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A Personal Reflection on Norodom Sihanouk and Zhou Enlai: An Extraordinary Friendship on the Fringes of the Cold War

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I was sixteen years old when I first read about Norodom Sihanouk and Cambodia. Jacqueline Kennedy's visit to Cambodia in November 1967 had been widely reported by the press in my homeland, Chile, where her assassinated husband was greatly admired. Through Jackie Kennedy's visit to Cambodia, I became interested in Norodom Sihanouk's fascinating life, totally unaware that, years later, our paths would cross and I would become his private secretary. My Cambodian friends often tell me that it was my destiny. In 1967, I wanted to know more about Cambodia. Since there was no information available, I wrote to the Cambodian mission at the United Nations. I found it unbelievable, but four months later I received a handwritten letter back from Sihanouk himself. That began our friendship, which was first conducted through correspondence.¹

After Sihanouk was deposed in March 1970, I discovered that the local New China News Agency branch in Santiago, Chile, carried copies in Spanish of all of Sihanouk's statements made in the Chinese capital a day earlier. It didn't seem to make sense that a Communist regime would extend such courtesies to a former monarch. This led me to one aspect of Sihanouk's political life that I found especially intriguing: his association with Chinese premier Zhou Enlai. This relationship seemed to be a very special one between the head of state of a Buddhist kingdom and the prime minister of a Communist state. As a novice in international affairs, I knew little about how relationships operated between states, yet it still seemed strange to me that a ruler who claimed to be descended from the kings of Angkor had a unique relationship with the political leader of a country ideologically opposed to monarchical government.

I sought to gain a better understanding of the Sihanouk-Zhou friendship when I began researching my first degree in Melbourne, Australia. However, in those days there was little

written about Cambodia's relations with China, as attention was mainly focused on the ongoing conflict ravaging Vietnam.

Figure 1. Premier Zhou Enlai welcomes Prince Norodom Sihanouk to China for the first time, February 1956. Source: Private collection of the author.



During this period, I continued to correspond with Sihanouk as circumstances allowed. Then, in 1981, I met Sihanouk for the first time during a visit to North Korea, a trip he organized for his “young Chilean friend” when Sihanouk was the honored guest of President Kim Il-Sung. The trip came about after I had informed Sihanouk—in one of my letters to him—that I had won a ticket in a raffle for a trip to Hong Kong. Sihanouk said that Hong Kong was not far from North Korea and that he would ask the North Korean president's permission to receive me at his own residence in Pyongyang. Little did I know that this trip was going to change my life; the following year I joined the private secretariat of Sihanouk. I was initially based in Bangkok but often traveled to Beijing, where Sihanouk had, once again, established his headquarters following Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia. In Beijing I was able once again to pursue the topic that interested me: the relationship between Sihanouk and Zhou Enlai. In this essay, I trace the relationship between the two leaders from their first meeting at the Bandung Asian-African Conference in April 1955 until the last time

they met, in August 1975, just before Sihanouk returned to Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge regime and lived for three years under house arrest.

In Beijing, which again became my permanent base in 1988, I began mingling with a select group of Khmer speakers in the Chinese foreign ministry whose careers were directed toward managing China's policies toward Cambodia and its immediate neighbors, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. In most cases, they served two or three postings at the Chinese embassy in Phnom Penh, then in Bangkok, Hanoi, or Vientiane, from where they followed those countries' relations with Cambodia. Beginning as translators to the embassy or the ambassador, they rose in seniority up the diplomatic ladder and, in some cases, became ambassadors to Cambodia, Laos, or Thailand. But that was the limit of their careers. They were fluent even in the language of the royal court of Cambodia, so they enjoyed unique access.

On their return to China, these diplomats were posted as liaison officers at the grand residence in central Beijing, not far from Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City, which China had made available to Sihanouk since 1970. During my stays in Beijing I began to know some of these liaison officers. Intriguingly, I soon became aware that those Chinese diplomats, specialists on Cambodia, who originated from Shanghai were more ideologically committed than those who came from other parts of China. They were quite vociferous about the Cultural Revolution. Yet, subsequently, the Shanghainese seemed very quick to switch ideologies and abandon the Cultural Revolution for the modernization advocated by Deng Xiaoping.

