

***Brothers in Arms: Chinese Aid to the Khmer Rouge, 1975–1979.*  
By Andrew Mertha. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press,  
2014. Hardback: 175pp.**

Andrew Mertha's admirable book attracted considerable media attention before its release because of pre-publication publicity about its subject: China's assistance to the Khmer Rouge regime from 1975 to 1979. Although the fact of this Chinese assistance has been well known to those with a specialist interest in Cambodia (for example, Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, pp. 102–03 and passim), the issue has not been given a great deal of attention in more general discussions. Not least has this been so because of China's own reluctance to see detailed attention given to its role in supporting a regime that has been widely recognized as tyrannical and murderous in character. It has been this shocking character of the Khmer Rouge regime that has, understandably, been the focus of both academic and journalistic writing. Misleadingly, some of the pre-publication media discussion of this book suggested that the author was claiming that Chinese aid workers in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge period had no sense of the regime's character. As discussed below, this is not what Andrew Mertha states.

The author's first chapter sets the scene in a striking fashion. For, as Mertha points out, "China had been involved in every aspect and at each stage of the CPK [Communist Party of Kampuchea] rise to power" (p. 2). And, as Mertha mordantly records in a fashion made more striking by its colloquial tone, to the extent there has been awareness of Beijing's involvement with the Khmer Rouge, "China embraced a sucker's payoff in a Faustian bargain: it justifiably received international condemnation for maintaining the viability of the CPK regime while receiving precious little benefit from its Cambodian allies" (p. 3).

The story that Mertha tells is fascinating in its detail and surprising in much of what that detail reveals. Perhaps most importantly is the extent to which China's lack of leverage over the CPK regime was a persistent theme of the relationship. While China was able to persuade Pol Pot of the value of abandoning a policy of excessive secrecy, it failed to persuade him and his regime to change their radical domestic policies. Chinese officials, including Deng Xiaoping, criticized Pol Pot to his face and the latter smiled as they did so but [he] failed to give any orders that would have countermanded

what was taking place: "To the Cambodians, the message was clear: continue as if the Chinese had said nothing" (pp. 6–7).

In order to place the Chinese-Cambodian relationship in a comprehensible framework, Mertha provides two detailed chapters, "The Khmer Rouge Bureaucracy" (pp. 21–55) and "The Bureaucratic of Chinese Overseas Assistance" (pp. 56–76). Both chapters provide insights into the functioning of two very different bureaucracies which, certainly for this reviewer, have not been so clearly set out before. To take the Cambodian case, the establishment of an institutional structure following the Khmer Rouge victory in April 1975 ultimately was destroyed as the regime "imploded on itself" (p. 54) in an endless search for enemies.

Without doubt the greatest interest in this book for most readers will be the author's account of the work done by the Chinese aid personnel in Cambodia and their reaction to the circumstances in which they found themselves. He details their role in relation to specific projects, most importantly the construction of the Krang Leav airport, near Kong Chhnang (Chapter 3) and the Kompong Som petroleum refinery (Chapter 5). The picture that emerges from Mertha's careful account is of Chinese aid workers who, finding themselves in Cambodia after a turbulent period in their own country, were effectively cut off from being in a position to make informed judgements as to what was happening around them. Many of the Chinese aid workers lived more comfortably than they would have done at home, though they did so in a clearly defined fashion and restricted in where they could go without supervision. But, Mertha insists, they "were almost certainly aware that some horrific political violence was afoot" (p. 76).

As more than an aside, the question of who saw what, or did not, during the Khmer Rouge's rule remains as an issue worthy of continuing consideration. Were groups such as the Swedish-Kampuchean Friendship Association who visited Cambodia in 1978 so blinded by ideological conviction that they placed the best gloss on all that they saw? Or was the Khmer Rouge regime so skilled in disguising what was actually happening that their foreign visitors really did not see anything to give them pause? I declare my own position in judging that the first possibility was and is the most likely.

This is an important book, full of important factual information and thoughtful judgments. In ending my strong endorsement of its virtues, I only have one query to pose to the author: does he, in fact, have another location in mind when, on p. 59, he refers

to Chinese advisers travelling to Kratie from Phnom Penh by bus and returning to the Cambodian capital by lunchtime? Such a trip, given Kratie's location, suggests a rare misprint in this otherwise meticulously prepared volume.

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