Summary
Navigating a river by its bends. A comparison of Cambodian returnees’ contributions to the transformation of Cambodia

Introduction
The turbulence of a civil war (1970-1975), the Khmer Rouge takeover (1975-1979) and the Vietnamese intervention (1979-1989) forced many Cambodians into exile. Among the nations that offered refuge, America and France stand out for the number of Cambodian refugees that were accepted for resettlement. Decades after these conflicts, the first generations of the overseas Cambodians are resettling in Cambodia. This first generation has combined the personal experiences of pre-conflict Cambodia and a prolonged stay in the countries of exile with the process of ‘getting reacquainted’ with a post-conflict Cambodia emerging from its position as a weak state under authoritarian leadership to economic growth and relative political stability.

In the history of the Cambodian refugees’ resettlement, since 1975, America and France have made a logic ‘safehaven’ and have been the recipient of three chronological waves of Cambodian refugees. Contributing to current discussions on the influence of migrant communities in sending and receiving countries, the focus of this research is on the return of the first generation Cambodians who entered France or the United States before 1979 and have returned to Cambodia after the Paris Peace Accords of 1991. This group of informants may be distinguished in the Cambodian refugee community, in general, by their relative independence in resettlement, their language proficiency, the displayed cultural awareness of their new surroundings and their social belonging to the Cambodian middle or upper classes.¹

Research Question
This research fills in a gap in research on remigration and transnational entrepreneurship by looking at it from a multidisciplinary, multisited and multi-embedded perspective in studying institutional entrepreneurial activities by Cambodian returnees that are using their transnational networks as resources.

The question explored is:
In what ways do first generation Cambodian French and Cambodian American returnees create and employ their social capital in institutional entrepreneurial activities upon return?

The focus is on the creation and employment of the ‘social capital’ available in (trans)national social networks. It is proposed that social capital may be a tool for the Cambodian migrants to bind, or be bound by, their social networks in host and home countries and that it thus affects their institutional entrepreneurial activities by offering multiple opportunities at achieving social legitimacy.

Methods
The research was designed as a comparative multiple case study, in the acknowledgement, nevertheless, of individual differences and social contexts. It was not meant to bring forward a set of structural cultural and ideological differences between host countries. Moreover, the social capital created and employed in social

¹ In this study an informant is considered a committed respondent that actively participates in the exchange of information.
networks was not quantified systematically. Rather, evaluations were made on the basis of informants’ stories on the social networks’ cohesion by analysis of their ‘narrativizations’ on themes related to conflict and solidarity.  

Data collection took place in Lyon, France (2010), Long Beach (CA), USA (2011) and Phnom Penh, Cambodia (2010 & 2011). In the localities studied, members and leaders of Cambodian community organizations were contacted systematically and asked to assist in the recruitment of other informants. In four, three-month periods of data collection in Lyon, Phnom Penh, Long Beach and Phnom Penh, the experiences of individual and key informants were collected through 129 semi-structured interviews.

Comparison and Analysis
From the descriptions presented in this dissertation it can be established that a country’s resettlement policies and immigration infrastructure have (had) a determining effect on many of Cambodian communities’ actions. Law and policies can bind the form, aims and extent of community organizations and the support they offer, thus affecting refugees’ social adaptation process and the social capital they create.

The comparison of findings brings forward that, for the Cambodian French this has resulted in a discourse implying that contributing to transformative change in their homeland is important, yet that it does not mean they will have to resettle in Cambodia. For instance, while claiming their lawful French benefits and fulfilling their mortgage obligations, my informants in the overseas communities proudly mention their feelings of ‘homecoming’ in Cambodia. The Cambodian French remigrants they refer me to, also, may rather be characterized as ‘circular migrants’.

Upon return, their transnational networks and their positive linkages to overseas Cambodian French communities and organizations have initially provided the Cambodian French returnees with relatively generous bargaining power. This seems to be related to perceptions of their social status both before and during exile. In this way, historical ties with Cambodia brought returnees from France the benefit of their preferential treatment and expedient inclusion in certain local social networks both in the home and host country. They had a lot of overseas and local social capital to share transnationally. Since the 1997 clashes, however, colonial associations with France, the Cambodian French’s traditional attitude of middle- and upper-class superiority towards the local Cambodians, and the English language barrier have all contributed to processes to exclude the Cambodian French from reintegration at other levels of society.

