

# **The Young Nuon Chea in Bangkok (1942–1950) and the Communist Party of Thailand: The Life in Bangkok of the Man Who Became “Brother No. 2” in the Khmer Rouge**

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Based on interviews with Nuon Chea and his former comrades in the Thai communist party and on his academic records in Bangkok, this study presents details about his life in Bangkok, and also corrects erroneous information that has been written about him. He was born on 7 July 1926 in Battambang, went to Bangkok in 1942 to pursue higher education, taking the Thai name Runglert Laodi (Laodee) or Rungloet Laodi. He finished middle school, did the two-year preparatory course at Thammasat, then entered the university as a law student. He joined the leftist Thai Youth Organization in 1947 and began working as a clerk in the finance ministry. Among the close friends he came to know in the Thai Youth Organization and in his workplace were people who were already members of the Thai communist party, but he remained on the periphery of the party for four years, not joining until 1950. By January 1950 he had almost completed his sophomore studies. That year he joined the Thai communist party and started working in the foreign ministry. But he abruptly abandoned his studies and his government job to join the anti-colonial struggle in Cambodia.

Little or nothing about Nuon Chea's Thailand times explain his radical and murderous policy choices when the Khmer Rouge were in power. These choices must have other roots, such as Nuon's experiences while in Vietnam or after his return to Cambodia in 1955.

## **Introduction**

As deputy secretary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea, a post he had held since the 1960s, Nuon Chea came to be known as “Brother No. 2”, standing second only to the party's leader, Pol Pot (the pseudonym of Saloth Sar, 1925–1998). Following the capture of Phnom Penh by communist forces on 17 April 1975, the name of the country was changed to Democratic Kampuchea (DK), and Nuon became chairman of the country's People's Assembly. In his positions he became the ideological driving force behind the regime and responsible for its most radical policies. Following Vietnam's invasion of Kampuchea at the end of 1978, he stayed with Pol Pot, retreating with the party leader back into the countryside. Pol Pot died in April 1998, and on 25 December of that year, Nuon along with Khieu Samphan, Democratic Kampuchea's head of state, sent a letter to Hun Sen, Cambodia's prime minister, offering to surrender and saying they wished to live in the country as ordinary citizens. Hun Sen welcomed their offer. Thereafter Nuon moved to Pailin on the border with Thailand and lived with his family. On 19 September 2007 he was arrested and held as a suspect in the genocide that took

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place during the existence of Democratic Kampuchea. He was brought to Phnom Penh and is now awaiting trial before a special tribunal set up under the auspices of the United Nations to cast judgment on the genocide.

It is common knowledge among scholars of modern Cambodian history that Nuon Chea received middle and higher education in Bangkok, that he was employed as an official in the Thai government, and that it was in Bangkok that he became a member of the Thai Communist Party. However, there is still no study that comes close to providing an accurate, detailed picture of this man during the years he spent in Bangkok. In his work on Pol Pot, David P. Chandler, the well-known scholar of modern Cambodian history, makes only brief mention of Nuon, saying simply that

Nuon Chea was a Sino-Khmer from Battambang, born into a prosperous family in 1927. His name at birth was Lau Ben Kon. During World War II, when Battambang was under Thai control, he went to Bangkok, where he completed his secondary schooling under the name Long Ruot. In 1945 he enrolled as a law student at Thammasat University, also in Bangkok, where he earned an academic scholarship. He soon became a member of the Communist party of Thailand without informing his family. He was probably inspired to do so by his cousin Sieu Heng, who had also spent part of the war in Bangkok and had joined the Indochina Communist party in Battambang in 1945.<sup>1</sup>

Another example is the brief comment of Ben Kiernan, a scholar with detailed knowledge of Cambodian communism, in his work on the subject, wherein he writes:

Around the same time [in 1945], Long Reth, a Khmer law student at Thammasat University in Bangkok, working part-time as a clerk in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was recruited by Muon and joined the Communist Party of Thailand. He moved back to Battambang and soon transferred to the ICP. (In 1960, under the name Nuon Chea, he became deputy secretary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea.)<sup>2</sup>

There is also the Ph.D. dissertation by Somsak Jeamteerasakul, the most knowledgeable Thai scholar on the history of the Thai communist party. Regarding Nuon Chea during the time he was in that party, Somsak only relates the brief and in part inaccurate words of Udom Sisuwan, writing that

Udom remembers having been asked, in 1947, to attend several meetings of one youth cell to talk about the domestic and international situation. (As a cadre in open propaganda work, he usually did not take part in such underground organizational activity.) Led by Ruam and Roeng, the cell had six or seven members, among them a young Khmer. He was introduced to Udom as “Rot” and was said to be working with the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He returned to Cambodia in the same year. Udom later learnt that “Rot” was in fact Nuon Chea, who after 1975 became president of Democratic Kampuchea People’s Assembly.<sup>3</sup>

Along with their brevity, each of these passages about Nuon Chea contains inaccuracies about the year of his birth, the year he entered Thammasat University and the course he studied, the name he used in Thailand, about his occupation while in Bangkok, about when and how he entered the Thai communist party, and when and how he joined the Indochina communist party and its anti-French struggle.

On 4 June 2001 the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (the ABC) carried a news report titled “Cambodian genocide investigators call for Thai held documents”, which commented that

Cambodian genocide researchers are asking a prestigious Thai university to hand over the records of a senior Khmer Rouge leader who studied there, saying they may contain vital evidence for any UN-sponsored trial. Documentation Centre of Cambodia director Youk Chhang, has written a letter urging Thammasat University to hand over the records of Nuon Chea, the shadowy “Brother Number Two” to dictator Pol Pot.

It says officials of the United Nations says the University archives will be the key source of evidence for the tribunals. Investigators are keenly interested in Nuon Chea, who was Deputy Secretary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea and Deputy Prime Minister of Democratic Kampuchea. Nuon Chea attended law school at Thammasat University on an academic scholarship in the 1940s and later worked for a time in the Thai foreign ministry, he now lives in Pailin in the northwest of the country where he has been since the Khmer Rouge resistance ended.<sup>4</sup>

The news report did not indicate whether Thammasat University had responded; but even if the university had wanted to respond, not knowing what name Nuon Chea had used during his time in Bangkok would likely have made it all but impossible to identify him from among the many thousands of students who were registered at the university during the time he studied at Thammasat. Moreover, as will be pointed out below, up until 2001 even former Thai communist party members who had been active with Nuon during his Bangkok years had not known that their old party comrade from Cambodia was in fact Nuon Chea, Brother No. 2 of the Khmer Rouge. Starting in September 2003, this author met with these former members of the Thai communist party, people whom this author had heard from Nuon himself had been comrades of his. These were people who realized only much later that the comrade of theirs who had transferred from the Thai to the Indochina communist party, and then had made his way back to Cambodia was the one who had taken the name Nuon Chea.

To this day there is still largely no publicly available information about Nuon Chea during the time he was living in Bangkok, which can be inferred from the fact that as of 20 October 2008, this author’s search of the Web for Nuon’s Thai name, Runglert Laodi,<sup>5</sup> using the Thai orthography, **รุ่งเลิศ เหล่าดี** resulted in not a single hit. However, a search using the Romanized spelling, Runglert Laodi, hit on a *Bangkok Post* article by the Thai journalist, Nusara Thaitawat, who over many years has collected a wealth of information on Cambodia. Based on an interview the reporter had with Nuon, the article appeared in the newspaper’s 18 April 2006 edition. The same reporter has also

set down highlights of Nuon's life in a document dated 17 April 2006 and which is available at the Documentation Center of Cambodia.<sup>6</sup> Parts of what Nusara heard from Nuon Chea and what this author heard in his own interview with the man are of course the same. However, the name Nuon used while living in Bangkok, which he would not divulge to this author, he did tell to Nusara. In the above document available at the Documentation Center of Cambodia, she writes that Nuon Chea entered Thammasat University (actually the university's preparatory course [author's note]) in 1944 using the Thai name Runglert Laodi. At first glance Nusara's work appears to go beyond anything previously about Nuon Chea, but a closer reading of her article shows that she reported only what Nuon told her. She did not examine any other literature or primary documents, nor did she search out anyone who had been active with Nuon during his Bangkok days to crosscheck what he told her. Moreover, Nusara had insufficient knowledge about the history of Thai politics of the time and of the laws then regulating the employment of government officials, which led her to make factual mistakes and to draw questionable interpretations. As a result, what she wrote of Nuon Chea's life in Bangkok rather diverged from what actually happened.<sup>7</sup>

This author visited Nuon Chea at his home in Pailin on 12 August 2003, at which time he was still a free man, and interviewed him for three hours and 20 minutes. In that interview, which was carried on in Thai, Nuon refused to divulge the name he had used during his Bangkok days, but he was clear in saying that the middle school he graduated from was the government-run school located on the grounds of Wat Benjamabopit (now known as Mathayom Benjamabopit) and that he was in the seventh graduating class of the preparatory course of Thammasat University. He also mentioned the names of some five people who had been members with him in the Thai communist party including one who had been in the same party cell.

Based on this information, this author made a search and discovered that Nuon Chea's name while in Bangkok was Runglert Laodi. He was able to find the records of a person of that name at Mathayom Benjamabopit and Thammasat University, where Nuon as a young man had studied, and at the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where he had worked. While doing this research, the author also conducted interviews with a number of the former members of the Thai communist party whom Nuon had mentioned in his interview.

Based on the information gained from the above research, the aim of this study is to trace in as much detail as possible the life and political activities of the youthful Nuon Chea while living in Bangkok from 1942 to 1950. Along with shedding light on unknown parts of his biography, this study will also examine the communist movement in Thailand in the late 1940s during which it expanded beyond its mainstay membership of Chinese and Vietnamese and began recruiting among Thai intellectuals and university students. Nuon Chea was one such student who became involved in communist-influenced activities and eventually joined the Thai communist party. There has been very little research on the Thai communist party during this period. Along with elucidating more details about Nuon Chea the person, this study will also look at the Thai communist party movement in the early postwar years and the entry of highly educated Thais into the party.

### **1. Interview with Nuon Chea in Pailin**

On the morning of 12 August 2003, the author along with three other university people departed Battambang city to visit Nuon Chea at his home in the Pailin area in western Cambodia near the Thai border.<sup>8</sup> His house stood next door to Khieu Samphan's home. Built of wood with a tin roof and standing on stilts, it was an average-sized house with a front room and two bedrooms. A tall television antenna stood next to the stairs leading up to the entrance. There were no guards, and no security of any kind was maintained. It was an ordinary, tranquil traditional village house. Nuon was living together with his wife and with his children and their spouses. His children's families were engaged in growing maize and sesame seeds, and they rented land from the son of Ieng Sary (the deputy prime minister and foreign minister during the time of Democratic Kampuchea). This son is an influential man in Pailin.

At the time of the author's visit, Nuon was at home with his wife and a grandchild about a year old. One of the persons accompanying the author was a Cambodian graduate student named Ourn Pheakiny who was in her second year of M.A. studies at Waseda University's Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies. Speaking in Cambodian she introduced each of the guests. As everyone in the group could speak Thai, conversation continued in that language. Nuon's Thai was hardly any different from that of a native Thai. One might expect this considering that he had received a middle and higher education in Bangkok, and while a student at Thammasat University, he had worked for more than three years as an official in the Thai national government. However, this was over half a century earlier; and according to Nuon, after he entered the struggle in Cambodia in 1950, his connections with the Thai communist party ceased, and he rarely had opportunities to use Thai. Nevertheless, he had not forgotten the language, in large part because Nuon said that since taking up residence in Pailin, he was reading Thai books again and listening to Thai radio. He also traveled into Thailand every six months or so to visit a clinic in Chanthaburi for treatment of a heart problem and a cerebral infarction among other ailments. At those times he said he bought Thai-language books on Buddhism that he brought home to read. On saying this, Nuon went into his bedroom and brought out books by such well-known Thai Buddhist priests as Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, P.A. Payutto Bhikkhu and Panyananda Bhikkhu. In his front room he had also hung a photograph of Thailand's supreme patriarch, Somdej Pra Yana Sangvorn.

Six days after the interview with Nuon Chea, this author met with Youk Chhang of the Documentation Center of Cambodia in Phnom Penh. According to Youk, Nuon is said to be wary, distrustful and on his guard when interviewed by Cambodians, but with foreigners there are times when he will talk at length. Particularly when the questioning is in Thai, he shows more emotion and is willing to talk in greater detail about himself. Nuon was certainly talkative during the interview at his home. Maybe this was thanks to the Thai language.

#### **Synopsis of the interview**

Nuon Chea began the interview saying he was born on 7 July 1926 in Battambang city [in the Cambodian province of the same name]<sup>9</sup> in the neighborhood of Voat Kor temple. His father was a trader, grew corn and was involved in all sorts of business activities, while his mother did sewing and similar work. He started school when he was

seven years old and as a child had no experience doing farm work. He received a French-language education at school. In Battambang the Thai language was also learned, and according to him, it is an easy language for Cambodians to learn. Before World War I his family had been very well off economically, but during the bad economic times following the war, the family fell into debt and its living conditions declined. His maternal grandfather was a Teochiu Chinese from Shantou (Swatow), China; his maternal grandmother was a Cambodian. His father's surname was Lao. At the time of the Lunar New Year and at Qingming<sup>10</sup> his father would pray in the Chinese manner to his ancestors; he also honored Sun Yat-sen. But his parents also worshiped at the Buddhist temple. Although of Chinese ancestry, Nuon learned little of the language. His wife is also of Chinese ancestry and was born and grew up in a peasant family in Kampong Chhnang. They have four children and more than ten grandchildren.

In 1941 when Thailand acquired Battambang and Siemreap, he was still young and had no particular feelings about that event. Although he was really of Cambodian nationality and ethnically a Khmer, that event made him a Thai citizen and part of the Thai nation. Later in 1941 when the Japanese army moved into southern Indochina, then into Thailand, Japanese soldiers were stationed at Voat Kor, a temple near his house, to guard the nearby steel bridge on the rail line running from Phnom Penh to Battambang. He had no feelings of hatred toward the Japanese soldiers. Any critical feelings he had were against the French, so he had no reason to have bad feelings toward the Japanese who were suppressing the French. Besides, he heard that the Japanese were aiding Cambodian patriots. At that time, however, he was still a young man in Battambang, and was not clearly conscious of being anti-French. He still had not been awakened politically; that awakening would come later, and develop gradually. But eventually he would come to realize that the French colonial society in which he had been born and raised had a class of local Khmer officials that had been fostered by the French, and which wrung from their own fellow Khmers the taxes and other extractions that the French demanded. That colonial government controlled the sale of alcohol and had even legalized the sale of opium in its greed for gain.

In 1942 he finished the fourth year of middle school. He then left for Bangkok. By that time he said he had come to have a vague interest in what an independent country was. After arriving in Bangkok, he was surprised to see that although Thailand was an independent country, there were many Chinese. The country's commerce was dominated by the Chinese, and very few Thais engaged in trade. However, he saw that the Thais and the Chinese were co-existing. In Cambodia the Khmers and the Chinese also co-existed, but there was antagonism between the Khmers and Vietnamese.

