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Phi Ta Khon Performing Gangnam Style Dance: A Case Study of the Impact of Tourism Industry on the Changing Cultural Meaning of Dansai's Phi Ta Khon

ผีตาโขนเต้นกั๋งนัมสไตล์: กรณีศึกษาผลกระทบของอุตสาหกรรมการท่องเที่ยวที่มีต่อการเปลี่ยนแปลงความหมายทางวัฒนธรรมของผีตาโขนแห่งด่านซ้าย

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A b s t r a c t

This article presents a case study of the impact of tourism industry on host community. A textual analysis of the narrative elements of the video clip “ผีตาโขนเต้นกังนัมสไตล์” (Phi Ta Khon Performing *Gangnam Style* Dance) produced by the Dansai Municipality is employed to unpack the meaning-making process that generates the new meaning of “being touristy” to the Phi Ta Khon tradition of Dansai, Loei Province, which is different from the definition made by the Dansai residents. The textual analysis also renders comprehensible the conflict between the municipality and the residents caused by their different meaning-making approaches. While the Phi Ta Khon tradition is seen by the municipality as a “culture for sale,” to the residents of Dansai, its cultural significance is the result of the combined socio-historical contexts of Dansai. The municipality’s clip production without consulting the residents reveals the local government’s intervention which subsequently leads to the conflict between the authorities and the community.

Keywords: Phi Ta Khon, impacts of tourism, cultural meaning and representation, narrative, intertextual worldliness

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มุ่งศึกษาผลกระทบของอุตสาหกรรมการท่องเที่ยวที่มีต่อชุมชนเจ้าของวัฒนธรรม โดยใช้ข้อมูลกรณีศึกษาจากคลิปวิดีโอยูทูบ “ผีตาโขนเต้นกังนัมส์สไตล์” ซึ่งจัดทำโดยเทศบาลตำบลด่านซ้าย อำเภอด่านซ้าย จังหวัดเลย ในการศึกษาที่ผู้ศึกษาเลือกใช้วิธีการวิเคราะห์ด้วยบทและองค์ประกอบในการเล่าเรื่องเพื่อหาคำตอบว่าผู้ผลิตคลิปวิดีโอมีกระบวนการอย่างไรในการสร้างความหมายใหม่ให้แก่ผีตาโขนที่ใช้ในการท่องเที่ยว และความหมายนั้นต่างกับความหมายเดิมที่เกิดจากการประกอบสร้างของผู้คนในท้องถิ่นอย่างไร การวิเคราะห์ด้วยบทยังช่วยให้เข้าใจความขัดแย้งระหว่างเทศบาลตำบลด่านซ้ายและคนในท้องถิ่นซึ่งเป็นผลจากการสร้างความหมายที่แตกต่างกัน ผลการศึกษาพบว่าการสร้างความหมายใหม่ของเทศบาลตำบลด่านซ้ายเป็น “การสร้างวัฒนธรรมเพื่อการค้า” คือเพื่อการท่องเที่ยว แต่ชาวด่านซ้ายมีความเห็นว่าความหมายเดิมของผีตาโขนเกิดจากหลอมรวมบริบททางประวัติศาสตร์สังคมจนเกิดเป็นประเพณีการเล่นผีตาโขน การจัดทำคลิปวิดีโอโดยที่คนในท้องถิ่นไม่ได้มีส่วนร่วมนับเป็นการแทรกแซงของภาครัฐที่นำไปสู่ความขัดแย้งระหว่างภาครัฐกับชุมชน

คำสำคัญ: ผีตาโขน, ผลกระทบของการท่องเที่ยว, ความหมายและการสร้างภาพแทนทางวัฒนธรรม, เรื่องเล่า, โลกแห่งสัมพันธ์บท

Introduction

The Phi Ta Khon tradition of the Dansai District of Loei Province, Thailand is a cultural product of the Dansai residents. It is a folk performance in which a group of performers, who wear the Phi Ta Khon ghost mask made from a colourfully-painted sticky rice container and the colourful costume perform the walking move of hip swinging, leg skipping, and waist twisting (Suanpradit 1990). The Phi Ta Khon is traditionally performed as part of the Dansai's *Bun Luang* rite and later it has been adjusted to the socio-economic change of Dansai brought about partly by tourism promotion. The changing socio-economic context has had an impact on the cultural practices associated with the Phi Ta Khon performance and has consequently led to the changing cultural meaning and the significance of this folk performance.

