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Satoru Kobayashi (Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University)**

1. Introduction

This paper aims to illustrate how Cambodian rural society has been reconfigured after periods of civil war and totalitarian state rule of Democratic Kampuchea (hereafter, the Pol Pot regime) in the 1970s. Specifically, this paper addresses two key questions. The first is “who are the people known locally as *chen* and *khmae* in present-day Cambodian rural community?” The second is “how do villagers’ interactions concerning *chen* and *khmae* reflect the reconfiguration of social structure and culture since 1979?” This paper analyzes these two questions together in order to present a comprehensive picture of dynamics of Cambodian rural society in recent years. I believe this inquiry will contribute to the study of the historical formation of mainland Southeast Asian societies as a whole. The article begins with brief ethnographic sketch the situation that I first encountered through the Khmer word *chen* in the research area.

1.1 *Chen* and *Khmae*

I conducted long-term rural fieldwork in San Kor commune, Kampong Svay district, Kampong Thum province during the period of 1999-2002. The field site is located in the eastern Tonle Sap region of central Cambodia, and consisted of 14 villages and a rural market located along National Highway No.6. Most of the local population was earning a living from rice cultivation and small-scale fishing, but some families living in vicinity of the market engaged in trading too. The fundamental concern of the research was to examine the processes of destruction and reconstruction of Cambodian rural community after the 1970s. It also aimed to illustrate what had changed and what remained unchanged in the local people’s lives and culture.

Tonle Sap Lake is well known for its ecological uniqueness. The geographic and ecological characteristics of the Tonle Sap Lake provide the primary context of the people’s activities in the research area. The lake has a conical geographical feature with a

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very shallow inclination; water surface is at the center, and the vegetation shows a regular pattern radiating out from flooded forest, grassland, bushes, shrubbery, and tropical monsoon forest at the end. On the other hand, the area of the water fluctuates over the course of a year; it becomes over three times larger in the rainy season than in the dry season as it receives a huge amount of flood water from the Mekong River as well as runoff from monsoon rainfall in surrounding catchment area.

The primary significance of the geographic and ecological features of the area is evident from the location of provincial centers in the region. There are five provinces surrounding Tonle Sap Lake now, and all capitals of those provinces are located along rivers draining into the lake. The location of each is at the upper point that flood water reaches in the middle of rainy season every year. This means that, in the era until the beginning of 20th century when water transportation was more important than land transportation, these capitals were established as river ports where various goods from inland areas, such as woods, ivy and vines, medical plants, paddy, dry fish and so on, were accumulated and traded. Moreover, those places were multilateral ethnic environments consisting of Khmer peasants, Kuy woodlanders, Chinese traders, and Vietnamese fishermen, although the vast majority of the population in the region today speaks only Khmer.

It was in March 2000 that I first reached San Kor, and I had my first encounter with the word *chen*. I still remember very vividly that the villagers at the time often asked me some common questions such as, “what is your objective of coming to this place?” or “why do you ask such questions?”, during my interviews with them.. At that time, I often replied that “I came here to study Khmer traditions and culture, such as rice cultivation and Buddhist practices. I also wish to understand recent changes too”. My responses are perhaps not strange for a foreign anthropologist pressed by local people to explain his research. However, the words of one old bicycle-repair man sat in a hut nearby National Highway had a lasting impression on me. He said “if you want to research Khmer culture, you had better to go to *srok leu*, because San Kor has mixed with *chen*.” The literal meaning of the Khmer word *srok leu* is “upper country”, but in the geography of the local people it designated the open forest area in the northern upper lands of San Kor¹. The word *chen* means “China, Chinese people”.

If we follow along with the old man’s opinion, one must imagine that a socio-cultural distinction would be observed in the people’s lives in San Kor and those living in the northern upper lands. At the same time, his words seem to convey a recognition that the more offspring of Chinese immigrants reside in San Kor than in the villages in *srok leu*.

¹ The local people call San Kor *srok kraom* (lower country) in contrast to *srok leu*.

However, it is important to note that the local people did not have any evident self-consciousness along lines of “ethnicity”, although they very frequently expressed their identity by using the words *chen* and *khmae*. As I will examine in later, the preconceived idea of “ethnicity” or “ethnic culture” could be dismissed after a review of how local villagers used the words *chen* and *khmae* in daily lives.

The difference in analytical standpoint between this paper and previous works on Cambodian rural society must be explained in detail. This paper focuses on the rural residents in Cambodia called *chen*, not “Chinese people in Cambodia” in general. Most scholars of Cambodia studies around the world agree that the society was formed while receiving a lot of Chinese immigrants since ancient times. William Willmott, who studied “Chinese people in Cambodia” in the 1960s, once wrote that the border between Chinese and Khmer as an ethnic group could be defined by presence or absence of a certain religious practice and belongingness to Chinese mutual-help associations (Willmott 1967, 1970). Moreover, American anthropologist May Ebihara, who conducted research in a rice-growing village in southeast suburb of Phnom Penh in 1959-60, concluded that all of villagers in the research village were ethnic “Khmer” and did not have any significant relations with “Chinese people” living in rural markets (Ebihara 1968, 1971).

This paper takes the each of the words *chen* and *khmae* to indicate “a social category in ongoing negotiations”, not as “a self-evident substantial ethnic group”. This is the most fundamental ground for the following discussion. In other words, contrary to the previous works that directly translated *chen* and *khmae* into “Chinese” and “Khmer” in English, this paper undertakes to review the words in an “emic” environment, and therefore a concrete ethnographic context.

1.2 Reconfiguration of “social structure” after the Pol Pot era

This paper tries to illustrate the characteristics of “social structure” that the local people’s interactions with the words *chen* and *khmae* are based on. More specifically, this paper examines the social structure sustaining practice and representation of *chen* and *khmae* as well as exploring how it reflects the conditions of the country after social upheaval. The word social structure here refers to a structural relation of concepts that the people in a locality use for interpreting their social universes. The analysis of reconfiguration of social structure in this sense in present-day Cambodian society presents interesting insights onto the historical formation of lowland societies in mainland Southeast Asia.

It is well known that Cambodia suffered tremendous socio-cultural transformations since the beginning of the 1970s. The country got independence from French colonial rule in

1953, and enjoyed steady development under Norodom Sihanouk's authoritarian leadership. However, in the 1960s, both the international and the domestic situation deteriorated rapidly. The Vietnamese war became more and more serious during this decade, and Sihanouk failed to learn the lessons of national governmental affairs from neighboring countries. Then, General Lon Nol, backed by the United States, seized power through a coup d'état in March 1970. Following this, the country fell into civil war pitting the ballooning communists plus Sihanouk against the new republican government of Lon Nol.

The war ended with the victory of the communists, and the establishment of the Pol Pot regime in April 1975. As well known, the regime pursued an extreme totalitarian state rule and tried to force the old society to change completely into a new utopian state. First of all, urban dwellers were relocated to rural villages. Then, every person was questioned concerning their personal history in order to discover supporters of the old regime. Finally, the people found to have linkages to the old regime were almost always executed. Furthermore, all assets were nationalized, and the population was organized into work groups according to age and sex, and forced to labor under unrealistic production goals set by the state. Religious activities and medical care were virtually abolished. In the end, the harsh living conditions and the murderous cleanup policy resulted in a huge loss of human life.

Pol Pot rule ended in January 1979 with the invasion of Vietnamese troops, accompanied by Cambodian communists who had escaped the country in previous years. The country once again was plunged into civil war for the next ten years. The newly installed socialist government had opposed the Pol Pot and other political factions which occupied the Cambodian-Thai border area. The warfare ended when the Cold War started to deteriorate in 1989. The domestic political groups were able to create the Paris Peace Agreement with the assistance of foreign countries in 1991. The United Nations Transitional Authority of Cambodia (UNTAC) prepared national elections in 1993 to unify competing political factions. After the resulting re-birth of the Kingdom of Cambodia in that year, the country has enjoyed a period of relative stability until now. The country has continued to receive huge amounts of aid from donor countries, international organizations, and NGOs working for socio-economic development. Domestic security marked a significant improvement in the 1990s, which gave a boost to the expansion and diversification of economic activities of rural families.

