

Any history is someone's history: Cambodian teachers' historical recognition of the Khmer Rouge in a post-conflict context

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to clarify how Cambodian teachers recognise the history of the Khmer Rouge when viewed through the prism of their lived experience. This paper draws on interviews with secondary school history teachers who teach the history of the Khmer Rouge era to the next generation. To achieve this purpose, I formulated two research questions: (1) How did the teachers acquire knowledge of the history of the Khmer Rouge? (2) What educational value do teachers place on the teaching of Khmer Rouge history?

Design/methodology/approach – I conducted interviews with 11 secondary school history teachers. I then constructed life histories from the interview data to analyse how the teachers' experiences and thoughts both shaped and transformed their historical understanding.

Findings – One teacher from a generation generally considered to have no real experience of the Khmer Rouge era had experienced the Khmer Rouge invasion and clashes with her village in her childhood. Another teacher had been educated in anti-Pol Pot ideology, but in his later educational activities, he valued teaching Khmer Rouge history as an education in the value of peace. This study reveals that many teachers had diverse experiences that cannot be summarised as generational theory, but all teachers valued Khmer Rouge history education as a way to teach their students about peace. Detailed analysis of the teachers' narratives also revealed that their values such as education for peace were diverse.

Research limitations/implications – One limitation of this study is that it did not examine how history was transmitted during the Khmer Rouge era in relation to Cambodia's broader political, social and economic history. Although perceptions and values based on individual experiences are also tied to a broader context, the focus of this study was specifically on history education.

Originality/value – The findings are significant in showing differences in the historical understanding of the public and of teachers. Studying teachers' life histories recaptures and restores the value of education in a particular context.

Keywords Historical recognition, Historical education, Life history, Khmer Rouge, Cambodia

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

The world today continues to be threatened by wars between nations, civil wars, terrorism and genocide. Mass violence is not a phenomenon confined to the past; many lives remain at risk today. How is the past remembered in countries that have experienced mass violence? Do memories of violence trigger new violence? This research focuses on educational development in post-conflict periods and explores how teachers sought to *better* education.

This paper examines the past in the form of Cambodia's Democratic Kampuchea era, the so-called Khmer Rouge era (1975–1979), which it uses as a case study. At that time, the Khmer Rouge enforced an extreme communist ideology and applied forced relocation and forced labour to the population. During this period, a large number of deaths, estimated to be at least



1.5 million, occurred as a result of executions, malnutrition and disease (Kiernan, 1996, pp. 456–458). More than 45 years have now passed since the end of the Khmer Rouge era. The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) was established in July 2006 for the purpose of investigating crimes committed between April 17, 1975, and January 6, 1979, and to assist the people of Cambodia in their search for justice, national reconciliation and peace. The tribunal concluded its proceedings with a final verdict on September 22, 2022. The era of Cambodia's public confrontation with the Khmer Rouge era has come to an end. Efforts are now being made, mainly by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), to preserve memory and engage in remembrance. The purpose of this paper is to clarify how those involved in educating the next generation understand the past. It does so through interviews with history teachers at junior high and high school (HS) level in Cambodia who undertake this activity.

Today, teachers who lived through the Khmer Rouge era are leaving the teaching profession. This paper is based on interviews with a limited number of teachers, but it reveals how history teachers, who are the gatekeepers of modern history education, understand their country's past, including the mass violence that afflicted it, and how they intend to use it in the future. It will clarify the teachers' historical understanding in a concrete way, as part of an individual experience. The study will focus on the process of creating and changing their historical understanding. It will also identify the factors affecting why these historical understandings were created and why they changed or did not change. It will examine how the legacy of the history of mass violence has been constructed so far and in what direction it is going. It is important to capture the dynamics of history education about mass violence and to provide a new perspective for future historical education practice.

Previous research on second-generation understandings of Khmer Rouge-era history includes a 2005 study by Münyas (2008), for which they interviewed approximately 200 young people (ages 14–27) about their experiences learning about the Khmer Rouge era. According to this study, the youths indicated that they found their parents' generation's stories about the Khmer Rouge era to be primarily "unbelievable" and that they had a hard time addressing their families' traumatic experiences (Münyas, 2008, pp. 421–422). In addition, as I will discuss later in this paper, the limited opportunities to learn about the Khmer Rouge era scholastically meant that the stories told by teachers were perceived as harsh anecdotes (Münyas, 2008, p. 426). This study of youth perceptions and understanding revealed an ambivalent sense of proximity and distance: a history close enough that they were able to witness family trauma, but at the same time difficult to believe and accept as a real event.

