

Interview excerpts with Kho Chenda, textile conservator at Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, with the help of Sam An Sopheaktra for translation and Magali An Berthon, textile researcher. Recorded on January 8, 2020, at Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

1/ Could you please introduce yourself and say a few words about your career path?

My name is Kho Chenda, I am a former student from the Archeology Department [at the Royal University of Fine Arts]. I have experience in ceramic conservation, stone conservation and metal conservation. And then in 2013, I took short a course at the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts on metal conservation. It was under the support of Germany and it took 1.5 months. I then came to work at Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum as a volunteer, then became a full-time staff at the museum in metal conservation in 2014. In 2018, I learned about textile conservation from Ms. Julia Brennan for one full year to rescue the abandoned textiles at the museum.

2/ Between 2017 and 2020, what has changed at the museum in terms of textile conservation?

The process of the conservation of textiles is different from what I was doing earlier until I got to learn from Ms. Julia Brennan. Originally, I did not know anything at all. I learned how to store textiles with an Australian expert. We stored the textiles on the wooden shelves. And usually, when we had visitors, we would always show them the objects. However, after learning from Julia, it was different. The museum got funding from the US Embassy. I learned other techniques on how to conserve textiles and how to use DryBox to store them.

3/ What have you learned about textile conservation processes?

I have learned from Miss Julia Brennan both how to store and take care of the textiles. We put the textiles in the DryBox after treatment and we check the humidity and the temperature. I do the whole process: cleaning, inventory, taking pictures, pest control, and temperature and humidity check, the whole process.

4/ What would you say is the most difficult aspect of your job?

The most difficult part is lacking equipment, lack of technical equipment. Because we don't have enough conservation equipment, it's hard to run the conservation department smoothly. For example, related to metal conservation, we lack the glue that we need to import from abroad, glue B72, B48, white spirit... And the balm that we need to write down on metal. And for textiles, it's hard to find acid-free fabrics and paper materials.

5/ What is so specific about the emotional aspects of your work as a conservator at Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum?

From the beginning when I worked with metal conservation [for the shackles], I knew the history [at the prison], and how they used that metal object. And I was so sad working with that. But then when I moved to work with textiles, it was another feeling that was hard to accept because I still can imagine those who wore that piece of clothes and how they suffered during that time.

With metal, for example, the shackles, it feels normal to look at them because you are working with those every single day. You can see they're all the same, the shackles are the same. But for the textiles, it's different. They all have their own specificities. Some pieces of clothing have small patches sewn together. And some are torn, even stitched with nylon wire.

It feels so intense because it can tell us that those who wore those pieces of clothes were suffering a lot. When they were sewing a patch to fill in the lost parts, they used another colour. It is not the same material, it is just like, they added a fragment in a different colour. They just used it to sew it without caring whether it's matching in colour or not. So it makes me feel anxious.

Sometimes clothes belong to the military but sometimes they belonged to civilians. When I don't see any damage on the object, it's easier.

6/ Any final thoughts? What are your plans for the future?

The lessons I learned from Julia, I do not want to keep them all for myself. I want to share that knowledge with someone who really has the intent to know more about textile conservation. For my

former school, if they have a special course for textile conservation, I would be really happy to share that knowledge to teach people or younger generations about that. I feel I do not need to be on-site all the time. I would also like to get another experience, to work in another place, or another country, where they have also suffered from genocide. If they still have remaining textiles until now, I would like to exchange experiences, learn more, and provide lessons to learn how to do that.

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Courtesy of Kho Chenda.

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