This performance-cum-ritual has a long history. There is no record of its origin, but it is held that the Phi Ta Khon developed from the ghost mask performance in Luang Phrabang called “Pu Yer Ya Yer” of the ancient Lan Chang Kingdom of Laos. The

Luang Prabang migrants who settled down in Dansai brought with them the belief in the ancestral spirits and thus conducted the rites and the ghost mask performance to worship and please the ancestral ghosts (Upala 2003).

When in Dansai, the Phi Ta Khon was included in the *Bun Luang* rite or the grand merit-making rite that combines *Bun Prawes* (connected with the Buddhist Jataka of Prince Vessantara) and *Bun Bungfai* (the sky rocket rite associated with the Dansai's agricultural society and the Mekhong River region folklore). Its integration in the *Bun Luang* rite together with the related ritual practices reflects the worldview of the Dansai residents. The mixed beliefs in Buddhism, Brahminism, Animism and superstitions (Suanpradit 1990) that are manifested through the cultural practices conducted in the *Bun Luang* rite contribute to the cultural construct of the Phi Ta Khon of Dansai, a result of which is the profound cultural meaning of this folk performance.

Through time, the Phi Ta Khon performance has come into contact with various systems of politics, economics, societies,

and many ethnic groups. These factors have had certain effects on the development of the Phi Ta Khon festival which can be categorised into three periods: the ancient period (before 1957) in which the Phi Ta Khon was performed to please the ancestors' spirits; the period from 1957 to 1987 which is the beginning of the cultural change in Dansai influenced by the central government and capitalism; and the present era which starts from 1987 which is the period of a big change for the Phi Ta Khon festival caused by tourism (Upala 2003).

In 1988, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) proclaimed that the Phi Ta Khon festival was a tourist attraction of the Dansai. Since then, this top-down tourism policy has been responded to by the local government and the residents. The Phi Ta Khon tradition, which was originally a minor part of the *Bun Luang* rite, has then been emphasised as the Phi Ta Khon ghost mask festival and adjusted to the central government's policy and tourism industry's discursive demand. An example of how the local residents manage to cope with these factors is their arrangement of the Phi Ta Khon parade for the purpose of tourism. They arrange the Phi Ta Khon parade for the opening ceremony of the Phi Ta Khon festival in order to differentiate it from the traditional Phi Ta Khon of the *Bun Luang* rite (Upala 2003). It shows their attempt to maintain the old beliefs and retain the sacredness of the *Bun Luang* rite and the related cultural practices and, at the same time, their adjustment to the encroachment of the outsiders, namely the central government and the tourists.

The adaptation to meet the current tourism boom is also seen in the Phi Ta Khon merchandise. The small Phi Ta Khon mask used in the *Bun Luang* rite is reproduced and sold to tourists for home decoration (Obpahat 2010). The mask is also used as a reconstructed model for various souvenirs, such as magnets, bookends, vases and mugs. Additionally, in tourism advertisements, the Phi Ta Khon festival has been represented as a “Halloween party” or “Phi Ta Khon party” (Phungpracha 2013; Pornpenpipat 2003). In the tourism industry discourse driven by the TAT, the Phi Ta Khon as a kind of folk performance is transformed into a cultural commodity and sold to tourists. This commodification results in the changing way that the local people give significance to the Phi Ta Khon and thus its changing cultural meaning. However, to a certain degree, the residents, in their adjustment to the intervention of the outside forces, attempt to manage and maintain their tradition and the sacredness of their cultural practices.

