

Forthcoming in *South East Asia Research*

**Citizens of photography: Visual activism and social media—a rhetorical weapon and collective action in Cambodia**

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**Bio**

Sokphea Young obtained his PhD from the University of Melbourne (Australia), and is currently a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the University College London (UK). His research interests are on the areas of transnational activism, civil society, visual politics, visual media and development, citizenship, globalisation and development, and political regime and development in Southeast Asia. His research published in *Journal of International Relations and Development*, *The Chinese Journal of Comparative Law*, *Journal of Civil Society*, *Asian Politics & Policies*, *Asian Journal of Social Science*, *Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs*, and *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, and as book chapters and other working papers.

## **Abstract**

We are living in the age of photography. Photography and visual social media have flooded our communication channels and become embodied in our daily activities. People who can afford the medium of photography—people who are described here as ‘citizens of photography’—use these channels to articulate and represent their grievances. These exemplify a form of visual activism and articulation that have long been discussed in social movement studies, yet the links between photography and social movements remain unpacked. Drawing on a socio-environmental movement case in Cambodia, this paper interrogates how photographic and visual representations, and social media shape the outcomes of collective action by disgruntled citizens. The paper argues that the ubiquity of visual devices and digital access to visual social media facilitates underprivileged citizens in grassroots movements to aesthetically exert influence on their targets in order to leverage their demands effectively. Beyond considering images as messengers and mediatisation, the power of visual images inspires and provokes action: participation in the protest, and re-production and re-circulation of the images on social media. The power of visual images—produced by ordinary citizens—is the performative force that brings about change in the era of social media.

Key Words: citizenship, visual activism, social media, photography, collective action, Cambodia

## **Introduction**

Cambodia's economic development has induced an inexorable rate of natural resource extraction and, ultimately, depletion. The latter, in turn, has provoked affected communities to resist this top-down approach to development. Among many other protest movements in the country, a minority indigenous people—known as the Prey Lang forest community—has struggled to protect their forest and the natural resources that have sustained their communities for generations. The protests achieved no favourable outcomes throughout the early 2000s, at a time when the forest was gradually being encroached upon by commercial and illegal logging. But in early 2012, this grassroots mobilisation appeared to attract participation from the public, especially urban youth, and they also obtained results, with the forest being listed by the government as one of the national wildlife sanctuaries. This achievement was followed by colourful protests, known as “Avatar” protests. The “Avatar” photographs and youth engagement in protecting the forest using smartphone cameras and social media are significant to the Prey Lang community; they also enable this study's analysis of their contribution to the achievement of the objectives of collective action.

The effective resistance of the Prey Lang forest communities has reverberated within social movement studies, and media and visual studies. However, the interactions between these fields have often been neglected, despite many points of intersection (Mattoni and Teune 2014). Collective actions are concerned with how to make their grievances, activities and voices heard and visualized to gain leverage with their targets. Towards that end, activists and organisations exploit the burgeoning use of social media devices, such as smartphones and the internet, to mediatize their activities, including transmitting their messages directly to their targets (Nicole, Mattoni, and Teune 2015). Media scholars focus on the importance of media in framing activists' mobilisations (Khatib 2013). Political sociologists consider visual

expression (via social media) as the dynamics of collective actions, identities, and demands in interaction with power holders. On the other hand, visual anthropologists seek to understand the meaning of image construction within collective actions (Mattoni and Teune 2014). All of these different perspectives—placed within the context of socio-political change—are, in fact, central to the tactics of social movements.

Tactics are employed by activists as tools to mobilize mass participation to gain leverage with their targets and to attain their desired outcomes. Scholars have made claims regarding the positive impacts of media and visual expression on politics and other socio-phenomena (Khatib 2013; Schill 2012). However, while speculating that media, as a whole, influences the outcomes of citizens' collective actions, they fail to examine the aesthetic content and power of the photographs circulated on social media by those disgruntled citizens. Aesthetics, in this context, transcends what would be considered beautiful within the realm of visual arts, including photography (Shelley 2017); instead, the concept of aesthetics here describes the way in which the content of images creates judgments and invokes interactions in the spectators: believing, expressing a feeling, commenting, reproducing, (re-)circulating, and/or acting. The aesthetics of visual images shape how people see, believe and act. This fact has been raised by scholars of photography, political violence and human rights concerning the viewing of atrocities and sympathetic images, or 'the pain of others' (Sontag 2003). These types of images can provoke interactions and actions to condemn or to prevent atrocities from happening in the future (Linfield 2011). What is in a photograph matters, for that is what stimulates the collective action of citizens.

Based on the case of Cambodia's Prey Lang forest communities, this paper interrogates how the power of images shapes the outcomes of collective action by disgruntled citizens. While I acknowledge the contingency of photographs—namely that they are subject to different interpretations—in assessing visual expression in collective actions, this study

analyses the fantasy (power) of images, photographs and audio-visuals produced by the community and journalists and within (visual) social media networks. In tandem with their form, the content of these images engages spectators to act collectively online and offline to leverage their targets, and to obtain their intended outcomes, in light of their initial objectives. Fantasy is the imaginative power of the images to induce and inspire the collective actions and participation of the spectators. Tagg (1988, 21) suggests that this power is the authority generated by the photographic representations: "... the forms and relations of power which are brought to bear on practices of representation...". The practice or influence of visual representation is power. This power is imaginative and invisible but influential in demanding interactions of the spectators to engage in the visuals. To this end, I argue that, rather than the roles of photos and images as mediators and mediatizers (as messenger and communicators between protesters and public spectators), visual imagery's aesthetic contents are the faculty that prompts the public (through participation and opinion) to leverage with their target institution i.e., the state.<sup>1</sup> Along with the democratisation of image-making mediums and mediums of circulation such as social media, the power of image activism, as a weapon of the weak, prompts the anticipated outcomes of collective action.

