

Visual Anthropology and Cultural Integrity: Cultivating Long-Term Field Relations

Wang Peize*

Faculty of Fine-Applied Arts and Cultural Science, Mahasarakham University,
Thailand

527193125@qq.com

Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-8295-4636>

Arkom Sangiamvibool

Faculty of Fine-Applied Arts and Cultural Science, Mahasarakham University,
Thailand

arkomsang@gmail.com

Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-5074-9389>

Abstract: In recent years, there has been growing attention on the ethical commitment to cultural integrity within anthropological fieldwork, alongside the continued focus on ensuring the authenticity of data. This heightened sensitivity emphasizes the vital role of visual anthropologists, who must dedicate substantial effort to maintain ongoing presence in the field. Their continued engagement allows for thorough inspection, documentation, and study of diverse cultural communities, which is essential for generating meaningful and authentic anthropological insights. The establishment of thoughtful and genuine relationships with information sources is a key aspect of this process. These connections play a crucial role in shaping and informing the anthropological knowledge produced. However, it is important to recognize that the reflexivity and principled standards of anthropology are deeply reliant on ethical performance. The study draws upon the author's active involvement in the creation of ethnographic films and extensive fieldwork conducted in the Altay region of Xinjiang, China, as well as insights gathered from interviews with authorities. Through this comprehensive approach, a framework has been developed to encourage the cultivation of field interactions. Central to this framework is a focus on introspection and self-reflection. The study examines the process of selecting cultural sources and outlines strategies that promote meaningful engagement throughout the documentation process. It also addresses the challenges and strategies involved in maintaining long-term relationships with these sources, which often extend beyond the fieldwork period itself. Ultimately, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of participation in visual anthropology and the ethical principles that underpin it.

Keywords: Cultural Reflexivity, Cultural Integrity, Ethnographic Film, Visual Anthropology, Relationship, Fieldwork Method, Stranger Society

1. INTRODUCTION

The process of making an ethnographic film entails lengthily roaming

and immersing oneself in numerous cultures. Realistic information can only be captured by structured genuine interaction with civilizing carriers (Bilgen & Fábos, 2024). The film's authenticity and how viewers understand and value the cultures portray the impact of the film's aptitude to precisely approach these concerns. The ethnographic video "Hero Wings" was completed as an effect of fieldwork in Kezilexilike Township, Xinjiang, China. The project's primary focus is to surveillance how people leverage interpersonal associations, including the characters and personalities that are essential for effectual fieldwork. Detection is necessary to comprehend how communications and data collection are prejudiced by interpersonal dynamics. Filmmakers have to contract with tricky thoughts like cultural relativism (Zhunusbekova et al., 2022), ethnocentrism (Archer & Souleles, 2021), rights relations (Kunst & Mesoudi, 2024), morality (Teira, 2021) and ethics. The fieldwork also contributed appreciably to the film's legitimacy and profundity by providing the perceptive in sequence on provincial social structures, customs, and daily life. Anthropologists such as Margaret Mead have taken issue with the hypothetical underpinnings of Chinese ethnographic films, which comprise social evolutionism and Marxism (Shen et al., 2021). Figure 1 shows the fieldwork conducted in the village.



Figure 1: Fieldwork Area of the Study

As a finding, both the government and academic organizations have authorized these documentaries, which offer perceptive into human cultural performance. Even while their hypothetical frameworks are indeed being discussed and examined within the regulation of anthropology, support the films' implication in deepening consciousness of other cultures (Steinmüller, 2022). Even with comparable cultural identifiers, it takes a lot

of endeavour and occasion for citizens from a variety of backgrounds to become associates. In anthropological fieldwork, the difficulty is especially evident since conservative approaches include living with people from other cultures to produce purposeful information (Sylaiou & Fidas, 2022). The process adds levels of complexity to the chase for factual, neutral insights by requiring not just negotiating cultural disparities but also increasing relationships and trust while maintaining the researcher's impartiality (Li, 2020). Visual anthropology has developed into a diverse field due to the large division in the performance and growth of Chinese ethnographic films, which have been supported by significant assistance from specialists, academics, and filmmakers. Since visual media plays a particular position in depicting and evaluating artistic processes, the regulation has urbanized with hypothetical constructs that describe it within the circumstance of cinema ontology (Yu, 2023). The significance of cinema in recording and explaining social dynamics and human behaviour is being increasingly acknowledged, as seen by the progression. To understand their authority on the formation of ethnographic films, it is significant to examine the connections between academics and cultural legislature (Guo, 2024). Since they encourage assurance and collaboration, these associations have a chief collision on the development of investigative objectives. Moreover, they progress the universal quality of ethnographic study by ensuring that the films completed are truthful and courteous, contributing an additional multifaceted and genuine depiction of the societies under study.

