

***The Handbook of Contemporary Cambodia.* Edited by Katherine Brickell and Simon Springer. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016. Hardcover: 496pp.**

No other book better depicts the country's "here and now" than *The Handbook of Contemporary Cambodia*. By avoiding the usual — and often simplistic — Western-centric narratives of the country's development challenges, this volume presents a first-rate account of current Cambodian society. Although both editors come from a geography background, their book provides a unique and well-rounded insight into the country's current situation, primarily because of their engagement with international and local academics, development professionals and activists.

As is made clear in the introduction, the traumatic Khmer Rouge era provides only a partial explanation of the forces that have shaped contemporary Cambodia. The country has been haunted by its submissive position as a recipient of development aid, problematic relations with its nearest neighbours Vietnam and Thailand, and its dependence on China since the coup of 1997. The 2013 elections raised hopes that Prime Minister Hun Sen's ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP)'s "rule by law" would be overturned. But after the CPP's narrow-margin victory ensured that the old elites continued to hold power, the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) refused to attend parliament, resulting in months of political instability. The subsequent fragile peace between the ruling and opposition parties has been characterized by too many painful compromises.

The Handbook of Contemporary Cambodia helps readers understand the country's complex facets by dividing them into five sections: political and economic tensions; rural developments; urban conflicts; social processes; and cultural currents. These five themes reflect entangled social realities that can be both sources of optimism and pessimism regarding the country's future.

Catherine Morris' chapter on Justice, Law and Human Rights, for example, provides a legal backdrop to the current political situation. When the traditional system of dispute resolution was disrupted during the violence of the 1970s and 1980s, alternatives provided under pressure from foreign donors, such as law reforms and legal training for lawyers and judges, proved much less effective. Given the environment of heightened neopatrimonialism,

attempts to establish the rule of law were undermined by the CPP and powerful elites who utilized the law for their own benefit.

While many Cambodians and foreign observers remain sceptical about the opposition CNRP's ability to offer solutions to the country's many socioeconomic challenges, civil society receives high praise from international organizations and donors. Acknowledging the increasing number of attacks on activists, Louise Coventry's chapter offers a less romanticized view of Cambodia's civic engagement. Coventry shows how wider civil society has been overshadowed by an ever-growing number of NGOs backed by powerful donors that often cast aside more embedded, more traditional and likely more effective community-based organizations (CBOs).

In making a connection between evolutions, concepts and spaces that are usually analyzed separately, this edited book also shows Cambodia as a country of blurring boundaries. This is, for example, apparent in the merging of boundaries between the village and city. With three-quarters of the population living in rural areas, the poor management of natural resources shapes the everyday experience of most Cambodians. Melissa Marschke's chapter describes how state concessions to extractive industries, insufficient water and land management, and related political decision-making make rural livelihoods harsh. As a result, rural-urban migration for employment in garment factories and at construction sites, insightfully analyzed in Sabina Lawreniuk's chapter, has in the past two decades been one of the main drivers of the country's economic growth. But living in the city also creates challenges, such as forced relocations of poor communities and restricted labour rights. In this regard, Simon Springer's absorbing chapter on homelessness shows how violent relocations of homeless people is being hidden under the euphemism of "city beautification". While conceding that the division between the rural and urban is artificial, the sections of the *Handbook* that cover Rural Developments and Urban Conflicts capture these linkages and offer a uniquely contextualized insight into key issues affecting most Cambodians on an everyday basis.

Another example of blurring boundaries is the often seemingly paradoxical conceptualization of the masculine and feminine. Three highly insightful chapters by Katherine Brickell, Mona Lilja and Mikael Baaz, and Heidi Hoefinger, Pisey Ly and Srorn Srun explain fast-changing practices of gender identities which are likely to become major drivers of Cambodia's social change. The social construction of women as competent to economically manage

households, yet unsuitable for engagement in public life, has been one of the important factors contributing to widespread violence against women. But as Hoefinger et al. suggest, certain groups, such as women engaged in public decision-making and communities of people with various sexual orientations and gender identities/expressions (SOGIE), are now more willing to challenge harmful stereotypes. The unique capturing of these patterns of change presents one of the main values of this volume.

Despite the literature on Cambodia being fairly extensive, this book is still able to provide a comprehensive and in-depth overview of the factors that have shaped the country's contemporary development. Moreover, rather than criticizing or providing Western-centric solutions, the volume engages with local perspectives. Both editors have more than a decade of experience doing research in Cambodia, and several contributing authors are key practitioners or researchers in their respective fields. By challenging the traditionally simplistic view of Cambodia as "just another developing country", and by asking new questions rather than providing conventional explanations, the book treats its readers to a refreshing new take on Cambodia. *The Handbook of Contemporary Cambodia* is thus highly recommended for researchers, development practitioners and policymakers with a genuine interest in Southeast Asia and Cambodia in particular.

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