Interview with Sichan Siv

QUAN MANH HA
Texas Tech University

This piece presents a transcription of a March 12, 2009, interview with Sichan Siv, the 28th U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Economic & Social Council, by SEC/AAS member Quan Manh Ha, during the 2009 Vietnam Center Conference on “Cambodia, Laos, Thailand & the Vietnam War,” held at Texas Tech University in Lubbock.

Brief Biography of Sichan Siv

Sichan Siv was born in Pochentong, Cambodia, in 1948. His father was chief of police of Phnom Penh district. He was educated in Cambodia, where the language of instruction was primarily French. On April 17, 1975, he and his family were forced out of Phnom Penh by the Khmer Rouge. Eventually, on February 13, 1976, he left his family and country in order to flee slave labor in the “killing fields” of Cambodia and seek a new life and freedom. His daring escape led him eventually to the United States and to further education at the Columbia University School of International Affairs in New York. Siv became a U.S. citizen in 1982; he is married to Texas native Martha Pattillo. In 1989, he was appointed deputy assistant to President George Bush, with an office in the White House; and in 2001, the Senate unanimously confirmed his appointment as the 28th U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Economic & Social Council by President George W. Bush. He continues to work actively as a lecturer on international affairs and as an advocate for the social and economic development of Cambodia and the recognition of Cambodian contributions to world history and culture. Golden Bones, his memoir, was published by HarperCollins in 2008.

Conversation between Sichan Siv & Quan Manh Ha

QUAN MANH HA: Mr. Ambassador, thank you very much for granting me this interview today. It is a pleasure and an honor to talk with you about your book, Golden Bones (2008), and about Cambodia. Let me begin by asking you about the reception of your memoir. How has it been accepted by audiences and readerships?
SICHAN SIV: It has been very well received. The reactions have been overwhelmingly positive. The common response has been, “Thank you very much for sharing your story.” My central message of hope—my mother’s message of hope—has been noticed and mentioned in the responses.

QMH: How long did it take you to write your book?

SS: I generally say that it took me thirty years. The minute I introduced myself, since I arrived in the U.S. in 1976, people asked me, “When are you going to write a book?” They would say, “You need to write a book.” I hesitated at the beginning because I knew it would bring back bad memories of painful experiences. So it took me a long while to find the right time to put pen to paper. The actual writing time, however, was seven months after I started to work at the computer.

QMH: Many people approach writing a memoir or an autobiography in an effort to reconcile themselves with the past. Do you think that in writing this book you also were attempting to reconcile yourself with aspects of your past or with the past of Cambodia and its history?

SS: No, I didn’t write this book to reconcile myself with the past. I wrote the book to share the story. I wanted, in a sense, to give some historical anecdotes. Many people, even some Cambodians when they read this book, said, “Oh, my goodness, I never knew this thing happened or that thing happened.” These details needed to be recorded, so producing the book entailed an educational process, too. One of the reviewers said that the book is very educational.

QMH: In your autobiography, you emphasize the importance of your own education, both in Cambodia and in the United States. I found your learning experiences with English and French very impressive, because back then you probably didn’t have a lot of educational opportunities, but you tried very hard to learn in Khmer, French, and English. What do you consider to be the primary motivation in your life toward learning, and what do you consider to be the most important elements in your education?

SS: I am glad you noticed the importance of the education element in my own life. My mother was the principal source of strength for me, and she emphasized education by telling me that I needed to go on. I was the first of my family to go to college; thus, education was probably the most important thing in my life, and that is thanks to my mother. You mentioned French and English. Those also were parts of the educational system. It was more French than English. French was taught in Cambodia as the second language. As I grew up, I spoke French just like everybody else in my generation. And English was taught as the third language, but no one took it
Interview with Sichan Siv

QMH: In your memoir, I noticed that there are two lines of development. One portrays the disintegration of Cambodian society, most precipitously under the rule of the Khmer Rouge. The other line portrays the potential for working one’s way into the establishment of American society. Do these two separate stories in your life actually converge in ways that might be further explained in a subsequent book?