Another study by McCaffrie, Somaly, Daniel, and Lina (2018), which considered the educational significance of the ECCC for the second and third generations, noted that young people in Cambodia are generally perceived to have little interest in the Khmer Rouge era. Even when it is included in middle and HS curricula, the study suggested that many young people neither know much nor think deeply about it. However, Tann and Tim (2019) survey of 220 people, mostly university students, found that the younger generation is interested in the Khmer Rouge era, even if they did not experience it themselves, and that about half of them consider themselves victims of the Khmer Rouge. In addition, four out of five agreed or partially agreed that all Khmer people, including Khmer Rouge cadres, were victims of the Khmer Rouge regime, indicating the formation of a broad sense of victimhood that included those who participated on the Khmer Rouge regime's side. Many of the study participants cited school curricula (76.1%), family (75.1%) and media (67.4%) as sources of information about the Khmer Rouge era, but nearly 80% of the young people surveyed considered that they did not have access to enough information (Tann & Tim, 2019, pp. 21–23).

However, although valuable, these studies overlook the diversity of individuals' backgrounds and fail to consider how their historical perceptions are formed and transformed. When considering history education, they also lack a perspective on how teachers choose to preserve the Khmer Rouge past. Teachers continue to play an important role in education, and it has been pointed out that they not only teach knowledge but also promote

learning (Yoshida, 2020). This suggests the importance of the background and values of individual teachers; it can fairly be said that society has expectations for the role of teachers in relation to their humanity. Therefore, this paper conducts research on historical recognition based on a study of teachers' life histories.

Specifically, it conducts interviews to clarify the possibilities of learning about the Khmer Rouge era from the teachers' childhood to the present, and investigates the emotions and thoughts that the teachers felt when learning about it, as well as any changes that have occurred in them. The relationship between individual and collective memory has been a subject of considerable discussion. In his major work, Halbwachs (1992 [1952]) argued that individual memory is not isolated and self-contained, but is recalled and reconstructed in relation to collective memory. Halbwachs's concept of collective memory has been interpreted in a variety of ways and has given rise to extensive debate. Olick (1999) identified two competing understandings of the "collective" in "collective memory": it can be seen either as a compilation of socially framed individual recollections or as an autonomous social phenomenon. Kansteiner (2002) highlighted the lack of conceptual and methodological advances in memory studies, pointing out that much research focuses on representations of specific events while neglecting the processes of negotiation and their relation to the historical consciousness of social groups.

This study examines changes in individual memories and their valuation, in order to elucidate the dynamic negotiation between individual and collective memories. The Khmer Rouge era, which is the focus here, is frequently regarded as a "unique" period. However, as Rothberg (2009) argues in *Multidirectional Memory*, memories are often shaped and activated by subsequent, unexpected events. In this regard, the notion of "victimhood nationalism," as discussed by Lim (2009, 2025/2021), and a broader global perspective are also relevant. Finally, Assmann (2011) introduced the concept of cultural memory, emphasising the media through which culture is preserved and transmitted. Building on this framework, this study treats history textbooks as a form of cultural medium and positions teachers as key actors who mediate and communicate this memory.

This study conducted interviews to discover the educational value of learning about the Khmer Rouge era and to find out how teachers recognise this past as history possessing educational value. The teaching of history is closely connected to the construction of individual identity and collective memory (Carretero, Asensio, & Rodrigues-Moneo, 2012). Levstik and Barton (2023) argue that history education is not merely about transmitting knowledge of past events but also about cultivating historical practices that enable us to understand our identities and envision possible futures. The background of history teachers shapes the quality and limitations of history education (Ravitch, 2000). Teachers' values and practices directly influence how historical meaning and interpretation are conveyed in the classroom. While it is widely acknowledged that teaching about a violent past is neither impartial nor completely objective, it has been seen as a potential contribution to conflict reduction and reconciliation (Carretero, 2017). It should also be noted that students do not necessarily retain all the historical knowledge taught in schools (Carretero, Asensio, & Rodrigues-Moneo, 2012, p. 6).

I set the following two research questions to clarify how teachers interpret the Khmer Rouge past and the educational values they attach to it:

- (1) How did the teachers learn and know about the history of the Khmer Rouge?
- (2) What educational value do teachers place on teaching Khmer Rouge history?

