

Weaving Narratives: An Exploration of a Family's Journey through the Khmer Rouge Genocide

by Tiffany A. Tep

A THESIS

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Oregon State University

Honors College

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Honors Baccalaureate of Science in Biology

(Honors Scholar)

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Tiffany A. Tep for the degree of Honors Baccalaureate of Science in Biology presented on May 27, 2021. Title: Weaving Narratives: An Exploration of a Family's Journey through the Khmer Rouge Genocide

Abstract approved: _____
Christoffer Petersen

As a child of two Khmer Rouge refugees, the Khmer Rouge genocide serves as the prologue of my family's story. The Khmer Rouge genocide took place in Cambodia in 1975-1979 after a successful coup led by the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) (Dy 2007, 2). In an attempt to create a classless society, the Khmer Rouge regime killed over 3 million Cambodians (Heuveline 1998). As a result of these deaths, I possess a limited understanding of who my ancestors were and can only trace my lineage to my maternal and paternal grandparents. The absence of elders as well as geographical distance from Cambodia has culminated in difficulty embracing my Cambodian identity. The purpose of this study is to explore my identity as a Cambodian American and preserve the memories of my ancestors who lived before, during, and after the Khmer Rouge genocide. Furthermore, this information will be shared with my future descendants to aid in their understanding of their roots and empower them to keep our family history alive. The methodology for this project was oral history interviewing captured with digital video and audio recorders. Interviews were conducted with Henry Chau, Aun Sin, Michael Tep, and Nenna Tep in Portland, Oregon. The findings of this project successfully obtained stories of the Khmer Rouge genocide era and uncovered two to three generations on the maternal and paternal sides of my family.

Key Words: Cambodia, Cambodian American, genocide, identity, Khmer Rouge, oral history

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Honors Baccalaureate of Science in Biology project of Tiffany A. Tep presented on May 27,
2021.

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Christoffer Petersen, Mentor, representing the Special Collections and Archives Research Center

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Toni Doolen, Dean, Oregon State University Honors College

I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

Tiffany A. Tep, Author

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This project could not have been accomplished without the support of my incredible thesis committee. Chris, Tiah, and Sara: thank you for believing in freshman year Tiffany's ideas, being flexible throughout the evolution of this project, and believing in me even when I stopped seeing the value of my own work. This was a personally challenging project, but with your kind words and constant encouragement I was able to overcome even the most discouraging of thoughts. You all have gone above and beyond as mentors and I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to work with you during my time at Oregon State University. Nothing can stop Team Tugboat!

To my friends and family: thank you for reassuring my anxious thoughts, supporting my personal and academic endeavors, and always being there for me. You've all been constant sources of joy in my life and have contributed to the development of who I am today. To my parents, grandma, and uncle Henry specifically: thank you for sharing your time, wisdom, and life stories with me. Words cannot describe how meaningful these interactions were for me. With the knowledge you have entrusted in me, I promise to preserve your memories and keep our family history alive.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Abstract</i>	3
<i>Copyright</i>	4
<i>Title Page</i>	5
<i>Signature Page</i>	6
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	8
1. <i>Introduction</i>	
1.1. <i>Overview of the Khmer Rouge Genocide</i>	11
1.2. <i>Timeline of Khmer Rouge Genocide era</i>	13
1.3. <i>Purpose of this Project</i>	14
2. <i>Methodology</i>	
2.1. <i>Interview Protocol</i>	15
2.2. <i>Participant Recruitment and Sampling Methods</i>	16
3. <i>Map of the Chau and Tep Families</i>	
3.1. <i>Map of Cambodia with Familial Landmarks</i>	18
3.2. <i>The Origins of the Chau Family</i>	19
3.3. <i>Serei Sophon, Cambodia</i>	20
3.4. <i>Battambang, Cambodia</i>	21
3.5. <i>Map of the Chau Family's Journey to Thailand</i>	22
4. <i>Family Tree</i>	
4.1. <i>Before Interviews</i>	
4.1.1. <i>Chau Family</i>	24
4.1.2. <i>Tep Family</i>	25
4.2. <i>After Interviews</i>	
4.2.1. <i>Chau Family</i>	26
4.2.2. <i>Tep Family</i>	27
4.2.3. <i>Tep Family, continued</i>	28
5. <i>Biographies</i>	
5.1. <i>Chau Family</i>	
5.1.1. <i>Chan Siv</i>	29
5.1.2. <i>Chau Voy Lan</i>	29
5.1.3. <i>Henry Chau</i>	30
5.1.4. <i>Nenna Tep</i>	30
5.2. <i>Tep Family</i>	
5.2.1. <i>Aun Sin</i>	31
5.2.2. <i>Tep Vicchean</i>	31
5.2.3. <i>Michael Tep</i>	32
6. <i>Stories</i>	
6.1. <i>Life before the Khmer Rouge Genocide</i>	

6.1.1.	<i>The Chau Family</i>	33
6.1.2.	<i>The Tep Family</i>	34
6.2.	<i>The Khmer Rouge Takeover and Subsequent Evacuation</i>	
6.2.1.	<i>Serei Sophon</i>	36
6.2.2.	<i>Battambang</i>	36
6.2.3.	<i>Evacuation</i>	37
6.3.	<i>The Khmer Rouge Era</i>	
6.3.1.	<i>Adaptation</i>	39
6.3.2.	<i>Separation</i>	40
6.3.3.	<i>Hunting Snakes</i>	41
6.3.4.	<i>Disease</i>	42
6.4.	<i>The Downfall of the Khmer Rouge Regime</i>	
6.4.1.	<i>Return to Serei Sophon</i>	43
6.4.2.	<i>A Boy and his Cow</i>	44
6.5.	<i>Escape to Thailand</i>	
6.5.1.	<i>Nong Chan Refugee Camp</i>	45
6.5.2.	<i>Minefield</i>	45
6.5.3.	<i>Return to Cambodia</i>	46
6.5.4.	<i>Khao-I-Dang & Sa Keo II</i>	47
6.5.5.	<i>A Boy and his Friend</i>	50
6.6.	<i>Transitions</i>	
6.6.1.	<i>City Life</i>	52
6.6.2.	<i>Re-emergence</i>	53
6.7.	<i>Home</i>	55
6.8.	<i>Epilogue</i>	
6.8.1.	<i>Reflection</i>	55
6.8.2.	<i>Reintroduction</i>	58
6.8.3.	<i>A Note to my Future Descendants</i>	60
7.	<i>Interviews</i>	61
8.	<i>References</i>	61

INTRODUCTION

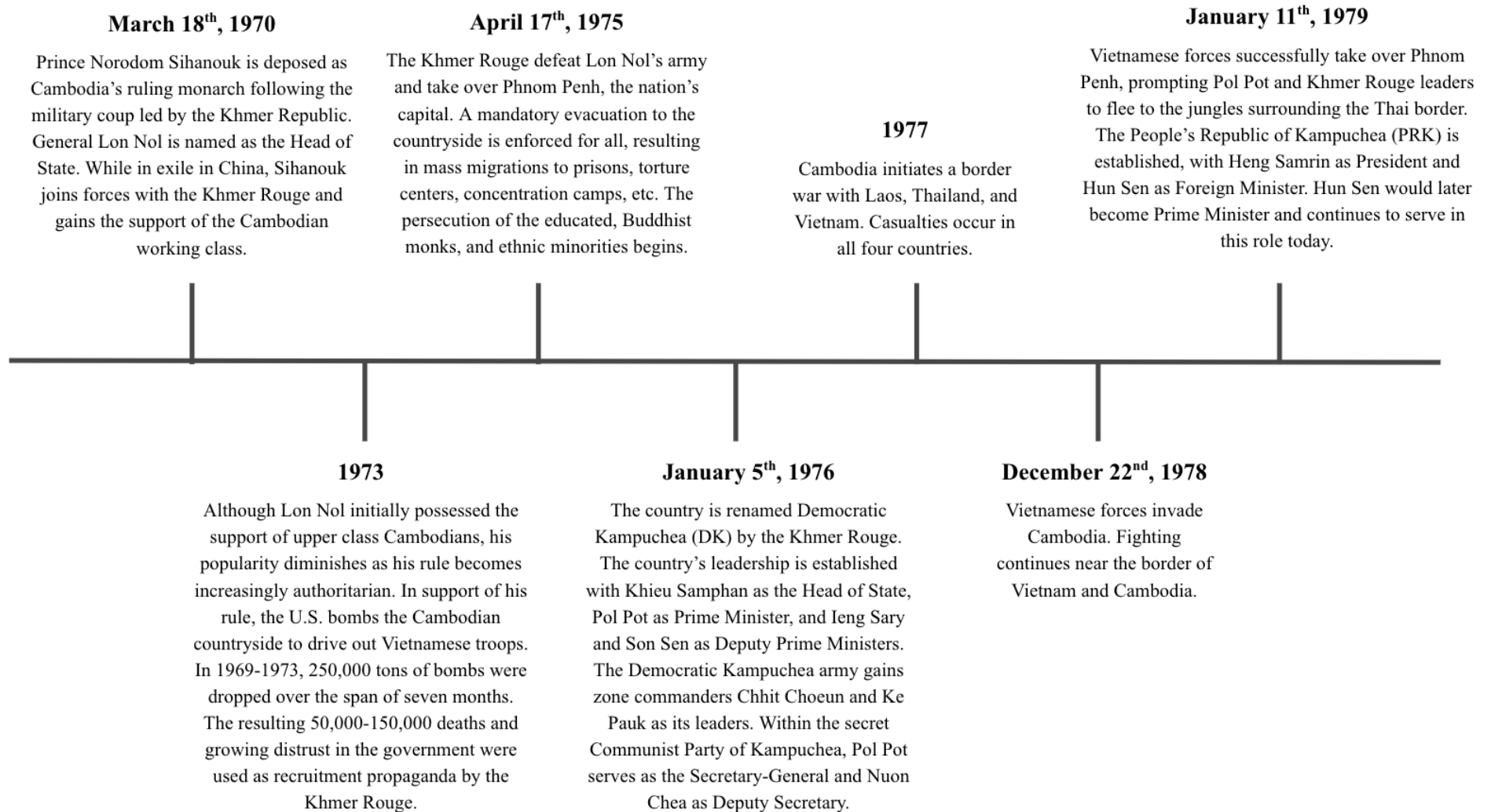
1.1. Overview of the Khmer Rouge Genocide

On April 17th, 1975, the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK), more popularly known as the “Khmer Rouge”, overthrew the military-led Khmer Republic and sparked the beginning of the Khmer Rouge genocide. This merciless attempt to transform Cambodia into a classless society resulted in the abolishment of currency, schooling, private property, religious practices, and traditional Khmer culture (Dy 2007, 2). Despite a stated objective to create a society in which all individuals were equal, the Khmer Rouge regime stripped all Cambodians of their basic human rights and specifically persecuted the educated, Buddhist monks, and ethnic and religious minorities. A mandatory evacuation was enforced, which resulted in the relocation of millions of Cambodians into concentration camps in the rural countryside. Although civilians were told by Khmer Rouge soldiers that the evacuation was necessary to protect them from potential U.S. bombings, the Khmer Rouge leaders, Ieng Sary and Pol Pot, had differing perspectives. According to Ieng Sary, civilians were evacuated from cities to compensate for the lack of infrastructure to provide food and water following the downfall of the Khmer Republic. However, according to Pol Pot, the evacuation was a means of demobilizing an “enemy spy organization” (Dy 2007, 14-16).