In Bangkok there were three Khmer priests at Wat Benjamabopit who were from Battambang, and they took care of him. He lived in the priests' quarters, and he started attending the Wat Benjamabopit school as a fifth-year middle school student. His father paid for his school fees and for his living expenses in Bangkok. He was able to live on less than what his father sent him, so he had no problems financially. On finishing the sixth year of middle school, he enrolled in the seventh-graduating class of the preparatory course at Thammasat University.<sup>11</sup> Because of the war however, regular classes were not held. He sent in his schoolwork by mail and only took his exams at the university. During his time in Thailand, he used a different name, and took his present



name during the time of struggle in Cambodia. However, he said he could not reveal to this author the name he used in Thailand. Although he enrolled in Thammasat's preparatory course, he never had an opportunity to talk to Pridi Phanomyong, the university's president. That was because he was young and just one of the many students there, and because he did not take part in the anti-Japanese activities of the Free Thai, which Pridi headed.

In those days, *Mahachon*, the official organ of the Thai communist party, was published openly,<sup>12</sup> and it carried articles about the struggle for colonial liberation. He liked reading *Mahachon*, and he would visit its editorial office near the Sanam Luang where he argued with Udom Sisuwan<sup>13</sup> and the other communist party ideologists about the anti-French struggle and other issues. At first he did not realize that *Mahachon* was a communist party publication, but the reading of this periodical was his initial connection to the Thai communist party. He took up reading *Mahachon* during the time it was being published openly; before that when it was published underground, he said he had not read it. As he got into reading *Mahachon*, he began to have doubts about why he was studying at Thammasat University. He began to wonder what he was studying for and thinking that rather than being of service to the nation, his studying would only serve the ruling class. If he graduated from university and happened to be posted somewhere as a district chief, it seemed that would be serving the ruling class and only suppressing the people. If he became a lawyer, that would only be defending the people with money. Such thoughts brought a conflict of questioning within him.

The loathing that he came to feel at that time for the injustice and dishonest in society made him think about joining the Buddhist monkhood for the rest of his life; and he remembered that once during his childhood while watching a cremation at a cemetery, he had said to his grandmother (on his mother's side) that he wanted to become a monk, but that thought ended when she had told him he was too young. During the time he lived at Wat Benjamabopit, once a week he would listen to the monks' sermons.

It was in 2487 (1944), before the war ended, that Nuon said he joined the Thai Youth Organization,<sup>14</sup> which he said was a body under the Thai communist party. He joined at the invitation of Ruam Wongphan, the headmaster of a Chinese school that at the time was near Nanglerng in Bangkok. The two of them were living together in a room they rented. (Here Nuon digressed saying that many years later when he was visiting the Soviet embassy in Phnom Penh, he was surprised to see an article in a French-language Soviet magazine reporting that Ruam had been sentenced to death in Bangkok [on 24 April 1962] for his involvement in communist activities, which had become a crime in Thailand.)

The Thai Youth Organization was, according to Nuon, the place where progressive young men and women got together for social action, mutual aid, and for exchanging views. On May 1st they all participated in May Day together. When the Korean War broke out, Nuon said he worked for the peace movement opposing American aggression. By then he had become a communist party member.

Some of the Thais in the youth organization with whom he remembered being active were Nit Phongdapphet,<sup>15</sup> a short girl of Chinese ancestry; and Sanoh Phanitcha-

roen, a man of small stature who had lived in China for a long time and who, Nuon commented, was not to be confused with Chulalongkorn University lecturer Sanoh Tambunyun [who will come up later in this study]. Others who were active were Roeng Mekphaibul, whom Nuon remembered had a moustache before the November 1947 coup d'état; and Lamchiak Sapsunthon, the younger sister of Prasoet Sapsunthon [a communist intellectual and author]. The members of the Thai Youth Organization knew Nuon was from Battambang, and they would talk with him about the distress of the people who had to live under French colonial rule.

Besides his regular reading of *Mahachon*, Nuon said he also read Udom Sisuwan's *Thailand's Way Out* [*Thang Ook Khong Thai*],<sup>16</sup> a Thai translation of the *Communist Manifesto* [*Kamnotkan Khommiunist*],<sup>17</sup> and *A View of Life* [*Chiwathat*] penned by Prasoet Sapsunthon;<sup>18</sup> he did not agree with some of the point in this last work.<sup>19</sup> He also read the progressive newspaper *Siang Thai*.

Speaking about the Khmer Isarak movement at the time he was in Bangkok, Nuon said it was divided into numerous groups, and was not pursuing a correct policy. Some of the groups used the movement's name to promote their own self-interests. He met the Khmer Isarak leader who in Thailand was known as Poc Khun, but this man struck him as the type who would pursue his own self-interest if given the opportunity.<sup>20</sup> The reason that these Khmer Isarak groups largely pursued their own self-interests was, in Nuon's view, because among the ethnic Cambodians in Thailand living in places like Surin and Buriram, the national consciousness of being Khmer was very weak, and they did not think about what was happening in Cambodia; in Bangkok the number of Cambodians was small, and they spoke Thai. He contrasted this with his later experience in Vietnam where the consciousness of being Khmer among the Cambodians living in that country was deep in their soul.

During his time in Thailand there were a large number of Viet Minh units on the Thai side of the border with Indochina. He thought they were highly capable units, but at that time he had no contacts with the Viet Minh. As a student, however, he traveled to Poipet and Surin to observe the activities of the Khmer Isarak.

During his time in Bangkok, Nuon said his uncle, Sieu Heng, the husband of his mother's younger sister and who came from the southern part of Cambodia, was active with the Khmer Isarak in Thailand's northeastern province of Surin. From time to time he would come into Bangkok to procure supplies. However, according to Nuon, this uncle did not introduce him to the Indochina communist party, nor to Professor Tran Van Giau, a Vietnamese leader who was in Bangkok at that time. Giau was a friend of Pridi Phanomyong, and Nuon said he knew his name but never did meet him.

While a student studying at Thammasat University [which he entered in May 1946 on completion of the preparatory course], Nuon said he also worked for three years as a regular government official in the Comptroller General's Department<sup>21</sup> within the Thai Ministry of Finance. His life became one of listening to lectures at Thammasat in the morning, then going over to his office at the finance ministry. In 1950 while working at the ministry, he became a member of the Thai communist party. Prior to joining he had to go through a six-month candidacy period. Before that Nuon said he had been active for four years in the Thai Youth Organization, which he again said was under the Thai communist party. The party cell he belonged to was one for government officials and



was composed of three members, including himself, who worked in the Comptroller General's Department. He remembered that the name of one of the cell members was Udom. He had been the person who had invited Nuon to join the Thai communist party, but this was a different person from Udom Sisuwan. Nuon could not remember the name of the other member. As far as he knew, he was the only Khmer in the Thai communist party.

In 1950 while working at the finance ministry, a test took place for employment at the Thai foreign ministry. He took it and passed. His reason for taking the test was because his work at the finance ministry was only with numbers, and he saw no future in it; also he wanted to become a diplomat. After moving to the foreign ministry he was placed in the Indochina Office (*Phanaek Indochin*), which was in charge of affairs with Burma and French Indochina. His monthly salary was a low 24 baht. He worked at the foreign ministry for a mere one month, during which he remembered reading a report about French soldiers firing on some Lao people who were on a riverbank drawing water from the Mekong River.

The Vietnam branch of the Indochina communist party knew that a Khmer had joined the Thai communist party. The Vietnamese contacted him via the Thai party to ask whether he had any intention of joining the struggle against the French. He replied that he did have such an intention. If he had wanted a comfortable life, he would have remained working at the foreign ministry. Perhaps one day he could have become an ambassador. But he could no longer endure what the French were doing in Indochina. Following senior-level discussions between the Thai and Vietnamese parties, he transferred his membership to the Communist Party of Indochina.

His career in the communist party was calculated from the time he entered the Thai communist party, Nuon commenting that it was a basic principle among communist parties that one's party career was counted from the time one first entered the party, no matter which communist party it was. After transferring to the Indochina communist party, he moved into the Samlot area of Pailin where he worked in the villages in charge of propaganda and newspaper publication for the anti-French struggle. At that time he still did not belong to the senior ranks of the party.

In the anti-French struggle he could see that the Khmer Isarak was still not following a correct policy, and in mountainous regions beyond the reach of French control, villagers who had weapons could rise up on their own with or without Khmer Isarak assistance. He saw that the patriotism of the peasants was very strong, and if agitated, they would join the anti-French struggle. But the Khmer Isarak leaders had no policy; they were opportunists.

The year Stalin died [5 March 1953], Nuon left Pailin going on foot to the Thai border town of Aranyaprathet where, posing as a Thai, he boarded a train and went to Bangkok. From there he took a train to Nong Khai, then a car to Bung Kan, finally crossing the Mekong River and landing at the Laotian town of Pak San. From there he passed through Laos guided by Lao Issara people who took him by bicycle and on foot toward Hoa Binh, his destination in Vietnam. The journey took him several months. For two years in Hoa Binh, around ten Khmers including himself received training under Vietnamese instructors. Interpreters were provided for those who could not understand Vietnamese. He was training in Vietnam when the battle of Dien Bien Phu took place

[March-May 1954], and it was there that he met the Lao leaders Prince Souphanouvong, Kaison Phomvihan and Singapo Sikhoudchounlamany. But he did not meet any Thais. The Geneva cease-fire agreement was signed in [July] 1954, and the next year, 1955, he left Vietnam and returned to Phnom Penh. It was then that he met Pol Pot for the first time. He also read Mao Zedong's book in Vietnamese translation that he purchased in Phnom Penh following the end of the anti-French struggle.

He was elected deputy secretary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea and remained in that position, ranking second behind Pol Pot in the party hierarchy. He noted that in any party, even within the Buddhist monkhood, there is confrontation. There was some confrontation between himself and Pol Pot; however, there was no big confrontation between the two of them, especially in the area of policy. Pol Pot was a communist, Nuon asserted, and as such he was a highly moral man. He did not lay a hand on other people's things, and he did not drink.

When it came to war, there was war of aggression and war of self-defense, and the war he had fought was one solely of self-defense. To defend one's country, one had to have military might, and everyone had the right of self-defense. Sometimes one had to kill people in self-defense; it was an unavoidable duty. It was in 1970 when he took to the jungle to carry out the struggle, and only recently did he take up the serious study of Buddhism; nevertheless, from the time of the revolution when talking to government officials during training sessions, he talked about things that were the same as the Five Commandments of Buddhism, things like: people in positions of power must not lose themselves to money, alcohol and women; they must not plunder what belongs to the people; those who cannot abide by these requirements cannot become government officials. This was the same as the thoughts of Mao Zedong.

After leaving Thailand in 1950, he had no more contact at all with the Thai communist party, and he very seldom met any Thais. A rare example was in 1975 or 1976 during the Democratic Kampuchea period when he met Pluang Wannasri, a Thai communist party member who had come to Phnom Penh on a tour of observation. Back in 1944 at Thammasat University when he had been in the seventh graduating class of the preparatory course, Pluang had been in the fifth graduating class. Otherwise, the only other meeting with a Thai that he could recall was one with a man whose title he remembered was secretary of the Thai communist party, who went by the alias "Chat", and who was lightly complexioned like a Chinese.

His foreign travels were limited to a trip via China to attend a peace conference in Moscow during the time of struggle against the French, and official trips to China, Vietnam and North Korea as the leader of Democratic Kampuchea's People's Assembly.

Reflecting on the leaders of the Khmer Rouge,<sup>22</sup> Nuon called them good people and not thieving, villainous types. They were very knowledgeable; Pol Pot, like Zhou Enlai, was highly educated and had studied in France. When they (Nuon and the other Khmer Rouge leaders) were in power, people outside the country criticized them for one thing or another; in his view, however, this was nothing but the criticism of outsiders. He pointed to the example of Japan. Although poor in natural resources, it was able to develop. This was because of its spiritual awakening (*tuntua*). The most important thing was one's thinking (*thatsana*), one's will power (*nukkhith*). Japan was able to become a great power because of its thinking and its will to do, because it put these into

practice through its own efforts. His intention too was to lift up Cambodia's thinking and will, and to put them into practice through its own efforts.

After the Khmer Rouge lost, the victors made them responsible for all the things that had happened during the time of Democratic Kampuchea. But he asked, if Democratic Kampuchea had killed people, then how was it able to win the war in 1975? Was there a person anywhere who would burn down his own newly built house? He himself never had in his mind the thought of killing ordinary people. But the leadership of Democratic Kampuchea was swamped with work. They simply believed what middle- and low-level officials told them, and they were unable to go out to inspect the local areas. Many people died of exhaustion and hunger because they were forced to work far longer hours than had been set and had to eat mostly riceless gruel because of the scarcity of food. That he had been unable to go out and stop what was happening was unfortunate, and for this he accepted responsibility.

Nuon finished the interview saying that he had not written any book, and had no intention of writing one. He wanted his biography to be written by the people.

## 2. Searching for Nuon Chea's Thai Name

Armed with the information from the interview, the author's first task on returning to Bangkok from Phnom Penh was to find out the name that Nuon Chea had used in Bangkok. Not knowing that name would make it difficult to pursue the story of his life in Bangkok, even if the author did meet the former Thai communist party members whose names Nuon had mentioned in his interview.

The first step was to get hold of the name list of the students who had been enrolled in the seventh graduating class of Thammasat University's preparatory course to see whether or not there might be a name that caught the author's eye. The seventh graduating class, as Nuon had mentioned, entered school in the first half of 1944 and finished two years later in the first half of 1946. The class name list the author examined contained 1,439 names.<sup>23</sup> There was no way of knowing if any names had been omitted, but most likely this was the total number of students in the seventh graduating class; and it was far more than the author had expected. The names were listed in Thai alphabetical order. Starting from the top of the list, the author had searched about half way down when he came across the name "Runglert Laodi". Looking at that name, the author had a hunch this was the one Nuon Chea had used. One reason for this hunch was the information from David P. Chandler and Ben Kiernan quoted at the beginning of this study. According to Chandler, Nuon Chea had used the name Long Ruot during his time in Bangkok; Kiernan gave his name as Long Reth. Both were close to Runglert. Another reason was the family name Laodi. In his interview Nuon had mentioned that his father's surname was Lao. This is a Chinese surname, and the probable character for it is 劉. When creating a Thai-style family name, Thais of Chinese ancestry often incorporate the sound of their Chinese family name into their new Thai family name. To his Chinese last name Lao, it was apparent that Nuon had added the Thai word "di" meaning "good", giving him the Sincized Thai family name of Laodi (Goodlao).

Having strong evidence that Nuon Chea's Thai name had been Runglert Laodi, the next step was to check at Wat Benjamabopit school (the present Mathayom Benjama-

bopit), where Nuon said he had studied, to see if that name was on the school's list of graduated students.

Mathayom Benjamabopit is a government-run secondary school located on the grounds of Wat Benjamabopit, a venerable and distinguished temple built by King Chulalongkron that stands in the heart of Bangkok not far from Chitlada Palace and the Office of the Prime Minister. Also known as the Marble Temple, it is a popular tourist attraction in the city. A Sukhothai statue of Buddha is enshrined within the marble *wihan*, while the galleries of the surrounding cloister are lined with a great number of Buddha statues that have come to the temple from around the world. Aligned at the rear of the temple are the numerous buildings that form the quarters of the resident monks. Next to these stands Wat Benjamabopit school. These monks' quarters were the home of the three monks from Battambang who took care of young Nuon Chea, and it was here that he lived while studying at the school next door. Nuon's mode of living and studying was not unique. To this day many Thai youths from rural areas who come to Bangkok to further their education live and study in the same way. Among the members of the Thai communist party who will be taken up in this study, Prasoet Sapsunthon, Ruam Wongphan, Sanoh Phanitcharoen, Somkhwan Phichaikul and Udom Charoenrat had come from the countryside and lived in temples while pursuing higher education in Bangkok.

