Use of Observational Documentary to Advocate Human Rights among Youth in Thailand and Myanmar:
A Case Study of *The Third Eye*

By Unaloam Chanrungmaneekul

June 2019

Working Paper
SHAPE SEA Research Project

Abstract

Based on human right violation due to the construction of international deep-sea ports and special economic zones in Ban Banglamung, Thailand and Dawei, Myanmar, the observational documentary *The Third Eye* was selected as case study to explore two main points: The use of observational documentary as a tool to advocate human rights among youth of Thailand and Myanmar, and ways of the youth to create their own ways to advocate human rights. The research indicated three main arguments: Firstly, *The Third Eye* was attractive for specific audiences however younger groups outside locations of human rights violation found it challenging to connect themselves with the film. Secondly, participation of the film subjects and audience were crucial in advocating human rights. Lastly, there is no best media for all countries. Although Southeast Asian youth had mutual culture and life styles, different political and cultural contexts of particular societies were significant elements in producing and distributing media to advocate human rights successfully.

Key words: observational documentary, youth, human rights, media

Introduction: Human rights violations in Ban Banglamung and Dawei

Arguments of the paper are based on relationship between uses of observational documentary and human rights advocacy in Thailand and Myanmar. Indeed, the human rights issue stated in this paper is a regional issue for Thailand and Myanmar. Two locations in the two countries, Ban Banglamung, Thailand and Dawei, Myanmar face similar human rights violations.

The impact of the Laem Chabang Port construction on Ban Banglamung village, Chonburi, Thailand's environment and livelihood

The Port of Thailand used land near Ban Banglamung village to build Laem Chabang Port. This happened under the disguise of *Thailand development for the growth of national GDP* while villagers were forced to ask the state to compensate for their loss of land. However, up until the 2000s, the government's prioritization of development plans before human rights respecting has seen a particularly unequal fight between the State and powerless locals. Since the 1980s, the construction of Laem Chabang Port has caused negative impacts on the community, such as natural resources deficiency, the loss of cultural and economic public space, and low or no compensation for illegal land transfers. In addition, some species of marine animals became extinct as direct result of the port. All these consequences have affected the livelihoods of traditional small fishermen.

The impact of the Dawei project on Dawei people's lives

The people of Dawei, Myanmar have faced the same challenges as those in Thailand's Ban Banglamung village. In 2008, the Myanmar government cooperated with the Thai government to sign an MOU of the Dawei project, and carried out the plan, including the construction of an international deep-sea port and a special economic zone linked with Kanchanaburi province and the Laem Chabang Port in Thailand. Moreover, the project was financially supported by the Japanese government. According to the Dawei Special Economic Zone's (DSEZ) website, the project will cover 50,675 acres of industrial zone, including the deep-sea port, a coal-fired power plant, highways and railroads, which connect the project to Thailand (Karen News, 6 January 2015).

The Tavoyan Women's Union (TWU) and the Dawei Development Association (DDA) reported negative impact of the Dawei project on several human rights. Firstly, land confiscations and damage of farmland caused a substantial loss of farmers' income. Secondly, the DSEZ and related infrastructure projects possibly affected 43,000 people. The lack of information and community consultations were critical issues too. Thirdly, land transfers were handled improperly, adding to the vulnerability of farmers and others. Fourthly, the DSEZ also decreased the quality of life of people due to the destruction of the environment and livelihoods of local people. Lastly, the TWU reported that women, including TWU members, who expressed frustration over the damaging impacts of the projects on Dawei people's livelihoods and environment, were publicly harassed and threatened by local authorities and project supporters (Burma Partnership, 25 February 2015).

The Laem Chabang Port in Thailand was established before the DSEZ thirty years ago. At that time, the duty to respect and protect human rights was not as recognized in Southeast Asia as today. However, 30 years after the Laem Chabang Port project, locals in Myanmar today are facing the same human rights violations. Furthermore, economic development led by both national and international multinationals has been expanded into even bigger projects, resulting in transnational issues.

