

Karaoke Discourses: A Case Study of Mekong Border Karaoke Settings

Worathanik Photijak* and Savitri Gadhavanij**

Abstract

This case study provides scene surveys and discourse surveys of the Mekong border karaoke bars in three districts; Khemmarat, Nataan, and Khong Chiam, of Ubon Ratchathani province. This study will illustrate contrastive characteristics of city zone karaoke bars, unique attributes of the Mekong border karaoke bars, as well as highlight the uniqueness of the Mekong border karaoke business. The case study will explore discourses circulating in the Mekong border karaoke communities. The findings reveal that the characteristics of city zone karaoke bars and the Mekong border karaoke bars are different. The Mekong karaoke bars sustain their business viability on hidden sexual services. Khong Chiam karaoke bars are more touristic and systematically managed, however, the sexual service available in the karaoke bars is similarly highlight. The lived experiences of young Laotian karaoke service girls who live and work in the karaoke bars are confined within conditions of their karaoke service and sexual service work. In terms of discourses, there are various discourses produced, maintained, and reproduced within the complex Mekong karaoke communities. In term of instruction, this case study demonstrates fieldwork processes according to Nexus Analysis method.

Keywords: Discourses, Border Karaoke, Karaoke Business, Sex worker, Hidden Prostitution

* Graduate School of Language and Communication, NIDA
118 Moo 3, Serithai Road, Klong-Chan, Bangkok, Bangkok 10240, THAILAND.

** Graduate School of Language and Communication, NIDA
118 Moo 3, Serithai Road, Klong-Chan, Bangkok, Bangkok 10240, THAILAND.

วาทกรรมคาราโอเกะ: กรณีศึกษาร้านคาราโอเกะ เลียนชายแดนแม่น้ำโขง

วรธนิก โปธิจักร* และ สาวิตรี คทวณิช**

บทคัดย่อ

กรณีศึกษานี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อนำเสนอลักษณะทั่วไปของชุมชนคาราโอเกะเลียนชายแดนแม่น้ำโขงในเขตสามอำเภอของจังหวัดอุบลราชธานี กรณีศึกษาจะเปรียบเทียบกับลักษณะทั่วไปของธุรกิจคาราโอเกะในเขตเมืองใหญ่กับร้านคาราโอเกะในเขตชายแดนเลียนแม่น้ำโขง โดยเน้นอธิบายลักษณะเฉพาะของร้านคาราโอเกะชายแดน รวมทั้งสำรวจวาทกรรมที่ถูกสร้างขึ้นและไหลเวียนอยู่ภายในชุมชนคาราโอเกะชายแดน กรณีศึกษาพบว่า ลักษณะทั่วไปของร้านคาราโอเกะชายแดนเลียนแม่น้ำโขงมีความแตกต่างจากร้านคาราโอเกะในเขตเมืองใหญ่ ร้านคาราโอเกะชายแดนเน้นการให้บริการทางเพศแก่ลูกค้าที่ร้านคาราโอเกะ ร้านคาราโอเกะในเขตอำเภอโขงเจียมมีการจัดการอย่างเป็นระบบและเป็นไปในเชิงท่องเที่ยว อย่างไรก็ตามร้านคาราโอเกะในโขงเจียมก็ยังเน้นการขายบริการทางเพศของหญิงสาวชาวลาวที่ทำงานเป็นพนักงานในร้านคาราโอเกะ รูปแบบการใช้ชีวิตประจำวันและการทำงานของเด็กสาวชาวลาวอยู่ภายใต้เงื่อนไขการทำงานในร้านคาราโอเกะและการให้บริการทางเพศแก่ลูกค้า ในแง่วาทกรรม ในร้านคาราโอเกะชายแดนมีการสร้าง คงไว้ และผลิตซ้ำวาทกรรมที่หลากหลาย ในแง่ของการเรียนการสอนวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ กรณีศึกษานี้แสดงแนวทางการเก็บข้อมูลภาคสนามตามแนวปฏิสัมพันธ์วิเคราะห์

คำสำคัญ: วาทกรรม ร้านคาราโอเกะเลียนชายแดน ธุรกิจคาราโอเกะ คนทำงานบริการทางเพศ การค้าประเวณีแอบแฝง

* เลขที่ 118 หมู่ 3 ถนนเสรีไทย แขวงคลองจั่น เขตบางกะปิ กรุงเทพมหานคร 10240

** เลขที่ 118 หมู่ 3 ถนนเสรีไทย แขวงคลองจั่น เขตบางกะปิ กรุงเทพมหานคร 10240

This case study is developed upon ethnographic data collection called ‘Nexus Analysis’ field guide for a research on *Discourse of the Mekong Karaoke Girls*. The case study reports an ethnographic field survey which was conducted during November 2014 to April 2015 with follow-up research conducted in February 2017. The fieldwork was conducted in three districts located along the Mekong River in Ubon Ratchathani provinces including: Khemmarat, Nataan, and Khong Chiam. These field sites are a unique setting in which young Laotian girls immigrate into these bordering districts to work mainly as sex workers, in a less stigmatized form as a ‘karaoke waitress.’ The dynamics of Laotian karaoke girls, Isan karaoke owners, and their customers are worthy for researchers to investigate further especially their unique characteristics, discourses, and the various identities realized through their social actions, as they practice in their mundane karaoke lives.

This ethnographic study could not have taken place without the active support and attentive assistance from a variety of actors including: the GSLC, Share Foundation, Khong Chiam Hospital, research assistants, local coordinators, as well as coordinative karaoke participants. With all those supportive hands, this case study can now report salient content which the research team experienced in the period of the ethnographic data collection.

