

SUMMARY OF DOCTORAL THESIS

A Comparative Study of Khmer-Thai Perceptions through Historical Writings: Ideologies and Discourse

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Cambodia and Thailand are two neighbors in Southeast Asia that share many close cultural affinities, yet they remain mired in chronic antagonism and ‘love-hate’ relationship. The 2003 incident that culminated in the burning of the Thai Embassy in Phnom Penh and the recent border disputes concerning their sovereign rights over the Preah Vihear Temple, as well as the invocations of hostile political discourse of historical memories among the people, have recaptured our attention to the impacts of the ‘history problems’ and history education in these hereditary enemy states. But is history really the root cause and how does it affect the perceptions of the people in these countries? What are the major different perceptions, beliefs and opinions do the Cambodian and the Thai have as invoked by their divided memories? Why are the issues of historical perceptions between Cambodia and Thailand persisting?

There have been many comparative studies by post-modernist scholars on history of Cambodia-Thailand relations and the processes of historical reconstructions in these countries, but most of them tend to provide one-sided views of the others. This dissertation is a fresh attempt to deal with the above-mentioned problem by employing a large body of historical writings and the Multi-Perspective Method or Approach Croisée. By using this method, the study is aimed mainly to examine the debates over the authenticity that involve the constructions of the collective memories, portrayals and stereotypes, and how the politics of historical memories and history education has affected and transformed the two peoples’ perceptions. The debates touch upon three main areas including the conceptions of self, the stereotyped and enemy images, and the discourse of irredentism and nationalistic sentiments.

Through historical evidence conceptualized by comparative historical categories, this dissertation has proved that Khmer-Thai historical writings contain a large pool of discrepancies, distortions, ambiguities and traces indicating that the new past has been constructed in a way that induces divergent historical interpretations conveying hereditary enmity to each other. The study reveals that there are two main schools of thought adopted by the Cambodian and the Thai—one being the Originator and the other being the Contriver of the same root of national identities, the Angkor civilization. Within these conflicting schools of thought, various negative stereotypes are created and different enemy images have been painted over each other. These are reflected through their hostile discourses of race-ethnicity, irredentism, cultural ethnocentrism, and civilizational

ethno-chauvinism. This dissertation conducts discourse analyses of the core content of these images and proves that the ideologies derived from these images are of different political motives.

In addition to reviewing and assessing the national myth-making of conservative elites, this study suggests that the major cause of the century-long ‘love-hate’ relationship between the Cambodian and the Thai has been their own *identity anxiety*, the enduring fear of losing national identities, as their relations fell victim to the myths of nationalism when the new concept of space was employed and international law was enforced upon them by European colonizers. The transnational policies adopted by the French towards Cambodia and Thailand in the late 19th century to achieve their colonial purposes not only induced drastic changes in local cultures but also produced new historical traditions, the competing themes of which are bound by hostile myths and emotion-laden symbols.

These traditions have maintained their continuity and retained their popularity in both societies through politics of nationalistic populism played by both Khmer and Thai political leaders from the early 19th century and the post—World War II periods to achieve certain goals of their symbolic politics of chauvinist mobilization. The identity conflict has been caused mainly by the politicized interpretations of the nation’s past based on the existing discourse and the biased historical traditions. It has been institutionalized through biased school textbooks and textbook censorship and propagandized through various government propaganda tools.

This dissertation argues that the identity anxiety is primordial. It gradually emerged prior to the construction and manipulation of the hostile discourse to express its wills and power. The biased historical narratives that carry a huge body of hostile myths transferring emotion-laden symbols and negative stereotypes to the others were constructed by both the Siamese ruling elites and the French/the French-backed Cambodian rulers during the time of conflicts when their identity anxiety was already on the tipping point. In this sense, Khmer-Thai historical perceptions are virtually a product of historical reconstructions triggered by colonialism, reinforced by myths of nationalism, and ruled by identity anxiety.