

Interview of Choun Yat

A: Interviewer: Heng Sovannorin

B: Interviewee: Choun Yat

Summary of the Interview

Choun Yat, age 55, has five siblings and is the second child in her family. Her childhood was not a happy one because the Khmer Rouge era began when she was young, and she wasn't able to receive an education. In this interview, Choun Yat describes a vivid story of being uprooted from her home, losing all her possessions, and being forced to labor alongside everyone else. Thankfully, she was taken in by a group of friends who helped her survive during the difficulties of the regime. Her story comes to a climax when she describes the Vietnamese army invading the village, and how she found herself in the line of fire of the newcomers. She was able to survive and after reuniting with her family, she returned to her hometown, where she worked diligently to care for her mother and younger siblings. Choun Yat's story reflects her resilience and dedication to her loved ones.

A: First, I would like to thank you for allowing me to interview you about your life. This interview has been prepared by a university in the United States named Brigham Young University. The aim of the university is to interview the Cambodian people and record their history so that future generations can know the history of their ancestors. When I finish your interview, I will post it on their website www.cambodianoralhistoryproject.byu.edu. Do you allow me to put your interview on this website?

B: I do.

A: Yes. Today's date is the 16th of October 2020, and this interview is being conducted in Chong Kneas village, Chong Kneas commune, Siem Reap district, and Siem Reap province. I am the interviewer, and my name is Heng Sovannorin. And I would like to ask, what is your full name?

B: My name is Choun Yat.

A: Do you have a nickname?

B: No, I don't.

A: How old are you?

B: I am 55 years old.

A: Do you remember your birthday?

B: I do, it was on a Wednesday in the month of Shraavana.

A: What year?

B: The year of the horse.

A: Do you remember the Western calendar year?

B: I don't because I never went to school.

A: Where is your hometown?

B: Phnom Krom.

A: How many siblings do you have?

B: There are five of us.

A: How many boys and girls are in your family?

B: There are two girls and three boys.

A: Which child are you?

B: I am the second child.

A: Could you tell me all their names? From the oldest to youngest?

B: I can. My oldest sibling is Chuon Yan. Second is me, Chuon Yat, third is Chuon Vannak, fourth is Chuon Vannet, and fifth is Chuon Nat.

A: Chuon Nat?

B: Yes, because our family name is Choun.

A: As a child, what did you like to do with your siblings?

B: We didn't usually do anything together. We liked to learn, but ever since the end of the Pol Pot era, I didn't go to school, I've been working to take care of my younger siblings.

A: So, what grade did you get to in school before the Khmer Rouge?

B: First grade.

A: And which school did you go to?

B: I learned at Phnom Krom school.

A: Do you know how to read and write?

B: I do, but not much. I know how to read my name and a few other things.

A: So before you came to Phnom Krom, where did you live?

B: In my hometown. In Phnom Krom—it's like I was saying, when the Lon Nol era ended—after the reign of King Sihanouk came to a close, Lon Nol hadn't fallen yet. When Lon Nol fell, we went back to our homeland, but by the time we got back to Phnom Krom, there wasn't any work, so I took my siblings to work on the river. Once we were there, when we were there in that era, we just worked in Chong Kneas. But when we tried to go back to Phnom Krom, they wouldn't let us. They said that they had put guards there. So after that, I brought my siblings back to the river, and we've been there ever since.

A: So how old were you during the Khmer Rouge?

B: Back then in the Pol Pot [era], I was about 11 or 12 years old.

A: So do you remember at first when Pol Pot came to power? Where were you relocated to?

B: When he came to power?

A: Yes.

