

The Phnom Penh Post

New generation revives 'lost culture' of reading

Written by Gemma Deavin
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Behind closed doors, Cambodia's bookworms are hard at work. There may be few people reading on the street, but analysts say reading is on the rise as the once-popular Khmer pastime re-emerges from a turbulent era that rendered books an unnecessary part of life.

After the Khmer Rouge lost their grip on power in 1979, immediate efforts to rebuild Cambodia fell far from reviving the book industry something a new generation of readers hopes to change.

"After the war, people only thought about finding a way to survive. We didn't think about knowledge," said Hun Sarin, director of the Department of Books and Reading under the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts.

As literacy rates and standards of living rise, more people are settling down with a good book and rediscovering stories of the past, said Thonavet Poav, director of The Federation for Development of the Book Sector in Cambodia, a non profit organization made up of book sellers, authors, publishers, distributors, librarians and representatives of government and non governmental organizations who wish to alleviate problems affecting the development of books and reading in Cambodia.

"People aren't aware of how good Khmer literature is and it is only a matter of time before it is rediscovered," said Poav. Theory Theng, financial director of Phnom Penh retailer Monument Books, said a more open society means Cambodians can learn about a broader variety of subjects.

"Before, many topics were forbidden. Now, we can learn anything we want," she said.

But getting books into readers' hands remains a challenge, with analysts indicating that access to reading material and publishing practices need to improve.

"Even for those in the big cities there are an insufficient number of libraries, most under-stocked with no regular government initiative to promote reading," Helen Jarvis, author of *Publishing in Cambodia*, says in the 2006 revised edition of her book.

Writers, publishers and printers are confronted by an industry still in its early stages of development and, without the presence of official publishing houses, responsibility falls on authors to produce their own books.

"One in three writers handle the whole process of publishing and marketing their works themselves by photocopying and selling their copies to friends at market stalls," Jarvis wrote.

Unable to afford books in Phnom Penh's selection of upmarket bookstores, most readers take advantage of the over 150 roadside kiosks and the concentration of bookstalls at the Psar O'Russey, Olympic and Thmey markets.

Part-time bookseller Keo Saravuth, 28, said business was improving at his mother's bookstand at Psar O'Russey market. In the ten years since his mother set up shop, he has seen a sharp rise in book sales, particularly of Khmer fiction books costing \$1.50 to \$3.



"We are starting to read more and more," said Saravuth. "Before there were not many books to read, now people can find whatever they want."

To help those in the countryside also find what they want, the Department of Books and Reading plans to start a mobile library that will travel nationwide in the next few years.

Help from abroad is on its way, too. Last month, a delegation from the US-based International Freedom to Publish Committee visited Cambodia on a fact-finding mission at the invitation of the Center for Khmer Studies.

Committee chairman Hal Fessenden told the Post there were many NGOs doing important work to build a literary culture in Cambodia but his organization made up of members of the Association of American Publishers could enhance their efforts by identifying concrete steps to rebuild "a lost culture."