Documenting intangible culture for sustainable tourism: Disrupting the tranquil image of Chiang Khan, Loei province

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Alexandra Denes

Department of Women's Studies, Chiang Mai University, Thailand

alexdenes@gmail.com

Sorayut Aiemueayut

Media Arts and Design, Chiang Mai University, Thailand

sorayut.a@cmu.ac.th

Abstract

Visual representation has long been a key modality in the creation and promotion of tourism destinations. In today's digital media landscape, videos and images shared online play a central role in establishing tourist expectations, fueling what are often idealized images and narratives of a place. In the case of the town of Chiang Khan in Loei Province, photos and promotional videos highlight the charm of the wooden vernacular architecture along the sleepy bank of the Mekong River, which serves as a nostalgic backdrop for another major tourist attraction—the morning Buddhist almsgiving ceremony, or *tak bat khaw niaw*. Since these images of Chiang Khan's cultural landscape began circulating widely on the internet in 2009, hundreds of thousands of domestic tourists have been drawn to this town on the Thai-Lao border to experience its picturesque cultural heritage and the promise of "slow life" in proximity to nature. Behind its tranquil image, however, Chiang Khan's intangible heritage has been profoundly affected by the tourism boom of the last decade. Engaging with scholarship on tourism and visual culture, this article presents findings from action-based research about this transformation. Using visual ethnographic methods, this research sought to understand how the residents of Chiang Khan viewed the impacts of tourism on their intangible heritage, and it also garnered local opinions about how to mitigate the adverse impacts of the commodification of cultural heritage. Through a case study of ethnographic film production in Chiang Khan, this article aims to demonstrate that visual methods can play a vital role in fostering constructive dialog among stakeholders and raising awareness about sustainable tourism and intangible culture, both for residents and visitors.

Keywords: Cultural tourism, intangible cultural heritage, visual ethnography, Thai studies

1. Introduction

Ever since the publication of Urry's groundbreaking book, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (1990), tourism scholars have focused on the role that visuality plays in the tourist experience. Drawing on Berger's concept of the gaze in *Ways of Seeing* (1972), Urry argued that tourism is a socially learned practice of consuming places visually. Contrary to the idea of tourism as a unique and individual experience, Urry argued that all forms of tourism are mediated by visual representations of destinations which shape the expectations and behaviors of tourists. The tourist gaze is "a vision constructed through mobile images and representational technologies. Like the medical gaze, the power of the visual gaze within modern tourism is tied into, and enabled by, various technologies, including camcorders, film, TV, cameras and digital images (1990:2)."

As argued by Burns, Palmer and Lester (2010), in spite of the recognition of Urry's important theoretical contribution to tourism studies, relatively few scholars have undertaken research examining the linkages between tourism and visual culture. Such studies are particularly needed today as the growth of digital platforms has led to the circulation of more visual representations of tourist destinations than ever before. This paper aims to contribute to the field of tourism and visual culture by focusing on a case study of a popular object of the tourist gaze—traditional cultural heritage. As illustrated by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998), cultural tourism often has the effect of transforming living practices into staged performances of packaged culture. Rituals and traditions that were once enacted within the community become "folklorized" (1998:62) and frozen into fixed, commodified forms for tourist audiences.

Recognizing the potential threats of tourism to the integrity of living heritage, several international organizations have drafted guidelines and instruments to help communities and local stakeholders to manage cultural tourism and thus mitigate the negative impacts. One

particularly important instrument is the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Adopted in 2003, the Convention aims to ensure respect for the living heritage of communities, groups and individuals and raise awareness about its importance. The 2003 Convention defines intangible cultural heritage as "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity (UNESCO 2003)."

The Operational Directives—a text which provides detailed guidelines for the state signatories on how to implement the 2003 ICH Convention—caution that tourism may lead to over-commercialization, misappropriation, and distortions of the meaning of culture. To mitigate these risks, the Operational Directives encourage state signatories "to assess the potential of intangible cultural heritage for sustainable tourism and the impact of tourism on the intangible cultural heritage and sustainable development of the communities, groups and individuals concerned (UNESCO 2020:71)." Furthermore, it urges signatories to ensure that communities are the main beneficiaries of tourism related to their own intangible cultural heritage while promoting their role in managing tourism. It also states that local communities should have a leading role in educating the tourism industry so that the cultural meanings of ICH are not diminished (UNESCO 2020).

2. Background of the Research: A DASTA and CultDLab Collaboration

The research in Chiang Khan took place as part of a broader capacity-building initiative for the documentation of cultural heritage supported by the Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration (DASTA) of Thailand. Established in 2003, DASTA is a government funded public organization whose core mission is to promote sustainable tourism which balances economic, social, and environmental factors while supporting community participation in all phases of tourism planning and decision-making. The authors of this article were part of a team of researchers affiliated with the CultDLab of Thammasat University, Bangkok, who were invited to lead the pilot initiative with the DASTA Area 5 in Chiang Khan.

