



# Local People's Memories of Refugee Camps in the Thai-Cambodian Border Areas of Sa Kaeo and Chanthaburi Provinces and Guidelines for Life and Community Development



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### Abstract

This research aims to compile and analyze stories from the memories of local people in Thai-Cambodian border areas and to present guidelines which can be used to develop border communities. Fieldwork information was collected through interviews by the Subdistrict Administrative Organization. Thirty villagers with specific relevant experience were selected to be interviewed. The data were analyzed according to the theory of biography research. The results of the study provide information about the arrival of Cambodian refugees into the camps at different periods and with diverse groups of Cambodians, along with interactions between the refugees in the camp and Thai people at border areas. When the refugee camps were closed, the majority of people were deported back to Cambodia. Only a small percentage had the right to emigrate and live in third countries. The results of group discussions with representatives of local administrative, educational, and cultural departments yielded guidelines for using research results for development. In the short term, the community disseminates information through social media to help it to become more well-known, with an aim to emphasize the importance of the border area as a place with sentimental and memory value. In the long term, the community will build learning centers, monuments, accommodations and souvenir shops for visitors because former immigrants and those who have worked with the camps come back to visit the place regularly throughout the year. Nowadays, the community is seriously progressing forward on social communication via Facebook, Tik Tok, and Instagram. At Sa Kaeo, the Khao I Dang Learning Center was established and in Chanthaburi, the bunkers have been preserved. Both of these places have expanded the



legacy of memories and developed the area into a source of learning about local history. To ensure longevity of learning, local schools have added local history subjects to the educational curriculum to narrate the history of their hometown and to formulate it as part of national history.

**Keywords:** Memory, Khmer Refugees, Refugee Camps, Thailand-Cambodia Border.

## Introduction

This research was conducted in response to the Social Engagement strategy of Srinakharinwirot University (Sa Kaeo Campus) on the issue of social services in the area where the university is located to ensure that spatial operations are in line with national strategies and policies in advancing towards Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) according to the principles of University Social Engagement. This represents a mission relationship that consists of joint thinking, alliances and partnerships. Partnership creates mutual benefits in the area of those involved since knowledge is given and learning occurs together and has a measurable social impact in the area. This research therefore focuses on studying the area of Sa Kaeo Province where the university is located (Srinakharinwirot, 2021, p. 23).

Sa Kaeo Province is a province in the border area. The current spatial context consists of flat landscapes, rice fields, and agricultural areas. It is a forested mountainous area. The area looks peaceful today. If anyone passes by and talks to the villagers, they will find out that an important event took place in the local area decades ago as this border area was once a bustling refugee camp. Khao I Dang Camp is an area that continuously appeared in the media from 1975-1993 in regard to the issue of refugee camps. A representative of the local Subdistrict Administrative Organization said in an interview that the area that used to be a refugee camp is still important to local people in terms of the memories of local people. When you invite local people to tell stories about immigrants, you will find that it is a very interesting story. Furthermore, what is very interesting is that some of the Cambodians who used to live in refugee camps have now moved to western countries. They still bring friends and family members to visit the land that was once a refugee camp to recall their memories. Thai people on the border therefore came up with the idea to develop this memory space into a learning resource and a historical tourist attraction, which is in line with the goal of the research project; to benefit the people in the area and their needs based on the local history.

A border area is a diverse social and cultural area. It is an area that is meaningful for national safety and security. Knowing about borders and developing border communities is therefore important to the nation (Thongkanarak, 2008, p. 29). Thailand and Cambodia share a border of approximately 798 kilometers in length. About 40 years ago, the border areas housed refugee camps. The border areas have stories to be told about their communities in the days when they were refugee centers. Those

who had direct experience at that time are now getting older. and many who experienced life in the refugee camps today are at a very old age. If recollections from such people are not collected now, it may be difficult to find living immigrant storytellers in the coming years.

Therefore, this research aims to interview people who can share their experiences during the time when the refugee camps were in place, with great assistance from the Subdistrict Administrative Organization in selecting and contacting people with experience and giving consent to convey information to the research project. This research is interested in the villagers' spatial perspectives regarding the current conditional problems of the area, where the area conditions presented by authorities are different from those described by the villagers. People who have lived in the area for a long time know the background of the area. For example, the area of Prasat Sdok Kok Thom is presented as a national museum or a historical park, according to official information. The site is a Hindu religious place based on the beliefs of the ancient Khmers. However, the local version explains that Prasat Sdok Kok Thom was once a place of refugees from the civil war in Cambodia and used to be a community of Khmer immigrants. It was a meeting area for Thai border people and Khmer immigrants in the form of a bustling border trade market.



