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Expressions of Cambodia

The politics of tradition,
identity, and change

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and Tim Winter

and heavy machinery are involved in the "development" of the environs surrounding a number of historical sites; besides providing timber for use and export, logging makes land available for the introduction of casinos. In this respect, Anlong Veng is coming to increasingly resemble that last stronghold of FUNCINPEC, O-Smach, a mere 100 kilometers from Anlong Veng. Thus, while historical tourism was proposed as the economic engine of development in the former Khmer Rouge stronghold, trade in goods and women seems to have supplanted those ideals. If Anlong Veng proves to be a lesson in Cambodian development, it shows the government's full embrace of market mechanisms, even as these processes come to haphazardly shape (sites of) national identity construction.

Notes

- 1 Much of the information for this chapter comes from over two years of fieldwork, especially interviews, in Anlong Veng, which spanned 2002 to 2005.
- 2 Interviews with the author: Thong Phnom Penh, June 26, 2002; Chung Anlong Veng, January 15, 2004.
- 3 Conversations with informants in Anlong Veng confirmed that this pacing of battle persisted through the 1990s.
- 4 Interview with author: Chung Anlong Veng, June 12, 2004.
- 5 This totalizing approach finds parallels in the work of those attempting to sort through the evidence for genocide, exemplified by DC-Cam and explained in Cook (2002).
- 6 In fact, much of Chandler's text discusses the moderate similarities and vast differences between these two horrific historical episodes.
- 7 This "pimping" a history of suffering occurs within a period of condensation: Khmer Rouge tribunal efforts and preparations; the expansion of DC-Cam's funding, structure, activities, and publications; and a continued proliferation of publications dealing with the Khmer Rouge period.
- 8 It was perhaps less a concern for the content of "socialism" for the PRK elites than an interest in de-legitimizing Pol Pot clique links to the Khmer People's Revolutionary Party to which the CPP traces its political lineage.
- 9 A couple of local informants suggested that the idea to construct a museum in Anlong Veng preceded Hun Sen's dictate. According to these interviewees, the district chief, who is a former Khmer Rouge regiment commander, was to direct the organization of staff and the preparation of sites for the memorialization process. Some individuals who were to participate in the museum's construction have also expressed complimentary views of Pol Pot and Ta Mok rule.
- 10 Chhang, interview with author: Phnom Penh, August 19, 2002.
- 11 See for example Berger 2004; Crampton 2003; Falby 2003a; Wain 2002.
- 12 Interviews with author: Chung Anlong Veng, June 12, 2004 and January 15, 2004.
- 13 See for example ADB *et al.* 2004; Calavan *et al.* 2004; Currah 2002; De Lopez 2002; Lintner 2002: 104; Vickery 1992; World Bank 2004: 31–2, 97–8.

13 Khmer women and global factories

Annuska Derks

Since the mid-1990s, garment and shoe factories have multiplied in the outskirts of Phnom Penh and provided work to hundreds of thousands of people, most of them women. Though this phenomenon happened later than in other neighboring countries, Cambodian women have become part of the so-called "new" international division of labor by taking their place along an imagined "global assembly line." While such abstractions are often used to analyze structural consequences of global industry, they do not provide an understanding of how new work and urban experiences influence the lives of Cambodian women working in these "global factories." Caught in ambiguous and contradictory representations, Cambodian factory workers are considered at once to be dutiful daughters and loose women; a docile and industrious workforce as well as obstinate, lazy workers; a driving force behind national economic development and a threat to Khmer values and traditions. How do young women themselves make sense of these conflicting positions when they leave their villages to work in Phnom Penh? And what do they tell us about the changing nature of Cambodian society today? In this chapter, by focusing on rural women who have moved to Phnom Penh to work in the garment industry, I attempt to answer these questions and look at how they deal with various contradictory expectations and aspirations. In so doing, I pay particular attention to the story of one factory worker named Srey, to illustrate how these expectations and aspirations are reworked through urban employment, rural networks, and participation in "modern" consumption and activities. The dilemmas and contradictions that make up her story speak to the challenges that shape not only the lives of young Cambodian women, but also the whole of Cambodian society.¹

Global markets, local pursuits

I arrived in the city as an ignorant girl. I became a garment factory worker in order to earn money to support myself. [I have] a salary of 40 dollars a month, hardly enough for food and rent, yet not enough to return home. I have only my body left, no money to bring along.

