

LOOKING INTO THE CINEMATIC PAST TO UNDERSTAND THE PRESENT: FULBRIGHT TO CAMBODIA 2024

LINDA SAPHAN

ABSTRACT

As a Fulbright Scholar to Cambodia, my goal was to conduct research on history of Cambodian cinema in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge and to teach the first course on film studies in early Cambodian cinema at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP) offering opportunities for future documentarians and filmmakers to learn about their cinematic history and film analysis.

Keywords: Cambodia • Cambodian movies • History of cinema •



MY CONNECTION TO CAMBODIA

My experiences in Cambodia stretch back decades. I conducted my doctoral research in Phnom Penh between 2004 and 2007. Each research project I took on prepared me for my Fulbright project on postwar Cambodian cinema. Two projects in particular were highly relevant, my work on the film *Don't Think I've Forgotten: Cambodia's Lost Rock and Roll* (2014) and my book *Faded Reels: The Art of Four Cambodian Filmmakers* (2022). As a researcher on the documentary film about prewar Cambodian popular music, I was proud to help many young Cambodian filmmakers learn about their cultural past. I accomplished this by teaching them cinematic language and deconstructing the early films.

Faded Reels is the first book to present in-depth cinematic analysis of prewar Cambodian films and features an exclusive interview with film auteur Uong Citta (Kanthouk). The Department of Media and Communication at the Royal University of Phnom Penh published the book in Khmer in Phnom Penh and hosted a launch event attended by central figures in the Cambodian cinema industry. These experiences provided the foundation for what would become my Fulbright project. As I worked on these projects, I realized the importance and urgency to document Cambodian cinema.

I have been visiting Cambodia since I was 18 years old. As a Cambodian refugee, I have returned regularly and even settled there for a couple of years, working in academia, the arts, and the film world. Every time I am in the country, I make it a priority to support local Cambodians. I have the privilege of holding a passport from a Western country, and part of my work ethic and

life philosophy is to use my privilege to uplift others, ensuring that students, artists, and filmmakers have access to all the opportunities and resources available to them. I am also a strong advocate for cultural sensitivity in the arts and filmmaking industry in Cambodia.

FULBRIGHT 2024: RESEARCHING POSTWAR CAMBODIAN CINEMA

I planned and achieved three critical outcomes during my Fulbright tenure. The first outcome was to examine the social and cultural conditions surrounding the rise of movies after the Khmer Rouge, including the role of the film industry as a business venture, production and marketing, the casting process, gender and sexuality, and the filmmakers' diverse styles and artistry. The second outcome was to document the postwar film industry and record interviews with key individuals in a way that would allow researchers to explore the social constructs of representation on the silver screen in postwar Cambodian society in the aftermath of genocide. The third outcome was to catalog all the films made during those two politically unstable decades.

The film industry has shifted greatly in the 21st century in Cambodia with the arrival of new technology. While the early cinema industry mainly filmed on 16mm in the 1960s, the 1980s with the VCR (video cassette recorder) opened up many possibilities for filmmaking and distribution beyond the homeland. A country's film industry represents the politics, culture, and lifestyles of the people living in that country. As is the case with all other industries and aspect of life in Cambodia, its film industry has also had to endure the heavy influence of political incidents. Be it the royal influence through Norodom Sihanouk or the Civil War, the different political regimes influences are evident in the Cambodian cinema. Since the beginning, the Cambodian film industry revolved around such scenarios as entering the modern era, celebration of its cultural legacies, and even including government members in its film. Cambodian cinema industry and its artists disappeared under the Khmer Rouge regime from 1975 to 1979. In the 1980s, Cambodian cinema was not in existence due to the country's struggle to rebuild itself. The 1990s saw a slow return to this form of entertainment, mainly in the karaoke form but a dominant filmmaker, Rithy Panh a French-Cambodian filmmaker brought the feature film and a new documentary genre back to the homeland (Wille). Today, because of the digital camera, filmmaking is now accessible to Cambodian young artists such Kavich Neang, Lida Chan, Chhay Bora, Kanith Tith, Fai Sam Ang, Pan Phuong Bopha to name a few. Cambodia's diaspora are also producing films. French-Cambodian Chou Davy, Cambodian-American Caylee So and Thavary Krouch are also contributing to the Cambodian contemporary scene. Caylee So and Prach Ly started a Cambodiantown Film Festival in 2013 in Long Beach California while in Cambodia the first Cambodian Film Commission was created in 2009.