**Figure 1** The Baray of Sdok Kok Thom (It was a field of chili and basil trees).

Source: Author

During 2007, the researcher surveyed the area around Prasat Sdok Kok Thom by following the guidance of local people. The villagers took the researcher to see fields of basil and fields of chili. Villagers conveyed their memories about the events at the time when many Khmers had come to use the area around Prasat Sdok Kok Thom. After the Khmer people left the area, there were plenty of chili and basil trees remaining there (Chalerm Suntun, interview, 8 August 2020). This is because the Khmer refugees used chili and basil as ingredients. As a result, chili and basil

waste was scattered around the residential area until it became a field of chili trees. However, the area nowadays is a water pond (baray). When the researcher went to explore the routes and the border area of Sa Kaeo province, the villagers pointed out where the refugee center used to be. The place used to be a bustling trading market with Khmer immigrants, where hundreds of thousands of immigrants stayed together for nearly 20 years (Siripen Yenjit, interview, 8 August 2020).

The research revealed that the information told by local people gives an idea of the area's conditions and its importance. If there is no such information and explanation, it would be difficult to notice how important the things we see today were in the past.

In its current condition, the area has only mountains, forests and fields, without any indication that it used to be a bustling area. Memories of the bustling area are things that cannot be seen by the eyes, but they are vivid in the memories of those who were there at the time. Some villagers who knew the stories have already died. Therefore, 'memories' are significant in terms of their form since they could fade, or their transmission might not be possible, and they may be lost along with the person who holds them if no studies, surveys or interviews are conducted to keep records of their experiences. The memories of villagers are the history of the community, which are a part of national history. The transformation of local history into national history helps to build the understanding of diverse communities with both narrow and wide perspectives, allowing people in younger generations to know and understand the background of their locality. Consequently, gathering information from biographies is important for communities and nations (Baddeley, 1999, p. 19).

The purpose of this research is to study the stories of people in the Thai-Cambodian border areas. The study of oral history is beneficial in terms of its essence as the information is obtained from local people. Telling the story of their locality is an opportunity for ordinary people to participate in writing local history. This will complement the history of the nation, which may differ from the history written by people in the capital city, which generally focuses on the history of the elites instead of the general public. The researchers are interested in conducting a study by employing a qualitative method based on biographical research concepts and theories (Robert, 2002, p. 52).

This research employs field data from interviews with people who described situations in the area that occurred in the past in order to communicate with people nowadays and build an understanding among them regarding the origins of the historical features in the area. Storytelling conveys memories which are linked to a place. The research aims to show that the collective memory of people in the Thai-Cambodian border area is linked to events that happened in the area and are linked to the practices of local people. What people remember has become history that is inseparably related to the area. This connection reflects the great importance between living space and the way of life and aspects of the social life of the local people.

The study of memories is valuable in reviving the collective consciousness of the local people. It is performed to strengthen the locality with local historical and cultural roots (Walliphodom, 2011, p. 11-12). The results of this study can lead to a better understanding of local identity which can be used to revive people's memories, perspectives, ways of life, culture and beliefs, as well as prevent such information from being lost over time. The development of local communities through local stories is a study method performed in order to obtain information for usages in various fields. It can be improved by transforming its results into community development guidelines in order to strengthen and maintain social and cultural stability in the border areas, enhancing the conditions of the border areas so that the communities have a better quality of life based on local identity. This local study aligns with the Thailand 4.0 policy to drive Thailand towards prosperity, security and sustainability in preparation for changes in the culture of existence and changes in the culture of learning (Sikkhabundit, 2017, p. 4).

## Objectives

1. This research aims to study the memories of people in regard to refugee camps (1975-1993) in the Thai-Cambodian border area at Sa Kaeo and Chanthaburi provinces.
2. This research aims to use local memories as information and topics in small-group meetings with local people to seek ways for local development by using space and memories as the basis.

## Research Methodology

The objectives of this research project are to collect stories about Khmer refugees and refugee camps from the memories of local people on the Thai-Cambodian border in Ta Phraya district of Sa Kaeo province and Pong Nam Ron district of Chanthaburi province and to present guidelines for developing the way of life of Thai-Cambodian border communities. The scope of the research project focused on the memories of local people on the Thai-Cambodian border to allow people to share their memories of the Khmer refugee camps located there, which was from around 1975-1993. By 1975, the Khmer Rouge invasion of Phnom Penh and Cambodia had begun, and 1993 saw the end of this period, when all refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodian border officially closed.

