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MY CAMBODIAN SON: ANOTHER RACE: ANOTHER CULTURE

BY

PATRICIA V. RUSSELL

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

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IN

ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes my experiences in raising a child of another culture, acknowledging both the rewards and heartbreaks that go along with such a venture. The child, Mao Sam, a Cambodian boy, came into my life at a time when I was sure that I had finished with the task of rearing children, having already raised three biological children--all daughters. I will detail the changes in my life and in the life of my family as we cared for a child from another race, another country.

In the first chapter, I briefly describe Mao Sam's cultural background; I show his way of life in Cambodia before he came to America and contrast pre- and post-war Cambodia to provide a cultural background for Mao Sam's life. Then, in Chapter two, I look closely at Mao Sam's day by day experiences, both in Cambodia during the genocide and afterwards in this country. I examine the qualities in his character which enabled him to survive terrors beyond our comprehension. I still marvel at the fact that in spite of all he had endured, he was still able to smile and joke with his new family and friends and I am amazed that virtues like gentleness and honesty are still part of his character. Finally, also in Chapter two, I describe the difficulties I

encountered in raising Mao Sam. There were frequent cultural misunderstandings. His early life was not the life of an American child. Our food was different and this was an obstacle to overcome also. And finally, when he reached his teen years, life was every bit as difficult for him as it had been with my other children. I think it is necessary to point out that language was never a problem. There are happenings in life that transcend speech. We found ways to communicate that were very satisfying.

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PREFACE

We have today very few accounts of the experience of American couples in raising children from another culture. Of course, there are many problems in these circumstances. For example, in raising a child from another race or from another culture there is the problem of the language differences and the clash of two cultures. In this thesis, I will look closely at this complex topic and especially focus on my experiences in raising a young Cambodian boy.

In all such discussions, we need to take note of the differences among the peoples of the world. I have been asked many times if language was a problem in dealing with my Cambodian son. I have always responded that I felt the dissimilarity of our two cultures was more of a challenge. By citing the experiences I have had, I hope to convince others facing similar situations that it is important in a relationship with someone foreign to us to learn as much as possible about their ways and their beliefs. We live in a multi-cultural society, daily encountering those who have come to our land from different places around the world. Attempting to learn another language can be the first step in reaching out to these people, but gaining a knowledge of their customs and convictions is certainly of equal impor-

tance. My work will break new ground in discussing these kinds of conflicts as seen through the eyes of a parent. Thus the principal aim of the thesis will be to describe my experience of raising a son from another culture.

I will divide my thesis into two parts. Part I will be an introductory section. In this introduction, I will place my thesis in the context of other works whose authors have discussed the experience of raising an adopted child from another culture, as for example does Gail Sheehy in The Spirit of Survival.

Part II of my thesis will provide a biographical account in two chapters. Chapter 1 will provide a brief description of the cultural background of my Cambodian son, Mao Sam. Chapter 2 will give an extended account of my son's early life in Cambodia and his and my experiences in America where he grew to adulthood.

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PART ONE

Introduction: Contextual Essay

For centuries, there have been children who were raised by someone other than a biological parent. There have been numerous reasons for this. In this country not too many years ago, children from large families were commonly sent to live with relatives until they were of working age. These children sometimes toiled on an uncle's farm or helped an aunt with cooking and baby-tending. There were also children who might be sent to relatives who had none of their own and who were willing to care for and educate others whose parents were not so affluent. In his book, Gift Children, J. Douglas Bates quotes Nicholas Lemann in The Promised Land. "The adoption of gift children by close friends was common among poor blacks in the South, a custom that involved generosity on both sides..."(1). In different times and different places, there have been still different reasons. But in this country, the common cause for such unnatural practices was usually death: death of a mother perhaps, but in some cases death of a father or both parents. Children were then shuffled off to a grandparent, an aunt and uncle or in some cases, a neighbor or friend. There were times, too, when an orphanage was the only answer. In

very rare circumstances, children were kidnapped and sold into slavery, which is not too different from what is happening to youngsters today who fall into the hands of pimps or drug dealers and seldom, if ever, return to their homes and their parents.

The death of parents and the general disruption of the family is particularly common where there is war. Parents do not always die, but frequently families are separated and if the child is very young, he/she never sees his/her family again. Older children sometimes remember names and are more likely to attempt to trace their parents when life in their country has returned to normal. While there have been many accounts in fiction--i.e. Charles Dicken's tales of orphaned children in Victorian England--there are also other real life accounts which are very compelling and important. For example, Gail Sheehy has written about her Cambodian daughter, Mohm Phat, in an article published in the Boston Sunday Globe and in her book Spirit of Survival.

In addition, there have also been others who have written about similar experiences. Writers like Mike Stanton in Caught Between Cultures, David Hawk in Cambodia Witness, Roger Rosenblatt in Children of War, J. Douglas Bates in Gift Children, L. J. Grow and Deborah Shapiro in Black Children and White Parents and David Anderson in Children of

Special Value have provided intelligent commentary about the experience of raising children from other cultures and just generally have examined the implications of such cross-cultural experiences in the lives of both the children and their foster parents. All these studies merit some attention here because they provide a valuable context for what is the subject of this thesis--my experiences in raising my Cambodian son in Rhode Island.

Gail Sheehy is especially important in this regard. In her book, Spirit of Survival, she cites the many differences and some difficulties encountered, but stresses, too, the joy in sharing her life with someone from another culture. She is careful not to point out that this child was not as fortunate as her other daughter or that she was never grateful for what Gail Sheehy did for her. The author, instead, attempts to show us how fortunate she feels for having found the girl and for having the opportunity to share with someone else the gifts that have come her way. She has examined Mohm Phat's background and realizes that if it hadn't been for the war in Southeast Asia that destroyed three countries (Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam), uprooted and separated families sending them reeling across oceans to foreign lands, where no one understood their language or culture, the young Cambodian girl would have probably lived a much richer life

than she could ever realize in this country. Ms. Sheehy has, in fact, taken it upon herself to return to Cambodia and determine just who her daughter is and where she comes from. In tracing the heritage of this young woman, the author has discovered many hithertoo unknown facts about life in another country far from the shores of what she calls "home".

We Americans believe in the superiority of our land, which negates many other parts of the world. We know that we are not the only country, but except for when we vacation to some exotic land, we prefer to believe that life begins and ends right here in the United States. We might grudgingly admit that the art of one place or the music of another is to be admired, but few of us wish to acknowledge the fact that there is any country as great as ours. Among ourselves, we may complain of the many problems that do exist here and we threaten to retire to a lovely tropical island but this seldom happens. We stay here because we want to stay here and we assume that everyone else in the world would come here if only they had the opportunity. Picture yourself in this situation, however. The U.S. is attacked by a powerful enemy. Cities are bombed, homes destroyed and families separated. After spending some time in enemy labor camps, children and some adults find their way to refugee

camps where they are clothed and fed and advised to seek sanctuary in a country far away. Now, as a refugee of war, you are sponsored and flown to your new home. You are distressed to learn that there is a new language in this country which you do not know. You are placed in a house which does not have running water or electricity and you are expected to plant a garden and grow your own food. The people in this land have a different skin color and their features are not the same as yours. They admire art and music that are foreign to your eyes and ears. They laugh at your attempts to communicate with them and the majority of them do not understand why you ever came to their shores and wish you would return to your own country. Most of them, however, are somewhat sympathetic to your plight, but you still feel all alone. To add further to your woes, your family is not with you and you never see anyone you knew from back "home." Occasionally, you do see another American, but perhaps they have nothing in common with you and even though these people from your new country attempt to link the two of you together, you have no desire to be friends with this other American and he/she feels the same way about you. You are alone and in spite of the fact that most of the time your new countrymen try to make you feel wanted, you still feel very lonesome. They tell you that you are now a member

of their family and that they love you. This is hard for you to understand. How can they love you, a stranger from a far-away place?

