New Nonfiction from J. Malcolm Garcia: “The Forced Disappearance of Sombath Somphone”

Ng Shui Meng speaks of her husband Sombath Somphone in the present tense, with a firm matter-of-fact tone about his disappearance, a way, I presume, for her to maintain control in a situation where she has none and knows nothing but heartbreak. Yet I hear the deep sentiment behind the words. To her, Sombath is much more than the internationally acclaimed, award-winning development worker who vanished one night years ago. He is her partner, companion and mentor, a man with a quiet presence whom she relies on even in his absence. Although short and thin, he stood out in a crowd partly because of his shock of silver white hair. Most older Lao men dye their hair, she explains. Government officials all have black hair but Sombath has this head of white hair, and he always wears a cotton peasant jacket and yet there is something about him that makes everyone feel deferential toward him. That may have been a contributing factor to his disappearance, Shui Meng muses, this deference, the tranquil influence he has. He would never call himself an activist. He is not confrontational. Sombath believes in cooperation and works with Lao officials. In private he can be critical of the government but never in public. He’s a pragmatist and strategic about what he does. Although he is not political, he inspires people. Perhaps that is what led to his undoing.

Sombath Somphone’s wife, Ng Shui Meng. Photo: J. Malcolm Garcia.

On December 15, 2012, Somphone was stopped at a police checkpoint in Vientiane, the capital of Laos, and was never seen or heard from again. Lao officials denied any involvement. Officials with human rights organizations believe Somphone was the victim of a forced disappearance by the government. Then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton demanded answers and the European Parliament expressed its concern but to no avail. The Lao government insisted it knew nothing. Almost nine years later, his fate and his whereabouts remain a mystery. His friends can only speculate on why he was taken.

The police checkpoint where Somphone was stopped. Photo: J. Malcolm Garcia.

“There’s an expression I first learned from Shui Meng,” one of Somphone’s colleagues told me. “You cut off the head of the chicken to scare the monkeys. It means you make an example of somebody. This is how the Lao government operates. They find an example and hit it hard to give it publicity and shut everybody up, and they did that with Sombath, and its consequences are still in effect.”

Laos is not alone in its use of forced disappearance. Phil Robertson, the deputy director of Human Rights Watch’s Asia Division in Bangkok, Thailand, told me its use remains common throughout Southeast Asia. Thailand has abducted people over the years but less frequently than outright assaults and assassinations. Vietnam insists on taking people through a

kangaroo court. The Philippines and Indonesia also use abductions to crack down on dissent. Some governments are quicker to use it than others. Laos is very quick. Robertson estimates about 22 Lao people have disappeared in recent years.

The night before he and I spoke, two Khmer-speaking men tried to drag prominent Cambodian dissident Chamroeun Suon into a van outside a 7-Eleven in Bangkok. “The boss needs to catch you, to arrest you, you have to come with us to the van,” one of the men told him. They tased Suon but he escaped, running back into the store. The attackers tased him so many times that their batteries ran out. Robertson presumed, with a hint of detached humor, that they had not used a very good taser. The two attackers may have operated without the authority of the Thai government, he said, but they certainly felt emboldened to try to grab him in a public place.

Sombath Somphone, who disappeared in 2012. Photo: Wikipedia.

“There’s a lot of these cases in the region. A prominent Lao activist disappeared recently,” Robertson said, referring to the 2019 abduction of Od Sayavong in Thailand. He is

affiliated with Free Lao, a group of Lao migrant workers and activists who advocate for human rights and democracy in Laos.

“We don’t know if there was Thai cooperation or not. The Thais have gone after their own dissidents in Laos so there very much could have a quid pro quo: You guys have targets, you go after them, and we’ll go after our guys.”

Robertson described the use of forced disappearance as one of the cruelest practices used against dissidents.

“Groups like Human Rights Watch, we raise the issue with governments but don’t get a reply,” he said. “When diplomats get involved they will get this sort of, ‘We’re investigating, yes. We’re concerned; we don’t know what happened. Isn’t it horrible?’ That sort of thing. ‘We don’t have any information. We heard he had a mistress and he ran off.’ Or they’ll say some other scurrilous excuse and accuse us of being naive to think something happened.”

