

**Kenneth T So: "The Khmer home in Southeast Asia: a wider view"**

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***Kenneth T So**, a Khmer living in the United States, offers a view of Cambodia's past and future, prompted by comments about the Cambodian-Thai border issue*

A HISTORY lesson must be taught to Don Pramudwinai, the Thai Foreign Ministry spokesman reported in the Thai newspaper The Nation of July 23 as saying that Siem Reap, Battambang, and Sisophon belonged to Thailand.

Unlike the Khmer people, who are native to Southeast Asia, the Thai were emigrants from China. They were one of the ethnic groups from the region of the Yangtze River, and founded the Nanchao Kingdom in northwest Yunan around the 7th century.

From Nanchao, the Thai spread to parts of Southeast Asia: to the Shan states of Burma, to northern Thailand and the Chao Phraya valley (until 1939 Siam), to Laos, and to northern Vietnam (Thai Dam or Black Thai, and Thai Deng or Red Thai).

The Kingdom of Nanchao fell to the Mongol army of Kublai Khan about 1253 and its fall accelerated the movement of the Thai south and eastward, pressing against the Khmer Empire.

Given a choice of fighting the Mongols or the Khmer, the Thai opted to fight the Khmer, believing their chances of survival greater. They won control of the Khmer-Mon territory of Dvarati and Haripunjaya.

The double defeats of the Khmer at Sukhothai in northern Thailand by the celebrated Thai warrior Phra Ruang, and at Haripunjaya by another Thai warrior, Mangrai, led to the foundation of the Thai Kingdoms of Sukhothai in 1238 and Chiangmai in 1296.

Chiangmai maintained its independence as a separate Thai territory until it was conquered by King Phya Taksin in 1775, then absorbed by the Bangkok Kingdom in 1782.

Sukhothai, ruled by King Ramkemaeng, weakened after his death in 1378, and was absorbed into the new Kingdom of Ayuthaya founded by King Rama Thibodi in 1350.

During his reign, from 1350 to 1369, he tried many times to take Angkor by force.

Even though the Khmer had continually lost territory to the Thai during that time, paradoxically the Khmer culture, art, language, dance, court etiquette, and religion had infiltrated and influenced the Thai people.

In 1417, Po-ea Yat became King at the age of 21 under the full occupation of the Thai at Angkor, the capital of the Khmer empire. He took the name of Borom Reachea II. He fought the occupying Thai army and finally succeeded in chasing the Thai out of Angkor in 1427.

However, during the Thai retreat, they took with them thousands of Khmer families, including intellectuals and strong, able bodies, as prisoners - leaving the capital city empty of all but the tired, the weak, and the sick.

The Thai strategy was clever: not only did they obtain the use of the best of the Khmer people, but they weakened the Khmer empire and thwarted further attacks for some time.

In addition, the breeding between the Thai and Khmer yielded offspring of strong physique and intellect.

The retreating Thai army occupied the western part of the Khmer territory, namely the provinces of Chantaborei, Roy-ng, Baschimborei, and Nokor Reach Sima which the Thai called Chantaboun (or Chantaborei), Roy-ng, Prachin, and Korat. Fearful of having his capital too close to the Thai capital Ayuthaya, King Po-ea Yat moved his capital from Angkor south to Basan, on the east side of Mekong, in 1431, then a year later moved again to Phnom Penh.

The king made a tactical error by moving the capital of the Khmer empire so far to the east away from the Thai capital: the move signaled his weakness and unwillingness to fight the Thai, and virtually invited them to further encroach on the vast expanse of Khmer territory between the newly established Thai frontier and the new Khmer capital.

For their part the Thais were relatively satisfied with their possessing the four Khmer provinces. In addition, they had their hands full trying to control the newly acquired Khmer population.

After 47 years, King Po-ea Yat abdicated in 1463 in favor of his eldest son, Noreay Reachea II. He reigned until his death in 1468, and was succeeded by his younger brother, Srei Reachea.

Unlike his father and elder brother, King Srei Reachea was not content with the diminished kingdom they had left him, and began preparing his army to reconquer the four lost Khmer provinces.