For the duration of the grant period in Cambodia, I initiated a new phase of my research on Cambodian popular culture. I documented and examined the visual and social history of postwar Cambodian cinema of the 1980s and 1990s. Studying postwar Cambodian cinema was a natural and necessary extension of my research as I worked towards documenting the complete history of Cambodian popular culture, a field that continues to be under-researched.

Documenting the history of postwar Cambodian cinema with firsthand accounts by those who worked in the industry at the time is an urgent matter. Many stars and filmmakers of the 1960s survived the horrors of the Khmer Rouge only to pass away before their stories were documented, including Mer Meun, Loto, Phuong Phally, Chin Bunnath, Chan Siphon, Huy San, Yeak Nhom, and Nop Yada. Many of the stakeholders from the postwar era have passed away recently, including Ieu Pannakar, Mao Ayuth, Ly Bun Yim, Ly You Sreang, and Keo Montha, and many others are aging. I was grateful that the Fulbright afforded me the opportunity to interview the few remaining survivors before it was too late. Through my research project their stories will be preserved and shared for future generations from their struggles to their creative process. The primary goal of my research project was to interview all stakeholders involved in Cambodian cinema during the 1980s and 1990s, from directors to voice actors and more. I have seen the impact *Faded Reels* has had on Cambodian youth who previously had no idea how talented and skilled the founders of Cambodian cinema were. My research allowed students and filmmakers to anchor themselves with the national cinematic history. My ongoing Fulbright project to document the cinema of the 1980s and 1990s will have just as much of an impact once I publish my findings in the coming years.

Because no one has worked on the topic, it was necessary to start with a preliminary ethnography. There was no phone book or central database of the people involved with postwar Cambodian cinema. Many stakeholders from the time left the film industry after its collapse in the early 2000s, and they are now working and living in various places across the country. Despite its revival today, the new faces of Cambodian cinema do not know who their predecessors were. It was necessary that Cambodians have an understanding of their past and how their cinematic culture developed over time to gain perspective on their current struggles and issues. Because of this, it was necessary to find informants through informal conversation and exploration. In order to conduct my research, I used two different methodologies in order to understand the history from 1980s and 1990s since there was nothing written about that era. I conducted interview and archival research.

In the oral history phase, I selected key people for formal, face-to-face interviews and video-recorded their stories for future generations. The selected interviewees were individuals who not only witnessed cinema history but lived and worked at the core of it. With these stories, told by people in their own

voices, I hope to support the curiosity and learning of future generations so that history does not repeat itself whether political or economic regarding the film industry and its artists. Cambodians have lost a sense of our collective visual history, but with dedicated research, I have begun to map the road that lifts the veil on the past so the next generation can inherit a more complete picture of their history.

The archival research phase of my project was critical to uncovering the history of postwar Cambodian cinema. I searched for any and all documentation related to the subject, from personal photography and private collections to film reviews and interviews in magazines. I also networked with private collectors to discover the breadth of archival materials that had not been accessible to the public, and I explored libraries, book stalls, and bookstores to look for and collect films that exist on VHS, DVD and YouTube.

There is no collection or repository that gives a sense of how many films were made and by whom, even at the Cambodian Cinema Department. The goal of my project was to address this missing piece of history by creating the first catalog of films from the period. Beyond the fact that I was documenting an era of popular culture in Cambodia that has been largely ignored, I wanted to make inroads for future scholars so that they can dig deeper and continue to shed light on a critical and fascinating segment of Cambodian history.

TEACHING AT THE DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION AT THE ROYAL UNIVERSITY OF PHNOM PHNH

I first taught in Cambodia in 2004 as a faculty member at Cambodia University and later the Center for Khmer Studies. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to teach again in Cambodia twenty years later. I experienced culture shock when I encountered the changed education landscape. Students now have global knowledge and possess keen insight into regional geopolitics. Their English is excellent, which made for a smoother flow of communication than I expected and a deeper level of intellectual engagement.