This is somewhat the situation for newcomers to our shores. Those who come alone without their family do not usually come because they think America is such a wonderful country. They may be happy that they are leaving a war zone and that they will finally have enough to eat and drink and a place to sleep, but if they had a choice, they would take the same conditions in their own country. Even those who come with family and friends find it difficult to adjust to another culture, another language and sometimes another race. However, they have each other and when they look across the table at another member of their group, the face they see is a reflection of their own. Many times these newcomers are alone and the only one in their neighborhood with different color skin. This is a shocking experience and immediately they sense a feeling of loss and of just how far away from home they really are.

In "The Americanization of Mohm Phat," Gail Sheehy tells of first meeting her Cambodian daughter and remarks that "Our meeting was Serendipity-unless it was destiny" (6). She goes on to explain how she fell in love with Mohm. This love is an important ingredient to launching a re-

lationship as close as mother and child, especially when you did not physically give birth to this child. Any mother who has turned the key and opened the door to her heart for another woman's child will tell you, however, that the feeling is quite the same. This is your child. You feel that you did actually give birth to him or her. Most of the time this feeling is there from the beginning and the child senses it strongly. Ms. Sheehy notes that the first time she saw her new daughter coming down the ramp of a plane in New York, "the world around me shrank to a soundless and primal concentration. Something stirred in my private regions of creation. This was birth" (7).

Of course Gail Sheehy is not suggesting that everything will go smoothly from the first. Far from it. Like your biological children, there will always be clashes and misunderstandings and lashings out. The relationship will probably never appear to reach the "perfect" stage that you so ardently desire. I always felt that my Cambodian son really loved me when he talked back to me sometimes in quite a hostile tone of voice and when he treated me as my own children had when they had been the same age. I was sure that he loved me then because only when you are sure of another's love can you afford to scorn it. It can be very difficult for the recipient until he or she realizes what is happening

and goes on from there. And love may not be enough. As Gail Sheehy further explains, "Already I felt love for her, but would I like her? Would she like me?" (9).

Of course, there can be other ways of reacting to your love. When Sheehy narrates the details of the terrible life her daughter lived once the Khmer Rouge had turned her country upside down, she remarks that, "So expert was Mohm at surviving, she gave no hint of feelings" (9).

At that particular time in Sheehy's life with her daughter, it must have been extraordinarily difficult to even think that such an emotion as love would ever surface in their relationship. I think we both yearned for the day when our child would agree that he or she was "Sokh sabai" or content and calm.

These children, both from the tiny, sad country squeezed in between Laos and Vietnam, arrived with a chip on their shoulders. They were not to be like the Japanese and Chinese who had flooded our shores and who were anxious to achieve both scholastically and socially, straining to adapt to the American ways and elated to be part of the American dream. While Mohm Phat and my son came from the same country and had similar war experiences, they had been virtually deprived of the right to a child's life, complete with school and the competition that is associated with school

and school sports. Mohm was from an elite background, while my son was probably from what we would call a peasant background. He had three years of schooling in his country before the war, which was not much to build on.

In his article "Caught Between Cultures", Mike Stanton observes that, "...for a growing number of young Southeast asians...becoming American has trapped them in the no-man's land where two cultures and two generations-clash" (8). And in this same article, Marilyn Gurney, who is co-ordinator of St. Joseph's Hospital outreach program that counsels refugees remarks that "Not all Southeast Asians are valedictorians. There are a lot of kids really hurting and who aren't making it. Some have suffered trauma from the war..." (8).

It is only too true that many of these kids have problems in school. They become loners. Mohm Phat was overjoyed when she first saw another Cambodian girl in her school. My son did know some Cambodians in his school, but they were shunned by the American students. They felt like outcasts. He never shared these feelings with me, but a daughter of an American friend confided that she sat with the Cambodians at lunchtime in the school cafeteria because they looked so lost. Unfortunately, many people in this country, including school children, do not like Asian people and the children suffer this snub. I know that my son did

because he has dark skin and this further separated him from Americans.

When my son first came to the country, I took him to see the movie, E.T. I thought that he might understand the story, even though there was a language barrier. He accepted it for what it was; just a story about someone else who did not belong. Of course, it had a happy ending. Strangely enough, Gail Sheehy took her daughter to see E.T. and she wept. But like my son, her daughter remarked, "Not sad, Mom. Not like Pol Pot time. Just a story" ("Cambodia" 10).

Gail Sheehy points out that the terrible struggle that the Cambodian girl went through when she first encountered strangers in a strange land would bring tears to the eyes of the most hardened stoic. As her daughter observed, "I don't like to live here, all Americans, all big apartments, no children, and I can't speak. I don't know what they ask me, don't understand, don't want to see people, feel stupid, feel sad. I can't think. If I think, I not come out of my room" ("Cambodia" 9).

My son did not confide in me as much as Gail Sheehy's daughter did, but I knew when he was troubled as he always retreated to his room, closing the door; shutting me out. His refusal to eat was further proof that he felt as

miserable as his counterpart in New York, who, as her mother said, "She had left me. I could not reach into the tunnel of silence to pull her out" ("Cambodia" 9).

When Mohm finally did open up to her mother, she could not spill her story fast enough. Ms. Sheehy reveals that, "Mohm told me of the horrors she had seen. She drew a finger across her throat. Ebrey day, ebrey day, she said. She had seen people's heads lopped off like fruit and tossed in mass pits. There was no escape. "No go, kill." Simple as that. Those who were caught trying to escape were skewered to a post in the broiling sun and left to a swarm of carnivorous red ants. Children who refused to spy on their parents might be dipped upside down in a vat of urine" ("Cambodia" 10).

In "Cambodia Witness" David Hawk elaborates on the historical circumstances in Cambodia that forced these children to seek sanctuary elsewhere. "Cambodian society, with its customs and traditions, has been torn apart. The damage and trauma to the people of Cambodia are incalculable" (3).

Hawk also tells of what happened in Cambodia while the rest of the world turned it's back. "What happened to Cambodia was governmental murder of monstrous proportions... The killings take place without regard to any legal or judicial process. The victims are denied protection through any

legal system. Many people are abducted, illegally detained, or tortured before they are killed. Sometimes the murders are ordered at the highest level of government. In other cases, the government fails or refuses to investigate killings or to take measures to prevent further deaths" (5).

