Managing Uncertainties of the Life Course in Transformative Society – Experiences of a New Generation of Young Cambodians

Chivoin Peou & Jens O. Zinn
School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne
Email address: peouchivoin@gmail.com

Abstract

Social transformation brings not only opportunities but also risks and uncertainties for the life course. This is particularly true for young Cambodians when planning their life in a country that after a bloody past rapidly transforms from a mainly peasant society towards a modern society with growing industrial, service and knowledge economy. By drawing on empirical data of a study on rural-urban young migrant laborers and university students in Phnom Penh, we argue that the management of risks and uncertainties by different social groups reflects the social resources and opportunities available to them when finding a new place in the transforming social structure of Cambodia. We present an empirically grounded typology of biographical management of the young people in the study, illustrating the different ways of dealing with experiences and developing expectations during the course of their life. We conclude that how young individuals deal with uncertainties is linked not only to material resources but social resources and cultural values.

Key words: Uncertainty, risk, compressed modernization, Cambodia, youth

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Introduction

Global changes in the last few decades have generated debate on the life course. In the Western world, second modern conditions (Beck 1992) such as post-industrial production and increased individualization are considered to have altered the ‘normal’ or ‘standardized’ life course (Mayer 2004), and inherent uncertainties and new risks of the contemporary age have serious consequences for youth and the transition to adulthood (Blossfeld et al. 2005). In non-Western societies, social change has unfolded differently, but modernization and globalization have also brought about risks and uncertainties in the life course along with improved living standards and reconfiguration of institutional and cultural fragments, such as in East Asia (Han & Shim 2010).

This paper contributes to the debates on the impact of social transformations on the life course in modernizing societies in Asia. It examines the lived experiences of a generation of young Cambodians managing biographical risks and uncertainties during their transition toward adulthood. We argue that young Cambodians have to invent their future on the basis of available resources and socio-cultural expectations when engaging with new opportunities and risks during the course of their life. How they see and manage risk and uncertainty reflects the loose coupling between the resources available to them and the worldviews they engage in when approaching the future. In the Cambodian context, where little institutional support system is developed, the availability of family networks is still crucial to protect against hardship and to enable strategic biographical planning.
Modernization and Uncertainties in the Life Course

In the Western modernization process, the fundamental change in the organization of labor (Kohli 1986) and the introduction of the welfare state (Mayer & Müller 1986) have been identified as crucial for the institutionalization of the life course, which produced a normatively desired and, for most people, experienced life course. However, this ‘normal’ life course model has been subject to question amidst a growing trend of diversity in the sequencing and timing of transitions and statuses over the past recent decades. The second modern shift (Beck 1992), encompassing post-industrial economy and increased institutional individualism, has generated risks and uncertainties for individuals and new life course outcomes depending on specific welfare and institutional regimes (Mayer 2001). The youth life course, in particular, has been subject to the increased risks and uncertainties of the global market order and individualization process, entailing varying life course outcomes depending on specific institutional configuration (Blossfeld et al. 2005). Thus, a ‘social climate of uncertainty’ goes together with ‘biographical uncertainty’ for young people (Leccardi 2005).

In non-Western societies, although modernization processes have unfolded differently from those in the Western world (Eisenstadt 2000), socio-structural and institutional changes characteristic of a modern societal form such as industrial economy, functional differentiation, and educational growth have also taken place (Schmidt 2010). Coupled to globalization processes this means that lifestyles, risks and options that characterize Western modernization processes can also be expected in non-Western societies, yet specific institutional and cultural elements should remain relevant for the individuals in constructing their life courses. In East Asia, for instance, intense and quick transformation processes such as ‘compressed modernization’ (Chang 1999) have entailed not only opportunities, such as improved living standards and desired life styles, but also risks and uncertainties as well as
reconfiguration of traditional cultural elements, particularly family value and reliance (e.g. Chang 2010) in the context of a ‘productivist’ welfare arrangement (Holliday 2000). In the following, we will situate Cambodia in a transforming societal context and examine how the institutional, socio-cultural and family resources shape how individuals deal with risks and uncertainties of the life course.

Social Transformation in Cambodia

After a history of political instability, civil war and totalitarian regimes, Cambodia has in the past two decades undergone profound transformation through to political stability and a neoliberal market economy. Economic growth has been impressive, averaging 7.8% between 1994 and 2010 (Hing et al. 2012), with profound structural shift. Agricultural economy has shrunk, dropping from 48% to 29% in GDP share and from 79% to 56% in employment between 1993 and 2007, while the industrial, service and knowledge economy has been rising (WB 2009). In terms of social development, Cambodia has also boasted improvement, including literacy and school attendance rates, child and maternal mortality rates, communications and life expectancy (WB 2013). Values and supporting institutions of market capitalism and democratic governance have been rapidly transplanted. Income per capita, social mobility and post-secondary education have risen, and so have social inequalities, with Gini coefficient for wealth increasing from 0.38 in 1994 to 0.44 in 2007 (WB 2013). In many ways, opportunities and risks abound in the new Cambodia.