The structure of the paper

The paper will start with different political and cultural contexts of Thailand and Myanmar that affected the production and distribution of media. Then, the concept of observational documentary will clarify why *The Third Eye* was selected as case study for the research on human right advocacy. The plot of *The Third Eye* will be provided before focusing on the methodology of the research. The findings of the focus groups of Thai and Myanmar youth will be elaborated before comparing similarities and differences of youth perceptions between Thai and Burmese youth. Finally, three main arguments will be concluded.

Documentary film and human rights advocacy: different political and cultural context of Thailand and Myanmar

Several forms of communications, news, research, documentary, film festivals and protests have been applied for years to promote human rights/community rights in both Myanmar and Thailand.

In Thailand, human rights academic courses and training courses as well as center for human rights emerged in and after the 1980s. Moreover, the Constitution of Thailand contains a section on human rights and community rights since 1997. In 2010, media activism such as Prachathai and i-LAW were established with the clear objective to protect human rights.

In Myanmar, human rights issues were sensitive under its military rules for more than 50 years.

Documentary was one of the most popular media used to advocate human rights in Thailand and Myanmar. For several years, the Thai Public Broadcasting (TPBS) provided grants to produce documentaries, and training filmmakers on human rights concepts. The films produced by TPBS were shown during special events related to human rights, with some of them being selected to air on TPBS' television programs. Also, human rights film festivals were organized periodically by Amnesty International and education institutions in Thailand. Observational documentary was introduced in the Thai society, in particular when Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre (SAC) provided trainings and grants for producing observational documentaries based on Visual Anthropology concepts. In Myanmar, two organizations of filmmaking - the Human Rights, Human Dignity Institute and the Yangon Film School - trained filmmakers for documentary production. Several international financial sources supported human rights trainings, including producing documentaries. Nonetheless, the distribution of films seemed difficult due to the scrutiny of the military government.

Based on their political and cultural contexts, Thailand and Myanmar face different situations of media perception and distribution. Although both countries have experienced military control, the time, there are several differences: Thailand's military has seized power in coups d'état for more than ten times since the 1932 Siamese Revolution. Under those coups d'état, debates and discussions about human rights were prohibited. Hence, in times of civilian governments, the Thai society had more freedoms to express opinions and hold debates and discussions about human rights violations via mass media and educational institutions. At the same time, Thailand's young generations accessed information about human rights movements and concepts via several media channels. Moreover, many youth clubs in Thai universities have been working on protecting human rights and community rights, including through documentary films production.

In Myanmar, the situation was different: The military dominated the country for 50 years. Before 2011, Myanmar was labeled a pariah state. Prior censorship on all media was employed despite it being a violation of Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). After 50 years of the country's isolation, the direct military rule ended when President Thein Sein's quasi-civilian government came to power in 2011. In November 2015, the victory of Aung San Suu Kyi's political party, the National League for Democracy, changed the country dramatically, including the media landscape (UNESCO and IMS, 2016).

Before 2012, taboo topics such as natural resource extraction, the drug trade, military operations, and corruption were not reported on the media coverages. In August 2012 prior censorship in the print media was cancelled and other media reforms followed. The Report of Assessment of Media Development in Myanmar (2016) indicated the new media landscape in Myanmar that, "these include the adoption in 2014 of the Printing and Publishing Enterprise Law (PPEL), which officially abolished past prior censorship and allowed newspapers to become editorially independent from the state; the Broadcasting Law 2015, which enables private, public and community media to flourish; the establishment of the Myanmar News Media Council in October 2015 to act as a media self-regulatory body, just to name a few" (UNESCO and IMS, 2016, p.V). However, this development seemed not be absent absent from the development of democracy and human rights in Myanmar. At least two critical situations of media practices indicate that human rights advocacy in Myanmar are challenged: Firstly, the cancellation of prior censorship does not apply for the film industry. Under the 1996 Motion Picture Law, both domestic and foreign films are subject to the scrutiny of the Motion Picture Censor Board, formed by the Ministry of Information. Before airing publically, films must be approved by the Censor Board, and have a Motion Picture Certificate. Furthermore, persons showing films publically must apply for a Cinema Hall License which is granted by the Myanmar Motion Picture Enterprise (UNESCO and IMS, 2016). The Motion Picture Law defines criminal penalties for offenders as follows: "The objectives set forth in the Law are broad and contain vague wording which can be used to effectively censor any films which include anti-government sentiments. The Law states that motion pictures must 'prove beneficial' to the 'preservation of Myanmar cultural heritage, contribute towards the unity of the national races and towards keeping alive a keen sense of patriotism'" (ibid). Any enterprises allowing to air films without a Motion Pictures Business License face a one-year prison term and a fine while filmmakers can be subject to a six-month prison term and a fine. The Report of Assessment of Media Development in Myanmar (2016) reported that "the existence of prior censorship in the film industry violates international standards relating to freedom of expression" (ibid).

