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FOOD AND SOCIETY
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Taste, Culture, Education.

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PUTTING COOKING SKILLS TO THE TEST: DIETARY LIFESTYLES IN CAMBODIA'S INDUSTRIAL SLUMS

Hart Feuer
Sary Seng

Introduction

The factory worker lifeworld in popular imagination

The driving force behind improvements to conditions in ‘sweat shops’ in poorer countries have been based on the presumption that the necessary interventions are primarily needed at the workplaces in question. The dominant narrative understood by international audiences, particularly among those who put pressure on brand names, is that factory conditions are hot and cramped, and that workers toil for long hours for low wages. It follows that factories should become better ventilated, overtime working hours should be optional, and that wages should simply rise. Since the International Labour Organisation’s (ILO) ‘Better Factories Cambodia’ (BFC) initiative began in 2001, all of these things have occurred and yet the condition of factory workers in the garment and footwear sector remains a chronic point of concern and national fixation. Two areas have attracted special attention in the national dialogue: health and safety, and nutrition. And in these areas as well, pressure has been imposed on the garment sector to manage the safety of factory workers at home and en route to work, to manage health and maternal care, and to support a nutritious diet. A certain ideal seems to surround this push,

centered around visions of a gleaming factory with on-site health services, free food canteens, and worker transportation via air-conditioned bus from safe housing estates. The supporting assumption is that a centralized, regulated, and systematized system attached to factories would be more efficient and effective than the inconsistent domain of private service provision outside the factory gates. There is some evidence that when these services are internalized by factories, the workers' well-being rises, but few have compared whether the "chaotic" private sector is, on balance, the optimal place for intervention—especially given the recalcitrance of most factories toward long-term structural changes. This paper departs from multi-lateral, governmental, and non-governmental organization (NGO) reports and academic work in that it squarely seeks to determine how the existing systems of nutrition and food provision can play a role in improving workers' health conditions.

One driver of this research is the observation that the factory sector is in a constant state of flux on which it is difficult to impose health and nutrition rationality, while other forms of service provision are comparable and consistent across neighborhoods and industrial estates in Cambodia. Optimizing the workability of factory workers' fresh markets, lunch vendors, and food stalls would have a more universally-felt effect not only for the workers, but also within the broader industrial working and living space. Beyond this are potential knock-on effects, including better domestic and cooking skills, better financial management, and more independence to customize one's nutritional lifestyle. The impacts are potentially significant for Cambodia's middle-term industrial development and its

post-industrial future. The ILO estimates that around 700,000 workers (out of a population of around 14 million), mostly young and female, are engaged in the garment and footwear sector – which amounts for perhaps one-quarter of all females aged 18-29 in Cambodia (Heng & Ashish, 2017a). It is therefore not surprising that, overall, most international aid funded projects have targeted maternal and sexual health (Heng & Ashish, 2017a), as there is a strong expectation that long-term family building is at stake. The result is an interventionist approach that seeks firstly to improve nutrition during the critical maternal years at the cost of taking a longer-term approach which would focus more on empowering factory women to manage their own nutrition strategically and become savvy domestic managers.

The project appraisals and reports produced about nutrition in the garment and footwear sector often articulate a patriarchal discourse of innocent young women in need of protection from profiteering factory owners, unscrupulous food vendors, and their own dietary illiteracy. This constellation of characteristics serves to deny agency to the workers while creating a justification for structural intervention. One example of this is the preoccupation with factory canteens. Despite the decline in the number of canteens and the persistence of major structural impediments to their use (BDLINK & HRINC, 2012), policy recommendations typically refer to them as the ideal solution for workers (Angkor Research, 2016; Ashish, 2017; Becker, 2012; CARE International, 2006). The implication is that the food systems internal to the targets (i.e. the factory workers' own domestic and food skills) and external (i.e. the food vendors, fresh markets, and stalls) are sub-

optimal spaces for intervention. In short, factory workers' dietary skills are not consistent and vendors cannot be trustworthy. This paper does not seek to contradict the well-documented nutritional challenges facing factory workers, but rather to avoid the trap of seeking *a priori* top-down interventions.

Factory workers in the lens of development aid

Consistent with the experience of industrialization in most countries, factory workers in Cambodia typically transition from farm homes to cramped slum areas where basic amenities, including kitchens and running water, cannot be taken for granted. Most typically, young female workers reside in a single room with an improvised cooking area made up of a camping stove, wood block, and set of crockery. Many have disrupted school and domestic education to migrate to the city and may lack comprehensive cooking and life skills. While this set of conditions might suggest ominous nutritional outcomes, our research in a number of factory worker areas in the greater Phnom Penh area has uncovered a more optimistic state of affairs. This short research update draws on surveys, and itinerant research among factory workers to illustrate how the social modeling in migration, the food spaces around factories, and ingenuity combine to create a lived environment with surprisingly high nutritional potential. This is not to say that factory workers' health and hygiene are necessarily good, as indeed many migrants struggle to adopt optimal dietary behavior, but rather to suggest that nutritional outcomes are better than expected and can often be quite good.