In November 2012, in order to promote tourism in Dansai, the Dansai Municipality released a music video clip “Phi Ta Khon Performing *Gangnam Style* Dance” (ผีตาโขนเต้นกั๋งนัมสไตล์) onto YouTube. In the clip, the global *Gangnam Style* fad* is combined

* *Gangnam Style* is the top-chart song of 2012 by the South Korean pop singer, Psy. The song and its music video were released in June 2012. It became a phenomenon in a very short period of time after it went viral on the internet. Psy’s signature dance featuring in his global top-hit music video, which imitates the horse gait of trotting and the gestures of spinning a lasso and holding the reins, has been an internet meme. People around the world, including notable people such as Barack Obama (the President of the United States of America), Hollywood movies stars and American singers, have imitated and parodied Psy’s *Gangnam Style* dance.

with the Phi Ta Khon performance. Not long after the release, it became a news item in national newspapers and was a big issue discussed on current affairs programs on television. It was reported in *The Nation's* news article that the local residents showed their opposition and expressed their aggression towards the municipality's disrespect to the over 400-year Phi Ta Khon tradition. They were offended by the “unacceptable” music video clip in which the traditional Phi Ta Khon folk dance was tarnished by the *Gangnam Style* global fad, and by the fact that the municipality did not seek their advice for the clip production. In his response, the Dansai mayor argued that the purpose of this clip production was to promote tourism in Dansai and to propagate the local culture and tradition. It is appropriate to combine the folk dance and the global fad as he saw that the Phi Ta Khon players danced to the traditional northeastern region *Morlum* tunes as well as the Western music in the *Bun Luang* festival every year (Sritraipop 2012). The heated argument between the Dansai residents and their local government points to the problem of the impact of tourism on the host community and the intervention of the authorities on the local culture.

Methodology

This article is a case study of the impact of the tourism industry on the host community, specifically the case of the changing cultural meaning of the Dansai's Phi Ta Khon caused by the intervention of the local authorities. Throughout the historical time, the Phi Ta Khon has undergone substantial transformations

from the ritual Phi Ta Khon to the commodified one, and the residents are able to accept it and adapt their tradition to the socio-economic change caused by tourism. However, the case of the YouTube clip is not the same. The intervention of the Dansai Municipality in its video clip production of the local tradition aroused anger among the residents.

The article aims to unravel the representational practice of the Phi Ta Khon made by the Dansai Municipality that leads to the “unacceptable” change of the Phi Ta Khon’s cultural meaning. To do this, the YouTube clip “Phi Ta Khon Performing *Gangnam Style* Dance” will be investigated. Textual analysis of the clip is then used as a methodology for the study of the impact of the municipality’s intervention in the cultural meaning of the Phi Ta Khon. The focus of this study is thus on how the Phi Ta Khon’s new cultural meaning is created by the representation made by the municipality in the clip. As an interpretive framework, textual analysis will also help make understandable why the representation of the Phi Ta Khon in the clip causes disagreement between the Dansai residents and the government, and how the different practices of meaning-making of the Phi Ta Khon lead to the conflict.

In the analysis of the clip, the narrative elements, namely the characterisation of the Phi Ta Khon figure and the setting used as the backdrop for the pivotal storyline of the dancing actions revolving around the *Gangnam Style* song will be investigated. Together with this, the news content about the argument between the residents and the municipality over the

clip will also be studied.

The textual quality of “Phi Ta Khon Performing *Gangnam Style* Dance” and its intertextual worldliness

According to Barthes (1972), a “text” is any kind of cultural object that can be decoded or read through its layers of signification. Barthes’ statement can be used to stress the textual quality of the clip “Phi Ta Khon Performing *Gangnam Style* Dance”. It is argued in this article that the clip as a text has the narrative quality of storytelling that can generate meaning. In the story telling, the Phi Ta Khon has been textually represented and has been accordingly encoded with certain cultural meaning. In addition, the clip does not have only one story to tell and one homogeneous meaning to convey. The controversy discloses the heterogeneity of the cultural meaning of the Phi Ta Khon of the clip. Since the content of the clip is made up of the hybridised components of the Dansai’s Phi Ta Khon folk performance and the *Gangnam Style* global fad, an intertextual relationship between these two components is established within the clip, allowing a diverse range of meaning to be transmitted to its audiences and inviting them to decode and make interpretation.