Secondly, several journalists and filmmakers have been arrested and often detained without charges for criticizing the military and the government (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2019). On April 12, 2019, the website of the Committee to Protect Journalists reported that "*the military's Yangon Region Command filed the criminal complaint against the news outlet's Burmese-language editor Ye Ni at the Kyauktada Police Station in Yangon. The criminal complaint was filed under the Telecommunications Law's Section 66(d), a provision that permits two-year prison sentences for guilty convictions.*" (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2019)

In April 2019, Min Htin Ko Ko Gyi, a prominent filmmaker who produced human rights films and founded and organized international human rights film events such as the Human Rights, Human Dignity International Film Festival, was arrested. *The Irrawaddy* reported that Min had been a strong critic of the Myanmar military, posting a series of Facebook posts criticizing the undemocratic military-drafted 2008 Constitution and the political role it granted to the Army. Lieutenant-Colonel Lin Htun of the Yangon Region Command opened a defamation case against the filmmaker under Article 66(d) of the Telecommunications Law. Just days later, the officer opened a second case against Min under non-bailable Article 505(a) of the Myanmar Penal Code (Aung, 2019). Both charges carry a maximum two-year prison sentence. All these controversial cases indicate that Myanmar's freedom of expression remains unprotected. Human rights issues are still sensitive and prohibited on mass media coverage. As a result, human rights advocacy in Myanmar is being monitored by authorities.

Observational documentary concept

This research employed an observational documentary, *The Third Eye* (Chanrungmaneekul, 2013) as a tool to explore in what ways the documentary could advocate human rights and communication rights effectively, and how youth in Thailand and Myanmar created their own ways to communicate human rights issues to the public. According to Grimshaw and Ravetz (2009), and based on Andre Bazin's philosophy of realist films in 1945-1946 essays, observational cinema was formulated in 1970s when "*a dialogue between anthropologists and documentary filmmakers*" emerged (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2009, p.IX). While then-common conventional documentary required script writing before shooting, observational films provide meanings on a subject's daily life without scripts that are dominated by the views and opinions of outsiders and filmmakers. This reflects the observational documentary's philosophy of authenticity and objectivity. As films and subjects are not directed by the filmmaker's intentions but rather their own lives and 'truths', observational documentaries preserve the 'identity' of the subject. On the other hand, "*they referred to a particular ethical stance in which 'to observe' meant 'to respect' or 'to comply with.*'" (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2009, p.10) One crucial principle of observational cinema is that no

single and no outsiders' narration voice dominate the film. Rather, stories should be narrated by indigenous or local subjects. Accordingly, story-telling represents subjects' perspectives alone.

The reasons for selecting the observational style to study advocacy of human rights included:

1. The films respect subjects' identity, lived experiences and perspectives. Moreover, the films prioritize subjects or characters' exigency;

2. Subjects' rights of communication is protected by participation of local people (subjects/characters) in the stages of pre-production (doing research, selecting issues and locations). In the case of *The Third Eye*, the community selected a key character. In the production stage, the films allowed subjects' voices to portray diverse 'truths', that is rights of communication of insiders (local people), not only outsiders (filmmakers);

3. The films open opportunities for marginalized people to speak to the public with less domination from outsiders/filmmakers, which may empower otherwise powerless people. When people, including filmmakers, produce media, they usually think, write and edit based on their bias, background, and interests as well as their financial supporters. Yet, human rights violations are normally faced by vulnerable and marginalized people, such as ethnic minorities, children and low-income people. Therefore, 'truth' in marginalized people's lives can be represented variously if we use the technique of observational cinema;

4. According to the literature review, it was found that drama documentary/conventional films (docu-drama) was a popular form often used by human rights advocacy movements. In filmmakers' sense, there is a common knowledge that drama documentaries have more power to attract audiences. Nevertheless, as I argued beforehand, conventional documentary is always subjective because it is dominated by the interests and perspectives of filmmakers or outsiders. Hence, studying observational cinema related to human right ethics, and how it can open public space for sensitive and controversial issues effectively, is a challenging study.

