnamese-Chinese border town Dong Dang. At the age of forty-eight Mrs. Kieu decided to invest her savings in a private silk-reeling factory in her hometown Tan Chau. Having good connections all over the Mekong delta and a good nose for business she became even more successful than the other legendary silk brand in Tan Chau, ‘Mi-A’.71

An important factor in her decision to open up a silk factory in Tan Chau was a growing demand for silk yarn from Thailand in the 1980s.72 Because of this Cambodia became an interesting ‘transit hub’ in the 1980s, as its post-war borders were extremely porous and the route to Bangkok a short one. Out of fear for the anti-Vietnamese attitude of the war-traumatized Cambodians, Mrs. Kieu did not dare to peddle the yarn to Bangkok herself but established trade relationships with fellow ethnic middlemen in Phnom Penh. To her own surprise - and she still feels lucky about this - these middlemen became huge silk yarn wholesalers themselves in the 1990s and to meet their demand for silk yarn she decided to open up two more silk-reeling factories in the mid-1990s. Like the manager of the 2nd September factory in Bao Loc, Mrs. Kieu also

71 Again, I had some difficulties translating this name. Interestingly, Dr. Philip Taylor, an expert in Vietnamese culture, confirmed that ‘Mi-A’ was a famous colonial silk brand name in the colonial and postcolonial era.
72 As I already explained, allegedly Jim Thompson revived the Thai industry into a flourishing silk industry.
confirmed that most silk yarn nowadays no longer comes from Vietnam but from filatures in Uzbekistan and China. For her, however, this was a matter of rational reasoning which had nothing to do with her affection and passion for Vietnamese silk. Or, as she puts it herself: ‘Vietnamese silk is very expensive. It costs 19 dollar per kilo. Uzbekistan silk is only 13 dollar per kilo that is why I buy silk yarn from there’.

Map 2: silk weaving regions in Cambodia
The wholesalers and ‘their’ middlemen

In the beginning of the 1980s the Tan Chau filatures established business ties with co-ethnic wholesalers in Phnom Penh, who in turn were subcontracted as brokers in a wider Vietnam-Thailand silk yarn trade. Female silk yarn traders from the weaving regions of Takeo and Prey Veng stepped into this trade niche and opened their shops near one of the four main markets in Phnom Penh. Today three of these silk pioneers operate from the Central Market (Banteay Srey, Neary Khmer and Heng Sourkia), one from the Old Market (Meng Kong) and one from the Olympic market (Kim). The wholesalers operate from Chinese courtyard houses, built in an urban housing style that can be found all over Southeast Asia. This housing style offers the wholesalers not only ventilation against the vicissitudes of the monsoon climate, but also enough space to store their batches of silk yarn. Characterized by Chinese symbols such as ancestral shrines, black and white photos of deceased family members and red lampions at the entrance door, they also symbolize which culture dominates the Cambodian business arena. Although two silk yarn wholesalers also market high quality sampot (Banteay Srey and Neary Khmer) the core business of all five wholesalers is the import of silk yarn from Vietnam. Although it is hard to find out how much silk yarn the wholesalers have in stock and who dominates this trade,73 some 300 tons, exceeding a market value of six million dollar, are necessary to cater for the 20,000 silk weavers annually.74 What can be said though is that the five wholesalers control the silk yarn

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73 The wholesalers were extremely cautious about showing me their silk yarn stock. Moreover, they might have stocked their silk yarn elsewhere as well, of course. However, the story goes that the Meng Kong wholesale shop has by far the largest silk yarn stock and that Meng Kong is a true millionaire.

74 I reached this number by doubling the figure of 150 tons that Pujebet and Peyre estimated to cater the 10,000 silk weavers in 2001. However, it is virtually impossible to get a grip on this trade, as official numbers do not exist.
From Worm to Sampot

trade in a conglomerate (see chapter five) and have filled their pockets very well through the silk yarn trade.

To provide the weavers with silk yarn the wholesalers have subcontracted middlemen from the weaving regions to act as intermediaries between the rural weavers and themselves. At least from the colonial days onwards, French agronomists have observed the essential role middlemen play for peasants and craftswomen in the rural hinterlands, supplying them with a variety of services such as bulking, storing, transporting and crediting (cf. Delvert 1961). Middlemen have always bridged ‘rural-urban’ gaps for the silk weavers and have constantly provided them with silk yarn, dye-stuff and loom materials such as frames, heddles, reeds, beams and rods. Another important task of middlemen is their role as ‘design-brokers’ between the marketers in Phnom Penh and the silk weavers in the rural areas. Like in traditional supplier networks, the design relationships between the marketers (wholesalers and retailers) in Phnom Penh and the middlemen in the rural areas are characterized by large power asymmetries. The marketers, who know about the taste of the customers, give the middlemen blueprints of the kind of sampot their customers like (tjool tjut). The middlemen in turn enhance the blueprints to the weavers, who have to execute the sampot order in accordance with correct colors, weaving patterns and yarn thickness, within the arranged time period.

Although it is hard to say how many middlemen are active in the silk weaving industry, Pujebet and Peyre (2001) came up with a number of several hundreds. Recently, however, Dongelmans et al. (2005:39-42) observed that a distinction has to be made between small and large middlemen and that the silk weaving industry is in fact dominated by some thirty to fifty large middlemen, each providing silk yarn to some 400 silk weavers. The only region that seemed to lack such institutional
conditions is the Prey Veng/Kampong Cham silk weaving region, where many ‘loose’ middlemen arranged trade contacts with independent Vietnamese silk yarn traders, they referred to as smugglers. This is also a region in which middlemen do not become ‘petty capitalists’ such as in Takeo and Kandal provinces, but become agrarian industrials hiring hundreds of weavers and some sub-middlemen to work for them as factory workers. With regard to this dependence on smugglers, one middleman from the Kampong Cham/Prey Veng region told us:

‘I do not buy silk yarn from the bosses (the wholesalers) anymore, but I buy it directly from Vietnamese smugglers. First they came to my village, but now they sell their silk yarn at the central market. We work with mobile phones and they call me when they are in Phnom Penh. That is much cheaper, because one koli (two kilogram) of silk yarn costs 42 dollar, while the bosses ask 50 dollar or even more. The bosses do not like that of course and do not want to do business with me anymore’.

The large number of small middlemen that Pujebet and Peyre (2001) counted, were probably silk weavers or humble traders who tried to peddle silk sampot for their family members in the Phnom Penh markets. Being used to focus only on their household, most of these sub-middlemen had a limited understanding of the market and lacked social networks to trade their silks. This led Dongelmans et al. (2005: 39-42) to conclude that the strength of the middlemen as key players in the silk industry not only derives from the fact that they are willing to take a risk, providing silk on credit, and to look after the logistics of the weavers, nor solely from their management skills, but mostly from their social relations and skills to occupy a central position in the network of wholesalers, traders, middlemen, weavers and vendors. It is important to

76 Interview January 2005
note that only a few middlemen know how to use their social capital and how to gain trust with one of the five wholesalers for the procurement of credit (ibid.).

As a result of this a trend is visible in which production areas are guarded by a few big middlemen, whether as petty producers or agrarian capitalists, which makes it possible for them to operate as monopolists and strengthen their position in relation to the weavers, due to their distribution networks with the wholesalers (ibid.). Both qualitative and quantitative research shows that the wholesalers-middlemen guilds control close to 75 per cent of the production in the large silk weaving areas of Kandal and Takeo, providing yarn on credit. As a consequence only 19 per cent of the silk weavers can afford to pay directly for the silk yarn, which means that almost all weavers are in constant debt to their middlemen, indicating once more the firm grip the wholesalers-middlemen guilds have over the industry (ibid.). This also means that the wholesalers-middlemen guilds have transformed the silk sector into a closed system, which one can only enter on the basis of a social relationship. Another implication of this is that a weaver needs to be introduced to a middleman and a middleman again needs a wholesaler who is willing to provide him with credit (ibid.).

**The retailers**

Although the *sampot* marketing system is an amalgam of numerous selling sites\(^77\) rather than a single market, by far most *sampot* are sold at government- and private-owned markets in the capital city of Phnom Penh. In what Anthony Reid (1988) famously dubbed ‘the Age of Commerce’ (1450-1680), Cambodia shifted its capital from inland Angkor towards the river-based Phnom Penh. Due to its development as an

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\(^77\) There is a large number of selling points in many market places in Cambodia, such as Battambang, Kampong Cham and Siem Reap.
entrepôt, Phnom Penh has always been a rare exception in the rural Cambodian landscape, because of its multi-ethnic, multicultural and cosmopolitan character. Although Cambodia did not urbanize as heavily as most other Southeast Asian nations, around 1.5 million Cambodians are nowadays living in Phnom Penh.\textsuperscript{78} Since 2001 the number of retail outlets in Phnom Penh has almost doubled due to the growth of the city as an urban economy. This doubling of silk outlets corresponds with the growth of the nationwide industry in its rural hinterlands, and the doubling of silk weavers from 10,000 (Pujebet and Peyre 2001) to more than 20,000 (Dongelmans \textit{et al.} 2005) over the past four to five years. Although the silk vendors I interviewed found it hard to give exact information about customers, most estimated that some sixty per cent of their respective stock was sold to Cambodians living in diaspora. These ‘foreigners’, like regular tourists, visit their motherland during holidays and fill their suitcases with \textit{sampot} every year. It would certainly be interesting to investigate whether this trade must be seen as a tourist trade or a business trade.\textsuperscript{79}

By far the most popular silk clothes market for Cambodian women is the Olympic Market, owned by the notoriously rich and highly controversial Cambodian business tycoon Theng Bunma. Besides being the owner of Cambodia’s biggest company Thai Boon Roong, the Intercontinental Hotel, Rasmei Kampuchea (Phnom Penh’s biggest newspaper) and head of the chamber of Commerce, Bunma is also suspected by the United States to be a powerful drug runner (Edwards 2004) and is mentioned in one breath with other Asian business tycoons such as Stanley Ho and

\textsuperscript{78} According to the CIA World Factbook (2005) the total Cambodian population is 13,607,069.

\textsuperscript{79} Many diaspora customers told me that the sampot were distributed in their respective communities by a kind of Tupperware party system. Others told me there were regular silk shops in the US as well, owned by Cambodians. It would be fascinating to investigate how this silk trade has extended itself into the different diaspora communities and if these entrepreneurs are somehow related to the wholesalers and silk vendors in Cambodia.
Aw Boon Haw. Because of his controversial background Bunma is a close associate of prime minister Hun Sen and claims to have sponsored Hun Sen’s 1997 *coup d'état* against the Funcinpec troops. For the international press Bunma’s biggest claim to international fame was the airplane-shooting incident in April 1997. Annoyed at the perceived rudeness of the airplane personnel he ordered his bodyguard to get him a gun. Once outside he shot at the airplane tires bragging that if this would be his staff he would have shot at them (*ibid.*). Backed by Prime Minister Hun Sen he was never convicted and continued to strengthen his position as Cambodia’s leading business tycoon.

In the 1990s Theng Bunma bought the Olympic Market and used it as a transit hub for a wider and more lucrative Thailand-Vietnam trade. At the second floor of his extremely busy wholesale market, around fifty-four retailers\(^{80}\) offer a wide variety of high quality sampot hol, phamung and sarong for sale. Having an average of 75,000 dollar of silk clothes in stock, the turnovers of these silk retailers are sky-high and their profits, exceeding seven hundred dollars per month, are skyrocketing for Cambodian standards. Without exception all silk retailers at the Olympic Market lack a background in the silk industry. A typical story is that of Kim Ry (45)\(^ {81}\):

> ‘I came to Phnom Penh in 1993 and bought this silk shop for 4000 dollar. I borrowed the money from my parents who owned a wholesale food shop in Kampong Cham. Our family diversified into the silk business, because my father thought that was a good business for a female. This is because most customers are females. Before I came here I did not know much about the silk trade at all. I started to buy sampot hol from a middleman in Veal village. Now I have many middlemen from Takeo, Koh Dach, Kandal

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\(^{80}\) I counted them myself in March 2005, but there could easily be more stalls by now.

\(^{81}\) Interview February 2005
province, and Prey Veng. My parents are Chinese, but also celebrate Khmer festivals such as Phcum Ben and Khmer New Year. But at home we follow the Chinese calendar and not the Khmer one and celebrate Chinese ceremonies such as saen kbal tuk, Chinese New Year and Cheng Ming. I consider Khmer to be my mother language and I also feel Khmer. But I want my children to learn Mandarin, too, because that is important on the market. Just listen, everybody speaks Mandarin here’.

A second silk market where Cambodian women buy sampot is the Old Market, owned by a Taiwanese business group called ‘Jiayun International Group’. This group transformed the Old market from a humble food and fruit market into a large three-story white wholesale block in the mid-1990s. In general Taiwanese investment became clearly noticeable in Cambodia after the Taiwan Straits crisis in 1996 when China fired missiles in the vicinity of Taiwan. From that moment onwards the Taiwanese government actively promoted a ‘go-south policy’, encouraging Taiwanese to invest in Southeast Asian countries (Chan and Wang 2003), and in the same year around 4,000 Taiwanese businessmen invested huge sums of money in Cambodian garment and shoe factories (ibid.).

With the arrival of the Taiwanese business group, the Old Market became a dump store for second-hand clothing from China, Taiwan and Korea. On the second floor of this dirty, shadowy and narrow market, some twenty-five retailers offer all kinds of sampot against fairly good prices. Having around 25,000 dollars’ worth of sampot in stock, their assortment is less varied and considered to be of lower quality than the sampot offered for sale at the Olympic market. Consequently the turnovers and the profits of the vendors are lower as well. Most of the silk vendors at the Old Market are again ethnic Chinese, and often the daughters of experienced retailers who already peddled silverware, handicrafts and
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sampot in the 1980s. As the silk clothes retailer Suy Chan Sitha (52) explains:

‘My father was professor at the University and could speak French and English. He was a koncen (Chinese-Cambodian). We were wealthy people and lived in a big apartment. My mother had a shop in silverware and also sold handicrafts from Laos and Thailand. She was also a koncen (laughing). After the war was over we bought a shop for eighty dollars worth of gold at the Old Market. The market was not so big as it is now, it was basically a food and vegetable market. We bought handicrafts from ambassador women my father knew. They often traveled to Laos and Thailand and sold handicrafts to us. Especially the Russians liked these handicrafts. It was a good business. Later we also sold sampot from Takeo province. In the beginning that was not such a good business and we had to sell handicrafts and silverware as well. After UNTAC came the silk business grew enormously and many Cambodian women bought sampot hol. I do not know why. I think because the king told them on television’.

The sellers at the Old Market complained heavily about the bad smell, the muddy floors, the leaking roofs of the market and the high rents they had to pay to the managers of the Taiwanese business group. In the words of Um Chanboth (32):

‘Customers like the Olympic Market much better than the Old Market, because it is cleaner and does not smell fishy. In the rainy season the roofs here are also leaking and I have to cover my sampot with plastic bags. The Taiwanese company promised to solve this problem, but they do nothing. But they do ask high rents and offer only a small stall. If I want to expand my business I have to buy two shops. But that is too expensive.

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82 Interview February 2005
83 Interview January 2005
They also raised the price of electricity. Before the Taiwanese came I paid 600 riel for one kilowatt, now 1200 riel ... But still, it is better to have a shop here than at the Central Market, because this market is not popular among Cambodians at all. Only tourists come there, but what if these tourists stay away?

Although it is not popular among local Cambodians the Central Market (psah Thmei) is by far the longest standing and architectonically most impressive market in Phnom Penh. The Central Market dates from a 1937 idea of the French town planner Ernest Hebrard, and became an important transit market for Chinese and Vietnamese entrepreneurs (Igout 1993). Because of its architectural beauty and its prominent position in all kinds of travel guides, the market attracts mainly Western expats and tourists. At the entrance of the Central Market some forty silk vendors try to draw tourists and Khmer expatriates to their stalls piled up with machine-made silk handicrafts and table clothes from Thailand, Laos and Burma, and, to a small extent, with sampot hol. ‘You want Khmer silk mister, good scarf for you mister, I give you good price, come to my shop, sit down here, Sir’. Most of the silk vendors at the Central Market are former weavers from Takeo and Prey Veng provinces who migrated to Phnom Penh in the 1990s. In the words of Chheang Chhun Eng (45):84

‘My mother was a silk weaver from Takeo province and I learned silk weaving from her. Yes, she was koncen, but my father was Khmer. We only spoke Khmer at home, never Chinese. My mother sometimes went to a Chinese fortune teller. My father died during the Pol Pot regime and my husband did not like to work in the farm, because he is a dentist. So we decided to leave Takeo and I tried my luck as a silk vendor in Phnom Penh.’

84 Interview January 2005
In the 1990s we sold our land and now I live here with my mother and two sisters’.

The Central Market is also ‘the place to be’ for Cambodian expatriates to stroll around, to chat with each other and buy *sampot* for their family members and friends at home. Like the other ‘foreigners’, they visit the Central Market in the rainy ‘tourist season’ (June-September) and vendor profits can easily climb to four hundred dollars per month during this season. The downside of this, however, is that silk vendors at the Central Market need these profits desperately to bridge the ‘ploughing season’, ironically the most profitable selling months for their colleagues at the ‘local’ market. As the handicraft retailer and former silk weaver Simon Tha (28)\(^{85}\) complained:

‘It is much better to have a shop at the Old Market, because they can sell sampot all year. But a shop at the Old Market is too expensive. Therefore I sell sampot to tourists, but what if they do not come anymore? Last year [2002] during the bird flu tourists did not come to Cambodia and I did not earn much that year. But customers at the local market do not care about the bird flu. The government is also very bad for us. The only want tourists to visit Angkor. Really, tourists do not come to Phnom Penh anymore, they all go to Angkor. And what can we do? Give up our business?’

The second ‘tourist market’ is the Russian Market (*Psah Toul Tom Poung*) owing its name to the shopping behavior of Russian Technical Assistance forces (RTA) in the 1980s. After the Vietnamese army defeated the *Khmer Rouge* in 1978, the Soviet Union became Cambodia’s single largest donor, supplying the country with vehicles, tractors, chemical fertilizers, and machinery, but also providing assistance with medicine, higher education and technicians for the restoration of the country’s

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\(^{85}\) Interview January 2005
From Worm to Sampot

infrastructure (Desbarats 1995). Later on, in 1986, the Russians signed a trade agreement for a five-year period and at that time their economic aid, trade and cooperation with Cambodia was worth as much as $130 million a year, representing eighty per cent of revenues for the national budget (ibid.).

Today, the Russian Market is valued in the ‘Lonely Planet’ backpackers guide as the most popular handicraft market in Phnom Penh and attracts new handicraft vendors from all over the country every year. Every morning, tourist operators park their busses in front of the market to give tourists with well-filled pockets and zooming cameras the opportunity to buy authentic ‘Khmer’ silk handicrafts. At the Russian market some fifty vendors offer a wide variety of Laos and Thai silk handicrafts to these tourist groups, but contrary to the Central Market no sampot can be found at this market anymore.86

Because of the extremely high mark-ups in the silk yarn trade (see chapter five) only three wholesalers sell a wide range of sampot, the most famous and illustrious of them being the Banteay Srey silk shop situated close to the Central Market. The Banteay Srey silk shop was already an icon in the French colonial period and is a family enterprise passed on from generation to generation (see chapter five). The sampot stocks of the wholesalers are diverse, impressive, and easily exceed 250,000 dollars. A remarkable social climber is La Maison de la Soie, which is by far the largest sampot dealer in Cambodia operating from the Russian Market. Unlike the Chinese-oriented wholesalers Banteay Srey and Neary Khmer, this wholesaler has crystallized a French colonial identity around his

86 When I arrived in Cambodia for the first time in November 2003, I saw many vendors selling Cambodian sampot at this market. However, when I departed in May 2005 no sampot could be found at this market anymore. Traders told me that after the Tsunami many vendors started to market cheap Lao and Thai silks due to lack of tourists in Thailand. These silks are sold as typical Khmer to tourists, which also explains why only eight per cent of the weavers’ fabrics are produced for the tourist markets (Dongelmans et al 2005).
shop and attracts mostly foreign silk entrepreneurs buying ‘silk per meter’.\textsuperscript{87} The owner of \textit{La Maison de la Soie} also differs from the ‘Chinese’ wholesalers\textsuperscript{88} in that he is easy to approach, illustrated perhaps most clearly by his characteristic morning greeting:

‘\textit{Bonjour professeur, you want coffee, sit down, where do you want to talk about today}’.

\textit{Table 8: Retailers, stock and customers per market}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Markets</th>
<th>Stalls</th>
<th>Stock</th>
<th>Stock value($)</th>
<th>Customers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psah Thmei</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>\textit{Sampot/handicrafts}</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>Diaspora/tourists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psah Toul Tom Poung</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Handicrafts</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Tourists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psah Olympic</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>\textit{Sampot}</td>
<td>75,000</td>
<td>Domestic/diaspora</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psah O’Russey</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>\textit{Sampot}</td>
<td>25,000</td>
<td>Domestic/diaspora</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textbf{The customers}

Although development agencies, academic scholars and the international media widely accept the idea that NGOs and tourists revived the silk weaving industry, Dongelmans \textit{et al.} (2005) observed that the spectacular growth was in fact due to the increase of national and diasporic demand for traditional silk clothes, and only to a lesser extent to the interplay between NGO programs and tourists’ desire for authentic Khmer

\textsuperscript{87} The ‘silk per meter’ can be typified as a variety of \textit{phamung}, but it is used for other purposes than dress-making, for example furniture, curtains and other applications. The ‘silk per meter’ production in Prey Veng province is the result of foreign silk entrepreneurs operating their business in Cambodia since it became a member of ASEAN in 1999.

\textsuperscript{88} This wholesaler was known as well. His father was a Chinese farmer from Kandal province and his mother a Khmer.
handicrafts (*ibid*).\(^{89}\) Counting the number of looms and investigating production lines and consumer behavior showed that only eight per cent of the total production of silk *sampot* and handicrafts was manufactured for the tourist markets. By far the majority of *sampot* are sold to Cambodians themselves, in particular to the ‘new’ urban elite in Phnom Penh and the ‘old’ cultural bourgeoisie in diaspora. Although it is hard to estimate how many silk clothes are exported abroad, retailers and wholesalers in Phnom Penh mention figures that range between sixty and seventy per cent of their respective stock.

The role of Cambodian American entrepreneurs, acting as intermediaries between home and host markets calls to mind the observations of Robin Cohen (1997), who points at Indochinese refugee minorities in the United States generating exports of their crafts to the Western world. Dahles and Zwart (2003) also rightly observed that American Cambodians came to visit their fatherland again after peace had been restored and acted as ambassadors for the export of craft products to the western world. Most Cambodian Americans buy their *sampot* in the ‘tourist season’ (June-September) and often combine their trade missions with family visits and sentimental journeys to the *Angkor Wat* temple complex. Although more specific research should be conducted on this trade issue, the few Cambodian Americans I chatted with told me that they filled their suitcases with *sampot hol* and re-distributed these to community members in the United States by means of ‘*sampot* parties’. Un Bunna, a Cambodian American silk ‘entrepreneur’ from Boston said the following\(^{90}\):

‘I was a soldier during the war but asked asylum in Thailand after I lost a leg. For more than twenty years I have lived in Boston now and I have

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89 In the 2005 silk survey we found out that only eight per cent of the total production of silk clothes are sold as handicrafts on the tourist market.

90 Interview March 2005
married a Khmer woman there. Since the 1990s I visit my family in Cambodia and do a little business as well. I buy sampot for the Khmer community in Boston. In the US sampot hol are popular, because elderly ladies like them. Young Khmer women do not like to wear Khmer sampot, but dress themselves in the American style. The sampot hol business is not good enough for a living, but I can pay my airplane ticket and visit my friends and relatives here. I just got divorced and in the future I hope to return to Cambodia, because life is much better here now. From my 1000 dollar pension in the US I can live more comfortably here’.

