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Specters of Dependency: Hou Yuon and the Origins of Cambodia's Marxist Vision (1955–1975)

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Abstract

This article traces the intellectual contributions of Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) intellectual and founder Hou Yuon, whose influence on party policy has been the subject of scholarly debate. Although proposals in his political writings were implemented in CPK liberated zones and, later, Democratic Kampuchea (1975–1979), his outspoken nature led to his ejection from the CPK picture and from appraisals of Cambodian Communism. From his studies in France to his death in 1975, Hou Yuon's importance as a Cambodian Marxist and Communist deserves our attention. Marxist theory provided him a critical interpretive paradigm and language with which to contextualize Cambodia's stark rural-urban divide and larger issues of global capitalist exploitation in his writings, most notably in his 1955 doctoral dissertation. The goal of this article is to uncover the link between Hou Yuon's application of Marxist theory to understand inequality and underdevelopment in his homeland and more broadly, to fill the gap between the Paris Group *Cercle Marxiste* and many of its members' leap to "pure socialism" and "total equality" in founding Democratic Kampuchea.

Keywords: Communist Party of Kampuchea, Hou Yuon, Cambodia, Democratic Kampuchea, Khmer Rouge, Marxism, socialism, class inequality, agriculture, peasants, globalization, imperialism

Introduction

Hou Yuon (1930–1975), a founding member of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK), became a Communist during his studies in 1950s Paris, where he read and engaged with Marxist works to frame solutions to Cambodia's underdevelopment. A onetime Parti Communiste Français (PCF) cell member and mentor to Cambodian students, Hou was a highly influential Marxist political analyst, leftist teacher, and politician who was instrumental in garnering support for the CPK and helped conceptualize some of its early policies (figure 1). An anonymous member of his Paris cohort stated in an interview that if Pol Pot had followed Hou Yuon instead of having

him killed, then “it would not have been like this.... Yuon allowed the use of money; he opposed the evacuation; and he only wanted to have exchange labor groups and not to have cooperatives in the countryside” (Chea 2000). But to date, scholars have largely dismissed Hou’s role in framing Democratic Kampuchea (DK, 1975–1979).



Figure 1. Hou Yuon, Communist Party of Kampuchea Minister of the Interior in charge of urbanization and cooperative management, delivering a statement on the twenty-third anniversary of the fighting in Amlaing district, September 30, 1974. *Source:* Used by permission from the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DCCAM).

One position holds that Hou and other Paris-educated Cambodian intellectuals were “nonentities” until the late 1960s—“more Vietnamese than the Vietnamese when it came to Cambodia”—and that their popularity “was exploited by the Communists to give their movement a misleading public face” (Heder 2004, 2, 8). Future CPK Minister of Defense (1967–1975), DK Prime Minister (1976), and Chairman of the DK State Presidium (1976–1979) Khieu Samphan himself claimed that he and Hou Yuon were mere “figurehead[s]” (Khieu Samphan 2004, 67–68), whereas former CPK intellectual Suong Sikœun regards Hou Yuon as one of the CPK’s “principal leaders” alongside Pol Pot, Khieu Samphan, and future DK Minister of Information (1975–1977) Hu Nim, and the lone advocate for free-choice cooperatives. Suong does concede, however, that Hou was “never a member of the...ruling party” due to his murder in 1975 (Suong 2013, 39–41). Vietnamese suspicions in the 1960s of high-ranking CPK figures that were “little-known...and inevitably suspect because they were educated in France instead of in Hanoi”—a description that fits Hou and his Paris cohort—highlights the lack of consensus on Hou’s leadership role in the CPK (Mosyakov 2004, 49). As for Hou’s

writings, notably his 1955 economics dissertation “Le paysannerie du Cambodge et ses projets de modernisation” (The Cambodian peasantry and its modernization projects), British journalist Philip Short contends that it “would be wrong [to see in it] a blueprint for the economic system that the Khmer Rouge introduced in Cambodia in 1975.” But he admits that “many of the key concepts of the Khmer Rouge experiment...can be traced back to the discussions that took place at that time” (Short 2004, 290). If we consider how influential Hou’s work was on his protégés, then is it a stretch to suggest, at the very least, that his work is part of this larger conversation on Cambodian society?

Hou’s diagnoses of systemic problems in rural-urban and local-global relations, his career as a progressive politician, his influence on leading CPK figures, and his contributions to the CPK’s Marxist-Leninist orientation highlight how he ought to be part of the larger conversation on Cambodian Communism. A man who best understood the Marxism of his troupe, Hou sought to alter Cambodia’s course *without* the total erasure of the existing political system, feeling instead that “class conflict should be resolved by a method that will not damage the unity of the nation” (Um 2015, 88). He also recognized the “viability of an accommodationist stance and ideological alignment with Sihanouk’s ‘anti-imperialist’ platform” (Um 2015, 88). Hou was the unanimous choice to lead the Paris-based Association des Étudiants Khmers (AEK, Khmer Students Association) and its successor organization, the Union des Étudiants Khmers (UEK). His dissertation provides “perhaps the most detailed and penetrating analysis of the Kampuchean rural socio-economic structure available” (Kiernan and Boua 1982, 31; see also Sher 2001, 85; Becker 1998, 80) in describing an exploited peasantry—or *prolétariat agricole* (agricultural proletariat) as he terms it. It proposed, most famously, the establishment of “semi-social types of agricultural production cooperatives” tailored to ameliorate peasant living standards (Hou 1955, 81, 145). Pol Pot later espoused, rather enthusiastically, several of Hou’s proposals, implemented them in liberated zones after 1973, and expanded them after 1975 (Pol Pot 1977, 63–67). Hou espoused existing ideas like a socioeconomic analysis of five rural classes, self-reliance, and antifeudalism—all of which were tied directly to Third Worldism and the nonaligned movement in which the CPK was an active participant. These ideas struck a chord with Pol Pot not because they were original or particularly innovative, but because Hou framed them in a way that was applicable and relatable to Cambodia’s then-current situation. It is therefore unsurprising that Hou’s failure to implement his ideas in actual practice led Pol Pot to apply his violent approach to agrarian collectivization, which arguably resulted from, and was a logical next step of, Hou’s ideas on the topic.

After his studies, Hou translated his popularity and reverence into politics, which, alongside his writings, formed a nascent part of DK’s intellectual framing (Sher 2004, 207). By the early 1960s he worked as a schoolteacher at Phnom Penh’s Lycée Kambuboth, which he developed into a “center of radicalism” as its director and “best-known leader” (Chandler and Kiernan 1983, 175). He was simultaneously a leading figure in the pro-China Association d’Amitié Khméro-Chinoise (AAKC, Khmer-Chinese Friendship Association) before its closure by royal order in 1967 (Phouk 1977, 9). Hou’s

willingness to work with Cambodian head of state Norodom Sihanouk's Sangkum Riyastr Niyum (Community of the common people) changed that year after the outbreak of the Samlaut Rebellion, as he joined the *maquis* (Cambodian Communist guerrillas). Thereafter, he became Minister of the Interior, Cooperatives, and Communal Reforms of the Gouvernement Royal d'Union Nationale du Kampuchéa (GRUNK, Royal Government of the National Union of Kampuchea; Khmer: *Reachorodthaphibeal Ruobruom Cheat Kampuchea*), an important, yet somewhat ceremonial, role. He served through the 1975 takeover until his mysterious death in 1975 or 1976, though CPK Central Committee members posthumously exonerated him as "rehabilitated" by September 1978 (Sher 2004, 290).

Although the CPK pursued policies of Third Worldism, abolishing currency, and import-substitution (exporting rice to China to accumulate surplus capital to modernize industry), Hou Yuon's analysis of Cambodian peasant issues helped guide some of DK's most notorious leaders and architects on their path toward implementing the country's radical social transformation and genocide between 1975 and 1979. Hou's analysis—and distorted view of some of Cambodia's socioeconomic realities—was at the root of Cambodia's Communist regime, as Pol Pot interpreted, reinterpreted, and (mis)used Hou's proposals (either directly or as reiterated by Hou's protégés Khieu Samphan and Hu Nim). For Hou, Marxism provided a critical interpretive paradigm for developing concrete solutions, but, importantly, his engagement with Marxism was through a practical lens, recognizing that Cambodia had served as merely another cog in the moving wheel of an already prosperous imperial nation's wealth machine. Hou's approach, encapsulated in his dissertation, was also informed by economists (Paul Bernard, Adhémard Leclère, and René Morizon), agronomists (Yves Henry and René Dumont), and dependency (core-periphery) theories of the 1950s. By the early 1960s, he was an influential figure in progressive intellectual circles in Cambodia and later organized a pro-Cultural Revolution wing within the CPK (with Hu Nim and Pol Pot's personal secretary Phouk Chhay). Hou's disciple Khieu Samphan became one of Pol Pot's chief lieutenants (Phouk 1977, 9–10). In analyzing Hou's path to becoming a Communist and his lasting influence on so many of his CPK peers, we seek to uncover a better understanding of the larger intellectual thrust behind DK.

This article applies the genealogical method to situate Hou Yuon within the larger Cambodian Communist sounding board (Hinton 2005, 142). The aim is to understand more fully his lasting imprint on DK's architects through his writings and career, as well as to trace his passages through spaces intellectual and geographic, transforming and transformed. Though select excerpts of his dissertation are examined elsewhere (Kiernan and Boua 1982, 34–68), this article explores the work in its entirety, situating it in the life trajectory of its author. Accordingly, the article takes the form of a biographical triptych covering: (1) Hou's early adult years and becoming a Communist in the student-activist milieu of the French metropole; (2) an analysis of his doctoral text and subsequent book *Banha sahakor* (The cooperative question); and (3) his limited ability to bridge ideological thought and political practice while serving in a series of

high-level ministerial posts and intellectual associations under Sihanouk's regime. The article tracks Marxism's rise as a major influence on Hou and his intellectual engagement with its concepts (the agrarian question, the question of cooperatives, and theory of productive forces, among others). The article then explores how he applied in his political career (his initial failed implementation of Marxist concepts to Cambodia) what he had written about in his dissertation, which was highly influential on his onetime protégés and CPK comrades Khieu Samphan and Hu Nim. As revealed in his activist career trajectory, there was some continuity between Hou's proposals and CPK programs (Etcheson 1984, 51). His lived biography therefore betrays the life of a civil bureaucrat whose professional life was complicit in a regime that oppressed peasants and was at complete odds with the praxis and revolutionary aspects that formed the nexus of the radical thought and political action that he held aloft. In the end, Hou was unable to put the theory of his student life into public practice. But although he fell victim to shifting geopolitical and domestic tides and, ultimately, failed to exert enough influence in his limited positionality to influence political outcomes and to save himself, his contributions to CPK thought and practice must not be understated.