The Third Eye

The documentary *The Third Eye* was shot in 2012/13 at Ban Banglamung, Chonburi, Eastern Thailand where people suffer from the negative impact of the Laem Chabang Port construction since the 1990s. I, as the producer and director of the film, worked together with my undergraduate students, Thitiphun Bumrungwong, Donlawat Sunsuk, Sukrit Phumsrichan and Aniwat Phandinthong while they were in their third year of studies at the Department of Communication Arts, Burapha University, Thailand. It presents a story of uncle Banjob Changthong, a 77 year-old local blind fisherman. The narrative of the documentary parallels uncle Banjob's everyday life together with community practices when Yingluck

Shinawatra's government decided to build the third phase of Laem Chabang Port in 2012. *The Third Eye* employs an observational documentary style shooting without script, narration and music. Instead, it provides details of uncle Banjob and his family, and the community's negotiation with the authorities. All scenes are natural practices without any settings, directing etc. Participation from local people began in the stage of selecting the main character and the issues presented. The community selected the characters and issues by themselves after discussing with the film crew prior to the shooting. Importantly, *The Third Eye* did not design the story and issues related to human rights. Rather, it was the project of visual anthropology with an experiment of ethnographic filmmaking that aimed to record the cultural identity of specific places. With regards to film aesthetics, with the style of slow, quiet and realistic, it may be called an ethnographic film that is challenging the dissemination of human rights/community rights content. How did different groups of people make sense of the film? In what ways and how effective did the film inspire audiences about human rights issues? In this research, *The Third Eye,* 42 minutes duration was shown to four groups of Thai and Burmese youth.

Methodology

Four focus groups were conducted to explore how youth perceived 'human rights' from *The Third Eye,* and in what ways respondents desired to create their own media to advocate human rights. The samples of Thai and Myanmar youth were divided up to be four focus groups using the frame of insiders and outsiders. Firstly, the insiders were teenagers who lived in the place where human rights violation took place (Ban Banglamung, Thailand and Dawei, Myanmar). They all shared similar challenges, such as forced migration from their homeland, unfair land compensation, and living in communities suffering from environmental degradation after the international deep-sea ports project started. Secondly, the outsiders (i.e. teenagers who lived outside Ban Banglamung and Dawei) were involved. For Thailand, students in Bangkok were asked as participants of a focus group. In Myanmar, students in Yangon participated in another focus group. The outsiders were selected based on two criteria. Firstly, they had to be students majoring in film or production or communications studies in media institutes or universities. Secondly, they had to live in the capital cities Bangkok and Yangon. The reason for selecting media students and filmmakers was because the research was designed in such way to allow the participants to create their own media in a limited period of time. Thus, the participants needed to have enough knowledge and skills. Both Thailand and Myanmar participants were selected by using the criteria as follows:

Thailand focus groups participants included
1) a younger group in Ban Banglamung, aged 13-18 year-old (the insiders);

2) media students, aged 19-24 year-old in Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok (the outsiders).

Myanmar focus groups participants included

1) a younger group in Dawei, aged 14-18 years old (the insiders);

2) young filmmakers and producers, aged 17-31 years old in Yangon(the outsiders).

The findings

The Thai insiders: The film should be dramatic, entertaining and short.

After watching *The Third Eye,* most participants liked the film because it showed scenes and people of the village. It was the story of themselves that they were connected with. For teenagers, watching uncle Banjob, an indigenous blind fisherman who was self-reliant on his small-fishing livelihood, was amazing for the new generation. Importantly, as for the terms 'human right/community rights' issues, the participants did not understand these terms. In Thai language these terms are written 'สิทธิมนุษยชน/สิทธิชุมชน' which they never used in their daily life, especially in the teenager age. After watching the documentary, they explained these terms based on their experiences. The terms 'human rights/community rights' did not make sense to them until we talked about loss in their life, such as basic needs: food, water, clean air and land for livelihood.