The objectives of the capacity-building initiative in Chiang Khan were twofold. First, focusing on the built heritage of the town, CultDLab researchers undertook a detailed mapping of the vernacular architecture using GIS technology to document the various periods and styles of construction as well as significant sites, such as Buddhist temples and sacred ritual spaces. Through interviews with local stakeholders and residents, the team recorded oral histories and narratives associated with the built heritage and the surrounding natural landscape which will be part of a cultural heritage archive of Chiang Khan.

Secondly, as part of the focus on documenting intangible cultural heritage, the research team undertook field research using participant observation, interviews, and visual ethnographic methods (photography and film) to establish a qualitative understanding of the living culture of Chiang Khan. One of the objectives of the research process was to collaborate with the community to produce an ethnographic film about Chiang Khan's living cultural practices, and furthermore to identify the perceived risks and threats to their meaning and continuity, including threats from tourism. In keeping with the principles of the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage—a binding international agreement to which Thailand is a signatory—DASTA acknowledges that the process of

engaging with the community to identify and document intangible culture is the first step in developing a plan for sustainable cultural tourism.

3. Chiang Khan: A Brief History of a Not-so-Quiet Border Town

The town of Chiang Khan is in Loei, a province on the Thai-Lao border in Northeastern Thailand. The entire district of Chiang Khan has a population of approximately 61,000; however, the town itself has only around 11,000 residents (Loei Governor's Office, n.d.). While Chiang Khan became part of the central administration of Siam in 1911, for most of its history it was part of the Lao cultural and political sphere (Teerawatt 2020). The ancient town of Chiang Khan was not in its present location, but rather across the river on the left bank of the Mekong River, in present-day Laos[1]. Established circa the fourteenth century CE, Chiang Khan was part of the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang and served as a trading hub between the Lao cities of Luang Prabang and Vientiane. Following attacks on Luang Prabang by Vietnamese (Yuan) armies in the fifteenth century, the king of Luang Prabang—*Chakkaphat Phaen Phaeo*—moved with his entourage to Chiang Khan, thus raising the economic, military, and cultural importance of the city. In the eighteenth century, the rival Lao kingdoms of Vientiane and Luang Prabang became dependencies under the rule of the Siamese kingdom of Ayutthaya. During this period, the Siamese king arbitrated the rivalry by splitting Chiang Khan into two territories divided by the Mekong River, with the right bank (in present-day Thailand) ruled by Vientiane and the left bank (in present-day Laos) ruled by Luang Prabang. In 1778 CE, the Siamese king, Phra Chao Taksin, sent armies to suppress a rebellion in Vientiane and sought to unify Vientiane and Luang Prabang into a single tributary principality under Siamese suzerainty. During the conflict, people from both Luang Prabang and Vientiane were forcibly resettled to the right bank of the Mekong, to a town called Pak Hueang located to the west of Chiang Khan, at the

[1] The name "Chiang Khan" first appears in the Lao historical record in 1449-1450 CE, during the reign of Chakkaphat Phaen Phaeo (Teerawatt 2020).

confluence of the Nam Hueang tributary and the Mekong River. In 1826 CE, war broke out between Siam and Laos when Chao Anuwong, the king of Vientiane, led a rebellion against his Siamese overlords, attacking the city of Nakhon Ratchasima. Siam sent armies to suppress the revolt and attack Lao cities, including Chiang Khan. The ancient settlement of Chiang Khan on the left bank of the river was burned to the ground and abandoned, and the population was moved to Pak Heung on the right bank. Pak Hueng proved to be strategically vulnerable to attacks, however, particularly by the Chinese "Haw," and circa the 1850s, the population moved to the area across the river from ancient Chiang Khan, naming the town *muang mai Chiang Khan*, or the new city of Chiang Khan (Teerawatt 2020).

After Laos was established as a French protectorate in 1893, many residents on the left bank of the Mekong moved to Chiang Khan to escape French control, and in 1911, Chiang Khan was designated as a district within the newly centralized Siamese administrative system (Teerawatt 2020). With its strategic location, in the early twentieth century, Chiang Khan developed as a trading hub, attracting migrants from China and Vietnam who came to launch their own businesses. Despite being part of Siam politically, the people of Chiang Khan maintained their close cultural and economic ties to neighboring Laos. This relationship was severed in 1975, however, when the communist Pathet Lao took power and restricted all trade with Thailand. Having lost their main trading partner, many of the residents of Chiang Khan gave up their wooden shophouses and their lives on the river and moved inland towards the new highway, while younger generations sought employment opportunities in larger urban centers (Gunther 2017).

Chiang Khan's fate changed course in the late 2000s, when the town was rediscovered first by backpackers and then by Thai tourists who were seeking an "authentic" rural experience. As Gunther (2017) has shown, Chiang Khan's rustic architecture and traditional culture appealed to a growing sense of nostalgia found among Thailand's urban middle class.