Robertson did not know Somphone, but he has worked with Shui Meng, who continues to demand answers about her husband’s disappearance. At first, she was confident he was alive and being held, but Robertson thinks her attitude over time has changed. For an advocate like Robertson, questions about what happened to Somphone become sensitive. He has his opinion but it’s not for him to impose his thoughts on the family. That, he said, was Shui Meng’s call.

The more I read and heard about Somphone the more disturbed I became. The idea that someone so accomplished could be abducted without consequences other than rote international condemnation struck me as terribly wrong. I know that sounds naive, but some things are just not complicated. You don’t rip someone from their family for no reason other than a skewed notion of social control. To dismiss with a cavalier *Well, these things happen* didn’t sit well with me. During my research into Somphone’s disappearance, unidentified federal

agents began arresting Black Lives Matter protesters at the urging of then-President Donald Trump. It seemed my own country was becoming less and less removed from totalitarian impulses. I became determined to write about Somphone, and to, in a small way, join the diminished but still vocal chorus of human rights advocates demanding answers, because one day, I thought, I might be insisting on similar answers for the disappeared here.

“I don’t want fear to grip my life,” Shui Meng told me before I flew to Laos. “If they want to target you, they can. That is the factor of uncertainty. Nothing is normal. Since Sombath disappeared, I don’t know what normal is.”

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Sombath Somphone was born in 1952 and grew up in Done Khio, rural southern Laos, the eldest of eight brothers and sisters. He was curious and innovative even as a child. Shui Meng recalled one story when as a boy he decided it would be easier to raise frogs than catch them to sell in the market. At that time no one in his village bred frogs, but Somphone did and they multiplied. They also escaped because he did not have containers big enough to hold them. Still he tried. He was always experimenting.

At sixteen, Somphone enrolled at a French lycée in the town of Savannakhet, boarding with relatives in exchange for doing chores. An American teacher, Sylvester Morris, became his mentor and enrolled him in night classes at a local American school.

“He was in one of my English courses,” Morris recalled from his home outside Kansas City, Missouri. “He looked like he was 12. He was a very nice kid, very humble, respectful. He was not boisterous. The other kids looked up to him. He wanted to learn as much as possible.”

Morris helped recruit students for the American Field Service U.S. exchange program and in 1969 Somphone was accepted and spent a year with the family of Oscar and Phyllis Bardon in Wisconsin, where he attended Elkhart Lake-Glenbeulah High School.

“We called him Sam,” one of the Bardon children, David, told me. “He was so easy to talk to. He did his chores and fit right in. I can remember him laughing and always having a good time. We loved him to death. It was a sad day when we took him to the airport to return to Laos. We all cried. We had gotten very close.”

Somphone was impressed by the things many Americans take for granted, especially food. He saw stacks and stacks of packaged chicken and meat in supermarkets. He had never eaten steak before he went to Wisconsin, he told Shui Meng. Boys and girls played sports. Somphone’s only sport had been physical labor. Children yelled at their parents, shocking him. No Lao child would shout at their mother and father. He wondered how to take the good aspects of American culture back to Laos, especially technology. He was in awe of technology.

In 1971, Somphone studied agriculture and economy at the University of Hawaii. After he graduated in 1974, he returned to Laos but then traveled back to Hawaii and earned a master’s degree in agronomy. He also met Shui Meng there in 1978. A Singaporean, she was working toward her doctorate in sociology. They married in 1983. Shui Meng became a senior research fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore and then worked for UNICEF in East Timor and China. In 1986, she joined Somphone in Laos.

Shui Meng recalled that he was always clear he wanted to return home. His intentions were modest: to be with his mother and father and siblings and use his skills and education in agriculture to improve the lives of farmers. He believed that the life of a Lao farmer is rich despite its typical poverty.

Farmers have everything they need, he said: food, fish, water. They grow enough rice to sustain themselves for a year. He thought that there was much wealth in this kind of simplicity. A farmer lived with very little and was quite content to pick fruit, gather mushrooms, swim in the river. Many of them did not have running water or electricity yet they seemed happy. Somphone was always curious about nature and the relations between different plants. Shui Meng was a city girl. She couldn't recognize one mushroom from the next, one animal from another, but Somphone taught her to value the diversity of a forest and what it provided. He wanted to improve the lives of farmers without violating their attachment to the land.

"I adjusted," Shui Meng told me. "I was also curious about Laos. It was very different from anything I'd known. When I first came I saw that farmers had very little, but they had a contentment that I admired."

