

# Interview of Yun Yan

**A: Interviewer: Heng Sovannorin**

**B: Interviewee: Yun Yan**

## Summary of the Interview

*Yun Yan was born in the year of the Rooster, in the month of Assuja, on a Saturday, and is the oldest of five siblings. In this interview, Yun Yan recounts her story of being relocated from place to place during the bombings and upheaval caused by the Lon Nol coup d'etat. She also reflects on the many difficulties she had to face during the Khmer Rouge era and in its aftermath. She has since received assistance from other organizations to support her livelihood and currently lives in Chong Kneas village, Siem Reap province.*

A: First of all, I would like to thank you for allowing me to interview you about your story. This interview has been organized by a college called Brigham Young University, located in America. The aim of the university with this project is to interview the Cambodian people to preserve their history so that the next generations can know the story of their grandparents and learn about their history. When I finish interviewing you, I will put the interview on a website called [www.cambodianoralthistoryproject.byu.edu](http://www.cambodianoralthistoryproject.byu.edu). Do you give me permission to put your interview on the college's site?

B: Yes, I agree.

A: The date of this interview is December 19, 2020, and it is being conducted in Chong Kneas village, Chong Kneas commune, Siem Reap city, Siem Reap province. I am the interviewer, and my name is Heng Sovannorin. I'd like to ask, what is your full name?

B: My name is Yun Yan.

A: Yun Yan?

B: Yes.

A: Do you have a nickname?

B: Nope, only from a long time ago, the people who called me a nickname are dead—they called me Grandma Mab, Grandma Mab!

A: How old are you?

B: I am 65 years old.

A: Do you remember your birthdate?

B: I do.

A: Can you tell us?

B: The year of the Rooster, the month of Assuja, on a Saturday.

A: Do you remember the French calendar date?

B: Nope, not at all.

A: So where is your hometown?

B: My father's hometown is here, but my mother's is in Battambang.

A: I see. So, you were born in Battambang?

B: Yes, I was born in Battambang, but I've been here for a long time. When Pol Pot evacuated [the Khmer people] I was in Battambang. So we ran from Battambang to here and there was no food. In fact, I left back in the Lon Nol era, when there were intense bombings. I ran to Prek Toal, and then after Prek Toal they evacuated us again, and the first place was Bak Angrek. They then brought us back to Prek Toal. The last place they brought us to was Pursat, but I didn't go, I ran to Ta Puon and Preaek Norint. I went down to Ou Ta Ki, Ou Ta Kae, I wandered very far. When I was in Prek Toal, they wanted to kill me three times. They said that I had 2 kilograms of gold. They captured me and claimed that I was persuading the youth to love each other, but I had no idea what they were talking about at all. They took me to go shoot me. It was raining, but my husband pled for my life. Angels helped me, and because I had integrity I survived. This happened one time, two times. It was the same in Bak Angrek. Oh, there were so many catastrophes, too many to count.

A: How old were you when you came here from Battambang?

B: When I came here from Battambang, I was probably 40, probably in my early 40s.

A: I see. What part of Battambang were you in at that time?

B: At that time, at first, I was in Prek Toal village, Battambang province, the same district—Ek Phnom, and Kaoh Chiveang commune. When I went up to Battambang, I went to Sala Ta An. Sala Ta An, likewise in Ek Phnom district, but in Prek Kanhchraeng village, Prek Narin commune. My children were born all over the place. They were born in—oh, let me think. My first was born at Sala Ta An. My second child, my daughter, was born in Bakprea. Those two were born in the area of Prek Toal. Oh, I can't count them all, it was so miserable as a mother! You can't find anything that compared to [my experiences]—I would cry and scream until I had no more tears. I'm talking about my history. I was very poor, I suffered a lot. I'm speaking the truth—I'm not complaining to gain pity, I'm telling the truth by saying this.

A: How many siblings do you have?

B: I am an only child, but my mother had four children with her second husband.

A: So how many are you all together?

B: Five people.

A: Which one of your siblings are you?

B: I am the oldest.

A: The oldest child?

B: Yes.

A: Can you name your siblings from the oldest to the youngest?

B: I can, the second oldest is named Hun, the third is Huor, the fourth is Kang, and the fifth is Pov.

