

Youk Chhang

A relentless investigator of Cambodia's killing fields seeks justice, not revenge

BY PHILIP SHORT

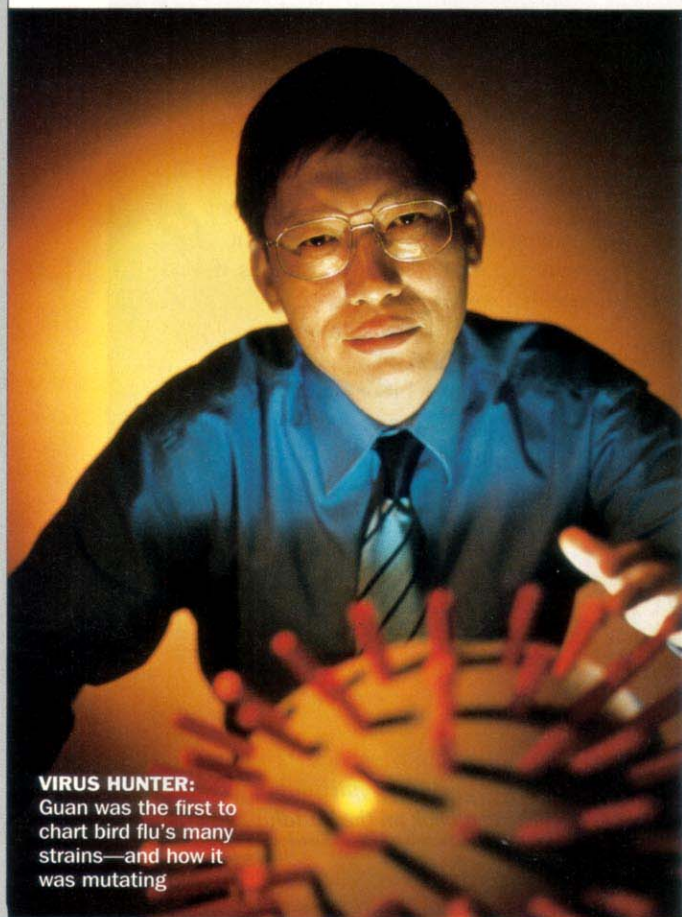
FOR MORE THAN A DECADE, YOUK CHHANG HAS been Cambodia's conscience. If today there is a real possibility of bringing at least some of the former Khmer Rouge leaders before the international tribunal that will begin hearings next year, he, more than anyone, is responsible.

Youk's Documentation Center of Cambodia, a private organization financed mainly by foreign grants, has amassed more than 600,000 pages of documents detailing the workings of the Khmer Rouge regime that from April 1975 to January 1979 transformed Cambodia into a slave state. The Center's holdings in the capital Phnom Penh include minutes of Cambodian Communist Party leadership meetings chaired by the movement's ultra-radical chief Pol Pot; confidential reports describing conditions in the countryside where more than a million people died of starvation or related illness; and the confessions under torture of thousands of prisoners killed by Pol Pot's secret police. Without these documents, a trial would be almost impossible. Today the most damning items are kept in armored, fireproof cabinets, guarded day and night.

An affable, engaging 45-year-old, Youk has the demeanor of a soft-spoken diplomat rather than a man investigating mass murder. Yet his quest for justice has



POSTMORTEM:
Youk at Tuol Sleng Museum, formerly the Khmer Rouge's interrogation center



VIRUS HUNTER:
Guan was the first to chart bird flu's many strains—and how it was mutating

Guan Yi & Malik Peiris

Their scientific research on deadly diseases makes all of us safer

BY KARL TARO GREENFELD

IN THE DANK SPRING OF 2003, when Hong Kong was besieged by pestilence, it seemed unlikely that anyone of significance or global import could be based in the plagued city. Early in my research for a book about Hong Kong, China and the SARS outbreak, I met with Malik Peiris and Guan Yi, respectively professor and associate professor of microbiology at the University of Hong Kong. The two men were co-heads of Pandemic Preparedness in Asia, a group that monitors

influenza around the region; both were friendly, concerned, uncynical and each, in his own way, devoted to Hong Kong in a manner that seemed quaintly anachronistic. Peiris was the more soft-spoken of the two, his Sri Lankan-by-way-of-Oxford accent so droningly dispatched that it occasionally caused me to lean in to hear him. Guan spoke faster, his choppy, Chinese-inflected English making him hard to understand. When I was struggling to comprehend some element of virology, they



JOHN VINK—MAGNUM PHOTOS

been as much a personal odyssey as an abstract search for historical truth. When the Khmer Rouge took power, he was marched off, like millions of others, to do forced labor in the countryside. His brother-in-law and two nieces died. Then his sister was accused of stealing rice. “She denied it,” he remembers, “but the Khmer Rouge cadre refused to believe her. To prove his accusation, he took a knife and slashed her belly open. Her stomach was empty. She died a slow and horrible death.”

Years later, Youk tracked down the man who had killed her. He had grown old and pathetically poor. Youk has decided that revenge is not the answer. “Nothing can resurrect what we’ve lost,” he says. “Violence won’t erase the horrible memories. It could never ease the pain of Cambodia’s past.” Youk believes the trial, to which he has devoted so many years, will help Cambodia find closure. Without accountability, he argues, the country will remain dysfunctional and unable to advance, no matter how much foreign aid is poured in. “Cambodia is like broken glass,” he says. “Without justice, we cannot put the pieces together.” ■

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would draw me little diagrams to illustrate their point.

They were so patient with me that I initially came away with the wrong impression of them. It took a while to understand just how significant these men were, not locally but globally. I was in the habit of assuming that important research in science and medicine was done elsewhere, in the gold-standard laboratories of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta or the Pasteur Institute in Paris. But here? In Hong Kong? How could our dying city host groundbreaking research? And if Peiris and Guan were truly great, important men, why would they be so generous with their time?

I’m embarrassed to admit it now, but I traveled around the world, speaking with virologists, epidemiologists and public-health officials in

Geneva, Rotterdam, New York, Atlanta and Beijing before I finally figured out that the true heroes in the fight against SARS were right in Hong Kong, where I lived and worked. Peiris and his team were the first to identify the agent that causes SARS. Guan, through his network of contacts in southern China, was the first to label the wild-animal markets of Guangzhou as a byway through which the virus came to infect humans. He had spent months in those markets himself, drawing blood and swabbing for feces in order to map out the early

epidemiology of the virus. His research would compel Chinese authorities to shut down the markets, possibly a key step in preventing subsequent outbreaks.

It had taken mankind centuries to figure out how yellow fever was spread; in the 1980s we had progressed to the point that it had taken only two years to determine what caused AIDS. Peiris and Guan had done similar research, in the face of an onrushing epidemic—as their colleagues were literally lying stricken in neighboring hospital wards—in a matter of weeks. Both men

would continue their heroic work as Hong Kong became the likely epicenter for another emerging disease: avian influenza. Guan and his team would sequence more than 250 strains of the bird-flu virus H5N1, providing the first accurate genetic roadmap of how it is mutating—and where it might strike next.

“There are only four questions you need to ask about a virus,” Guan once told me. “What is it? What does it do? Where does it come from? And how do you kill it?” Malik Peiris, Guan Yi and their colleagues have made answering those questions their life. For that, we may owe them our lives. ■

Karl Taro Greenfeld is the former editor of TIME Asia and the author of China Syndrome: The True Story of the 21st Century’s First Great Epidemic



PIONEER: Peiris discovered what causes SARS

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