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# INTRODUCTION TO “SONGS AT THE EDGE OF THE FOREST”

David Chandler

The essay “Songs at the Edge of the Forest” was written in June 1978 for a workshop on Southeast Asian intellectual history sponsored by the Social Science Research Council. It was first published in a 1982 volume edited by Alexander Woodside and David Wyatt called *Moral Order and the Question of Change*. In 2003, I made some slight emendations to the text that brought the references up to date.

“Songs” is my own favorite of my essays because I think it manages to capture, via the three texts that it examines, some of the poignancy, stylishness, and common sense of the people I befriended when I worked in Cambodia in the early 1960s. The two folktales and the nineteenth-century verse chronicle that I discuss in the essay are rich in tensions and ambiguities. They cross and re-cross the borders between the forest (*prei*) and the rice fields (*veal srae*), between destiny and chance, and between savagery and civilization. They ask why suffering happens. They try to explain how the rewards for virtue are often hard to perceive. The chronicle tells the story of a real family’s tribulations and shares a mythic quality, as well as a fully Cambodian world, with the two folktales, which are, of course, impossible to date. The three texts are best understood by placing them in our mind’s eye inside the landscapes where they occur—in a muddy, swift-flowing river filled with crocodiles, at the edge of the forest as night comes on and the *kaun lok* birds cry out forlornly, and on the grounds of a glittering new Buddhist *vihara* in Kompong Thom in 1856.

I wrote “Songs at the Edge of the Forest” in the last year of the Pol Pot regime, before the regime’s collapse was anywhere in sight. I felt sad and desperate. In the essay I wanted to pay homage to a country that I suspected was being destroyed, and to the men and women, many of them already dead, who had kept me company, shared their language with me, and showed me portions of their culture. I was delighted to learn, as I revised the paper for publication, that the Khmer Rouge regime had collapsed. Later on, I discovered that a handful of my closest friends had survived.

Twenty-five years later, as I write, Cambodia itself has managed to survive in a lively, partly familiar, but clearly altered state. I feel that these haunting,

straightforward, unconsciously elegant texts are superb examples of what it is that has drawn me, for over forty years, toward the sun-drenched kingdom, its history and its people.