With prevailing optimism for better lives, compared to a bloody past, the now demographically young society embraces the opportunities of the new age, but socio-cultural resources remain important for expectations about a good life and legitimate social mobility. These include values and normative framework for life conduct and mobility shaped by Cambodian traditional culture and the post-independence economic and cultural prosperity of
The traditional framework for the life course was characterized by a rooted sense of place in the given social order, fitting with both the centuries-old Buddhist ideology and the highly hierarchical social structure, such as between the sexes and rural-urban space (Chandler 1979). A Cambodian was expected to do well and increase his lots through ‘self-improvement’ defined within a traditionally given path, rather than by planning and charting a new one (Steinberg 1959). This ‘self-improvement’ was perceived in a broad sense, ranging from character improvement to personal industry, from doing charity to getting educated and earning through honest means.

The national prosperity of the 1950s and 1960s generated strong national and individual aspirations for modernization and upward mobility, which seemed achievable through education (Ayres 2000). With increasing numbers of school and university graduates entering the civil service, a belief in the absolute good of education became pervasive and regarded as a sort of ‘self-improvement’ for upward mobility. However, such mobility was limited to those with a certain degree of family resources, while the majority remained grounded to the peasant life course of subsistence production-oriented lifestyle but hopeful of a better future through ‘self-improvement’. The social destruction through armed conflicts and oppression in the 1970s–80s rendered unrealistic this normative framework for legitimate social mobility and life course expectation, but they became idealized only to be aspired to again when the post-conflict national reconstruction began in the 1990s.

Finally, the lack of institutionalized support for the life course and the crucial role of the family and kin network in supporting individuals, enforced through tradition and historical circumstances of warfare and hardship, mean that the family is central for dealing with risks and uncertainties of the life course. In the following, we will examine how this process of rapid transformation and the social and family resources available to young people feed into the way they deal with uncertainties of their life course.
Data

The article is based on data of a study on young people’s biographical experience and management in Phnom Penh. The study, employing common procedures of a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990), contrasts the life experiences and expectations of two groups of young people: migrant laborers (n=20) and university students (n=31). Theoretical sampling was applied with both groups in order to first discover significant life experiences and issues and then narrow in on selected ones. Two waves of interviews were conducted in 2011 (n=32) and 2012 (n=19). The interviewing process followed the logic of biographical and in-depth qualitative interviewing (Witzel and Reiter 2012), requesting the participants to discuss their biographical experiences, present life situations, and future life perspectives, followed by more focused questioning on emerging issues of interest. The data

In a context of transforming society, what was previously taken for granted with regard to the social world and life course becomes less certain as new conditions, ideas and resources come into existence. New ways to manage biographical experiences are called for, but fragments of old structures and ideas remain. For a new generation of young Cambodians making transition into the labor market, therefore, ways of managing biographical experiences and expectations are developed, that is, what we call modes of biographical management. These are ‘ideal types’ (Weber 1949) we use to categorize a number of possible modes of action and expectation developed by the young people in managing the tradition toward adulthood. The typology is ‘empirically grounded’ (Kluge 2000), the process of which began with open and thematic coding (Flick 2002) to generate and relate concepts and compare cases. Salient concepts were then related to theoretical considerations on risk, the life course and Cambodia in order to identify dimensions that explain different types of biographical action and expectation.
Managing Uncertainties of the Life Course through Biographical Management

In the following, we present some dimensions of the typology, emphasizing their different ways of perceiving and dealing with life course uncertainties and their different resources (see Table 1). The discussion is restricted to biographical aspects related to jobs and livelihood, critical to biographical certainty in modern societies (Zinn 2004) and to youth transitions (Roberts 2003).

[Table 1 about here]

Uncertainty Perception

Uncertainty about future life is a significant dimension for future expectation not only because known certainty about the social world and the life course is subject to question and revision in a changing societal context, but also due to the opening up of possibilities by a future perspective. In the entrepreneurial mode, uncertainty is perceived as risks to be managed individually. As risk requires active assessment and management with future-focused orientation (Giddens 1991), future career options are assessed in terms of likelihood to achieve, whereby some are seen as being more feasible or distant than others, requiring calculation of ‘probability’ and risks involved. This is exemplified by Nary⁹, when inquired about her career prospect:

(1) I believe in myself that there’ll certainly be a job. … The first thing I want to do is a diplomacy job. But I don’t want to aim at just one thing because if I lose it, I’ll have nothing. I want to be a chan-srak [multi-layer stackable food container]. It means I’ll have the first, second and third priorities. If I can’t have the first, I’ll take the second. My second ambition is also not small. I want to work at a UN office [or international agencies] such as USAID, UNICEF or in other jobs to do with the background of my study. I think we can’t get all we want, so I want to have other priorities. So when I lose one, I’ll have another. (Female, 20, student)