However, the reality of recovery in people's lives since the end of the 1970s has been left unexamined until quite recently. Now therefore this paper tries to explore the issues by focusing on "social structure". As explained, the term social structure in this article means

the relation of concept that the people used for interpreting and representing their own lives. This is quite different from the conventional usage of the term following British anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown, who once defined social structure as “network of actually existing relations” (Radcliff-Brown 1952)².

There is a tradition of studying the characteristics of social structure in lowland mainland Southeast Asian societies from the structural-functional perspective. Arguably, the most prominent example of this anthropological inquiry is the concept of “loosely structured social system” (Embree 1950). This is the conceptualization of Thai society by John F. Embree, American anthropologist trained by Radcliff-Brown at Chicago University. He originally conducted fieldwork in a Japanese village, and then visited Thailand, where he had a chance to observe Thai people’s daily behavior. He was impressed by the lack of rigid organizational and institutional aspects of social order in Thai society and characterized it as a loosely structured society. This conceptualization ended up being very influential among scholars studying the region in the 1950-60s. May Ebiara described the social structure of a Cambodian village as:

“It is important to recognize that there is “loose structure” in the sense that some aspects of life have ill-defined rules of conduct, while other areas may have definite norms but allow for variation or even transgression without incurring strong negative sanctions. But village life in general is both orderly and relatively harmonious, implying that even a “loosely structured system” does have some structure” (Ebihara 1968: 209). *underline in original

Cambodian village society is said to have no clear membership, and there are no rigid social classes. Cambodian society is also recognized as formed in a “bilateral” kinship system, similar to other rice-growing lowland societies in mainland Southeast Asia. However, “bilateral” here does not indicate the existence of a certain rule for characterizing social universe in the region, in contrast to the so-called patrilineal or matrilineal descent. After Ebiara’s monograph, Jan Oversen concluded that Cambodian village society can be understood as a gathering of isolated households (Oversen et al. 1996), while Judy Ledgerwood countered that argument saying that Oversen overlooked the importance of social relations observable in broader spheres than household, leading to a serious misunderstanding of the Cambodian village (Ledgerwood 1998). This contention originates from the difference in the two anthropologists’ analytical perspectives, not from the ethnographic facts they had uncovered³. This might suggest

² See Kemp (1988, 1992) about the problem of conventional concept of social structure for studying the lowland mainland Southeast Asian societies.

³ As Jeremy Kemp wrote that the discussion of loose structure as applied to Thai society belongs more to a

that it is necessary to revisit the analytical perspective on “social structure” in Cambodian society. In the end, the concept of “loosely structure” came under criticism from diverse directions in the late 1960s. For example, a common critique was the rather vague nature of the loose-tight dichotomy (see Evers ed. 1969).

Here, I would like to pay attention to the relationship between space and identity as a vehicle for opening an analytical window on the study of Cambodian rural society. The word “space” here refers not to geographical units, but rather the arena of experience and imagination within the various socio-economic, political and belief systems of daily interaction (Kobayashi 2008). In practice, Cambodian people often express their identity in terms of space, as seen in terms such as *neak ti krong* (urbanites), *neak phsar* (market dwellers), and *neak srae* (country men, rice-cultivators). These are not ad-hoc representations of identity, but rather are the concepts that encompass the expression of localness that each individual uses to interpreting and representing their social universe. In other words, it could be argued that Cambodian peoples’ self/other recognition is very often understandable in a conceptualization of spatial consideration with socio-economic contrast.

This interest in Cambodian people’s conceptualization of space and identity is actually overlapping with the other anthropological scholarship on “social structure”. British anthropologist Edmund Leach’s thinking in his classic *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (first edition in 1954) stated that,

“In my view, the facts of ethnography and of history can only *appear* to be ordered in a systematic way if we impose upon these facts a figment of thought. We first devise for ourselves a set of verbal categories which are nicely arranged to form an ordered system, and we then fit the facts to the verbal categories, and hey presto the facts are ‘seen’ to be systemically ordered! But in that case the *system* is a matter of the relations between concepts and not of relations ‘actually existing’ within the raw factual data, as Radcliffe-Brown and some of his followers have persistently maintained.” (Leach 1964) *emphasis in original

In that monograph, Leach studied political systems in the northeastern mountainous region of Myanmar. The inhabitants of the region could be classified into sub-groups by

study of the history of idea in anthropology than to preparatory preliminaries to the contemporary analysis of social behaviour in the region (Kemp 1992: 12), I believe that the concept derived from the analytical difficulty of the absence of definite social groups in the region, such as decent, cast, and village with closed membership. Moreover, one must remember the study of so-called “bilateral” kinship societies in lowland mainland Southeast Asia was a challenge in the history of anthropology, but it has continually failed to present any concepts for promoting interpretation of local people’s social behaviour.

languages or ritual tradition. However, according to Leach, all of them shared a series of notions on their political universe; *gumsa* egalitarian order, *gumlao* stratified order, and feudalistic order of neighboring group called *shan*. He argued that these political systems should be understood as an oscillation between *gumsa* on one hand, *shan* on the other, and *gumlao* as the intermediary mode. Furthermore, he emphasized that the three modes of political order existed as “ideals” so that the researcher must analyze the way local people use the concepts for interpreting their social universes in daily lives instead of substantializing them. The above mentioned notice of Cambodian people’s representation of identity with space coincides with Leach’s conceptualization of social structure in this sense⁴.

I believe this alteration in the conceptualization of “social structure” might bring about novel insights on how Cambodian people perceive their social universe, as well as the more immediate reality of the reconstruction of their lives after the disaster of the 1970s. This paper will begin by describing the setting of the research area and sketch the local history in next section. Following this, the paper will analyze the contemporary ethnographic situation at first, and then turn its attention to a review of the historical context of the community. Finally, the paper will synthesize the findings and analysis in a concluding section.

⁴ One can argue that this alternation of conceptualization of social structure is parallel with the development of discussion of “social boundaries” (Kemp 1992: 8-10).