Driven by feelings of alienation and cultural loss resulting from decades of rapid economic growth and modernization, in the 2000s more Thai tourists from urban areas began to seek out their imagined lost past in the countryside[2]. This desire for rural authenticity was further amplified by the romantic visual imagery of Chiang Khan circulating in travel programs, popular films, magazines and particularly in social media.

As of 2013, more than 600,000 tourists were visiting Chiang Khan annually (Gunther 2017: 73). Gunther (ibid) has demonstrated that the domestic tourism boom had significant socioeconomic and cultural impacts. Younger generations of Chiang Khan residents who had left to find employment in the cities returned home to open trendy cafes, shops, and guesthouses, contributing to the town's "nostalgic gentrification" (Berliner 2012: 783; cited in Gunther 2017: 73). Moreover, some outside investors came to the town to start businesses, leading to the rise in social tensions between locals and non-locals.

Tourism also had a major impact on intangible cultural heritage, particularly on the morning almsgiving ceremony. Many guesthouses and vendors began offering almsgiving sets to tourists for purchase, with sticky rice, flowers, and packages of sweets or other prepared foods. As more tourists participated, what was formerly a sedate religious tradition became a spectacle of excess. From her field research between 2009-2012, Sirada (2016) noted that the abundance of offerings meant that monks had to rely on helpers with carts or large baskets to carry the alms back to the monastery. Moreover, whereas Chiang Khan locals had traditionally given only sticky rice, tourists were offering flowers and mass-produced packaged goods in keeping with almsgiving practices found in other parts of the country, particularly in urban areas. Concerned locals argued that the commodification of almsgiving had led to waste and the distortion of the meaning of a traditional religious practice (Gunther 2017; Sirada 2016).

[2] Numerous tourism scholars have studied how the growth of domestic tourism in Thailand was linked to motivating factors such as nostalgia and the quest for authenticity. See Cohen (1988), King and Parnwell (2011), Peleggi (1996) and Wantanee (2017).

Over the course of the current research project, from March to November 2021, similar concerns were articulated by some members of the community, as will be discussed further below.

4. Notes from the Field: A Preliminary Survey

In March 2021, the research team met with local stakeholders and residents of Chiang Khan to learn more about the current state of intangible culture and the perceived impacts of tourism. The DASTA Area 5 staff brought us to meet a devout Buddhist and a spirit medium, Mae Nang—a 76-year-old resident who is widely recognized as a local cultural expert. Mae Nang explained that numerous cultural practices were fundamental to Chiang Khan's history and identity. One of these was *Phasad Loi Khro*—a ritual of releasing one's bad luck into the Mekong River at the end of Buddhist Lent, which falls during the months of October or November. While bearing some similarities to the *Loi Krathong* festival found in other parts of the country, Chiang Khan's *Phasad Loi Khro* was distinctive in that it involved a pyramid-shaped float made of banana leaves and decorated with yellow beeswax flowers. Moreover, the Brahmin prayers and rites associated with releasing the float into the Mekong River were much more elaborate than those associated with the *Loi Krathong* festival. Mae Nang then told us about how at the peak of the tourism boom, the *Phasad Loi Khro* had been simplified and modified to suit tourists, which she felt was a distortion of its meaning.

Mae Nang expressed similar misgivings about another important cultural practice mentioned previously—the morning sticky rice almsgiving ritual, or *tak bat khaw niaw*—which had also been adapted to suit tourists. Before the tourist boom, the residents of Chiang Khan would gather early in the morning to offer alms of sticky rice to the monks from three local monasteries. Then later in the morning, devotees would go to the monasteries to make offerings of cooked foods for the monks. With the arrival of tourists, however, this began to change, as

more guesthouses and vendors prepared alms offering sets for purchase. Mae Nang expressed the view that these vendors gave in to tourist demands to offer packaged foods and flowers in addition to sticky rice, which diminished the traditional practice. Moreover, many tourists dressed and behaved inappropriately. Mae Nang was adamant that the traditional almsgiving of only sticky rice should be protected, as it was at the heart of Chiang Khan's cultural identity.

Another local cultural expert who shared Mae Nang's views was Ta Sai. A 78-year-old native of Chiang Khan, Ta Sai is an expert in Brahmin ritual practices, including the *Phasad Loi Khro* mentioned above. Ta Sai was ordained as a monk for many years, and upon leaving the monkshood, he continued to serve the community as a learned Brahmin priest who officiated weddings and rituals. Ta Sai echoed many of Mae Nang's concerns about the negative impacts of tourism on Chiang Khan's culture. For instance, he said that the *Phasad Loi Khro* ritual used to have a very detailed procedure for preparing the float, which was determined by the specific physical attributes of each individual, but this level of detail had been lost due to standardization of the floats for tourism purposes. Moreover, he also felt that the morning almsgiving ritual had been negatively impacted, as it was *phid sin*—taboo or immoral—for monks to give tourists a blessing because the monks had not been properly invited. In conclusion, Ta Sai said that tourism had brought economic development to Chiang Khan, but the real values of traditions had been lost.