The qualitative research method was carried out in accordance with the following procedure:

Step 1: Conduct a literature review to examine the concepts and theories of biographical research, the concepts of ethnicity and nationalism and the concepts of development;

Step 2: Study and analyze narratives based on local people's memories by conducting fieldwork studies in the border provinces of Sa Kaeo and Chanthaburi and using observation methods and in-depth interviews with the key informants to gather information;



Step 3: Conduct content analysis in accordance with the concepts and theories of biographical research. The expected benefits from the research project are the story narratives gathered from the memories of local people in the Thai-Cambodian border communities of Sa Kaeo and Chanthaburi provinces, and the knowledge gained about the historical background of local communities and experiences of local people, leading to a better understanding of thoughts and perspectives toward life and individuality as well as social and cultural interactions between insiders who resided in the border areas and outsiders.

## **Concepts and theories employed in the research**

This study is consistent with Connerton's (2010, p. 38) work on the concept of memory by Maurice Halbwachs, a famous French philosopher and sociologist, on the concept of collective memory. Connerton proposed a theory of memory that highlights the importance of people's memories which he called 'collective memory,' a profound, delicate and meaningful assessment of the information shared by people. People in society have collective memories; they have stories about past events that they perceived. Connection and reproduction is facilitated by retelling the story, linking it to people in the present day in order to allow them to see the overall picture of a particular event and to understand the situation in the past, which in turn is connected to what is happening in the present.

The results of the research in collecting the villagers' narratives of memories and stories help villagers to participate in sharing memories together. This is a joint way of telling local history and expressing their pride in the locality in which they have been raised. Storytelling superimposes historical time onto a place. It is the collective experience of many people which is always a topic for villagers to talk about. The villagers have various local stories to tell to visitors. It is the continuation of local stories which creates value for the local area. Nowadays, when villagers want to talk about the importance of villages and communities, the story about when the village was used as a refugee camp is still important. Locals mention that the place was once used as a refugee camp to help Cambodians fleeing war. Even though the majority of the narratives are about Khmer people, local villagers have their own identity in every story they tell. The site of the former refugee camp is the embodiment of memory that connects present life with the past. The formation of identity in the present derives from the roots in the past. Therefore, recurrent telling is a creative production of memory since it is a strong link between the past and the present. It can be used to interpret or create identity, as well as explain knowledge, create better understanding, and clarify past events, which could have some effects in the present. It is a creative memory; it gives an extremely clear picture of the relationship and history of people in the past and present in a particular area.

## **Biographical Research: Memories and narratives about life**

Brian Roberts (2002, p. 15-16) proposed that biographical research is a method of studying life, experience, and history from memory through retelling stories and gathering evidence from individuals. Each person has a story in regard to his or her life. The various stories that are told by people sharing the experiences of communities becomes the history of the society and of the nation. Biographical research is a form of qualitative research as it explores the overall picture of small units, such as communities, as well as bigger units, such as societies, nations and international alliances. Biographical research concepts and theories are focused on personal life experiences. Storytelling based on what people have seen and touched, according to their memories of the time, is valuable, important and very interesting. Writing about life stories is very broad and includes the use of memories, autobiographies and diaries. A case study on personal life and data depends on the focus of the study (Smith, 1994, p. 287). If viewed from a historical perspective, it presents history according to word of mouth. Looking at it from a psychological perspective, it is a study of influences on the perceptions, conceptions and interactions of people (Yow, 1994, p. 167). The study of life stories has become a complement to analysis of life experience and individuality. It relates to social groups, situations, and events (Lieblich et al, 1998, p. 8-9).

Biographical analysis is an understanding of science that begins with individual curiosity. Doubt is an abstract idea that must be tested and resolved with empirical data. From a psychological viewpoint, knowing how a person experienced life leads to an understanding a person's perceptions and cognitive concepts (Josselson, 1995, p. 31-21). Another important aspect of biographical research is that the researcher must know how to integrate many disciplines. Hastrup (1992, p. 127) stated that memory is a time that can be remembered, recounted, and explained by reminiscing on past experiences. Memories are the result of past experiences and the things that are remembered, and how they were viewed. What did people do? What was his/her role? How did people see themselves? Past memories affect thoughts and actions that occurred and may continue to occur in the future (Baddeley, 1999, p. 19).