1. The Mekong Karaoke Scene Survey

A low cost flight from Bangkok landed in Ubon Ratchathani during a heavy rainstorm. While landing during a dark rainy day did worry us. It was not about safety on board the flight but rather our concern was for our fieldtrip along the Mekong borders. Rain is definitely a hazard for this fieldtrip in paddy fields in this season. Once the first 600 kilometers of the fieldtrip was already accomplished, the fieldwork must go on despite the rain.

We stayed overnight at the town of Ubon Ratchathani in order to consult with Khun B, our assistant. He was a former news reporter who had worked on border sex and prostitution between Thailand and Laos borders. He was my first key informant who provided background and recent information concerning karaoke

life in Ubon Ratchathani. Acquiring advice from Khun B helped us achieve our goal. At the end of the rainy day, the assistant appeared willing to help and also volunteered to drive to Khong Chiam district on the next day. This was a lucky start to the trip.

A day later, another hundred kilometer of highway number 2050 took us, and Khun B, from Ubon Ratchathani to the border district of Khemmarat. On the road, it was raining. In the car, it was cool. Along the road, there were green paddy fields—Isan farmers just finished rice plantation the previous week. In some fields, farmers were still planting paddy sprouts into their farms. Some women were bending down and planting under the spray of rain. Not only the road, but also the light green paddy fields enabled the research team to experience how the life of young Laotian karaoke girls would be. The girls for whom we were seeking were not easily exposed to us as those paddy fields. They hide themselves in the corner of paddy fields in the border town along the Mekong River.

An analogy of newly planted rice in the paddy fields would be like Laotian karaoke girls who ‘planted’ themselves in Thailand by working in Thai-Lao border karaoke bars; they were young and they were in a stage of their lives that was not yet stable. Rice might take several weeks to stand firmly, sought nutrition through its roots, grew up and finally reached harvesting. Those Laotian girls who emigrated from their homeland to Thailand might be able to stand firmly, secure their job and life in the karaoke bars, and then seek the life that they wish for when they move to work here. Nevertheless, our analogy might not be correct, unless their discourses and lived experience proved to be so.

We spent some time enjoying different paddy scenes with working farmers and refreshing forests along the road. Suddenly, Khun B asked, “What do you want to know today?” One of us teased him that, “Will you help me asking some questions?” He looked at the inquirer and smiled knowingly, and then answered that, “You know I can drive, but not solely a driver.” His answer actually comforted the team as it emphasized that he has been an experienced reporter, so he is very familiar with the locality and sex worker issues. When he said that he was not

solely a driver, he meant to remind us of his experience, and much needed skills of asking good in-depth questions. A skillset needed for researchers who are involved in any case study research. At that moment we knew that we had the experienced assistant and the following part was about what we wanted to know.

Like other researchers, a doctorate student wants to know, and has to search for, reasonable answers for proposed research questions. Within a specific field, students in an interdisciplinary field of critical discourse analysis are being asked “how” and “why” people in each language community use the language as they do. To an individual researcher who chose the Mekong karaoke bars as research sites and has attempted to reveal how Laotian sex workers working in karaoke bars manage their discursive practices. Also, I question further how and why do they deal with their ‘identity work’ in ways that they individually and communally do in different situations? Khun B said “Ok.” I secretly wished that we would be lucky to talk to some karaoke owners and karaoke girls in Khemmarat, Khong Chiam and Nataan district. My major challenge was that without accessibility to these people, I will never answer Khun B’s question which is the same as my research questions.

On that rainy day, we were heading to interview more key informants in Khemmarat. Before launching this fieldtrip, a coordinator at Share Foundation was already contacted and confirmed to assist us by suggesting how to go to karaoke bars, how to get in touch with Laotian girls, and also how to acquire an opportunity to interview karaoke shop owners. The foundation also supported us by providing a volunteer who led us to the most cooperative karaoke owners in the area. Consequently, this case study was a synthesis of three in-depth resources: Khun B, the reporter; Khun Mercy, the Share Foundation executive; and karaoke owners and their Laotian sex workers in several karaoke bars.

Shortly, this section introduces a well-known data collection methodology used in both traditional ethnography and an applied ethnography which shifts the focus of study from a cultural group of people to ‘social action’ that is officially called Nexus Analysis (Scollon, 2001; Scollon and Scollon, 2004). Some useful teaching guides could include discussions pertaining this particular methodology

in comparison with traditional ethnography. Within the Nexus Analysis frame work, social actions happen at the intersection of agency, discourse, and practice. There are three main activities to be processed; engage the nexus of practice, navigate the nexus of practice, and change the nexus of practice. This section has just exemplified how a researcher could launch an ethnographic project by conducting a ‘scene survey’ and ‘discourse survey’ which are needed in the stage of ‘engage the nexus of practice.’

2. Contrasts of City Karaoke Bars and the Mekong Karaoke Bars

After consulting the literature, local expertise and practitioners, three districts in Ubon Ratchathani province were selected as the research field sites, fundamentally based on their geographic advantage and their unique socio-economics of the border area. Geographically, Ubon Ratchathani is located along the Mekong River and the province also serves as the border between Northeastern Thailand and Southern Laos. In each selected district, there is an immigration check point located near the Mekong River bank. The check point is a gate where Laotian girls come to Thailand and then spread to work in karaoke bars or local restaurants in bordering districts. These gateways do have impacts on the high density of Laotian girls working along the Mekong border areas.

On the way to the field site Khun B provided details on how some karaoke girls moved across the Mekong River from Laos P.D.R. into Thailand. Some of them formerly worked in entertainment places such as restaurants, beer gardens and karaoke bars on the Laos side of the Mekong before crossing to Ubon Ratchathani. In the last decade, entertainment businesses have been growing up quickly. We could see ‘*Haán kin duùm*’ which literally means ‘Eat and Drink Shop’ open up in main towns in Laos P.D.R., for example, Pakse, Tha Kheak, Vientiane, and Huaysay. Those towns are all located along the Mekong River where the economy is growing faster than other remote provinces. Girls from different villages are then attracted to work in those towns in order to earn money for their families. Khun B mentioned Savanakheth, which is a province on the Lao side of the river located opposite to Nong Khai province of Thailand, as an obvious example of the growing

entertainment business in which sexual service can be jointly offered to customers.