To address the above questions, I conducted a survey of current history teachers to explore their understanding of the history and examine how that understanding has been shaped and evolved over time. I conducted interviews to explore how teachers' personal and learning experiences shaped their understanding of Khmer Rouge history, and how they attached value to the Khmer Rouge history in deciding how to teach it. I distinguish these analytical

dimensions —experience meaning and pedagogical value— in the research questions. In practice, they are inherently intertwined. In order to examine the teachers' life histories, this study first analyses how the Khmer Rouge era has been publicly interpreted since the 1980s (i.e. after the end of the regime). This analysis will illustrate the opportunities teachers have had to learn about this period through public discourse. Although this study focuses on the life histories and the narratives of only some Cambodian history teachers, its findings contribute to international education development by highlighting the role of teachers' personal histories in shaping post-conflict education, reconciliation, and global citizenship education.

One limitation of this study is that it did not examine how history was transmitted during the Khmer Rouge era in relation to Cambodia's broader political, social and economic history. Although perceptions and values based on individual experiences are also tied to a broader context, the focus of this study was specifically on history education.

2. Public discourse on Khmer Rouge history

The following section examines the public historical discourse surrounding the Khmer Rouge era, with a particular focus on the school curriculum; as previous studies have shown, it provides the most comprehensive opportunity for learning about this period. [Table 1](#) shows the characteristics of Khmer Rouge history education by decade from the 1980s to the present. As shown in [Table 1](#), for decades after the Khmer Rouge era, the way in which this period was addressed in public education was strongly influenced by political considerations and social background. The table thus allows us to see the possibility of distinguishing between generations in terms of understanding the Khmer Rouge era in Cambodia.

2.1 *Genocide education as Propaganda in the 1980s*

The post-Khmer Rouge era, defined by the People's Republic of Kampuchea (1979–1989), existed in the specific context of building a new socialist state out of devastation. Since the legitimacy of the popular rule of the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party government depended on the fact that it had saved the nation from the Khmer Rouge, there was an important political motivation to share with the nation the memory of how cruel and inhumane the Khmer Rouge era had been ([Shintani, 2015](#), pp. 2–3). Even school curricula sought to promote an anti-Khmer Rouge ideology ([Hagai, 2011](#)). According to Chandler, textbook descriptions of the Khmer Rouge era during this period were not faithful to historical facts and demonised the Pol Pot faction ([Chandler, 2008](#), pp. 362–363). [Senda \(2023\)](#) also pointed out that the extreme descriptions of the Khmer Rouge era were intended to obscure the common political background and ideology of the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party government and the Khmer Rouge ([Senda, 2023](#), pp. 110–117). What does the learning experience from this period mean for history teachers today? The question remains as to how it has been recognised and how it has or hasn't changed.

2.2 *Deletions and restrictions in the 1990s and 2000s*

After the democratisation of the political system in the early 1990s, the new government and the Pol Pot faction sought reconciliation. At the same time, all references to the Khmer Rouge era were removed from national textbooks ([Shintani, 2020](#), p. 87). In 2001, new history textbooks were published that included content regarding the Khmer Rouge era. However, when the opposition demanded that the 12th grade history textbooks be corrected for inaccurate descriptions of the Khmer Rouge era and for bias in favour of the ruling party that had won the elections after 1993, all textbooks were recalled and all pages on modern history since World War II were removed. In 2008, 12th grade history textbooks were published that included contemporary history up to 1993 ([Shintani, 2015](#), pp. 6–7). In other words, for almost 20 years, from the early 1990s until 2008, there was no discourse concerning the Khmer Rouge era in school curricula.

Table 1. Education policy and changes in curriculum and textbook descriptions regarding the “Khmer Rouge era”

Time	Education policy and direction	Curriculum and textbook	Background
1980s	Emphasis on genocide	Description of hatred and fear of the Pol Pot regime that committed genocide against the people	Legitimacy of the People’s Revolutionary Party Government
1990s	Prohibition and deletion of all textbook descriptions	No content	Paris Peace Accords (1991)/First general election (1993) Regime transition For reconciliation between the government and the Pol Pot faction
1999	Publication of a social studies textbook for 9 th grade	Simplified content	Surrender and arrest of all Pol Pot faction members (1999)
2001	Publication of history textbooks for 12 th grade	Some contents →No content	Request for revision from the opposition →Recovery →Removal of all contemporary history after 1953
2007	Publication of the textbook <i>History of Democratic Kampuchea</i> prepared and nationwide distribution	Development of genocide education Without expressions of explicit genocide and violence	Special Courts fully engaged (2006)
2008	Reissue of history textbooks for 12 th grade	Not much difference from the 2001 version	National Election
2011	12 th grade new history textbooks issued	A sense of victimhood is established that includes residents who cooperated with the Pol Pot faction. Responsibility is executive. No violent images are shown. No use of the term “genocide.”	Considerations that do not affect the Special Court
2018	High School New Curriculum Unveiled	International Comparison of Genocide. Resumption of the use of the term “genocide.”	Impact of the Special Court’s Decision
2022	Publication of the second edition of DC-CAM’s <i>History of Democratic Kampuchea</i>	Clear distinction between victims and perpetrators. Use of the word “genocide.” Additions to the content regarding the Special Tribunal	Internationalisation, Modelling Final Judgement in Special Court (2022)