As this Cambodian American silk dealer confirmed, the recent spectacular demand for sampot phamung in Phnom Penh is due to the taste of a fast-growing female middle-class in Cambodia and not to the US-based clientele. Like the elderly sampot hol customers, young Cambodian women stroll around the Phnom Penh markets between May and December, the so-called ‘Royal Ploughing season’. The ‘Royal Ploughing Ceremony’ inaugurates the planting season and dates back to the times when the reigning king traced the first furrows in the capital's sacred rice field. Today the ritual is performed at the start of the rainy season in late May each year, with representatives of the king taking on the role of King Meakh, who leads the yoke and plough, and Queen Mehour, who sows the seeds. Besides inaugurating the planting season, the Royal Ploughing Ceremony also symbolizes the start of an impressive religious, cultural and party season. Between March and December Cambodians plan their weddings, celebrate Khmer New Year, Labor

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91 In Cambodia it is a custom for young couples to marry in the ‘ploughing season’. It is still common in Cambodia that families decide whether a partner is suitable or not. Each family appoints a representative to investigate the other family who makes sure that the other family is honest and, hopefully, wealthy. Once the two families agree to the wedding, they exchange gifts and consult an astrologer who chooses a lucky date for the ceremony. In line with the matrilineal kinship system the wedding ceremony takes place at the bride’s house.
Day, the birth of the Buddha, Constitution Day, *Pchum Ben*[^92], *Bon Kathen*[^93], the birthday of king Sihanouk, Independence Day, the Water Festival (*Bonn Um Tuk*),[^94] Chinese New Year, farewell parties, housewarming parties, and so on. At all these religious and cultural occasions it is extremely important for Cambodian women to arrive in a correct silk *sampot*. Elder women normally wear a *sampot hol* while younger women usually arrive in a plain-woven flashily colored *sampot phamung*.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have attempted to answer my second research question: How is the contemporary silk weaving industry organized in terms of production and trade relationships? The ‘grand narrative’ about the Cambodian silk weaving industry has always celebrated its bounded and disconnected character and suggests that silk weavers still search for their own dye-stuff, plant their own mulberry trees and reel their own silk yarn. However, far from being disconnected from the outside world I have shown that the silk producers are members of multi-layered transnational business networks that ‘start as a worm’ in the Vietnamese borderlands and end up as a *sampot* in the United States of America.

[^92]: *Pchum Ben* is a religious ceremony in September when everyone commemorates the spirit of dead relatives. For fifteen days, people bring food to the temples or pagodas of their birthplace. On the fifteenth and final day, everyone dresses in their finest clothes and says prayers to help their ancestors pass on to a better life. It is a strong belief among Cambodians that those who do not attend the *Pchum Ben* ceremony will be cursed by their angry ancestors.

[^93]: This ceremony lasts for 29 days, generally starting at the beginning of October, brings spiritual merit to the donors and affirms the vital bond between the *sangha*, the monastic brotherhood of Buddhism, and the community within which it exists.

[^94]: This festival takes place in late October or early November and marks the reversal of the Tonle Sap Lake into the Mekong River. The highlight of the three-day festival is formed by the boat races held in Phnom Penh where village representatives row against each other with their own canoes. At the end of the festival, supposedly, the river will be happy, the fish will be plentiful and rice crops will flourish.
From Worm to Sampot

Mapping the main producers and traders from ‘worm to sampot’ this study has shown that the silk yarn used by the Cambodian weavers comes from private silk spinneries in Tan Chau, just across the Vietnamese border. The Tan Chau filatures import their silk yarn again from cheaper silk yarn-producing countries such as China and Uzbekistan. In the 1980s they established business ties with five wholesalers in Cambodia, situated around the Central, Russian, Olympic and Old Markets in the capital city of Phnom Penh. Initially the wholesalers functioned as intermediaries for a bigger Vietnam-Thailand silk yarn trade. Gradually however, they started to provide silk yarn to the Cambodian market and control the lucrative cross border silk yarn trade. To provide the silk weavers with raw materials the wholesalers subcontracted some twenty middlemen each, who again sell a large part of the finished silk clothes to the same wholesalers, and a remaining bulk to retailers in the main markets of Phnom Penh (ibid.).

The Cambodian silk weaving villages are an amalgam of four craft communities situated along the banks of the rivers Tonle Sap, Mekong and Bassac in the lower Mekong delta. All four weaving areas have their own weaving specialties, which they consider ‘family secrets’. Over the last five years the amount of silk weavers has doubled from 10,000 to 20,000 due to a growing middle class in Cambodia and the demand of overseas Cambodians for silk sampot. The booming tourist market does not affect the number of silk weavers significantly because most silk handicrafts are machine-made in neighboring countries such as Thailand and Vietnam. Although there are NGO initiatives to ‘revive’ sericulture techniques, they only provide jobs to some 1,000 silk weavers, four per cent of the total silk weaving force.

Switching to the trader perspective, the exchange relationships between the silk traders and weavers are institutionalized in a hierarchical
From Worm to Sampot

patron-client system, in which the debtor at one level becomes the creditor of numerous other producers and smaller traders. This financial system has a pyramid structure, in which five powerful merchants manage some one hundred middlemen and 20,000 silk weavers by means of their cross-border connections and credit schemes. The hierarchical structure of the silk weaving industry also calls to mind the ‘colonial’ revenue farm managed by a small number of wealthy merchants, who in turn control a much larger number of traders and manufacturers who again are bound to them by means of kinship ties, loyalty and obligation (Wilson 2004: 66).

The hierarchical organizational structure of the silk weaving industry jeopardizes the neo-liberal argument that free-market based networks have replaced the command-based socialist ones in Southeast Asia (Zeleny 1999: 274). According to capitalist believers globalization, mass production and its requisite specialization of labor, task and knowledge has ‘forced’ Chinese enterprises to give up their ethnic boundaries and flatten their network structures (Gomez 1999). The reason for this is that global competition is forcing companies to increase their flexibility, responsiveness, timing and innovation and to do that they must diminish the need for hierarchical coordination (Zeleny 1999: 274).

This chapter, however, has shown that the Cambodian silk weaving industry is still organized as a vertical hierarchy of command, in which a small wholesalers group dictates the cross-border silk yarn trade and the quantity and quality of production and trade of sampot. Both the middlemen and the silk weavers cannot act as autonomous and innovative entrepreneurs, because they live under the strict patronage of a wholesalers conglomerate. That is also why the cultural argument euphemizing ethnic Chinese business networks as harmonious Confucian-based family-systems does not match the vertical structure of
From Worm to Sampot

the Cambodian silk weaving industry. Its hierarchical command-based structure, on the other hand, gives credit to Gary Hamilton’s often-cited ‘embeddedness’ theory (1996, 2000). This is because the institutional structure of the silk weaving industry still reflects an internal structure of socialism, an ideology prevalent in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. As indicated in chapter two, from their independence onwards Cambodians have lived under the command of socialist state paternalism, a command structure that still exists in the market arena. There is one difference though. After the failed Khmer Rouge revolution the commander of the silk weavers is no longer the Cambodian state, but has become a group of Pol Pot harrowed mostly, ethnic Chinese wholesalers.

Graph 1: Command pyramid structure of the Cambodian production and silk trade

[Diagram of command pyramid structure with labels: Tan Chau filature, wholesaler, subcontracted middlemen, subcontracted silk weavers]
From Worm to Sampot

Silk spinnery in Tan Chau. Photograph taken by the author.

Tan Chau women spinning silk yarn inside the factory. Photograph taken by the author.
From Worm to Sampot

From Tan Chau silk yarn is transported over the Mekong river to wholesale shops in Phnom Penh. Photograph taken by the author.

The Meng Kong wholesale shop in Phnom Penh. Photograph taken by the author.
The owner of the wholesaleshop ‘La Maison de la Soie’. Photograph taken by the author.

Middleman in Takeo province checking the quality of a sampot hol. Photograph taken by the author.
From Worm to Sampot

Middleman at the Saiwaa market (Takeo province) weighing silk yarn in front of her shop. Photograph taken by the author.

Road in a weaving village in Takeo province.
Photograph taken by the author.
Silk weaver winding yarn on a wheel.
Photograph taken by the author.

Silk weaver preparing her loom.
Photograph taken by the author.
Silk weaver in Koh Dach working behind her loom. Photograph taken by the author.

Grandma spinning yarn on a wheel. Granddaughter prepares the 'hol' frame. Photograph taken by the author.
From Worm to Sampot

Husband of a silk weaver building up the loom. Photograph taken by the author.

Village leader standing in front of his house. Photograph taken by the author.
From Worm to Sampot

Entrance of the Old Market in Phnom Penh.
Photograph taken by the author.

Retailer inside the Old Market paying a sampot trader.
Photograph taken by the author.
From Worm to Sampot

A young retailer selling *krarna* to tourists at the Central Market. Photograph taken by the author.

Cambodian-American entrepreneur buying ‘*sampot hoat*’ at the Central Market. Photograph taken by the author.
Chapter 5
Dragons United: Ethnicity and trade relationships


Introduction
In this chapter I want to answer my third research question: How do silk producers and traders negotiate their identities within the economic domain of the silk weaving industry? In so doing I will conceptualize the silk weaving industry as a flow of culturally grounded capitals and examine how the silk producers and traders use their identity symbolically to establish trust relationships, to obtain rents from the officialdom or to legitimize patron-client relationships. In the early colonial era the silk industry was still a myriad of connections that kept all the silk migrants, whether weavers or traders, embedded in a Chinese identity. After the introduction of the 1920 Civil Code, however, many ethnic Chinese gained citizenship and identified themselves as Sino-Cambodians (Edwards 2003). In 1954 many Sino-Cambodians and ethnic Chinese became Khmers (col khmae) under a dubious citizenship law. Today, conversely, the wholesalers and middlemen present themselves as ethnic Chinese and the silk weavers and silk vendors say that they are ethnic Khmer. How can this shift of ethnic presentation be explained?

Addressing the core theme of this thesis - how the Khmer modernization claim of the silk weaving industry relates to the network organization and diverging identities of the silk entrepreneurs - I will illustrate in the following two chapters that exhibiting a Khmer or Chinese identity must not be seen as a given fact, as a primordial affiliation or as state bio-politics, but as a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986) that marks powerful and unequal trade positions in
Dragons United

the silk network. I will present two case-studies in this chapter, one of a retired wholesaler and another one of a middlemen couple, in an attempt to understand why trade ventures in the Cambodian silk weaving industry still operate within the boundaries of Chinese ethnicity and why the silk producers refer to themselves as Khmer.

Case study
At the entrance door of the Banteay Srey silk shop two armed guards watched my steps with great suspicion. There were no customers inside and two young sellers watched a popular Thai soap, not showing any interest in me. The silk shop was shadowy and decorated ‘Chinese style’ with red lampions, a shrine filled with the deities ‘red face’, Mi-Lo Flo and Kuan Shih, and black and white photographs of ancestors. Carefully locked behind glass, huge vitrines were filled with particular kinds of sampot weaving techniques and place of origin. At the right wall vitrines were filled with phamung from Koh Dach and sarong from Prey Veng, and in the back of the shop behind the counter I recognized sampot hol from Takeo, while around the corner at the left wall red and white checkered krama and sampot hol from Prey Veng were for sale. Impressed by the huge stock of sampot my translator nudged me in the arm and whispered, ‘There she is, John, there is Mrs. Bun, can you see how nasty she is, she will never talk to us, shall we go, ok?’, pointing at an elderly lady taking a mid-day nap, lying on a red stretcher. To be honest I was a bit surprised. Was this elderly lady the notorious Silk Legend everybody had warned me for? Silk weavers and traders had praised Mrs. Bun for her excellent nose for the silk trade and her impressive clientele, including the Royal family, but had also told me how they feared her nasty, short-tempered character and her good connections with high-ranked government officials. They depicted Mrs. Bun as an inapproachable person, and as someone who would never speak to me about her business. Even the charming and charismatic Japanese silk expert Kikuo Morimoto had warned me about her bad temper and seriously doubted whether she would speak to me. To cut a long story short, the legendary Silk Lady indeed appeared to have a nervous, scary and introvert character and did not show any interest in me at all, complaining about how sick she was and how impossible it was to speak about her trading career. In fact, of all my fieldwork interviewees Mrs. Bun was by far the most difficult
personality I came across and I had great difficulties to stimulate her to let a few cats out of her bag and analyze her stocks, profits and business relationships.\textsuperscript{95} It took me another six months to collect stories together about her trade career and find out how Mrs. Bun could ever have become the Silk Legend she is considered now. Only at the end of my fieldwork period Mrs. Bun allowed me to interview her, on the condition that she would tell nothing about her business tactics, because these were ‘a secret in her heart’.

Mrs. Bun did tell me that she was born in 1933 in Phnum Chambak, a small weaving town at the foot of Chiso Mountain (Takeo province) and that her father was a Chinese silk yarn merchant, who had migrated to Cambodia somewhere in the beginning of the twentieth century. As a child, Mrs. Bun often accompanied her father on trade trips to silk breeders in \textit{Tani} and \textit{Prek Chang Kran} and to \textit{sampot} dealers in Phnom Penh. Her mother, a Chinese Vietnamese immigrant weaver, taught her how to judge high quality silk yarn and how to distinguish thick or thin woven \textit{sampot}. Hence, being socialized and educated in a well-respected silk family, Mrs. Bun came to know the industry ‘as well as her own skin’. At the age of fifteen, like many other descendents of wealthy compradors, she went to a Cantonese school in Phnom Penh and learned the Cantonese language and other Chinese traditions. Because of her Chinese education she never celebrated Khmer New Year or \textit{Phcum Ben}; only Chinese New Year and Chinese festivals such as the mooncake festival and the grave month (\textit{Cheng Ming}). From her mother she also inherited a passion to worship Kuan Yin, a female deity she still loves very much today. Every day after she wakes up Mrs. Bun burns incenses and worships Kuan Yin on a little shrine placed underneath black and white photographs of her ancestors. Like many other ethnic Chinese Mrs. Bun visits the ‘\textit{achaa}’ (lay priest) to ask for business advice, good health and protection from bad visitors.

\textsuperscript{95} When I visited the Banteay Srey silk shop one week later Mrs. Bun and her daughter were again extremely hostile to me and yelled that they could not speak to me because they had had an extremely bad trading day after I left the shop. In their opinion I was the bad visitor who had brought bad luck to the shop and for that reason I was not welcome anymore. In the end, it took me six months to shake off my identity as an angry ghost, but eventually we were on speaking terms again.
As a young woman Mrs. Bun often stayed at her uncle’s home, the Banteay Srey silk shop, and learned a lot about the silk business from him. Her uncle was even richer than her father and imported silk yarn from filatures in Vietnam, China and Japan. In the 1950s she returned to Phum Chambak where she married a state cadre and took over her parents’ business. She did not buy silk yarn from traders in Tani or Phnom Penh anymore, but directly from Vietnamese traders. In those days Mrs. Bun provided some one hundred silk weavers with silk yarn and distributed their finished *sampot* to wholesalers in Phnom Penh, Battambang, Kampong Cham and Kratie. During Sihanouk’s *Sangum Reastr Reyum* regime her business grew steadily and she became the ‘*Thaoke*’ (Boss) of some three hundred weavers. Mrs. Bun ‘confessed’ that these silk weavers were not ‘real’ Khmers, but that they ‘*col khmae*’ (‘entered’) Cambodia, like her father. However, unlike her, the weavers became Khmer and adopted the Cambodian culture ‘in their heart’. Or, as she formulated it, ‘they (weavers] are people with Chinese skins and a Khmer heart’.

In the 1970s the *Khmer Rouge* peasant revolution interrupted Mrs. Bun’s business career brutally, and she was transferred to a working zone around Angkor Borey together with her only daughter. Her husband was transferred to another working zone and was killed by Pol Pot soldiers. After the war was over she returned to her hometown and tried to pick up her old trade profession. However, the weaving villages were destroyed and many silk weavers had been killed during the war. Moreover, there were no more customers, as most of the Khmer and Chinese bourgeoisie, traditionally the wearers of the *sampot* had either died or fled the country. Hence, she decided to move to Phnom Penh to start a career in the flourishing black market as a contraband trader. Luckily she met some old trade friends from Vietnam in Phnom Penh, who approached her to fill a vacancy as a broker in a wider Vietnam-Thailand silk yarn trade. She decided to step into this trade

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96 Some misunderstanding exists about the connection between the old and new Banteay Srey silk shop. In a personal conversation Kikuo Morimoto explained to me that there is no family connection between the ‘colonial’ silk shop and the contemporary one, however, Mrs. Bun explained to me that Banteay Srey was owned by a rich uncle of hers. What is clear is that Mrs. Bun’s father traded *sampot* to a familial wholesaler in Phnom Penh and all together I assume that this wholesaler was indeed the owner of Banteay Srey silk store who disappeared after the war.
niche and moved into one of the many empty courtyard houses around the Central Market, which she later named Banteay Srey.

Being a war widow she managed the silk shop ‘matriarchal style’ and started to rebuild her silk empire again. To protect her business interests in the politically turbulent anti-Chinese 1980s Mrs. Bun co-operated with female silk yarn traders from Takeo province ‘to get bulk discount from the Vietnamese silk yarn merchants’. Mrs. Bun ‘admitted’ that she filled her pockets well thanks to the lively contraband trade between Vietnam and Thailand in the 1980s, mainly due to the extreme porous postwar border system.97 To her own satisfaction however, cross-border traders, working in the Thai borderlands, started to ask for hand-woven sampot again in the early 1980s, which made her decide to re-establish business relationships with silk weavers in Takeo. Based in Phnom Penh she could not sell the silk yarn directly to the weavers anymore, hence she decided to subcontract brokers, fellow-villagers, as intermediaries to cater the silk weavers with silk yarn, to guard the speed of production and the quality of the sampot and to distribute the sampot to her shop. Initially she worked with many middlemen, but gradually she established business relationships with only a few of them. Mrs. Bun clearly remembered ‘the sampot rush’ in the 1980s and still smiled when recollecting how traders offered her high prices in those days, even for second-hand sampot. Although she had no clue where the sampot went to, she did know for sure that hers is the most popular shop among members of the Cambodian Royal House, commoners and Cambodians living abroad nowadays. Although she considers it a trade secret how many sampot she peddles to ‘foreign’ Cambodians, she did mention relatives in the United States and other ‘Khmer Americans’ who come to her shop to buy sampot. Talking about her relatives in the United States she also revealed that her grandson wants to go to study at the university there and open a business later. In the beginning of the 1990s her daughter took over the silk shop because she herself was ‘sick in the head’ after the atrocities of the Pol Pot working camps’.98 Luckily her daughter,

97 Other silk traders remember very vividly how silk yarn in the 1980s was smuggled into Cambodia tied under speedboats a trade system, which stopped when border patrols.
98 Many Pol Pot camp survivors suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome and have similar complaints about their psychological and physiological well-being.
who had just married a high-ranked state cadre from the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) Commerce Department, wanted to take over her shop and run the business together. Although Mrs. Bun has retired a long time ago she is still a highly-respected trader among the middlemen, as they always bend benevolently for her and call her ‘ama’ (elderly lady). Today, after a turbulent trade career, she enjoys her well-deserved elder age period and makes holiday trips to Macau, Shanghai and Hong Kong. Not to do business, she said laughing, but as a tourist.

A feminized business
The powerful trade position of Mrs. Bun demystifies the adagio that Chinese women are good at weaving, but lack cultural skills, social mobility and political connections to steer the marketplace themselves (Bell 1999: 119-120). Although most silk weaving regions in China and Southeast Asia are gendered on a production level it is widely accepted that the storing, bulking and peddling part is still in men’s hands (ibid.). The story goes that Confucian doctrines have placed Chinese women stiffly behind their looms forbidding them to peddle woven clothes on the markets themselves. Recently Linda Bell (1999), while studying the Southeastern Chinese silk regions, did not find evidence that women personally benefited from their looms and observed that earnings were collected at the marketplace by their fathers, husbands and brothers (ibid.).

Marjorie Topley (1975) and Andrea Sankar (1978) observed, though, how some of the ancestors of the Cambodian silk weavers in Shunde County had organized themselves in ‘sister organizations’, which stood up against the traditional foot-binding practices and subordination to men. In Southern China these weaving women came to be known as lesbians who refused ‘to go down’ to another family (pu-lo-chia), a gender-consciousness that derived from female role models such as the Goddess of Mercy, Kuan Yin (ibid.:123). In contrast to the Confucian gender ideology the life history of Kuan Yin glorifies the fact
that she was a princess who became a nun and thus had no husband to claim her devotion (*ibid.*: 124). Believing in this folk tradition silk weavers in Shunde County considered non-marriage not only natural but also desirable to protect their businesses, and for this reason did not move into the natal compound of men (*ibid.*). Although it was not possible for the Shunde County silk weavers to steer the market place, the silk industry did have a feminist streak in Southwest China.

Once in Cambodia gender moralities around production and trade professions changed in favor of female ethnic Chinese immigrants. Similar to the Chinese emissary Zhou Daguan in the twelfth century, they witnessed how Khmer women accompanied Chinese men on trade missions, and must have noticed the absence of Khmer men in the market place. Scholars have often wondered why Southeast Asian women peddle at market places and why their husbands see moneymaking, in the words of Robert Hefner (1998: 24), as an unflattering trait. One argument goes that Khmer men, as devoted Buddhists, like to hand over their salary to their wives, afraid as they are that their material desires might affect their karma negatively. Another argument holds that upon marriage Khmer husbands often go to live with the family of the bride and, in contrast with the Chinese kinship system, are considered a loss to their natal compound. Although in theory Khmer men have equal rights through marriage, in practice the house, land and other kinds of material properties often become ‘ancestral property’ of the wife’s lineage. Similar to Negeri-Sembilan Malay men (Peletz 1998:173-200), Khmer men prefer jobs in the political, religious and administrative domain, providing themselves with a separate base for social identity and self-esteem. As

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99 In Cambodia an exceptionally large number of silk weavers were unmarried too (Dongelmans *et al.* 2005), because they regarded men as a danger to their businesses because men would spend their last pennies on drinking.

100 Although the Buddha does not prohibit his followers to accumulate material wealth, this is not highly valued in discourse, and men, afraid to spoil their karma, rather take non-commercial jobs as teachers or monks or serve the administration as state cadres.

101 At least this is what Cambodian men told me personally.
a consequence, they have never learned how to handle the money pot at home. Thus, if we embed female ownership of the Banteay Srey silk shop into the Khmer habitus crystallized around male religious behavior and professions, female ownership is no longer an anomaly. This is also why the five wholesalers Mrs. Bun, Mrs. Heng, Mrs. Kim, Mrs. Kong, and Mrs. Mong in Phnom Penh could inherit the business from their fathers, giving the industry an indispensably feminist streak from the postcolonial period onwards.

In the 1960s Mrs. Bun had a well-running silk business, but tragedy struck her personal and professional life as Pol Pot soldiers forced her to move to another region in the mid-1970s and killed her husband and many other relatives. Only after Vietnamese troops had defeated the Khmer Rouge regime could she return to her village, which had become, as any other town, nothing more than a ghost town. It was in this period of total chaos and destruction that she rediscovered her old trading partners in Phnom Penh, who asked her to function as a broker in a wider Vietnam-Thailand silk yarn trade. But Mrs. Bun was not the only one who stepped into the lucrative cross border silk yarn trade and admitted she combined her business interests in a female conglomerate with her fellow silk yarn traders from Takeo Province, Mrs. Kim, Mrs. Heng, Mrs. Meng and Mrs. Sourkia. As the latter wholesaler explained:

‘Before the war I was a merchant in Takeo province. The silk industry was only small and only rich people bought sampot in my shop. They were governors, professors, businessmen. In these days some weavers had their own mulberry gardens and reeled their own silk, but most silk yarn already came from Vietnam and China. The Chinese even had their own reeling factories in Phnom Penh. Sihanouk did not care about this, because he did not invest in mulberry plantations but only in cotton. Most of the Vietnamese silk yarn was redistributed to Thailand.