“On the Laos bank of the Mekong, at Tha Kheak district, Savannakhet provinces, various kinds of entertainment bars locate by the road along the Mekong River. It spans approximately three kilometer long. And sex workers come from different parts of the country or even come from foreign countries— low land Laotian, minority groups of Laos, Chinese, and Vietnam.”

(Satrakhom, 2014)

The border town karaoke bars do not share the same characteristics as other karaoke bars found in other parts of Thailand, especially in city zones. Typical karaoke bars in Bangkok, or other major cities, are places where they mainly provide rooms for guests to sing. Food and beverage may or may not be served in the bars. The singing rooms are closed so that loud music does not bother other guests. Their customers vary in terms of age, sex, gender, work and income. Most in-town karaoke bars provide private or VIP rooms for their guests to sing and chat with members of their group while waiters and waitresses fundamentally work on facilitating singing equipment and serving food and drink. The working girls' income is from salary which the owners of the bars pay and some small tips which their customers reward. These karaoke bars open publicly, located on streets where they can be easily spotted, and advertised on any mass media which budgets of the business operators may afford. Sexual services offered by karaoke 'receptionists' could be found in any karaoke bars, but is not compulsory for every girl. For those karaoke girls who are satisfied with the income generated from their salary, guests' drinks, and tips—they chose to deny practicing sexual service.

To make contrastive characteristics on city karaoke bars, we can consider significant aspects of running karaoke bars in major cities such as Bangkok, Nonthaburi and Chiangmai in terms of organization of the karaoke bars, income generation of the girls and their customers. City karaoke bars are bigger so that the organization of the business is more systematized. For instance, a karaoke shop in

Chiangmai consists of approximately 60 people working in 7 departments including: human resources, cashiers, reception, service, food, cleaning, and light and sound controller (Changchamrat, 2001: 46). Girls working in city karaoke bars have to follow guidelines and regulations which are defined by the bars. Violations to the regulations normally involve salary deduction. For example, coming to work late is deducted 50 baht. Another karaoke shop in an entertainment area has a rule that if a girl comes 30 minutes late, 500 baht of her salary will be drawn back. If a girl goes out with a customer without informing the bar, 1,500 baht is deducted. Taking leave on Sunday – Wednesday one bar deducts 400 baht and another one deducts 1,000 baht. Taking leave during Thursday- Saturday will be deducted 800 baht in one bar and 1,500 baht another (Phonphiphit, 2003: 26-27).

In terms of generating income, the city karaoke bar girls can earn income from several methods. First they receive a salary where the money is paid by karaoke bars every two weeks or every month depending on each bar's management. The average amount of salary is 3,000-5,000 baht. The second source of income is from encouraging customers to buy drinks. Each karaoke bar normally requires girls to sell 100-120 drinks per month. From each charged drink, the charge will be divided into two parts—one for the owner and the rest is for the girls who cheer or sell the drink. In detail, it could be counted that the charge is subdivided into 3 parts. For example, 160 baht earned from a drink the girl who sells the drink can keep 60 baht and 100 baht will be kept by the karaoke owner. This 100 baht is then split, 50 baht for the owner and 50 baht for the girl's salary. Thus the girl earns two-thirds out of any drink which she can sell. Another type of income is 'tips' from satisfied customers. The last and source of income comes from offering sexual service to their customers, but this is optional to the girls who want to make extra income (Phonphiphit, 2003: 24-25).

The customers of the city karaoke bars are various, a manager from a karaoke bar in Chiangmai classified his customers into 4 groups including: foreigners, working people both in private and government sectors, graduate students, and families. The girls are able to serve Asian customers from other Asian countries who come

for their business in groups with a translator. English speaking customers are less likely as the girls hardly speak English. Due to the bar's location close to a university, graduate students are frequently returning customers who come in groups when they celebrate social and academic success such as: initiation, birthday, farewell, graduation and commencement ceremony. For working people, only some hi-ranking officers come to the bar but not many government staff can come often as they have limited finances. Most working people are from the private sector including companies, freelancers, and traders. Then the family customers come in groups of father-mother-kids and their relatives who would come on weekends and leave the karaoke shop sooner at 11.00 PM or midnight (Changchamrat, 2001: 70-71). To summarize, the karaoke girls working in city karaoke bars work for a bigger place with more staff working in various departments. The girls' income can be derived from salary, share from selling drinks, and tips. For those who want extra income they can make money from offering sexual service to the customers. Also, their customers are diverse in groups and have higher affordability.

The border karaoke bars, however, are a bottom-up phenomenon. The border karaoke girls work for little bars run by villagers in the districts. Thus their bars are organized simply by members of the owners' family. Their income hardly generates from shares of selling drinks and tips, but is mainly earned from offering sexual services to their male customers this is due in part to the fewer number of customers at karaoke bars along the border. Most of their customers are a small group of 'salary men' working in the government sector in adjacent communities.

Most Ubon Ratchathani karaoke bars share characteristics with karaoke girls working in a border town in the North, Chiangkhong district, Chiangrai province. Tangthanaseth (2011) reports that Chiangkhong karaoke girls stay in the bars where they currently work where their main tasks are to sit and chat with their customers. Offering sexual service occurs depending on their satisfaction with their customers. Their income from offering sexual service ranges from 1,000-5,000 baht each time. Most of the girls are responsible for their family's financial burdens, thus they are required to send remittance to their family. They normally isolate themselves

from the surrounding communities, socialize with their own folks from the same villages or same bars. They count the karaoke owners as their fictive kin, for example mother, sister and relatives. They keep their job secret and never mention karaoke life to their family members, and natal communities since they worry about social stigmatization attached working in the sex trade. It should also be noted that they do not want to pursue higher education or vocational training as they believe they are not capable. Most of them want to save money then leave the karaoke bars to work in their hometown and get married.