## **The results of the study**

### **Memories of people in regard to Khmer refugees on the Thai-Cambodian border**

The literature review reveals historical information about Khmer immigration before and after 1975, which affected the situation in the border area. The number of Khmer refugees had been rising in the early 1970s as a result of the Cambodian civil war, which was due to conflicting democratic and communist ideologies. King Norodom Sihanouk was removed by a coup d'état carried out by the military commander General Lon Nol. The policies of Lon Nol's government were 'pro-American', and its primary mission was to combat the expansion of communism. The fighting then turned into



a civil war (Hein, 1995, p. 22-25 and Vickery, 1986, p. 19-21), which eventually led to a large number of refugee problems (Bull, 1983, p. 10-12). Finally, the Lon Nol government was defeated by the Khmer Rouge communists. Due to the hardships of the living conditions under the rule of the Khmer Rouge, especially starvation and disease, many Khmers decided to emigrate and fled the country, with hundreds of thousands of them seeking asylum in Thailand (Wright, 1989, p. 39) (Kamm, 1998, p. 249). The Khmer Rouge remained in power for around four years. In the meantime, Khmers Heng Samrin and Hun Sen sought help from Vietnam to overthrow the Khmer Rouge, leading Vietnamese soldiers to victory in capturing the capital of Phnom Penh on January 7, 1979 (Buakamsri, 2004, p. 129). Heng Samrin became the head of the government and Hun Sen still holds political power in Cambodia today (Chandler, 2000, p. 222-225 and Vickery, 1986, p. 42-43).

During 1979-1993, different political factions joined together to form a Khmer government in exile. It consisted of King Sihanouk and the Khmer Serei and was supported by the United Nations (Theerawit, 1981, p. 11). In 1988, the United Nations pressured Vietnam to withdraw its troops from Cambodia and established the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) to be responsible for the 1993 election. After that year, Cambodia became officially known as the Kingdom of Cambodia (Klintworth, 1989, p. 9). Sihanouk became the king again, while Hun Sen was appointed as prime minister. King Sihanouk later abdicated, and he died in October 2012. His son succeeded him on the throne as King Sihamoni.

## **Refugee Camps along the Thai-Cambodian border**

After the Khmer Rouge occupied Phnom Penh, refugee camps were established between 1975 and 1993. High-ranking members of the Lon Nol government fled from Cambodia to Thailand by air with assistance from the US operation 'Eagle Pull'. At that time, all foreigners were ordered to leave the country and Khmers were continuously escaping from Cambodia across the Thai-Cambodian border. In response to the situation, Thai authorities initially established operation centers for displaced persons in June 1975. Many small huts were built in the border areas, whereas refugee crisis relief meetings were held in Bangkok. Various volunteer organizations worked with governmental bodies, including the Thai government, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The United States defined the term "refugee" for the Khmers as a person fleeing due to fear of the communist regime (Robinson, 1998, p. 22). The UNHCR offered voluntary repatriation options to the refugees, but the refugees rejected them. The UNHCR and the USA then proposed a plan for refugee resettlement in local areas. However, Thailand announced a policy of refusing asylum seekers looking to resettle on Thai territory. In the first half of 1979, nearly 200,000 Khmers entered Thailand (Robinson, 1998, p. 44-50). In mid-November 1979, the Thai authorities and the UNHCR built a large refugee camp at 'Khao-I-Dang'. The refugees at the Khao-I-Dang Holding Center were able to resettle in a third country because they had been granted refugee status as determined by the UNHCR (Feith, 1988, p. 26). The refugee



problem abated when Vietnamese forces withdrew from Cambodia in early 1989, and several Cambodian political parties signed the Paris Peace Agreements in October 1991. A Cambodian national election was also held in 1993 under UNTAC supervision and all refugee camps in Thai-Cambodian border areas were closed in March 1993 (UNHCR, 2000, p. 96-7).



Figure 2 Refugees and volunteers at Kao I Dang Holding Centre.

Source: Colin Grafton (1980)

