

Essay Review

Education and the Politics of Language: hegemony and pragmatism in Cambodia, 1979–1989

Thomas Clayton, 2000

Hong Kong, Comparative Education Research Centre, University of Hong Kong

243 + xviii pp. \$US 32 (+\$5 air mail carriage)

ISBN 962 8093 83 5

Following the withdrawal of the Vietnamese from Cambodia (1989), the Paris peace accords of 1991 and the 1993 elections, the Phnom Penh boulevard formerly known as the 'Kampuchea-Vietnam Friendship Bvd.' was renamed 'Kampuchea Krom Bvd.'. This rather public statement of a change in the character of the relationship between the neighbours is a reminder of the large delta area of South Vietnam, still incorporating a Cambodian-speaking minority, taken over from Greater Cambodia by Vietnamese immigrants in the 17th century.

Thomas Clayton's second last chapter, 'Forming New Men and Women', ends with an apocryphal story echoing the irony of this symbolic reinsertion of an almost universal Cambodian perspective on Vietnamese motives. The story gains its point from the writer's application, to his description of the decade-long Vietnamese occupation of modern Cambodia, of the theoretical elaboration of Gramsci's concept of hegemony as ideological domination. This is a goal of considerably broader international scope than the imperialism attributed by many to the Vietnamese.

The initial chapters on the broad theoretical context of Clayton's analysis report the attempts by scholars succeeding Gramsci to describe in other international settings the role of '... education as the principal mechanism for the promotion of the dominant ideology ...' (p. 13). His penultimate chapter describes the Vietnamese process of political education of the Cambodians or, as put another way by some of his Cambodian informants, the attempt to 'change the brains' of Cambodians. Clayton ends the chapter with the story of the truly magnificent building for a political training college (now a part of the Royal University of Phnom Penh) constructed by the Vietnamese as a parting gift dedicated to the promotion of socialist ideology in Cambodia. When Clayton returned to find it empty, neglected and deteriorating in 1994, his Cambodian companion simply shrugged his shoulders and remarked, 'It's all gone now'.

Thomas Clayton, who has worked as a teacher and research worker in Cambodia on at least three occasions since the early 1990s, has prepared a comprehensive report on the objective and operations of the education component of the ten-year Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. Chapters 2 and 3 set the theoretical context of the report, with a learned discourse on current developments in the theory of hegemonic relations and the role of language as an instrument of client-donor relations. This framework adds a number of subtle dimensions to the rather simplistic debate over Cambodia's successive choices of preferred international language for access to the outside world, a choice which generated such heat in the mid-1990s.

The book's sub-title refers to the pragmatism of the Vietnamese policy of ideological conversion, choosing to use, wherever possible, the Khmer language, rather than Vietnamese, as the medium of education. This contrasts with the Vietnamisation which characterised the previous occupation of Cambodia by its neighbour in the 1830s.

Many of the examples described by Clayton remain issues of aid policy and practice, now raised in the regular consultative group meetings between the Royal Government of Cambodia and its international donors.

For those of us who are aid workers in Cambodian education, Clayton's update on the theory of hegemony gives 'development cooperation' a whole new set of perspectives, many validated by our own on-site experience of the course of aid relationships, so often frustrating to both recipient and donor.

The policy setting is described in the four Appendices, comprising a most enlightening set of education policy documents from the occupation, authorised in turn over the period 1983–1984, by the party secretary, the prime minister, the chief of the Central Committee of the Party and the deputy prime minister. The first sets the tone:

The main objective of higher and technical education is to provide good political training and good technical training.

One detailed nine-page circular (Appendix 3) is headed 'Ideological and Political Training in Higher and Technical Education'. As illustrated by Clayton's story of the fate of the political training college, a decade later there was little to show in the way of outcomes from this policy.

Cambodian reports on the origin of these documents exemplify another dimension of the on-going aid policy context, one well illustrated by the last decade of aid to Cambodia from a much broader range of donors. Clayton cross-checked with various Ministry informants and traced the Cambodian who translated the drafts, prepared by Vietnamese advisers, into what became Cambodian policy documents (and who later provided Clayton with the English form of the policy documents reported in the four Appendices).