A: How many girls and boys?

B: One boy and four girls.

A: Oh, one boy and four girls?

B: Yes.

A: I see. So, can you tell us some things you liked to do with your siblings when you were younger or some memories you have with them?

B: It was so miserable! I said before, as a poor person, there is no one to look after you, not even like a mother [who looks after her] child. You suffer so much as a poor person, walking around starving and suffering in the forest, running out of fish and everything. I don't know how to describe it all. If it were to be written as a story, I wouldn't know how many chapters there would be. I was so poor, to tell you the truth. We did have a lot of family, but my mother had siblings who were mad at her for marrying a husband who was poor and didn't work. My mother's siblings also didn't work, and they had large farmlands. They were mad that my mother married a poor, non-working man, even though they didn't know how to work themselves. They were mad at us and weren't very friendly. On my father's side, they also weren't very friendly, they hated us and were mad at us.

A: So where are your siblings nowadays?

B: They are all close, we all live close together—in those huts over there. For me, this isn't my land, the commune gave it to us. I didn't buy it myself—the village and commune distributed the land around and an organization built houses for everyone back then. At that time, I went to buy land in the middle of the fields, I went to get their land. At that time, one [square] kilometer of land was ten riel. For ten riel, they let you take the land, but when I went to take it, I fell deathly sick, I almost died. I figured that my life wouldn't continue, that I wouldn't live to the present day, I figured I would be dead, that I would lose it all. The look in my eyes became distant, nobody thought I would make it. I came back, but I lost the land—I lost everything, they took it all. Nobody came back, and I received some kindness from the village leader, [who was named] Sun. He gave me a square kilometer of land. Everyone else sold their land, but my husband and I didn't sell. What would I do if I were to sell my land? I was afraid that I would not have anything again because I had been poor before. I was miserable, I'm telling it to you straight, I'm not just saying things. I am amazed at myself for making it this far. From the beginning we struggled—my parents had to split their money [when they divorced]. Honestly, we were extremely poor.

A: I see. So, during the reign of Pol Pot, how old were you?

B: At the onset of the Rouge, in 1975, I was 19 years old. Uh—let me see, when I was 20, it was in '76. In '77 I was 22, in '78 I was 23, in '79 I was 24, and then it ended. At that time, I was evacuated from place to place, on the verge of death. I never guessed I would make it to this point, live to today.

A: You previously mentioned that during the Lon Nol era, they dropped bombs on you, right?

B: Yes, they did.

A: Could you tell us what it was like during that time?

B: When they dropped the bombs, the people living there ran into caves. My aunt on my stepfather's side died in the cave. They came and shot at us during the Lon Nol era. We ran and ran, if we didn't run in time we died. At that time, I wasn't here, I went to a place called Chamkar Tha Mao farm, a little way past Kantheay Koum. Originally, that area was a large forest. But when they started the bombings—back then we would put our prahok in wooden crates, but [when the bombings started] the boxes were scattered all over the rooftops. My mother, grandmother, and I ran away to Kampong Pluk. After we ran there, they bombed there as well, so we turned around and came to Chrey. Once we got to Chrey, they bombed Chrey as well and we went to Prek Thul. Then they left to fight elsewhere, it was only after we arrived at Prek Thul that there was finally peace, there were no more bombings. There were still shootings at Kampong Prahok and other places but in Prek Thul village, there were no shootings.

A: So, when Pol Pot's reign began, were you in Battambang or Siem Reap?

B: Neither, I was at Prek Thul, I fled from here to Prek Thul. Yeah, in Prek Thul village. It's in Battambang province—Prek Thul village.

A: Do you remember when Pol Pot's reign began, what did they have you do? And where are some of the places they relocated you to?