Considering film aesthetics, the most favorite scene the insiders liked and remembered was when uncle Banjob caught fish despite his blindness. Furthermore, all pictures presented clean and white beaches in the past. However, the insiders were with cinematic techniques, such as hand-held shots and unclear sounds. Hand-held shots made them dizzy and they did not understand what was happening in the scene. The point that everyone agreed on was that the documentary duration was too long - it should be 20-25 minutes. The insiders suggested that the film should be dramatic, entertaining and short. One of them offered that a cartoon was an interesting form.

The Thai outsiders: The observational documentary was too quiet, too slow and lacked comprehensive information.

The outsiders group mentioned the scenes they liked, for examples boats in the storm, Banjob's wife weaving fishing nets, and children on beaches. These scenes impressed the students in respect of film aesthetics creation and constructing meanings in each scene. Nevertheless, they raised weaknesses of the documentary. Firstly, it was too slow and too quiet - they wanted it to be more attractive and dramatic. Music was very important to increase the audience's attention. Secondly, they wanted to know information from the other side.

"It is dangerous to take side without comprehensive information. I prefer to see many sides of information and decide by myself which side I should support." (Piano, a female Chulalongkorn University student)

Nonetheless, most participants seemed to be satisfied with the theme of a blind fisherman and his struggle. One of them was happy seeing only one side story telling but said she needed more comprehensive information, for example: What type of port? Why were the fishermen affected? How many times did the villagers participate in the meetings with the Port?

Thirdly, the documentary had too many issues, hence it was difficult for the group to catch up. They recommended using narration (voice-over) to tell the story more clearly.

Observational documentary: Outstanding content but less opportunity in distributing to public.

Different from the insider group, the outsider group believed that in order to advocate human rights and community rights, we need to distribute the documentary to the public. The group's view on the distribution of the documentary was positive as they found the content outstanding. One student believed that the issue of rights had good potential since the Thai society had been confronting rights violations in many realms. Showing the film in specific media channels, e.g. TPBS and Documentary Club, was possible as they had particular targeted groups who were interested in rights issues. Nevertheless, apart from TPBS and Documentary Club, making the film available to the public audience tended to be difficult. Everyone agreed that mass media distribution was not an option as the film's content seemed to be less relevant to many people, in particular those living in Bangkok. However, it was mentioned that people living in other areas of the country could potentially identify with the human rights and community rights violations portrayed in *The Third Eye*. Therefore, non-engagement with Ban Banglamung's suffering tended to be an obstruction from advocating for and educating on human rights and community rights.

Creating receivers' participating media: Board games, social media and fictional films.

Due to limited opportunities to distribute the film publicly and the fact that it engaged with specific people in a specific location and context, it was concluded that the mass audience would not find *The Third Eye* as interesting. The best solution was to create media that audiences could participate in, or produce by themselves. The group of Chulalongkorn students created media for advocating human rights and community rights in three forms: a board game, a fictional film, and a viral clip. Firstly, a group of three male students designed a board game that demanded participation from three parties of players: a community leader, a villager and an NGO staff. To win the game, the three parties have to

work together. The game was inspired by situations in Ban Banglamung and relied on actions of the players as the group described: *"The board game will play on inequality of development. Each player has different roles including a community leader, a villager and an NGP. Everyone has their own power in working to stop the Port construction. Each party will have 'action cards' for examples, the villager has a card in protesting, NGO has a card to campaign of a hunting list. To win the game, all parties have to work together to aim to two ways of victories: getting public city points and stopping the Port construction. Gaining the public city points means attracting the mass media to give attention to Ban Banglamung. …. To stop the Port construction, each party will have different action cards. The game will be run by opening 'event cards', that is a process of the Port construction, starting from land expropriation, EIA and HIA reporting and public hearings. The critical point is that all event cards will be removed or shuffled by the game master to imitate reality of Thai society that always has unexpected situations and often violates human rights"* (Mee, a male Chulalongkorn student).