2. METHODOLOGY

The difficulties in transportation of visual anthropological study in China are discussed in the section, particularly with orientation to ethnographic films. To address the challenges faced by researchers when they attempt to live with and document the lives of cultural bearers, by utilizing participant observation methods. Cultural disparities and problems brought by industrialization and urbanization, have undermined the old kinship-based "acquaintance societies". Researchers at the present find it more difficult to engage with and examine cultural traditions in China as a result of the changes in interpersonal interactions brought by economic expansion and urbanization. Figure 2 shows the relationship between the ethnic group and horses.



Figure 2: The Relationship between Kazakh Ethnic Group and Horses

2.1 Selection Criteria

The ethnographic film on Kazakh culture begins the filming; data gathered a broad understanding of Kazakh through extensive study of documents. The study conducted research across all Kazakh-populated regions within Xinjiang, focusing primarily on the Ili Kazakh autonomous prefecture and the Altay region. Although both regions are home to Kazakh communities, the research chose Altay over Ili's it is more developed and commercially influenced, with fewer nomadic livestock, which did not align with exploring traditional Kazakh culture. Altay, being closer to the border, has been less impacted by outside influences, allowing Kazakh traditions to remain more intact. The research selected a village in Altay for the year-long fieldwork, ensuring that it met specific criteria, such as supporting nomadic pastoralism and being largely unreported by the media. The village chosen in Fuyun County is next to the Kalamaili mountain ungulate nature reserve, an area where seasonal migration of people and herds occurs. The village, the last in the country to gain road access, has preserved its traditional cultural practices. It also needed a core extended family with deep kinship networks and diverse professional roles within the family. Notably, the entry into the family was facilitated by an existing network of acquaintances and later discovered that one family member was a horse racing participant featured in an ethnographic film.

2.2 Fieldwork in Altay, Xinjiang

Early in the process of making ethnographic films, it is important to establish the research population structure: the group traditional or in transition. Given the current rapid pace of cultural integration, the choice of research locations often focuses on isolated areas with minimal external cultural influence. When it came to Kazakh culture, researchers conducted

a study of the literature, spoke with Kazakh academics in the area, and travelled far around Xinjiang, China, to find areas where traditional customs had been maintained. Key Township in the Altay region, which is renowned for its seclusion and unbroken cultural traditions, was the perfect spot for filming; they opted to avoid locations that are regularly covered by the media. Figure 3 shows the tent at Gobi.



Figure 3: Depiction of the Tent in Gobi

2.2.1 Selection of Representative Family in Ethnic Group

Ethnographic films are a complete representation of ethnic culture as they show the lives of those who uphold it in daily life, not simply during celebrations or social gatherings. Complex kinship links are useful for study as they provide light on family dynamics and give the story depth, like in the case of the Kazakh culture, where customs like meal routines and seating arrangements have deep cultural meaning. The Kazakhs have managed to hold onto their extended family customs despite urbanization, not to mention the strong cultural bond that Kazakhs have with horses.

2.3 Ethnographic Film Production

Ethnographic film production captures community life through immersive research and ethical filmmaking. By using diverse cinematographic techniques and engaging with participants, filmmakers create authentic narratives. Post-production focuses on editing and incorporating feedback to ensure accurate representation, culminating in distribution for educational or cultural impact.

2.3.1 Long-Term Contact: Maintaining Relationships

Human motivation is largely dependent on the creation and maintenance of close connections, both of which are facilitated by emotions. Building

trusting connections with cultural bearers is crucial to the process of creating ethnographic films. To capture true cultural expressions, filmmakers need to "eat, live, and work together" as members of these communities. Long-term involvement with the approach enables a thorough comprehension of cultural practices that are experienced but difficult to describe. Difficulties like language barriers and the requirement for lengthy fieldwork are brought to light, especially in multi-ethnic areas like China where cultural manifestations are intricately linked to customs and everyday life. Figure 4 depicts the productive labour of cultural holders.