The remainder of this paper is to begin with a conceptualisation that the power of photographs and audio-videos mobilize general public participation to represent and attend to under-represented groups, or deprived citizens, who later establish influence on the target state institutions. The paper then discusses the mobilisation of the Prey Lang indigenous community, using the aesthetical tactics and mediums of circulation they adopted from movie *Avatar*, to protect and reclaim their forest. The paper concludes by arguing that, in this era of

<sup>1</sup> As current Cambodia's political context, I use the terms of "state" and "government" interchangeable since they are under a political party formation.

visual social media, aesthetically powerful photographs and audio-visuals provide the fantasy that can be a catalyst in contributing to change.

### **Visual citizenship, protest and collective action**

Visuals and the collective actions of social movements, in this era of visual social media, are interwoven, and complement each other for socio-political change. Known as a group of people who share a common goal or belief (Tilly 1978), a social movement is a form of collective resistance aimed at bringing about change in society. In the digital media and activism, the emerging means of communication, such as social media, play critical roles in bringing about change in their society, economy and polity (Juris 2005). When dealing with social media, visual expression and representations have been brought into the debate regarding social movements (Philipps 2012). Yet, the emphasis tends to be on the roles of visibility in social media, rather than on its aesthetic contents and performance: how photographs or visual images shape the way people see, believe and act. It is often claimed that visual arts or materials can be framed as the ‘performance’, and ‘mediatisation’ of social movements (Nicole, Mattoni, and Teune 2015). Through the lens of performance, scholars still suggest how collective actions represent or communicate themselves through visual means (Doerr, Mattoni, and Teune, 2013), rather than how visual representations exert their power. These scholars focus on ‘mediatisation’ because they believe visibility is key in the messages which are communicated and mediated between activists and their targets, see Adams (2002). This paper proposes that, while visual images play an important role as the medium of mediatisation, the content of images is the power that influences spectators to reproduce and re-circulate them, leading to ‘viral’, on social network sites.

This use of power of images in this context is best known as ‘visual activism’ (Mirzoeff 2015). Visual activism foregrounds how the re-production and re-distribution of images, photographs, and audio-visuals of activists contribute to the emergence and dynamics of collective resistance (Mattoni and Teune 2014). This kind of visual activism and collective action is located within the context of citizenship because collective mobilisations are often, in this era of visual social media, orchestrated by citizens who can afford these mediums of visualisation—namely smartphones, cameras, as well as online access—to proliferate the audio-visuals and photographs. There is no fixed definition of photography, but it incorporates the notions of space, representation, time, evidence, memory, presence, love, loss, mourning and nostalgia (Barthes 1981). This study perceives photography as a piece of evidence which captures, not only the beauty, but also atrocity of an event. This evidence, as suggested by Tagg (1988), is a form of representational power that invokes the concerned stakeholders in the photography to interact, view, circulate, reproduce and express ideas. In a study of citizenship from the photographic point of view, Azoulay (2008) defines such a form of power as a ‘civil contract’ between the spectators and the photographed. Since photographs document and capture something that actually was there, they provoke the spectators not to simply gaze at the photographs, but to act and think critically and ethically, especially about the pain of others when it comes to images of atrocity (Linfield 2011). Azoulay (2012) suggests that, whereas the authorities define two types of citizenship: non-citizens and citizens, photography (as evidence and identity) is a form of ‘civic citizenship’ which happens in advance of any political authority’s definition of citizenship. She claims that “anyone who stands in any relation whatsoever to photography has membership in the citizenry of photography” (Azoulay 2012, 69), meaning that anyone can be a photographer, and a viewer who sees, comments, interprets, shares, displays, and a anyone can be photographed.

Citizenship is contractually embodied in photography, even though many, especially political scientists, have disagreed with this notion.

Influenced by Marshall's (1950) three elements of citizenship—social, political and civic—Janoski (1998) suggests that citizenship involves membership by individuals, through their 'personhood', to a nation-state. Membership defines how a person is recognized and accepted by the nation-state, as a citizen with specific rights. Being a privileged citizen, he or she enjoys rights and assumes the duties of membership within a specific political community (Isin and Turner 2002). This definition rests on the rights of those who are members of the community or the lack of such rights for non-members. The former are recognized and entitled to claim their rights and socio-economic services, while the latter enjoy no such services; in this study, such a disenfranchised group are called the under-represented citizenship, which refers especially to vulnerable and indigenous groups. Disgruntled under-represented groups, as we can observe in social media, act not only for their own self-representation, but also for even more vulnerable groups without the means to possess digital devices, through sharing and commenting on visual images. Those citizens of photography, who can afford the mediums of visualisation, can both self-represent and represent those under-represented by enacting performative citizenship. I define citizens of photography, based on performative citizenship and social movements, as the process in which aggrieved citizens employ means of visualisation to bargain and negotiate with the state or organizational entities. As defined above, visual representations and photographs are forms of power, allowing citizens of photographs to wield influence on the targets, i.e. the state. I propose that how citizens' action, through visual approaches, not only persuades action by the public, it also gains leverage with those in power to respond. The aesthetic contents of visual images and photography have more power in shaping the way citizens see, believe and act for a particular purpose.



## **An overview of Cambodia's socio-politics, natural resources and forests**

While the socio-political phenomena of Cambodia have evolved, traversing between authoritarian and democratic political systems, the country's natural resources, especially its forests, have declined substantially. After the collapse of Sangkum-reas-nyum (Popular Social Community) of King Norodom Sihanouk (1953-1970), brought about by the coup orchestrated by the pro-United States General, Lon Nol, the country was thrown into a rampant civil war. The Khmer Rouge, which adopted a communist-style of leadership similar to that of Leninist politics, managed to depose Lon Nol and take control of the country from 1975-1979. The regime implemented what is called 'utopian society', in which the urban people were stripped off their status quo titles: artists, intellectuals, officials, or working class. Most of the latter were the urban people (new people) who were forcibly relocated to work in the paddy fields with the base people (old people) who have already practised and experienced agricultural activities (Hinton 2005). In 1979, when the Vietnam troops overthrew the Khmer Rouge, about 60% of the country was covered by forests.

