

Art & Social Action: Case Studies from the Mekong Region

My Library, Film Class

A Case Study of Finding Voices through Filmmaking

LAOS



Finding Voices Through Filmmaking: A Case Study of @My Library in Luang Prabang, Laos

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Introduction

In Luang Prabang, a city in northern Laos, there is a small, two-story wooden library called “@My Library.” The library was founded in 2002 by an American woman, Carol Kresge². @My Library is part of The Language Project³, a non-profit organization that has set up community libraries in Laos, a developing region, and has launched a variety of educational projects focused on English education using the libraries as a base. As the largest free learning center in the project, it has had a lasting impact on the local community. In addition to library services such as lending and providing books, the library also organizes and runs computer classes, thinking games, library tours, and workshops on photography and various other topics (it also hosts projects not organized by the library). The “5 Weeks Basic Filmmaking Class” addressed in this study is one such example. At the time of its launch, there were no educational facilities or programs specializing in film in Laos, especially not in Luang Prabang. The staff of @My Library took on the challenge of film as a new medium of expression and decided to adopt it as one of the library's projects. In doing so, they bet on the possibility that “film can be a tool for expressing and transmitting individual voices, and that mastering film production techniques can create a future for people.” So began a unique experiment: a filmmaking class taught in Lao by Lao people.

The purpose of this study is to examine this filmmaking class and to discuss its impact on the participants and the community in question. The survey was conducted in the form of four online interviews using Zoom in February–March 2021 (about two hours per interview). The interviewees were YaxengLy Chuechonglee (Figure 1: current director of @My Library and instructor for the filmmaking class) and Bin Kiphavong (vice director of @My Library). They cooperated in a total of four interviews on this research project. In addition, two former students of the class (described later in 2-3) participated during the third interview. By listening to the opinions of both those organizing and those participating in the class, the author was able to gain a comprehensive understanding of the project.

¹ This research is based on my own interviews with YaxengLy Chuechonglee (representative) and Bin Kiphavong (facilitator) on February 4, February 24, March 10, and March 17, 2021. I'd like to express my gratitude to both of them for their cooperation. All photos in this article are retrieved from @My Library with their permission.

² Although Carol has already retired from @My Library, she continues to support the organization's activities as a consultant.

³ In addition to running four libraries in Luang Prabang, including @My Library, and one in Vientiane, The Language Project supports more than 60 libraries in Laos (see The Language Project's website).
<http://www.thelanguageproject.org/index.php/the-libraries>

1. 5 Weeks Basic Filmmaking Class

1-1. The Class Process

The five-week basic filmmaking class offered by @My Library consists of three stages: “Basics,” “Practice,” and “Review.” The class, which began in 2012, is held once a year during the Lao school system’s summer vacation period. This is because many of the participants are high school and university students⁴, and because Laos uses a two-semester system (first semester September – January, second semester February – June), so the end of the school year, from the end of June to August, is a good time to hold the course. Table 1 briefly summarizes the content of the 2020 class.

	Activities		Duration
1	Basics of filmmaking	What is a film? (types, etc.)	1 day
2		Composition (storyboard, angles, etc.)	1 day
3		Use of camera and related equipment, lighting	1 day
4		Use of audio equipment, recording and editing methods	1 day
5		Storytelling and acting (in front of the camera)	2 days
6		Editing (how to use editing software)	1 day
7	Practice Group work	Division into groups: Practice/ check shooting and editing	3 days
8		Ideas for films and location: Selecting story and location, negotiating locations and actors	5 days
9		Scriptwriting, shooting, and editing	16 days
10	Review	Screening	2 days

Table 1: Schedule of the 5 Weeks Basic Filmmaking Class (conducted from August 3, 2020 to September 5, 2020)

In the first section, “Basics,” all participants first learn what a film is and what types of films there are, and then the basics of film production (composition, use of various equipment, sound and lighting, acting, editing, etc.). The class is conducted in a lecture format that includes hands-on practice for all participants. At this stage, the day is divided into two periods, morning (8:30–12:00) and afternoon (13:00–16:00), with two to three periods spent on each unit. In the following “Practice” section, the students are divided into 4–6 groups, each of which produces a short film of 7–15 minutes. In the Basics section, the instructor explains that filmmaking consists of five steps: concept development, pre-production, production, post-production, and distribution (Figure 1). The class is set up so that students can actually experience not only filming techniques but also the entire process of film production for themselves.

⁴ Currently, Laos has a system of five years of elementary school (primary education), four years of middle school (lower secondary school), three years of high school (upper secondary school), and four to six years of university or other higher education [Yamada 2018: 288–289], which differs from the Japanese school system.

