

# **Curricular Challenges to Human Rights in the Mekong: Disputed Histories, Contested Identities**

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## **Abstract**

This chapter explores curricular challenges to multiculturalism in the Mekong sub-region of Southeast Asia by looking at human rights and history textbooks in Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos. Although these countries are part of an elite effort aimed at constructing a multicultural regional identity through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which partly relies on common educational practices and policies, the countries are perhaps best known for their human rights abuses, illiberal policies, and undemocratic polities. These issues are counter to much thinking on human rights and are revealed by analyzing textbooks. To unpack the curricular challenges, this chapter looks at the disputed histories and contested national identities in short case studies from each country's upper-secondary history textbook. In Laos, the conflation of socialism and capitalism is contextualized to the changing geopolitical realities of the country. This is the explicit curriculum – that which is purposefully taught as mandated by the government. In Thailand, the xenophobic origin story of the Thai race shows a negative historical memory towards migration and mobility. This is the implicit curriculum — that which is hidden inside the curriculum. In Cambodia, the selective history of the Khmer Rouge offers an entry point into the disputed histories among countries in Southeast Asia. This is the null curriculum — that which is not taught for political reasons. Collectively, the three cases of the explicit, implicit, and null curriculum underscore the challenges facing supranational efforts to create a curriculum advancing human rights — and therefore multiculturalism — in the Mekong.

*For a new type of progress throughout the world to become a reality, everyone must change. Tolerance is the alpha and omega of a new world order.*

– Mikhail Gorbachev, 1990

*With few exceptions, democracy has not brought good government to new developing countries...What Asians value may not necessarily be what Americans or Europeans value. Westerners value the freedoms and liberties of the individual. As an Asian of Chinese cultural background, my values are for a government which is honest, effective and efficient.*

- Lee Kuan Yew, 1992

## **Introduction**

At the end of the Cold War, optimism for a possible interconnected and tolerant world produced a wave of global summitry. There were global summits on the environment in Rio de Janeiro (June 1992), population and development in Cairo (September 1994), social development in Copenhagen (March 1995), and women in Beijing (September 1995). These events, organized by the United Nations, brought together representatives from nation-states, civil society, and transnational organizations to collectively decide the direction of the “new world order,” a term used in the late 1980s by both the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, and the President of the United States of America, George H.W. Bush, to connote their vision of a post-Cold War world. International relations were no longer seen as a contestation between Communism and Capitalism but instead as a multicultural collage of nation-states that embraced liberal democracy, social justice, and tolerance (Silova, 2010). To achieve this tall order of progress, as Gorbachev stated in the above quote, everyone would need to change.

The 1993 World Conference on Human Rights exemplified the emerging global consensus but also showed, in hindsight, fissures built into the normative and legal framework that would cause lasting contestation among nation-states. The conference, held in Vienna, aimed to develop monitoring mechanisms to ensure all member states worked towards the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which was first ratified by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948. By the 1990s, human rights were believed to be *the* international normative and legal framework that would advance a tolerant global society, even acting as the rationale for military intervention (e.g., in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to end human right abuses against Kosovo Albanians in 1999).

Human rights, the focus of this chapter, are loosely coupled with multiculturalism, the focus of this collection. Although human rights and multiculturalism consist of a range of approaches,

theories, and practices (e.g., Bajaj, 2017 or Banks, 2015), they share “commitments to cultural pluralism, amplifying marginalized voices, social and economic rights, and analyzing systems of (in)justice” (Gibson & Grant, 2017, p. 241). In fact, multicultural education has been called a “predecessor” to human rights education because of their shared focus on democracy, diversity, equality, and laws and rights (Spren & Monaghan, 2017, p. 293).

Human rights themselves contain fundamental assumptions about society, government, and their relationship. Human rights are based on notions of natural law and natural rights, popularized during the Age of Enlightenment (18<sup>th</sup> Century European philosophy), that theorized there were certain unchanging moral principles common to all people, including “rights to life, liberty (freedom from arbitrary rule), and property” (Weston, 2006, p. 18). These natural rights were to be protected by governments through a social contract with citizens. The 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen written during the French Revolution embodied these ideas (Hunt, 1996). Natural rights morphed into human rights and were re-popularized in the aftermath of World War II when, in the wake of genocide in Nazi Germany, “certain actions...[were seen to be] absolutely wrong, no matter what the circumstances” (Weston, 2006, p. 19). At the end of World War II, human rights were seen as universal and enshrined in international law through the United Nations. No longer would nation-states be solely responsible for protecting and promoting human rights; now the international community would claim human rights are transnational. The UDHR enshrined notions of individuality, property rights, and democracy. Although common in liberal political philosophies, human rights continue to be challenged for, among other reasons, their connection to Christianity (de Benoist, 2011) and their affront on state sovereignty (Bettari, 1996).<sup>1</sup> These challenges remain important today for some countries.