Source(s): Author

Chandler referred to this manner of (not) presenting contemporary history in school curricula and public discourse as a “policy of collective amnesia” (Chandler, 2008, p. 354). Describing the absence of historical discourse in public education as a ‘policy of collective amnesia’, as if it were an official, forced forgetting of the period, is questionable. However, Chandler’s research reveals a contradictory situation: the coexistence and divergence between state policy and the unwavering memory of individuals. It also highlights the need for more thorough research into the nature of individual memory and how history is passed down through generations.

2.3 Peace education since the 2010s

Civil society has made efforts to preserve the testimonies and records of Khmer Rouge members and to use them in educational activities. One representative organisation is the

Documentation Center for Cambodia (DC-CAM), which traces its roots to the 1994 passage of the Cambodia Genocide Justice Act by the US Congress. Following the passage of the Act, a local DC-CAM office was established in 1995 in cooperation with the US Department of State and the Yale University Cambodia Genocide Program (established in 1981). Later, in 1997, DC-CAM became an independent research and study organisation. However, the US Agency for International Development is still its main funder. Its main efforts include the collection of data, especially documents, photographs and testimonies from the Khmer Rouge era; the creation and analysis of databases containing such data; and genocide education.

Genocide education efforts include the development and dissemination of Dy's *History of Democratic Kampuchea* (2007), which is used as history-teaching material for secondary school programmes, and teacher training on the use of the material. In the 2010s, after the publication of the *History of Democratic Kampuchea*, DC-CAM was active in acknowledging the Khmer Rouge era and its transmission through education, especially by distributing materials for supplementary textbooks for secondary schools and training history teachers in the use of these supplementary textbooks. The DC-CAM has also received support from the Ministry of Education and has had a significant impact on the collection and transmission of memory and official historical discourse. In addition, a relatively detailed description of the Khmer Rouge era was included in a 12th grade history textbook published in 2011; this description was consistent with the *History of Democratic Kampuchea* (Dy, 2007) and also shows the strength of its influence (Senda, 2022). The content of this textbook is characterised by its focus on depicting the organisational structure of the Pol Pot regime and the lives of the people, with as few references to explicit violence as possible. According to Dy (2015), one of the characteristics of the *History of Democratic Kampuchea* is that it does not dare use the strong word “genocide” in order not to negatively influence the Special Tribunal. This is precisely the opposite of the approach taken in the 1980s.

In the HS history curriculum published in 2018, the term “genocide” is again used, and the genocide of the Khmer Rouge era is compared with genocides in Germany, Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Iraq (MoEYS, 2018, p. 42). The international comparison of the history of mass violence, including its political ideology and background, strengthens its importance as peace education—*peace education* has different meanings and interpretations for different peoples. Here, peace education is broadly defined as education for peace—. However, it has also been noted that there is a tendency to make a sharp distinction between victims and perpetrators within a nation (Senda, 2022). Textbooks based on the 2018 curriculum have not been published as of 2024.

3. Methodology and subjects

I conducted this research by means of fieldwork interviews, which I conducted over approximately two weeks in August 2022 and August 2023. I conducted interviews with 11 junior HS social studies teachers or HS history teachers aged in their 20s to 50s. The subjects of this study were all history and social studies teachers at the school of the principal who was asked to conduct the study. There were no age or gender restrictions on who could participate in the survey.

The study was conducted in Kandal and Battambang provinces. Kandal province is closest to the capital, Phnom Penh, and is therefore highly susceptible to the policy decisions made there. In recent years, Kandal has become increasingly urbanised, with more and more people attending schools in Phnom Penh. Battambang province, located in northwestern Cambodia about 290 kilometres from Phnom Penh, contains the second largest city in the country. However, it is also an area where conflicts with the Khmer Rouge regime continued well into the 1980s. This long period of civil war makes it a typical example of Cambodia's war-affected regions.

