



EXPLAINING THE BREAKDOWN OF VIETNAMESE-KHMER ROUGE RELATIONS OUTSIDE OF THE CONTEXT OF THE COLD WAR

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Introduction

Too often have International Relations scholars used Cold War politics to explain inter-state conflict during the Cold War Period. Although it cannot be said that any inter-state conflict occurred completely independent from the broader geo-political rivalries between the United States, China, and the USSR, these rivalries were not always the central issue. One important example of this is the Vietnamese-Cambodian War in 1979. After a series of smaller border conflicts, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam invaded Cambodia and ousted their former ally, the Khmer Rouge, from power. At first glance, it would appear as if Sino-Soviet rivalries led to the conflict as they each backed the Khmer Rouge and Vietnam respectively. Deng Xiaoping at the time commented that “the Soviet Union will make use of Vietnam to harass China” and that “Vietnam is playing the role of Cuba”.^① This suggests that even state leaders saw the Cambodian conflict in terms of larger hegemonic struggles between China and the USSR. However, this explanation is inadequate for two reasons. Firstly, the Soviet Union’s military support for Vietnam only began to rapidly increase after the subsequent Chinese invasion, not in Vietnam’s preparation for offensive operations in Cambodia.^② Additionally, Deng had criticized the Khmer Rouge in 1978 for “the lack of discipline and putschist,

① “Summary of the President’s First Meeting with PRC Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping,” Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980, Volume XIII, China, 1977–1980, eds. Daniel P. Nickles (Washington: Government Printing Office), Document 202. Memorandum of Conversation.

② Sally W. Stoecker, “Clients and Commitments Soviet-Vietnamese Relations, 1978-1988,” RAND Corporation, December 1989, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/notes/N2737.html>.

anarchic behavior of their troops along the Vietnam border”.^① This at least suggests that the conflict occurred independently from both Soviet and Chinese ambitions. For the conflict to be labeled as a ‘proxy war’ both sides need to benefit from their exploitation of their allies; if both attempted to maintain the peace it is not a ‘proxy war’. I intend to further analyze this by comparing aid numbers over time from both sides to their respective allies. I also hope to use primary evidence to show that leaders on each side reacted to the conflict rather than instigating it. Finally, I use historical evidence to show how racial tensions between the Vietnamese and Cambodians contributed to the conflict. I was not able to completely rule out other factors, but by disproving existing theories about the Sino-Soviet competition in Indochina, and supporting other theories, I hope to give more agency to both Vietnamese and Cambodian people whose stories have often been overlooked.

Literature Review

One of the main arguments used to support the idea that the war between Cambodia and Vietnam was a proxy war is that massive amounts of aid were funneled to each by their respective allies. Could the aid sent from China to Cambodia have been used to encourage its military operations against Vietnam? China only began to halt economic aid to Vietnam in July 1978 after its Fifth Plenum Declaration to remove Pol Pot from power.^② This suggests that Deng was hoping to maintain some form of a relationship with Vietnam despite a growing Soviet influence. If the conflict were to be instigated by China, an increase in its aid to Cambodia along with a reduction in aid to Vietnam would be expected. Finally, primary sources should indicate whether China was constraining or encouraging Pol Pot’s “Anti-Vietnamese” domestic and

^① Philip Short, *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006) 388-389.

^② Nicholas Khoo, “Revisiting the Termination of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance, 1975-1979,” *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 9, no. 2 (2010): 321-361, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156805810x548784>.

