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Asian Pacific American History
Professor Chu

Transcription of Rouen Chea's Oral History:
Asian American Project

Tell us about yourself?

"My name is Rouen Chea, and I am fifty years old. Currently I'm working at Springfield public schools. I teach art and math intervention and this will be my 20-30th year in education. I have four kids and I live in Florence, Massachusetts."

What was life like back in Cambodia?

"Well I lived in a really remote village, it's about 45 minutes to an hour drive from the main city. My family is very poor, most of the people there are very poor. We have a lot of relatives where we come from, most of the Cambodian people in a whole village are related to one another. My family are farmers, mostly raising animals and planting rice."

What is the education like in Cambodia and how is it different from that of the U.S.?

"It's very different in terms of education in Cambodia and America. Here, I see that kids have more access to technology and schools. They can afford to go to school. In Cambodia, you have to have money to go to school, and kids have to provide their own transportation and all the educational materials. It's very different from here [America]. In Cambodia, if you are poor as I said, you're more likely to go to a certain school that is very low quality across the board. If you have access, if you have money, you can go to private or more upgraded schools."

Life Under Khmer Rouge

"My situation was when I was young, I was separated from my family due to the communists. They took me away from my family when I was little and sent me to a concentration camp. I worked at the concentration camp for three years. During the war against the Vietnamese and Pol Pot, we lost the war and then everyone kind of had to escape away from the camp. Then, I escaped to the Thai refugee camp and I stayed there for three years. Finally, they found a foster family in America, in Amherst, and I was able to come to America when I was fourteen years old."

Separation of family structures by the Khmer Rouge

"During that time they just wanted to destroy family structure. For example they sent me to Springfield, sent my sister to New York, my dad to California, and my mom to maybe New Jersey. They tried to destroy family structure so that way they can tell you what to do. You were not allowed to see your family... you're lucky if you see them once a year. You worked for them, for the Khmer Rouge. Twelve hours a day, seven days a week."

Within those three years, they killed close to three million people, either from starvation or sickness. You know, all of these things happened at the same time. We didn't have a chance to see one another. We didn't have celebrations or school, basically just work, work, work. And just people were not feeling well and would get sick. Sometimes you tell them, if you're not feeling well, you don't get much food to eat. It was mostly just water and vegetables you know? Maybe one cup of rice for fifty or seventy people eating it, mostly water. You worked until you couldn't move or were really sick. During that time, there was no medication, no clinic, no doctor. Basically they would give you a type of medicine that was not helpful at all. They were not doctors. They were pretending, or they had no knowledge in terms of knowing medicine and what would cure people and how to take care of people. So there was no doctor during that time, yeah."

Use of Angkar by the Khmer Rouge

"Angka is basically, they used that word during the Khmer Rouge time. I'd never seen one, but heard that word Angka. Angka to me is like representing the leader. Like, if you were my group leader, I look at you as my anka. If you were the president I looked as you as like Angka. I follow what you say. So, Angka during that time I consider is like God. Basically he's the leader of the Khmer Rouge, is Angka. Angka is responsible for whatever happened during the Khmer Rouge time. Because as I said, Angkar is like the leader of the group, the leader of the town, leader of the village or the district. Because you're responsible for whatever Angka has done."

What is your reaction to the recent trial of the two Khmer Rouge members and how did you feel about the guilty verdict?

"I think that it's great that we, you know, we got those people on the case. And held them responsible for what they did. But I'm sure it was not only those two who were behind the scenes. I don't know who else was behind the scenes but I'm sure there's more people, and as I said I'm glad that things happened to them. Let the other countries learn about and see the consequences of those two people who were responsible for the Khmer Rouge. And I hope they take further consequences so other countries and learn from them."

Concerns about voicing opinions about the trial and Khmer Rouge regime

"To me because I travel to Cambodia a lot, and in Cambodia, even though people think it's a freedom of speech, it's not really freedom of speech. Because it could be very dangerous if you're talking about something that you criticize another party. I don't want to put myself in that situation, and also I don't want to put my family in that situation, so that's why I want to play it neutral - whatever you do I just hop along with you. When I'm in America, I know that I am safe, so that I can say whatever I feel like. But in Cambodia it is very limited in terms of what you can say and what you can't say."