Those who survived the evacuation were forced to perform exhaustive agricultural labor without adequate nourishment or rest. Resisting the evacuation resulted in execution, torture, or coercion into becoming a member of the Khmer Rouge militia. These practices continued in concentration camps and torture sites, creating a climate of fear, anxiety, and paranoia. To prevent opposing alliances from forming, families were intentionally separated and many of those families remain separated today.

In addition to the atrocities occurring within the country, the Khmer Rouge initiated border wars with Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam (Yale, n.d.) The fighting at the border could be heard and seen at night by those in nearby concentration camps and eventually served as a declaration of the downfall of the Khmer Rouge. After the invasion of the nation's capital, Phnom Penh, by Vietnamese forces, the Khmer Rouge regime was defeated and forced to retreat into the Cambodian jungles. By the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, over 3 million Cambodians had been killed (Heuveline 1998). Although almost fifty years have passed since the rise of the Khmer Rouge's brutal regime, its atrocities continue to scar its survivors and their families—including my own.

1.2. *Khmer Rouge Genocide era Timeline* (Yale, n.d.; Hinton, 2004)



1.3. Purpose of this Project

“Writing about this bleak period of history for a new generation may run the risk of re-opening old wounds for the survivors of Democratic Kampuchea. Many Cambodians have tried to put their memories of the regime behind them and move on. But we cannot progress—much less reconcile with ourselves and others—until we have confronted the past and understand both what happened and why it happened. Only with this understanding can we truly begin to heal.”

- Youk Chhang, Director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia (*A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)*, 2007)

As a child of two Khmer Rouge refugees, I have always perceived the Khmer Rouge genocide as the prologue of my family’s story. Our story begins with the death and separation of my grandparents during the Khmer Rouge era, resulting in both my mother and father becoming orphans at a young age. As a result of these deaths, I possess a limited understanding of who my ancestors were and can only trace my lineage to my maternal and paternal grandparents. Furthermore, like many children of refugees, I was raised between two cultures. My intertwined Khmer and American upbringing has allowed me to appreciate both cultures, but the combined effects of geographical distance and lack of elders has disconnected me from my Cambodian identity. When thinking about my future children, or any of my future descendants, I often find myself contemplating how they will feel about their Cambodian identities as well. Will their level of detachment stem deeper than mine? How will this impact the development of their sense of self? If they ask me questions about our ancestors, will I even be able to provide a substantial answer?

With these thoughts in mind, I was inspired to collect stories about my ancestors before their memories die with my living family members. This information will be shared with my

family members and descendants in the form of an academic paper, oral history interviews, and an expanded family tree. With this knowledge and documentation in hand, I hope to aid my descendants in understanding their roots and empower them to keep our family history alive. Through this project, I aim to reflect upon my identity as a Cambodian American and preserve the memories of those who lived before, during, and after the Khmer Rouge genocide.

METHODOLOGY

2.1. Interview Protocol

The methodology for this project was oral history interviewing captured with digital video cameras and audio recorders. This practice was chosen because of its efficacy as a medium for storytelling and preservation of memories, as well as my familiarity with the interview process. Although countless books, papers, and documentaries about collective and individual Khmer Rouge experiences have been published, they are not the experiences of *my* family. By conducting oral history interviews with family members, I was able to gain insight into the Khmer Rouge genocide era, engage with their personalization of the history, and learn about significant family details that aren't documented anywhere else. Oral histories preserve stories, but they also preserve individual perspectives and words. Interviewing my family members provided a means of preservation that allowed them to tell their stories to our descendants in their voices, even after death. Saving these voices will prevent generalizations, inaccurate retellings, and the erasure of details of my family history for future generations.

The oral history interviewing approach I utilized conformed to the best practices outlined by the Oral History Association in its guidance on interviewing techniques and ethics. The video and audio of the interviews were recorded on an iPad, with an additional audio recording collected by an iPhone for backup purposes. To ensure that each interview produced responses

relevant to the intended question, a prepared list of questions was used as a preliminary guide. After the interviewee developed confidence in their role as a narrator, improvised questions were asked to establish a naturally flowing conversation throughout the interview. Either English or Khmer was used during the interview, depending on the language spoken most comfortably by the interviewee. In addition to the list of prepared questions, a preliminary family tree and corresponding table were used as tools to obtain the names, relationships, and birth and death dates of ancestors. The interviewees contributed to the family tree and table during or after the interview.

To obtain information about the Tep family (paternal lineage), Sin Aun and Michael Tep were interviewed; to obtain information about the Chau family (maternal lineage), Henry Chau and Nenna Tep were interviewed. The length of the interviews ranged from five hours to thirty minutes. These disparities in length emerged as a result of differences in a given interviewee's endurance as well as the breadth of information required from the interviewee. Due to my elderly grandmother Sin Aun's low endurance, her interview consisted of only filling out the family tree and table. All interviews conducted with individuals of separate households adhered to the current state and federal COVID-19 safety guidelines.

2.2. Participant Recruitment and Sampling Methods

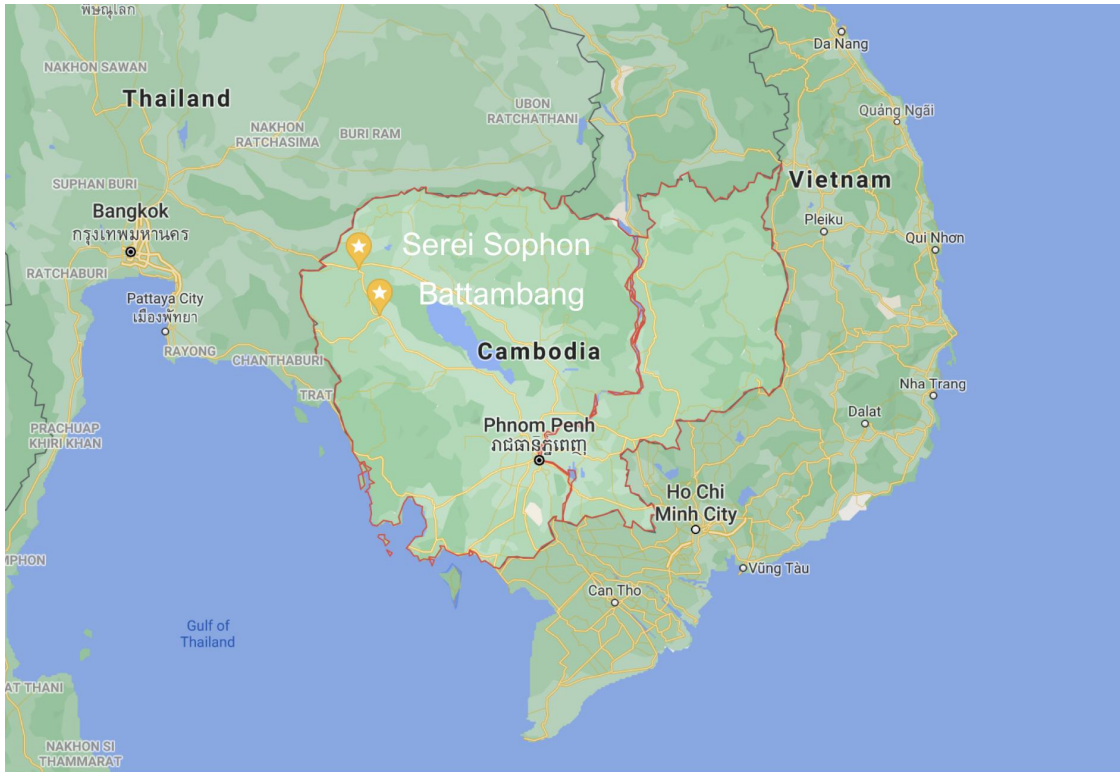
Potential participants were identified primarily through existing family networks. Recruitment was conducted through direct email contact, direct messaging through text, and verbal interpersonal interactions. Each interviewee was provided with a consent form in either Khmer or English during recruitment, which was also read to them again at the beginning of the interview. The consent form outlined the objectives and intended outcomes of this project; participant requirements; storage or disposition protocol for the raw interview content; and,

importantly, the mandate that this completed thesis be presented online and shared in the OSU ScholarsArchive. In order to be a participant of this project, the potential interviewee was required to affirm their understanding and acceptance of their role both verbally and in writing by signing the consent form. The completed consent forms are in my personal files and will not be shared publicly.

This project also utilized the knowledge, information, and documents obtained through three oral history interviews I conducted in Cambodia in 2018. At that time, I was also adhering to the best practices outlined by the Oral History Association in its guidance on interviewing techniques and ethics. For the 2018 interviews, verbal consent was obtained from each narrator prior to their participation. The 2018 interviews were recorded to audio only using a digital audio recorder, with an additional audio recording collected by an iPhone for backup purposes.