Not all residents shared these views about the negative impacts of tourism, however. For Pho Ko, a senior Sino-Thai resident of Chiang Khan, the tourism boom had been an unprecedented opportunity. Phor Ko had always been a businessman, but when the tourists started arriving, he invested in refurbishing his buildings and open them as boutique hotels. Pho Ko told us that many Chiang Khan families who had left after 1975 returned to town in the late 1990s and early 2000s to open businesses, and some had been very successful. For those who were business-savvy, tourism was a boon.

Another group who had more positive views about cultural tourism in Chiang Khan was the fishing community, whose livelihoods were dependent on the Mekong River. One of these was Som, a 60-year-old fisherman whose livelihood had been adversely affected by the construction of dams along the Mekong in China and Laos. Som took us out on the river in his long boat to show us how high the water line of the river used to be, and the areas where fish used to spawn and gather. After the dams were built, the flow of the river became unpredictable, sometimes running dry, and other times flooding heavily, damaging their crops along the shore. Fish stocks were also severely depleted. Many fishermen and younger generations sought opportunities elsewhere, as they could no longer make a living on the river. Som said for the fishermen, cultural tourism had been a lifeline that made it possible for them to continue to make a living on the river, by offering boat tours to visitors.

Based on these preliminary findings, it was clear that Chiang Khan's residents had differing views about the impacts of tourism. For those community members who saw themselves as the defenders of Chiang Khan's cultural heritage, tourism was perceived as a threat to the integrity of local traditions because it commodified and standardized what were once sacred practices.

On the other hand, for local entrepreneurs and the fishing community, tourism had brought much-needed revenue that enabled these groups to maintain their local livelihoods rather than seek employment elsewhere.

For the research team, these divergent interpretations of cultural tourism presented a challenge—how might visual ethnographic methods be used to reveal these complexities? And how might they be used to encourage dialog between the different community factions? The next section of the paper describes efforts to employ film as a tool for reflection on the meanings of intangible culture and the impacts of cultural tourism.

5. Collaborative Visual Ethnography as a Method: Documenting Intangible Culture for Sustainable Tourism

As mentioned in the Introduction, tourism is an inherently visual experience, and media images have played a foundational role in representing Chiang Khan as a site of distinctive cultural authenticity. Considering this abundance of images, the central challenge for the research team was as follows: how could we employ visual documentation in a way that would reveal the complexities and tensions around intangible cultural heritage in Chiang Khan, rather than merely reproducing the existing seamless representations of culture? Moreover, how could we document Chiang Khan's intangible culture in a way that was collaborative and participatory?

After the preliminary fieldwork in Chiang Khan in March 2021, which is summarized in the previous section, the research team consulted with DASTA about the visual documentation process. As the UNESCO 2003 Convention for Intangible Cultural Heritage emphasizes, it is crucial to involve local stakeholders in all stages of documentation of intangible culture, as this builds local capacity in heritage management and fosters a sense of ownership in the process. For this reason, the CultDLab team sought to identify a local media production team that could partner with the project. DASTA Area 5 recommended the Team Thai Loei production house—a media production group based in Loei Province who had many years of experience creating promotional travel videos. The three members of the production house were all native to Loei Province. Moreover, they had witnessed the transformation of Chiang Khan resulting from the tourism boom and they were familiar with the community tensions described above.

One of the co-authors of this article, Sorayut Aiemueayut, is a visual anthropologist and Lecturer in the Department of Media Arts and Design at Chiang Mai University. As part of the CultDLab research team, Sorayut worked closely with the Thai Loei Production House from

the outset, serving as a mentor to guide the team in using visual ethnographic approaches for documenting Chiang Khan's intangible culture. In his mentorship role, Sorayut explained the core principles of visual and sensory ethnography and how these differ from more conventional narrative styles of documentary filmmaking. Sensory ethnography eschews the discursive approach to film as a chronological story in favor of a more experiential approach where film endeavors to convey a sense of immersion in a place and time. While conventional documentary filmmaking focuses on presenting a clear and coherent position about an issue, sensory visual ethnography emphasizes color, movement, sound, light, and a sense of the everyday (Pink 2015). Moreover, sensory ethnography is practice-based and action-oriented, in that it encourages collaborative and interventionist approaches to field research which employ audiovisual methods as means to understand local subjectivities and imagine alternative futures.

> Doing sensory ethnography entails taking a series of conceptual and practical steps that allow the researcher to re-think both established and new participatory and collaborative ethnographic research techniques in terms of sensory perception, categories, meanings and values, ways of knowing and practices (Pink 2015:7).