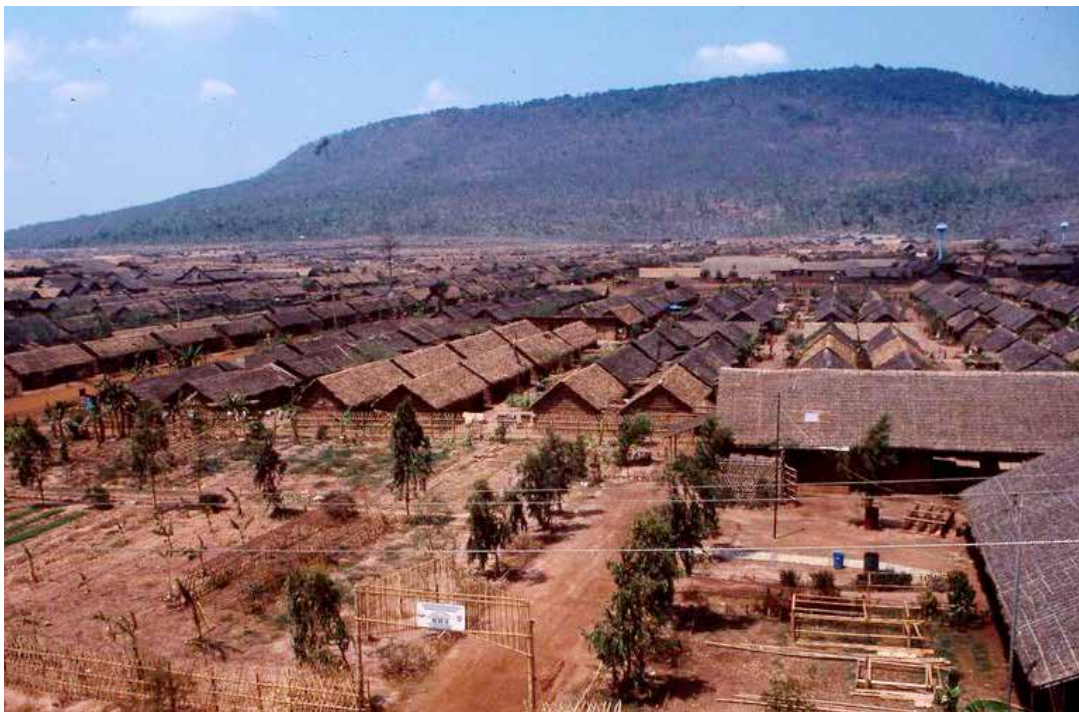


Figure 3 Refugees at Kao I Dang Holding Centre 1979-1993.

Source: Suttipong Jongkolnee (2025)

## Memories of the Border People about Khmer Refugees and Camps

Old Khmer means people who initially migrated to the Thai-Cambodian border areas before 1979. They were already aware of the fact that Phnom Penh would be controlled and people would be in trouble. Among them were families of officials of the Lon Nol government, who were middle class to upper class people, not ordinary people. Khmer people who still remained in Cambodia were those who were concerned about their assets and preferred not to flee the country. Many of them believed that Cambodia would not face a severe situation or were confident that the Khmer Rouge's ideology would serve the country better by reducing the inequalities between social classes. The UNHCR and Thailand defined the difference between the old Khmer and the new Khmer as follows. The Khmers who immigrated to Thailand before 1979 were categorized as "old Khmer", and "new Khmer" is the term used for those who arrived in the kingdom after 1979. The old Khmers were granted the opportunity to resettle in a third country, unlike their new Khmer counterparts. The old Khmers and the new Khmers were also placed in different refugee camps (Robinson, 1998, p. 69). The Thai border villagers referred to the immigrants who came under the regime of Sihanouk and Lon Nol as "white Khmer" because they were from the democratic government while those who escaped from the Khmer communist regime were called "red Khmer." Thais from Koh Kong were called "black Khmer" based on the color of their clothes (Naris Sawasdee, interview, 11 February 2020).

During the first phase of Khmer immigration into Thai-Cambodian border areas, Thailand allowed the Khmers to temporarily stay in public places that could accommodate them, such as schools and temples. Later, temporary shelters and refugee camps were built. The Khmers who had relatives, friends or acquaintances living at the border were asked to live with those groups of people. However, after the refugee camps were completed, all Khmer migrants were ordered to remain only in the camps, without being allowed to engage with Thai villagers. Manee Sommutwong (interview, 14 December 2019) said that in 1975, she was studying at Khlong Yai School. When her school became a house for the Khmers, she had to study at a hygienic base instead.

Sing Sommutwong (interview, 14 December 2019) told about the fate of the Khmer immigrants after the Khmer Rouge had seized power. Khmer people who fled Cambodia were able to avoid being forced into labor by the Khmer Rouge. The Khmers who escaped came to the Thai border, where many of them were granted the opportunity to resettle in third countries. When the Khmer Rouge came to seize Pailin city, some of her siblings decided to escape. They arrived at the border camps and were eventually sent to the USA. Today, the Khmers overseas still come back to visit the border areas in Sa Kaeo province although much of the environment has changed into land and forest. Nevertheless, images of the old days are still vivid in the memories of their early lives.

The new Khmers, who crossed the Thai-Cambodian border after 1979, were people who had suddenly fled from Cambodia. Nichada Somwan (interview, 8 December 2019) explained that these

Khmers were the most weary-looking. They looked starving, and they seemed unwell. At such time, Thailand had to help them for humanitarian purposes. Since the new Khmers were considered as members of the Khmer Rouge, they had no chance of settling in third countries. Many countries set criteria to discourage the Khmer Rouge because of their atrocious behaviors.