Figure 4: Participating in the Productive Labour of Cultural Holders

2.3.2 Adapt to Field: Language and Lifestyle

Anthropological fieldwork was transformed by Malinowski's work, which also made it the main technique used in anthropological investigations. The method places a strong emphasis on learning the local language as essential to assimilating. However, there are problems when Chinese researchers have to rely on local elites to translate for them during fieldwork because of practical limitations like time and money. Research can have omissions as a result of these translators' lack of awareness of their own culture. The way culture is portrayed can also be skewed by the power dynamics of translation. It is recommended to maintain their academic expression and those cultural bearers have more control over how they represent their culture to remedy this. The significance of choosing a qualified translator due to his grasp of visual anthropology, cultural familiarity, and language skills was instrumental in the effective completion of the qualitative film "Hero Wings." For academics, conversing directly with cultural bearers through acquiring the local language continues to be the most effective strategy. To establish ties and completely integrate into the community, it's crucial to adopt the local way of life while on fieldwork. Being near someone encourages social intimacy,

which increases interaction and forges stronger bonds. Scholars ought to treat cultural bearers with equality and humility, even in the face of their elevated social standing, and refrain from using technical language. With the method, ethnocentric prejudices are avoided and a greater knowledge of culture is possible. Ethnic communities' achievements and tenacity in harsh settings attest to the importance of their cultures. It was best to improve cultural immersion and knowledge by actively engaging in local work during ethnographic research. The method places a strong emphasis on the value of inclusion and equality in intercultural studies. Figure 5 shows the ethnic Kazakhs are rushing to compete in a sheep race.



Figure 5: The Kazakh Ethnic Group Scrambling for a Sheep Race

2.3.3 Living Together: Mutual Benefit and Mutual Respect

An ethnographic film's production costs vary, and inexperienced filmmakers frequently encounter financial obstacles that prevent them from conducting in-depth research. Ethnographic films prioritize the portrayal of culture and research over financial gain, in contrast to commercial films, where performers are compensated for their labour. Although cultural holders are not aware of their legal rights, researchers have an ethical need to provide recompense that is flexible and takes into account their financial resources. During fieldwork, the Kazakh ethnic minority, who are renowned for their generosity, frequently shares meals and helps filmmakers. Relationships are strengthened by reciprocal support, which is essential for effective ethnographic research. Directors with experience, find money from many sources and place a strong emphasis on developing polite connections with cultural bearers, which goes beyond financial considerations and promotes deeper cultural understanding. Figure 6 shows the cultural holders who had lunch with the ethnographic film team.



Figure 6: Cultural Holders had Lunch with the Ethnographic Film Team

2.4 Development of Ethnographic Film

Creating an ethnographic film involves planning and researching the community, filming their daily lives, and editing to craft an authentic story. Feedback from the community ensures respectful portrayal and distribution through festivals and screenings fosters understanding.

2.4.1 Integrating into the Field: Gone Camera

When cameras and recording devices are used in the anthropological study, it causes mistrust and a barrier between the researchers and cultural bearers, such as the Kazakh ethnic group, who might not be comfortable with high-end filming technology. Smartphones have simplified the meaning of these instruments, yet their existence can despite cause privacy issues and skew genuine cultural manifestations. To overcome these obstacles, anthropologists frequently turn to ethical rules; yet, they cannot adequately meet the worries of the cultural bearers.

2.4.2 Fieldwork Collaboration and Participant Engagement

Effective fieldwork collaboration and participant engagement depend on clear communication of research goals, building strong local partnerships, and early participant involvement to integrate their feedback. Offering ethical incentives and maintaining transparent communication are key to fostering motivation and trust. Proper training for fieldworkers in both research protocols and interpersonal skills is crucial for high-quality data collection while respecting participant's time and cultural norms is essential. Following the fieldwork, the family maintained their usual routines, focusing on herd management and participating in leisure activities such as horse racing and a sheep scrambling game. Although their herding skills were limited outside summer pastures, these activities helped

with essential tasks like cleaning the herding pen and providing feed and water. This comprehensive approach not only improves data quality but also contributes to the overall success and impact of the research.

3. RESULTS

Establishing trust and obtaining deeper cultural insights through extended encounters with ethnographic subjects, like the athlete in "Hero Wings," is essential to improving the calibre of subsequent studies. To ensure responsible distribution and preserve the dignity of cultural subjects, ethical representation in cinema necessitates informed permission, respect for creativity, and avoidance of exploitation. Up to 23-month fieldwork visits are necessary to collect primary data; shorter timeframes are devoted to other research endeavours, highlighting the necessity of continued community involvement. By targeting real-world needs like healthcare and education, practical support and regular connection with community's boost research effectiveness and develop partnerships.