In 2010, the government claimed that the total forest area of the country was 57.7 per cent. Compared to the 1960s, when forests were believed to cover about 74 per cent of the country's area, forest cover had, it appears, declined by 19.3 per cent, while the protected areas had decreased from 3.3 million (1993) to 3.1 million hectares (Royal Government of Cambodia [RGC] 2012). However, a local NGO claimed that, as of 2013, the forest cover in Cambodia had again declined to just 46.33 per cent<sup>2</sup> of the country's land area (Open Development Cambodia [ODC] 2013). In contrast, in early 2015, the government asserted that forest cover was up to 51 per cent of the Cambodian landmass (Peter 2015). These natural resources and forests serve not only as a source of subsistence livelihoods of poor

<sup>2</sup> Including tree crops, such as rubber, and teak.

rural communities, especially indigenous communities, but also as sacred areas of these communities. For these compelling reasons, the surrounding communities have striven to protect the remaining forest from exploitation.

As the population of Cambodia increases, urbanisation has expanded rapidly; the demand for agricultural land for food production has simultaneously soared. The Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) has introduced agricultural commodification policies which aim at exploiting the remaining resources—the forest, in particular—to meet the new market demands and with the added intent of enabling rural employment and poverty reduction. In 2005, the RGC issued sub-decree 146 on ELCs (economic land concessions), by which foreign investors could obtain access to land or natural resource concessions for up to 99 years (recently reduced to around 50 years); and million hectares of land were granted to both foreign and domestic investors, including joint ventures, under ELC scheme (Young 2019b). These foreign investments, in turn, induced adverse rather than favourable social, economic and environmental impacts on the grassroots communities, including indigenous communities, located in and around the investment areas. These impacts, in turn, provoked what it is called ‘popular resistance’ to demand redress of the unfavourable impacts; peasants and indigenous people protest almost every day everywhere in the country, employing tactics such as protests, road blockages, campaigns, advocacy and petitions, in which they are assisted by aggrieved non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Young 2016; 2019a). The grassroots mobilisation of Prey Lang communities is one of these popular collective efforts.

## **Methodology**

To attain the objective outlined in this paper, combined research methods: using qualitative and quantitative data tools were employed to collect both primary and secondary data. The research began with a review of relevant documents, reports and other publications. Some

citations are drawn from various published works and media. I then attended a workshop on natural resource management and advocacy approaches held in Phnom Penh in August, 2017. The workshop included about 50 male and female participants from Prey Lang communities, youth activists and other photographers who presented and discussed their advocacy approaches and results, including the use of social media work. Following the workshop, I approached individual youth activists to conduct interviews, and met with them on several occasions to discuss about Prey Lang communities, and the Avatar pictures.

Since the nature of this research is a combination of media, activism and photography, the approach I used to analyse relevant materials is not restricted to any of these themes. As photography is a form of social contract (Azoulay 2008), my analysis of the photographs is not exhaustively based on form and composition; rather, it aimed at understanding how the iconic images or photographs, especially their contents and meanings, affect the public. The paper acknowledges that while both ‘form’ and ‘content’ of photographs are essential in understanding visual arts and photographs, the ‘content’ plays a significant role when it comes to the effect of visual materials. This effect, called ‘performative force’ is the ability to affect viewers to act beyond what they see in the frame (Levin 2009). While photographs, as a medium of mediatisation, are important, the paper argues that the power—derived from the ‘content’, to some degree from ‘form’, of the photographs—provokes action: participation in protecting the forest, re-producing and re-circulating the images and audio-visuals on digital and social media. Three photographs were chosen for analysis given their iconic and popular representations of the Prey Lang communities.<sup>3</sup> This motivated me to explore further, by looking into the quantitative data, to what extent the content of audio-visuals and images of the Prey Lang forest affected the spectators, in terms of their circulation on social media and news outlets, to reach out to a larger number of viewers. Quantitative data illustrated in the

<sup>3</sup> A youth programme officer (23 January 2020).

form of trend charts in this paper is the result of online searches in Google using the key term, “Prey Lang Cambodia” in English. The results of the search were classified as general news, video and pictures, and includes how often the term appeared per year. “Prey Lang Cambodia” was not used in Khmer script for Google search since the variation in written Khmer made it difficult to find an accurate search result.

### **Visual protests for Prey Lang protection: Actions and consequences**

Prey Lang is the largest remaining evergreen lowland forest in Southeast Asia. The forest covers at least 350,000 hectares spanning four provinces of Cambodia: Kampong Thom, Preah Vihear, Stung Treng and Kratie (Parnell 2015). The forest has been the source of livelihood for more than 250,000 people from 339 villages in these provinces (Argyriou et al., 2015). Settling around the forest, these people are identified as indigenous communities, most of them are *Kuy* (pronounce Koo-ie) people who have benefited from the forest for generations. Their social and spiritual traditions are closely tied to the forest. Like other indigenous communities in Cambodia, the *Kuy* believes the forest is sacred and acts as an agent of the existence of the community and their livelihoods. Protecting Prey Lang is akin to protecting the lives of the communities as well as the relationship between nature and humans against the greedy (legal or illegal) commercial logging.

The forest has also been identified as a source of valuable minerals below ground, which has seduced not only neighbouring communities but also foreign and domestic investors to explore and exploit its resources. As such, about 53 companies were granted concessions in Prey Lang. Of these concessions, as many as 234,784 hectares are ELCs;

264,693 hectares are mining concessions; and 884 hectares are forestry concessions.<sup>4</sup> Most of these companies, if not all, have not only developed the areas granted to them but also extracted timber from the intact forest of Prey Lang.<sup>5</sup>

To resist the encroachment and invasive territorialisation of commercial agriculture and mining, the communities surrounding the forest have organized their mobilisation since the early 2000s. The aim has been to leverage pressure on the government to end the large-scale commercial logging and declare Prey Lang a protected area. Initially, the mobilisation was informal and fragmented because of a weak capacity to coordinate among those living in the area surrounding the very large forest. In 2004, with assistance from local and international NGOs, several communities united to protect the forest. In 2007, the Prey Lang Community Network was formally established, gathering and coordinating members from the four provinces. The network consists of 120 active members, with a core group of 20 individuals, representing about 200,000 family members from the surrounding provinces. Voluntarily, members of the network have patrolled to protect the forest from illegal logging, by companies or individuals, and from forest clearing for small or large-scale farming. However, their network has been otherwise silent and has exerted no influence on the government and companies. Anarchist logging; land encroachment; slash and burn and wildlife poaching continued despite community efforts.