B: Pol Pot was here for two years—in Chong Kneas—after they were here for two years, they told us that we were going to be moved to Kralanh. They moved us to Kralanh, and—in that year, there was a lot of rain and flooding, the year of the horse. There was a lot of rain. So they relocated us, and I had my father and mother with me, but my father was crippled, and they had just had my fourth younger sibling. And at that time, they had us go there by following the Kralanh stream. We followed the Kralanh stream and from there went up into Kralanh district where they told us to travel further inland, that we couldn't stay there. After that, they took us and put my siblings and my father in a car and took us farther. Once we got there, they divided us up among several villages, they said that some would go to this village, and some would go to that village. They had me to go to—oh, what was the name of the village? I can't remember. Oh! Chab Dai! In Chab Dai village, they had my siblings set their belongings down and dropped them off there. And the Pol Pot [soldiers] kept track of everything we did, they told us, "You have too much stuff, the last group that came had fewer belongings, that they had lost it all. So how are we supposed to put up with you bringing all your possessions? What do you think?" My family was terrified. They told us that we could only take what we could carry, and they took some of our belongings, so we were left with only a few clothes we could wear.

After that, they told us that we weren't allowed to stay there, that we had to keep moving. We carried our crippled father and kept going until they told us that we had arrived, we went all the way to Khnay Chaor village. We were there for a while when the soldiers asked again, "What belongings do you have? Bring it and put them all together!" After that, my mother asked me, "What clothes do you like the most, child?" I told her, "I don't love any of them, Mom! I like the black clothes more." That's what everybody else was wearing. My mother said, "Oh, you don't have any child. Can I give the rest away?" and I said, "Yes!" They also told us that if we had any gold or silver, that we needed to give it all to them. So, I gave them—my mother gave them a box of gold, she gave them everything because they told us, "Everyone who came before you didn't have many clothes or belongings at all, they lost it all. And we can't put up with all of you, you're new here. They've been here for a long time and are dying already. But you are all new here and have many clothes and belongings, and you may even be educated!" So, we paid our respects and wished them well. We told them, "Whatever you need to take, go ahead, including our gold and everything else." We gave them everything, and only kept a couple of sets of clothes. And that was it. For me, they told me that they wouldn't allow my older sister and me to stay together. They had us go to Khleang district and split us up. [Khleang is the Khmer word for warehouse and is a common place name.]

A: Right.

B: Yes, they split us up and had us go to the warehouse there. I followed my mother, after which they said, "Friend Yat! We aren't going to let you stay with your parents, we're going to have you go to the dry season rice fields." I responded, "Where are those rice fields?" and they said, "They're up in Kralanh." After that, I said, "Yes, if you want me to go, I'll go." After that, I took my journey and left. Once I got to the dry season rice fields, I saw that it was full of similar people, they had a president and that it was full of people, there were hundreds of them to work there at the rice field.

A: Right.

B: I went there, and my parents went to the village. After that—it's hard for me to talk about this, we were so destitute. [Speaking Emotionally] Once I was there, there were two boys and two girls who came from Siem Reap who saw me all alone and took pity on me. They said to me, "Oh friend! Come work with us, you don't need to go with them!" I asked, "What do you want me to go and do?" and they responded, "Don't bother asking those questions, just come with us and wait and see! And you can eat with us, you don't need to eat with them!" After that, when [the soldiers] gathered everyone together for a meeting, I didn't go. Whenever [soldiers] had us get up in the night to work in the rice fields, they would strike the bell—clank, clank clank! —and take us to do our work in the rice fields in the cold.

[One morning] I said, "Oh, I can't go with them, I'm going to sleep." And one of those friends told me, "Don't bother getting up, get some sleep, when the sun comes up you can come work with me." I responded, "Oh yes, yes." After that, everyone else had gone to the fields, they lined up in rows and went to the fields, and I was the only one left. When the sun rose, I woke up and my friend Thoeun told me—that was the friend who took pity on me—Thoeun said, "Get a bag and some coconut water, we are going to work in the fields. And there is some rice you can take, there is a bit of leftover rice you can eat." I responded, "Yes" and followed that friend around. After that, my friend said to walk around and sprinkle [water] on the spots in the rice field that don't have any water, and I did what I was told. I walked around and sprinkled water until the day went on and it got too hot. After that, I fell asleep under a tree. I think that my friend saw me sleeping under the tree and took pity on me. My friend brought another person, and the two of them went and cut down a dirt mound. They cut down a huge dirt mound and some forest trees and cleared the area for me to sit. My friend said, "I cut that down so you can sit on it. Don't sleep in the fields anymore." Yes, so I went and slept there. My friend told me, "If anyone comes to transplant the rice or work over here, don't leave or they might see you. Be careful, they might get jealous and say that we are conspiring together." And I responded, "Yes."

