

មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឯកសារកម្ពុជា

Artistic Roles in Khmer Rouge Revolution

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The Koh Rumduol Buddhist monastery stands at the center of Thkol Thom village, Pursat province. Given its geographical importance, the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) Film Team chose this site for a film screening for nearly 300 villagers. With senior people forming a large proportion of the audience, the Film Team thanked them for attending the meeting even though they were busy with the rainy season's rice transplantation. The Team stressed the importance of the meeting, pointing out that the participants would have the chance to watch documentary films, to discuss the Khmer Rouge history, to hear an update on the work of the Khmer Rouge tribunal, and to learn about the imminent visit by DC-Cam's Victim Participation Project team, who would be providing assistance in filing complaints with the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC).

After hearing about the Film Team's program, many villagers regarded it as an entertaining and effective way to quickly grasp information. Some were even moved to share their personal stories about how art performances were used in their village both before and during the KR regime. Therefore, this article will focus mainly how the KR used art to indoctrinate the people to support their revolutionary cause and to build up the revolution. Interviewees' viewpoints on the screened documentary films also will be discussed.



Villagers and their children came to meet with DC-Cam film team

Artistic Role in Sowing Revolutionary Ideologies

In March 1970, the Cambodian people entered into a state of socio-political confusion after General Lon Nol staged a successful coup against Samdech Preah Norodom Sihanouk and created the Khmer Republic. From that point on, the Khmer Rouge movement increased in power in most parts of Cambodia's rural areas and the whole country was dogged by constant fighting.

Ms. Toch Srei Ron said that due to the insecurity at that time, ten groups composed of at least 100 youths were established by Thkol Thom village to prevent the Khmer Rouge movement's attack. According to Ms. Leng Ly, this preventive measure soon proved ineffective. The Khmer Rouge eliminated the Lon Nol regime's presence in the area in late 1970, periodically evacuating the villagers into the jungle in the process.

From the beginning of their control over the village, the Khmer Rouge formed a small number of the village's female youths into an "artistic group." Youth were compelled to join the KR forces and the art performances were used as a tool to indoctrinate and mobilize more youths to fight against "the American imperialists and its lackey, Lon Nol regime."

Ms. Toch's story is reflected in the lyrics of revolutionary songs played on National United Front of Kampuchea radio. Approved by the DK's Cultural and Social Committee of Eastern Zone, the nine and tenth paragraphs of the song titled "*We Conquered an Aerial War of the American Imperialist*" states as follows:

"...the Kampuchean people and revolutionary forces were most brave and devoted, committing their children and themselves and leaving their fresh blood covered the earth. The American imperialist, a worldly most stubborn and cool-blooded mastermind, was defeated in a most humiliating manner on August 15..."

Ms. Leng Ly observed that, together with Samdech Sihanouk's appeal to Cambodians to enter the jungle to fight the Lon Nol regime, anti-imperialist songs played a vital role in building up the KR revolutionary forces, strengthening political viewpoints and sowing communist ideologies. While many people supported the KR movement, Ms. Leng Ly's family decided to leave Thkol Thom village for Chhnok Trou village, Kampong Chhnang province. However, their hope to find a more stable place in Kampong Chhnang ended with the KR's total victory over Lon Nol regime in April 1975.

Using Arts Performance to Inspire Exhausted People to Build Revolution

A policy of forcibly evacuating people from towns and cities to rural areas was enacted shortly after the KR defeated the Lon Nol regime on April 17, 1975. Ms.

Chhuon Leav, 60, of Thkol Thom village recalled the day she was forced to abandon her home, saying that:

“I did not bring rice or other belongings with me as the KR declared that the evacuation would last within three days. In May, the KR militiamen ordered me to settle in many different places where there was a dearth of food. My baby boy died from malnourishment at the age of nine months old.”

The KR leadership adopted a policy of turning Cambodia into an agrarian society where its people bore the same status as the “worker-peasant class.”¹ Their vision was to build a “super great leap forward” and in doing so they disregarded the starvation, disease, execution and overwork that would eventually claim the lives of an estimated 1.7 million people between 1975 and 1979. Rather than taking concrete measures to assist the traumatized and exhausted people, the KR *Angkar* used arts performances to entertain them.

