

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION



1. Rationale

Anti-Vietnamese sentiments could be considered one of the crucial issues in Cambodian society today. The behavior of the Khmers towards the Vietnamese led by these sentiments ranges from conflicts in various communities to large demonstrations in the street. Some incidents which happened in the last few years provide strong evidence to this claim. For example, in 1998, at least four Vietnamese including a girl were beaten to death by Cambodian aggressive mobs in Phnom Penh after being accused of putting poison in the food and water supply in order to kill the Khmers. The beating occurred after a hundred Cambodians suffered from drinking wine with an overdose of methanol and 44 died while 28 had serious illness. The result from the laboratory test after the incident showed that no poison was found and the Vietnamese were not involved but it was the toxicity in the rice wine itself which caused great danger to those who drank it.¹ It was clear that the Vietnamese were just the victims for the Khmers to put the blame on when bad things happened.

Another evidence of anti-Vietnamese sentiments can be seen in many big and small anti-Vietnamese demonstrations in Phnom Penh since the second half of the 1990s. Interestingly, these demonstrations were actively attended by university students. In the massive march of 15,000 protesters to oust Hun Sen from the Prime Minister post in 1998, the students were one of the most important groups to destroy and burn the Cambodia-

¹ Cambodia Daily, 01/09/98, p. 9; 07/09/98, p.2

Vietnam Liberation Monument while shouting “we hate the Communist Yuon² and the Yuon puppet Hun Sen.”³ In this demonstration, the anti-Vietnamese and the anti-Hun Sen sentiments were linked together and the students were known as the anti-Vietnamese group.

Apart from being active demonstrators, the student group was known later as the organizing force behind the demonstrations themselves. In January 2000, more than 70 university students held a protest against the government. The protest was against the government's intention to use Vietnamese and Cambodian border treaties signed in the 1980s between the governments of the People Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) and Vietnam as the basis for border negotiations with Vietnam. Claiming that Cambodia would lose her territory to her Vietnamese neighbor, since these treaties were made during the period of Vietnamese occupation, the students requested that the treaties be removed.⁴ It can be interpreted that the students condemned the Vietnamese for exploiting the Cambodians and reaping benefits from Cambodia during the occupation. In the same year, a group of 50 university students held a march to the Vietnamese Embassy on 7 January. This day was the 21st anniversary of the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime and the liberation day for Cambodian people at the hands of the PRK, later known as the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP), and Vietnam. While the CPP leaders were meeting across the town to celebrate this unique symbol of the relationship between Cambodia, especially the CPP, and Vietnam, the students staged the anti-Vietnamese protest because this day was the day Cambodia started to be under foreign occupation.⁵ Thus, the Vietnamese were perceived by the students as the occupier and the exploiter rather than the rescuer of Cambodia.

The anti-Vietnamese sentiments have had a negative effect not only on the process of relation-building between the two countries but also on the social, political and economic development of Cambodia herself. Major politicians, both from the ruling and

² The word "Yuon" is commonly used by the Khmers to refer to the Vietnamese. According to Justin Corfield and Laura Summers, *Historical Dictionary of Cambodia* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2003), this word derived from the Sanskrit word "Yavana" which means barbarians.

³ *Cambodian Daily*, 31/08/98, p. 12

⁴ *Cambodia Daily*, 08/01/2000, p. 3; 14/01/2000, p.11; 22/11/2000, p.10

⁵ *Cambodia Daily*, 8-9/01/2000, p. 3

the opposition sides, perceived and understood this problem very well. Sam Rainsy, the opposition leader, made a public comment after his visit to Vietnam in 2001: "Cambodia should consolidate all her efforts to alleviate poverty...instead of diverting energy to tension with her neighbors."⁶ This opinion was shared by Prime Minister Hun Sen as his official speech given during the occasion of signing the supplement to the border treaty with Vietnam claimed that ending the suspicions, specifically the border tension between Cambodia and the neighboring countries, will lead to strengthening peace and development.⁷ That meant the conflicts and confrontations between the two countries could be solved in a respectful manner.

That the government will take action is undoubtedly the best way to solve the problem. However, will the government's good intentions accomplish anything without understanding, support and participation from the people? The incidents mentioned earlier clearly showed that most of the conflicts had their origins in the behaviors of the Cambodian people toward the Vietnamese. Without the profound understanding of the root of the problem, the attitudes of the people which lead to these behaviors and actions, a peaceful solution could never be found.

