

Interview of Yong Keo

A: Interviewer: Eng Dalin

B: Interviewee: Yong Keo

Summary of the Interview

Yong Keo was born in 1982 in Battambang province and is the second of four sisters. In this interview, she discusses growing up in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge era and recounts a story of the Khmer Rouge using her family's rice field for combat against the PRK's forces. Despite facing numerous challenges and familial discord after becoming an orphan, Keo persevered through various jobs. She now works hard to support her children's education in an effort to improve their lives.

A: To begin, I want to greet you, thank you for allowing me to conduct an interview regarding your personal history and the history of the Khmer people. This history will be saved for your posterity and later generations to listen and to be familiar with your history. My name is Eng Dalin and I will be your interviewer. I come representing a university in America named BYU. The day I am conducting the interview is the 26th of August 2018. So, will you allow me to interview you?

B: Go ahead, you can interview me.

A: Right. thank you! So, what village is this?

B: Thnal village, Srangae commune.

A: What district?

B: Siem Reap district, Siem Reap province.

A: Yes! So, what is your full name?

B: My name is Yong Keo.

A: Yong Keo?

B: Yes!

A: Your full name? Oh! It's a bit windy. No worries, do you have a nickname?

B: No, I don't have one, just that one name.

A: That's the only name you have, right?

B: Yes!

A: Okay. And how old are you now?

B: 38!

A: 38?

B: Yes!

A: And what lunar year are you? Like, the year of the mouse, the ox, the tiger, the rabbit—

what year are you?

B: The year of the dog.

A: The year of the dog?

B: Yes, the year of the dog, I was born in '82.

A: You were born in 1982?

B: Yes!

A: Where were you born?

B: I was born in Battambang province.

A: Battambang?

B: In Bavel district.

A: In Bavel district?

B: Yes!

A: Battambang province! Oh! You're a native of Battambang?

B: Yes! But I was an orphan.

A: Is that right?

B: I was an orphan, so my aunt helped me.

A: Yes! How many siblings do you have?

B: There are 4 of us siblings. All of us are girls—4 of us and all sisters.

A: And which child are you?

B: The second child.

A: The second?

B: Yes!

A: Can you list your siblings' names, please?

B: Their names—Yong Cheat is one, and Yong Sokun is another. And one more, my younger sibling, who was an infant. That sibling died when they were still small, eight months old, I was still young back then.

A: How old were you [then]?

B: Back then, probably 8 or 9 years old. If my third sister was about this big, she would be about nine years old at that time—oh, wait! If she was this big, how old would she be—? [Pauses] About this big. Maybe 3-4 years old.

A: Oh! Your parents died as well, isn't that right?

B: Yes!

A: Okay. And can you list your siblings' names, please?

B: Yes. One more was named Koem Yoeun, but she's not in this province together with us. There are only three of us that have come here. That sister got married, we let her go already. Mother and father took care of her until she got married when she [and her husband] went to work in Thailand.

A: So, what about when you were young—do you remember any happy stories with them? When was it difficult? Could you remember and describe it, please?

B: Yes, I can describe it—

A: When you were a young child, what would you always do?

B: As a child, my older sister stayed with others, she was over here a bit, over there a bit, she never really had a set place to stay. For my other older sister and my younger sister, they stayed at a place with Chen—my aunt, that aunt took care of my youngest sister. She took care of her, but I don't know what she did for work, just that she raised her niece. She also still works for wages as a dish washer for someone else's Kuyteav [shop]. While she worked cleaning dishes, two of my older sisters—oh! my younger sister and the older sister—my older sister Cheat and Yong Sokun—always stayed together. But on my older sister's part, she was here a little bit, there a little bit. She didn't have a future like us. As orphans, we drifted around. But when my grandparents were repatriated from the camp—the [refugee] camps of that era—when they were repatriated back here, I went to live with my grandmother. When I left my grandmother's house and came back, I came to stay with my aunt—the one that was with my sister, Chen, the one who washed the Kuyteav dishes. After that happened, they got married. After that, she stopped working with the Kuyteav dish washers, got married to her husband, and then brought my older sister to be with her. When she brought my older sister to be with her, I was also growing up, I was 13 years old. After I turned 13 years old, I learned to harvest and whatnot. I had earned to work, so I could earn a little bit of money. After that, all we thought about was working with rice. My aunt used us to come and bring back the rice. We were in Srae Roneam which was really far away. I used to walk by myself, and in that era, there were no drugs or anything. I was young, 13 years old and I could walk anywhere.