The multi-layers of meaning carried by the clip are not self-assumed, but socially meaningful. The social meaning of the clip comes from the intertextual relationship between the clip and the social world where the clip is situated. The

conflict between the municipality and the residents caused by their different meaning-making and interpretation shows the inseparability of the cultural meaning of the Phi Ta Khon from the socio-historical context of Dansai where the Phi Ta Khon tradition originated and which the clip makes reference to.

The intertextual relationship between the text and the world where the text is situated is referred to by Edward Said as the text's "worldliness". Said (1983) sees the text's status as "an event having sensuous particularity as well as historical contingency," that are "considered as incorporated in the text, an infrangible part of its capacity for conveying and producing meaning" (Said 1983: 39). Said states that the text is a cultural object whose material presence originates within the world. Its result is the formation of the discursive relationship between the text and world where the text is located and interpreted. The text's meaning is not self-assumed and is inseparable from the social world since the text is a part of the world of which it speaks. This worldliness is itself present in the text as a part of its formation. Because of its worldliness, the text has a specific situation that places restraints upon the interpreters and their interpretation.

An understanding of the controversy between the municipality and the residents over the production and the content of the clip cannot be worked out without considering the worldliness of the clip. As stated by the Dansai Mayor in the news, the clip was made to "promote tourism and propagate the Dan Sai residents' tradition" (Sritraipop 2012). Such a

purpose reflects the ideological filter the municipality uses to conceptualise how the Phi Ta Khon should be represented in the clip. It points out that the tourism industry is the dominant force that affects the municipality's way of viewing the Phi Ta Khon as a cultural product for sale.

The tourism industry is a discursive regime that is relational. It involves interactions between the host as the provider of tourism products and the tourist as their guest (cf. Urry & Larsen 2011). In Thailand, the Tourism Authority of Thailand is a government enterprise under the Ministry of Tourism and Sport, which is responsible for promoting tourism and setting development plans for tourist destinations in Thailand (TAT Newsroom). The Dansai Municipality becomes an agent of a lower stratum in the tourism industry discourse when it mutually responds to the TAT's plan of tourism promotion. To boost the local economy, the well-known Phi Ta Khon performance is objectified and used as a sales representative of the local culture and tradition. This folk performance is transformed into a cultural commodity whose sale can facilitate business and bring money into Dansai. The adaptation to the tourist's demands is therefore the process that the commodified Phi Ta Khon has to undergo (cf. United Nations Environment Programme).

In the commodification process, the municipality employs the social-networking site of YouTube as a channel to present the Phi Ta Khon to the target consumers. Getting a good reception from the YouTube audience means that the tourism promotion clip has to be eye and ear catching and its content needs to

be striking. To connect the local to the global, the globalising *Gangnam Style* fad of the time is employed. The clip portrays a group of Phi Ta Khon figures joyfully dancing along the Korean popular song *Gangnam Style*, and making the horse trot, holding-the-reins and spinning-a-lasso moves. The representation of the Phi Ta Khon as such is made in a way that caters for the tourist's demand of the fun of the ghost mask festival.

The Dansai residents construct the different meaning of the Phi Ta Khon of the clip due to their different worldview. For them, the Phi Ta Khon's becoming and cultural meaning are connected with the socio-historical context of Dansai. The extreme hybridised combination of the local tradition and the global popular culture is unacceptable because the cultural meaning of their tradition has been changed.

The conflict over the production of the clip reflects the municipality's and the residents' different meaning-making of the Phi Ta Khon tradition, which results from their dissimilar discursive beliefs and assumptions of what the Phi Ta Khon is. The meaning that the residents give to the Phi Ta Khon is associated with the ingrained *Bun Luang* rite and the Dansai's social structure that have formed the Phi Ta Khon's becoming. However, for the municipality, the meaning of the Phi Ta Khon is rather goal-oriented. They see the folk performance as culture for sale. The meaning that they give to the Phi Ta Khon is therefore in conflict with the residents' meaning-making.