3.1 Long-Term Fieldwork Relationships

In anthropology, fieldwork usually lasts a year or two, although the connections last for many years. The author's continued relationship with subjects from the ethnographic film "Hero Wings" serves as an example of this kind of sustained interaction. The athlete who plays the protagonist of the movie in combat sports offered a noteworthy chance to stress how important it is to keep these ties going. The investigator was told by the character that he was getting training in Thailand just ahead of the Chinese New Year. The story serves as an instance of how these varieties of continuing individual interactions construct trust and aid in an improved understanding of cultural individuality. These associations progress the quality of the next studies and are necessary for important follow-up studies. A longer-term appointment with the character in diverse cultural surroundings strength offers the investigator deeper insights and highlights the value of long-term promise in anthropological investigations.

3.2 Ethical Adherence and Publicizing Film Materials

To properly publicize film materials, it is necessary to get the informed agreement of every person who is included and to appropriately reflect the content to avoid distortion. Respecting intellectual property requires securing licenses, providing due credit, and exercising cultural awareness to prevent stereotypes. It is important to be open and honest about possible

conflicts of interest, and caution should be exercised to prevent sensationalism or the exploitation of delicate subjects. Lastly, taking into account the possible effects on various audiences guarantees that the movie doesn't support negative habits or beliefs. Respecting topics and viewers is demonstrated by upholding ethical standards and adhering to these ideals. While most anthropologists follow ethical rules, only a tiny minority do so strictly, which has an effect on research procedures and findings distribution. Film materials that aren't legally released can violate the private spheres of cultural property owners and lead to abusive circumstances. The need to build long-term relationships with cultural stakeholders, keeping notification requirements, and offering fair remuneration are all highlighted by the case. Respectful representation is ensured and exploitation is prevented by upholding ethical norms in these areas.

3.3 Distribution of Research focus in Ethnographic Field Work

Figure 7 shows how time is distributed across different research activities. It highlights how much time is spent on-site with fieldwork visits receiving the most attention (54.4%). Frequent communication is important for maintaining connections, as seen by its 27.2% follow rate with cultural bearers. The 6.8% share for both community engagement and follow-up research indicates their importance in preserving community connections and confirming results. The fact that other duties like first contact, ethical review, film screening, and medical assistance take considerably less time highlights their helpful but submissive responsibilities. This distribution highlights that relationships and fieldwork are the main priorities, with other activities serving as ancillary functions.

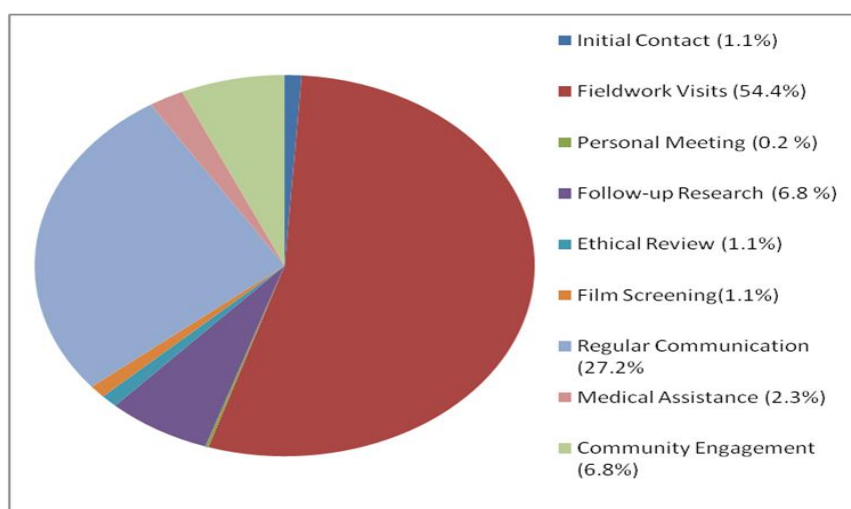


Figure 7: Time and Effort across Ethnographic Study Phases

3.4 Practical Support and Community Engagement

To promote sustainable growth and improve the well-being of the community, it is imperative to involve the community and provide practical help. When educational carriers have reasonable support and these relationships are reinforced by frequent communication, the competency of a study is gradually enhanced. This includes kind acts like sending people warm Christmas wishes and offering support at important turning points in their lives. Building trust and fostering constructive contact with the community are further facilitated by addressing real-world concerns like healthcare and educational requirements. This procedure shows how more creative bearers can benefit both sides, resulting in more robust and cohesive communities, and it emphasizes the importance of ethical and practical considerations in anthropological study.