A: Right.

B: And the people in Battambang's rice wasn't short at all, it was taller than my head, you wouldn't be able to see my head. I walked on roads that weren't easy to cross, and the water was up to here [gestures]. I would also carry a backpack across my shoulder with 50 cans of rice grain in it, it was so heavy. Once the rainy season was over, we could go to harvest. Once that was over—well, back then, the war between the Khmer Rouge and our soldiers wasn't yet over. Once when I was harvesting, I saw our soldiers and the Khmer Rouge start shooting at each other—I could hear the bullets being shot! And when we went to harvest, we saw the Khmer Rouge set fire to our crop! They burned all our crops and everyone that was in the fields burned alive. After that, I came here. My aunt was staying here, she married a man from around here, so she brought me to stay here as well. After she brought me here, she said to me, "Come live with me for a while, and wait until things have gotten better here in the country. Wait and I'll bring you back here." That's what she said.

A: And so, what are the names of your parents?

B: My parents, their names were—their names—the name was Yong.

A: Your mother's name was Yong?

B: My father was named Yong, but my mother's name was Chaen.

A: So, for both of them, if they were still alive, about what age would they be?

B: If they were still alive, they would be around fifty years old.

A: Okay. They would be in their fifties. Yes! And so, when you were younger, they were still around, right?

B: They were still there—

A: Back then, when they were still alive, what kind of work did they do to take care of their kids?

B: Back then, we had the fields, as well as other things. We were in the countryside, there was nothing but fields. They worked in the fields, my mother also worked in the fields during the farming months. During the months that they were free, at that time my father was a clerk, he did clerk work and other kinds of work. And he knew how to carve statues, statues of the gods, and whatnot. Whenever someone needed him to carve something, he would carve statues for them. He also made the game pieces for tiger and gourds [a Khmer gambling game] for customers, he would carve the dice for them. He never played the game himself, but he would make the game dice for others.

A: He's really skilled, huh?

B: He could also draw pictures, he would do different works of art. He would draw things like Khmer calligraphy and put it on fabrics. He would draw for them.

A: Was his handwriting beautiful?

B: It was, yes. But it was also like the work of someone not yet mature in their skill. Like we couldn't wait for him to be done [meaning, it looked rushed].

A: Oh, you couldn't wait for him to be done.

B: After that—

A: So, why did both of them die?

B: Uh, back then most people just went. They didn't have any serious sicknesses. They—

A: So, what happened to them then? Can you describe it?

B: I can describe it. From what my aunt said about when she was still young, she told me a story—when my aunt from when I was young—she went to cut thatch. She went to cut thatch—the thatch they use to cover the roof, you know?

A: Right.

B: She went to ask for help from someone else because they had a cart, and we didn't have a cart. She went to ask because she was going to cut the thatch. When she went to cut the thatch—and in that period of time, people were bold enough to catch someone's hand or their shirt. They all knew it, but people were offended by it. She was young, but the man

[she asked for help] asked to make love with her. And that man—the person who caught her, he had a wife already—I remember. He had a wife already, and when evening came and he returned to his house, there were a lot of accusations between him and [his wife], they fought, and he didn't take responsibility for his actions—that is, the man who had a wife already. After she accused him, we didn't know the reason, all we knew was that they got into an argument. That's it. After that—

A: At that time, your father—

B: Oh, my father didn't have much to say about it.

A: Oh! Really?

B: Yes! He didn't have much to say.

A: Okay. So, did he die then?

B: He—

A: Like, he didn't have any sicknesses?

B: No, he was sick! He was sick—just wait, let me tell you. He had a sickness that made his upper chest very hot. And for my mother, she would sleep holding one of those earthenware water storage jars [to cool down], she was too hot. And when my father's illness would clear up, the [sickness] would get worse for my mother. And once my mother got better, it got worse for my father—they would exchange it back and forth.

A: Really? They were constantly sick?

B: They were sick for only a week, they would exchange illnesses back and forth throughout the whole week.

A: And after that, they both died?

B: Both died! Just wait—

A: When they would get together?

B: No! Just wait and listen to me tell you. When they got too sick—remember, their house was far away from grandmother's house—but at that point, they got up and took my mother who was extremely sick and carried her on a hammock to the grandmother's house to be healed. By the time they found a doctor, she wasn't doing any better and that was the day that she died. And my father, he sat in front of the stairs, he wasn't [dead] yet. When people sit normally, we sit like we aren't sick. They said, "If your mother dies, your father will also go as well, child." That's what they told us. Then, once our mother's funeral ceremony was over, three days later our father died as well.