How Mohm Phat and Mao Sam survived at all under these conditions will never cease to amaze those of us who know and love them so well. Like others before them, they have been changed horrifyingly by a genocide that eradicated millions of their countrymen. As is pointed out by Roger Rosenblatt in Children of War, "A country known for centuries for docility, gentleness and pride--known mainly for smiling--is ravaged now, the people shaken, their former values ruined and cast away. Still, you will see vestiges of the old dignity...From a very early age, the children are taught to honor, in this order, the land, the nation, their dead ancestors, their parents, their village, including their friends" (129). In my experience, Cambodian children still reflect these teachings even though the land, the nation, the dead ancestors, the parents, and the village belong now to another world. A world that is dead to them. A world that fades into the distance just a little more with each passing day.

To support his view (and mine), Rosenblatt tells of

Neil Boothby, a child psychologist from Harvard who worked with Cambodian children in the refugee camps. Boothby says of these children, "They are very gentle, especially when you consider what they've come through" (138). "Cambodia has always been peaceful. In some ways, it was the least likely country in the world to get entangled in killing and destruction...For centuries, their culture was calm and whole. Now their traditions are decimated...their freedoms are limited...yet the children seem to know what freedom is nonetheless...(139) perhaps it is in their worst hours that the thoughts of freedom are created" (140).

Rosenblatt maintains that the children probably survived because they felt they were guided by the protecting spirits of their dead parents. With memories like this it is amazing that these Cambodian children were still so very gentle. Children of War concludes that "What Pol Pot did was genocide. Tens of thousands killed in a sweep. Some now call it "autogenocide". The killers of the victims were one people: the same skin, the same hands" (146).

In exploring the differences among people, I initially considered only language and culture. In researching these two concerns, I have been exposed to a larger consideration, and that is the overwhelming barrier of race. And in this regard, J. Douglas Bates' book Gift Children has been espe-

cially helpful about race, family and adoption in this country. In Gift Children, Bates challenges his readers to look squarely at racial problems and admit that in this country, in particular, they rate first. He details the problems encountered when white parents adopt black children of African-American origins and he grounds his comments in the story of his own family of two biological sons and two black daughters. These girls were not victims of war like the Asians, but rather victims of something which he claims black critics were calling "a cultural genocide that robs black children of racial pride..." (12). Bates and his wife, Gloria, were accused of adopting the girls for several reasons, among them an attempt "to resolve their racial guilt or to settle some other personal or social problem" (13). Although the girls were not biological sisters, their mothers were both white and their fathers were black. Each girl was light complexioned, but did have negroid features. Unlike my experience when family and friends were overjoyed that we had received our gift child, friends and relatives of this family did not accept the adoptions lightly. The girls, however, "both agreed that it was chiefly their racial isolation at school and not their adopted parents ancestry that created problems for them" (114). One close friend did observe that "I think every kid

has a right to have permanent parents. And if he has to settle for second-best, which is white parents,...that's certainly better than growing up in an institution" (96).

This view is also supported by L. J. Grow and Deborah Shapiro in their book on Transracial Adoptions, Black Children/White Parents. In their report, in which they recorded the results of tests administered to transracial parents by both black and white social workers, Grow and Shapiro show that "A black home for every child has not as yet become a reality, despite vigorous recruitment efforts, beginning availability of adoption subsidy, and modification of agency procedures in evaluating adoptive applicants. Such efforts should unquestionably be intensified, since no one disputes the preferability of a black home for a black child. Until that objective is reached, society is left with a choice between adoption of some black children by white parents and having these children grow up without the continuity and security of a family of their own. The apparent success of the large majority of adoptions in this study suggests that we should not reject the alternative of adoption of black children by white parents" (239).

The work of Grow and Shapiro makes me realize that I should have thought about such problems that my son might face as he moved into our world. In spite of his blackness,

I never did. When he revolted as a teen, he did not seek the worst element of Cambodian society in our city, but kept in touch with friends he knew from school or from the area that he had known in camp. He stayed close to his adopted sisters and tried to work out the issues that were causing both of us much pain.

In Gift Children, however, J. Douglas Bates' two black daughters created many problems for their adopted family and it was years before they could find peace in their relationship. In looking at their story, I see some similarities. The girls left the home of their white parents and moved in with either black families or boy-friends. When my son left, he, too, moved in with friends: Cambodians, and now lives in a house with many Khmer families.

In Children of Special Value David C. Anderson adds the perspective of couples adopting children who are Korean, American Indian and African-American. In this case, an African-American child was outraged when he realized he was black as was a Native American Indian child, Johanna. The history of her race upset Joanna and was a challenge to her parents who realized that "even more than accepting the fact of a child's blackness (or brownness), white parents have to be able to re-inforce it positively. To do this, they have to be able to change themselves; they have to develop black

awareness of their own" (64).

The parents and children discussed in Children of Special Value had much in common. They include Jim and Susan McLean with Joshua (black), Sam and Ellen Conrad with Laura (American Indian), John and Christine Golden with Johanna (part black/part American Indian), William (part black/part white), Steve and Ann Miller with Lucy, Robin and Charles (Korean), Martha (Caucasian), and James and Joseph (part white/part black), had much in common. Though they may not have shared a killing war, they were at constant war with the way society treated them and their multi-racial children. Most people felt sorry for the Cambodian refugees. No one feels sorry for a black baby who had no control over happenings in his/her life which placed him/her outside the confines of a loving family situation. Racism, especially hatred of blacks, has reached an all time high in America and nothing has been able to control it. (Note: This book was written in 1971. The problems of racism today are certainly no better and might be said to be much worse.)

In his book, Anderson also declares that "Adoptive parents are often fascinated by the idea of fate. In retrospect, they notice that events which led them to their child seem unusually coincidental" and "as their life grows, they may become convinced that they were meant to be the parents

of their child and no other...,leading to the suspicion that the intersection of their lives and their child's was no trivial matter, but something awesomely predetermined" (17). Anderson also notes that "The idea is tempting that people who adopt interracially are prompted to do so by some unique experience or life-influence" (29). Thus in spite of ambivalent feelings over racial prejudice, the Golden's finally had to admit tht it was "radical viewpoints of American society that probably led them to desire to adopt a black child" (49). Similarly, for the Milanos, with their seven adopted children, not every one of the adoptions was untroubled. One of the Korean children, Robin, especially had great difficulty adjusting to living with a family after a history of abandonment in his country. The parents in speaking of his problems also noted, "there is a huge difference between the feelings of parents whose adopted children have problems because of conditions previous to their adoption, and the feelings of parents who have trouble with their biological offspring. For in a sense, the adoptive parents are freer. The biological parent can never escape the feeling that his difficult child reflects himself and his failure as a person or a parent; the adoptive parent knows for sure that he cannot be held responsible for the child's original problems..." (78).

From his study of these special families, Anderson reaches several conclusions.

1. "Parents who contemplate adopting across racial lines have to accept the fact that aside from ideas they may come to share with other parents in the same position, they will have to trust their own insight and judgment in dealing with special problems that arise" (103).
2. "Adoptive parents ought to be sure of their "motivation", their emotional readiness to adopt..." (105).
3. "A study of people chosen at random in an Eastern city showed that while they initially mouthed positive attitudes about adoption, they still revealed strong feelings that biological parenthood is superior to adoptive parenthood" (110).
4. "Adoption is different and because it is different, adoptive parents commonly find that most other people don't understand them" (110).