### **Colourful demonstrations: *Avatar* and audiovisual actions**

<sup>4</sup> According to a joint statement of NGOs, retrieved from

[http://www.ngoforum.org.kh/administrator/components/com\\_ngoforum/files/513ff3c46a11b7fb60c077128fc73242-Final-Joint-Statement-PreyLang----EN-22-06-15.pdf](http://www.ngoforum.org.kh/administrator/components/com_ngoforum/files/513ff3c46a11b7fb60c077128fc73242-Final-Joint-Statement-PreyLang----EN-22-06-15.pdf) (accessed on 24 May 2017)

<sup>5</sup> Prey Lang Community Network website, <https://preylang.net/the-threat-2/> (accessed on 24 May 2017)

In 2012, aiming to attract public and international attention, the communities began using visual imagery, a movement collectively termed “Avatar”, to depict the meaning of Prey Lang forest. “Avatar” was inspired by the film *Avatar*, which was produced in 2009 by 20th Century Fox. Directed by James Cameron, the film earned about US\$ 3 billion and sparked the attention of audiences as well as academics worldwide, including environmental activists (Der Derian 2010). The film is set in the year 2154 on Pandora, a fictional Earth-like moon in a distant planetary system. Humans fight to extract from natural reserves, a precious mineral known as unobtainium, from Pandora. The indigenous people, known as the Na’vi—the sapient and sentient race of humanoids indigenous to this moon—resist the colonists’ extraction and expansion. The film suggests the conflict that can be caused by the expansion of land, resource and political control of space by neo-liberal regimes (Bebbington and Bebbington 2011), closely reflecting the situation with regard to Cambodia’s natural resources, which are being exploited by an invasive and extractive regime.

To emulate the influential concepts, the Prey Lang community set their protest strategy by painting the Avatar colours depicted in the film (blue, green and white) on the skin of their protesters. In Phnom Penh, where about 1.5 million people are living, protests were organized to attract not only NGOs but also the youth in general to learn about the Prey Lang forest, and to eventually alert the relevant ministries, such as the Ministry of Environment, and Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, and the Prime Minister, Hun Sen. In Siem Reap, the third-largest city in Cambodia and the home of Angkor Wat, which lures tourists from all around the world, the “Avatar” protest aimed to visually disseminate the community’s demands to the international community. Taken by a photojournalist, two images from the protest were widely circulated and used by different organisations and youth.

Figure 1 is near here

Figure 2 is near here

These photographs show facial expressions that depict the feelings of people who watch the *Avatar* movie, thereby identifying these Cambodian women with the people portrayed in the film. Thus, these images effectively help to elicit empathy and highlight the concerns of the indigenous communities whose resources are being exploited by 'alien' people (in this real-life Cambodian circumstance, by local businesspeople and foreign investors). These photographs reflect two interconnected themes: visual activism through performative force, and membership of the community.

The first photograph (figure 1) shows a woman, known as *yeay* (grandmother) Sros (beautifully fresh), behind a man participating in the protest. Her expression and the green colour, aimed at drawing the attention of the general public, illustrates the meaning of "Avatar" and the identity of those people protecting the land and forest. The black lines are meant to suggest the wildlife, especially tigers, Banteng, and other biodiversity species in the forest.<sup>6</sup> The hat is made of tree leaves from the forest. It suggests how important the forest is, in this case simply providing shade to humans, but also implying much more: a source of livelihood, water, fresh air (as it absorbs carbon dioxide), and protection for humans and animals from extreme climate/ heat. The white dots on the woman's face represent the culture of the Kuy community. For them, the forest is culturally and animistically believed to be their god; if it is destroyed, the god will, in turn, harm the community. Venerable Bun Saluth says that "God-like Buddha used to live with nature and forest for enlightenment. Human in the

<sup>6</sup> A community activist (15 August 2017).

present time has yet to live with nature. They instead committed the crime against nature."<sup>7</sup> Destroying the forest likewise depletes human lives, as illustrated in the Avatar film, where humans from another planet felled the sacred trees which contained thousands of souls and the lives of the Na'vi indigenous people.

When asked whether the journalist took the two photographs because of the beauty of the ladies, a community activist responded: "we were not performing for the photographer, but we expressed our concerns."<sup>8</sup> Another activist commented that "it is not about the lady who attracted the photographer, but the elements of photography."<sup>9</sup> Hence, it was neither a performance by the lady for the photograph nor the aesthetics of the painting on her face that mesmerized the photographer and lead to a photographic event; the event occurred when the photographer's lens captured the juxtaposition of the elements that allowed the spectator to gaze at the forest and participate in the protest of the community. The photographs captured the sympathies of the communities that were duly communicated to a wider audience.<sup>10</sup> The woman established a contract (shot contract), which was later transmuted through the photograph to viewers, including any one of us. This woman created her own agencies to invoke visual activism by corroborating into the political conception of citizenship both "performative citizenship" (an enactment of rights to protect forest and livelihoods), and "performative force" (the potential that photographs have to exert power on spectators to take actions, as defined in photographic theory). The combination between these conceptions is what is here termed "visual activism". Due to the ability of photographs to travel across time

<sup>7</sup> Venerable Bun Saluth has been fighting for decades to protect a large portion of evergreen forest in Oddar Meanchey province, Cambodia (05 January 2018).

<sup>8</sup> A community activist (18 February 2018)

<sup>9</sup> A youth activist (20 February 2018)

<sup>10</sup> A community activist (1 August 2017), and a youth programme officer (23 January 2020).



and space by dint of storage, reproduction, and online or offline transmission, ‘visual activism’ allows photographs to self-enact power without being controlled by the photographed or photographers.