102 Interview March 2005
Dragons United

which was a much bigger market. In the Sihanouk era my father bought silk yarn from traders in Phnom Penh, Tan Chau and Hanoi and sold it to weavers in Cambodia and Thailand. After the war was over I continued his silk business and bought silk yarn from Vietnamese traders. I knew them very well because of my father of course. For the distribution to Thailand I first subcontracted Thai traders, but they cheated on me and that is why I subcontracted Khmer traders from Poipet. Today I am still a wholesaler for some twenty middlemen, but I am also a hotel owner now and bought this hotel in 2004. It is true I work together with other wholesalers for the procurement of yarn. We have been working together already for twenty years. I know them very well, because they are from Takeo as well. We are all middlemen there.’

This raises the question why these former silk yarn brokers, obviously each other’s competitors before the war, would bundle their forces in a closely-knit female sister-organization103 after the war, which took the form of a conglomerate. Let us continue Mrs. Bun’s trade career and see if we can find out why a shared Chineseness was so important for Mrs. Bun in the aftermath of the war.

A female conglomerate

After the war Mrs. Bun, now a widow with only one daughter left, returned to the village of Chambak in Takeo province to pick up her former profession as a silk yarn trader. However, she only found a desolate village, as many weavers had been killed or had fled the country during the Pol Pot war. For Mrs. Bun, like most Cambodians, survival became a matter of personal initiative and she went to Phnom Penh to find a job as a petty trader. In Phnom Penh she observed how everything was for sale on the roadsides ranging from vegetables, fruit, meat, fish, and shoes, to radios, guns, old clothes and so on. Most of the commodities came from Thailand and were smuggled in by tens of

103 I deliberately use the term ‘sister organization’ to emphasize the feminist character of the conglomerate structure.
thousands of cross border traders, all Chinese Cambodians or ethnic Chinese (Gottesman 2003: 88-89).

It was in the crowded street side around Phnom Penh that Mrs. Bun discovered her old trading partners who asked her to host in the Vietnam-Thailand silk yarn trade. Mrs. Bun’s immediate decision to grasp this trade opportunity calls to mind the ‘gold rush’ mentality Chinese entrepreneurs are praised for, as well as their ability to deploy opportunity networks in politically and economically turbulent times. In Cambodia two rumors circled around Mrs. Bun’s early success; the first one being that she was financially backed by wealthy family members in the United States, and the second that she had hidden all her gold under her house and had only had to dig it up once the war was over.104

But whether or not Mrs. Bun was a ‘gold digger’, or had a rich sugar uncle in the United States, the ‘new’ PRK leadership, most of them disillusioned Khmer Rouge cadres, harbored deep worries about the re-emergence of the Chinese opportunity networks between Bangkok, Phnom Penh and Ho Chi Minh city (Gottesman 2003:175-176). Just like the Khmer Rouge regime, the ‘newly’ established ‘People’s Republic of Kampuchea’ (PRK) developed an extremely hostile attitude against its Chinese businessmen and stigmatized them as communist spies, sponsors of the Pol Pot regime and greedy merchants destroying the domestic economy (Edwards 2003). The PRK Party congress, again like the Khmer Rouge regime, was obsessed with the growth of a renewed urban Chinese middle class, and accused them of antagonizing the Khmers from trade positions and of disturbing the domestic economy (Gottesmann 2003:173).

104 I am not sure whether this story is a myth, but many traders told me about Cambodians digging for gold under the houses of wealthy Chinese after the war was over.
To break the Chinese class dominance the PRK regime wanted to gather information on the nature of the postwar Chinese business networks and established an extremely anti-Chinese committee, ‘the Central Committee to Examine and Research and Guide Implementation of the Policy Regarding the Chinese in Cambodia’ (ibid.). In an attempt to uncover the nature of the Chinese business networks, a guideline, called ‘Circular 351’, gave instructions to state cadres to inquire into Chinese people’s citizenship status, geographic origins, their families, their length of stay in Cambodia, their overseas connections, language abilities, political leanings, and past affiliations, including whether they had worked for the police, the military or the courts of Sihanouk, Lon Nol or Pol Pot regimes (ibid.).

Penny Edwards (2003) has qualified ‘circular 351’ as a racial policy and a political pawn against the PRK support of the Khmer Rouge regime. She argues that many Chinese, afraid of being labeled ‘351’, assumed an overtly Khmer identity, bribed their way into a Khmer name, darkened their skin or stopped speaking Chinese in public. However, Edwards fails to mention that circular ‘351’, like the DK policies, was not directed ‘against the Chinese race’, but mainly ‘against the Chinese gentry class’ that had been dominating the Cambodian economy and officialdom from the nineteenth century onwards. She also omits the discrepancy between the ideology behind ‘351’ and the actual implementation of it by poorly educated and ill-paid state cadres. To the frustration of the PRK party congress, the implementation of ‘351’ failed dramatically because the ethnic Chinese merchants simply bribed the ill-paid state cadres and gave false information about their enterprise and lineage background. Hence, Chinese merchants may have stopped speaking Chinese and worshipping their deities in public, but backstage they successfully resisted the ‘351’ label and organized themselves in conglomerates.
To oppose the assimilationist measures of the PRK government and to protect her business interests at the same time, Mrs. Bun organized herself in a female conglomerate based on a Shunde County native place of origin, Kuan Yin ancestral worship rituals, fellow provincial ties and comprador class membership. She did not use her Chinese identity as a means to impress lower-ranked weavers this time, but as an ideology of solidarity in reaction to the alien status the ethnic Chinese had in the 1980s. That is also why Light and Rosenstein (1995:19) describe this form of ethnicity as a reactive response in order to establish boundaries, and hence solidarity among fellow ethnics. Building identities vis-à-vis an enemy, in this case the Khmer state, also builds on Laclau’s (1990) notion of social antagonisms, and illustrates the strategic and political character of hybrid identities. This is because to become accepted as a conglomerate member in the hostile 1980s Mrs. Bun had to silence her Khmer identity and use her Chineseness as symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986) to transnationalize her silk enterprise across the Vietnamese and Thai borders in the 1980s.

However, as Mrs. Bun explained, not only merchants from Vietnam approached her to function as a broker; Cambodian traders from the Thai borderlands asked for silken *sampot* as well. To cater to the demand for hand-woven *sampot* Mrs. Bun decided to re-establish business ties with middlemen from her own weaving villages in Takeo. Mrs. Bun preferred long-term credit relationships (*tjumpah*) with some ten middlemen over short-term ones with hundreds of them. To reveal what role Chinese ethnicity, as social, cultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986), plays in the patronage-based credit relationships between the wholesalers and the middlemen I have included another case study, this time the trade career of a young middlemen couple, Mr. Mong and Mrs. Heang, as the situational use of their Chinese
background appears symptomatic for most middlemen couples I came across.\textsuperscript{105}

\textit{Another case-study}

Mr. Mong (42) and Mrs. Heang (38) are the proud owners of a large rural silk enterprise in Kpam village, which is perhaps the most productive weaving region in Takeo Province with some 183 active looms. As usual in weaving villages the main road of Kpam village is relatively empty with only a few chickens, pigs, dogs and monks strolling around looking for food. Perhaps Mr. Mong is the most active user of this road, as he drives around all day on his Honda motorbike to check if the weavers spend his investments and credit wisely. Mr. Mong does this because he is afraid that the weavers do not manufacture the correct color or patterns and that he will lose his forty-five dollar silk yarn investment that way. Among the Kpam villagers Mr. Mong is not only considered handsome, but also a well-respected figure, perhaps even more than the village leader, because he is the Thaoke (boss) of all Kpam weavers, the main sponsor of the local school and has good connections with the officialdom. Villagers also look up to Mr. Mong because he finished his studies of economics at the university of Kampong Som\textsuperscript{106} just before the beginning of the Pol Pot war and is considered a true intellectual for this reason. During the Pol Pot war Mr. Mong stayed in Kdanh commune and was ordered to work on the surrounding rice fields by Pol Pot soldiers. Although he did not like to work on the rice fields, life continued relatively normally in Kdanh commune and Pol Pot soldiers were not hard on him. After the war was over Mr. Mong married a weaver from a neighboring village and moved into her natal compound. Unlike many other Kpam men he did not want to cultivate rice and walk behind an ox all day but wanted to find a trade job in Phnom Penh. Although he was a degree holder in economics he knew he lacked connections to find a job in the PRK administration, whereas he also considered this a low-paid job. Hence he tried to get a foothold as a petty trader in the post-Pol Pot war economy selling all kinds of things in Phnom Penh such as lemon grass, wine, fruit, and the \textit{sampot} of his family in law. For years he carefully re-invested profits

\textsuperscript{105} I often met the powerful middlemen in the wholesale shops and made appointments there to meet them in their weaving villages later and talk to them about their trade careers.

\textsuperscript{106} Kampong Som is the old name of Sihanoukville.
of other trades in batches of silk yarn and after a few trading years he was able to buy silk yarn cash and become a middleman for some five weaving families in Kpam village. His business grew very slowly and initially he found it very hard to obtain silk yarn on credit from wholesale shops such as Banteay Srey, Neary Khmer and Heng Sourkia. In fact it took him five trading years before wholesalers started to *kchey* (lend) silk yarn to him and considered him a trustworthy business partner. Mr. Mong knew he had become a good customer of Mrs. Bun when she invited him and his wife to attend a dragon dance she had organized in her shop during Chinese New Year and attended a housewarming party of the young couple a few months later. For Mr. Mong this was a huge step forward in his trading career because in Cambodia visiting each other’s house is considered crucial to become a trustworthy trading partner. And once he was a trustworthy trading partner and could obtain silk yarn on credit Mr. Mong could become a middleman for hundreds of weavers and transform his humble petty enterprise into one of the largest rural silk enterprises in Cambodia. To modernize and professionalize his small silk yarn enterprise Mr. Mong decided to leave his wife’s natal compound and build a courtyard house at the outskirts of Kpam village with the financial help of friends and family members. The young couple decided to run the silk business together and his wife gave up her weaving enterprise to manage the money pot for her husband. This in turn gave Mr. Mong the opportunity to make more trade trips to Phnom Penh and bond with the local officialdom. Separated from her natal compound Mrs. Heang was often alone in her courtyard house and had to get used to her new role as Thaoke (boss) of the weavers. Suddenly she was not one of the girls anymore, but a credit provider and a quality checker who had to bargain with former colleagues. Suddenly she did not have to ask for credit lines anymore but note them in a notebook. Suddenly she did not have to tie yarn into *hol* frames anymore, but weigh them carefully to ensure that she did not give too much silk yarn on credit. And suddenly she did not have to sit for hours behind a loom anymore, but search finished *sampot* for weaving mistakes with her finger tops. The weavers however did not bother about her role change at all and respected Mrs. Heang very much, precisely because she was ‘one of them’, because she had woven *sampot* for more than ten years and had climbed socially to the position of a well-respected silk lady. The weavers also consider Mrs. Heang a nice person, because she is a
calm bargainer, lives to the rules of the chbab srei\textsuperscript{107} and serves coffee and rice while they have to wait for her judgment outside her shop. Mr. Mong likes his wife very much for this reason and once joked, ‘her beautiful face, good character and happy smile are why Mr. Meng Kong [the wholesaler] likes my shop so much and gives me credit’.

\textit{The image of the lazy Khmer}

As the above case study shows, the ancestral roots of Mr. Mong and Mrs. Heang, like those of Mrs. Bun herself, lie in the Southern Chinese weaving districts, and they were born in a weaving village only a few miles away from her own birth place. Although Mr. Mong introduced himself as a co-ethnic, co-villager and co-worshipper to Mrs. Bun, he only received credit after Mrs. Bun had visited his house a few trading years later. Other middlemen also complained about the impossibility to obtain credit from a wholesaler within in a short period of time, and without him/her attending a wedding, ‘tweu bon’ ceremony or funeral first. As one middleman from Tra Peang Ta village recalled\textsuperscript{108}:

‘\textit{I remember very well I invited Mr. Meng Kong to my house for the wedding of my daughter. I was very nervous because if he would not come he did not like me as a regular customer. Luckily he showed up and gave me an envelope with money’}.

There is nothing new about searching for long-lasting credit relationships, because long-term continuous transactions have been recognized by anthropologists and sociologists as being effective in forging mutual trust and cooperation (cf. Burt 2005). In what Clifford Geertz (1978) calls a process of clientelization, mutual trust created by long-term continuous transactions is often reinforced by multiple interlinked transactions. Mayfair Yang (1994) also indicates that the

\textsuperscript{107} The traditional code of conduct for Cambodian women. This code of conduct tells Cambodian women how to be demure, respectful, caring, moral and discreet persons.

\textsuperscript{108} Interview October 2004
psychological basis of mutual trust can further be strengthened by incorporating personal elements into business transactions, such as exchanging gifts and attending weddings and funerals. This process of forming ethnic partnerships through continuous and multiple interactions has been referred to by Kotkin (1993) as the ‘ethnic advantage’ by which he means that a shared ethnic identity forms the basis of the success of Chinese traders in modern Southeast Asia.

To understand why the wholesalers Mrs. Bun and Mr. Meng Kong want to see the village, the family and the homes of their business partners it is important to know that, unlike in the western world, business transactions in Cambodia are not backed by a well-functioning legal system. In particular traders introducing a new commodity on the market such as silk clothes must be careful when looking for reliable and trustworthy business partners. For Mrs. Bun, a shared ethnic Chinese identity, fictive or not, gives her confidence that the middleman couple will not become nervous of credit lines and will not cheat on her in the lawless Cambodian business arena. This also means that the middlemen couple Mr. Mong and Mrs. Heang, socialized as ethnic Khmers, had to eclipse their Khmer identity vis-à-vis Mrs. Bun and present themselves as ethnic Chinese to her. Illustrative for his strategic and negotiated use of Chinese identity Mr. Mong once said to me\textsuperscript{109};

‘if I am in my shop in Takeo I feel Khmer. Then I wear a sarong and I walk around on bare feet. But when I am in Phnom Penh I always wear pants and white trousers. The wholesalers like that’.

Mr. Mong cannot wear a sarong in Phnom Penh because that would make him, rightly or not, a not-to-be trusted Khmer in the midst of

\textsuperscript{109 Interview November 2004}
the wholesalers. As the wholesaler Mr. Kong once said about the Khmer\textsuperscript{110};

‘Khmer do not know how to kchey [borrow], they only know how to give away (aawie) money to their relatives. So how can they pay me back in time?’

Mr. Heng Sourkia, another wholesaler, was even more outspoken in his distrust of the credit qualities of the Khmers\textsuperscript{111}:

‘Khmers are lazy people, do not know how to work hard and spend their money drinking beer in bars’.

The same wholesaler also told me\textsuperscript{112},

‘I have been betrayed many times when people came into my shop and told me they were middlemen. Once I gave them the silk yarn, they left and never came back. I know these were Khmer people because they were black’.

The moral judgment about the lazy and non-commercial Khmer is an echo of the French administrators, who favored the Confucian-trained ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants for their commercial and officialdom qualities (Osborne 1994). However, we cannot see the distrust of Mr. Heng Sourkia against the Khmers separately from past Khmer hostility against him and his family. It is widely accepted in Cambodia that the Chinese \textit{comprador} class was hit hard during the \textit{Khmer Rouge} revolution for their colonially inherited trade positions. It is well documented that between 1975 and 1978 dark-skinned, uneducated Khmer youngsters, often from humble backgrounds,

\textsuperscript{110} Interview June 2004
\textsuperscript{111} Interview March 2005
\textsuperscript{112} Interview March 2005
humiliated, tortured and brutally murdered family members of the wholesalers. After the war the Khmers continued to humiliate the Chinese population. To put it bluntly, perhaps drawing overtly sharp ethnic boundaries between the Khmers and the Chinese, the following question can be raised: Why would a wholesaler give a Khmer tenant the opportunity to climb socially if Khmer soldiers killed their family members in the Pol Pot working zones and/or made distasteful jokes about them in the 1980s?

Against the background of this stereotype of the lazy, unproductive and unreliable Khmer we must analyze the wholesaler’s wish to visit a middlemen’s house and his satisfaction to see couples living in a Chinese courtyard house. During the house visits the wholesaler is evaluating the way the middleman has presented himself in Phnom Penh and testing his reputation as a creditworthy businessman. Once the wholesaler has reached the spot, many questions go through his mind: how is the house of the middlemen couple decorated, does he have expensive furniture, are his children well dressed, is he able to store the silk yarn safely? The wholesaler is also there to find out if the middleman is well-respected in his community, if he is a hard worker, a good patron for the weavers, if he pays his debts in time, if he is on speaking terms with the local officialdom, whether he has family or lineage members that support him financially, etc. The wholesaler thus attends a middleman’s wedding or birthday party to chat, or better, to gossip, with ‘third’ parties about the creditability of the middleman and his membership of local credit-rotating associations, and to find out if there are any bad stories circulating about him.

113 Ronald Burt (2005: 100) writes that reputation is fueled in part by people getting to know one another so that they can better predict probable behavior. This is because in economic theory reputation is typically defined with an eye towards the future: the reputations accumulated in a relationship can be lost if either party behaves so as to erode the relationship.
**Ethnic saving clubs**

Most middlemen assured me that they were backed by lineage-based credit institutions such as *procham* and *chang kar luy*\(^\text{114}\) for the procurement of their start-up capital. At the Saiwaa market in Takeo province I once met a young middlemen couple who borrowed money ‘*procham* style’ from an inner circle of lineage members to build a brand new courtyard house.\(^\text{115}\) *Procham* is a credit-rotating system, in which the borrower lends money or gold in exchange for a mortgage, which could be jewelry, a house or land with a high monthly interest (Leang, Socheat and Khemrin 1999). In case one cannot pay back one’s debts in time, one looses one’s assets and sometimes even the company.

Like many Chinese saving clubs *procham* members are linked by personal trustrelationships (*guanxi*) and norms of reciprocity (*huibao*) (cf. Hamilton 1996, 2000) and there are no formal laws and administrative agencies to enforce the obligations of the *procham* members. In this case the *procham* members lived all over Cambodia and met each other once a year to commemorate their deceased lineage members during the grave month (*Cheng Ming*). The *Cheng Ming* ancestor worship ceremony is still widely practiced by the ethnic Chinese communities in the weaving regions and takes place at their family cemeteries just before Khmer New Year.\(^\text{116}\) Although it is not a one-month celebration anymore, the young middlemen couple still honors their ancestors with a banquet consisting of roasted pigs, fried shrimp, tofu, boiled chicken, pork and mushrooms at the family cemetery outside their village.\(^\text{117}\) While worshipping their ancestors and enjoying a nice family banquet the young middlemen couple will

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\(^\text{115}\) During a field visit in August 2004.

\(^\text{116}\) In the paddies around the weaving villages one can find hundreds of ancestral graves pinpointing again the Chinese origin of the weaving regions.

\(^\text{117}\) See for more on the Cheng Ming ceremony: Thom, W.C. (1985)
naturally also chat with lineage members about their business plans and make appointments for the repayment of loans, or ask if they can borrow some more investment capital.

With respect to class, middlemen couples assured me that not every lineage member could borrow money ‘procham style’, only those who had paid for the family cemetery and who were considered creditable enough. Those lineage members who belonged to a lower class could not invest in the family grave and were excluded from the high-value borrow systems. That is also why humble lineage members, excluded from the procham lending system, only have access to humble credit-rotating systems such as bol srov or bandak where small loans can be repaid in commodities such as paddy rice, sugar palm, corn or sampot. Silk weavers, often humble lineage members, borrow money bandak style and pay back their loans in sampot. For instance, when asked about the height of their debts silk weavers will explain they owe their middlemen three or four kaben (around sixteen meters) sampot instead of the actual ‘street value’ of two or three hundred dollars.

However, even for a big middleman procham is an extremely risky credit system, because in case of bankruptcy he will not only lose his house or land, but also his reputation towards the lineage. But the young couple was confident and assured me they only needed one more year to pay back their debts to the procham members. However, they also admitted that they dared to borrow start-up capital procham style because they had established long-term credit relationships kchey style with the mighty wholesalers in Phnom Penh for the procurement of silk yarn. Backed by this vertical credit system the young middlemen couple was able to obtain much more silk yarn in

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118 In Phnom Penh undertakers told me that some family graves cost over 10,000 dollar and are usually paid by four or five family members.
119 I am indebted to Seng Bunly for this insight.
stock than they could finance themselves and hence could persuade a large group of weavers to work for them. This again guaranteed them a regular cash flow, turnover and monthly profit and thus enough prestige and trust to borrow a large sum of money procham style from their lineage members.

** Patron-client relationships
Contrary to the horizontal procham lending system, the kchey credit system is governed by vertical class relationships connecting wholesalers, middlemen and weavers into a tightly knit vertical guild system that evokes the structure of the colonial revenue farm system. With five wholesalers at the top and some sixty ‘silk brokers’ in the middle, the wholesalers-middlemen guilds supply seventy-five per cent of the weaving force with raw materials and indebt them by means of ‘normal’ patron-client relationships. Although labor value theorists would measure the vertical kchey relationships as exploitative, the subordinated middlemen in Cambodia approach the vertical loan conditions of the wholesalers as a relatively ‘normal’ affair, because they have much more power and connections than they themselves do. As a middleman from Tnot village (Takeo province) recalled$^{120}$:

‘I cannot buy silk yarn myself in Vietnam, because I do not have a passport. It is also very dangerous to cross the border. Vietnamese officials do not allow me to enter Vietnam. I have never tried it, but that is what I heard. The wholesalers have a strong back and have good connections in Vietnam. They have family there ... Of course they cheat on us, rich people always do that. Last year the silk price was 15 dollar per kilo, this year the silk yarn is very expensive, 21 dollar per kilo, and the quality is very poor’.

Another middleman from Veal village (Takeo Province) complained$^{121}$:

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120 Interview July 2004
121 Interview July 2004
'Since 1997 [the Asian economic crisis] everything went wrong. The Vietnamese are coming to Cambodia and we cannot do anything about it. It is very easy for them, they just come in by taxi. The Vietnamese have many children and need a lot of space, that is why they come to Cambodia. We are cold [he means left alone] by the government and cannot trade with Vietnam ourselves. Only the wholesalers can trade with Vietnam. I worry about my children and I am very afraid the yuon [Vietnamese] will rule our country again. If I think about that my heart cries. But what can we do, I only hope that things will turn out for the better in the future'.

In Cambodia the vertical *kchey* relationships are seen as ‘normal’ borrowing systems because differences in status and class, like in India and China, have always guided social relationships in the business arena. Already in ancient times vertical moral codes existed among Khmer kings, who spoke of ‘men of unequal souls’ (Kirsch 1974), or ‘men of prowess’ (Wolters 1982). Within the family social rankings are also based upon birth order and sex; those outside the family are often based on a combination of factors including age, wealth, political position and religious piety (Ledgerwood 1990). The Khmer language reflects this hierarchical patterning, as the words for ‘eating’ for example vary for the king, a monk, an older respected person, a person of similar status, a person of lesser status, a child, an animal and so on (*ibid.*). Finally, the moral underpinnings of the *kchey* credit system reflect Buddhist notions of *merit, karma* and *dharma*, as in Theravada Buddhist texts a leader is born into his advantageous position because of meritorious actions in previous lives (*karma*) and should fulfill his *dharma* by acting as a generous and righteous leader (*ibid.*).

*Mimicry Chinese*

Although much has been written about patron-client relationships in Cambodia, there is no commonly accepted Khmer word to describe
this relationship (O’Leary and Nee 2001: 53). There is a Khmer proverb that perhaps best captures this vertical relationship, saying, ‘neak mean reaksa ksoth doch sampot poit pi krao’ (‘the rich can take the poor as the sarong surrounds the body’) (ibid.). To become the sarong of the wholesalers middlemen couples had some identity construction work to do, because, as descendents of the weavers’ class, they were mainly socialized as ethnic Khmers. In a classical act of mimicry many ambitious middlemen couples started to copy the lifestyle of the wholesalers and built a new courtyard house outside the village. Often the wooden structure of their former home was still visible and betrayed that it had once, like the weavers’ homes, stood on wooden poles. The middlemen couples literally downplayed their Khmer identity and filled this void with a ‘new’ courtyard house, red lampions, good-luck stickers, a Chinese shrine, Chinese newspapers, a Chinese calendar and Chinese brand goods. This void was filled by mimicry symbols because the middlemen lacked knowledge of the Chinese language, could not read the Chinese newspapers and calendars and also had no clue who the deities on their shrines were, and what position they had in the Chinese pantheon of gods. Chinese ethnicity in this case was thus purely an imitation of a wholesalers’ lifestyle and had nothing to do with primordial affiliation or a desire after a lost homeland.