The interviews were conducted after the interviewees had been informed in advance of the content of the questions to be asked. I then undertook semi-structured interviews in which the

interviewees were free to add additional questions. The interviews were designed to ensure that basic information such as the interviewees' own upbringing and learning experiences were included. The interviews also ensured inclusion of responses to questions such as: When and from whom did you learn and know about Khmer Rouge era? What were your thoughts when learning about it (when did you learn about and understand it; what did you feel and think)? And what are your wishes and hopes regarding teaching about the Khmer Rouge era in the classroom (what do you hope to pass on to the next generation about the history of the Khmer Rouge era)?

In addition, depending on the content of the answers, I added the following questions as appropriate. For example, if they heard about the Khmer Rouge from their family, what were their family's experiences during the Khmer Rouge era? If they heard about it from their teachers, what was the teaching method? Regarding history lessons, I added questions about difficulties and innovations in teaching, depending on the flow of the interview. All interviews were recorded with permission. I conducted the interviews myself in Khmer, and no interpreter or other intermediary was involved.

The teachers' life histories were written from the interview data to analyse how experiences and thoughts change and are shaped. A life history methodology is an account of a life based on interviews and conversations (Goodson & Gill, 2011, p. 22). Life history includes interpretation of historical context. Life histories can be topical, focusing on only a segment of a life, or complete. Life history and life story are different. Life story is the account of one person's life story, or a segment of it, as told to another, such as is found in interview narratives. A life history, on the other hand, is a history that based on an edited life story and interpreted by the author. In many cases, life history and life story are used together (Goodson & Gill, 2011, p. 22). I also analyse my interviewees' life stories, with the conversations being translated verbatim (in whole or in part). Although the interviews involved in-depth questioning on a single topic, the questions were profound and firmly rooted in the broader context of the individual's life history.

Table 2 shows my subjects' attributes.

Some of the teachers I interviewed have experienced not only differences between the history they learned and the history they teach, but also changes in the content of the history they teach.

Table 2. Attributes of subjects

No.	Group	Codename	Sex	Year of birth	Affiliation	Province	Years of teaching***
1	1	Vireak	M	1965	HS* teacher	BTB	Approx. 30
2		Chanda	F	1968	JH** teacher	Kandal	Approx. 30
3		Bunthoeun	M	1968	JH teacher	BTB	35
4	2	Dara	M	1968	JH teacher	BTB	33
5		Vannak	M	1981	JH teacher	BTB	21
6		Sokha	M	1982	HS teacher	Kandal	16: 6 (JH) + 10 (HS)
7		Rachana	F	1984	HS teacher	Kandal	14: 1 (JH) + 13 (HS)
8		Vathana	F	1985	HS teacher	Kandal	12
9		Sreymom	F	1985	HS teacher	Kandal	11
10		Phalla	M	1989	HS teacher	BTB	14: 7 (JH) + 7 (HS)
11		Sophea	F	1991	JH teacher	BTB	11

Note(s): *HS: High School, **JH: Junior High School, ***Years of teaching experience at the time of the interview

Source(s): Prepared by the author

4. Results and discussion

The interviews showed that the teachers' knowledge and experiences of the Khmer Rouge era were so diverse that they could not easily be grouped into generational categories. In addition, their understanding and feelings about the Khmer Rouge were based on historical perceptions that had gradually formed over time, and in some cases had changed as they progressed from childhood to university and then to their careers as educators. Despite their different backgrounds, the main significance of teaching about the Khmer Rouge era in current history education is said to be "peace education." However, a detailed analysis of the meaning of this "peace education" has revealed several key points. The following sections examine each of these points in turn.

4.1 *Diverse, non-generational experiences*

All four teachers in Group 1, who were born before the Khmer Rouge era had childhood memories of the Khmer Rouge. However, Sophea (No. 11) in Group 2, who was born in 1991 (after the Khmer Rouge era), had a memory of the Khmer Rouge invasion and fighting in her village when she was very young. Sophea was 2 years old at the time, so she did not see it clearly and does not have a particularly vivid memory of it. She described his experience of the clash as follows;

What I remember is how they (parents/villagers) were frightened of the Khmer Rouge. [omitted] I remember that I was scared of the Khmer Rouge. I am afraid of the Khmer Rouge. . . [omitted] I did not witness it. I saw the light of the collision at the end. I saw it, but it was toward the end. But I was scared.

Sophea did not learn about the Khmer Rouge era via her education at elementary school through HS. Through her own personal experiences and the stories of her family members, relatives and community members, Sophea said she had some understanding of the Khmer Rouge by the time she was in junior HS. Now that she is a teacher, Sophea says the Khmer Rouge era is the most important in Cambodia's history.