In "The Weeping of the Garment Factory Worker," Hem Sivorn, a famous Khmer singer, intones about the grief of a young woman who came to work in a garment factory in Phnom Penh. Confronted with hard work, a low wage, and stifling conditions in the factory, she thinks of her home village where she might, after all, be better off growing rice with the people she loves. The song is not alone in highlighting the plight of factory workers in the city. Various media reports about Cambodia's garment industry tend to focus on young Cambodian women working long hours in garment factories producing for the global market and struggling to earn a meager income to support their poor families in rural areas.² However, this image of the ignorant and exploited factory worker clashes somewhat with recurrent stories in local newspapers about strikes and demonstrations, and garment workers demanding proper payment and working conditions. Politicians and investors claim that this kind of activist behavior may affect Cambodia's reputation and attractiveness among foreign investors in the garment industry. Yet it is not only the country's reputation but that of the factory workers themselves that is at stake, as their parents often fear. While working in a factory allows their daughters to contribute to family income, it also means that they (temporarily) leave the "safe" boundaries of the village and gain new "modern" experiences in the city that can easily give rise to suspicion regarding their "proper" behavior.

Notwithstanding the hardships portrayed in popular songs or parents' concerns, thousands of young women make their way from rural villages to Phnom Penh's factories, which are now employing an estimated 230,000 workers of which 85–90 percent are female (ADB *et al.* 2004: 21; Sok Hach *et al.* 2001: 51). The Cambodian garment industry has developed rapidly during the past decade, having grown from seven factories in 1994 to around 200 in 2004. The majority of the factories are owned by foreigners—mostly investors from Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, Korea, Macau, and Singapore—who are subcontractors to clothing companies, such as Nike, Gap, and H&M, and produce garments predominantly destined for US and European markets. With the rise in the number of factories, the output as well as the value of garment exports has also increased considerably during the past few years. The value of garment exports rose from 27 million US dollars in 1995 to 660 million US dollars in 1999, to 986 million in 2000, to 1,607 million in 2003, equal to almost 80 percent of the total Cambodian exports during that year (ADB *et al.* 2004: 22; cf. Sok Hach *et al.* 2001). The garment industry has now, as an ADB report states, "become the engine driving the national economy, making the greatest national contribution to poverty reduction by having created some 230,000 direct jobs, probably with as many indirect jobs again, and generating the majority of Cambodia's foreign currency earnings" (ADB *et al.* 2004: 77).

The enormous growth of the garment industry is related to the political and economic developments in the early 1990s. The newly elected government adopted a comprehensive set of market-oriented reforms and created conditions for the establishment of a labor-intensive and export-oriented industry. These political and economic reforms were meant to lead Cambodia, after decades of civil war, to what Prime Minister Hun Sen called a "new era of growth and prosperity" (Ministry of Commerce 2000). This new era is usually connected to what is seen as a necessary and desirable "process of modernization and national economic development" as well as integration into a capitalist global economy (Minister of Commerce Cham Prasidh in Ministry of Commerce 2000). Such references to prosperity, development, and modernity are not just fantastic statements made by the country's politicians, but play, in fact, an important role in the goals of many Cambodians who are trying to fulfill their needs and desires in the context of new opportunities and structural constraints.

Young women play a decisive role in realizing these goals. First, their labor contributes significantly to the pursuit of national economic development in the factories that produce for a global market. Second, their earnings contribute to fulfilling, if only to a limited extent, the needs and aspirations of their rural-based families who, through new commodities, agricultural inputs, as well as the education of younger siblings, hope to enhance their position and comfort in the village. Third, young women are pursuing their own aspirations for modern consumption and display, as images of modernity are promoted in advertising and the mass media, as well as in stories of peers living and working in the city. Needless to say, these three roles are not necessarily easy to reconcile.