Early Years and Conversion to Communism, 1930–1953

Hou Yuon was born in 1930 to mixed Sino-Khmer lineage. His father, Hou Him, grew rice and tobacco on the Mekong River in Angkor Ban (Kompong Cham) not far from Hou's future CPK colleague Hu Nim, who was born in Korkor (Archives Nationales d'Outre Mer 1952b, 3; Hu Nim 1977, 1). Until the 1930s, few Khmers had access to French education at any level in the protectorate, as the colonial administration favored Chinese and Vietnamese students for civil service education (Chandler and Kiernan 1983, 14). Under the puppet king Sisowath Monivong (1875–1941) and the region's true authority, the Résident Supérieur du Cambodge, the protectorate was a colonial police state; thus the Khmer majority was largely disconnected from ideas of European democracy, socialism, and the nation-state (Tully 1996, vii, xii). After decades of the French favoring Vietnamese for colonial administrative positions, however, a new generation of Khmer elites benefitted from a new French policy of cultural coexistence in the 1930s. Now, the protectorate's best and brightest Khmer students, often from the wealthiest families, had access to French classics (Tully 1996, 309).

Despite his rural upbringing, Hou received a French-language education, an important factor in the "semiotics of status" in French *Cambodge*, because anything French that could be consumed—language, culture, products—represented an elevated standing (Edwards 2007, 62). Cambodian students spoke French in French schools, and French colonial rule was what they knew. French was therefore the "prism through which they viewed the outside world" (Short 2004, 47). Hou's worldview was certainly evidence of this fact. He gained admission to the prestigious Collège Norodom Sihanouk, a junior high school in Kompong Cham, where in 1942 its first class comprised a mere twenty students (Tyner 2008, 35). At the Collège, a French education entailed

immersion in French literature, which by dint of its emphasis on thought and achievement in the French Revolution and the pillars of French nationhood—*liberté, égalité, fraternité*—influenced his perception of the *Cambodge* protectorate as a nation (Cambodia). His teachers' aim, however, was to “create elites, assistants...with a view to a useful collaboration, to help in the moral and intellectual uplifting of the race, to augment its dignity and well-being, and to enrich their country by intelligent and sustained labor” (Tully 1996, 220). But despite their efforts, Hou and his cohort developed strong nationalist sentiments through shared experiences as students reading French classics about revolution, romance, and emancipation. As his classmate, future understudy, and CPK comrade Khieu Samphan recalled, they were “profoundly influenced by the spirit of French thought—by the Age of Enlightenment, of Rousseau and Montesquieu” (Harris 2013, 182n7). The “comradeship of the classroom,” as it turns out, served Khmer students “as a microcosm of the emergent nation” rather than as a bastion of an ancien régime (Henley 1995, 293).

The centralized French educational system had the entire student body master the same curriculum. “History was taught with no adaptation to local conditions, so that future citizens and colonial subjects alike would identify with French history and with French political values,” French sociologist Serge Thion notes (Chandler and Kiernan 1983, 14). This lasting legacy of the French remained long after independence, as a generation of French-educated students became Francophone and Francophile. Importantly, we see a prime example of the irony of the French *mission civilisatrice* (civilizing mission): French educators wanted to train Khmers to become proper civil servants of a French domain, yet through immersion in all things French, young Khmers learned about the greatness of liberty, equality, and fraternity, which inspired nationalist imaginings (Tyner 2008, 35). In fact, Lycée Sisowath was established in 1935 by the author of “How to Be a Khmer Civil Servant,” *Résident Supérieur du Cambodge* Achille Louis Auguste Sylvestre, and its students were the first to develop nationalist ideas, with the first anticolonial demonstrations occurring in 1936 and Buddhist demonstrations in the 1940s (later forming the *Krom Brachathibtey*, Democrat Party) (Edwards 2007, 224). Hou and other future CPK heads attended secondary school at Lycée Sisowath. Future CPK Minister of Foreign Affairs Ieng Sary studied there, where he spearheaded the “Liberation of Cambodia from French Colonialism” group (Becker 1998, 69). The significance of Lycée Sisowath was that it brought together young minds—Hou included—giving them the rare freedom to associate and discuss relevant topics, which ultimately helped develop strong bonds of connection and commitment to a common goal (Edwards 2007, 224). As an anonymous member of Hou’s Paris cohort recalled:

We read books and newspapers, and we had a lot of freedom of thought and knowledge.... They [the French] did not let us know about Communism...at Sisowath [High School]. They just told us that there was Marxist philosophy. But they never let us know what Marxism was. Nor were there books to read. But when we went there [France], we had

newspapers. The French Communist Party published newspapers and we read them. And the French Communists helped French colonial countries to be freed from the yoke of the colonial rule. They helped us a lot such as with ideas. As we wanted independence for the country, and when we saw them helping us, we joined with their ideas. We loved, we liked, and learned [Communism]. And when we learned, we saw that this ideology was good and just. The Communist ideology had justice: it helped protect the poor from oppression. Therefore, we loved it, because we had been oppressed for 100 years. (Chea 2000)

Indeed, to understand how and why Hou Yuon became a Communist, it is necessary to indicate the role played by radical currents of avant-garde thought, which, together with the setting of 1950s Paris, made impressionable students more receptive to radical trends. Paris was where Hou first encountered Marxist works (Chandler 1991, 52). Moreover, shared experiences and study of Marxist texts in that illuminating city against the backdrop of wars in Indochina and Korea—a period that Jacques Vergès, then-president of the *Association des Étudiants Coloniaux* (Association for Colonial Students, AEC) and friend to Saloth Sar, calls “the springtime of peoples”—galvanized Hou and his colleagues as awakened agents of change (quoted in Chandler 1999, 52). Khmer intellectuals developed shared political views and established lasting bonds well into the heyday of the Communist movement; students met regularly to debate politics, art, and philosophy, and Cambodia’s position in an ever-globalizing world (Chandler 1999, 27). Post- World War II Paris therefore served as a rare meeting ground for the avant-garde.

More important than which “ism” young students espoused at this time were their experiences of discussing these new ideas, through which they bonded as comrades. After arriving in Paris in 1949, Hou Yuon settled at the Pavillon de l’Indochine (Indochina Pavillion) in Paris (Archives Nationales d’Outre Mer 1952a).¹ Contact with others and shared experiences engendered the inception of radical thought for the young Khmer intellectuals in the French capital (Martin 1989, 103–106). As Hou’s contemporary and future CPK head Saloth Sar (also known as Pol Pot) recalled, “I came into contact with some progressive students.... I often stayed with them, and little by little they influenced me” (Pol Pot 1984; Xu 2001, 219). Khieu Samphan also remembered that as a student in Paris he “was in the same situation as many students of our country. We debated the future of our people and ways of realizing our goals such as national independence, economic progress, and prosperity for everybody. Already at that time all my activities had been aimed at the fulfillment of these ideals” (Pilz 1980, 13). Whether it was the shared experience of living abroad, or their interpretation of radical thought within the context of rectifying their homeland’s ills, these men coalesced around *taking action* and the fact that they could do it together.

¹ The Pavillon de l’Indochine was located in the Cité Internationale Universitaire de Paris (International University City of Paris) at 59 Boulevard Jourdan in the 14th arrondissement.

But how did Hou become a Communist, and when did he begin to interpret his country's plight as part of a global phenomenon of capitalist imperialism? A brief biographical note in the 1952 report by the *Sûreté*, the French police force, states that Hou had "Communist sympathies" (Archives Nationales d'Outre Mer 1952b, 3). This note came from participation in the *Cercle Marxiste* (Marxist circle, hereafter *Cercle*), a secret cell within the nationalist AEK (established 1948) with links to the PCF-established *groupes des langues* (language groups, ca. 1949). Endorsed by PCF Secretary General Maurice Thorez, the *Cercle* constitutes one of four major pushes in this transformation. The other three are reading Marxist texts and seeing how they became useful to their readers, networking with Communists in Berlin, and following the corrupt politics at home that crushed the democratic process.

Concerning the *Cercle*, Keng Vannsak (pseudonym Kolott), a radical thinker and student mentor who had long held that Buddhism and Hinduism had contaminated the purity of Khmer culture and who had ties to Parisian leftist circles (Kiernan 2007, 543–544), was most senior among the Khmer intellectuals' cohort. Keng and his French wife, whom he married in 1952, hosted student meetings at his Rue de Commerce apartment to organize anti-monarchist nationalist reading groups in which students found value in Marxism not because of its theoretical insights but insofar as it could be useful for obtaining independence (Smith 2014, 190–199, 236–251; Short 2004, 51, 63–64). Yet Marxist critiques of wealth soon rubbed off on these students, who soon developed suspicions of wealth and influence, particularly in the case of *Cercle* member Thiounn Mumm, a descendant of a prominent non-royal family and proponent of the AEK's nationalist tendency (Tyner 2008, 46). Wealth, *Cercle* members believed, was merely a card played by those who could afford it. In an August 1952 text written by an AEK member, "money and rank were regarded as potions that poisoned people and subjected them to the monarchy"; soon afterward, the *Cercle* shifted further to the left (Sher 2004, 76). The *Cercle* then encouraged doctrinaire discussions, reading ideologically tinged materials that consisted of individual cells and preaching strict adherence to clandestine operations.