There are many eras that we cover in class, but my feeling is that (the Khmer Rouge era) is the most important. There have been other civil wars in different eras. All of them are important. But in this (Khmer Rouge) era, many people died. [omitted] As for my family, my father also experienced many deaths of his relatives. My mother also. I lost many people during that era, most of my family of seven, and only my mother survived. It's so painful.

Sophea has first-hand experience and is aware that the Khmer Rouge era is both familiar and important. In previous studies, Sophea's generation was generally considered to be the generation that did not personally experience the Khmer Rouge era. In some areas, however, it is a generation that was exposed to Khmer Rouge violence as an actual experience. She had a strong sense of being victims herself and is uncertain whether the recognition of "pain" is about their family members or herself. Teachers from different generations and regions have their own unique real-life experiences and knowledge of experiences inherited from their families. It is clear that there is a diversity of experience that cannot be inferred from generational or regional theories.

4.2 *Change in historical recognition*

Next, I examine how the historical recognitions of teachers in Group 1 who experienced the Khmer Rouge clashes at an early age and were subsequently educated in anti-Pol Pot ideology formed recognitions to Khmer Rouge era.

There were three teachers (1, 3, 4) in Group 1 who received anti-Pol Pot education in the 1980s [1]. Of these, the life history of Bunthoeun (No. 3) is particularly worth discussing. Bunthoeun was born in 1968 and experienced the Khmer Rouge era when he was between the ages of 7 and 10. During the Khmer Rouge era, he worked long hours with children his age with little food, and he lost his father and older brother. He recalled that in the junior HS he

attended after the Khmer Rouge era, he experienced an education that disdained the Pol Pot faction in the subject of “political morality.” The content was angry and hateful, describing the violent actions of the Pol Pot faction against the people. Bunthoeun said that this experience matched his own feelings of anger and hatred. In class now, he explained, he uses the textbook as the basis for his teaching, adding texts from NGOs, his own experiences and stories from his mother. He then follows the textbooks and emphasises teaching the students what they can understand about the events, the political system and the lives of the people, based only on the facts. He said it was important not to create hatred or anger, and that it was important for children who did not know about that conflict to understand how it happened and not to repeat similar regimes.

Bunthoeun particularly appreciated the teaching of the history of the Khmer Rouge era as peace education. For Bunthoeun, it was a change in the perception of history as well as a shift to peace education, as the study of the conflict showed. It is clear that current history teachers, who have had very different experiences, that they share a common appreciation of this integration of genocide education into the official contemporary historical understanding –education about the Khmer Rouge era as peace education.

4.3 The process of historical recognition

How did teachers who had no real first-hand experience and had never been taught this material in their own schooling from elementary to HS create their historical understanding? In this study, there were nine teachers (2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11) who had no or little experience of being taught the history of the Khmer Rouge formally from elementary to HS. Here is the life story of Sreymom (No. 9).

From a young age, Sreymom had heard about her mother’s experiences during the Khmer Rouge era. Although she loved hearing her mother’s stories, she said she felt “sad” and “did not want to believe” when she first heard them. She said she had heard stories not only from her mother, but also from her father, relatives, friends, neighbours and others close to her about their experiences. Sreymom also remembered some of her mother’s stories. For example, her mother told her that the family was separated; that they all wore the same clothes and her mother only had two pieces of clothing; that her mother only ate porridge with a little salt in it; and that her mother worked more than 12 hours a day. Sreymom’s mother also told the following story about seeing a dead body when she went alone at night to visit her aunt.

I asked my mother why she was walking alone at night and if she was scared. My mother replied that she was not afraid. My mother was hungrier than that, and her aunt shared food with her, so she said that her hunger outweighed her fear. She said she wasn’t afraid even though there were dead bodies in the rice field. [omitted]

When I heard that, I thought that if it were me, I would be really scared if there were dead bodies. When I grew up and became a university student, I saw many pictures in the text “History of Democratic Kampuchea” produced by the DC-CAM, and there were many pictures of dead bodies, similar to what my mother had told me. I was convinced that what my mother had done was true. This is the experience my mother taught me.

When her mother first told her these stories, Sreymom considered them “unbelievable.” This way of understanding the situation has been found in previous studies. However, through various activities such as learning about the Khmer Rouge era at university, using textbooks and learning apps created by NGOs (especially DC-CAM), visiting the Tuol Sleng Massacre Museum, watching films about the Khmer Rouge era, and attending the ECCC trial, Sreymom realised that “*what my mother told me was true.*” Sreymom then explained the educational value of teaching about the Khmer Rouge era: “*By teaching about the past, we can change it [the future]. We can make sure that the Khmer Rouge regime will never happen again.*” She recognised it as a form of peace education. It is clear from this study that Sreymom’s historical recognition was shaped by multiple experiences: it took time for her to hear and understand her

mother's story, and she also understood her country's history through experiences other than hearing her mother's story.