I once chatted about the Chinese identity of the middleman couples with a silk weaver, who turned out to be a kin member of one of these middlemen couples. She said the following about the house-style conversion and the lack of command of the Chinese language of a middlemen couple:

‘No, of course they are not Chinese, she was a weaver just like me and knows nothing about the Chinese culture. But now she is a middleman, she must be a Chen [Chinese].’

122 Interview September 2004
Processes of ethnicization

But how is this possible? How can the same family have two lifestyles? To understand and appreciate the existence of diverging lifestyles within one weaving family we must recognize that identities in Cambodia are multi-layered (see chapter two) and that power positions between silk weavers and middlemen are unequal. As Eric Wolf (1969) noted, relationships between peasants and merchants are always relationships of tactical power and patron-client relationships cannot occur between people who are each other’s equals. Processes of ethnicization have emerged under such unequal power conditions in Cambodia, because middlemen, once equal in rank, employed a Chinese lifestyle. The reason for this was that in Cambodia, the acceptance of exploitation as part and parcel of an essentially ethnic difference is reinforced by the fact that rural Chinese merchants are foremost undeniably Chinese, no matter how long they have lived in Cambodia (Conway 1993: 110). To become accepted as a moneylender by the silk weavers middlemen couples could not continue their Khmer lifestyle as a silk weaver, but had to employ a lifestyle associated with business power, and thus live in a Chinese courtyard house, celebrate Chinese New Year and buy a Toyota Camry.

Although the weavers are aware that the rate of returns for their sampot, in labor value terms, is far too low, they have also internalized the idea that they are ‘just’ workers and depend on the credit of ethnic Chinese middlemen for their survival. As a middle-age silk weaver from Sla village (Takeo Province) recalled\textsuperscript{123}:

‘I produce two kaben (four meters) of phtei muk phi (high quality sampot hol) per month and earn 20 dollars. That is not much, but what can I do? I am divorced and I have to raise two sons. I must borrow money from my middlemen to obtain silk yarn or to restore my loom. I do not

\textsuperscript{123} Interview September 2004
have the time and money to go to Phnom Penh and sell my textiles myself. But I am not poor, I do not have to cut stones or beg for money as other people do’.

In Prek Chakkran (Prey Veng province) a silk weaver in her forties legitimized her humble position as follows:\textsuperscript{124}:

‘I produce two kaben of sampot hol per month and earn 17,000 riel (around 10 dollars) per kaben. I subcontract the loom and half of the profit goes to my middleman, who owns the loom. I do not sell my textiles myself in Phnom Penh. The middleman always sells my textiles. But why should I sell my own textiles? I am a weaver and not a trader. In the future I hope I can buy my own loom and earn more money with my textiles’.

And in Kdanh village (Takeo) an elderly silk weaver complained\textsuperscript{125}:

‘I once tried to buy silk yarn myself from the ‘loak thoms’ in Phnom Penh, but they sent me home with the message that I could only buy silk yarn from my own middlemen. I am sad about it, but it is very important for my family to weave sampot hol. It is good money’.

The above quotes of the silk weavers call to mind the work of James Scott, who placed the critical problem of the peasant household - subsistence - at the center of his study (1976). According to Scott (1976) the subsistence attitude of the peasants makes them technologically conservative and entangles them in a reciprocal web of social obligations, but must also be seen as a rational strategy, which guarantees them a life-long safety net. In his view, it may thus be fully rational for silk weavers to choose to become exploited as ‘Khmer’ workers, if they think they are materially better off being exploited by

\textsuperscript{124} Interview September 2004
\textsuperscript{125} Interview September 2004
a middleman than trying to find a job themselves outside their network. As May Ebihara (1971) noted, Khmers do think that debt is a burden, but they accept the loan conditions without complaint because they know of no other resources and no other system to gain start-up capital. This is also why Polly Hill (1986) and Oscar Salemink (2003a) argue that rural debts must not necessarily be seen as social evils but also as a risk-absorbing strategy of the essential creditworthiness and economic viability of small holding farmers.

Middlemen, however, do not subscribe to the exploitation theory and refer to the subsistence attitude of the silk weavers by calling them ‘lazy’ because of their allegedly slow speed of production. In their former profession as silk weavers they realized very well that the production of one *sampot hol* a month was the limit, because one had to cultivate paddies, feed the cattle and raise kids. But once having become bosses (*thaoke*) themselves they changed their ‘old’ subsistence attitude and started to antagonize and misjudge the ever under-producing silk weavers as lazy Khmers. As an elder silk weaver from Sla village complained:

‘In earlier days the middleman was more relaxed. But nowadays, they are always in a hurry and complain a lot about the speed of the production. They also shout at us when we do not produce the correct colors’.

The ascribed Khmer identity of the silk weavers is thus also reproduced in a structure of misjudgments, which reminds us that identity operates through an active process of marginalization. This structure of ‘othering’ must be seen as an act of ‘symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu 1991) wherein ‘Khmer’ becomes synonymous with being a lazy, subsistence peasant, whilst a Chinese is an ambitious, innovative entrepreneur. That brings us to the paradoxical situation

126 Interview October 2004
that national and global stakeholders depict the silk weavers as descendants of the greatest Khmer empire ever, Angkor, whereas the middlemen and wholesalers connote them as credit-depending, lazy Khmers.

**The art of gift giving**

But processes of ‘othering’ and marginalization aside, social hierarchies in the Cambodian silk weaving arena are also a delicate balance of power, because when middlemen refuse to honor their obligations as a patron, silk weavers can dump them and choose another boss. About this delicate balance Solange Thierry (1978) has written that *demerit* legitimizes changes in the positions of individuals within Cambodian hierarchy, and can make a person fall in status immediately. While doing fieldwork I came across several middlemen who shivered at the thought how lack of support from a village leader or district leader could *demerit* them and damage their business badly. As Mr. Mong once explained¹²⁷:

*The village leader can kill your business, because he has a lot of power and can spread a lot of bad talk about you. I must establish close relationships with him and must bring him cigarettes or wine from Phnom Penh. I also give his wife and daughters a lower silk yarn price*.  

Mr. Mong was afraid that the village leader would deliberately create biases between him and the weavers and *demerit* his prestige as a good boss. To prevent the village leader from destroying his business and to protect his reputation he offers gifts and discounts to the village leader and his wife¹²⁸ to keep a lasting hold over them. Moreover, being raised in a class-conscious society Mr. Mong knows that his university degree will help him to regain ideological

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¹²⁷ Interview December 2004

¹²⁸ In this case the wife and daughters of the village leader were weavers and thus clients of the middlemen as well.
domination over the local, often illiterate village leaders, who will respect him for his superior knowledge. The roots of this concern with educational levels can be traced back to the great Chinese philosopher Confucius, whose ideas about prestige, frugality, benevolence, filial pity, hard work and social organization became deeply rooted in the hearts of the Chinese gentry-class.

However, Mr. Mong knows that a few bottles of wine, silk yarn discounts and a university degree alone are not sufficient to gain prestige and enhance his powerful position; he must also support all kinds of local development projects such as the building of a new school, an irrigation project, etc. This is because ‘official’ state revenues are not sufficient to develop the village and the extra schools, roads and water pumps will bring much wanted prestige for the village leader, which will enable him to be re-elected.

To win the blessings of the village leader Mr. Mong organizes a ‘bon kathen’ ceremony every year somewhere in October or November, depending on the Buddhist lunar calendar. ‘Bon kathen’ is an annual ceremony in which laity give donations to Buddhist monks in their village pagoda in return for merit. Traditionally lay people give cotton krama to the monks, but lately wealthy government officials and merchants have been donating money for the building of schools, irrigation projects or a new road. After the completion of the ‘bon kathen’ ceremony, donors receive five kinds of merits: susanthanera (‘complete organs’), ‘surubata’ (‘looking good’), suvannata (‘good color’), susurata (‘a sweet sound’) and adhibaccambarivaro (‘having many followers’).129 In particular receiving adhibaccambarivaro is interesting for the middlemen, because it allows them to convince silk weavers and the local officialdom to follow them.130

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130 ‘Bon kathen’ can be seen as a Bourdieuan form of symbolic capital that the middlemen-wholesalers guilds use to impress the local officialdom.
By organizing a ‘bon kathen’ ceremony Mr. Mong will capitalize his long-term relationships with his wholesaler and ask him to donate a great sum of money on behalf of a local road or another charity project. In this way he can present himself symbolically as a powerful Chinese merchant with good connections and impress the local officialdom.\textsuperscript{131} Mr. Mong wants to impress the district chief to prevent him from taxing, because he is responsible for duties such as tax collection, writing bills for land sales, organizing and executing public works and passing down proclamations, laws and propaganda from the central government to the village level.

For this reason the district chief is seen as a ‘loak thom’, a big person having a lot of administrative power and demands that he can impose on the local population. In theory, the district chief must tax the middlemen for profits, houses, lands, business registrations, motor vehicles, turnovers, public lighting, value added, and so on.\textsuperscript{132} However, like in any politically turbulent nation the Cambodian tax collection system is vulnerable, and district chiefs are very selective in whom to burden and whom not. The ill-paid district chiefs will not give tax discounts and trade permits to small middlemen, but only to big persons (loak thoms) like themselves.

Scholars in Cambodia have often legitimized such forms of elite favoritism as a ‘Khmer fairness ideology’ in which “helping one’s kind” is seen as a normal social practice (Ledgerwood and Vijghen 2002:109-150). In a related vein Ross Marlay and Clark D. Neher (1995) have deployed the term ‘patron-client communitarianism’,

\textsuperscript{131} I visited a couple of ‘bon kathen’ ceremonies in the weaving regions and witnessed how a ceremony leader, often a high-ranked district official, thanked donors by name in public, precisely mentioned who gave what and in what amount, and blessed them for their giving.

\textsuperscript{132} In June 1994 the government decided to reform the tax system found under the Finance Act 1994, to mobilize revenues and to strengthen its administrative capacity. Under Sub-degree No 114 a new 10 per cent VAT tax was implemented in 1999 to replace the consumption tax.
legitimizing the favoritism and rent-seeking advantages of the Khmer elite by means of the Buddhist idea of accepting suffering and losses as one’s fate. However, the ‘Khmer fairness ideology’ seems to depict ‘elite favoritism’ as a given fact and does not recognize that middlemen battle with each other for resources in the officialdom. In doing so Marlay and Neher (1995) fail to acknowledge how some middlemen deliberately organize ‘bon kathen’ ceremonies in order to become the favorite middlemen of the district chief and to escape heavy taxation in this way. Yet, middlemen who possess the ‘art of gift giving’ (cf. Yang 1994) to the officialdom have an advantage over those who lack such qualities. In other words, those middlemen who realize that ‘bon kathen’ is an important form of symbolic capital to bond with the officialdom are more likely to grow than middlemen who never ‘kom bos san touch rom long Phnom’ (‘throw the fishing line over the mountain’).

Strategic marriage

In the final pages of this chapter I will switch to the trade career of Mrs. Bun again and outline how she managed to control the cross border silk yarn trade in the 1990s, and why it was wiser for her to downplay her Khmer identity again. To protect her favorite trade position Mrs. Bun cleverly subcontracted former weavers as middlemen, because she knew these craftswomen and farmers lacked the political contacts to cross the border and had no means to become a future competitor. As one middleman from Veal village commented\textsuperscript{133}: 

\begin{quote}
‘I once biked to Tan Chau, I think it was ten years ago, to buy silk yarn there. The owner of the factory told me it was only possible to buy 5000 kilogram of silk yarn and not just a few silk batches. I returned home empty-handed because I cannot afford to buy such large quantities’.
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}133 Interview September 2004\end{flushright}
Another middleman, situated at the corner of the Saiwaa market in Prey Kabas district, came up with the same ‘5000 kilogram story’, but also complained he could not cross the border ‘tax-free’ like the wholesalers\textsuperscript{134}.

‘You know, the wholesalers have good connections at the border, so they do not have to pay import tax. I do not have these connections and have to pay ten per cent import tax. So it is much cheaper for me to buy the silk yarn directly from the wholesalers’.

In the immediate aftermath of the war Mrs. Bun had no difficulties to cross the Cambodian border, as it was extremely porous and open to anyone. In fact, precisely because the borders were so porous Mrs. Bun was able to trade tons of silk yarn to Thailand and grew rich by the mark-ups that way. However, from 1982 onwards the PRK state party decided to regulate the Vietnamese and Thai cross-border trade ‘communist style’. This was because the PRK government feared the far-flung ethnic Chinese trade networks connecting Ho Chi Minh City with Phnom Penh and Bangkok, as they were convinced they would bypass the state as a regulator and revenue collector (Gottesman 2003:149-151). Moreover, the PRK regime was also convinced that the ethnic Chinese traders supported their families in China and not the Cambodian economy. To go against this far-flung contraband trade two border treaties were signed in the early 1980s\textsuperscript{135} and military patrols began to guard the Cambodian river and land borders (\textit{ibid.}). In line with the usual communist preference for centralized control the PRK Ministry of Commerce established Joint Economic Commissions, sister province policies\textsuperscript{136} and numerous other bilateral trade agreements with both Thailand and Vietnam. And to complete their

\textsuperscript{134} Interview September 2004
\textsuperscript{135} The 1982 Agreement on the Historical Waters and the 1985 Treaty On The National Border Delimitation.
\textsuperscript{136} Sister province policies were bilateral trade policies made between Southern Chinese and Cambodian provinces during the PRK regime.
‘communist mission’ Hanoi-trained custom officials, most of them Vietnamese, were stationed at the border to collect the state revenues and fees there (ibid.).

Since it had become a huge obsession for the PRK government to regulate the far-flung Chinese Cambodian trade networks Mrs. Bun was confronted with a gender problem. Not being able to bond with the officialdom because of her gender Mrs. Bun desperately needed contacts in the upper echelons of the state departments. With regard to the latter it is widely accepted that women in Southeast Asia cannot steer any political domains and depend on men for the procurement of licenses and government support. However, Mrs. Bun was lucky because it was equally widely known in the Cambodian business arena that high-ranked state officials were not loyal to the communist ideology behind the PRK border regulations at all, and were very willing to become patrons for wealthy merchants (Gottesmann 2003:190-191). As Gottesmann noted, after the atrocities of the Pol Pot revolution most government officials were bored with any kind of ideology and became what Max Weber (1930) calls ‘Ersatz capitalists’ for wealthy Chinese traders in Phnom Penh. As one middleman explained:

‘the wholesalers married influential state cadres from the PRK Commerce Department, because they are very influential persons and know many commune leaders, governors and border officials. Everybody knows that because Mrs. Bun and Mrs. Sourkia come from this area.’

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137 For privacy reasons I do not mention the name of the village.
138 Interview October 2004.
In a similar vein, another middleman told me:\textsuperscript{139}

‘the husbands of the wholesalers are former state cadres from the PRK Commerce department. The wives do not even love their husbands, they do not even live together, but they are very clever and use them for their good connections at the border’.\textsuperscript{140}

Mrs. Bun’s own son-in-law, although without mentioning the strategic function of his marriage, ‘confessed’ he was a former state cadre, while a few blocks further, the male owner of the Neary Khmer silk shop also did not hide his officialdom career and explained he managed the shop because his wife was out of the country.\textsuperscript{141}

In other words, Mrs. Bun and at least two other members of the conglomerate used the tradition of elite intermarriage\textsuperscript{142} as symbolic capital to overcome their gender constraints and to get constant access to the Vietnamese silk yarn market in the mid-1980s. Not being able to steer the political domain herself, Mrs. Bun interlocked with fellow ethnic politicians in the higher echelons of the PRK officialdom by means of an arranged marriage, which again allowed her to control the lucrative cross-border silk yarn trade. Again she wisely silenced her Khmer identity and expressed her Chinese one because the Cambodian parliament consists predominantly of Vietnamese and Chinese members, a remnant of French colonial policies. The reason for this, as said, was that unlike their British counterparts in countries such as Malaysia, the French colonizers looked down on the administrative qualities of the Khmers and

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{139} For privacy reasons I do not mention the name of the village.
\item \textsuperscript{140} Interview December 2004.
\item \textsuperscript{141} In reality his wife had been kidnapped the year before and was only released in exchange for a huge sum of money. Afraid to return to Phnom Penh she stayed with relatives in New Zealand. Shortly before I returned to Holland she returned to Cambodia again and continued to manage her silk enterprise.
\item \textsuperscript{142} Linda Bell (1999) describes how silk industrials in Wuxi County also arranged marriages with the local officialdom to boost their power.
\end{itemize}
preferred Confucian-trained clerks and politicians from Vietnam and China (Chanda 1986: 56). The success of ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs such as Mrs. Bun also caused ethnic Chinese politicians in Cambodia to become well-integrated into the business life, and added to the establishment of a powerful ethnic Chinese political and economic elite. As William Case (2003) once said, access to the world market, even in developed ASEAN countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines, is based on the twin pillars of having colonial legacies and rents in the officialdom.

Conclusion
In this chapter I have attempted to answer the third research question: How do silk producers and traders negotiate their identities in the economic domain of the silk weaving industry? Both the silk producers and traders were ethnic Chinese who had become Khmers (col khmae) under a 1954 ethno-nationalistic citizenship law. Today however silk producers present themselves as ‘assimilated’ Khmers and the wholesalers and middlemen as ethnic Chinese. The diverging self-presentations of the silk weavers and traders jeopardize the agnostic way in which culturalist and capitalist scholars have approached ‘ethnic economies’ and ‘diasporas’. These cultural notions still seem to treat Chineseness as a harmonious organizing principle that ethnic Chinese use to unite themselves within the parochial boundaries of a shared ethnicity.

This chapter, however, makes clear that silk producers and traders did not search for comfort within the parochial boundaries of a shared ethnicity but have established social antagonisms to legitimize the unequal production and trade positions within the network. These social antagonisms are not ‘real’ existing conflicts, but symbolic repertoires, body practices and lifestyles grounded in a specific social and material context (Jackson 2006: 322-330). This is because the
Cambodian subject, having lived under the command of various foreign hegemonizers for centuries, is a multi-layered subject and cannot be approached in terms of one ethnicity anymore. As a consequence it is relatively ‘normal’ for Cambodian families to assume a Chinese, Khmer, Cambodian, Vietnamese or Thai lifestyle depending on the context.

Because it is impossible for Cambodians to primordialize each other’s identity, symbols have become crucial forms of communication clarifying ‘who one is or who one wants to be in society’. That is also why in this chapter I come to the conclusion that the self-presentations of the silk producers and traders have lost their state association and must be seen as lifestyles that belong to the position one has in the silk weaving network. The reason for this is that the Cambodian silk producers and traders did not approach each other in terms of ‘assimilation’, ‘diasporic consciousness’ or ‘ethnic affiliation’, but in terms of unequal production and trade relationships and cultural repertoires and identities belonging to these positions. Processes of ethnicization have emerged under these social conditions because producers are expected to exhibit a subsistence Khmer lifestyle and traders a capitalist Chinese one. However, going against the culturalist discourse of a harmonious diaspora (Hsiao 2002), the choice of lifestyle was often re-produced by force, misjudgment and marginalization. That is also why this study comes to the conclusion that the ethnicized production and trade relationships could also be seen as a form of ‘symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu 1991), wherein ‘Khmer’ is synonymous with being a lazy, subsistence peasant, whilst a Chinese is an ambitious, innovative entrepreneur.

The five female wholesalers, having controlled the cross-border silk yarn trade already from the late colonial period onwards, had no problem to play this correct role of an ambitious, innovative entrepreneur. Joining their fathers on trade trips the wholesalers not
only learned how to negotiate silk yarn prices, but also how to negotiate their Chinese identity vis-à-vis lower-ranked traders and weavers. This way Mrs. Bun learned that it was wise to live in a courtyard house, speak Cantonese, order a Chinese dragon, pity ancestors, worship Kuan Yin, celebrate the Mooncake festival, go to a fortune teller, organize bon kathen charity ceremonies, bury family members in a family grave, read Chinese newspapers and interlock with the officialdom for the procurement of licenses and tax reductions. In the hostile 1980s Mrs. Bun did not have to express her Khmer identity but used a shared Shunde county genealogy to form a silk yarn conglomerate with silk yarn traders from Takeo Province. This time her Chinese identity should not be seen as a symbolic toolkit to impress lower-ranked workers, but as a shared ideology to resist the hostile 1980s and to protect her lucrative windfall position as a powerful wholesaler. Even to gain officialdom rents to control the cross border silk yarn trade she did not have to become a Khmer, because high-ranked clerks in Cambodia are also ethnic Chinese, a remnant of French colonial administrative policies (Chanda 1986).

In the working place regimes (Ong and Nonini 1997) of the wholesalers a corporate Chinese identity was expected from the middlemen couples as well. As rural representatives of the urban wholesalers, the middlemen couples had to supply the weavers with silk yarn, control the speed of production and check the quality of the sampot hol. The clever wholesalers, however, aware of the ‘differences in the togetherness’ (Ang 2001), deliberately chose to subcontract ambitious middlemen couples with a non-trading background, because it assured them the couple would be short of cross-border ties in Vietnam and would thus not easily become silk yarn wholesalers themselves. They did expect the middlemen couples to become one of them, though, and used personal visits and gossip mechanisms to check their adherence to a Chinese lifestyle.
Playing the correct Chinese role was not easy for the middlemen because as descendents of the weaving class they had been socialized as Khmer for many generations. As a consequence, the middlemen couples had some identity construction work to do and had to downplay their Khmer lifestyle. In an act of mimicry the middlemen couples started to copy the lifestyle of the wholesalers and replaced their wooden Khmer huts for a courtyard house, hung red lampions in front of their house, bought Chinese consumption goods, revived Chinese rituals, used a Chinese calendar and replaced the Khmer sarong for a Chinese suit. This change in lifestyle had nothing to do with a desire for a mythical homeland (cf. Pan 1998) or an allergic reaction against un-ambitious Khmer, but should instead be seen as symbolic capital necessary to climb socially to the ranks of a middleman.

At the bottom of the silk pyramid, some 20,000 silk weavers produce sampot hol under the close supervision of the 100 subcontracted middlemen couples. The silk weavers not only learned dye and silk-weaving techniques from their mothers and grandmothers, but also the identity and roles that go hand in hand with being a silk weaver. Although the weavers share ancestral roots with the wholesalers and middlemen they identify themselves predominantly as ethnic Khmers and argue they feel Khmer, love the king and are devoted Buddhists. Unlike the wholesalers and middlemen, they celebrate Khmer religious ceremonies, follow the Khmer Buddhist calendar, cremate their dead and resemble the image of assimilated Chinese.

Of historical importance for the weavers’ ‘assimilation’ was undoubtedly the rush on Khmer grooms after the 1929 ban on Chinese landownership and the fact that they internalized the Khmer culture of their husbands. Another important factor was the virtual ban on Chinese language and cultural practices under Lon Nol (1970-1975) and Pol Pot (1975-78), and the repression of Chinese language
teaching and cultural celebrations from 1979 to 1991 by the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) and its successor the State of Cambodia (SOC). However, a strict focus on intermarriages and state bio-politics alone does not explain why silk weavers who married a fellow ethnic farmer identify themselves as ethnic Khmers and why other silk weavers who climbed up to the ranks of middlemen represent themselves as ethnic Chinese.

The Khmer self-identity of the silk weavers must also be seen as a form of symbolic capital, which marks their humble position in the silk network vis-à-vis the fellow ethnic but higher-ranked middlemen. An overt Khmer identity was necessary because, as said, the middlemen couples in the weaving villages were former weavers, kin members, and thus shared common ancestral roots. For this reason, the silk weavers and middlemen found themselves in an awkward situation, because morally, in Cambodia, the former is always the exploited and the latter the exploiter (cf. Conway 1993). To legitimize the changing labor relationships the weavers depicted the different standard of living of the middlemen, like ‘real’ Khmers do, as part of a foreign culture rather than as an aspect of exploitation. In this negotiation process they had to silence their Chinese background and could not express a Chinese lifestyle, even if they would have liked to do so.
Chapter 6
100 % Khmer, Sir!: Ethnicity and consumer behavior

Introduction
In the previous chapter we have seen how the wholesaler Mrs. Bun, although she is a Cambodian citizen, primarily expressed a Chinese identity and expected the same identity token from the middlemen she subcontracted. In this chapter I will attempt to explain the gap that exists between the ‘marginal’ ethnic Chinese and ‘dominant’ Khmer modernization claim and answer the fourth research question, addressing the reasons why ethnic Chinese silk traders market ‘their’ silk weaving products as authentic Khmer?