By the 1990s, human rights were a common global discourse; “you couldn’t escape it” (Cmiel, 2004). The Vienna conference was a “key driver” bringing “non-liberal states into the human rights regime” (Dunne & Hanson, 2009, p. 67). However, a lack of interest by member states during the lead up the 1993 conference caused the Secretary General of Amnesty International, Pierre Sane, then the largest human rights organization, to warn, “There’s a real danger of a retreat in the defense of human rights...The lack of interest [in the World Conference] is disappointing” (Pierre Sane quoted in Riding, 1993, n.p.).

Pierre Sane’s diplomatic scolding of member-states in the *New York Times* came a few weeks after a group of ministers and representatives from Asia signed the Bangkok Declaration, the culminating document of the Asian regional meeting that was used to prepare member states for the World Conference. What caused Sane concern was likely one statement buried in the middle of the declaration:

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<sup>1</sup> de Benosit (2011) argues that the idea of “rights” changed from being uniquely defined by an individual’s relationship to a community to being defined as a universal concept connected to an individual’s soul with the introduction of Christianity. That universal Christian idea is, to de Benoist, embodied in 20<sup>th</sup> Century notions of human rights and is therefore problematic for the non-Judeo-Christian world. Bettari (1996), meanwhile, argues that the realization of international law, such as human rights, is “breaking down” national sovereignty (p. 92). The nation-state must adapt, to some extent, its own domestic legal frameworks to align with international frameworks, shifting power from domestic to international law makers.

[Signatories of the Bangkok Declaration] Emphasize the principles of respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity as well as non-interference in the internal affairs of States, and the *non-use of human rights as an instrument of political pressure*. (Bangkok Declaration, 1993, p. 4; emphasis added)

The group of Asian ministers expressly declared, albeit in nebulous language common to diplomacy, that the promotion of human rights at the international level *should not* impede national sovereignty. Instead, Asian ministers paradoxically accepted human rights as universal but also particular. That is to say, human rights as a term can be found worldwide, but its meaning is based on each country's historical, cultural, and religious background. Asian heads of state refused to be pressured into accepting one, universal definition of human rights, which was unequivocally the intent of the World Conference and a defining feature of a normative moral and legal framework; rather, they wanted the ability to define human rights on their own; they would accept change in the "new world order," but not a unitary change decided for them.

The disagreement between the Asian leaders at the Bangkok regional meeting and those planning for the World Conference, such as Pierre Sane, should not have been surprising, since similar sentiments have been common in Asia for decades (Cardenas, 2002). Indonesia's first President, Sukarno, was among the founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961, which sided neither with the Soviet Union nor the United States during the Cold War, and Singapore's first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, often spoke out against Western influence in Asia, as the quote at the beginning of this chapter exemplifies. Even General Secretary Zhao Ziyang of China used the phrase "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" at the 13<sup>th</sup> National Congress in 1987 (Lee, 1995, p. 399), suggesting a sort of "Asian" uniqueness to various global terms like socialism.

It was in this context of geopolitical debate between "Asian" and "Western" cultural values that led Wallerstein (1991, p. 224) to theorize that "the concept of civilizations (plural) arose as a defense against the ravages of civilization (singular)." In other words, the "Asian values" discourse countering the universalizing rhetoric emblematic of human rights in the 1990s can be explained as a difference among civilizations or worldviews, which are born out of different histories and historical memories. Arnason (2003, p. 8) argues that Wallerstein was equating civilization (singular) with ideas of "progress, enlighten and universalism" (i.e., what Gorbachev argued for at the end of the Cold War) while civilizations (plural) with "counter-values of identity, autonomy and diversity" (i.e., what Lee believed vis-à-vis the West).

The tension between national sovereignty and global normative frameworks — between a single civilization articulated as universal from the United Nations and the civilizations countless Asian leaders have professed — continues to be evident in the advancement of human rights in Asia. This is especially the case in the Mekong sub-region of Southeast Asia where most nation-states provide limited protection of property rights (counter to article 17 of the UDHR), prohibit labor unions (counter to article 23) and practice non-democratic forms of government (counter to article 29). In many ways, the critiques levied against the World Conference on Human Rights by Asian member-states to the United Nations in the early 1990s continue to be relevant nearly a quarter century later.

One area where tension appears between international pressure to adopt normative frameworks and the protection of national sovereignty is in systems of education. Nation-states have historically used public schools to “not only control people...[but] also help control meaning” (Apple, 1979, p. 63). Individuals and groups who control state power have used education to advance their own agenda, be it self-interested understandings of history or a privileging of certain morals usually wrapped up in terms like nationalism and justified in terms like self-determination. However, international organizations such as the United Nations also see schools as a vehicle to promote their own agenda, socializing youth into a liberal worldview by constructing global citizens and peace. These disputes are fought over curricular content — the learning planned and guided by schools. Learning standards, textbooks, and school environments collectively construct meaning and memory in efforts to instill in young citizens certain identities and worldviews. The influence by the international community on national systems of education happens most often in poor countries where development agencies, such as the World Bank or the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), contribute large sums of money and therefore have power to design curricula. Although curricular struggles may appear to be frivolous, in fact they reveal the very international pressures Asian leaders warned against in 1993. What is left in or out of a curriculum reveals complex negotiations between national and international actors over the struggle for meaning, identity, and unity.