The second picture (figure 2) depicts a young woman whose face is aesthetically painted like other participants, including a label on her forehead that says “Prey Lang is our forest!”. This younger lady has a blue colour on her cheek, which represents water. The forest is also representative of water, and water is for all people, not just for the communities dwelling around it.<sup>11</sup> In essence, it is not just the forest of those Kuy communities, the forest is for all, given its connection to the whole ecosystem, and shared-benefit to all Cambodians and the world. An activist from the community explained that: “In our language [Kuy], Prey Lang means 'our forest' (Parnell 2015). Prey in Khmer means “forest”, and Lang in Kuy language means “our”. This forest is for everyone. Prey Lang is YOUR forest, too. The way in which the hat is labelled aims to create membership of the forest community. It invokes in the readers and spectators of the photograph the feeling that they are members and part of the community, sparking a form of citizenship; anyone who sees this photograph, not just the caption (label of the hat), becomes a community member. This membership is created by the power or force of the photograph of the forest and the indigenous community. The implication is that if these members do not act to protect the forest, they will all lose the community and the forest, as indicated by another activist:

If I lose Prey Lang, I lose my life. ... If we lose Prey Lang, we lose the forest, the herbal remedies, the wildlife ... Today I pray for the world to appreciate the importance of Prey Lang and help us to put an end to this conflict.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> A youth activist in Phnom Penh (20 February 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Cited from Cambodian Centre for Human Rights (accessed on 24 May 2017 from [http://www.cchrcambodia.org/media/files/news/370\\_200g\\_en.pdf](http://www.cchrcambodia.org/media/files/news/370_200g_en.pdf))

This statement corroborates with another youth activist's comment: "Not only just Cambodians, but also the whole world population need to help protect the forest"<sup>13</sup> for the benefit from such preservation is for all; it is beyond the individuals and a nation. As this resistance succeeds, not only does it address the local problem, it also solves the world problem of environmental degradation and climate change. The Prey Lang forest campaign has thus become global since the images have been transmuted throughout the world via different social network sites.

After the launch of these colourful protests, the visibility of the Prey Lang community, in the eyes of the domestic and international arenas has increased significantly. As in Figure 3, in the early period of the Prey Lang movements, a keyword search for "Prey Lang Cambodia" in Google would garner very little information, from 158 results in 2002-3 to 222 results in 2004-5. The upward trend continued: 1100 results in 2008-9; 3870 results in 2012-13; 6220 in 2014-15; and 10,200 in 2016-17. The fact that, from 2010 onwards, access to the internet and social media, facilitated enormously by the affordability of the smart phone, has widely covered not only urban areas but also remote locations, must be viewed as a critical factor in spreading information about the Prey Lang forest. In particular, "Prey Lang Cambodia" in Google search has surged and the figures clearly illustrate that "Prey Lang Cambodia" has proliferated beyond Cambodia.

<sup>13</sup> A youth programme officer (23 January 2020).

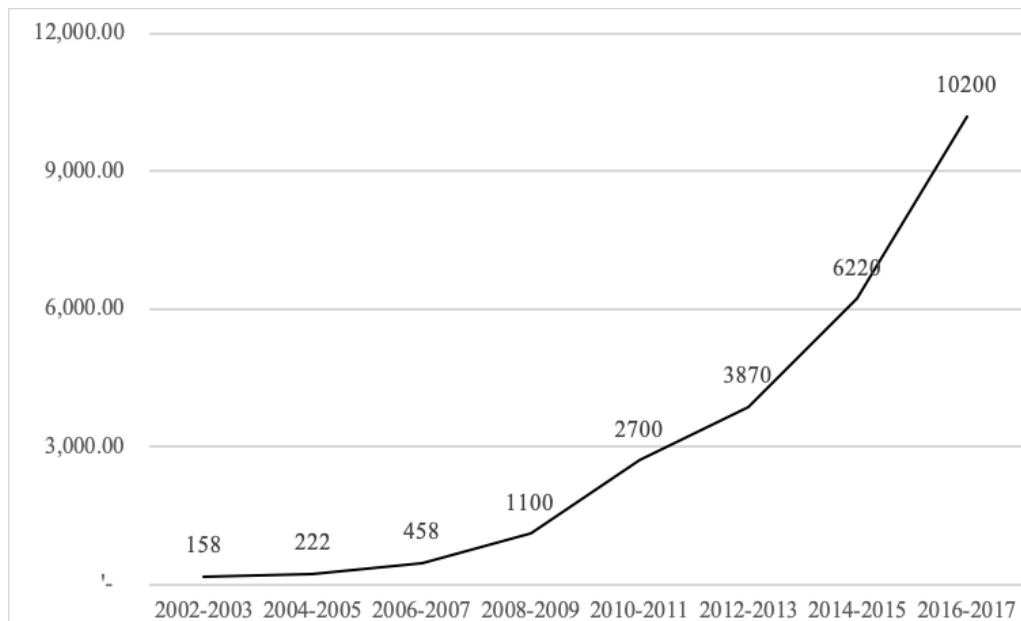


Figure 3 "Prey Lang Cambodia" appears in Google (Source- Author, 2017)

In Figure 4, the trend of “Prey Lang Cambodia” appearing as 'news' or 'video' is different from the general keyword search results in Google. At the beginning of the Prey Lang movement (2002-2007), there was no news or video about the forest in Google searches, although online news and video websites were increasingly used at that time. Only after 2009, Prey Lang started to spark media awareness, but very little attention. It was not until 2011 that videos (audio-visual) about Prey Lang were found online immediately after the community’s “Avatar” protests. Likewise, news and videos search results subsequently increased, from 77 in 2010-11 to 149 in 2012-13, and 298 in 2016-17. This correlates with video search results relating to Prey Lang, which gradually doubled from very few in 2011, to 104 in 2014-15, and then to 253 videos in 2016-17 (Figure 4). Based on these figures, the “Avatar” activism of the Prey Lang community clearly attracted public spectatorship both within and outside the country. The widespread dissemination of these images and news is a direct consequence of the availability of affordable smartphones, and of access to the internet and social media. The tactical escalation, from traditional protests and petitions to the creative and attractive content

of the “Avatar” actions, became instrumental in raising awareness about Prey Lang and the threats it is facing.