2. Research Site

2.1 Present-day situation

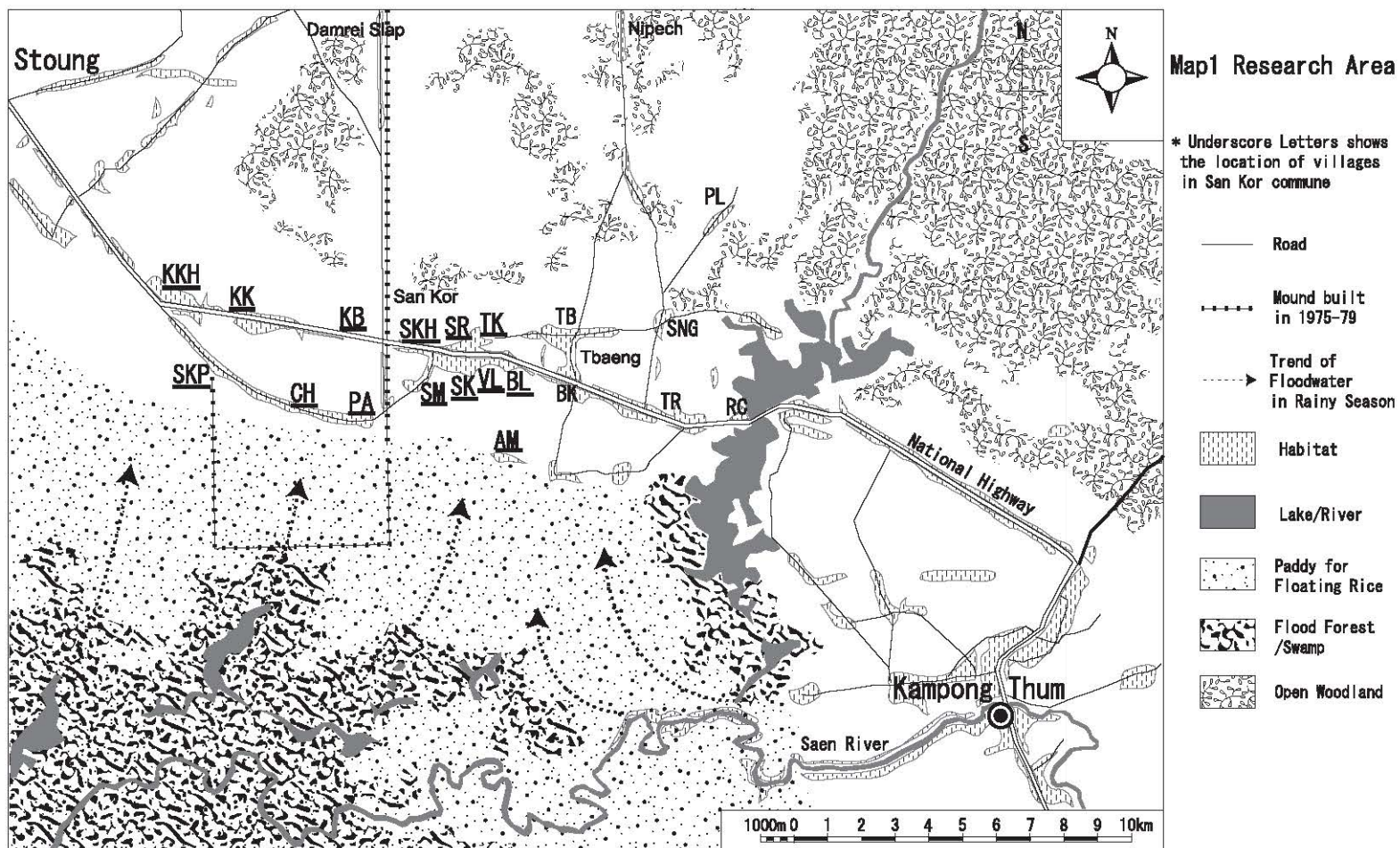
The total area of Cambodia is 181,035 square kilometers, about half the size of Japan, and is characterized by a contrast of lowland and mountainous terrains. The lowland area less than 30 meters above sea level makes up approximately 40 percent of national territory. Over 80 percent of total population lives in the lowlands. The national census in 1998 tells us that total population was 11,437,656 at the time, 85 percent of that number living in rural areas. The population rose to 13,099,472 in 2001 (Cambodia RGC. 2004). The result of the second census in 2008 shows an increase in total population to 13,395,682 with a decrease in rural population to 80 percent.

Cambodia lies in the tropical monsoon zone. The rainy season starts in late May and continues to November, and it turns into a dry season lasting from December to April. This seasonal change in rainfall creates the basic ecological conditions that affect people's livelihoods and various economic activities in the country. Rice cultivation is the most important livelihood for the country, as the population eats rice as the staple food. On the other hand, the country has a high degree of homogeneity in terms of socio-cultural aspects. Over 90 percent of the total population is said to speak Khmer language and practice Buddhist activities⁵. Although there are foreign immigrants such as Chinese and Vietnamese and indigenous minority-groups in the country, Cambodian society can be considered to be highly homogeneous with regards to ethnicity, language, and religious group.

Map1 shows the location of San Kor commune, between the provincial capital of Kampong Thum and the rural town of Kampong Chen, in Stoung district. The commune is located at a distance about 20 kilometers from each. The area north of the National Highway there is a small paddy area and open forest, while the south is a vast paddy area, neighboring with flooded forest in further south⁶. San Kor could be characterized as locating in the area of waterfront in ecological sense; in-between water area of Tonle Sap and forest area of *srok leu*. There were 14 villages in the commune. All of villages are located on higher land about 13 meters from sea level. About half of them are located along the Highway, while the others are seen in the middle of the paddy south of the Highway. The population of each village varied from 400 to 1800 persons.

⁵ Buddhist practice is very important for them because it rhythmus annual cycle of their lives under the traditional lunar calendar.

⁶ A number of paddy plots north of the National Highway depend on seasonal rainfall, because flood water of Tonle Sap Lake could not reach there in rainy season.



Resource: Author's drawing on Cambodia Topographical Maps No. 5934 (JICA, 1999)

My research was mainly conducted in VL village and PA village. VL village is located along the Highway in close proximity to the market, while PA village is farther from the highway and surrounded by paddy fields. The research activities consisted of household-level socio-economic data-collection in both villages as well as participant observation of people's daily activities in and around the commune. The analysis in the following sections mainly relies on the ethnographic data I obtained in VL village, but the comparison with the situation in PA village is crucial for the ensuing discussion.

VL village consisted of houses and residential compounds located both to the north and the south of the National Highway. To the south of the village is paddy land where rice is planted for ordinary household consumption. Villagers in the area cultivate floating rice too, as well, in paddy fields located about 7-8 kilometers south of the village. Floating rice is cultivated mainly for sale. Almost all rice-growing families cultivated both ordinary rice and floating rice in several plots.

Although rice-cultivation is the most popular livelihood activity in the commune, fishing is not the same across villages⁷. In some villages far south of the Highway, the villagers engaged actively in fishing, but this was not the case in the villages near the market, including VL village. At the same time, fishing is crucial for poor landless families as a source of disposable daily cash income, but because of the irregularity of catches fishing is not a reliable source of capital accumulation. In addition, most of civil servants, salaried workers, and traders in the commune were living in villages near the market, not remote villages. The market in SK village was set up in 1982, but local people's narratives confirm that the socio-economic center of the commune remained in SK villages since the pre-war period.

It is important to note that socio-economic development in recent years was typically uneven across villages within the commune. My household-level data collection in VL village and PA village support this general observation⁸. For example, the penetration rate of manufactured products was higher among households of VL village than PA village. Moreover, the analysis of population composition of village households demonstrates that in VL village a number of household-members were living outside of the village as migrant workers, especially young females who were working at garment factories in the suburbs of Phnom Penh (Kobayashi 2005a: 495-496). Contrary to this, it was rare for PA village households to have members residing outside of the village. Moreover, as table 1 shows, village chiefs estimated the amount of money that villagers in his village would bring to a feast to bless bridal couples in these days. This data shows that a major

⁷ For the detail of livelihood activities in the area, please see Kobayashi (2004).

⁸ For the specific comparison of data obtained from VL and PA village, please see Kobayashi (2004, 2005a).

discrepancy in socio-economic development between villages in vicinity of the market and remote villages.

Table1 Normal Amount of Wedding Tip in each Village

Village	Amount of tip bring to wedding banquets in the village
KKH	2,000 – 5,000 Riel for both sex
KK	2,000 – 5,000 Riel for both sex
KB	2,000 – 10,000 Riel for both sex
SKH	3,000 – 5,000 Riel for both sex
SKP	More than 3,000 riel for woman, more than 5,000 riel for man
CH	3,000 – 5,000 Riel for woman, 5,000 – 10,000 Riel for man. More than 5,000 Riel for husband and wife
PA	4,000 – 10,000 Riel
SM	More than 5,000 Riel for woman, more than 10,000 Riel for man
SR	More than 5,000 Riel for woman, 7,000 – 10,000 Riel for man
SK	10,000 Riel for woman, more than 10,000 Riel for man
VL	More than 7,000 Riel for woman, more than 10,000 Riel for man
BL	More than 3,000 riel for woman, more than 5,000 riel for man
TK	More than 3,000 riel for woman, more than 5,000 riel for man
AM	3,000 – 7,000 for both sex

Note: Amount had mentioned by the village chief and elders in each village.