Among all contrasts between the border karaoke bars and the bars in city zones, only social stigmatization of the karaoke girls could be a shared feature. Most of the girls working in karaoke bars regardless offering sexual service or not tend to be stigmatized by their family, natal family and society as a whole. Although the girls have chances to go out with customers, their choices are limited due to their financial need and the karaoke shop's requirements. As reported, both city and border karaoke girls suffer sexual harassment, dehumanization, as well as sexual and mental violence from their male customers. Also they bear labeling and social stigma from their respective societies (Changchamrat, 2001; Phonphiphit, 2003; Virakultawan, 2003; Thaothawin, 2005).

The most significant characteristic of the border karaoke bars is the availability of sexual service behind the façade of a seemingly innocent shop. While the in-town karaoke bar attracts a music lover crowd, with a good sound system and friendly atmosphere, the border karaoke bars attract male customers with exotic young Laotian girls as 'a waitress.' These girls keep the clients company and participate in singing and chatting with them. Thus male customers can choose only to flirt with the ladies or bluntly ask them for sexual service. Therefore, a main activity is not singing as the Japanese 'karaoke' is originally defined, rather karaoke in a local sense is a place where male customers can meet their sex workers. The local karaoke goers' activities are to sing-drink-flirt, but the highlight is to take the Laotian waitress out of the bars for sexual service.

Therefore, the aforementioned contrast educate the researcher and her assistants that in order to ‘engage in the nexus of practice’ at the Mekong border karaoke bars, ‘the scene survey’ should enable the team to understand what are the key characteristics and how the routine interactions are practice in such unique setting.

A teaching guide herein is that when we instruct any novice field work team, it is imperative to consult, compare, and browse any possible resources that envision the team about a given ‘nexus of practice.’ Scollon suggests that it is important to identify crucial social actors, environments, and their interactions.

3. Uniqueness of the Mekong Border Karaoke Bars

Characteristics of the karaoke bars in Ubon Ratchathani are deemed unique because of the following aspects. In terms of location, the bars are mostly located in remote or hidden areas. Most karaoke bars are opened in outer ring areas of the town. In the case where bars are opened by villagers, the bars are normally located outside of villages. Some bars in Nataan district are located in farms or the paddy fields of the shop owners where sound and music volume is tuned down due to their proximity to the adjacent community. This secluded location distinguishes border karaoke from the ones in town. The sexual service offered in a karaoke shop in Ubon Ratchathani is hidden behind its name. There are several strategies for naming practices of karaoke bars which enable owners to hide their obscene enterprise. The first is to name the shop with the word ‘karaoke’ such as *The Meeting Point Karaoke*, *The Party Karaoke* and *Mind Resting Point Karaoke*. The second is to name the shop after a person’s name, for example an owner’s name, nieces or daughters of the owners such as *Ball*, *Khun Toon*, and *Khun Noy*. The third is to name with kinship terms which expresses inclusiveness to the customers, for instance, *Two Sisters Karaoke*, and *The Last Son in Law Karaoke*. The last trend is to give a specific name and identify the bars as ‘restaurant.’ Naming them as such allows the bars to be seen as common service places. Also these names circumvent the stigmatized or illegal practices of the places. Practically, the customers have no trouble acknowledging the real business of the bars. They can predict the shop’s

nature and service the shop by their direct experience of living in the same community. Thus, advertisement of the bars is managed orally from one customer to the others. Mass media ads are not commonly practiced.

Most of the owners of karaoke bars are people residing in the same community. Those of which are villagers, teachers, leaders and leading families in the areas. These local people can only afford to invest in building simple bamboo shacks, wooden huts, or concrete buildings as a space for singing, drinking and singing. The bars also need to invest in a building annex for the girls to live in. This building often comprises of bedrooms. Some of them occupy one room, but some girls may share a room with a friend or sibling. A communal kitchen is built separately or added onto from the owners' kitchen, which is commonly built outside of the owners' house. The bars do not give a salary to the girls as they live in the bars for free and share some food with the owners' family. In some cases, a couple, Thai husband and Laotian wife, own the shop and this enables recruitment of girls into karaoke easier because the wife has some relatives and acquaintances in Laos.

For qualitative research instruction, a researcher in Nexus Analysis tradition makes some key points by surveying the 'scenes.' The researcher and the team need to make sure that they acquire uniqueness of the scenes, thus they can establish issues of interest, social actors, and interactions that key to the investigation. As this section has shown, the Mekong border karaoke bars are unique in terms of its environment- their location and name, business model, and social actors especially the owners of the bars and the Laotian bar girls.

4. Becoming Karaoke Serving Girls

My next question was "How did sex workers cross the border to work in karaoke bars on the Thai side of Mekong? Where do they come from?" Conversations between Khun B and a karaoke shop owner in Nataan district revealed that these girls have been recruited from their home town. There are several recruiting patterns. Firstly, young Laotian girls in villages are introduced to work in the karaoke bars in those border districts by someone who worked in such entertainment

places in Laos, and later learned that they could move across the Mekong River to work in karaoke bars in Thailand for a better pay. For instance, they may earn average 4,000-12000 baht per month in Laos, but their average income in Thailand ranges between 6,000- 15,000 baht per month. Secondly, people who currently work in karaoke bars in Thailand returned to their home town and recruited new girls, who are their relatives and friends, to come work in the same karaoke shop. Thirdly, former Laotian karaoke girls who have left, or are leaving, a karaoke shop convinces their acquaintances to come to Thai karaoke bars. After which the recruiters permanently leave the shop and leave the new comers with karaoke owners. Details collected from several owners in Khemmarat and Nataan all affirmed those patterns.