A: Life is very difficult, not having a mother or a father, huh?

B: It's difficult! It's so hard because we became orphans, we didn't know who to rely on and we had no idea what to do.

A: Yes. That's right.

B: I'm telling the truth about my life.

A: Yes. So then—oh! I have just been listening to your life history, it is very bitter. So, do you know where your parents were from?

B: My parents were residents of this area, in Battambang province, in Bavel district.

A: In Bavel district?

B: In Sranal village.

A: Oh really? And for you, what year did you get married?

B: I'm not married, but I did have this child, we did the offering ceremony like normal back when I was 21 years old.

A: What year was that?

B: The year 2001.

A: Oh really?

B: Yes!

A: So you must love each other, with both of your hearts, huh?

B: We love each other with both of our hearts.

A: And did you tell your parents?

B: His parents also love me—actually if I think about it, they saw me when I was young. At the time, I was with my aunt, it was very hard at the time. When I went to stay with my aunt, it was so difficult. I carried desserts around and sold them, one plate for 100 riel back then. 100 riel for a plate—we were so poor!

A: Oh, that's different!

B: Right! I would begin selling in the morning—I would get up and make Lat [a type of egg roll] and then I would carry my goods from my house which was to the east. Back then, Thnal village was exactly like it is now but there was only one person per side. I carried [my goods] until I sat down here by my mother's house, to which my father-in-law would call out to me, he would call me his daughter-in-law, he always called me that. After that, I also helped and made him Num Cheal [a cake made of sticky rice flour wrapped in banana or palm leaves and steamed in a basket], and rice and other things for him to eat. All I knew to do was to travel to the house and sell my desserts, and then go back. I exchanged rice, eight bowls were equal to a kilogram of rice back then because at the time, rice grain was 800 riel for a kilogram and I was only able to sell 8000 riel's worth of dessert in a single day. Not only that, but I also took care of my aunt and her five children. Her husband also helped, he would go fishing. After that—

A: Wait, so did your aunt ever help you sell dessert?

B: When I hadn't come yet, she carried [the desserts] by herself. But when I came, I became the person that carried [the desserts].

A: And what about her?

B: For her, at first, because I didn't know the people in the area yet—because I had just

barely moved there, and I was brand new—she took me around the area and I carried the desserts while she followed behind me. Back then, I was just barely over 13 years old when came from that other place. After that, I was only 17 years old when I started working in construction.

A: Where did you work?

B: Back then, uh—I worked—I started to work at—oh! The cultural village—back then, it didn't yet exist. The cultural village wasn't there yet but connected to the cultural village and the new hotel they built—back then they built a hospital there for Village 4. There in Village 4, there was a hospital they built for the soldiers that were there, for them to be taken care of. I worked there from that year until it was completed three or four years later. After that, I—

A: Did you find it difficult doing construction?

B: It was very difficult and burdensome, we did hard work. And they would insult and swear at me, they always made fun of my mother, but I endured it—and why? Because I was uneducated, I didn't even know the alphabet because I never got to study—

A: You didn't learn at all?

B: I never learned—and so, because I didn't know the alphabet, they kept insulting and making fun of me. I had to put up with it, they said that in—

A: At that point in time, were you married?

B: At that time, I didn't have a husband, I was still single.

A: At that time, you worked in construction, and did you do anything else?

B: I only worked in construction. At that time, I—actually before I worked construction I was a hired worker, I would work transplanting rice seeds. In one day, I would earn 2500 riel.

A: Transplanting seeds—

B: To exchange rice!

A: Did you do all the work?

B: I worked—I still worked in the hotel, arranging rooms, that's what I was up to. I also still worked washing dishes and pots for them. But when I received my husband, he told me to cut down on [work] so that it would be over quickly. When I received my husband—that is, before I received my husband, it was hard living with my aunt, and I felt depressed.

A: So, when you were with your aunt, did she love you or what?

B: She loved us, but she always went along with her husband—

A: Did her husband not love you?

B: Her husband—uh, he always looked down on me. Whenever I would come back from work, and we came back to the house, he would mock me, he was always saying that there were only men doing this type of work, he accused me of having a lover, so they never gave me money. Back then, in a month, we only got 120000 riel.

A: And would you keep the money or give it to your aunt?

B: I'd give all of it to them, I wanted to be on good terms with them. My aunt would give me 4000, 4000 Khmer riel, nothing more. She was fine using all my money, I got sick and tired of it.

