

## KHMER RICHE

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### “KHMER RICHE”

Written by Andrew Marshall

**Good Weekend Magazine for the Sydney Morning Herald**

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They live in one of the poorest countries on earth, yet they drive flash cars, dwell in mansions and scorn their impoverished brethren. Andrew Marshall meets the rich sons and daughters of Cambodia elite.



[1]

The huge Phnom Penh mansion owned by Victor's parents, General Meas Sophea. (Good Weekend Magazine)

“I’m going to drive a little fast now. Is that Okay?” There is one place in Cambodia where you can hold a cold beer in one hand and a warm Kalashnikov in the other, and Victor is driving me there. We’re powering along Phnom Penh’s airport road with Oasis on his Merc’s sound system and enough guns in the boot to sink a Somali pirate boat. Victor is rich and life is sweet. His father is commander of the Cambodian infantry. He has a place reserved for him at L’Ecole Speciale Militaire de Saint-Cyr, France’s answer to Duntroon. And, in his passenger seat, there is a thin, silent man with a Chinese handgun: his bodyguard.

“His name is Klar,” says Victor. “It means tiger.”

Victor is only 21, but when reach our destination—a firing range run by the Cambodian special forces—the soldier at the gate salutes.

Devastated by decades of civil war, Cambodia remains one of the world’s poorest nations. A third of its 13 million

people live on less than a dollar a day and about 8 out of every 100 children die before the age of five. But Victor—real name Meas Sophearith—was raised in a different Cambodia, where power and billions of dollars in wealth are concentrated in the hands of a tiny elite. This elite prefers to conceal the size and sources of their money—illegal logging, smuggling, land-grabbing—but their children just like to spend it. The Khmer Rouge are dead; the Khmer Riche now rule Cambodia.

I first met Victor at a fancy Phnom Penh restaurant called Café Metro. Outside, Porsches, Bentleys and Humvees fight for parking spaces. The son of a powerful general, Victor has his future mapped out for him. He went to school in Versailles, speaks French and English, and now studies politics at the University of Oklahoma. “My mother wanted us to get a foreign education so we could come back and control the country,” he says. The shooting range is where Victor and his friends go to relax. “I’ve grown up with guns and soldiers all around

me," he says, laying out a private arsenal on a table: two automatic assault rifles, two Glock pistols, one sniper's rifle, one iPhone.



[2]

"My mother wanted us to get a foreign education so we could come back and control the country". Meas Victor Sophearith (above) is one of Cambodia's privileged elite.

educated overseas—partly because their families' wealth made them targets for kidnapping gangs—and often speak better English than Khmer. They carry US dollars – only poor people pay with Cambodian riel – and live in newly built neoclassical mansions so large that the city's old French architecture looks like Lego by comparison. And their connection to the Cambodian masses is almost non-existent.

Sophy, 22, is the daughter of a Deputy Prime Minister. Rich, doll-like and self-obsessed, she could be the Paris Hilton of Cambodia. She imports party shoes from Singapore, brands them "Sophy & Sina" (Sina is her sister-in-law), then displays them in her own multistory boutique. It has six staff, no customers and a slogan: "It's all aboutme." Sophy's name is spelled out in sparkling stones on the back of her car, a Merc so pimped up that I have to ask her what make it is. "It's a Sophy!" she replies.