The sensory ethnographic approach was considered important for this project because of its potential to challenge the seamless imagery and narratives of Chiang Khan as a site of nostalgic longing found in most of the tourism promotional media. By introducing the Thai Loei production team to sensory ethnographic methods, the CultDLab team sought to guide the Thai Loei production team to use filmmaking as a collaborative process that would engage members of the community, encouraging them to share their perspectives about their local culture and their views on the benefits and drawbacks of cultural tourism. The aim was to create a space for a range of local viewpoints, rather than privilege a particular group's narrative.

At this juncture, it is important to note that this research took place in 2021 during the Covid pandemic, and as such, the CultDLab research team had to adapt our research plans repeatedly according to the changing restrictions on travel and large group gatherings. As mentioned previously, the first field visit to Chiang Khan took place in March. However, due to travel restrictions issued by the government, the research team was unable to travel to Chiang Khan for the launch of the visual ethnography project. Instead, Sorayut worked closely with the Thai Loei production team via Zoom and Line, guiding them in every step of the collaborative film process, from filming to editing.

Sorayut's first virtual meeting with the Thai Loei production team was on August 25, 2021. During this meeting, the Thai Loei team told Sorayut more about their own personal and professional background. He learned that they had several years of experience producing promotional videos for the tourism sector, and that these videos often required the team to stage cultural performances against aesthetically pleasing backgrounds and to use post-production image editing and lighting that would appeal to tourist audiences.

Based on this knowledge about the team's past work, Sorayut decided it would be necessary to begin by organizing a series of intensive online capacity-building workshops on visual ethnographic theories and methodologies that would take place during the month of September. In the first session, Sorayut met with the team via Zoom to provide an overview of visual anthropology and sensory ethnography, pointing out how these approaches differed from mainstream documentaries and promotional films. Unlike mainstream documentaries which craft a narrative before filming, visual ethnography is a process of reflexive learning and co-creation with the community. This means that members of the community are actively involved in the selection of themes, questions, locations, individuals, and practices that are to be documented visually. Furthermore, rather than presenting culture in idealized and aestheticized terms, visual ethnography focuses on the dynamism and multiple meanings of cultural practices

as interpreted by local practitioners themselves. Sorayut explained how this collaborative and reflexive approach to documentation was consistent with the core principles of the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, which places emphasis on community participation in all aspects of heritage management, including research and documentation. Sorayut also discussed the importance of conducting a literature and media review, to better understand how Chiang Khan was represented visually and textually, and to reflect on the gaps and ramifications of these representations.

The next topic of the online workshop was field research methodology. Before filming, it was vital for the Thai Loei team to take the time to establish rapport with different groups in Chiang Khan—including community leaders, housewives, youth, entrepreneurs, and professionals—by participating in their daily routines and engaging in dialog. As local Loei residents themselves, the Thai Loei team already knew many local stakeholders, but it would take time to build enough trust to be able to talk openly about more sensitive issues—particularly the issue of how tourism had impacted livelihoods and led to the commodification of traditional practices. During this initial phase of field research, Sorayut encouraged the team to use visual documentation in a more open-ended, experimental way. Rather than seeking to capture predetermined shots or scenes, they should use visual documentation as a tool for prompting dialog with members of the community. Short clips could be shared with the community to elicit further reflection on issues, and to ask members of the community for their opinions about what other points the film should address. In this way, members of the community became co-creators of the film and would have a sense of ownership.

In a follow up meeting after the team's initial fieldwork, the Thai Loei team explained that they had learned a great deal from taking an ethnographic approach. Even though they had produced a promotional tourism video about the almsgiving ritual before, through their discussions with numerous stakeholders, they had come to realize the scope of the local

conflicts and contestations relating to how intangible cultural heritage had been impacted by the arrival of tourists, and they were eager to explore how visual documentation could address these problems.

In October, the Thai Loei team worked intensively on the visual documentation. Using the open-ended, participatory methodology described above, they documented numerous aspects of Chiang Khan's intangible culture, including the morning sticky rice almsgiving ritual, fishing livelihoods, and traditional foodways. Moreover, they documented the viewpoints of a range of stakeholders across different age groups, genders, and social statuses. In consultation with Sorayut, the team discussed how to bring all the footage together in a way that would reflect the holistic context and the participatory process. The Thai Loei team agreed that the issue of sticky rice almsgiving and the impacts of tourism should be set within the larger ecological context of local livelihoods on the Mekong River. This was because the almsgiving ritual was not just about the traditional merit-making practice of giving sticky rice—it was also about traditional foodways tied to the river. As the team had learned through their fieldwork and interviews, early every morning, members of the local community prepared various Mekong fish dishes—such as fish custard and fish curry (*ho mok pla*, *kaeng pla*)—to bring to the monastery, and they would also prepare some for sale and their own consumption. The Thai Loei team agreed that by showing the connection between fishing, food preparation and almsgiving, they could produce a more inclusive film that incorporated not only the perspectives of Chiang Khan residents living in town, but also that of the fishing communities who had historically been marginalized.