I believe Anderson's conclusions are valid and my own experiences bear them out. He is especially correct to emphasize that "a white couple contemplating interracial adoption must come to terms with their racism. They must accept the fact that adoption across racial lines will complicate their situation with the larger community, their alienation" (131). For it is Anderson's correct belief "that nearly all

white people who have grown up in a largely segregated America to date are racists in some degree. What is crucial to their future as adoptive parents to non-white children is their ability to understand their racism and so to escape it to the point that the value of a close human relationship far exceeds any concern over racial difference" (131).

Anderson makes another point that really touched home to me: "A couple pondering adoption can't quite liberate themselves enough to say they will take a black child, but they do manage to see themselves as the parents of an Indian or Asian child" (133). I must admit that when I finished this book, it struck me that I could be called a racist. I would probably not hesitate to adopt a brown child, an Asian or even an American Indian, but I might hesitate over a black child. I honestly do not believe that skin color would be the determining factor with me, however; rather, it is black culture which is more foreign to me than the culture of any other race.

Of course all of this is relevant to my experiences in raising my son. There were few incidences of racial problems when my son came to live with us. Relatives and friends alike accepted him immediately and while many did not know where he was from, few asked. He had a wonderful smile, ingratiating himself with strangers immediately and

they forgot he was so dark. I have a neighbor who detests blacks, but took to Mao right away, becoming like a second father to him, advising him when he felt he could use another voice besides that of his parents. Maybe his fellow students had problems with his race in High School, but his teachers didn't seem to be unduly concerned. While the courses he took did not seem entirely appropriate considering his overall lack of education, his instructors went out of their way to assist him, encouraging him to excel over tremendous odds. Twice, he attended High School Proms with Caucasian American girls. Only once was there a blatant disregard for his feelings. We were attending a movie theatre some distance away from where we lived and the woman behind the candy counter where my son stood, selecting candy before going in to see the show, called out in a rather loud voice to my husband and me, "What's he?" When we replied that he was Cambodian, she enquired further as to just where his country was located. The attitude of my son during this exchange was a wonder to behold. He stood in front of her with his arms crossed and looked her right in the eye (eye contact is very unusual for Asians), letting us, however, deal with the whole situation. Encouraged by his bravado, we very briefly explained Cambodia's location to her and then went into the theatre. I was very proud of him.

All in all, what I have tried to show in this brief review of some of the most important books and articles on the experience of cross-cultural parenting is that there are no easy answers and no sure-fire advice that can be dispensed. I am reminded that when Pearl S. Buck first decided to open her heart and home to orphaned children from both China and other countries that had spit them out of their collective mouths, her situation was unique for the time she lived in. There were plenty of white babies who could be adopted by white parents in the United States, but not too many parents who were interested in a child of foreign birth. This famous writer had spent much of her life in China, a country that was to her mind as strange as America would be to the children she brought here. The fact that she could understand their difficulties and problems enabled her to understand their loneliness and sense of not belonging. Because she spoke the same language as many of them, life in this country was not so strange. They knew that she, too, had once been an outsider in another country. She gave of herself to these abandoned children, sharing herself with them, this woman, their "new" mother from another race, another culture.

Similarly, more recently, Maxine Hong Kingston in her autobiography, The Woman Warrior, speaks of her early life

in America. A difficult existence because even though she had been born in this country, her parents came from China. She attended American schools, but life in her home was very different from the life of her schoolmates. Her parents were still mentally bound to the land of their birth. Her mother spoke constantly of family members they had left behind and of cultural experiences that were quite alien to the author. At times, it was difficult for her to believe that she was living in a different country, which was to remain foreign to her parents as long as they lived. Maxine survived by recording these happenings and accepting both her parents' differences and her own necessity to embrace the two cultures in order to survive. In effect, she, too, was raised by someone from another culture.

For the most part, books offering a personal glance into the daily lives of families divided by their place of birth have dealt with the cultural contrasts between white parents and black children. Indeed, as we have seen, very little has been written about the experience of white couples raising Asian children. In the remaining part of my thesis I hope to remedy that situation. In the next part of my thesis I will explain in detail my experiences in raising Mao Sam, my Cambodian son.

PART II: Biographical Essay

Chapter 1: Background Essay

This chapter is about Cambodia. Its aim is to briefly describe the kind of cultural background from which my son came, for that background was very much a part of his life, even though he does not remember much beyond the awfulness of life beneath the rule of the infamous Khmer Rouge. The older Cambodians who came to this country at the beginning of the war grew to adulthood in their beloved country where they led quiet, self-sufficient lives centered around rural, rice-producing villages. The Khmer people followed the gentle, natural rhythms of the rice harvest. They have fond memories of a beautiful, gentle land. I am acquainted with a woman who was born and raised in Cambodia and graduated from college there and became an Architectural Engineer, even though it was unusual to educate girls at that time in her country. When the war broke out, she came to this country, got her B.A. and her master's degree in Social Work. She works with children, mostly black Americans and Spanish. She also sees some Cambodian children in her work. In this paper, I will call her Vanna, to protect her privacy. Vanna has spoken with me at great length. To her, it is important that Americans understand how different her country was

before hostilities broke out and over 3 million Cambodians were massacred. We spoke about customs and she gave me many books to read, books filled with pictures of Cambodians still in refugee camps in Thailand, still suffering, still lost. Many were born in camps, have always lived there and have married without ever seeing their own country. They try, with the help of any elders who have survived the Genocide, to observe all the rudiments of their society so that perhaps some day they may return to Cambodia and recreate once again a peaceful place to raise a family.

Vanna began her tale by explaining that Cambodians keep the same calendar as the Chinese and that it is always the year of some particular animal. They observe seasons more than particular months. For example, June, July and August are part of the rainy season. It rains, stops and then rains again. In September there is a big celebration. Food is prepared, especially white sticky rice wrapped in banana leaves, which is then brought to the Buddhist monks (or bonzes as the Cambodians call them). The monks are asked to bless this food for the spirits of their ancestors. During this celebration, school is closed for three days. In November, the rivers overflow and there is boat-racing. The rain stops in December, January and February. It is windy then with an overnight temperature of 60 degrees. This is

the time to harvest the rice. Then, it begins to get hot. In April, which is their New Year's, there is another celebration, which lasts also for three days. The temperature at this time goes to over 100 degrees. When it becomes too hot to work, there are games of all kinds and dancing, too. This is not western-style dancing, but a more formal dance, with many hand gestures, which can be traced back to ancient kings.

It is very obvious from all this information that Cambodia is an agricultural country. Many centuries ago, in fact, it was called Kampuchea, the agricultural capital of the world. This is the way of life the Khmer Rouge wanted to return to when they began to kill anyone who was educated or who belonged to a higher class than the peasant farmers. They changed the calendar to the year Zero and put everyone to work in the rice fields. Those who could not stand the hard work were killed instantly.

