

Losing My Number-One Ranking

Because of My Desire to See Phnom Penh

When I was studying in elementary school, I used to walk from home in the morning and afternoon; each time, one kilometer to go to school and vice versa. But when I attended junior high school, which was named "Pearang Junior High School," I could no longer walk, as the distance from home to school was three times longer than that to the previous school. Therefore, my parents bought me a bicycle. In high school, our way of life changed. First, we were no longer called "schoolboys" but "students." We became big boys. Second, we did not have one permanent teacher, but many "professors" who taught us specific subjects, one professor for each subject. Third, our uniform changed too. Instead of wearing a white shirt and blue shorts, the students wore a white shirt and khaki pants. The last change was the lessons we had to learn. Except for Khmer literature, which was still taught in Khmer, other subjects were taught in French. My first year at Pearang High School was good. I received high ratings in history, science, mathematics, and

composition in both Khmer and French. I was supposed to be the number one student in my class, but unfortunately, I finished the year in third place. This result was because I missed one of the subjects' control examinations in the first semester.

At that time, Phnom Penh, with its busy streets and avenues, all sorts of cars in circulation, many shopping places, beautiful gardens, and well-designed public and private buildings, was so attractive to me. Many times a year, I tried to make a trip to the city. Each time my elder brothers came to visit us, I always asked them to bring me along. And I always failed to get my parents' approval. For me, visiting Phnom Penh was equal to receiving a reward. Normally, we went to the capital every year, but only on special occasions such as the Water Festival, Independence Day, and Congress Days (twice a year, the "Popular Community" organized a three-day congress so that ordinary people could talk to the ministers about any issue). One day, my brother, Sinoeun, came home for a weekend and proposed to my parents that I go with him to Phnom Penh. The idea was so exciting to me that I invented some good reasons to convince my parents to allow me to go with my

brother. I did not tell them that I was having an examination. If they had been aware of my timing, they would have prevented me from taking pleasure in my unconscious and unnecessary desire. The student's performance was rated from 0 to 20 points. So, for one of the examinations in the first semester, I got an awful zero.

Throughout the year, the school council may reward the best students with prizes and honour awards. The awards consisted of certificates, prize certificates, and honour certificates. The prize certificate was delivered to the highest-rated student. But the best among the best would receive an honour certificate. One day, the school management was organising an awards distribution ceremony. With a rating of zero in one subject of an examination, I had no hope of receiving any awards, and I did not pay much attention to the ceremony. I came to school late that day. When I arrived, a hundred students were crowding in front of the Director's office. The director was calling the winners of the awards one by one. Those whose names were called were jumping with joy. Once they had received the certificates from the director's hand, some of

them just disappeared; some stayed, probably awaiting additional rewards.

I felt very sad and frustrated at the idea of losing the award just because of a stupid desire to go around the city. I was moving slowly to get closer to the place. Finally, the crowd seemed smaller. The director was now announcing the next winners of the honour award. Suddenly and unexpectedly, I heard, "Ieng Mouly" and then applause. My name was coming up first to receive the award. On the spot, I did not believe it. I was not so sure of winning the prize, but when all eyes had turned on me, I became certain of my lucky moment.

I was so astonished to see this surprising and happy event happen. I was so proud to receive the honour certificate from the director, surrounded by many of my professors and friends. At that occasion, almost all students were cheerful.