On 3 September 2003 the author visited the teachers' room at Mathayom Benjamabopit. The school had the names of all of its graduates entered into the computer, so he was told it would be a simple matter to search for the name. Certain that Nuon Chea's Thai name would be there, he had an immediately search made, and within a moment it appeared: Runglert Laodi. Recorded next to the name was: student no. 4467, completion of 4th-year middle school (Mo.So. 4) in the school year 1942, graduation from 5th-year middle school (Mo.So. 5) in the school year 1943, entered Thammasat University preparatory course. The 1943-school year graduation would have taken place in the first half of 1944, which would have coincided with the time of entry into the seventh graduating class of Thammasat University's preparatory course. But there was something amiss here. In his interview, Nuon Chea had told this author that he had graduated from fourth-year middle school in Battambang and had gone to Bangkok and studied at Wat Benjamabopit school where he had entered fifth-year middle school and graduated from the sixth year, which would have been the normal process for a student wanting to go on to the university preparatory course. But the school record showed that Nuon, under the name Runglert Laodi, had entered fourth-year middle school, had graduated from fifth-year, and then had gone on to the university preparatory course, something that was highly unusual. The author wondered if there could have been some computer input error. The school staff person who had done the search could provide no answer.

The author next contacted an official he knew at the Thai foreign ministry and asked her to check whether the name Runglert Laodi could be found in the ministry's personnel employment records. This she did, and in the ministry's repository of records in an old *Listing of Foreign Ministry Officials (Batraichu kharachakan Ko.To.)* she found the name Runglert Laodi along with a brief note recording that he entered the foreign ministry in B.E. 2493 then resigned. This confirmed that Runglert entered the Thai foreign ministry in 1950, which was B.E. 2493; however the month and day of his entry

were not recorded. The year, month and day of his resignation were also not recorded, but the official who had done the checked told the author that on the line directly below the one recording that Runglert entered the foreign ministry in 1950, it was written simply that he resigned, from which the official said it could be inferred that he had resigned in the same year of 1950. This would accord with Nuon Chea's statement in his interview that he had entered the foreign ministry in 1950 and had resigned one month later.

Following his discoveries at the foreign ministry, the author inquired at the Comptroller General's Department of the finance ministry, where Nuon Chea said he had work for three years, to check whether Runglert's name could also be found on their name list, but he was told that the department only maintained a name list of personnel who had retired since 1986. Therefore the author was unable to confirm from the archival records of the Thai finance ministry Runglert Laodi's employment in the Comptroller General's Department during the latter half of the 1940s.

By now it was close to certain that Runglert Laodi was Nuon Chea. If the people Nuon mentioned in his interview also acknowledged that they had been active with Runglert, and if the essence of those activities coincided with that which Nuon had spoken of in his interview, the certainty would be complete. The author now got in contact with Udom Charoenrat (1929–2007), who had been very active as a communist and who, it was the author's hunch, had been the Udom who had been Nuon Chea's colleague in the Comptroller General's Department and whom Nuon said had invited him to join the Thai communist party.

In October of 2003 the author got Udom's phone number from Prachuap Amphasawet (born 1919) who had been in the second graduating class of Thammasat's preparatory course and who was Udom's close friend. Phoning Udom, the author said he had been introduced by Prachuap, told Udom that in August he had met Runglert in Cambodia who still remembered Udom's name, that he had photos he had taken of Runglert, and that he very much wanted to meet Udom and hear about his experiences. Udom reacted immediately on hearing Runglert's name, asking in surprise if he was still living, and saying he had heard that a long time back Runglert had fallen from a horse and died. After talking for a while, Udom agreed to meet for an interview if it was together with his trusted friend Prachuap.

During the afternoon of 22 October 2003 the author met with Udom and Prachuap at the Thai Hotel, one of the hotels near the national parliament building often used by Thai politicians, and had a three-hour interview with the two men. Despite being the first meeting, Udom talked quite readily, although he held back on more than a few points. But this was to be expected at a first interview, something the author had frequently experienced in his many interviews with Thai politicians. To get accurate, detailed information, an interviewer had to meet his subject many times and become trusted. One thing Udom and Prachuap both wanted to do was visit Pailin and meet their old comrade Runglert, something they hoped this author could arrange. With this idea in mind, for the next year and a half, until March 2005, the author had numerous chances to talk on the phone with Udom. In December 2003 when he again visited Phnom Penh, the author telephoned Nuon Chea and received his consent for Udom and Prachuap to visit. As things turned out however, Udom was not as enthusiastic about

visiting Nuon Chea as was Prachuap. Although old and hard of hearing, Prachuap was greatly interested in the study of modern Thai history. But Udom seemed to worry that given his communist past, a visit to such a high-profile Khmer Rouge leader might have an adverse effect on his close kin, one of whom was enjoying a successful diplomatic career in the Thai foreign service. Eventually there ceased to be any more talk of a visit to Pailin, and in 2007 Udom passed away.

Among the Thais that Nuon Chea said he had been active with in Bangkok, Udom Charoenrat was the first that the author interviewed. But Udom worked with Nuon, as Runglert, at the ministry of finance and introduced him to the Thai communist party near the end of Nuon's time in Thailand, which is the end of the timeframe of this study, thus making Udom one of the later communist activists in Bangkok to influence Nuon. In the following section, which sets forth the people who were active with Nuon during his Bangkok years, the order of presentation is chronological starting with those who had the earliest contact with Nuon Chea/Runglert Laodi in Bangkok.

### **3. Ruam Wongphan and the Thai Youth Organization**

In his interview Nuon Chea told this author that he had been invited by Ruam Wongphan to join the Thai Youth Organization and that he had joined in B.E. 2487 (1944). At that time the two were living together in a room they rented (at which point in the interview Nuon digressed commenting that he knew of Ruam's execution in Bangkok for the crime of conducting communist activities). Joining the Thai Youth Organization marked the start of Nuon's political career, and to grasp an understanding of the man, we need to describe what this organization was actually like.

During the interview, the author asked Nuon Chea three times if he were not mistaken about the year he joined the Thai Youth Organization, which Nuon said had been in 1944, because the author was skeptical that this kind of organization could have existed at that time. Each time Nuon repeated that it had been in 1944, before the war ended. From his experience interviewing elderly people, the author knew that no matter how good a person's memory, when talking about events of more than half a century earlier, even ones important to the interviewee, it is not unusual for dates to be off by a few years. In the interview Nuon had also told the author that before entering the communist party in 1950, he had been active in the youth organization for four years. If he had joined the Thai Youth Organization in 1944, as he claimed, that would have been more than four years before joining the communist party. Clearly something was amiss here. To clear it up, we need to find out when and by whom the Thai Youth Organization was established. A look at Ruam Wongphan, the person who invited Runglert Laodi to join the organization, can help answer these questions.

There was no possibility of interviewing Ruam Wongphan, as he had been executed by firing squad on 24 April 1962 by order of Thailand's then ruling dictator, Sarit Thanarat. Without even having him brought before a court, Sarit had declared Ruam guilty of "receiving instructions from foreign persons outside the country and attempting to overthrow Thailand's democratic system with its king as head of state in order to replace it with a communist system."<sup>24</sup> But there are documents and materials about Ruam as well as people who knew him which makes it possible to examine this man's life and activities with some degree of accuracy.



He was born on 1 April 1922 in the village of Makhamlom in Tambol (sub-district) Bang Plama of Suphanburi province, the eldest son of a peasant family.<sup>25</sup> In 1941, after his fifth year of middle school, he left the local school where he was studying and transferred to the famous Suan Kulap School where he completed his sixth and final year of middle school. Two other students who transferred to Suan Kulap at the same time and who likewise did only their final sixth year of middle school were Charoen Wangam (1925–1979) and Suthi Natworathat (born 1927); Charoen would be the secretary general of the Communist Party of Thailand from 1961 until his death in 1979, while Suthi would head the foreign trade department in the Ministry of Commerce and later be the minister of commerce in the cabinet of Prime Minister Thanin Kraiwichian. Another two students, who did their last three years of middle school at Suan Kulap (which had a three-year system at that time covering the fourth, fifth, and sixth years of middle school) and who were in their sixth and final year when Ruam, Charoen and Suthi transferred in, were Thanin Kraiwichian (born 1927) and Somkhwan Phichaikul (born Sep 1926); Thanin would be a prime minister (1976–1977), and Somkhwan would become a central committee member of the Thai communist party.<sup>26</sup> All of these students were graduates of the 1941 school year, meaning that they graduated from Suan Kulap School in the first half of 1942. Surrounded by the affluent children of Bangkok who made up much of the student body at Suan Kulap School, Ruam preferred the company of Somkhwan and Charoen who also had grown up in rural poverty.

In order to enter university at that time, after finishing the sixth year of middle school, a student had to complete the two-year university preparatory course, or had to have an equivalent level of education. After graduating from his sixth year in 1942, Ruam did not go on to the university preparatory course. Instead he went to Phra Nakhon Business School in Wang Burapha, Bangkok, where he studied for two years (1942/1943–1943/1944) gaining qualification for entry to university, then registering on 19 October 1944 to study at Thammasat University. His student number was 17857.<sup>27</sup>

In May 1944, while still studying at the business school, Ruam attended an evening course in journalism at Chulalongkorn University. Among the students taking the course were his old Suan Kulap classmate, Charoen Wangam, and a communist party member named Wirot Amphai.<sup>28</sup> It is possible that this was the point when Ruam came in contact with the communist party.

Speaking to the author about this possibility, Damri Ruangsutham,<sup>29</sup> who had been a labor leader and influential person in the Thai communist party, told him that Wirot headed one of the occupational sections that in the Thai communist party was termed a *sai*, meaning a “line”. Party members were grouped by occupation into different *sai*. There was a *sai* for workers, for peasants, for women, for teachers, for students, for government officials and so on, and Wirot headed the *sai* for intellectuals which was also responsible for the party organ, *Mahachon*. Damri explained that it was this *sai* headed by Wirot that brought Ruam into the party; this was after the war, when the Qi Guang (啓光) Chinese School<sup>30</sup> opened for studies, and Ruam became the school’s Thai-speaking headmaster. It was during this time that Ruam became a member of the party.<sup>31</sup>

Also agreeing that Ruam joined the Thai communist party after the war ended was Lamchiak (Sapsunthon) Songkharak, who told this author that Ruam had joined the party a little before the entry of her older brother, Prasoet Sapsunthon [whose party entry was published on 6 December 1946<sup>32</sup>]. Another person who indicated the same was Pa Phung (Somphon Angkhathawon), wife of Wirat Angkhathawon [1921–1997, also known by the name Zhang Yuan (張遠), who until his death was said to have been the most powerful person in the Thai communist party.] Pa Phung said it was not during the war but soon after it ended that Ruam became leader of the communist party-affiliated student movement at Thammasat University.<sup>33</sup>

For a long time after Ruam's death, his wife did not have his body cremated. It was not until 23 April 1995 that she had it done, and the commemorative funerary volume published at that time contained the following: "Comrade Ruam joined the revolutionary movement following the end of World War II. During the period when *Mahachon* was being published openly, he took part in organizing a study group. During the time of the Thailand Youth Association [Samakhom Yawachon haeng Prathet Thai], he joined that movement to resist Fascist dictatorship. He took part in the earliest student movement at Thammasat University."<sup>34</sup>

While there is the possibility that Ruam Wongphan came in contact with Wirot Amphai and his people in the Thai communist party in the latter part of the war, his participation in revolutionary activities came after the Second World War had ended, and evidence indicates that he joined the Thai communist party around the middle of 1946. It appears that Wirot, the person registered with the government as the proprietor of the party organ, *Mahachon*, along with Charoen Wangam, a *Mahachon* reporter who was a friend and former classmate at Suan Kulap School, were involved in Ruam's entering the party.<sup>35</sup>

From the information in his interview, it would appear that Nuon Chea began participating in the youth movement from the time which the Ruam the funerary volume called "the period when *Mahachon* was being published openly", when Ruam Wongphan "took part in organizing a study group." Nuon Chea was also clear in stating that he joined the Thai Youth Organization (Ongkarn Yawachon Thai). This raises the question of whether or not this organization was the same as the one referred to in Ruam's commemorative funerary volume as the Thailand Youth Association (Samakhom Yawachon haeng Prathet Thai).

The timeframe of this question is "the period when *Mahachon* was being published openly", which was from October 1945 [see end note 12] until around 1950, and when Ruam Wongphan "joined [the youth] movement to resist Fascist dictatorship", i.e., the military dictatorship that came back into power following the November 1947 coup d'état.

A January 2005 weekly magazine article by Sanoh Phanitcharoen gives some hint about a post-war Thai communist party youth movement "to resist Fascist dictatorship." In that article Sanoh wrote that on 10 April 1947 (actually 7 April<sup>36</sup>) on orders of the Thai communist party, he held a meeting in the name of the Thai Youth Group (Klum Yawachon Thai) at the grounds in front of the Grand Palace (Sanam Luang) to oppose plans for a coup d'état to restore the military dictatorship.<sup>37</sup> According to a news report in the 13 April 1947 issue of *Mahachon*, which stated that the meeting took place

on 7 April, the chairman of that meeting was Roeng Mekphaibul while Sanoh acted as the master of ceremonies. Although Ruam Wongphan's name did not appear in the article, it indicated that an anti-Fascist communist-inspired youth group had come into existence by the spring of 1947.

In a March 2005 interview with this author, Sanoh provided more details about that 1947 period. Domestic politics after the war were in turmoil, he said; rumors of a military coup were in the air, and Phibun had made it known that he intended to return to politics. In response, Sanoh said he held the anti-coup d'état meeting on 10 April 1947 [again giving the wrong date]. After this meeting, the Thai Youth Organization (Ongkarn Yawachon Thai), popularly known as "Youth", was organized. The leader of the new body was Ruam Wongphan. It operated in the open, and initially only three people in the organization were Thai communist party members: Ruam, Sanoh himself and Roeng Mekphaibul. Roeng, a former corporal in the army, had joined the party shortly after Sanoh had, was eight years Sanoh's senior, and liked drinking. Later these three were joined by Somkhwan Phichaikul, Kanda Sunthonchamon, the daughter of Wat Sunthonchamon,<sup>38</sup> and a party member named Nikhon, who ceased being active soon after joining the party. At its most, Sanoh said there were about 10 Thai communist party members who were involved in Youth. Commenting on Runglert [who was still not yet a communist], Sanoh said he was good at French, so he [Sanoh] would take him to meet foreigners who were connected with Youth.<sup>39</sup>

Further evidence that the Thai Youth Organization had come into existence by the latter half of 1947 and was operating in the open was provided by an article in the Bangkok Post of 1 September 1947. Titled "Student Meeting Hears Border Return Appeals", the article said in part:

Hope that Siam still may be able to regain some of the Indochina border territory returned to France,<sup>40</sup> either by appeal to the United Nations or by negotiations with France, was expressed by several speakers yesterday at a public meeting sponsored in Saranromya Garden by the Siamese Youth Organization [i.e., Thai Youth Organization<sup>41</sup>]. Nai Ruam Wongsebandhu [the Romanized Pali spelling of Ruam Wongphan's family name], student at the University of Moral and Political Science [Thammasat University's English name], opened the meeting at 11 a.m. He explained that the meeting was called to hear the opinion of those who felt that the border territories were an integral part of Siam and who felt that some means should be found for their return. . . ."

The 7 September 1947 issue of *Mahachon* also carried a report about the meeting. In the article Ruam was called the "chairman of the Thai Youth Organization" (prathan Ongkarn Yawachon Thai).