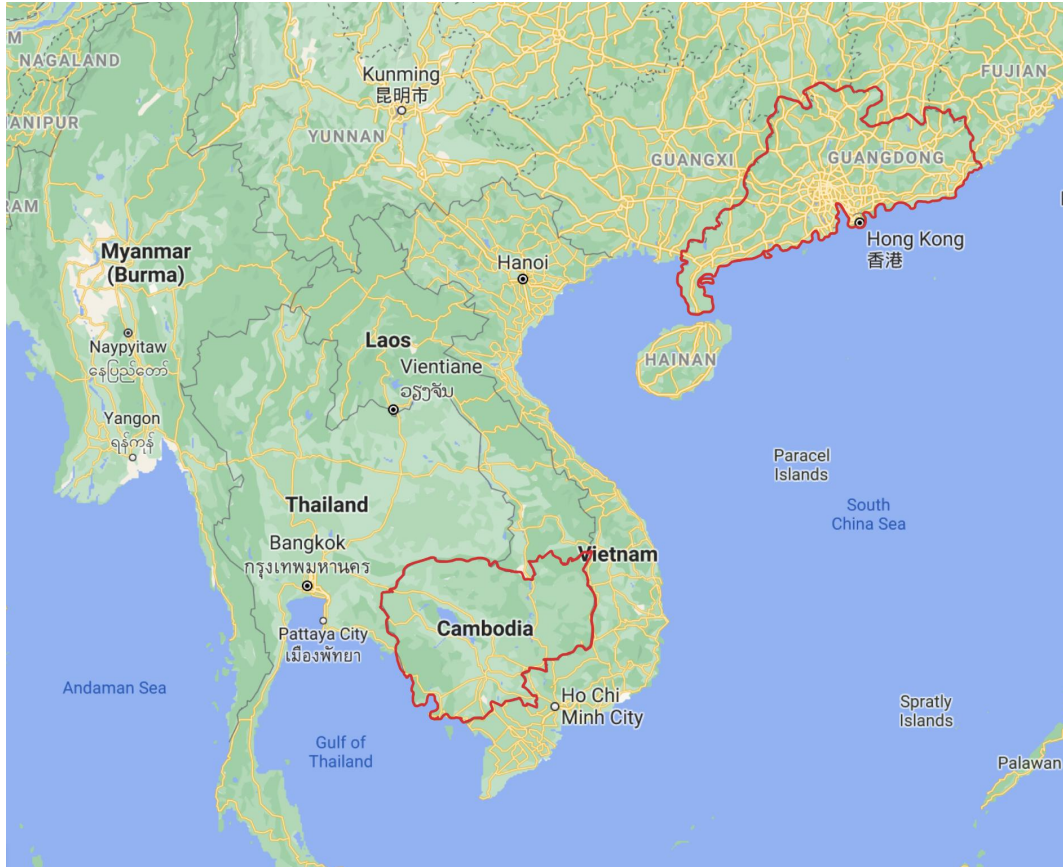
After each session, the raw interview content was uploaded to my OSU Box account and personal hard drive. The content stored in Box was disposed of once the project was completed. The content stored in my hard drive will be kept for personal use and will not be publicly disseminated. Once the interview data was safely uploaded, I re-listened to each interview to log the timestamps of significant events and details. The family trees and tables completed by each interviewee in 2021 were then compiled to create two separate family trees representing the maternal and paternal components of my family.

MAP OF THE CHAU AND TEP FAMILIES



*Map of Cambodia with Familial Landmarks
derived from Google Maps, adapted to highlight Serei Sophon and Battambang*

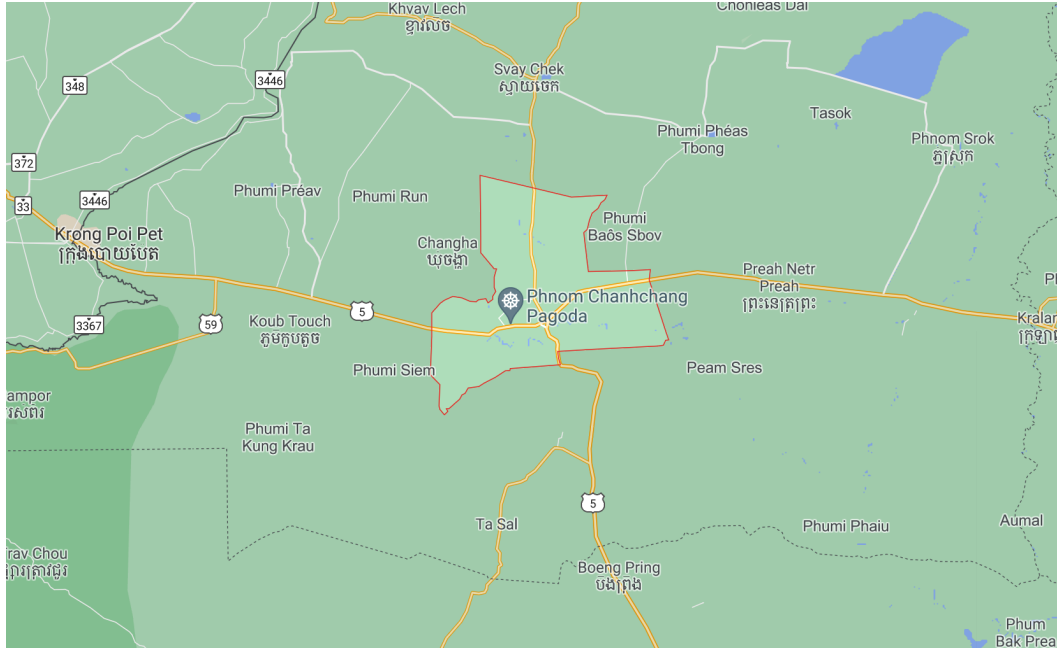
Cambodia is a country located in Southeast Asia and bordering Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand. Before the Khmer Rouge Genocide era, the Chau family lived in Serei Sophon and the Tep family lived in Battambang.



The Origins of the Chau Family

derived from Google Maps, adapted to highlight Cambodia and the Guangdong Province

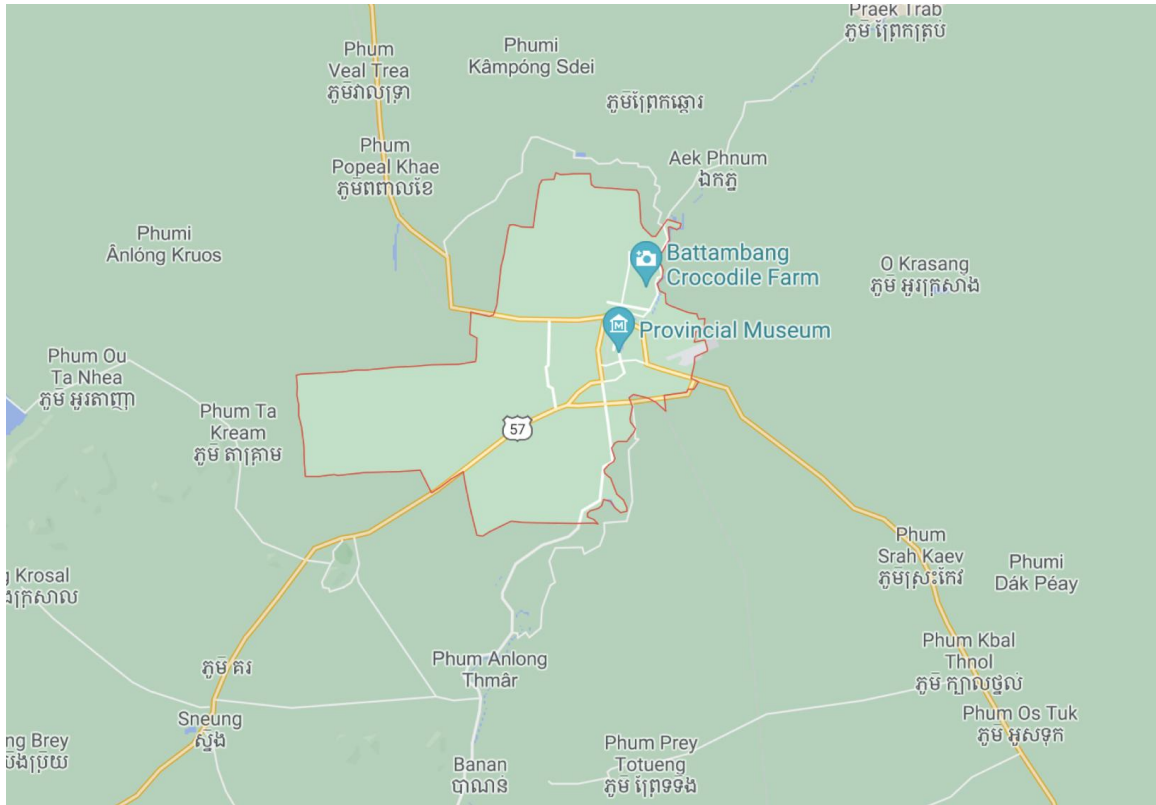
The Chau family is originally from the Guangdong province of China. In the 1920s, the Chau family immigrated from China to the Battambang province of Cambodia. Their mode of travel is unknown, but it is most likely that they sailed from China to Cambodia. Decades before the Chau family settled in Cambodia, my great-great-great grandfather travelled throughout Southeast Asia practicing and teaching medicine for 10-15 years.



Serei Sophon, Cambodia
English translation: “Beautiful Freedom”

Serei Sophon is the capital of the Banteay Meanchey province and the fourth largest city in Cambodia (National Institute of Statistics, 2020). The city is also known as “Sisophon”, which is a reminder of past Thai rule in the 17th century and derived from Thai pronunciation of the city’s name. The city has developed the nickname “Svay”, which translates to “mango” in English, by truck drivers for unknown reasons.

When my maternal grandfather made the decision to settle in Serei Sophon, he was met with disdain by local Cambodians because he was Cantonese. However, this animosity diminished as more Cantonese families moved to Serei Sophon over time.

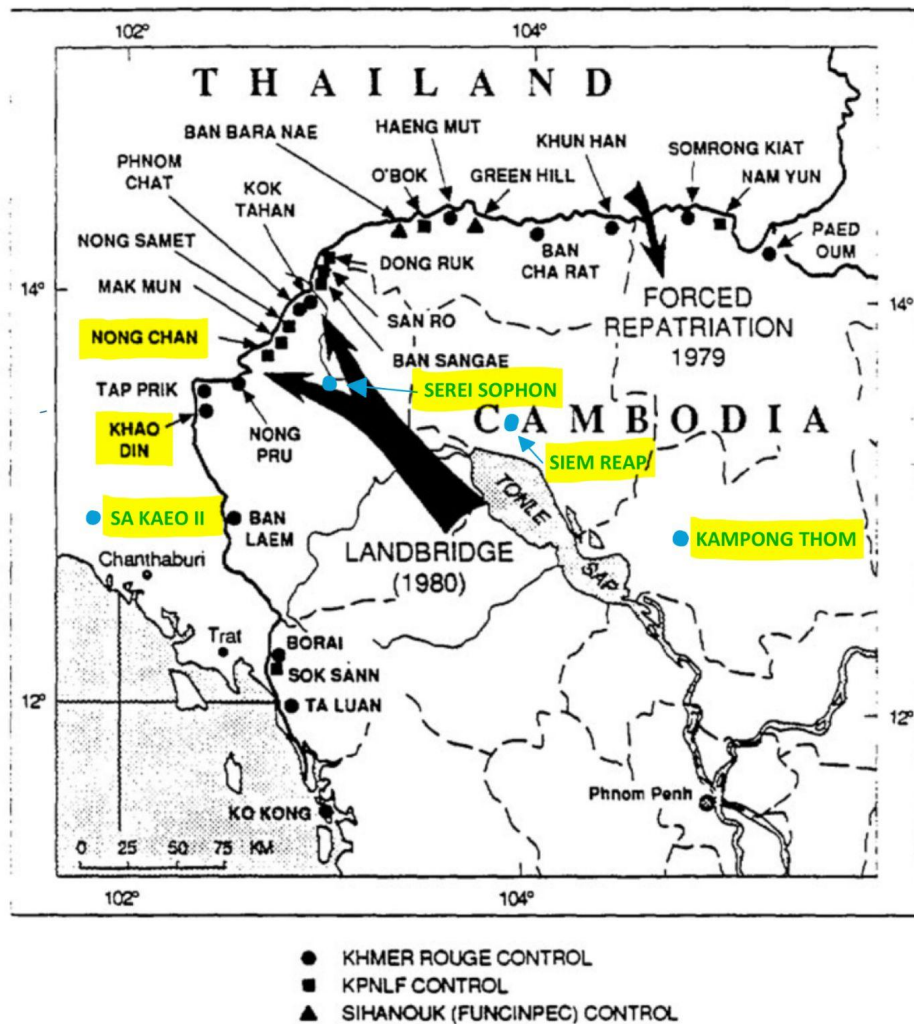


Battambang, Cambodia
English translation: "Lost Stick"