Duties and desires

Srey's story exemplifies the contradictory expectations and aspirations related to family obligations and concerns, economic needs, and individual desires. Srey is one of thousands of women who have (temporarily) left their villages to find work in a factory in Phnom Penh. When I met her for the first time, she was eighteen years old and had just arrived in Phnom Penh. She told me that she had wanted to work in Phnom Penh long before, but her father had discouraged her from doing so, arguing that "[t]here is no need to. We can grow some rice and what we have is enough. No need to become miserable in a place far away." Srey's father obviously did not like the idea of his daughter working in the big city, far away from the protected home. Srey's parents, while definitely not wealthy, had enough land to support Srey and her four siblings. This started to change when her family got into a spiral of debt after her older brother, and then her mother and younger brother, fell ill. The rice harvest did not yield enough to repay the debts accumulated to pay for medicine. This became even more difficult when her father also got sick. He was

brought to Phnom Penh for treatment, a heavy burden on the family's already strained financial situation. Unfortunately, Srey's father did not recover.

After her father's death, Srey's mother was left with a huge debt. The moneylender kept on coming to their house pressing for repayment of the loans. Interest rates, which are generally very high in Cambodia, amounted in the case of Srey's family to 50 percent per year. Since the rice yield was also very low due to unfavorable weather, Srey's mother had to sell parts of their land in order to release some of the debt. Realizing the difficult situation they were in, Srey decided that she should go and find work in Phnom Penh, but was not sure how to proceed:

I could not do it just like that. I was afraid people would say bad things about me, that I am not a good girl because I stay far away from home. People from the village would think that I was going to be a prostitute to earn money in order to release my mother's debt.

Though migration to the city has become a more viable option for Cambodian women from the countryside, a young woman leaving her village may still be viewed with some suspicion as to the nature of her work in Phnom Penh and her virtuousness.

The importance of "proper" behavior for the status of a woman and her family is emphasized in a range of sayings, folktales, codes of behavior (*Chhap Srey*), and other texts describing the perfectly virtuous women (*srey krup leak*), who due to their virtue, silence, softness, and devotion bring fortune, peace, and honor to their families (Ledgerwood 1990; Pou 1988). Such texts portray the unmarried *srey krup leak* as a shy, ignorant, vulnerable, industrious young woman, who is devoted to her parents, follows their advice and helps her mother at work. Although the ideals presented in these texts are based on norms and values written by an elite of times past, they are not completely irrelevant for women in present-day Cambodia. With only two years of schooling, Srey, for instance, had never heard about the *Chbab Srey*, yet she held a very similar view on what a "good girl" was supposed to be, namely:

a girl who behaves properly, respects old people, helps her parents, does not play around with boys or seek fun all the time. If she goes to the pagoda, she does not forget to pay respect to the Buddha. That is a good girl. But a bad girl behaves improperly, goes out at night and flirts with boys. That is not good to see.

Srey's comments about a young woman's behavior towards men serve as a reminder of the importance placed on a young woman's reputation when on her own and how closely it is connected to her family's reputation. Just as the *srey krup leak* can lead her family—and husband—to success,

the opposite means that a woman 'at leak who is not behaving properly, especially in relation to men, can destroy the reputation and wealth of her family. For a young woman this means that she should preserve her virginity before she gets married. She should ideally stay at home and preferably not leave the house, let alone the village, without the company of a trusted relative (Ledgerwood 1990; Pou 1988).

Migration into the city challenges many of the ideals Cambodian women are still more or less expected to uphold. The real and perceived influences associated with life in an unknown environment may easily give rise to suspicions about their moral conduct.³ A friend of Srey, who had worked in Phnom Penh before, was confronted with such suspicion upon her return to the village. Some villagers, through their gossip, insinuated that she might be *kouc heay* (literally, already broken; lost her virginity). She defended herself by claiming that she could only be *kouc ci'emuey machiin*, or "broken (deflowered) by the machine." Her response succinctly made clear that she had been working hard in a garment factory and had not spent her time fooling around. On the contrary, through her hard work in the city, she earned money and could contribute to the household economy. In other words, even though female migration does not follow certain ideals assigned for proper Cambodian women, it is a means through which young women can fulfill other important responsibilities and obligations, thus providing for the welfare of their families.