foreign policy. There is very little evidence to support this narrative. Firstly, China did not increase its aid to Kampuchea in any significant manner from 1975-1979. Its initial aid package in 1975 promised a record 1 billion dollars in Chinese aid for the new government of Cambodia.^① Additionally, China promised in 1976 to send tanks and other vehicles, ammunition, communications equipment, and few other pieces of military hardware.^② Since this was occurring simultaneously with Chinese aid to Vietnam, we can begin to reject the hypothesis that this aid was meant to stir conflict between the two countries. This becomes even clearer when analyzing diplomatic conversations between Chinese and Cambodian officials. Deng Xiaoping warned Nuon Chea in 1978 that “Phnom Penh must be less provocative towards Vietnam, but nevertheless continued to send military and nonmilitary aid to DK in increasing numbers”^③. Additionally, China refused to send its soldiers to the Cambodian border to deter Vietnam. This demonstrates an attempt to restrain their ally rather than to embolden it. Furthermore, Soviet aid to Vietnam during this period is also relevant. An increase in military aid to Vietnam before the outbreak of the conflict would suggest that Soviet ambitions were a driving force behind Vietnam’s invasion. On the other hand, if this aid arrived after Vietnam had made its intentions known, it would suggest that the USSR was backing the conflict instead of creating it. Multiple scholars support the idea that the Treaty of Friendship emboldened Vietnam and allowed them to conduct the war with Cambodia. Khoo asserts that “If Hanoi had not had Moscow’s backing, in all likelihood it would not have attempted to

① Le Monde has called this the “largest aid package that China had ever given to one country.” John Ciociari, “China and the Pol Pot Regime,” *Cold War History* 14, no. 2 (2014): 6, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2269301.

② Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975–79* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 136.

③ Andrew Mertha, “Chinese Aid to the Khmer Rouge 1975-1979,” in *Brothers in Arms: Chinese Aid to the Khmer Rouge, 1975-1979* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2019), 9.

realize its long-sought goal of establishing control over Cambodia”^①. Furthermore, Thayer and Thakur claim that “the treaty was timed to precede Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia”.^② There are two issues with these arguments. The first is that Vietnamese cadres were warned of the conflict in June/July 1978, nearly 6 months before the signing of the Friendship Treaty with the Soviet Union. Secondly, the offensive into Cambodia was reportedly arranged around the seasonal weather.^③ This is not to say that the treaty was not an important tool used to deter an aggressive reaction from China, just that it was unlikely to be a deciding factor in Vietnam’s already conceived war plans. As Leighton concludes in their analysis of the conflict, “to view the conflict [as a proxy war] implies that the respective big powers seek specific gains through the military actions of their proxies. As it happens, neither Moscow nor Peking stands to benefit from the current fighting”.^④ We can safely conclude that the “proxy war” explanation is lacking for a multitude of reasons.

The next section of my paper will analyze different understandings and racial tensions in the region and how they contributed to both the Khmer-Vietnamese conflict and the Sino-Vietnamese War. Contrasting views of cultural superiority between Vietnam, China, and Cambodia were dampening points in their relationships and a reason for the buildup of tensions in the region.^⑤ Each sought to expand their influence in Indochina and this again

① Nicholas Khoo, “The End of an ‘Indestructible Friendship’: Soviet Resurgence and the Termination of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance, 1975–1979,” in *Collateral Damage: Sino-Soviet Rivalry and the Termination of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 128.

② Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 133–134.

③ Kevin Klose, “Soviets and Vietnamese Sign Treaty, Warn Chinese,” *The Washington Post*, November 4, 1978, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1978/11/04/soviets-and-vietnamese-sign-treaty-warn-chinese/e7be2390-fc73-441d-b91c-2a196d6476b7/>.

④ Marian Kirsch Leighton, “Perspectives on the Vietnam-Cambodia Border Conflict,” *Asian Survey* 18, no. 5 (1978): 448-457, <https://online.ucpress.edu/as/article-abstract/18/5/448/21357/Perspectives-on-the-Vietnam-Cambodia-Border?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.