Battambang is the capital of the greater Battambang province of Cambodia. The name of the city and province refers to the legend of Preah Bat Dambang Kra Nhoung (“Lost Black Stick King”), (Marin n.d.). According to the legend, a woodcutter named Ta Dambong (“grandfather stick”) used a stick from the Kra Nhoung tree to stir his cooking rice. This stick turned the rice black, but upon eating the rice he was granted with the power to overthrow the king. The deposed king and his sons then fled to the woods and became monks. After having a dream in which a holy man riding a white horse overthrew his rule, Ta Dambong had all holy men killed. This dream eventually came true as he witnessed a prince riding a flying white horse. In an attempt to kill the prince, Ta Dambong threw his magical stick at him but missed. In defeat, Ta Dambong fled and he and his stick have never been found.

Within Cambodia’s agricultural industry, Battambang is the country’s leading rice-producing province. From my paternal grandmother’s recollection, the Tep family has always been involved in the farming industry in Battambang.

FIGURE 3.4
LOCATION OF BORDER CAMPS
1979 - 84



Map of the Chau Family's Journey to Thailand

Adapted from websitesrcg.com, annotated to include Sa Keo II, Serei Sophon, Siem Reap, and Kampong Thom

After the downfall of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979, the remaining Chau family members returned home to Serei Sophorn. Although the rule of the Khmer Rouge was over, individuals that were not of Cambodian descent were fearful of the possibility of the Khmer Rouge regime regaining power again. To escape the potential consequences, these individuals fled to Thailand.

The Chau family escaped to Thailand and settled in the Nong Chan refugee camp in late 1979.

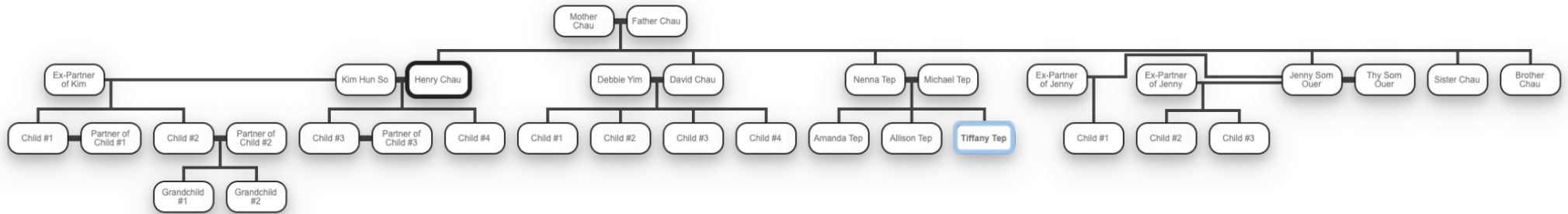
However, due to strains in Cambodia and Thailand's relationship resulting from past Thai occupation, recent border wars, and the large influx of Cambodian refugees (Yale, n.d.), the family was forced to return to Cambodia after three to six months. After traveling within

Cambodia to Serei Sophon, Kampong Thom, and Siem Reap, the family crossed the Thai border once more and settled in the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp. From there they migrated to Sa Keo II, and then immigrated to the United States. The details of their journey will be explored in a later section of this thesis.

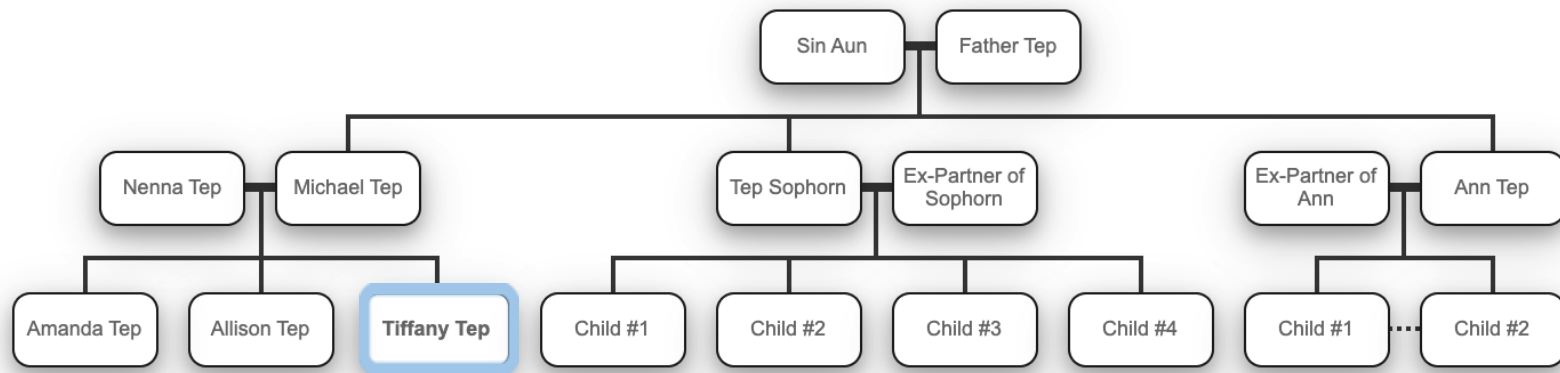
FAMILY TREE

4.1. Before Interviews

4.1.1. Chau Family

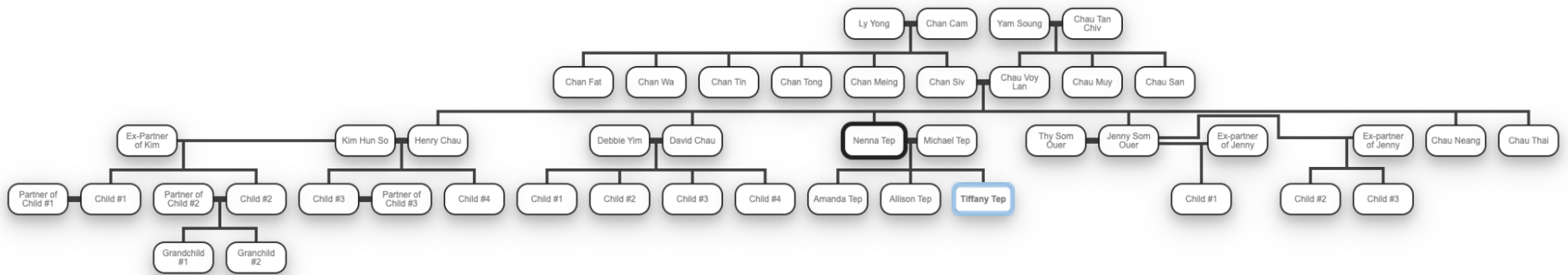


4.1.2. Tep Family

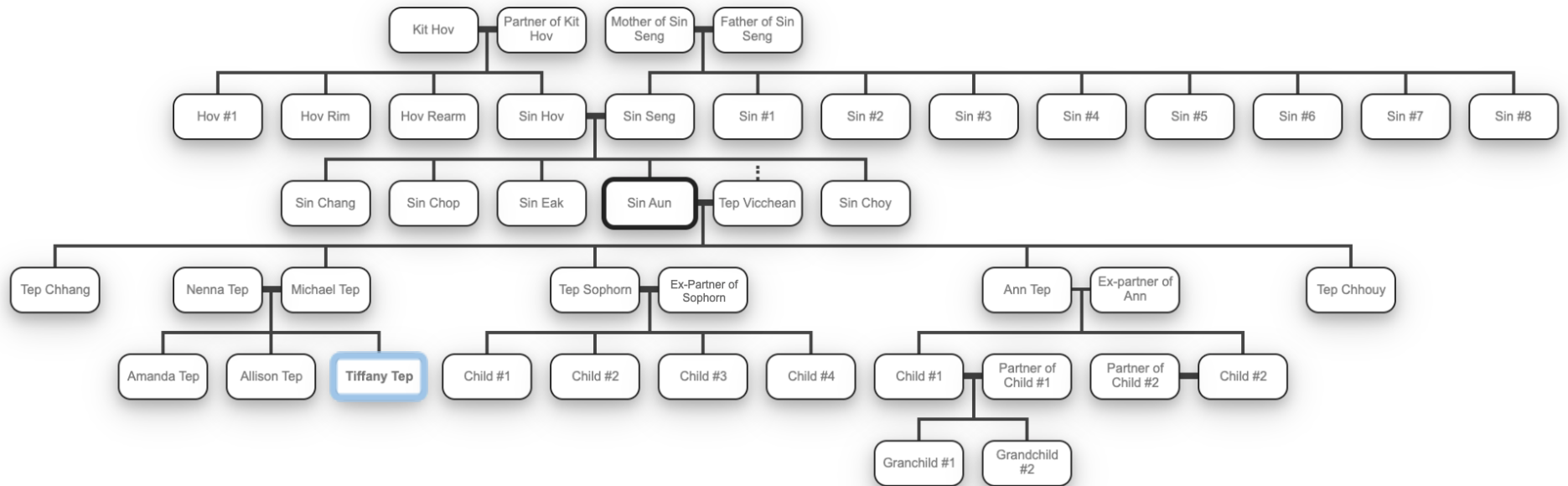


4.2. After Interviews

4.2.1. Chau Family



4.2.2 Tep Family



BIOGRAPHIES

5.1. Chau Family



A portrait of Chan Siv on her wedding day. She is estimated to be 24 years old. This photo was collected from the residence of Henry Chau

Chan Siv

Born: unknown

Death: 1979

Relationship to author: maternal grandmother

Chan Siv was born in the early 1940s in the Battambang province of Cambodia. The Chan family is originally from the Guangdong province of China and they immigrated to Cambodia in the early 1920s. After marrying Chau Voy Lan, they had six children together and she joined the Chau family business in Serei Sophon, Cambodia. The family was involved in milling, textiles, and owned a convenience store. Chan Siv passed away from starvation and an unknown disease in 1979, shortly after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime and the death of her youngest daughter, Chau Neang.