Khun B: แม่เฮ็ดจั่งได้จั่งได้น้องๆ นี้เข้ามาอยู่น้าเฮา

How do you take these girls to work in your karaoke shop?

Karaoke owner: ส่วนใหญ่กะแม่นคนที่เขาเคยมาอยู่นี้แหละ เขาพามา

Most of the time, girls who have been here take them to the shop.

Khun B: เบาะ เขาพาไผมานำแน

Really? Who did they take with them?

Karaoke owner: ลางเทือกก็น้องเอื้อยเขา ลางเทือกก็หมู่พวกเขาหมู่ นั้นแล้ว...

Sometimes, their sisters...sometimes their friends

Our interviews with some karaoke girls at a shop in Nataan also reaffirmed that they were introduced and convinced to work there by one of their acquaintances who had worked in that karaoke shop previously. When they returned to their hometowns in Laos, the owner would ask them to recruit some new girls into the karaoke shop. For the owners, recruiting new girls is important to their business since new girls attract more customers to the shop. The shop could make more income from selling food, snacks, beer, and soft drinks. It can also benefit from a higher ‘taking out fee’ collected from the customers who take the girls and occasionally take the ‘virgins’ out for sex. To take a non-virgin girl out, a customer may pay 50-200 baht to the shop and then pay 1,000-2,000 baht to the girl, while to take a ‘virgin’ girl out the customer does not need to spend the taking

out fee, but pay for a so-called ‘open freshness fee.’ This special fee costs the customers from 20,000-50,000 baht. The price is influenced by satisfied characteristics of the virgins and bargaining among the customers, the owners and the virgins. Thus, the ‘taking out fee’ depends on how each shop defines it, and it is normally negotiable between the shop and its regular customers.

My next curiosity is “What does each recruiter get from taking the new girls to the karaoke shop?” Answers from both the karaoke owners and the Laotian recruiters confirm one another. The owner said she did not pay anyone to recruit the new girls. Also, the recruiters said that they did not get any profit from the shop owner. However, Khun B and I had a chance to hear different story from a girl living in the karaoke bars in Nataan and Khemarat districts. She told us when we asked her at a customer’s hut while the owner was not around.

- Researcher: น้องรู้จักฮ้านนี้ได้แนวได้
How do you know this karaoke shop?
- Girl: เอื้อยเพื่อนพามา
A sister took me here.
- Khun B: เอื้อยเจ้าหั้นเบาอะ เอื้อยแท้ ๆ ดีพามา
Your sister? Your real sister took you?
- Girl: บ่แม่นเอื้อยซ้อยแท้ ๆ แต่เป็นคนที่เคยมาอยู่ที่นี่ บัดนี้ลาวเขา ออกไปเอาผ้า
No, not my full sister, she was a karaoke girl here.
She stopped working. She got married.
- Researcher: อ้อ ลาวพามาแล้ว ลาวบ่อยู่เป็นหมูน้องดี
Ah! She took you here. Did she not stay with you?
- Girl: บ่ ลาวนอนนี้คืนหนึ่ง เช้ามาลาวกออกไป
No, she stayed overnight here and left in the next morning.
- Khun B: เขาพามาส่งร้านแนวนี้ เขาได้เงินค่าจ้างบ่ เจ้ารู้รึน้าเพื่อนบ่
Taking you to this shop, did she get hired to do?
Do you have any idea about that?
- Girl: ก็ได้นะ แม่เพื่อนก็ให้ค่ารถ นั้นนี่
Yes she got some. Mom (karaoke owner) paid for her transportation and other costs too.

When the girl was out of the owner's presence, we could acquire other information of what happened in the process of acquiring new girls. Another pattern was highly possible for the Laotian recruiters to convince, or even lure, some new girls to leave their hometown for work in the karaoke bars. The word 'lure' was used in the situation above because there were some girls telling us that when the recruiters asked them to come, some of them were not fully informed about sexual service required in the bars. A fourteen-year old girl reported to us that she was told to come and work as a waitress, but the recruiter never mentioned sexual service which was compulsory attached to the karaoke girl job descriptions.

Researcher: ตอนเพื่อนชวนมา เพื่อนบอกน้องว่าแนวใด

At the time when she convinced you to come here, what did she tell you?

Girl: เพื่อนว่า...จะพามาเฮ็ดงานฮ้านคาราโอเกะบ่อนเดียวกัน

She said...she will introduce me to work at the same karaoke shop.

Researcher: ก่อนนี้ น้องรู้บ้างว่าเวียกงานฮ้านคาราโอเกะมีหยังแต่

Before coming, did you have any idea about karaoke jobs?

Girl: บ่แล้วเนาะ บ่เคยมา บ่เคยฮู้เพื่อ ก็เชื่อความลาวบอกว่ามาเสิร์ฟอาหาร

Not at all. I have never been here, I have no idea.

I believed what she has told me to come and just to serve food.

Researcher: เคยสงสัยบ้างว่าเอื้อยลาวอาจเฮ็ดแนวนี้ฮ้อยู่

Did you doubt-she would do that kind of thing (sex)?

Girl: บ่แล้ว ก็บ่คิดว่าแนวนั้นจักเพื่อ เชื่อว่าลาวมาเฮ็ดอาหาร เสิร์ฟอาหารให้แขก และมีเงินเดือน เงินดีป

No, I have no clue. I believed that she cooked and served food so she has salary and tips.

Therefore, the karaoke girls who crossed the borders to work in the districts along the Mekong were commonly introduced to a karaoke shop by people who worked, or are currently working, in a karaoke shop either in Laos or Ubon Ratchathani. Tactically, the new comers might be introduced by their friends and siblings who worked in the karaoke bars. Some recruiters took their acquaintances into this karaoke business genuinely for the new comers' chance of obtaining

better income. Nevertheless, some recruiters manipulated the girls from their natal communities simply because they wanted to make a profit provided by the karaoke owners.