Reading Marxist texts constitutes the second major factor in Hou Yuon's conversion to Communism. Through reading the texts in their language of choice, and by interpreting them through a local cultural lens, *Cercle* members such as Hou were able to conceptualize a Marxism that fit with Cambodian realities. Although *Cercle* members conversed in Khmer, they contemplated these works in French, because some political terms lacked Khmer equivalents (Chandler 1999, 32–33; Tyner 2008, 91). More senior members mentored younger participants, with elder students like Hou Yuon and Khieu Samphan forming "part of [the] circle from university," as Hu Nim recalled in 1977 (Hu Nim 1977, 4). The *Cercle* met monthly, and as PCF operative Mey Mann recalled, it secretly controlled the student movement (Chandler 1999, 33; Kiernan 1985, 119; Debré 1976, 81). As a section of the PCF, the *Cercle* had its own Politburo and Secretariat, though it did not confer with the Vietnamese-led Khmer People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP) because it feared harsh reprisal and disliked the Vietnamese students' parochial

proposal of Indochina Federation, unity of Cambodia with Vietnam and Laos (Engelbert and Goscha 1995, 54). The *Cercle* leaders in 1950 and 1951 were PCF members Rath Samueoun and Ieng Sary and included recent PCF recruits Hou Yuon, Khieu Samphan (1953–1957), and Saloth Sar as participants. Sar, who held a low rank, recalled that he and his colleagues dated the *Cercle*'s foundation to July and August 1951, though Ieng Sary repudiated this claim (Pol Pot 1984; Ieng Sary 1979; Xu 2001, 219). They were not the first Khmers to become Communists; Tep Saravouth and Sien An had “converted” to Communism by July 1950 (Complin 1952, 1). Saloth Sar and Ieng Sary soon followed, and went the next step by abandoning their studies in 1951 for politics. Ieng Sary in particular studied Stalin's works and techniques for organizational structures of the Communist Party closely.

Hou Yuon, by contrast, continued his academic pursuit regardless of *Cercle* participation, earning an economics doctorate in 1955. He was in the same cell as fellow CPK founders Ieng Sary and Saloth Sar, and their group focused on the Communist canon. Upon Sar's mid-1950 return from Yugoslavia, where he worked in a “labor battalion” on the Zagreb highway, he joined Hou Yuon and Ieng Sary in discussing Lenin's “Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism,” Marx's *Das Kapital* and *The Communist Manifesto*, Stalin's collected works, and Mao Zedong's *La nouvelle démocratie* and *Lectures choisies des oeuvres de Mao* (Chandler 1999, 26, 33; Sher 2001, 78, 121; Short 2004, 64–65). But *Cercle* participants did not merely read and discuss Marxism; they also interpreted it through the lens of national culture, which for them was Khmer Buddhism. The CPK later banned Buddhism and defrocked monks, but in the Paris years of these participants Buddhism was still inseparable from Cambodian identity (Harris 2013, 53). One member of Hou's coterie, and his onetime co-worker at the private Lycée Kambuboth, even viewed Buddhism as compatible with Communism: “There's nothing bad about Communist theory. It is like Buddhism...[and] in compliance with the theory of Buddhism. In Buddhism, [one] only has enough belongings to carry with oneself in life” (Chea 2000).

The third factor that pushed Hou toward Communism was his connection to Cambodian Communists in Berlin. In July and August 1951, he was part of a ten-member AEK representative youth delegation, to the International Federation of Democratic Youth festival in East Berlin (Ieng Sary 1951, 1; Complin 1952, 1). One of their instructions before arrival was to bring a Khmer flag “without the color blue,” the red flag of the KPRP (Archives Nationales d'Outre Mer 1951, 1). The festival was their first exposure to the KPRP and news of resistance against the French in Cambodia, and a watershed moment in the shift of the Paris Group (the Paris-educated future CPK founders) toward an internationalist outlook. Once there, Hou met delegates from the Viet Minh resistance group who gave him “a number of Communist documents,” including news on the latest from the anti-French nationalist movement Khmer Issarak and its leader Son Ngoc Thanh (alias Minh) (Chandler 1999, 35). Hou returned to France with brochures, photographs of Son Ngoc Minh, and “a sample of the Issarak five-towered flag” (Chandler 1991, 55). By his return, Keng Vannsak had left Paris, but his

departure initiated even deeper bonds between Hou and his colleagues, with the *Cercle* relocating to Ieng Sary's hotel room on Rue St. André des Arts in 1952 (Chandler 1991, 53). Hou ascended to AEK leadership in December 1951 and connected it to the internationalist Union National des Étudiants de France (UNEF) (Service de Sécurité du Haut Commissariat au Cambodge 1952, 1). His rise signaled the *Cercle's* seizure of the AEK from within (a bloc-within strategy, so to speak), as PCF members divided the AEK into moderate, right-wing, and leftist camps (Martin 1989, 289n2). This fissure also led the AEK to be openly "hostile toward the Sovereign" and augment its leftist political orientation, with members distributing *L'Humanité* (a French newspaper and the organ of the PCF), frequenting PCF cells, and expressing outright criticism of the association's honorary president, King Norodom Sihanouk (r. 1941–1955) (Direction des Services de Sécurité du Haute Commission en Indochine 1953, 2). In one instance, AEK members decried Sihanouk's suppression of opposition parties, demanding that he renounce his honorary title (Martin 1989, 104; Huoth 1952). Sihanouk's continued disruption of the electoral process, both before and after Cambodia's 1953 independence, ultimately pushed the *Cercle* toward embracing Communism as its guiding principle.

Politics on the home front constitute the fourth major factor that pushed Hou toward Communism. Three important developments constituted this push. In the first, Sihanouk dissolved the National Assembly in January 1949 and ruled by imperial decree, which angered a Democratic Party that had lobbied for a popular vote (Sar 1952, 39; Thion and Kiernan 1981, 357; Osborne 1994, 63–66). The tipping point was the January 1950 assassination of Democrat leader Ieu Kouess by an associate of Sihanouk's uncle, Norodom Norindeth, which left Khmer students with few political options. The Democrats continued their push for elections, which they gained in 1951, and in May 1952 anti-Sihanouk demonstrations among students in Cambodia gave indications that the monarchy could no longer ignore calls for reform. From Paris, Hou penned a letter in which he lauded the demonstrators' efforts, situating their protests in a global context: "These positive developments have become normal throughout the world, whether in the European countries or the Asian ones, and especially in the countries where independence is being sought" (Kiernan 1985, 121). The next development was the French position on Sihanouk, which cast him as the only hope for political stability and, ultimately, infuriated the pro-democracy Paris group. As French military commander General Pierre de Langlade declared, "Democracy had no hope [here].... The parliamentary experiment has failed.... The Sovereign remains the only person capable of giving Cambodia political direction.... [He is] heir to the...mystique of the God-Kings, who for thousands of years have guided the destinies of the land.... Everything in this country has to be done by the King" (Short 2004, 80). Sihanouk thus had unchecked power, and again dissolved the National Assembly in a coup d'état on June 15, 1952 (Extrait de BQR 1953, 2–4).

Sihanouk's corruption pushed Hou and many of his Paris comrades to embrace the PCF's Stalinism and dogmatism (and emphasis on clandestine operation and organization). In response to Sihanouk's coup, Keng Vannsak levied harsh condemnation

in a 1952 issue of the AEK publication *Khemara nisut* (Khmer student), in which he declared:

We, Khmer students of the AEK, consider that Your Majesty has acted illegally...and that the policy of the Throne...will inevitably lead our Khmer Motherland into an abyss of perpetual slavery.... In your message to the nation, [you said that] Cambodia faces ever greater dangers.... What should the people think when Your Majesty's Palace has become a lobby for dishonest dealings which place within your hands the riches of the country and the people?... Corruption in our country stems from the Throne and spreads down to the humblest officials. The French oppress the whole country, the King trades his Crown, the Palace and its parasites suck the people's blood.... These are the main causes of our country's critical situation today.... Your Majesty has sought to divide the nation in two: the royalists, and those who struggle for independence. [Your] policy is to set Khmers against Khmers. ("Lettre de l'Association des Étudiants Khmers en France à Sa Majesté Norodom Syhanouk [*sic*], Roi du Cambodge" 1952; see also Archives Nationales d'Outre Mer 1952c, 3–5)

Yet *Cercle* members realized the limits of theory (their two years in Paris had not brought Cambodia closer to reform), and as Sihanouk disbanded the AEK in 1953, they took a radical turn, forming the Communist Union des Étudiants Khmers on November 26, 1953 (Debord 1953, 1). As Khieu Samphan, who assumed UEK leadership in 1957 and linked it to the KPRP's Phnom Penh branch, recalled, "My studies as well as my experiences convinced me that the only way of implementing our ideals in general, and of building up our backward agriculture in particular, is socialism. Thus, I became a communist. I did so out of objective conviction and not out of daydreaming" (Pilz 1980). Indeed, Sihanouk's 1952 dissolution of the Democrat-led assembly exacerbated the Paris Groups' radicalization, with students flocking en masse to join the PCF (Chandler 1991, 8). The PCF owed its appeal to General Secretary Thorez, a charismatic orator who had developed a personality cult of his own (Chandler 1999, 25). But in 1950 Thorez suffered a stroke and left the country for medical treatment. An intra-party struggle for power culminated in purges, and many Cambodians in France, including Hou, were swept along by a Stalinist wave as the PCF's rigid disciplinary line instilled in members a sense of purpose and direction (Chandler 1999, 33, 35). Hou learned the effectiveness of staying out of sight and mind, especially in light of the French government's crackdown on scholarship student participation in Parisian leftist groups (Sher 2004, 30; Etcheson 1984, 174). By 1952, Hou "vowed a lifelong commitment" to Communism, and he never looked back (Chandler 1999, 28).