More than a teacher, I aspire to be a model for Cambodian youth as a woman, a scholar, and an American-Cambodian. Few Cambodian women hold Ph.D.'s, and even fewer are tenured scholars. Being able to return to Cambodia and teach the next generation of future researchers allowed me to achieve more than professional goals. It impacted and resonated with my personal journey as an immigrant and a woman of color. At Royal University of Phnom Phnh, I mentored two senior students working on their research projects and senior theses. The results and quality of their research were equivalent to my students in the United States. The bond I established with them continues today. I support their careers, conference applications, and publications.

As the Department of Media and Communication director Ung Bun Y has stated several times, many Cambodian students lack critical thinking skills and knowledge of theoretical frameworks. Their exposure to analytical approaches to visual culture is limited, so many people believe that to become a filmmaker or documentarian, they only need to pick up a camera. Questioning image production, representation, socio-political and cultural implications, and ethical concerns is not common. The course I taught on Cambodian cinema and visual culture was groundbreaking and the first of its kind in the country.

Cambodian cinema is often misrepresented in current scholarship. The prewar years are either ignored or described as a time of B-rated horror movies, and the 1980s and '90s aren't even discussed. Representation matters, and the question of who gets to tell the story of a people, a place, and time will always be important, particularly in relation to cultural and artistic endeavors. Students can learn about the history of their country's cinema, their cultural heritage, while deconstructing the visual world and societal constraints seen in the making of these films. My students at Royal University of Phnom Penh had access *Faded Reels* in both English and Khmer. I chose to publish my book with a Cambodian university because the Royal University of Phnom Penh also offered to translate the book into Khmer. I wanted to ensure that this major contribution to Cambodian popular culture could exist in Khmer for Cambodians. My upcoming book is a companion to *Faded Reels*. *Remnants of the Past, a Filmography of Early Cambodian Cinema* was published in September 30th, 2024.

FULBRIGHT 2024: IMPACTS AND FUTURE

The Fulbright has had a tremendous impact on me as a professional and as a global citizen. My tenure as a Fulbright scholar redefined my idea of what being part of a global community means and what I can achieve as an American scholar through sharing, connecting, and exchanging ideas. It is easy to get weighed down by geopolitics, but the Fulbright showed me that there are many reasons to persevere and that my efforts can result in meaningful impacts. The Fulbright has helped me solidify my place in Cambodian academia. After teaching and researching in the country, I have established strong bonds with the intellectual community and with students. My colleagues and my university at large understand the value of the Fulbright as well. When I returned to work, I was promoted to full professor.

During my Fulbright stay, I kept a weekly email diary where I sent updates to family and friends. These updates covered the mundane challenges I encountered as well as the whimsical observations I noticed. As I wrote them on the weekends, I also reflected on my personal journey as an immigrant,

and I started to write a novella based on my memories, a way to revisit my past. I was finally able to tap into my creativity. The Fulbright gave me the space to explore this lifelong dream, something I have wanted to do since I was ten years old.

“My tenure as a Fulbright scholar redefined my idea of what being part of a global community means and what I can achieve as an American scholar through sharing, connecting, and exchanging ideas.”

My experience with the Fulbright and my connection with other Fulbrighters has shifted my perception of what it means to be an American scholar. In 2017, the political situation in America made me nervous about the fact that I did not have the same passport as my daughter. Having a green card was not enough. Maybe my fears of being deported were unrealistic, but people felt the same way in Cambodia before the genocide. They never could have seen it coming. I didn't want to become an American out of fear, and the change made me resentful for some time. My Fulbright experience allowed me to reflect on my citizenship and what it means to go to Cambodia and represent America with a new-found pride. I can't think of anyone better suited to be a cultural ambassador for the U.S. than a mid-career woman of color and immigrant. To have the face of American achievement be that of a Cambodian-American woman demonstrates that America is indeed a land of immigrants where all dreams are welcome. Representation changes the future, and seeing a Cambodian-American woman secure a prestigious Fulbright grant will encourage young women to continue graduate school and pursue research.

FURTHER READINGS

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Dr. Saphan with DMC students, with research assistant Kan Penhsamnang interviewing cinematographer Sok Sam Art, and lost among the archives in the National Library, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 2024

BIOGRAPHY

Dr. LinDa Saphan is a Fulbright Scholar to Cambodia in 2024 and Professor of Sociology at the University of Mount Saint Vincent, New York City. She can be reached at linda.saphan@umsv.edu