This chapter explores curricular challenges to human rights in Southeast Asia by looking at history textbooks in Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos. In so doing, the chapter begins to tease out implications for multicultural education in the region. Although these countries are part of an elite effort aimed at constructing a regional identity through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which partly relies on creating common educational practices and policies that promote diversity, social justice, and democracy, the countries are perhaps best known for their human rights abuses, illiberal policies, and undemocratic polities. These issues are counter to much thinking on human rights and are revealed by analyzing textbooks based on Eisner’s (2002) categorization of explicit, implicit, and null curricula.

The chapter begins with the context of Southeast Asia, highlighting the historical particularities of the region as well as the liberalizing role of ASEAN and international development agencies in promoting human rights in contemporary times. The following section uses Eisner’s conceptualization of curriculum in short case studies for each the explicit (Laos), implicit (Thailand) and null curricula (Cambodia). These cases show how countries navigate the universalizing tendencies of development agencies with domestic political realities. In the conclusion, a discussion is presented of the theoretical explanations of the curricular challenges in the Mekong. In particular, the role of exclusion in the formation of national and regional identities is examined as well as issues related to trauma and selective remembering in terms of civilizational analyses. These are important issues to consider when thinking about multiculturalism in the Southeast Asian region.

## **Context of Southeast Asia**

Southeast Asia consists of 11 nation-states split between a mainland that sits south of China and India (including Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam) and maritime nation-states spread across the Pacific and Indian Oceans (including Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore, East Timor, and Brunei). Home to over 620 million people, Southeast Asia is

culturally and linguistically diverse. Over 700 languages are spoken in Indonesia alone. The combined GDP of the region was US \$2.4 trillion in 2013, ranking 7<sup>th</sup> in the world, just behind the United Kingdom (HV, Thompson & Tonby, 2014). However, there is a large GDP per capita gap between countries: Singapore sits at the top (US \$52,000 in 2016) and Cambodia at the bottom (US \$1,100; World Bank, online data). There is also a wealth gap within countries, common in many countries (Piketty, 2013).

The Greater Mekong Subregion, a term used by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), consists of mainland Southeast Asia plus the southern Chinese province of Yunnan and the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region of China. The Mekong river delta connects these countries and jurisdictions, providing a vital economic and food source for the sub-region's 336 million people (ADB, 2015). Experiencing fast economic growth in recent decades,<sup>2</sup> the sub-region produces nearly half of the World's rice; however, malnourishment and stunting remain persistent problems across the region.<sup>3</sup> Economically, the sub-region is poorer than most island nations of Southeast Asia.

The sub-region is home to a greater level of single-party, authoritarian rule than democratic governance. In Thailand, the country's political elite has flirted with popular elections several times but has repeatedly seen military-backed coups overthrow democratically elected governments to protect the interests of the monarchy and businesses. In Cambodia, despite formally being considered a liberal democracy since 1993, the Prime Minister has been in power for 32 years and has dismantled opposition parties by controlling the courts and local levels of government as well as co-opting the monarchy. Laos and Vietnam meanwhile are single party Socialist states. Myanmar is the region's newest democracy, ratifying a constitution in 2008; however, it was only in 2016 when a non-military head of state assumed the presidency. In these countries, political traditions *other than* democracy have been the historical norm.

The political proclivities towards non-democratic norms are not a deficiency per se but a testament to the non-Western civilizational influences that have historically been present in the sub-region. Chinese and Indian merchants who visited the Mekong region starting in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century brought new customs, religious practices, and ideas, such as *rajadharma* (Hindu and Buddhist beliefs, codes, and court practices from South Asia) and *sultanate* (the area controlled by an all-powerful ruler as first practiced in West Asia), to the various Kingdoms in the region. Many of the languages in the Mekong were influenced by Pali and Sanskrit, which are languages native to the Indian subcontinent. These cultural flows were further influenced by traveling monks who crisscrossed ancient Kingdoms like the Sri Vijaya and Khmer Empires in effort to translate religious texts housed in various monasteries. As such, the Mekong is known for its strong tradition of Theravada Buddhism. Although scholars debate the exact impact on culture from traveling merchants and monks (e.g., Lingat, 1929; Coedes, 1966; Wheatley, 1975; Keyes,

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<sup>2</sup> Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam's combined annualized growth rate between 1993-2010 was 5.27 percent. Yunnan province grew at 11.64 percent per year and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region grew by 9.96 percent. (ADB, 2011, p. 3).