In contrast, in the traditional mode, uncertainty is perceived as dangers for biographical projection. Unlike the risk perception of uncertainty, which results from one’s own decision making in the entrepreneurial mode, potential dangers come from forces external to one’s own decision making⁹. Such dangers can be remotely felt as possible unwelcome events:
Sometimes there’s worry, for example, when the economy is down and some companies have to lay off staff. I’m a bit worried … that when I graduate, I can’t get a job because there are now many qualified people … and then in 2013, it’s election time too. *(Sokhom, female, 20, student)*

When I see strikes, I feel worried too that in the future it might happen to my factory too. *(Ty, male, 18, garment factory worker)*

In the above examples, such biographical dangers result from the labor market and political and economic conditions, which are independent of their capacity to decide and act. In other cases, family conditions such as illnesses and financial needs can be perceived in the same manner.

Future dangers may also result from events that are not yet conceivable because they exist outside the socialized notions of normality within a normative social order. Such notions of normality make the future appear closed or certain because things are ‘expected’ or ‘hoped’ to proceed according to the given order of things, for example:

*I’m not worried! … For telecom and automatic control system [which I’m going to be specialized in], there aren’t many who choose to study them … I hope that when I finish my electrical engineering degree, I hope for 88% or 89% that I could find a job.* *(Sokha, male, 24, student)*

For such given notions of normality, a university degree will lead to a high-status job, or returning to the village with some savings will guarantee an improved peasant livelihood.

Some of the young people express this sort of expectation and fail to recognize the growing prospect of graduate unemployment or loss of peasant way of life.

In the *situational mode*, future events are contingent upon an unknown future, making future uncertainty ‘fateful’ *(Giddens 1991)*, for highly consequential events in the life course are bound to happen by are beyond one’s knowledge at present, for example:

*Actually the job is temporary. (Interviewer: Then what’s the permanent one?) … The permanent one, I don’t know … because I don’t know what to do yet. At my home [village] there’s no job. And my family is poor. I don’t know what to do, and also I have only the mother, so there’s no farmland to work on.* *(Touch, female, 23, waiter)*

*I don’t have any plan [after graduation] … Just study first. (Interviewer: What do you think about the future?) … Hmm … I’m not sure. … I’m worried because I’m not an outstanding student… They only select those outstanding, with experience.* *(Sophearaek, male, 22, student)*
In the following, we will show how these perceptions of future uncertainty (risk, danger and fate) are linked to different biographical action orientation as well as the various aspects of resources available to or used by the young people.

*Action Orientation*

With the risk perception of future uncertainty in the *entrepreneurial mode*, the young people have to devise individualized action strategies to pro-actively and reflexively counter the conceivable risks and to achieve the desired options. This is exemplified by Nary’s (example 1) metaphor of the future goals as a *chan-srak* [multi-layer stackable food container], through which the future is to be managed inventively and reflexively by herself and with considerable assessment of multiple options. For the young people following this mode, such management involves knowing and directing one’s passage toward the required capital such as the right knowledge and university degree, professional experience and network.

For those following the *traditional mode*, biographical action taken during the life course is linear-additive in accordance with the framework of given norms and traditions. Unlike the *entrepreneurial mode* of flexible adaptive strategies to deal with manageable risks such as employment options, the action orientation of the *traditional mode* is guided by the traditionally normative framework of values and conduct, in this case the Cambodian conception of proper life and legitimate upward social mobility – characterized by the ideal of (semi-)subsistence peasant livelihood or absolute good of education for elevating occupational and social status. In such normative framework, the life course is viewed as linear-additive accumulation of decisions and events aligned to the traditionally given path, whereby unwelcome events are possible dangers rather than risks to be flexibly and proactively dealt with. As shown in the examples (2 – 4) above with regard to uncertainty
perception in this *traditional mode*, the young people hope or worry but do not do anything to counter possible dangers, such as reassessing and reorienting occupational options and paths.

For the *situational mode*, the contingency of an unknown future makes it neither possible to devise action strategy to counter unwelcome events nor realistic to plan for the future. Hence, unwelcome events in the life course are to be responded situationally, dependent upon the conditions and limitations at hand. As examples 5 and 6 above show, biographical action linked to a future perspective is absent or delayed and will only be taken in response to specific events and situations that arise.

**Resources**

Personal and family-based resources are mutually re-enforcing with the different perceptions and action orientation. Here, we focus on perspective of personal capacity in terms of both human capital and perceived autonomy, enabling-restrictive resource character, and the social and material resources provided by the family.

