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Book Review: Bamboo Promise: Prison Without Walls by Vicheara Houn

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The mass killings in Cambodia still hold a world record for state terror. No government has murdered a greater proportion of its citizens: one in five Cambodians—more than 1.5 million people—died at the hands of the Khmer Rouge (KR). Such numbers are hard to grasp and the impact on people, society, the economy, and culture are beyond our comprehension. *Bamboo Promise* by Vicheara Houn is a stark reminder of what these numbers mean for the day-to-day life of an average Cambodian person. Written years after the events occurred, her account is nonetheless fresh and colored with numerous intimate events and encounters. Her story stands out, as a chronicle of courage and survival, and is unquestionably riveting. In the end, as we know, our narrator—

Vicheara Houn—survives to tell the tale of mass murder. Her survival and her new life in the United States prompted her to retrace her experiences of depravation and death, partly to pay respect to all those who silently perished. *Bamboo Promise* adds to the growing number of accounts published in English by those who lived through the years of terror when the KR targeted, tortured and killed many of the educated elite. *Bamboo Promise* makes sure that we won't forget what transpired in Cambodia in the 1970s.

The first section of *Bamboo Promise* describes Houn's childhood in post-independence Cambodia and the second part of the book delves into the years of starvation and hard labor. The final section recounts Houn's return to normalcy and her final decision to escape to Thailand. The genocide in Cambodia continues to hold a mysterious grasp on our imagination. For one, the KR rebels came to power in plain sight while Westerners were still in town. Moreover, some Europeans and Americans had had interactions with the KR earlier and studied their propaganda material, which foreshadowed the horrors to come. Published pamphlets laid out in meticulous detail the evacuation of urban areas and the establishment of state controlled collectivism based on a reduced population. A KR official told a Newsweek reporter right after the fall of *Phnom Penh* that the people of the capital will grow rice, and moreover, that they will work or starve (Maguire, 2005, p. 50).

The KR followed through with its promises when they managed to take over *Phnom Penh* in April 1975. They coerced educated professionals to plow fields, they forced the small Muslim minority to eat pork, they housed pigs in the National Library, and they abolished all

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private property, including money. In the beginning, Cambodian refugees who were able to escape to Thailand gave exact descriptions of the chaos and mayhem at home, but their accounts were dismissed as outlandish and not credible. Stories about slave labor and random killings of parents and children were dismissed by supporters of the KR in the West. A year later, however, the U.S. State Department confirmed that the KR had created a network of rice plantations where young and old slaved away from dawn to dusk without any modern tools and overseen by sinister soldiers. The State Department also noted that the regime systematically executed Cambodian government officials and professionals as well as their relatives. But many Western intellectuals dismissed such horror stories and therefore indirectly lent support to the KR regime (Etcheson, 2005).

The Vietnamese army invaded Democratic Kampuchea and swept the KR from power in January 1979. Unfortunately, the liberation-occupation by Vietnamese forces deprived the Cambodian people of coming to terms with the years of terror and of bringing those responsible for the crimes to justice. The Vietnamese government had its own agenda, which was to control and govern Cambodia. While they created the macabre Tuol Sleng museum (a former prison where thousands were tortured and killed) there were no war crime tribunals and no efforts to seek redress for the victims and survivors of the genocide. It took until the early 2000s before a genocide tribunal was established to try the remaining KR leaders (Van Schaack, 2011).

Vicheara Houn's book serves an important role in reminding the international community that punishment, even if delayed by decades, should not be spared. Of course, many survivors of the genocide have died in the intervening decades. However, *Bamboo Promise* helps lift the mystery of the genocide and its complex impact on survivors.

Bamboo Promise starts in the 1950s when at first glance life seemed comfortable and promising. The birth of Vicheara Houn coincided with rapid social and economic changes that took place under the government of Prince Sihanouk (1954–1970). Higher education was expanded, millions of school-age children attended elementary school and gained basic literacy while new production methods dramatically increased rice yields and filled up the reserves of the Cambodian central bank.

Houn was raised in a multi-generational home in the center of *Phnom Penh*. Her father worked for a pharmaceutical company and became a successful and wealthy businessman. His commercial success led to a political career and he sat in Congress for many years starting in the early 1960s. Nevertheless, Vicheara's childhood was marred by two events. First, when she was only eight, her mother died unexpectedly after a botched surgery to remove a tumor. Her father soon took a new wife who did not have any children of her own. The stepmother's jealous rage against her step-daughter rivals the cruelty portrayed in the fairy tales from around the world. Vicheara thankfully lived close to her extended family and relied on the warmth of her maternal grandparents and other relatives to compensate for a turbulent home life. Her second challenge as a young child stemmed from her father's own difficult relations with his family. Her father lost his mother young and the grandfather remarried a woman with a handful of children. Her father's relatives were often hostile and envious of her status as a single child of a prosperous businessman.

