

Indigenous Media and Empowerment: Analyzing the Participatory Media Production Workshop

This section discusses the problems with claiming empowering qualities for media trainings and rejects empowerment as an objective. It follows a description of the first media training workshop I carried out with the directors of the Moso Folk Museum in Luoshui, China in 2005. Since this is lifted out of a dissertation chapter, I would appreciate feedback on what additional context you would find helpful. Please refer to my website, <http://staff.washington.edu/tamiblu/ParticipatoryMediaProject.shtml>, for context about the people I worked with and the larger project on which we collaborated.

Claims that media production brings empowerment pepper the literature on indigenous media production. For example:

“The embrace of media—film, video, television—as a form of indigenous expression coincided with an increasing sense of empowerment for [Australian] Aboriginal people that has accelerated since the 1960s.” (Ginsburg 2002a: 44)

“The real issues are not the preservation of ‘culture,’ non-Western or Western, but the empowerment of social actors, whatever their degree of cultural ‘purity’ as defined by whatever standard, to produce their own cultural mediations.” (Turner 2002: 80)

“The process of creating visual images is often a source of empowerment...” (Wang et al. 1996: 1392)

Defining empowerment will help us deconstruct these claims. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, empowerment means “to impart or bestow power to an end or for a purpose; to enable, permit.” What I find most troubling about linking visual media projects to empowerment is the sense that power is actively given (imparted / bestowed) by one party, to another, which passively receives that power. I explain why I find this patronizing below.

Turner (2002: 80) explains that indigenous media production is most important not for the products generated, but for the process which empowers its producers. I find this a dangerously simplistic notion, especially in light of his claim several pages earlier (2002: 78) that handing the camera to the wrong person can create serious problems and cause social strife. The notion of empowerment smacks of ethnocentrism, colonialism, or at least naïveté about the role of an outsider—especially an outsider with an academic agenda (or a development agenda). Although some projects rejoice that their use of participatory methodologies eliminates paternalism, condescension, and idealism (Wang et al. 1996: 1399), the converse is often true.¹

¹ For example: “In photo novella, Chinese village women are visual anthropologists...Anthropology is ultimately carried out to increase our empathy. As our project demonstrates, photo novella creates the opportunity for village women to promote outsiders’ empathy—rather than paternalism, condescension or idealism—toward their lives.” (Wang et al. 1996: 1399)

In no community that I know do people sit around all day eagerly awaiting a visiting outsider to come ‘empower’ them over the course of several months. But potential empowerment certainly makes that outsider (and their funding agency or organization) feel good.² This is particularly evident in projects backed by the Ford Foundation and The Nature Conservancy in China. These organizations emphasize how their participatory media projects (called ‘Photovoice’ by The Nature Conservancy and others) empower villagers, often women (The Nature Conservancy 2006; Wang et al. 1996; Women of Yunnan Province 1995).³ In contrast, one rarely hears mainstream media, or for that matter independent media created by people in the cultural majority, lauded for its ability to empower its producers. ‘Empowerment’ as used in indigenous media contexts carries connotations of ethnocentrism.

Bessire also points out that in many cases, non-native individuals contribute to indigenous media production (2003: 833). Laura R. Graham expressed her shock that one Xavante person whom she brought to Florida to lead the editing of a film they had recently worked on together knew little about editing techniques, despite having participated in numerous Video in the Villages projects.⁴ He explained to

² Projects often benefit their facilitators more than their participants, whether through career advancement, acquisition of scholarly credentials, increased project funding, or simply that warm and fuzzy feeling sought by benevolent do-gooders.

³ For more information on the Photovoice concept, see Hyde (2005: 190), <http://photovoice.org>, and <http://photovoice.com>.

⁴ Graham described this experience at a screening in the University of Washington Anthropology Department in autumn 2008, when introducing the film they had created together, *Keepers of the Waters*.

her that the non-indigenous filmmakers took over at the film editing stage, a crucial point in the storytelling. Perhaps in admission that they did not really intend to offer complete creative control to indigenous filmmakers, the Video in the Villages editing facilities were also relocated away from the places where most of the filmmakers lived, and which had been accessible to them before. Then again, the Video in the Villages series is a well received collection that resonates with students and teachers throughout the United States and elsewhere. Thus it could be argued that the narrative structure imposed on the film by the non-indigenous team members who bring experience with creating marketable projects actually allows their message to reach broader audiences.