More about the Thai Youth Organization was provided by Somkhwan Phichaikul (about whom more will be said later) in an April 2005 interview with the author. Somkhwan's pertinent information can be summarized as follows:

When the conference of the pro-Soviet World Federation of Democratic Youth took place in London [probably the federation's founding conference that was held

on 10 November 1945], Chulalongkorn University lecturer Sanoh Tambunyun, then residing in England, participated in the conference as Thailand's youth representative. After returning home,<sup>42</sup> he made plans to set up a democratic youth movement in Thailand. Before the November 1947 coup d'etat, people from England came to Bangkok where they held a conference of International Democratic Youth at the National Museum, bringing together representatives of youth from Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Malay. Sanoh Tambunyun acted as the chairman of this conference. Many Chulalongkorn University teachers participated, bringing along their students. A large number of Thammasat students also participated. Tiang Sirikhan, a former cabinet minister, gave the welcoming speech at the opening ceremony. Around the time this conference took place, the Thai Youth Organization also got started. Originally it was to have been called the Democratic Youth Organization, but the word "democratic" was provocative, so it was dropped, and only "Youth" was used. Both Ruam and Somkhwan himself participated in this Youth movement. Suthi Natworathat, their classmate at Suan Kulap, also participated, but Somkhwan did not know how he came to be a participant. Suthi later went to study in America, and he never joined the communist party. Runglert may also have been active in Youth, but at that time Somkhwan never made his acquaintance. The growth of Thai communist party membership, according to Somkhwan, came after the November 1947 coup d'etat. Before that the party's influence on Youth as a movement was limited.<sup>43</sup>

The conference of International Democratic Youth on 14 September 1947 that Somkhwan spoke of was not held at the National Museum as he stated. It took place at the National Theater of the Fine Arts Department that stands next to the National Museum. According to a 21 September report in *Mahachon*, one week after the conference, and another on 15 September in the newspaper *Quan Minbao* (全民報) youths from seven countries attended the gathering; they call on all youths to unite, to uphold world peace and democracy, and to support national movements for independence. As representative of the Thai Youth Organization, Ruam Wongphan acted as the chairman of the panel made up of a representative from each attending country and which led the conference.

In the foregoing discussion, during the timeframe "when *Mahachon* was being published openly", all of the sources except one mentioned the existence of the Thai Youth Organization (Ongkarn Yawachon Thai), and some state clearly that Ruam was head of or involved in the organization; only the Ruam Wongphan commemorative funerary volume used the term Thailand Youth Association (Samakhom Yawachon haeng Prathet Thai). This indicates strongly that Nuon Chea's recollection that he was active in the Thai Youth Organization is correct, that this was also the organization that Ruam Wongphan was active in (along with other Thai communist party members, notably Sanoh Phanitcharoen and Somkhwan Phichaikul), and that Ruam's funerary volume was referring to this Thai Youth Organization, although by an incorrect but similar name.

In his interview Nuon Chea had said that the Thai Youth Organization was under the Thai communist party, but this was a misconception, probably because he was

recalling events that had happened over half a century earlier. The Thai Youth Organization, although sympathetic toward communism and containing members who were also Thai communist party members, was not a communist-controlled youth organization. The Thai communist party's equivalent of such an organization, the Thailand Youth League (Sannibat Yawachon haeng Prathet Thai, or So.Yo.To.), was not set up until the late-1949 early-1950 period.<sup>44</sup> Prior to this, as will be pointed out later in this study, there was a communist party youth group, but this was an informal group for youths who had already joined the party; this was not a youth group for non-party members. Thus, prior to the founding of the So.Yo.To., there was no communist-party-controlled body for bringing together youths in general, which meant that members joined the party directly without passing through a communist youth organization.<sup>45</sup>

The above discussion also shows that Nuon's assertion in his interview that he had joined the Thai Youth Organization in 1944 cannot be correct. While Ruam Wongphan was the person who invited Nuon to join the Thai Youth Organization, Ruam himself did not become a member of the Thai communist party until mid-1946, and the formation of the Thai Youth Organization did not take place until mid-1947. Thus, in 1944 Ruam still had not begun his political activism, and the Thai Youth Organization still had not come into existence. Nuon's assertion was also contradicted by Sanoh Phanitcharoen, whom Nuon named as having been active with him in the Thai Youth Organization. As will be pointed out later, in an interview with this author, Sanoh indicated that he became active in Youth during 1947 (probably around the middle of that year). In his interview Nuon Chea also said that before joining the Thai communist party in 1950, he had been active in the youth organization for four years. If he had joined the Thai Youth Organization in 1944, as he claimed, his involvement in that organization would have spanned seven years, not four. However, if the year he joined was 1947, that would have been exactly four years before he became a member of the party.

Looking briefly at Ruam's career after joining the Thai communist party, in May 1949 he departed for China in the first group of members that the Thai communist party sent to the Chinese Communist Party for training. Until then he had been the Thai headmaster of the Qi Guang Chinese School; there he had married one of the teachers less than two months before leaving for China. His good friend and fellow communist party member, Somkhwan Phichaikul, succeeded him as the school's Thai headmaster. While in China he engaged in political work among the peasants in the Tai ethnic region of Xishuangbanna in Yunnan Province. He returned to Thailand in 1957 where he utilized the experience he had gained in China to begin organizing the peasantry in his home province of Suphanburi. At the third congress of the Communist Party of Thailand in 1961, he was elected to the party's politburo. On 23 February 1962 he was apprehended by police after fleeing arrest the previous day.<sup>46</sup> On the 24th April he was interrogated for an hour by Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat himself but refused to divulge any secrets thereby greatly angering the prime minister. At 18:00 hours that same day at the Bang Khwang prison, Ruam Wongphan was executed by firing squad. The heavy-handed suppression of the Sarit military dictatorship accelerated the communist party's shift over to armed struggle against the government.<sup>47</sup>

#### 4. The Recollections of Prasoet Sapsunthon

Another person Nuon Chea mentioned was Prasoet Sapsunthon (1913–1994), whose book, *A View of Life*, had influenced his early thinking as a leftist. The author's interview with Prasoet took place in Bangkok on 16 June 1981, one of the earliest interviews he had with former members of the Thai communist party, Prasoet told the author that he was one of the first Thai intellectuals to join the party. He was raised in a local ruling class family in southern Thailand's Suratthani province. He grew up to be an intellectual, living in Bangkok's Wat Rachathiwat while studying at Chulalongkorn's Faculty of Arts and Science where he majored in history under lecturer Rong Syamananda. In his senior year of university in 2479 [1936/37], he became the president of the Chulalongkorn University student council.<sup>48</sup> In September 1946 as a member of the Thai House of Representatives, he introduced a bill to abolish the law outlawing communism which the assembly successfully passed. In response, Prasoet said central figures in the Thai communist party, notably Wirot Amphai, Udom Sisuwat, the party spokesman Praphan Wirasak,<sup>49</sup> and Song Nophakhun,<sup>50</sup> invited him to join the party. Long influenced by Buddhist idealism, Prasoet said he sympathized with communist ideology,<sup>51</sup> and at the end of 1946 he joined the party. With the November 1947 coup d'état and the military's return to power, the national assembly was dissolved, and Prasoet lost his job as a representative. But publication of the party's mouthpiece, *Mahachon*, was not affected, so he found work on its staff during which his book, *A View of Life*, was carried serially in that newspaper.<sup>52</sup> The party's office, which was also *Mahachon's* office, had the complete writings of Marx and Lenin in English translation. Prasoet said he was practically the only one in the party who used these volumes and read their writings in English. The top leaders of the party did not like reading Marx and Lenin; they only read Ma Zedong's writings in Chinese. In this way his source of knowledge differed from that of the other leaders of the party. He began by reading Marx and Lenin, then read Ma Zedong's works in English. Thus the party leadership recognized that he was much more knowledgeable than they were in Marxist-Leninism. In May 1949 he was sent to China with the first group of party members that the Thai communist party sent to China. Others in the group were Damri Ruangsutham, Ruam Wongphan and Song Nophakhun. At the party's second congress in 1952, held ten years after the party's founding, Prasoet was officially elected to the central committee. When he joined the Thai communist party, Prasoet noted that it was espousing democracy, so there were no difficulties between himself and the party. Democracy was a good thing that he agreed with, and he said he had no qualms about joining the party. But later the party line changed to armed struggle which he opposed. Around 1954 there was heated debate for nearly a year among the Thai communist party members staying in Beijing, but in the end the party mainstream did not adopt his democratic line, and thereafter Prasoet said he went a separate way. He returned to Thailand in 1958, was arrested, but while in prison he was praised for the instructions on communism that he gave to the Police Special Branch, and he was released.

#### 5. The Recollections of Sanoh Phanitcharoen and Lamchiak (Sapsunthon) Songkharak

Sanoh Phanitcharoen has appeared a number of times already in this study. He was



another former comrade Nuon Chea mentioned, and the interview with him took place on 26 March 2005 for three and a half hours at Thammasat University.

Born in May of 1927, Sanoh said he grew up in Bang Ban district of Ayutthaya province in central Thailand. His paternal grandfather was a Chinese who had immigrated to Thailand from Hainan; his father was a Thailand-born Chinese. His maternal grandfather lived in Ayutthaya and was of Persian ancestry while his maternal grandmother was a Lao who had grown up in Viangchan (Vientian). But Sanoh said his parents lived totally like Thais. He was the youngest of six children. His oldest brother became a priest at Bangkok's famed Wat Bowonniwet, so from the fourth year of elementary school through the sixth year of middle school, Sanoh was able to attend the government-run school on the temple grounds while living in the priests' quarters with his brother. After graduating from middle school, he enrolled at Thammasat University in the sixth graduating class of the preparatory course<sup>53</sup> [entering in school-year 1943 and graduating in school-year 1944, one class ahead of Nuon Chea (Runglert Laodi)]. In July 1944 Phibun and his entire cabinet resigned. Following this, Sanoh said he wrote an article critical of Phibun which he contributed to the newspaper, *Suwannaphum*. This led to a job at that paper. During the latter half of 1946, he borrowed an English translation of the Communist Manifesto from Charoen Chaichana [1907–1983], the editor-in-chief of the *Isaratham* newspaper, translated it into Thai, then had it published serially in that same newspaper. Later he published it as a book. On 31 December 1946, New Year's Eve, Udom Sisuwan invited Sanoh to join the Thai communist party, which he did following a three-month candidacy. The two people who supported his party entry were Udom Sisuwan and Wirot Amphai. Sanoh said he then became involved in the Thai Youth Organization, and during 1947 and 1948 he also became a central figure along with Ruam Wongphan in the youth group organized within the Thai communist party. This group put out a mimeographed newspaper called the *Voice of Siam*, and Somkhwan Phichaikul and Runglert Laodi were some of the people who distributed it. Sanoh said that the person closest to Runglert was Somkhwan, so to him it was strange that Somkhwan had not been involved in Runglert's joining the party, and that it was Udom Charoenrat, who had entered the party later than Somkhwan, who introduced Runglert to the party. After the November 1947 coup d'état, through an introduction from Wirat Angkhathawon, Sanoh said he got a job at the Chinese Nan Yang (南洋) Middle School. On 24 November 1951 he left Bangkok for China where he remained for the next 42 years, not returning to Bangkok again until 9 November 1993. But he made it clear that it had not been his wish to go to China. Rather it was his criticism of the party leadership for its inept response to the November 1947 coup d'état that got him into trouble. His complaints came to their attention, and the leaders lost trust in him. To deal with this troublemaker, they shipped him off to China to shut him up.<sup>54</sup>

Another person Nuon Chea said he had been active with was Lamchiak (Sapsunthon) Songkharak (born July 1926). The author interviewed her at her home on 21 December 2003. She is the younger sister of Prasoet Sapsunthon, author of *A View of Life*, and she began the interview commenting that among the eight brothers and sister, Prasoet was number two, second oldest, and she was number seven, second youngest. She joined the Thai communist party at the beginning of 1947, one month after Prasoet did. Her younger sister, Songsri, the youngest in the family and still back home in

Suratthani, also joined the party. She remained a party member until her death in Suratthani in 1954.

Lamchiak studied accounting at Chulalongkorn University for three years, but said she left school and found work at a European company dealing in the processing and sale of gems. She had been working there for about one year when she joined the communist party. According to her, young party members would sometimes get together in the youth group inside the party to discuss and exchange opinions about politics. The members of this group included Ruam Wongphan, the group leader who was much older than the others and much trusted; Nit Phongdapphet, the deputy leader and since the wartime the highest ranking female party member; Sanoh Phanitcharoen; Nikon, a government official and party member who quit being active because his wife opposed his party involvement; Somkhwan Phichaikul, an official in the finance ministry's Comptroller General's Department who after being sent to China was active in Thailand's Northeast until being arrested; Kanda Sunthonchamon, the daughter of Wat Sunthonchamon; and Lamchiak herself. When asked about a Khmer who went by the Thai name of Runglert Laodi, Lamchiak said there was no such person in the group. From its start there had been no Khmer member. Besides this youth group for party members, she also commented that the party had a student group that it had set up. Aimed at students whether party members or not, some of the main members in this group were Pa Phung, who later married Wirat Angkhathawon, and Nikhom Chanthorawithun (1925–2001), a student of the fourth graduating class of Thammasat's preparatory course who never joined the party, and who would become a director of the labor department in the Ministry of Interior.<sup>55</sup> Both of these groups worked together when celebrating major events such as May Day. Lamchiak then added that Charoen Wangam worked for the party organ, *Mahachon*, and was not involved in either of these groups. He was a quiet, polite person, what the Thais call *riabroi*. Well liked by Wirat and other central figures in the party, he rose quickly up the party ranks.

Continuing her own story, Lamchiak said in November 1949, without a passport and in the company of another Thai woman, Nongyao Praphatthit, and a Chinese guide, she left Bangkok aboard a ship headed for China in order to attend the Asian Women's Conference that was to take place in Beijing on 6–10 December of that year. After that for one year she was in a youth training group learning with overseas Chinese children who came to China from Thailand, Malaya and Singapore. The men and women in the training group were between 20 and 30 years of age and numbered between 100 and 200 people. Following this she studied at the Marx-Lenin Institute until 1956. She then worked for about ten years at Radio Beijing, then became a housewife. Her husband had been a Thammasat University student who had participated in Pridi Phanomyong's 26 February 1949 coup attempt and had fled to China where he had become a Thai language instructor at Beijing University. In 1982 she returned for a time to Thailand, her first time back since leaving in 1949. She then moved back and forth between the two countries a number of times until 1992 when she finally left Beijing and moved back to Thailand.

From these two recollections of people whom Nuon Chea named as having been active with him in the Thai Youth Organization, it is evident that Sanoh remembered Runglert (Nuon Chea), but Lamchiak did not. Sanoh mentioned working with the Thai

Youth Organization, and state specifically the Runglert had some contact with the party members' youth group through his duty of distribution the group's *Voice of Siam* publication. Lamchiak, on the other hand, never mentioned the Thai Youth Organization or having any connection with it, instead talking in some detail about being a member in the youth group for party members. She had no recollection of a person named Runglert, and it seemed she had never heard or ever known of him. But Nuon Chea had remembered Lamchiak's name and recalled doing activities with her. It seems, therefore, that Nuon remembered her name from activities where he came in contact with the party members' youth group, such as distributing the group's publication, *Voice of Siam*, or at May Day celebrations when Runglert's Thai Youth Organization worked with the party's youth group. In his interview it is apparent that Nuon remembered his activities with Lamchiek, and she left a lasting impression on him. But the reverse was not true, the probable reason being that Runglert Laodi, the Khmer with the Thai name, had been one of many young people involved in activities with Lamchiek and her party youth group, and for her Runglert had not been someone distinct or special.