<sup>3</sup> In 2010, Unicef (2010) found that 28 percent of children under 5 were stunted across the Mekong.

1995), it is generally accepted that Chinese and Indian ideas, customs, and practices — and their subsequent indigenization — impacted society in the Mekong.

The cultures and societies of the Mekong were further impacted when colonial powers emerged in the sub-region. In the island nations of Southeast Asia, Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, and Britain colonized, starting in the 1500s, part or all of various countries to protect trade routes and promote Christianity. Often this was accomplished through private companies, such as the East India Company of Britain or the Dutch East India Company of the Netherlands. Modern capitalism and Christianity were in many ways first introduced through these encounters. In mainland Southeast Asia, the British colonized present-day Myanmar starting in 1826, and the French conquered most of Indochina, the label used to denote present-day Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, starting in 1858 (Barton, Kingsbury & Showalter, 1970). Thailand, squeezed between British and French colonial governments, escaped direct colonialization by ceding large parts of land to stronger colonizing powers. Just like the traveling merchants from India and China from the 5<sup>th</sup> Century, colonization brought to the sub-region in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century new ideas of government, law, and education (e.g., for educational reforms in Cambodia under the French see Clayton, 1995).

Modern education arrived in Southeast Asia through colonialism. Before colonialism, education occurred primarily inside Buddhist pagodas, reserved for monks (Fuqua, 1992). In pagoda schools, recitation of scripture was the primary mode of learning. With the advent of colonial administrations, however, education systems across the Mekong were reformed to civilize indigenous populations as well as prepare some people for future colonial administrative roles. No longer would schools and pagodas be linked. Secular subjects would enter the curriculum as would new pedagogies. Moreover, education became the prerogative of the state, not religious institutions. Despite modern educational goals, many colonial administrators remained frustrated that their reforms rarely worked. For instance, Louis Finot, the founder of the *École française d'Extrême-Orient* (the French School of the Far East) in Paris, observed in a 1918 report on the Pali School in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, using pejorative language common to the era:

If you ask a student at the *École de Pali* how Buddhism envisages the origin of the universe and of life, the nature of mental operations, transmigration, the sacred, salvation, et cetera...[his] response will be furnished by the Canon that he has been made to study, but without giving him any comprehensive idea of what it contains. It is essential to liberate the students from this perpetual recitation of texts that only encourages memorization, at the cost of thinking, and thus aggravates the original tendency of the native mentality (Finot cited in Hansen, 2007, p. 136-137).

The social change and control during the period, as exemplified by Finot's description of the "native mentality," cultivated anti-colonial sentimentality in parts of the domestic population. Some of these sentiments were reinforced through the modern education system that explicitly cultivated national identity demarcated along nation-state borders, both modern colonial products (Anderson, 1983). Western notions of nation-states and nationalism had the unintended consequence of fostering independence movements (e.g., the Young Men's Buddhist Association in Myanmar formed in 1906, Phan Boi Chau's Reformation Society in Vietnam formed in 1903, or the Free Khmer movement formed in Cambodia in 1945). Some of these movements set the

stage for future factionalism among rival groups (e.g., the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia). As Solomon (1969) warned, “Southeast Asian leaders inherited a boundary system that, in its broad outlines, was satisfactory as a basis for modern nationhood, but these nations were not ethnically integrated and they lacked the administrative apparatus either to enforce their borders or to build out to them” (p. vii). The colonial legacy of competing meanings of national identity was thus a major feature in the post-colonial period.

After World War II, the Mekong became a primary battle field where Cold War ideologies were fought. In these recently independent nation-states, the bi-polar world between Communists and Capitalists sought to divide every part of the world, including Southeast Asia, based on allegiance to two superpowers. Although many leaders in Southeast Asia wanted to remain neutral in the ideological fight between the United States and the Soviet Union, as exemplified by Sukarno’s participation in the Non-Aligned Movement, some of the colonial resistance movements were considered leftist or communist. At the height of the war between the United States and Vietnam in 1967, a group of Southeast Asian nations, including Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, formed a regional organization dedicated to social stability and the defeat of leftist groups in many of their countries. The organization was called the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Jones (2012) situates the formation of ASEAN in the aftermath of the 1963-66 war between Malaysia and Indonesia that was a “struggle over the form of social and political order that should prevail in post-colonial Southeast Asia [that] ended by the decisive defeat of the Indonesian left [i.e., Sukarno], which brought the Indonesian state into alignment with its anti-communist neighbors” (p. 123). ASEAN thus “represented an international elite pact designed to stabilize their respective social, political and economic order and prevent radical change” (p. 123).