SS: Yes, the two lines can be put together in two words: to adapt and to be adopted. I was able to adapt to the Khmer Rouge killing-fields society, and I was able to survive. When I came to America, I was able to adapt to America and to survive and to succeed at the same time because the United States is full of opportunity. If you work hard and put your mind on your work, you are likely to succeed. There is a strong possibility for my writing a second book, and in fact I am writing a second book already. It is a fiction book based on facts.

QMH: The Khmer Rouge systematically exterminated the educated and professional classes of Cambodia. Many of those who were not assassinated eventually escaped from the country, as you yourself escaped. Is a new middle class beginning to reemerge in Cambodia? And to what extent might the development of a new middle class depend upon the work of refugees now living abroad or possibly of former refugees returning to visit or to live in Cambodia?

SS: When I was in the White House with President Bush [the elder], we were involved with the peace process for Cambodia. We were meeting to discuss the role of Cambodians living overseas, and especially those in the United States. (The largest Cambodian communities in the United States are in Long Beach, California, and in Lowell, Massachusetts.) In our meetings, they asked me about the Cambodian Americans. I said that there would be three groups of Cambodians in the United States. The first group has a very well-established life here, and they may go back to visit Cambodia. They have children who have grown up here playing video games, and it would be difficult for them to move their families back. They would only go to visit. The second group includes those who have the ability to go back for longer periods of time. Then there is the third group who might go back to stay, so your question encompasses everything. For the past twenty years, since 1989, some Cambodians have returned to help out, to work either in government or in the private sector; some have become cabinet members. Others have returned with their families, particularly their children, to help the kids understand their cultural roots. The flow is constant. For me, I try to take my wife there once a year in order to introduce her to various
parts of the country and to stay in touch with friends. The new middle class that you mentioned is expanding slowly, but there is a degree of injustice, corruption, crime, and impunity that needs to be addressed as Cambodia becomes politically and socially mature.

QMH: The Vietnamese government, for example, now welcomes back the Vietnamese who live outside the country. Does Cambodia also welcome the Cambodians who live overseas and encourage them to return and invest in the economy?

SS: Yes. In fact, the Cambodian government started even earlier. They even offered overseas Cambodians permanent visas, which they call the “K” visas. Those who were born in Cambodia like me are issued permanent visas, stamped right here. They can go in at any time and stay as long as they want. Many people do go back to invest and help develop the country, and a few went back and became involved in the corruption. There are some bad elements, but overall good people have returned.

QMH: What do the Cambodians living overseas think of Cambodia nowadays?

SS: They think the country is moving forward on a good economic footing. The problems, which I mentioned earlier—with injustice, corruption, crime, and impunity—still remain. Therefore, Cambodia needs to work on these issues to correct them.

QMH: From photos, Angkor Wat is truly magnificent. My question is this: Might the policies of the Khmer Rouge for turning Cambodia into one great construction site under the central authority of the Angkor have been modeled on the supposed agricultural organization of the ancient authoritarian culture that produced the canals for rice production and the wats—or temples—that the wealth resulting from rice production allowed?

SS: No, I do not think that the Khmer Rouge had the idea of using the model of Angkor in building their Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge were trapped in their crazy ideology of trying to turn Cambodia into a utopian society, and no one knows why they went to such extremes—not even the Chinese, who were their masters. I do not think that the Khmer Rouge were adapting their Maoist ideology to the glorious past of the ancient Angkor civilization.

QMH: I have visited many museums around the world, and wherever I go I see works of art that have been taken from Angkor Wat. Does it hurt you when you see such pieces of art elsewhere and not in Cambodia?