Facing Trauma Under the Khmer Rouge

“I think you can’t rewind and replay something that already happened. You can just learn from it. And how I dealt with it, I used to have nightmares a couple months after I came to America, think about what happened. What I did is try to avoid. I tried to think that there’s nothing I can do. It already happened. Let’s move on. You know, and even though the Khmer Rouge did many things, I cannot get it back. So whatever happened, let’s move on. And I keep telling a lot of my friends too like I’d say ‘dude, your aunts and uncles your mom and your dad whatever’s happened it’s the same thing we are in the same boat. Let’s move on, let’s move on. You have a family, let’s move on. Build your life, you know?’ Even when I went home, there’s a guy from when I was young. He’s in my village and he was Angka, he’s chief and he killed most of the people. And he’s alive. He’s in my village. And for the last couple of years he pretended that he was crippled, because he wanted people to look at him and not torture him. A lot of my friends were like, what are we going to do to him? I said you know what? Leave him alone, because it’s already happened. And by killing him, or doing something bad to him, it’s not gonna help you. I’m trying not just to educate my friends here to ignore and move on, but also when I’m at home, a lot of my friends think back about this particular guy, and I say, just let him live the way he wants. That’s fine. Let’s move on. So I think that’s the best way—just ignore the negative behavior or negative that’s already happened. Just move on. Yeah I don’t forget, just keep that in mind that this happened to you, but you cannot overload of that thing. Otherwise you can’t continue your life, if you keep thinking about all these bad things happening to you.”

What was the role of the U.S. in creating destabilization in Cambodia?

“I’m not sure, I don’t really know about it. I know there was a Khmer Rouge fight on who supported. Because it’s out of my knowledge so I don’t know how the Khmer Rouge started and who’s behind it so I don’t know if the United States was involved or not so I’m not sure. I know that during the Vietnam war I believe that there was the Lon Nol civil war in Cambodia, and I knew that maybe some of it was supported by the United States. And actually one of my sister’s was killed by the air raid. But I wasn’t sure if that air raid was supported by the United States or not. During the Lon Nol times, the Cambodian civil war, I know there were airplanes dropping bombs but I wasn’t sure who was behind it.

My feelings, it’s like I think, you know, in that case if the United States was behind in that scene, I think the United States shouldn’t get involved and step in. I know we try to help other people, but you cannot be the king of the world. That creates conflicts with the rest of the world you know? The United States should let other people deal with themselves. It’s nice to help but sometimes you step over the boundaries and creates more problems.”

Refugee Experience: Thai Refugee Camps

“I was a refugee. I stayed at an orphanage center for three years. That’s where I began to learn how to read and write my own language. Before that, because of the war, we didn’t

have any schooling and I was separated from my family since then, until 18 years later when I found my family when I came to America.”

What is your most vivid memory from the refugee camps?

“I would say that we played soccer. You know, I loved soccer. Everytime after school my friend and I would just get together and play soccer and try to hang out, exercise, and keep up. I loved soccer. And also painting is one thing I liked to do when I was in the camp. I liked to paint.”

Process of gaining refugee status

“When I was in the camp, the United Nations interviewed maybe three or four times, asking you where you want to come, which country you want to go, so I told them, I have no idea what the United States looks like. I told them that I wanted to come to the United States, because I think that the United States is the powerful country. I don’t want to get involved in anymore war. So I told them. And then the Lutheran services found a family, in the United States, in Amherst, so that’s how I got here. So when I got here I already had a family here. I didn’t take any classes but I saw some videos that sometimes they have like small classes in the camp they show people how to use certain items like microwaves, kitchens, or stoves. But to me, I didn’t have that experience at all. I just came in there, and I got out of the airport, have no idea, I got my heavy jacket on, have my name tag on- it was like “IOM” like a refugee thing, like an immigration thing, and my foster parents came and they brought me home.”

What can be done to help speed along the process of helping refugees gain refugee status?

“In the camp I was in, because there was a lot of people they keep calling people for interviews and it take a longer time. I wish there were more countries involved during that time so that way the speeding of the interviewing process would be quicker and bring people out to different countries.”