This thesis, therefore, aims to examine in detail the attitudes of the Cambodian people toward the Vietnamese and how these attitudes have been formed, particularly the attitudes of the young educated Cambodians (hereafter YECs). The term YECs here refers to Cambodians aged 18-30 who are currently studying in universities or have already graduated from universities. They are the main focus of this study because they are the group who strongly and publicly show their sentiments towards the Vietnamese. Moreover, they are regarded by Cambodians as the most important human resource of the country who will be the major contributors to development and peace building in the future. To understand their attitudes will lead the way to solve the Cambodian-Vietnamese conflict.

⁶ Cambodia Daily, 29/06/01, p. 13

⁷ www.evervdav.com.kh . 02/12/2005

It must be mentioned here that the word ‘the Vietnamese’ used in this thesis refers not only to the Vietnamese who live in Cambodia but also the Vietnamese government. Therefore, the study of the attitudes of the YECS will be divided into two parts, the attitudes toward the Vietnamese people in Cambodia and the attitudes toward the Vietnamese government.

2. Objectives

This thesis aims:

- To examine the attitudes of young educated Cambodians toward the Vietnamese
- To examine the causes of these attitudes.

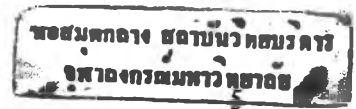
3. Hypothesis

The attitudes of young educated Cambodians toward the Vietnamese have been influenced by many factors such as school education, social surroundings and political situation in the country. However, politics and the process of socialization seem to be the main reasons that led young educated Cambodians to hold negative attitudes toward the Vietnamese.

4. Research Methodology

Documentary Research

The first part of this thesis, an exploration of the past and present relationship between Cambodia and Vietnam, political problems in Cambodia and the use of anti-Vietnamese propaganda, was a result of the documentary research. Apart from academic books on Cambodia and Vietnam both in English and Khmer languages, newspapers and websites used as the main sources include:



Cambodia Daily: an English-language daily newspaper distributed both inside and outside Cambodia.

Phnom Penh post: A bi-monthly English-language newspaper distributed both inside and outside Cambodia.

www.everyday.com.kh: a private Cambodian website providing up-to-date news and information, very famous among Cambodians both inside and outside the country.

www.nhandan.com.vn/english/: a website which focuses on current issues in Vietnam.

Fieldwork Research

The second part of this research, an exploration of the attitudes and the cause of attitudes toward the Vietnamese, was the result of fieldwork research conducted in Phnom Penh between 12 October and 31 November 2005. There are two reasons why Phnom Penh was chosen as research site. First, the informants could easily be found as most of the universities are located in the capital city. Moreover, university graduates generally work in the city. Second, the demonstrations organized by the students happened only in Phnom Penh.

As for data collection techniques, focus group discussion and in-depth interviews have been used in order to examine the attitudes. These methods are recommended by experts as the appropriate combining method in attitude study.⁸ While focus group discussion provided the researcher a variety of answers including unexpected ones, in-depth interviews allowed the researcher to get deeper interpretations and clearer understandings of the found answers.

Because this thesis follows a qualitative approach, the number of the informants is not fixed. However, 28 informants were selected through the snowball technique in order to be able to organize focus group discussions which were later divided into four groups. Each

⁸ Seymour Sudman, Norman M. Bradburn and Norbert Schwarz, Thinking about Answers (San Francisco: Jossey-bass, 1996), p. 45

of the informants was introduced to one another. This allowed them to feel more comfortable with the researcher, thus reducing uneasy feelings and increasing confidence when meeting with strangers since the researcher was introduced by someone they knew. This is a very important method for the study of attitudes, especially for a sensitive topic like this one.

The sensitive topic and data collecting techniques

Lee defined sensitive research topic as research which potentially poses a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved with it.⁹ He also categorizes the potential threats into three groups. The first is the intrusive threat, which refers to intrusion into the private sphere. These lead to feelings of unease, discomfort and emotional pain in providing the desired information.¹⁰ The second is the threat of sanction, which is related to the study of deviance and social control and involves the possibility that information may reveal that which is stigmatizing or incriminating in some way. Thus, the research becomes unwelcome or is viewed skeptically by the informant.¹¹ The third type of potential threat is a political threat which refers to the vested interests of powerful persons or institutions, or the exercise of coercion or domination.¹² In general, sensitive research may face difficulty in getting information and it will be seen as a threat to the physical security of both the informant and the researcher in which they trespass in that which is the controversial or matters which could be involved in social conflicts.¹³