In the *entrepreneurial mode*, confidence in individual skills, particularly cultural capital in the forms of educational qualifications and self-achieving attitude, and the enabling character of social and material resources, provided mainly by the family, are significant factors. In Nary’s (example 1) case above, for instance, despite acknowledging nepotism and corruption as possible obstacles for her career goal in diplomacy, she believes that there is a good chance for “people’s qualities” to be noticed, while she also expects an uncle in the government who “knows a lot of people” to be of help. In other cases of the *entrepreneurial mode*, anticipation of using social resources as capital mobilized from durable network of relationships (Bourdieu 1986), especially family and kin, as well as from weak ties beyond the family (Granovetter 1973) is also noticeable. In addition, the enabling aspect of family-
Based material resources is obvious as the logic of entrepreneurial mode is limited to only some university students and not migrant laborers.

In contrast to the entrepreneurial mode, in which the young people are knowledgeable about how their skills and abilities could affect their future, in the traditional mode, individual capacity to influence biographical future is rather unknown to individuals, except in a very general sort of manner in believing in the absolute link between a degree and high-status jobs or savings and better livelihood. They are uncertain of whether their abilities or resources will yield in the direction they hope for.

For the traditional mode, family-based resources are also seen as safety net to fall back on in case unwelcome events occur. Pha, a female factor worker, exemplifies this resource character:

(7) When the factory closes, I can find another one. But if it closes too, I can go home. … Nothing to do at home. I’d just help my mom with farming… Enough to live on.

In the same manner, some students who follow the traditional mode also rely on family-based material and social resources as safety net against employment failure, mainly through the expectation that their family will be able to finance a small business venture or utilize kin connection to get them a job.

In the situational mode, the lack of family-based resources or occupational skills is linked to a fateful future and situationally responsive action orientation (e.g. example 5 of Touch above). For some of the young migrant laborers, harsh family poverty and absence of occupational skills renders not only current laboring precarious but also the future fateful. The situational mode is however not limited to absence of family-resource or occupational skills, as a few university students from middle-class background or one that is able to provide safety net and higher educational investment also follow this fateful mode. It appears that the (perceived or real) lack of capacity in the sense of autonomy leads to an apprehensive future perspective as well as situational-responsive action (e.g. example 6 of Sopheaek.
above). In another case, such a fateful mode is linked rather to the restrictive character of the family resources:

(8) **Interviewer**: What’s your plan after graduation? … I don’t know. My father said my brother would help me. I wouldn’t know where to apply. They haven’t told me the plan. If they had, I’d have been easier for me and I could know what to do. (Phara, male, 20, student)

Phara initially intended to enroll for a law degree, hoping to pursue a career in public administration (a traditionally established career path); however, his older brothers who are supporting him financially and had experienced the university passage, one of whom unable to find a job with a law degree, made him enroll to study economics. The knowledge and financial resources of his family in this respect become restrictive for his biographical action and expectation. In a context of structural and institutional transformation, therefore, young people following this *situational mode* are at risk of failing to manage a successful transition into the labor market or relatively stable adult life course.

**Conclusion**

The typology shows that one’s life conditions and perceptions mutually enforce specific modes of biographical management. Lacking knowledge about possible futures go along with the lack of resources to reach other opportunities, whereas strategic action and risk-taking in the entrepreneurial mode go along with vast social and material resources. However, although the sample suggests that some modes are more likely to be developed by people coming from specific social contexts, this seems not predetermined, considering the cases where even university students follow sometimes a situational mode. This happens in a context where family as a whole makes decisions about its members’ biography and hence one’s life course is not so much individually but collectively negotiated.

In a context of rapid transformation from a mainly agrarian society to a growing industrial and service economy, opportunities and risks abound for young people managing transition into the labor market and constructing their life courses. With a lack of well-
established career paths and absence of a welfare state, Cambodian young people have to manage their lives newly based on the resources available to them as well as on traditionally normative values. In so doing, inequality structures are reshaping, and the critical role of the family as the main provider of social and material resources is reinforced despite a normative individualization discourse, a feature significant in compressed modernization elsewhere, especially in East Asia (Chang 2010; Shim & Han 2010).

References


**Table:**

*Table 1: Modes of Biographical Management*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Entrepreneurial</th>
<th>Traditional</th>
<th>Situational</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Uncertainty</strong></td>
<td>Risk: Manageable</td>
<td>Danger: External</td>
<td>Fate: Contingent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action</strong></td>
<td>Inventive, flexible adaptive</td>
<td>Additive linear</td>
<td>Responsive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resources</strong></td>
<td>Enabling resources, confidence in and developing capacity</td>
<td>Resources as safety net, exploring own capacity</td>
<td>Lack of resources or restrictive resources, lacking capacity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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\(^1\) All the names are code names.

\(^2\) This follows Luhmann’s (1993) sociological distinction, where risk is a result of one’s own decision making, and danger of a condition external to one’s own decision making.