

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF

Youk Chhang

Youk Chhang is the Executive Director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), founder of Sleuk Rith Institute and a survivor of the Khmer Rouge's "killing fields."

He was born in 1961 and raised in Phnom Penh. At age 15, laboring under Khmer Rouge rule, he was arrested for picking up mushrooms in the rice fields to feed his pregnant sister. He was tortured publicly before more than a hundred villagers before being dispatched to an adult prison without trial. He recalls, "Months later, when I ran out of lies to tell to save my life, an older prisoner begged the prison chief to release me. The prison chief agreed, but I later learned that the older prisoner was killed in exchange for my freedom. I lived, and he died. I do not remember his name but have been searching for his surviving relatives to pay respect to them for what he did for me. I hope someday I will find them."

Chhang later escaped the Khmer Rouge killing fields, moving to the United States as a refugee, but his experience of Khmer Rouge terror and loss of loved ones led him to a lifelong commitment to promote memory and justice in Cambodia. He returned to Cambodia in the 1990s to manage human rights and democracy training programs for the U.S.-based International Republican Institute and assist the Electoral Component of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC).

Chhang became DC-Cam's leader in 1995, when the Center was founded as a field office of Yale University's Cambodian Genocide Program to conduct research, training and documentation related to the Khmer Rouge regime. He continued to run the Center after its inception as an independent Cambodian non-governmental organization in 1997 and among many contributions to truth and justice, he has testified before the Khmer Rouge tribunal as a living witness to genocide. He is currently leading DC-Cam's effort to establish the Sleuk Rith Institute, a permanent hub for genocide studies in Asia that will be based in Phnom Penh.

Chhang has authored several articles and book chapters on justice and reconciliation and co-edited the book *Cambodia's Hidden Scars: Trauma Psychology in the Wake of the Khmer Rouge* (2011). He is the executive producer of *A River Changes Course* (2012), a documentary film about Cambodia's changing social, economic, and environmental landscape that won the Sundance World Cinema Grand Jury Prize for documentaries in 2013 and other awards. He also produced the film *Don't Think I've Forgotten: Cambodia's Lost Rock and Roll* (2014), which illuminates the culture that preceded and survived the country's genocide.

He is a Senior Research Fellow at the Center for the Study of Genocide, Conflict Resolution, and Human Rights at Rutgers University-Newark. He was a member of the eminent persons group who founded the Institute for International Criminal Investigations in The Hague in 2003. In 2000, he received the Truman-Reagan Freedom Award from the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation in Washington, DC. He was named one of TIME magazine's "60 Asian heroes" in 2006 and one of the "Time 100" most influential people in the world in 2007 for his stand against impunity in Cambodia and elsewhere.

Written by Prof. John D. Ciorciari
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Youk Chhang

Travailler avec Youk Chhang à été un plaisir car il a le regard de ceux qui sont habités par l'histoire et la volonté. Révéler ce visage a été un véritable honneur.
Photo by Esther Segal, June 2016.

"La mémoire est comme une ombre, on ne peut pas s'en défaire." Quatre cent mille: c'est le nombre de documents qu'il a patiemment accumulés. Ces ombres cauchemardesques, Il n'en a plus peur et les classe avec méthode. Ce que d'autres préfèrent oublier, lui est résolu à l'exhumer. Chhang Youk est le grand archiviste de la Douleur. Il interroge les fantomes pour séparer les victimes de leurs bourreaux. "Chacun d'entre nous tente de saisir ce qui est arrivé. Mais individuellement, personne ne peut trouver de réponse satisfaisante. Toutes ces questions, il faut les rassembler, faire en sorte que ça devienne une seule et même question nationale, afin d'essayer de comprendre." Ce travail, il le fait pour constituer une banque de données indépendante en vue d'un jugement de l'Histoire. "Ici, les gens sont otages de leur passé et je crois que le procès des Khmers rouges pourra les aider à se libérer..."
—Thierry Diwo