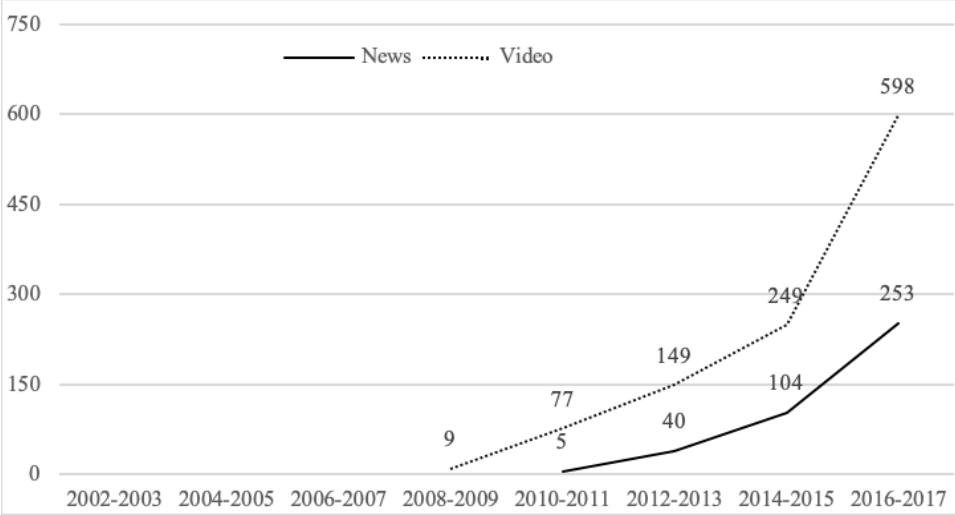


Figure 4 "Prey Lang Cambodia" as news and audio-visuals (Source- Author, 2017)

The significant increase in the number of “Prey Lang Cambodia” results and photographs online is underpinned by the ubiquity of affordable mobile and smartphone cameras in the era of Cambodia’s post-war economic liberalisation. As depicted in Figure 05, the number of smartphone subscriptions began to surge in the early 2010s, increasing from just 2.5 million in 2007 to 8 million in 2010, and reaching its peak at 20 million in 2015. This means a Cambodian owns at least two phones. This period coincides with when social media penetrated the Cambodian market, and social media smartphones and cameras were in market demand. This did narrow the gap in image-making, and in the communication and transmission of images between rural and urban areas. The development of connections between the two areas has stimulated the ability to view the deterioration of the forest and the surrounding environment as well as the decline in the well-being of the rural dwellers, e.g. poverty, which had not hitherto been exposed to the urban youth.

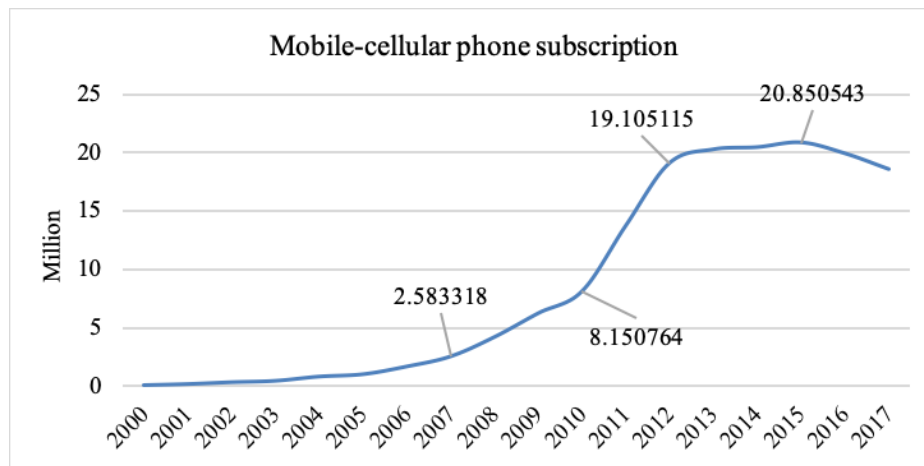


Figure 5 Number of mobile-cellular smartphone subscription (ITU, 2018)

Along with the proliferation of news images relating to Prey Lang, youth from Phnom Penh, in particular, and NGOs, began to participate in activism aimed at the protection of Prey Lang. The participation of urban youth (Parnell 2015), with their diverse political affiliations (in both opposition and ruling parties), echoes, in this instance, the collective actions of citizens. They partake collectively to demonstrate that the Prey Lang forest is not just the forest of those living around it, but it is also the country's common resource, which needs to be protected. Through their photographs and films depicting the forest scenery and the feeling that people have for Prey Lang, these citizen journalists not only visualize the beauty of the forest, but they also highlight the threat that the forest is facing and the necessity of conquering that threat. They have participated in patrolling, filming and photographing illegal activities (poaching and logging) and camping with the indigenous communities to learn about the Prey Lang forest. Phnom Penh-based youth associations regularly organize trips and expeditions. Among several activities in the trip, they have coached and mentored participants on how to use social media and photographic devices to make photographs of the forest and share them online and with friends. An interviewee states:

We regularly organize camping with the participation of those youth from the urban areas to Prey Lang. Some of them who took video and pictures made them available through social media. This is a huge contribution to the result we have had today.<sup>14</sup>

They have shared their photographs and videos through social media, especially Facebook, to the world. On Facebook as of 24 May, 2017, there were at least seven groups, each of which attracted between 30 and 250 members. Based on the descriptions of the groups, they generally aim at protecting and sharing information about the forest. One of the groups, called "Prey Lang Trip", describes their purpose as "citizen actions to keep this flagship forest protected."<sup>15</sup> A page called "Prey Lang- It's Our Forest Too" has more than 36,000 likes (as of January 2020). In addition to its own website ([preylang.net](http://preylang.net)), the page has posted and shared many photos, videos and messages about Prey Lang, which are accessible to Cambodians and foreigners. As illustrated in Figures 01 and 02, the photographs and video news about Prey Lang have been created not only by Cambodians (primarily urban youth), but also by foreign filmmakers and photographers who have visited Prey Lang. On YouTube, there are 3810 videos about "Prey Lang Cambodia", with each video having up to 20,000 views. This suggests that, following their "Avatar" action, social media has played an essential part in the Prey Lang mobilisation. As the Prey Lang communities are connected online, they create a new form of an imagined online community that allows those beyond the physical boundaries of the community to approach one another and to interact. In contrast to the Anderson's (2006) imagined community that is primarily based on print media (often censored and controlled by the ruling party, as is the case in Cambodia), this new but

<sup>14</sup> A youth officer of a youth organisation (04 December 2017)

<sup>15</sup> Cited from the Facebook group "Prey Lang Trip", retrieved from

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/359882854200329/> (accessed on 24 May 2017).

alternative form of the imagined online community of Prey Lang belongs to the communities whose interests are to protect their forest resources. The Prey Lang community is now widely owned by individuals who are involved in photography and videography. These photographs, and even audio-videos, exercise their contract beyond what is just an object of the gaze.

