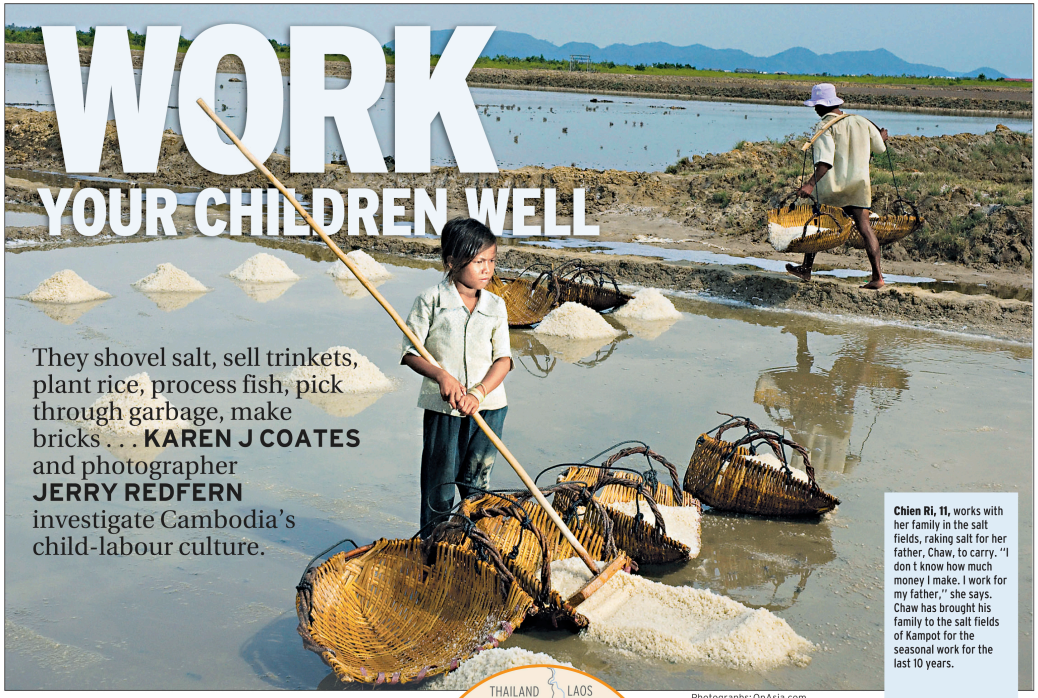
WORK YOUR CHILDREN WELL

They shovel salt, sell trinkets, plant rice, process fish, pick through garbage, make bricks . . . **KAREN J COATES** and photographer **JERRY REDFERN** investigate Cambodia's child-labour culture.



Photographs: OnAsia.com

Chien Ri, 11, works with her family in the salt fields, raking salt for her father, Chaw, to carry. "I don t know how much money I make. I work for my father," she says. Chaw has brought his family to the salt fields of Kampot for the seasonal work for the last 10 years.

Hong, 10, dreams of being a tour guide when he finishes his schooling, but for now he makes money selling paintings to tourists on the beach for $3 each. He gives the money to an aunt with whom he lives. Hong's parents died several years ago – his mother from illness and his father from a gunshot in Phnom Penh.

Had I been born as Roeut Sokang, who is precisely my age, I would have three kids, aged 14, eight and five. For the hottest four months of every year, my family and I would live together in the salt fields of Kampot, in southern Cambodia. We would make the journey from our small farm, in Svay Rieng, many hours away, to camp in a wooden hut with dozens of others. The families here would come in droves, driven by necessity but never choice. I would dream of a time when my kids could go to school uninterrupted. All of my neighbours would share that dream.

My youngest child would play around the house, hunting for recyclables, still too young for the fields. But the rest of us would toil in the shallow ponds beneath a non-stop sun. We would shovel thick wet salt into baskets, one after another. We would lug those baskets, about 20 kilograms each, two at a time, on a bamboo pole. Back and forth we would trudge, from field to warehouse, where the salt would sit in piles seven metres high.

If we could afford socks, we would wear them to protect our feet from the gravelly salt and its hot, oily film.

That salt would be bundled into 50-kilogram sacks and shipped to Phnom Penh and Thailand, and points beyond. We would work each day until our muscles grew strong, our bodies lean, our arms and legs chiselled by repetitive motion. Each sack of salt would sell for the equivalent of $US2 ($2.30) on site – so cheap, our boss would let us take a small bag home for free. All that work, all day long, and the three of us together would earn just $US5 a day.

If I had been born as Roeut, this would be my life every dry season for 12 years straight – through the births of two children, through the end of war. I would go to work these days in peace time, no longer scared of attacks by Khmer Rouge soldiers. I would take my children with me – or else we could not eat. And had Roeut been born in my shoes instead, she would sit at restaurant tables far away, where the food is cooked in Kampot salt. She would lift a shaker over her plate and sprinkle her food with little white flecks. She would season her dishes with salt from a harvest that maybe, just maybe, my children and I helped shovel.