⑤ Xiaoming Zhang, “The Roots of the Sino-Vietnamese Conflict,” in *Deng Xiaoping’s Long War: the Military Conflict between China and Vietnam 1979-1991* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 38.

occurred independently from the Sino-Soviet rivalry. Cambodian rejection of Vietnamese authority can be seen through an analysis of Cambodian purges of Vietnamese Cambodians. Their fear of perceived Vietnamese encroachment on their territory dated back to Pre-Colonial times when Vietnam had annexed parts of The Khmer Kingdom.^① Many myths about the annexation persisted through to the Modern Era and contributed to racist sentiment against the “treacherous Vietnamese”.^② Pol Pot worked to reduce Vietnamese influence in the country long before Vietnam had the military strength to demonstrate its authority in the region. In 1976, Pol Pot “sought to consolidate his position within the Khmer Rouge by beginning to purge members who had ties to Vietnam”^③. Further analysis of these purges, along with those conducted against Chinese Cambodians, could provide evidence that Pol Pot’s extremism was unbound and that China was pulled into the conflict as a result. With regard to Chinese Cambodians there are two schools of thought. The first is that they were targeted due to their wealth as “new peoples” and the second is that they were targeted because they weren’t “Khmer”. There is certainly evidence for both, but the latter is more convincing due to the firsthand accounts brought to us by survivors of the massacres. While I will present these accounts through my research, the next portion of the literature review will focus on arguments made previously. Hinton claims that “Khmer nationalists portrayed the Vietnamese (and, to a much lesser extent, ethnic Chinese) as the quintessentially evil ‘other’... wily, greedy, heartless”.^④ One myth titled “The Master’s Tea” featured Yuon – a slur meaning

① Joseph R. Pouvachy, “Cambodian-Vietnamese Relations,” *Asian Survey* 26, no. 4 (1986): 440-51, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2644157>.

② Anna Lewis, “Historical Patterns of the Racialization of Vietnamese in Cambodia, and Their Relevance Today,” *CERS Working Paper*, 2015, <https://cers.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/97/2016/04/Historical-patterns-of-the-racialisation-of-Vietnamese-in-Cambodia-and-their-relevance-today-Anna-Lewis.pdf>.

③ Edward C. O’Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 32.

④ Alexander Laban Hinton, “Manufacturing Difference,” in *Why Did They Kill?: Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2005), 211-51, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pp9zp.16>.

barbarian which was used against the Vietnamese—torturers placing boiling pots of water on ancient Kampuchean prisoners’ heads and then chastising them for squirming so that they don’t spill their master’s tea.^① With regard to the Chinese Cambodians, some scholars claim that their persecution in Cambodia was partially due to their “widespread involvement in trade and usury”.^② While this was the argument made by Pol Pot in defense of his crackdown against ethnic Chinese, there is little evidence to suggest that they were responsible for the indebtedness of Cambodian peasantry. In fact, research shows that Cambodian indebtedness was actually less common near the major cities.^③ Furthermore, we also know that the Chinese in Cambodia inhabited major city centers. Therefore, we can dismiss Pol Pot’s defenses of his purges against them. The Vietnamese used similar tactics to deprive ethnic Chinese of their property in South Vietnam (after reunification).^④ Vietnamese justifications for this are also dubious as they later expelled all ethnic Chinese from the party.

My research focuses on explaining why the Khmer-Vietnamese rivalry was a product of historical racial and nationalistic tension, rather than a result of Sino-Soviet disputes. While I do not have any intention of completely abandoning the usage of “Cold War politics” to explain the Indochina conflicts, I provide a new lens with which to view them. Hopefully, this will give more agency to the parties involved as well as reducing the tendency of Western scholars to put “Great Powers” at the center of every conflict.

① Kiernan, Ben. “Myth, Nationalism and Genocide.” *Journal of Genocide Research* 3, no. 2 (2001): 187–206. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520120062402>.

② Alexander Laban Hinton, “A Head for an Eye: Disproportionate Revenge,” in *Why Did They Kill?: Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2005), 45-95, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pp9zp.11>.

③ Jean Delvert, *Le paysan cambodgien* (Paris: Mouton and Company, 1961), 519.

④ Ramses Amer, “Vietnam’s Policies and the Ethnic Chinese since 1975,” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 11, no. 1 (1996): 76-104, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41056928>.

