



A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

YOUK CHHANG

Executive Director

Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam)

Head of the Queen Mother Library in Phnom Penh,
and a survivor of the Khmer Rouge's "killing fields."

Ambassador to the Cabinet of His Majesty,
the King of Cambodia, with a rank equivalent to
that of a minister.

Chhang was born in 1961 and raised in Phnom Penh. At age 15, laboring under Khmer Rouge rule, he was arrested for picking up mushrooms in the rice fields to feed his pregnant sister. He was tortured publicly before more than a hundred villagers before being dispatched to an adult prison without trial. He recalls, "Months later, when I ran out of lies to tell to save my life, an older prisoner begged the prison chief to release me. The prison chief agreed, but I later learned that the older prisoner was killed in exchange for my freedom. I lived, and he died. I do not remember his name but have been searching for his surviving relatives to pay respect to them for what he did for me. I hope someday I will find them."

Chhang later escaped the Khmer Rouge killing fields, moving to the United States as a refugee. However, his experience of Khmer Rouge terror and loss of loved ones led him to a lifelong commitment to promote memory and justice in Cambodia.

He returned to Cambodia in the 1990s to manage human rights and democracy training programs for the U.S.-based International Republican Institute and assist the Electoral Component of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC).

Chhang became DC-Cam's leader in 1995, when the Center was founded as a field office of Yale University's Cambodian Genocide Program to conduct research, training and documentation related to the Khmer Rouge regime. He continued to run the Center after its 1997 inception as an independent Cambodian non-governmental organization.

Among many contributions to truth and justice, he has testified as a living witness to genocide before the United Nations-backed Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, a tribunal created to address Khmer Rouge atrocities. He has also developed a nationwide genocide education program with strong grassroots support; built one of Asia's leading genocide research centers; led successful programs on oral history, documentation, and reconciliation; and established the Anlong Veng Peace Center. He currently leads DC-Cam's development of a permanent hub for genocide studies in Asia to advance justice, memory, education, and healing in Cambodia and beyond.

Chhang has authored several articles and book chapters on justice and reconciliation and co-edited the book *Cambodia's Hidden Scars: Trauma Psychology in the Wake of the Khmer Rouge* (2011). He is the executive producer of *A River Changes Course* (2012), a documentary film about Cambodia's changing social, economic, and environmental landscape that won the Sundance World Cinema Grand Jury Prize for documentaries in 2013 and other awards. He also produced the film *Don't Think I've Forgotten: Cambodia's Lost Rock and Roll* (2014), which illuminates the culture that preceded and survived the country's genocide.

He is a Senior Research Fellow at the Center for the Study of Genocide, Conflict Resolution, and Human Rights at Rutgers University-Newark. He was a member of the eminent persons group who founded the Institute for International Criminal Investigations in The Hague in 2003. In 2000, he received the Truman-Reagan Freedom Award from the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation in Washington, DC. He was named one of TIME magazine's "60 Asian heroes" in 2006 and one of the "Time 100" most influential people in the world in 2007 for his stand against impunity in Cambodia and elsewhere.

Chhang and DC-Cam were the honored recipients of the 2017 Judith Lee Stronach Human Rights Award from the Center for Justice and Accountability. In 2017, His Majesty King Norodom Sihamoni made Chhang a Commander of the Royal Order of Cambodia in recognition of Chhang's distinguished services to the Kingdom of Cambodia. In 2018, Chhang was awarded the Ramon Magsaysay Award, often referred to as the "Asian Nobel prize," for his courageous stand against impunity and advocacy for truth, justice and reconciliation. In 2026, he earned the rare honor of appointment as Ambassador to the King, serving as a formal liaison between the Royal Palace and the government, reflecting his status as one of Cambodia's most trusted and distinguished public figures.

Written by **John D. Ciorciari**, Interim Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor
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Photo by Orn Vannara, 22 January 2026, at the Queen Mother's Library