I still had another question for the karaoke girls: what did you feel when your sister took you here? In case the recruiter left the girl with the owner: “How did you feel and what did you do when you were left in the karaoke shop?” My questions were held at this point because Khun B and I punctually arrived at the Share Foundation in Khemmarat at 11.00 PM. We had an appointment to meet the Share’s executive, Khun Mercy. She eagerly came to welcome us and started to share with us the recent karaoke situations in Khemmarat and Nataan.

“What did the new comers feel to be taken into a karaoke shop where they just learned that sex service was a part of their job and a key determinant of their income?” My questions were hanging, but Khun Mercy would help me to get in touch with karaoke girls who could share their feelings. It was about sharing their personal experience, thus I needed some girls who trusted us and were willing to share their emotions with us. It was worth waiting. Khun Mercy explained the nature of karaoke bars in these two districts. She mentioned several names of karaoke bars where we should visit in Nataan, but an interesting part of the information which she kindly provided was that she highly recommended us to visit a karaoke shop in Khemmarat. To strengthen her recommendation, she briefly described the uniqueness of this karaoke shop.

In conducting qualitative research, the well-trained researchers will have to always seek for their key informant. It is the same activity which Nexus Analysis calls ‘crucial social actors.’ Once they are correctly identified, the important persons can be focused as well as different data collecting techniques can be appropriately applied. This section has shown how the Laotian became the karaoke bargirls. This suggests that their activities should be intensively observed, and they are the ones whom the researchers and assistants should interact with. Also, some useful techniques can be brought in, for example, non-structured interview, focus group, and inter-observation for which the researcher can enhance research validity.

5. Karaoke Sex Work Transformation

This shop already transformed from what we had seen several years ago. Before the transformation, customers came in, ordered food and beverage, chatted with girls, sang and then took a satisfied girl out with them. The customers were required to drive or ride back to the karaoke shop to send the girl to the karaoke bars. Today, there is a motorcycle delivery service which serves delivering the girls out to customers who do not want to pick up a girl himself. Some customers sneak from their work during the day time to meet the girls. This service can help customers save time on transportation so they can spend more time with the girl. It also provides a more secured way of getting a girl without risking their reputation of being seen in places like karaoke bars where there are obviously women involved in the sex trade. Some returning customers would just call the owner and ask for the girl he likes. Then a motorcycle rider will facilitate to send the specified girl to meet with her customer. In case she needs a ride back, she then directly calls a motorcycle taxi so her customer does not waste time to send her back to the shop. After some years, the karaoke shop has learned to improve its service to facilitate and attract customers not only taking some new girls into the shop but also providing other complementary services as well.

When I was living in Bangkok, I learned of a Somtam shop at the end of my Soi which also offers a motorcycle delivery without a delivery charge. A customer can call and order, wait about 20-30 minutes, and then a motorcycle taxi will send the ordered food directly to the customers' apartment and collect the money back to the Somtam shop. I knew that the Somtam shop had learned about delivery service from fast food companies like McDonalds which have motorcycle delivery services in Bangkok. In this karaoke shop case, I had to ask Khun Mercy "Where did the shop learn to design this delivery service?" Khun Mercy explained that the owner has tried to solve problems which occurred when the girls were taken out. Sometimes, the customers were in a hurry. Often, they were too drunk so they left the girls at local resorts or hotels. The girls then had a hard time getting back by themselves as they relied on the customers' transportation. Public transportation

was not, and is not available in these remote Mekong border towns. Thus bringing the girls back to the shop burdened the owner, or friends, in the shop who would go to pick them up. Finally, the owner found someone to take the delivery job. A rider has been made available, so either day time or late at night, the girls who are taken out are ensured a ride back fast and safe by this service.

Later this problem-solving becomes more systematic. Therefore, there are requesting calls, taking out and taking back service, and a collection fee either from the customers, or from the girls. This is a 24-hour service. After this additional service was systemized, Khun Mercy let us guess ‘what is another complementary service which the shop successfully offers to the customers?’ I guessed ‘a massage.’ Khun B predicted ‘free condoms and selling sex toys.’ Khun Mercy laughed at our answers because they were focused on sex. Our answers were wrong. Khun Mercy told us that it was a car wash. This joint service has been offered to customers who want to clean their car, or motorcycle, while they spend time drinking, chatting and singing in the karaoke shop. My next question was ‘who are their laborers?’ Khun Mercy asked a staff member who had been working closely with this karaoke shop to explain. He told us that karaoke bars in the Mekong areas are family businesses. Most labors are recruited from their family members and relatives. For example, a mother provided rooms and healthcare for the karaoke girls living in the karaoke. Daughters and nieces cooked and managed food and beverage service. Sons and nephews took care of the motorcycle delivery and car care. Occasionally, other people would join the business by offering beauty and salon services. Sometimes, boys in the adjacent community would be called to help in case the motorcycle delivery and car care required more laborers. Thus most joint services were run and profit was made to the karaoke shop owner and their family members (Asasri, 2014).

At this point, I noted that in addition to a karaoke shop in Nataan, I must plan more fieldwork in order to interview people at the suggested shop in Khemmarat. I left with a hunger for more knowledge knowing that I had more work to do. Later, a volunteer assigned from the foundation took us to Nataan where we proposed to interview people at a big karaoke shop.

