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Cambodian Documentary to Premiere at Sundance Festival

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It took four years to finish the documentary “A River Changes Course,” but the efforts of American-Cambodian filmmaker Kalyanne Mam and the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) have paid off: In January, “A River Changes Course” will celebrate its world premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in Utah.

Out of a total of 12,146 submissions, the festival announced Wednesday night that Ms. Mam’s film has been selected as one of the 12 best international documentaries and will be shown from January 17 to 27.

The idea behind “A River Changes Course,” said Youk Chhang, director of DC-Cam, which produced the documentary, was to show the negative impact of development on nature and society but in a poetic way.

“We use the beauty of images to engage [people] and make them appreciate the beauty of resources,” Mr. Chhang said of the 83-minute production, which follows the lives of three rural families—in Ratanakkiri, Kompong Chhnang, and Svay Rieng provinces. The film depicts the three families as they struggle with the impact of deforestation, over fishing and debt.

The film’s original title “Kbong Toek Tonle” refers to the importance of water in Cambodia, Mr. Chhang said.

“It means that if you hold a scoop of water, every single drop of the water has to be protected, because the river and the water [means] life to the Cambodian people,” he said, adding that being selected for the Sundance festival was exactly the kind of recognition that the filmmakers had hoped for.

“Everything was thought through from the beginning; the light, the settings, everything. And that’s what you need for such a festival, and we made a film that fulfills the requirements of a world audience,” Mr. Chhang said.

“A River Changes Course” also has chances of taking home the jury or audience prizes in the World Cinema Documentary section as well as netting awards in Sundance’s editing, directing and cinematography categories.

“But for us, just entering the world stage is a success. It’s a victory,” Mr. Chhang said.