Research Design

The majority of my research was concentrated on the treatment of Chinese people in Vietnam and Cambodia from 1970 to 1980. The reason that I chose to focus on Chinese rather than Vietnamese peoples is that I wanted to ensure that I was measuring racial tensions rather than Cold War tensions. If the Cambodian-Vietnamese War was indeed a proxy between China and the Soviet Union, an analysis of either Vietnam's or Cambodia's treatment of the others' citizens would not tell us anything about racial tensions. The Soviet Union or China could have been encouraging violence in order to facilitate the proxy conflict. While this was unlikely to be the case, it is not something that we can rule out. By measuring the treatment of Chinese citizens, we can definitively rule out the possibility that China was the one instigating racial violence. As numerical data from Cambodia is unavailable for the time period in question, I will use refugee data procured by Vietnam to measure the exodus of Sino-Cambodians from the country. We also have data from both French and Vietnamese census records which show the population of Sino-Vietnamese or Hoa People. In addition to these I will be using refugee data to show the movement of Chinese people away from Indochina. My results show that both Kampuchea and Vietnam pursued a variety of policies which negatively impacted the wealthier minority Chinese populations in each country. That being said, the harsh treatment of Vietnam's Hoa people paled in comparison to the treatment of Chinese under Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge. Many Vietnamese and Chinese Cambodians fled to Vietnam to escape persecution in Cambodia. The mistreatment of the Chinese in both countries exemplifies the fears and distrust each country had to the imagined hegemonial intentions of the other. It didn't matter that Mao's China was the ideological leader of Pol Pot's revolution, the Chinese Khmer were to be treated with suspension, nonetheless.

Treatment of Chinese Cambodians

Getting numerical data from Cambodia is difficult due to the anarchic nature of the country during the period from 1975-1979. According to multiple sources, the Chinese population in Cambodia was 425,000 in 1975, but by 1979 only 200,000 had survived the regime.^{①,②} We also know from multiple first-hand accounts that Chinese based in Cambodia were targeted by the Khmer Rouge. Refugees often fled to Thailand or Vietnam and these countries allowed them to remain if they were Vietnamese or Chinese.^{③,④} There were reportedly 20,000 refugees living in Vietnam during the height of the conflict, but very few of them elected to return to Cambodia.^⑤ When confronted by China, Pol Pot defended these persecutions by claiming they were targeted against wealthy upper class citizens who happened to also be Chinese.^⑥ I believe that some scholars are too quick to accept Pol Pot's defense of these persecutions. Even if we buy that the orders coming from the top were in the "sanctimonious pursuit of dismantling the bourgeoisie", it is also important to consider the racial biases of those in lower positions enforcing the orders and their impact on the execution of said orders.

① Ben Kiernan, "The Survival of Cambodia's Ethnic Minorities," *Cultural Survival*, last modified September 1990, <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/survival-cambodias-ethnic-minorities>.

② Rudolph J. Rummel, "Freedom Virtually Ends Genocide and Mass Murder," in *Saving Lives Enriching Life* (Hawaii: Hawaii University Press, 2001).

③ Werner Wiskari, "Vietnam Copes With Cambodian Refugees, Who Sound Thankful Despite Their Privations," *The New York Times*, April 30, 1978, <https://www.nytimes.com/1978/04/30/archives/vietnam-cope-with-cambodian-refugees-who-sound-thankful-despite.html>.

④ Henry Kamm, "Refugee Says Cambodians Deport Ethnic Chinese; Family Home Vandalized," *The New York Times*, December 9, 1979, <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/12/09/archives/refugee-says-cambodians-deport-ethnic-chinese-family-home.html>.

⑤ Leo Dobbs, "Khmer Refugees in VN Wary About Repatriation," *The Phnom Penh Post*, September 12, 1992, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/khmer-refugees-vn-wary-about-repatriation>.

⑥ Hinton, "A Head for an Eye: Disproportionate Revenge," 45-95.