The King ordered his army to attack the kingdom of Ayuthaya in 1475. The Khmer army was to attack the Thai from both sea and land: the King's Samdech Choavea Tolha (prime minister) was to head from Kampot toward Chantaborei, while the King would lead the land army personally. He asked his younger brother, Srei Thomma Reachea, to reign in his place during his absence from Phnom Penh.

King Srei Reachea's army crossed through Battambang and Sra Kaeo and arrived at Nokor Reach Sima (Korat) so swiftly that it took the Thai governor by surprise. Without much of a fight, the Thai surrendered Nokor Reach Sima and Baschimborei to the Khmer army.

King Srei Reachea then concentrated all his forces at Baschimborei (Prachin Buri) to attack Ayuthaya, the Thai capital. He launched many offensives against Ayuthaya but each time the Thai pushed back the Khmer army.

While Srei Reachea was busy fighting the Thai at Ayuthaya, his nephew Srei Soriyotei (son of Noreay Reachea) revolted in Phnom Penh. He formed his own army and moved to the eastern side of the Mekong river.

He controlled the provinces of Kampong Siem, Stung Treng, Baray, and Choeung Prey. Not to be outdone by his nephew, Srei Thomma Reachea prevented his brother King Srei Reachea from returning to Phnom Penh and expanded his control over all the provinces on the western side of the Mekong river.

After hearing that his brother and nephew had betrayed him, Srei Reachea decided to return to Phnom Penh and asked his generals to take over the governance of the Khmer territory regained from the Thais.

Thus in 1478 the Khmer kingdom was ruled by three kings, and Srei Reachea wasted time and energy fighting Srei Soriyotei for 10 years.

The civil war gave the Thai King Maha Chakrabatti his greatest opportunity to weaken the Khmer people once and for all.

King Chakrabatti, considering Srei Reachea too powerful and anti-Thai and Srei Soriyotei illegitimate, chose to support Srei Thomma Reachea in this Khmer royal feud. As a result of his support, both Srei Reachea and Srei Soriyotei were defeated, captured and brought back to Ayuthaya, where they died soon after.

But for the rebellion of King Srei Reachea's brother and nephew, Cambodia might have been an empire stretching from Prey Nokor to Ayuthaya. Never again would Cambodia come close to recapturing the lost Khmer provinces from Thailand.

Khmer disunity was the cause of that loss. And we Khmer have never learned from our past mistakes. We fought and still fight among ourselves, and our enemies gain from our troubles. Greed, power, and selfishness have been the downfall of the Khmer race.

Is there a chance for Cambodia to regain Chanborei (Chantaboun), Roy-ng, Baschimborei (Prachin), and Nokor Reach Sima (Korat) from Thailand - and most of south Vietnam back from Vietnam? Realistically, **no**.

However, there is a chance for Cambodia to regain the trust of all Khmer living anywhere in the world. How can we gain their trust? How can we influence the Thai and Vietnamese policies toward Cambodia?

We must practice a peaceful revolution. We must help people of Khmer descent living in Thailand and Vietnam to organize themselves into political forces that the governments in these two countries cannot ignore.

However, for people of Khmer descent to want to help Cambodia, the Khmer government in Phnom Penh must first get its house in order. A country is powerful if its economy is strong and its social justice is based on fairness and the democratic rule of law.

The Phnom Penh government must take the lead. We must follow the example of the way the Japanese and Germans conducted themselves during their reconstruction period after World War II.

When Cambodia becomes a nation with an economic strength parallel to Thailand's and a social justice system parallel to the western world's, then the Khmer living in Thailand and Vietnam will have a great affinity.

Khmer Surin and Khmer Krom are like two children separated from their parents during a war. One child was put in an orphanage, the other was adopted. The adopted child may have an easier time than the orphan child growing up, but both long for their parents to come and take them back home.

The adopted child who lives with relatively rich parents may not want to go back home to his real parents if these are poor and drunk. Yes, Cambodia right now is poor, drunk, and undisciplined. The same may be less so for the orphan child, but he nevertheless wishes for good parents. Until the real parents are sober, good providers, full of tender and loving care, then and only then, will the children respect their parents.

I believe that Cambodia can be a good parent to her children. Don't let artificial frontiers separate us: we must be united in spirit and action. One day we will all come back home and rejoice as a united Khmer family.