In the Practice section, all the participants first think of ideas for films. After each person presents their concept, one idea is chosen by the group. The instructors do not give the participants specific topics for their films, allowing them to come up with their own ideas. However, they are instructed to avoid content that deals with alcohol or drugs, as well as anything that could be considered a violation of human rights, such as ethnic discrimination. The person who came up with the idea chosen serves as the director, and the other members of the group take charge of the camera, sound recording, lighting, and other equipment when shooting the film (the group works as a team on production of the script, storyboard and pre-production checklist, as well as editing). Since the filming teams are made up of the bare minimum number of people (five to six), friends and acquaintances of the group members are often asked to appear as actors. In addition, the group decides on a location suitable for the film (on the condition that filming can be done on a day trip from the library), and the participants negotiate the filming at the location themselves. After the shooting and editing process is complete, a final “Review” section takes place.



Figure 1. Basics: What is a film?⁵

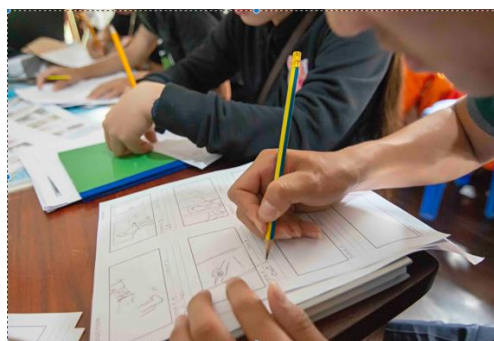


Figure 2. Basics: Composition (how to make a storyboard)



Figure 3. Basics: How to use a camera



Figure 4. Basics: How to use recording equipment⁶

⁵ The instructor, YaxengLy, explaining the five steps involved in filmmaking. Figures 1 through 7 show the class held in 2020, as documented and photographed by @My Library. Figure 8 shows a screening from before the COVID-19 pandemic; compare with the situation in 2020 (Figure 7), which was affected.

⁶ In the middle, giving instructions on how to operate the recording equipment, is the instructor, Xengyang.



Figure 5. Practice: Shooting on location⁷



Figure 6. Practice: Shooting on location



Figure 7. Review: Screening



Figure 8. Review: Screening (pre-Covid)

This is usually held as a public screening. In 2020, however, the COVID-19 outbreak meant that the screening was held privately. Amid the pandemic that has shaken the world since early 2020, Laos has not recorded that many cases⁸, but the running of the class still seems to have been affected. Figures 1-7 show that the participants did not wear masks even indoors, but the library's policy was to always take preventive measures such as handwashing and disinfection.

After the class is over, the completed films are posted publicly on @My Library's official YouTube channel⁹. Some of the films distributed by the channel have received more than 5 million views; it has grown to become a high-profile platform in Laos and abroad. Generally, these films are released with English subtitles, creating a distribution system that is not just limited to Laos, but is globally oriented. Support is also given for the best-made films to be entered in film festivals in Laos and overseas. Through the five-week program, many participants have produced outstanding work, including the 2016 winner of the short film category at The Vientiane International Film Festival (Vientiane in short). The class is also intended to develop people who will continue to make films and consider it as one of their future career options, so there is a full range of follow-up services available, including free rental of cameras and related equipment outside the class period.

⁷ The director on the far left is Somkiet. This group shoot was held at his temple, Wat Siphouthabath Thipharaw.

⁸ The number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Laos as announced by the Embassy of Japan in Laos stands at 511 (as of April 27, 2021). https://www.la.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr_ja/11_000001_00439.html
Comparing with other countries, the number of COVID-19 cases is not so big amount but the situation is getting worth: everything is currently lockdown in Laos.

⁹ The official @My Library YouTube channel, which currently has about 36,000 subscribers, is below. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC19171xF-tFMZeFGakz1Wow>

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1-2. Budget and Management

Currently, @My Library is managed by a staff of six, consisting of two full-time and four part-time employees (with additional volunteer staff as needed). As mentioned in the introduction, the library is involved in various projects, with an annual budget of about 25,000–50,000 USD. They are funded by donations from US charities and grants from other support organizations. The annual budget for the 5 Weeks Basic Filmmaking Class is approximately 3,300–4,000 USD, which breaks down as follows (estimated total amount for 2021: 3,290 USD; amounts given in parentheses below are the budget for 2021): instructor fees (2 instructors/35 days: 1,700 USD), refreshments (total of 22 participants + instructors: 66 USD), location expenses (including transportation and props: 175 USD), lunch on location (440 USD), remuneration for actors (6 USD per person per day: 384 USD), equipment (210 USD), and other miscellaneous expenses (215 USD). The funds come from grants from the Asia Foundation, Lao Culture Challenge Fund, Luang Prabang Film Festival, Statement ARTS, and others.

