



Policy Brief

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

This policy brief is based on a research project funded by SHAPE SEA and carried out by Unaloam Chanrungmaneeikul.



1. Introduction

Contested ideologies: development discourse and human rights

In Thailand, human rights concepts are debatable, especially in times when the country is under the control of military governments. Thailand has seen more than 10 coup d'états ever since the 1932 Siamese Revolution. Two contested ideologies - human rights, and national development - were indeed disseminated to public through 30 years. Especially national development projects were operated continuously under 'Development Discourse' which was disseminated through media and communications. While development in the Third World has mostly focused on economic progress for decades, this has created a discourse on economic, social and cultural ideologies. Thailand's globalization and industrialization was prominently reported in foreign countries, which contributed to the country's economic boost and modernization, leading to an improving lifestyle, increasing income and wealth (Chanrungrmaneekul, 2009). As a result, although 'human rights advocacy and development discourse' have been represented through a diversity of communication and mass media channels for decades, human rights advocacy does not seem to be a popular and dominant ideology.

After the Thai government constructed the Laem Chabang Port project in Eastern Thailand from the 1980s, the Thai society received information about the advantages of this development project through mass media outlets. Nevertheless, in the last ten years, there have been intense debates between the development ideology and human rights ideology in the independent media, including documentary filmmakers who were contacted by victims of the Laem Chabang Port project.

Similarly, in Myanmar, people have been living under a military government for more than fifty years. Human rights documentaries have been produced particularly by educators of the Human Rights, Human Dignity Institute and Yangon Film School. However, the distribution of films seemed challenging in reaching the public due to the scrutiny of the Burmese military government. The people of Dawei, Myanmar have been facing the same challenges as the inhabitants of Ban Banglamung, Thailand. In 2008, the Dawei project was launched. The Myanmar government cooperated with the Thai government in signing a MOU for the Dawei project, including the construction of an international deep-sea port as well as a special economic zone to be linked with Kanchanaburi province and Laem Chabang Port in Thailand. Issues on the importance of this project for the wealth of the country were distributed through mass media

outlets. It was the independent media who took it upon itself to report on the many human right violations suffered by the local people in Dawei.

2. Method

Observational documentary film as a tool to advocate human rights

Human rights violations have normally appeared as conventional documentaries in both Thailand and Myanmar. Most often, the style of the documentaries presented narrative stories based on screenplays through the filmmakers' perspective. However, filmmakers are oftentimes 'outside' human rights violations - both mentally, physically, and geographically. Hence, most documentaries mainly contain standpoints of filmmakers themselves in overly dramatic scenes, which are supported by specific music and narration.

In contrast, observational documentaries aim to present local people's voices by allowing the film subjects' daily life, activities and situations appear in front of cameras without scripts and directing. This type of documentary is only possible if the filmmaker studied the subjects' livelihood and culture prior to the shooting of the film. One crucial principle of observational cinema is that no single voice dominates the films, and no outsider narrates the documentary. If there is to be a voice, it should be that of an indigenous or local telling the story from their own perspectives rather than the filmmakers'. Observational documentaries do not contain music or any dramatic stories, but depict authentic lives that the local people want to convey to the public. Thus, observational documentary needs input and participation from locals in the process of production. Due to the real-life depiction of people's lives as well as the active participation and shaping of the movie by affected people, observational documentary respects the human rights of those who are the 'owners' of human rights issues.

The respecting of human dignity was embodied in and preserved by the depiction of authentic scenes in the shooting of *The Third Eye*.

3. *The Third Eye: A case study*

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. 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 Third Eye was used as case study for this research to analyze how effective observational documentary advocates human rights in Thailand and Myanmar. *The Third Eye* presents local people's struggle and violations of their human rights due to development projects. The Dawei Project in Myanmar was added as it was similar to the Thai case in Ban Banglamung.

Powerful media and effective ways of distribution

The Third Eye, a 40-minute observational documentary, was shown to the four groups as follows:

1. Youth aged 8-15 years old in Ban Banglamung, Thailand;
2. Youth aged 8-15 years old in Dawei, Myanmar;
3. Youth aged 17-22 years old in universities in Bangkok and Chonburi, Thailand;
4. Youth aged 13-22 years old in Yangon, Myanmar.

Focus groups were conducted with the youth groups after watching *The Third Eye*. The findings showed the following similarities and differences between the two countries:

Similarities

1. Both Thai and Myanmar youth groups agreed that *The Third Eye* was 'too slow', and its duration too long. They preferred short films of around 20-25 minutes.
2. Both youth indicated the importance of participation in media production processes to inspire local people to fight for human rights protection. Also, both youth groups preferred to produce films by themselves instead of hiring filmmakers. The most common reason for this was that the groups desired to present some issues of their own problems to the public. Considering participation from the audience, all groups indicated that post-movie forums, seminars and talks were necessary to enhance the understanding of human rights issues.

3. Both Thai and Myanmar youth preferred to distribute 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.
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.

4. Policy recommendations

1. Filmmaking funder should have a plan to provide grants for distributing media, and not only provide media grants.
2. For Communication and Media Studies educators, teaching filmmaking and media production should expand trainings to study effective ways of media distribution based on different political and cultural contexts.