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Lucky Child

BYLINE: ROBERT L. SMITH, PLAIN DEALER REPORTER**SECTION:** SUNDAY MAGAZINE; Pg. 9**LENGTH:** 4633 words

It's about 10,000 miles from **Loung Ung**'s home in Shaker Heights to her sister's house in Bat Deng, in central Cambodia. Loung (pronounced LOU-ung) knows the route in her sleep.

Typically, she will fly from Cleveland to Los Angeles to catch a flight over the ocean to Hong Kong, and from there fly into Bangkok, then on to Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital, where she keeps a motorcycle helmet stashed at a friend's house.

Outside the city, the pavement vanishes and the rutted, red-dirt roads winding into the countryside are best traveled by motorcycle. For about \$20, Loung leases a bike and a driver for the last stretch of her journey.

She is petite, 5 feet 2 inches tall and light as bamboo, and she must peer around her kerchiefed chauffeur to drink in the scenes that now stir her blood: The sun shimmering on a green rice paddy ringed by palm trees; orange-robed monks walking single file along the side of the road; naked, brown-skinned children scrambling across her path.

When the bike finally roars into Bat Deng an hour and a half later, she's spitting dirt and cursing in Khmer, the language of Cambodia, which she speaks fluently. Almost always, Chou is waiting, coming toward her, smiling.

Chou Ung is the older sister who looks like Loung, who smiles like her, who should have been her. Chou is the sister who never has taken a hot shower, or seen a doctor, or gone to high school or college, or written a critically acclaimed book, so that Loung could do all of those things. Chou is the sister left behind so that Loung could escape.

When they lock eyes, as they did again a few months ago, Loung feels a surge of emotion. She wants to shout "We're alive! Oh my god, I'm here!" Instead, she falls silent as Chou directs some of her children to fetch well water and food. Loung allows Chou to take her backpack and her hand.

They walk to a thatched-roof house where Loung removes her Cambodian clothes from a small box stored inside and changes. She's younger now than her 34 years, a little sister again, displaying a shyness and deference that would astonish her friends back in America.

Outside, she glances past Chou to the village stirring with children. Her shoulders loosen and her teeth unclench as she slips into her other, parallel life.

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For 15 years she was sure - absolutely certain - she would never see this world again. More than home, it is the other side of the looking glass. She looks at her sister and she sees who she might have been.

Often, it makes her question what she has become.

Phrases of whispered wonder - I can't believe this is happening. How the hell did I get here? - roll often from Loung's lips. The happenstance of her life would fill an epic, but some incidents stand out from the uncommon routine. Like that July night in Boston during the Democratic National Convention, which she attended wearing a V.I.P. pass.

The hot ticket that week was the Red Sox-Yankees game at Fenway Park. Sometime about the second inning, Loung felt that familiar amazement as she considered that she was sitting in a box seat next to singer Emmylou Harris and just a few rows from Senator John Kerry, who was running for president.

OK, 25 years ago I was eating garbage in the street. Do they know who I am?

Her first book introduced her to a lot of people. First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers was published in 2000 and has since been translated into nine languages, including Khmer.

Cambodian schoolchildren learn of the Cambodian genocide by reading Loung's book. She's one of the first survivors to publish an account of her people's holocaust. Writing in the first person, and from a 10-year-old's perspective, she describes how she lost her childhood, both parents, two sisters, and more than 20 relatives before escaping to America. She's been called the Anne Frank of the Killing Fields.

But much of the attention comes her way because of her job. She's the spokeswoman for the Campaign for a Landmine Free World, which leaves her virtually unknown in Northeast Ohio but a human-rights celebrity in some high-powered circles.

Emmylou Harris is a real friend. So is Patch Adams, the maverick doctor portrayed on screen by Robin Williams. She's dined with Paul and Heather McCartney and Queen Noor of Jordan. She receives invitations to parties at the California home of the Eastwoods, Clint and Dina.

At Fenway Park that night, she worried that someone might realize who she really is. I'm nobody. I'm no genius. I'm no supermodel. I'm this lost little girl. A refugee from Cambodia. But she smothered her doubts. There was work to be done. And who else could do it as well as she?

