
Zhou Dagan, *A record of Cambodia: the land and its people*. Translated by Peter Harris, foreward by David Chandler. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2007, xv + 150 pp. ISBN 9789749511244. Price: USD 19.85 (paperback).

UN LEANG
University of Amsterdam
lun@fmg.uva.nl

The Khmer civilization and empire reached its peak from the ninth to the thirteenth century, with the central power located at the Angkor complex in what is now Cambodia's Siem Reap province. In 1296, a young Chinese man named Zhou Dagan (Chou Ta-Kuan) was sent on a diplomatic mission to the Khmer empire. Zhou Dagan came to Cambodia during the reign of Indravamman III (1295-1308), who ruled the empire just a few years before it collapsed and Angkor was abandoned, not to be remembered again by the outside world until its 'rediscovery' in 1860 by the French naturalist Henri Mouhot. Today, Angkor and its civilization have been brought to life by countless studies and by the restoration of its monuments. But Zhou Dagan's memoir, written around 1312, remains the only eye-witness account of the Khmer capital in its heyday. Although its originality is doubtful since there are many version of Zhou Dagan's text in the Chinese language, Peter Harris is surely right to state that *A record of Cambodia* stands alone as a remarkable description of day-to-day conditions in Angkor (page 30).

Zhou Dagan's book has been translated many times. Its first translation into French, by Abel Rémusat, appeared as early as 1819, even before Angkor was rediscovered. But this publication, as David Chandler notes in his introduction to the present translation, did not have much impact. In 1902 Paul Pelliot retranslated the text from Chinese to French. A second edition of Pelliot's translation, published in 1951, was widely read and served as the basis for two English editions of recent years, both under the title *The customs of Cambodia*, respectively by J. Gilman d'Arcy Paul (1992) and Michael Smithies (2001). In 2006, Michael Smithies revised and corrected his 2001 edition. A Cambodian scholar, Ly Theam Teng, translated the text from Chinese into modern Khmer in 1971.

In terms of the organization of Zhou Dagan's text there are no significant differences between Peter Harris's translation and the Pelliot/Gilman d'Arcy Paul/Smithies versions, or between these and the Khmer translation by Ly Theam Teng. Compared to its predecessors, however, this new Harris edition provides more informative notes, drawing to advantage on recent Cambodian and Chinese scholarship on thirteenth-century Khmer life. In visual terms, on the other hand, the Paul and Smithies versions, in which each section of the text is accompanied by an illustration, are more attractive (although not all the illustrations accurately reflect the adjacent text).

As the main basis for his translation, Peter Harris has used a recent annotated edition by Xia Nai, completed in 1980 and published in Beijing in 2000. This means that there are differences between the Chinese-language text used by Harris, and those used by previous translators. When one looks carefully at corresponding sections of these books, there are differences not only in terms of style and choice of words, but here and there also in meaning. In their renditions of Zhou's general preface, for instance, Harris, Smithies and Ly translate his estimate of the extent of the Khmer country (7000 *li*) as 2174 miles, but Gilman d'Arcy Paul puts the figure at 'over 1750 miles'. Other striking differences concern the names of prevalent diseases: what Harris, Gilman d'Arcy Paul and Smithies refer to as leprosy, for example, Ly calls 'ringworm'. In his notes and introduction Harris deals with the factors that influenced Zhou Dagan's writing, rather than clarifying the discrepancies between the various modern translations. Accounting for these differences is beyond the scope of the present review but represents an important task for future scholars in Khmer studies, given the status of Zhou Dagan's text as the only surviving eye-witness account of classical Angkor.