Certain aspects of the routine, lived dietary experience have been well documented in reports by consulting and aid agency reports. As a starting point, the most recent controlled study of the impact of factory canteens (Angkor Research, 2016) ultimately endorses canteens, but the contradictory tone apparent in the recommendations reveals a more ambivalent conclusion.

“Improvements in workers’ understanding of positive health behaviours, including how to make appropriate food choices for better health and nutrition, would help workers to make positive changes *in their own lives over the long term, and would also benefit their children and other family members.*” (Angkor Research, 2016, p. 27, emphasis added)

Contrary to popular imagination, they find that the workers’ Body Mass Index (BMI) is not dissimilar to that of the overall Cambodian population, and that factory workers actually had an “acceptable amount of dietary diversity” when eating independently (Angkor Research, 2016, p. 7). Instead of forcefully and exclusively pushing for canteens, they recommend a combination of trainings on food diversity, nutrition, and hygiene, as well as more eggs, dairy, and foods rich in vitamin A and iron. In evaluating existing canteens, they suggest that the food be more culturally appropriate and that providing sufficient food choice is important for uptake – in other words, to render the food experience more similar to typical private dietary habits.

Factory workers in an ethnographic lens

Our research seeks to explain why the contradictory conclusions documented above arise by exploring a domain little covered by project evaluation based, technocratic research. In part, we do this by replicating the basic research methodologies used by numerous studies in evaluating the link between behavioral patterns and dietary outcomes (BDLINK & HRINC, 2012; i.e. CARE International, 2006; Heng & Ashish, 2017b), and by triangulating these with ethnographic research. In addition to a survey of ‘dietary history’ and routine food consumption patterns, we follow up with key informants by developing sufficient rapport that we may visit their rental rooms for an impromptu meal and then follow-up with a visit to their provincial hometowns to further explore their cooking background. Vansintjan (2017) effectively captured our initial impressions with his representation of Vietnamese street food:

“Street vendors rarely have fridges, nor do they have large cooking surfaces, dishwashing machines, or ovens. By and large, they make do with some knives, two bowls to wash fresh vegetables in, a large pot, a frying pan, coals or gas burners and — for products that may go bad during the day — fermentation. Having limited access to capital and consumer electronics, these vendors — most often women — ply their trade in a way that has stood the test of time.”

The food preparation conditions of factory workers are also very rudimentary (see **Figure 1**), but in many ways comparable to their hometown counterparts (see **Figure 2**).

The transferability of certain food preparation skills – such as the effective employment of very basic equipment – can explain why we have consistently experienced thoughtful, hygienic and efficiently-prepared meals (see Figure 3). Given the good availability and proximity of fresh markets to most high-density factory areas, workers can be said to have more consistent access to a wider variety of ingredients than in their hometowns. As a result, factory workers with sufficient cooking and domestic planning skills are also frequently able to coordinate the preparation of breakfast and a packed-lunch (44% do so at least a few times per week), despite having very little time before and after work (typically 07:00-17:00 shifts, with bedtime around 21:00) to complete cooking and all other domestic duties.



Figure 1 The rental room kitchen of hometown kitchen of female factory worker A.



Figure 2
The hometown kitchen of female factory worker A.

By our measure, 28% of the workers have *comprehensive* cooking skills and are able to use these skills to manage their dietary lifestyle efficiently. Given that an additional 66% of the workers can cook most everyday Khmer dishes (including all male informants), the potential for employing independent skills to effectively manage one's nutrition remains high. Furthermore, when working in groups, gaps in dietary skill can be remedied and dietary diversity can be increased significantly. As documented by most of the evaluations and reports summarized above, and confirmed in our research, most factory workers live with others (usually family), with an average household size of three (Angkor Research, 2016). By coordinating differences in their work schedules and cooking skills, they can very efficiently prepare nutritionally comprehensive meals. Khmer cuisine is particularly suited to such shared arrangements, as many of the healthiest dishes require group eating (Feuer, 2015).



Figure 3 A dinner of female factory worker B.