Some of these diplomats were willing to speak to me, a foreigner, whereas others were not. However, one topic was taboo with all: details of their years at the Chinese embassy in Phnom Penh during the Khmer Rouge regime. Some felt that China had made a serious mistake by aiding such an appalling regime. Others felt that it was China's duty to help a brotherly socialist country. I was most interested in the relationship between Sihanouk and Zhou Enlai and hoped the diplomats would be able to give me insights into it. Some of them did, even bringing photos of the two leaders taken in the 1950s and 1960s, from their homes, for me to make copies.

So how did this extraordinary friendship begin? Sihanouk has written in his memoirs that "destiny brought Zhou Enlai and me together for the first time in April 1955 at the Afro-Asian Countries Summit Conference hosted by President Sukarno of Indonesia."² It appears that before going to Bandung, Sihanouk had consulted members of the Cambodian delegation

to the 1954 Geneva Conference who had met Zhou Enlai. They told him that the Chinese premier was an extremely seductive personality who had mastered the art of explaining things and conveying his ideas. But they also warned Sihanouk that the guy was a Communist and thus not to be trusted!³ Zhou Enlai had told the Cambodians at Geneva that he wanted to establish friendly relations with their country and that for China the only criterion of that relationship would be for Cambodia to remain independent.⁴

Sihanouk did not personally participate in the 1954 Geneva Conference on Indochina, but he was kept informed by Tep Phan, Cambodia's chief delegate to the conference, of China's professions of respect for Cambodia's territorial integrity. During the conference, Zhou Enlai also intervened to persuade the North Vietnamese delegation to recognize the independence of Cambodia, to respect the country's territorial integrity, and to withdraw its troops from the kingdom.⁵

Figure 2. Premier Zhou Enlai, President Sukarno, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, and Foreign Minister Chen Yi in Jakarta on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Bandung meeting, 1965. Source: Private collection of the author.



The two leaders seemed to get on well at Bandung, with Zhou inviting Sihanouk for a private Chinese luncheon at his guesthouse. Sihanouk felt from the beginning that Zhou was determined to create strong friendly bonds between China and Cambodia. Zhou praised Sihanouk's struggle for his country's independence from France. Above all, Sihanouk was

impressed by Zhou's courtesy, which made him feel that much smaller Cambodia was on a par with "great China" and that he and Zhou were equals.⁶

Sihanouk first visited China in February 1956. He was welcomed as an old friend and was accompanied by Zhou Enlai everywhere he went. Mao Zedong flattered the prince by praising his policy of peace and neutrality. The visit took place soon after Sihanouk had visited Manila, where the Filipino president had pressed him to join the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization. Sihanouk was not used to being told what to do and the Manila visit had left a bad impression, thus when he received such a grand welcome in Beijing he was duly impressed.⁷

Zhou Enlai visited Cambodia twice. The first time was in November 1956, when he signed a joint declaration with Sihanouk calling for the observance of the principles of peaceful coexistence. Sihanouk was pleased when Zhou Enlai advised the local Chinese community to abstain from involvement in the internal politics of Cambodia and to join Prince Sihanouk in developing the country. In July 1958, Cambodia officially recognized the People's Republic of China and the two countries established diplomatic relations.

Zhou's second visit took place in May 1960, when he visited Cambodia as part of a regional tour. On his way to Cambodia, Zhou was informed that King Norodom Suramarit, Sihanouk's father, had just died. He immediately instructed the official delegation to have white suits made in order to express their deep sorrow toward the Cambodian people and the royal family. He also asked the Cambodian side to simplify the reception protocols, which pleased the Cambodians immensely. For Sihanouk these courteous gestures were extremely important and helped to cement the friendship.⁸

Challenges of the Cultural Revolution

In 1966, the Cultural Revolution was unleashed in China. The friendship between the two leaders almost came to an end after the Chinese embassy in Phnom Penh was taken over by partisans of the Red Guards who began promoting Maoism in Cambodia. What followed was a series of misunderstandings between the Cambodian and Chinese authorities that Sihanouk cleverly used to put forward Cambodia's view that China should keep out of Cambodia's internal affairs.⁹