After the Cold War ended and liberal democracy was seen as triumphant on the global stage, ASEAN, coupled with increased development assistance from international financial institutions such as the World Bank, began to promote a liberal world order. In its vision for a stable region aligned to the international order, ASEAN called for the establishment of a political-security community by 2020 that promoted shared rules, an economic community that created a single, integrated market, and a socio-cultural community that fostered a regional identity. Collectively these three pillars of ASEAN would align Southeast Asian nations with the ideas and norms advocated by the United Nations. It would not only legitimize the rulers across Southeast Asia by connecting them to the international order but also would create the possibility of stable domestic politics by improving livelihoods. One way to achieve what was called Vision 2020 was through education:

Education underpins ASEAN community building. Education lies at the core of ASEAN’s development process, creating a knowledge-based society and contributing to the enhancement of ASEAN competitiveness. ASEAN also views education as the vehicle to raise ASEAN awareness, inspire the “we feeling”, and create a sense of belonging to the ASEAN Community and understanding of the richness of ASEAN’s history, languages, culture and common values. (ASEAN Website).

Decisions related to the use of education to achieve both economic development and social cohesion are usually reserved for nation-states (Green & Janmaat, 2016). However, Vision 2020



of ASEAN also claims these goals. One of the initiatives doing so is funded by UNESCO's regional office in Bangkok called the Shared Histories Project. This project aims to "promote greater respect and tolerance for the diversity of cultures in the sub-region. In this way the project will seek to strengthen appreciation of common cultural heritage, better mutual understanding, intercultural dialogue and a culture of peace within the sub-region" (Kim, 2013, p. 5). The project, based off of the General History of Africa project also funded by UNESCO, sets out to develop textbooks and curricula that can be taught in school across Southeast Asia. The logic behind the project is that by using the same textbooks, the countries can create a common identity in ASEAN — the "we feeling" envisioned in Vision 2020 — which would create peace through understanding. It is a decidedly liberal logic found in much of the thinking on human rights, believing that peace is possible through achieving multiculturalism; by being tolerant of difference and respecting human rights, which is like the push for human rights in the 1990s, after World War II, and, perhaps, during the French Revolution in the late 1700s. Although this curriculum is, as of this writing, still under development, it is valuable to step back from the goals of the shared histories curriculum and look at national history curriculum currently in practice. The context of Southeast Asia, as this section has briefly explored, suggests that nation-states, a modern invention cultivated through European colonialism, will filter understandings of history through ideas like nationalism and national interest. Moreover, the plural approach to civilizations advocated by many Asian leaders, rather than the unitary approach predominately assumed in institutions like UNESCO, suggests that shared histories will be contentious in their differences rather than universalizing in their effect. The next section details three curricular challenges to UNESCO's vision of a shared history in the Mekong.

## **National history textbooks as challenges to shared histories**

Since the modern education systems in Southeast Asia are products of European colonialism, it is appropriate to critically analyze the curricula found in these education systems using theories developed in the West. Eliot Eisner's (2002) classification of the "three curricula that all [modern] schools teach" (p. 87) is a sufficient starting point to unpack the challenges embedded in national systems of education to the international community's promotion of human rights. Eisner conceptualized the modern school curriculum as a combination of the explicit curriculum, the implicit curriculum, and the null curriculum. The explicit curriculum is the information and practices taught and used inside schools that are made publically available. These can include written syllabi, standards, and textbooks. This surface level curriculum is identified empirically (what exists in print?), but "schools teach far more than they advertise" (p. 93). The implicit curriculum is, by contrast, the subtle ideas and messages not only within the explicit curriculum but also the entire school environment about what values and beliefs are deemed important for children to learn and emulate. Although these favored behavioral and cognitive traits may not be written in the curriculum explicitly, "the culture of both the classroom and the school socializes children to the values that are a part of the structure of those places" (p. 88).

The final type of curriculum is labeled the null curriculum. This is what schools do not teach. This can be understood as an "intellectual process" by which schools tend to develop a single learning process that is difficult to change. For instance, memorization in pagoda schools is an intellectual process that has been difficult to escape in many countries in Southeast Asia despite the advent of modern learning pedagogies. Student centered learning, the goal of much

educational development, is part of the null curriculum — that which is not used. There are also “content areas” that schools do not teach students. These are subjects or ideas that are left out of the explicit curriculum. It is this area that is of interest here, as the choices about appropriate content areas are often political in nature. Powerful groups fight over which content must be removed in a curriculum and in what ways historical ideas should be framed.

In this section, three short case studies of national history textbooks are explored based on Eisner’s conceptual framework. In Laos, the explicit curriculum is explored to show how its notion of nationalism is based on ideas totally counter to human rights. Advancing human rights in Laos would require a complete reconceptualization of Laos national identity, something the ruling political is likely not willing to do. In Thailand, the implicit curriculum is explored through the conflation of ethnicity and nationalism. Thai nationalism erases the identity of minority groups, implicitly countering notions of multiculturalism. In Cambodia, the null curriculum is explored through overt deletions of text in a textbook designed by a non-governmental organization (NGO). Here we can empirically see the often-hidden process of the state’s role in shaping curriculum, suggesting other ideas counter to the national identity of Cambodia would similarly be pruned. Collectively, these three cases show challenges to human rights education because the nation-states have prioritized domestic priorities over international normative frameworks.