Similarly, Srey's motivations for wanting a factory job seemed to be directly related to the debts and the difficulties of releasing them after her father's death. Her oldest brother had already taken up employment in construction in the provincial town and would come back again when it was time for plowing. Srey aimed to go to Phnom Penh to contribute her part to family income. Yet, as Srey admitted, she was not only motivated by the idea of earning money to support her family. For her, and for many young women like her, factory work had the attractive image of working and living with other young women, working indoors and out of the sun—thus changing the skin color to a lighter shade—and receiving a monthly salary paid in dollars as opposed to the riel or gold that are more commonly used in the rural areas. Srey had seen other factory workers returning to the village with nice clothes, gold jewelry, and a much-desired whiter skin. They told her that "Phnom Penh is a happy place and has many fun places for people to go, like Wat Phnom, the garden in front of the palace, the riverside." She thus decided that she "also wanted to come and see."

Through these remarks, one can have a better appreciation of the multi-layered meanings ascribed to migration by young rural women. The motives are not solely prompted by their sense of duty in relation to the economic necessities and insecurities of everyday rural life. Individual desires for urban experiences, beauty, lifestyle, and modernity equally play an important role.⁴ Moving to, and working in, the city gives young women such as Srey an experience of "modern" urban life and, with it, an independence

their mothers never had in their youth. At the same time, however, it gives rise to other dilemmas: how does Srey remain a dutiful daughter while leaving her village? How can she support her family while pursuing her own aspirations? To elucidate these questions, one needs to closely examine and reconfigure the (changing) notions of the rural and the urban, of the "traditional" and the "modern" in social relations and practices.

Rural networks and urban employment

Even though migration entails leaving the family and village, it does not take place in isolation from family and village networks. On the contrary, these relationships are of major importance to young women who wish to find work in the big, unknown city. Networks of related and befriended women from the same area play a central role in providing newcomers with shelter, information, and necessary contacts to find a job. At the same time, they serve to strengthen relationships with the family and place of origin, and as agents of social control over migrant women.

This was also true for Srey. She saw her chance to go to Phnom Penh when neighbors and friends working in garment factories in Phnom Penh had been given a few days off to celebrate *Bon Pcum Ben*. They came back to the village with news about upcoming selections for new workers in their garment factories during the days immediately following the Buddhist holiday. Srey was excited and spoke to her mother about it. After learning about the monthly wages, the social protection, and the support that existed among factory workers from the same district, Srey's mother decided to set aside her worries. She borrowed some money from neighbors and packed a bag of rice and some *prahoc* (fermented fish paste) for her daughter.

Srey was not the only woman to leave her village after *Pcum Ben*; she left with four other young women from the same or nearby villages, all with the intention to find work in a garment factory in Phnom Penh. They stayed in the upper floor of a house in Tuol Sangkeo—an area where a lot of garment factories are located—together with about twenty women from the same district, sharing bed, food, joy, and sorrow. The house provided the newcomers a secure place and protective social environment in the otherwise unknown city. While attracted by the prospect of wealth and exciting promises of a Phnom Penh "modernity," Srey and her friends were also anxious about the dangers accompanying city life, most notably the crime and the ranges of immoral activities, which stood in contrast with the serenity and moral unity that are commonly associated with village life.⁵ This is reflected in how they perceived differences between "people from the rice field" (*neak sraei*) and city people (*neak krong*). In contrast to *neak sraei*, city people were thought to be modern (*toansamay*), rich, better dressed, more hygienic, but also less trustworthy. Srey once remarked that whereas back home she is afraid of ghosts, in Phnom Penh

she is above all afraid of people (*new srok klaac kmaoc, new Phnom Penh klaac menouh*). She had heard about the violence in the city and that people easily get involved in fights and even kill indiscriminately. She also thought that city people were smarter than girls from the countryside, who "are easy to cheat" and thus easily tricked into taking a "bad job" (i.e. prostitution).