(Source) Author's interview, July 2000

The inter-village socio-economic discrepancies in the commune are generally the result of differences in diversification of livelihoods. It is not surprising that the villages near the market along National Highway had multiple employment options and were comparatively wealthier, while the remote villages were moderately poor and engaged in a less diversified agricultural setting where rice-cultivation and fishing were the dominant source of livelihood. As I have written elsewhere (Kobayashi 2004), there was a relatively high level of families engaged in trading in villages in the vicinity of the market. The owners of the stalls in the market selling clothes, shoes, and groceries lived in villages in nearby. There were some private shops selling various goods located to the side of Highway too. Moreover, the households earning a living the salary of a school teacher, policeman, or NGO workers, and remittance from migrant workers, were found more frequently in villages along the Highway than in remote villages.

The local people were very much aware of this differentiation. I frequently encountered residents of remote villages speaking of the differences between their lives and the more affluent lives of those living in market areas – “our lives are poorer and very different from *neak phsar* in SK village!” Access to outside information such as government policies and services and market trends was naturally easier in villages located along the Highway. This resulted in differences in views and attitudes, such as education for children, where similar discrepancies were observed in the contrast to San Kor and the northern *srok leu* area.

Local people in San Kor frequently commented that *neak* San Kor (people in San Kor)

were enjoying relatively developed and wealthier lives than *neak srok leu* (people in northern forest area), signaling a recognition of their own socio-economic standing. This recognition also means that local people's perceptions of the geographical structure of San Kor and *srok leu* was grounded in not only the distinct ecological features of the area, but considered economic discrepancies as well. Moreover, the situation seems to tell of the existence of difference in social history and culture between the communities in the two areas as well. Furthermore, the everyday activities of the people in the area are not limited by village or commune boundaries. The social bonds and actual connections bridging the people living in the different spaces are reflected in different ways in their daily lives. Thus, when speaking of the spatial structure of the area, it is necessary to discuss the life-worlds of local people in San Kor, as I will do in the following sections.

2.2 Brief sketch of local history

According to historians, the lowlands of the Tonle Sap Lake area were a more backward place than the Mekong delta region. The rural population in the country in pre-modern era seemed to be concentrated along the river banks. This suggests that the community of San Kor had developed later than the provincial capital of Kampong Thum or the rural town of Stoung district (called Kampong Chen), because there is no prominent river in the territory of San Kor.

San Kor commune at the beginning of the 20th century was said to be covered with forests, and had only a small population. Based on the narratives of the locals, the construction of the Highway in the 1910s seemed to mark the beginning of environmental change. In the first half of the 20th century, a number of immigrants from diverse backgrounds had migrated into the commune. Actually, the area was a frontier at the time, shown by the fact that there are a lot of villages located in the west of San Kor and along the Highway today which were formed by immigrants from Takeo province during the decades from the 1940s to the 1960s. Furthermore, a number of Chinese and Vietnamese had settled in villages in the area in those days too, as one old woman born in 1918 in CH village, San Kor, recalled;

“When I was small child, there were only 9 families in CH village, and 7 of them were headed by Chinese father. The number of families in the village increased up to about 50 in the end of the 1960s. About 10 of them were the families of *yuon* (Vietnamese).”

But since long before, it seems that the local people's activities in the commune were not limited to the village community. In fact, the commune had a group of natives who

wandered up and down to the remote cities such as Phnom Penh and even Saigon in the 1940s at the latest. This is proved by the fact that one wealthy local trader who was born in SK village had built one two-storey building at most popular temple-monastery in Phnom Penh in 1948. It is said that the man had developed a very good relationship with one famous educated monk in the temple and decide to dedicate a building to him. This story tells us that the commune has been part of the urban-rural network since long before.

On the other hand, according to the local narratives, the security conditions of the commune were relatively harsh in the decades of 1940s and 1950s⁹. This was a time of political transition in which the authority of the colonial regime yielded to that of the new independent state. The rule of French protectorate was in the process of erosion and rural communities were falling into an environment of anarchy. Many villagers remember that there were a number of bandits in the forest area at the time involved in disruptive activities. However, after independence in 1953, the administrative directions of the government began to work to some degree. For example, some villages originally located far north of the Highway in San Kor were forced by government order to relocate to the Highway¹⁰.

In addition, in the 1950s, villagers recall that some business persons in Stoung district launched a truck transportation service moving packages and passengers from there to Phnom Penh. From this point, improved transportation began to have some influence on the lifestyles of the people in San Kor, as information began to flow into the village and trends from outside brought about some influence on the people. However, the majority of the local residents in the area still engaged in agriculture and fishing.

As is the case across the country, the commune suffered in the processes of destruction and reconstruction that characterize the 1970s. Land transportation was disrupted as the Highway cut off by the American air bombing of the area. The residents were forcibly uprooted and relocated twice; first by the Lon Nol army in February 1974 and then again by the Khmer Rouge in April 1975 (Kobayashi 2005b). These multiple relocations may function to bring about an adequate condition for the following all-out totalitarian state rule.

Although the rule of the Pol Pot regime was brought to an end over 20 years ago, the influence of this era is still recognizable in the rural landscape. Irrigation canals dug in the

⁹ Jan Delvert (2002) wrote that the security problem was very serious in every area in the country at that time.

¹⁰ This government order was mentioned in Ebihara (1968).

DK era completely altered the layout of the paddy lands south of the Highway, creating a regular square shape to the previously more heterogeneous paddies. Needless to say, many people died from murder, starvation, and disease, and cultural activities including Buddhist practices were stopped completely. The life of the people became a day-to-day struggle to survive under unreasonable state-imposed work arrangements..

It was in January 1979 that the people were released from the awful conditions of DK rule. From the first moment, the overwhelming reaction of the people was to return to their native villages. The process of reconstruction of lives since then started within the context of village social order, largely independent of the state. The details of the reconstruction of livelihood of villagers will be traced in the second half of the next section, but it is worth noting here that rural security situation of Cambodia did not fully recover throughout the 1980s, and it even declined before and after the retreat of Vietnamese forces from the country in 1989. It is after the national election of 1993 that the development of rural economic activities finally got into full swing.

As far as I understand, the most significant factor for understanding the historical experiences since the fall of the Pol Pot regime is the fact that reconstruction had begun with the people's self-initiated return to their mother villages. That is to say, the rural Cambodian people returned their homelands without any guidance from above. The return to village homelands was the primary driver of the following reconstruction process, as surviving family members, relatives and neighbors who were scattered during the period of upheaval sought each other out in the areas in which they had previously lived. Thus it could be said that the continuity of social relations in the local community were one of the conditions for this processes.

The strategies employed by local people, therefore, suggest that they have maintained a perception that reconstruction cannot be achieved by individuals, but rather requires social interaction. This observation challenges the assertion by some scholars that foundations social relations in Cambodian society was fundamentally damaged by the atomization experienced under the Pol Pot regime. In 1979, ownership of household compounds was approved by returnees; giving another indication that reconstruction would be based on an effort to draw on continuity of past social relations.

At the risk of overstatement, it should be emphasized again that people's return to their native villages in 1979 was a simple but very influential historical development, as it gave an assurance of continuity within the community before and after the 1970s. Therefore, the post-1979 reconstruction process should be analyzed within a historical context from pre-war times. The constraints and options perceived by local people within the

reconstruction process were largely defined by the pre-war social context, and therefore provide the basis for contemporary rural communities. Thus, personal and community social history should be at the center of the examination of this reconstruction process.

3. Analysis of the contemporary context

This section will explore the first question raised in the introduction of this article; “who are the people whom the local residents call *chen* and *khmae* in present-day Cambodian rural community?” in the ethnographic situation of San Kor. The basic situation concerning *chen* and *khmae* has already been described in the first section, but I would like to revisit the issues from different analytical points of view.

3.1 Division by “ethnicity”?

It is fair to say that the people’s activities I observed in San Kor represented a cultural complex of “mixed-appearance,” from the perspective of “ethnic culture”. Particularly, within religious ritual practices there are clearly aspects drawing on two religious traditions, Khmer and Chinese.