A portrait of Chau Voy Lan on his wedding day. He is estimated to be 35 years old. This photo was collected from the residence of Henry Chau

Chau Voy Lan

Born: unknown

Death: 1978

Relationship to author: maternal grandfather

Chau Voy Lan was born in the early 1930s in the Mongkol Borey district of Cambodia. The Chau family is originally from the Guangdong province of China and immigrated to Cambodia in the late 1800s. Although Chau Voy Lan enjoyed his early profession as a teacher of medicine, he ultimately joined the family business at the request of his mother. The Chau family was involved in the milling industry and owned a popular convenience shop in Serei Sophon, Cambodia. Chau Voy Lan married Chan Siv and they had six

children together. He was murdered by Khmer Rouge soldiers in 1978.

Henry Chau

Born: July 12th, 1964

Relationship to author: maternal uncle

Henry Chau was born in Serei Sophon, Cambodia to Chan Siv and Chau Voy Lan. He is the oldest of six siblings. After surviving the Khmer Rouge genocide, Henry escaped to Thailand and eventually immigrated to the United States with his three younger siblings. After high school, he moved to San Diego, CA and then San Jose, CA to join the quickly growing donut business within the Cambodian community. He married Kim Hun So in 1987 and they operated their own donut shop in downtown Portland, OR from 1989-1999. Today, they have two children together, as well as a cat named Percy.



A photo of Henry Chau and Kim Hun So at their child's wedding in July 2020

Nenna Tep

Born: May 5th, 1968

Relationship to author: mother

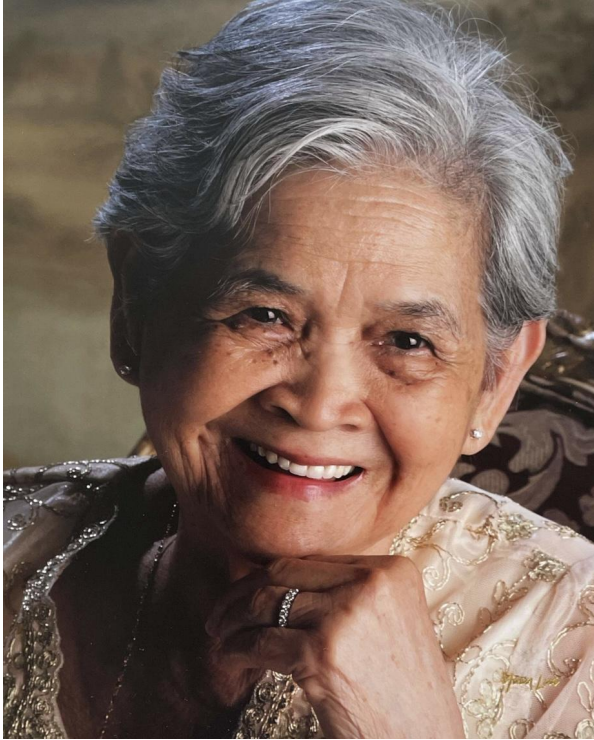
Nenna Tep was born in Serei Sophon, Cambodia to Chan Siv and Chau Voy Lan. She is the third oldest of six siblings. As a child, Nenna was known for being “adorable” and hardworking. After surviving the Khmer Rouge genocide, Nenna escaped to Thailand and eventually immigrated to the United States with her three remaining siblings. She graduated from St. Helens High School in 1987 and Portland Community College in 1991. She is currently a lab technician in Portland, OR. After marrying Michael Tep on March 27th, 1993, they had three children



A photo of Nenna Tep and Michael Tep at their niece's wedding in July 2020

together. She enjoys cooking, gardening, and spending time with friends and family.

5.2. Tep Family



A portrait of Sin Aun, taken in 2015. This photo was collected from the Tep residence

No Extant Photo

Sin Aun

Born: January 1st, 1939

Relationship to author: paternal grandmother

Sin Aun was born in the Battambang province of Cambodia to Sin Seng and Sin Hov. She is the fifth child out of six siblings, as well as a twin. After marrying Tep Vicchean, they had five children together. To support herself and her children, Sin Aun cooked and sold food on the street. After surviving the Khmer Rouge genocide, Sin Aun returned to Battambang with four of her children. In 1996, Sin Aun immigrated to the United States after being sponsored by Michael and Nenna Tep. She eventually became a U.S. citizen in 2002. Today Sin Aun is cherished by her three remaining children, ten grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren.

Tep Vicchean

Born: unknown

Death: 1969

Relationship to author: paternal grandfather

Tep Vicchean was born in Siem Reap, Cambodia to Tep Chhat and Tep Men. He attended the Royal Thai Air Force Academy but was unable to complete his training due to an illness in the family. At the request of his ailing mother, he returned home and forfeited his spot in the academy. Tep Vicchean then joined his father's trucking business in Battambang province. After marrying Sin Aun, they had five children together. Tep Vicchean passed away in a car accident prior to the Khmer Rouge coming to power.



A portrait of Michael Tep and his mother, Sin Aun. This photo was taken in 2015 and collected from the Tep residence

Michael Tep

Born: January 15th, 1962

Relationship to author: father

Michael Tep was born in the Battambang province of Cambodia to Sin Aun and Tep Vicchean. He is the second oldest of five siblings. After his father passed away, he was sent to live with his uncle Uy Kim Chan in the urban area of Battambang. During his childhood, Michael was a bright student and enjoyed living in the city. After surviving the Khmer Rouge Genocide, Michael ran away from home to go to Thailand with a childhood friend. He eventually immigrated to the United States and graduated from Sweet Home High School in 1983, Portland Community College in 1989, and the OHSU School of Nursing in 1998. He is currently an IV nurse at a local hospital. After marrying Nenna Tep on March 27th, 1993, they had three children together. He enjoys tennis, gardening and spending time with friends and family.

STORIES

The following section conveys some of the experiences of Henry Chau, Michael Tep, and Nenna Tep. Due to the fact that Sin Aun's interview only consisted of completing the family tree and corresponding table, her experiences are not included. The stories are organized chronologically and retell memories of life before, during, and after the Khmer Rouge era. These stories are also divided into two perspectives: the Chau family and Tep family. The two perspectives join together in an epilogue that discusses life in the United States, as well as the participants' hopes for their future descendants. The section concludes with a personal reflection on the evolution of this project and my Cambodian American identity.

6.1. Life before the Khmer Rouge

6.1.1. The Chau Family

In Serei Sophon, life was good for the Chau family. They thrived off their prosperous businesses and close relationships with their neighbors. Following in the footsteps of his grandfather, and at the request of his mother, my grandfather Chau Voy Lan left his occupation as a teacher to join the family textile and milling business. The Chau family also owned a popular convenience store in which my mother, Nenna Tep, excelled as a young salesperson. Described as "adorable" and "hardworking", customers were unable to resist her precocious sales acumen.

As the family prioritized education, all of the Chau children attended the local public school. When they were not in class or helping their parents at the family store, they would play with the other neighborhood children or visit relatives in surrounding cities. For my mother in particular, she would spend the majority of her time with her nanny. Although the Chau family

did not need a nanny, my grandparents knew that the woman they hired was recently widowed and in need of financial support. The nanny loved and treated my mother as a daughter, and even adopted a cat for her.

While my mother was spending time with her nanny, my uncle Henry Chau spent most of his free time reading. If he wasn't with a book, he was roaming around town with his brother David Chau. In an attempt to prevent them from getting into trouble or straying too far away from home, my grandparents forced them to take my aunt Jenny Som Ouer along. However, this arrangement backfired as my uncles took my young aunt everywhere with them.

6.1.2. The Tep Family

After the death of his father in a car accident, seven year-old Michael Tep was sent to live with his uncle, Uy Kim Chan. This decision was made to alleviate the stress and financial burden on my grandmother, Aun Sin, who was suddenly a single mother of five young children. Although my father remained in Battambang, he now lived in the urban region of the province. Unlike his life at home, he was able to spend money on whatever he wanted. This was due to the fact that his uncle was a wealthy dentist and dental school professor. In his new city life, my father was able to drive around downtown in his uncle's car and purchase street food and desserts. In addition to these luxuries that he had never known before, he now received private tutoring after school. As his aunt Sao Youn was the principal of his public school, his education was a high priority. Fortunately, my father possessed an intrinsic passion for learning and continued to excel in school. After high school, he had hopes of attending university in France and becoming a doctor or dentist.

As a child, my father didn't understand the significance of the privileged lifestyle he led. While my grandmother was cooking and selling food on the street to support four children, he

became fully accustomed to the city life and its delights. When he returned home to visit his family, he couldn't understand why his mother added corn to the family's rice porridge. As an adult, he now knows that the corn was a low-cost filler that kept everyone's stomachs full.



Photo of the Sin and Tep Family (circa 1965)

Collected from the Tep Residence

Michael Tep is on the far left and Sin Hov is the fourth from the right

6.2. *The Khmer Rouge Takeover and Subsequent Evacuation*

As young children, the turmoil arising within Cambodia's political leadership never infiltrated my uncle and parents' games and play time with friends. Although reports of the Khmer Rouge regime's advances and propaganda dominated the radios of the homes of Serei Sophon and Battambang, most adults were unafraid. They were certain that this small guerilla

group would be unable to overthrow the Khmer Republic. Even if they were successful, my grandparents believed that Khmer Rouge rule would be similar to that experienced by the citizens in communist Vietnam. Despite warnings from friends of the family that were in political circles, the elders in the Chau, Uy, and Tep families remained unperturbed. For the time being, evil, monsters, and villains continued to exist only in my uncle and parents' make-believe games.

6.2.1. Serei Sophon

In Serei Sophon, those who believed in the Khmer Rouge's inevitable rise began to spend their money generously. They claimed, "if you have money, spend it now!" in response to the Khmer Rouge's stance on abolishing currency. As political tensions continued to rise, the Chau family began to worry about the reality and implications of the Khmer Rouge's power and influence. Packed into a rental car with all of their belongings, the family drove to the Thai border to escape the impending chaos. Unfortunately, before they could even reach the border, they were ordered to return home by armed Khmer Rouge soldiers. They were told by the soldiers that all of the country's borders were now closed.