B: When it first started, they didn't have us do anything—they held a meeting and relocated us to Bak Angrek, they called it Bak Angrek. They made us go to the Bak Angrek pagoda. We journeyed together, they had us park our boats one right after the other. My mother and father whispered to each other, talking about where they were taking us. They talked and talked—honestly, the way they talked about us was almost like they were haggling about buying vegetables! They whispered to each other trying to figure out who would stay together, and who would take who. Then they [the Khmer Rouge] sorted us into groups, [I was to be] put into the young women's unit. I lied to them and said that I was a widow, my mother also lied and said she was a widow, she said that my husband had divorced me and gone to Siem Reap. After that, I was able to escape the danger and we were able to make it to Prek Thul, they relocated us there. They took forty families back to Prek Thul. They sent me to a place—what was it called? I forgot what it was called. I was in the place where the widows went.

A: [Was it called] Chhean Mok?

B: No, the place where they sent all the young women was separate. They had all the widows go to [a different place] afterward. At that time my mother lied and said I was mentally insane—she even said that my other siblings were crazy. Other mothers did that too, not just my mom, they lied so much to Pol Pot and said that their kids were crazy, they all just lied.

A: I see. So, when they relocated you, what sort of work did they have you do, and what did give you for food?

B: At the river during the dry months, they would give us rice. They called it steamed rice, it

was like rice porridge. They rationed it out, but a lot of people came—that's how many portions were given. The portions were suitable. But when we went up to Bak Angrek village they gave us a single can. At first, it was a little more than three cans, and they mixed vegetables in with it, and the water turned black. We only had one bucket to split between fourteen people. If we strained it, we got one scoop of rice. Besides that, all we had was bindweed and water. The water had turned black, the bindweed was from the fields. And for work, if we were at the river, they had us fish all day and all night. The girls would work with the girls, and the boys would work with the boys. They told us to go work according to areas of responsibility, such as fishing, beekeeping, or casting nets. They had jobs in every possible location and the girls had to do manual labor. They had us work to such a point that I got so sick and struggled with diarrhea, which made things worse. On the days I was extremely sick, the excrement would run down to my heels. We wouldn't let ourselves receive any attention or anything. [...] Some of the women lost their children in the womb because of their work during that time. If you don't believe me, go and ask some of the older people here in Prek Thul. If you ask, they all lost children. People who came from Phnom Penh were afraid of dying [of starvation], they would rip apart raw fish and eat it. This is why I say we were miserable. We were relocated over and over, we were always on the run until '78 when they went off to Pursat and I came here. I went to Preaek Norint, and then I was evacuated to Ou Ta Ki, Ou Ta Kae.

A: So, when you were at Ou Ta Ki, did you work in the fields?

B: We did. But, oh child! They would cook steamed rice mixed with beans, and those of us who were sick couldn't eat it. We had constant diarrhea, it would never stop. And in the daytime—for those of in the village—in the daytime they had us walk on the roads [that bordered] the fields. Do you know what the field roads are?

A: Yes.

B: So, you would [understand], in the fields, all I saw were people carrying loads and dying left and right. In the morning time, they count how many people didn't die—three, four, five, three, four, five. Oh, all I saw was death. And when the Vietnamese liberated all of us—when they liberated the people, all the [troops] ran in and walked all over the corpses. Those who were alive and just [weak and wounded on the ground] were trampled to death. I also fled from the fields. And there, some of the rice crop that was being carried by a cart fell out of the mat. My mother went to scoop it up, but I warned her that she was about to die—I [shouted] for an angel to help us. It was suddenly that a car, a Vietnamese car came and when the [soldiers in the car] saw the leaves and the rice they would shout, “Ho, ho!” And they shouted at her to take the rice back, or she would be beaten to death. And it wasn't so much rice, probably only about this much. Probably just a bowl-full, enough that you could gather, just a little from the mat that fell out of the car when it was shaken up a bit. All she did was pick it up, just a bowl-full, and they grabbed it from her. My older siblings didn't dare to resist. We only stood there and cried, my cousins whom we knew, and Grandmother Hang whom we pitied. We saw the car come from the road, and then all the sudden it was gone. I was in the middle of [a place they called] Chy Puok Lake. I don't know where they came from. They went away, and when the morning came, we were only two people; my younger sibling Kang and my small child from my previous husband—the husband I married during the Pol Pot era. I had a child with him, and when that child was 3

days old, they took my husband away and killed him. My current husband is the one after him. After I had my child for three days, they took [my husband] and said that he was a first lieutenant or a captain in the army and that we were hiding firearms and other things. They took him, and I was miserable. I say this as truthfully as possible. I'm telling the truth, not lying at all.

