

**A Victim Still Remembers:
Catching Up with Tang Kim¹**

By: Keo Dacil
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Since the release of the documentary film, “The Khmer Rouge Rice Fields: The Story of Survivor Tang Kim” over two years ago, the film’s leading character, Tang Kim, still has nightmares about the Khmer Rouge soldiers who tortured her. DC-Cam visited Ms. Tang on Thursday, April 5th in her home located in Kampong Chhang province. When the two staff members arrived, Ms. Tang was watching over several men breaking a large palm tree into two. The wood from the palm will be used to rebuild part of her house that has been severely damaged by termites. When Ms. Tang realized saw the DC-Cam staff, she quickly walked over and offered them chairs. Ms. Tang was slim but did not appear to be suffering from any physical ailments. As she spoke, her eyes sparkled even though she bore a solemn expression.



As her granddaughter looks on, Tang Kim cooks rice by burning firewood.

This time the DC-Cam crew had no cameras, no movie agenda, and there were only two of them. The two female staff had come to inquire about Ms. Tang’s current living condition. The first thing the staff noticed about Ms. Tang was that she is no longer a nun. At the time of filming in 2004, Ms. Tang was dressed in a long-sleeve white robe and her head was shaved. On Thursday, she wore a red and black print shirt and black cotton pants. Her short haircut hanged just below her ears. She was looking after her granddaughter who looked to be about two years old. During the interview she managed to smile a few times, but it was evident that many things were troubling her.

She talked about the recently fell palm tree that lay in several chunks in front of her small wooden house. The workers placed a large stake in the middle of the trunk which was then pounded deeper and deeper into the trunk until a split occurred. This was done at several points along the trunk until it eventually split into two

halves. She told the interviewer that she was very sad to cut down the palm, which was estimated to be at least 60 years old, but it was a hazard to keep and she needed material to repair her house.

Ms. Tang currently sells firewood for a living. She goes to a nearby forest to cut down trees with her three sons. They then would transport the wood to customers in a water buffalo driven wagon. Due to the increase number of those in the business however, including foreigners who also come to the forests near her village, the amount of wood her family can cut down has decreased from year to year. “All the big trees in the forest disappeared several

¹ Interview with Tang Kim conducted by Keo Dacil and Ly Sophal on April 6, 2007, Kampong Chhang province.

years ago,” said Ms. Tang. This created economic hardships for her family and led Tang Kim to discontinue being a nun in order to return home to provide for her children.

The end of Democratic Kampuchea on April 17, 1979 did not mean the end of pain and anger for many survivors. Ms. Tang hoped to lessen her anger and grief by becoming a nun. During her days of learning Buddhist scriptures her nightmares were less frequent and her overall mental health was better than before. Her daylong concentration on chanting Buddhist teachings helped to keep her mind off many things, including the experience of being raped by a group of Khmer Rouge cadres twenty-five years ago. A little over a year later however, she took off her white robe because of troubling finances and because her children “were cold” without her watching over them. Since then, the nightmares have been more frequent. Sometimes they occur once a month and sometimes several times a week. She told the interviewer that she just had a nightmare earlier that week. She dreamt that she was being chased by several Khmer Rouge soldiers; their faces hidden by the night sky. The next morning she was sick. Everyday Ms. Tang rises before the sun and goes to bed late at night. Her sleep is easily interrupted; the slightest noise wakes her up. Nightmares and little sleep have made her sick periodically, in addition to having countless headaches. She said that she will become a nun again once the house renovations are complete, but when probed further, she responded that she really does not know when her situation would allow her to return to a life of dedication to Buddha. If her family, especially her youngest son, called her back home, she would comply and return home.

Ms. Tang’s youngest son, Meas Channy, in separate interview, said that he wanted his mom to continue being a nun. He said that when she is at home she thinks about many things and ultimately develops a headache and gets sick as a result. At the temple, she spends all her time reading and participating in ceremonies and slowly forgets about the past. He hopes that after he finishes high school in two years, he can find a job to support his mom so that she can become a nun again. Channy, who speaks relatively good English, appears to be an ambitious young man despite his background. In the daytime he attends high school at Khemrak Raing Sey and in the evening he goes to English classes. Profits from sales of the documentary film, “The Khmer Rouge Rice Fields: The Story of Survivor Tang Kim” goes to Ms. Tang who uses the money to pay for her son’s education. One class that he cannot afford however is a computer class which Channy is really interested in taking. He said that he does not have access to a computer and recalled how exciting it was to see people using a computer when he visited Phnom Penh with his mother several years ago.



Tang Kim’s youngest son, Meas Channy, hopes to get a good job after graduating high school so that he can support his mother and allow her to become a nun again.

When Channy grows up he would like to work for an organization or become a teacher. Presently, he teaches English to several village children for almost free. The young children are not well disciplined however and show up for class infrequently. In his spare time he likes

to study English and read magazines, including DC-Cam's monthly magazine, *Searching for the Truth*. He reads both the Khmer and English edition. When asked if he ever inquired about the Khmer Rouge regime from his mom, he said no. Tang Kim was also asked if she spoke to her children about her experiences from 1975-1979, she responded sometimes. When they behaved badly or took things for granted, she would point out to them that such behavior would not have been tolerated during the Khmer Rouge regime. She does not however, go into detail about her experiences; her children have not seen the documentary film made about their mother. This evidently is a period that Ms. Tang still cannot openly talk to her children about. Her son Channy hopes that Democratic Kampuchea education will be added to the school curriculum one day.

Tang Kim said that her present living conditions are not that much better than when the film was made in 2004. She also said that after speaking about her rape experience in an interview for the film, she did not experience a lessening of anger and pain. It was only after spending time in the temple as a nun that part of her anger and anxiety were alleviated. When she came to live with her children again however, the pain and anger returned. Her horrific past is something which she "tries hard to forget, but follows nonetheless." Ms. Tang hopes that in the future all her children will be married and live comfortably and that she will be taken care of in her old age. As for her desire to become a nun, she declares that she has not given up, "I am determined to die in white."