SS: No. In fact, the pieces that were brought out before the Khmer Rouge period, a long time ago, are well displayed in public museums for people to
interview with sichan siv

view. What hurts me are the thieves who broke statues to sell them on the
black market, and which eventually ended up in private collections. But if
works are in a museum or in a place for public display, I think they are
safer there anyway, instead of possibly being stolen or broken by thieves in
Cambodia. To make Cambodian culture known to the world, in 1997, the
National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, organized an exhibition of
Cambodian art, and that was the most-visited exhibition at that gallery, ever.
During that summer, Cambodia and the United States joined hands to
mount the exhibition, and it was a very good introduction to the glorious
civilization of Cambodia.

QMH: Let me return for a moment to Pol Pot’s [1928–98, prime minister
from 1976 to 1979] policies. Can you say that the model employed by the
Angka was primarily Maoist and future-oriented, then, with the Cambo-
dian Cultural Revolution taking that ideology to a deadly extreme? Would
you say that Cambodia today has transcended that ideology and moved on
toward modern and sound economic and democratic models?

SS: The ideology was taken to a degree that even Maoist doctrine cannot
explain. It was criminal in its nature. I would say that Cambodia has de-
velope d a flawed economy and democracy. It will take Cambodia a bit longer
to move on toward what you might call a Western-style democracy. Some of
the serious domestic problems still need to be addressed—and again, they
are the ones that I have listed already: injustice, corruption, crime, and im-
punity.

QMH: Which foreign countries are investing the most in the development
of Cambodia today? Can you mention a few?

SS: The South Koreans are big investors today, along with the Singapor-
eans and the Thais; and the United States has a very high approval rating
in Cambodia. I have asked Cambodians in Cambodia why the United States
enjoys such a high rating, and I was told that the Cambodians have begun
to realize that the United States has no agenda in Cambodia beyond help-
ing the development of the democratic process and the economy. For ex-
ample, we gave Cambodia quite a quota on garments, and that was quite
helpful. Cambodia has been cooperating with us on a number of fronts—
with terrorism, for example. The Cambodian people now realize that the
United States is there to help them to gain a better life, to understand the
nature of freedom, and to pursue happiness.

QMH: Have you spoken with many Americans about investing in Cambodia,
and have you encouraged them to do so?

SS: Yes, when the opportunity has arisen. At the United Nations, my job
was to work with the other 191 member countries. Whenever possible, how-
ever, I would mention Cambodia and recommend that they consider investing there. American corporations are very long-term in their thinking. They go by the book, and they follow the rule of law. They obey the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act of the United States. If they find people abroad who are involved in corruption—with what I call UTM, or under-the-table money—there is a problem. It might take a corporation two years to enter and bid on a contract. Therefore, they are the kind of corporation that Cambodia welcomes because they bring a lot of credibility to investment in Cambodia.

QMH: In *Golden Bones*, your autobiography, you place much emphasis on the traditional role of the family—speaking especially of your own family and of neighboring families. The traditional structure of the Cambodian family was broken down under the rule of the Angka. Can the traditional family structure and village life in any way be recovered, and is this recovery desirable in today’s world?

SS: Absolutely. You ask me now about family and the importance of family, and it almost did break down. Looking at the cover of my book, you notice that my face is not on the cover but on the back, and you should ask questions like: *who, what, where, when, and why?* These questions are answered in the book. *Who* are you looking at? You are looking at the back of Sichan Siv. *What* is he doing? He is kneeling and praying. *Where* is he praying? He is at Angkor Wat. *When* was the photo taken? It was taken in March 1992, when I returned to Cambodia for the first time. *Why* was this photo chosen from among the hundreds that could have been selected? Because to me it is the ultimate symbol of faith, family, friends, and freedom—and the second word in this sequence is *family*. Family is very important in Cambodian society and, I believe, in Asian societies in general. In Cambodia, when the Khmer Rouge tried to break up the family, which is the basic unit in the society, they were going against the rule of nature. The Khmer Rouge were crazy—these people were crazy!—they were idiots and they were stupid! They wanted to use their political ideology to transform a culture that is old and based on a strong foundation, so they lost in the end. They could kill my family; they could kill my friends; they could kill my neighbors; but they could not kill the cultural foundation of the society. Today, families are back together in Cambodia, and on weekends you see motorcycles or scooters with whole families on them—with the father, the mother, the children—and they are carrying bananas and coconuts—and this is very heartwarming. I lost my father when I was in fourth grade, so my mother brought me up, and for me she was everything. A child’s education depends, of course, on the family, and not just on the school. We always hold the family as the most important component of children’s upbringing.
QMH: Two very important things in your life have been family, as you have just said, and also faith. Can you speak further about your faith in Lord Buddha?