Moving to the city is considered to include certain risks. For young women these risks are most notably related to having relationships with men, and exploitative and "immoral" work. Yet, as for Srey and her friends, it can be said that the more women migrate from the same area, the lower the associated risks for individuals, as networks for potential migrants become denser. Reliable information about the opportunities and dangers associated with the place of destination and the migration process become more readily available (Curran and Saguy 1997). The experiences, knowledge, and contacts of earlier migrants are helpful in calming fears about the risks of migration. At the same time, they are crucial for finding a "proper" job for newcomers.

Securing a job may take weeks or even months and requires not only connections but also money and endurance. After almost one month in Phnom Penh, Srey still had not found a job. Whenever selections took place at a garment factory in the neighborhood, she and her four friends went there in the early morning to wait in the hope of being selected. When factories need to recruit workers, they usually tell their workers to spread the message among their friends and relatives and put up a paper outside the factory about the date and time of selection. Such an occasion may attract hundreds of women and, to a lesser extent, men. They assemble at the gate of the factory, waiting for hours until a supervisor comes out and selects a number of people to do a test. Srey was selected to do a test twice, but failed, which she blamed on the fact that she did not have enough money to spend on more sewing classes, organized for newcomers such as her.

In addition, there is a more direct way of getting a job, namely through a broker, referred to as *ksaei* or *ksaei royeah* (literally, string, rope; also used for patronage networks). A *ksaei* can be a supervisor in a garment factory or someone connected to a supervisor. The *ksaei* usually demands about a month's salary for her (or his) service. For 45 dollars, a woman living next door had offered to help Srey and her friends get a job. Although this would be the easiest way to get a foot in the door, they feared that this woman could not be trusted. They might lose their precious savings if the woman just took the money without arranging a job, or if they got fired during the probation period. Srey thus decided to try her luck again at upcoming selections.

In the meantime, she slowly ran out of money. What she had brought from home was limited, considering the expenditure she had to make on food, pictures for an identification card, and transport. Through visiting

relatives of one of the women in the house, she sent her mother a message asking for extra money, rice, *prahoc*, salt, and dried fish, which she hoped relatives of other villagers would bring along when they came to visit Phnom Penh. She knew that she would otherwise have to return home if she did not find a job soon. Yet, she dreaded the thought that others in the village would say that she went to Phnom Penh, did not manage to find a job, and spent all the money given to her. She felt ashamed to have to go back home because she was running out of money.

Srey's case shows that migration to the city does not necessarily reap the expected financial returns. In the short term, women may actually lose money, especially when expenses for transport and living in the city are taken into account. As Srey eventually did, many women return home empty-handed. In such cases loans may need to be extended or pigs sold in order to be able to pay back the moneylender. Instead of reducing poverty, an unsuccessful job search in the garment industry may lead to an accumulation of further debts.

The determination to find a job in a garment factory in Phnom Penh is not, however, necessarily stalled after an initial failure. About half a year after Srey left Phnom Penh, she unexpectedly came to visit me at my house. She had arrived in Phnom Penh two days earlier after receiving words from her friends that new workers would be selected in the days following the Khmer New Year. Srey was very excited when she told me she had just passed the test at a factory and that she would work the night shift starting the following week.

After her initial failure, what made Srey so determined to come back to the city? Why would she risk losing even more money for a job that would, as Hem Sivorn warns in her song, entail working long hours and earning a meager income? In order to understand the motivations of women such as Srey, it is necessary to go beyond the push—poor conditions in the countryside—and pull—demand for female labor—arguments that are commonly used to explain such migration patterns. While structural conditions and economic motivations certainly play a role, they should be analyzed in relation to women's own aspirations and in the context of the changing nature of Cambodian society. As I will point out below, Khmer women working in garment factories do not only play a role in national economic growth but also in negotiating Cambodian meanings of modernity. They are indeed important actors in finding ways to “remain traditional” while “becoming modern.”