Secondly, a group of female students created a fictional film about rights of the Karen ethnic group in Thailand's north. Interestingly, they preferred to form a fictional film with a dramatic, exciting story to attract mass audiences while the filmmaker would insert rights issues in the narrative. The main character would be a Karen girl who dreamed to be a nurse, however in reality she had to do agricultural tasks. Later onwards, the state evicted the Karen from the forest and the Karen girl went to Bangkok where she struggled with lack of equality of rights. Lastly, the last sub-group of the Chulalongkorn students offered a viral clip of passive smoking. The fictional form would be used by following a smoker's life in a day to explore how smoking affects other people. The 15-minute film would be distributed via social media.
.
According to the findings, it was evident that participation from receivers/the audience was a key strategy to create media for advocating human rights among younger generations. Interestingly, all groups selected to use communication channels via social media, games, and a mainstream film.

The Burmese insiders: Inspiration, social practice and local people's participation in media production.

The focus group of Dawei teenagers was conducted to investigate their reaction towards the observational documentary that related to their homeland of Dawei. While *The Third Eye* did not tell the story of Dawei's livelihood but of Banglamung village in Thailand, however both communities suffered under the same economic development projects. The main objective of this research stage was to investigate how the documentary advocated human rights and community rights issues.

Dawei teenagers appreciated *The Third Eye* with respect to showing details of reality in the lives of fishermen and other marginalized people. It reminded them of life in Dawei's after the Dawei project had launched. The film inspired them to think about protection measures for their cultural and natural resources. Most importantly, one of the discussion topics was how to empower the community to protect its rights. In terms of film aesthetic and presentation, most of them agreed that the film was too slow and long - they would prefer a film length of 5-20 minutes. While the group appreciated authentic daily life activities in the film, all agreed that the shorter the media the more powerful it would be. Regarding the media distribution, the group recommended for the film to be posted via social media, which is the most popular channel for their generation.

Interestingly, one Burmese youth offered an idea to produce a film or media created by Dawei local people, not filmmakers outside the community. It was very important for him, as an insider, to tell the public the truth concerning his community. Overall and importantly, local people's participation was connected to advocate human rights issues because locals were able to discuss issues concerning their own livelihoods, which would empower their rights with their own voices in media.

The Burmese outsiders: The digital age of media distribution under authoritarian power, and power of observational documentary.

As young filmmakers in Myanmar, all key informants had experiences in producing human right films. Moreover, some of them had experiences or had heard about human rights violations in their own lives. All agreed that *The Third Eye* represented human rights issues clearly, especially the lack of rights of local people in development projects, as well as the disableds' rights. They viewed that human relations was the main issue of *The Third Eye*. The film was very emotional and touching to them, and all participants liked it. They regarded the observational style suitable to present human rights issues because it was full of authentic shots and left time for audience to reflect. The group did not see think the film was slow but, in contrast, said the film should have spent more time in some scenes. The group's dislike involved handheld-shaking shots. The most capturing point for them was uncle Banjob's speech at the end of the film where he says: *'I can't see but I know everything.'*

According to the findings, Myanmar young filmmakers concentrated on *The Third Eye* dramatically. As artists, all cinematic techniques connoted signs of struggle of two sides of the world (dark-bright and elites-marginalized) such as the scenes of heavy raining storm, diving, and the ending scene captured them. They confirmed that observational style was suitable to advocate human rights as it portrayed real and authentic events. It should be in the form of a documentary, short films or animation. Importantly, advocating human rights to public efficiently did not rely on only content and art forms of

media. It also involved with context of distribution, media channels, political conditions and culture of media reception: *"As a filmmaker, I wanted my film to go to film festivals. That's our way. But for advocating human rights, I think short films is the best and distributing via social media, especially Facebook. Everyone here uses Facebook. Myanmar people love seeing films. They like documentary but observational cinema is not popular for commercial screenings. If you put it in cinema theatre, it was commercial risk and may be the Censor Board won't allow. Even in film festivals, all films have to pass the Censor Board."* (Perry, a Myanmar filmmaker)

As the finding described above, advocating human rights under Myanmar political and cultural circumstances became a sensitive topic. Yu, a young male filmmaker, who offered to create animation for advocating human rights issues, elaborated 'open space' for his film: *"I want to set an event. I need to choose people to watch my film. For human rights issues, it's sensitive in Myanmar. Even, film festivals, it will get censored. The government doesn't allow to do that. You cannot do it in movie theatres because of censorship in Myanmar"* (Yu, a Myanmar young filmmaker). According to Yu's words, under specific political and cultural conditions, producing good films is possible but distributing them to the public or specific groups might be difficult, even impossible. Social media thus became a key distribution platform and open space in the digital age.