When they did come to transplant rice nearby, I didn't dare to leave or anything. I just let my friend bring me my food and other things so that the people working there wouldn't get jealous and say that I was more privileged than them. My friends always had enough to eat, but aside from them, nobody had enough to eat. They got one ladle full of rice porridge. There weren't any fish, all they had was some salt. When I was free during the day, I would sneak off by myself and fish in the pipes. I would get a fish in the pipes and bring it out and marinate it. After it was marinated, I would dry out the fish, and then give it to the people who came back from work for them to cook and eat because I already had food already.

After a few months went by, they started letting us visit our parents in the village once a week. I brought my siblings, and we would walk over and visit our parents in the village. They let us go once a week, and we would cut through the rice fields to get there. A while later, I heard someone say, "Friend, you're getting older, soon enough they'll take you to Phnom Trong Bat." I responded, "If I go to Phnom Trong Bat, what will I do?" My friend told me, "Oh when you go there, you'll have it easy!" and I said, "Oh, is that right? Easier than this?" But in truth, that wasn't the case. I didn't know, it was only after Vietnam freed us that I found out. They took people to Phnom Throng Bat to burn them alive. [Begins to Cry]

After that, the Vietnamese entered the land, after which I found out that they would burn the victims alive there. If the Vietnamese hadn't come in time, we would've been the next group taken to be burned alive, because they would take the youth away before anyone else—they called them "komar chamteur" [Khmer for youth that hadn't grown up yet]. But when the Vietnamese entered, that's when I realized, "Oh! That's how it really is—imagine if they had come just a little too late."

When the Vietnamese came in, the Vietnamese started shooting and forcing the Khmer Rouge out. In the village, they said, "We need to prepare to run away, we can't stay here in the village! Why? Because the Vietnamese have come in and they're forcing Pol Pot out!" But where were we supposed to run to? They said, "Just run away from here first! We're more concerned that Pol Pot's soldiers will round us all up and take us to Anlong Veng." I took my siblings, and we all hid in the forest, all of us except for my father. He couldn't escape, he waited at the house. When the sun came up, it was totally silent, after which we went back [home]. Once we got back, all of a sudden, we heard the Vietnamese start shooting to push out the Khmer Rouge. They started shooting from the main road, but we were on the main road they were shooting at! Oh! And the bombs, they were going off like popped rice exploding all around us—it was like popped rice! I was so dumb; I couldn't think straight in the moment, so I just grabbed whatever was in reach. I had some rice on one side and some fabric on the other side, and I grabbed the fabric and sprinted away with it on my shoulders. I grabbed it and ran; I carried it and ran. My father wouldn't go, and I shouted, "Dad! You have to come!" He said, "I'm not going child!" and I replied, "If you stay, you're going to die! You need to come, come!" He said, "I can't do it!" So we grabbed what we could and ran away first, I ran away carrying that stuff with my siblings until we got back to the main road.