Modern experiences

For many young Cambodian women arriving from the countryside, Phnom Penh is what Chambers called the “metaphor for the experience of the modern world” (1994: 92). This “modern” urban world is, as many of them imagine, very different from their rural life. Although the urban and

the rural are not, and have never been, isolated, separated spaces, the stories of fellow villagers working and living in Phnom Penh, as well as the occasional images of urban life and people that reach the countryside through the few televisions and other mass media, bring the city closer than ever to the world of Cambodian villagers. Migration and mass media are, as Appadurai (1996) argued, central forces in the “work of imagination.” Flows of people and images “enable some people to experience, albeit unevenly, new ideas and practices and thereby imagine (if not realize) new ways of being” (Hodgson 2001: 6). For the young people in Cambodia's countryside, imagining new ways of being are strongly related to their ambitions of working and living in the city.

Yet, once in the city, young factory workers are quickly confronted with its less glamorous sides. Working in the factory usually involves long hours of work, unhealthy conditions, strict discipline, and factory hierarchies that allow them little opportunity to move up. Their living quarters in the city are often crowded, hot, and poorly ventilated. The higher cost of living absorbs a major part of their monthly earnings. Although there is resistance to exploitative working conditions, in the form of union action as well as in less apparent everyday forms of resistance such as slowdowns, obstructions, or withdrawal, they do not structurally change the marginal position of factory workers in “global factories.” However, factory workers should not be seen as helpless victims of global economic structures either. While acknowledging the constraints of their position, factory workers such as Srey, in their own ways, give meaning to their position. They regard their employment in the garment industry as a way to gain new experiences. The economic and social constraints with which factory workers are confronted are thereby mediated by their aspirations for participation in new patterns of commodity consumption. For instance, in her study on Thai factory workers Mills argues that participation in “modern” consumption and activities presents an arena within which young rural women “may confront and attempt to rework the tensions and contradictions that underlie their status as urban wage workers” (1997: 41). “Modern” consumption is thereby used as part of young women's enhanced social life in the city, providing young Khmer women a creative basis on which they try to make sense of the tensions and contradictions they encounter when their “traditional” village values confront their “modern” urban aspirations.

Young rural women's urban aspirations to participate in “modern” city life are most commonly expressed through new clothes, make-up, jewelry, and *dai leeng* (going out). This, of course, costs money and leads to a delicate balancing of spending on personal pleasure and beauty, and family obligations. Women evaluate their position by giving their own meaning to dominant notions of being traditional (*taam propeinii* or *boraan*), modern (*toansamay*) and too modern (*toansamay peek* or *taonsamay cruel*). Although the opposites *boraan* and *toansamay* are perhaps most obvious in

material aspects of life, such as in the way people dress, walk, eat, live, celebrate, and earn their money, “modern” also relates to behavior, between parents and children, between men and women, and also between employers or supervisors and workers. There seems to be a constant juggling between what is acceptable or desirable “modern” behavior and what should be cherished as so-called *boraan* values concerning seemingly superficial issues such as clothing, make-up, going out, but which are directly related to parental authority and sexuality. Just as “modern” clothes, such as pants and T-shirts, are considered beautiful (*s’aat*) and desirable items when they are not too short or tight, having some fun, being happy (*sepbaay*), and *dai leeng* on Sunday afternoons with friends is also acceptable unless the women return after dark and the friends turn out to be boyfriends. This is *toansamay cruel*, or beyond modern.

It is within this context that many migrant women identify themselves, as “people from the rice field” taking part in city life. While these young women are often eager to lose their “provincial image” and change to more modern styles and attitudes once they are in the city, they also make an effort to keep up the so-called village morality. This is clearly exemplified by Srey and her friends, who use part of their earnings for new clothing, jewelry, and photos of their outings, but who are at the same time subject to a strong social control with regard to their way of dressing and going out. Here, peers play an important role in judging each other and preserving certain values as well as in stimulating each other to participate in common “modern” activities and to show off urban sophistication when visiting the village. The latter was displayed in an instance when the women in Srey’s house got a few days off and returned home for Khmer New Year. They pooled some money to rent a hi-fi unit, invited relatives, neighbors, and other villagers, and danced, in their newest outfits, until two o’clock in the morning.

