

Cambodian Farmers and Chinese Shop Owners

Between 6 and 7 a.m., the place became more crowded, mostly with women seeking cooking ingredients, vegetables, meats, or fish to prepare daily meals for the family. Normally, Cambodian women would spend the whole morning and afternoon cooking after spending some time at the market. At 9 a.m., the market finished, and the place emptied. Farmers used the sale money to buy necessities from Chinese shops and returned home. A dozen smaller villages surrounded Snay Pol. It was a business centre of the district. Many peasants from neighbouring villages came to shop at any time of the day. Most of them enjoyed the trust and confidence of the shop owners as long as their business relationship lasted. Very often, goods were not all paid for in cash.

Even at night, some farmers would come and knock on the shop door and take home whatever they needed: gas, cooking oil, salt, fish sauce, agricultural tools, medicines, clothing, soft drinks, or alcohol. The Chinese shop owners were very patient. They just kept records and waited until the harvest time, in January or

February next year, to clear all accounts. The peasants would pay interest and principal debts with the crops. After clearing all debts, the surplus would be saved for next year's consumption and for contingency. Those who harvested good crops got a greater surplus and could afford to buy new clothes or new tools and improve their living conditions. Fixing their houses, or purchasing a new bicycle and a radio set, was a sign of a better life. Peasants at that time earned just enough to pay their debts. Most of them owned their land both for farming and housing. But some did not succeed in paying all their debts each year, to the point that the accumulation of debts plus interest resulted in the confiscation of the land by the Chinese creditors. Those in this category would work for the new landowners and receive shared crops in return. They lived in an economic system that kept them working closely with the Chinese shop owners, who were the masters of the market. The Chinese fixed the prices of goods and commodities based on their connections with the nationwide Chinese network. Through the network, the Chinese supplied goods to the village. In theory, the system was a market economy. But the Cambodians were always

demanding, and the Chinese were always offering. And demands were always unlimited, thus always exceeding offers.

Even in a small village like Snay Pol, those Chinese whose great adaptability facilitated their integration into the community dominated our economy. After two generations, they were completely integrated. If Chinese men could not speak Khmer fluently, their wives or children did very well. Chinese families in the village were mainly Buddhist. The older women went to the same pagoda and sponsored religious ceremonies like their fellow Cambodian villagers. Later, the Chinese would marry their daughters to Cambodian boys who got jobs within the government civil service. In those earlier days of my childhood, for many Cambodian farmer families, sending children to school was not a high priority. Parents needed them to help keep cattle, cows, or buffalo. But for those who did, they were well rewarded, as their boys would earn positions within the government after graduation and, in turn, would help support their families. In the 1950s, anyone who graduated from a primary school could become a schoolteacher. In the 1960s, the ordinary schoolteacher position

required at least the successful completion of the High School's 9th grade, which was attested by a nationwide annual examination. Holding a higher diploma would give access to a higher position. The monthly pay of a schoolteacher was equivalent to about USD 100, which was considered good pay and quite high compared with the standard income of an ordinary Cambodian. The schoolteacher position was so popular that any Chinese businessman in the village would offer his daughter to marry its holder. The newly appointed bachelor schoolteacher was immediately high on the wanted list and would receive a motorbike as a present if he were to accept the hand of the businessman's daughter. The other positions within the government were also in high demand. But at the same level of position, only that of the schoolteacher was spread out in almost every village. In my generation, the Cambodian cohabitation with the Chinese community was trouble-free, and the Sino-Cambodians were well accepted as ordinary Cambodian citizens. In general, we did not have any problems with any ethnic groups in the village.