6.2.2. Battambang

The Uy family, which now included Michael Tep, was offered secret passage into Thailand by a family friend who was a pilot in the Khmer Air Force. Although the Khmer Rouge continued to steadily gain power, the Uy family believed that life under Khmer Rouge rule would be similar to communist Vietnam and would proceed as normal. As a result, they declined the family friend's offer to fly across the Thai border. The next day, the Khmer Rouge took over Battambang.

6.2.3. Evacuation

The Khmer Rouge began its revolution in Phnom Penh, the nation's capital. Its dominance spread outwards throughout the country, in the form of an enforced evacuation. In line with the regime's mission to create a classless society, every Cambodian was forced to leave their home to perform exhaustive agricultural labor in concentration camps. Refusal to comply resulted in summary execution, prison sentence, or inevitable death in a torture center.

In Serei Sophon, the Chau family was informed by armed Khmer Rouge soldiers parading on trucks that they needed to leave their homes immediately. They claimed that the United States and Vietnam were going to bomb the city but it would be safe for citizens to return after three days. During this time period, they claimed, the Khmer Rouge was going to clean and reorganize the city. To support the Khmer Rouge's effort to keep Cambodians safe, civilians were encouraged to cook meals and deliver them to the soldiers.

Although my grandparents did not dare to defy the Khmer Rouge soldiers, they were hesitant to leave home because my grandmother had recently given birth to my uncle, Chau Thai. To prevent the Khmer Rouge soldiers from confiscating the family's valuables and necessities, each family member strategically hid food, jewelry, and medicine in the folds of their clothing.

Before the citizens of Serei Sophon were allowed to leave the city, they were paired with another family from the same neighborhood. The pairs were then directed to follow different pathways led by armed Khmer Rouge soldiers. Although the Chau family was not separated, they were now formally disconnected from their friends, neighbors, and acquaintances within the tight-knit Chinese Cambodian community.

As the Khmer Rouge took over Serei Sophon, they also assumed control of Battambang. A mandatory evacuation to avoid U.S. and Vietnamese bombs was also enforced in Battambang.

Although my father and grandmother lived in the same city, my father did not have enough time to return home to join his mother and siblings. As my father was surrounded by his uncle's family, he did not feel fear. However, after witnessing the deaths of resistors who were lined up along the river and shot, he began to shake and finally understand the reality of Khmer Rouge rule.

Rather than joining their neighbors in a mass migration to the countryside, the Uy family and my father drove to the family farm. However, upon their arrival, they were ordered to surrender their car to the regime. Soon after, the family was visited by a member of the Khmer Rouge, who my father's aunt Sao Youn recognized. This man had infiltrated the school she worked at by posing as a teacher. Aware of the fact that the man knew that she was a school principal and her husband was a dentist, they interpreted his invitation to Phnom Penh as a death sentence. Throughout the entire car ride to the nation's capital, the family hugged each other as they approached their executions.

But they were not killed. In exchange for safety and housing in the city, my father's uncle was required to teach dentistry to Khmer Rouge soldiers. This was extremely surprising to the Uy family as it went against the ideals and actions of the Khmer Rouge regime. In order to achieve the regime's goal of creating a classless society, educated individuals such as doctors, dentists, and teachers were labelled as enemies of the state and were ordered to be killed instantly. This policy also extended to anyone who wore glasses or a wristwatch, whether or not they were actually an intellectual.

Despite the fact that my father's uncle was a dentist, his life was spared because he had treated Khmer Rouge members in the past. They remembered him as a kind, humble, and generous man because he continued to provide them with dental care even after learning that

they would be unable to pay for it. His reputation continued to save his life even after the family was transferred to Kampong Chhnang to teach dentistry at a general hospital. In the middle of the night, they were informed by a Khmer Rouge member that the regime leader of Kampong Chhnang had been replaced. The new leader more strongly adhered to the Khmer Rouge's stance towards the educated and planned to kill all of the doctors and dentists at the hospital. With a boat provided by the Khmer Rouge member, the Uy family and my father sailed across the Tonlé Sap River to safety.

6.3. *The Khmer Rouge Era*

6.3.1. *Adaptation*

In Serei Sophon, the Chau's light skin served as an indicator of the Chinese heritage that they shared with their neighbors. However, in the towns the mandatory evacuation led them to, their light skin isolated them and made them targets for Khmer Rouge soldiers. To prevent harm and unwanted attention from coming their way, the Chau family worked hard to blend in. As a family that prioritized education and business, the members of the Chau family were not accustomed to physical labor such as harvesting rice, digging dams, and cutting trees. Yet they strived to do their work assignments quickly and with expertise. In addition to competently carrying out their daily tasks, the family also studied and followed the routines of the locals who were already established in the village. They even went so far as to adopt the accent of each region they were in. Their efforts to assimilate were successful and they were able to build new networks. Although these relationships were not as meaningful as the ones they shared with their neighbors at home, the Chau family was just grateful to fit in.

While the Chau family quickly adapted and assimilated to the first village they were evacuated to, the family they were paired with from Serei Sophon did not. Similar to the Chau

family, this family was also not familiar with physical labor; however, unlike the Chau family, they did not demonstrate the same level of dedication to acclimate. As a result, this family did not get along well with the village locals. To avoid ruining the Chau family's efforts to adapt and blend in, my eight year-old mother intentionally stopped playing with a similarly aged girl in the other family.

6.3.2. Separation

In addition to the Chau family's efforts to blend into their new environment, they also worked hard to remain together. During the Khmer Rouge era, children would be intentionally separated from their parents for weeks or forever and sent to work camps. When the Chau children were ordered to separate from their parents, my uncle Henry, the oldest in his family, bargained with Khmer Rouge soldiers to keep his young siblings with him. In particular, to compensate for his siblings' lack of speed and endurance as a result of their age, he would offer to pick their quota of rice in addition to his own. He was able to deliver on this promise and successfully kept his family intact.

When the family was together, this altruism and sacrifice continued. Although the Khmer Rouge were successful in gaining power and control of the Cambodian government, they failed to provide a clean water system or resolve the country's dwindling rice shortage. As a result, individuals in prison, torture centers, and concentration camps were only granted one bowl of watery rice porridge a day. Diets were discretely supplemented by foraging and catching frogs and crickets. To ensure that the youngest Chau children remained full and healthy, the three oldest Chau siblings would give them a portion of their daily rations. Although my mother was starving, her round, plump face gave everyone the impression that she was well-fed.

In 1976 or 1977, the Chau family was moved to a new village and began their adaptation process again. Due to increased fighting at the Thai border, individuals in the area's concentration camps were relocated to camps closer to the center of Cambodia. In this new commune, each family was given a raised bamboo hut to sleep in together. Although the family remained together, my ten year-old mother and fourteen year-old uncle Henry were soon taken away to a children's work camp in 1978.

This experience of forced relocation was shared by my father, who was separated from the Uy family after sailing across the Tonlé Sap River. From this point onwards, he did not know where he was in Cambodia as he drifted between work camps for children.

6.3.3. Hunting Snakes

Upon returning from their month-long assignment at the work camp, my mother and uncle Henry were informed by my thirteen year-old uncle David that their father had been taken away and executed by the Khmer Rouge. Specifically, while they were gone, my grandfather was invited to "hunt snakes" by Khmer Rouge soldiers. Although he questioned the reasoning behind hunting snakes, he knew that he was not in a position to refuse the invitation and made sure to take his spade along with him. According to a young acquaintance that was working nearby, my grandfather was taken to a field, ordered to kneel, and then promptly shot in the back. He made one noise upon impact, then fell over and died instantly.

Despite the rage and sadness that they felt, my mother and uncle were told by their mother not to cry, speak, or ask about their father's death and disappearance because they were being watched by Khmer Rouge soldiers. The family was unsure of the reasons why my grandfather was targeted, but speculated that it was because he was Chinese, or perhaps a neighbor had turned him in. The latter was supported by the fact that my mother later found her

father's spade in the yard of an elderly neighbor. Unable to contain her curiosity, my mother confronted her neighbor but did not receive a satisfactory response.

Although they were unable to express their grief, my mother obtained a measure of personal revenge. Knowing that Khmer Rouge soldiers were hiding and listening underneath their bamboo hut at nightfall, she *loudly* offered to give her bedridden, five year-old sister Neang a bath. After finishing her bath, my mother then poured all of the water directly onto the soldiers underneath their bamboo floor, drenching the soldiers and driving them out.

6.3.4. Disease

After the death of my grandfather, the Chau family was relocated to a remote village near the country's border. Although they remained together, my aunt Neang was severely ill and developed edema as a result of malnutrition. Without medical treatment and proper nutrition, she passed away at the age of five. She was buried by my uncle Henry.

The death of her husband and daughter led to the decline of my grandmother's mental, emotional, and physical health. As my grandmother was very in love with my grandfather, she could not bear to be without him. This led to my mother and uncle Henry being forced to step up and act as the heads of the family at the ages of ten and fourteen, respectively. They took over cooking, cleaning, and caring for their younger siblings Jenny and Thai. When it came time to return home to Serei Sophon after the downfall of the Khmer Rouge, my grandmother begged her children to leave her behind to die. She believed that her bedridden state would only slow her children down and endanger them, as they were in close proximity to the fighting taking place in the jungles surrounding the border. However, her children refused and fashioned a sling to carry her home.

6.4. *The Downfall of the Khmer Rouge Regime*

In the dark and quiet of the night, fireworks and explosions near the border now illuminated the sky. Faint sounds of Vietnamese planes and bright lights of celebration slowly trickled from the nation's capital. Whispers of Vietnam's victory over the Khmer Rouge began to circulate in concentration camps as Khmer Rouge leaders and soldiers began to mysteriously disappear. Although Cambodia was freed from a dictatorship on January 11, 1979, it is important to note that not all of its people were freed at the same time.

6.4.1. *Return to Serei Sophon*

As many sprinted towards freedom with the hope of reuniting with friends and family, my uncles Henry and David slowly made their way through the jungle to Serei Sophon while carrying their ailing mother in a sling. Following closely behind, my mother carried their younger siblings and the family's kettle. Though my grandmother survived the reign of the Khmer Rouge, she was unable to recover from the physical and emotional strain she endured during its rule and died in transit. After my uncle Henry buried her, the family continued their journey back to Serei Sophon.