### **The explicit curriculum in Laos**

Laos has done a poor job protecting and promoting human rights in the eyes of international observers. Human Rights Watch, an NGO that reports on human rights abuses around the world, in effect patrolling the normative framework, states that the government “severely restrict(s) fundamental rights including freedom of speech, association, and assembly” (Human Rights Watch, 2015, p. 1). Freedom House, another NGO policing human rights, labels Laos “not free.” The press is controlled by the party in power and any opposition to state power is brutally repressed. Laos is anything but a liberal democracy open to diversity in thought or opinion.

Notwithstanding the real concerns of the NGOs, contemporary Laos cannot be understood through the brutal actions of the illiberal state alone. After all, even countries labeled “free” by Freedom House have participated in what could be labeled human rights abuses. To understand Laos, it is important to situate the country within its history and historical memory. For the government of Laos, the country emerged out of social uprisings in the 1960s and 1970s. The government fought a war against the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States, which has remained generally outside the historical memory of most Americans, overshadowed by the war in Vietnam (Kurlantzick, 2016, p. 18). On one side of the war in Laos were communists from China and Vietnam. On the other side was the United States: “...Laos increasingly appeared, at least to the American officials, to be part of a broader effort by international communists forces to dominate Asia — and the world” (Kurlantzick, 2016, p. 3). Between 1964 and 1973, the United States’ effort to support a pro-western government turned Laos into the most heavily bombed country per capita in history (Khamvongsa & Russell, 2009). After nine years of bombing, the United States withdrew. The communist movement the United States fought against finally gained complete power of the country under the name of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP). It remains in power to this day (in 2016, 128 out of 132 members of the National Assembly were from LPRP) and has constructed a national identity around

defeating a superpower, which proved its state ideology of socialism as triumphant despite the “new world order” articulated in the 1990s.

One way to understand the national identity of Laos is to explore the explicit curriculum in state schools. In Laos’ 2011 history textbook for grade 12 students, the “special war on Laos” (Chapter 15) is described as a “magnificent victory” brought on by “wise leadership of our Marxist-Leninist party.” “National democracy” was achieved because the war “united all the nationalities of the country in a single national front, based on the alliance of workers and peasants.” The Marxist-Leninist political party that emerged from the war was “specific to the conditions of the country.”

The textbook makes clear that the “special war” is a central pillar in Laos’ national identity formation. The textbook connects notions of democracy to its political identity, although in a different way than the democracy envisioned by the UDHR. Whereas the democracy from the perspective of the UDHR entails universal suffrage in periodic elections, in Laos although elections are held they are generally predetermined by the LPRP. No candidate can run for office without approval from the LPRP. This is probably why Laotians have been found to be apathetic about voting (Radio Free Asia, 2016). Moreover, even the Marxist-Leninist political ideology of the LPRP is explicitly stated as “specific” to the country, echoing the 1993 Bangkok Declaration. In other words, the political ideology in Laos is unique despite similarities to other countries like China and Vietnam. Even after the introduction of a market economy in the 1980s, Laos explicitly stated that economic liberalization was a way to use capitalism to pave the way to socialism. The purpose of the New Market Mechanism of 1987 was not an embrace of capitalism but a way to create a “socialist market economy,” which did not embrace a regime of private property as the UDHR states.

This short case of Laos shows that national curricula can be explicitly at odds with international normative frameworks because cultivating nationalism is more important domestically than achieving United Nation standards like human rights, especially for a relatively young and small nation like Laos. To put it another way, a human rights framework that cultivates cosmopolitan beliefs is at odds with the national identity articulated by the Lao state that requires the American “Other” to justify its existence. Moreover, Laos shows that one of the ways countries navigate the terrain between domestic needs and international pressure is to use international words such as democracy and capitalism but with nationally-specific meanings. Finding words inside textbooks related to multicultural education and human rights is thus theoretically possible, but the actual meaning of these terms will be refracted through a nationalism that advances state interests and maintains the party’s power. These terms become devoid of their meaning vis-à-vis global trends. Whereas Laos’ explicit curriculum cultivated nationalism by promoting the triumph of socialism over the capitalist United States, the next case study shows how curriculum can work in subtle ways to advance powerful domestic actors.

### **The implicit curriculum in Thailand**

When the army officer Luang Phibunsongkhram, usually called Phibun, overthrew the King of Siam in 1932 to end the country’s absolute monarchy, one of his first priorities was to cultivate a sense of national identity. By setting up indigenous businesses, he set out to expel the large

number of Chinese living and working in the country who had migrated at various times over the centuries when the Mekong was a web of intermingled kingdoms. A new flag and national anthem were introduced and the traditional calendar was revised to align with the Western calendar. Most importantly, he changed the country's name from Siam to Thailand, recognizing the most populous ethnicity, the Tai (sometimes labeled Thai). The changes implemented under Phibun were a political project that cultivated nationalism to secure power (Pinkaw 2003; Loos 2006).