Cambodia was always a religious country, with perhaps 90% of the population embracing Theravada Buddhism. Young boys frequently entered wats (temples) and became monks. Sometimes it was to atone for sins of their parents. Many primary schools were built in these temples, which were also centers for traditional medical practices, music, arts and culture. Not all the youths stayed there or became monks

for life. They served, rather, as young men in western countries serve in the military for a certain length of time.

The Cambodians have their own traditional system of healing. Their belief in spirits affects how they view illness, and the means to cure it. Spirits are held responsible for accidents, sickness and mental illness. There are spirit doctors who teach the ancient theory of Yin and Yang and believe that the body must maintain a balance of hot and cold. They use "coining", revere the head, not letting others touch it, and use Khmer herbs and food for their diseases. They call their healers Krou Khmer (Krou meaning teacher).

In Cambodia before the war, there was no dating as we know it. Girls were sent to all girls schools and did not go anywhere alone with a boy. Marriages were arranged by parents. The only time a girl could meet a boy who might be eligible for her to marry was at the New Year's celebrations, where in games scarves were tossed to anyone who might catch one's eye. A boy would tell his parents if he was interested in a particular girl and then the two families would meet. The couple could not go out together without a chaperone until after they were married. The boy's family paid for everything; the girl's family, nothing. The

children had great respect for their parents and often married someone they were not particularly fond of merely to please their parents.

According to Lindsay French, who wrote for the International Rescue Committee in a report on Displaced Lives, "Traditional Khmer culture is something that is achieved, not something one is simply born with by virtue of being born Khmer. Culture is a kind of order; it is man-made, human" and "it is the difference between Khmer people and savages or animals" (5). French goes on to point out that "Khmer education teaches you...rules for behavior and the proper relationships between different kinds of people, people and places, and people and things." "There is a popular Khmer saying that ten educated men are not equal to one man with the wisdom of experience" (5).

French's report emphasizes the importance of Khmer folktales and this is one of the first things that impresses one about Cambodians. They firmly believe in "the spiritual universe of gods and humans and forests and spirits" (5). You will come to understand that they "look to the past for wisdom to apply to the present and the future, of finding wisdom in tradition, but in the tradition of tried and true principles, not simply the past" (5). In addition, Cambodians believe that "Story-telling itself is a cultural activ-

ity; it creates culture, it creates order" (5).

This way of life, these traditions were shattered by the devastation of the Pol Pot years. Miraculously, their stories survived as did their dancing, which was brought to this country and to France along with special costumes that were smuggled out of Cambodia. "Participating in traditional activities helps to keep the memory of that way of life alive," says Lindsay French (6). "This is important for people who have been separated from their homeland for a long time..." (6).

When Cambodians refugees first arrived in America, they felt a great sense of loss. They had been scattered around the world, with only pockets of settlements in some of the larger cities. They soon discovered that they were not as alone as they had first believed. While attempting to learn our language so that they could somehow or other survive, they still kept their old traditions alive as much as was humanly possible. They opened grocery stores and sold food that they were familiar with. In a nearby city, there is a Buddhist temple. No native Cambodian would ever recognize it as such because to the untrained eye it appears to be an inner-city tenement house. Mingled in with the stacks of shoes piled in a hall (because the Cambodians always remove their shoes before entering a temple) and the sweet smell of

incense, there is the latest 20th century stereo system, complete with microphones so that the monks may be heard throughout the building. There are several monks in attendance there, including one Maha Ghosananda, spiritual leader for many of the Cambodians in the U.S. who has been leading groups of Cambodians and local Americans on peace marches from the Thailand camps to different parts of Cambodia, preaching a message of tranquillity and reconciliation for all Cambodians. In this country, according to Richard Dujardin of The Providence Journal, this Buddhist leader "urges Cambodians not to forget your traditions." The monk himself "has great hopes for his people. The suffering of Cambodia has been very severe,...but great suffering leads to great compassion. Great compassion makes a peaceful heart" (A9).

Earlier, I quoted from Roger Rosenblatt's book, Children of War, in which it was said of Cambodia: "A country known for centuries for docility, gentleness and pride...is ravaged now, the people shaken, their former values ruined and cast away. Still you will see the vestiges of the old dignity..." (129). I believe that dignity is alive today; it is evident in the face of every Cambodian. It is the one positive sign that Cambodians have not forgotten the lovely land of their birth and that even though they are scattered

to the four winds, they will survive. The Khmer youths who are growing up among foreigners will hopefully hold fast to their dreams of a new and better Cambodia where future generations can return to the peace of their ancestors and I believe the story I will tell in the next chapter about my Cambodian son coming of age in America confirms the possibility of that realization.

PART II: Biographical Essay

Chapter 2: Raising a Cambodian Son

This chapter is about my son's early life in Cambodia from the time he was born probably sometime in the 1960's in the capital city of Phnom Penh as Mao Sam to the time that he left home, got married, and established his own life (1982-1988). Mao Sam was born to parents named San Sam and Bo Kum. He was the older of two boys, his brother, Sina, being two years younger. The facts of his early childhood and family life until the time that the Khmer Rouge, the Cambodian Communists, destroyed his home, killed his father and ended his peaceful life in that country forever are very meager. The war, however, will not be my first consideration in detailing the facts of his life, even though the trauma of it has left scars that will last a lifetime. The cultural aspect is my prime interest here. My son came from the other side of the world and therefore has a background of Eastern, not Western Civilization. This includes deeply ingrained facets of Theravada Buddhism, the form of Buddhism most prominent in Southeast Asia, including the daily presence of monks with their begging bowls.

My son also comes from a culture of ancestor worship.

There was a shrine on the tree in front of his house, with incense burning all the time for others in the family who had died. All this is part of this young man and each aspect of it had a profound effect on him. As we turned each corner of our relationship, we were faced with yet another difference in our ways. We took him to a play; he took us to a terrifying Cambodian film where young girls had their eyes torn from their sockets and where giants and winged horses roamed the land. Even the food he liked was different. The method of preparation and cooking was not the same as ours, and to him Cambodian festivities such as New Year's and weddings have different meanings; different reasons for celebration.

In sum, I will discuss my son's life from the time he came here twelve years ago until the present, relating both the excitement and the difficulty of raising a child from another culture. He was probably in his early teens at this time (all his birth records were destroyed in the war, so his age is always approximate) and schooling was the most important item on any agenda for him. Eventually, my husband and I adopted Mao Sam and he changed his name to Sammy Russell and graduated from High School, got a part-time and a first full-time job and finally was married to a lovely Cambodian girl. His principal sorrow now is that they can

never have children of their own and so the Cambodian branch of his family will die. He hopes, however, eventually to adopt a child, just as he was adopted.

There is much debate today as to whether the language or the culture of a race or nation is more important to know in attempting to understand what its nation's inhabitants are thinking. Many people spend a good deal of time studying a nation's language, hoping to communicate with others and thereby penetrate the barrier that separates them. Still others seem to believe that by grasping the customs and culture of those foreign to us we will be better able to comprehend their innermost thoughts and feelings. There are people also who think that language and culture are one and the same and no matter which you study the end result will be identical.