This research on the attitudes of the YECs toward the Vietnamese could be considered sensitive research topic for many reasons. First, most of the researchers who have conducted projects related to Vietnamese issues have had rather negative impressions and experiences. A volunteer of the Vietnam-Cambodian Dialogue Project, which aimed to

⁹ Raymond M. Lee, Doing Research on Sensitive Topics, (London: Sage Publications, 1993), p.4

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 4-6

¹¹ Ibid, p.4-7

¹² Ibid, p. 4-9

¹³ Ibid, p.4

enhance more understanding between the two peoples, found that it was very risky to do the job in Cambodia because Cambodian society did not like the Vietnamese and people found that the project went against their understanding.¹⁴ In another instance, a human rights organization which had a project to protect minority groups in Cambodia was not able to continue their work after one year as the Khmers had labeled it as a Vietnamese organization because the project dealt largely with the Vietnamese minority in Phnom Penh.¹⁵ These experiences showed that anyone who has been involved in projects concerning the Vietnamese could be dangerously criticized or threatened.

As for the experience of the researcher herself, the sensitivity of this research topic had been tested as early as the first interview was performed. When the researcher told the informants that she was conducting a research on the perception of the Cambodian people toward the Vietnamese by focusing on the YECs, this information brought a very unhappy reaction from the informants. One man screamed at the researcher: "Don't you know what Vietnam had done to us? Have you ever heard about *Kampob Te Ong*?"¹⁶ Another man disgustingly told the researcher: "If you want to do this research, you should first ask in reverse what the Vietnamese have done to the Khmers"¹⁷. From his words, it seemed the informant automatically judged that this research will put the blame on Cambodians who have negative attitudes toward the Vietnamese.

Moreover, the political situation in Cambodia during the period when the field research was conducted made the topic even more sensitive. At that time, the government of Cambodia had agreed to sign a supplement to the treaty on the Delimitation of State Borders between Vietnam and Cambodia made in 1985. It was charged by the opposition that the Government had cut out Cambodian territory for Vietnam. The Prime Minister brought the men who made these charges to court. Two of them were put in prison while

¹⁴ Interview with informant no. 29

¹⁵ Conversation with a NGOs staff

¹⁶ *Kompop Te Ong* is a story about the use of the heads of three Khmers as a stand for boiling tea by the Vietnamese. This story has been told in the Cambodian society up until the present.

¹⁷ Interview with informant no.3

others fled the country. From this incident, the researcher was not given permission to conduct interviews in one institution as its head told her: "I can not allow you to conduct this research in my place since I am afraid of the charge that our organization is conducting a survey against the government. The current situation does not allow us to do so."¹⁸ One informant even referred to the arrest mentioned above when giving an interview: "You can have two destinies after finishing writing this thesis. You would probably go to Prei Sor¹⁹ or you would probably get a government position if you write a pro-Vietnamese thesis."²⁰

It can be concluded that a sensitive topic like Vietnamese issues can pose two kinds of threat, a political threat and a social threat. Therefore, in order to reduce all the sensitivities of the research, to get more reliable information and to secure the safety of both the informants and the researcher, indirect data collecting techniques were used. First the discussion groups were held after the designed questionnaires being given to the informants, and in-depth interviews came in the next meetings.

Even though the questionnaire had asked the informants to scale their attitudes, it was not focused only on Vietnam and the Vietnamese. Three other countries, namely Thailand, Laos and Japan, were also included. By doing so, the informants were left to compare their perception toward the people and governments of these four countries. The designed questionnaire was not aimed to get fixed answers but rather to give some guidelines to informants for the discussion to come. In the in-depth personal interviews, additional questions or the unclear points from the discussion were raised. Informants were also asked to tell about their experiences during the Vietnamese occupation until the present time and how they looked back to the past. By doing this, the researcher was able to examine how their attitudes toward the Vietnamese had been formed.

¹⁸ Although I had submitted an official letter from Chulalongkorn University asking for permission to conduct an interview with the students only for academic purpose, my request was rejected.

¹⁹ Prei Sor is the name of a prison near Phnom Penh.

²⁰ Interview with informant no.4

5. Significance of the research

-Understanding the attitudes of young educated Cambodians toward the Vietnamese.

-Understanding the causes of these attitudes in order to be able to foster better understanding among the Cambodian people toward the Vietnamese.

-Being a reference for the study of Cambodian-Vietnamese relationships in the future.