Houn attended college where she met her first serious boyfriend. The timing of her college years coincided with the widening efforts by the American military to prevent North Vietnamese communists from sheltering in the Cambodian countryside. The secret bombings started in 1966, but intensified in the years 1969–1973. The random bombings of scores of

villages and rice fields destabilized Cambodia and created mounting economic, social, and political tension.

Civilian casualties in Cambodia drove the rural population into the arms of a Khmer Rouge insurgency that had enjoyed relatively little support until the bombing began, setting in motion the expansion of the Vietnam War deeper into Cambodia, a coup d'état in 1970 displacing prince Sihanouk with Lon Nol, the rapid rise of the Khmer Rouge, and ultimately the Cambodian genocide (Nhem, 2013).

In the early 1970s, Houn and her boyfriend were ready to tie the knot. But her family tried to hold out for a better match, possibly with the scion of a wealthy and connected family. While Houn waited for her father to accept her current boyfriend/fiancée, she decided to try to complete her education in France. Her father was extremely reluctant to approve her study in France, thus Houn continued to attend pharmacy college in *Phnom Penh*. That decision had fateful consequences. Even in 1974 when many ominous signs gathered around *Phnom Penh*, and after many other wealthy families sent their children overseas for safety, he was ambivalent about letting her go to France. Her wedding took place years after the official engagement when her father finally relented, though the festivities were tarnished by the approaching KR rebel forces and ensuing chaos in the capital.

Newly-wed, Houn, her young husband, and her father, his wife and her in-laws were part of the forced evacuation of *Phnom Penh*. The KR ended urban life and closed hospitals, schools, and libraries. Factories were shut down. Monasteries were vacated. An entire population was moved to the countryside with the most rudiment tools and shelter. The country became one large prison camp. The objective was to control an entire nation by prohibiting any form of individuality or creative independent thinking. In this atmosphere, anybody who came from the educated professional class was immediately suspect. Houn's family therefore faced a double jeopardy since they were urban residents unprepared for life in the fields, and also were members of the targeted educated elite.

Houn and her father were forced to move from one isolated village to another and ended up living in a tiny hut next to the in-laws. She was separated from her husband who she spotted later being dragged away by KR soldiers. She never saw him again.

Young children and the elderly were the first to die. Houn's father died after two years of poor and insufficient nutrition and a lack of medical treatment. After the painful death of her father, Houn moved in with her in-laws who resented having to share food with another person, while they also carried grievances against her father for delaying the wedding plans for years. As the food situation continued to deteriorate, Houn increasingly felt unwelcome and unwanted and decided to strike out by herself. She is in a "hospital" late 1978 when the Vietnamese army chased the KR to border areas and installed a new government in *Phnom Penh*.

The third part of the book traces her slow return to the capital. In 1979, alone she reconnects with a few old friends and relatives. She visits the family home, which has been ransacked and emptied of everything of value. Thanks to her language skills, she becomes an interpreter for the Vietnamese and the French foreign community. She is also able to complete her pharmacy degree. Nevertheless, sadness pervades her life since at every point she is reminded of her losses and the disappearance of her loved ones. After a couple of years of drifting and trying to find a niche for herself, she makes the bold and risky decision to escape to Thailand. In early 1983, Houn finds herself in a refugee camp across the border in Thailand. She is free, at least, free to dream of a better future.

Bamboo Promise ends with Houn's escape to Thailand. We know that she arrived in the U.S. in 1985. We will need to wait for volume two to hear how she managed to leave the refugee camp and settle in the United States. In the meantime, we are fortunate that Ms. Houn decided to publish her autobiography. She is an inspiring writer and presents an entrancing and poignant account of her years of suffering as a victim of the Cambodian genocide. Her book is a chronicle of courage and determination in the face of unimaginable deprivation and terror.

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About the Author

Paulette Kurzer is professor of Political Science at the School of Government and Public Policy at the University of Arizona. She is also the director of the online M.A. degree in International Security Studies offered by the School of Government. She is an expert in European politics and the European Union and has published widely. Her most recent book (coauthored with Scott Greer) is *European Union Public Health Policy: Regional and Global Trends* (Routledge 2012).

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