When the Chau family finally reached Serei Sophon, they were met by my mother's old nanny. Since returning to Serei Sophon, she had waited for my mother at the city's entrance every day. However, upon seeing the five siblings return without their parents, the nanny could not bring herself to separate the siblings. She also knew that she would not be able to care for five children by herself.

During the four years that they were gone, the Chau family home had been demolished. Orphaned and without a home to return to, the Chau siblings reunited with their aunt and cousins and lived with them.

6.4.2. *A Boy and his Cow*

One morning, the habitants of a children's work camp woke up and discovered that all of the supervising Khmer Rouge soldiers had disappeared. Unsure if this was a ruse or game of deception, my sixteen year-old father and the rest of the children continued to perform their daily tasks as if nothing had changed. However, once it was clear that the adults were never returning, all of the children began to fight over the remaining rice rations. My father grabbed a bowl of rice and a cow in a nearby field and began the journey back to Battambang.

Surprisingly, even after four years of chaos, bombings, and violence, the signs lining the highways were still intact. With the cow as both a companion and mode of transportation, my father followed the highway signs to Battambang and returned home in two days. He was then reunited with his uncle, who was baffled by the presence of the cow. Due to the fact that they lived in a relatively urban area and were unable to properly care for a cow, my father's uncle then sold the animal to a farmer.

6.5. *Escape to Thailand*

Although Cambodia had been freed from the Khmer Rouge, the country was in a state of chaos. This social and material circumstance was amplified by the fears of the Khmer Rouge regaining power, and the implications of their rule for ethnic and religious minorities. Having reunited with their aunt and cousins that were also of Chinese descent, the Chau family joined them in seeking refuge in Thailand in 1979. Along with the clothes on their back, the only material possessions they carried were the Chau family kettle and their grandmother's traditional Khmer clothing.

6.5.1. Nong Chan Refugee Camp

In the Nong Chan camp, all Cambodian refugees were prohibited from mingling with the local Thai citizens. They were instead forced to remain near the Thai border and were given little more than blue tarps to construct a shelter. The Chau children set up their new home at the edge of a nearby temple. Although they were now in Thailand, the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge's atrocities spread chaos and danger across the border. To protect their siblings from harm inflicted by other refugees and Thai soldiers, my uncles Henry and David constantly guarded their tent. However, they were unable to protect their four year-old brother, Thai, from contracting measles.

The Chau family remained at the Nong Chan refugee camp for somewhere between three to six months. Due to a shift in the Thai government's attitude towards Cambodian refugees, camp residents were forced to return to Cambodia in phases. The Chau family, as well as their aunt and cousins, were put onto a bus and driven back to the Cambodian border. When the bus stopped to get gas, my mother remembers seeing a crowd of Thai locals rushing to the bus to hand the refugees care packages through the bus windows. My mother grabbed a kit consisting of water, menthol ointment, and medicine.

6.5.2. Minefield

Once they crossed the border, they were abruptly dropped off at the edge of a rocky mountain, Phnom Dangrek. In English, this translates to "Carrying-Poles Mountain." Upon further investigation and observation, the returned refugees quickly learned that they were inhabiting a leftover minefield placed by the Khmer Rouge. In order to access the river at the bottom of the mountain, they had to walk over the dead, blown-up bodies of those who had preceded them in attempting to make this treacherous crossing. To mask the smell of death, my mother and her siblings applied the menthol ointment they received on the bus underneath their

noses. Moving together, the refugees formed a chain to travel kilometers down the mountain, and the constant pressure applied by this human chain prevented the activation of the hidden landmines.

When night fell, the refugees paused their descent to rest. Using the blue tarp from the Nong Chan camp, the Chau family constructed their shelter for the night. As it is Cambodian superstition to never sleep directly on the earth, they also gathered twigs and branches to sleep on top of. When they awoke the next morning and cleared their camp, they discovered that they had been sleeping on top of a landmine the entire night. However, due to the bed of twigs and branches they slept on, as well as their small and malnourished bodies, they never touched the landmine. With this knowledge in mind, they carefully continued their descent down the mountain.

Although their aunt was aware of my uncle Thai's measles, she never offered to help the Chau children. As a result of her indifference, my fifteen year-old uncle Henry declared that they would continue their journey on their own. After this departure, the Chau family walked approximately 230 kilometers to Kampong Thom.

6.5.3 Return to Cambodia

In Kampong Thom, the Chau family checked their brother Thai into a hospital. Although he was finally receiving proper treatment for his measles, his body was not responding to the intravenous medication; instead of circulating the medication throughout his body, it pooled in his arm. In order to collect the proper food used as offerings when praying to ancestors, my mother traded the contents of the care package she had received on the bus. She also learned basic Vietnamese to ask Vietnamese soldiers for rice. Using the family's kettle and water from nearby streams, she was able to cook the rice. However, despite the family's efforts and prayers,

their brother passed away in the hospital at the age of four. This was extremely heartbreaking and devastating for the Chau family. Chau Thai had survived the brutality of the Khmer Rouge regime, as well as the dangerous journey to and from Thailand, but his life was taken from him not long after he had become free.

After the death and burial of my uncle Thai in Kampong Thom, the Chau siblings decided to return home to Serei Sophon before making another attempt to cross the Thai border and escape the pandemonium in Cambodia. After making the journey from Kampong Thom to Siem Reap on foot, they then encountered an old friend with a truck who was on his way to Serei Sophon. Joining the friend, the Chau siblings were safely transported back home.

When the Chau family finally returned to Serei Sophon, they reunited with family friends and were invited to live with them. As my mother and aunt Jenny were still quite young at eleven and nine years-old respectively, my uncles Henry and David left them in the care of these family friends. However, they were not abandoning them. Rather, in order to successfully obtain spots in the Thai refugee camps for all of the Chau family members, the brothers first had to embark on a dangerous expedition to find a safe route for their sisters to use. They promised to return in three months.

6.5.4. Khao-I-Dang & Sa Keo II

After two months, my mother and aunt grew worried. They had no form of communication with their brothers, and the family friends that were housing them seemed restless themselves, as they also planned to leave Cambodia once my mother and aunt had left their care.

However, my uncles kept their promise and returned after three months. My uncle Henry returned for my aunt and mother and secured them safe passage with a covert group that

smuggled refugees across the Thai border. My uncle David was waiting for them in the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp. They left in the middle of the night. My mother's prominent memories of this journey include crawling in ditches, laying flat in grassy fields to hide from troops, and being thrown across a ravine. They eventually reached the Thai border and snuck underneath a fence to enter the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp. Upon entering the refugee camp, my mother and aunt were told by my uncle Henry to act as if they were already living there and to provide no response if questioned. During this period of time, Thailand was no longer accepting new refugees. As a result of my uncle Henry's strategic insight and guidance, they were reunited with my uncle David and eventually transferred to Sa Keo II after six to nine months in Khao-I-Dang.

In Khao-I-Dang and Sa Keo II, the Chau family exerted all of their efforts and limited funds to send aerograms to non-profits, embassies, and global organizations that could grant them with refuge and citizenship in their respective countries. Leaning on the sales skills that she had built in the family shop, my mother sold crackers she received from the orphanage to earn money to buy postage stamps. The Chau family continued this practice until they were finally given an interview in Sa Keo II. An interview was a one-time opportunity to escape the turmoil in Southeast Asia; if you and your family missed your interview, it was given to another family without consideration. Due to the fact that these interviews were never officially scheduled and were announced at random times, my mother kept an anxious eye on all of her siblings. As my uncle David enjoyed wandering around the camp with his friends, this caused her much stress as she waited for their interview to be called.

As it happened, all of the Chau siblings were present for their interview and they passed. With the support of a Catholic charity organization, the Chau family was granted refuge in the United States. Soon after, they began to learn basic English at a nearby temple.



Photo of the Chau Family taken at the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp (1980)

Collected from the Tep residence

From left to right: Henry Chau, David Chau, Nenna Tep, and Jenny Som Ouer

6.5.5 *A Boy and his Friend*

During the months following the defeat of the Khmer Rouge, my father's uncle was involved in the reconstruction of a hospital in Battambang. Due to the lack of doctors and nurses, my seventeen year-old father was able to assist my uncle in treating patients and received bowls of rice as a salary. Already interested in medicine, he enjoyed learning how to clean and close wounds. Along with being reunited with his aunt and uncle, my father was also reunited with his childhood friends and they worked together in the hospital.

After one of his close friends learned that his parents had safely and successfully reached the Thai border, he invited my father to walk to Thailand with him. With a father that worked for the International Committee of the Red Cross in Thailand and a cousin already in the United States to serve as a sponsor, this friend had secured passage into both Thailand and the United States. After my father agreed, he was told not to tell his family about their plans because his friend was unable to accommodate a large group. That night, my father went home, ate dinner with his family, went to bed, and then woke up early to meet his friend.

They rode a motorbike from Battambang to Serei Sophon and stayed with a family friend for a night. Although this family friend was a doctor that worked with my father's uncle, he did not say anything about my father's departure to his uncle. Instead, he and his wife fed them and connected them with a group of men that safely guided refugees to the Thai border. Despite the safety they received by traveling with these guides, my father and his friend could not avoid seeing the dead bodies of those who had encountered mines planted by Khmer Rouge soldiers hiding in the jungles.

The group eventually reached the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp and were reunited with my father's friend's family. After a few months, his friend's cousin, with the help of my father's

future foster parents, sponsored their immigration to the United States. While my father immigrated to the United States with his friend's family, his own family was left wondering about his disappearance, and if he was even still alive.



Photo of Michael Tep in the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp (circa 1979)

Collected from the Tep Residence

Michael Tep stands at far right

6.6. *Transitions*

6.6.1. *City Life*

On April 13th, 1981, the Chau family landed in San Francisco, California after a restless flight. Fearful that danger would strike again, both my mother and uncle Henry were unable to sleep throughout the journey. However, despite their fatigue, they were amazed by the bright lights and towering skyscrapers of downtown San Francisco. For three to four days, they lived in one of these luxurious high-rise buildings; however, they do not remember what type of building this was or where it was located. They were also paired with another group of orphaned siblings, so each morning they would play together and visit the front desk for free apples, orange juice, apple juice, and other snacks. My mother and my aunt would also shower two to three times a day, just to play with the shower's unique functions. During this time, they were also given the opportunity to choose a coat for themselves out of a room filled with winter garments. In addition to the clothes they wore on their backs from Thailand, they now owned a coat.

As it was the middle of April, the Chau family arrived in the United States during the new year celebrations of many Southeast Asian countries. In the lobby of the building they were staying at, a Thai new year event was taking place. My mother remembers admiring all of the beautiful partygoers in their traditional clothing as she and her siblings sat on the sidelines in their pajamas.