Following the business career of a former silk weaver, this chapter will illustrate the strategic conditions under which ethnic Chinese silk traders in Cambodia do not have any reason to divert from the grand narrative of Khmer modernization and express a far-away Chinese past. According to Karl Marx (2000 [1867]) the leading culture in society is the one of the economic and political elite and has the ambition to alienate the workers from their culture. In the Cambodian market place, however, the silk products are not marketed in accordance with the culture of the silk capitalists, but in accordance with the working culture of the silk weavers. Elaborating on Walter Benjamin’s (1940) concept of ‘traditional modernity’ and Jean Baudrillard’s (1998 [1970]) concept of ‘consumer culture’ this chapter will illustrate the modern conditions under which silk traders in Cambodia prefer to market the sampot hol as authentic Khmer.
Case study
At the entrance lane of the popular Central Market hundreds of tourists stroll around looking for handicrafts to complete their ultimate Cambodia discovery experience. Mine victims, often former Pol Pot soldiers, walk around on wooden crutches and wear ‘I survived Cambodia’ t-shirts. They attack the tourists with a gunfire of questions: ‘You want to buy books about Pol Pot, Sir, I have very good books on the Khmer Rouge, Sir, very cheap, I also have pictures, you like pictures about Angkor Wat, Sir, or you want to go to the Killing fields, Sir, my friend can bring you, no, Sir, you do not like, you want girl then Sir, I can arrange many beautiful girls for you, Sir’. On the side of the entrance lane some twenty market stalls are pilled up with silk scarves, wooden Buddha statues and all kinds of silverware. In front of the market stalls young women dressed in silk sampot, white ‘Sesame street’ t-shirts and New York Yankee baseball caps greet the tourists in their own language and encourage them to visit their shop in English, ‘you want to buy silk scarves Sir, 100% Khmer, Sir, only seven dollars, good price for you, Sir’. Once the seller gets the attention of the customer, a co-vendor, often the mother, welcomes him/her with two or three plastic chairs and samples of silk scarves wrapped around her neck. Most of the tourists are Japanese, Koreans, Chinese and Taiwanese and to a lesser extent French, Americans and Australians. Cambodian Americans, who fled the country during and after the Pol Pot war, stroll around the Central Market as well, and are easily recognized because of the ‘authentic’ dressed mother and the ‘all American’ dressed children, who are more assertive as well. ‘Jesus, you are tall Sir, I have you been to the Angkor Wat temples yet, I guess not, because they are still there [laughing]’.

Most of the silk vendors on the Central Market are former silk weavers from Takeo, Kandal and Prey Veng provinces who opened a retail shop some ten years ago. One of these former silk weavers is Youn Malis, an introvert, somewhat shy woman, who complains a lot about the heat in the market, about how tough it is to compete with the young, fanatic and multi-lingual silk vendors, and mostly about the decreasing number of tourists. Despite her omnipresent pessimism, however, she starts every conversation with the

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143 Pointing at my six foot seven height.
same ‘feel good story’ on how many scarves she sold to UN workers in the 1990s and how well she filled her pockets during this period, because UNTAC’ members did not bargain at all. But nowadays, she repeats over and over, tourists do not come to Phnom Penh anymore, but only go to Siem Reap to see the Angkor Wat temples and fly directly from there to Bangkok, Singapore or Hanoi. As for the decline in tourists Youn Malis particularly blames the government and complains they only think about the Angkor Wat tourists and how to fill their pockets through them, and no longer about how to attract tourists to Phnom Penh. She has often heard about this problem on the radio and television and explains that since Cambodia became a member of ASEAN in 1999 tourists have only been going to Angkor.

Youn Malis also has a small stock of sampot hol, phamung and sarong, which she sells to Cambodian American women instead of local women, because the latter do not buy sampot at the Central market. Youn Malis has one regular overseas customer, who visits her shop every year to fill her suitcase with seventy kilograms of sampot. This regular customer turns out to be her elder sister, who fled the Pol Pot war in the 1980s to a Thai border camp, and from there successfully sought asylum in the United States. During the war her younger sisters, together with her father and an older brother were deported to different working zones and for this reason she lost track of them. In the working zones she was very afraid of the Pol Pot soldiers, but her mother told her she just had to work hard and not tell anything about their Chinese background. Her mother also told her they were lucky to be farmers and that they had to act like that to survive the regime. Her mother, as an elderly lady, continued her weaving enterprise, but she herself also a skilled weaver, had to work on the surrounding paddies all day. Life conditions were terrible and after a long day of work she could only eat a handful of rice and some vegetables. As a young woman she witnessed how some of the villagers were taken away, officially to work in another village, but from her mother she heard that they were killed. Later the killlings became more obvious and when someone’s name was mentioned by a Khmer Rouge soldier you knew that you could be next.

Life in general deteriorated as time passed by, because there was less food and soldiers began to shout at people more and more often. Later Youn Malis
did not have to work on the fields anymore but was ordered to bury dead Khmer Rouge soldiers, who were casualties of combat. She became increasingly afraid that she would die too, and at night she could not sleep because she missed her father, brother and sisters. Luckily she survived the war and could return to her hometown of Prek Changkran to continue her weaving enterprise. In these days she often biked to Phnom Penh and bartered silk yarn against gold from Mr. Meng Kong, a wealthy middleman in Prek Changkran, who had just opened a shop in Phnom Penh. To her relief she also saw her father and one younger sister return home, while another younger sister and her older brother were still missing. One year later she heard that her younger sister had sought asylum in the United States and that her older brother had been killed in a town near Battambang. This was a huge shock for Youn Malis, because the whole family had woven many sampot to get him to the University of Phnom Penh and was very proud of him for that reason.

After his death Malis was determined to quit her weaving enterprise at some point, and to go to Phnom Penh to offer her son a good education instead. In the mid-1980s she married a neighboring Khmer farmer, who, like herself, had ambitions to migrate to Phnom Penh. In 1992 Youn Malis opened a sampot shop in Phnom Penh after she had borrowed start-up capital from co-villagers and had sold two hectares of land. From her start-up capital she bought a stall for two hundred dollars at the Central Market and a stock of sampot hol to get into business. Her husband did not accompany her in her business and found a job as a state cadre at the tax department. Only her younger daughter works in her shop, but most of the time only on the weekends. The main reason why Youn Malis opened up a silk stall was her sister in the United States, who had found a good job there as a nurse and was able to visit Phnom Penh once a year. This way she could buy sampot exclusively from her shop and distribute these further to other Cambodian refugees in the United States. Youn Malis explained that many other silk vendors at the Central Market had relatives in the United States and did business this way. She added that her younger cousin, a sarong retailer three stores away, was ‘in the process’ of marrying a Khmer American and opening a silk shop in the United States. However, slightly to her surprise, her plan to sell sampot to Khmer Americans did not work out, as she was
not able to obtain credit from a middleman, notably a fellow villager, and therefore came to depend more and more on the tourist industry for a living.

Initially this was not such a big problem, because after the war was over thousands of UN-expats became stationed in Phnom Penh and asked her for silk scarves to bring home as souvenirs. The UN-troops, however, did not like the silk *sampot* she had once woven herself for their dull color and rather high price, and asked for the machine-made and more colorful Lao and Thai scarves. Youn Malis learned about the UNTAC’s taste for foreign silk scarves from the other silk vendors, but none of the silk vendors told the UNTAC people about the real origin of the silk scarves, and simply sold them as ‘Khmer’ scarves to them. After I noticed the foreign origin of the scarves Youn Malis begged me not to tell ‘other’ tourists about this trade secret¹⁴⁴ as it could damage her business. She also kept silent about her Chinese background for a long time and identified herself as a loyal Khmer and good Buddhist to me for more than six months. This had nothing to do with the war, she explained afterwards, because she was not afraid anymore, but simply with the fact that she feels, like her husband, that she is a real Khmer. To underscore her Khmer identity she told me that she went to the Buddhist temple every week, celebrated *Phcum Ben*, loved the King and asked advice from the *achaa* about her life, family and future. In sharp contrast with her loyal Buddhist identity however, she also ‘confessed’ that she celebrated Chinese ceremonies such as *Cheng Ming*, *Saen Kbal Tuk* (‘the Hungry Ghost festival’), the Mooncake festival and New Year. And, also contrary to her loyal Khmer discourse, she complained heavily about her husband’s relatives ‘eating up’ her business, something her own relatives, ethnic Chinese, would never do.

*A multi-layered identity*

The above biography of the middle-aged silk vendor Youn Malis represents the third and last group of traders in the silk weaving industry, the silk vendors. Analyzing processes of modernization and ethnicization in the organization of the Cambodian silk weaving

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¹⁴⁴ She asked me not to tell it to tourists, but she did allow me to write this secret down in my dissertation.
industry we have seen how national and global stakeholders depict the industry as authentic Khmer, while network dominance asks for a Chinese identity. The Khmer modernization narrative thus thrives on the bureaucratic myth that the ethnic Chinese in Cambodia have become Khmer people, while the trade career of Mrs. Bun celebrates primal features of Chinese culture such as thrift, family, networks, and officialdom connections in a Confucian hierarchy.

Representing the grand Khmer narrative while being of ethnic Chinese descent, Youn Malis negotiates her identity in between the conflicting narratives of Chinese dominance in the market place and the Khmer identity of the silk weavers. The question I seek to answer in this chapter is why Youn Malis presents herself so overtly as an ethnic Khmer in public, concealing her Chinese identity, while Mrs. Bun dismisses Khmers as business partners, considering them lazy and non-industrial. To complicate things even further, since she harbors ambitions to become a sampot entrepreneur in urban Phnom Penh, why does she not celebrate features of Chinese culture instead of concealing them?

In the recently published book ‘Diasporic Ventures, the Life and Work of Wang Gungwu’ (Benton and Liu 2004: 51), Wang Gungwu dismisses the concept of Chinese diaspora for its oversimplified character, and rejects the political explosiveness of the term, because he fears that Chinese networks are seen as an enormous octopus operated by China, spreading its tentacles across the world. I once watched Youn Malis burning paper money during ‘saen kbal tuk’, the Chinese Hungry Ghost festival, and also called her an ethnic Chinese. Youn Malis herself laughed at me and explained that her celebrating saen kbal tuk had nothing to do with her appreciation of a far-away Chinese past but should be seen as a habit she learned from her parents. She could not speak one word of Chinese and had no desire at all to visit China, because her home village was Prek Chakkran.
Moreover, beside Chinese festivals, she celebrated all kinds of Khmer ceremonies such as Phcum Ben, New Year, the King’s birthday and the water festival. Illustrating the multiple character of identities in Cambodia my translator once said to me:\textsuperscript{145}:

\textit{‘I have Chinese roots and celebrate Chinese festivals, but I also celebrate Khmer festivals, and I am also a Christian and celebrate the birthday of Jesus’}.

The silk vendor Youn Malis married a Khmer; however, possessing a Khmer citizenship does not resemble Aihwa Ong’s (2000) image of the nomadic and deterritorialized flexible citizen, nor does the fact that Youn Malis’ eyes do not get wet hearing the Chinese national anthem. This is also why Ma and Cartier (2003: 5) warn us that the idea of a prototypical ethnic Chinese is problematic because Chinese all over the world have very different experiences. Being socialized primarily as a Khmer the ‘hidden’ Chinese identity of Youn Malis and many other silk entrepreneurs reminded me of a famous painting of Salvador Dali, ‘The Venus of Milo’, an anthropomorphic figure with multiple layers. Elaborating on Sigmund Freud’s theories of unconsciousness Dali illustrates that the modern body is one full of hidden layers, which can only be opened by means of psychoanalysis. The trick for an ethnographer in this case, like it would be for a psychoanalyst, is thus to find out why Youn Malis has no reason to open up her Chinese layer. Finding out why this is so I will analyze her trade career and outline the historical construction of her mother’s identity in the French colonial period.

\textit{The Chinese ban on landownership}

In the early colonial period the silk weavers had access to land and could cultivate mulberry trees and sericulture workshops at the banks of the Mekong river. Their bosses, the Cantonese silk merchants,
controlled the silk industry and the French had to come to terms with the Chinese *bangs* (secret societies) for the attraction of fresh Chinese labor, and with the Chinese *compradors* to market their silk yarn to the export companies in Saigon. However, in the 1920s, undoubtedly frustrated by the powerful economic positions of the Chinese immigrants and by their own incapability to control them, the level of French tolerance towards the Chinese started to change and the French decided to empower the indigenous Khmers. To accomplish this they started to label the ethnic Chinese as greedy traders, whose greatest pleasures in life were opium, gambling and extortion. And although the French reaped huge sums of money from the Chinese population through discriminatory poll taxes, they also complained that the Chinese were exploiting the indigenous Khmers and remitting their entire incomes home (Edwards 2003). To empower the Khmer peasants the French also decided to sever the rights of Chinese to own land and implemented a land law in 1929 denying Chinese access to land (Edwards 2003; Willmott 1967).

The 1929 ban of Chinese landownership had great implications for Youn Malis’ mother’s economic future because suddenly she, and many other silk weavers in Kandal, Takeo and Prey Veng with her, became landless. This is because in the bureaucratic calculus of the French it was no longer possible to be a farmer and to be Chinese at the same time (Edwards 2003). Luckily for the Chinese weavers, though, there was one escape possible because under the 1920 Civil Code a Chinese woman who married a Khmer man automatically obtained a Cambodian citizenship and was entitled to own land and thus could continue her weaving enterprise (*ibid.*). To save their weaving enterprise, intermarriage with a Khmer became a very profitable strategy for Chinese weavers and not coincidentally, many Chinese silk weavers, among whom Youn Malis’ mother, married a Khmer peasant.
The colonially established farmers' identity of Youn Malis' mother and her marriage with a Khmer peasant must thus be seen as a strategic form of essentialism to continue their silk business. Or, to recall what Peter Gosling and Linda Lim (1983:1-14) said about the assimilation of Southeast Asian Chinese:

'We sometimes seem to forget that ‘assimilation’ may also be a necessary cultural practice for Southeast Asian Chinese to survive or to grow economically as a business in a certain area'.

As a consequence Youn Malis grew up in two worlds, a Chinese and a Khmer one, and learned how to deploy instrumental frontstage and backstage identities. In practice, however, we will see in the following pages that she did not have to negotiate her identity, because it was much wiser and later also much more profitable to identify herself as a loyal Khmer citizen and Angkorean silk weaver.

A Pure Khmer

On 17 April 1975 tragedy struck Youn Malis' life and she was deported, like millions of other Cambodians, to one of the seven Pol Pot working zones. The 'pro-farmer and anti-Chinese gentry class rhetoric' of the Khmer Rouge regime dovetailed with the ideological anti-huaqiao discourse prevalent in Cultural Revolution China (Edwards 2003). For this reason the massive physical destruction of 200,000 ethnic Chinese (half of Cambodia’s Chinese population) by Khmer Rouge soldiers (cf. Becker 1986) did not bother the Khmer Rouge leaders at all, but was instead seen as a 'Great Leap Forward' in the peasant revolution. Although the Khmer Rouge regime was not opposed to the Chinese race, but to the Chinese capitalist class (cf. Vickery 1986), the young and ill-educated Khmer Rouge revolutionaries found it hard to cut the Chinese cake class-wise and signs of Chineseness became associated with capitalism. In practice every ethnic Chinese, whether or not from an elitist background was
at danger, because eating pork, wearing trousers, using chopsticks, worshipping Chinese deities and speaking Mandarin all became associated with Chinese capitalism and thus with the death penalty (cf. Edwards 2003).

To survive the Khmer Rouge regime Youn Malis, like her mother during the French colonial period, had to conceal her Chinese background behind a Khmer mask. The reason for this was that Khmer peasants were seen as crucial subjects to create the agrarian utopia they were striving for and the Chinese merchants as enemies of this ruralization plan. Youn Malis’ mother strongly advised her to only speak Khmer, dress like a Khmer, identify herself as a peasant and tell nobody about her Chinese roots. On the surface the Khmer Rouge regime might have seemed classless and people were encouraged to call each other ‘brothers’ and ‘friends’, but behind the scenes they were encouraged to spy on each other and betray non-revolutionary figures. Luckily, having a Khmer father and being transculturally socialized it was not difficult for Youn Malis to act as the correct revolutionary figure. Her older brother, though, was less lucky and was betrayed by a co-worker after they had found out about his university education, and he got killed by the Pol Pot soldiers because of his intellectual background.\footnote{Ironically, the Pol Pot biographer Philip Short (2003) argues that Pol Pot was a Sino-Cambodian intellectual as well who had received a university education in Paris.}

Afraid being labeled ‘351’

In 1979 the Pol Pot nightmare ended for Youn Malis after former Khmer Rouge cadre Heng Samrin, backed by the Vietnamese army, had occupied Cambodia and ousted the Khmer Rouge rebels. Immediately after the war was over, she returned to her village Prek Changkran and continued her weaving enterprise under the close supervision of Vietnamese soldiers and government officials. However, the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) regime was basically a Vietnamese vassal state and, like the Pol Pot regime, repressed any

Observing the anti-Chinese sentiment of the new PRK regime Stephen Heder (1981) reported that Vietnamese troops had restricted the movement of Chinese around Cambodia and had barred their entry into commercial areas. To tackle the Chinese problem the PRK regime endorsed a ‘351’ assimilation program based on the presumption that the greedy Chinese merchants had already caused too many problems to the national unity of Cambodia. The ‘351’ assimilation program was meant to map the Chinese in Cambodia, based on the prejudice that behind every noodle shop a communist Chinese network would hide (Gottesmann 2003). Although they did not inflict death penalties on them as had been common practice under the Khmer Rouge regime, the PRK regime denied Chinese Cambodians the freedom to celebrate Chinese New Year, to worship their deities, speak Chinese in public or display Chinese cultural artifacts. Afraid of being labeled ‘351’, wealthy Chinese bribed their way out and adopted a Khmer name, while poor ethnic Chinese such as Youn Malis married a Khmer to conceal their Chinese identity.

In 1989, after the establishment of the State of Cambodia, restrictions on Chinese expressions of identity waned in the slipstream of the improved state relationship between China and Cambodia and the withdrawal of the ‘anti-Chinese’ Vietnamese advisors from Cambodia (Edwards 2003). The return of King Sihanouk from exile in 1991\(^\text{147}\) was also seen as a dividing line between the discrimination of the past and the cultural freedom enjoyed by most Chinese today (Edwards 2003). And undoubtedly the arrival of ‘new’ Chinese entrepreneurs injecting the postwar Cambodian economy with huge sums of aid and

\(^{147}\) Sihanouk lived in exile enjoying the hospitality of the Korean ruler Kim II-Sung.
investment dollars also dimmed the associations of Chinese with communism and Pol Pot support.

Like in the prosperous 1960s Cambodia witnessed a renaissance of Chinese schools, newspapers, dialect organizations and temples catering to the massive re-awakening of Chineseness in Cambodia. From the 1990s onwards the Cambodian government, under the lead of a young Prime Minister Samdech Hun Sen, restored the rights of Chinese Cambodians to express their Chinese roots, speak Chinese in public, worship their deities and celebrate the Hungry Ghosts and Mooncake festivals again. And despite the state narrative that only one per cent of its population is ethnic Chinese, modernity, like in Thailand (cf. Szanton-Blanc 1997) became associated with China and not with Cambodia. In Phnom Penh, housing styles, clothing, food, leisure and entertainment shifted progressively towards the Chinese style and the Mandarin language became widely accepted as a business language.

Precisely in this period of Chinese ‘renaissance’ Youn Malis decided to quit her job as a silk weaver and find a job in Phnom Penh as a sampot retailer. Having a past as a silk weaver, good connections with middlemen in her village, access to a local credit saving system and overseas relatives in the United States, Youn Malis saw good future perspectives in Phnom Penh. But despite the fact that being modern and having business success became associated with the image of the industrious Chinaman, Youn Malis, unlike her middleman and unlike the sampot silk vendors on the Olympic and Old Market, kept identifying herself as Khmer. Why did she not express her Chinese background like many other entrepreneurs in Phnom Penh, or, to reverse the question, why does she still exhibit an overtly Khmer identity?
Khmer men do not peddle

To understand why Youn Malis still presents herself as ethnic Khmer we must analyze her failure to establish a credit relationship with her middleman and become a sampot entrepreneur first. Part of the answer is related to her being married to a Khmer. In a weaving context her middleman saw Youn Malis’ marriage with a Khmer as an advantage, because the matrilocal system would move him into his wife’s natal compound and oblige him to give her a hand in her weaving enterprise.148 This to the satisfaction of the middleman, who likes to see many kin members around a loom, as this guarantees him a well-running weaving enterprise that will survive for many generations. However, when Youn Malis expressed ambitions to become a sampot retailer the middleman judged her business identity differently. This was because he had doubts about her trustworthiness as she did not comply with the ideal of traders copying a Chinese lifestyle. Let me explain this further.

Being himself transculturally socialized and thus familiar with both the Khmer and Chinese lifestyle, the middleman knew that Youn Malis’ husband, like most male Khmers, would like to keep the market place at arm’s length. In line with his view on the Khmer sexual division of labor her husband indeed preferred a job in the officialdom and did not want to peddle sampot on the market. The middleman observed how her husband, but also her two sons, never appeared in Youn Malis’ retail store and did not show any ambitions in this direction either. As Youn Malis (laughingly) recalled149:

‘No, my husband never helps in my shop. He works at the tax department and does not like the markets. He thinks selling silk is a job for women and not for men. My son does not help either, he is busy

148 In the weaving villages I came across many matrilineal kinship systems, although most weavers argued that the choice was open.
149 Interview October 2004
with school. Only my daughter helps, but often only in the weekends. She goes to school as well’.

Similarly, a neighboring peddler, also a former weaver, echoed:\textsuperscript{150}:

‘My husband is a constructor and never comes in my shop to help. He does not like the markets because that is something for women. I have two sons and one daughter. My son does not work on the market, he likes to stroll around (daileen) with friends along the riverside. Perhaps my daughter will take over the business later, but I am not sure. Perhaps she will marry a rich man and work in his shop, then what can I do?’

What bothers a middleman about such stories is the husband’s preference to start a career outside the market place and the incapability of the above retailers to mobilize kin members. Precisely because Youn Malis lacked family support in Phnom Penh her middleman wondered whether she could ever attract customers, bargain with several customers at the same time, establish a permanent clientele and ask for government licenses, on her own. In his opinion Youn Malis’ market stall was embedded in weak family links, and had no possibilities to accumulate capital and increase its stock in the future.

But Youn Malis had other family problems:\textsuperscript{151}:

‘The family of my husband eats up my business. They always come to Phnom Penh when they are sick and when they have debts. During Phcum Ben, when I go to their homes, I always have to bring food with me and clothes. My family is poor as well, but they never come to Phnom Penh and beg for money, but my husband’s family always

\textsuperscript{150} Interview October 2004
\textsuperscript{151} Interview October 2004
comes to me and asks for money. How can I ever become rich that way?’

This could be compared to what the owner of the wholesale shop *La Maison de la Soie* once said:

‘During UNTAC there were many sellers and we all sold a lot of handicrafts. I was not a very good peddler at all, some were much better than me, but their business never grew. This is because they always gave their profits away, while I re-invested all my profit in my business and slowly became bigger and bigger’.