Bobby Muller, the executive director of the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation (VVAFA), by chance heard her speak one night in 1997 in Washington, D.C. He wept.

Vietnam left him a paraplegic, but he says he witnessed the real carnage of the Vietnam War when he visited Cambodia in the early 1980s. He saw the acres of skeletons and the shock in the eyes of the living. He saw the fresh amputees hobbling on homemade prosthetics in a country littered with land mines. And here was this young woman who survived it and could describe it with a poet's precision, yet still could make conversation, flash a vivacious smile and lighten a room with laughter. He asked Loung to join the foundation's prized cause, the campaign to outlaw land mines.

At that time, no one knew her family's story. In Loung's mind, no one knew Cambodia's story. Muller was offering a stage. Though she felt unworthy, she stepped upon it.

Now, dozens of times a year, wealthy and famous people invite Loung to exclusive parties, where she's given five or six minutes to talk about Cambodia and land-mine victims. After telling her tale, she might leave with \$75,000 for the campaign. So she pushes aside her insecurities and speaks from her heart.

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But for her cause to succeed and, really, for her heart to heal, she needs the rest of us to care. For that, she knows, she must continue to go out and share her story. She pursues that task with a passion that whispers, entertains and rises toward rage.

On a Friday afternoon in October, Loung strode into an auditorium at Buffalo State College ready to perform. She wore a fashionable black leather jacket over a black sweater and red slacks. Cheeks rouged red, jet-black hair pulled back, silver balls dangling from her ears, she looked like a rock star entering an arena.

When she took the stage, the audience of about 100 students and teachers stirred.

Loung asked for their indulgence. She told them she was nervous; that English is her fourth language. She had learned the perils of an accent working as a bingo caller in a French-Canadian town in Maine, a terrible job for someone who grew up reading Chinese right to left, but at least she got to hear old ladies swear in French.

The audience laughed and relaxed. They saw no props or note cards. Just a small woman on a big stage, her head barely bobbing above the podium.

Loung's casual tone hid a carefully crafted script. Waiting for her flight out of Cleveland that morning, she sat at the departure gate with a file folder open upon her lap, a cell phone to her ear, poring over notes written neatly across page after page of white paper.

She was rewriting the notes she had penned the night before. She would copy them again on the plane, and again 20 minutes before her speech; then walk out with nothing in her hands but her notes fresh in her mind.

On the ride from the airport, she had quizzed the college administrator who picked her up about her audience. How old would they be? What was their class background, what were their political leanings?

Loung tailored her speech for sheltered, suburban college students who might be able to imagine losing it

all.

She described a magical childhood in a small Buddhist country, where Pa was a military police captain, and the family lived in a big apartment one floor above a bustling street.

She was the sixth of seven children. Mom trained the four sisters to be proper young ladies. Loung's three brothers wore bellbottoms and practiced dancing like Elvis, whose image was everywhere in 1970s Cambodia.

She loved the family routines, such as breakfast at the local noodle shop, and Sunday movies best of all. All nine of them would go together. Loung was Pa's favorite, and she would climb into his lap clutching her favorite snacks - a bag of dried crickets and a soybean drink. When she held out her drink, Pa's palm came up. Her chair, her cupholder, her Pa.

She and her sisters were playing hopscotch when the trucks of the Khmer Rouge rolled into the neighborhood April 17, 1975. The neighbors cheered the rebels before they fled from them.

The Khmer Rouge and their messianic leader, Pol Pot, espoused a pure agricultural state. Some 2 million people were evacuated from the capital city in 72 hours. The subsequent three-year reign of terror wiped out a quarter of the population of a country of less than 8 million people.

Loung was five when it began. She knew only that her world was falling apart.

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She and her family joined a flotsam of people, cows and cars directed by soldiers with bullhorns. She remembers pots clanging, children crying, guns firing. Mostly, she remembers the soft, startling sound of thousands of sandaled feet hitting the street in hurried steps.

The new regime forbade all culture and self-expression. For three years, eight months and 21 days, she would wear only black and know only work and hunger. Food was scarce and went first to the soldiers.