Throughout the 1980s, Somphone struggled to secure Lao government approval for projects promoting community-based sustainable agricultural development. He offered to work with the department of agriculture on the use of organic fertilizers. However, officials did not know what to make of his ideas and were suspicious: Why had he returned to Laos when so many others wanted to leave? Abandoned to his own devices, Somphone used his family's farm to implement his ideas. He experimented with azolla, a water fern that can be used as an organic fertilizer. He also encouraged the use of rice-based farming systems, in which rice is the major but not sole crop. Farmers diversified by planting vegetables, beans and fruits. They also began raising fish and fowl rather than catching them in the wild. In addition, Somphone introduced the use of fuel-saving stoves and rice mills, and large clay pots to collect rainwater for the dry seasons. He developed a recycling center in Vientiane.

In 1996, with the permission of the Lao Ministry of Education,

Somphone founded the Participatory Development Training Center, better known as PADETC, to promote education, leadership skills and sustainable development buttressed by Buddhist principles. He trained young volunteers and local officials in community-based development, including sanitation, recycling and agricultural production. PADETC became perhaps the best-known civil society organization in Laos.

A woman who worked with Somphone at the center in the early 2000s, and who spoke to me on condition of anonymity, remembered him as zen-like. He was always smiling. The co-worker enjoyed watching Somphone and Shui Meng together. They teased each other. Shui Meng would tell funny stories about the two of them. They just looked happy together. She was the one who was more outgoing. He was calm, composed, thoughtful, and reflective, but he didn't drone on. He could make people laugh when he wanted.

Much of Somphone's work, the co-worker said, had to do with changing school curricula to better represent Lao culture. He was very focused on getting children involved with local customs. True happiness, he told them, was founded on one's culture and the environment in which they lived. Cooperation with the government and the education of young people, he believed, would bring progressive change to Laos.

Somphone retired from the center in June 2012 to spend more time with his family, meditating and writing. Six months later, he disappeared.

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Before I departed for Laos and between calls to Shui Meng, I spoke with a number of Somphone's associates. Like his PADETC colleague, most refused to let me use their names. No, don't print that, they would tell me. Even without my name, the Lao authorities will know you're quoting me. As one man told me,

the mystery of a disappearance is what makes it so effective. “It’s a strategy of repression through fear,” he said. “As long as there is no information about Sombath it will have this chilling effect. No one will talk to you because no one wants to be next. If they can take him, they can take me.”

Everyone I interviewed remembered how Somphone loved driving around in an old army jeep and how he enjoyed relaxing on a log, drinking beer and eating sticky rice and grilled fish. He cooked little pizzas in a toaster oven and told stories. He was very centered except when he played ping-pong. He was mad about ping-pong and would play for an hour or longer. He insisted it was good exercise.

His friends told me that Somphone often spoke about the use of communication technologies to empower communities. He believed in developing people and then letting them create their own organizations. He could be quite forthright about his opinions but he wasn’t an alpha male, as one friend put it. He didn’t raise his voice to be heard. He spoke softly when he offered a different point of view yet he didn’t mince his words. The considerate way he made his point impressed his colleagues. He was unassuming——his presence felt through his humility.

In the years before his disappearance, Somphone had been concerned about families losing their farms to government land seizures for industrial projects. After years of political and economic isolation, the Lao government began soliciting international investment in the 1990s. It agreed to hydropower dams along the Mekong River financed by the Thai government and to a high-speed railway connecting Vientiane and Kunming, the capital and transportation hub of China’s southern Yunnan province. Somphone talked often about these developments to friends but he didn’t make public statements. He never slammed the government. He wouldn’t do that, was always careful, but he knew he was walking a fine line. But the line always shifted. Who knew where the line was? Who knew when it was crossed?

There was one friend of Somphone's whose recollections may offer a window into his disappearance. The friend had been involved with a weekly talk radio program. Listeners called and raised concerns about government corruption and other issues affecting their lives. In 2011, farmers spoke on the program. They opposed government confiscation of their land for commercial development. The show's producer opened the lines and callers made strong statements in support of the farmers. After the show aired, the deputy director of the state-run Lao National Radio called the producer and told him his show had been canceled effective immediately. Somphone unsuccessfully appealed to the government to restore the program.