Life conditions in Khmer refugee camps meant that many refugees lived in the camps for many years. Some children stayed in the camps until they became teenagers. Thai education agencies provided teaching and learning to the children and youths in the camps. Thai teachers taught Khmer students in the Thai language while Khmer teachers taught them in the Khmer language, and foreign language courses were also available in the camps as preparation for those who intended to travel abroad. Naris Sawasdee (interview, 11 February 2020) said that he used to work as a teacher in a camp. Many Khmer children in border areas were able to speak Thai. Surprisingly, a theater for a theatrical performance was also built inside the camp. There were some activities, particularly those based on dance and performance practice which were provided to relieve stress. These activities included Khmer dance performances and Khmer-Chinese operas.

The lives of the local people during the time of refugee camps are learned about through interviews. People shared their memories of what they had experienced and what they had seen. Wane Puphiluek (Interview, 5 March 2020) said that people in Ta Phraya district were familiar with the Site Two camp, which was commonly known today as ‘Tubtim Siam 03.’ When all refugee camps were closed, Thai authorities then built border self-defense villages. This is in contrast to the time of refugee camps when activities between small Thai businesses and refugee centers at the border were very active. The Thai currency was mainly used as the currency of trade. During the first phase of immigration, in around 1975, some immigrants even used gold as currency. The Khmer people gathered together in Site Two after several small camps were closed. The camps were finally closed in 1993 after almost 20 years.

Guidelines for the sustainable development of communities.

Guidelines for the sustainable development of communities were derived from the results of in-depth interviews with local sages and people who played roles in education, administration and culture.

Proposal 1: to conduct a public hearing to survey the villagers’ needs in order to learn about weaknesses and strengths and to create a development plan.

Thanaphon Treechart—local culture expert (Interview, 11 August 2020) suggested that community development must inquire into the needs of people in the community. In this matter, a community representative from Thap Thai Subdistrict, Ta Phraya District, Sa Kaeo Province, Anunchai Puphiluek (Interview, 5 March 2020), said that the community wants to develop the area into a space for memories. Local people want to build a place that explains what happened in the past in order to encourage people to recall the old days when there were evacuation centers.



The project was inspired by Khmer people who had lived in refugee camps on the Thai-Cambodian border. They continually return to visit the places of their memories, despite living in different countries across the European and American continents. The community welcomes visitors throughout the year. The locals eventually decided to provide facilities and knowledge sources, and even to replicate buildings in the way they used to be when people lived in refugee camps. Wanee Puphiloek—Community Culture Department (Interview, 5 March 2020) said that many Cambodians who had been in refugee camps have returned to visit the area that used to be a camp. People come back to see, revisit and reflect about the place where they used to live, including the important places in their memories such as the Site Two Camp and Khao I Dang Camp.

Proposal 2: to conduct research studies to benefit the border communities.

Siriphen Yenjit—a community representative for education (Interview, 9 August 2020) suggested that work must be done step-by-step. The first step is to research data, collect data, categorize and compile the data for ease of usage. In this case, it is necessary to consider in what form should local stories be preserved and how they should be published through media. This must be completed in regard to conservation, promotion, continuation, and development. Dissemination of information must be done in every possible way. We can publish in social media, social networks, websites, etc., and must organize activities, training, seminars, activities to promote the learning. Ananchai Puphiloek—the head of the Subdistrict Administrative Organization (SAO) (Interview, 5 March 2020) said that some local information has been published via social media such as Facebook to open space for awareness to the world. The SAO hopes that it will be an effective and widely-recognized channel. People can also easily access information since it is convenient and quick to communicate. Nowadays, the SAO has been posting pictures and descriptions regarding the area of the camp Site Two and Tubtim Siam 03 project in both Thai and Khmer via its Facebook account. Pictures of Khmers around the world who came back to visit the area of old refugee camps throughout the year were posted on social media and received a lot of attention from Khmer people around the world.

Proposal 3: to provide a modern learning centre and related materials for the communities.

Wanee Puphiloek (Interview, 5 March 2020) who works for the community in the field of culture says that the local Subdistrict Administrative Organization has collected old photos and related materials for the modern learning centre project. The SAO has been posting information on social media. The SAO uses social media because it is convenient to create promotional materials via this platform. Most importantly, this method does not require too much cost, but the results are highly effective. SAO staffs have been uploading many pictures about life of the Khmer refugees in the camps, which are mostly rare pictures. Pictures of life in the past have a lot of meaning. When Cambodian people who have experiences in refugee camps see the pictures, it certainly has a great impact on their feelings. The pictures do not require much explanation, but people who have shared such experiences will understand immediately.