4.4 As plural peace educations

Four teachers (3, 7, 8 and 9) spoke directly about the importance of teaching the history of the Khmer Rouge era. They included Sreymom (No. 9), who said that it was important never to repeat such an era. Less directly, Vireak (No. 1) spoke of his recognition of the importance of teaching about national unity, and Sokha (No. 6) mentioned that Cambodia would have been more developed without the Khmer Rouge era. It is a statement that places the current nation, which has inherited a negative legacy, on the side of the victims. Eight teachers (4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11) also discussed the importance of teaching historical facts, such as what regime and organisation it was that acted in that way. Teaching that serves as education aimed at preventing the repetition of the mistakes of the Khmer Rouge regime focuses on politics and social structures. In addition, some teachers spoke of the educational value of such teaching in terms of cultivating ethical values. For example, during her interview, Rachana (No.7) said the following;

☆: How did you feel when you heard it (the Khmer Rouge history)?

Rachana: First of all, I felt pain. The fact that Cambodians were killing each other is like that. Second, an innocent people were killed. Third is the killing of intellectuals. It is the loss of educated people. Finally, it is the loss of culture. We have become a country that has lost its culture and civilisation.

☆: I understand. It's hard.

Rachana: It is hard. But just looking back to the past is meaningless. We are teaching them [our students] to know and understand the truth. We are teaching them to love each other. If we can care for each other and respect each other, there will be no war. It is also important to teach students to love their country and their culture.

[omitted]

Rachana: I want the students to understand that this is a true story, not a story that will become a story over time. I want to tell it clearly. I want to make sure that we don't forget it in the history of Cambodia. We want to create a sense of mutual respect. Not to fight, but to take care of each other. We want to give the feeling that we value the people.

(☆:interviewer)

In the above narrative, Rachana emphasises the importance of conveying that this is a historical event that actually happened, rather than a didactic history for the sake of peace. Furthermore, rather than merely raising awareness of social structures or politics, she aims to cultivate a spirit of high ethical standards and mutual respect in individual lives.

Phalla (No.10) valued history education about the Khmer Rouge era as a moral lesson for everyday life rather than peace education to prevent war and conflict. Phalla had little experience of learning about the Khmer Rouge era in school and had heard stories about it from his parents and grandparents. For example, if he left a grain of rice in his rice bowl while eating, he would hear stories about the time when there was no food during the Khmer Rouge era, and he would be admonished to appreciate his food. Phalla said the following about the educational value of the history of that era;

☆: What do you think are the most important points when educating students about the Khmer Rouge era?

Phalla: The heart, the power, the power to live. . . to give students the power to live. For example, young kids these days, I mean the youth after 2000 in Cambodia, their health is better. [But] their minds are not good. There is no energy. There is no curiosity. There is no desire to try. They are afraid of failing or not being able to do it. Some even choose suicide. Some do not eat much.

☆: Is this about young people in Cambodia today?

Phalla: Yes, it is. It is about the youth of Cambodia today. Our grandfathers and grandmothers and parents are the reason why we are here today. We should understand that families were formed after the Khmer Rouge era. We must understand that there is a generation of grandparents who lived through that era.

☆: That's important. Morality? Is it the same when teaching history as it is in other eras?

Phalla: Not really. The Khmer Rouge era is important. This era is difficult to understand because of the cruelty of the content, which is not a real experience. I do not teach emotionally. I teach historical facts objectively. I tell them what kind of era it was and leave it up to the students to decide what they think about it and how they understand it.

The above narrative reveals that Phalla believes that it is important to study the history of the Khmer Rouge era in order to give the younger generation the strength to live in the present by understanding life during the Khmer Rouge era. There was moral educational value in making students think about the preciousness of life, leading to them being grateful for their daily lives.

Regarding peace education, most teachers agreed that students should know historical facts, but it was also clear that the meaning of "peace education" differed depending on the individual teacher. They share a common goal of teaching about the Khmer Rouge era "for peace," yet their intentions and sentiments reflect plural peace educations shaped by their own experiences and intentions.