## 6. The Recollections of Somkhwan Phichaikul

Another person that Nuon Chea named has having been active with him in the Thai communist party was Somkhwan Phichaikul, who has been mentioned a number of times already, and who, according to Sanoh Phanitcharoen, had been the person closest to Runglert during 1947–1948, a formative period in Nuon Chea's career as a communist. The author met Somkhwan in Bangkok on 1 April 2005 in a suburban coffee shop and interviewed him for nearly three hours.

Somkhwan began the interview saying he was born and raised in Ban Rai district, Nakhon Rachasima province; his birthday was 4 September 1926. After completing the fourth year of elementary school at the local school, he went to Bangkok with the help of a priest from his own village who was then staying at Wat Rakhang in Bangkok. His own father had been a priest in Bangkok for 15 years, and after returning to his home village, he had become the village headman. His mother's younger brother had also gone to Bangkok and become a lawyer. He said his parents made him study. From Ban Rai district he walked three to four days to the railway station at Si Khiew where he boarded a train for Bangkok. He lived at Wat Rakhang in the priests' quarters while studying at a private school until he graduated from third-year middle school, after which in 1939 he entered the fourth year of middle school at the prestigious government-run Suan Kulap School, which at that time, Somkhwan noted, taught only the fourth through sixth year of middle school. Along with himself, the priest from his home village was taking care of some ten students at Wat Rakhang, so money was really tight. Somkhwan said he had to live for the whole year with the same set of clothes. At Suan Kulap School most of the children were from rich families, but entry to the school was by examination, so poor students from the countryside could also get in if they had the academic ability. For his three years at Suan Kulap, Somkhwan was in the same class with Thanin Kraiwichian,<sup>56</sup> one of the rich kids. He went to and from school by car. Including Thanin, there were only five students in the school at that time who were driven by car. Among the students in the same year as Thanin at Suan Kulap

School, ones who later became communist party members were Ruam Wongphan and Charoen Wangam<sup>57</sup> along with Somkhwan himself. Commenting on this fact, Somkhwan said that people have written that Thanin came under the influence of communism during his student years because of his classmates, but later he reacted against this and became a staunch anti-communist. In Somkhwan's opinion this was not actually true. Thanin in his student days had no interest in politics. He was totally a right-winger, and he never exchanged views with Somkhwan and his group. But this was not to say that he and Thanin did not associate at all. At the time of his mother's funeral, Thanin was one of those who came to pay his respects. On entering the sixth year at Suan Kulap School, Charoen Wangam, Ruam Wongphan and Suthi Natworathat transferred in. These three did only their sixth year of middle school at Suan Kulap, so studied at the school for only one year. As poor students brought up in the countryside, Somkhwan said he and Ruam were odd ones out at Suan Kulap School where so many of the students were from Bangkok's wealthy class. Having grown up in similar circumstances, the two became close friends. But after the class of 1941 graduated [in the first half of 1942], Ruam went on to business school while Somkhwan enrolled at Thammasat in the fifth graduating class of the preparatory course, and the two did not meet again for the next three years. Their next meeting was at Thammasat [in 1944] when Ruam enrolled as a university student.<sup>58</sup> Charoen Wangam was in the same sixth-year middle school class, but he and Somkhwan were not so close and did not talk to each other very much. Like Ruam, Charoen went on to business school after middle school graduation and did not go through the university preparatory course. Somkhwan then commented that the middle school class he and Thanin, Suthi, Charoen and Ruam belonged to was only for the top students whose test results were 70% or higher, and was known as the "king class" [*hong king*]. Competition for high grades was fierce among the students; it did not create an atmosphere for mutually friendly feelings.

In mid-1942 Somkhwan enrolled as a student in the fifth graduating class of Thammasat University's preparatory course [school-years 1942–1943]. Among those enrolled with him were Thanin Kraiwichian, Suthi Natworathat and Pluang Wannasri [1922–1996]. The fifth graduating class was itself divided into 15 classes. The students with the most outstanding grades were in Class 1 [*Hong 1*]; from this class down to Class 3 was known collectively as the "king classes" [*hong king*]. Thanin was in Class 1, but Somkhwan said he moved between Class 2 and Class 3 as his grades fluctuated. The reason his grades stayed at this level was because he did not have the money to buy textbooks, which was unfortunate. He graduated from the preparatory course in the first half of 1944 and went on to Thammasat University [records in the university archives showing that Somkhwan enrolled 23 August 1944, student no. 17727<sup>59</sup>]. After graduating from the preparatory course, he worked for a Japanese construction company, Kaigai Doboku (海外土木) that had undertaken the construction of a Japanese army base at Don Muang Airport. His work was supervising the Thai construction laborers, and he communicated with his Japanese boss in English. His working for the Japanese army was simply to earn money, Somkhwan telling this author that it had nothing to do with the Free Thai movement. He worked for Kaigai Doboku until Japanese assets were frozen and requisitioned as enemy assets by the Thai government after the war [in September 1945]. After that he found employment at the liaison office

the Thai government established for cooperating with the Allied Forces. According to Somkhwan, the Thai government had set up this office in order to requisition and manage Japanese assets [enemy assets] in Thailand in place of the Allies. The government sent people, for example, to requisition Japanese vehicles; some of these people took a car for themselves to make money. Somkhwan said he went to requisition a large Japanese clothing warehouse in Si Phaya, but he only took a few pieces of clothing. His salary was a high 150 baht a month; but it was a temporary job, and it was not long before it came to an end.

It was in 1947 when he joined the Thai communist party. The people who introduced him to the party were Udom Sisuwan and his fellow classmate at Suan Kulap School and close friend, Ruam Wongphan. Somkhwan said Udom was able to explain any and every problem in terms of Marxist theory, and his lucid analysis of conditions brought him great respect from the intellectual class. All of the articles in *Mahachon* that were a little theoretical were written by him. Somkhwan said he was influenced the most by Udom Sisuwan. He was also influenced by Prasoet Sapsunthon's work, *A View of Life*. Somkhwan said he belonged to the Udom Sisuwan *sai*. A party member was supposed to be active only within the *sai* he or she belonged to, and it was against party rules to try to find out things about another *sai*. The only people he was in contact with as a communist party member were Udom and Ruam.

Somkhwan also spoke about the International Democratic Youth conference held in Bangkok in September of 1947 (the highlights of which were mentioned earlier, and wherein he stated that the Thai Youth Organization was set up around the same time, and that he had not yet become acquainted with Runglert Laodi).

Following the end of his job at the Thai government-Allied Forces liaison office, Somkhwan took examinations for work at the Comptroller General's Department in the Ministry of Finance and at the Bank of Thailand.<sup>60</sup> The head of the Comptroller General's Department also taught classes at Thammasat University; he liked Thammasat students, so he hired Somkhwan. After he had begun working at the Comptroller General's Department in the Bureau of Accounts, Somkhwan said Runglert was hired by the same department and worked in the same office, so the two became colleagues. Runglert was light complexioned, was a person of good character. They worked together in the same office at the finance ministry for one year, and during that one year Somkhwan said there was no other friend he became closer to. They hung around together like two childhood pals. Wherever they went; whatever they did, it was always together. Every day they ate together. Somkhwan was staying at Wat Rakhang, but he said he would also stay over at the priests' quarters at Wat Benjamabopit where Runglert was living. Runglert had more spending money than he had, so Runglert would treat him to meals. Runglert spoke French well, and Somkhwan had heard that on the French language test of the entrance exam for Thammasat's preparatory course, Runglert had done the best. He himself was interested in studying French, and he made an effort to talk with Runglert as much as possible in French. Their conversations were a mixture of Thai and French. They read *Mahachon* together, which was sold openly at that time; they read the writings of Udom Sisuwan together, and together they discussed the issues and ideas they read about. As a Cambodian, Runglert's patriotism for his country was very strong, and he took great interest in the problems of poverty and



Cambodia's independence from France.

Somkhwan commented that during the time he and Runglert were together, Runglert had no contact with Ruam Wongphan. When Ruam was sent to China [in May 1949 with the first group of party members that the Thai communist party dispatched to China<sup>61</sup>], he resigned his job as the Thai headmaster of the Qi Guang Chinese School, and Somkhwan said he took over the position. He left his job as a *samian* [an ordinary clerk working in a government office] at the finance ministry where his salary at the time was a very low 35 baht a month, although that was better than his starting salary which had been an even lower 24 baht. After he moved to the Qi Guang Chinese School, he received a salary of 200 baht per month. After leaving the finance ministry, Somkhwan said he had no more opportunity to meet Runglert. He worked as the headmaster for around two years, but his growing fears about being arrested in a crackdown on communists led him to take a new job in Sakon Nakhon province as a teacher at a school owned by Tiang Sirikhan [previously a cabinet minister]. Actually Tiang did not have just one school; he had a number of them here and there in different districts of the province, and Somkhwan said he traveled from one to another teaching English. In 1952 the party sent him to China where he stayed for three or four years, then returned to Thailand.

After returning he worked as an English teacher in a Bangkok middle school while continuing his communist party activities. He would travel periodically to Nakhon Rachasima, his home province, which was the party's base at that time. The third congress of the Communist Party of Thailand in 1961 was not a large-scale gathering of members. Instead it took place as meetings in each area attended by small numbers of people. Somkhwan attended the meeting in Nakhon Rachasima; there were only three participants. In 1967 he was a member of the party's central committee. They were betrayed by a close associate, and more than 100 people connected with the Thai communist party were arrested, Somkhwan among them. The police were going to torture him, but his cousin, the son of his mother's younger sister, was then director of the Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy, the army's officers' training school. From this important position, he telephoned the police, and Somkhwan escaped being tortured. Ultimately he was imprisoned for five years. After his release, he opened a drugstore in the city of Rayong in eastern Thailand on the Gulf of Thailand. His wife's mother lived there, and he was involved in business there until recently. He also did work as a consultant for the city's mayor. He has four children; two are studying in the U.S., one of whom has set up a business involved with the Internet.

From Somkhwan's comments about his time at the Comptroller General's Department, he was already working in that department when Runglert was hired. The two became very close friends and worked together in the same section for one year until Somkhwan left around May 1949. Somkhwan also said that at the time of the International Democratic Youth conference in September 1947, around the time that the Thai Youth Organization was also set up, he had not yet met Runglert. This information would indicate that Runglert began working in the Comptroller General's Department at the end of 1947 or the first part of 1948, about a year before Somkhwan left that office.

Nuon Chea in his interview said that until 1950 he worked for three years as a clerk



[*samian*] in the Comptroller General's Department of the finance ministry. Although there is no remaining official record of his employment in that ministry, the record at the Thai foreign ministry, where Runglert worked right after leaving the Comptroller General's Department, confirms that he entered that ministry in 1950, although the exact month is not known. Counting back three years means he entered the finance ministry in 1947. However, Somkhwan did not make Runglert's acquaintance until after the September 1947 International Democratic Youth conference. This information indicates that Runglert would have started working in the Comptroller General's Department in the latter part of 1947, when he was in his first year as a university student. This would also mean that he left government service in the latter part of 1950, three years later. There is a difference of about six months in the recollections of the two men regarding when Runglert began working in the finance ministry, but given that they were recalling events of over half a century earlier, the difference is not great, and we can say that Nuon Chea, as Runglert Laodi, started working as an official in the Thai government some time between the end of 1947 and the first third of 1948.

## 7. The Recollections of Udom Charoenrat

In his interview, Nuon Chea had mentioned the name of a Thai communist party member named Udom, who was working with him in the same office of the finance ministry's Comptroller General's Department, and who was together with him in the same cell after Nuon had joined the party. Earlier in this article the author explained how he surmised this person was Udom Charoenrat, and how among the former party members named by Nuon Chea, Udom was the first to be interviewed.

As the interview began, Udom expressed how surprised he was to learn that Runglert was still living. After Democratic Kampchea had been established in April of 1975, he said he had thought about Runglert, and that he had asked Phin Buaoon [1931–1999], a central figure in the Thai communist party, if he had any news about Runglert. Phin told Udom he had heard that Runglert had fallen from a horse in the jungle and had died a long time ago. Phin's answer, Udom told the author, showed that even the central leaders of the Thai communist party had no realization at all that Runglert Laodi was Nuon Chea.

Speaking about his impressions of Runglert, Udom remembered that unlike ordinary Khmers who were dark complexioned, Runglert because of his Chinese ancestry was white. His manner was gentle and polite; he was not the type who bragged about his strength or showed off how manly he was. He had lived in a temple for a long time, therefore he was not the kind of person who would kill people. Were he to meet Runglert again, Udom said he wanted ask him why the Khmer Rouge had carried out such a genocide.

When this author queried Udom about Nuon Chea's comment that he (Runglert) joined the Thai communist party in 2493 (1950), Udom replied: "That's right. Runglert's memory is good, isn't it." Udom thus confirmed the date that Nuon Chea joined the party.

Turning to his own history, Udom said he was born to a peasant family in Ubon province on 1 April 1929. After completion of his sixth year at the local middle school, he graduated and enrolled in Thammasat University's preparatory course in the eighth

graduating class.<sup>62</sup> He said his older brother had also studied at Thammasat, and that his younger sister's husband was a diplomat in the Thai foreign service. After graduating from the preparatory course, he enrolled in Thammasat University [on 8 July 1948<sup>63</sup>]. Around the time of Pridi's attempted coup d'état on 26 February 1949 and while still studying at university, Udom got a job as a *samian*, the lowest-level government clerk, in the Bureau of Accounts (*Kong Thanathikan*) in the Comptroller General's Department of the Ministry of Finance. Here Udom pointed out that the position of *samian* was a regular government position staffed by people who had been hired as government officials, and the Bureau of Accounts had the important responsibility of managing the revenues and expenditures of the national budget.<sup>64</sup> When Udom started work in the office, Runglert was already there working as a *samian*. They worked together in the same office for about a year until Runglert left and moved to the foreign ministry. Udom verified Nuon Chea's statement that the two of them along with a third official working in the same office composed a three-man cell.<sup>65</sup> Udom said he had invited Runglert to join the party in 1950 while the two were still working in the Comptroller General's Department. He himself was the head of the cell (*huana nuai*) while Runglert was a cell member (*luk nuai*). The third member was older, Udom surmising that now (2003) he would be around 80 years old. He wanted to preserve that person's anonymity, only saying that it was not Somkhwan Phichaikul. Although Somkhwan was also working in the Comptroller General's Department, he was in a different cell. Later he became the Thai headmaster of a Chinese school. Another Thammasat University student working in the Comptroller General's Department was Samphat Phungpradit,<sup>66</sup> who would later become a Thai communist party member, ultimately serving on the party's central committee.

Udom mentioned how after passing the examination for the foreign ministry and taking up employment there, Runglert left that job only about one month later and went back to Cambodia.