A: Oh, really? So, you worked but you never kept any of the money for yourself, you just gave it all to your aunt?

B: Nope! [I never kept the money.]

A: Oh! Because you were living with them?

B: Because I was living with her, and I was still young. I didn't know who else I could rely on—I didn't know anybody else. I didn't know anyone else, I wasn't like the youth of today—they can go and do whatever they want to, like rent a room or something. But for me—

A: You didn't know—

B: I didn't know what to do, no matter what I did, it never went anywhere.

A: So, it was hard for you to be with your aunt?

B: It was so difficult! I was so sad, to be honest, as soon as I got there, they started to cuss me out and criticize me. My aunt never cussed at me, but when her husband was drinking, he would cuss me out and look down on me, he mocked me in every way he could. I got to a point where I couldn't endure it any longer, and he accused me of saving some of the money to run after some guy. That's why he never gave me any of the money. After that, he said, "Come fishing with me, we'll sleep over and go on a long fishing trip together." When I heard that, I was so young and scared so I ran away from their house. After I ran away from their house, after running for three days—and remember, none of my siblings were here together—when I left [my aunt's place], my little sister Yong Sokun came with me as well. When she came with me, I had told her, "Little sister, today we're going to run away from this house, if we don't leave, they're going to hurt me!" I hugged my sister and cut right through the field—I came from there to here.

A: Yes.

B: As I was cutting through here, back then, there was a light and a lot of soldiers guarding the area here. They were police night guards, it was about 12 o'clock that night, and they called out, "Who's there?" I didn't dare to answer, and after that, they walked over and asked again, to which I bit the bullet and replied, "Me!" They asked, "Where are you going? Why didn't you answer the first time?" At that time, I was very nervous, there was no way I could say I was running away. So, I said that I was going to my grandparent's house in the east, and they stopped asking me questions. Then my younger sibling pointed out that I only had two pairs of pants, two pairs of shirts, and no money, not even a hundred riel.

A: And where did you go to live?

B: I went to a master craftsman's house that night, I got there at one o'clock—I arrived at their house at one o'clock at night. Once I got there, he sent me to Angkor Chum, and kept my younger sibling at their house. When I arrived at Angkor Chum, I worked there for two

days. After I worked for two days, they found out I was at Angkor Chum and they went after me. They followed me there, and I saw them at the market in Angkor Chum, but I didn't let them see my face. I escaped and I took a car and came here to Svay Thom at 3 o'clock in the late afternoon. That's when they found me in Svay Thom—that is, the younger brother of the master craftsman. We went around looking for me and when he found me he said, "Go back to your house." My aunt's mind was made up, she wouldn't give up. They said, "Your siblings have all come, they are all at the house already. Go back!" The people in that village said to me, "Oh, child, go back home. Do not come here, because—"

A: Because you were by yourself!

B: I was alone, and I was living like a vagrant [without] responsibility—that's what my aunt told me.

A: Right.

B: I said that a number of my siblings hadn't gone [to my aunt's house] yet—I had gone and lived at my aunt's house already. My oldest sibling already went back to our hometown and took all the rice from there—it was worth a lot, but back then they hadn't yet sold it, it was about 2 hectares. The field was an inheritance from my father, they hadn't yet sold it. Once night came, I left for the place [my aunt lived]. My uncle also died. [The word she uses is a term for a younger brother of one's parent.]

A: You mean, your uncle?

B: Yeah, the uncle that would always look down on me.

A: He died?

B: Yeah! He didn't drink anything the day he died. Why? It was because we didn't have anything to eat during that time, we only had snails we would get from our rice fields. He would go out and catch snails to boil or pickle and serve it up where he would sleep. He went out to work, and when night came—about 4 o'clock in the morning before the sun arose, he went into convulsions and died.

A: Did he die of food poisoning from the snails, do you know?

B: No! We all ate the snails.

A: Oh, really?

B: That day, he didn't drink or anything at all. It was his time to die—that's what they said! "Oh Keo, child, you are free from suffering and fault already," is what they said—the locals that knew me and pitied me. They said I was free from suffering and free from fault. I would quickly retort and tell that I wasn't free from suffering and fault, but that it was harder than before.

A: Why was that?

B: I had to work to take care of their kids. Their father wasn't around to work to feed their kids.

A: At that time, the kids were still young, right?

B: The kids were, uh—eight or nine years old, and one is more than ten years old. The older

sister is twelve years old. And after them, there are 5 children, if I think about it. The last of them is Bun, she's the one that just walked by.

A: And you work to support all of them?