*Can Buddhists become rich?*

To understand Youn Malis’ husbands’ moral attitude against capital accumulation it is perhaps wise to make a religious side-step and analyze the differences in soteriologies (i.e. theories on how people achieve enlightenment) between Khmer Buddhism and Chinese Buddhism. Although the Khmer Buddha does not condemn wealth, he does teach his followers to spend their profits moderately (*mattannuta*) rather than satisfying their own desires (Payutto 1998). In contrast with the classical economic discourse to reinvest profit into one’s business, Theravada Buddhist texts teach household members to share their wealth with generosity and return it for beneficial purposes in accordance with the path of the Noble One (*ibid.*: 69). In one passage for instance the Buddha explains to the wealthy merchant Anathapindika how he should spend his profits in a morally sound way and how he should please his family, his friends, his servants, his co-villagers and his *sangka* (*ibid.*: 86). The Theravada Buddhist concept of ‘*pratityasamutpada*’ also offers a strong moral base for giving (*aawie*), pointing at the interdependence of things and actions and noting that helping others in this life will bring prosperity in the next one (*ibid.*).

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152 Interview September 2004
The above moral attitudes do not increase one’s stock but increase one’s merit, which again will give a person a better karma in a future life. In other words, Khmer Buddhist moralities do not measure a person’s worth by material wealth, but instead judge the ethical value of wealth by the ways in which it is obtained, and the use to which it is put (ibid.). That is also why Youn Malis’ husband feels morally obliged to spend his income and that of his wife on sick and poor family members. Followers of Chinese Buddhism in contrast practice a completely different kind of Buddhism, Mahayana, and sometimes mix that with forms of Confucianism or other forms of popular beliefs (Ornatowski 1996).

Although both kinds of Buddhism value lay-normativity highly in discourse, economic ethics in Mahayana Buddhism show differences with those in Theravada Buddhism, because of its different understanding of nirvana, enlightenment, and the Bodhisattva ideal. The most important difference between Mahayana and Theravada soteriologies is the former’s greater acceptance of this-worldly economic activities by the Chinese sangha. This must again be understood in terms of Buddhism’s entry in China as a foreign religion and its efforts to accommodate itself to an already existing Confucian/Daoist heritage (ibid.). Unlike Buddhism, Confucianism placed much more emphasis on happiness and prosperity in ‘this world’, which also contributed to the development of commercially-minded monks, monasteries and followers. In Chinese temples for instance one could see commercial activities that could never have taken place in Indian temples, such as grain milling, oil seed pressing, money lending, mutual financing associations and the renting of lands to farmers in exchange for some percentage of the crop (ibid.).

Apparently Youn Malis deployed a more commercially oriented and this-worldly vision on capital accumulation than did her husband.
However, being married to a Khmer, she did not have the power to resist his worries, because women only rule the money pot in Cambodia, but not the other life spheres (cf. Ledgerwood 1990). Not being able to resist her husband’s objection against capital accumulation, it became impossible for Youn Malis to establish a long-lasting trust relationship (tjumpha) with her middleman. Again, in a weaving context her middleman did not care that Youn Malis’ husband spent most of her profits wisely on his kin members, friends and the sangha.\footnote{The monk-order} because the more debts the better. This is because debts guaranteed the middleman that Youn Malis would continue to produce for him and not dump him for another middleman. But once she wanted to become a silk vendor in Phnom Penh the middleman was suddenly abhorred with her husband’s ’spending culture’ and witnessed to his dissatisfaction how her sampot stock did not increase and that Youn Malis was not able to copy the lifestyle that goes hand in hand with the image of a Chinese family firm.

The myth of a harmonious diaspora
Expressions like ‘blood is thicker than water’ (Kuo 1996:119) are often used to express the closely-knit character of Chinese business networks and express a primordial and racist definition of ethnicity. Taken as authentic features of an essentially Chinese culture both the Chinese family and guanxi particularism have been systematically used as objects of cultural analyses by scholars studying ethnic Chinese (cf. Ong and Nonini 1997). In particular familism, guanxi (good connections), ganqing (sentiment) and a common native place (tongxiang guanxi) have been emphasized as positive attributes to the trust and credit that make the Chinese commercial system prosper around the world (Hamilton 1996; Kotkin 1993; Ong and Nonini 1997; Weidenbaum and Hughes 1996).
The trade career of Youn Malis, however, represents a counter-narrative to the idea that guanxi particularism and tongxiang guanxi benefit ethnic Chinese, and that all Chinese are willing to provide each other with credit, commercial contacts and inside information. It is ironic that Youn Malis first used her marriage with a Khmer successfully to conceal her Chinese identity, but cannot climb socially to the ranks of a sampot entrepreneur now because she married a Khmer. This also indicates that her hybridity is not always a blessing for her but can also work against her, in this case when trying to obtain credit. Or, in the words of Stuart Hall (1996:3):

‘Identification is a process of articulation, a suturing, an over-determination, not a subsumption. There is always ‘too much’ or ‘too little’ - an over-determination or a lack, but never a proper fit, a totality’.

Because Youn Malis’ hybridity was a disadvantage to bond socially with her middleman she decided to start up a silk stall in the diaspora- and tourist-oriented silk industry. Helpful in this regard was her sister who lived in Boston, as well as many other Cambodian Americans roaming around the Central Market to fill their suitcases with sampot hol. Since Cambodia opened up its border in 1991, Leiper (1998) noted an enormous increase of Cambodian Americans visiting their homeland as ‘American’ tourists. The Cambodian Americans have clear emotional interests in Cambodia and depict the silk weaving industry as an Angkorean treasure that was destroyed by the evil Khmer Rouge revolutionaries. Forced to leave their homeland in the 1970s and having lost many relatives in the Pol Pot working zones the Cambodian diaspora framed a diasporic consciousness around the silk industry as authentic Khmer. As Katharaya Um (2006: 88) explains:
‘For many Cambodian refugees, nostalgia for a glorious pre-war homeland became a way of reclaiming an identity amidst the loss, disorientation and liminality of their refugee condition’.

To tap herself into the wider spectrum of the global economy Youn Malis recognized this nostalgia as a market niche and became a storyteller and representative of the grand Khmer narrative, selling authentic Khmer silks. To make a living as a storyteller she commercialized her weaving past, not only to attract the Cambodian diaspora, but, as we will see in the pages that follow, also a second group of Khmer authenticity seekers: tourists. Her Khmer identity was a blessing again.

After Angkor Wat became a UNESCO World heritage project in 1992 the number of tourists visiting it has grown astonishingly from 140,000 visitors in 1993 to 800,000 in 2002 and over one million in 2005 (Ministry of Tourism 2005). Most of the tourists are middle-class package tourists who fly in directly from eastern Asian and Western countries to Phnom Penh and lately also to Siem Reap. With a recovering postwar economy desperately seeking for extra revenues, ‘Angkor tourism’ generates a gross income amounting over US$ 220 million and represents one of the country’s most important assets for socio-economic development (Economic Institute of Cambodia 2004). On the whole the tourism industry is estimated to employ some 70,000 Cambodians, of which only 10,000 are working in the hotel and travel industries (ibid.). The ‘other’ 60,000 workers try to make a living out of tourism for instance by selling ‘authentic’ Khmer handicrafts.

In the slipstream of heritage tourism, Richie and Zins (1978: 253) have defined cultural tourism as ‘the consumption by tourists of features resembling the culture of a society’. Richie and Zins identified certain elements of culture, which attract tourists to particular destinations, such as handicrafts, language, traditions, the history of
a region, architecture, dress, and so on (ibid.). However, it is not a secret anymore that World Heritage programs conceive culture in rather static and geographically bounded terms and often cover up paradoxical social and economic relations within the industry (Dahles 2001). After UNESCO framed the Angkor Wat temple complex as a monument of past glory (Winter 2006), it also framed the silk woven *sampot hol* as an historical core in the identities of the Khmers.

In the official UNESCO narrative the silk weavers in Takeo Province are ethnic Khmers and the *hol* weaving techniques have their roots in the temple complex of Angkor. Fitting into the ‘grand narrative’ that the silk woven *sampot hol* can be traced back primordially to the ruins of Angkor, the standardized and homogenous UNESCO discourse clearly corresponds with the romantic stories tourists like to hear about ancient old ruins and authentic crafts having survived decades of brutal civil wars. Recalling Arjun Appadurai’s (1996) notion of ‘touristscape’ a high UNESCO official in Phnom Penh once told me how he had reconstructed Phnom Chisor in Takeo Province as an authentic weaving site and had added to it authentic performance arts such as Khmer drama dances, shadow theatre, oral folktails and Arak music to attract tourists and generate incomes for the Khmer artists at the same time. Although these performative artists were internal migrants from other provinces, they were presented as Phnom Chisor villagers to meet the expectations of tourists.

The invention of traditions and the social construction of authenticity in the tourism industry are not new phenomena, of course, and have been widely studied (Cohen 1988, MacCannell 1973, Urry 1990). We all know by now that tourists consume ancient tales of discovery like ‘real’ commodities and have adopted a romantic gaze in their search for ‘naturalness’ (Urry 1990). In Cambodia, after package tourists and backpackers have visited the once-lost Angkor Wat temple complex, they fill their suitcases and backpacks with Khmer *sampot hol*. In the
wake of this discovery experience the argument goes that, confronted with the authenticity demand of tourist handicraft, silk vendors start to reconstruct and objectify their ethnicity and consider it as an authentic commodity to tourists (cf. MacCannell 1973). They stage, to paraphrase Dean MacCannell, their authenticity to attract tourists and prevent them from seeing other cultures.

Contrary to what tourists believe, the silk scarves and *sampot* that Youn Malis peddles are machine-made replicates from Laos, Burma and Thailand. She begged me to keep silent about this trade secret, because it could damage her business and future income. To eclipse the cultural diversity of her commodities Youn Malis presents herself ‘Khmer style’ with a make-up-free face, curled black hair and a silk *krama* wrapped around her neck. To complete her ‘Khmer authenticity strategy’ she is seated on a bamboo mat and burns incense to create a spiritual atmosphere. And once the intended tourists sit in her plastic chairs she overloads them with machine-made Lao scarves, which she sells as 100% Khmer. This ‘act of Khmer authenticity’ is also how Dahles and Zwart (2003), the author of this thesis, and Weyers (2005) were misled by handicraft vendors on Cambodian tourist markets as they staged themselves and their commodities as authentic Khmer.

But when Youn Malis markets her foreign scarves as authentic Khmer she is not fooling tourists, but instead anticipating on what tourists define as authentic Khmer. The Russian technical forces in the 1980s, the UNTAC members in the 1990s and also the contemporary tourists disliked the expensive *sampot hol* for its dull color and preferred machine-made colorful scarves from Lao and Birma to bring home as souvenirs. In a related vein Eric Cohen (1988) observed how tourists in Thailand and Java appreciated commercialized replications of local artifacts more than the original ones, and were not always seeking for authentic experiences at all. And going against the postmodern indices that tourists search for ‘naturalness’ (Urry 1990) Popelka and
Littrell (1991) also studied tourists’ perceptions of authenticity and found that only nine per cent focused on the issue of the genuineness versus fakeness of the product. Although scholars accept that heritage-based tourism revolves around the fragmentary nature of late-modern society and a lack of depth and originality in tourists’ own lives (cf. Baudrillard 1998 [1970]), we must be careful when assuming that tourists share the same kind of pessimism. As Eric Cohen (1988) observed, middle-class package groups, unlike the educated elite, are relatively unconcerned with the problem of authenticity and do not care about being surrounded by copies and plastic art.

**Conclusion**

Addressing the fourth research question (Why do ethnic Chinese silk traders market ‘their’ silk weaving products as authentically Khmer), I have presented another case study in this chapter, this time around the silk vendor Youn Malis. Following the trade career of this middle-aged silk vendor from the late colonial period onwards I have shown, why, contrary to Mrs. Bun and all the wholesalers and middlemen, this retailer has no reason to exhibit a Chinese trader’s lifestyle and counter the Khmer modernization claim. When Youn Malis says she feels Khmer, is a devoted Buddhist and loves the king she is not eclipsing a Chinese identity, but is instead a Cambodian citizen with a multi-layered identity who has no reasons to revive a far-away Chinese past. Being socialized in the Khmer weaving class, having gained a Cambodian citizenship and being married to a Khmer Youn Malis has been socialized primarily as a Khmer, who happens to have Chinese ancestors. Of course she celebrates Chinese New Year and, yes, she offers food to please the Hungry Ghosts in November, but unlike the wholesalers she does not close her stall on that day, because she is not ‘really’ scared that these ghosts will harm her business. There has only been one moment in her trade career when she wished she could negotiate her Chinese past a bit better, and that
was when her middleman was judging her as a future business partner to give credit to. Youn Malis did not succeed in establishing trade connections with her middleman, notably a co-villager and former patron, because of her husband’s Khmer Buddhist attitude against capital accumulation. As a consequence she had great difficulties to copy and exhibit the Chinese life style that goes hand in hand with a closely-knit and harmonious family firm.

Turning the burden of a Khmer identity into a blessing again she decided to sell ‘foreign’ handicrafts as authentic Khmer on the tourist markets. On the tourist markets she used her Khmer weaving identity strategically again because tourists love to buy authentic Khmer silks from an authentic Khmer weaver. When Youn Malis expands her silk business across the borders into the Cambodian Diaspora communities her Khmer weaving identity is also an advantage. The Cambodian Diaspora has a clear emotional interest in her being an authentic Khmer weaver, too, because they depict the ‘hol’ silk weaving techniques, like themselves, as remnants of an Angkorean past that survived the evil Khmer Rouge revolutionaries.

This chapter has also shown that the identity of the foreign silks and the ‘indigenous’ sampot hol have merged into one symbol of Khmer authenticity. This is because it follows the global consuming desires of today’s tourists and Khmer expatriates for Khmer authenticity. Marxist scholars would say this consumption behavior has exercised a monopoly over Youn Malis’ identity and has forced her to become the commodity she sells. In such a vision the silks that Youn Malis sells have ultimate power over her, a situation George Lukacs, cited in Inglis and Hughson (2003:23-24), called reification. Jean Baudrillard (1998 [1970]) also dislikes the ‘fake’ character of commodities and
sees such forms of capitalism as an uncontrollable sign system full of simulacra (ibid.:148-149).  

The question remains what is fake and what is reality in a multi-layered and hegemonized country such as Cambodia. The Cambodian subject, as I have shown, is used to exhibiting different lifestyles and codes of conduct. Thus if the Cambodian subject does not think in terms of primordial affiliations, why would Youn Malis then be a victim of the ‘fake’ commodity she sells? Of course Youn Malis can not tell tourists about her Chinese ancestors. Of course the sampot hol cannot have its roots in China. And of course Youn Malis has become the identity that her commodity has ‘forced’ her to become. But does that mean she is a passive victim of a global demand for authenticity or must we see her identity as that of an active entrepreneur consciously exhibiting the ‘correct’ lifestyle to earn a living in one of the poorest countries of Asia?

154 According to Baudrillard (1998 [1970]) simulacra are images that fabricate a reality that has no existence except for its fabrication.
Conclusion

Within the context of a booming Cambodian silk weaving industry the aim of this thesis is to generate empirical knowledge about migration movements, business networks, identity politics and modernization processes. Elaborating on concepts of ethnicity, transnationalism and materialism on the one hand and postmodern and post-Marxist theories on the other I have attempted to answer the following research question:

‘How does the ethnically complex organization of the silk weaving industry relate to diverging modernization narratives and which interests do these narratives serve in the contemporary Cambodian nation state in general and its silk industry in particular?’

One conclusion to be drawn from this research it is that the Cambodian silk weaving industry sits uncomfortably in between two narratives of modernization; i.e. a dominant cultural narrative referring back to the glorious Angkor empire and a re-emerging economic narrative singing the praise of the commercial qualities of the ethnic Chinese population. As the dominant modernization narrative about the silk weaving industry holds, Khmer women manufactured silk skirts and used an *ikat* weaving technique also referred to as ‘hol’ as early as the twelfth century. This dominant narrative describes how the ‘hol’ *ikat* weaving techniques disappeared from the Cambodian landscape during the Khmer Rouge revolution and returned again in the 1990s, mainly due to the efforts of foreign development agencies.

The Cambodian population and their political leaders are extremely proud of this craftsmanship and consider the ‘*ikat*’ woven *sampot hol* as an important ‘totem pole’ of their nationhood. In the run-up to the UN-sponsored elections in 1993, the veteran Cambodian politician
Son Sann even proposed a ‘sampot test’ as a means of discerning the true ethnic identity of Cambodians. This patriotic remark was made during a heated debate about the voting rights of Vietnamese residents of Cambodia, and it was believed that only pure Khmer (khmae sot) could pass a sampot test, a feat deemed impossible for Vietnamese who commonly wear trousers.

Precisely because narratives about cultural objects in Cambodia are loaded with ethnic pride, breaking cultural codes or making ‘false’ statements about their origin can lead to demonstrations or even outbursts of anger. In January 2003, the popular Thai TV soap-star Suvanant Kongying remarked in an interview with a Cambodian newspaper that she would visit Cambodia only under the condition that they would return Angkor Wat to its right owner, Thailand. In the week that followed the publication of this interview, raging Cambodians destroyed $47 million worth of Thai property (Thai embassy, Thai hotels, Thai cars) in Phnom Penh and evicted more than 700 Thai nationals, including Ambassador Chatchawed Chartsuwan and his staff. A few days later, the left-wing Cambodian politician Sam Rainsey made things even worse declaring that prime-minister Hun Sen had purposely used and blown up the phrase of this young and naïve soap-star to promote his campaign for the coming elections and win souls for his CPP party.

This incident once again illustrates that postcolonial Cambodian political leaders use to seek legitimacy in the imagery of the twelfth-century temple complex of Angkor Wat, as Penny Edwards (1999) argued, making this temple complex the dominant cultural and political framework for national identity building, in which images of history, place, landscape are envisioned. Yet, going against the narrative that Cambodia modernized in a Khmer way, colonial scholars emphasized the constructive character of Khmer culture and
argued that French colonial art institutions authenticated the *sampot hol* as a symbol of Khmer ethnic pride (Edwards 1999, 2002; Muan 2001). In an attempt at critically assessing this ‘total colonial fact’ (Ben Ari 1999) both Edwards and Muan remind us that Cambodian nationalism must not be seen as a colonial allergy but as its avatar, because postcolonial state leaders adopted the French Oriental discourse.

Although the colonialism/modernism continuum of Edwards (1999) and Muan (2001) is refreshing, they seem to be just as trapped in the total colonial fact. Exhibiting an orientalist perspective (Said 1995), these writers seem to have established a blind spot, as only one possible modernization claim exists for them: the French one. Yet, establishing a historical perspective on the origin of the Cambodian silk weaving industry in chapter three, this thesis indicates that the origin of the present-day Cambodian silk weaving industry neither lies in the Courts of Angkor nor in French colonial art institutions, but that it is the result of Chinese migration and a demand for authentic silk clothes by the Khmer elite in late nineteenth-century Cambodia. I deliberately refer to the origin of the present-day silk weaving industry, because academic research has shown that the Chinese again adopted the weft *ikat* weaving techniques from Tai speaking groups (cf. Howard 1999). Still, adopting the weft *ikat* weaving techniques from the Tai, it were the Chinese immigrants who manufactured a silken cloth they referred to as *sampot hol*.

After being hegemonized by the Siamese and Vietnamese courts for centuries, Cambodia was ‘liberated’ by the French in 1863 and the Khmer elite was desperately searching for a dress to mark their independence as Khmer. The Cantonese silk merchants recognized the Khmer desire after an indigenous identity and marketed the *sampot hol* as authentic Khmer. Filling this silk ‘niche’ was profitable for both parties, because the Khmer elite, as customers, got their much-
wanted identity and the economic Cantonese elite, as producers, was presented with an opportunity to continue their silk businesses. At stake was thus the establishment of a pre-colonial ‘winning hegemony’ (Gramsci 1971) between two different social categories, who had joint political, cultural and economic interests to depict the *sampot hol* as authentic Khmer.

Often, Chinese migration to Southeast Asia has been described as the effect of poverty, wars and a colonial demand for their labor. This study has shown that the ethnic Chinese dominated the silk weaving industry long before the arrival of the French colonists. In fact, the French silk industrials could not compete with the Cantonese silk merchants at all and depended on their revenue farms for the supply of raw materials, labor and export channels. The Cantonese silk immigrants, therefore, were not naïve opportunity seekers, starting up a whatsoever business under the patronage of French colonists. Instead, their migration movements were business-oriented and many of them had already been conditioned for centuries to respond to various kinds of market niches abroad (cf. Kuhn 2006), in this case silk producing and weaving in Cambodia.

To understand how this modernization process continued I have attempted to answer the second research question in chapter four: ‘How did the present-day silk weaving industry transform into a multi-layered silk weaving network?’ Initially, the Cambodian silk weaving industry was a humble household affair in which silk weavers cultivated their own mulberry trees, reeled their own silk yarn and peddled their own *sampot*. From the late colonial period onwards, however, silk yarn was imported from Japan, China and Vietnam and the village-based silk weaving industry transformed into a transnational multi-layered business network.
Conclusion

Going against the capitalist argument that increasing global competition, mass production and the emergence of the consumer as the driving force behind capitalism will flatten ethnic Chinese business networks (cf. Yeung and Olds 2000), this chapter has pointed at the fact that descendents of the Cantonese silk immigrants still organize their production and trade relationships within the pyramid structure of the ‘colonial’ revenue farm system their ancestors once introduced (cf. Trocki 1997; Wilson 2004). As indicated, small wholesaler conglomerates hold some 75 per cent of the total amount of 20,000 silk weavers in a firm credit grip, controlling the cross-border silk yarn trade (cf. Dongelmans, Seng and Ter Horst 2005). In line with political-economic writers such as Khan and Jomo (2000), Wedeman (2003), Duara (1988) and Case (2000), this chapter comes to the conclusion that rents are essential for maintaining social order and also necessary for economic growth in Cambodia.

Although Cambodia became a member of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) in the 1990s and openly promoted an ‘open sky policy’, silk weavers and middlemen, who notably live in the borderlands, cannot buy silk yarn themselves at the Tan Chau spineries. The idea of the border as an excluder of economic opportunities for the weavers and middlemen clearly goes against the ‘cultural optimism’ of globalization theorists such as Samudavanija Chai-Annan (1994), Robin Cohen (1997) and Andrew Walker (1999) who have applauded the re-emergence of ethnic-based cross-border relationships in the Mekong region. Instead, the results of this study bring us much closer to what Donnan and Wilson (1999) once said about border crossings, namely that they implicate the twin narratives of inclusion and incorporation on the one hand and of exclusion and dispossession on the other hand. Due to their good connections with high ranked government officials only the powerful wholesalers in
Phnom Penh have the opportunity to cross the border and buy raw silk from the Tan Chau spinnery.

In Marxist terms, the institutional alliance between a small political and an economic elite may be dubbed as unproductive, exploitative and corrupt. However, in the Cambodian context, the silk weavers and middlemen do not feel exploited by the business practices and power position of the wholesalers. As James Scott (1976) stated, exploitation is not a scientific concept but a moral one, and silk weavers and middlemen account for their lack of power in the officialdom as part of their rank in the silk weaving network. In this regard one should not forget that Buddhist monks in the village pagoda also put silk weavers and middlemen into place, and remind them continually of how much merit powerful traders must have collected in a previous life and how justly they are reaping the rewards of generosity and compassion.

Yet, the cultural, economic, institutional and political arguments do not explain the ethnic differences that exist between present-day Khmer silk producers and Chinese silk traders. Often ‘ethnic economies’, ‘diasporas’ and ‘transnational business networks’ are seen as homogenous entities that operate within the boundaries of shared group affiliations. In its early days, the Cambodian silk weaving industry was organized within the boundaries of an ethnic Chinese diaspora. As illustrated on the cover of this thesis and more explicit in chapter four the nineteenth century silk weavers lived in houses decorated in a Chinese style and wore black farmer pants from China. Today, however, silk weavers no longer wear black farmer pants but spin the wheels in a cotton sarong or a silken sampot.