Sihanouk felt that, as far as China was concerned, "nothing was improvised." He regarded what had transpired in the previous weeks as a deliberate gesture by the ruling circles in Beijing to ignore the closure of the Khmer-China Friendship Association, which the

Cambodian leader ordered shut down for reputedly being pro-Beijing after it received a telegram of support from its counterpart in Beijing, the China-Cambodia Friendship Association (CCFA), which had also been taken over by the Red Guards.¹⁰ In the following weeks, two left-wing government ministers with links to China were forced to quit, and Sihanouk ordered the Cambodian ambassador to China home. He also suggested that the embassy in Beijing be shut down while a referendum was organized so the Cambodian people could choose between Sihanouk and Mao Zedong!¹¹

Figure 3. Premier Zhou Enlai and Foreign Minister Chen Yi during their May 1960 visit to Cambodia. They are dressed in white to associate themselves with the mourning for King Norodom Suramarit. Source: Courtesy of His Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk.



The crisis was suddenly resolved when Sihanouk announced on September 18, 1967 that Prime Minister Zhou Enlai had met the Cambodian ambassador in Beijing and made a personal appeal to his “old friendship” with Sihanouk in order to calm things down, while suggesting that the telegram sent by the CCFA had been a mistake caused by the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution.¹²

A Royal Court in Beijing

Norodom Sihanouk was deposed on March 18, 1970, while he was in Moscow on his way to China to seek Zhou Enlai's influence with the Vietnamese Communists who were again violating Cambodia's territorial integrity. When Zhou Enlai learned of the coup against Sihanouk, he met with Chairman Mao Zedong and they decided to go ahead with Sihanouk's reception in Beijing and not recognize the dismissal of Sihanouk.

When Sihanouk arrived in Beijing, he was in shock, but after meeting with his senior adviser, former prime minister Penn Nouth, he decided to fight back. The Chinese promised help but warned that "the anti-imperialist struggle" would not be easy and might take many years. The Vietnamese prime minister, Pham Van Dong, traveled especially to Beijing to discuss events in Cambodia with Sihanouk and also promised help, including military training for Sihanouk's supporters.¹³ Once Sihanouk decided to join the anti-imperialist struggle, his Chinese hosts began making arrangements to make his life as comfortable as possible. Zhou Enlai was the perfect host; he took care of every detail to make his guest feel at home. Initially Sihanouk was accommodated at the Diaoyutai State Guest House, one of the largest and most comfortable villas. A year later, his Chinese hosts found more suitable quarters for their royal guest: he was moved to the spacious former French embassy in Beijing. It was ironic that the man who negotiated the independence of Cambodia from French colonial rule was now exiled and housed in France's former embassy (located on the appropriately named "Anti-Imperialist Street") in the old legation quarter of the Chinese capital.¹⁴

Figure 4. Prince Norodom Sihanouk putting the final touches on a dish in the kitchen of his Beijing residence, accompanied by his aunt, Princess Norodom Ket Kanya, 1970. Source: Private collection of the author.



The compound, located in the center of Beijing, comprised three buildings among lush gardens and lawns. Sihanouk lived in the main building, a three-story white dwelling that had been completely renovated prior to his settling in. Another building to the right accommodated his private secretariat, while the building to the left housed the Chinese embassy accredited to Sihanouk's exiled government. Here, the Chinese ambassador, who had returned from Phnom Penh, kept in constant touch with Sihanouk.¹⁵ The Chinese government also provided Sihanouk with seven cooks who worked a fully furnished kitchen, where Sihanouk, himself a gourmet, spent time teaching them French cuisine, including such elegant dishes as *Canard de la Tour d'Argent de Paris*.¹⁶

Figure 5. The residence of Samdech Sihanouk in Beijing, 2012. Source: Private collection of the author.