Beyond the household, factory workers consistently share food with others at the factory (88% of the time). This not only allows a more relaxed, convivial break, but also facilitates food sharing and dietary diversity. We have documented groups of between 3-6 workers eating together, sharing between 4 and 12 dishes. A particular form of this behavior emerges among factory comrades who delegate the responsibility of buying food for the group to those who are particularly adept at selecting a balanced and hygienic meal from among the myriad options outside the gate (see Figure 4). This ideal case, however, must be viewed in the broader context of food in front of the factory gate. While the variety of low-cost food near factory areas is often impressive due to the entrepreneurship of the vendors, there are two main weaknesses in the current system: hygiene and temptation. While our research confirms that the vast majority of workers consume a typical Khmer meal of rice (99%), *samlor* (stew) (60%-98%), and stir-fried foods (36-97%),

we also know that unhealthy choices are common as well: artificial fish balls (55-65%), milky desserts (33-80%), salted clams (30%), and all manner of sugary drinks (cane juice, soda, lemonade) are very common complementary additions. In general, those with longer tenures at the factories purchase less unhealthy options from the factory gate (declines are particularly noticeable for fish balls, clams, and sugary drinks). Over this period, workers can improve their independent cooking skills, domestic management, and gain discipline.



Figure 4 An arrangement of soups, fried dishes, pickles, and rice for quick sale in front of a garment factory.

Conclusion

Lifelong dietary skills for navigating urban food systems

The food systems that have developed alongside dense factory areas in the Phnom Penh metropolitan area are not ideal from the perspective of hygiene, but they have co-

evolved with factory workers and their preferences for over two decades. While external interventions, such as in-factory canteens, can achieve a marginal increase in nutrition outcomes, they also rob workers of their independence in dietary management and food preference. The consistent support for canteens is sustained by the patriarchal view, present among government, civil society, and factory managers, that factory workers lack the agency to navigate the turbulent food systems which they are faced with. This paper has provided the preliminary case for how the inherent food skills are already the backbone of worker nutrition and how they can continue to be indispensable, especially when expressed in group effort. Workers themselves, when given the chance, express their desire to maintain independence and responsibility over their dietary lifestyles. In this, there is an opportunity to push for empowerment of workers to continuously refine these skills to help manage the challenges of hygiene, micronutrient intake, and rising food costs. This would not only help raise productivity and alleviate ongoing nutrition-based health problems, but would also set workers on a path to lifelong cooking and domestic management skills that will benefit not only them but also their future families. Although there are few innovative examples of how such empowerment would be shaped, a few factories have stumbled upon promising solutions and a few observers have made important suggestions. Among these are: working closely with vendors to set baseline standards for hygiene, inviting vendors into factory gates to create informal 'food courts' away from unsafe and dusty roads, and providing healthy snacks (such as bananas) to increase the probability that workers are driven by choice rather than hunger. Outside of the factory, it is important to support rather than demonize

the fresh market and food systems that have evolved with the workers; instead, it is important to recognize their strengths and work to minimize their weaknesses. These spaces, which are the facilitators to independent dietary learning, are inescapably part of the present and future facing urban workers in the next generation.

Endnotes

¹ We reviewed completed and ongoing evaluations from the following projects: HealthWorks (2012-present), funded by USAID; Healthy Food, Healthy Workplace (2016-2019), administered by CARE; Life Skills (2012), funded by ILO, administered by World Education; Better Factories Cambodia's Nutrition Program, funded by the US Department of Labor

² The sample size is 77 workers from 5 factories in different regions in the metropolitan Phnom Penh area. The informants were selected randomly as they exit the factory gate in the evening and those with literacy impediments were given the survey orally.

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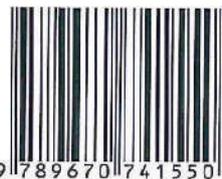
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This book encapsulates the proceedings of the second Food and Society Conference that was held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in November 2017. The theme ascribed to the conference was "Taste, Culture and Education".

Taste is a problematic concept in sociology and so is culture for anthropology. Using common sense, we tend to define aesthetical taste as a natural affinity towards the objects of our passion. Sociology has persisted in showing that this relationship is actually socially constructed through the categories employed, the authority of leaders, the imitation of intimates, institutions and frames of appreciation, as well as through the social game of identity making and differentiation. The debate therefore narrows down to the infamous structure/agency duality. Is our sense of taste socially determined? In other words, are our choices really our own? That is where culture with a big C comes into play; but again anthropologists have been struggling for more than one century to make operational sense of the concept of culture, as culture is not a given data but must be analysed or interpreted, depending on the school of thought you belong to. Education as a philosophical construct cannot be taken for granted either, as it may refer to the transmission of knowledge and enlightenment of the mind – the *skhole* of the ancient Greeks –. Education can also be understood as cultural capital waiting to be transmitted – or not – to the next generation; or it may even signify social control in certain contexts. This second Food and Society conference conveys the ambition of investigating the dialectics of these three highly volatile concepts, the former reflecting either culinary systems in-the-making, or social change at work. These dialectics may be seen as a circumscribed and specified manifestation of a broader phenomenon: the polar tension between cultural homogenization and ethnic revitalization. We trust that the reader will find some partial answers to those critical discussions in this engaging collection of essays about the food that makes us.

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