Proposal 4: to preserve people's memories for future generations.

The memories of local people are valuable things that must remain for the next generations. They must be preserved, inherited, and managed in order to maintain the learning. Naris Sawadee and Pratchaya Sangkhawanich (Interview, 11 February 2020)—the village's teacher expressed the opinion that local schools must teach local stories in social subjects since students must know about their local history. Yang Wandee (Interview, 12 January 2020)—the village philosopher of Khlong Yai Subdistrict said that the stories about life in the past are very interesting and can add value to the local community. In this regard, local development can focus on what is missing and should be brought back. Many people want to experience the old days so a local project to build a refugee house will serve as a learning resource for the community and visitors to study, learn and reminisce.

Proposal 5: to sustain local memories by enriching and adding value to them.

Development will be stabilized and sustained by adding value. Therefore, refugee camp projects have emerged. In the past, SITE 2 was a place that held valuable memories for those who had lived there before. When local people understand it, it can create value for the local area in terms of tourism and the economy. Jan Bunphul (Interview, 8 December 2019)—the sub-district headman stated that the project must be completed with the cooperation of the villagers since the projects should benefit the villagers in return thus making the project more sustainable. Many villagers have come up with suggestions on repairing and restoring memorials, such as restoring a bunker since it will serve as evidence of the situation actually happening in the area. This is beneficial for the locals in terms of tourist and local development.



**Figure 4** Ban Klong Yai's bunker, Chanthaburi

Source: Author

Proposal 6: to encourage a sense of recognition in regard to the value of community memories.

Siriphen Yenjit (Interview, 9 August 2020) suggested that collective consciousness is important. Some villagers dig up antiques for their own business, and we had to ask them to sell only duplicate pieces and to keep value pieces. Some of the donated antiques will be displayed in community museums. In the past, Ta Phraya villagers used to dig antiques, but now people have more of a conservation mind-set. They understand that having treasures buried in the ground means the land has value in terms of culture and history. Villagers who were conscientious also brought the antiques to the temple as they did not regard them as personal property.

Proposal 7: to learn from the past to build the future of communities.

Anunchai Puphiloek (Interview, 5 March 2020) stated that the Tubtim Siam 03 Project is a project that can be said to have learned from the past to build immunity for the future. The area of Thap Thai Village was used as a center for receiving refugees from the war in 1979 (SITE 2) but the Oriental Army has now established Thap Thai Village as a self-defense village along the border. The village establishment is designed to be easy to manage, maintain, and protect. One rai of land was allocated to each family as a living space, and another 20 rai of arable land was also allocated. All houses were built by the government based on the same plan. Wanee Puphiluek (Interview, 5 March 2020) stated that Tubtim Siam 03 is a border self-defense village area. The main purpose is for people to stay in villages to protect the area and prohibit Khmer immigrants from entering the area. It is an incentive for people to come and settle on the border. The project gave veterans rights to local people who do not have a place to live and volunteers who want to settle in the border area.



Figure 5 Kao I Dang Learning Centre

Source: Author



Proposal 8: to enhance the importance of local people's memories at national and international levels to represent the cultural heritage of the communities.

The Thap Thai Subdistrict Administrative Organization (SAO), Ta Phraya District, has a plan to elevate local issues to important matters of national interest at the international level because Site 2 and Khao I Dang refugee camp are large camps that appeared in the movie "The Killing Fields" (1984), a film about the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. It was directed by Roland Joffé and produced by David Puttnam. The SAO has a project to build a community learning centre and a museum about the refugee camps. The project is considered as part of local history, national history and also world history. This is an important memory for the local people and it is a part of the world's memory. It complements the study of history, politics, and international relations with facts from real historical areas.