Reviewing the sequence of a funeral ceremony I observed in VL village might help to interpret the situation. Photo 1 and photo 2 show two locales in a funeral ceremony. We see the atmosphere of indoor merit-making act, which took place in the morning in photo 1. The invited Theravada monks and novices sat by the casket and were chanting a sutra aloud at the home of the dead. There was one figure called *achar* in Khmer. The word *achar* means “teacher, wise man” in literary usage, but refers to a special figure having the ability to lead the preparation and operation of various religious ceremonies. The presence of the *achar* demonstrates that the ritual is a common one for the vast majority of Cambodian people.

After the merit-making ritual pictured in photo 1, the gathered villagers ate breakfast at the house. Then, the relatives of the dead carried the casket out of the house and placed it on the table in front of the house. Then, one old man living in SK village, called *achar chen* (literary “Chinese *achar*”) by some villagers, ordered the children of the dead to conduct some rituals at the casket, such as bowing to the body, offering incense sticks, kneeling down and crawling around the casket in a counter-clockwise direction three times. Photo 2 was taken at one of those ritual acts.

The photos remind one of the possibilities of studying a situation from a syncretic standpoint. However, the concept works only for describing the situation, not for

presenting explanatory insights on people's behavior themselves. Moreover, an ethnicity-centered analytical perspective, Khmer on one hand and Chinese on the other hand, clearly do not match with the actual situation in San Kor, because the local people did not identify with those concepts exclusively. As Michel Moreman (1965) pointed out in the case of northern Thailand, the concept of "ethnicity" cannot be discussed without full consideration of self-identification of the persons interested themselves. In fact, during my more than one-year stay at San Kor, I had not seen even one villager who made a genuine declaration that "I am *chen*"¹¹.

The people's representations using the words *chen* and *khmae* were very often encountered in the research site, but it seemed not to divide the community into insiders and outsiders. As a matter of fact, I would say that all of the San Kor people would respond to the question "Are you *chen*?" with the statement "No, I am *khmae*!" Even if we consider the fact that people's self-identification was very changeable in each circumstance, I am confident in concluding that a social division based on "ethnicity" between *chen* and *khmae* is not relevant or useful in the analysis of the ethnographic situation in San Kor. The following examination of the actual usage of the words both in the people's explanation and in the practice of naming "others" will prove this.

3.2 Explanation and practice

Examining villagers' responses to the question "What is *chen*?" uncovers one side of the reality. When I asked VL villagers what kind of person should be called *chen*, they replied in many ways. However, their definitions can be classified into two main lines of thinking. The first is based on the recognition of genealogy, as in "*Chen* means the offspring of Chinese immigrants in past." The second is a reference to the exercise of religious acts such as "*Chen* are the people having an ancestor alter, called *Kong Ma* (see photo 3), in their houses and practicing religious events according to the Chinese calendar".

First, table 2 shows the result of my research on the genealogy of the villagers in VL village. It illustrates the villagers' connection with Chinese immigrants in parent-children relationships in the past. There were two villagers born in China in the village, while half of the villagers aged 70 to 79 were the children of Chinese immigrants. The percentage of the people who have parental relationships with *chen* decreases in the younger generations, as shown in table 2. However, most of them had a link with Chinese

¹¹ I remember one scene during the household-survey in VL village. One day when I was asking some questions about kinship with the mother, I knew that her grandfather was from China and said; "He was the *chen*." Then, there was a young daughter lying in her hammock in the house said; "I am *chen* too." In this way, the villagers' identification of as *chen* was observed in some cases, but did not have any more meaning than a joke at the time of my research.

immigrants at the grandparent-grandchild relationship. For example, among 51 villagers in the 50-59 years old age group in 2001, other than the five persons who had parent from China, there were 16 villagers who had a Chinese immigrant as a grandfather.

Table 2 Proximity to Chinese immigrant in geneological relations (VL village)

age group	number of villagers	He/She was born in China (%)	Having one parent from China (%)	Having one grandparent from China (%)	other
80-89	4	0 (0)	1 (25)	0 (0)	3
70-79	12	1 (8.3)	6 (50)	1 (8.3)	4
60-69	43	0 (0)	4 (9.3)	9 (20.9)	30
50-59	51	0 (0)	5 (9.8)	16 (31.3)	30
40-49	72	0 (0)	3 (4.2)	—	—
30-39	104	1 (0.9)	4 (3.8)	—	—

(Source) Author's Research

Table 3 is concerned with the second often heard explanation of “what is *chen*” in San Kor. It mentions the number of households which performed two kind of religious practices considered to be the indicator of being *chen*. The first is the existence and nonexistence of arranging an ancestor alter called *Kong Ma* in the house, and the second shows the result asking if a special ritual for the dead ancestors is performed on the day of Chinese New Year. According to the table, 50 of 149 households did not have ancestor alters in the Chinese tradition, but 45 among those 50 households did join rituals on the day of the Chinese annual festival¹². Thus, only 5 of 149 households could be classified as non-*chen*, based on the villagers’ explanation.

Table 3 Correspondance of installation of *Kong Ma* and celebration of Chinese feast days (149 households, VL村)

	Celebrate Chinese feast days	Do not celebrate Chinese feast days	total
With <i>Kong Ma</i> in the house	90	9	99
Without <i>Kong Ma</i> in the house	45	5	50
total	135	14	149

(Source) Author's Research.

If so, then is it correct to say that almost all of the villagers in VL village must be considered *chen*? I think the analysis of their explanations shows only one side of reality. Although we can present the explanation that the majority of the villagers should be considered *chen*, in line with the local definition, we must take a look at the villagers’ daily interactions as the other side of the question. That is, the word *chen* is often observed in the people’s daily interactions as a naming act: “He/ She is *chen*!” The following sketches of my observations in VL village will help to illustrate this.

¹² The people who did not have *Kong Ma* at their house went to the parents’ house to conduct rituals collectively.

(1) At the very beginning of the research I visited every household in the village and asked basic questions such as the kinship relation of the members, size of paddy holdings and they were obtained, livelihood activities including rice cultivation, and others. I also gathered information about household debt. In the case of households having economic difficulties, members of the households answered “I am borrowing money from *chen*”. I always followed up directly to ask “Who is the *chen*?” to which the response was to designate a certain wealthy villager in the village, saying “He/ She is the *chen*!”

(2) One day in the evening I was walking by the hut in VL village. The hut has assorted various general goods for village life such as cooking oil, washing powder, batteries, tobacco, snack, and other goods for sale. One woman living near the hut approached me and asked, pointing to the owner of the hut with her finger, “Have you already questioned this *chen*?”

(3) In VL village, some young males had immigrated to Thailand to earn money, a phenomenon that has emerged in the village since 1998. One day I had a chat with several villagers in front of a village house. One man came up to us and began complaining about the owner of a hut in the village. According to him, one of his sons who went Thailand last year had recently returned home with an amount of money. Then, the owner of a hut in the village visited his house and demanded that he repay his debts. However, the amount of money he was asked to pay was larger than the amount he remembered. In the end, he went to the hut with the owner to check the debt records and discovered the miscalculation. He finished his narrative with the phrase that “You know, this is the type of stunt that *chen* always pull!”

This analysis shows that the words *chen* and *kmae* are used differentiate among members of the community even if the majority of the villagers in VL village are recognized as *chen* according to their own explanatory criteria, both in genealogical sense and in conduct of religious practice. It is true that phrases including the word *chen* are observed in many different occasions in villagers’ daily conversations, but all of them seemingly function to point out the speaker’s inferior economic conditions as well as the prosperity of the interested other. Moreover, the word seemed to use for designating a distinguishing personality of commercial dealing. In short, the word *chen* seems to indicate a “quasi-class” social category based on the awareness of economic gaps and the economic activities that produces the wealth itself.