A few years ago, I would probably have agreed with the last speculation. However, events have crept into my life which have reshaped my original conception. I firmly believe that culture is separate from language and is the main factor in understanding others and I also now believe that language is a series of words that are exchanged for other words so that two interested parties may communicate. I believe, too, that this communication can only really be understood if the conversationalists have a firm knowledge of

each other's customs or culture. Only then can they be sure that the meaning of the exchanged words are completely understood. To demonstrate this fact, I would like to share the following with you.

In the tiny kingdom of Cambodia, nestled neatly among Vietnam, Laos and Thailand, halfway around the world from the United States, there are some mountains called the Cardamon. This range stretches for miles from the city of Battambang in the west, southeasterly to the lush capital city of Phnom Penh. These hills are not really mountains as we know them, but the lairs of sleeping giants from a long ago time. Although no one I know has actually seen these giants, I am convinced that this is a true fact. My son has told me so and he does not lie, for he does believe in the many myths and fables of this mysterious and beautiful land of his birth.

Although I am his mother, I have never seen my son's country. Because of my love for this orphaned boy, I have come to know every part of his land and if blindfolded and put there on the darkest night, I would know where I was. I would recognize the Tonle Sap, the country's largest lake, which extends from the provincial capital of Siem Reap, located over 3 miles from the famous 12th century temple, the Angkor Wat (which my son claims was not built by slaves from

Thailand as it is recorded, but by the very giants who repose in the mountain range), past Phnom Penh and Takhmau, the capital of Kandal Province and on to the mouth of the Mekong River.

Out of the chaos of a genocide that overwhelmed this enchanting country in the 1970's have crawled and climbed hundreds of thousands of people, who by some stroke of extreme good fortune managed to hang on to a thin thread of life, while millions of their fathers, mothers, siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents and friends perished at the hands of other Cambodians in ways too horrible to describe. Among those who walked barefoot across 400 miles of mined ground in Cambodia after the Vietnamese entered their country in 1979 to rout the infamous communist soldiers known as the Khmer Rouge, was a skinny, short, scared, very worried boy who was probably about 13, but who looked many years older. With several other children who were headed across rough terrain and through a dangerous and forbidding jungle that squatted like an immense, forbidding tiger on the border of his country and Thailand, Mao Sam plodded day and night on his journey to refugee camps on the other side of the border. In these camps, he had been told that he would be safe at last and that there would be much more food awaiting him than the thin rice gruel which had been his daily allotment

for the past four years. He stopped only to rest when the sun was highest in the heavens. This was to be the last time he would see his beloved country, but that was the thought farthest from his mind. Concentrating on reaching the border, he paid no attention to others walking with him. He stayed on the narrow trail to avoid the mines because he knew many had died from explosions within sight of their goal. There was also fear of the tree-dwelling serpent, the Hanuman, who would drop down on its victims from above. There were wild animals in the jungles, too, but he was not as afraid of them as he had been of the Khmer Rouge soldiers who had seemed to be everywhere since his whole world had gone up in smoke on that horrible day in April, 1975.

On the other side of the world, I knew nothing about Mao Sam and little about Cambodians. I had read the newspaper and seen some of the war on television, but most of it was focused on the plight of our soldiers in Vietnam and while Cambodia was mentioned occasionally I had no idea that there was so much bloodshed nor was I aware of the atrocities being committed on the civilian population. Their war was not with the Vietnamese, but with each other, although it could not really be called a war but rather a massacre. There was very little coverage about the happenings within the country, beyond the bombing inflicted by U. S. planes.

The Khmer Rouge were careful not to let the rest of the world see what was going on behind the closed borders of the lush country that they had renamed Kampuchea.

When Mao reached the first refugee camp of Khao-I-Dang in Thailand, it was October 7 and the year was 1979. Because he lacked any proof at all that he had been born or even existed and because Cambodians do not celebrate birthdays (everyone turns a year older on New Year's Day which is in April) he was told that that day would be his birthday. The people at the camp gave him 1964 as the year of his birth. (This seemed to be a coincidence to me, as in 1964, I had a miscarriage. It was as if he actually took the place of the child I might have had.)

The first thing Mao did in camp was eat. And eat. And eat. Even when he felt he had had enough, he continued to eat. This habit was to stay with him for the rest of his life. Whenever he saw food, he ate and ate until most of the time he made himself sick. His diet under the Khmer Rouge guards was substandard for a bird. While working in the child labor camps in Kampuchea, his day had started at 2:00 in the morning and he was not given any food until he had finished working in the rice fields at about 5:00 in the evening. This meal of rice and water was all he would have had had he relied on the whim of the guards. By the time

the children were lined up to receive their daily allotment, he was crawling on his hands and knees because he was so weak. After a very short time, he knew he would never have the strength to do anything if he did not forage for himself. And he did. He would delight in our squeamish protests many years later when he described some of the food that entered his stomach in those days. Rat meat, which he insisted was very sweet (ugh!), snakes, monkeys, birds and on very bad days, even grass, which his stomach rejected almost immediately.

The first few days in Thailand Mao spent as if in a daze. He was settled in a barracks type of building with some other boys his own age and a German mother, father and little sister, who must now replace his own family. He was barely aware of these dusty, hot surroundings at first, but in time, he started to sleep better and even managed to find little jobs in the camp for which he was paid a few bahts (Thailand currency), which he exchanged for his first post-genocide possessions. He slept with these precious belongings under his pillow so no one else would be tempted to steal them. He listened outside the window of the camp school (going inside cost too many bahts, which he didn't want to part with) and slowly learned a few words of English. He made friends easily and listened while some of

them spoke about finding ways to leave the camp and go to France or America. He thought about that, but wasn't sure he was ready yet. He had to find his brother and he wouldn't leave until he did or until he knew for sure that he was dead.

In the peaceful days that followed, the past came rushing back to torment him. He sadly remembered the day the Khmer Rouge had appeared on the street where he lived and ordered everyone out of their houses, which were then torched. He had walked with his parents and his younger brother, Sina, on a forced march to the countryside where they were ordered to join others like them. People were attempting to drive cars and carry televisions plus other belongings that they felt they would need on their journey. In time, these were left by the roadside and the only thing that mattered to the refugees was to find shelter and food. The soldiers goaded them on, promising food eventually. Somewhere along the way, his father stole a chicken from a farm that they passed so his family would have something to eat. Mao heard a gunshot. To his horror, he realized that his father would never return to the little family. With an aching heart, he struggled on with his mother and brother, and eventually they came to a shelter of sorts, where all children were separated from their parents. Mao was with

his brother, but was not to see his mother again until they sent for him to go to her when she was dying. He tells of her belly being swollen from starvation while the rest of her body was skin and bones. He huddled with her at night, trying to keep her body warm and finally awoke one morning to find her dead beside him. He asked for permission to burn and bury her body. He was probably 11 years old at the time. He then returned to the Child Labor Camp and the days blurred together. Another time when out scavenging for food, he returned to camp to find his brother missing. The other boys said that the soldiers had taken Sina to the mountains. The boy never came back, and in time Mao learned to shut all these bad happenings into a far corner of his mind, where they were not brought forth again until he reached the Refugee Camps.