6. Service Live and Risk at the Mekong Border Karaoke Bars

Along the way, we reviewed the number of karaoke bars which the foundation provided us. There were 10 karaoke bars scattered in Nataan. Each shop had about 7- 10 girls. Including some girls who were short-term who briefly came and quickly left the bars, there were approximately 100-150 girls working in Nataan karaoke bars. It was easy for khun B to figure out where the girls were living. For all of the country roads, remote villages and paddy fields I could not imagine where they were living and working. While I was turning around searching for karaoke bars in the vehicle, and my participants, the volunteer noticed and began to point to some karaoke bars hidden in dense forests while Khun B was driving.

We learned that the karaoke community is integrated into common life of the owners and rural life of the border communities. Their lodging was commonly adjacent to the karaoke shop where they worked. It belonged to the karaoke owners who are Isan, Lao or couples of the Lao wives and Isan husbands. The locations of karaoke bars were located in a town zone of each district; however some of those may be more isolated, fairly adjacent to paddy fields or community's forest. Most karaoke billboards looked like common restaurants located in a tranquil environment rather than entertainment sites. With such integration, the stigmatized characteristics of the sexual service places are blurred, especially to outsiders.

Under the rain, we arrived at Nataan in the afternoon without sunlight. The volunteer led us to the biggest karaoke shop, introduced us to a daughter of the shop owner, and informed them of the reason for our visit. The team came in while some karaoke girls were busy cooking. One little girl was trying to fire up a clay stove. On a rainy day like this, humidity was a major hardship for her to overcome. Several girls were sitting before a television. Silence covered their TV session as soon as we came in. It was a common day for them as they woke up around noon, slowly dressed up, then came out from their rooms. They shared food and took turns cooking in the kitchen of the karaoke shop.

The karaoke girls started their work about 6.00 PM. However, from our observations we found that the karaoke bars are open 24 hours. The girls also

confirmed that there was no exact working hour. They welcomed their customers whenever the customers entered the bars. The customers might come early in the morning, sneak from their office at noon or came right after they finished their meeting, seminar or conference in the evening.

The girls were responsible for preparing and serving drinks and snacks. They earned money from tips and mainly from offering sexual services to their male customers. The customers might spend 1-3 hours drinking, singing and chatting with the girls in the bars, and later negotiating to take out a girl to a nearby hotel or a 'local resort.' To offer sexual service with less than 3 hours, the girls charged their customer for 800-1,500 bath, if they stayed overnight, they charged about 2,000 baht per night. Most customers requested to facilitate transportation for the girl back to and from the karaoke bars, a few of them might not follow the suggestion due to conditions such as they were drunk, or were badly disappointed with the girls' sexual service (Waiyawan, 2014).

Regarding their sexual services, there were healthcare concerns raised by both the Share Foundation and healthcare organizations, such as local hospitals, community healthcare centers and provincial public healthcare organizations. The karaoke service staff was targeted as a vulnerable group for STDs, especially HIV infection. Although the Share Foundation regularly organized sexual healthcare and preventive STDs programs, we still found that young Laotian sex workers working in karaoke bars along the Mekong border region, lacked sexual healthcare knowledge, including negotiating skills for practicing safe sex with their customers. They were found vulnerable to forced sex, violent sex, as well as STDs risk for not using condoms (Sangsawan, 2014).

In the same trend, Srikham (2012: 492) reports that sexual service work is at high risk for STDs, including HIV. Laotian girls aged 14-18 years old who offered their virginity charged 20,000-30,000 THB. The customer counterpart also assumed that the Laotian girls were a virgin. We found that every girl who offered a virginity charge affirmed that their customers did not use condoms. Therefore STDs and HIV risks were deemed very high. More importantly, the myth about selling virginity is an act

that signifies more economical power, more physical strength, and the dominant gender of male customers. As a result, 80 percent of young Laotian girls aged under 18 years old lacked knowledge of sexual health, safe sexual intercourse, and STDs. Also, they lacked of negotiating power to convince their customers to use condoms so that they were vulnerable to get STDs infection.

However, from our interview, we found that there are other interpretations regarding using condom and lubricant gel which the healthcare organizations fundamentally trust that they are for safe sex practices. As we found a 20 year old girl who viewed that applying lubricant gel meant ‘their bodies are being used.’ The lubricant gel was a mean for which the customer took advantage of her by using her body to please him longer than she allowed. According to such interpretation, the lubricant gel was not viewed as a part of safe sex practices but a mean for female body exploitation (Photijak, 2015).

What we experienced in Khemmarat and Nataan at the very beginning of the field work was as described above. The field work was formally set out in November 2014 in Khong Chiam. Here we learned more about the karaoke business which was more touristic both in terms of its location and management. The general setting was slightly different from the hidden karaoke bars located in the two previously described border towns. The karaoke bars in Khong Chiam appeared to be easy to access. Most of the bars were located on the highway which links Khong Chiam to the Chongmek check point. The karaoke management was more likely entertainment business administration and the karaoke girls were also trained to be professional service staff. Investment was made into a good sound system, comfortable seats, VIP rooms, and hiring experienced cook for making good food services. Advertisement of the karaoke was commonly done by presenting the karaoke service girls in front of their bars.

The fieldwork in Khong Chiam was successfully performed with assistance from Khong Chiam hospital. The research team got in touch with assistants who lived in the Khong Chiam community for 20 years. Our assistant in Khonjiam was a female who had access to the karaoke bars as she worked on reproductive healthcare for

karaoke service people for many years on different projects. Our assistant took the research team to visit karaoke bars both as customers, visitors, and staff on the healthcare project team. During those visits, the team had also established rapport with the bars' owners and their karaoke girls. Thus at the end of our fieldtrip we gained some interesting lived experiences and learned of the many cycles of discourse which were produced and reproduced in Khong Chiam karaoke communities.