In November, the Thai Loei team presented a draft of the film to Sorayut and the CultDLab research team for review and comments. Overall, the team felt that the structure of the film worked well, in that it integrated life and livelihoods of the fishing community along the Mekong River with the almsgiving ritual and town life, including scenes from the tourist

walking street. Sorayut noted that the auditory aspects of the film could be brought out even more to reflect the soundscape of daily life in Chiang Khan—the flow of the river, fishermen knocking on their boats to call the spirits, and the rhythmic thud of chopping fish. Emphasizing these auditory aspects of daily life was one way to highlight the multisensory dimensions of life in the Chiang Khan community, thus downplaying the idealized visual aesthetic found in tourism promotion. In terms of the impacts of tourism, the Thai Loei team had endeavored to include representative voices from a range of groups, including the fishing community and different generations of town residents. In keeping with the community-based, participatory approach, the next step of the visual ethnographic documentation process was to present a draft of the film to the Chiang Khan community for their review and feedback, which is described in the next section.

6. Self-Reflection on Cultural Tourism through Film: A Community Forum

On November 19, 2021, DASTA and CultDLab organized a community forum at Wat Sri Muang temple to screen the draft of the film produced by the Thai Loei team. Invitations were extended to members of the Chiang Khan community, tourism business owners, and local government stakeholders, including the Subdistrict Administrative Organization. The CultDLab team briefly explained the collaborative methodology that had been used to produce the film and stated that the objective of the forum was to discuss issues raised in the film and identify gaps or inaccuracies in representation. The CultDLab team made clear that the film was not a finished product, but rather a work in progress that could be revised based on community inputs. A description of the film draft screened at the forum follows below.

The film opens on a longboat with a fisherman named Som, making an offering of boiled chicken, sticky rice, whiskey, and incense to the boat spirit. The footage focuses on the soundscape of the river and the sounds made by the fisherman as he calls upon the spirits of

place, knocking on the wooden hull of the boat. Shortly afterwards, the film takes the viewer out on the river on a longboat, where a 64-year-old fisherman named Yun describes how the upstream dams and ecological changes have affected the livelihoods of fishing communities on the Mekong River. Yun explained how the dams caused levels of the river to rise and fall unexpectedly, depleting fisheries and washing away nets and traps. In the context of this increased risk and uncertainty, tourism was a vital supplement to income with no negative impacts. Through dialog with fishermen and the female vendors who sold traditional fish dishes at the market, the film shows that the real threat to the fishing community is the changing river ecology due to upstream dams. Furthermore, through footage of the educational exhibits at the fishing community center and shots of longboats full of visitors, the film subtly suggested that ecotourism is one way to raise awareness among the broader public about these ecological issues.

Following a truck carrying fish custard to the market in town, the film then shifts to scenes of the morning almsgiving ritual, which takes place along the Walking Street. The first person interviewed is Somphit, a 61-year-old resident of Chiang Khan who had witnessed the transformation of the town into a tourism destination. When asked whether Chiang Khan had changed because of tourism, Somphit answered unequivocally that it had changed for the better, because now people had more income from selling goods to tourists, whereas in the past they were “just rice farmers” with limited supplemental income. She went on to explain how she was one of the vendors who came up with the idea to sell almsgiving sets with sweets and flowers to tourists for 50 baht each, which encouraged more tourists to participate because they could take nice photos of the experience. Somphit said tourists had often asked her why locals only give sticky rice, wondering what the monks would eat with the rice, and in response she offered to sell them bags of prepared dishes to go with the rice offerings.

This positive assessment of tourism contrasts starkly with the next interview with Mae Nang—the 74-year-old president of the 100 years of Chiang Khan Association who is widely considered a local expert on Chiang Khan living culture. Intercut with footage from the traditional morning almsgiving, in the film Mae Nang explained that the "authentic" way of offering sticky rice as alms is very simple—the layperson carried his or her basket of sticky rice on their shoulder, and then kneels before the monks on their shoes while placing balls of sticky rice in the alms bowl. When tourists ask her about what the monks eat, she tells them that the practice is to bring cooked food to the monastery. What tourists do now with the mats and offering sets is a distortion of local traditions, and this has been exacerbated by entrepreneurs from outside Chiang Khan who have come here to make money. She also lamented the competition between vendors and the lack of clear rules and standards, suggesting that there should be clear zoning separating tourist areas from areas for giving alms in the traditional way. For Mae Nang, the commodification of the almsgiving ritual for tourists signifies a deeper erosion of the fabric of the community, as competition for tourist income has led to social fragmentation. Nevertheless, she said she still believes that a revival of the traditional almsgiving practice is possible, and that it is important to transmit the values of community cohesion to the next generation.