Arout this time, a sympathetic, low-level official warned Somphone's friend that he and Somphone, among others, were on a government blacklist. None of them thought they would be disappeared. Perhaps imprisoned for a short time but nothing more. And given the official's minor status, the blacklist might be nothing more than a rumor. But the official insisted. Somphone, he said, was the first one on the list, but no one believed him.

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I flew to Vientiane in February 2020 expecting to enter the grim urban decay of a totalitarian state, something out of a dystopian movie. Instead, I found a city that despite its population of 683,000 people felt very much like a small town. Men and women paused at vendor stalls picking through fruit and the aroma of bread rose from French bakeries and Buddhist monks in orange robes strolled past parked tap-taps whose drivers slept sprawled across the front seat. Barefoot farmers watered crops near roads that meandered through parks where women sold flowers. Travel bureaus promoted tours to other cities.

"There are a lot of tourists," Somphone's PADETC colleague

told me, “and you kind of forget the regime. The totalitarian aspect is not overt. It’s smartly managed. You don’t feel the regime.”

The day after my arrival, I met with Shui Meng at Common Grounds, a coffee shop on a posh narrow street that included restaurants and stores filled with overpriced wood carvings and supposed antiques. After spending months talking to people who had asked me not to name them, I felt nervous, their paranoia becoming mine.

“Don’t keep looking over your shoulder, otherwise you’ll be more suspicious,” Shui Meng scolded. “Nobody is listening to you. If they want to target you they can and you wouldn’t know you are a target. Nobody tells you anything.”

That did not make me feel better, but the stern look she gave me through her wide glasses kept me focused. Her dark hair, streaked with gray, came down almost to her shoulders and she leaned back in her chair, legs crossed, as if nothing was amiss. She pointed across the street to TaiBaan, a shop she and Sombath founded a year before he disappeared. It sells handcrafts made by hundreds of Lao women across the country. The women receive all the profits from their work.

Shui Meng described Laos as living in a fishbowl. Everybody knows everybody and everybody sees everybody. It is not necessary to use the power of the state. It’s just knowing you’re being observed. Maybe you’re not, but you think you might be.

“I really do believe that 95 percent of the time and 95 percent of the people are not being watched because the state does not have the resources,” Shui Meng said. “It’s that five percent chance that keeps everyone guessing.”

We left Common Grounds and drove to the police checkpoint where Somphone was last seen. The crowded roads teemed with cars and tap-taps and a few wagons loaded with vegetables.

Storefronts on both sides of the two-lane highway appeared to be doing a brisk business and I saw half a dozen signs offering dental services. Nothing remotely suggested a police state. In fact, I did not see any police officers.

“Because it can be so easily controlled, the oppression does not need to be very overt,” Shui Meng explained. “You don’t see police because you don’t need to. Everyone monitors himself.”

After about 15 minutes we reached the police station on Thadeua Road, in Vientiane’s Sisattanak district not far from downtown. We stopped at the intersection and I snapped a photo. There was not much to shoot. The sidewalk had crumbled into a dirt path and ran past the station, which was little more than a hut. When the light changed, Shui Meng told me to put down my camera and we passed the station immersed in the flow of traffic. Shui Meng continued for about five minutes so as not to draw attention before she turned around. We drove back the way we had come and again passed the station, which appeared vacant.

“Sombath’s disappearance is an invisible wound,” Shui Meng said as she took me to my hotel. “It’s not like a cut where I can stop the bleeding. There’s no recourse for justice. The police say they don’t know. The government says it doesn’t know. How do you make a case against a state system that has all the power to lie and there’s no independent press or judicial system? Where do you go? Nowhere.”

In 2012 Laos was chosen to host the Asia-Europe Meeting, an annual gathering of leaders to discuss the relationship between Asia and Europe. From October 16 to October 19, the ministry of foreign affairs asked Somphone to co-chair the ninth Asia-Europe People’s Forum, a parallel three-day convention of grassroots activists and nongovernmental organizations, or NGOs, to discuss matters affecting their communities such as land and water rights, religious freedom

and other issues. About 1,000 participants attended, the biggest civil society event ever held in Laos.

The cultural hall where the forum took place. Photo: J. Malcolm Garcia.

The popularity of the event scared more conservative elements of the government. Plainclothes security police took notes and photographs, intimidating many of the participants. A statement by Somphone, about promoting understanding, was translated into Lao and English, but not released. Somphone would never be critical. He was encouraging and inclusive but never confrontational. However, the Lao authorities thought differently. Despite his good relationships with various ministers, there were others within the government who always viewed him with suspicion because of his U.S. education and his close working relationships with international NGOs.