A residual effect of the fourth push was the process whereby leftist Khmer intellectuals like Hou turned their attention to bringing actual change to Cambodia. As

Keng Vannsak stated in an interview, “We wanted to take power and believed that we could do so only with popular support, which necessarily means violence. We opposed the PCF’s view that we could come to power through universal suffrage” (Martin 1989, 105). Sar returned to Cambodia in 1953 to take up a regional position as cell secretary in the KPRP, yet frustration mounted among cadres, who merely tolerated rather than embraced Hanoi’s leadership over the Cambodian Working Bureau in eastern Cambodia, and awaited directives on what to do next (Chandler 1999, 27–28; Mosyakov 2004, 45–48). In Paris, the PCF discarded Stalinism; its members had grown tired of Soviet and Vietnamese support of their nemesis Sihanouk. As Keng Vannsak, who had returned to Paris to finish his invention, the Khmer typewriter, elaborated, “At the beginning, we were very Stalinist.... We turned toward China in the late 1950s because the Russians were playing the Sihanouk card and neglecting us.... When everyone began to criticize Stalin, we became Maoists” (Martin 1989, 105–106; Sher 2001, 119). Why? One answer is because Soviet de-Stalinization and “revisionism” propelled many radical students in Paris toward looking to Communist China for answers to crises in Cambodia. The other is that Maoism, borne of the Chinese revolutionary experience, stressed practice over dogmatism, discarded the Eurocentrism inherent in Marxism, and contained emancipatory features. The primacy it placed on practice must have had an influence on Hou, who undoubtedly took a practical approach to Marxist concepts and categories in his own written work. In addition, Marxism’s liberating possibility lay in accounting for Cambodia’s national experience. Accordingly, Hou Yuon sought to challenge the corruption of the ruling government in Cambodia by taking first an academic, then a political, route to reform in his homeland. As the next section shows, his dissertation represents an important formative stage in the Cambodian intellectuals’ radical vision for their homeland.

Countryside Surrounds the Cities: Hou Yuon’s Doctoral Dissertation (1955)

Hou Yuon defended his dissertation at the Université de Paris on February 14, 1955. Hou drew from a wide range of sources, from area specialists like Jean Chesneaux, Jean Ajalbert, and Paul Sebac to Cambodian leftist academic Phung Ton (Hou 1955, 279–280), and focused on Cambodia’s rural sector, emphasizing peasant emancipation and collective work. His thesis came out at a time when Communist China had followed Soviet prioritization of heavy industry, which influenced him to regard the Soviet Union’s second Five-Year Plan’s response “to peasant needs...by studying the possibility of, encouraging, or creating Machine Tractor Stations” (Hou 1955, 228). Accordingly, Hou’s “careful research” represents a “radical analysis” of the Cambodian countryside, making several novel suggestions to reform its economy around improving peasants’ living and working standards (Heder 2004, 72). After Hou returned to Cambodia, he expanded upon his dissertation in his 1964 book *Banha sahakor*. But it was his dissertation, which identifies real problems in the rural sector—usury, poverty, exploitation, inter alia—through the lens of Marxism, that struck a sympathetic chord

with his protégés Khieu Samphan and Hu Nim, whose own doctoral dissertations reflected Hou's lasting influence (Heder 2004, 59; Suong 2013, 72). Khieu Samphan's economics dissertation, in particular, expanded on Hou's study in an overall view of Cambodia's national production (Becker 1998, 79).

This section examines five central themes in Hou's work that engage with Marxist concepts with an eye to applying them to Cambodia's concrete realities: (1) the nature of Cambodia's rural-urban divide and the socioeconomic inequity that consumerism and foreign dependency had wrought as a result (the capitalist mode of production and state monopoly capitalism); (2) state-supported (as the state represents majority rather than minority interests) autonomous development whereby peasants could organize economic productivity themselves (democratic centralism); (3) Cambodia's rural classes and peasant voluntarism (the agrarian question); (4) peasant organizations in the form of "mutual aid teams," but without the ultimate goal of state upheaval (the question of cooperatives); and (5) modernization of Cambodia's productive forces and the freeing of the peasantry from usury and capitalist exploitation (the theory of productive forces). Hou's proposals provide us with a telling example of his engagement with Marxist concepts at the time, and his assessment of the status of the various classes in semicolonial, semifeudal Cambodia leads to his conclusion that the peasantry is integral to national welfare.

Cambodia's Agrarian Question

The primacy that Hou places on the agrarian question as a prelude to any changes, above all, yields his most important proposals: an agrarian policy in which triumphing over seasonal limitations with human will was a powerful variable; and emphases on emancipation, collective work, and struggle against exploitation. For this reason, something must be said about the agrarian question before Hou related it to Cambodia's rural-urban dichotomy. For Marx, and then Engels, the agrarian question relates partially to conditions in late nineteenth-century Russia. Earlier on, the debate was over whether peasants constituted a reactionary, counterrevolutionary force that might impede the achievement of socialism, or a significant body with the potential to contribute significantly to a proletarian revolution. Marx famously held that industrial workers' collective action would initiate a self-realization of the need for revolutionary change. The proletariat was therefore the key to overcoming capitalism, because only the alienated industrial workers would recognize their exploitation and affect change through collective action. Accordingly, Marx held little hope that the peasants could self-realize their exploitation and be allies, though he was receptive to working across classes in a worker-peasant alliance. Thus for Marx, the peasantry alone constituted a reactionary force.

Importantly, Marx studied events in Russia, which shed light for many, Hou included, on how Marxism could take shape in nations lacking a significant industrial proletariat. Scholarship is inconclusive regarding Marx's hope for early Russian collective

farms. However, Marx vehemently opposed any notion of the vanguard, positing that revolutionary change could occur only through self-realization and collective action, not the workings of an intellectual cabal. In this vein, Marx was vocally skeptical that agricultural cooperatives could serve as substitutes for industrial factories. Marx noted that the *mir* (also known as *selskoye obshchestvo* or *obshchina*, Russian peasant collectives that practiced collective liability, periodical land redistribution, and shared ownership) was tending toward extinction (Marx [1877] 1968). Yet Marx also recognized a communistic consciousness in peasant collectives (Marx [1881] 1983). It is no wonder, then, that because of the absence of a real bourgeoisie to overthrow, or capitalism to overcome, in a predominantly feudal Russia, that some observers favored the latter perspective over the former.²

In Hou's proposals, we discover plans informed by a creative, malleable, and practical application of Marxist concepts to the Cambodian reality that underpinned CPK policies more than a decade later, though Pol Pot took them to new and terrifying extremes in 1975; Yuon's criticism of Pol Pot that year led to his execution (Sher 2001, 72, 83–85; Chandler and Kiernan 1983, 178–179). Central to Hou's argument for reform is his diagnosis of an unequal relationship—a dependency-theory take on state monopoly capitalism—and his recommendations for its replacement with one that gave the poorer strata a fighting chance to improve their lot. Dependency theory held that the world's poorer countries constituted a "periphery" wherein their respective

² Russian observers envisioned a European socialist future and not some "atavistic agrarian communal model," endeavoring to adapt Marxism to local conditions and, thus, break from Marx's perspective on the peasantry (Kimball 1973, 491). *Narodist* (Russian populist) Nikolay Chernyshevsky (1828–1889) disregarded the *mir* as a model of socialism, but combined with advanced technology, it could provide a means by which to pass into a new phase of development (Marx and Engels 1990, 491). Viktor Chernov (1873–1952) and Georgi Plekhanov (1856–1918) held hope for a proletarian-led socialist revolution in which peasants could play a role, and grounded a populist vision for socialist revolution in Russian realities, respectively (Trapeznik 1997, 44–45; Harding 2009, 34). Pyotr Lavrov (1823–1900), an influential ideologist on the then-fledgling Russian revolutionary movement, recognized Russian particularities and called for Russia to "rejoin European civilization in the quest for the socialist future" (Kimball 1971, 29). Others held that the *mir* could substitute for industrial proletarian factories, tracing its position back to Marx's understanding of, among others, alienation (transformation of labor into power) and self-reliance. Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876) advocated for collective anarchism, a brand of socialism that seeks the abolition of the state and private property, and regarded the state's existence as symptomatic of human alienation per Marx's and Engel's teachings (Harding 2009, 107). As the Russian Revolution proceeded, the debate shifted to one on the relationship between industry and agriculture rather than between rural and urban. Lenin and Alexander V. Chaynov disagreed over the direction of change in the Russian agricultural sector (capitalism versus "vertical integration" from production to sale) (Huang, Yuan, and Peng 2012, 140). Lenin broke from Marx, stressing the vanguard's role and, effectively, overturned the dialectics of Marx's understanding of revolution. "Marxist-Leninism" soon became the CPK's ideological basis as it fashioned its revolutionary approach, regardless of the fact that it was, essentially, the opposite of what Marx promoted.

economies were pegged to, and thus unable to develop from, the world's wealthy "core" nations.³ Marx and Engels noted that in creating large cities and increasing the urban population relative to the rural one, the bourgeoisie had "made the country dependent on the towns [and] made barbarian and semi-underdeveloped countries dependent on the civilized ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the East on the West" (1964, 65). This was indeed the case in Cambodia, where France had prioritized constructing its protectorate around a small, French-educated elite, with the economy structured to produce surpluses of rice and rubber.

Colonial domination had initiated a profound, though very slow, readjustment of the relationship between political powers and social forces in an example of state monopoly capitalism. In acquiring the collaboration of the traditional civil servants and endowing the rural authorities (*mehsrok* and *mehkhom*) with increased powers, the colonial administration damaged the protective relations and reciprocal obligations through which authority was exercised in Khmer countries. The misappropriation and exactions of the new elite of bureaucrats, the increase in taxes, the expansion of merchant agriculture along the river, and the indebtedness in rural areas triggered the first agrarian tensions (Brocheux and Hemery 2011, 285). Such vestiges of French colonialism persisted after Cambodian independence in 1953 to reduce the Cambodian countryside, according to Hou, to a semifeudal state and prevent its agricultural sectors from sustainable development on a more equitable basis (Hou 1955, 24–25). Hou contends that despite growth in commercial agriculture in Cambodia, with farmers producing surplus for export, agriculture was "enmeshed in a dense network of feudal and precapitalist relations...[which] gives the Cambodian economy its semifeudal and semicolonial character" (Hou 1955, 23–24). Although Hou's assessment of the rural sector as semifeudal from the colonial period until the 1940s was accurate, by the 1950s it was somewhat of a stretch, especially when compared to Cambodia's neighbors' economic situations (Hou's statistical data of Cambodia, after all, was from 1949 to 1951) (Hou 1955, 279).

