



One man's mission to open history of Khmer Rouge

Jake Schoneker

June 22, 2011

When my co-producer Mark Oltmanns and I set off to Phnom Penh to shoot our story on Case 002, we planned to focus on victims of the Khmer Rouge time, on those civil parties and witnesses who would be brought to testify against the four leaders during the upcoming trial. But though listening to their stories was harrowing -- a woman left without family and forced to marry a soldier, a man still imprisoned by the Khmer Rouge in hellish nightmares -- it was the story of the students, and the impact of education, that made the deepest impression on us.

A central figure in the incorporation of that Khmer Rouge education to classrooms was Youk Chhang, the director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia, or DC-Cam. For over a decade, he's compiled hundreds of thousands of documents, photographs, and testimony about the Khmer Rouge -- evidence that now is playing a key role in the trials of the Khmer Rouge cadre.

But what gets Chhang most excited is when he talks about Cambodian students and the textbook that he's helped incorporate into Cambodian classrooms. Sitting in his cluttered office in Phnom Penh this past March, he told me a story that helps put the whole trial into perspective. It goes something like this:

Chhang had gone to a high school classroom in Phnom Penh, and brought along two survivors of the Khmer Rouge period to meet the students. First was Norng Chan Phal, a former child prisoner of the infamous Tuol Sleng prison, where thousands were tortured and killed. And second was Him Huy, a Khmer Rouge prison guard at Tuol Sleng who admitted to killing five people during his employ there.

Him Huy, fourth from left, leading group of Khmer Rouge guards at Tuol Sleng

Chhang began leading a lesson to the class, without telling them who the two men were. When the students started asking questions, he told them to ask the survivor or the prison guard in front of them.

"I said, 'Why don't you ask Him Huy? He's said he killed people, he's said he arrested people, and he admits he was head of the prison guards at Tuol Sleng,'" Chhang told me. "The whole class fell silent. Their eyes got big."

No one would make eye contact with Him Huy -- they directed all their questions to Norng Chan Phal. They pretended like the former prison guard wasn't there. In Phnom Penh, most children come from families who were victims of the genocide -- part of the

Khmer Rouge doctrine was to eliminate educated city people and create a pure, agrarian society.

Finally, a boy with a backpack rose from his seat to ask a question -- about Him Huy, directed at Youk Chhang. He still couldn't bear to look at the prison guard. He slowly spoke.

"Him Huy joined the Khmer Rouge because he wanted power, right?"

As the boy sat down, all his classmates clapped and cheered him -- all except one girl in the back of the class. Some time later, that girl had a question of her own for Chhang.

"Teacher, are all Khmer Rouge bad people?"

Chhang could sense that she was a child of the Khmer Rouge herself. Later, she told him that her father was a Khmer Rouge soldier. That night, the girl went home to her father and asked him another question, which she repeated back to Chhang the next school day. "Daddy, did you kill people?"

Chhang asked the girl what the answer was.

"My father said, 'you can never understand.' That was it."

You can never understand. That seems to have been the mantra of survivors of that time, as a cold silence has clouded the country's discourse. Only a few years ago, that silence was helping to create a young demographic who had little knowledge or understanding of their own history, and no confidence to question their elders. But the Tribunal (which is prosecuting former members of the regime) has helped spark an education campaign that has brought light to those long shadowed corners of the Cambodian psyche, and armed a new generation of students with the confidence that they can create a better country than the one in which their parents lived.

"It took us nine years to convince the government to write a text book of 78 pages -- and finally, in 2007, they approved," Chhang told me. He said that DC-Cam has helped train 3,500 teachers across the country on the Khmer Rouge curriculum. From grade 9-12, students are required to study about the Khmer Rouge, and questions about those lessons are on the high school final exam. After years of silence, there is now a platform for discussion.

High school students in Phnom Penh reading textbooks produced by the Tribunal

There still appear to be problems -- many of the 3,500 teachers who have been trained were themselves part of the Khmer Rouge, with their own prejudices and opinions about that history. And many students come to school with their own attitudes toward the past.

"If you go to Battambang or Banteay Meanchey (western provinces that were considered the Khmer Rouge stronghold for decades) you can assume that half of the students were

children of the perpetrators," said Chhang. "Then you have students who were the children of the victims, who start to divide from their own friends who were children of perpetrators."

Cambodian schools -- like Cambodian courts -- have a long way to go. But where the Tribunal is having one of its biggest impacts is in providing an opportunity to create a teaching moment for an entire generation by offering them a model of what the rule of law looks like. And giving them the ability to ask hard questions: to themselves, to their parents and elders, and eventually, to the civil society in which they live.