

## An EAA Interview with the 2015 Franklin R. Buchanan Prize Winners for *My Cambodia* and *My Cambodian America*

*This is our nineteenth consecutive interview with the recipients of the AAS Franklin R. Buchanan Prize. This year's winners are Rylan Sekiguchi and Risa Morimoto, who developed the free multimedia education package My Cambodia and My Cambodian America, published by the Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education (SPICE) online at [stanford.io/1sI162V](http://stanford.io/1sI162V). SPICE serves as a bridge between Stanford University and K–12 schools and community colleges by developing multidisciplinary curriculum materials on international themes.*

*Rylan Sekiguchi is a curriculum designer at SPICE. His publications include a dozen curriculum units and several web-based resources. Risa Morimoto is a partner in Edgewood Pictures, an independent New York City-based motion picture company. Morimoto received her master's in Film Production and Education from New York University in 1999, where she served as the Associate Director of the Asian/Pacific/American Studies Program and Institute and was the Executive Director of Asian CineVision, a nonprofit media arts organization in New York City, from 2002 to 2006.*

**Lucien:** *Rylan and Risa, congratulations to you, and other members of the team who developed this comprehensive and impressive multimedia education package. What factors led to the SPICE decision to create middle and high school educational materials on Cambodia and Cambodian-Americans?*

**Rylan Sekiguchi:** Thanks for the kind words, Lucien. We were really thrilled to receive the Buchanan Prize this year! Thank you also for the opportunity to do this interview with EAA. I hope it encourages your readers to watch the films for themselves, and maybe to use them in their own schools.

Several factors led us to pursue this project. First, as you know, SPICE develops supplementary teaching materials on all kinds of international and cross-cultural topics. We do a lot on Asia—especially East Asia—but we're always trying to cover new ground and explore new ideas. We'd only undertaken a few film projects previously, and we had never done a project solely focused on Cambodia, so when the right circumstances arose we didn't think twice.

Those circumstances began to take form when SPICE Director Dr. Gary Mukai met and came to know Dr. Khatharya Um, an Associate Professor of Ethnic Studies at the University of California at Berkeley. Professor Um's academic expertise on Southeast Asia, refugee migration, genocide, and diaspora was an obvious match for a SPICE project on Cambodia and Cambodian-Americans. Even more than that, however, her personal history—as a young Cambodian

refugee fleeing the Khmer Rouge in 1975, as the first Cambodian-American woman to earn a PhD in 1990, and now as a passionate educator herself—truly made her an ideal collaborator for us. Fortunately for SPICE, Professor Um turned out to be just as enthusiastic about the project as we were, and thus the curriculum package was born.

In creating the films and curricular materials, we had a few goals in mind. Of course, we wanted to make them intellectually and emotionally engaging for students. But in addition to that, we really wanted to create

something that teachers could easily use. We wanted the materials to be accessible, widely applicable, and flexible. We decided early on to make everything available for free online, and we tried our best to design lesson plans that would appeal to a broad student audience and deal with key themes that span the social studies curriculum—themes like identity, culture, historical memory, and social change. The lesson is designed to be adaptable to different grade levels and scalable for different time lengths and classroom contexts, and it offers a flexible menu of activities

that can be customized at the teacher's discretion and/or students' interests.

Through it all, we hope that students gain an understanding of Cambodian and Cambodian-American history, and begin to consider some of the complex issues raised by that history. I think Professor Um put it nicely when she said, "We approach history and culture as tools and platforms for empowerment." I hope our materials help teachers to empower their stu-



The film crew in Cambodia. From left to right: Rylan Sekiguchi, Sony Yen, Professor Khatharya Um, Risa Morimoto, and Bao Nguyen.

dents—especially those teachers with Cambodian-American students who rarely, if ever, see their and their families’ stories reflected in the curriculum.

**Lucien:** *Risa, I am familiar with your earlier film documentary Wings of Defeat since it received an excellent review in the fall 2008 issue of EAA. What appealed to you as a filmmaker about having the chance to create the two Cambodia and Cambodian-American documentaries that are integral components of the unit?*

**Risa Morimoto:** I worked with SPICE on the teacher’s guide for *Wings of Defeat*. It was an enormously positive experience, and to have the film be taught in schools with a curriculum guide was beyond my original expectations when I made the film. When Gary and Rylan approached me about making a pair of short films on Cambodia and Cambodian-Americans, I jumped at the chance. It gave me an extraordinary opportunity to learn about Cambodia and how the legacy of its history continues to affect millions of Cambodians today.

Several documentaries and fiction films have been made about the Khmer Rouge. The challenge was to create films that would appeal to teenagers and fit within the time constraints of a high school class period while placing Professor Um’s and Pete Pin’s experiences into the larger historical context. I hope we succeeded with these films and that students continue to ask more questions long after the films have ended.

