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## BOOK REVIEW

### Direct from Angkor

#### *A new translation of a classic account of ancient Cambodia*

#### CHRIS BAKER

In 1296 a young Chinese visited Angkor as an assistant on a diplomatic mission. On return he wrote a memoir of his visit. In 1902, the great scholar Paul Pelliot translated the memoir into French, but without any explanation or commentary.

In 1967, that French version was rendered into English by J. Gilman d'Arcy Paul under the title *The Customs of Cambodia*. Michael Smithies produced a new translation from the French to English a few years ago. A translation of a translation is always a bit clumsy and suspect. In this new book, a scholar of Chinese has produced the first translation direct from the original Chinese into English. Because it is informed by an intervening century of scholarship on Cambodia, this should now become the standard version, supplanting even Pelliot.

Zhou Dagan spent a year in Angkor. He was probably around 25 years old, and came from the port city of Wenzhou, south of Shanghai. His memoir follows a standard format of old Chinese travel literature. He is mostly interested in the court, in trade goods and in curious local customs. In a very thorough introduction, Peter Harris points out that the book is very fragmentary. Much of the original text may have been lost or edited out. A 17th century Chinese commentator estimated that 60 to 70 per cent may have disappeared. Still, what remains is fascinating. There is no astounding new fact or discovery revealed by Peter Harris' translation. That is no surprise given the legendary thoroughness of Pelliot's scholarship. But the new version reads far, far better in English, partly because it is a direct translation, partly because Harris has aimed for a delicately simple style. Also, Harris draws on recent work by Chinese scholars, especially a 1980 edition by Xia Nai who compared 13 variants of the original text. Although there is no big difference between Harris and earlier versions, there is a lot of change in detail. Take one example. Paul (following Pelliot) had "others use carts identical with those in other countries. The horses are ridden bareback, and elephants have no howdahs." In the Harris version, that becomes "The carts are made in the same way as in other places, but the horses have no saddles. The elephants, on the other hand, carry benches to sit on."

Harris also adds an introduction which is the same length as the text, plus annotations, which are the same length yet again. The book contains 26 colour photographs, which are not there to prettify the book but to illustrate key points that come up in the text and Harris' discussion of it.

Almost nothing is known about Zhou Dagan. Harris' introduction fleshes him out a little bit by describing the society and culture of his home region. The introduction then sketches the historical background of Angkor at the end of the 13th century, summarises Zhou's text, and

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traces the history of its publication over the centuries. In a short postscript, Harris notes that Zhou's memoir was just one of 70 references to Cambodia in Chinese sources before the mid-14th century, and he summarises key points from some other major records.

The most important innovation of this new edition is the footnotes. Pelliot left no notes or commentary, except a few words slipped in parentheses within the text. Harris has done the job properly. He tracks down the trees and animals. He identifies the places. He discusses the weights, measures and other technicalities. He tries to unscramble the Khmer words. He discusses variations in different editions of the Chinese text. He confesses when he finds a passage difficult to translate, and tells us when he has made a guess. At some famous and controversial passages, he gives us his opinion. Everywhere he provides signposts into scholarship in English, Chinese and other languages.

On the few passages where Zhou refers to Siam, the new translation is clearer than past versions, and gives slightly different meanings. Here are the two main examples.

Paul: "Recently much attention has been given by Siamese settlers in this country to raising silkworms and cultivating mulberries; their mulberry seed and silkworm stock all come from Siam. Grass-cloth, which they do not know, finds an equivalent in lo-ma. The Siamese use silk to weave the dark damask-like textiles with which they clothe themselves. The Siamese women can sew and mend, and when the fabrics worn by the Cambodians become torn, Siamese are called in to repair the damage."

Harris: "In recent years people from Siam have come to live in Cambodia, and unlike the locals they engage in silk production. The mulberry trees they grow and the silkworms they raise all come from Siam. (They have no ramie, either, only hemp.) They themselves weave the silk into clothes made of a black, patterned satiny silk. Siamese women do know how to stitch and darn, so when local people have torn or damaged clothing they ask them to do the mending."

Harris' version makes clearer that the Siamese are recent immigrants. He makes sense of lo-ma and adds a footnote on the blending of ramie (hemp) and silk. He has dropped the confusing use of "damask" in favour of a more descriptive translation.

Paul: "Only recently, during the war with Siam, whole villages have been laid waste."

Harris: "As a result of repeated wars with the Siamese the land has been completely laid to waste."

Harris adds a footnote emphasizing that the passage contains a word meaning "repeatedly". The earlier translation seemed to refer to a single incident. Also, the Paul version has villages being laid waste, while Harris makes the destruction more general. This mention is maddeningly brief, but still Harris has made it a little bit clearer.

For all its fragmentary nature, Zhou's account is a first-hand contemporary record, and that makes it immensely valuable. Peter Harris has done a great service by providing a direct translation informed by recent scholarship. To widen his market beyond academic interest, he suggests the book will be a good companion for modern travellers to Angkor. That is not a bad idea.

A Record of Cambodia: The Land and its People

By Zhou Daguan

Translated with an introduction and notes by Peter Harris

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