As her stomach ballooned from malnutrition, Loung learned to steal corn, trap rats, chew roots and swallow rotten leaves. She survived by living a lie. Ma and Pa told the children not to reveal to anyone who they were. Educated people were disappearing. Intact families were suspect. So they hid their identities among strangers in agricultural labor camps and kept moving to avoid detection.

Loung's soothing voice, which she strives to push across an auditorium, rose a painful octave as she shared the first event to break her heart.

One night, two soldiers came for Pa. They said they needed help pulling an ox cart from the mud. Loung was sitting on the steps of the family's hut. She was six years old, but she knew they were lying.

Her voice quaked as she recalled Pa asking for a moment.

"And then he pulled me up in his arms. And I still remember that. I can still feel his arms, the nape of his neck. I can still smell his sweat. And I refused to believe what was happening, because then it would be true."

She watched him walk away, escorted by the armed men, into a glorious purple and orange sunset. The next day, she prayed he died quickly.

Sunsets still give her a melancholy chill.

The audience was rapt now, quiet and still. A few people dabbed at their eyes with tissues. But Loung was not finished. She took a deep breath and, in the same driving, passionate voice, shared Heartbreak No. 2:

It happened about a year after Pa had been taken. Ma was struggling to hold the family together. Loung's older sister Keav had already starved to death. Two brothers were away at distant labor camps. The Khmer Rouge were now executing the children of people suspected of being connected to the former government.

One night, Ma hurriedly gathered the three oldest children still with her - Loung, Chou and their brother Kim - and told them they must leave her. With her voice shaking, she instructed them to walk in three different directions and never come back. They were to tell the first people they met that they were war orphans.

Loung protested. She stamped her feet, and shouted, "I don't want to go!"

She recalls her mother shouting back, "I don't want you here!" and swatting away her reaching hands.

Loung was eight years old. Blood boiling, she stormed off. She never saw her mother again.

"I thought she didn't love me," she said softly, imploringly, as if still seeking forgiveness. "I was angry. I was angry for 15 years."

Only years later did the truth become obvious. Her mother's desperate act of courage probably saved her children.

Soon after their parting, Loung's mother and her baby sister, Geak, disappeared. Both were probably executed.

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Loung and Chou defied their mother and stayed together. In a work camp of orphans, Loung fought when Chou would not. Her anger and combativeness attracted the Khmer Rouge, who conscripted her as a child soldier. They taught her how to kill with knives and guns and axes. They taught her how to smash skulls with hammers.

Had the Vietnamese not invaded Cambodia in 1979 and sent the Khmer Rouge running, Loung told her audience, "I have no doubt I would have been a very effective killer. I closed my heart and I hated the world."

Before the hate could set, a quick and fateful decision changed the course of her life.

Loung did not share that episode with her audience this day, not entirely. She said only that she was smuggled to a refugee camp in Thailand in 1979, and from there made it to America in 1980. She grew up in Vermont, where people loved her and helped her to heal.

A mother of two, holding a copy of her first book, asked about her good fortune. "How did you get out? Why you?"

Loung paused. She was still exploring that passage of her life, which is the subject of her second book.

At war's end in 1979, five Ung children were still alive, she said. They found one another in their ancestral village. The world smoldered. The Khmer Rouge still attacked from jungle hideouts.

Meng, the oldest son, and now the family patriarch, resolved that some must escape. By selling the last of their mother's jewelry, he bought three spots on a smuggler's boat to Vietnam. From there, they might get to Thailand and then, possibly, America.

He could take only his new wife, Eang, and one more. Everyone knew that the young children faced the longest odds of surviving in such a dangerous land. Loung was 10. Chou was 12. They held hands as their older siblings debated their fate. Once again, Loung did not know what was happening, only that she was leaving. She was the "lucky child."

Loung clung to Chou as sisters and cousins hugged her goodbye. She remembers clasping Chou's fingers until her brother finally lifted her onto his bicycle, breaking their grip, and began to pedal away. As Chou's face dissolved in tears, Loung turned away and did not look back.

She refused to believe what was happening, because then it would be true.

Years later, in America, Meng told her she had been chosen because as the youngest she had the best chance of receiving an education in America. But Loung has since reached another conclusion, one she shared with her audience.