Udom also said that Runglert had told him about a Khmer relative in Surin province who was active in the Khmer Isarak, then adding that he himself had lived for around six months with a Vietnamese who was in charge of all Cambodian communist activism. He could not recall the person's name, but he thought that if he could meet and talk with Runglert about the person, he (Runglert) would immediately know who he was. Runglert was in contact with that head of Cambodian communist activities via a relative living in Cambodia. This head was in contact with the Vietnamese communists. Udom thought that it was through his association with this head that Runglert rose up through the communist organization. He noted that while living in Thailand until 1950, Runglert's understanding of communist theory remained low. Among Thai communist party members in general, knowledge of communist theory was low. There was Prasoet Sapsunthon's book, *A View of Life*, but this book was meant to agitate and was not a theoretical work. To acquire a higher understanding of theory, party members were sent to study in China. So there was no way that Runglert could have acquired in Thailand a high level of understanding about communist theory. Thus Udom surmised that Runglert had received training in Vietnam to improve the level of his theoretical knowledge.

Some time after Runglert had gone back to Cambodia, Udom said he was sent to

China.<sup>67</sup> After returning to Thailand in 1957, his views changed from those of the Thai communist party, so he left the party.<sup>68</sup> He reentered Thammasat University and graduated in 1964.

### 8. Nuon Chea as Seen from the Thammasat University Student Records

Runglert Laodi entered the seventh graduating class of the preparatory course at Thammasat University during the first half of 1944. By this date wartime conditions had worsened considerably. The Allies were intensifying their air raids on Bangkok. At this time too, the Free Thai movement began stepping up its anti-Japanese activities. These developments affected the university's operations. According to Udom Charoenrat, who had been in the eighth graduating class of the preparatory course, the seventh graduating class had regular classes for only about one month. Commenting in the same vein, the funerary volume of Pramuan Saphawasu (1927–2002), a former finance minister and a student along with Runglert in the seventh graduating class, wrote that Pramuan “had entered the seventh graduating class of Thammasat University's preparatory course; but the severity of the war increased, and the school was closed, leaving students with no other recourse than studying via postal correspondence.”<sup>69</sup>

Nevertheless, in the following year, 1945, the students of the preparatory course seventh graduating class were able to advance to their second year. The “Thammasat University Preparatory Course, Seventh Graduating Class Name List—Second Year (1945–1946)”, held in the university archives, shows that the students were divided into 24 classes, and the name Runglert Laodi was at the top of the list of Class 9 (*Hong* 9).<sup>70</sup>

When the author mentioned this point to Udom, he commented, “Well then, Runglert's grades were on the good side.” Students in Thammasat's preparatory course were divided into classes starting with Class 1 (*Hong* 1) and continuing numerically downward. The smaller the class number, the higher the grades of the students in the class.

After completing Thammasat's preparatory course in the first half of 1946, Runglert enrolled in the university to study law. A check in the university archives of the “Thammasat University Bachelor's Course Name List: Nos. 15026–20000” shows that he enrolled on 1 May 1946, student no. 19770. His enrollment record also noted that he was born on 7 July 1926; his age at enrollment was 19; his Bangkok address was No. 69, Dusit District;<sup>71</sup> his father's name was Prasert, mother's name was Somboon, and his guardian was Khun Phisansangkakit.<sup>72</sup>

The university archives also contained the records of Runglert's grade results. He had enrolled just two months prior to his 20th birthday, and according to Udom Charoenrat and Prachuap Amphasawet, it was possible at that time to graduate from Thammasat in as little as three years; however, the courses that a student had to pass each year were determined by the university, and a student could not move up to the next year until he had passed all of the required courses of the preceding year. The two men noted there were students who had been at the university for three years but still had not passed all of their freshman courses. They also pointed out that the number of credits per course differed depending on the course. For example, an important course like Constitutional Law was worth 30 credits, whereas a lesser course, such as Elections, was only 10 credits. For each examination that a student took, he had to pay an

examination fee. This was the university's sole income, which in effect made the fee a kind of tuition payment. The fee was higher for important courses than for less important ones. After passing all the course examinations, an interview exam was administered before a student could graduate.

During his first year at Thammasat, Runglert was required to take the following seven courses: Fundamental Knowledge, Natural Persons and Legal Persons, Criminal Law 1, Constitutional Law, Elections, Court Organization Law, and Real Rights. In October of 1946 he took his first exams. According to the records of the university's "Examinations of 1 October 1946: Results of the Written and Oral Examinations for First-Year Bachelor Course Students", Runglert took all seven of his course exams but only passed two of them: Criminal Law 1 and Court Organization Law.<sup>73</sup> The author's check of the exam results recorded for the other students showed that although there were some who passed as many as six out of their seven courses, these were exceptions. Most of the students passed only two or three of their courses, meaning that Runglert's results were the usual. In the exams that took place in January 1947, he took those for the five courses he had failed, but could pass only two: Natural Persons and Legal Persons and Elections.<sup>74</sup>

One year later in the exams of January 1948, Runglert took exams for the three remaining courses, passing two of them: Fundamental Knowledge and Constitutional Law.<sup>75</sup> The last remaining required course of his freshman year, Real Rights, he was able to pass in the exams of October 1948.<sup>76</sup> From the time he had enrolled in Thammasat on 1 May 1946, it had taken Runglert two and a half years to pass all seven of his required first-year courses. He had spent all of 1947 and three-quarters of 1948 slowly accumulating the freshman course credits he had failed to acquire during 1946.

When the author showed these grade results to Udom, his thought was that Runglert had been involved in political activities and working as a government official, and therefore had had little time to study. Had he had time to study regularly, Udom felt that he could have passed his exams much more quickly. As discussed earlier, 1947 was the year that Runglert joined the Thai Youth Organization led by Ruam Wongphan; then later that year, or in the first part of 1948, he began working at the Comptroller General's Department in the Ministry of Finance, indicating that much of Runglert's time was taken up by activities that reduced his study time. There was also the point mentioned in Nuon Chea's interview that his reading of *Mahachon* caused him to have doubts about why he was studying at Thammasat. Thus in 1947 and 1948 it would seem that Runglert was not in an environment nor frame of mind to devote himself to his studies.

However, from the time he became a second-year student at the end of 1948 until the start of 1950, he suddenly became serious about his studies. His required sophomore courses were: Judicial Action and Debts, Collateral, Commercial Trading, Renting and Leasing, Borrowing, Proxies and Agencies, Criminal Law 2, and Administrative Law. In January 1950, a year and three months after passing the last of his required freshman courses in October 1948, Runglert took exams for all eight of his required sophomore courses and passed seven of them, the only exception being Commercial Trading.<sup>77</sup> This would indicate that up to the beginning of 1950, Runglert still had a strong desire to graduate from Thammasat University. Most of the courses he had been required to

study were legal and specialized ones about capitalist society, and although he had been slow to pass all of his first-year courses, by the beginning of 1950 he had successfully passed all but one of his second-year courses. In 1950 he took and passed the employment test for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, then left the finance ministry's Comptroller General's Department and moved over to work at the foreign ministry. During 1950 Runglert turned 24 years old. In the early part of that year it would seem that one career choice he was contemplating was that of graduating from a Thai university and becoming a Thai government official, perhaps with a vision of one day becoming a high-ranking bureaucrat. But 1950 was also the year he joined the Thai communist party, and though this would not have necessarily conflicted with his position as a low-level government official (Somkhwan Phichaikul and Udom Charoenrat, among others, were also party members who worked as low-level government officials), joining the party indicated that Runglert still felt conflicted about the inequities in society and the idea that a career in government was contributing to the inequities, for which it seemed the communist party and its ideology provided an antidote. As things turned out, becoming a party member would also bring the opportunity to follow a different life career, that of an activist in the struggle to liberate Indochina, and Cambodia in particular, which was the one he chose to take. This contrasted with two of Runglert's student contemporaries, Nikhom Chanthorawithun and Suthi Natworathat, mentioned earlier in this study, who had also been attracted to leftwing movements, and like Runglert became involved in the Thai Youth Organization. Also like Runglert, they passed the employment test and become government officials. But neither of them took the step of joining the Thai communist party. They both stayed with their government careers and later went on to be high-ranking bureaucrats, Nikhom becoming labor department director in the Ministry of Interior and Suthi becoming director of the international trade department in the Ministry of Commerce.

At the start of 1950, Runglert had only one more required course to pass, and he would have completed his sophomore year of Bachelor-course studies at Thammasat. If he had made the same level of effort as he had displayed during the previous year, there was the possibility that during the next year or so he could have completed the required courses for his junior year at Thammasat and have earned enough credits to qualify for graduation from university. But sometime in 1950, when this outcome was a real possibility, Runglert suddenly discarded both the continuation of his studies at Thammasat University and his position as a government official in the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs for which he had expressly taken the employment test and where he had just begun working.

Examinations were held in October 1950, but it is not known if Runglert took his exam for Commercial Trading, the one remaining course in his second year, because it seems the documents pertinent to those exams have been lost or were not kept by the university archives. The name lists of the second-year and third-year students who took exams in January 1951 are available, but Runglert Laodi's name does not appear on them.<sup>78</sup>

## 9. Why Did Runglert Leave Thailand?

Runglert Laodi was enrolled in Thammasat University for over four years, during which he had completed all of his required freshman courses and was close to completing all of those for his sophomore year. It was possible at that time for a student to graduate from Thammasat on the completion of his junior year. Thus had Runglert continued to study with the same determination he had displayed in the previous year, there was the possibility that he could have graduated in a little over another year. But he did not graduate from university; he also left his job at the Thai foreign ministry after working for only one month, and in the latter half of 1950 he suddenly disappeared from Bangkok. He had Thai citizenship. Over the eight years that he lived in Bangkok, nothing changed between him and his Thai middle school and university contemporaries who had grown up in the countryside. He had succeeded in getting on the track toward becoming a member of the Thai elite. At least for a time it seems he had envisioned himself and his future as part of Thai society. But in the latter half of 1950 at age 24, Runglert Laodi (the future Nuon Chea) traveled back to his homeland to take part in the struggle for Cambodia's liberation.

In the introduction of this study this author commented on the newspaper article by the Thai journalist, Nusara Thaitawat, in which she reported her interview with Nuon Chea and which was carried in the 18 April 2006 edition of the *Bangkok Post*. He criticized her for neglecting to crosscheck and verify Nuon's remarks against other documentation, and for simply reporting the errors in his reminiscence of events long ago as though they were the real facts. Nusara even made her own conjecture of Nuon Chea's reason for leaving Thailand and returning to Cambodia, irrespective of the facts and Nuon's own words. According to her explanation, Nuon passed the employment test for the foreign ministry in 1947, but the position he was given in that ministry was the same low-level clerical position that he had held before in the finance ministry. The foreign ministry did not give him a professional position like it gave to people who were genuine Thais. Upset by this unfair treatment, one month after starting work he quit and joined a newly formed youth movement and later the Thai communist party. Nusara then went on to speculate that perhaps the discriminatory treatment he had suffered was a cause for Runglert's decision to return to Cambodia in 1950.<sup>79</sup>

The year that Nusara gave for Runglert's entry into the foreign ministry was three years off the actual one, and equally fallacious was her explanation for his departure from the foreign ministry and from Thailand, which is clearly evident from a reading of the Civil Service Regulatory Law of 1942<sup>80</sup> that was still in effect in 1950. This law stated that the first requirement for eligibility to take the employment test for regular government service was the possession of Thai citizenship (Article 31). Regular government service employment was divided into five grades starting from Grade 4 at the lowest level then rising through Grade 3, Grade 2, Grade 1, with Special Grade at the highest level (Article 7). Work positions were classified into seven types starting from ordinary clerk (*samian*) at the bottom, then rising through chief clerk, section chief, bureau chief, division head, department director, and finally administrative vice-minister (Article 8). An ordinary clerk was a Grade 4 official; a chief clerk was Grade 4 above rank 11 or Grade 3, a section chief was Grade 3 or Grade 2, and a bureau chief was a Grade 2 or Grade 1 official (Article 25). Qualification to take the test for Grade 4 ranks



1–3 was graduation from middle school; for Grade 4 rank 7, it was graduation from the university preparatory course; for Grade 3, qualification was graduation from university or working for more than five years in Grade 4 rank 6 or higher (Article 35).

From the above stipulations for employment as a regular national government official, a person studying in Thammasat University who had Thai citizenship and had graduated from the university preparatory course was qualified to take the employment test for an official at the level of Grade 4 rank 7. If he passed the test, he could only be assigned to the position of an ordinary clerk. If his academic qualifications remained unchanged and he worked in his job for at least five years, or if he graduated from Thammasat University and received his degree, then he could take the test for employment as a Grade 3 official. If he passed the test, he would be assigned at least to the position of chief clerk, one position higher than ordinary clerk (*samian*).

Given these stipulations and the fact that in 1950 Runglert still had not graduated from university and had worked for only three years in his clerk position (and would need two more to reach five years), he could not qualify for a position higher than clerk no matter in which government office he might have sought employment. It would have been exactly the same for “genuine Thai people” like Udom Charoenrat and Somkhwan Phichaikul. It was not the discrimination of the foreign ministry because he was not a genuine Thai that relegated Runglert to the position of ordinary clerk. He had Thai citizenship, something he possessed even before he came to Bangkok, and thus was able to take the test and gain employment as a government official. Thailand’s citizenry is made up of diverse ethnic groups, and it is hard to believe that when hiring people having Thai citizenship, government offices would normally make differences in ethnicity a reason for job discrimination. Connections and personal relations would, of course, have been influential, but given Runglert’s academic qualifications at the time and the number of years he had worked as a government official, under the regulations set forth in the law, he could not have hoped for a position higher than that of clerk. Surely this was clear to Runglert himself as a student studying law at the university.

So why did Runglert turn away from the career that could have led to a life in the Thai elite? Why did he choose one of hardship by returning to his homeland of Cambodia? It was not because of unhappiness over discrimination against him in his government job. It was because he had ethical qualms about pursuing that career, qualms that made him susceptible to the ideals of communism and led him to join the Thai communist party. Coupled with this was a fervent patriotism for his home country. Thus when his communist party connection offered the opportunity to return and join in the struggle for Cambodia’s liberation, he accepted it.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Little is known about the biography of Nuon Chea, especially about his formative, youthful years in Bangkok, and much of the little that is known is incorrect. This study has sought to provide a far more accurate and detailed look at the background of this man between the years 1942 when he arrived in Bangkok as a 16-year old middle school student, and 1950 when he left his studies and his work and headed back to Cambodia as a 24-year old communist activist. To this end, the author met and conducted an interview with Nuon Chea, then crosschecked and compared the information from this interview with that from interviews with people who were active with him during the

late 1940s, notably Sanoh Phanitcharoen, Somkhwan Phichaikul and Udom Charoenrat, former members of the Communist Party of Thailand. The author also evaluated the information from these interviews against other relevant materials, particularly the primary-source student records maintained by Matayom Benjamabopit School, Thammasat University and the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The facts about the young Nuon Chea gleaned from the above sources have been laid out in this study and can be summarized as follows. He was born on 7 July 1926 in Battambang city in western Cambodia. When this part of Cambodia was reincorporated into Thailand in 1941, Nuon automatically became a Thai citizen. The next year he traveled to Bangkok where he came under the care of three monks living at Wat Benjamabopit who were compatriots from Battambang. There he lived with the monks and enrolled in the government middle school on the temple premises using the Thai name of Runglert (Rungloet) Laodi. He studied at Wat Benjamabopit School for the two academic years of 1942 and 1943, graduating from middle school in the first half of 1944. He immediately went on to the two-year preparatory course at Thammasat University, enrolling in the seventh graduating class. He did well in his studies, graduating in early 1946 with good grades. He went on directly to Thammasat University, enrolling on 1 May 1946.