After all the shooting died down, we went and checked on my father, to see what happened to him. We didn't have any hope for him because he couldn't walk, he had lost feeling [in that part of his body]. He had received only one injection of medicine, and he still couldn't walk. So we went to check up on him, and he was still there. He said, "Child! I'm alright!" We picked him up and carried him in our arms until we found a cart that we could use to push him around in. We brought him to the highway on the cart because we were all going back to Siem Reap. Once we got to the main road, we were finally together again. We walked along the highway—I was there with my three younger siblings and my father. My father had a cane, he walked with his cane from Kralanh to a village called—I can't remember the name. But we left from there, and we kept on walking. That's all we did, we just walked day and night without resting at all. Oh! We rested at gathering places. We got to a gathering place when it was dark and we saw a lot of people there, they had a house we could rest at so we asked them if our father could rest there. We rested there for the night, and then we left there in the nighttime. We didn't go alone, there were others with us. We carried our goods on our heads and our shoulders, even my three younger siblings and I carried our clothes. We kept walking until we made it to Siem Reap, to Svay Pagoda. Once we got to Svay Pagoda, we saw someone's house that had some free space, so we requested to stay there. When we were staying there at the house, we heard them say that there was rice at Svay Pagoda, so I took my siblings there to harvest it—we got several bags, maybe somewhere between 14 to 20 bags. After that, we took it and husked and ground it all up, so we had food to eat. At that time, we didn't have anything [to process the rice].

A: Right.

B: Yes, we hadn't gone back to the river yet. Because back then, there were only two tractor tillers that came from here. And when we came back here, all we had was what we could carry by ourselves. I had a shoulder pole and a basket, that was it. When we went back, I took a sickle with me. I took the sickle wherever I went so that we could harvest any rice available. I took my siblings, and we would grind the rice and make rice porridge. We made a lot, and we shared it with each other. We then heard that things had quieted down in Chong Khneas. We then left to go back to our hometown, we were scared that someone would find us at the house we were staying in—that the owners of the house would come back and find us in their old [abandoned] house. Because back then, we were just staying there without permission. So we kept traveling further; we woke up in the middle of the night and left. We kept on walking and carrying our belongings until we arrived here at Chong Khneas at the mouth of the river. We set up camp there, but we didn't have any possessions at that point. We slept on the road—on the dirt at first, we didn't even have a mosquito net, and we had but one single mat. We didn't have very many mats, they got that one from when we were in Kralanh, they carried it here. After that, we just worked and did what we could, until the news came out—someone said that the Vietnamese had completely driven the Khmer Rouge out. The girl who told me had worked at Khleang [Khmer word for warehouse]; she had left there on foot. She had come on foot, and we met at Svay Pagoda, we traveled together from then on. We were there all together—they had walked all the way from Khleang, and my small group had come from Kralanh. Yes, she was in what they called the young women's group—

A: Right.

B: They came from Khleang. We met up after my group left Kralanh, and we met up and stayed together. My friend—back then, her group was larger than mine. After that, I went and asked someone at the warehouse for a boat, and I got one. After I got the boat, all I ever did was go fishing—I asked for a net and some other things because back then, the warehouse was in an area where people weren't relocated. There were no relocations that happened there, so there was still a lot of stuff left behind.

A: Yes.

B: I decided to ask for a net, and I got two or three of them. I went into the river and fished with my father—my siblings were too little then. We went, just the two of us. [Speaking Emotionally] My father would cast the nets, and I would prepare and clean the fish. We didn't start selling any fish yet because we still hadn't bought any selling equipment. We only had enough fish to eat for ourselves.

A: Right.

B: We didn't start selling anything yet because things hadn't settled down [from the Khmer Rouge] yet. We didn't even have an active market going at the time, it was only after a year that we were able to start selling and buying goods back and forth for food. That's the sad history of my family.

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

B: My mother's name is Din Toan.

A: What about your father's name?

B: My father's name is Chuon Nang.

A: And where are they both from?

B: Both my mother and father are from around here.

A: What jobs did they have when you were young?

B: When they lived here, my father was a musician. Yes, he was a music teacher, he played pinpeat music.

A: What about your mother?

B: My mother was at home; she didn't have a job.

A: What music did your father know how to play, did he know how to play everything?

B: Yes, he could play everything.

A: What about you, do you know how to play anything?

B: I don't, I only like listening to music.

A: Yes. You didn't learn from your father?

B: Yes, yes.