She was the black sheep. She was the bitter, angry child always sassing her elders and fighting other children. Smiling, she explained that it appeared unlikely she would ever grow into the dutiful Cambodian wife the culture expected. But she might do OK in America.

Elder Brother succeeded in spiriting his wife and Loung across the river to Vietnam, and then to a United Nations' refugee camp in Thailand. A Catholic church sponsored their immigration to America. Loung started a new life in Essex Junction, Vermont, raised by Meng, a tireless worker who did not know his little sister was a writer until she told him, when she was 29, that she had written a book.

Meng Ung has worked for 21 years at IBM's manufacturing plant in suburban Burlington, Vermont. He and Eang put Loung and their oldest daughter through college. Their second daughter is a sophomore at Kent State University.

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To think of Loung and what she has accomplished makes him swell with pride, he says, because he knows Pa would be proud. He has read parts of her second book and it saddens him to learn that her torment was greater than he knew. He wishes he could have done more. He wishes he could have softened her landing in America. He wishes he could have brought Chou, and everyone else. But how? They were all desperate and poor and strangers in a cold new land.

From the first day of elementary school, Loung tried to push Cambodia from her thoughts. The past was too painful and powerful. She worked hard to become an American girl and she mostly succeeded. She dressed up as "Tom the Cat" for her first Halloween, learned to eat hamburgers without making a face and honed her English skills watching soap operas. But she never felt at home.

Her teen years in Vermont were tortured. She was the only brown-skinned, Asian-eyed girl around. Meng and Eang worked long hours at several jobs, and Loung often was alone, or caring for her two nieces. She suffered nightmares, daytime flashbacks. She tried to kill herself by swallowing pills.

Beth Poole, her best friend in Essex Junction and now a teach-

er in Orange County, California, knew something was wrong when Loung described seeing a friend's head shot off and then laughed. They were 12 years old. Neither knew how to talk about such memories.

Beth also saw the feisty, showy, resourceful Loung; the little girl who in the eighth grade made the cheerleading squad and who declared she would one day write a book about her life; the young woman who financed her first trip abroad by making and selling ceramic jewelry; the former refugee who could travel for weeks with one small backpack of clothes.

Loung became the first Ung woman to graduate from high school and, in 1992, the first Ung to finish college.

She became a domestic violence counselor in Maine, helping women whose terror did not unnerve her.

Finally, in 1995, at Meng's gentle urging - and 15 years after she came to America - she returned to Cambodia and began to heal herself.

The reign of the Khmer Rouge had not ended for Loung. Her power of memory kept it alive and always will, she now knows.

She once bristled to hear adults call her lucky because she was so young when her world exploded. She'll forget, they said. She'll move on.

She has never felt lucky. She remembers everything. She remembers how Ma, before the war, tied red ribbons in her hair to match her new red dress for Lunar New Year. She remembers how Ma, before sending her forever away, wrapped her empty food bowl in a scarf and tied it diagonally across her back.

At the airport in Phnom Penh, seeing her family of survivors there to greet her, Loung began to feel whole again. Chou took her hand and took her home.

At first, she was shaken by the squalid conditions and danger in which Chou and her family lived. There was no running water or electricity in the village. Khmer Rouge bandits still roamed the night.

Loung seethed to learn that millions of land mines laced the countryside. At anytime anyone could lose a limb or a life. She saw dismembered children hobbling on crudely carved crutches. She also saw palm trees and rice paddies, and she met nieces and nephews she never knew. For nearly a month, she drank in the terrible beauty of Cambodia.

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Back in America, she began to feel guilty for having been given so much. She would spend \$20 on dinner and realize that was one month's salary for her sister's husband. Filling a prescription at a drugstore, she'd recall Chou had borne five children without ever seeing a doctor.

She resolved to devote her life to helping the country where she was born. So it was that in 1997, when Bobby Muller offered to make her the face of the land-mine campaign, she saw her chance to live the life of an activist, to pursue her crusade no matter where she called home.

On a recent March morning, Loung stamped a foot in the slush along Chagrin Boulevard in Shaker Heights and muttered cross words, exhaling breath like puffs of steam. Mark was late, again.

She swears she waits for only two people in this world - Muller, who is in a wheelchair, and Mark Priemer, her husband.