One of the outcomes of Phibun's nation-building project was the exclusion of ethnic minority groups as well as the arbitrary matching of the Tai ethnicity to the borders of the country. Thailand is home to many ethnic groups, including Chinese, Lao, Khmer, Malay, Mon and Hmong. By labelling the country Thailand, these groups were discursively excluded. To identify as a Thai national implicitly meant identifying with the Tai ethnicity. Moreover, the main ethnic group in Thailand, the Tai, are spread across much of the Mekong. There are Tai in Cambodia and Laos for instance. By changing the country's name from Siam to Thailand, the Tai ethnic group became synonymous with the national boundaries of Thailand, which were set when the country ceded territory to the colonial governments in Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos. Thai nationalism thus conflates the idea of nation with a particular definition of ethnicity.<sup>4</sup>

The conflation of nation with ethnicity is implied in the contemporary Thai curriculum. Standard S. 4.3 states "Students understand the origin of the Thai nation, Thai culture and Thai wisdom. Students love, take pride in and seek to conserve Thai-ness." Notwithstanding the clear patriotic message in the standard (the explicit curriculum), to what does Thai refer — the country or the ethnicity? This is the implicit curriculum. The ambiguity of the meaning of "Thai" is furthered in the use of the word เชื้อชาติ (*Cheūxchāti*), which can mean ethnicity or nationality. In the history textbook for upper secondary schools, the country's origins are described like this: "The Thai *Cheūxchāti* has over 2,000 years of successive civilization. It was able to build up a unified and strong nation." If *Cheūxchāti* means ethnicity in this sentence, then the meaning of the second sentence excludes non-Tai people. The nation of Thailand is exclusively a nation for the Tai. However, if *Cheūxchāti* means nationality, then the textbook re-writes history by suggesting that Thailand was formed not in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century but in the anno Domini era. In this interpretation, the nation of Thailand has a history dating to the same time when the Tai ethnicity emerged in the Mekong. The exact meaning is ambiguous and can be read differently depending on context, purpose, or person.

Critically analyzing the implicit curriculum complicates simplistic notions of tolerance and multiculturalism. How can tolerance exist when a history textbook implies the nation-state is for a particular ethnic group? Non-Tai ethnic groups would necessarily feel excluded — i.e., not tolerated — from national identity. How too can multiculturalism exist when the conflation of ethnicity and nation constructs borders along modern state lines? Thailand as the historical location of the Tai ethnicity subsequently creates irredentist movements or migratory flows in neighboring countries with populations large populations of Tai. This mode of thinking perceives States as exclusively tied to a nation and not multicultural; each nation should have its own state. The power of Phibun in the 1930s and his self-interest in preserving power for him and his ethnic group, suggests the nation building project in Thailand remains an important feature of the Thai

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<sup>4</sup> I thank Dr. Vong-on Phuaphansawat, my research project collaborator, for this insight.

state (as does the promotion of Thai business interest). Whereas Thailand shows the importance of wooly terms in the construction of the implicit curriculum, the next case shows where state power can censor content.

### **The null curriculum in Cambodia**

Cambodia is no stranger to crises. The country has experienced nearly 100 years of colonialism followed by decades of social unrest that resulted in genocide. Within less than 50 years between 1953 and 1998, Cambodia went through five distinct transitions: royalism (1953-1970), republicanism (1970- 1975), Maoism (1975-1979), socialism (1979-1990), and liberal democracy (1991-present). Cambodia's transition to liberal democracy was part of the larger "new world order" geopolitical movements in the 1990s. In fact, liberal democracy was implemented by the United Nations Transitional Authority of Cambodia (UNTAC), an unprecedented experiment in liberal internationalism at the time (Doyle, Johnstone & Orr, 1997). Adopting Western, liberal state governing institutions, however, did not go as smoothly as the United Nations had hoped in Cambodia. By the mid-1990s, the UN rarely used UNTAC as an example of successful liberal internationalism like it did earlier.

Cambodia's problems with liberal democracy began almost immediately after the UNTAC-sponsored 1993 elections when no party won enough seats to form a majority government. Assembling a ruling coalition was difficult, especially for Prime Minister Hun Sen who had been head of state since 1985 after defecting from the Khmer Rouge. His Cambodian People's Party (CPP) administered government at all levels. Even the civil service was politicized, meaning the CPP controlled day-to-day government operations at the village level. Controlling power at all levels of government ensured the CPP would maintain power after the elections regardless of the coalition formed. In 1997 the coalition government, which oxymoronically had co-prime ministers, fell apart and Hun Sen re-took full power over the country, adopting state capitalism practices like Laos did in the late 1980s while using the rhetoric of democracy. He has been in power ever since.