Tensions between the authorities and the forum's organizers soon emerged. The government had no experience dealing with

such a sizable number of people descending on Laos from Europe and Asia, some of whom were activists within social movements. People were speaking openly about life in Laos. The ministry of interior and the public security forces had planted minders everywhere. Anger over little things spilled over. The security people might say, You can't sit here. Why not? an organizer would demand. We can sit wherever we want. These small clashes became problematic because the authorities were not used to people arguing with them. As co-chair, Somphone had to sooth irate officials. What he may not have understood was what a facade the government had put up pretending the forum would be a safe place to speak freely.

Security people confronted one woman for raising concerns about land and housing rights in her village in southern Laos. The police intimidated her family. According to one source, the woman complained to Somphone, who became upset. He had given participants his word that they could say what they thought, based on the government's assurances to him if he agreed to be help chair the forum. He felt responsible, this source said. Somphone asked participants to compile a list of those who were being harassed. No one knows if the list was made. If it had been, knowing Somphone, the source said, he would have spoken to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Not in an in-your-face manner, but in his quiet way.

"Maybe this made him seem like a threat to the government," the source told me.

Another friend of Somphone's recalled that he was not looking forward to the forum. I'm ready to tend my garden and not deal with this, he said. He complained it was going to be a big headache. Somphone didn't anticipate how big a headache it could be until an NGO administrator, Anne-Sophie Gindroz, was thrown out of the country.

Gindroz had been the country director of Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation in Laos, an international NGO that works on

agricultural development and land issues, from 2009 until her expulsion. She and Somphone worked together to organize the forum. They were in constant negotiation with the government about what they could and could not do. Still, she believed they had made progress. But she now believes the government took advantage of their trust and used the forum to observe the most outspoken participants, something neither she nor Somphone had expected.

In preparation for the forum, Somphone led a survey to measure happiness throughout Laos with the cooperation of local authorities. The findings of this consultation were incorporated into a video, "The Lao People's Vision," promoting an alternative development model based on consultation with rural communities. It was not a critical discussion about policy, but many issues came up, including the use of land and how development was conducted, as well as government corruption. People were very vocal. In a country where denunciation of the government is not tolerated, such an exchange of ideas would have been perceived as dangerous.

During the forum, the authorities would not allow "The Lao People's Vision" to be distributed. Some officials realized the potential consequences of people openly discussing their concerns. It was as if an alarm had gone off, Gindroz said, a wake-up for conservative elements of the government. They didn't want this in their country.

Gindroz described herself as very outspoken and along with Somphone had expressed concern for the harassment of forum participants with the Lao government even after the forum had concluded. On November 21, 2012, she submitted a letter to international NGOs and donors critical of the government's interference with the forum and the repercussions people had suffered. About two weeks later, on December 7, she was called into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for a meeting she thought was about partnering her agency with local aid organizations. The meeting, she recalled, actually began with a discussion

about her work, and at times she thought she had a good relationship with the ministry. But then an official said, You know, I've had a very bad night. I couldn't sleep. What happened? Gindroz asked, and then the official handed her a letter notifying her that she had to leave Laos within 24 hours. Her husband and children, the woman said, could stay if they chose.

"Of course, I will go," Gindroz said, adding, "I think it's a pity. What you are doing now is proving what I was saying was right. You are putting restrictions on freedom of speech."

The official gave her a pained look.

"That was it," Gindroz told me. "I left. I was thrown out."

This was eight days before Somphone disappeared.

On Saturday, December 15, 2012, Somphone and Shui Meng left his office at 5:30 p.m. He got in his jeep and drove behind her. She last saw him as she passed the police station about a half hour later. When he did not come home for dinner, Shui Meng became concerned and called his phone but received no answer. Then she contacted friends to ask if they had seen him, but no one had. She drove on the road leading to their house to see if his jeep had broken down. She went to hospitals. Nothing. The local police said it was late and no one worked on Sundays. Come by on Monday.

Friends of Somphone called everyone they knew to ask if he had been seen. People were worried because he had worked closely with Gindroz and she had just been banished. Paranoia set in. Sombath, they took Sombath! Be careful, save yourself, his friends told one another. Many of them hunkered down in their homes. One man told me that he would tell his family and friends where he was going and when he would be back. He advised his wife: If I do not return, go to the nearest embassy and ask for asylum. Or cross the Mekong River and flee to Thailand.