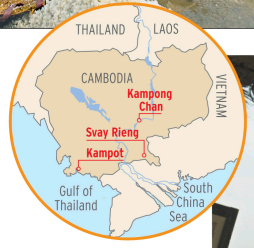
The differences between Roeut and me are manifest in countless ways – not just what we wear, where we sleep or the money in our pockets but also how our cultures interpret the image of her children working beside her, sweeping salt in the mid-day heat of a tropical sun.

I come from a part of the world – the West – that advises Roeut's part of the world – the Developing – on how best to raise her children.

I come from a place that, for better or worse, classifies the Cambodian salt fields as "hazardous" work venues, and deems the job itself one of the world's worst forms of child labour.

> "It's hot and it's hard and I don't like it, but I have to work."
> **Chien Ri, 11**

Nearly 250 million children around the globe work. Nearly half of Cambodia's kids are among them. For most that means planting rice, tending cows or otherwise helping on the farm. But many Cambodian children, like Roeut's, work in salt production, fish processing, portering, brick-making, garbage-picking and other realms determined to be hazardous to a child's mental and physical development. They are back-breaking, dangerous and foul. As a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as the International Labour Organisation's Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, the Cambodian Government is obliged to stop children from doing this work. It's participating in a $US4.75 million program to that end.



Since 2000, routine labour inspections in Cambodia include questions about employees' ages. Yet, despite the presence of more than 2 million kids in the Cambodian workforce, the US Labour Department reports "no employer has ever been prosecuted for violating child labour laws".

Perhaps it has something to do with culture and necessity.

Hazards or no hazards, the idea that child labour is wrong stems from modern-day Western polemics on the meaning of childhood.

The guiding principle is a "concept of childhood as a biologically driven natural phenomenon characterised by physical and mental growth stages that are everywhere roughly the same", writes William E. Myers, a scholar and former official of the ILO and UNICEF.

But this presents a problem. As Myers points out, there is "infinite variation" in how cultures view children and how societies view children at work.

In the West, most children are not expected to work towards the household economy. Usually, food appears on their tables three times a day. But in countries such as Cambodia, many kids don't eat if they don't work, simple as that. It's hard to tell a struggling Cambodian parent that a job is inappropriate to her child's development. Such notions, Myers writes, "do not adequately fit with the realities of developing countries".

The Oxford anthropologist Jo Boyden, in the 1990s, was among the first and loudest to critique a global concept of childhood. She would argue that my upper-middle-class, Midwestern, Catholic, American upbringing does not necessarily qualify me to tell a young widowed Khmer woman, living on a few dollars a day, how best to raise her kids. But policymakers were, and frequently still are, applying Western values to child-rearing across the globe.

Boyden cited a classic example of thousands of child factory workers in Bangladesh who were fired after the United States prohibited imports of goods made by children. The children did not return to school but found work in more dangerous situations. Boyden essentially argued that shutting kids out of the workforce was not their best protection. If kids must, let them work. But let them work well, with food and shelter, education and hope for the future.

These are, after all, the precise goals for which many children work in the first place.

It's why, back in the salt fields, 11-year-old Chien Ri sweeps the slushy white grains into small piles for her father to carry to the nearby warehouse. They come from a small house in the countryside an hour away, where the earth doesn't give them what they need to eat, to survive. So they come to the salt fields to work. "It's hot and it's hard and I don't like it," Ri says. "But I have to work."

Her father, Chaw, stops for a quick smoke before lugging more baskets. He doesn't like this life either.

He would prefer a different childhood for his daughter.

Whether shovelling salt, tending cows, picking spinach or sorting garbage, the children of Cambodia work to live.

Like Hong, a 10-year-old boy selling paintings – his paintings – on the Sihanoukville beach not so far from Kampot. Hong has been an artist for about two years, but it's not what he wants to do in life. When Hong grows up, he wants to be a tour guide. But for now he sells little painted planks of wood for $3 and gives the money to his aunty for rent. His parents died several years ago. When I ask how, he says his mum was sick and "my father drove a motorcycle and then a boy came with a gun and went boom, boom, boom. And then he died. In Phnom Penh".

There's a lot of love in Hong's paintings, lots of boyfriends and girlfriends. Lots of families, too.

He hands me his cheeriest picture, all yellow and red, which depicts a family of crabs. I keep that painting in my office, its yellow background brilliant as the sun. It reminds me of Hong: a little chipped at the edges but sturdy and bright.

Mahp, 11, sells drinks from a cooler along the riverfront promenade in the evening in Phnom Penh. She lives with her family, attends school during the day and works every night. As is the case with the vast majority of Cambodian children, Mahp's work is essential to the survival of her family.

Wan Sao, 12, looks for collectables atop the Steung Meanchey dump on the edge of Phnom Penh, which she has done every day since arriving from Prey Veng Province with her father and sister two years ago. "I stopped going to school," she says. "I'm too busy working." Wan Sao earns the equivalent of 50 cents a day.