A: Right. So, what is your mother's name?

B: Her name is Hang, Sras Hang.

A: What about your father?

B: My father's name—are you asking about my stepfather or my biological father? My stepfather's name is Chhoem Kean.

A: Chhoem Kean is your stepfather?

B: Yes.

A: Do you remember your biological father?

B: I've forgotten my biological father because when he split with my mother, I was only 3 days old. They divorced—my father had another wife, and my mom was mad and ran away to Prek Thul. My father had a new wife and had children with her, and they were relocated over and over. They had grandchildren as well. My mother was remarried to my stepfather, and he was the one who raised me and took care of me like I was his birth daughter.

A: So what kind of person was your mother? Was she cruel or kind?

B: My mother—honestly, to her grandchildren, she was cruel. She was cruel, but honestly, she was only mean to me, but to my younger siblings, she wasn't. For me specifically, I suffered a lot. She hurt me and hit me. She verbally abused me as well. She was bad to only me, just talking about it makes me tear up. My life was very miserable. My mother didn't really love me. She only loved the kids she had with my stepfather. She abused me a lot. Whenever I did something wrong [I was severely punished], I wouldn't be given anything to eat, and my stepsiblings would have plenty. It was only me that was abused. She hit me, mocked me.

A: I see. Where is your mother's hometown?

B: She is from Battambang, she was a person from Anlong Ta Mei, Chamka Svay.

A: And what about your father?

B: My father's hometown is right here—the father that looked after me, he was from right around here. But they took away all his land already.

A: What did both of them do in terms of work?

B: I told you from before, they cast fishing nets and tied fishing rods, cut firewood—it's incomparable, the variety of jobs that someone living next to the river has. If we can't do one thing, we do something else. We just find things to earn a living and care for our children. We didn't have anything, we couldn't have a real job, such as fishing with fish traps or seine nets like other people because we were so poor. All we could do was work with fishing nets and cut firewood.

A: Do you remember your grandparents on your mother's side?

B: Yes.

A: What are their names?

B: My grandmother's name was Ma Khoem, and my grandfather's name was Uch.

A: Was that your grandfather on your mother's side?

B: Yes. Actually no, that is on my father's side. On my mother's side, I don't really remember. Wait, my grandfather on my mother's side's name is Sras. My grandmother's name is Ku, I remember. Sras [like my mother's name], Sras.

A: When you were born, were they all alive?

B: They weren't, only my grandfather Uch was alive. All my grandmothers were dead, on my mother's side and both of my father's sides. I only remember Uch from when I was 3 or 4 or 5.

A: Do you have any siblings or relatives living abroad?

B: I don't.

A: I see. What is your husband's name?

B: His name is Sun Phon.

A: That's your current husband?

B: Yes.

A: How did you two meet each other and become a couple?

B: At that time, I was living in Prek Thul, and he was a welder. He had just finished being a monk. They saw me and said that I was a widow. When he arrived, he was fishing at a place called Prek Da, and I was at Prek Thul. He got to know my brother-in-law and asked to come visit him. He saw me but he didn't know me at first and didn't fall in love. He fell in love with my younger cousin. They fell in love and I didn't know his name at first, I would hear them calling him an ex-monk. All I knew was he was in love with someone. He would greet me when he came to my mother's little shop and bought things—a few cigarettes, some incense, some flowers, beer, a packet of cigarettes, and my mother would give it to him.

A: I see. So why did you choose him as your husband?

B: His mother gave him to me, and my relatives in the area said that we knew each other, but it was a risk for me. I was struggling, I was living with my mother and siblings who were struggling, why would they say that I knew him? It was because [my mother] only loved her children [from her second husband] and she didn't love me, because I was a widow. None of the rest of her children had been married. Whenever I would eat, [my stepsiblings] said that I stole food. I didn't steal anything at all, but they still said I did. They said I would go hide in the forest and eat stolen food, but in truth, I never did that. I never ate any stolen food, but my younger siblings would tell my mother, and my mother would always find something to be mad at me for. I was so tired of her, so I got married. If I didn't,

then I would have just continued to be abused—I didn't know what to do. I got married and he never hit me, never.