2. Participants, Project Evaluation, and Outcomes

2-1. Participants

The 5 Weeks Basic Filmmaking Class attracts about 20 to 25 participants each year. The two requirements for participation are being ages 16 and above and having already taken the photography workshops (beginner and intermediate) organized by @My Library. Initially, there were no conditions for participation, but the current requirements were imposed because the class involves handling expensive equipment and focusing intensively on highly specialized knowledge. The participants tend to be mostly high school and college students (including junior colleges) living near the library, as well as monks or apprentice monks. The rate of female participants is low, comprising only 30% of the total. This seems to be due to the fact that in rural areas, traditional beliefs that women should concentrate on housework still persist. Those from outside of the province are attending not as individuals but on dispatch from various organizations that cooperate with @My Library, such as those from the Lone Buffalo organization in Xiangkhouang Province.

Laos, with its long and narrow topography, is generally divided into three regions: northern, central, and southern, with Luang Prabang serving as the administrative capital of the north. As the former royal capital, the entire city is registered as a World Heritage Site and is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the country, attracting many foreign visitors. It is a city with a unique historical and cultural background that is quite distinct from that of the capital, Vientiane. The city is also home to a large number of educational institutions, including Souphanouvong University, one of the five national universities in Laos. As such, it is only natural that there is a high proportion of students. However, @My

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Library does not exclusively target students. It offers anybody who meets the two aforementioned conditions the opportunity to learn for free, and in fact, the class is attended by many independently minded people from a variety of backgrounds who have a strong desire to learn.

2-2. Assessment

In order to improve the project, the filmmaking class has been assessed using two approaches: a post-event questionnaire for the participants, and internal evaluation by the organization. The questions from the questionnaire are given below. They can be divided into two categories: "identifying issues relating to the class," and "participants' relationships with filmmaking and their visions for the future." The choice of the latter is particularly interesting. This demonstrates that the class is positioned as part of lifelong education, showing the high hopes on the part of the organization for producing people who engage in filmmaking.

Post-event Questionnaire for Participants

1. Are you currently working on a film project? If so, please explain.
2. What type of film will you try to make in the future?
3. Are there any issues or problems that you can give feedback on to improve the class for next year?
4. What role would you like to have in the filmmaking industry? (For example, director, producer, camera operator, etc.)
5. Which filmmaking skills would you most like to improve?
6. What is your "why" for making film?
7. How can you achieve this goal?
8. List 4 important things you learned at this class.
9. List 3 things you would have liked to have learned more about.
10. Do you need a mentor? Please explain why.
11. Do you want to borrow equipment? Or do you already own it yourself? Please give details.
12. Do you have any comments for the instructor in order to improve the class in the future?
13. Others

Internal evaluation by the organization is conducted in four stages: (1) documenting any problems that occurred during the class, (2) critique for the participants at the end of the class, (3) sharing of issues and exploring improvements among the organization, and (4) identification and repair of malfunctioning equipment. The results are used to (5) plan the next year's class (lecture plan, schedule, etc.) and (6) draw up a list of necessities for the following year (equipment, budget, sponsors, etc.), indicating that an effective assessment flow has been established.

2-3. Outcomes of the Project

In order to examine the effects of the project, I also interviewed two people who had participated in the class, focusing on the background to their participation and their relationships with filmmaking. The interviewees were Xengyang Vaja (Figure 2), an early participant in the class who is now a freelance filmmaker and photographer, and who also works for @My Library on a part-time basis as an instructor for the class, and Somkiet Siyangvongsar (Figure 5), a participant in the 2020 class. The latter is a monk at the Wat Siphouthabath Thipharaw temple near the library, as well as a young social activist who heads Keep Helping Each Other¹⁰, a non-profit organization founded in 2015. Both of them have attended @My Library since their secondary school age and have participated in various educational projects offered there.