B: I work to support them all. A pey [ambiguous measuring unit] of rice only lasts a week. I go to work and when I come home from Wat Bor—do you know Wat Bor?

A: Yes! I know about it!

B: Wat Bor—I ride a bicycle from there. Oh, my husband is waiting to be served rice. [The interviewee pauses her story briefly.] Once when I came home from Wat Bor to my home, I found that my younger brother had gone out and borrowed some rice grain, so they could cook rice. I was heartbroken because when I came home, they didn't have anything to eat. [They] said, "May I have 500 riel please, I bought some pastries to eat."

A: That is difficult—Okay, has your life with your family nowadays improved compared to before or what?

B: If I think about it, it was a little better back then when my husband was healthy, but nowadays he's sick, so it's a bit difficult [right now]. I regard [my life] as getting harder bit by bit, and since the beginning of this year, I've especially learned that it is hard. Back when my husband could work, he used to drive a motodop and I would go and work or do whatever. When I was working, I got up to five months pregnant when I stopped working in construction.

A: Okay. What about education, did you ever go to learn or anything?

B: No, I never got to learn! I learned the alphabet for a total of three days when my uncle started accusing me of having a boy I was chasing.

A: Oh, right. So, were you born before the Pol Pot regime happened?

B: I was not born yet but experienced a little bit of the end of the war. At that time—

A: How old were you back then?

B: Oh, back then, I do not remember my age. When the war was still happening and they were all running, I don't remember that. I only remember when I came here and I was 13 years old, and we still had the Khmer Rouge around, they weren't completely broken up yet.

A: Yes. And so, what religion do you worship nowadays?

B: Buddhism.

A: Buddhism?

B: Yes!

A: And how many children do you have nowadays?

B: 3 children.

A: 3 children!

B: Yes!

A: What is your husband's name?

B: His name is Yan Yin.

A: Yan Yin?

B: Yes!

A: Your husband's name is Yan Yin?

B: Yes!

A: How old is he now?

B: My husband is 39 years old.

A: Okay.

B: He is one year older than me.

A: 39!

B: Yes!

A: And do you remember the names of your grandparents on your father's side?

B: My grandparents on my father's side?

A: Yes. Who are your grandparents on your father's and mother's sides?

B: Uh—I only know that my grandmother's name was Uch, and my grandfather's name was Chruk, that's his name.

A: Okay.

B: And for my grandparents on my mother's side were named Grandfather Vaen and Grandma Kham—those were their names. I remember everything—I was born before they passed. My grandfather just passed away 2 years ago, but my grandmother has been dead for a long time already, I never saw her face, I just know her name.

A: Those are your grandparents on your father's side?

B: On my mother's side. On my father's side, I was born while both were still alive.

A: Yes.

B: They have passed away already.

A: And next, do you have any siblings living in another province? Your birth siblings?

B: No, I don't. All of them are in this province. I have four siblings here, I have one more outside of the country in Thailand, who's been there since she was young.

A: Yes. And does she remember all of you?

B: She remembers us all! It's because all of the siblings on this side don't hide themselves. They'll tell everything for each other to know, so that we all can come and visit as well. Two years ago, they came and visited. But for that sibling in Thailand, we have never really kept in touch with her.

A: And what do you do every day for work?

B: Before, I used to—oh! You mean nowadays?

A: Yes!

B: I sell dessert in front of that house, right now it's not selling very well. For instance, I'll buy everything for 50000 riel, and I'll sell about 40000 riel's worth [of desserts]. Day by day, I've added a little bit here and there until now, I think I'll stop selling [dessert].

A: Yes!

B: After that—

A: Your life is very difficult?

B: It's difficult! At this point, my younger sibling on this side sells goods. [They] their daughter-in-law to go scavenge for recyclables, they give them 25000 riel a day.

A: Oh!

B: They're close to the house.

A: That child buys recyclables?

B: That child buys recyclables, and also sells small goods.

A: Yes. So, to close, do you have any final words of advice you would like to send to your posterity, like for them to avoid certain things and such?

B: That's right!

A: For them to try hard in life, right?

B: To the children of the next generation, if possible, avoid participating in drug use. Do not use them at all in order and be a good person, don't be a vagrant child or anyone like that.

A: Yes!

B: I only ask that, for my own children, that they study until they become smart and have learned sufficiently. For my children, I work hard to get money to send them to school.

A: Yes, thank you!

B: Yes!

A: Finally, thank you for allowing me to interview you. Yes, thank you again very much.

B: Yes!

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