Initial Reactions: Life in the United States

“When I came to America, right now I got goosebumps. When I came to America I was having a new life. And I couldn’t believe I made through all these obstacles that I went through. Three years in the concentration camp and escape one month cross through the jungle, and another three years in refugee camp. So when I came to America, I can’t believe that happened to me. Coming to the United States is just like the land of opportunity, it’s just like a new life. You take the politics away, just deal with your own situation, it’s like this is the land of opportunity. You can go to school, you can basically borrow money to pay off your student loans. Where I came from in Cambodia, you have no money, you can’t go to school. So this is lots of opportunity in America.”

American Dream

“American dreams to me is to have good opportunity. Everything is so modern, high tech, and it’s a land of freedom to me. When I think about America, I think about a multicultural salad bowl that’s a mixture of different types of nationality. So American dream to me is like the dream of a better life, to have a better life and a better future. I think in this country, everyone has a chance to reach this opportunity. It's just a matter of you want it or not. It might be a little longer, it might be a little faster, depends on which way you are taking it. But if you really want to reach your goal, definitely. You have the chance to do so.”

Challenges: The realities of living in the United States

“It was a good opportunity to come here but when I first came here I think everything was great. But after 30 years here I feel homesick. Nothing is as good as home. Right now Cambodia is better. I feel homesick and want to go home. It is hard for me to accept the life I have here. When I look back home, my relatives are struggling from top to bottom you know? With food, clothing, school, housing- everything is hard for them. It is hard for me to accept the life I have in America. For example, I can have a whole chicken by myself and think back home one whole chicken can feed a couple families. It is hard for me to take that. Even not just food, even the bed that I have, the car that I have and the clothes that I wear. But I have to deal with it in order to be here. I need to take what I have to accommodate the needs that I have. The part I miss the most is the Cambodian culture across the board. The celebrations especially the new year's celebration in April. I miss alot, the music the people the language that they speak. Here we have a Cambodian community. The temple but when I went there it was not the same. The smell of the environment was not the same. You can people talk about Cambodia in the Cambodian language but it was mixed. When you are in Cambodia you are in the environment. Those are the things I miss the most. Home”

Culture clash and searching for identity

“When I first came to America I was influenced by MTV music so I try to be in a rock band, try to be part of the group. So I play in the band and try to be one of them and um the harder part ws that I came from a new place so It was hard to completely melt into the society. Even with the language and the way I look. Even when I curled my hair and wear spandex pants I dont look like Bon Jovi. I still look as I am but I try to be like them. People like to especially teenagers in bands they all had long hair and tattoos to fit in. One time I told my parents my foster parents I said I want my tattoo on my foster parents said no way. I said why a lot of people have tattoos on”

The language barrier

“The language is really hard. Sometimes when I first came I felt like I wish I was white I wish I was born in America because I would not have to deal with the language or the way I look. That was the hard part. I try so hard I said because of the help of my teachers

my friends my family. Without them I would not be here today. I was the only one. The only one in the United States. All my family are back home. I had to help myself. If I don't help myself who will help me who will help my family back home. I tried hard at schooling. People do make fun of you I just try to ignore. I speak two languages and I know more than you and I know your language and if someone from America make fun of me I feel like I ignore and I say to myself that I can speak my language and I can speak your language. It might not be perfect but it's okay. You know? I try to ignore the negative behavior. I remember in high school in junior high school. In my math class. It was really simple but because the language the word problem I got stuck. But if you just deal with the numbers I can deal with. So I told the teacher I did not understand and some student said something. It turns out the teacher talked to him. The next day he was not in school. So I assumed he said something not nice about what I asked the teacher. He was not in school for a couple days. So it was some kind of that situation. So I just ignore."