The next person interviewed was Pop, a 24-year-old tutor living in Chiang Khan. Pop acknowledged that tourism has led to commodification of the almsgiving ritual and points out that local residents—not just outsiders—eagerly participated in the competition to sell alms to tourists. Pop argued that while the commercialization of almsgiving conflicts with local culture, the way to solve the problem was to find a middle ground. Intercut with footage of wagons carrying heaps of pre-packaged foods and sweets offered to monks, Pop said that one of the consequences of commercialization has been the increase in waste from packaged food products. While he felt it would be impossible to stop the sale of packaged goods for alms sets

entirely, Pop proposed that more traditional sweets packaged in banana leaf could be made for sale. Another suggestion he supported was clear zoning, to separate the tourist areas selling sets from areas of traditional alms offering. Pop concluded that because of tourism and the media, the sticky rice almsgiving ritual has become the symbol of Chiang Khan identity. If the people of Chiang Khan want to protect and preserve this value and meaning of this practice, they would need to strike a balance between commercialization and tradition.

After the screening, forum participants were invited to share their views and offer suggestions about the film. The first comment came from the Head of Subdistrict Administrative Organization. He noted that the question of how to manage the morning sticky rice almsgiving was still an unresolved point of debate in the community, and it was good that the film had raised this issue. He said that Covid had curbed the excesses of tourism in Chiang Khan, but he feared what would happen when many more tourists returned. To preserve local traditions, he suggested the establishment of a committee to oversee almsgiving on the Walking Street. He also stated that he agreed with the film's inclusion of fishing livelihood, as this was an important part of Chiang Khan's identity.

The next person to comment was Ajan Samniang, a local teacher and culture expert. Ajan Samniang noted that tourists were drawn to Chiang Khan because of the almsgiving ritual, and yet, so much of what they saw here was just a tourist spectacle resulting from local residents who followed the whims of tourists (*tamjai nak thong thiaw*). Ajan Samniang suggested that more of the focus needed to be on the beliefs associated with almsgiving, and he also advocated for the wearing of traditional, appropriate attire.

Two forum participants expressed concern that the film focused too much on the local conflicts and problems in the community, and they feared this would be humiliating (*khai ton eng).* One of these participants suggested that the Thai Loei team could make the film nicer and smoother for the purpose of promotion. In response, a representative from DASTA

reiterated that the objective of the project was not to create yet another promotional film; rather it was to use the film process as a mechanism for addressing how tourism had impacted Chiang Khan's culture and for proposing possible solutions.

A local small business owner named Ben raised the point that as a non-native resident of Chiang Khan, she was offended by how "outsider entrepreneurs" (*phuprakobkan nauk*) were repeatedly blamed for distorting the sticky rice almsgiving practice. She was not born in Chiang Khan, but she had invested her life in her small tourism business, and she was dedicated to sustainable tourism practices. She proposed that the film should offer solutions to the problems of commodification of almsgiving, such educating tourists about the meanings and traditional almsgiving practices. The Head of the Subdistrict Administrative Organization agreed with this idea and said that they could propose a kind of award for model households (*cao khong ban thi di*). Mae Nang, who was featured prominently in the draft film, echoed this suggestion, saying that tourism businesses should educate tourists about the appropriate almsgiving practices. Another non-native small business owner named Jeff agreed with Ben, saying that he was also tired of being blamed for the commodification of almsgiving, especially when he had done so much to support the local economy and continuity of local traditions.

Lastly, several forum participants suggested that the film should include an even broader range of perspectives, including that of monks, "outside entrepreneurs," and tourists.

In terms of proposed solutions to the issues raised about the commodification of almsgiving, most of the suggestion centered on three points: 1) raising awareness among tourists about the distinctive practices associated with almsgiving in Chiang Khan; 2) establishing a clear zoning system for traditional almsgiving with sticky rice only and for the sale of almsgiving sets; and 3) promotion of alternative local products for sale with biodegradable packaging, such as sweets wrapped in banana leaf.

7. Take Two: The Final Cut

After the community forum, the CultDLab and the Thai Loei team consolidated all the stakeholder feedback and discussed how to incorporate the community's suggestions into the film. The teams agreed that one of the most significant gaps in the film was the absence of viewpoints of tourism business entrepreneurs from outside the province who had come to settle in Chiang Khan. At the forum, the teams had learned that these non-local actors felt that they had dedicated themselves to the community, and yet they were often unfairly labeled as outsiders who didn't understand or respect Chiang Khan culture and values. In the spirit of inclusivity, CultDLab and Thai Loei approached two small-business entrepreneurs who had joined the forum to ask them if they would be willing to be interviewed for the film. Both agreed wholeheartedly.