During the 1990s, the principal change in the hegemonic process was the plurality of donor agencies driving the drafting of policies and plans, often in divergent and even conflicting directions. Recent initiatives in donor policies, intended to foster and support corporate Ministry of Education development and hence ownership of its policies, are pushing the aid dilemma in the first decade of the new millennium towards a new arena for donor–client conflict. The strongly felt Ministry of Education preference for what is virtually universal education to upper secondary level is beyond the reach of combined Cambodian and donor resources, let alone unaided national capacity. No donor is likely to support such an ambitious policy, fraught with consequences which the national framers appear to discount.

Clayton's concluding remarks on the 'hard choices' are as relevant to today's emerging dilemmas as to the situation in the 1980s:

The tension that Cambodians describe in educational assistance during the occupation plays out across the world daily, as periphery educators balance their need for resources against the certainty of ideological imposition. For Cambodians and other citizens of the periphery, educational assistance from hegemonic core groups is indeed a double-edged sword, forcing hard choices with far-reaching implications. (p. 166)

Equally revealing of the character of the Cambodian policy development context is the method by which Clayton has obtained most of his compelling evidence. The four Appendices of policy documentation (Vietnamese drafted) are preceded by eight pages of end notes from the chapters, all notes based on interviews, mainly with Ministry officials of the time, mostly from the Ministry of Education or from higher education institutions.

This rich source of information is in default of any other Cambodian-initiated written policy documentation of the period.

A number of Cambodian educators told Clayton that between 1979 and 1981 no language policy existed for Cambodian higher education. Some pointed out that a default policy did in practice operate—French was often used as the only language shared by the remaining educated Cambodians and the rapidly diminishing cadres of older, French-speaking, Vietnamese advisers. In the broader field of educational policy generally, this characteristic lack of policy driven practice has left a vacuum which has continued down to the present time as the principal barrier to efforts to establish effective governance (and not only in education).

Recently this situation has begun to be changed by the most significant Cambodian initiated education policy since the Constitution was adopted in 1993. The policy is directed towards universal education to Grade 12 (see above). An equally significant Cambodian-determined policy, set out in the constitutional clauses defining the right to education, was the commitment to universal education to Grade 9. Neither policy shows serious prospects of being realised. As recently documented by UNESCO, even the 1990 international target of Education For All to Grade 6, also subscribed to by Cambodia, is far from being realised.

Vietnamese efforts to bring their own internationalist Marxist hegemonic order into the customary situation of received Cambodian practice were perceived by Cambodians as requiring compliance with the directions set by the occupying power: 'We had no choice'. After 1981, Vietnamese initiatives were perceived as backed by the menace of the fate of Pen Sovan (the first Cambodian prime minister after the departure of the Khmer Rouge, abruptly exiled to Hanoi), or even the widely rumoured fate of Chan Sy (his successor as prime minister who died in a Soviet Union hospital—a death perceived by some of Clayton's Cambodian informants as the consequence of a murderous injection by Vietnamese doctors en route through that country).

Clayton tests out successive international theories of hegemony and linguistic policy against Cambodian compliance, sometimes conversion, sometimes covert resistance, mostly pragmatic tolerance without any sense of ownership—hence the collapse of these policies with the departure of the occupiers. He accepts the contribution of various theories (e.g. of linguistic imperialism), defines their limitations and goes on to his own pragmatic moderation of their hypotheses through consideration of the choices exercised by target individuals in response to the utility, for their own purposes, of the particular characteristics of the agency of change. Clayton sees agency in today's pluralistic world in much more complex dimensions than, say, the monolithic policies of a core state towards, for example, the use of an imperial language.

Many observers (following David Chandler) see the choices exercised by Cambodians as determined by their cultural history of learning how to survive in a situation of dependency on resources controlled by others, behaviours which today continue to characterise the response to international aid. Clayton's research has located some potent Cambodian phrases to describe these behaviours—for example of those Cambodians who became leaders under the Vietnamese occupation through ideological compliance in the pursuit, not of GNP, but rather of GPP—'Gross Personal Product'.