It is important to remember that Cambodian people’s self-identification is often observed in the nested structure of space. Although the representation of self will change according

to what community they imagine as belonging to, the people's embedded nature of the identification of self fosters an attitude within the context of certain locality with specific geographical, socio-economic and historical characteristics. However, in before moving on to a discussion of the essence represented by the words *chen* and *khmae*, we must turn to examine the historical context of the community in order to illustrate the social background and structure upon which these phenomena are observed.

4. Analysis in the historical context

4.1 Arrivals and activities of *chen* in pre-war times

As described briefly in the previous section, the historical situation of San Kor in the first half of the 20th century was that of a frontier society. The population had scattered into small villages that were surrounded by thick forest with an abundance of wild animals such as elephants and tigers. The villages were composed from domestic and foreign immigrants. The local Vietnamese families cannot be researched because they and their children had disappeared from the local scene in the 1970s as a result of the persecution policy of the Lon Nol and the Pol Pot regime. The situation of the Chinese immigrant community, however, can be traced and analyzed based on information collected from their offspring still resident in the area.

San Kor commune received a number of Chinese immigrants from the end of the 19th century to the 1960s. Almost all of them were of Fujian origin. My research has uncovered two typical patterns of Chinese immigration into the local society. Here I introduce two charts for the examination.

Figure 1 is the genealogical chart of one kin group in VL village. The dot-line-circle in the figure denotes the existing village households at the time of the research. The black symbol indicates people who were born in China. In this case, according to their children's explanation, the Chinese immigrant marked as "A" was born in 1902 in Fujian province, Southeast China. He reached Cambodia in the French Protectorate period. The details of his arrival in San Kor are not clear, but it is said that some Chinese predecessors from the same district of Fujian province were living in San Kor at the time and helped come to the commune. He died in 1970 at the age of 68.

The Chinese immigrant marked as "B" was born in the 1930s in Fujian. He left his hometown at the age of 12, worked first in Saigon as a servant in Frenchman's house, and later moved to Phnom Penh. He was guided by a fellow Chinese and married a woman who was born to a Chinese predecessor in San Kor. He returned to Phnom Penh after the

marriage and earned a living as a street vendor. He and his wife died in Pursat province in the Pol Pot period after forced relocation, while his two surviving children returned to San Kor in 1979.

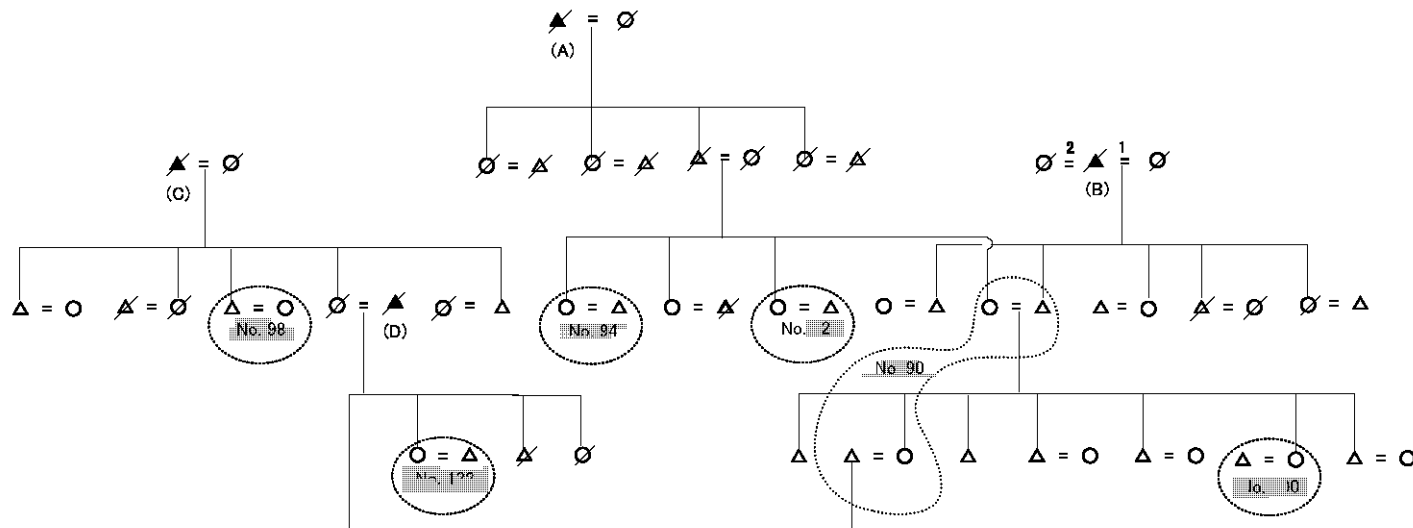
By examining the life-histories of Chinese immigrants, we get a concrete picture of the actual process through which these people came to reside in the area. From the findings of my research, I have identified two typical immigration patterns. In the first pattern, the grandfather arrived in the area as a fisherman, and shifted to an agricultural lifestyle after marrying with a native Khmer woman. The second pattern is characterized by a Chinese immigrant marrying into a local Chinese family already present in the area. That is, the first generation might bring about a chain of continual immigration as the second one. This pattern lasted until the 1960s.

Then, there were smaller-scale migrations in and around the commune too. Figure 2 shows the kinship relations of three couples who obtained household compounds and took up residence in VL village during the 1940s. As the highlighted black symbols indicate Chinese immigrants, this informs us that a large portion of the persons entering the VL village around 1940s was children of *chen*. Figure 2 also shows that the original villages of those people were all located north of the Highway, adjacent to the forest (see the location of villages in Map 1). And, interestingly, the surviving children related similar reasons for their parents' migration that they were afraid of bandits that frequently emerged from the forest.

As introduced in the former section, it is widely recognized that serious security problems had risen in rural Cambodia during the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s. French geographer Jean Delvert emphasized repeatedly in his monograph that banditry was very severe in rural areas at that time (Delvert 2002). Local people in San Kor in their 70s and 80s still remember many cases of outlaw activity. For example, a group of outlaws emerged from the forest in the north and proclaimed themselves to be "*Khmer Issarak*". In national history, the word "*Khmer Issarak*" would translate as the anti-French political group, but in the local people's memory refers to ordinary groups of bandits.

This divergence in understandings of "*Khmer Issarak*" between Cambodian national history and the local history clearly shows the preference for researchers to stand on the local context in their analysis. From this perspective, it seems very important to understand that the main reason of those smaller-scale migrations at the time was the danger of bandits. In other words, this suggests that a number of Chinese and Chinese offspring had decided to move into VL or other villages along the National Highway to seek safe living conditions.

Figure 1 Kinship chart of village households (1)



Note 1: Black colored symbols in the chart indicate people from China. Dot-rounded-circles and the characters in half dot tone meshing are the couple of households in VL village.

Note 2: Personal information about the Chinese immigrants in the chart.

(A) Fujian origin. The birth year and the process of migration is unknown, but he lived in CH village and earned a living by rice cultivation and dealing in paddy credit.

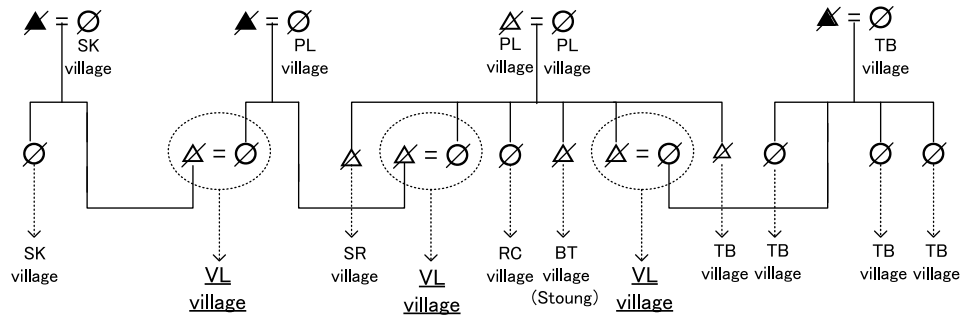
(B) Born in Fujian province, China in 1902. He reached Cambodia in the French Protectorate period. The actual conditions of his migration into San Kor are unknown, but there was a Chinese predecessor from the same district in Fujian residing in San Kor at the time. He died in 1970 at the age of 68.