Similarities and differences between Thailand and Myanmar

Culturally, younger people in Southeast Asia may have similar life styles. They perceive knowledge, news, movies and other content through social media, especially Facebook. Nonetheless, human rights advocacy seems to be different. According to the findings, political and cultural contexts of particular places affected advocating human rights, especially the process of media production and media distribution for learning human right issues. Under different political and cultural contexts, the Thai and Myanmar focus groups showed certain similarities and differences in terms of human rights advocacy on the example of *The Third Eye* as follows:

Similarities
1. Both Thai and Myanmar young groups agreed that *The Third Eye* was too slow, and its duration was too long. They preferred films that were shorter in length.
2. They indicated the importance of participation in media production processes to encourage and inspire local people to fight for human rights protection. As for the insider groups from Ban Banglamung and Dawei, they preferred to produce films by themselves instead of filmmakers outside as they desired to present some issues of their own to the public. Considering participation from the

audience, all groups indicated that forums, seminars or talks after watching films were necessary to enhance the understanding of human rights issues.

3. They preferred to distribute the media via social media as it was accessible by the public.

Differences

1. While Myanmar youth aimed at distributing their media via internet channels (especially Facebook), the Thai youth still considered other types of media such as television, movies/ theatres and film festival as effective ways to communicate with the public. This is a direct result of the political context, with the Myanmar youth stating that (online) social media was less scrutinized by the military government. They actually desired to organize film festivals to show human rights documentaries, however the focus group participants revealed that it was too risky to challenge the Censor Board of Myanmar. As Myanmar had been living under military control for a long time before the 2015 general election, mass media such as newspapers, television, movies, and radio seemed unsuitable channels to distribute media related to human rights issues. As for Thailand, although the country was controlled by the military periodically, advanced media technology had still developed, especially in the sections of younger media users.

Findings showed there was no best media for all counties. The audience studies in two different societies proved that advocating human rights needs to concern itself with political and cultural contexts of a particular society.

2. In terms of media styles, especially the Thai youth in Bangkok, offered to produce board games, computer games, animation and short films. They believed that engagement with and from the audience was key to successful human rights advocacy. The media they offered seemed to be very effective to provoke participation from game players and the audience. In contrast, the Myanmar youth engaged more with short films, documentaries and animation, believing that real life in the observational film was powerful to attract audiences which would result in the advocating of human rights. They also recommended the need to have an open space to talk and discuss with the audience after watching films.

Conclusion

The research indicated three significant arguments. Firstly, the observational documentary, *The Third Eye* was attractive for specific audience, filmmakers and media students. Nevertheless, it was too slow and too long for the younger groups. In Ban Banglamung, the village shooting location, the youth connected themselves to the film because all scenes were real, and because research participants lived there. Nevertheless, the film was not attractive to them as it was hard for them to understand it without

narration, music and dramatic scenes. In contrast, for the outsider groups, *The Third Eye*'s cinematic style was attractive but they could not connect themselves with the content of the film. The participants perceived that human rights violations emerged in the village but they did not engage with human rights advocacy by the film. This showed that, theoretically, *The Third Eye* respects local people's rights because locals took part in the film's production. The locals' voices were presented directly through the film without any directing from the filmmakers. Practically, the public audience may not connect themselves to the film, hence the participation of film subjects and the audience proved to be key factors in determining the leverage of the film in advocating human rights.

Secondly, participation was vital for learning and advocating human rights. In the case of using observational documentary to advocate human rights, both insiders and outsiders had different views. In the insiders' view, participation of the locals or film subjects who suffered from human rights violation was important to create a real, authentic and touching situation. Moreover, the locals or subjects should participate in film making, or be filmmakers themselves. In the insiders' view, to advocate human rights by using observational documentary, participation of the villagers was crucial. The filmmakers from outside the village should produce a film that focuses more on the quality of the film but rather the cooperation with locals to advocate for human rights. These concepts are in line with the goal of observational documentary.