In chapter five I have attempted to shed light on the processes of ethnicization that occurred under the ethnic Chinese modernization conditions and to answer the third research question: How do silk producers and traders negotiate their identities within the economic domain of the silk weaving industry? Undoubtedly, the 1929 land law
and the repression of Chinese identity in the 1970s and 1980s has left their marks on the Khmer self-presentations of the silk weavers, but this does not explain why wholesalers and middlemen wear ‘Chinese’ pants and why silk weavers dress themselves in a sampot resembling the image of an indigenous Khmer. Embracing a materialist view on the subject, this study comes to the conclusion that Khmer and Chinese self-presentations must not be seen as primordial affiliations or as outcomes of state bio-politics (cf. Foucault 1978, 1980, 1991), but instead as lifestyles, cultural repertoires and codes of conduct rooted in a territorial division of labor and local community networks.

Although there is nothing new about shifting and strategic identities, transnationalism scholars have neglected to connect the flexible identities of the ethnic Chinese to their social position in the ‘bamboo’ networks (cf. Weidenbaum and Hughes 1996). As Philip Yang (2006) indicates, transnationalism scholars have extensively written about diverse home and host experiences (cf. Ma and Cartier 2003), but failed to write about the network experiences ‘in-between’. Although this study does not have the ambition to institutionalize the reductionism of classical Marxist theories, it illustrates how production and trade relationships became ethnicized according to distinctive and unequal positions in silk industry.

Chapter five has shown how the silk entrepreneurs in Cambodia moulding themselves as ethnic Chinese and downgrade the silk producers, whose labor they consume, as Khmer. The ethnic distinctions between silk producers and traders give credit to Abner Cohen’s view on ethnicity pointing out that it is a useful heuristic concept tailored to make sense of particular, historically delineated economic processes such as colonization, urbanization and modernization. In his own words:
Conclusion

‘one need not be a Marxist in order to recognize the fact that the earning of livelihood, the struggle for a larger share of income from the economic system constitute an important variable significantly related to ethnicity’ (Cohen 1990 [1974]: 91).

Culturalist literature emphasizes that reciprocal relationships within ethnic groups enforce harmony and consensus towards the lineage (cf. Fukuyama 1995; Kotkin 1993; Redding 1990). However, this study (cf. chapter five) shows that middlemen and wholesalers used ethnicity to antagonize and downgrade kin members and fellow ethnics as lower ranked weavers. In the working place regimes of the wholesalers and middlemen the sampot hol, the house on poles and Khmer religious relics are symbols that express the poor economic position and subsistence ethic of the silk weavers. In contrast, the Chinese housing style, dress system and Confucian religious orientation exhibit a lifestyle that legitimizes a trader to reap the benefits of the commodity and ‘own’ the labor of the weavers, kin member or not.

This brings me to the conclusion that identity is a both a material and a symbolic affair in the Cambodian silk weaving industry, and that the trick for weavers and traders is to play the correct role that belongs to someone’s economic and political position in the network. Playing the correct role as a peasant or trader is not uncommon for Cambodians. As chapter two has shown, underneath the myth of an all-Khmer nation rests an extremely diverse and pluralistic society that has been hegemonized and ‘civilized’ by both domestic (especially the Khmer Rouge regime) and foreign powers for centuries. As a consequence, the Cambodian subject is used to adapt to different codes of conduct and deploys multi-layered identities for strategic use.

As anthropologists argued, identities are symbolically constructed in social processes, like in the case of mimetic practices, in which one literally adopts cultural codes from powerful others to climb socially (Jackson 2006: 326). Especially in preliterate societies where most
practical learning is a matter of direct observation and ‘prestige imitation’, role-identities are important sources of symbolic capital (ibid.). In this regard the American sociologist Erving Goffmann (1959) observed that front-stage performances are most visible and are used as forms of ‘impression management’ among marginal people who are discriminated and must hide their ‘stigma’ to successfully interact with others. In Goffmann’s notion of ‘impression management’ human beings, called actors, play roles and give impressions of how they would like to be seen. At the front-stage actors stage a public face that depends on the audience they are confronted with and the context they are situated in, while once leaving the public stage and entering the backstage, they feel much safer and closer to their ‘real’ mental, moral and psychological self (ibid.).

Still, linking the symbolic identities of the silk weavers and traders to unequal production relationships and subsistence ethics alone is not sufficient to understand the gap that exists between the ethnic Chinese dominance of the industry and the Khmer modernization claim vested on the silk products by a range of stakeholders including the ethnic Chinese silk traders. According to Marx, the state usually secures the interests of the capitalist class in society and deploys ‘ideologies’ that mask the true, class-based exploitative nature of society (Inglis and Hughson 2003: 23). The story that the majority of the Cambodian parliament still consists of ethnic Chinese [as a remnant of French colonial policies (Osborne 1969; Meyer 1971) should be interpreted in this light. However, the political and capitalist elite in Cambodia proliferates the culture of the workers and not the one of the capitalists. In other words, there exists a gap between the ethnic background of the political and economic elite in Cambodia and between the ways they advertise Cambodian culture publicly.

In chapter six I have attempted to shed light on the gap that exists between the Khmer and Chinese modernization processes and to answer the fourth research question: Why do ethnic Chinese silk
traders and other crucial stakeholders (the state, NGOs and local communities) market silk weaving products as authentically Khmer? Following Walter Benjamin’s (1940) notion of ‘traditional modernity’ and Jean Baudrillard’s (1998 [1970]) concept of ‘consumer societies’ this study comes to the conclusion that all stakeholders, including the ethnic Chinese silk entrepreneurs, had an economic interest to market the silk products as being the ‘traditional’ ones of the Khmer silk weavers. First, to cope with the trauma of the Pol Pot regime postwar national leaders re-introduced the sampot hol as the national dress and nostalgically linked it back to the glorious age of Angkor, like their forebears used to do. Mythologizing Khmer culture to create national unity was put to the extreme by the PRK regime, which, demonizing Pol Pot, wanted to reverse a ‘reality’ in which Cambodians had killed each other during the war into a ‘new’ narrative of Pol Pot survivors sharing the same traumatic event and Angkorean roots. Converting aggressors into victims the postwar regime needed the ‘fictive’ Khmer sampot hol again to unite all Cambodians as members of the same destroyed Khmer community.

Secondly, the return of king Sihanouk from exile in 1991 and members of the royal household publicly advertising the sampot hol as authentic Khmer, the Angkorean origin of sampot hol became an important symbol of community, peace and liberty. After all, the Royal family is beloved by the majority of the Cambodian population and traces its genealogy back to the glorious era of Angkor, a genealogy that the war-stricken population needed to be reminded of in order to heal the wounds of the failed Khmer Rouge era. Albeit cruel, a ‘trauma dress’ supported by both the state and the royal family was lucrative for the silk entrepreneurs, because it guaranteed them a huge regular clientele, mainly in the busy April-November ceremonial season.

Thirdly, as the case-studies organized around the silk retailers in chapter six indicated, the Cambodian diaspora also had emotional and economic reasons to present silk weaving as authentic Khmer.
Conclusion

Forced to leave their homeland in the 1970s and having lost many relatives in the Pol Pot working zones, the Cambodian diaspora framed a narrative of diasporic nostalgia around the silk industry as authentic Khmer. Allowed to visit their homeland again in the 1990s, Cambodian expatriates filled their suitcases with *sampot hol* and redistributed these among Cambodian diaspora communities in the US, Europe and France. Silk traders such as Mrs. Bun and Youn Malis recognized this diasporic demand for Khmer authenticity skillfully and had no reason to market the *sampot hol* as Chinese.

Fourth, after Angkor became listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1992, the number of tourists increased from a mere 9,000 in 1993 to around one million in the year 2005 (Ministry of Tourism 2005). In particular the temples of Angkor and sites relating to the Pol Pot era became the focal point of a 1990s post-conflict ‘Restoration Culture’ led by international organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (Ollier and Winter 2006). The arrival of millions of dollars of financial assistance integrated Cambodia further into a dense web of Khmer consumer culture, in which it again became very lucrative for the silk entrepreneurs to advertise silk weaving products as authentically Khmer.

In sum, and coming to terms with the gap that emerged between the Khmer modernization claim vested in the silk products and the ethnic organization of the silk weaving industry, this study comes to the conclusion that this gap must be seen as a political strategy to imagine a nation (cf. Anderson 1991 [1983]) and a marketing strategy to meet consumer demands for Khmer authenticity. In negative terms, the strategic silence around the Chinese origin of the *sampot hol* can be valued as a superstructure (cf. Marx 2000 [1867]) that covers up the story that the ethnic Chinese are not only economically powerful, but also dominant in the political domain of Cambodia.
But, to paraphrase Fink (1995: 25), canceling out the real does not mean the symbolic becomes a postmodern phantasm, because the symbolic creates a new ‘reality’, a reality which is named by language and can thus be thought and talked about in a meaningful way. As Walter Benjamin (1940) pointed out, myths are not only negative indices of the real but also have a positive productive dimension for the future. Or, in the words of Glynos and Stavrakakis (2004: 207), myths can be traumatic in the sense that they threaten identities but they are positive in the sense that they serve as the foundation on which new identities are constituted.

Although it is true that the business practices of the businesspeople in the silk industry operate vertically within the boundaries of ethnic Chinese ethnicity, their business practices also filled a gap in ‘Khmer’ culture and gave millions of Cambodians a sense of ethnic pride after the horrifying Pol Pot regime. Conversely, the grand Khmer narrative can be regarded as a myth that silences other truths, but we must acknowledge that Cambodian history was a painful one which had to be eclipsed by a fallacious Khmer symbol. To eclipse a painful history of war and poor economic conditions, a myth about an ancient Khmer-rooted silk weaving industry is meaningful for the emotional, symbolic and economic recuperation of the nation. Making whole what has been smashed, silk weavers and traders had to silence their Chinese backgrounds and stage themselves as descendents of the 12th century Khmer. This also means that progress in Cambodia is interwoven with silence because, resembling Walter Benjamin’s (1940) ‘angels of progress’, silk weavers and traders have to enter the 21st century with their faces to the past and their backs to the future.
Appendices
Appendix A

A mobile research approach

In ‘Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century’, the American anthropologist Eric Wolf (1969: xii) elaborates:

The anthropologist is greatly aware of the importance of groups, which mediate between the peasant and larger societies of which he forms a part. The landlord, the merchant, the political boss, the priest stand at the junctures in social, economic and political relations, which connect the village to wider ranging elites in markets or political networks. In his study of peasant villages he has learned to recognize their crucial role in peasant life, and he is persuaded that they must play a significant role in peasant involvement in political upheaval. To describe such groups, and to locate them in the social field in which they must manoeuvre, it is useful to speak of them as ‘classes’. Classes are for me quite real clusters of people whose development or decline is predicated on particular historical circumstances, and who act together or against each other in pursuit of particular interests prompted by these new circumstances. In this perspective, we may ask – in quite concrete terms – how members of such classes make contact with the peasantry. In our accounts, therefore, we must transcend the usual anthropological account of peasants, and seek information also about the larger society and its consistent class groupings, for the peasant acts in an arena, which also contains allies as well as enemies. This is arena is characteristically a field of political battle.

In his famous study on peasant rebellions Eric Wolf was perhaps one of the first anthropologists to undermine a particular anthropology that drew distinct analytical boundaries around villages, regions and states, and instead suggested to approach peasant communities as a part of larger networks (Schneider and Rapp 1995: 57). Today, however, ethnographers cannot but start to appreciate a cross-border
approach on organizations, because recent literature on processes of globalization has identified the emergence of transnational spaces (Pries 2001: 3). This also implies that we cannot study people and their cultures in a Malinowskian way anymore, but must exchange, following Eric Wolf, the once territorially bounded research site for a mobile approach (ibid.).

To collect data on how the contemporary silk weaving network is organized in terms of trade and trader relationships I adopted a mobile research approach and followed the silk threads spatially from ‘worm to sampot’ between April 2004 and May 2005. Because the monsoons would soon flood the sandy roads to the rural weaving areas I decided to start my research in Phnom Penh and meet the retailers and wholesalers within and around the main markets first. After the roads had run dry in November I relocated my study to the weaving regions in Takeo, Kandal and Prey Veng province. Although I had some knowledge of the Khmer language I did not feel comfortable to do the interviews by myself and was very happy to have the help and moral support of my interpreter and good friend Sophal. I had met Sophal in the ‘Khmer Language Center’ in Phnom Penh where I was following language classes and he was one of the teachers. With Sophal by my side, getting access to the weaving villages was not so hard either, and a ‘gift’ to the village leader was often sufficient to do my job there. In fact, the village leaders and silk weavers were more than willing to talk about their careers and enjoyed giving interviews. Because of the cheerfulness of the weavers and the pastoral sound of the clacking looms I enjoyed doing fieldwork there very much and considered it ‘an ethnographer’s heaven’ compared to the crowded, bad-smelling and hot Phnom Penh silk markets.

155 There were exceptions. Since I lived in Phnom Penh I had the opportunity to conduct interviews with wholesalers and retailers all year long.
In March 2005 I traveled to the Vietnamese highlands, more specifically to Bao Loc district, and interviewed five silk spinners and a manager of a silk spinnery there. I made this field trip because the silk weavers in Cambodia confirmed to me that the silk yarn they used was imported from Vietnam, which made me curious to know which ethnic group spins the yarn and who dominates the Vietnamese-Cambodian cross-border silk yarn trade. Once in Bao Loc town I met a university student, who had spent his entire childhood in the United States and identified himself to me as Frank. For three days Frank and I roamed around the Central Highlands of Vietnam and he introduced me to the silk farmers in the hilly surroundings of Bao Loc. It was not difficult to get access to the silk farmers as we could simply walk into their mulberry plots and interview them about their farm activities. The silk farmers enjoyed talking about their passion for mulberries and silk worms and often invited us to continue the conversation while having lunch at the farm. Getting access to the state-owned silk spinnery in Bao Loc was much tougher and it was only through Frank’s tremendous patience that I got the chance to observe a silk spinnery from the inside, normally forbidden terrain for foreign observers. Luckily, the factory manager turned out to be a six foot six volleyball player who shared a passion for NBA basketball with me, especially for the giant Chinese superstar Yao Ming. Thanks to this shared passion I managed to set up a relatively smooth conversation with him and found out soon that silk yarn was not exported to Cambodia by the state-owned spinners but by the private Chinese spinners in Tan Chau, a border town in the Southern Mekong region of Vietnam.

The next day I traveled to Tan Chau and after a few days of relative silence I got in contact with Ms Ngo, a travel agent who once worked in one of the Tan Chau spinners. Being a tour operator she spoke English fluently, which made her a good candidate to interpret for me and visit the Tan Chau silk merchants. The owner of the Tan Chau
silk spinnery turned out to be an elderly lady, who, to her regret, was just on her way to her family in Saigon. But she indeed recognized my interpreter and also felt sorry for me traveling this long to speak to her. Moreover, the idea of being mentioned in a book about silk weaving also flattered her ego and finally she decided to give a one-hour interview. Perhaps because of my own excitement at having an interview with such an influential trader I see this as the best interview of them all.

Throughout my fieldwork period (April 2004-May 2005) I visited the Phnom Srok silk region and interviewed directors of NGOs there who had subcontracted silk spinners for their silk yarn rescue programs. Particularly informative were my many meetings with the Japanese silk expert Kikuo Morimoto with whom I spent a lot of time talking about silk weaving. Although he is heavily criticized for selling the ikat woven pidan for a high price in western art galleries, he was also a charming and devoted man with great knowledge of the Cambodian silk weaving industry. In many ways he reminded me of the Thai silk rescuer Jim Thompson, whose rescue attempt also did not harm the Thai silk industry. Among ourselves Kikuo Morimoto also suspected that the silk weavers were of Chinese origin, because they looked Chinese to him and also spoke a Chinese dialect. From Kikuo Morimoto I also acquired technical knowledge about silk weaving as a practice, which again was very useful in my conversations with the weavers. It was also because of Kikuo Morimoto’s enthusiasm that I decided to follow a silk weaving workshop at the Silk Farm in Siem Reap to further enlarge my knowledge of the weaving techniques.
Appendix B

*The CAS silk census*

While mapping the pivotal silk actors in the silk weaving industry luck turned heavily in my favor in December 2004, when my expertise was recognized by Roger Henke, director of the Center for Advanced Studies (CAS) in Phnom Penh and I was asked to participate in a national census of the Cambodian silk weaving industry. This was because CAS was subcontracted by an American donor organization, USAID, to explore the possibilities of reintegration of former prostitutes in the silk weaving industry. Suddenly I found myself in the luxury position to update the 2001 silk census (Pujebet and Peyre 2001) and saw a great opportunity to map the Cambodian silk weaving industry in terms of trade and trader relationships (see chapter three). Apart from myself, the CAS consultant team consisted of an experienced Cambodian economist, Seng Bunly, and another Dutch anthropologist, Boris Dongelmans, who both had conducted several studies already about economic opportunities in rural areas for so-called ‘vulnerable’ people. Our job was to establish a methodological tool to answer the following three objectives:

1. Mapping of the silk industry, its trade functions and different business models in use.
2. Exploring opportunities for a growth of the silk industry and an increase in its labor demand.
3. Exploring opportunities for weak and vulnerable people to enter the industry.

In order to meet this ambition we decided to develop a loom census and ask the weavers in Cambodia about what fabric was on their loom, the numbers of active weavers per family, their age-sex ratio’,
how they obtained credit, their monthly incomes, the loom activity,
and competition from their industries. We started the census in the
hope that we would have enough time and resources to count all the
weavers, as we did not know how many people were involved in the
industry as weavers. Unfortunately, we did run out of time and money
after the CAS surveyors had questioned the impressive number of
11687 silk weavers. To finish the national census we got into contact
with the French-based silk NGO ‘Projet d'appui au secteur de la soie’
(PASS) that counted an additional 7751 looms increasing the total
number of looms in Cambodia to 19438. Next to designing the census
we also spent a number of weeks in the different silk weaving areas
and quite a number of interviews were held with weavers and
middlemen to understand the business model they used. An
important focus of attention during this qualitative part of the study
was to increase our understanding of the social aspects of the
industry and to find out how social relations in rural Cambodia help
shape economic relations and opportunities.
Appendix C

The interviews
To explore and analyze how the silk traders negotiated their identity in the organization of the silk weaving industry I used ethnographic interviewing as a data collecting method. The ethnographic approach is based on the belief that knowledge of social phenomena can be gained only by direct experience, a view also referred to as ‘ethnographic realism’ (Hammersley 1997: 131-142). The heart of this realism is based on the idea that there are independent and unknown realities that become known by the researcher getting into direct contact with them (ibid.).

Structured interviews
To collect ethnographic data about the ‘inner structure’ of the silk enterprises I conducted 85 structured interviews between April 2004 and May 2005; i.e. twenty silk weavers, fifteen middleman couples, forty silk retailers and all five wholesalers. Designing these interviews I elaborated on the ethnic entrepreneurship literature (Light and Gold 2000) and divided my questions among the following ‘capitals’ in the Bourdieuan (1977) sense, leading to the following interview questions:

Economic capital
-Where did your start-up capital come from?
-Did you have savings?
-Did you get support from a micro-credit association?
-Do you give or receive personal loans?
-Are you a member of a credit rotating system?
-Do you prefer long- or short-term credit relationships?
-Is it difficult to obtain long-term credit relationships?
**Human capital**
- Do you have a schooling diploma?
- How much work experience do you have?
- Who taught you the business/weaving skills?
- Do you remember business/weaving stories of your ancestors?
- Did you often join your parents on trade trips?
- Did you learn business/weaving skills from NGOs?
- How many hours do you work per day?
- How many employees do you have?
- How do you improve your business/weaving skills?

**Social capital**
- Who founded the business/weaving enterprise?
- Did you inherit the business from your parents?
- Do you own the business?
- Are your children supportive?
- Do you recruit laborers within the natal compound?
- Do you outsource labor activities?
- Do you obtain credit from family members?
- Are you collaborating with other entrepreneurs?
- Do you belong to a dialect or surname association?

**Cultural/symbolic capital**
- Are you inviting business partners during ceremonies?
- Do you meet credit members at religious ceremonies?
- Are these ceremonies important to gain credit?
- Do you donate money to the local community?
- Do you donate money to the pagoda?
- Do you give presents to the local officialdom?
- Are your business skills a secret?
- Are there differences in Khmer values and Chinese values?
- Do you know much about Chinese ceremonies?
- Do you follow the Khmer or Chinese Buddhist calendar?
- Are you closing your shop during ‘saen kbal tuk’ (the Hungry Ghost festival)?

Semi-structured interviews

I raised more open questions during the second or third interview because I wanted to analyze how the silk producers and traders negotiated their identity, not only to get things done within the enclave, but also to disclose or antagonize other ethnics. Ethnic economy scholars often stress the unique skills and outlooks shared by members of an ethnic group in their homeland or enclave: the so-called ‘toolkit’ of symbols, stories, rituals, and worldviews that people may be using in establishing configurations. A lesser used model however, emphasizes the way entrepreneurs establish ethnic boundaries (cf. Barth 1969) around their credit members, and disclose other ethnics. Since I was running out of time I was able to interview ten silk weavers, seven middleman couples, fifteen silk retailers and four wholesalers this way. The questions I raised to the traders during these interviews were the following157:

- Are you proud of the sampot hol?
- Is the sampot hol a Khmer dress?
- Why do you refer to the silk weavers as ethnic Khmer?
- Why do you refer to yourself as an ethnic Chinese?
- Do you feel more Khmer or Chinese?
- Is it true that Chinese are better in business than Khmers?
- Why do you only trust Chinese traders?
- Would you ever hire a Khmer employee?
- Is there a difference between Chinese and Khmer styles of doing business?
- Can you give examples why Khmer traders are not creditworthy?

157 I say ‘kinds of questions’, because these were only starting questions. In reality most questions ended up in long conversations, in which I raised numerous other questions, which I cannot trace back in detail anymore.
To the silk weavers I raised the following kinds of questions:

- Why are you so proud to be a Khmer?
- Is it true that Chinese are better in business than Khmers?
- Why are all silk weavers Khmer?
- Are there also Chinese weavers?
- Why do you only subcontract kin members?
- Why do you depict yourself as an ethnic Khmer and your middleman as Chinese while you both ‘became’ Khmers?
- What is the difference between Chinese and Khmers?
- How come the middlemen and wholesalers are so powerful?
- Do they have connections with the officialdom?
- Is there a lot of gossip about each other in the weaving villages?

Life-history interviews

The third data collecting method I used were life-history interviews. A central location for the pioneering of life history methods was the Chicago School in the 1930s, which generated a range of innovative life history studies as part of the wide-ranging studies of the urban environment undertaken by the sociology school (Goodson 2001: 129-142). According to Goodson the main landmark in the development of the life history was the publication of Thomas and Znaniecki’s (1918-1920) mammoth study, the Polish Peasant in Europe and America (ibid.). In exploring the experiences of Polish peasants migrating to the United States, Thomas and Znaniecki relied heavily on migrants’ autobiographical accounts (ibid.). The zenith of the life history method according to Goodson (ibid.) was reached in the 1930s with Clifford Shaw’s account of a mugger in ‘the Jack-Roller’. As Howard Becker’s (1971: 71) comment on Shaw’s study underlined:

‘By providing this kind of voice from a culture and a situation that are ordinarily not known to intellectuals generally and sociologists in
particular, the Jack Roller enables us to improve our theories at the most profound level: by putting ourselves in Stanly’s skin, we can feel and become aware of the deep biases of such people that ordinarily permeate our thinking and shape the kinds of problems we investigate. By truly entering into Stanly’s life, we can begin to see what we take for granted (or ought not to) in designing our research – what kinds of assumptions about delinquents, slums and Poles are embedded in the way we set the question we study’.