It was possible at that time to graduate from Thammasat in three years, but Runglert took until October 1948, two and a half years after enrolling, to pass all seven of his freshman-year required courses. This slow pace could be attributed to a lack of study time because of his participation in the Thai Youth Organization, a communist-influenced group that he joined in 1947 on the invitation of Ruam Wongphan, then a Thammasat student and member of the Thai communist party. In addition to this activity, Nuon also took a job as a regular government official in late 1947 or early 1948, working as a clerk in the Bureau of Accounts of the Comptroller General's Department in the Thai finance ministry. As a student, his reading of *Mahachon*, the Thai communist party organ published openly from October 1945, and his involvement in the communist-influenced Thai Youth Organization from 1947 were his first experiences in political activism. Among the close friends he came to know in the Thai Youth Organization and in his workplace were people who were already members of the Thai communist party, but he remained on the periphery of the party for four years, not joining until 1950.

In January 1950, only a year and three months after having completed all of his freshman courses in October of 1948, Runglert took the exams for all eight of his required sophomore courses and passed seven of them, failing only Commercial Trading. This was in sharp contrast to the slow two and a half years he had needed to complete his freshman studies. His courses at Thammasat had for the most part been specialized ones concerned with the laws of capitalist society. Also in 1950 he joined the Thai communist party at the invitation of Udom Charoenrat, a party member who like Runglert was a Thammasat student and also working in the Bureau of Accounts of the Comptroller General's Department. Runglert was in a three-member workplace cell headed by Udom. Later in that same year he took the employment test for the Thai foreign ministry, passed it, and left his job at the finance ministry. But a mere month after starting work at the foreign ministry, he quit; he also gave up his studies at

Thammasat University, apparently never completing his sophomore year with only one more course to finish, and he transferred his membership from the Thai to the Indochina communist party in order to return home and join the anti-French struggle in Cambodia.

Along with examining the youthful Runglert Laodi and his life in Bangkok, this study has also endeavored to shed more light on the Communist Party of Thailand and the people who were involved in the party and with Runglert. A number of these people were examined in this study, and they can be divided into two categories: party members who were of Chinese ancestry and those who were Thais and highly educated. Party members of the first category that were taken up in this study were (Thai name followed by their Chinese name): Wirot Amphai (Huang Jun Yu, 黃君玉), Wirat Angkhathawon (Hong Shu Cong, 洪書從)<sup>81</sup>, Udom Sisuwan (family name: Shi, 史)<sup>82</sup>, Song Nophakhun (Yu Song, 余松), Damri Ruangsutham (Wu Wei Shi, 吳維實), Nit Phongdapphet (Wu Qin Ying, 伍勤英)<sup>83</sup>. Party members of the second category were: Prasoet Sapsunthon, Ruam Wongphan, Charoen Wangam, Sanoh Phanitcharoen, Somkhwan Pichaiikul and Udom Charoenrat.

Members of the first category were Thailand-born children of Chinese immigrant fathers or parents; they received an elementary and/or middle school education in Chinese-language schools in Bangkok; at these schools they came under the influence of Chinese teachers who were members of the Communist Party of Siam (as the party was named until the end of the 1930s); and they became active in the communist party from the late 1930s. Members of the second category were not very different in age from the first category; but they had grown up in rural Thailand, received a middle school or higher education in Bangkok; following the end of the war in 1945, they were influenced by people of the first category which led them to join the communist party; and they were the first generation of highly educated Thais to become members of the Communist Party of Thailand. A communist movement had begun functioning in Thailand from the end of the 1920s, and the Communist Party of Siam was established in 1930, then reorganized as the Thai communist party at the party's first congress held in Bangkok in December 1942. But its membership was filled almost entirely by Chinese (either residents of Thailand or from China) and Vietnamese (who had left Indochina and taken up residence in Thailand)<sup>84</sup>. The party considered it important to bring in educated Thais who could become party leaders, but such leadership did not appear until after the Second World War.

Runglert was a Khmer, but he was not a separate third ethnic category that became involved with the Thai communist party. He belonged very much to the second category of people. He had grown up under the influence of Theravada Buddhism, and when he came to Bangkok, he lived in a temple with the monks while doing his middle school and higher education. This was exactly the same as the Thai students who were raised in the countryside and came to Bangkok to further their education. He had a Thai name and Thai citizenship, and after entering Thammasat University, he worked as a regular government official in the finance ministry and then the foreign ministry just as any other Thai student at Thammasat (including communist party members) could do if they passed the government employment test. It was as a Thai that he became active in the Thai Youth Organization and later became a communist. Thus it

is totally correct to regard him as part of the first generation of educated Thais who joined the Communist Party of Thailand. At the same time however, Runglert also maintained an ardent love for his Cambodian homeland, and in this he differed from his fellow students, government office colleagues and communist party comrades; and because of this, in 1950 at the age of 24, Runglert Laodi set off on a different career that took him back to Cambodia and ultimately, as Nuon Chea, into the top ranks of the Khmer Rouge. Little or nothing about Nuon Chea's Thailand times explain his radical and murderous policy choices when the Khmer Rouge were in power. These choices must have other roots, such as Nuon's experiences while in Vietnam or after his return to Cambodia in 1955.

**Footnotes:**

1. David P. Chandler (1999), *Brother Number One: A Political Biography of Pol Pot* (Revised Edition), Westview Press, Boulder, Colo., p. 54.
2. Ben Kiernan (2004), *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Communism in Cambodia, 1930-1975* (Second Edition), Yale University Press, New Haven, p. 59.
3. Somsak Jeamteerasakul, "The Communist Movement in Thailand", A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Monash University, 1991 (revised 1993), p. 237.
4. [www.ahrchk.net/news/mainfile.php/ahrnews\\_200106/1022/](http://www.ahrchk.net/news/mainfile.php/ahrnews_200106/1022/)
5. The author has chosen one common way to render Runglert's name in the Roman alphabet. Another common way is Rungloet.
6. See: [www.dccam.org/Archives/Documents/Biography/Nuon\\_Chea\\_Chronology\\_Final.pdf](http://www.dccam.org/Archives/Documents/Biography/Nuon_Chea_Chronology_Final.pdf)
7. Nusara Thaitawat's "Nuon Chea in brief", dated 17 April 2006 and available in the Documentation Center of Cambodia (see note 6 above for source), and her 18 April 2006 article in the Bangkok Post contain far more than a few errors. Both documents state that Nuon Chea, then named Runglert Laodi, enrolled in Thammasat University in 1944, and soon thereafter joined the Thai Youth for Democracy Movement that was under the Community (sic. Communist) Party of Thailand. In 1944 Runglert did not enroll in Thammasat University, but in the university's two-year preparatory course, as this study will make clear. Nuon Chea told both this author and Nusara that he had become involved in the Youth for Democracy Movement in 1944, but as this study will show, the correct year is 1947. Nusara states that in 1945 Runglert quit Thammasat to work in the Comptroller General's Department in the Thai Ministry of Finance. But in fact he was still studying in the preparatory course in that year and was not even enrolled in the university. As this study will show, after entering Thammasat University, Runglert never quit; he continued his studies right up until he left for Cambodia in 1950. He did not begin working in the finance ministry in 1945; he began around late 1947 after he had entered university. Nusara goes on to write that Runglert spent one season as a monk at Wat Samrong in Chachoengsao province after which he came back to Bangkok and started working at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. However, according to her, Runglert was denied a higher position and given the same kind of low-level clerical job that he had done when working in the Ministry of Finance, therefore after only one month, he quit and became involved in pro-democracy youth activities and then the Thai communist party. This information is almost totally wrong, as this study will show. Records in the foreign ministry show that Runglert did not work there in 1947, but in 1950. Nusara's speculation that Runglert quit the foreign ministry because he was upset about the low-level position he was given is completely erroneous, again as this study will show. A person employed in government service as a regular official while still doing his studies in university, and thus not yet graduated, could only hold a job as an ordinary clerk. The same was true for Runglert's Thai colleagues who will be taken up in this study. The claim that Runglert then joined the communist party in 1947 is also wrong; he joined in 1950. In her Bangkok Post article, Nusara was angered by what she said was Thammasat University's failure to cooperate with the Cambodia Genocide inquest people and show them Nuon Chea's student records. In fact however, if one knew Nuon Chea's Thai name, it was really quite easy to

check for his records in the university's archives, as was the case for this author.

8. The author was accompanied by Ourn Pheakiny, a Cambodian student then in her second year of M.A. studies at Waseda University's Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies (and through whom the author was able to get in contact with Nuon Chea); Yoko Kikuchi, a full-time lecturer at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies; and Tomomi Ito, a full-time lecturer at Kobe University.
9. Bracketed information in this interview synopsis and in those that follow has been added by the author.
10. meaning Pure Brightness, a day around April 5th or 6th when people pay respects to their ancestors at their family tombs.
11. In 2480 (1937/38) Thailand introduced a six-year middle-school system followed by a two-year university preparatory course. Previously there had been an eight-year middle-school system (with graduation from the eighth year known as *mathayom boribun* [middle school completion]) with no university preparatory course. This system was abolished in 2481 (National Archives of Thailand, Ko. To. 43.24/118). The first graduating class of Thammasat's preparatory course entered in 2481 (1938/39), Runglert Laodi's seventh graduating class in 2487 (1944).
12. Beginning as an underground Thai communist party publication in July 1942, *Mahachon* started to be published above ground on a weekly basis from its 25 October 1945 issue.
13. 1921–7 October 1993, grew up in Kokha district, Lampang province; a Thailand-born Chinese of Hainanese ancestry. Based on the author's interview of Udom Sisuwan (in Bangkok, 25 December 1992) and on his commemorative funerary volume (*Nangsu anpen anuson khamnungthung Udom Sisuwan nuangnai ganchapanakitsop*, 4 December 1993), the following is a brief biography of the man. Born in 1921, in 1937 at age 16 he graduated from the fourth year of middle school at Kenneth Mackenzie School, an American mission school in Lampang. He then traveled through Laos to Haiphong city in northern French Indochina where he worked as an automobile repairman and driver. There he became acquainted with some Chinese in an anti-Japanese group. He changed jobs and became a nurse, and it was while administering inoculation shots that he was introduced to a member of the Chinese Communist Party who in turn introduced him to the Chinese Red Cross, whereupon Udom moved to China. (The funerary volume commented that Udom worked as a nurse for the Guomindang Army in Hunan province.) He was in China from 1939 to 1945. In 1940 the CCP sent him to Yan'an as an English-language interpreter for the Americans there. While in Yan'an he also studied liberal arts along with political economy. (The funerary volume said that Udom went to Yan'an in order to study political economy and liberal arts; in 1944 he worked in the external affairs section of the CCP government in western Shanxi province and was assigned to assist American intelligence agents in interrogating Japanese prisoners of war; then in early 1945 he was a member of a unit that infiltrated behind enemy lines to rescue B29 bomber crews shot down by the Japanese.) But there is also information about Udom that does not agree with what he told the author in his interview and what is reported in his funerary volume, which raises doubts about the veracity of Udom's story. For example, Sanoh Phanitcharoen told the author in an interview (in Bangkok, 26 May 2005) that Udom had once told him that he (Udom) had been involved in communist activities in Bangkok before the war. There is also the information from Damri Ruangsutham, who told the author in an interview (in Bangkok, 13 July 2005) that Udom had studied at the Huang Hun (黃魂) Chinese School in Bangkok. These comments indicate that around 1938, before going off to China, Udom was in Bangkok where he had some schooling and was involved in communist party activities. At this time, too, there was a poem that appeared in a Bangkok Chinese-language newspaper written by someone using the penname Gao Han (高漢). The poem, "To My Mother", appeared in the 12 October 1938 issue of the *Zhonghua Minbao* (中華民國報) newspaper, and in it Gao Han told his mother of his determination to go back to the ancestral homeland and join in the anti-Japanese war. The next year, the 8 May 1939 issue of the Bangkok newspaper *Huaqiao Ribao* (華僑日報) carried an account written by Gao Han of his travels from Bangkok to Kunming, China. Udom went by the name Gao Han while he was in Yan'an undergoing communist leadership training. The content of the poems plus the penname used indicate that they were written by Udom, and very likely he was in Bangkok at the time intending to go to China. He then went to China and later sent back the account of his travels that was published in May 1939. After the war, following his leadership training, Udom returned to Thailand, and it would seem that he immediately became one of the central figures in the Thai communist party, another indication that for a time prior to the war and going to China, he



- had been active in Bangkok in the party.
14. Thai Youth Organization is the English rendering of Ongkarn Yawachon Thai, the standard Thai term for this organization; but in his interview, Nuon Chea also used the term Ongkarn Yawachon Prachathipathai Thai, meaning the Thai Democratic Youth Organization. In this study the English rendering of the standard term is used.
  15. 31 March 1927–5 October 2000, her Chinese name was Wu Qin Ying (伍勤英). Born in Bangkok, Nit attended the Guang Zhao (廣肇) Chinese School, graduating in 1937 and enrolling in the Zhonghua Zhongxue (中華中學) High School. In August 1939 this school was closed down by the Thai government ending her education (*Special Publication by the Alumni Association of the Chinese Middle Schools in Thailand* [Taiguo zhonghua zhongxue xiaoyouhui tekan, 泰國中華中學校友會特刊], 1993, Bangkok, pp.238–239). She became active in the Thai communist party before the war in Khorat under Song Nophakhun (from interview with Damri Runagsutham in Bangkok, 14 August 2004). During the war she was active in the anti-Japanese movement; in the early 1950s she went to China, and from 1959 she worked for the Radio Beijing International (*Commemorative funerary volume for Nit Phongdapphet* [in Thai], 2000, Bangkok, p. 1).
  16. Nuon Chea was mistaken in citing Udom Sisuwan as the author of this book. It was written under the name Pho.Na Sukhothai, one of the pennames used by Praphan Wirasak (see endnote 49), and published in 1950 by the Mahachon Publishing Company (Pho.Na Sukhothai (1950), *Thang Ook Khong Thai*, Samnakphim Mahachon, Bangkok, April 1950, 98 p).
  17. Sanoh Phanitcharoen translated the manifesto from English into Thai, and it was printed in December 1946 (*Nation Sut Sapda*, 6 December 2004, p. 31).
  18. Prasoet Sapsunthon (1949), *Chiwathat*, Rongphim Uthai, Bangkok , September 1949, 122 p.
  19. Prasoet Sapsunthon himself told this author (in an interview in Bangkok, 16 June 1981) that he wrote *Chiwathat* “because of the 8 November 1947 coup d’etat that overthrew the Pridi-supported government. Pridi headed the Free Thai movement, and the people that carried out the coup killed a large number of Free Thai politicians. But there was no direct effect on the communist party, and the party organ, *Mahachon*, continued to appear. The popularly elected House of Representatives was abolished, and I no longer was an member of that body, so I became one of the *Mahachon* staff. At that time we published *Chiwathat* serially in the *Mahachon*, then later assembled it and published it as a book. But it was only worthwhile reading this book for pleasure. It wasn’t important fundamentally, and it couldn’t be used as a textbook. When I wrote it, I didn’t have enough knowledge about Marxism. The content was limited only to a progressive form of liberalism.”
  20. Regarding Poc Khun, see Eiji Murashima, “Opposing French colonialism: Thailand and the Independence Movements in Indo-China in the Early 1940s”, *South East Asia Research*, vol. 13, no. 3, pp. 362–366.
  21. The primary function of this department was auditing the accounts of the national budget and the expenditures of the different central and provincial government bodies.
  22. Nuon Chea used the term *Khamen Daeng*, Thai for Khmer Rouge.
  23. *Thamniam To. Mo. Tho. Ko.*, Rongphim Mahawithayalai Thammasat, Bangkok, 1952, pp. 249–269.
  24. *Commemorative funerary volume for Ruam Wongphan (Anuson nuangnai ganchapanakitsop nai Ruam Wongphan*, 23 April 1995), Bangkok, p. 47 (in Thai).
  25. *Phuchatkan*, 30 March 1995.
  26. from interview with Somkhwan Phichaikul in Bangkok, 1 Apr. 2005.
  27. Thammasat University Archives, (1) Mo.Tho. 23.4.4/3, “Samutthabian Mahawithayalai, Thammasat Bandit, 15026–20000”, p. 315. However, in the commemorative funerary volume for Ruam Wongphan there is a copy of the photograph that Thammasat University provided to Ruam for its student records; clearly written on it is the enrollment registration date of 19 July 2487 (1944).
  28. Wirot was born into a family that ran a wholesale business in Tha Tian, Bangkok, known as the Amphai Store that sold goods to upcountry retailers. According to Damri Ruangsutham (in an interview, 13 July 2005), Wirot grew up in a wealthy family. His Chinese name was Huang Jun Yu (黃君玉). In October 1931 the Chinese Chamber of Commerce sponsored a speech contest in the Chinese and Siamese languages in which representatives of all the Chinese schools in Bangkok took part. The winner of the Siamese-language speech for the upper elementary school level was the representative from Huang Hun (黃魂) Chinese School, Huang Jun Yu (Zhonghua Minba (中華民國報), 20 October 1931,