Between Cores and Peripheries

Hou tackles the stark rural-urban divide, which he characterizes in Marxist dependency theory terms as an unequal relationship between cores (cities) and peripheries (rural areas). Hou's position mirrors the position of Samir Amin, who was also an influence on Samphan. Amin held that precapitalist (Third World) economies were integrated forcibly into a world market by Euro-American capitalist imperialism to supply inexpensive labor in service to foreign interests. The principal contradiction of this international capitalist system was thus between monopoly capital as represented by towns (cores), and the

³ French-Egyptian Marxist economist Samir Amin argued that, globally, the principal contradiction within this capitalist-imperialist system was between monopoly capital and the over-exploited masses (Amin 1977, 109). The solution was to break from this globalized economy and develop socialism autonomously.

over-exploited peripheries (Amin 1957, 9, 139–141). At the center of this imbalanced system were cities, which for Hou represented epicenters of market domination and “pumps that drain away the vitality of the rural areas” (Hou 1955, 192–193). Marx and Engels had discussed the rural-urban divide in their writings, intimating that the town represented the “concentration of the population, of the instruments of production, of capital, of pleasures, of needs, while the country demonstrates just the opposite fact, isolation and separation” (1970, 68–69). The resulting “antagonism” between towns and countryside was survived by a framework of private property that entrenched views of who was urbanite versus countryman. Hou’s position reflects a similar outlook. On a macro scale, exploitation by the global market for resources from the world’s peripheries (underdeveloped, newly independent nations), both human and natural, prevented forward progression and forced underdeveloped countries like Cambodia into a “cyclical phenomenon” (Amin 1957, 1–9). Hou’s homeland thus remained poor even with independence from France in 1953. Cambodia’s hasty integration into the global market accounted for neither its economic development nor affordable commodities for the average Cambodian. The result was Cambodia’s entrenchment in a capitalist world order in which its economic and industrial fate was inextricable from the perpetuation of commodity and capital production for export and outside profit.

Accordingly, Hou’s critique of towns (cores)—the principal sites of this ongoing unilateral exchange—concerns productivity. For Marx, it was necessary for capitalism to mature fully as a precondition for the self-awareness of an alienated existence; then the proletariat could affect change and the peasants would follow along: “Only the fall of the capitalist can help the peasant,” Marx urged, and “only an anti-capitalist, a proletarian government can end his economic misery, his social degradation” (Hammen 1977, 684). But in China and the global South, where there was no appreciable proletariat, vanguards tried to lead peasants to revolution. Hou avoided explicit mention of a vanguard likely out of fear of drawing too much attention to his activities in progressive intellectual circles, which might have compromised his scholarship and employment prospects back in Cambodia. He therefore promoted the contradictory term “agricultural proletariat” to address the lack of a sizable industrial proletariat in Cambodia and to account for the nature of this class, which did not own property. It was important to categorize this group as such because they were full-time waged workers employed by what he classifies as a semifeudal agricultural enterprise. Although Hou avoids weighing the revolutionary potential of Cambodia’s agricultural proletariat, he highlights their productivity despite adversity and their willpower as important variables to consider in reframing and reforming the Cambodian rural economy’s nature and form.

Unequal Exchange and Production

Next, Hou argues that Cambodia’s agricultural sector supplied cities with necessary commodities, but cities and market towns only consumed or exported rather than producing for the countryside. This argument mirrors Marx’s recognition that a

fundamental contradiction in capitalism is that of workers, who are at once producers and consumers. Capitalists kept wages low yet expected workers to produce. In Cambodia's economic system, products were either exported for or consumed by only the wealthy, mostly foreign, few at the expense of the majority population. This process represented a "two way circulation" of imports that

flows from the great Cholon [Ho Chi Minh City] business houses and branches out into the whole country, first to the small wholesale houses that compose the secondary arteries, and then to small retailers, whose thatch shops may even be established at the corner of two ricefield embankments, completing the arterial network. These arteries...convey imported products out to the most remote parts of [Cambodia's] countryside, but they also drain away all the paddy that remains in peasant and smallholder hands, and delivers it first to the small wholesale merchant in the provincial center, and finally, due to the organization of transport, connects the entire wholesale rice trade to the shops of the big Cholon importers where the paddy is delivered for export, ending the circulation and closing the trade cycle. (Hou 1955, 192–193)

The Cambodian market, moreover, was "such that the peasant is robbed when he sells his product and is held at ransom when he buys the products that he needs. All of [Cambodia's] commerce is in the hands of foreign monopolies, and there are middlemen at every level of the organization and distribution of merchandise and credit" (Hou 1955, 192). This dual system of exploitation pillaged peasants at every level, thereby widening the gap of socioeconomic inequity in Cambodia's rural sector.

Indeed, agricultural yields, particularly in rice, were the lifeblood of the already rural poor strata, but what little living they could generate for themselves was erased by the unequal rural-urban exchange and the absence of modern technology. While Cambodian soil was extremely poor, most poor peasants did not own their own land and, thus, "remained [poor] even while the population quadrupled in the period 1900–50" (Kiernan and Boua 1982, 31–32; see also Zhou 1964, 43–44). Landlords and wealthy farmers had forced poor peasants to depend on sharecropping, paying debts in kind, or selling their labor outright to make even the most modest ends meet. Hou describes how under agrarian capitalism, agriculture in its "traditional form of family farming" had degraded to ruin in service to large capitalist exploitation, as agricultural prices "established on the market" did not allow small producers to keep some of their product to sustain themselves (Hou 1955, 191–192). "From that moment began the rural exodus," Hou continues, as Cambodia "was depopulated, and the city now bustles with workers. The private farmers will augment the industrial 'reserve army' in the cities, while the rest is transformed into a rural proletariat" (Hou 1955, 210). Hou paints a picture of a destitute and indebted Cambodian peasantry. He acknowledges that

landlordism was not rampant in Cambodia like in Vietnam or China, and that nearly all farmers held *some* land, but notes that plots were so minuscule that peasants could not conceivably sustain themselves by tilling them. Already constrained by French-imposed taxes and below-market value paid by merchants for their product, peasants could afford neither fertilizers nor modern equipment, and were forced thus to borrow money at impossible rates and to repay debts (Becker 1998, 78–79).

Recently, scholars have contested Hou's appraisal of class stratification and polarization in Cambodia. Critics include Steve Heder, who charges that Hou exaggerates the situation "in part on account of [his] political convictions and hopes" (2004, 74). Heder claims that Cambodia was "only beginning to display class stratification...agricultural and non-agricultural working classes comprised a mere 4 per cent of the active work force; practically the whole of the upper class strata comprised civil servants or petty traders" (Heder 2004, 74, 206n46) and challenges Hou's breakdown of the rural sector into five classes of peasants. Jean Delvert's study of Battambang, Prey Veng, and Svay Rieng notes that some areas were exceptional in that landlord-tenant conflict existed, which is why they were attractive sites for the CPK to manipulate peasant unrest. He concludes, however, that Cambodian peasant society was "a democracy of small owner-tillers, under the commercial domination of the Chinese and at a mediocre standard of living," thus it experienced "no agrarian problem" (Delvert 1961, 509; see also Willmott 1981, 221). William Willmott agrees, claiming that Hou exaggerated the number of poor peasants and proprietors, and that there was "little social basis for rural discontent (except in pockets) when the [CPK] began to organize the peasantry in the Kampuchean revolution" (Willmott 1981, 224). May Ebihara's ethnographic study of Svay village reveals that although Hou is correct that most peasants neither lived comfortably nor owned mid-to-large plots (less than a hectare, or under 2.5 acres, per household), traditional sharecropping arrangements were "mutually beneficial [and] not as exploitative rent extracted by the rich from the poor" (Ebihara 1968, 196). Alexander Hinton elaborates that one could describe life in this hamlet as containing "an ethos of egalitarianism, a tradition of mutual aid, and a lack of significant class stratification" (Hinton 2005, 57).⁴ Thus, although class stratification was a very real problem, its severity in Cambodia's rural sector paled in comparison to the situations in China and Vietnam (Frieson 1988, 424). Despite such criticisms, however, Hou rightly condemns the effects of marketization on Cambodia's rural sector, which tied peasants' fates either to outsider interests or to internal feudalistic enterprises, forcing them to rely on surpluses or paying usurers for land costs (Hou 1955, 20).

⁴ In Sobay, for example, socioeconomic categories simply "did not exist" by 1960, though there were metrics of differentiation such as "those who have" (*neak mean*), "those who have enough" (*neak kuorsâm*), the poor (*neak krâ*), and the super impoverished (*neak toal/ neak toal krâ*) (Ljunggren 1993, 161; Hinton, 2005, 57).

State-sponsored Autonomous Development

Hou argues that peasants also could not increase productivity because their tools and techniques were “primitive and archaic” (Hou 1955, 190–193). First, rather than dismissing them as lazy or uncivilized, the state should equip them with the proper materials to increase production and, vicariously, their standard of living. Marx and Engels once proposed a theory of productive forces wherein true liberation (social change) was achieved through technological advancement (technical change).⁵ Hou’s perspective, by contrast, places the responsibility of equipping peasants with modern tools and better working and living conditions *on the state*. Only the Cambodian state’s spearheading of this initiative could maximize production and minimize the suffering of poor peasants and semi-proletarians—the two lowest strata. Peasants would then be free from repression and exploitation by foreign market dominance and debt bondage to landlords and rich peasants (Hou 1955, 228).