In my final research months I approached three silk weavers, three silk retailers, three middleman couples and two wholesalers and asked them to participate in a life history interview. In the case of the silk weavers I asked the eldest and most interesting storytellers. Regarding the middlemen and wholesalers I picked the most powerful ones. And in the case of the silk retailers I chose former silk weavers who had failed to steer the sampot market and diversified into the tourist markets. Some of these interviewees, such as the elderly silk weaver Sotheap, the wholesaler Mrs. Bun, the middleman couple Mr. Mong and Mrs. Heang and the retailer Youn Malis became key storytellers of this research. My main aim was to collect data on how the silk weavers and traders negotiated their identity as ‘strangers’ in Cambodia. This way I wanted to grasp some taboo ‘outsider’ experiences of the silk traders and analyze what it meant to be ‘a Khmer with a white skin’ in Cambodia. In theory all Cambodians are ethnic Khmers, but does that mean that there are no differences between those who are Khmers and those who became Khmers in practice? Often at home and sometimes in a restaurant I had been fascinated by the silk weavers’ and traders’ stories of how they had experienced their childhood, how they survived the Pol Pot working zones, how they negotiated their identity in the hostile 1980s and how they anticipated to the arrival of tourists and expatriates in the 1990s.
Sensitivities and constraints in the field

Interviewing the silk weavers and traders called for sensitivity with respect to the extreme violence most of them had been confronted with during the Pol Pot regime. Without exception all of them had lost relatives, they all had been victims of violence, they all had had to dig holes to bury the dead, they all had to remain silent about their Chinese past and they all found it extremely difficult to talk about this period. That is also why I approached the different silk entrepreneurs as ‘a not so smart stranger’, who happened to be in town by accident, walked into this fascinating silk industry and decided to stay a bit longer to write a book about it. I never asked direct questions such as: ‘how does the middleman exploit you?’ This would immediately lead to a non-response because the silk weavers ‘like their middlemen a lot’, simply because they eat and live from his credit. But I could ask more indirectly: ‘I heard from other silk weavers that they experience a lot of stress finishing their sampot hol in time, how about you, does your middleman make you work late often as well?

The silk entrepreneurs did not feel comfortable talking to a tape recorder or a video recorder, which made me decide to take notes. This again made it more difficult for me to concentrate on the conversation so I decided to interview the traders without any recording tools and write down the conversation in my notebook as soon as possible afterwards. Another ethnographic hurdle I had to take were the busy schedules of the silk traders and wholesalers not who were not eager to talk freely about their business at all. The owner of the Banteay Srey wholesale shop, Mrs. Bun, even saw a clear causal relationship between me visiting her shop on a certain day and her not selling silks that day. In her eyes I was bringing bad luck to her family and for more than six months she considered me a Hungry Ghost. In the end my regular interpreter turned out to be a stand-in-the-way because of his humble class background and only after I brought with me a
higher-class interpreter, the Banteay Srey doors suddenly opened for me. In the words of the higher-class interpreter, ‘that is how things work in Cambodia’.
Appendix D

An historical approach

In order to collect data about how the ancestors of the silk entrepreneurs brought their business to Cambodia I had to adopt a historical approach, because oral history in this case was not sufficient. To be honest, after I had articulated the hidden histories of the silk entrepreneurs I felt a bit uncomfortable bearing this ‘unpopular’ secret with me. The reason for this was that my professor would not be comfortable with it, because she assumed, albeit hypothetically, that the silk weaving industry was Khmer-dominated and perhaps a counter discourse against the many Chinese-dominated industries in Southeast Asia. I also realized that my Cambodian friends would not accept a Chinese discourse of the Khmer sampot hol, because ‘in their heads’ it was authentically Khmer. In fact, even my interpreter Sophal, an ethnic Chinese himself, kept on saying that the weavers were Khmer, even after he had heard their ‘hidden’ life histories ‘live’ on the spot. I guess the best thing, politically at least, would have been to avoid the taboo identity of the silk weavers and become a member of the dominant discursive formation. However, I decided not to do so and dig deeper into the lives of the silk entrepreneurs, ending up in the French colonial archives of Phnom Penh and Aix-en-Provence.

Much of the problem of articulating the hidden identities and powers of the silk industry is rooted in the nature of ethnographic endeavor itself, the impossibility of ethnographers to see the larger relationships structuring the jumble of human interaction around them (Bourgois 1995: 140). Or, to paraphrase the same author, ‘structures of power and histories cannot be talked with’ (ibid.). It is thus only by means of historical data that I could articulate the hidden identity of the silk
entrepreneurs and find answers to questions that I could not answer by asking or observing. A historical research approach calls to mind the work of Eric Wolf (1982), whose book ‘Europe and the People Without History’ advocates an integration of the disciplines of anthropology and history. In this important book, Wolf critiques the daily routine of anthropological research and argues that anthropologists merely consider previously assembled cases of cultures, which they construct from observed or reported data (Schneider and Rapp 1995: 6-7). These models, he continues, are then either compared synchronically or serially with respect to each other, using one or more diagnostic criteria to order the cases in question. The main point Wolf wants to make is that we often regard the data we observe as realities in and of themselves, and not as results of under-laying processes operating on a historical time-line. But eschewing these shortcuts Wolf has shown us what anthropologists can learn about particular local histories if those histories are charted in relation to the large-scale transformations of let us say the last three hundred years (Schneider and Rapp 1995: 9).

This is also why Schneider and Rapp (1995: 9) argue that researchers influenced by Wolf generally want to know what happened in their research site during times of tributary and mercantile expansion, European or other colonialism and imperialism, political and religious movements for national independence, neo-colonial or other development initiatives, and the related processes now unfolding. In their volume ‘Articulating hidden histories’ they have given the floor to a range of researchers who investigate topics ranging from the invention of colonial tribalism in West Africa, to peasant insurgency in revolutionary Vietnam, to the ecological activism of North American housewives (ibid.). All these accounts share the vision that painful lives and taboos cannot be dealt with solely by means of fieldwork observation, but need to be understood as the history of social,
economic and political forces strong enough to dislodge people from their ‘hidden’ identities (*ibid.*).

In my opinion, Wolf and his followers were right, and some of the crucial dislocations in this thesis could be found in the French colonial archives of Phnom Penh, Siem Reap and Aix-en-Provence. It was in Aix-en-Provence that I found the image of the weaver on the front of this thesis, whose black farmers’ pants and signs on her house articulated the Chinese immigrant background of the Cambodian silk weavers. In the archives, I also came across works on the Cambodian rural economy by Yves Henry, Jean Delvert, Charles Robequain, Alain de Forest, and Virginia Thompson. But for the purpose of articulating the hidden identity of the silk industry I benefited most from the historical works of Penny Edwards on Cambodian national culture and more recently, on the ethnic Chinese. Although I do not agree with her rather Hegelian view on culture, I do acknowledge that she has a more profound inside knowledge of Cambodian culture than I have.

Having said all this, I want to return to the elderly silk weaver Sotheap one more time and ask myself the question: would I expect so many layers around her identity at first glance? Would I expect her grandmother to arrive in Cambodia in the 19th century as a migrant from Shunde County district? Would I suppose her silk yarn to come from Vietnam, China or Uzbekistan? And would I guess that the *sampot hol* she is weaving would be worn at a Buddhist ceremony in Little Phnom Penh, Southern California? My answer is simple: no, I would not, because when I met Sotheap she seemed to me an ordinary Khmer weaver living in a far away rural village, sitting behind her loom ten hours a day, frozen in time and history. Also, the rhythm of her clacking loom gave me the impression that nothing exciting had ever happened in this town. But the truth could not be further from this, and to understand the hidden, problematic, hybrid, fragmented
and multiple identities of Sotheap, a present-day ethnographer should not only observe her village life, but cross national borders as well and spend a lot of time in the archives.
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Samenvatting

Verweven met Cambodja: handel -en identiteitspolitiek in de (post)-koloniale Cambodjaanse zijdeweef industrie


‘Hoe verhoudt de etnisch complexe organisatie van de Cambodjaanse zijde-weefindustrie zich tot twee divergerende moderniseringsverhalen en welke uiteenlopende belangen dienen deze verhalen in het algemeen en binnen de zijdeindustrie in het bijzonder?’

Om deze hoofdvraag te operationaliseren heb ik vier deelvragen opgesteld:

Vraag 1: Onder welke historische omstandigheden zijn Chinese zijdewevers en handelaren naar Cambodja gemigreerd?

Vraag 2: Hoe is het huidige zijdeweefnetwerk georganiseerd in termen van productie en handelsrelaties?

Vraag 3: Hoe passen zijdeproducenten en zijdehandelaren hun identiteit aan binnen de context van de zijde-weefindustrie?
Samenvatting

Vraag 4: Waarom beschouwen zowel etnisch Chinese zijdehandelaren als de Cambodjaanse staat, ontwikkelingsorganisaties, academici en gewone burgers, de zijdeproducten als authentiek Khmer?


Sinds kort echter worden deze hypotheses van staatsgereguleerde migratiecondities tegengesproken. Historisch onderzoek in de Zuid-Chinese Pearl River delta heeft aangetoond dat de Chinese migratie naar Zuidoost-Azië geen staatsaangelegenheid was, maar voortkwam uit eeuwenoude individuele handelsstrategieën van welvarende familiebedrijven (cf. Kuhn 2006, Miles 2006, Yang 2006). Ver voor de komst van Europese kolonisten zouden rijke handelsfamilies in Zuidwest-China afgezanten naar Zuidoost-Azië hebben gestuurd (idem.). Deze afgezanten zouden de taak hebben gehad te zoeken naar ‘niches’, bijvoorbeeld het weven van zijde, en te peilen of expansie van de zijdehandel over de grens wel winstgevend zou zijn (idem.). Bij groen licht van de familieafgezant arrangeerde de rijke zijdehandelaar een ware volksverhuizing en stelde hij duizenden lokale wevers in staat voor hem te gaan werken in Zuidoost-Azië. Via lokale etnische banden zouden onontbarm, los van elkaar opererende zakennetwerken en dito Chinese diasporagemeenschappen zijn ontstaan in Zuidoost-
Samenvatting


In hoofdstuk drie kom ik dan ook tot de conclusie dat de komst van Chinese migranten naar Cambodja geen Chinees, Cambodjaans of Frans-koloniaal gereguleerde aangelegenheid was, maar zeer waarschijnlijk werd ingegeven door individuele strategieën van zijde-industriëlen in Shunde County en Nanhai (beiden gelegen in de Pearl River delta) tengevolge van een aantal noodlottige gebeurtenissen. Wat was het geval? Rond het begin van de negentiende eeuw (1821) zakte de wereldprijs van ruwe zijde tot een dieptepunt en was er nauwelijks nog werk voor handelaren en wevers in de Pearl River delta (Cliver 2004, Frederico 1997, So 1986). Ook verloor China in 1841 de eerste Opiumoorlog van de Britten en sloten de Britten de haven van Kanton, een haven die van groot belang was voor de Pearl River zijdehandelaren. Tot overmaat van ramp werd de Pearl River delta geteisterd door Red Turban revolutionairen (1851-1864) die de moerbeibomen en de weefgetouwen van de weefsters verwoestten. Het was in deze politiek zeer bewogen en economisch zeer ongunstige periode dat rijke zijde-industriëlen uit de Pearl River, met in hun kielzog duizenden weefsters, besloten te migreren naar Zuidoost-Azië (onder andere naar Cambodja) met zijn in economisch en politiek opzicht gunstiger zakenklimaat. Uit grafonderzoek van de Amerikaanse antropoloog William Willmott (1967) blijkt bijvoorbeeld dat zeer veel Kantonezen in de Cambodjaanse zijderegio’s afkomstig zijn uit twee Pearl River regio’s, Shunde County en Nanhai. Met andere woorden, de ‘roots’ van het meerendeel van de hedendaagse Cambodjaanse zijde-weefsters ligt niet in het grootste Khmer rijk ooit, Angkor, maar in de Zuid-Chinese Pearl River delta. Ook meen ik te kunnen concluderen dat de Chinese of Khmer staat niet verantwoordelijk is geweest voor de komst van de Kantonese
zijdeweefsters, maar dat de Kantonese zijdehandelaren en weefsters zichzelf letterlijk en figuurlijk Cambodja in geweven hebben.


Hoewel ik het eens ben met het argument dat de Khmer authenticiteit van de sampot hol sociaal geconstrueerd is, deel ik niet de mening dat Franse kolonisten daar verantwoordelijk voor zijn. Zoals ik al beschreven heb in hoofdstuk drie, was het een Kantonese migrantenelite aan het einde van de negentiende eeuw die er economisch belang bij had om een nieuwe zijde-markt aan te boren in Cambodja en hun sampot hol te verkopen aan de Cambodjaanse elite. In lijn met de wens van de culturele elite in Cambodja werd de sampot hol al snel omgedoopt tot een authentiek Khmer kledingstuk, een omdoping die winstgevend was voor zowel de Kantonese als de Cambodjaanse elite.

Hoewel er veel over het culturele moderniseringsverhaal van de Cambodjaanse weefindustrie is gepubliceerd (Green 2003, 2004; Morimoto 1995), is er maar weinig bekend over de rol van de Chinezen in het economische moderniseringsproces van het zijdeweven. Vanwege de geringe belangstelling voor het economische moderniseringsproces van het zijde weven weten we niet waar de
zijden kleding geweven wordt, hoeveel zijdewevers er zijn, waar ze
wonen, wat voor zijdeweeftechnieken ze gebruikt en hoe
arbeidsintensief het weven van een *sampot hol* is, hoe de weefsters aan
hun ruwe materialen komen, wat voor rol tussenhandelaren daarin
spelen, wie de tussenhandelaren zijn, wie de *sampot hol* verkoopt, wie
de groothandelaren zijn, of wie de klanten zijn.

In hoofdstuk vier heb ik getracht de economische basis van het
zijdeweven te beschrijven en heb ik aangetoond dat de Cambodjaanse
zijde-weefindustrie gemoderniseerd is van een bescheiden
dorpsindustrie in de twintigste eeuw tot een gelaagd wereldwijd
netwerk in de 21ste eeuw. Ten opzichte van de jaren negentig is de
industrie zelfs met honderd procent gegroeid van 10,000 naar 20,000
weefgetouwen (Dongelmans, Seng and Ter Horst 2005). Net als hun
voorouders wonen en werken de weefsters nog steeds aan de
rivierbanken van de Mekong en Bassac rivieren in de vier provincies,
Takeo, Kandal, Prey Veng en Kampong Cham. Met uitzondering van
een paar ontwikkelingsprojecten wordt ruwe zijde niet meer
geproduceerd door de Cambodjaanse weefsters zelf, maar
geïmporteerd uit Uzbekistan, Vietnam en China door vijf
groothandelaren in de hoofdstad van Cambodja, Phnom Penh.

De vijf groothandelaren die ik geïdentificeerd heb verkopen de ruwe
zijde niet zelf aan de weefsters maar hebben daarvoor
tussenhandelaren gecontracteerd, woonachtig in de weefregio’s. Deze
tussenhandelaren, honderd in totaal, geven ook de orders van de
groothandelaren door aan de weefsters, orders afkomstig van
Cambodjaanse klanten uit binnen- en buitenland. Uit dit onderzoek
blijkt tevens dat zestig procent van de totale productie van de *sampot
hol* ‘in de diaspora verdwijnt’, een productie die grotendeels opgekocht
wordt door diaspora Khmers woonachtig in de Verenigde Staten,
Australië en Frankrijk. Behalve van de groothandelaren kopen
Cambodjanen uit binnen- en buitenland ook *sampot hol* van
verkoopsters op de vier belangrijke markten in Phnom Penh: de Centrale Markt, de Russische markt, de Olympische markt en de Oude markt; ten tijde van mijn veldwerk 169 in totaal.

Ondanks de verandering van de Cambodjaanse zijde-weefindustrie tot een gelaagd wereldwijd zijdenetwerk in de 21ste eeuw vertoont de structuur van het netwerk nog steeds de hiërarchische contouren van een piramide, met aan de top vijf groothandelaars, in het midden honderd tussenhandelaren en meer dan honderdvijftig marktverkopers en onderaan 20,000 zijdeveters. De netwerkdominantie van een kleine elite roept zowel herinneringen op aan verticale etnisch Chinese zakenstructuren zoals de ‘kongsi’ en aan zakenpraktijken die Karl Marx benoemde met termen als onproductief, exploitatief en corrupt. Uit mijn onderzoek blijkt echter dat de weefsters en tussenhandelaren niet in verzet komen tegen de macht van de groothandelaars, maar hun afhankelijke positie accepteren. Zoals James Scott (1976) al zei, is uitbuiting geen universeel wetenschappelijk concept maar een kwestie van moraliteit die per regio kan verschillen. In Zuidoost-Azië bijvoorbeeld zijn hiërarchische relaties, ook wel patroon-cliëntverhoudingen genoemd, veel meer geaccepteerd dan in het Westen. In dit licht speelt wellicht ook het Boeddhistische concept merit een rol, namelijk het principe waarbij Boeddhistische monniken het succes of falen van iemand toeschrijven en accepteren aan de hand van gebeurtenissen in eerdere levens.

In hoofdstuk vijf heb ik in antwoord op de derde deelvraag getracht grip te krijgen op de overlappende en conflicterende identiteiten van de zijdeveters en de verschillende soorten handelaren. De zijdeveters en verkoopsters op de toeristenmarkten presenteren zich conform het culturele moderniseringsverhaal als etnische Khmer; de groothandelaars en tussenhandelaren doen zich conform het economische verhaal voor als etnische Chinezen. Dit is niet altijd zo geweest. Op de voorkant van mijn dissertatie zien we een foto van een
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Om dit te begrijpen is het nodig een materialistische kijk op het onderwerp te hanteren en de ongelijke productieverhoudingen van Marx te verbinden met de bijbehorende levensstijlen. Hoewel het besef van het bestaan van strategische en situationele identiteiten niet nieuw is binnen de sociale wetenschappen, verbinden nog weinig sociale wetenschappers deze identiteiten met netwerkposities en ongelijke arbeidsverhoudingen. De etnisch Chinezen in Cambodja zijn geen homogene groep maar vertonen onderlinge verschillen. Deze verschillen kunnen niet genealogisch verklaard worden, maar blijken symbolisch geconstrueerd te zijn om uiteenlopende posities in het productie- en handelsproces te classificeren. De geconstrueerde etnische verschillen tussen de zijdeproducenten en zijdehandelaren grijpen terug op de wijze waarop Abner Cohen (1990 [1974]) etniciteit al zag, namelijk als zijnde gerelateerd aan het opkomend kapitalisme en arbeidsspecialisaties.

In dit proefschrift kom ik tot de conclusie dat de Khmer en de Chinese etnische identiteiten in de Cambodjaanse zijde-weefindustrie ingezet worden om verschillen te markeren tussen producenten en handelaren, juist omdat die etnische verschillen er niet zijn. De staat als panoptisch oog (Foucault 1980) speelt in dit proces geen belangrijke rol meer. Een vaak gehoord argument is dat de weefsters
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hun Chinese identiteit niet meer willen profileren sinds het anti-Chinese Pol Pot regime. Maar datzelfde zou dan ook moeten gelden voor de groothandelaren en tussenhandelaren, die eenzelfde verleden hebben. In hoofdstuk vijf hebben we echter kunnen zien dat groothandelaren en tussenhandelaren zichzelf weer trots presenteren als etnische Chinezen. Het heeft er dus alle schijn van dat niet de staat, maar de lokale arbeidsverhoudingen tussen weefsters en de handelaren het verschil in etnische presentatie genereren. Ik kwam eens een weefster tegen die het volgende vertelde:

‘Ik ben Khmer, ik volg de Khmer Boeddhistische leer en weet helemaal niets meer van mijn Chinese voorouders. Mijn tussenhandelaar is een oudere neef van mij. Hij is Chinees ... Waarom is hij Chinees en ik niet? ... Gewoon, omdat hij tussenhandelaar is. Tussenhandelaren zijn Chinezen, zij hebben geld en macht’.

Bovenstaand voorbeeld geeft aan hoe instrumenteel de weefster en de tussenhandelaar, hoewel familie van elkaar, hun identiteit construeren ten opzichte van elkaar. Etniciteit heeft in dit voorbeeld weinig te maken met een gezamenlijke voorouderlijke afkomst, met gedeelde familiebanden of een gedeeld staatsburgerschap, maar is een symbool dat verschillende arbeidsverhoudingen en sociale posities uitbeeldt. De Chinese identiteit refereert in dit geval naar economische welvaart, patroonposities en ondernemerschap, terwijl de Khmer identiteit een armoedige, ondergeschikte arbeiderspositie uitbeeldt. Waar etniciteit vaak culturele verbondenheid symboliseert, wordt etnische identiteit hier ingezet om die verbondenheid te verbreken en het verschil in sociale en economische positie tussen familieleden te legitimeren.

In de symbolische orde van de Cambodjaanse economie zijn Chinezen dus de handelaren met geld en zijn de Khmer de arbeiders die daarvan afhankelijk zijn. In de symbolische orde van Cambodja kan een tussenhandelaar dus alleen de arbeidskracht van de weefsters
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‘bezitten’ (Marx) als hij Chinees is of in ieder geval wordt. Een tussenhandelaar, al is zij als een Khmer weefster gesocialiseerd, zal de Chinese leventijl van de rijke handelaar moeten overnemen om sociaal te klimmen. Op zich is dat niet nieuw. Zoals de religieuze en symbolische antropologie al eerder geïllustreerd heeft, wordt identiteit symbolisch geconstrueerd in relatie met anderen, zoals dat bijvoorbeeld het geval is bij imitatie, wanneer men letterlijk culturele codes van meer invloedrijke anderen kopieert om sociaal te klimmen of om een bereikte sociale status zichtbaar te maken (Jackson 2006: 326). Vooral in samenlevingen met een hoog analfabetisme-cijfer zien we dat leren een kwestie van observatie en imitatie is, en dat rolidentiteiten belangrijke vormen van kapitaal zijn (ibid.).

In overeenstemming hiermee is ook de observatie van de Amerikaanse socioloog Erving Goffmann (1959) dat mensen rollen spelen om een stigma kwijt te raken en/of succesvol met andere mensen te onderhandelen. In wat Goffmann noemt ‘impressie management’ spelen mensen publiekelijk rollen waarin ze gezien willen worden en vallen ze thuis terug op een identiteit die dichterbij henzelf ligt (ibid.). Met andere woorden, en aldus de derde vraag beantwoordend, de conflicterende identiteiten van de zijdeproducenten en handelaars moeten niet gezien worden als ‘echte’ etnische verschillen, maar als geconstrueerde levenstijlen, die horen bij de arbeiders- of handelsklasse van het zijdenetwerk.

In hoofdstuk zes heb ik de vierde deelvraag beantwoord en geprobeerd uit te zoeken waarom de producenten en handelaars van sampot zich als etnisch Chinees presenteren, terwijl de ‘sampot’ zelf vervolgens conform het traditionele moderniseringsverhaal verkocht worden als authentiek Khmer. Met behulp van Walter Benjamin’s (1940) concept van de ‘traditionele moderniteit’ en Jean Baudrillard’s (1998 [1970]) idee van de ‘consumptiemaatschappij’ heb ik aangetoond dat de etnisch Chinese zijde-handelaren in Cambodja economische motieven hadden om de sampot hol als traditioneel Khmer te verkopen. Volgens
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Ten tweede spelen de leden van het Cambodjaanse koningshuis een belangrijke rol in het consumptiegedrag van de Cambodjaanse bevolking en de marketing van sampot hol als authentieke
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Khmerproducten. De leden van het koningshuis dragen altijd een *sampot hol* bij officiële ceremoniële gelegenheden en geven zodoende ook een duidelijke boodschap af aan de Cambodjaanse bevolking dat de *sampot hol* een traditionele vorm van Khmer modernisering is. Immers, de koningen zijn rechtstreekse afstammelingen van Jayavarman VII, de architect van het Angkor Wat tempelcomplex. Veel Cambodjanen voelen zich sterk verbonden met het koningshuis en dragen net als de koning een *sampot hol* bij ceremoniële plechtigheden.

Ten derde speelt het consumptiegedrag van Cambodjaanse vluchtelingen een belangrijke rol in de marketing van *sampot hol* als authentiek Khmer. Van de vele Cambodjanen die vlak voor en tijdens de Khmer Rouge revolutie hun moederland ontvlucht zijn, zijn ongeveer 500.000 in de diaspora blijven leven (Poethig 1997). Veelen keren jaarlijks terug naar Cambodja en kopen daar *sampot hol*, uit nostalgische overwegingen of voor ceremoniële doeleinden, maar soms ook om te verhandelen in hun nieuwe thuisland.


Mijn vierde deelvraag tenslotte richt zich op deze veronderstelde Khmer authenticiteit van het zijdweven in Cambodja. Hoe komt het