

Acceptance Speech of Voltaire Prize 2022

Duong Keo

Dear Prof. Oliver Günther, the President of the University of Potsdam

Dear Dr. Friede Springer, representatives of the Friede Springer Foundation

Dear Professors,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am so excited to be here at the ceremony to receive this prize today. I would like firstly to thank the University of Potsdam for organizing the Voltaire Prize to promote “Tolerance, International Understanding, and Respect for Differences”, the Friede Springer Foundation for their funding of the prize, and the members of the jury for selecting me as the winner of this year’s prize. I would also like to deeply thank my doctoral supervisor, Prof. Dr. Timothy Williams for his nomination. Dr. Williams believes I deserve to win the prize, and here I am! I also want to express my gratitude to my other professors, colleagues, and friends who have worked and shared with me similar passions in history education and promoting diversity in Cambodia. I am honored to be selected as the winner of the Voltaire Prize 2022. This acknowledgement of my work is very important to me and the Prize motivates me to work harder in my research to contribute to the academic, as well as in my advocacy community in Cambodia and overseas.

Before talking about my work, let me say a few words about my life story as it has actually stimulated my passion for what I have done over the past fifteen years. In particular, my life story has shaped my academic career in the field of history as well as my work on the socially marginalized ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia.

I was born to a farming family in Svay Rieng province in the Southeast of Cambodia, and my parents strongly supported their children’s education as they believed this is the only way for a better future. They themselves had lost their dreams of receiving a higher education due to the wars of the 1970s and the massacre of teaching personnel during that time. While growing up in Cambodia’s countryside, I often heard people talking about war and the cruelties of the Democratic Kampuchea government (1975-1979), better known as the Khmer Rouge. During this regime close to 2 million people lost their lives. I heard some people talk about “people with pineapple eyes”. As a child – and I suspect that it is the same for you, too – I did not understand

what this meant. I wondered how people could have many eyes like a pineapple. In fact, it was a reference to how people lived under the surveillance of Khmer Rouge spies.

I also heard while I was growing up that many people starved to death under the Khmer Rouge. When I could not finish the food on my plate, my parents would say, “No single grain of rice was left on the plate during the Khmer Rouge”. At that time, I did not understand much of what had happened during the Khmer Rouge. But there were many questions in my mind. So I chose to study history in my undergraduate education, and I started to focus on answering the questions that I had related to Khmer Rouge history. I was then involved in some research activities about the lived experiences of Khmer Rouge survivors and turned the interviews I conducted into reports, academic papers, a book and films as well as multimedia applications.

In my country, Cambodia, the majority of the population was born after the Khmer Rouge regime and has limited knowledge on their past atrocities. I was initially one of them. So I took history as my undergraduate major and Masters. And after graduation, Khmer Rouge history has become part of my career. I believe that it is important to share knowledge about the Khmer Rouge past and the terrible events that happened to Cambodia with the younger generations through formal and informal education. Apart from publishing my book and articles about the regime, I have been the lead writer of a multi-media application called “App-learning on Khmer Rouge History.” This app was created by Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center to provide a digital platform for students to learn Khmer Rouge and post-Khmer Rouge history from their smart devices. The application has filled the gap of what students and teachers could not have in official textbooks and combating wrong understandings about the past amongst young people. The app chapters were written by me and several leading scholars. The audio-visual elements that were included into the app chapters make the digital platform helpful and attractive to both teachers and students across Cambodia. In this work, I was privileged to include some of my insights from the hundreds of interviews I was able to conduct with former Khmer Rouge cadres over the years that have enabled me to see the complex past from a variety of perspectives. While I was exploring Cambodian history during the Khmer Rouge, I also came across another important research theme which has not been explored much academically and is highly sensitive in Cambodian politics: the marginalized ethnic Vietnamese minority living in Cambodia. Over the past ten years, my work has increasingly dealt with the promotion of a more

nuanced and comprehensive understanding of past violence and a deeper understanding of the Vietnamese minority communities today in Cambodia.

During my field research on the Khmer Rouge history, I have often encountered the question from Khmer Rouge survivors as well as former Khmer Rouge who ask, “Why did Khmer kill Khmer?” (that means why did ethnic Cambodians kill ethnic Cambodians). In the end, this question often leads people to scapegoat someone for who they believe was really behind the mass killing. In most cases, people are referring to Vietnam, a neighboring country to the south and east of Cambodia. This is one of the main sources of anti-Vietnamese sentiment that has in the past led to racist behavior against the ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia and continues to do so today. This anti-Vietnamese racism specifically targets floating communities as they are most visible to the public and yet they are also among the most economically marginalized populations in the country. To deal with the issue, I started by collecting life stories of stateless ethnic Vietnamese and studied archival data to make films and a research report to reach different audiences. It is definitely a challenging task as the types of stories I tell go against the popular narratives fueled by political propaganda using nationalism and racism against the ethnic Vietnamese. Narratives that are rooted in propaganda that popularizes political parties in the opposition. On the other side, the government seems to maintain a blind eye regarding the situation of ethnic Vietnamese living in the floating villages because talking about the ethnic Vietnamese might not be beneficial for their political party. Only a few NGOs under the support from Civil Peace Services of German Development Program (GIZ) take on roles to intervene in these issues. I was one of the people who received kind support for our project.

I am also very fortunate that I received a PhD scholarship from the Gerda Henkel Foundation to do research on the topic of competing popular narratives of the Vietnamese in Cambodia at the Bundeswehr University Munich under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Timothy Williams. I hope and believe that this research will contribute to our understanding of the Vietnamese in Cambodia from the linkage between the historiography of ethnic Vietnamese minorities and discrimination with memory politics. It will have better inter-ethnic relations, acceptance of ethnic diversity, promote peace and reconciliation in Cambodia.

From my experiences, I strongly believe that enhancing knowledge on serious human rights violations contributes to the prevention of similar atrocities from happening again. I also believe that the deeper understanding of history and life stories of the ethnic Vietnamese in

Cambodia can help free people from prejudice, extreme nationalist sentiments and racism and can contribute significantly to tolerance, peace and the respect of the differences.

Thank you for this prize that recognizes my work's contribution to Cambodian society as well as academic discussions. The prize motivates me to continue forward in the direction I have been working and to have more impact on social justice, tolerance, ethnic harmony and academic freedom in Cambodia. I would like to accept the Voltaire Prize 2022 for myself as well as on behalf of young scholars who dedicate their academic career to a common mission of promoting tolerance, international understanding and respect for differences. Thank you very much!