

FEATURE

Destination: Cambodia

By Stanton Jue



Phnom Penh, capital of the Kingdom of Cambodia, was my first Foreign Service post. The assignment was Chinese Affairs Officer. I knew very little about the country, nor what the mission was precisely. But, my curiosity, coupled with the appeal of adventure, played a part in motivating me to take the job. Why Phnom Penh? A bit of historical context might help in placing the assignment into perspective.

In the spring of 1954, Ho Chi-minh's troops, after a 56-day siege, overran the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu, a strategic base near the Laotian border in North Vietnam. Soon an international conference was convened in Geneva which divided the former French colony into three independent sovereign states, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Each of the newly independent states faced many daunting political, economic and social problems. Vietnam was in

disarray and struggling for control of the country between Hanoi and Saigon; in Laos, 80 percent of the country was already occupied by communist Pathet Lao forces; and in Cambodia, the government of Prince Sihanouk pursued a dubious policy of neutrality in hope of salvaging its newly independent status.

The region as a whole was volatile and vulnerable to external exploitation. Not surprisingly, the communist bloc was more aggressive than the West by offering economic aid and political promises. On the other hand, Washington, having had the painful experience of the Korean War (1950-53) and the offshore islands crisis in the Taiwan Strait (1954-58), was slow, reluctant and showed little interest in direct involvement in the region. However, when the situation appeared ominous with the threat that the countries in the region might fall, one by one, like falling dominoes, under heavy communist pressure, our definition of strategic interests changed. In order to block the spread of communism, our government took on a more assertive role.

My baptism into the Foreign Service was unusual and certainly not in the normal or conventional mode. In 1956, I was a graduate student at the University of California/Berkeley, while also working on a Columbia Foundation project in San Francisco. Early one morning in June, at 5:30 a.m., the phone rang. I was startled and wondered who would phone so early. The voice at the other end of the line was from Washington, asking if I would be interested in a job opportunity overseas and if so, could I come to Washington for further discussion. I accepted the offer.

Following several months of basic training at Foreign Service Institute in Rosslyn, I was ready to go. In San Francisco my former colleagues wondered about my decision, saying that they could not understand why I would want to leave the comfortable life in S.F. for a remote, unknown land.

Though enthusiastic about the prospect of the assignment, I was still uncertain whether the Foreign Service would be my life long career. Earlier I had attended a session with a State Department recruiter on the campus in which he expounded on the challenges of the Foreign Service and the honor and privilege to serve and represent the United States abroad. He told us the Foreign Service is not for anyone; only those who are highly motivated and have the qualifications would be invited to join. When the time came, I was willing to give it a try but I never thought it would be long term, as it turned out.

Flying out on a large Pan Am Clipper in San Francisco, my wife, Florence, and I had stopovers in Honolulu, Tokyo, Taipei, Hong Kong, and Saigon before reaching our destination, Phnom Penh. Because of the long flight, the plane offered overnight sleeping berths. The dilemma for Florence was whether to change into pajamas or sleep in her clothes. She finally decided to sleep in her clothes.

After changes of planes at several cities, we arrived in Phnom Penh's Pochentong Airport. From the window of the approaching plane one could see the glittering golden roofs of the royal palace. We were shocked at the condition of the airport, which was squalid, and unpaved with a very short dirt runway. The airport terminal was nothing more than a wooden hut. The Executive Officer of the U.S. Information Service (USIS) Otto Stromenger met us and took us to our first residence, a two story villa on the outskirts of the city. The first level of the house, consisting of servant quarters and a car port, was similar to most villas occupied by foreigners. Our air freight had already arrived, and along with basic

furnishing provided by the embassy, we had the tools to set up a household quickly.

The first evening we met with Public Affairs Officer John Anspacher and his wife Eleanor and their two children. They welcomed us to Phnom Penh and explained the diplomatic and social protocols as well as living in Cambodia. A very relieved Anspacher related a little anecdote about my assignment. As a normal procedure, he said, Washington sends out a brief cable with the incoming officer's name, brief background and estimated time of arrival. The ambassador, Carl Strom, expected an older experienced officer and was in disbelief when he read I was born in 1934, a 21-year old coming out to advise the embassy on Chinese affairs! Washington corrected the error in another cable showing the year of my birth as 1924, not 1934, thus making me 31, as I really was. The ambassador accepted me with no further qualms.

My position, Chinese Affairs Officer, was never fully defined. The ambassador and his staff knew it was important at the time and wanted someone qualified to keep an eye on Chinese Communist (ChiCom) activities. Beyond that, though, it seemed quite vague. My office, "Special Assistant for Chinese Affairs" was located next to the office of the USIS Director. Looking back, this position was meant to be a function largely of my own making and how I wanted to proceed, though no one openly said so.

My first foray into the job was to identify my audience and develop good rapport with this group. Partly because of my proficiency in Mandarin and Cantonese dialects and partly because of my familiarity with Chinese ways of thinking and doing things, it was not too difficult to learn the dynamics of the Chinese in Phnom Penh - the economic pressures, social structure and cultural dreams. The power of the Chinese rests primarily in the business sector and many of the leaders tend to gravitate to the five Chinese congregations (associations) representing linguistic and geographic regions in South China:

Fukien, Swatow, Canton, Hakka, and Hainan. The congregations represent Chinese interests, arbitrate disputes, and control the Chinese public schools.

To foster good relations with the congregation/business leaders, I began to listen and learn of their views, concerns, hopes, and problems. I was conscious of the traditional Chinese respect for their elders, as most of them were 20 years older than me, and I was careful not to appear too arrogant or overly aggressive but to be humble enough to seek their views and advice. At the outset, they were friendly but cautious toward me as one coming from and representing the United States. I met periodically with them as a group, but often individually in informal settings.

Over a period of time, mutual trust developed. We exchanged views on a myriad of issues freely about Cambodian- Chinese interactions, Chinese schools, youth groups, and the coming and goings of ChiCom delegations and visitors. Two of the congregation leaders, Hakka and Hainan, were more formal and less

open as they were not fully sure of me. They both were more sympathetic and supportive of mainland China, our antagonist in the Cold War, and less with the Republic of China on the island of Taiwan.

Working with a small staff we translated all daily and weekly Chinese newspapers and publications. Important stories became special reports or part of the WEEKA, a weekly report sent to Washington. Monitoring, analyzing, and reporting became a major part of my focus. Ironically, when I was working in the department's Freedom of Information Office in the '80s and '90s, I had the opportunity and obligation to review and release many of my old reports in response to requests from scholars and journalists under the Freedom of Information Act.

Stanton Jue writes about his first post, Phnom Penh in 1958, and his experiences there as the U.S. Embassy's Chinese affairs officer.