In the next section, the production of the clip "Phi Ta Khon Performing *Gangnam Style* Dance" will be studied as a kind of

the narrative text that has the quality of storytelling and meaning construction. The clip's narrative elements will be analysed in order to understand the meaning-making process brought about by the representation of the Phi Ta Khon in the clip and to illuminate how the new cultural meaning is constructed to suit the tourism promotion purpose.

“Phi Ta Khon Performing *Gangnam Style* Dance”: The changing cultural meaning of the Phi Ta Khon tradition

The production of the YouTube clip by the municipality enables the representational practice that stresses the significance of the Phi Ta Khon as a product for public display and its new cultural meaning as a “culture for sale”. This representation is made to happen in the textual space of the clip where a narrative of the touristy Phi Ta Khon is told to the YouTube audience. The story that the clip narrates does not contain the story of the Dansai's Phi Ta Khon tradition that is linked with the *Bun Luang* rite. It is a new narrative that represents the Phi Ta Khon as a new cultural construct for the specific tourism context. The new meaning is produced by the use of the narrative elements - consisting of the characterisation, the setting, and the storyline of the dancing actions that revolves around the song *Gangnam Style* - that the clip employs as a representational method.

Phi Ta Khon ghost mask and characterisation: “Dansai-ness” in appearance

The representation of the Phi Ta Khon in the clip is a

meaning-making process that encompasses the politics of what is present and what is absent in the presentation of the Phi Ta Khon tradition. In the narrating the story, the Phi Ta Khon ghost mask is chosen to be presented as an emblem of “being” the Phi Ta Khon of Dansai. The exotic ghost mask is treated as a cultural artefact that has functions as an indicator of “Dansai-ness”. The ghost mask also functions as an anchorage point for interweaving the components of what is supposed to be Dansai-ness that are represented in the characterisation of the Phi Ta Khon figures and the setting in Dansai.

The characterisation of the Phi Ta Khon characters is seen in the portrayal of a group of people dressing in colourful costumes and wearing the Phi Ta Khon ghost masks. The mask wearing gives the wearers the appearance of the Phi Ta Khon ghosts. The presentation of the Phi Ta Khon characters as such is assumed by the clip producer to be the representation of the Phi Ta Khon’s being. Nevertheless, the ghost mask wearing in the clip is only an invention of the staged ghost dance that uses the local tradition as a model (cf. Hobsbawm 1992: 4-5). It is only a simulacrum of the Phi Ta Khon tradition with no social, cultural and historical significance attached to it since it does not signify the symbolic function of the Phi Ta Khon performance in the Dansai community.

Although it is a minor component in the *Bun Luang* rite, the ghost mask performance is integral in its function as the mechanics to maintain the hierarchical social structure and sustain the well-being of the Dansai community which are based on

the residents' belief in the ancestral spirits, Buddhism and the agricultural society of Dansai (Suanpradit 1990: 169-77). The three main objectives of this performance, which are to service *Chao Nai* or the spirits of the Dansai's ancestors, to be a component of the procession of the return of Prince Vessantara to the City of Sibi as narrated in the Buddhist Vessantara Jataka, and to ask for sufficient rain for growing crops from *Taen* or the god of rain in the northeastern people's belief (Suanpradit 1990: 169-77), reflect this function.

During the three consecutive days of the *Bun Laung* rite, the Phi Ta Khon is performed for the first two days. The emphasis of the *Bun Luang* rite is on the ritual practices and the main ritual practitioners rather than the Phi Ta Khon performance. On the first day, when the religious ceremony at the Ponchai Temple is over, the villagers will gather at the place of *Chao Pho Kuan* (the male spiritual leader) who is the medium and the messenger of *Chao Nai* to arrange the *Bai Sri* ceremony (Soongsiri & Wangwiwatsin 2007: 22-3). Held to wish *Chao Pho Kuan* and *Chao Mae Nang Tiam* (the female spiritual leader) happiness, good health and good luck, this ceremony indicates the spiritual leaders' very high social status in the community and stresses their leading roles in the ritual practices. After this ceremony, the two spiritual leaders will lead the procession of the villagers back to the Ponchai Temple, and the Phi Ta Khon will join this procession.