The interest of participants was sparked by the taking of ‘selfies’ with trees, which encouraged yet more such images and their circulation on personal Facebook accounts and other pages. The picture below depicts the sadness of a young man asking for help from the public to stop felling the big trees in the forest, trees like the one he is hugging. “The trees like these are all human's friends. As the trees fall, so do our human lives.”<sup>16</sup> Taken by one of his friends during their visit to Prey Lang, “the picture is not a performance in order to attract views on Facebook.”<sup>17</sup> The person in the image is hugging the huge dying tree which is losing its beauty. Clearly, the tree can no longer serve its natural function in terms of carbon dioxide absorption and water retention. The image, thus expresses the remorse of a human towards the deterioration of nature. Those who view this image may feel, somehow, similarly to those who see S-21 mugshots of torture at Toul Sleng museum (Benzaquen 2014); hugging a dying tree is not a pleasure or entertainment as many expressed their sympathetic emoji on the Facebook post. The fallen tree, as a live body, decries the human’s distrustfulness towards nature, which has long served critical functions alongside human society. “It is a loss of society blood,” said a community member,<sup>18</sup> when asked to comment on the picture of the fallen trees. When anyone gazes at this picture, the interaction can be seen as a “contract”, as Azoulay (2008) postulates. The interaction is a viewing of the pain of the other (Sontag, 2003), and as such, it attracts the sympathetic expressions of Facebook users as seen in the

<sup>16</sup> A youth member of the Prey Lang Community Network (15 August 2017)

<sup>17</sup> A community member (01 August 2017).

<sup>18</sup> A community member (01 August 2017).

screenshot from the Facebook page. In a spiritual sense, even though the man/tree is alive, the dying tree is "talking to us that it will never serve the human anymore"<sup>19</sup>, and soon "all the trees in the forest will be gone if we do not protect Prey Lang."<sup>20</sup>



Figure 6 A Prey Lang youth hugging a big tree fallen by an unknown logger (Source-  
Printscreen from Prey Lang Facebook Page)

In addition to the urban visitors, the village members of Prey Lang have also employed similar means of visibility as their weapon to capture the criminal loggers. More than capturing the aesthetics of the tree, photography is, as mentioned earlier, a piece of convincing evidence —a form of evidence which ironically is, more often than not, used by the state to censor citizens (Tagg 1988). Now, it is being appropriated and used by citizens in

<sup>19</sup> A youth activist (15 August 2017).

<sup>20</sup> A monk activist (01 August 2017).



the era of smartphone cameras to x-ray or capture the corruption of and loopholes in the state's environmental protection policies. Such photography and videography help provide documentary evidence of the poachers and illegal loggers for use in testifying against illegal and criminal activities and helps to protect the patrollers and the community members from being intimidated or threatened by these criminals.<sup>21</sup> Through these they can also hold the state and corporations accountable for their environmental deterioration actions (Young 2019b). Hence, the under-represented and weak indigenous communities in Prey Lang, essentially similar to what are called non-citizens by Azoulay (2008; 2012) are immeasurably aided by the democratisation of smartphone cameras and social media. The camera and photography serve as a means whereby weak (non) citizens can invoke or enact their universal human rights and citizenship, rather than being ignored and brushed aside by the state or authority.

This tactic of mobilising participation in the age of digital and visual media has become prominent for activists in Cambodia, not only to leverage with their targets but also to visualize their grievances to the general population. "As you know, the Cambodian literacy rate is quite low, and they do not like reading and writing, but they like seeing."<sup>22</sup> Visibility is thus a plausible, easy and quick way to understand the message in Cambodia. Suffered by several decades of civil war and political instability, many Cambodians, especially in the rural area, were left uneducated. However, visual representations have been an important tool for the training provided by non-governmental organisations, whose mission focused on alleviating the poverty.

Despite the countless intimidating measures undertaken by government officials, private companies and illegal loggers, the community has sustained their resistance with the

<sup>21</sup> A community member (15 August 2017).

<sup>22</sup> A young environmental activist (15 December 2017).

assistance of civil society organisations, donors and the participation of youth from around Cambodia and beyond. For their efforts, they were awarded an Equator Prize 2015, which was provided by the Equator Initiative of the United Nations Development Program. The prize is awarded to indigenous people and local communities working to protect and secure rights to their lands, territories and natural resources. The prize is awarded to an outstanding local and indigenous community that has advanced innovative solutions for people, nature and resilient communities (Parkinson 2015). Winning the award has sparked stronger local and international attention and a desire to think about Prey Lang as national property, rather than just for those who have protested. As seen in Figures 1 and 2, after the award in 2015, news and videos about the forest accumulated quickly.

While the community was undertaking the “Avatar” protests and other activities to protect Prey Lang, there was a draft sub-decree of the government of Cambodia (2011), circulated by NGO Forum on Cambodia (a local NGO based in Phnom Penh) and designating 615,306 hectares of Prey Lang as a protected biodiversity conservation area. However, the decree was never finalized and approved. After the election in 2013, when the ruling government led by the Cambodian People’s Party lost about 30% of their seats at the national assembly to the opposition party (Cambodian National Rescue Party), there was a new appointment of the Minister of the Environment and a review of ELCs, which lead to proposals to the Prime Minister calling for the revoking, resizing, and reducing of the period of agreement, from about 99 years to around 30-50 years. Among several proposals, the Prey Lang forest proposal was approved by the PM in a sub-decree dated 09 May 2016, designating 431,683 hectares of the of Prey Lang as a wildlife sanctuary. Although the area demarcated by the Ministry of Environment is smaller than the original proposal, the inclusion of Prey Lang is a fruitful result of the mobilisation by the community (RGC 2016). While changes in political momentum after the 2013 elections is acknowledged to have had

an impact on forest and conservation reform, without the visual approach of the Prey Lang mobilisation, there would not even be this relatively favourable result.