Ms. Prak Lieng, 55, of Thkol Thom village said that during both day and night breaks from the dawn-to-dust working, people in the cooperative were instructed to learn artistic performances. According to Ms. Leng Ly, although the men, women, and child units functioned separately, each unit was similarly required to perform a dance and sing songs. She said that in her cooperative, Ms. Roeung, chief of the women’s unit, was responsible for teaching the people at a dam construction site.



Ms. Toch Srei Ron

To entertain people in the cooperative, Ms. Roeung often selected Ms. Toch to sing and dance during work breaks. Ms. Toch, however, quietly emphasized that she was forced to perform, although the performances were created to please her and her cooperative members and make them smile despite their hunger.

Ms. Toch recalled the time in 1977 when she and another 100 women from her cooperative were told to walk to Kampong Chhnang provincial town to watch an artistic performance. Asked what the performance was like, Ms. Toch said that it was about the KR’s victorious war on the Lon Nol regime and rice cultivation. She recollected the following lyrics from a song titled “April 17, We Liberated Phnom Penh”:

“From all directions, [we] frantically attacked...the [Lon] Nol clique... Most traitorous individuals and regime were completely destroyed for ever... On April 17, 75, our noble combatants liberated Phnom Penh from all directions...”

¹ The term was used in the Revolutionary Flag Magazine published during the Democratic Kampuchea.

Another song titled *“Women of Cultivation Solidarity Group”* speaks of the hard work by the women’s group:

“We, women of cultivation solidarity group, are all happy to work frantically... On arrival at the rice fields ... Some ploughed the fields, some transplanted rice.”

Ms. Toch wondered how these performances could have been expected to make her happy when she felt so hungry, drowsy, and exhausted. She explained that after long hours at hard labor, her cooperative members were forced to watch such performances until early morning. Sometimes they had to return to work after spending only one or two hours sleeping. Notably, Ms. Leng Ly said that over 70 of the 140 members in her cooperative had died during the DK period.

General Viewpoints on KR Documentary Film



Monks and villagers watch documentary films in Koh Romduol pagoda

Due to the immeasurable hardship they suffered and the loss of their loved ones, survivors have been unable to forget the KR regime since its fall in 1979. They have chosen many ways to preserve this memory, ranging from informal storytelling to appeals to teach today’s school children about the period. The Film Team’s visit to Thkol Thom village was organized to discuss these issues. After hearing an update on the proceedings against the five Khmer Rouge leaders in

custody at the ECCC, the villagers watched two documentary films *“Preparing for Justice”* and *“Behind the Walls of S-21: Oral Histories from Tuol Sleng Prison.”*

Ms. Toch felt that through artistic means, such as the film screenings, the villagers would be better able to learn about the Khmer Rouge trials and to help their children understand KR history. Nevertheless, having lived through the bitter times of the KR regime, Ms. Leng Ly found it hard and depressing to recall her memories of those days. She warned against anyone thinking the KR had been good for Cambodia and spoke of the untold suffering they had brought on the Cambodian people as a whole.

Ms. Leng Ly also found the film screening to be an important means by which to inform the villagers about the KR history and KR tribunal. Although she was aware through radio broadcasts that there would be a trial of KR leaders, before the Film Team’s visit she didn’t know the names of the charged KR leaders or anything about the provisional detention appeals proceedings before the ECCC’s Pre-Trial Chamber.

Conclusion

The villagers of Thkol Thom took a very keen interest in learning about the KR history and the trials of the KR leaders. Some even spent their busy time giving our Film Team members long interviews about their personal lives under the KR regime. Many recollected that before the KR regime, artistic means was used to fan the fire of anti-Lon Nol and anti-American sentiments and to recruit villagers to support its revolutionary causes. During its rule between 1975 and 1979, arts performances were a tool to encourage the starved people to work hard for the revolution despite the horrendous number of unnatural deaths. By contrast, today, the Film Team is using art to generate discussion about the upcoming trials of those most responsible for these deaths, and to encourage survivors to find societal reconciliation with their tragic pasts.