While trying to decide about his future, Mao was transferred to another refugee camp, which was safer and better and was far away from the Cambodian border where occasionally Thai soldiers shot at refugees who wandered too near just for fun. This camp was called Chonburi and was also in Thailand. By this time his body was rested and he had lost some of his scrawniness. The nightmares of his early days were slowly being replaced by memories of happy times before the Communists came. He remembered days when he had skipped

school to escape to the countryside and visit with his older step-sisters. Days of riding the water buffalos through the rice paddies. He still had the scar on a mangled toe where one of these creatures had stepped on his foot. He remembered when he lived in Phnom Penh where his father worked as a policeman and his mother as a nurse until the hot season came and they moved to a cooler place near the mountains. The happy memories were soon drowned out by his tears and the bad dreams came back, leaving him night after night sobbing into his pillow, afraid to wake the others, afraid that they, too, would remember their dark days.

There had always been unsettled times in Cambodia with fighting here and there and his parents would talk about different government leaders and generals and he and his brother and friends would play at war, always pretending that the enemy was the Vietnamese. They knew about the clandestine army in the jungle, the Khmer Rouge and its notorious leader, Pol Pot, and were among the many who were delighted that unforgettable day in April of 1975 when these troops finally left their encampment in the countryside and rode through the streets of the Capital while everyone cheered. It was to be the beginning of a new day for Cambodia. The year Zero and their country was to return to its ancient name of Kampuchea. There were cameramen from around

the world recording this wonderful event and Mao's family was there, right in front of all the cameras for the whole world to see. Before another day had passed, the smiles and cheers would turn to tears as the soldiers came to their villages and the great exodus from Phnom Penh would begin. The Khmer Rouge had told them false stories of the United States preparing to bomb the capital city. Mao also remembered the camps where, in addition to hard work, they were taught to hate their parents and to embrace a new way of life ordered by Angka, the government of Democratic Kampuchea; Angka, the new way of life had replaced his parents. The young boy closed his mind and his ears. He didn't want to hear it; he didn't want to think about it.

In 1979, about the same time he was in Chonburi, I was approached by a teacher who had started to work with the Southeast Asian refugees who were streaming into Providence from Laos and Cambodia. She asked if I would be interested in helping her. My background had been in Business and I knew nothing about teaching, nor did I really want to. I didn't think I had the patience for such an undertaking. It was more than just teaching, however. She wanted me to visit the refugees in their homes and try to help them adjust to our strange ways, in addition to our language. I consented and a door was opened for me to step through and I

never went back to my other work. My love affair with the Asians had its birth years earlier, when I became a devoted fan of Pearl S. Buck. I think I read every book she wrote and was drawn to the Chinese people as she had been. The refugees from Laos, the Hmong, had originally come to the highlands of Laos from China and so strongly resembled ethnic Chinese. The Cambodians, or Khmer people as they were called, were different and when we first encountered these individuals, we referred to them as "The Spanish of the East". They were colorful and flamboyant; just the opposite of the quiet, self-effacing Hmong. I loved them both. The Hmong had been mountain people and their needs were not the same as the Cambodians, who had spend much time in the cities and who loved jewelry, make-up, fancy clothes and other trappings of an urban society. They did have much in common, however, and I was to learn of a whole new way of evaluating life. Things I had never been exposed to became common everyday ideas to me. Many refugees were Buddhists and were concerned about their Karma or destiny. Some, however, were Christians, having been exposed to the tenets of Christianity during their stay in the refugee camps. There had also been a period of time when their country was part of French Indo-China, ruled over by France and taught Catholicism by French priests and nuns. Many of the older

Khmer people spoke French fluently and were anxious to become parishioners of Catholic parishes.

I began to work with this teacher in the classroom and learned much more about these people. One Cambodian man had lost all the color from the iris of one of his eyes at the hands of the Khmer Rouge and had to sit with his good eye directed at the blackboard or the teacher. Another had had his children taken from him by the State of Rhode Island because they believed he was abusing them. He tearfully explained that he was employing the art of "coining" to keep them well. "Coining" is something my son believed strongly in when he first came here and it was difficult to get him to switch to aspirin. When someone had a headache, for example, they would proceed to rub their forehead with a silver coin until the entire area was a livid red. I never did find out just what good it did. The student had rubbed coins across the chest area of his two children because they were coughing and he wished to make them well. We had to discuss this with the State of Rhode Island Child Advocates so that the children could be returned to the desolate man.

The teacher I had been working with became more involved in helping to settle newly arrived refugees and I was hired by the Indochinese Dept. of OIC (Opportunities Industrialization Center of Rhode Island, Inc.), an inner city

group of educators, who were dedicated to helping some of the less fortunate among us learn skills which would enable them to eventually find employment. I stayed there for three years, at times substituting for different teachers who might be absent from class. When the Indo-Chinese department of OIC shut down due to lack of operating funds, I joined the staff of The Genesis Center as a part-time substitute teacher, returning to college to get my BA, so I could become a permanent ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher. During the time I was at OIC, I was approached by a Bilingual Aide (Cambodian), who asked if I would be interested in going to a party that the Cambodians were giving to welcome a group of "Unaccompanied Minors" who were due to arrive in Boston from the Thailand Refugee camps the following week. This was the first time I had heard of this group, but I was to spend the next few years being very involved in their work.

Around this time, Mao went to one of the leaders of the Chonburi Camp and told him that he would like to go to America. He was sent to the field director, a Mr. Manit Chiachuabslip, who said he would find a sponsor for him. Before one could be found, the man suggested that my son might like to take a wife. This was not too unusual even though he was still young, as it had been the custom in

Cambodia before the war to marry at a young age. Mao gave this a great deal of thought and decided that it might be easier to reach America if he were to travel alone; without a wife, without a child.

When my husband and I saw the young, lost orphans from Cambodia with faces like old people, our hearts melted. I asked my Bilingual friend how we could get one as it appeared that all these children had American families waiting for them. He introduced me to a Social Worker from the USCC (U. S. Catholic Conference) and after several meetings with her, we were deemed qualified to take a child. That was in February of 1982. Then began the long wait.

Finally, one night in August when I had returned from teaching at OIC, there was a telephone message for me. The Social Worker had called. We were to meet the 9:25 P. M. Ransom Airlines plane from New York at the State Airport to welcome Mao Sam, born on October 7, 1964. There was no other information given; there was no other information known. When we first met him on that sultry night in late summer, he still had a haunted look on his face, appearing thin, but healthy. He smiled as he came down the ramp and met his new American family for the first time. The thought must have crossed his mind that he had entered the valley of the giants as my husband and I are nearly 6 feet and my

youngest daughter, who was with us, is at least 5'8". Our new son was a compact 5'4", with large hands and feet. We were to learn that his bones had fused together during his growing years because of the famine in Cambodia. He was wearing brilliant blue (his favorite color) corduroy slacks, an orange T-shirt that said "Thailand Christian Mission", a kelly-green nylon jacket and rubber sandals on his feet. A yellow plastic bag proclaiming "Jesus Saves" in black letters on the outside weighed him down. This bag contained a white dress shirt that was much too big for him, 3 bibles (two in English; one in Khmer) and some pictures of his friends from the refugee camp. He looked like the refugee that he was. We let him sit in the front seat of the car and his eyes were everywhere as we headed home, taking in all the strange sights, assuring me in very limited English that the airport at Bangkok was much bigger. (He later shared the astonishing fact with us that it was the first time he had ever been in an automobile. In Cambodia, the three-wheeled pedicabs were the most common means of transportation before the war.)