The Culture and Gender Research Institute—Lijiang, Photovoice, and the Ethics of Minority Media Production

Claims of empowerment also mask gender inequalities. Many of the individuals involved in the first projects to foster indigenous media production are male (e.g., Vincent Carelli, Terence Turner, Eric Michaels, and Norman Cohn), and men often dominate media production in community-based projects. Carelli (1995) explains why it is primarily men who participate in the media projects: they are instantly construed as political tools, and men are the ones who are involved with those arenas. In one article, Terence Turner defended his decision to work

only with Kayapo men in community video production (Turner 2002). He argued that gender separation was culturally appropriate, and that forcing gender balance in media projects would amount to inappropriate imposition of Eurocentric values. While I do not challenge his decision, I wish to point out that gender imbalances pervade purportedly empowering media production projects.

Discussing my encounters with the Photovoice project in Lijiang, the closest major city to Lugu Lake in Yunnan, helps illustrate why ethical approaches became crucially important. In fall 2002, I established a home base at the courtyard home of He Zhonghua, a professor at the Yunnan Academy of Sciences who had written a book about the Na (He 2000). Her home was the headquarters of the Lijiang Culture and Gender Research Institute, an organization she had founded with other Naxi intellectuals.⁵ The Lijiang Culture and Gender Research Institute, followed principles of participatory rural development practice and sought to empower women from ethnic minority groups living in villages in the greater Lijiang area. Funded in part by the Ford Foundation, they partnered with The Nature Conservancy, Oxfam, Green Watershed, and other non-governmental organizations and trained interested people in following their models. While living at the Institute, I helped with translations when needed and visited some of their project sites. He Zhonghua and her husband spent most of their time in Kunming

⁵ Many of the scholars were affiliated with the Dongba Institute, a state-run center for Naxi scholarship.

and only came to Lijiang occasionally. In their stead, scholars and NGO personnel passing through town would stay there for short periods. It was a fascinating crossroads. I learned about the methods being used by NGOs and about the complex interactions they have with one another.



Figure: A meeting at the headquarters of the Lijiang Culture and Gender Research Institute in 2005. Niazhe Xiaoma is seated on the far right.

I was particularly interested in the participatory photography (Photovoice) project that the Culture and Gender Research Institute had implemented on behalf of The Nature Conservancy (TNC), which was engaged in a large-scale conservation effort in northwest Yunnan.⁶ The project was designed to empower villagers by teaching them basic photography skills and then giving them cameras

⁶ See Wang et al. 1996 and Litzinger 2004a, 2004b.

for a month. Each month the project personnel would return to the project sites to collect the film and develop it in Lijiang. They would also bring back the developed prints from the previous visit.

In conversations with people involved in this project, people voiced criticism of this project for the gap between its stated goals and its actual practice. Complaints also emerged over TNC's proprietary and possessive use of the villagers' photographs. While they did give prints to the villagers each month, TNC refused to share photographs with the Institute. This was frustrating because the Institute was primarily responsible for implementing the Photovoice project – they were the ones who went to the mountain villages each month, often under difficult conditions. Sometimes the only way to reach the village was to hike on narrow mountain trails. They felt that they should be able to display the photographs that they had played a key role in creating. TNC also kept the negatives. Meanwhile, TNC uses the photographs in exhibits and on their websites to promote their conservation work.⁷

Criticisms also revolved around the irony of TNC's 'empowerment' efforts. While they did teach villagers to use cameras and they did return prints to the villagers, they treated the villagers like uneducated inferiors. Each month the project staff was instructed to take the film out of the camera, load a new roll in the

⁷ See their website: <http://www.nature.org/wherework/asiapacific/china/strategies/art13320.html>. A slideshow with captions is available from <http://www.nature.org/wherework/asiapacific/china/strategies/art13320.html#>.

camera, and then tape the camera shut with heavy-duty tape. Apparently they thought the villagers would be incapable of accomplishing this procedure on their own. What might have been an opportunity to teach villagers the entire photographic process was truncated, and TNC retained control over the cameras by not teaching the complete skill set required.⁸ Furthermore, rather than giving people cameras and letting them express themselves, which I would argue is an important step in any empowerment efforts, TNC always provided specific guidelines of what villagers should photograph. They also encouraged certain forms of expression at the expense of others. For example, they would steer village photographers toward ‘natural’ images and focus discussions on how people interacted with their natural world. One example is the caption from Nongbu, a 36-year-old male from Niuba Village.⁹

I went to visit my relatives in Foshan County in October 2001 and I was impressed by the biogas installation in their village. I wonder when we will be able to use biogas in my village of Niuba. Biogas is a really good way to use less fuel wood and protect the environment.