SS: Cambodia is predominantly a Buddhist society—as are Thailand and Laos—and to the religious community in Vietnam, Buddhism is also very important. I grew up in a Buddhist society, and my mother was a devout Buddhist, and she taught us many things about love, caring, and sharing. When I was a child, she told me never to give up hope, no matter what happens. That kept me alive under the Khmer Rouge for a year. It kept me moving on after I arrived in America. So, when I got to Thailand, after I escaped out of Cambodia, I was ordained a Buddhist monk, because it is the Buddhist’s belief that by becoming a monk, you earn merit and accumulate good deeds, and you can dedicate those to your loved ones, and I did that for my mother, for my sister, and for my brother, and for their families. It was during that period that I really learned how to meditate, how to organize my thoughts, how to be more patient, to be persistent, and to become focused.

QMH: Are you still going to temples in the United States? Are you still a devout Buddhist now, as you were back then?

SS: Yes, I still go to Buddhist temples. There are not many where we live in San Antonio. I think there are two Thai temples, there is a Vietnamese temple—which I have yet to visit—but I have visited one of the Thai temples. I go to the temples whenever I have an opportunity. The largest temple in that region is in Houston, so I go to that temple whenever I go there.

QMH: There is a great difference between Buddhism in Vietnam and Cambodia because in Cambodia you have Theravada Buddhism and in Vietnam we have Mahayana Buddhism, primarily. Theravada Buddhism has been very important in Cambodia since the twelfth century. To what extent did the Khmer Rouge effectively eradicate Buddhism in your country? Is Buddhism still important in Cambodia today as the nation is attempting to reconstruct itself?

SS: Yes, that is another very good question. The Khmer Rouge did not destroy just Buddhism in Cambodia—they destroyed all religions. There was a Muslim community, and there was a Catholic community in Cambodia, and the largest cathedral in Southeast Asia was in Phnom Penh. The Khmer Rouge leveled it to the ground, and no one knows why they spent so much time and energy tearing down that building. They destroyed; they destroyed; they destroyed! They wanted to bring Cambodia to the “Year Zero,” as one Catholic priest refers to that time [see Ponchaud 1978]. They killed Buddhist monks, they disrobed them, and they forced them into la-
Q. M. Ha

bor camps. At that time, they considered that religion was the “blood sucker” of the society. Amazingly enough, I came across a Buddhist monk a few months after the Khmer Rouge came to power, and I thought I was hallucinating, but he was real. In fact, in my book, he was the one who told me to follow the sun and the moon to freedom. I didn’t understand what he meant until I escaped into the jungle, where I learned that I had to put the sun behind me in the morning and in front of me in the afternoon in order to get to Thailand—and the same at night, when the moon would rise behind me early in the evening and appear before me later at night or early in the morning. This is part of the wisdom that came to me at various parts of my life, and it led to my arrival and success in America.

QMH: Do you believe that there are forces that guide us that cannot rationally be explained?

SS: Yes, I do—and I think that you have taken the words right out of my mouth. I believe that everything happens for a reason. There was a truck driver who saved my life twice. I knew that he knew that I was not the man that I told him I was, but he didn’t say a word. He saved my life twice, and I cannot explain it. I spent a good deal of time looking for him each time I went back to Cambodia, and either by myself or with my wife I tried to find him. At the end of my book, I describe how we eventually found his two surviving sisters. That is an example of the occurrence of something that we simply cannot explain.

