

The People's Dancer: Hang Leng  
By Dr. Karen Quintiliani

Ms. Hang was a well-known dancer and performer throughout Cambodia due to her position in Prince Norodom Sihanouk's government. She danced for the Cambodian military wherever they were dispatched around Cambodia. In an interview, Ms. Hang told me – her role and the roles of the other performers were similar to Bob Hope. They brought comic relief to the troupes and performed traditional and folk dances that reminded them of their villages.

After 1969, the Cambodian government was unstable and Ms. Hang's life took many turns. Starting in 1972 she worked for the American Embassy as a dispatcher organizing the transportation of American soldiers in Cambodia. Prophetically, in 1975, she and other employees were offered a trip to go to Thailand for a vacation. She was one of the few that wanted to go and she left with her oldest daughter and the son of one of her friends (who wanted him to be able to go on a trip). After 3 days in Thailand, Cambodia fell to the Khmer Rouge and she had to find a sponsor to America... Left behind in Cambodia were her son and her numerous other family members.

After being sponsored by the World Church Service she worked for a family in Santa Monica for \$50 per week – the job also provided room and board, which enabled the children to attend school.

About a year later, a Cambodian friend contacted her. She told Ms. Hang she needed an education and offered her a room in her house in San Bernardino. This is when her life took on new directions and meaning. She received her beautician's license in 1977 and opened a beauty salon in Long Beach. But she not only opened a business for her own profit, she realized through the urging of Cambodians in Long Beach, that she needed to share her knowledge of Cambodian dance and the arts. She started the Cambodian Arts Preservation Group in 1983.

Ms. Hang Leng opened a salon with enough space to have a dance studio and a Khmer Weaver program with large traditional looms. She also made costumes for Cambodian dances and wedding ceremonies.

For more about Ms. Hang Leng, see *Apsara: The Feminine in Cambodian Art*, in the Additional Resources below.