Soon after, the Chau family flew to Portland, Oregon and met their new Cambodian foster parents at the Portland International Airport. Their foster father drove them around downtown Portland, and as my mother was now accustomed to the sights and sounds of city life, she was excited by the prospect of living in one of Portland's many grand skyscrapers. Looking out the car window, she tried to discern which building would be her new home. However, as

they drove down Highway 30 and away from the city, my mother's preconceived notions of life in the United States began to dissipate. After an hour of driving, the Chau family finally arrived at their new home in St. Helens, Oregon.

Although St. Helens did not compare to the glamorous lights and high-rises of San Francisco and Portland, the Chau family was just thankful to be safe, healthy, and together. They now had a new family to love and support them, and have grown up to become amazing and compassionate individuals.

6.6.2. Re-emergence

My father immigrated to the United States with his friend's family in March of 1981. Although they were to be sponsored by his friend's cousin who was already in the U.S., the cousin was unable to financially support all 16 members of the family on his own. However, he was able to accomplish this with the support of a Lutheran church in Sweet Home, Oregon. As a result, the family settled in Sweet Home as well.

My father was immediately enrolled as a senior at Sweet Home High School. Although his English was limited, his childhood passion for learning reemerged. His dream of pursuing a career in medicine or dentistry remained and motivated him to do well in his classes. Due to the fact that his education in Cambodia was more advanced than what he was learning in Sweet Home, he was able to successfully pass his classes and had enough free time to join the tennis team as well.

After a few months in Sweet Home, the family decided to move to California. However, as my father was dedicated to his studies and was unsure if he could continue his high school education in California, he decided to stay behind. He did not have a source of income at the time, so he was unable to remain in the house the family had been renting. Once his friend's

family departed for California, my father then moved in with Jim and Catherine Muir. The Muirs were active members of the Lutheran church and provided support for his sponsorship as well. They treated my father like a son and supported his educational endeavors. I never had the chance to meet Jim Muir as he passed away before I was born, but I knew Catherine Muir as “Grandma Catherine” and would occasionally visit her as a child. She passed away in 2007.

After graduating from high school in 1983, my father then attended Linn-Benton Community College in Albany, Oregon. During the day he would attend his classes, and at night he worked as a nurse aide to support himself and pay for his apartment. He eventually moved to Portland, Oregon to attend Portland State University and the OHSU School of Nursing. Upon moving to Portland, he was recognized by his old teacher from Cambodia while visiting a mutual friend’s house. As this teacher was fond of my father and remembered him as a bright and cordial child, he invited him to live with him. My father accepted and moved into one of his spare bedrooms.

After obtaining his Associates degree in Nursing in 1989, my father began working as a nurse in Portland. Now that he had multiple degrees and a stable source of income, he began to reflect on his privileged childhood in Cambodia. He felt remorse for leaving his family behind and began to look for them. When he learned of friends and acquaintances going back to Cambodia, he would ask them to deliver letters to his family to let them know that he was alive and well. Through this messenger system, he reconnected with his uncle’s family and also learned that his mother was alive as well. Although he was on a different continent, he supported his family by sending them a portion of his salary each month. After almost a decade, the Tep family was finally whole again.

6.7. *Home*

Today, the Chau and Tep families are safe, whole, and happy. After a lifetime of loss, adversity, and struggle, that is all they could ever ask for. Although they are disheartened that their parents and siblings left them too soon and cannot witness the lives and families they've built, my parents and uncle are comforted knowing that their families would be proud of who we are now and what we have accomplished.

When asked if they had any messages for their future descendants, my parents and uncle Henry replied that they would like our future descendants to:

- ❖ Work and study hard
- ❖ Always care about your family
- ❖ Be loving, respectful, and compassionate to others
- ❖ Never look down on others; you never know what they have gone through
- ❖ Don't do things for the approval of others—do it for yourself
- ❖ Treat others the way you want to be treated... but if they wrong you, stand up for yourself

These pieces of wisdom come from a lifetime of profound experience. They have kept our family alive and prospering, and are words to take to heart.

6.8. *Epilogue*

6.8.1. *Reflection*

This project was originally intended to be an analysis of the effects of the Khmer Rouge genocide era on intergenerational trauma and survivor family dynamics. I began this project as a

college freshman who wanted to learn more about the genocide that influenced the course of my family history. In July 2018, I traveled to Cambodia for the first time to conduct oral history interviews with Khmer Rouge survivors. During my time in Cambodia, I interviewed three people and learned about their experiences during the Khmer Rouge era and how Cambodia has changed dramatically since then. While I immersed myself in Cambodian culture and society, I also had the opportunity to visit historical sites such as the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh. Throughout this experience, I felt both fulfilled by being in the country my parents and ancestors were born in, but also disconnected as I was left with more questions about what it meant to be a Cambodian American. In the United States, I was starkly Asian; however, in Cambodia I was obviously a foreigner. While I questioned where I belonged, a recurring thought I had was, “If my ancestors saw me on the street, would they even recognize me as one of their own?”

As two years passed, I believed that I could diminish these uneasy thoughts by collecting more interviews among large Cambodian immigrant communities throughout the United States. In addition to obtaining stories that would make my data more comprehensive, I felt that conducting interviews with survivors in the United States would elucidate the confusion I harbored about my intertwined Khmer and American upbringing. However, due to my demanding college schedule, and perhaps my own unconscious anxiety, I never conducted these interviews and put my thesis on pause.

After moving back home as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, I was left with long periods of time to contemplate what I truly wanted to achieve with my thesis, minus the distractions of typical college life. The more time I spent with my family at home, the more I realized that I had begun this project because I possessed a longing to know *who* I came

from. Although I enjoyed the time I spent in Cambodia in 2018, I was left feeling unfulfilled, my curiosity unsatisfied after each interview. After three years, I finally understood that the information I intended to collect with my current thesis would not answer the questions I was unconsciously and truly asking myself. No matter how many interviews I conducted with Khmer Rouge survivors in Cambodia or the United States, my lack of knowledge about my ancestors would never lessen—unless I interviewed my own family members.

For the longest time, I viewed the Khmer Rouge as the starting place of my family history and unconsciously accepted that any knowledge of those who came before was restricted from me. For my family, the only way we could go was forward. Furthermore, as this was a painful period of my parents' lives, I did not want to force them to relive their traumas by speaking about their deceased family members. However, this quiet acceptance of ignoring the past only intensified the questions that I harbored about my existence; Is the basis of my Cambodian identity fixed to this painful piece of history? Who is my family outside of this event? Do I only exist because of the Khmer Rouge's atrocities?

As I pondered these thoughts, I began to think about how the lack of knowledge of ancestors who lived before the Khmer Rouge era would affect the next generation of my family. While I empathized with my future descendants' potential struggle of understanding their Cambodian American identity, I was also terrified by the thought of our family history being slowly forgotten over time. With both my ancestors and descendants in mind, I made the decision to modify my thesis to focus specifically on my identity and family history in relation to the Khmer Rouge genocide.

Although the stimulating conversations I had during the interview process in 2021 momentarily pacified these thoughts, they also spawned new questions. As I spent 22 years

wondering who my ancestors were, once I finally learned their names and life stories, these individuals suddenly became alive and real to me. I was now left with more questions than when I had started. A recurring thought I often had throughout this process was, “this is a different type of hurt.” Throughout my entire life, I’ve know that these individuals were dead as a result of the Khmer Rouge genocide. But how did my grandfather Chau Voy Lan feel when he was ordered to kneel by the Khmer Rouge soldiers? Did my grandfather Tep Vicchean ever regret losing his spot in the Royal Thai Air Force Academy? What thoughts were going through my grandmother Chan Siv’s head when she asked her children to leave her behind to die? Although decades separate our periods of existence, we are connected by my empathy and intrinsic curiosity.

6.8.2. Reintroduction

I know now that the analysis required to fully understand my identity as a Cambodian American and child of refugees will require a lifetime of continued reflection and conversations. Although this process was personally challenging, I am glad that I collected these stories while my family members are still alive. What has been reinforced in each interview is that I come from a line of kind, hardworking, and compassionate people. Although we have never met, I share my grandfather and great-grandfather's passion for serving others. They were doctors so caring that they routinely provided free healthcare to impoverished patients; so much so that their mothers implored them to join the family business before the family became penniless as well. The kindness that guided their behaviors and actions have led to my existence today. As a college-educated woman who is on her way to becoming a dentist, I think my ancestors would be proud of who I have become. Following in their footsteps, I hope to treat my patients and community with as much care and benevolence as my grandfathers.

Rather than associating my Cambodian American identity with the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge genocide, I understand now that my identities are derived from the strength and humanity of my ancestors. These traits were passed onto my parents and uncle Henry, and aided them in their survival during the Khmer Rouge era. As they have led their adult lives with grace and empathy, I have been raised to do the same. Although the Khmer Rouge era obliterated my ancestry, it did not erase the kindness and compassion fundamental to their lives. While I may not have been born in the same country as my ancestors or had the opportunity to meet them, we are united by this innate drive to care for and be kind to others. And for now, that is enough for me.

As I age and experience new life milestones, I expect that my questions will grow and evolve over time. I know now that I am not fully ready to answer these questions and will need time to process what I have learned. Perhaps with age and matured wisdom I will be more equipped and mentally prepared to answer these questions.

I hope I am.

6.8.3. *A Note to my Future Descendants*

I hope this project has answered your questions, or helped you formulate questions you didn't know you had, about our family history. Please take care of this knowledge for those who will come after you. Even if you believe there isn't anything notable or significant in your lives, I implore you to continue the work I've started. I guarantee you that your future descendants would love to know mundane facts such as your favorite ice cream flavor or how you felt on your first day of college. All of these details are important and provide a glimpse into who our family is. While we may never meet or live in the same places or eras, we will always be connected by the values that our family upholds.

Love,

Your mom, favorite aunt, grandma,
great grandma, great-great grandma, etc.

INTERVIEWS

Aun Sin (Khmer Rouge survivor, paternal grandmother) in discussion with the author, April 11, 2021.

Henry Chau (Khmer Rouge survivor, maternal uncle) in discussion with the author, March 26, 2021.

Michael Tep (Khmer Rouge survivor, father) in discussion with the author, March 26, 2021.

Nenna Tep (Khmer Rouge survivor, mother) in discussion with the author, March 15, 2021.

Source A (Khmer Rouge survivor in Siem Reap, Cambodia) in discussion with the author, June 28, 2018.

Source B (Khmer Rouge survivor in Siem Reap, Cambodia) in discussion with the author, July 1, 2018.

Source C (Khmer Rouge survivor in Battambang, Cambodia) in discussion with the author, July 9, 2018.

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