

The Development of Cambodia

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Today, it is quite easy to dismiss academic philosophy and theory of development as ‘out of touch’ with the real world. Many will argue that what contemporary Cambodia needs is more science, more technology and greater Westernization to ‘catch-up’ with the developed world. Foreign development organizations vigorously promote this idea, and it is then picked up by many Cambodians (including local think tanks). But what all of these organizations fail to understand is that any ‘development’ that does not fit into the cultural, historical and social context of Cambodia will fail. The only way to break from this cycle of failed development is to find intellectual resources within Cambodia. Only when the Cambodians stand up and explain why ‘development’ designs do not fit the local context or can challenge Western development model with an indigenous theory, will the situation improve. That is, the only way to break the cycle of failed development is to first break from the unthinking allegiance to Western intellectual paradigms.

Any successful attempt must be built on indigenous philosophy. However, trying to formulate this indigenous response to the dysfunctions of truncated Western thought in Cambodia (‘development’) without first deeply engaging with Western thought is a road that only leads to further ultra-nationalism and extreme-confrontation

(as happened during the Khmer Rouge regime). As Nietzsche demands, we must seek to create new values. Creating new values for Cambodia begins by building them in synthesis with and creative response to Western philosophy and social theory. Once this indigenous Cambodian philosophy and social theory is built, it can then become the basis for Cambodian development (as opposed to the current wholesale Westernization of Cambodia’s development). It will take time, but only when indigenous philosophy and social theory fully emerge can “Cambodian thinking serves Cambodia”.

More broadly, we non-Cambodians need Cambodia to soon find its original voice, so that the donors agencies stop speaking for it, and so that Cambodia can contribute to the growing global chorus of voices collectively calling for a more peaceful and equitable world. As UN Leang continually to explore and asks me in many of our deep dialogues: “What constitutes the deepest principles of Khmer philosophy សន្តិភាវិកម្ម (pacification-action peacefully towards being)? How can we understand it in contemporary philosophical language? And what contribution might it make to both the future of Cambodia and our shared global world?”



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