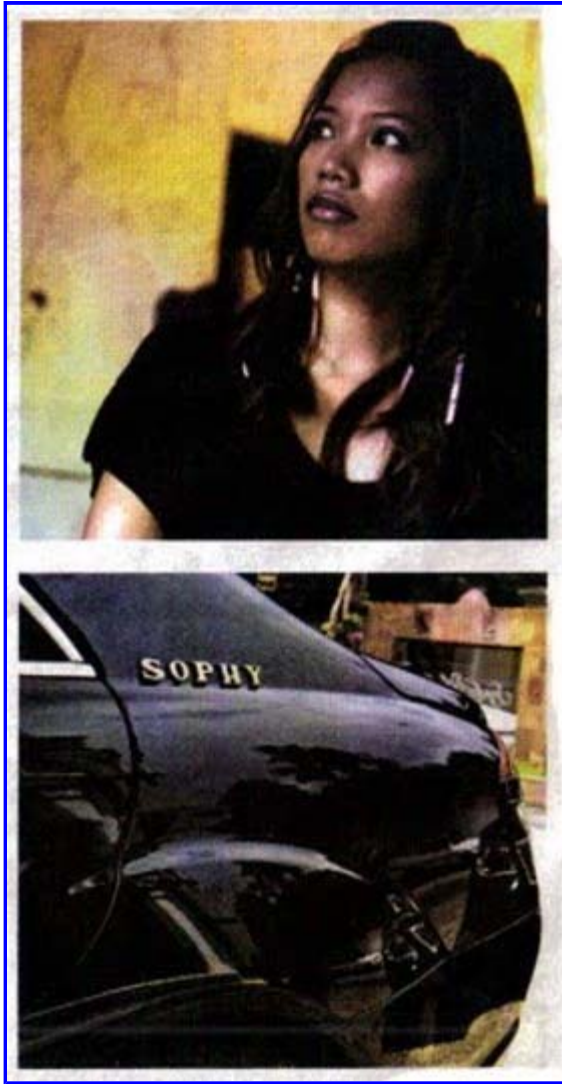
We meet at her hair salon, where she is prepping a model for a fashion shoot for a magazine she is starting up with her brother Sopheary, 28, and their cousin Noh Sar, 26,. All three were educated abroad and prefer to speak English together. Sopheary, who studied in New York state, seems both amused and slightly embarrassed by his wealth and privilege. "What can you do?" he asks. "Your parents give you all these things. You can't say no. If someone gives you cake, you eat it."

Talk to Sopheary and his friends, and Cambodia's tragic history seems very far away. The genocidal Khmer Rouge blew up banks and outlawed money before being driven from power in 1979. Later came the 1991 Paris Accords, and the plunder of Cambodia's rich natural resources—forests, fisheries, land –began in earnest. Cambodia's official economy largely depend on garment, exports, but there is a much larger shadow economy in which only the ruthless and the well-connected survived and prosper. "If you're doing business, you have to know someone high up, so he has your back," says Victor.

The closer you get to Hun Sen, Cambodia's autocratic Prime Minister, the better connected you are. Hun Sen staged a bloody coup d'etat in 1997 and has kept an iron grip on power ever since. Opponents have been silenced while loyalists have grown rich. This includes

Victor and his generation are Cambodia's future. Will they use their education and wealth to lift their less fortunate compatriots out of poverty? Or will they simply continue their parents' fevered pursuit of money and power? Britain's Department for International Development (DFID), which gave almost \$US30 million of its taxpayers' money to the country in the last fiscal year, offered one answer in June, when it announced the closure of its Cambodia office by 2011. The official reason? "It was felt UK aid could have a larger impact ... where there are greater numbers of poor people and fewer international donors," said a DFID statement. But the development agency might also have tired of throwing money at a nation where so much poverty can be blamed on a grasping political elite—and their luxury-loving children. (Australia clearly has not: it has allocated \$61.4 million in development assistance to Cambodia for 2009-10.)

Depressingly, the Khmer Riche Kids sometimes seem indistinguishable from the old colonial ruling class. They were



[3]

The "Paris Hilton of Cambodia", Sophy, daughter of a Deputy PM. Sophy's extravagantly decorated car. (Good Weekend Magazine)

\$US2,500 Hermes watch and a \$US13,000 2.5-carat diamond ring. He doesn't have a bodyguard, although some friends keep them as status symbols.