4. DISCUSSION

Study emphasizes how critical it is for visual anthropologists to sustain ethical norms and maintain long-term partnerships. The aforesaid case studies underline the implication of maintaining ties with educational bearers, such as the study sustained contact with the character of "Hero Wings," to achieve deeper insights and build the trust required for more study. These long-lasting ties not only intensify the consideration of anthropology but also make it easier to have additional important communications and collect data. Strict ethical attachment is additionally underscored by the difficulties of putting ethnographic films into the public field while maintaining the isolation of cultural subjects. Ensuring that participants get suitable compensations and appropriate announcements is vital in preventing manipulative practices and maintaining the distinction of civilizing subjects. The fieldwork done for the ethnographic film "Hero Wings" serves as proof in the conclusion of the importance of long-term, immersed collaborations for anthropological study. Deep reflection (Berardi & Scardozzi, 2021) and critical self-examination were key components of the researcher's technique (Yang, 2023), which demonstrated that strict ethical norms are insufficient on their own to meet the difficulties of fieldwork. Through self-reflection, it became clear that ethical considerations for each study circumstance are unique and challenge the traditional boundaries between the "self" and the "other" (Kessler, 2021). The study also highlights the requirement of trust-building and providing helpful assistance, such as helping with medical issues, to ensure

effective fieldwork. These acts show a dedication to the community that goes beyond scholarly curiosity and prove that helpful and courteous participation is just as important as rigorous scientific research. Anthropologists can make their study deeper and more relevant by including ethical protocols, building lasting connections, and offering concrete assistance. These procedures guarantee that anthropological research adds to academic understanding and benefits the communities in which it is conducted while simultaneously safeguarding the rights of the participants and enhancing the study's effect. Therefore, the study promotes an all-encompassing strategy in research on anthropology that strikes a balance between moral obligations and sincere, encouraging relationships. Compared to previous works, the study on visual anthropology and cultural integration discussed in this study presents a clear structure for developing sustainable field relationships. The main findings of this study are the ethical obligation to cultural promise and the need to establish genuine relationships with information sources. The study also works on making ethnographic films and has first-hand ethnographic experience in the Altay region of Xinjiang, China, which enriches the study. A unique concern of this study is introspection, self-reflection, and the practical guidelines for maintaining an active engagement with cultural source material once the research proper is over. Also, the lack of methodological studies in ethnographic films and the published samples integrated into a discussion about the influence of such films on cultural comprehension, various aspects of constructing relationships and consensus with subjects, and maintaining the status of ethnographer as the impartial observer contributes to extending the issues visual anthropology concerns. Furthermore, the study's focus on the complexities and approaches to the development of field interaction, a growing area in cultural anthropology, identifies high stakes issues and uses ethical considerations in the representations of cultures. These contributions not only advance the field's development but also inspire and motivate further research. In conclusion, the present research significantly contributes to the ongoing discussion of visual anthropology and cultural preservation, building on the findings of prior research in this domain.

5. CONCLUSION

Study promotes seeing cultural carriers as family members rather than only as research participants. By using a relational strategy, the researcher's

involvement with the community is improved and deeper relationships are fostered. Such an approach is essential in visual anthropology, as researchers are fully immersed in the civilizations they are studying. It helps researchers to better align with the cultural perspectives of their participants, which produces more nuanced and authentic insights. Moreover, the researcher's sustained engagement with the fieldwork family serves as an example of the advantages of observing "kinsfolk" ties after the fieldwork phase. The long-term association not only fortifies relations between persons but also enhances later phases of study by increasing understanding of cultural practices. These connections are dynamic, which emphasizes how critical they are to maintaining the reality and ethical reliability of anthropological study. The study highlights that flexible, context-sensitive methods to ethical dilemmas and enduring, empathic commitment to cultural carriers are necessary for the achievement of anthropological study. The methodology strengthens the reliability of cultural information and emphasizes the ethical obligations of researchers while interacting with the communities they are studying (Mantzou et al., 2023).

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