A: Did you go to school when you were young?

B: I didn't, I was here. But when I was really young, they had me go to school. At that time I went to a school called—what was it? Masin Ken Thma [Stone Mill] school. But when it was time to learn I went to my house to look after my younger siblings. My mother had kids with her second husband and she had me look after them, and make fish paste. If I didn't do it right, she would say I was lazy and would beat me with a switch. She abused me too much. I would go pick fruit, and my older cousin would tell me, "When you go back, tell your mother that I went to school and that you picked the fruit for me." I would tell them that I would pick the fruit for them. That's all I did, I didn't go to school. I was busy with children, and I was never in one place—I was poor and had to work.

A: Do you know how to read and write Khmer?

B: Nope, I don't even know the numbers. I don't know letters—I don't know anything.

A: So, do you have any close friends that you've known ever since you were a kid?

B: No. I did [before], but we have all split apart, I have no idea where they have gone.

A: So, what jobs have you had in your life to obtain a living and look after your family?

B: I cast fishing nets and used fishing poles and other things when I was here. My husband did the same, he went fishing with nets. When I went to the fields, my husband was hired as a day laborer.

A: Did you ever raise cows, pigs, or chickens?

B: I used to. When I first came here, an organization gave me a pig to raise. I raised a pig once. But they didn't give us chickens, I bought those and raised them on my own. They also gave me a bike when I sold the pig after I raised it and got a photo. This happened when my children were very young.

A: So how has your life changed from the time you were young to now?

B: It's only now that I've had [a house and all these things]. But I'm not saying that I have anything in abundance. It was only through hard work as a laborer that we saved up a reasonable amount. Sometimes at the end of the day, we only had 20000 riel, sometimes it was only 15000 riel. If there were no fish [that day], then we had nothing to carry [and we didn't make any money].

A: So, when you were younger, did you ever have a dream of doing something when you grew up?

B: I wanted to be rich and have a big house. I wanted to be able to sing. I saw others singing and I didn't know how they were able to do that. If I sang like them, I could live like them—I would always dream about that. I wanted to build a beautiful house to live in like them, but all I have is this small house.

A: So, talking about your preferences, what sort of food have you always liked? Which soup do you like to eat the most?



B: I like to eat Tuk Kroeung [ground fish soup].

A: You like Tuk Kroeung?

B: Yes, I only like Tuk Kroeung and grilled fish. That's it. I like Tuk Kroeung the most, though.

A: I see. Did you like to listen to songs as a child?

B: Oh! I am such a fan, even today. All the contemporary songs are so boring, but I like sad songs. And when I watch sad music videos on YouTube, I cry because I used to also suffer like the things they sing about. I see them post videos about other people, for instance, [I saw a video] of two siblings whose mother had left them ever since they were 4 years old or so and they have nothing and know nothing, and I just cry and pity them.

A: Do you know how to play any instruments?

B: No, I don't.

A: You only like singing?

B: Yes, I love singing. I don't sing myself, but I like listening to singing. Like if my children ever sing, it makes me happy. I don't ever tell my kids not to sing, if they sing and it's beautiful, I love it. And if anyone comes to my house and sings, I like listening to it, it sounds beautiful.

A: So how many kids and grandkids do you have currently?

B: I need to count, I've forgotten. My first child has seven children, the second has eight. How many is that?

A: Fifteen?

B: Fifteen. And the youngest has three. [Note: the pronouns the interviewee uses to describe her children are terms generally used between a mother and her daughters.]

A: That's a good amount! To end, do you have anything you want to say to the next generation or any words of warning for them—like how they should live or what kind of person they should be in society?

B: Yes, I urge my family and the Khmer people in general, and anyone from any country to be good citizens. Grandkids, please don't do drugs, stay far away from them, and don't do them, because during the Pol Pot era, it was very miserable, and I fear that things may go back to the circumstances then. Don't do it at all. Don't even try it. I'm terrified of it.

A: Yes. I would like to thank you for spending your time interviewing with me. I wish you good health, good luck, and happiness with your family.

B: Yes.

*Translated by Ethan Arkell and edited by Thomas Barrett.*