The second day is the day for the procession of the monks. Villagers will gather at the Ponchai Temple and dance along to

Morlum tunes. The Phi Ta Khon is performed. The procession of monks consists of a procession of the Buddha image, a procession of four monks, a procession of Prince Vessantara, and a procession of *Chao Pho Kuan* sitting on *Bung Fai* (the bamboo rocket). When the procession of monks arrives at the temple, it is the spiritual leaders who are the leading performers of the ceremony. After the religious ceremony is finished, the villagers will gather outside the temple to fire the bamboo rockets in order to ask for rain from *Taen*. *Chao Pho Kuan*'s and *Chao Mae Nang Tiam*'s rockets have to be the first to be fired. The Phi Ta Khon performance is over at the end of the second day (Soongsiri & Wangwiwatsin 2007: 22-3; Phungpracha 2005).

In essence, the Phi Ta Khon is integrated as a minor component into the *Bun Luang* rite not as a mere entertainment for the local residents. The ritualised gathering and the Phi Ta Khon performance support the social stratum, of which the spiritual dimension plays an important role in the community. The spiritual aspect that is reflected in the combined Buddhist and Animistic ritual practice helps uplift the spirit of the residents and, at the same time, becomes the behaviour controller that secures the community's social order. The *Bun Luang* rite is the culmination of the Dansai people's beliefs in the ancestral spirits, Buddhism, and superstitions, whose ritual practices emphasise the residents' roles and responsibilities as the community members. The Phi Ta Khon as a performance in the *Bun Luang* rite is part of the macro social system that is used to manifest the intangibility of the spiritual dimension that aggregates and

sustains the well-being of the community.

The YouTube clip does not deliver the spiritual dimension of this folk performance, which has the symbolic function embedded in it, to its audience. The physical description of the exotic ghost mask and the colourful costume or the dancing actions do not tell the audience about the origin of the ghost mask tradition or the local residents' mixed beliefs that have constructed the becoming of the Phi Ta Khon tradition. The spiritual dimension disappears in the representation of the Phi Ta Khon in the clip.

Setting: Suggested local attractions for visitors

Setting is the narrative element that equips the meaning of “being touristy” to the Phi Ta Khon of the clip. Setting is the moment of historical time, the geographical space (or location), or the metaphorical space that the story takes place in. It is used as a narrative device to provide the useful information of the motivation that drives the character to do an action. It is crucial to the development of the story.

The staged ghost dance is shot in many locations in Dansai, namely the Dansai Folk Museum located in the Ponchai Temple, the scenic point where the giant Phi Ta Khon ghost mask is situated, Kaew Asa Road, the local afternoon market, and the Office of the Dansai Municipality. These places are shot and portrayed as the setting for the dancing actions that the Phi Ta Khon characters perform. Nevertheless, the presentation of these places does not convey the social and cultural significance and

the signification of the historical time that the places have for the local way of life.

The Dansai Folk Museum is significant in a way that it is the place that collects and distributes the information of the establishment of Dansai and the significance of Phrathat Sri Songrak as the symbolic place for the establishment; the Dansai people's culture and tradition, especially the *Bun Luang* rite and the Phi Ta Khon tradition; and the importance of *Chao Pho Kuan* and *Chao Mae Nang Tiam* and their administrative assistants. The museum functions to display the Dansai locality.

The Ponchai Temple, built in 1562, is the major Buddhist temple of Dansai, and the folk museum is located in this temple. Its importance is seen from the fact that the religious rituals of the *Bun Luang* rite are held here for the three consecutive days.