Little surprise, whether in the 1980s or currently, that with the departure of the controllers of aid resources, traditional behaviours reassert themselves in the face of badly conceived and inadequately resourced cultural efforts to change the culture of governance. Hasty missionary zeal may well lead to apparent success due to compliance extrinsically motivated by the prospect of material benefits (or, in the case of the occupation, the avoidance of risk). However this achievement is a far cry from conviction arising from study in depth, the resultant perception of the benefits intrinsic to certain courses of behaviour,

and the free choice of new policies. Little wonder that one informant told Clayton the Cambodians ‘changed their faces’—but not their brains.

Mark Ginsberg writes a perceptive foreword which opens with his shock, on a visit to South Vietnam in 1999, at the obvious failure of the former Vietnamese occupiers to apply socialist theory in their own country. He draws attention to the relevance of Freire’s notion of dialogue as a means of arriving at shared convictions which might lead to sustainable changes in the local culture of human relations.

There is little in Clayton’s study to suggest anything remotely resembling a genuine dialogue between the Cambodians and what they clearly perceived as their Vietnamese masters.

In Vietnamese-occupied Cambodia, not only was success in the political education courses a prerequisite for professional advancement, the courses themselves and the related tests were seen by the Cambodians being taught by the Vietnamese as extremely difficult. It should hardly be surprising that a complex Marxist theoretical model, based on abstract analysis of a wide range of cross-national experience and philosophies, failed to gain acceptance by a critical mass of Cambodian opinion leaders. The great majority of the trainees lacked the educational background to benefit from sophisticated philosophical analysis.

Little in Cambodian cultural experience (apart from the lost generation of the best of the French-educated postgraduate students of the 1960s) could have prepared the students of the 1980s for the adoption of a sophisticated Marxist cosmology. One might equally ask whether the relatively brief workshops underlying current Ministry of Education choices of education investment priorities will influence the Cambodian culture of educational planning any longer than the flow of donor funds.

We are left, though, with at least one major difference between the 1990s and the 1980s. Clayton’s introductory chapter refers to the ‘Central Themes of the Book’ and goes on to summarise:

At its most general, this book examines education as, in the words of French sociologist Louis Althusser (1971), ‘the dominant Ideological State Apparatus’ in occupied Cambodia. (p. 3)

No such priority was evident in government decisions about education in Cambodia in the 1990s. True, government pays lip-service to the priority to education—for example, the oft repeated assertion from 1994 that education would receive 15% of the national budget. The hard fact remains that, down to the present day, education’s share of the recurrent budget (i.e. the national contribution largely free of distortion from the donor contributed component) remains around 8%.

In default, then, of policy choices backed by adequate resource commitments, educational opportunity increasingly favours those who can afford to pay their way through a semi-privatised system, particularly in Phnom Penh and the larger cities.

One wonders to what extent the end of the present aid bonanza will result in another ideological shift of the kind Clayton detects at various stages in Cambodia’s modern history:

As one Cambodian educator explained in 1994, after the Vietnamese withdrawal and the turning away from socialist political and economic systems ‘we did not want to continue with communist dogma [as it] was not important for our students’. In many ways, this ideological shift resembled the changes that took place in the 1840s, the 1950s and the 1970s under King Duang, Prince Sihanouk and Pol Pot respectively (see Chapters 4 and 5). In each case a period of foreign control ended,

and Cambodians immediately reformed hegemonic educational systems to eradicate ideologies associated with the departed regimes. (p. 148)

There are signs that Cambodian pragmatism is already preparing to dispense with another failed ideology. The nation may attach less significance to what was seen as its bearer, the English language, associated with a level of enhanced regional investment that never eventuated. The rapid informal growth in the number of efficient Chinese schools with Khmer enrolments is impressive, as is the interest of employed adults in the number of schools offering part-time after-hours classes in Chinese. As the Chinese Khmer resume their role as business leaders, finding space for their own priorities in the current policy vacuum, both economic and educational, and as China itself backs its strategic priority to its neighbours with substantial resource inputs, growing numbers of Khmer see the Chinese language as the new passport to employment opportunities.

VINCENT MCNAMARA

Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport

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