**Lucien:** *I watched both documentaries and was impressed with each of the subjects of the two films (Professor Khatharya Um, My Cambodia, and Pete Pin, My Cambodian America). What are some of the most important ways, in your opinion, each subject contributed to making the documentaries “work”?*

**Risa:** When we were shooting the films, it quickly became evident that the two stories complemented one another. Professor Um grew up in Cambodia and served as the perfect guide. She humanized the experience in a way that was personal and heartbreaking, while simultaneously providing valuable historical context. She allowed us into her world and gave us a glimpse of what the horrific years during the Khmer Rouge must have been like—an experience no human being should have to endure. Although the Khmer Rouge has defined Cambodia’s recent dark history, there are over a thousand years of rich Cambodian history that predated the Khmer Rouge. Professor Um gracefully reminded us of that time when Cambodia’s engineering, art, and culture flourished, and how Cambodians have used those memories and that history to rebuild themselves.

Pete’s story essentially starts where Professor Um’s ends. Pete represents those who, like many in his generation, have little to no personal memory of the Khmer Rouge. But he understands the value and importance of knowing his own history not only for himself, but for future generations as well. His camera serves as the perfect tool to not only document the Cambodian-American community but also encourage and inspire older Cambodians to share their stories. For the Cambodian diaspora, there are many questions left unanswered. Pete cannot answer these questions himself, but he is committed to continuing the dialogue with younger generations of Cambodian-Americans so that this history is never forgotten.

**Lucien:** *Rylan, I know you were in Cambodia for at least part of the filming of My Cambodia. In what ways did your in-country experience influence the development of the teaching guide? Did you have the chance to meet Pete Pin, the subject of My Cambodian America? How did direct interaction with Mr. Pin, and/or the vicarious experience of watching the rough cut or completed film, influence your work on the teaching guide?*

**Rylan:** I was actually fortunate enough to be present for the entire filming of *My Cambodia*. We had a crew of five: Risa, Professor Um, Bao Nguyen (our cinematographer), Sony Yen (our sound recordist), and myself. Our

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Scenes from *My Cambodia*



Professor Um makes a brief stop to watch happy children at play.



Speaking to Bou Meng, a survivor of the Khmer Rouge.



Praying at her family stupa.

Scenes from *My Cambodian America*



Pete Pin.



Pete's portrait diptych of his grandmother. © Pete Pin



Pete talking to young Cambodian men in Philadelphia.



Pete's portrait diptych of his father. © Pete Pin

travel itinerary took us from the elaborate temples of Angkor Wat in the north to the killing fields near Phnom Penh in the south. In a palpable sense, our itinerary mirrored the dualistic nature of Cambodian history: its glorious ancient civilization as well as its tragic recent past. The legacies of both aspects were everywhere around us as we traveled around the country. Being there in Cambodia allowed me to observe those legacies with my own eyes.

I also learned a ton from our crew, especially from Professor Um and Risa. Day after day, Professor Um endured my endless stream of questions with patience and grace and shared her encyclopedic knowledge about Cambodia generously. When it was time to film, Risa took the lead, organizing the rest of us, defining our vision, and working her directorial magic. By the end of our trip, I had gained a deeper understanding and appreciation of both Cambodia and documentary filmmaking.

Perhaps most importantly, my experiences in Cambodia really made me feel a strong emotional connection with the country. I know it sounds cliché, but that aspect was irreplaceable for me, and I think forming a connection like that would have been difficult had I not visited Cambodia. The warmth and gentleness of the people there really touched my heart, and the stories we heard made me feel close to the country and its people.

Because of scheduling issues, I wasn't able to be present for the filming of *My Cambodian America*, so I didn't get to meet Pete Pin in person. However, I did enjoy seeing the rough and fine cuts of the film as it was being developed, so it was more of a vicarious experience for me, as you say. Even though I didn't meet Pete face to face, it was easy to connect with Pete's story and purpose. I think people who've watched the film would agree with me. I believe that's a testament to Risa's talent for storytelling, as well as Pete's ability to articulate himself so well through both his words and his photography.

*My Cambodian America* touches on a number of big themes that I think resonate with all kinds of viewers—identity, cultural preservation, the value of historical knowledge, resilience—but it does so through the focused lens of Pete's story, and at times through the literal lens of his camera. That focused perspective provided a nice structure to work within, and it helped me frame the teaching guide in my mind.

**Lucien:** *What other Asia-related educational materials would either or both of you like to see developed and made available to middle and high school students?*

**Rylan:** For us at SPICE, we know most teachers use our materials to supplement their main curriculum. That gives us flexibility, so we design our lessons to give students learning experiences that aren't offered in textbooks. We try to fill in the gaps.

Sometimes that means covering countries and regions that are less commonly taught, so teachers have somewhere to turn to if they want to do a unit on, say, North Korea or Kazakhstan or Afghanistan. At other times that means delving deep into a popularly taught topic to examine alternate perspectives and challenge students' assumptions. I think Risa's film, *Wings of Defeat*, is a prime example of that; it completely upends your notion of the "fanatic" kamikaze pilots of World War II and forces you to reevaluate your own understanding of history. Maybe this answer is a little vague, but I'd like to see more of that—material that covers lesser-taught regions of Asia or that exposes students to multiple perspectives and narratives on topics within the standard curriculum.

**Lucien:** *Rylan and Risa, thank you for the interview!* ■