QMH: Let me return to the subject of ancient Cambodia. What importance do you give the memory of ancient Khmer civilization—as a continuing source of Cambodian national identity—for the development of a new Cambodia out of the ruins of the “killing fields”?

SS: As you mention, the ancient temples and the culture are the actual soul of Cambodia. Angkor Wat has been featured on the Cambodian flag regardless of the regime—even on the flag of the Khmer Rouge. Although they hated everything that represented or symbolized the past of Cambodia, they still used the image of Angkor Wat on their flag. Cambodia rose to greatness between the ninth and the fifteenth centuries, and particularly during the Angkor period. It is a monument or symbol of architectural marvels built during the twelfth century, and it is the largest religious complex in the world. It retains its symbolic importance in the culture of the redeveloping modern country.

QMH: Can we say that the people of Cambodia today look in many tangible ways to their glorious past as they attempt to build a new sense of national identity?
SS: They do look at their glorious past, but they must be careful. They cannot rest on the fact that their ancestors built Angkor Wat. They also must demonstrate that they can address the economic and social problems they face in the twenty-first century. They can look to Angkor as a symbol of their ancestors’ great achievements, but they must work hard to maintain that standard. That standard was set so high because, at the time, Angkor was the center of their highly developed civilization. They can use Angkor as the standard, but they must try to reach that standard today. From an economic standpoint, they must use the standard of the past to eradicate poverty, to assure success, to provide health care for everyone, to provide education, and to give people an opportunity to pursue the careers that they want. When I recently was in Cambodia, I saw a female truck driver, which is quite unusual, because that is not a traditional profession for women. From my generation, females went into the teaching profession. You didn’t see women operating heavy equipment. Opportunities are expanding, and the people are trying to adapt to the new environment. Of course they still set Angkor civilization as a high standard, but they must reach that standard by living in the twenty-first century.

QMH: Having spoken of the ancient culture of Cambodia and the Khmer culture, what about the influence of French culture in Cambodia?

SS: The French influence in Cambodia was very strong up to my generation. People in my generation spoke French. They did business in French. When people go to Cambodia, they will still find French influence there. In small villages there are bakeries that bake fresh bread every morning. That became part of Cambodia’s dietary culture. It is true that some of the best French restaurants in the 1960s were in Cambodia. I still run into people who visited Cambodia at that time, and they ask me if they are still there. I value that cultural influence, but at the same time, Cambodia has already reached the stage at which people in every neighborhood speak English. If they want to succeed, they will want to learn English. So, most Cambodians speak English, even children. If you go to Angkor, for example, children will sell you a set of postcards for one dollar, and they speak English. Moreover, they know quite a bit about America. You tell them “I’m from the United States,” and they will ask “Which state?” If you say “Texas,” they will say “Austin?” If you say “Massachusetts,” they will say “Boston?” If you say “California,” they will say “Sacramento?” They read, they learn, they listen. And that is very heartwarming. In my day, we didn’t have anything. We had books, books, books—which is why I devoted a section of my memoir to libraries. Nowadays the Cambodians use the Internet and cell phones; they have access to information. The good out of all this is that they are able to use this information positively.
QMH: Are there particular villages where French culture predominated? Are there still buildings that are really French in their architecture? Does the government own the colonial buildings, or do they belong to private owners?

SS: There are French colonial buildings everywhere in Cambodia. Usually the old governors’ mansions were all French, but most of the French mansions were in Phnom Penh. Those need to be preserved. They should not be razed to the ground just for the sake of commercial activity. Those old buildings are part of the cultural heritage. The government probably owns many of the buildings, and some do belong to private owners. They keep them up for investment, or for other purposes.

QMH: As a Vietnamese national, I noted in your book the references to the North Vietnamese communists and their activity in Cambodia—because in Vietnam we rarely heard of this activity. In your memoir, you focused on the facts, and you avoided comment on the Vietnamese communists. Can you comment more about Vietnam in Cambodian politics?