The Young Nuon Chea in Bangkok (1942–1950) and the Communist Party of Thailand

- p. 18). In March 1936 after entering the newly opened Zhonghua Zhongxue (中華中學) High School, he took part in a strike at the school and was expelled (*Zhonghua Minbao* (中華民國報), 30 March 1936). The strike was carried out under the leadership of the Siamese communist party. Around 1940 he was a principal member in a cell composed of Thai nationals that had been organized by the Thai communist party, and he was drafted into the army at the time of the Thai-Indochina war (Damri interview, 13 July 2005). During the Pacific War he became the secretary general of the Grand Anti-Japanese League established on 23 December 1944. For a year and a half he took an evening journalism course at Chulalongkorn University until the course was closed because of the intensifying air raids as the war neared its end (Khana Naksuksa wichakan nangsuphim Chulalongkorn Mahawithayalai, *Wichakan nangsuphim Chulalongkorn Mahawithayalai* [*Journalism Course at Chulalongkorn University*], Chulalongkorn University, 1952, pp. 30, 32).
29. Born in June 1923, Chinese name Wu Wei Shi (吳維實), graduate of Chong Shi (崇實) Chinese School in Bangkok.
  30. Established in June 1946 by a Hainanese association; a leftist, Fu Kai Xian (符開先), was the headmaster (Editorial Committee of the Friendship Association of the Chinese Returned from Thailand (1997), *Heroic Record of Chinese Returned from Thailand, Vol. 4* [Taiguo guiqiao yinghunlu 4, 泰國歸僑聯誼會〈英魂錄〉編委會編『泰國歸僑英魂錄, 第4卷』], Zhongguo huaqiao chubanshe [中國華僑出版社], Beijing, p. 76 also *Phuchatkan*, 30 Mar. 1995).
  31. Interview with Damri Ruangsutham in Bangkok, 11 September 2004.
  32. *Zhenxua Bao* (真話報), no. 20, 8 December 1946.
  33. Interview with Pa Phung (Somphon Angkhathawon) in Bangkok, 5 June 2004.
  34. Commemorative funerary volume for Ruam Wongphan, 1995, p. 49 (in Thai).
  35. According to Damri Ruangsutham (in an interview in Bangkok, 29 August 2004), Charoen Wangam took part in the sabotaging of Japanese-run factories that was organized by Wirot Amphai at the very end of the war. But his entry into the Thai communist party came about at the time *Mahachon*, the party organ, began appearing openly [from the 25 October 1945 issue]. To register with the government, the newspaper had to have someone with an eighth-year middle school education or higher, and there were very few people in the party who satisfied that requirement. Charoen had the educational qualifications, so he was brought into the party and made a reporter for the paper. Concerning the friendship between Ruam Wongphan and Charoen, see *Phuchatkan*, 30 March 1995.
  36. *Quan Minbao* (全民報), 7, 8, 9 April 1947.
  37. *Nation sut Sapda*, no. 659, 17 January 2005, p. 33.
  38. 1892–1954, a labor movement leader and lawyer who joined the Thai communist party a little before Prasoet Sapsunthon did.
  39. Interview with Sanoh Phanitcharoen in Bangkok, 26 March 2005.
  40. The territories in Cambodia and Laos, including Battambang and Siemreap, that were returned to French Indochina in the “Franco-Siamese Agreement of Settlement” of 17 November 1946.
  41. For a time after the war, Thailand reverted to using the prewar name Siam, but only for international, English-speaking purposes. The Thais themselves continued to call the country Thailand. Being an English-language newspaper, the Bangkok Post referred to the Ongkarn Yawachon Thai as the Siamese Youth Organization.
  42. He left England on 14 April 1947 to return to Thailand (National Archives of Thailand, Ko.To. 43.10/290).
  43. Interview with Somkhwan Phichaikul in Bangkok, 1 April 2005.
  44. Prachuap Amphasawet, *Phlik phaendin ton khabuankan sangkhomniyom nai Thai* [Revolution: About the Socialist Movement in Thailand], Sukhaphapchai, Bangkok, pp. 27–30.
  45. Interview with Pa Phung in Bangkok, 5 June 2004. Born in 1929, Pa Phung said she joined the Thai communist party when she was 18 after a two-year candidacy period. At that time no communist party youth group existed. After entering the party, she belonged to the cell headed by Nit Phongdapphet.
  46. Commemorative funerary volume for Ruam Wongphan, 1995, pp. 30–33 (in Thai).
  47. *Phuchatkan*, 31 March 1995.
  48. In 2478 (1935/36), the year before Prasoet, the student council president had been Sanoh Tambunyun. After graduating from the Faculty of Arts and Science, Sanoh became a lecturer of mathematics in the

- same faculty and was sent to Trinity College at Cambridge University in 1937. He was the man who came back from England in 1947 with the intension of organizing a Democratic Youth movement in Thailand.
49. Praphan Wirasak (Phayap Angkhasing) (1900–1974) who used the pen name Pho.Na Sukhothai among others, and whose Chinese name was Zhu Sou Lin (朱叟林). A brief biography of Zhu Sou Lin is in Editorial Committee of the Encyclopedia of Chaozhou and Shantou (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Chaozhou and Shantou* [Chaoshan baike quanshu, 潮汕百科全書編輯委員會編著『潮汕百科全書』], Zhongguo dabaik-quanshu chubanshe [中国大百科全书出版社], Beijing, 1994, p. 749.
  50. whose Chinese name was Yu Song (余松). In June 1935 while a student at the famed Xin Min (新民) Chinese School in Bangkok, Song took part in a student strike. From 1943 to 1961 he was the secretary general of the Communist Party of Thailand (see Eiji Murashima, “The Thai-Japanese Alliance and the Overseas Chinese in Thailand” (in Chinese), *Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies*, no. 7, 2005, pp. 54–55).
  51. For a discussion of Prasoet and the influence of Buddhadasa on his thinking, see Tomomi Ito, “Discussions in the Buddhist Public Sphere in Twentieth-century Thailand: Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and His World” (a thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the Australian National University, 2001), pp. 224–230.
  52. see endnote no. 19 above.
  53. *Thamniap To.Mo.Tho.Ko. Run 1–8*, Borisat Suratkanphim, 1968, p. 230, which shows that Sanoh Phanicharoen was a student in the sixth graduating class (1943–1944) of Thammasat University’s preparatory course. Thammasat University registration records show that he enrolled in the university in 1947 (Thammasat University Archives, (1) Mo Tho. 23.4.3.1/1, Raichu phusamak khao chan parinyatri 1946–1949, p. 280).
  54. Also see Pho. Muangchomphu (Udom Sisuwan) (1987), *Su somoraphum phuphan* [To the Phuphan Mountains Battlefield], Matichon, Bangkok, pp. 43–44, which tells about Sanoh being sent away to China.
  55. Commenting on Nikhom Chanthorawithun’s activities during his student days, his funerary volume says, “Nikhom displayed the attributes of a youth having an interest in social and political issues. He was involved in student activism at Thammasat University, and his name at that time was well known among the students of the university” (*Anuson nai ganphrarachathan phlengsop sastrachan Nikhom Chanthrawithun* [Commemorative funerary volume for Professor Nikhom Chanthrawithun], S.B. Publishing, Nonthaburi, 2002, p. 17 [in Thai]).
  56. Born in April 1927, Thanin graduated from Suan Kulap School in 1942 and entered the fifth graduating class of the preparatory course at Thammasat University; he graduated with a B.A. from Thammasat in 1948, then a law degree from the University of London in 1953, became a British barrister in 1954, began working in the Thai Ministry of Justice in 1955 and rose to be a justice of the Supreme Court. Following the disturbances that broke out on 6 October 1976, he was appointed prime minister and gained notoriety for his reactionary suppression of leftist activists. Thanin is presently a member of the Privy Council to King Bhumibol.
  57. Charoen was elected secretary general of the Communist Party of Thailand in 1961 and remained in that position until his death in 1979.
  58. Other than going through the two-year preparatory course after the sixth year of middle school, a student could study at another school, as Ruam did, to gain qualification for entering Thammasat University.
  59. Thammasat University Archives, (1) Mo.Tho. 23.4.4/3.
  60. At that time anyone who met the academic qualifications could enroll in Thammasat University. Class attendance was not compulsory; if a student passed the exams that took place twice yearly and attained the required credits, he could graduate. Thus it was common for students to work while studying. At that time there were only limited jobs opportunities in the private sector that were suitable for highly educated people, and for the most part such people hoped to get jobs in the government where the work was socially respectable and the income was stable. Thus it was common for students at Thammasat University to take the government service employment test as required by the Civil Service Regulatory Law and work for the government while at the same time studying in university.
  61. Comment by Prasoet Sapsunthon who traveled with Ruam as mentioned earlier in this study. Speaking

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about the circumstances surrounding the dispatch of this group of party member to China, Damri Ruangsutham, who had been in the group, said (in an interview in Bangkok, 16 March 2005) that soon after Pridi's attempted coup on 26 February 1949, police assassinated four former cabinet ministers. The communist party felt itself in danger and quickly sent this first group of members off to China.

62. *Thamniap To.Mo.Tho.Ko. Run 1–8*, Borisat Suratkanphim, Bangkok, 1968, p. 297.
63. Thammasat's records show that his student number was 21962, and they confirm that his birth date was 1 April 1929, that he attended the preparatory course, and show that he enrolled in the university on 8 July 1948 (Thammasat University Archives, (1) Mo.Tho. 23.4.4/4, "Thabian Naksuksa Mahawithayalai", p. 219).
64. The Bureau of Accounts continued to operate until 10 February 1995 when it was abolished in a reorganization of the Comptroller General's Department (Thai Ministry of Finance Comptroller General's Department, *Annual Report for the Budget Year 1995* [in Thai], pp. 34–35).
65. Known in the Thai communist party as a *nuai phak* (cell), it was composed of three or more members and was the smallest and most basic unit of organization in the party. For underground activities in urban areas, these units were small-scale with three to eight members, but out in the jungle there were said to be units with close to 100 members (interview with Pa Phung in Bangkok, 5 June 2004).
66. Born in 1928 to a peasant family in Phitsanulok, Samphat studied with Runglert in the seventh graduating class of Thammasat's preparatory course, and they both entered the university in 1944. Samphat graduated in October 1951, the date that Runglert could have graduated had he continued his university studies. Arrested in November 1952, Samphat joined the Thai communist party following his release (interview with Samphat Phungpradit, 6 April 2000).
67. He was sent in 1951 with other party members who were the first group that the Thai communist party sent as students to the Marx-Lenin Institute in Beijing. There were upward to 47 people in the group that along with Udom Charoenrat included Phin Buaoon, Thong Chaemsri, Charoen Wangam, Phayom Chulanon, Asani Phonlachan, and Wirat Angkhathawon (Phuchatkan, 30 March 1995).
68. According to Lamchiak Songkharak, in the dispute that took place in Beijing in 1954 between Prasoeet and the Thai communist party mainstream, Udom remained neutral taking neither side.
69. *Anuson nai ganphrarachathan phlengsop Nai Pramuan Saphawasu* [Commemorative funerary Volume for Nai Pramuan Saphawasu], Bangkok, 2002, p. 3–7 (in Thai).
70. Thammasat University Archives (1)Mo.Tho. 23.3.1/4 "Raichu Nakrian triamparinya pithi 2 Run 7, 2488–2489", p. 297.
71. The present-day address of Wat Benjamabopit is 69 Rama V Road, Dusit District, indicating that the address recorded in the university record was that of Wat Benjamabopit.
72. Thammasat University Archives, (1) Mo.Tho. 23.4.4/3, "Samutthabian Mahawithayalai, Thammasat Bandit, 15026–20000", p. 527.
73. Thammasat University Archives, (1) Mo.Tho. 23.4.6.1/79, "Khanaen sop khokhian lae pakplao Naksuksa parinyatri chan pi thi 1, Tulakhom 2489".
74. Thammasat University Archives, (1) Mo.Tho. 23.4.6.1/85, "Prakat phonkansopkhian chan parinyatri pi thi 1, kansoplai samai pracham duan Mokarakhom 2490", p. 145.
75. Thammasat University Archives, (1) Mo.Tho. 23.4.6.1/97, "Prakat phonkansopkhian chan parinyatri pi thi 1, kansoplai samai pracham duan Mokarakhom 2491", p. 146.
76. Thammasat University Archives, (1) Mo.Tho. 23.4.6.1/103, "Prakat phonkansopkhian chan parinyatri pi thi 1, kansoplai samai pracham duan Tulakhom 2491", p. 138
77. Thammasat University Archives, (1) Mo.Tho. 23.4.6.1/122, "Prakat phonkansopkhian chan parinyatri pi thi 2, kansoplai samai pracham duan Mokarakhom 2493", p. 28.
78. Thammasat University Archives, (1) Mo.Tho. 23.4.6.1/134, 139.
79. In her 18 April 2006 *Bangkok Post* article, Nusara wrote: "Upon his return to Bangkok [from his stint as a priest in Chachoengsao], Nuon Chea took another civil service exam, this time to join the Foreign Ministry. He was assigned to the Indochina Desk but was denied a professional position. Instead, he was given the same level of clerical position he had held at the Finance Ministry with the same amount of salary of 24 baht per month. . . . But perhaps the denial of a professional position by the Foreign Ministry, which granted it to real Thais, sealed his political fate. In his mind, Nuon Chea was Thai but was not really Thai; he was not really equal, and didn't have the same rights as other Thais. This

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perhaps decided him on returning to Cambodia.”

80. *Nitisan phanaek krisadika*, vol. 15, no. 10 (October 1942), pp. 1054–1076.
81. While staying in Beijing, he used the name Zhang Yuan (張遠).
82. While staying in Yan’an, he used the name Gao Han (高漢).
83. All six of these people were elected to the Thai communist party’s central committee at the party’s second congress held in February 1952. The central committee had a total of 12 members.
84. See, Eiji Murashima (1996), *Kanmuang Chin Sayam* (Chino-Siamese Politics), Chinese Studies Center Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok (in Thai) and Chris Baker (2003), “An Internal History of the Communist Party of Thailand”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 33, No. 4, pp. 510–541.