The perspective of the outsiders - those living in Bangkok and Yangon - was different. They found participation from the audience more crucial in advocating human rights. Being filmmakers and media students in Thailand and Myanmar, they designed media that audiences could participate in, such as board games, computer games and fictional films. In Myanmar, the outsiders wished to organize a talk with audiences after watching their films.

Lastly, there was no best media for all countries in advocating human rights as the selection of proper media depended on political and cultural contexts of particular society when producing content for human rights advocacy. Most importantly, suitable media distribution would enhance human rights advocacy successfully. In Thailand, television, film festivals and social media were considered to be suitable channels to distribute human rights content. In Myanmar, social media became a popular platform of distribution for sensitive issues as media producers could avoid the Censor Board. Furthermore, it was easily accessible by people around the world.

Distributing the film via social media was considered an effective way to disseminate human rights issues. After producing a film, the most important stage that would bring all content and feeling to

public was media distribution. It was evident that if filmmakers or media producers could not distribute their own media properly and widely, learning and advocating human rights would not possible. Consequently, the selection of communication channels was significant. Digital media or online media was the most proper channel in the participants' views. The research participants in Thailand and Myanmar confirmed that social media, especially Facebook and YouTube, were suitable channels to distribute documentaries to the public. Most importantly, effective advocacy depended on seeking channels of participation of audience.

Reference:

Aung, S. Y. (12 April 2019).'Filmmaker Accused of Insulting Army Is Denied Bail, Sent to Prison'. In *The Irrawaddy*. Available at: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/filmmaker-accused-insulting-army-denied-bail-sent-prison.html>.

Chanrungmaneekul, U. (2009). *The globalized village: grounded experience, media and response in eastern Thailand.* Doctoral thesis. Loughborough University.

Chanrungmaneekul, U. (2013). *Negotiation in production process of observational Cinema through social practice: A case study of resisting the third phase of Laemchabang port construction, Banglamung village, Chonbu*ri.

Committee to Protect Journalists (May 22, 2019). 'Myanmar reporter detained without charge since May 15'. *Committee to Protect Journalists.* Available at: <https://cpj.org/2019/05/myanmar-reporter-detained-without-charge-since-may.php>.

Committee to Protect Journalists (April 25, 2019). 'Myanmar military sues The Irrawaddy for criminal defamation over conflict coverage'. *Committee to Protect Journalists.* Available at: <https://cpj.org/2019/04/myanmar-military-sues-the-irrawaddy-for-criminal-d.php>.

Ditapichat, J. (2000). *Media & human rights in Asia.* Singapore: Asian Media Information and Communication Centre (AMIC).

Grimshaw, A. and Ravetz, A. (2009). Observational Cinema, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Phongpaichit, P. and Baker, C. (2002). *Thailand economy and politics.* Second ed. Salangor Darul Ehsan: Oxford.

Shin Min, M. K. (February 3, 2018). Dawei Special Economic Zone. *Global New Light of Myanmar* Available at: <http://www.globalnewlightofmyanmar.com/dawei-special-economic-zone>.

Tsuchikawa, M. (September 5, 2017). 'Will the Dawei Special Economic Zone benefit the people of Myanmar?' *Mekong Commons.* Available at: <http://www.mekongcommons.org/will-the-dawei-special-economic-zone-benefit-the-people-of-myanmar>.

Turner, G. (1993). *Film as social practice.* London: Routledge.

UNESCO and IMS (2016). *The Report of Assessment of Media Development in Myanmar.* Myanmar.

Wai, Y. (April 8, 2016). 'Urge for Action to Stop Human Rights Violations in Dawei SEZ'. *Myanmar Business Today, Vol. 4*(14). Available at: <https://www.mmbiztoday.com/articles/urge-action-stop-human-rights-violations-dawei-sez>.

Film

The Third Eye, 2013. [documentary] Unaloam Chanrungmaneekul and Thitiphun Bumrungwong. Thailand.