Loung and Mark met during their sophomore year at St. Michael's College in Vermont. He had a ponytail. She carried a journal. He told her he had worked over the summer at a refugee camp in the Philippines. Oh really, she said. She was a refugee.

They were friends before they were lovers. In the spring of 2002, she moved to Cleveland from Washington, D.C., to marry him.

The Priemer family of Shaker Heights builds homes, lately townhouses in the city and its inner-ring suburbs. When Mark married Loung, he promised they would live only briefly in his one-bedroom apartment. For he, the son of a builder, would soon build their home. That was three years and two books ago.

Mark takes his time arriving anywhere. Loung, always in a hurry, often ends up pulling him along. Or leaving him behind. She accepts 40 to 50 speaking engagements a year, all over the world. Usually, she travels alone.

Mark knew he would have to fight for her time. He says Loung always made it clear that Cambodia would come first, her land-mine work second, and he third.

They've known each other for 14 years, but still her books offered revelations. They helped him to understand, he says, why his wife becomes agitated when she is hungry even for a moment; and why a life with her often means life without her.

Loung sometimes speaks of Mark in exasperated tones. She complains that he's too slow, too laid-back and too damn nice to everyone, then she falls into his kindness like she once did into Pa's lap. They hold hands while sipping coffee at the Starbucks on Van Aken Boulevard. Laughter punctuates their conversations. She smiles shyly as he brushes the hair from her eyes.

They've managed to put off some family-like commitments, such as a house. Some decisions, like children, cannot wait forever. Both are 34. For now, they prefer their active, fly-anywhere-tomorrow lifestyle to visions of parenthood.

But today, they will take a walk through their newly finished townhouse. Loung's scowl softens as Mark arrives, and each has a spring in their step as they walk up the front steps of their tall brick home.

Shaker Heights' south side reminds Loung fondly of Georgetown, in Washington, where she lived for seven years before moving here. The rapid rumbles through, ferrying her downtown or to the movies at Shaker Square. She can walk to cafes and to her favorite restaurant, Matsui.

Mark hired the contractors, and once inside he points out special efforts, such as built-in bookcases. Loung points out a few problems, dozens really, some blemishes only she can see. She marks them with pieces of blue tape that leave a Band-Aid-like trail of to-do's through the unfurnished rooms.

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At the second floor, she pauses and smiles in satisfaction. This is the main living space, a bright room split by an open kitchen. A big exhaust fan will whisk away the aromas when she dries fish for Cambodian-style meals. From the kitchen, she can see and talk to anyone on the floor. It reminds her of another home in another world.

"Oh, if Chou could see this. Chou would love this."

Her first book, about surviving the war, released powerful memories and anger. Her second book, about losing and finding Chou, quenched an obsession. The question that long burned in the back of her mind flared after that first visit home in 1995. What if?

What if Chou had been chosen? What if I had been the one left behind? What would my life be like now? What should my life be like?

Now she could find out. Chou could tell her.

She began making more and longer visits to Cambodia, staying for weeks at a time with Chou and her family. Often, the land-mine work brought her to Phnom Penh, where the VVAF has clinics to fit amputees with prosthetics, and she took detours to Bat Deng. Many of the villagers came to believe she lived nearby.

In the last eight years, Loung has made the 40-hour journey to Cambodia more than 20 times, interviewing and writing and filling in the blanks of the missing 15 years. Her new book describes Chou's life in Cambodia after the war, set against Loung's life in America. She calls it Lucky Child, and she leaves readers to decide whom that may be.

As she reconnected with her sister, Loung began to re-examine much of what she thought about luck and happiness. She was astonished to learn that, as she worried about Chou and family members in Cambodia, they worried about her.

They were alarmed to hear she was in her 20s and still unmarried, that she worked nonstop and was often alone, with no one to share noodles with.

It dawned on Loung that Chou was a woman of some stature in her world. She had a kind husband, a small farm and five healthy children. Friends and family were all around in a village of more than 100 Ungs.

Watching Chou walk serenely across the village one day, so sure of who and where she was, Loung felt the heat of jealousy.