This quote was selected to show the success of convincing villagers to use alternative energy sources. However, many people I have spoken with about biogas in Yunnan have been skeptical of using animal dung as a cooking fuel. It is entirely

⁸ See Litzinger 2004a and 2004b for a more thorough discussion of The Nature Conservancy’s work in Yunnan, and see the special report on the organization in the Washington Post for strong critique of their practices (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/nation/specials/natureconservancy/>, accessed April 3, 2005).

⁹ View the original image by clicking on Slide 3 on the Photovoice Slideshow, TNC website: <http://www.nature.org/wherewework/asiapacific/china/strategies/art13320.html#>.

possible that Nongbu really did believe in the power of biogas, but to me it sounds too closely in line with what TNC *wants* participants to say to be credulous. While the Photovoice project did important work of turning the power of representation over to people who normally would not possess that power, it was an incomplete effort at power sharing, at best.¹⁰

In my own work, collaborating with the two male directors of the Moso Folk Museum on a community-based media project, I found that my anticipations of the empowering effect of media were extremely naive. For example, the directors had already been using their own video camera (which they decided to purchase instead of purchasing a vehicle) for two years when I arrived to do this project. While my presence encouraged them to focus on media creation a bit more than their busy schedules typically permitted, they hardly needed me to ‘empower’ them through the camera I brought them (which, incidentally, was of lower quality than their own professional-quality Sony) or the minimal funds I could dedicate to the media project.

Our collaboration turned out to be a true partnership, in which they asked an old friend to be the instructor for our film training class, I paid his fee and non-

¹⁰ For additional Photovoice citations, see "Yunnan Women Snap Rural Life" (1993 article in *China Daily*); "Native Eyes on a Land South of the Clouds" by Erik Eckholm (2005 article in the *New York Times*); and the introduction to *Visual Voices* (Women of Yunnan Province 1995).

local expenses, they hosted him (covering food and lodging), and they hosted the training at their museum (including the provision of lunch for participants). Now, was this empowering? I would not use this term. Rather, it was a gratifying experience for all parties involved. The directors gained new skills: they learned ways to improve their filming techniques, and also learned how to edit the piles of digital video tapes that had been filling their shelves. Then again, I also acquired new technical skills from the training (as well as learning the Chinese translations for photographic terms). The other Na participants (all museum employees) also learned new skills, and enjoyed practicing composition and lighting techniques by photographing and filming their friends. Yet I would not say that they were empowered, nor would I dare tell them that I hoped they would find the experience empowering. It sounds incredibly condescending now. I wonder how the Kayapo, the Inuit, and the Aboriginal Australians participating in media production projects described by Ginsburg, Turner, Michaels, and others would react if they read claims that they had become empowered.¹¹

Finally, in communally-oriented societies where individual accomplishments are prized not for their own merit, but rather for what they reflect on an entire household (to take the Na example), locating too much ‘power’ in an individual can be dangerous and harmful. Perhaps the emphasis on empowerment in

¹¹ Unfortunately, the sources I have consulted about community-based media production give very little space to comments from project participants. This seems like an incredible omission in projects conceived to redress imbalances of expression between outside researchers and community members.

community-based media production reveals more about our own values than about what actually occurs in those communities. As Bessire (2003) notes, reversing our gaze to examine how these projects reflect on us can be an important way to analyze the projects.

Films such as *Atanarjuat* should force many viewers to confront the depth of their own ethnocentrism. The question raised, then, is not one of the effect that dominant media may have on indigenous peoples, but, rather, the impact indigenous media may have on dominant audiences and socially constructed categories of 'otherness.'

(Bessire 2003: 836)

Despite the problematic notions behind claims of empowerment, community-based media projects remain valuable. Ginsburg (2002) is correct to caution against paralysis. In any anthropological endeavor, the inevitable ethical dilemmas should be carefully considered, but engaging with other communities is still important and should not cease.

Works Cited

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(The Nature Conservancy 2006; Wang et al. 1996; Women of Yunnan Province 1995).¹²

He Zhonghua

Hyde 2005

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Turner

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Add cite for Eric Michaels

¹² For more information on the Photovoice concept, see Hyde (2005: 190), <http://photovoice.org>, and <http://photovoice.com>.