4.5 Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that experiences and memories cannot be categorised by generation, nor can Group 1 and Group 2 be simply divided. Historical perceptions are gradually formed and changed through teachers' own experiences. Previous research on Cambodian perceptions of Khmer Rouge history has overlooked this process. [Senda's \(2022\)](#) study revealed that the descriptions in history textbooks and history education itself, as one of the official historical perceptions of the Khmer Rouge era, have undergone several changes influenced by the country's political background. The findings of this study indicate that teachers' historical perceptions are also historically influenced by both their local context and their experiences related to the Khmer Rouge era.

On the other hand, recent textbook descriptions have clearly been oriented toward internationality, as can be seen by their rewriting of descriptions according to international standards, and the transnational nature of the genocide comparisons they make ([Senda, 2022](#)). According to Etcheson – the original member of DC-CAM, a specialist in international conflict and transitional justice, and a member of the United Nations who had served as an investigator for the Special Court – DC-CAM was intended at its inception to be a model international institution for documenting large-scale social trauma ([Etcheson, 2005](#), p. 75). In other words, from the beginning, DC-CAM's activities, including genocide education, were expected to make an international contribution. Regarding such transnationality, [Lim \(2009\)](#) advocates "victimhood nationalism," the concept that the memories of victims are compared in the globally as collective memories, leading to a nationalistic competition to determine who made the greater sacrifice. In the case of the Khmer Rouge history, there is a clear distinction between perpetrators and victims and a tendency to concretise victim groups. This is due to the influence of international organisations and special courts in which DC-CAM is involved, the latter of which has driven genocide education in Cambodia. The courts embody tragic victims

and brutal perpetrators, and victims are also grouped into categories. The international comparison of genocides in the new curriculum, for example, is a step toward a nationalistic competition, not only within the country, but also in the global space, in which the victims of the Pol Pot regime compete over which category is the more serious group of victims. The problem with current history education curriculum is that it overlooks the people who have inherited the diverse memories and experiences of the Khmer Rouge era and misses the opportunity to understand the extant historical diversity (Senda, 2022).

However, the results of this study suggest that history teachers may incorporate their thoughts and wishes – based on their own memories and experiences – into the teaching of Khmer Rouge history education. This teaching approach differs from the teaching of a single nationalistic historical perception. The results are significant because they extend the possibility of history education that leaves the teaching to the initiative of the teachers, and because they open a new perspective from which to consider the development of a history curriculum.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I conducted interviews with history and social studies teachers who are in a position to educate students about the Khmer Rouge era, a period of large-scale political violence in Cambodia, and examined what historical recognitions they hold and how these recognitions were formed.

This study finds that many of the teachers had different experiences that did not lend themselves to a single generational theory. For example, although they were generally considered to be a generation that had no first-hand experience of the Khmer Rouge era, it became clear that one young teacher had experienced clashes with the Khmer Rouge as a child when the Khmer Rouge invaded her village. Another teacher had received an education devoted to opposing Pol Pot's ideology, but in subsequent educational activities, his recognition of the history of the Khmer Rouge era had changed to peace education.

It became clear that most teachers recognised the value of Khmer Rouge history education as plural peace educations. Many teachers emphasised the importance of clearly educating students about the historical events of the Khmer Rouge era so that they would never repeat the kind of regime that causes war, conflict and large-scale violence. On the other hand, there were also teachers who saw the value of peace education in cultivating a sense of ethics that students would find familiar, or who saw the value of peace education as a form of moral education that would nurture the students' power to live. In this way, it became clear that the value of a period in history education is underpinned by plural experiences, diverse desires, and multiple intentions, as revealed by a detailed analysis of the teachers' narratives.

In Cambodia, education is conducted according to a national curriculum using a single type of textbook. However, individual teachers have their own unique experiences and perceptions of Khmer Rouge history. Behind the common educational value of "peace education" lie diverse desires and motivations.

While this research is significant as a study of teachers' historical perceptions and life stories, it does not analyse educational activities, such as observing teachers' actual classes, and nor does it examine how students learn and understand. According to Chanda (No. 5), who has been a junior HS social studies teacher for more than 30 years, when teaching the third generation of students – whose parents did not experience the Khmer Rouge era – there are things that the students have not heard from their families, and it is difficult to teach this history in a way that they can clearly understand; the students' reactions sometimes indicate that they cannot believe the events of the Khmer Rouge era. Much fruitful further research could be undertaken, by myself and others, to analyse what kind of lessons are being taught and in what ways the students are learning and understanding.

Note

1. Within Group 1, Chanda (No. 2) did not talk about her experience of anti-Pol Pot education. This research did not directly ask whether she had received anti-Pol Pot education; instead, it asked, 'What did you learn?' Therefore, it is unclear whether she had experienced anti-Pol Pot education, but the result is that she did not talk about it.

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