SS: When the Geneva Accord was signed in 1954, the Viet Minh [predecessors of the Viet Cong] took a few thousand Cambodians with them to Hanoi, and those are some of the current leaders of Cambodia. The Vietnamese communists have been involved in Cambodian politics for a long time. Ho Chi Minh [1890–1969] founded the Communist Party in Vietnam. During the Vietnam War, the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong began to use the eastern part of Cambodia as sanctuaries for R&R—rest and relaxation—and also for weapon storage. At one point, in 1966, there was a Cambodian government report stating that there were about 60,000 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong in Cambodia. The Cambodian army was half that number, and they were poorly trained and ill-equipped. They were no match for the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong. When the Vietnam War spread into Cambodia, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong attacked throughout Cambodia like a straw fire. Very rapidly they occupied villages and provinces. The Khmer Rouge really drew strength from the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong. When we signed the Peace Agreement in 1973, the Khmer Rouge took over the fighting, and, two years later, they unexpectedly won the war.

QMH: What can you say about the current relations between Vietnam and Cambodia?

SS: The present relationship is very good between Phnom Penh and Hanoi. They are good friends. I don’t know that they are good allies, but as I said earlier, some of Cambodia’s leaders were trained in Hanoi. They help each other, but I do not agree with the idea that the Vietnamese went into Cam-
bodia to "save" Cambodia. They came in to topple the Khmer Rouge regime, but they stayed there for ten years before they finally moved out.

**QMH:** Do you discern much racial discrimination between the Cambodians and the Vietnamese who live near the border?

**SS:** I have not visited the area near the border recently; but in my book, I mention 1968, the time when I went to visit my brother who was the district chief near the border. At the time, I saw lots of boats, and later I was told that the boatmen were Vietnamese agents. They were working as fishermen, but many people knew that they were Viet Cong agents. I think, back then, there was no real discrimination against the Vietnamese, even when people knew they were ready to come out and attack.

**QMH:** I would really like to hear you talk about the role of China in Cambodia nowadays, because the Vietnamese are influenced by the Chinese economically, politically, and culturally. How do the Cambodians look at China?

**SS:** That's one of my concerns—the Chinese influence—because China is so close to Cambodia. When the Cambodians start to learn Chinese, it becomes easy to overtake the country culturally and economically, particularly. The Cambodian leaders need to be careful about the long-term results. It is fine to have investments to add to the economic progress, but Cambodia should not become anything but Cambodia. Their influence is there; but for China, it's more of a problem. For Vietnam, it's even more challenging because of the common border. You do not want to turn Vietnam into a Chinese province, and we do not want to turn Cambodia into a Chinese province.

**QMH:** In the area of Southeast Asia, who would you say are the best friends or best allies of Cambodia?

**SS:** I believe that Cambodia wants to be friendly with all of them.

**QMH:** Thank you for that insight. If you would choose one important message, from your experience, to convey from the people of Cambodia to the people of the United States, what would that message be?

**SS:** Visit Cambodia and learn about its culture and civilization. Cambodia has been a friend of the United States for a long time. It is interesting that the United States has the highest approval rating in Cambodia in comparison with anywhere—in old Europe or new Europe or elsewhere, perhaps even in some of the states. That would be my recommendation. Go and visit Cambodia.
QMH: As a very important Asian person in America, what message would you convey to the people in Cambodia about the United States—as an ambassador?

SS: Believe in the fundamental principles of the United States, which was founded on the strong principle of freedom. This is what we want in Cambodia. This is not the Cold War; but there are chances of getting misinformation and misunderstanding. Believe that the United States is a friend of Cambodia, economically and politically. What I would say to them is that the United States wants Cambodia to enjoy what I call “democratic prosperity”; and the fact that Cambodia gives the United States so high an approval rating is already an example of their understanding that Cambodia and the United States are best friends.

QMH: Thank you very much for your time, sir.

Note

†Angka ("The Organization") is the term used to refer to the central government by Cambodians living in the country during the Pol Pot regime (1976–79).

References