A: What kind of person was your mother? Was she strict or kind?

B: My mother was strict, she was strict.

A: What about your father?

B: He was kind.

A: Did your parents ever tell you about any stories from when they were young?

B: They did. They told me that when they were kids, they suffered a lot. That was during the Reastr Niyum generation, during the reign of King Sihanouk, they called it the Sihanouk era. It was so hard; at that time, there were no mopeds or cassette players or telephones. There weren't even any bicycles. If someone had a moped or a cassette player to listen to or a bicycle, they were privileged. Even if you had a bike, you were doing well for yourself. But for them, all they had was a bike. When they got married, they were so poor. My dad had a bike to ride so that he could go play music, and my mother stayed home and looked after the kids.

A: So, do you still remember the names of your grandparents?

B: I do.

A: What were their names?

B: My grandmother's name was Chum, and my grandfather's name was Din.

A: What about on your father's side?

B: My dad's father's name was Chuon Rik. I don't remember my grandmother's full name, but her first name was Sang.

A: Were they all from here in Chong Khneas as well?

B: Yes. They were in Phnom Krom, but when their houses burned down, they came down here to be near the river.

A: Were your grandparents alive when you were born?

B: Yes.

A: What do you remember about your grandparents?

B: I only remember a little bit. Are you asking about what they used to do for work, or what?

A: Just whatever you can remember about them.

B: My grandfather was a stone mason in Phnom Krom, he just worked with stone. They worked with stone and sold it to Japan [interviewee's speech is unclear, may be referring to something different]—all my ancestors did that. I heard them say they all worked with stone as their occupation. They would work on the stone, then go and work in the rice fields, then come back and work with stone.

A: That's it?

B: Yes.

A: Do you have siblings or relatives who live abroad?

B: No, I don't have any.

A: What's your husband's name?

B: I don't have a husband. [Chuckles]

A: Don't you have a family?

B: No.

A: Do you have any close friends that you grew up with that you remember?

B: In Cambodia?

A: Yes.

B: I don't really. People are friendly with me, and I am friendly back, but I wouldn't call anyone a close friend. Why? It's because I don't really like having just one single friend, they're just not trustworthy. I've stopped [trying to] make friends. It's because people are dishonest, it's not because of anything I've done. I loaned a friend my wristband once, it was made from about three chi of gold, and when they wouldn't give it back. I felt angry and upset, so I've stopped looking for friends and spending time with other people. I know that people aren't trustworthy.

A: So, do you have any close friends that live abroad?

B: I do, her name is Nov, Bong Nov. She came and ate some rice porridge when I was selling it in front of my house. I thought she was from Phnom Penh. It was her, her husband, her nephew [or niece, the interviewee uses a gender-neutral pronoun], and her mother. She came and I told her that she could eat here. I thought she was from Phnom Penh, but after I

talked to her for a while, I found out that she was a foreigner, and I was surprised. Her mother told me, "I want to eat fish, I want to try fish soup!" I told her, "Oh! If you want to try fish soup, they sell it at a stand nearby! I'll go and buy it for you and bring it back and cook it, we can eat some rice here at my house." After that, she had me go buy the fish and the ingredients and make the soup, and they sat and visited with me at my house—Nov and her mother and her husband. She told me, "Yat please, if you're sick, please get some rest, you don't have to work so hard, you might get sicker and you don't have anyone to look after you. And if you are out of money, you can call me, and I can send you enough for you to take care of yourself." I didn't have a phone to call her though, so after that, they went and found someone nearby who had a phone, and they took her number down, after which they came back and showed it to me saying, "Here it is!" We talked to each other for a few days, after which they said—the person who took down their number on my end—they said, "Oh friend! My telephone got lost, my child lost my telephone! I don't have anything to call with, if you want to make any calls, you'll have to find another phone." I replied, "Oh no, is that so?" Ever since then, I haven't had anything to communicate with her. I never met her again after that, and she never sent me any money or anything. She just visited with me the one time; she showed me where her house was. She said, "Yat, this is my house!" She was from America; she was an American.