Persevering through difficulty with a strong support system

"Yes it was a big change. When I came here it was like all I know was in terms of language was yes and no and couple of words hello and how are you. I was placed in 9th grade into a regular classroom and some of my content areas and I was placed in an ESL class so it was hard and I was like study a lot besides working hard in school, It was culture shock because everything was different from where I came from. I was fortunate to have an American family. I have a sister and I also have a brother and my foster parents and my sister was helpful in getting me ready to even go to school in the morning. You know what I should wear and to make me feel comfortable and to fit into the society so I got a great help from my family friends and teachers. They been to Cambodia many times and they helped many people in Cambodia and here and they help my family back home. They have great knowledge about the Cambodian culture. My mom used to own a catering business downtown in Amherst called Tina's Kitchen and she knew a lot about different types of food. At dining she tried to mix and cook some Cambodian food. She would cook rice and really try to cook not really Cambodian food but almost the same. She tried to accommodate as much as she can to fit into my needs in some way"

You seemed to have a strong supportive community, how can one create a similar system of support to other Cambodian Americans?

"We used to have a Cambodian community in Amherst but somehow it dissolves disappeared. I would like to have it come up again and build up that Cambodian culture because we do have Cambodian families and it would help to regroup and rebuild the organization again. To keep the Cambodian culture alive for the next generation"

Generation divides: Educating the next generation about their culture

"It is hard even with my own kid when I explain to them about how I came from this part from all the way of this part and you come from this part and this part. It is hard because

they do not know a lot about Cambodian culture. I went to UMass in 80s and we had a lot of Cambodian student organizations and we were all the same age so it worked nicely because we knew about the culture. Now as we move out and the second generation move in they do not know much about the Cambodian culture because they are more Americanized. The culture kind of fade and I wish we can bring that up again and keep the culture alive by developing another Cambodian organization to teach the younger generation to keep the culture back up”

How do your children learn about their culture

“Mostly from me. I talk alot about my life experiences and explain and let them know how it was and let them compare their lives to my life and let them see a difference and let them appreciate the life they have. So whenever I have the opportunity I take them along with me. We went to Cambodia several times and stayed for a few weeks. They were able to see the lives of the people in Cambodia and the life here. they can compare it with the life in America. They can appreciate the life they have. When they come home they say it's tough over there the kids don't have food to eat shoes to wear. We are so fortunate here. I am fortunate to have good kids”

What is the best way for the 5 colleges to aid Cambodian Americans as well as those still in Cambodia?

“For the Cambodian American. For the second generation, for those who want to continue their education it would be nice if they can get some financial support. In terms of tuition and textbooks and not just the Cambodians it should be across the board. FOR the Cambodians back home my dream would be to have different types of schools universities that collect educational materials and ship it to Cambodian and let the cambodian children use them. Basically helping the education in Cambodia”

How can college students help Cambodian Americans without dominating the conversation?

“The best way to do it is to just go in and talk to them. Ask them about their experiences and like what was it like living in America. Be able to learn about their background and share your own background. Especially for cambodian students in school in high school the best way is for college students to help them with tutoring like tutoring with subjects they need. That was how I got a lot of help from college students when I was in school. Helping with language, art, math, science. So it would be nice if they continue doing that.”

Why are you sharing your personal story and what is your advice to others to do the same?

“I’m sharing my experiences because the more I talk about my childhood experiences the more memory I will get. I will gain more memory. Even when I went home because I left my village so young, so when I talk about my childhood experience the old people would

be like remember you did this remember you did that. And I was like really? So the more you talk about it, new things came up. I like to share because I want people to know about it because everyone's experiences are not the same. Your childhood experiences might be different than mine even if we live in the same country in the same village. It is important for everyone to learn. Even though my kids I share my experiences with. In the school I work at with the older kids I share my experiences with them. My advice would be lets share what you have with other people so they can learn from it. Not with just experiences but knowledge too. Like if you have a talent. Life's too short like once you are gone you can't share anymore. I play guitar if my kid wants to play it i'll show you how to play my friend if they want to play it i'll show them how to play. If im dead I cant show you. Share your knowledge with others let them carry on. You can't have it forever”

What are your hopes for Cambodian Americans and the country of Cambodia?

“My hope for the Cambodian Americans and for myself is to continue to keep up with the culture and to learn about other cultures. With the Cambodians in Cambodia I hope for peace and prosperity and free elections so people can vote for who they want. For democracy. It is hard now but I hope in the future Cambodia will have better living condition, education, a better medical healthcare. A better life”