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MAO TSE-TUNG didn't prepare Philip Short for Pol Pot.

Back when Mr. Short was researching the 1999 biography, "Mao: A Life," he was able to draw from extensive records about China's chairman, allowing him to determine "what people were thinking, or at least how they wanted their views represented."

Not so with his latest book on Pol Pot, the leader of Cambodia's communist Khmer Rouge and onetime prime minister. During the four-and-a-half years spent researching and writing "Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare" (Henry Holt & Co., 2005), Mr. Short came to "rely enormously on human memory, on people's recollection and oral history," he explains.

When the Khmer Rouge insiders he interviewed were willing to talk (which wasn't always the case; it took Mr. Short 18 months and six approaches to secure an interview with Khieu Samphan, former Khmer Rouge head of state), basic story elements such as chronology proved difficult to tease out.

The result was a long process of minutely detailed construction. "It was like building a mosaic from grains of sand," recalls Mr. Short. "You had to put all these (tiny) pieces of information together . . . eventually, it built up a picture."

That picture is a look inside the minds of Khmer Rouge officials, and an examination of how Cambodia's culture contributed to the atrocities of Pol Pot's regime in the second half of the 1970s -- during which 1.5 million people died.

The subject, Mr. Short acknowledges, was difficult to confront. Aside from the sickening brutalities, the benefit of hindsight yielded no consolation. "No one emerges well," he explains. "The Khmer Rouge themselves followed policies that were not only cruel and inhumane . . . they resulted in disaster." But the analytical work of piecing together the reasons behind the atrocities, he says, kept him emotionally sound.

Personal Journal asked Mr. Short to recommend five works of non-fiction about Asia. His choices, he notes, all have a somewhat hopeful spin. "I suspect," he says, "that this is partly because I've been dealing with such a grim, such a black, topic."

Philip Short's Hit List

1. "Virtual Tibet," by Orville Schell (Metropolitan Books, 2000): Mr. Schell examines -- and skewers -- mythmaking about Tibet and Hollywood's fixation with the country, manifested in earnest movies like "Seven Years in Tibet" (1997). It was instructive for Mr. Short because, like Tibetans, "Cambodians are in many ways different from other Southeast Asian nations, a little bit otherworldly . . . there are things which resonate between those two peoples."

2. "The Diary of Ma Yan," by Ma Yan (Time Warner Books, 2004): The journal of the young girl from Ningxia, whose poverty had kept her from school, has raised both domestic and international interest in the plight of China's rural poor. At a lecture about the diary in Shanghai last year, remembers Mr. Short, one woman in the audience pronounced that the book's publication amounted to a loss of face for China, a showing of weakness. Another woman stood and countered her, arguing that the country's inability to educate its children was the real shame. "I think it's a very interesting sign of the times," he says.

3. "The Man Who Stayed Behind," by Sidney Rittenberg (Simon & Schuster, 1993): Mr. Rittenberg's memoir, written with Amanda Bennett, is the stuff of a Cold War thriller. An American sent to China after World War II, he became a member of the Chinese Communist Party, only to be imprisoned -- spending some 16 years behind bars, much of it in solitary confinement -- as an alleged spy. Nevertheless, Mr. Rittenberg remained steadfast in his support for the party. Mr. Short recalls Mr. Rittenberg telling him about his second imprisonment during the Cultural Revolution, during which "he gritted his teeth and said, 'Whatever they do, they're not going to make me hate China.' "

4. "Music Through the Dark," by Bree Lafreniere (University of Hawaii Press, 2000): Cambodian Daran Kravanh survived the Khmer Rouge through traditional music -- one of the very things the regime was trying to stamp out. Daran Kravanh , who told his story to author Bree Lafreniere, managed to stay alive by playing the accordion for local leaders. Says Mr. Short, "It tells a very unusual kind of odyssey through the darkness of mid-1970s Cambodian."

5. "The Good Man of Nanking: The Diaries of John Rabe," translated by John E. Woods (Knopf, 1998): John Rabe was a German businessman in Nanking who became caught up in the Japanese occupation of China in the 1930s. "(He) was utterly, utterly appalled by what was going on and . . . tried in every way possible to reason with the Japanese and prevent some of the worst atrocities," says Mr. Short. "It's a fascinating book and one that deserves to be read more widely."