The Dansai scenic point, which is the gateway to Dansai, is the place that the visitors stop and take photos of the statue of the giant Phi Ta Khon mask and the panoramic view of Dansai. Dansai's geographically distinct green area can be seen from this point which overlooks Dansai.

The main road of Dansai is named "Kaew Asa" after Phra Kaew Asa, the important and heroic governor of Dansai. He was their legendary hero. This road is the business centre of the small community of Dansai. Off Kaew Asa Road, the local afternoon market is located. The life of the local people centres around these two places.

As for the Office of the Dansai Municipality, it is the office of the Dansai local government. It is the Dansai Municipality that

is the producer of the YouTube clip.

The way that these places are portrayed and presented in the clip has stripped off their social, cultural and historical contexts that contribute to the becoming of the Phi Ta Khon tradition. The camera technique of panning from one location, to another and then to the other has reduced their signification and importance, causing the disappearance of the legends and narratives that are attached to them. In effect, these places are turned into one-dimensional shooting locations functioning as the backdrop for the *Gangnam Style* dance which is the focus of the camera. The places are presented as mere geographical areas for the merry dance. Being framed as the background setting for the *Gangnam Style* dance devoid of the social and cultural conditions that have formed the Phi Ta Khon's being through the historical time, these places are reconstructed in the clip and equipped with the new function of being the suggested local places for tourists.

Storyline: The centre stage of the *Gangnam Style* song and dance

The narrative elements of characterisation and setting are interwoven with the storyline in which the Phi Ta Khon characters perform the sequence of dancing actions, moving from one location to another along with the *Gangnam Style* song. The song and the dance take centre stage in the clip since they are employed by the clip producer to draw the audience's attention. The storyline as such is used as a method of communication. The municipality wants to make a welcoming dialogue with the

prospective visitors, inviting them to do activities in various places in Dansai.

The clip opens with the bell toll that wakes up a group of the sleeping Phi Ta Khon in the Dansai Folk Museum. Then the song *Gangnam Style* begins and the Phi Ta Khon figures come to life. They make the enjoyable dance moves, which are not reserved only for the traditional walking move, but also the signature *Gangnam Style* moves. In narrating the story, the background locations for the dancing actions move from the museum to the scenic point, taking the visitors into the town of Dansai. Then the location of the scenic point is interchangeably switched to Kaew Asa Road, the local market, and the Office of the Dansai Municipality. The camera also focuses on the colourful ghost mask from time to time to emphasise its exoticism, not its cultural significance, or the socio-historical context of the shooting locations. The clip ends with the bell toll for one more time to signal the time out for the merriment of the Phi Ta khon dance. All the Phi Ta Khon figures then get back to their sleep in the museum, waiting to be woken up by the visitors who come to Dansai.

Founded on the ground of the local culture for sale concept, the storyline is told by the use of the hybridised form of what is believed by its producer to be the representatives of the local Dansai tradition – the ghost mask and the places – and the global popular fad that is considered to be the selling point. This hybridisation turns the clip into a space of an encounter between the local and the global where the strategic positioning of the

global causes an unbalanced relation. The global is emphasised while the social, cultural and historical significance of the local is reduced to be only a façade of the old tradition without its profound meaning. The spiritual dimension is glossed over by the fun of the global fad in order to suit the contemporary sensation of the tourist consumers. As Storey (2003) points out, consumption is “always an encounter between the materiality of a cultural commodity and the cultural formation of a consumer, which takes place in a particular context” (Storey 2003: 112). This clip is produced in the tourism context with its emphasis on the fun of the ghost mask festival. However, in the milieu of Dansai where the Phi Ta Khon tradition is symbolic of the Dansai’s old tradition, the “most unlikely” hybridised adaptation to the fun of *Gangnam Style* seems to change the Phi Ta Khon into a new cultural construct with its own contextual meaning that is unacceptable for the local residents.

Conclusion

Textual analysis of the clip “Phi Ta Khon Performing *Gangnam Style* Dance” brings to the surface the intertextual worldliness of the clip, and untangles the root cause of the conflict between the Dansai Municipality and the local residents. Their different worldviews play an important role in their different meaning-making and interpretation of the Phi Ta Khon’s cultural meaning.