Richard was sent to New Zealand to be educated after a gang tried to abduct his brother. He is a short, affable man with an impish grin. In a city where the elite have a tribal suspicion of outsiders, he is refreshingly candid about his wealth. "My money is from my parents," he says, and then breaks it down. They gave him a villa, half a million US dollars, and a 400-hectar rubber plantation that will generate income for the rest of Richard's life. His parents-in-law gave him \$US100,000 in cash and another villa, worth \$200,000, which he sold and invested in real estate. Richard also runs a busy Phnom Penh nightclub called Emerald – his parents made their first fortune in gems – which provides him with "pocket money". A party of rich kids can spend \$US2,000 on drinks in a single night, more than an average Cambodian earns in 3 years.

His parents' second, much larger, fortune comes from real estate. A few years ago they bought about five hectares of land just outside Phnom Penh for \$US14 a square metre, then sold it for \$US120 a square metre two years later, making more than \$US5 million in profit.

ministers, a handful of tycoons and generals. Cambodians are often driven from their land by soldiers or military police. Formerly a French possession, Cambodia has been colonized all over again, this time by its own greedy elite.

But the Khmer Riche have a problem. "None of them can answer a simple question: where does all your money come from?" says a Western journalist in Phnom Penh. Ask Cambodian ministers how they got so rich on a meager government salary, and they will reply, "My wife is good at business."

When I ask Noh Sar, whose father is a senior customs official, why he is so wealthy, he gives me a slight variation: "My mother works a lot."

Victor's mother is also good at business, according to "Country for Sale," an investigation into the elite published by the London-based corruption watchdog Global Witness in February 2009. "She is a key player in RCAF [Royal Cambodian Armed Forces] patronage politics, holding a fearsome reputation among her husband's subordinates on account of her frequent demands for money," says the report. "RCAF sources have told Global Witness that military officers sometimes bribe [her] in order to increase the chances of her "close connections" to a major timber smuggler.

It is only in the past few years that the children of Cambodia's elite have grown confident enough to show off their family's wealth. "If you want people to respect you in Cambodia, you must have a good car, good diamonds, a good cell phone," explains Ouch Vichet, 28, better known as Richard. "It's an I'm-richer-than-you competition." Richard is quite a competitor: he drives a \$US150,000 Cadillac Escalade and wears a



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"Crazy money": (above) Ouch "Richard" Vichet is surprisingly candid about his wealth. (Good Weekend Magazine)

"Where else can you make profits like that?" grins Richard. "It's crazy money." He has a daughter called Emerald and a son called Benz. (His other Benz is a GL450.) They all live with his parents in a newly built mansion.

Yet Richard's house is modest by the operatic standards of Phnom Penh's Tuol Kuok precinct, part of which was once a notorious red-light district. A taxi driver shows me the neighborhood – it's like a "homes of the stars" tour in Beverly Hills, except that Tuol Kuok's backstreets are piled with rubbish. My driver points out giant mansion after mansion, and tells me who lives there. Hun Sen's son, Hun Sen's daughter, Secretary of State at the Ministry of Labour. A Deputy PM—Sophy and Sopheary's dad. A four-mansion compound with lots of razor wire, and a gate guarded by special forces soldiers – Victor's family.

Tuol Kuok's houses are well-guarded for a reason: until there was real estate to invest in, many wealthy Cambodians kept their money at home in bricks of cash. "We don't trust banks," says Richard. "The old

generation kept their money under the bed. The new generation keep it in safes in their houses." Victor says his family also stays away from banks, but for a slightly different reason. "If you put your money in a bank, everyone will know how much you have," he explains.

I had also heard that rich Cambodians had repatriated hundreds of millions of dirty dollars from Singapore banks after a post-September 11 shake up of global banking, and that his money had helped fuel the land speculation.