Second, Hou urges Sihanouk’s government, as representative of the majority will, to intervene and ensure the peasants’ quality of life based on *their* requirements. In this sense, peasants themselves could have a voice in shaping post-independence, rural Cambodian society, and the state could use its power to break the existing status quo. Hou’s proposal, less democratic centralism in a purely Leninist sense—his goal was not to overthrow the state *at this immediate stage*—emphasizes the peasants gaining more of a say in how to govern their sector according to their needs. Instead of a rigid interpretation of democratic centralism, Hou clearly recognizes that certain aspects were not politically expedient at that time. But the core essence of the concept, the people’s right to determine *their own* activity and to be the ones to shape it, remains largely intact (albeit with peasants instead of a classical proletariat) (Tyner 2017, 75–82). For Hou, one way to raise peasants’ living standards was to improve their access to modern farming technologies, particularly through establishing Machine Tractor Stations (MTS) not unlike the stations in Soviet *kolkhozes* (collective farms). Hou elaborated on the importance of technology in rural Cambodia, stating that Cambodia “cannot ignore modern technology, which must be applied in one way or another in agriculture” because modern technology brought farmers modern techniques that could augment their productive capacity and potential (Kiernan and Boua 1982, 139). Cooperative tool use could ultimately reverse low production yields in rural Cambodia, because it gave peasants “full use of scientific and technological methods, and...increase[d] the standard of living of the workers” (Kiernan and Boua 1982, 139).

⁵As they intimated, “Slavery cannot be abolished without the steam-engine and the mule and spinning-jenny, serfdom cannot be abolished without improved agriculture, and that, in general, people cannot be liberated as long as they are unable to obtain food and drink, housing and clothing in adequate quality and quantity. ‘Liberation’ is a historical and not a mental act, and it is brought about by historical conditions, the development of industry, commerce, agriculture, the conditions of intercourse” (Marx and Engels, 1970, 61).

As for a counterbalance to foreign exploitation, Hou proposes that peasants' working spirit would liberate Cambodia from dependency and strengthen the national economy. He maintains that the whole national economy lies in the peasant's "life and his strength," and that Cambodia's transformation from a "semifeudal and semicolonial economy...into a prosperous national economy...can only be done on the basis of modernization and technological development, relying on their [the peasants'] immense potential strength both economic and human" (Hou 1955, 4). Hou foregrounds peasants' will as a determining factor in Cambodia's true sovereignty. Because farmers—whom Hou calls the *prolétariat agricole*—are familiar with organized or collective labor and accepted a labor organization "on the basis of a united leadership" that defends their interests, Hou prophesies that peasants will "use the land rationally [and] start various crops on land that suits them," which he predicted would reverse their suffering (Hou 1955, 253). Although Hou may have supported the idea of an overthrow of the entire order in Cambodia in private, it is not present in his dissertation. He either believed in fixing the system internally through a bloc within strategy, or feared losing his Cambodian government bursary for such antigovernment sentiments (he had lost it before, recovering it only in January 1953) (Hou 1955, 253).

Cambodia's Rural Classes

Hou then presents a complex analysis of the classes in Cambodian rural society. "A central aspect of a revolutionary ideology," historian William Willmott notes, "is the analysis of the society to estimate the revolutionary potential of its various classes. While many Marxists would insist that the ideology flows from the analysis...the two [are] dialectically related, for the ideology also determines the analysis to a large extent" (1981, 210). This relationship is evident in Hou's assessment. Like Marx and Engels, Hou regards peasants as victims of the same bourgeois capitalist exploitation as the urban proletariat. Although classical Marxism cautions that the peasantry could stand in opposition to its own proletarianization, thereby preventing socialism's realization, Marx and Engels were "generally ready to side with any groups" against an exploitative government and economic system. In predominantly agricultural countries, they recognized, "an appeal to the rural masses" was necessary (Hammen 1977, 702). An "emerging proletariat" might even take the reins of the Communist movement, because workers in underdeveloped countries might respond more radically and responsively to their plight than workers in more developed locales (Hammen 1977, 681–682). Hou is aware of this issue, noting that "no study on this [the peasant classes] question in Cambodia" exists, and such a study is "delicate because Cambodian agriculture is entangled in a dense network of feudal and precapitalist relations" (Hou 1955, 150–151). Hou divides the Cambodian countryside into five social categories: (1) *les propriétaires* (landlords)—who hold land of 10 and 50 hectares (about 24.7 and 123.5 acres) in size, form part of the feudal class, and rather than work the land, earn by renting, sharecropping, or employing debt bondsmen; (2) *les paysans riches* (rich peasants)—

landowners who own but do not work land, contain bourgeois connections, and have agricultural equipment and important working capital; (3) *les paysans moyens* (middle peasants)—a stratum that owns agricultural equipment, does not exploit the labor of others consistently, but also does not sell their labor (Hou says that this class is part of the petty bourgeoisie); (4) *les paysans pauvres* (poor peasants)—the largest and most complex group, who lack agricultural equipment, some have no land at all, and many either rent land or are exploited by paying rent and interest on debts through selling their labor; and (5) *le semi-prolétariat* (the semi-proletariat)—permanent agricultural workers who are partial tenants, poor peasants, landless peasants, and debt bondsmen from impoverished peasant families (all of whom are poor or exploited by usury) (Hou 1955, 150–159).

Mutual Aid Teams

Hou proposes that the solution to the unequal distribution of wealth, opportunity, and tools to cultivate lands was for peasants to organize themselves into “mutual aid teams” in which all land and means of production that belonged to peasants would be “put toward the cooperative and used communally” (Hou 1955, 252). Peasants must organize, he urges, lest they “have no power, and not have complete capacity to defend their standard of living” (Hou 1955, 252). By organizing into mutual aid teams, Hou contends, the peasants will obtain real collective power and gain the “capacity and opportunity to defend and build their standard of living into one of happiness and dignity” (Hou 1955, 250). Thus, mutual aid teams—the union of all peasant groups into a cooperative, emancipatory effort to improve rural economic life—required participation across socioeconomic lines.

This particular proposal by Hou recalls the Marxist question of cooperatives. Marx argued that “however excellent in principle and however useful in practice, cooperative labor, if kept within the narrow circle of the casual efforts of private workmen, will never be able to arrest the growth in geometrical progression of monopoly, to free the masses, nor even to perceptibly lighten the burden of their miseries” (Marx [1864] 2000). Hou, by contrast, holds that the more mutual aid teams, the “greater the mode of production, the more abundant the harvest” (Hou 1955, 253). He states:

[Although] private ownership of the means of production remains...the difference with the individual farm is that the work is done collectively. Each member of the group retains its individual operation; he may augment or discard his product as he wants. When he goes to work...with another member of the group, he brings with him his own tools. [Mutual aid teams] therefore pool production resources temporarily for the accomplishment of a specific job. Group participants are not paid.... At the end of the day, everyone goes home...carrying

with him his equipment. And the cycle continues under the same principle. (Hou 1955, 249–250)

As is evident, Hou diverges from Marx's position on the utility of cooperatives. Hou's state-assisted mutual aid teams were, of course, modeled after the Soviet MTS. Yet the goal was the same nonetheless: Hou's target aim was to destroy modern capitalism and semifeudalism, but through collective production. Aid teams were to be "semi-socialist" and "semi-mechanical," whereby land, draft animals, and tools became shared properties available for everyone's use (Hou 1955, 250). The result, then, would be that peasants pooled their production resources for the accomplishment of a common goal, and could return from work with their own equipment in tow with a view to working collectively the next day.

The Modernization of Cambodia's Productive Forces

Hou Yuon concludes his dissertation with a proposal for Cambodia to normalize trade relations with Communist China and North Vietnam, and somewhat idealistically (even the CPK relied on Chinese aid), for the country to become economically self-sufficient (Mertha 2014; Mosyakov 2004). Regarding the latter idea, onetime managing director of the colonial finance house Paul Bernard was a major influence on Hou's proposal (Hou 1955, 279).⁶ Bernard argued that Indochina's economy ought to be its own market to satisfy its own needs, and peasants ought to have a decent standard of living (Hardy 1998, 817):

The point of industrializing Indochina is to equip the colony once and for all such that it can, alone, constitute an independent economic entity, able to produce everything necessary for its population to live and improve its lot.... We aim to turn this country, by means of its full industrial development, into a "living body," having a "harmonious equilibrium between the trunk and limbs," a veritable second-metropole, forming an economic unit more or less distinct from that of France. (Bernard 1938, 15)

Although Bernard was writing in the 1930s, long before independence in 1953, his argument rang true even in independent Cambodia: independence from French colonial rule neither resulted in Cambodia's economic independence, nor elevated the peasants' standard of living. The complete abolition of feudal production, Hou argued, was *sine qua non* for land products to go to those who grow them. Only then could the "potential strengths of the campaigns [of national emancipation] be freed from feudal remnants and the vestiges of colonialism, establishing the necessary industrial conditions and

⁶ Bernard directed La Société Financière Française et Coloniale (SFFC, Colonial Finance Company).

bases for the country's edification" (Hou 1955, 273). Any assistance, he argues, "must contribute to the development of our national independence, industries, and agriculture, and must not be accompanied by grants of economic or military privileges of any kind" (Hou 1955, 273). No matter what, Hou concludes, Cambodia "must count principally on its own forces. It has everything to gain in peace and everything to lose in war" (Hou 1955, 276).