The Cambodian American informants in Long Beach generally express high expectations of a return home. Extensive and visible homeland attachments and involvements show that transnational activities in the Long Beach community are not necessarily ‘choices’ but may provide an ‘escape’ from a socially marginalized existence in the United States. For example, political rhetoric during public events and a history of support for military activities that were initiated on the Thai border during the Vietnamese takeover (1979-1989), demonstrate aspects of diasporic nationalism in this overseas Cambodian community.

Informants interviewed in Cambodia express that over the last decades the relatively cautious reception of Cambodian American returnees has evolved into a warmer welcome to people from a country that is perceived to be rich and powerful. Cambodian American trade relations and American investments in Cambodia

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2 In contrast to personal narratives, such as life stories, a narrativization focuses on particular ‘selected’ experiences considered pivotal by the narrator in semi-structured interviews.

3 These returnee institutional entrepreneurs chose to remain ‘transnational’ and ‘unbounded’ in the sense that they only return to Cambodia for several months a year and live in France the rest of the time thus making ‘circular’ movements between countries.
are still growing. Cambodian American transnational networks have professionalized and returnees are taking advantage of the available Cambodian as well as American opportunity structures. These intensifying relations seem to be appreciated in both the USA and Cambodia. Nevertheless, it can prove difficult for returnees to effectively seize these opportunities. In general, however, returnees from both France and the United States, to a different extent, get stuck and become isolated in following the flows imposed on them by host land and homeland institutions. Both the Cambodian American and Cambodian French informants of this research explain how perceptions of group and individual identities, their feelings of ‘belonging’, ‘homecoming’ and being part of social networks are re-evaluated and renegotiated upon return. As a result the returnees’ transnational resources and distinct histories have sometimes even actively led to dynamics of cultural exclusion, self-exclusion and even marginalization upon return in Cambodia.

When it comes to the institutional entrepreneurs’ roles as builders, their institutional entrepreneurial activities do not lead to the significant contributions to the transformation of Cambodia they intended to make. The social capital these returnees have created in the host land is hard to employ in Cambodia, while their transnational social networks have mixed impacts on their ‘success’. Resistance, opposition and disinterest towards institutional entrepreneurial activities by fellow Cambodians, as well as local distrust can neutralize their ambitions to make change happen.

**Conclusion**

In answer to the question in what ways first generation Cambodian French and Cambodian American returnees create and employ their social capital in institutional entrepreneurial activities upon return, one of the more significant conclusions to emerge from this study is that the social capital in (trans)national networks is even more versatile than previous research would have us believe. Not only can it provide individuals with benefits through their membership of these networks, but also, in the dynamics of social relations, ‘negative social capital’ may be produced, which actually restraints relationships.

Upon return, the comparison and analysis of the Cambodian French and Cambodian American returnees’ cases show that neither group can freely employ the social capital in their (trans)national networks to realize their ambitions for Cambodia. When the returnees first arrive in the country, and their social legitimacy in Cambodia is not yet established, they are often met with suspicion by local parties. The questions of loyalty, ‘foreignness’ and the ‘ethnicity’ question of being a ‘real Khmer’ are being put to them and affect their access to resources as well as their initiation of institutional entrepreneurial activities. Only few returnees are well-established socially, both overseas and in Cambodia, and allowed to work from trust in multiple localities. Those individuals are often perceived as the ‘successful’ institutional entrepreneurs by the overseas Cambodian communities.

Returnees to Cambodia may not remain neutral. In the long term, they are not be able to remain unaffiliated and have to choose sides socially and politically in order to survive. Their transnational connections pushing for transformation of the country may prove a burden as the traditional Cambodian patronage system will hardly allow for change following contested western models for development or democratization. Moreover, populist rhetoric on ‘foreigners’ posing a threat to the Cambodian nation, affects the reception of returnees. A lack of social legitimacy, trust and acceptance thus limits the returnees’ opportunities to initiate institutional change in this context of cultural competition, political contestation and looming social conflict.
Of course, individual informants differ from one another in their abilities, skills and personality traits. On a group level, however, distinct differences that seem to exist between Cambodian French and Cambodian American remigrants confirm that:

(1) the geopolitical position of their host country may positively or negatively affect the returnees’ reception as well as their social legitimacy upon return;

(2) language barriers may restrict the returnees’ opportunities to find a livelihood as well as restrict the employment of the social capital available in their transnational social networks;

(3) levels of cultural exclusion related to the host countries’ migration policies and ideologies are evident in processes of resettlement in host countries as well as the employment of transnational resources by remigrants upon return.

The conclusions of this research support policy makers’ efforts to establish efficient and effective institutional mechanisms for (re)migration. Future research will have to produce more detailed insights in the ways these may facilitate and open up opportunities for returnees from a diversity of countries.