From March 1970 until December 1975, Norodom Sihanouk was the privileged guest of the Chinese government in Beijing. Zhou Enlai ensured that Sihanouk could meet whomever he wanted to meet, including members of the royal family of Cambodia, journalists, diplomats, and personal foreign guests. He instructed the New China News Agency and the *People's Daily* to faithfully reproduce Sihanouk's statements and messages to the Cambodian people. Above all, he ensured that Sihanouk remained in good health and high morale, as it was difficult for the former monarch to live away from his homeland. Sihanouk often felt depressed and humiliated to be in exile, even though his Chinese friends did their utmost to treat him with all the honor and respect extended to a king or a head of state.¹⁷

Zhou Enlai's support for Sihanouk was genuine, and he considered the return of the former monarch to Cambodia as vital to preventing its territory from being taken over by North Vietnam. Zhou Enlai told visiting U.S. senator Mike Mansfield during a visit to China in April 1972 that "the only point that China considered to be not negotiable on Cambodia was Prince Sihanouk's return to Phnom Penh."¹⁸ Zhou also kept Sihanouk fully informed of developments concerning China's discussions with the United States. Every time Kissinger visited Beijing, Zhou Enlai immediately briefed Sihanouk on what had been discussed concerning Cambodia and the peace talks on Vietnam.¹⁹

However, at times the secrecy surrounding internal development in China caused embarrassment for Sihanouk. For instance, in September 1971, Lin Biao, Mao's close comrade in arms and heir apparent, tried to flee the country after being purged and, according to the official version, died in a plane crash. However, the incident was kept secret and Sihanouk did not know about it. China's National Day celebrations on October 1 were scaled down, and Sihanouk received an invitation to join Zhou Enlai for a walk in a park followed by lunch instead of the usual parade at Tiananmen Square, as in previous years.²⁰

When the time came for a toast, Zhou thanked Sihanouk for the honor he bestowed on the people of China by participating in their rejoicing on the occasion of the National Day. Sihanouk responded with a short toast to the good health and long life of Chairman Mao, Marshal Lin Biao, and Prime Minister Zhou Enlai. The interpreter had begun translating Sihanouk's toast from French into Chinese and was startled when Sihanouk saluted Lin Biao. He paused and gave a desperate look to Zhou Enlai, pleading for instructions as to what he should say. Zhou smiled and quietly gave a discreet nod of his head, signaling the interpreter to continue.²¹

Zhou Enlai had been diagnosed with bladder cancer in mid-1972, yet he continued to work and to treat Sihanouk and his family with extreme courtesy. Sihanouk recalls that whenever Zhou Enlai needed to confer with him on issues related to Cambodia, or when Sihanouk requested to meet him, he would not allow Sihanouk to call on him but invariably insisted on visiting Sihanouk at his residence. Also, Sihanouk and his family were often invited to Zhou Enlai's modest residence for a meal.

From mid-1973, Zhou Enlai began a series of diplomatic discussions to try to establish a coalition in Cambodia, led by his friend Sihanouk, so as not to allow the Khmer Rouge to take over the country alone. Zhou Enlai was convinced that the Cambodian extremists' takeover of the country would not be in Cambodia's interests. He spoke to Henry

Kissinger and to several ambassadors in Beijing. He tried to induce French president Georges Pompidou to raise the issue of Cambodia, and of his friend Sihanouk, with the Americans. However, Zhou's failing health and internal political developments in China worked against his efforts to see his friend Sihanouk at the helm of a coalition in Cambodia. While the full record from the Chinese archives is yet to be declassified, it is known that the leader of the so-called "Gang of Four," Zhang Chunqiao, had taken a particular interest in Cambodia and, having established close links with the Khmer Rouge, had secretly visited Cambodia. He also helped to draft the new constitution of Democratic Kampuchea and opposed any negotiated settlement of the Cambodian conflict.²²

Figure 6. The leader of the "Gang of Four," Zhang Chunqiao, who had taken a personal interest in the Cambodian issue, escorts Prince Norodom Sihanouk, Princess Monique, and Ieng Sary, a Khmer Rouge leader, to a banquet in Beijing, date unknown. Source: Private collection of the author.



On August 26, 1975, Zhou Enlai received Norodom Sihanouk and his wife, accompanied by a Khmer Rouge delegation composed of Khieu Samphan and Madame Ieng Sary, at the hospital. Zhou was still fully lucid but much weakened by his illness and the treatment. This did not, however, prevent him from telling the Khmer Rouge leaders present at the hospital that "we the Chinese Communists must bear the distressing consequences of our own mistakes. We take the liberty of advising you not to attempt to reach the final stages of Communism with one great leap forward. You must proceed with much caution and proceed slowly with wisdom on the path leading to Communism."²³ He also urged them to

work together with Sihanouk. Zhou Enlai seemed to have foreseen the terrible disaster that was to engulf Sihanouk's country after the Khmer Rouge victory in Cambodia. This was the last time the two friends met and the last time Zhou Enlai met a foreign head of state. When Zhou died in early 1976, Sihanouk asked to be allowed to fly to Beijing to pay his respects, but the Khmer Rouge leadership ignored his request.

