

Building Intellectual Capacity: a CKS-Rockefeller Foundation Research Program

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Drawing on the recommendations of the January 2001 CKS workshop on “the State, Practice and Future of Khmer Studies”, the Rockefeller foundation, under its program “Creativity and Culture”, has granted the Center funds for developing a three-part three-year research program. Pre-Angkorean Archaeology, Social Anthropology and Vernacular Architecture were selected from the panel’s proposals to be most interesting as well as easy to implement with the existing human infrastructure.

The Anthropology program started in October 2001 was followed by the Vernacular Architecture Program in December. An office in Phnom Penh has been made available by CKS, enabling the assistant researchers to work and interact in a friendly environment.

The Pre-Angkorean Archaeology program will begin in March 2002 with a workshop organized by and held at the Center in Siem Reap.

The Anthropology program is developed in collaboration with Dr. William Collins, Center for Southeast Asia Studies, University of California Berkeley, and Mr. Kim Sedara, a cultural anthropologist. It deals with the anthropology of higher education in Cambodia and will focus on five university departments (Faculties of Architecture and Archaeology at RUFA, Departments of History and Sociology at RUPP and the Faculty of Agriculture) so as to assess how the curricula of these institutions address students’ needs and expectations. Social interactions among the university students in these five departments will also be studied. Three graduates, Ms. Heng Chhun Oeurn, Mr. Run Sambath, from Faculty of Archaeology, RUFA, and Ms. Hak Siphirath, from RUPP Department of Sociology, have been hired by the Center as assistant researchers to conduct the research under the supervision of Dr. Collins and Mr. Kim.

The Vernacular Architecture program is led by Dr. Beng Hong Socheat Khemro, Royal Academy of Cambodia and Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction, Mr. Hok Sokol, Architect, RUFA, and myself. The program has two objectives: (a) the development of a GIS database listing vernacular structures (with a focus on monasteries and houses) in Battambang, Kompong Cham and Kratie provinces and (b) the study on medium-size Cambodian cities which will provide the chance to work with other organizations like GTZ, the German Cooperation

Agency, the University of Hamburg and possibly other academic institutions.

Two students in their final year at the Faculty of Architecture, RUFA: Ms. Kong Panya and Mr. Unphheng Puthvisal have been hired as assistant researchers. More students/graduates will be employed, as research fieldtrips start.

Led by Dr. John Miksic, Associate Professor, Southeast Asian Studies Programme, National University of Singapore, the Pre-Angkorean Archaeology Program will be developed with the assistance from the University of Hawaii for fieldwork. The program will benefit from the input of Dr. William Southworth, an archaeologist affiliated to CKS and Dr. Kyle Latinis, an anthropologist from the National University of Singapore.

In parallel to this project, John Miksic and Kyle Latinis are also responsible for the Cultural Resource Management Course, a program funded by Sainsbury foundation and managed by CKS in Phnom Penh. Having these scholars as supervisors of the two programs will help maximize the training efforts.

Work methods

The Rockefeller “Building Intellectual Capacity” Program marks the starting point of the Center’s operational phase for which guideline, development and program management constitute crucial elements.

In this regard, the program represents an opportunity to promote work methods in Cambodia that combine a sense of inclusiveness and public service while also developing perspectives not necessarily derived from Western approaches.

New forms of collaborative work between institutions and individuals sharing common interests will be initiated. For the Vernacular Architecture and Pre-Angkorean Archaeology segments, highly focused workshops gathering experts, institutions and individuals who have a strong interest in these fields will enable participants to review and assess the existing research and documentation and to better coordinate their future research efforts.

The CKS-Rockefeller program will also promote exchange of service between various programs run by CKS

or by other organizations.

For instance, the three assistant researchers of the Anthropology research program whose study deals with social interactions among university students help Dr Kyle Latinis with the Cultural Resource Management Course held currently at the Royal University of Fine Arts. This course gathers students from different departments and universities and provides a good opportunity for the assistant researchers to interview them. These interviews, a decisive input to their research, will help them refine the scope of their survey undertaken in the five University departments. In return, they can help the Sainsbury students understand concepts and ideas related to CRM. The involvement of the three assistant researchers is indeed of much relevance for the group discussions, as students need to formalize their research project.

For the Vernacular Architecture research program, exchange of service will be promoted with the GTZ on the study of medium-size cities. The Rockefeller research team will undertake research on the history and urban development of the selected cities, serving as a work basis for the GTZ team for their urban development project to be presented to local authorities. In exchange, the GTZ team will provide assistance to the Vernacular Architecture program in setting up an inventory of vernacular structures based on aerial photographs.

In the effort to re-contextualize research, the Rockefeller programs team up Cambodian and foreign academics, thus enabling a fresh Cambodian perspective to be brought into the academic field. Teaming up Cambodian and foreign scholars will offer a great opportunity for training

young graduates on research methods as the curriculum of the Cambodian Universities offers few teachings on how to conduct research. As implied in the title “Building intellectual capacity”, training on research methods and the scope of research itself are equally important. With those programs running over three years, young graduates will be offered a first long work experience.

Program outcome

By promoting work methods as presented here, the Rockefeller research program aims at setting precedents in program management for future CKS projects (teaming up Cambodians and foreigners, training young graduates on research methods, foreign scholars volunteering their time, joined publications etc).

With workshops and seminars to be held at the beginning and the end of the research program and the collaboration between different academic institutions, the Rockefeller grant helps encourage a dynamic for research that will give the Center a unique role to play in Cambodia’s academic landscape.

Finally as part of the Center’s outreach activities, dissemination of the research outcomes for the three programs will be done through publications, notably the CKS newsletter, *Siksācākṛ*. If the Pre-Angkorean Archaeology research publications are likely to reach a limited audience of academics and students in Archaeology, the outcomes of the two other programs will nurture the public debate with an original perspective on issues whose stake is crucial in today’s Cambodia, i.e. strengthening higher education, and the Khmer built heritage that is rapidly vanishing.