Hou then presents three avenues for the cultivation of the necessary capital to achieve his vision of a truly independent Cambodia: (1) patriotic and liberated people working strenuously to break the chains of feudal and semifeudal relations; (2) normalized economic relations between all countries on the principles of equality and mutual interest, including the reestablishment of commercial relations with Communist China and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam; and (3) international aid organizations, with a view to improving the nation's agricultural development (Hou 1955, 275–276). In these avenues, Hou's position on internationalism, or his interpretation thereof, reveals itself:

[Our problem] is serious and not unique to Cambodia but common to all underdeveloped countries. They cannot appeal to foreign capital without compromising their independence and freedom of which they are justifiably jealous because they are dearly acquired.... They fear foreign control over important sectors of their economy.... [But] corrupt or reactionary cliques' domination could be overthrown by the people if there were no outside assistance to consolidate their dominant positions. (Hou 1955, 274)

Evidently, Hou saw Cambodia as a nation among many nations resisting foreign capitalist domination, and its people as part of a larger movement to cast out the corrupt and exploitative few for the good of the many. Cambodia therefore had to solidify economic ties with nonaligned nations, Communist China and Vietnam particularly, on the principle of mutual interest rather than the U.S. or Soviet norm of tailoring economic ties with nations friendly to their own, geopolitical interests. Although Hou also suggests, rather antithetically, that international aid organizations could play a role—a position that his protégés Khieu Samphan and Hu Nim did not share—he is cautious in stating that such organizations would not operate in a way that was detrimental to Cambodian farmers. Hou does not elaborate much on how this role would take shape, but it is clear that his approach reflects the larger anticolonial wave of the era, though he advocates for peace instead of violence, likely to avoid raising suspicion from his benefactors back home (Sher 2004, 207).

The Cooperative Question

Hou Yuon expanded on this proposal nearly a decade later in *Banha sahakor*, which was a “blueprint for a ‘United Front’ between Communists and anti-imperialists” (Kiernan and Boua 1982, 134). He urged that a united front against American imperialism was required for the development of cooperatives with an emphasis on modernization. Sihanouk’s modest socialist economic reforms (the rejection of U.S. aid, growth of national capitalism, and improved conditions for farmers and workers) had spun off course. Thus Hou identifies both “the main contradiction...between the whole Khmer nation and the American imperialists” and an “internal contradiction” between oppressive and oppressed classes (Kiernan and Boua 1982, 136–137). If unresolved, Hou cautions, these two contradictions would undermine any gains from Sihanouk’s recent reforms. The solution to rural problems was, once again, to modernize the productive forces and free the peasantry from usury and capitalist exploitation.

Hou calls for a system of cooperatives, in which peasants and workers “combine their labor power, their enthusiasm, their wealth, and work cooperatively on the basis of strict equality” (Kiernan and Boua 1982, 134). He lists three types of rural cooperatives that could work within a larger socialist system: (1) seasonal, permanent labor pools, in which peasants accumulate their labor power to work the land as a cohesive productive unit; (2) production cooperatives that accumulate labor forces in a much stronger and more rigid organization than in the labor pools; and (3) common property cooperatives, the end goal, in which all tools are for the use of the common organization. Organization was the launching pad for his cooperative vision, since he believed that the masses required administration and leadership. Thus each of these proposals was to be state-assisted to “enable [cooperatives] to leap forward in strength, for the leadership of the cooperatives to be truly in the hands of the people, and working in the people’s interests” (Kiernan and Boua 1982, 136–137). But Hou stresses that these three types of cooperatives stand no chance of succeeding in improving peasants’ welfare without organization and financial backing. Cooperatives, he concludes, would usher in an era during which city and countryside, industry and agriculture will cooperate, or the Khmer people would have to resort to armed struggle against the American imperialists whose pervasive influence prevented the rural poor from escaping their prostrate socioeconomic status and condition (Kiernan and Boua 1982, 139–147, 151, 156).

In sum, Hou’s 1955 dissertation and 1964 book reflect clearly his thinking of the time, which he held until the CPK purged him in 1975. Throughout his life he maintained that peasants were Cambodia’s lifeblood, and he devoted much of his academic and political life to identifying and proposing solutions to rural problems, many of which weighed most heavily on the poorest strata. His dissertation brought to light many of the causes of peasant suffering: capitalist exploitation, foreign market dominance, usury, and a stark rural-urban divide. His solution was peasant organization in mutual aid teams and self-reliance. However, Hou was a moderate among his peers, and would

later become a victim of the CPK's excesses. That is not to say that he did not have Communist views; rather, Hou presented ideas that, taken to their extreme by someone more radical, could alter Cambodia's social, political, and economic landscape drastically. Hou's protégé Khieu Samphan, for instance, was of such a mind; he expanded on many of Hou's proposals with his suggestion for a temporary commitment to autarkical development to resuscitate light industry and handicrafts in Cambodia. As it turned out, Khieu Samphan's ideas also had a lasting imprint on the Cambodian Communist movement. Once in power, the CPK committed the country to engaging selectively with foreign powers on Cambodia's own terms and trading (directly and indirectly) with nations in accordance with the nonaligned movement's pledge of developing socialism autonomously. For this reason, Hou's earlier work is integral to uncovering the origins of the Cambodian Communist vision.

From Page to Paddy: Hou Yuon's Implementation of His Vision, 1953–1967

Hou Yuon's efforts and failure to put his ideas into practice led to his decision to join the Cambodian Communist movement in 1967. He opted for the legal parliamentary route, whereas his Paris colleague Saloth Sar became a revolutionary after returning from France in 1953. Hou, who returned in 1956, offered to collaborate with Sihanouk rather than topple his regime. But he failed in the face of Sihanouk's repression, which in 1967 forced him to struggle alongside progressive politicians such as Khieu Samphan and Hu Nim to flee to the *maquis* (bands of rural Cambodian Communist guerrillas) and join Sar. In the midst of the destructive Cambodian Civil War (1967–1975), Hou's ideas, which had influenced the more expansive studies of Khieu Samphan and Hu Nim, became a basis for Democratic Kampuchea. However, Sar ousted critics like Hou after 1975, turning the revolution against ethnic and class enemies. Before the CPK's radical vision became reality in the DK years there was the problem of fixing a broken system, a task that Hou believed earnestly could be done through cooperation.

Hou's return to Cambodia marked the beginning of a "new generation" of Cambodian politics. These French-educated leftists brought with them new perspectives from their encounters in the "radical ferment" of postwar Paris (Kiernan and Boua 1982, 96). Hou was the first of the Paris-based doctoral students to return, in 1956 after accepting a position as Director and French instructor at the private Lycée Kambuboth, where he hired several left-wing teachers and worked alongside Saloth Sar and Ieng Sary (Kiernan 1985, 177). Hou was also an active Communist; he was a member of the organization Pracheachon (literally, "People's group," a legal front for the clandestine CPK) until Sihanouk coopted him (along with Khieu Samphan) into the Sangkum Riyastr Niyum to counterbalance the rightists in the National Assembly. Though never to be more than a "token force" in the staunch neutralist Sihanouk's master plan to play "supreme arbiter" between left and right, such inclusion meant that Hou Yuon and Khieu Samphan could use their political positions as elected officials to put their

theories into practice (Short 2004, 129; Chandler 1999, 58). Both won seats in the 1958 election.

However, Cambodia's political climate complicated any sort of vision that Hou Yuon had when he left Paris. Rather than undergo political and ideological training as a Communist cadre upon their return, patriotic intellectuals who wanted to become Communists were charged by their Vietnamese "big brothers" with petty tasks such as kitchen work and transport, and were occluded from the 1954 Geneva Conference (Kiernan 1996, 12–13). Afterward, Sihanouk guaranteed the young Cambodian nation's first free elections in 1955, abdicating the throne to his father, King Suramarit, to found the Sangkum Riyastr Niyum (1955–1970), which swept the elections (Chandler 1991, 8). Sihanouk's promise was empty; he suppressed and bribed leaders of the Khmer Issarak (Liberated Khmers) and Khmer Serei (Free Khmers), targeting leftists such as Hou for positions in his Royal Government to cement his position as the national father of sorts. The Communist movement suffered greatly: the Vietnamese-backed Pracheachon group lost the 1955 elections and went underground, and Son Ngoc Minh's KPRP, the "Communist backbone" of the Khmer Issarak, lacked a clear political line. After King Suramarit's death in April 1960, Sihanouk declared himself the permanent, neo-monarchical head of state, which caused an irreparable schism between his loyalists, the aristocracy, and democratic intellectuals. He then set out to tighten his grip on power, exacting harsh repression on leftists and shuttering left-wing newspapers. Communists thus operated clandestinely, with Hou working as Communist operative in the Pracheachon within the Sangkum cabinet (Chandler 1991, 113, 118, 192–193). In Hou's mind, any hope for political reform had to come by operating within Sihanouk's government.

Indeed, at this time Hou was a Communist who was "open" about his support for Sihanouk, even though it was insincere, being a tactical move for his own self-preservation (Chandler 1999, 55). Prime minister as of 1955, Sihanouk had adopted a Buddhist socialist stance, and although his frequent visits to China and meetings with Chairman Mao and Zhou Enlai had instilled in him a desire to transform Cambodian society (Norodom 1963, 8), he was profoundly obstinate toward genuine structural changes. He instead relied on his overwhelming popular support among peasants as Cambodia's *devārāja* (god-king) to ensure reelection. As Hou remarked, the "Popular Socialist Community of the ex-king Norodom Sihanouk" was merely a "political representative" of the wealthy minority, and despite its name, was staunchly conservative and vehemently anticommunist (Kiernan and Boua 1982, 97; Chandler 1999, 57). Accordingly, the Sangkum was replete with "former corrupt and vagabond government officials" (Chandler, Kiernan, and Boua 1988, 239). Because of this overwhelming representation of Sihanouk loyalists and hardline conservatives, the party echoed its charismatic leader's anticommunist stance:

The constant progression of communism throughout the world is undeniable, and I cannot see what will stop it and make it retreat.... The

Western conception of Democracy seems to me the only one that is worthwhile from the viewpoint of the human condition, of human right and freedoms. Its superiority resides in the fact that it places Man at the summit, while Communism reduces him to the state of a slave to an all-powerful State. (Short 2004, 130)

Sihanouk's cooptation of his leftist rivals was a ruse; though coopted leftists enjoyed some freedom, they were under close supervision and direction (Kiernan 1985, 181). A dynamic presence in Cambodian politics at the time, Hou took advantage of his position, however limited, to put his dissertation's theories in service to the lives of his rural constituency, especially because the government had the power to improve their lot. Although he was elected to the National Assembly controversially—he had a court case pending against him for “fomenting an illegal strike”—he became Minister of Commerce and Industry within Sihanouk's cabinet (Short 2004, 129).