### **Concluding discussion**

In this paper, I have demonstrated the connection between two fields—social movements and visual studies/representation—drawing on the concepts of performative citizenship, performative force, and citizens of photography. I have argued that scholars of social movements tend to consider the arts and other forms of visual expression and representations in terms of mediatizer and mediator in proliferating messages of collective actions to different audiences, rather than how visual representations, especially the power of photographs, are able to leverage influence on the targets and to eventually achieve objectives. In terms of collective actions, I have postulated that visuals, including photography and audio-videos, perform power beyond their roles as mediums of mediatisation, thereby sparking visual activism. As visual mediums, such as smartphone cameras, become democratized to people of different socio-economic backgrounds, citizens of photography can produce and circulate visual contents to represent themselves as well as the under-represented and weak communities, or non-citizens, to demand public responses and interactions. The latter, as bolstered by the social media and internet, stimulate an imagined online community transcending local and national boundaries. Urged on by images and online media, local and international communities act to protect the interests of the under-represented and weak communities or non-citizens.

I described the collective action of the Prey Lang indigenous community to reclaim their forest by shifting their strategy from the conventional protest approaches to a creative

one: launching colourful “Avatar” protests imitating the popular movie, *Avatar*, to attract public attention and convince a wider audience of the urgency of their claims. This “Avatar” movement imitates, as indicated above, the spirit or agency of the forest. Like the forest and the forest dwellers in the *Avatar* movie, the surrounding communities and citizens of Prey Lang, have worked together to create and enact their agencies or citizenship, demanding interaction and responses from a wide range of stakeholders, which have duly influenced the state to take action. For example, the photographs of Avatar women and other audio-videos invite the community of spectators to partake in the protection of the forest. The widely-circulated photographs and audio-videos exert influence, by what is called ‘performative force’ in photographic theory, to demand responses from and interactions of the spectators (Young forthcoming). The unstoppable online proliferation of these images and audio-visual materials about the Prey Lang forest is an example of the Cambodian and international response to the images of protecting the forest. Given their meaningful contents, these images have gone beyond the national boundary, a development which has consequently created both a local and an international community that bonds together to protect the forest. Protecting Prey Lang has thus become not only a national Cambodian interest but also a focus of the international community, as stated by the image of the young woman Avatar: “Prey Lang is our forest”. This forest is for all human beings, not just for the small indigenous community living around it. This has led to the award of a notable prize for their sophisticated tactics in protecting the forest, and the government has officially issued a sub-decree designating Prey Lang forest as one of the national wildlife sanctuaries. The award was given to testify that the Prey Lang forest is the heritage of the international community in addition to that of the Cambodian community.

The enactment of citizenship through audio-visual materials reflects the interest of

many activist photographers in Cambodia, such as Samnang Khvay<sup>23</sup> and Vandy Rattana<sup>24</sup>, whose photographic and artistic works and performance are critically focussed on politics, environmental deterioration, land grabbing; and rural and urban eviction. Even though these works appear to be important to human rights and environmental protection, the impacts on the state's policies vis-a-vis the above-mentioned issues are difficult to measure since these artists tend to isolate themselves from the means of mediation (social media), and the affected communities are not involved in any collaborative use of such critical works as tools of activism. The focus of the work is more on the arts, rather than on visual performance and impacts as articulated by “citizens of photography”, as defined earlier in this article.

The Prey Lang community's collective action through an visual approach suggests that, to ensure fruitful outcomes, social movements and scholars of media activism alike should consider transcending their more traditional views of photographs and videos as mediator and mediatizer (messenger). As the case study has suggested, they should recognize the way in which the power of visual imagery can inspire mass participation in social movements. The content of an image, and, to a certain degree, its form, has significant impacts on spectators' belief and action, moving them to act or respond rather than communicate by text messages. Aesthetically, images can provoke collective action of social movements to leverage influence on the target institutions to duly attain the former's specific objectives. Indeed, in a developing country where the literacy rate of the population is low, visuality is a significant rhetorical weapon that can empower grassroots citizens to bring

<sup>23</sup> Preah Kunlong (2016-2017) focuses on the spirit of Areng Valley's natural resources in response to the environmental degradation, retrieved from <http://www.khvaysamnang.com/works/preah-kunlong/> (accessed 31 Jan 2020).

<sup>24</sup> Bomb Pond (2009) is critical photography documenting an infamous legacy of US bombing in Cambodia in the 1970s, retrieved from <http://www.vandyattana.com/project/bomb-ponds-2009/> (accessed 31 Jan 2020).

about change. Change that is induced by both the domestic population and international communities is connected through the contract and performative force of photographs and audio-visuals widely circulated on social media. In the era of social media and smartphone cameras, the effectiveness of this visual imagery, as a weapon, is now much greater than the conventional approaches of Scott's (1985) weapon of the weak and other everyday forms of resistance. Besides media alone that, to a certain degree, influences decisions of the state (Vong and Hok 2018), visual representations and their contents that are circulated on social media can, in terms of evidence and power, influence the public to take actions that later put pressure on government, state and policy-makers. The remote and under-represented peasant and indigenous communities are now connected through visual and social media, and they are no longer isolated. These under-represented communities are claiming their citizenship, an enactment of rights and entitlements (Young forthcoming). Their voices and visibility transmute across space, from the remote areas to the urban centres and, indeed, to the globe. However, cautious measures are needed pertaining to digital surveillance, ethics and privacy.

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### **Acknowledgements**

The author received financial support for the research and finalisation of the article for publication from the European Research Council funded project entitled PHOTODEMOS (Citizens of photography: The camera and the political Imagination), grant no. 695283, at the University College London, UK. I would like to thank my PhotoDemos colleagues: Professor Christopher Pinney, Dr. Konstantinos Kalantzis, Dr. Naluwembe Binaiisa, Dr. Ileana Selejan, and Vindhya Buthpitiya, and the editors as well as the anonymous reviewers of the journal for their valuable comments.