Friends had to decide: Would they be afraid and not help Shui Meng or would they stand with her? For Lao people it was very hard, and in the following days Shui Meng lost many friends who did not want to be seen with her.

On Monday, December 17, Shui Meng reported Somphone missing to the police. She had noticed security cameras around the police station where Somphone was last seen and put in a request to view the footage. To her surprise, the police agreed without hesitation and allowed her to copy it to her phone. The footage showed a jeep slowing to a stop at the police station shortly after six p.m. Somphone stepped out and appeared to speak with an officer. No other vehicles were stopped, and traffic on the road continued unhindered. A few minutes later, an unknown motorcyclist stopped, got in Somphone's jeep and drove away, leaving his motorcycle behind. A short time later, Somphone and at least two other men, in the presence of police officers, got in a truck and drove away.

Shui Meng was stunned. Surely, she thought, it had to be a mistake. Why would the police stop Sombath? She asked various government administrators but no one admitted knowledge of the event. Then she showed the security camera footage at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and officials there appeared shocked but claimed ignorance. Still, Shui Meng remained hopeful Somphone's detention was a mistake. They'll ask Sombath a few questions and then he'll be home with his quiet smile. I was held up, he'll tell her. They let me out. Don't worry.

On December 19, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced it had begun an investigation but about a week or two after Somphone's disappearance, Shui Meng noticed that government officials avoided her and replied with hostility to her questions. She soon became convinced that Somphone's arrest was more serious than she had realized.

About two weeks after Somphone disappeared, three members of

the Asian Parliamentarians for Human Rights met with Lao officials about Somphone. Walden Bello, one of the parliamentarians, told me the officials denied knowing what had happened and refused to even confirm he was missing. They insisted their investigation had revealed nothing.

Bello told me that he believes the Lao government made a cost-benefit analysis: Shall we silence this guy and risk reactions from the world or let him go and allow his voice to get louder and louder? In Bello's opinion they chose to silence him and take the heat. Bello feels sure the decision was made by senior government officials. He doubts too many people outside the ruling party knew about it.

Almost a month after he disappeared, Lao police issued a statement that the activity at the police station the night of his disappearance had been routine without any reported disturbances or detentions. Police insisted Somphone had not been taken. They suggested, without evidence, that he may have been involved in a personal dispute. No information, the police concluded, had been discovered to suggest what happened to him. The government-backed Vientiane Times English language newspaper published the police findings on February 4, 2013.

There is a risk of mythologizing Somphone given the circumstances of his disappearance, Somphone's PADETC colleague told me. He lived by principles we can all aspire to. She continues to work with farmers and thinks he would be happy about that. She feels confident that people involved in development work still remember him. When she is alone with a colleague she'll talk about him——his work and philosophy. Sometimes she meets with adults who had been involved with him as children, pleased they mention him. She has no doubt she is watched and trusts only a small group of people. Every time she attends church she prays for Somphone and for the truth to be told. She once thought he'd be found; he was just so kind, a gentle soul. Surely, he'd talk his way out. His decency

would prevail. Despite everything in some ways she believes it has.

These days, Shui Meng sees herself as the voice of remembrance for Sombath. His memory persists, partially because the government's own security cameras filmed his abduction. The new technology can be a double-edged sword. The state surveils people, but people can also surveil it. The government certainly didn't expect that. The audacity of taking him without turning off the cameras angers her almost as much as his abduction. The arrogance.

She knows people believe Sombath is dead, but she has stopped being disturbed by what others think, their pity. She can't control the feelings of other people and won't lose energy over it. Sombath remains very present for her. Friends say, What a shame, a man like that who had so much to offer to have been disappeared. How can Shui Meng respond? She can't, other than to agree. Every minute of every day she worries about him.

"I miss Sombath," she told me on the last day of my trip. We were sitting in a back room at TaiBaan surrounded by colorful tapestries. Her voice quivered for the first time in our many conversations. Shui Meng still hopes Sombath will return to her but uncertainty has become her shadow, an unwanted escort. Sometimes she sees him in a dream. Come back, she tells him. I can't, he says. I'm leaving now. And she wakes up. Come back, she says again in the emptiness of their bedroom.

But by then he's gone.