

Human Sciences Encounters in Phnom-Penh: Researchers Profiles:KEO Siti

Siti Keo is a Ph.D. student at the University of California at Berkeley. She studies Modern Southeast Asian History, with a focus on Cambodian history. Her dissertation topic is the Urban History of Phnom Penh during Sangkum Reastr Niyum (1955-1970).

Happy Hours presentation, february 2010

A TALE OF TWO CITIES: SOTH POLIN AND PHNOM PENH DURING SANGKUM REASTR NIYUM

From 1955 to 1970, Phnom Penh was a source of national pride for the postcolonial Cambodian state. State newspapers featured articles and pictures, highlighting Phnom Penh and its changes. The openings of a luxurious hotel, a branch of a multinational business, or an air-conditioned movie theater were seen as yet another sign of how Phnom Penh was “in route to being one of the great cities of Asia.” The newspapers boasted of how some of these new buildings incorporated authentic Khmer architectural details and existed alongside old colonial buildings. Phnom Penh’s growth signified, according to these government newspapers, Cambodia’s ability to progress even as it remained firmly rooted in tradition and in the past. The state used Phnom Penh to build a bridge to its past, instilling a sense of pride in the populace for the new direction of Cambodia. Therefore, Phnom Penh was a crucial site for the enactment of Sangkum’s ideology and for the construction of a modern, independent Cambodian nation.

However, social tensions emerged from the gaps that “opened up in this period between Cambodia’s rich and poor and between the cities and the countryside.” These tensions manifested itself across a variety of mediums, from films to literature. The literary works of Soth Polin, in particular, provided an outlet for these tensions and a means to express the discontent against the government. The Phnom Penh that was described in his novels differed radically from the one that littered the pages of the government newspapers. Rather than the Phnom Penh celebrated for its modernity and its embodiment of the country’s progress, Soth Polin depicted it as a site of modern anomie, a place from which to escape. For him, man became a machine in Phnom Penh. By contradicting the state’s image of Phnom Penh and by revealing the alienating consequences of urban life, Soth Polin’s works challenged Sangkum’s representation of the city and its claimed progress. The discontent within Sangkum Cambodia, exposed through Soth Polin’s writings, later translated into political action against Sihanouk in 1970. Either as a site of modernity or a place of alienation, Phnom Penh played a central role in promoting the political agendas of the state and of Soth Polin.