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Guided by a dream

Cambodian 'educator' overcame early poverty and hardship, always driven by a strong desire for higher learning

By **LOW SHI PING** in Vientiane, Laos
For *China Daily Asia Weekly*

Of the many hats he wears, Vannarith Chheang prefers to be known as an educator. The reason is simple: Education lifted him out of abject poverty.

"Education is the key to unlocking your potential. You don't know who you are until you have the opportunity to educate yourself," said the 37-year-old from Cambodia.

Chheang discovered his calling after completing a bachelor's degree in international relations and realizing he had a flair for it. It spurred him to pursue a master's in the same discipline and eventually, a doctorate in Asia-Pacific studies.

Relatively new, the field of Asia-Pacific studies uses a multi-disciplinary approach.

"We do not specialize in politics, business, law or economics, but look at things from all those perspectives," Chheang explained.

Thanks to his education, he has been able to work concurrently with nonprofit organizations, think tanks and even governments in Asia.

To date, his career as educator, researcher and analyst has taken two tracks. The first focuses on Cambodia, where he tackles domestic issues and is an active observer of its relations with other countries.

The second has to do with social innovation and regional community building within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Never far from his work is the element of instruction. For instance, he is currently the Southeast Asia consultant at The Nippon Foundation, a Japanese nonprofit which champions social innovation.

He develops programs to provide fellowships to social innovators and seeks training partners in Singapore who can host them. The resulting exchange of knowledge will equip these innovators to go home and implement what they have learned.

Chheang is also working with his friend, Tshering Lama, to establish Childreach Cambodia by 2017. Lama is the country director of Childreach Nepal, part of the global network of Childreach International, a United Kingdom-based organization that provides children with opportunities to unlock their potential, such as through access to education and healthcare.

Another of Chheang's pursuits is regional community building in

ASEAN — looking at greater inclusiveness, integration and cooperation to benefit all 10 member states.

"ASEAN now faces the serious problem of a development gap." He said Brexit — Britain's vote to exit the European Union and seen as a retreat from globalization — was "a wake-up call for us and we need to learn from it by making sure we take care of everyone. We need to promote social innovation."

Within Cambodia, Chheang is active in two think tanks: The Cambodian Institute for Strategic Studies and the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace. The former enables him to engage with young leaders, while the latter has him rubbing shoulders with the ruling elite.

"This way, I have a finger in every level of Cambodian government and society. If I am approached for advice or comment about issues, I can offer it."

Ask Chheang about his purpose in doing all that he does and he points to his dream of "making a difference". Having lived through the Cambodian civil war between 1979 and 1992, he wants a "peaceful and stable society" to call home.

His village in the Stoung district of Kampong Thom province was a frontline in the fighting.

"I remember vividly many people getting killed in front of my house. When the Khmer Rouge occupied my village, they took everything and burned down houses. There was even one time when a soldier shot at my feet to threaten my mother so she would give him money."

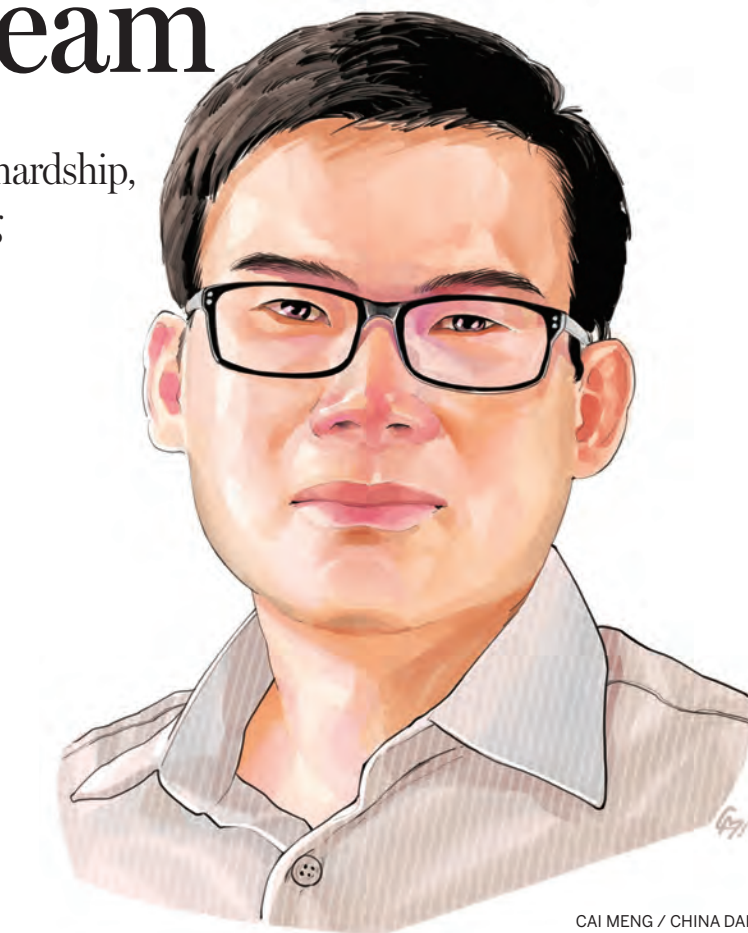
Despite the poverty and hardship, Chheang was always guided by a single dream: To go to university. This was drummed into him by his mother, who single-handedly raised Chheang and his elder brother.