Her survivor guilt dissolved completely one hot afternoon in Bat Deng three years ago. She was at work inside Chou's thatched-roof house, sitting on a plank bed writing on a battery-powered laptop computer that she had encased in Saran Wrap to keep out the dust. She heard thunder clap. Then she heard the rain. And then she heard the yelling.

She came out of the house to see people running and laughing. They carried pots and buckets and they rushed to collect rainwater flowing from roofs and pouring from rainspouts. "Free water!" they shouted gleefully. "Free water!"

The image imbedded itself in Loung's memory. When was the last time I was happy with free water? she asked herself. When was the last time I felt pure joy?

The sisters' parallel worlds are drawing closer now. Loung and Mark just moved into their new townhouse in Shaker Heights. It has an elevator to whisk her to her writing room on the fourth floor. Chou and her husband will soon move into a new concrete house in Bat Deng. It has electricity three hours a day. Loung has her own room there. She can call ahead on a cell phone before she arrives.

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Loung's cause, land mines, generates little interest in her adopted hometown. But that does not bother her as much as it used to. She has met the people for whom her work makes a world of difference.

A visit to Cambodia last summer started like many others. She stopped to talk to the children selling pirated copies of *First They Killed My Father* on the streets of Phnom Penh. She autographed several copies so they could double the price, from \$1 to \$2, then hurried on to one of the VVAF clinics in the countryside.

There, she saw something that made her pause. A legless old woman was hobbling along on new crutches, practicing walking on a single wooden leg under a brutal noon sun. Gently, Loung tried to dissuade her. She suggested she let her children push her in her wheelchair to wherever she needed to go.

The woman shook her head. She said she needed a leg. She wanted to climb the steps of the Buddhist temples. She wanted to pray properly again.

Loung smiles as she recalls the image. Cambodians are moving past basic survival, as they must, she says. Physical rehabilitation is not enough.

She knows her past is always there to torment her, and that it has in lasting ways shaped her. Before her speech at Buffalo State, she talked to about 75 students and faculty gathered in the bookstore at nearby Medaille College. She urged them to use anger as a motivator to do good work, then stunned the crowd by revealing she's still tempted to silence a chatterer at a movie with a kick to the head.

"Peace is an action!" Loung quickly added, sparking laughter. "It's a conscious effort, and I tell myself that every day."

When a student asked her what one person could do to change the world, Loung had answers. Fifty dollars buys a foot, she said. That could mean a new life in a country without wheelchair ramps. A couple of hundred dollars buys a seat on a plane out of Buffalo.

The world is a small place if you are an international person, she said. It is a beautiful, wonderful place. And if you leave, you can go home again. All the way home.

Robert L. Smith covers race and ethnic groups for The Plain Dealer. He finds Cleveland to be a fascinating world. He may be reached at 216-999-4024 or through magmail@plaind.com.

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GRAPHIC: PHOTO CAPTIONS A MESSENGER WITH A SENSE OF URGENCY, **LOUNG UNG** (LEFT) SPENDS ABOUT TWO WEEKS EACH MONTH TRAVELING AND SPEAKING TO AUDIENCES THROUGHOUT THE WORLD. A REPRODUCTION OF THE COVER OF HER FIRST BOOK (BELOW) GREETED PEOPLE ATTENDING AN OCTOBER PEACE CONFERENCE IN BUFFALO, WHERE LOUNG WAS THE KEYNOTE SPEAKER. PARALLEL WORLDS: In 1981, 10-year-old Loung (above) lived with her brother Meng and his wife, Eang, in their apartment in Vermont. At left, Loung visits with her older sister Chou (right) last year in Cambodia. Loung's work brings her close to people like Cynthia Ellis (left), a human rights activist from Belize in Central America. Both women addressed a United Nations Day program at Buffalo State College last fall. The author relaxes at home. Cleveland is the part of her life "where I don't have to be Loung the activist," she says. Mark Priemer and Loung met at college in Vermont and returned to campus for their culturally blended wedding on August 22, 2002. After a Catholic ceremony, both donned traditional Khmer clothing for a Chinese wedding and tea

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ceremony. Loung sits with her two nieces last year on the steps of a Buddhist temple near Bat Deng, as Chou watches from above. At left is Loung's sister-in-law, Mum Ung.

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