The first interview that was added to the film was with Jeff—a 47-year-old guesthouse owner who has been living in Chiang Khan for more than a decade. Jeff explained that he felt uncomfortable being classified as an "outsider entrepreneur" because this label created division and friction in the community. He said that all entrepreneurs—whether local or from elsewhere—had the same goals for Chiang Khan; they all wanted to see the town thrive. He asked viewers to think back to the time when Chiang Khan was just beginning to grow as a tourist destination, pointing out that it was entrepreneurs like him who helped to make the town lively. In a rebuke to those who accuse outsiders of exploitation, he stressed that he loved Chiang Khan and did everything for the well-being of the community, including serving as the President of the Walking Street Committee. He noted that through his hard work and commitment to this role, many residents of Chiang Khan no longer saw him as an outsider.

Similar sentiments were expressed by Ben—a 45-year-old guesthouse owner who was also from outside the province. Ben said that the problem of the commodification of almsgiving in Chiang Khan could not be resolved by blaming outsiders, as this only created division.

Moreover, it was simply inaccurate, because more than 90% of vendors in Chiang Khan are from the local community. She argued that to solve the problem, it was necessary to reflect on the factors that led to it in the first place. Ben suggested that in the absence of clear rules about almsgiving, people had made mistakes along the way. However, if rules could be established, then everyone would be expected to adhere to them. Ben further explained that although she was an outsider, she had done her best to revive and safeguard the traditional values of the almsgiving ritual by educating tourists about the practice and encouraging vendors to cooperate rather than compete. She said that it was up to the people of Chiang Khan to set an example by being true to themselves, and to invite tourists to participate and "do as we do."

The CultDLab and Thai Loei Team also agreed with the suggestion made at the forum that it was necessary to incorporate the perspective of the Buddhist monks given their role in the almsgiving ritual. To address this gap, Thai Loei interviewed Monk Nattakorn Nattakaro, the assistant abbot of Wat Sri Khun Muang. Monk Nattakorn shared the predominant view that the commercialization of almsgiving had changed the meaning of the practice. He was born in Chiang Khan and saw the sticky rice almsgiving before Chiang Khan became a tourist destination. He said that these days, many people compared Chiang Khan to Luang Prabang, where there is also a morning almsgiving, but Monk Nattakorn cautioned about such comparisons. From his perspective, Chiang Khan has its own unique identity, and it is the responsibility of local people to set an example and educate tourists about their traditional practices, particularly the offering of sticky rice which is followed by the offering of food at the monasteries. Nevertheless, he acknowledged that local vendors still needed to derive an income from selling sets to tourists, and thus he supported the proposal of clear zoning and regulations for tourist almsgiving areas. Local vendors should be allowed to sell sets and visitors can offer what they wish, but these should always be accompanied by sticky rice to symbolize Chiang Khan's identity.

After these interviews, the Thai Loei team also added footage from the community forum held at Wat Sri Muang. These shots were incorporated to illustrate the final stage of the participatory process of film production, and to demonstrate that visual ethnography could be a tool to generate discussions about the impacts of tourism and dialog about possible solutions. The central concern of the film was summarized succinctly in the closing comments of one forum participant who said,

"What worries me is that our culture won't endure. The sticky rice almsgiving has been the most valuable tradition that made Chiang Khan a tourist destination. When this charm is gone, will there still be sustainability for future generations?"

This statement reflects concerns articulated in the 2003 UNESCO ICH Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage and the principles of sustainable tourism. Cultural tourism can be a lifeline for communities, but it can also transform cultural practices into staged performances neatly packaged for tourist consumption. How can stakeholders work together to ensure that the spirit and meaning of cultural practices such as the sticky rice almsgiving ritual continue?

8. Conclusions

As tourism scholars have shown, visual media play a fundamental role in shaping the tourist experience. Visual representations of tourist destinations—including promotional videos, popular films, and photographs—often construct idealized representations of places which obscure complex social issues. In the case of Chiang Khan, the nostalgic imagery of the town and the Buddhist almsgiving ritual found in promotional media conceals deeper truths about how local livelihoods and the meaning of cultural practices have transformed because of the tourism boom. The aim of this collaborative research was to use visual ethnography as a tool to unsettle this seamless image of Chiang Khan. By encouraging the participation of the

community in the film production process, the CultDLab and Thai Loei team sought to create a visual and sensory space for open reflection on the meanings of intangible heritage and the perceived impacts of tourism. This reflexive visual process revealed that tourism is not viewed uniformly as having negative impacts on the local culture. Indeed, for the more marginalized fishing community, revenues from ecotourism had provided a lifeline during a time of ecological upheaval on the Mekong River. Moreover, through the process of the film screening at a community forum, the research provided an opportunity for the community to address the negative impacts on intangible culture—particularly the sticky rice almsgiving ritual—and consider possible solutions and policy recommendations for the future. Going forward, the CultDLab research team and Thai Loei productions also hope that the film can serve as a case study for the potential of visual ethnography in community-based, sustainable tourism management.

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