Constructing a national identity out of the country's turbulent and traumatic history has not been easy. Immediately after the Vietnamese liberated Cambodia from the Khmer Rouge in 1979, the international community believed that Vietnam was spreading communism to Cambodia. The United Nations did not recognize the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) government in Phnom Penh as legitimate, instead formally acknowledging a coalition government residing abroad. (The eventual solution to this crisis of legitimacy came in the form of UNTAC, which concluded with the PRK party, renamed the CPP, gaining power.) In an effort to unify the country despite international pressure, the PRK used schooling and textbooks to promote a "re-Khmerization" of national identity (Hagai, et al., 2017), which "sought to reconnect the Cambodian people to a glorious ancient past under the Angkor Empire and remind them that they came from a culture of greatness and were capable of building a great nation" (Ngo, 2014, p. 158). Moreover, since the PRK's main threat to legitimacy came in the parts of the country ruled by the Khmer Rouge (which received international support; see Haas, 1991), textbooks in the 1980s "negatively portraying the PRK's enemies, namely the [Khmer Rouge]" (Hagai, et al., 2017, p. 71). This helped to galvanize support for the ruling government.

In the 1990s after UNTAC and when Western international development assistance emerged in

the country, the teaching of the Khmer Rouge inside schools was consciously neglected “as a compromise for national reconciliation, political stability, and peace” (Dy, 2013, p. 1). By not teaching the Khmer Rouge, the factions in the country could unite. After 2007, however, the reverse became true: it was believed that teaching about the Khmer Rouge would achieve national reconciliation and peace. The null curriculum — i.e., not teaching about the Khmer Rouge — changed at different historical moments. The textbook that was developed to teach the history of the Khmer Rouge contained a new type of null curriculum, however. Although negotiations regarding the inclusion or exclusion of content usually remain hidden to the public, Ngo (2014) was able to obtain the emails between the NGO designing the Khmer Rouge history textbook and the ministry of education. In table 1 below, sample edits by the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports to the textbook are presented, detailing the new null curriculum.

<Insert table 2.3.1>

Table 1 shows that the government was particularly interested in distancing itself from the Khmer Rouge past. The leaders of the CPP were not to be shown as having any connection to the Khmer Rouge and the legitimacy of the government needed to come both from the international community and citizens of Cambodia. The explicit edits by the government show the construction of the new null curriculum and reveal the domestic political considerations over the history textbook. The null curriculum suggests that in Cambodia, at least, the way in which state power presents historical events not only needs an “Other” to galvanize support, as in the case of Laos, or be scrutinized for its effects on ethnic minorities, as in the Thailand, but also must be refracted through domestic political considerations in order to portray a positive image of the ruling party. Such “whitewashing” has implications on multicultural education: how can multicultural education operate in a context that does not tolerate criticism?

## Conclusion

This chapter has focused on national history textbooks in three countries to show challenges a regional history textbook will likely face. The heart of the problem is the struggle between national identity and regional identity; between accepting international pressure and solidifying domestic power bases. In Laos, the origin story of the country resides in a historical moment where socialism triumphed over capitalism, the antithesis of ideas advocated in, and the Other of the “new world order;” in Thailand, the conflation of ethnicity and nationalism excluded ethnic minorities from the state’s national identity, counter to the value of multiculturalism; and in Cambodia the censorship of curricular content distanced the ruling party from the traumatic experiences of genocide, thus leaving its legitimacy unsullied.

These realities make implementing multicultural education in the region difficult. The cases in the Mekong reveal that nationalism and identity are primarily defined through exclusion, not inclusion as theorists like Benedict Anderson (1983) predicted. Part of the nation building project in Thailand, for instance, purposefully excluded Chinese business owners, providing important context to the close ties between the state and business owners. In Laos, excluding political parties other than the LPRP retains the purity of socialism, which is the bedrock of national identity. In Cambodia, it is the exclusion of certain historical facts from the curriculum that maintain the historical memory deemed appropriate by the ruling paper. By excluding what is not national, the countries have been able to construct an identity and memory in their post-

colonial period that maintains power and stability, although not in the sense of an inclusive imagined community.

These national identity formations are at odds with international norms and pressure emanating from ASEAN. Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand do not embrace democracy, social justice, or multiculturalism as either the human rights framework or ASEAN Vision 2020 demand. Although the UNESCO shared histories project is attempting to re-work national history curricular into a political worldview of liberalism, it is likely the disputes between the values and practices in the Mekong and those of the United Nations will remain. A real shared histories project in the Mekong should focus on the civilizational differences not only within the region but also across the globe. Without conceptualizing the world into civilizations, human rights and multicultural education will continue to be seen by state power as an instrument of political pressure by outsiders.

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