Xengyang (25), joined the filmmaking class at the age of 18 in high school out of curiosity about filmmaking and the other participants. He later studied business administration and accounting at a junior college, but chose to become a filmmaker, and made his dream a reality. He currently makes a living by producing films and videos in a variety of genres including fiction, drama, advertising, tourism, and education. In addition to working as a filmmaker himself, he has been involved in the training of young filmmakers as an instructor for the class, hoping to overcome the current lack of film education and industry environment in the region. In the case of Somkiet (23), he learned about the class because he often used to produce English subtitles for the films, drawing on his experience of attending @My Library's English program for seven years. He was, however, unable to find the time to attend the five-week intensive course until 2020. Although he already had practical experience in film production, he took the course as an opportunity to refresh his knowledge of film production and the use of equipment, as well as to learn teamwork and how to be a leader, which he is now applying to his own work as a social activist. Of course, it is not easy for all participants to make what they learned in class a part of their lives afterwards. However, the existence of these kinds of success stories indicates that the continuation of this class has become a driving force for change, both for participants themselves and wider society.

¹⁰ A community-based non-profit organization that provides educational support to children in rural areas of northern Laos who are unable to attend school for financial reasons, by donating educational materials and other resources. <http://www.KeepHelpingEachOther.info/>

3. The Film Industry in Laos

This filmmaking class looks to be very well organized. However, this is the result of nearly a decade of trial and error. In 2010, three of the @My Library staff at the time, including YaxengLy, met Adri Berger, a Dutch freelance photographer and filmmaker living in Luang Prabang. After learning the basics of filmmaking from him for about six months, they participated in the first Luang Prabang Film Festival and a filmmaking workshop in Vientiane organized by the US Embassy, before starting the class at @My Library in 2012. In its first year, the class was just one week long and covered more basic material, but it gradually grew and developed into its current form. Of the three staff members who launched the class, all but YaxengLy, later struck out on their own, running their own studios or working freelance to expand the horizons of film and arts culture in the region.

According to Aya Hashimoto, the film industry in Laos is so underdeveloped that “it can even be said that since Laos gained full independence from France in 1953, it has never had a film industry like those of other countries” [Hashimoto 2016:103]. It was only in the 2000s that this began to really change, and the two film festivals held in Laos, Vientianale (since 2009) and the Luang Prabang Film Festival (since 2010), have been the driving force behind this wave. The former, which has had the official involvement of the Lao Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism since its second year, features a short film contest on the last day of the festival. This is aimed at increasing the number of young independent filmmakers in Laos and raising the level of technical skill in the country’s filmmaking. The latter, launched by Gabriel Kuperman, an American who has been working tirelessly to boost the Lao film industry, is distinctive in that it allows visitors to view outstanding films selected by film ambassadors from ASEAN countries [Hashimoto 2016:105]. In 2020, a new filmmaking course will be established at some national universities in Laos, with growing expectations throughout society for the film industry.

Conclusion: Finding Voices Through Filmmaking

It is not clear how Laos’ film industry in will develop in the future, but one trend is the view that currently “everything is becoming independent, and film is in a transitional period of searching for a new status, forcing it to take on new social functions” [Rayns 2007: 244]. The development of DSLR (Digital Single Lens Reflex camera) technology that supports video and the global spread of social media have made it possible to produce and distribute films on low budgets. As such, we are entering an era in which the old system of film studios is no longer necessary. The fact that @My Library’s activities have been able to produce remarkable growth and social impacts can be attributed to their alignment with these historical circumstances.

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In this survey, the fact that the author is not a specialist film scholar, as well as the limited time frame, meant that it was not possible to analyze and examine the content of the films in detail. However, the films the participants produce have their own distinct voices; that is to say, stories specific to their local communities. This study could be further extended to consider the content of the films and their production process as a form of community art; I hope to continue monitoring further developments.

Acknowledgements

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References

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- Rayns, Tony. 2007. "Eiga wa kankyaku ni katarikakeru saizen no hoho wo motometeiru (Cinema is looking for the best way to speak to its audience)" in *Eisai kyoiku jidai: Eiga no gakko wa dokonnidemo aru! (The Age of developing people's abilities in film education: Film Schools Are Everywhere! FILM ART*, pp.238-245 (Hiromoto Oka), in Japanese.

Internet Resources

For an overview of @My Library, see the following section from The Language Project's website:

<http://www.thelanguageproject.org/index.php/the-libraries/my-library-luang-prabang> (Accessed March 31, 2021)

@My Library Official YouTube Channel

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC19171xF-tFMZeFGakz1WOW> (Accessed March 31, 2021)

Keep Helping Each Other Website:

<http://www.keepphelpingeachother.info/> (Accessed April 10, 2021)

For more information on confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Laos, refer to the following page from the website of the Embassy of Japan in Laos.

https://www.la.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr_ja/11_000001_00439.html (Accessed April 30, 2021)