

## **Khmer Rouge brutalities through the eyes of a child**

**US-based author Chanrithy Him reflects upon her early years in Cambodia and the dark force that has shaped everything since**

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It had always seemed a mystery why all the former French colonies in Southeast Asia -- Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos -- became communist on achieving independence in the third quarter of the twentieth century, while none of the British ones -- Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong -- did.

Then a historian pointed out that it was largely because the bright young students from the French-administered territories went to study in Paris, where they imbibed the Marxist theories of Jean-Paul Sartre and his school. Students from Britain's colonies, by contrast, were sent to London and came under the influence of skeptical empiricists, academics who looked at the facts and concluded there was something to be said on the one side, but something on the other as well. Revolution from the mouth of the gun was the natural product of the first style of thinking, Parliamentary democracy of the second.

The French spawned the modern world's first such revolution, and it was not without its successes. But French elegance and sophistication have added a spurious charm to the ideas of some of their subsequent thinkers. The truth is, they have a lot to answer for.

1965 was not a good year to be born in Cambodia. But the author of this book eventually escaped the brutalities of the Khmer Rouge and at the age of 16 found herself in America, albeit experiencing recurrent nightmares set among the pine forests and cascading waters of Oregon rather than the papaya and mango groves of the land of her birth.

Others managed to migrate to the States later, and by the time she was 24, Chanrithy Him found herself working for a project investigating post-trauma stress disorder (PTSD) among the 200 schoolchildren of Cambodian descent at a Cleveland high school. Despite extensive repression of the memories of their childhood in the battle for academic success in their new country, half the adolescents proved to be sufferers.

But this book is largely about the author's own sufferings, from the age of five when American bombing and the Khmer Rouge incursion followed close on one another's heels to make life in a country previously renowned for its charm and civilized ways all but unbearable.

**(Continued)**

**(*Khmer Rouge brutalities through the eyes of a child cont'd.*)**

What, then, makes this book different from other memoirs of this terrible period in Cambodia's history? That it's a woman's story provides many insights into the conventions and taboos of the old society, not all admirable to a Western mind, but invariably preferable to the sullen ruthlessness the Khmer Rouge replaced it with. In addition, it's virtually a child's story, or at least a violent social upheaval seen from a child's perspective. This gives the story a softness that only throws the Khmer Rouge's disastrous policies into starker relief.

This book is not a place to look for details of atrocities. Rather, it chronicles the daily slide of one extended family into starvation, disease, and in some cases death. The Khmer Rouge are loathed (even today the author cannot see people dressed all in black without wincing), but Chanrithy Him is something of an impartial observer, and Thai soldiers in charge of refugee camps on the Thai/Cambodian border are also shown to possess their share of an instinct for brutality.

The Cambodians were in many ways the most tragic of all the victims of the hideous transition of Southeast Asia's states from colonial status to independence. They suffered twice, being firstly dragged into the Vietnam War, and then taken over by their own revolutionaries. They were in every sense caught between power blocs. And when the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia from the east in an attempt to end their neighbor's agony, the Western powers continued to back the Khmer Rouge rather than give support to their former, humiliatingly victorious, enemies.

The book's odd title refers to the Cambodian saying that when broken glass floats, something unnatural is happening -- evil is triumphing over good. Like the forces of evil in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the Khmer Rouge appeared to be undermining human nature itself -- and indeed, a change in people's very nature was what they had been taught to aim for, planned on, and actually envisaged. There can be few people who don't know where their support came from, and where they were trained.

~ **Bradley Winterton – Taipei Times**