Hou Yuon pushed consistently for reform. Between 1958 and 1963, he occupied many different ministerial posts, including one as Minister of the Economy, undertaking a relentless political struggle to transform the rural sector (Kiernan 1985, 181, 204). Repression against leftist politicians was ruthless, yet he reached out to peasants, including one instance in Saukong when he defended them against an absentee landlord's seizure of their lands (Kiernan 1985, 244n217). This incident aside, Hou soon realized that democracy was a facade in Cambodia. “One can no longer say anything without risk of being thrown into prison and tortured,” he remarked, and no doubt he experienced it firsthand whenever Sihanouk launched into a tirade against him (Kiernan 1985, 216). Yet Hou, ever the devoted public servant, did not forestall Sangkum efforts to nationalize specific industries in the early 1960s, though he was certainly wary of them (Kiernan 1985, 206).

Hou Yuon's *Banha sahakor* is a testament to his commitment to Cambodia. It outlines his political vision, despite its insincere pro-Sihanouk rhetoric. A guidebook for socialist transition, *Banha sahakor* urged the socialist and conservative Sangkum branches to form a united front against U.S. imperialism (Chandler 1999, 57). Hou lauded Sihanouk's neutrality and opposition to U.S. adventurism, regarding his late-1963 domestic reforms (“the royal form of nationalization”) for their establishment of “means to build up the national economy in the interests of the people” (Kiernan and Boua 1982, 134). But Hou still opposed the revolutionary route to rectify the peasant problem: “We must understand that class conflict should be resolved by a method that will not damage the unity of the nation against the American imperialists” (Hou 1964, 11). Never afraid to speak his mind, especially when it was in opposition to policies that were in contravention to peasant interest, Hou won reelection in 1962. His understudy in Paris, Khieu Samphan, joined him and became a Member of Parliament in the National Assembly that same year. Along with Khieu Samphan and Hu Nim, Hou Yuon was

reelected by a large margin in September 1966 (Kiernan 1985, 232–233; Chandler 1991, 154).⁷

However, in Phnom Penh during the mid-to-late 1960s, the rising popularity of radical thought, particularly from Communist China, disturbed Sihanouk who, after nearly a decade of singing Chairman Mao Zedong's praises (Sihanouk once referred to him as the "great venerated guide of the Cambodian people"), had come to regard China's foreign policy as a significant disruption (Norodom 1963, 7; 1956, 1–2). Fearful that Hou and other leftist AAKC members were plotting to usurp his leadership, he "became distressed by news that the Little Red Book was popular," and imprisoned or ordered the execution of pro-Chinese students (Chandler 1999, 83). Sihanouk also became suspicious of Chinese journals, which declared that "all Cambodian workers believed in Chairman Mao," while Zhou Enlai's plea for Chinese "to display their pride of the Cultural Revolution and their love for Chairman Mao" caused many Sino-Khmers in Phnom Penh to mimic the Cultural Revolution's fervor (Chandler 1991, 169). Aware of the Beijing link to leftist intellectuals in Paris and Phnom Penh, Sihanouk urged Beijing to cease "meddling in internal affairs" (Ying and Shi 1983, 106; Chandler 1991, 170). Sihanouk removed leftists from their posts, severed ties with them, and shuttered the AAKC. Although Sihanouk had promised not to interfere, he feared Hou's mounting popularity and published toxic polemics on Cambodian Communism during their campaigns. He threatened to bring each member of the Paris Group before a military tribunal, which escalated into threats of outright execution. Hou fled to the countryside immediately to join Saloth Sar in the *maquis* in 1967 (Norodom 1972, 90; Chandler 1991, 165–166).

By 1967, the political route to reforming Cambodia was all but dead. The CPK had determined that political struggle was the incorrect line, though Communists who held ministerial posts remained steadfast. But Sihanouk had grown paranoid by the 1966 elections because of the popularity of Hou and his Paris-educated colleagues. Sihanouk accused China and pro-China officials such as Hou of fomenting revolution, stating, "At present I find that China has made a serious change because she has given up peaceful coexistence and the five principles. China had changed her policy since the Cultural Revolution. There have been a number of Khmer who aid China" (Kiernan and Boua 1982, 181; Zhang 1996, 161). Right-wingers and commercial representatives within the National Assembly, too, remained ever recalcitrant, repealing policies proposed by the Paris Group. Afterward, Hou received a vote of no confidence in the National Assembly over his unwillingness to toe the Sihanouk line, which culminated in his resignation. His protégé Khieu Samphan lost the confidence of both the National Assembly and the government, and conceded that there was nothing to salvage from the "unreformable" state (Kiernan 1985, 204–205). Sihanouk grew increasingly angry with both popular

⁷ Hou Yuon won 78 percent of the vote in his Kompong Cham electorate.

ministers who had exposed for all to see the broken nature of the National Assembly. He responded by threatening the lives of Hou Yuon and Khieu Samphan.⁸

After joining the *maquis*, Hou Yuon became Minister of the Interior of GRUNK, charged with community development and cooperatives (Ieng Sary 1970, 17; Ross 1990, 43–44). He was, in actuality, one of the leaders of *Angkar* (Organization), the CPK's secret title as early as March 1971, and used it to downplay leadership of the revolution to stress collective involvement (Ith Sarin 1973, 56). Although he occupied an arguably ceremonial post, Hou was far from silent. He was very popular among peasants and urban intellectuals for his modesty and incorruptibility as a politician. For this reason, Pol Pot needed him to mobilize people, that is, until he branded him as “revisionist” and “materialistic” after the 1975 takeover. Yet initially, Pol Pot trusted Hou as a CPK mouthpiece. Hou's September 30, 1974 statement on the twenty-third anniversary of the CPK movement in Amlaing district is evidence of his importance as a party spokesperson and leader. As Hou proclaimed in an hour-long address, the CPK movement had been “successful both inside and outside the country, and was graded the number-three movement in the world, after China and Albania...[and] allied countries, like China and Korea, [have] come to learn from us” (Hou [1974] 2002, 5). He then echoed his earlier diagnosis of Cambodia as still “half-feudalist, half-colonialist and imperialist, and under the rule of foreigners politically, militarily, economically, socially, and culturally,” which was also Pol Pot's assessment by as late as 1977 ([1974] 2002, 5). The solution, Hou urged, was to distinguish friend from enemy in pursuit of ideological purity: “From this moment on, cadres and armies have to completely liberate the country, but do not forget...we must first get rid of the enemies within ourselves. You have to classify who is friend and who is enemy, and stick to the stances of politics, solidarity, ideology, and organization” ([1974] 2002, 5). He listed sixteen points to which all cadres must adhere, with the most noteworthy ones calling for all cadres and soldiers to love, respect, and serve the people of the party, laborers, and peasants with their hearts and souls; honestly and regularly carry out criticism and self-criticism within each section, and promote internal agreement; hold the spirit of self-consciousness and self-reliance; and believe that, although their struggle is hard, they will succeed (Hou 1975, 5). Many of these “solutions” became pillars of Democratic Kampuchea and characterized life under the veritable police state of the Pol Pot regime.

⁸ In his fight to seize power, Sihanouk's diatribe at a conference at Meru Terrace against them for their supposed role in fomenting the Samlaut Rebellion of March and April 1967 pushed them to flee secretly to the *maquis* to join their Communist brethren (Hu Nim 1977, 19–20; Ieng Sary 1970, 16–17). Announcement of their disappearance led many to speculate that Sihanouk had ordered their execution (Norodom 1972, 90). Their popularity as representatives of the marginalized prompted widespread mourning; in Kandal province, more than fifteen thousand students gathered at temples to grieve the “martyrdom of Hou Yuon and Khieu Samphan” (Chandler 1991, 167). Thus began the legend of the “Three Ghosts” (Hu Nim was the third): ostracized yet popular leftist ministers who reappeared in 1970 as leaders of the CPK.

Concluding Remarks

A comprehensive genealogy of Cambodian Communism from its origins in Paris to the streets of Cambodia's cities to the rice paddies of the countryside is a long, winding road that at once stares backward to account for the social experiences of its masterminds (Hou Yuon included), and forward to connect radical ideology to its brutal realization. Men such as Hou, who became Communists, took different routes to their radicalization. Hou showed a commitment to alter Cambodia's developmental and political course within the existing system, opting instead for peasant outreach. He did not agree monolithically with the same kind of Communism as his peers, either, as he favored a pragmatic, managerial interpretation of Marxist concepts and their applicability and adaptability in Cambodia. Future CPK co-founder Saloth Sar, by contrast, cared little for dense texts and preferred what he saw *in practice*, differing from Hou Yuon in the use of "revolutionary terror." Hou tried and *failed* to put his dissertation's proposals into practice, joining the Cambodian Communist movement (1967–1975).

But before Hou Yuon and his Paris colleagues went down in infamy as leaders of a Communist revolution—one that Pol Pot led down one of the darkest and most violent paths of the past century—they were passionate students who genuinely cared about liberating their motherland from exploitation and painstakingly went about identifying problems in Cambodia's labor sectors. Hou, in particular, had tremendous acumen when it came to peasant grievances, having lived that life before. Naturally, Hou shares blame for the horrors of the DK regime as he was a member of the CPK Central Committee and rallied some oppressed poor and landless peasants to join the revolution (though less than in the cases of China or in Vietnam, as Sihanouk's endorsement of the CPK gave the party greater appeal). The realization of the CPK's Communist vision after April 17, 1975—the day that it captured Phnom Penh—was sadly the beginning of a four-year project that would set the already downtrodden country back several decades, and cost the lives of nearly a third of its people, including the outspoken and critical Hou Yuon.

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