When we reached our house, we showed him his bedroom and he showed us his books and pictures from the camp. At the end of the first week, he told my daughter that there was a woman with long black hair in his room. He said that

she stood in the corner and he could not see her face. He felt that perhaps it was the ghost of his mother, reassuring herself that he was safe. She eventually faded away.

Language with Mao was never a problem, but our cultural differences were. He hadn't been with us long until we discovered ugly red stripes all over his face. I knew from work about "coining", but I tried to persuade him to switch to aspirin. He thought I was trying to poison him. He also got very upset when I stepped over him one time when he was watching TV while sitting on the floor. He told me that my act would bring him very bad luck. In addition, there was no way that I could explain vitamins. He didn't understand why it was important to eat different foods such as meat, eggs and vegetables. He didn't understand either that it was necessary to dress warmly when the cold weather came and during his first winter he pacified me by wearing a jacket from the house to the car, taking it off in the car and refusing to put it on again when we reached our destination. There is no cold weather ever in Cambodia, so his attitude was not from prior experience, but from a wonderful sense of stubbornness that he shares with my husband, his American father. He didn't understand the need for raingear either. Rain, in Cambodia meant the cooling off of a drip-dry body.

In other words, Mao and my family had a lot to learn

about each other. Our first big job was to get him some clothes. He had been wearing my daughter's jeans, but wanted his own. He was being sponsored by the United States Catholic Conference, and upon arrival, he received an allowance for clothing. Again, language was no barrier. In the clothing store, I held up what I thought was necessary and he either nodded his head or shook it, "no." He measured jeans by holding the waistband up around his neck. We bought small in everything else. He didn't understand that you wore different types of clothing for different weather or that wool kept you warm and cotton was cool. (He loved snow, building a shapely Khmer snow-goddess on our front lawn.) Sneakers were a must for him after years of going barefoot as he was determined to be as American as anyone else. USCC had assigned us a wonderful social worker, so paper work was handled with a minimum of effort. If only I had known then some of the heartache and difficulty that was to come, I might have been tempted to send him back to Thailand on the next plane; this poor lost soul from another time, another place. Then, maybe not. After all, I had already parented three other children.

First, though, we were to have a lot of fun with him. My daughters loved him and called him their brother. He was a terrible tease and had a wonderful sense of humor. Laugh-

ter seems to be universal. It has undoubtedly been the only reason that he has endured all this time. He called me "Mem" and finally "Mom". My husband was "Fadda", derived from the pronunciation of father as two separate syllables: fat-her. I biked with him all over our area so that he could find his way around without asking for help. He was so very independent and I found this difficult to deal with. I wanted to "mother" him; he protested my "smothering". After all, he had survived a war without a mother watching over his every move. To this day, I have a tendency to want to solve all his problems. Now, he just ignores this, but back then when he first came, it was a source of constant conflict. I would say "yes, mother"--he would smile and say "no, mother" and didn't obey me if he didn't want to. I pushed big issues and let him have his way on smaller ones, as I had with my other children.

Stores were a constant source of delight for him. He had never seen so much, even enjoying grocery stores. For three or four years, he went with me whenever I did my weekly food shopping and enjoyed embarrassing me by loudly calling food by funny names, such as macca-reeka-roni for any kind of pasta and creme-kai for ice cream and tox-i-oo for soy sauce. Some of these words were part Khmer; the other part came out of his sense of just having fun with me.

He rode on the back of the grocery carts like a four year old. At long last, he was being the kid he had never had a chance to be, desperately trying to catch up with his lost youth. When we introduced him to his first flea market, he was estatic and since has made them his second home. Hours have been spent there while he picked up one item, put it down and picked up another. At Christmas, he bought toys for children in the family, first playing with them for a while himself.

School, which Mao had been looking forward to, soon became a tedious chore that he began to dread. He had only had three years of formal education in Cambodia, but because he was older now, he was put in the local High School. There was no way he could understand Western Civilization and subjects like the Vikings were terribly confusing. Some of the boys in the neighborhood befriended him and although they were kind and took him fishing and to ball games, their interest soon waned. He could not talk about sports. When he learned enough English, his past started pouring out of him. His new friends were stunned and could not comprehend what he was talking about. They soon drifted off.

Adolescence was a very difficult time for him. He was picking up his lost childhood in the body of a teenager and he couldn't handle it. He wanted to play with trucks and

trains. He didn't care about girls or romance. In his country, there was no courtship; no dating. If a boy was interested in a girl, he told his parents and marriage negotiations were drawn up. But Mao wanted to finished High School first. They were four long years for him. He didn't fit into an American High School any more than he had fit into an American neighborhood. He was not alone. Few of the children he came to America with settled into life here. Many of them changed homes several times, but perhaps because he was so stubborn, Mao stayed with us.

In March of 1986, four and one-half years after his arrival, he went to Court and Mao Sam legally became our son forever and ever. It was a glorious day for all of us. In May he went to his Senior Prom with an American girl and the following month, graduated with 2 A's, 2 B's and 2 C's. He was very emphatic about not wanting to go to College. His dream was to drive a truck. He had been working as a stock boy in a nearby supermarket since he first came and he kept that job while trying to get into a tractor-trailer school.

Graduation had been the turning point in our relationship. He began to change. No longer the smiling Asian, he became sullen and began to revolt. There were "Cambodian sulks", which I did not understand. He would close himself in his room for hours, not eating nor speaking. No longer

the young boy who had entranced us with tales of his homeland or made us laugh at his silliness. The most terrible time came when he announced that he was moving out. Six months later he came back and was an usher at my youngest daughter's wedding. Four months later, he moved out again.

During this time, he applied for citizenship and we went with him to be sworn in as an American citizen. He asked to have his name changed to Sammy Russell. We had a little party for him, with American flags decorating the cake.

On a fine, autumn day, he brought a lovely Cambodian girl to meet us. They were married the following year in an American ceremony. They live nearby in the "Cambodian Ghetto", an eight family tenement in South Providence that is teeming with Cambodians of all ages. He is supremely happy because he is with his own people. We see him often and he reassures us of his love for all of us. He stops by to help his "Fad-da" and tease his "Mom". When I told him this summer that I had asked a neighbor to water our flowers while we were away on vacation so he would not have to come here after a long day behind the wheel of his truck, he became very angry. "I will water the plants," he said. "That's what a son is for!"

We still argue. He wants to go back to Cambodia and

search for his brother. I am afraid because there is no government there and have asked him to wait until there is. He made plans to go this past summer, regardless of my concerns. And then, the night he was to leave he called me very late. "I'm not going, Mom. I'll wait."

We now communicate very well in the same language and while we are aware of the differences in each other's cultures, we do not profess to always understand each other's ways and thoughts. Perhaps we never will. It is enough for both of us now that we don't have to worry about our differences any more. There is a bond between us that obliterates the necessity to know and that is our mutual love for each other. I don't think I could ask for more.

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