Figure 7. For the last time, Zhou Enlai met Norodom Sihanouk, Sihanouk's wife, Princess Monique, and a Khmer Rouge delegation that had traveled from Cambodia to escort Sihanouk back to Cambodia, August 26, 1975. Source: Private collection of the author.



In 2004, I received an indication through the Cambodian embassy in Beijing that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was willing to declassify some of the records pertaining to the discussions between Sihanouk and Zhou Enlai from 1970 to 1975. However, after asking for King Sihanouk's permission to do so, and even after the king signed a note giving permission to the ministry to pass those records to me, I never received them. After initially showing willingness to release the records requested, I never heard again from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Cambodian embassy in Beijing, so I dropped the matter. In 2008, during a discussion with a senior Chinese official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I again raised the matter of the release of the records, but this official said he was not aware of the matter and that he would check. Unfortunately, I never heard from him either.

These records may have helped to explain why Zhou Enlai pursued such a close friendship with the king of a Southeast Asian monarchy. Sihanouk has told me that he did not think that Zhou's intentions were purely political. Sihanouk felt that Zhou was a genuine

friend and that, as Zhou Enlai came from a noble Mandarin family, he followed the ancient traditions of respect for friendship that existed in China. Hopefully historians in both Cambodia and China can one day explore the full historical record and investigate all aspects of this compelling and unusual friendship.

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Notes

1. For more information, see Neubauer (2005).
2. Sihanouk and Krisher (1990, 48).
3. Sihanouk (1973, 176).
4. Sihanouk (1973, 176).
5. Sihanouk (1973, 176).
6. Sihanouk and Krisher (1990, 49).
7. For Norodom Sihanouk's comments on his successive visits to China between 1956 and 1963, see his report to the Cambodian people on his trip to China, October 8, 1964 in "Les Paroles de Samdech Preah Norodom Sihanouk," October-December 1964, Ministry of Information, Phnom Penh, 19. Accessed in Monash University Library's Norodom Sihanouk Archival Collection.
8. Personal communication from Zhou Enlai's family, Beijing, November 10, 1996.
9. Author's discussion with the late ambassador Noel Deschamps (Australian ambassador to Cambodia, 1962–1969), Melbourne, December 17, 2002.
10. Author's discussion with the late ambassador Noel Deschamps (Australian ambassador to Cambodia, 1962–1969), Melbourne, December 17, 2002.
11. French Ambassador–Phnom Penh to External Affairs–Paris, Memo No. 1740/AS/CLV, September 22, 1967, Diplomatic Archives of France, Paris, Folder Asie-Océanie 1967–69.
12. French Ambassador–Phnom Penh to External Affairs–Paris, Memo No. 1740/AS/CLV, September 22, 1967, Diplomatic Archives of France, Paris, Folder Asie-Océanie 1967–69.
13. Sihanouk and Jeldres (2005, 80–82).
14. The address of the residence was No. 15 Fan Di Lu (Anti-Imperialist) Street. Since the modernization of China, the name has been changed to Dong Jiao Min Xiang.
15. The ambassador was Kang Maozhao. He had stayed in Cambodia until late May 1970, as he was unable to leave the country until his Cambodian counterpart in Beijing was repatriated to Phnom Penh.
16. Pringle (1973).
17. Interview with King Norodom Sihanouk, Beijing, November 16, 1996.
18. See "Sihanouk's Ace in the Hole," internal discussion paper, November 9, 1972, Australian Department of Foreign Affairs, Canberra, NAA Series A1838, Control Symbol 3016/2/2/1.
19. Interview with King Norodom Sihanouk, Beijing, November 16, 1996.
20. Sihanouk and Krisher (1990, 55–56).
21. Sihanouk and Krisher (1990, 55–56).
22. Personal communication, January 20, 2002.
23. Interview with King Norodom Sihanouk, Beijing, November 16, 1996.

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