(C) Born in Fujian province, China, in 1910. He passed away in 1973 at the age of 63. He moved from Phnom Penh into San Kor alone in the 1930s

(D) Born in Fujian province, China in the 1930s. He left the country and moved to Saigon (Ho Chi Minh city) at the age of 12. He used to work at a French man's house in Saigon. He moved to Phnom Penh later and became acquainted with some natives of San Kor. He married a Chinese-Khmer woman born in San Kor in 1957. Finally, he returned to Phnom Penh after the wedding ceremony, and earned a living by selling cakes and snacks on a street.

(Source) Author's Research

Figure 2 Kinship chart of village households (2)



Note: Black colored symbols in the chart indicate the people that migrated from China.
(Source) Author's Research

On the other hand, I frequently came across a stereotyped narrative of *chen* livelihoods in the first half of the 20th century in and around San Kor. This narrative provides a critical hint to understanding the construction of their lives in those days. The story goes, “They came with bare hands as fishermen at first. They came ashore and married with Khmer women. Then, in the first year, they went around villages in the area on foot shouldering baskets full of rice-cakes. By exchanging food for paddy, they accumulated capital. A few years later they began to travel to villages, including *srok leu*, bringing goods such as clothes, plate wares and iron pans in the oxcarts they had purchased. In this way, they finally started to trade paddy in *bondak*”.

The Khmer word *bondak* means a traditional credit consisting of paddy, rice and money. The rule of *bondak* in rural Cambodia is very clear and guarantees a high rate of profitability. In the case of paddy and rice the borrower must return an amount equivalent to double the debt in next harvest. This has been a very effective way to make a profit in the rural communities, both in the past and at present. The two-storey cement-brick houses surviving from pre-war times were built by local traders who dealt in *bondak* (see photo 4). In fact, the trader who had commissioned the construction of the Buddhist temple in Phnom Penh in the 1940s made his money through *bondak*, as well.

Both the narratives of villagers and the remaining physical structures evoke a strong image of *chen* in the area in pre-war times as wealthy people who engaged in commercial *bondak* trading. Of course, this is an idealized conception and there were in reality many Chinese engaged in rice cultivation, similarly to local Khmer. Furthermore, my fieldwork found that some of them died under harsh economic conditions. However, it seems Chinese immigrants were the only ones who were so successful in *bondak* trading in the area, possibly because of their networks that provided them access to markets outside of

the community, giving them advantage over the locally born people of San Kor. It is likely that these networks were created in the process of moving from China through urban areas into San Kor. Furthermore, the experience of migration itself demonstrates these people's capacity for creating new social relations in an unfamiliar environment. Chinese immigrants' success in *bondak* trading illustrates their strategic positioning on the edge of local community and broader society.

The examination of migration patterns and the narratives concerning *chen* highlights some interesting facts about the local conditions in San Kor in pre-war times. First, some Chinese immigrants and their offspring were successful in making significant profits through dealing in paddy credit, and some of them moved to villages along the National Highway around the 1940s. As mentioned above, the usual explanation for smaller-scale migration at the time is insecurity in villages near the forest. However, it can be postulated that the Highway provided a pull-factor through economic opportunities, such as *bondak*, which required communication with external society. In essence, the emigration of *chen* to the area illustrates the historical dynamics of the community in the first half of the 20th century, providing important context for studying the reconfiguration of the socio-economic structures of San Kor since 1979, as well.

4.2 Who became rich since 1979?

In present day Cambodia, we find both rich and poor households in rural villages. The existence of economic differentiation in a society is nothing to be surprised. However, it is interesting from the perspective of the historical development of Cambodian society, because one can assume that any economic differences between households or villages were hidden by the totalitarian rule of the Pol Pot regime in 1979.

Here, we must focus on the socio-economic structure of San Kor at present once again. As already discussed, the general pattern is that villages located near the local market along the Highway are relatively wealthy and other remote villages were less prosperous. The same general pattern seems to be relevant in explaining the differences observed at a larger scale in the area. For example, the economic situation observed between the community of San Kor and the villages in *srok leu* coincides with this structure. We can summarize the situation after 1979 as a concentrated development of more prosperous villages linked to nearby markets along the Highway.

Reviewing the transition of household livelihood activities since 1979 in the area gives us a basic understanding of the development of these economic gaps. Rice cultivation in rural Cambodia was restarted under the state policy of farmland consolidation, which

called *krom samaki* (literary, solidarity group), in 1979. The socialist government first established a certain number of *krom*, consisting of about 10 households in each village. Then, each *krom* was asked to cultivate a given paddy fields around their houses. Paddy was owned by the state at the time, and the harvest yields were delivered to each household according to the amount of labor provided. However, this collective production policy had deteriorated by 1984 in most of the villages in San Kor. Paddy land had been divided among households in each *krom*, and the traditional form of rice cultivation based on the household as the production unit had reemerged. There is a general consensus among scholars that this agrarian land reform had progressed, resulting in a high level of equality in agrarian land holdings in rural Cambodian communities. The results of this redistribution of productive land among members of the community shows that rice production itself had not produced economic gaps.

Although rice cultivation was controlled under the consolidation policy, smaller agricultural activities were not. According to the interviews with villagers, cultivation of watermelon was prominent among households in 1981 and later years. Farmers were able to use paddy for planting watermelon during dry season, and were allowed to sell their produce in the market. This freedom was not enjoyed by farmers in their rice production, and in fact trade of surplus paddy was prohibited by the government, which monitored production closely. The freedom to produce and sell directly to the market maybe had been an important factor in stimulating the production of non-rice crops. Watermelon was a particularly profitable option during that time. Several households in VL village were in fact able to build new houses with income from watermelon cultivation in 1984-85.

People had begun to find that they could make their lives better with various livelihoods other than agriculture. One of these options was bicycle caravan trading, started in 1979 in San Kor by a group of men. They traveled by bicycle west from the village to the Thai border to purchase goods such as cigarettes and textiles in exchange for gold. They would then set out toward the east again, passing through San Kor commune, to the eastern region of the Mekong River and sell their goods in the market in Kampong Cham province. This bicycle trading ceased by around 1981 because of the deteriorating security situation. The initiative taken by the group of men shows that people had been thinking broadly about their livelihood options. Some people choose to engage in trading on a regional scale to supplement their village-based livelihood activities since the very early stage of reconstruction. Finally, a part of the households in VL village stopped cultivating the paddy lands they obtained in the land reform, and moved towards more commercial livelihoods that incorporated activities such as *bondak* in the late 1980s.

This analysis gives a clear answer to the question about who became rich after 1979. The

rich households are not the agricultural households, but rather those that actively engaging in trading. And, more interestingly perhaps, the life stories of the heads of the prosperous households share some common features. First of all, household heads, men aged over 60 years old at the time of the research, had already traveled frequently to urban areas and developed expertise in dealing with the market in pre-war times. In 1979, they joined the bicycle caravan trading very willingly, and finally by the end of the 1980s they stopped cultivating paddy fields entirely. At the time of the research, some of their children were engaged in trading like their father, while the other children had moved to the capital city and were working at government institutions.

The re-emergence of economic differentiation in Cambodian rural society was reported at the very early stages of the reconstruction process (Vickery 1986). Previous works has pointed out a number of economic gaps, such as the number of draft animals or the inequality in agricultural land holdings, as well as the distribution of other precious assets such as gold. These factors together produced a new form of economic disparity observed after the Pol Pot era (Frings 1993, 1994; Vickery 1986). However, from the San Kor data, it is clear that one must pay more attention to the existing gaps in knowledge and experience with economic activities among households. That is, it is the intangible capital, not hard assets, which was the key force in bringing about the economic gaps. This is supported by the fact that there were several men who did not engage in the bicycle trade caravans because they lacked confidence. Without the necessary experience, they hesitated to leave the village. Thus, we can say that even if there were multiple factors influencing the decision making processes, the levels of knowledge and experience accumulated since before the 1970s in each household was likely the most important cause of household differentiation.