The analysis of the clip’s narrative elements reveals the multi-layers of the cultural meaning of the Phi Ta Khon of the

clip. Reinvented as the culture for sale to tourists, the local tradition has undergone the dramatic transformation in the clip production. The new story and cultural meaning are invented to transform the old tradition into the fun ghost mask dance regardless of the Dansai's socio-historical background. This is in conflict with the local residents' attempt to adjust their tradition only partially to the socio-economic change brought about by tourism.

In the past, the traditional Phi Ta Khon performance was a small part of the *Bun Luang* rite performed within the specific context of pleasing the spirits of *Chao Nai*. Restrictions and taboos had to be strictly followed. The small ghost mask had to be made in secret. Only the elderly could perform Phi Ta Khon dance. All the ghost masks and the costumes had to be thrown into the Man River after the *Bun Luang* rite was over because they were considered evil (Phungpracha 2005; Soongsiri & Wangwiwatsin 2007; Suanpradit 1990; Thailand Research Fund 2007).

The striking transformational period occurred in 1988 when the TAT announced that this folk performance was the emblem of the tourism promotion in Dansai. Since then, the extending boundary of the tourism industry has swiftly encroached on this small community and had certain effects on its tradition. The old tradition has been adapted for the new purposes (Hobsbawm 1992: 5). The villagers still keep the Phi Ta Khon dance for *Chao Nai* while they have tried to cope with the change by reinventing the touristy Phi Ta Khon for visitors. The result is that some restrictions and taboos confining the

community members regarding the making of the ghost mask and the performance are set loose. The Phi Ta Khon dance can be performed outside the ritual context of servicing *Chao Nai*. Age and gender restrictions on the performance of the Phi Ta Khon and the making of the Phi Ta Khon masks are not strictly followed. The ghost masks and the costumes are not thrown into the Man River but kept at home for next year's festival (Phungpracha 2005; Soongsiri & Wangwiwatsin 2007; Suanpradit 1990; Thailand Research Fund 2007).

In the current globalising era as in the case of the YouTube clip “Phi Ta Khon Performing *Gangnam Style* Dance”, digital technology allows the digital economy of selling tourism products through the social media. The Phi Ta Khon tradition is removed from the real geographical space of Dansai where its social materiality is situated and repositioned in the textual space of the YouTube clip. The façade of the old tradition is used as the model for the newly-constructed touristy Phi Ta Khon to make reference to, generating the new meaning of which the uniqueness of the old tradition disappears.

The creation of the YouTube clip as a textual space to deliver the Phi Ta Khon tradition's new cultural meaning that was done without consulting the local residents can be considered the authorities' intervention in meaning-making of the local tradition. This transgression is the municipality's symbolic action of power exertion, of which the clip production is turned into a site for exercising power. By this means, the clip production itself tells a hidden story of the textual politics of

power exertion. The municipality's intervention indicates the unbalanced power relations between the municipality and the local residents. At the same time, the residents' discontent with the clip production tells another story of their attempt to balance the authorities' power. They disrupt the municipality's right to define the new cultural meaning of the folk tradition by denouncing the municipality's audacious act of not seeking their advice. The discontent is symbolic of the claim of the residents' share in meaning-making of the Phi Ta Khon of the clip.

The case of the tourism promotion clip "Phi Ta Khon Performing *Gangnam Style* Dance" is an example of the impact of tourism on the host community. Apart from the income, the tourism industry brings into the Dansai community the intervention of the authorities. The management of the cultural products for sale is interfered with and taken from the local residents. And this leads to the question, "In the tourism industry, who actually owns the local culture and tradition?".

This so-called question should be further raised to make sure all the stakeholders involved in the cultural commodification are aware of the adaptation of culture for sale. As culture is a product of the society where it belongs, the adaptation of culture should be done with the stakeholders' caution and their concern about the socio-historical contexts that have constructed the culture.



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