Treatment of Chinese Vietnamese (Hoa)

Firstly, I want to present the numerical data that I was able to gather about the Hoa people. According to French sources from their time in control of Indochina the population of the Hoa are as follows:

| Year | Total number of Chinese |
|------|-------------------------|
| 1908 | 138,284 |
| 1910 | 142,000 |
| 1913 | 189,000 |
| 1921 | 195,000 |
| 1922 | 214,760 |
| 1928 | 325,248 |
| 1931 | 267,000 |
| 1936 | 216,850 |
| 1937 | 217,000 |
| 1943 | 466,000 |
| 1949 | 668.301 |
| 1951 | 732,459 |
| 1952 | 613,576 |
| 1953 | 607,045 |

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① Ramses Amer, "French Policies towards the Chinese in Vietnam A Study of Migration and Colonial Responses," original title [Les politiques françaises envers les Chinois du Viêt Nam : études des migrations et des réponses du colonisateur], *Moussons* 16 (2010): 57-80, <https://journals.openedition.org/moussons/192>.

Vietnamese Censuses placed the Hoa population in 1979 and 1989 at 935,074 and 961,702 respectively.^① This puts the average annual growth rate of Hoa people from 1953 to 1979 at 1.4%. This is nearly half the average annual growth rate for all of Vietnam during the same time period.^② This number gets even lower after the Sino-Vietnamese War and falls to .3% from 1979 to 1989. Ethnic Chinese had a smaller growth rate than the rest of the country even when the Sino-Vietnamese alliance was strong. There are three explanations for this. The first is that either the French or the Vietnamese specifically inflated or deflated the ethnic Chinese population. The second is that the mass exodus of ethnic Chinese from Vietnam at the end of the 1970's artificially deflated the growth rate over the 26-year period between the French census in 1953 and the Vietnamese census in 1979. The final explanation is that racial tensions were boiling under the surface and anti-Chinese policies were being created by the Vietnamese even during their alliance with China. There is some evidence to support this. North Vietnam had established its own socialist policies –which tended to impact ethnic Chinese disproportionately—long before it applied them to South Vietnam.^③ More research would need to be conducted to study these policies and their impacts on Chinese living in North Vietnam. It is also important to note that the growth rate was at its smallest after the Sino-Vietnamese War which suggests that their relationship did have an impact on Vietnam's treatment of ethnic Chinese.

① Judith Banister, "Vietnam Population Dynamics and Prospects," Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1993, https://digitalassets.lib.berkeley.edu/ieas/IRM_06.pdf.

② "Population Growth (Annual %) - Vietnam," World Bank, 2019, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.GROW?locations=VN>.

③ Ramses Amer, "Vietnam's Policies and the Ethnic Chinese since 1975," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 11, no. 1 (1996): 76-104, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41056928>.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to show Khmer and Vietnamese fears of hegemonic rule by other races vis-à-vis their treatment of their own ethnic Chinese minorities. My research shows that their differing relationships with China did not completely alter their treatment of these minorities, though it certainly affected it. Naturally, Chinese living under the Khmer Rouge regime suffered greatly despite the country's close relationship with China. Multiple survivors of the massacres explained how Chinese were targeted by the Khmer Rouge regardless of their class. As I had hypothesized, Chinese in Vietnam also faced low growth rates even when the Sino-Vietnamese alliance was strong. Yet the Cold-War tensions also played a role in the case of Vietnam as the Chinese growth rates dropped rapidly after its conflict with China in 1979. Because of this, I can not rule out the possibility that Cold War politics had an impact on race relations in Indochina. Although I was unable to procure enough evidence to support my claim that racial tensions were the main reason for the conflict between Cambodia and Vietnam, I believe that I have shown how their weariness of foreign influence affected their treatment of their minorities. Additional research should be conducted to determine the extent to which minorities in Cambodia and Vietnam provided their country of origin with strategic benefits. This would better explain these countries' desires to reduce or guard against the influence of these minorities.

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