Following this logic, it should hold then that the distribution of knowledge and experience was different between villages in the community, as well. Recounting the local situation in pre-war times, the difference of living circumstances between villages near the market along the Highway and the remote villages seemed to support this reasoning. In fact, when I interviewed with the persons who actively engaged in *bondak* trading in past, they recalled that they had started trading in imitation of others in the village who had been involved in the trading for some time. The difference of village environment was important in this sense, because the villagers who lived far from the market were not able to make the necessary linkages with senior traders, who would serve as a model for new entrepreneurs.

In conclusion, the local history of this frontier society in the beginning of the 20th century laid the foundation for the re-emergence of inter-households economic gaps after the fall

of the Pol Pot regime. As I shown above, the immigration of the Chinese had forged the basic socio-economic structure of the rural community in the pre-war period. Villages located along the Highway have become wealthier than remote villages, because the roadside villages have a people were successful in using their experience and knowledge of economic activities like *bondak*, which that had been gained in pre-war times. In this sense, socio-economic discrepancies in present-day rural Cambodia are seen as having derived from the past social structures of the area itself. Furthermore, it is these structures that have sustained the practice and representation associated with *chen* and *khmae* distinction.

5. Concluding remarks

The analysis of this paper suggests, in response to the first research question, that in studying the peoples' interactions and representation using the word *chen*, one should consider it to be a quasi-class social category based on the recognition of economic gaps and the participation in some sorts of economic activities. This article pointed out at the same time that it is important to note the socio-economic structure of the area within their self-identification. With regard to the second question, the analysis suggests that the post-1979 social structure of rural Cambodian communities has been re-configured to the same design as of the pre-war times. Furthermore, it is the re-emerged socio-economic discrepancies that are maintained through people's interactions, particularly in the representational opposition of *chen* and *khmae* as expressions of differentiation between self and others. The destruction of the 1970s was huge, and the cultural tradition of *chen* marked a clear discontinuity in the era, but the rule of the Pol Pot regime did not alter the social system of the community.

5.1 Getting fresh to be “ethnic”

To treat the cultural situation observed in San Kor in 2000-2002 as a manipulation of “ethnicity” in the general sense is problematic, because the interested people themselves did not express a clear self-identification with the either “ethnic” traditions. There were, at the same time, however, signs of change in the future.

If we were to suppose the society had not experienced severe civil war and the totalitarian rule in Cambodia in the 1970s, the ethnographic situation and the analytical inquiry of my research in San Kor commune in the beginning of 21st century would likely take different directions and arrive at a completely different conclusion. In this assumption, the difference in understanding on the issue of *chen* and *khmae* is one of the most interested topics of analysis. When the villagers recalled the activities of *chen* in San Kor through the end of 1960s, they often told of the existence of a *chen* association (*samakom*) that held annual religious festivals at a Chinese god house called *preah put chen* (literary, Chinese Buddha). Microcredit activities were organized by the association, as well. However, in 2000-2002, the god house was taken over by the commune committee and used as a police station. Since then the original activities vanished and have not recommenced.

The historical experiences of the 1970s have brought about a situation in which there is a high degree of ambiguity in the nature of “Chinese culture”. For an example, the number of glasses placed in the *Kong Ma* varies among households, with some preparing three,

some were five, and some were nine. Additionally, photo 5 shows another aspect of variation in San Kor, in the entrance of houses preparing for a wedding ceremony. The red papers called *Shuang Lian* (双聯) in Chinese were attached at both sides of the entrance, but the paper on the right hand side was mistakenly attached upside down, as there was no one who could read the Chinese characters. Although the locals said they relied on a Chinese traditional religious practitioner (called *chen sae*) in pre-war times, there was no such individual present in the community now. The man in SK village who led the people in funeral ceremonies according to “Chinese” style was said to have only partial knowledge of the practices.

However, during the period of 2000-2002, I observed the beginnings of a standardization of cultural tradition. Photo 6 shows the Chheng Meng ceremony (清明節) of one kin group in VL village. I had observed this ceremony with the same kin group twice, in April 2001 and April 2002. In the second year they added a new ritual practice to the ceremony. At the end of the ceremony two men seized the board on which a roast pig was placed and swung it several times over the smoke of burning funeral offerings – paper houses, paper passport and fake money. When I asked the men about the action, he replied, “I heard from some of my friends in Phnom Penh that this is the correct way to celebrate Chheng Meng ceremony for *chen* of Fujian origin.” Thus, the new discussion of “What is real *chen*?” has started in San Kor recently.

This discussion draws on a revival of Chinese culture that began in cities at the end of 1990s and has gathered momentum in recent years. Social networking with urban areas enables the revitalization of the “ethnic” expressions of being *chen*. It remains to be seen whether this self-identification with *chen* will develop into fuller expressions of “ethnicity” in San Kor in the future.

5. 2. The reconfiguration of “social structure” in rural Cambodia

It has been said that Cambodian society lacks rigid structural features. These statements have been based on organizational and institutional viewpoints. However, by focusing on the spatial nature of socio-economic differentiation and examining the local people’s representation of self through interactions and practices within a certain space, this paper has presented a framework for studying the formation of Cambodian rural society. People use concepts such as *chen* and *khmae*, or *neak phsar* and *neak srae*, to interpret the social universe surrounding them. More specifically, the concepts show the structural relations that underpinning the socio-economic structures of the area. It was the Chinese immigrants that served as the catalysts in the creation of these social structures. Moreover, Chinese migration functioned to provide the foundation of the reconfiguration of

Cambodian rural society after the Pol Pot era. Furthermore, the similarity of current social structures in the community with those of pre-war times suggests that the social turmoil of the civil war and Pol Pot regime did not alter the basic structure of Cambodian society. In other words, although the rule of the Pol Pot regime caused a drastic transformation of society in short-term perspective, it did not result in a fundamental change of the society from the long-term viewpoint.

Furthermore, the conclusions of this examination of Cambodian rural society assert the importance of maintaining a long-term analytical perspective on the transformation of lowland rice-growing societies in mainland Southeast Asia. All of the societies in the area were formed through the interaction of different social and “ethnic” groups and the product of constant changes, as the same as other societies in the world. Social change is typically examined through the ideological lens of modernization, socialization, democratization, globalization, among others, selected and applied with relation to a specific time and place of research. However, the scholar must be careful in using such ideologies not to discount the possibility of persistence of a certain historically formed social bonds and environmental feature in a locality. More specifically in this sense, the comparative study of the role of Chinese immigrants in creating social structure at the interface of a rural locality and the outside world is certainly a productive undertaking.

On the other hand, the conclusions of this paper do not support a vision of complete continuity in social structure in San Kor. The research covers social processes observed only until 2002. The rapid and dramatic changes in the community occurring since this time still await analysis. The integration of Cambodian society into a regional market economy and the decentralization of the government authority that under way since the 1990s are beginning to exert influence on people’s everyday lives in diverse ways. Research on social structure in Cambodian rural community, from the long-term as well as short-term views, should remain a key analytical interest for scholars into the future.

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Photos



Photo 1 Monk is chanting a sutra at the funeral ceremony in VL village, March 2001



Photo 2 Ritual led by *achar chen* in the funeral ceremony in VL village, March 2001



Photo 3

Kong Ma attached with a rafter of the house,
VL village, January 2001



Photo 4

The surviving two strayed cement-brick
house (built in 1964) by the local *bondak*
trader, VL village, March 2001



Photo 5

Shuang Lian attached on the wall of the house of bride, KB village in January 2002



Photo 6 Chheng Meng ceremony in VL village, April 2001