"She dropped out of primary school and always regretted it," he said.

"But my mother loved education and wanted us to study. She believed that education and knowledge is the only key to get out from poverty — it was a very strong dream, vision and wisdom."

Chheang recalls trudging to school along pathways next to fields carpeted with unexploded landmines. He studied hard enough to make it to university in Phnom Penh but had to give up after about four months due to insufficient funds.

"I used to go to campus on an empty stomach because I didn't have enough money to buy break-



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fast. That was when I decided that, in order to survive, I had to get a scholarship."

The options were to apply to a university in either Russia or Vietnam. Deciding that the former was "too cold", he settled on Vietnam and went to Hanoi, pursuing his bachelor's degree in international relations.

Chheang admitted that he chose this subject because it was "completely new" to him and therefore interesting.

The study of international relations has become a huge part of his life and purpose, particularly in understanding the issues his country continues to face.

"War and peace are defined by international politics," he said.

"Cambodia was a victim of the Cold War. If we managed it better, my country might not have gone through the civil war.

"We were fighting each other based on the different ideologies driven by the superpowers. Because we could not manage it, we endured three decades of war."

According to Chheang, Cambodia will need smart diplomacy for the challenges and uncertainties that lie ahead. For instance, he believes that China and the United States are entering the early stages of a new Cold War.

"So how can Cambodia, as a small country, navigate through all these issues caused by international politics? We don't have the power and strength to drive the diplomacy, but we can try to manage the relations between the superpowers."

In the face of such challenges,

Chheang has his own strategy for coping. Living up to the label of educator, he said that wherever he goes, he tries to share the importance of openness and inclusiveness in the context of regional cooperation and integration.

He said he does not want to see ASEAN being divided like the EU, or, like the US now, grapple with xenophobia and protectionism.

"I don't know why all these champions of the open system have become more inward-looking," Chheang said.

"For us, we need to maintain this openness and inclusiveness. It is my mission and what I'm doing now for Asia in general."

Closer to home, Chheang looks ahead to the Cambodian general elections in 2018 and hopes for a nonviolent political transition.

"We have not had a peaceful regime change since 1953. My dream is to see it happen in a peaceful and smooth manner via a democratic process. I hope we can put national interest above group and party interests.

"I'm concerned about my country now more than ever," he said.

It is only natural to wonder if Chheang will take this to the next level and consider walking his talk — as a politician.

But, for now, the educator is sticking to his area of studies and his nonprofit and think-tank work.

Cambodia politics have a reputation tainted by corruption, and Chheang's Singaporean wife is not enthusiastic about his involvement.

"I might move into it one day, though it's hard to say. If I do, I will probably be the poorest politician in the history of the country."

Bio

Vannarith Chheang

Southeast Asia consultant at The Nippon Foundation, Tokyo

Education:

2010: PhD in Asia-Pacific studies, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University

2009: Graduate certificate in Asia-Pacific leadership, East-West Center, University of Hawaii

2006: MA in international relations, International University of Japan

2002: BA in international relations, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam

Career milestones:

2016: Southeast Asia consultant, The Nippon Foundation, Tokyo

2016: Visiting scholar (China-ASEAN relations), China Institute of International Studies

2015-present: Cofounder and chairman, Cambodian Institute for Strategic Studies

2013-2016: Lecturer, University of Leeds, UK

2009-2012: Executive director, Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace

Awards:

2014: World Cities Summit Young Leader

2013: Young Global Leader, World Economic Forum

2012: Personnalites d'Avenir (Personalities of the Future), French foreign ministry, Paris

2010: Research fellowship at the East-West Center, University of Hawaii

Quick takes:

What is the biggest current threat to peace and stability in Asia?

I am keeping a close watch on relations between China and the United States. They need to develop in a healthy and stable way, failing which it will affect all of us. The political rhetoric now in the US is quite anti-China, but the Chinese leadership seem sincere in their hope to build an inclusive world based on the soft power tools of economics and culture.

What advice would you give to the leaders of ASEAN?

They need to stay together in any circumstances. Our leaders need to learn to navigate the challenges in good and bad times together. ASEAN is a catalyst of national reform, especially for countries like Cambodia.

How do you wind down?

I enjoy traveling the world. For me, it is important to find the human connection. One way I do this is to go couch surfing (sharing others' homes in a social approach to world travel). My wife and I have met many interesting people as a result.

Date of birth: Feb 12, 1979