## **Conclusion.**

During the years 1970-1993, an important situation occurred at the Thai-Cambodian border and many stories still remain in the memories of local people. This study gathered the memories of local people on the Thai-Cambodian border in regard to Khmer refugees and refugee camps. The Khmers who immigrated to Thailand before 1979 were called "old Khmers" and those who arrived after 1979 were called "new Khmers". The old Khmer group were considered for resettlement in a third country before the latter. The old and new Khmers were placed in different refugee camps. At first, Thailand used schools and temples as temporary shelters for them before later building refugee camps. After the Khmer Rouge seized power in Cambodia, the world learned about what had happened in Cambodia from the Khmer refugees, and some refugees were granted the opportunity to settle in foreign countries. The new Khmer group who came to the Thai-Cambodian border after 1979 were in worse condition than the previous group. In the Khmer refugee camps, children were provided the opportunity to study many school subjects, with Thai teachers teaching in the Thai language and Khmer teachers teaching in the Khmer language. Courses in foreign languages were also available at the camps as preparation for those who intended to settle in a foreign country. Vocational and professional skills training was also provided inside the camps and theaters were also established there for leisure and recreational activities. Several border people said they were satisfied with the refugee camps because the refugee camps created more opportunities to earn income. The UN paid rental fees to landowners, which was another benefit in addition to their farming income each year. The villagers also had a better quality of life at that time because of infrastructure development; many new roads were constructed, electricity and water systems were developed, and people enjoyed abundant goods and supplies. The Tubtim Siam Project built houses and provided land for veterans' families so that they could live in the border area and help to protect it.

## Discussion.

Analysis of people's memories and life stories through biographical research has clearly highlighted the importance of the area in which they lived. Through the stories told by local people, we can learn about their stories, experiences and other memories. The results of the interviews provide an overall picture regarding the impacts that conflict had on people at the border. It also reminds us that border areas are areas where political ideas potentially clash. Border areas were easily infiltrated by Communist ideologues. In particular, the Sa Kaeo-Ta Phraya border was seen as a red zone since it was the area where the Communist terrorist faction has infiltrated.

Ta Phraya was thus a conflict area between the ideologies of democracy and communism. The Ta Phraya people faced many fears, especially fears caused by the communists, and later, fears caused by Thai military officers carrying out operations to wipe out the communists. They feared repercussions from being in a war zone between various political groups from both inside and outside the country. Due to the aforementioned circumstances, border security increased as border areas became global focal points for helping the Khmer migrants. The bustle of the border made it difficult for Thailand's communist terrorists to maintain its stronghold at the border area for long. Hundreds of thousands of Khmer refugees were placed in Site Two centers.

Refugee camps at border areas also received assistance from international organizations. Thai border people benefited from land rental and border trade, leading border people to have good incomes, which encouraged growth in the border economy. Consequently, border people had a better life. After the immigration center was closed, the Tubtim Siam Project was designed to create stability and peace of mind for local people, making them confident in the security of their lives and property, and providing a secure future for the next generation. Currently, border people are no longer viewed with suspicion by outsiders as people living in red zones. The border area transformed from a remote, hard-to-reach area into a bustling area with many people living there. Outsiders came into the border area in large numbers and Cambodian refugees gathered in border areas. Various groups of officials from many countries, including Thai and foreign agencies and dignitaries, took turns to visit the refugee camps. Media around the world were also interested. News from the border was spread across the world through media. The interests and importance of the border was not limited to the local area, but became a problem that is discussed on the world stage.

The research results remind us that border areas are important in terms of strategic space. Border people who have gone through dangerous events learned from the experience and grew stronger. People and border areas continue to function as a fence that protects against foreign threats and b Border peace can be seen as an indicator of national peace and security.

## Recommendations for further research

Even though Thai-Cambodian border does not have the same immigration problem as in the past, a number of Cambodians still enter Thailand for economic and educational reasons, according to the research of Chhon (2019, pp.55-59), who studied Khmer people living along the Thai border in the area of Khok Sung, Sa Kaeo Province. The life of Khmer people in Thai territory and the Thai border is therefore always an issue for study.

Suggestions for further research on the Thai-Cambodian border include the following. Border work should be studied in depth, such as the Thai-Cambodia land border problem, Thai-Cambodian maritime boundary problems in the Gulf of Thailand, which are overlapping maritime areas claimed by both Thailand and Cambodia.

Problems with bomb disposal in the Thai-Cambodian border area, welfare and assistance for families of deceased border people injured or disabled, cross-border illegal acts related to human trafficking, weapons of war and drugs, and developing transportation and cross-border transportation systems for the sustainability of the economy, trade, tourism, pilgrimages, and health-related businesses to support the aging society in the Indochina region are also possible subjects for further investigation. The border area is a political conflict area where many incidents have occurred. Research to study border development guidelines from the perspective of people outside the group should be consistent with the development needs of people in border areas.

The past still affects the feelings and behavior of people in the present. In addition to holding exhibitions to educate the public, Khao I Dang Center has organized an annual merit-making ceremony to remember those who passed away. This merit-making event is an effective way to communicate with Thai and Khmer people in the area. Making merit according to Buddhist principles heals the mind, calms people's hearts, and cultivates generosity and sharing. People come together to make society strong, creating a strong community landscape.

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