The relevance of the question regarding what is considered “acceptably modern” and what is not goes beyond individual migrant women and their negotiation of the perceived contradictions between “traditional” rural and “modern” urban life. It touches upon the desire of Cambodian society as a whole to get to the material state of richer and more modern neighboring countries—most notably Thailand—and the associated concern regarding the loss of Khmer culture, tradition, and identity. Prime Minister Hun Sen once warned that the nation’s values are being eroded by the skin-tight and short skirts worn by female singers on television shows and demanded that program managers lower the skirts of their stars and return to modesty (Nov 2000). While it is, of course, questionable if, and for how long, such demands are obeyed, the underlying anxiety shows the degree to which “modernity” displayed in the behavior and appearance of women stands as an important symbol for the preservation or erosion of Khmer culture in general. Prime Minister Hun Sen’s concern regarding the erosion of Khmer culture is similarly shared by many people of the

older generation. An elderly neighbor of Srey’s family therefore concluded that “too modern is not good, [present-day youth] should keep some *boraan* values . . .”

In their struggle to strike a balance between what is acceptable or desirable “modern” behavior and what should be cherished as so-called “traditional” village values, young rural women living and working in Phnom Penh variously explore the new opportunities open to them. What Srey and her friends call “too modern” may therefore be part of the work, and also the fun of urban life, for other migrant women. While Srey and her friends pursued their aspirations in participating in “modern” urban life, they made sure to be considered “acceptably modern” within the village they knew they would return to after getting married. And they would accordingly criticize other factory workers who had become more disconnected from their rural background and who lacked the social control from relatives or friends from the village. Such women are often accused of being “crazy about dollars” and “forgetting about their homeland, the countryside.” They, as the common expression goes, like tap water too much. Back in the village “they drink water from the well [. . .], but once they come to Phnom Penh they prefer tap water and forget about well water.” The reference to tap and well water in relation to behavior in the city is commonly used in the context of young rural women who “have a boyfriend” (*sangsaa*) and “are too happy.” Such women are considered to *chlo’ek tik machiin*, to “choke on” or to “be crazy about” machine (i.e. tap) water, as they spend too much for their own consumption, get involved in relationships with men, and change their appearance, behavior, and way of talking into “too” urban, or modern, styles. They, in other words, like the water—symbolizing the way of life—in the city better than the (well) water back in the village.

In reality, of course, most rural women working in Phnom Penh’s factories drink from both sources, and try to keep up an image of dutiful daughters while exploring the city as “modern” women. In mixing these sources in various ways, young women will eventually change the taste of water, and accordingly shape dominant presentations of *neak sraei* and *srey samay* (modern women) within a changing society like Cambodia. As dutiful daughters earning money to support their family, they also challenge ideals related to the protection and supervision of unmarried women; as low-waged workers with little opportunity to move up, they intently participate in “modern” city life; as important contributors to the country’s drive towards modernization and development, they are condemned for mimicking “too modern” behavior, so actively promoted through television, commercials, and music. The ambiguity of such multiple and contradictory positions appear prominently in the various accounts given by factory women. However, these same ambiguities and contradictions allow factory workers such as Srey to creatively respond to various expectations and aspirations, and to shape their own lives and that of their families, and thereby the directions for social changes.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is based on my PhD dissertation entitled "Khmer Women on the Move: migration and urban experiences in Cambodia." Material quoted without a source in this chapter is from my conversation with Srey.
- 2 See, for example, the BBC documentary "GAP Nike—No Sweat?" on working conditions in the Cambodian garment industry, which sheds light on the use of child labor and abusive practices within Cambodia's garment industry.
- 3 By comparison, male migration raises less moral issues than female migration. This can be explained in the fact that male mobility has a precedent in off-farm labor during the slack season, as monks, traveling merchants or for administrative purposes. Moreover, there is a double standard regarding sexual morality: generally, men are allowed more sexual freedom before marriage while women are not.
- 4 Conflicts in the family play a role as well. Indeed, not all women opt for factory work in agreement with their parents (see also Wolf 1992).
- 5 This is similar to the images Svay villagers had of Phnom Penh in the late 1950s, as described by Ebihara (1968).

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