A: From the United States of America.

B: So, I didn't have a phone to communicate with her ever since then. There hasn't been anyone else since then who I have called my friend. And my friend who said that their child lost their phone, they've stopped talking to me. They don't talk to me anymore because they're rich—they said that they don't spend time with me anymore, they spend time with other rich people, that it's more fun. They're not happy to spend time with a poor person like me. [Speaking Emotionally] I tell myself that I'm poor, and ever since then, I have stopped going to people's houses. I've wanted to call [my friend] again, but I don't have anything to call her with. I haven't told my siblings, I'm afraid that the story wasn't true. I've kept it to myself, you're the only one I've ever told. They stopped talking to me, so I haven't been able to talk to my friend Nov at all.

A: So, what have you done for work ever since you were a kid?

B: I was a fisher. I went with my father for a while, but when my father stopped going with me, I didn't dare to go anymore, I was afraid. I was afraid that someone would hurt me. After that, I sold Num Banhchok near the river. After I did that for a while, I heard people saying that the government was giving away land along the main road to anyone who wanted to live there. So I brought my mother and her kids here and built a house for my family. If I wouldn't have taken it, someone else would have because the government was giving it away. I haven't been to the river in a long time, I came right here. After that, my mother passed away. When my mother was alive, I worked for some people for a bit, but then they started cutting my pay too much, and I stopped working for them. I quit and took care of my mother at home. After my mother died, my father was still alive. And now, my father has gone and become a monk. He said, "I'm going to become a monk, you should stay and look after the house. If I stay at the house, I won't live much longer. I'm going to become a monk so that if I die, I'll die as a monk."

A: So, reflecting on your life, when do you think that you were the happiest?

B: I can't think of any time that I was happy because my life has been filled with suffering. I've always had to rely on myself, not anyone else to make me happy.

A: When you were young, did you ever consider what you wanted to be when you grew up?

B: I did, I wanted to be a seamstress, but in the end, it never happened. I had to make money to take care of my younger siblings because they were so young. After the Khmer Rouge, my father's legs got better, and he could walk. He didn't take any medicine, and he could walk. He could walk, and I went fishing with him to take care of my younger siblings and my mother. My older sister watched my mother while I would go fishing with my father—my older sister would watch my mother and my younger siblings while we would work in the forests, both my father and me.

A: So, what is your favorite food that you've enjoyed ever since you were a kid?

B: I like stewed pork leg.

A: I see. Anything else?

B: I like stewed pork leg; it gives me strength and it has a special flavor.

A: I see. And what kind of music do you like to listen to?

B: I like listening to anything, but I mostly like older music. I really like In Yeng, Sinn Sisamouth, and Ros Sereysothea—I like them a lot. I don't really enjoy listening to Pen Ran, but I really like to listen to Ros Sereysothea.

A: When you were a kid, did you ever play any traditional games, like during the Khmer New Year?

B: I did.

A: What games did you play?

B: I played Bos Angkunn [a game where children throw rocks and other stones, hoping to knock them over], Chol Chhoung [a game where two lines of children try to hit each other with a rolled up krama], tug-of-war, Sdech Jang [King's Game] and other games. But I don't know how to play any card games.

A: Yes. To finish up, do you have anything that you would like to say to your descendants and future generations? Any advice for how they should live their lives, and what kind of people they should be?

B: I don't really know what to say. I want my descendants to do good, to think good things. I don't want them to smoke or drink or do anything against our traditions; to be Khmer Buddhist and to follow Khmer traditions, because we were born into the world as Khmer people.

A: Anything else?

B: I don't really have anything else; I'm not very educated.

A: Thank you so much! I wish you good health and good luck and to have happiness. Thank you for interviewing with me.

B: You're welcome.

A: Yes.

Interview translated by Ethan Arkell and edited by Thomas Barrett.