For the children, the wealth comes with one big condition: they must do what Mum and Dad tell them. "I wanted to go to art school but my parents wouldn't let me," says Sopheary. Most kids dutifully join the family business—Richard translated for his father during overseas gem-buying trips. For some, that business is politics. Concept like nepotism and conflict of interest don't count for much in Cambodia. Commerce Minister Cham Prasidh—whose giant house resembles an airport departure hall, one with its own jet-ski lake – gave a ministry position to his wife and made his daughter his chief of cabinet. Cambodia's ambassadors to Britain and Japan are brothers, and their boss is also their father: Foreign Minister Hor Namhong. He says he hired his sons on merit. "It's not nepotism," he insists.

Their parents also expect them to marry young—men in their 20's, women in their teens—and strategically, meaning to someone from a rich and influential family. These marriages are often arranged. "It's like medieval times in France," complains Victor, still a bachelor. This means that many high-society Cambodians soon find themselves trapped in loveless unions; affairs are common. Sophy was married off at 17 to the son of the rich and powerful Interior Minister.

The web of marriages binds together Cambodia's political and business elite and ensures the ruling Cambodian People's Party's stranglehold on power. At the centre of the web sits Prime Minister Hun Sen. His three sons and two daughters are all married to the children of senior ruling party politicians or, in the case of his son Hun Manit, to the daughter of the late national police chief. Now in his 30's, Hun Manit is being groomed to succeed his father. He graduated from West Point, the US military academy, in 1999, amid protests by members of the US Congress over his father's human rights record. In July, Global Witness urged the British Government to revoke the visa of the Cambodian Prime Minister, who visited Bristol University to watch Hun Manit receive a doctorate in economics.

Senior Khmer Rouge figures such as Comrade Duch, the mass-murdering commandant of Tuol Sleng prison, are currently on trial at a United Nations-based tribunal in Phnom Penh. The Khmer Riche, on the other hand, remain above the law. Victor displays a military VIP sticker on the front dash of his Mercedes. “It means the police cannot touch me,” he says. Richard is an advisor to a military police commander, which also effectively grants him legal immunity.

Many of his generations abuse such privileges. Last August Hun Chea, a nephew of the Prime Minister, hit a motorcyclist with his Cadillac, ripping off the man’s leg and arm. Hun Chea tried to drive off but couldn’t because the accident had shredded a tyre. Military police arrived, removed the car’s license plates and, according to “The Phnom Penh Post”, told Hun Chea: “Don’t worry. It wasn’t your mistake.” Hun Chea walked away. The motorcyclist bled to death on the road.

Hun Sen has yet another bad-boy nephew, the widely feared and mega-wealthy Hun To (“Little Hun”). In 2006 a newspaper editor filed a lawsuit against Hun To for alleged death threats, then fled overseas to seek asylum with the United Nations’ help. Hun To was also once spotted sitting in his luxury speedboat, its sound system cranked up high, being towed around Phnom Penh by a Humvee. A few weeks before, Victor had been in Los Angeles, where he test-drove Hun To’s latest acquisition before it was put in a Cambodia-bound shipping container: a \$US500,000 Mercedes McLaren SLR supercar.” He has already built a special garage for it,” says Victor.

Victor will not – dare not—criticize Hun To. But he is critical of Cambodian society. “From top to bottom, everyone is corrupt,” he says. He hopes to one day set up a foundation to help poor Cambodians send their children to study overseas. “We want to change things, but we’ll have to wait until our parents retire,” he says.

But older generation shows no sign of retiring – not when there’s so much cake left to eat. In January, foreign donors pledged \$US1 billion to Cambodia, its biggest aid package yet. The Government relies on foreign aid for almost half its budget. It could break this reliance by exploiting its reserves of oil, gas and minerals: the International Monetary Fund estimates Cambodia’s annual oil revenues alone could reach \$US1.7 billion by 2021. Could, but probably won’t. Why? Because the same elite who cut down the trees and sold off the land are now poised to extract the oil and minerals, with the help of their children.

Some Hun Sen loyalists have already been allocated exploratory mining licences. One of them is General Meas Sophea, the army chief. He recently hired a temp to act as his foreign liaison officer. The temp is his son. His son’s name is Victor.

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