December 2014 appeared to be 'recognizable winter' in Isan. The temperature went below 23 degree Celsius. Several days before New Year Eve, I rode my bicycle to a small karaoke shop in order to chat with the girls and to help cook for their karaoke guests. My role as cook was formed after I went to their karaoke bars many times with the hospital's team. Thus I was shown to be harmless and allowed to stay with them in their karaoke shop during their work hours and worked with them as a part-time cook. Female outsiders were not easily trusted as once a female outsider who came to the karaoke shop turned out to be a policewoman. She came to observe illegal conduct in the karaoke shop. Later some karaoke girls at this shop were arrested and deported. The business was hurt by being sued and later when it could be reopened, the shop was understaffed. Also, it took a while to regain trust from customers to come back to meet the girls at this shop. Fortunately, I was approved to be trustful and was able to include myself into the karaoke community at a small karaoke shop.

The karaoke bars in Khong Chiam are notably more touristic and more modern than the two towns previously mentioned because Khong Chiam is a tourist town. By its location, Khong Chiam is located right at the confluence of the Moon River and the Mekong River. In terms of transportation, Khong Chiam is linked to many tourist sites along the Mekong River bank, for example Phataem National Park, Saengjan water falls, and Sam Phan Bok rock reef in the Mekong River. On the East, Khong Chiam links to Chong Mek check point where people cross to the town of Pakse, Champasak province, Laos P.D.R. It is also the main point where Thai-Lao immigration flows.

Although the karaoke bars were set up by local owners, the karaoke bars were relatively modern. Each karaoke shop had about 7-12 service girls. Their appearance was sexy. Several karaoke bars trained their service girls to provide professional entertainment services to their customers. Thus, the girls were polite, gave services in the correct orders: food, drink, and then song menu, and later accompanied the customers to sing, drink, and chat.

From our interviews with the owners, the karaoke girls, and some of their customers, we found that Khong Chiam karaoke bars had what they referred to as ‘salary men’ coming from nearby districts as their main customers. Some were tourists from other provinces who travelled to Ubon Ratchathani. A few of them were Laotian traders who came for their business in Ubon Ratchathani. It was confirmed by the girls that majority of the customers were the ‘salary men’ from nearby districts and adjacent provinces. We learned that prospective customers for the karaoke service girls in Khong Chiam were men with salary because there were two expenses which the customers needed to cover while they came to the karaoke bars. The first part is to cover food, drink, and karaoke services within the bars. The second part is for providing the service girls tips or taking a girl out for sexual service after the karaoke session.

Having some conversations with the girls while I was cooking dinner for them, I inquired why they preferred a so called ‘salary man’ instead of tourist or traders from other towns. Their answer was that the salary man customers tended to revisit the karaoke shop. Some of them might return several times a month. Thus their visits to the karaoke shop maintained the viability of the karaoke shop and the girls could generate income from their revisits.

Researcher: ย้อนแย้งจึงว่าลูกค้าคือผู้ว่ามีเงินเดือน

Why do you define your customers as ‘salary men’?

Noy: พวกเขาเข้ามาได้เรื่อย ๆ มีเงินเดือนได้ สิ้นเดือนกะได้เงินทุกเดือน

They come more often. They have salary. At the end of every month, they get it.

- Researcher: พ่อค้ากะมีเงินหลายอยู่นะ บ่มีกบ้อ
The traders do have a lot of money. Don't you like them?
- Noy: กะแม่น แต่พ่อค้า คน ๆ มาเทื่อ คั้นถ้าพ่อค้ากะอดตายก่อน
Yes. But they come once in a while. If we rely only on them, we would be underfed.

The word 'salary men' was preferable to the girls as it indicated that the karaoke was a form of livelihood in several aspects. Firstly, as the girls told us that the customers with salary tended to come back the karaoke bars in this town as they have sufficient and sustainable income for their karaoke entertainment. Secondly, the karaoke owners explained to me, these customers worked hard and they were stressful. After work, they looked for a place to relax before going home where they assumed household burdens. Thirdly, they frequently took with them new customers, their friend and collogue, to the karaoke bars. Thus the karaoke shop could extend new customers' connection through their visit. Also, their karaoke experience was spread out so that it was indirect advertisement and marketing.

Talking to Dao, there is another category of customers which the girls preferred. It was called 'the aged men.' The following conversation reveals how Dao defined the word and explained the reason why this type of customers is more attractive to them (Photijak, 2015).

- Researcher: ชุมนี่เ็นว่าจ้งไต
How do you call this group (of customers)?
- Dao: เ็นผู้ชายหลักสูง
We call them the aging men.
- Researcher: เ็นหยังจ้งว่าหลักสูง
Why do you call so?
- Dao: อ้าว เามีอายุ อายุหลาย สี่สิบ ห้าสิบ หกสิบ
Oh! They are aged-old. They are like 40s, 50s, and 60s.
- Researcher: ย่อนหยังจ้งมีก้ลูกค้าสูงอายุจ้งก้น้อย
Why do you like those aged customers?

- Dao: พวกนี้ว่าอู๋เลื่อง บ่เรื่องมาก ชูซี
They are okay to talk with. They are not annoying.
- Researcher: เงินหลายสายเลี้ยงบ้อผู้เฒ่า
The aged men have a lot to pay?
- Dao: อือ เงินกะหลาย ใจกะดี บ่บังคับเฮา มักตามใจเฮา
Yes. They have money and they are kind. They don't force but treat us well.
- Researcher: ดีทุกคนเลยบ้อ ผู้สูงวัย
Every aged man is nice like that?
- Dao: บ่ทุกคนดอก ลางคนเมากะบ่เป็นตาฮัก แต่ส่วนหลายก็ดี ใจดี มีทิปสิบทิปชาว
No! Not everyone. Some are drunk and they are not nice, but most of them are kind.
hey paid tips 10 baht 20 baht.
- Researcher: ทิปร้อยมีบ่
Any 100 baht tips?
- Dao: คันเมาเจ้ากะได้แหละทิปร้อย (หัวร่อ)
If he is drunk, then we can get a hundred baht tips. (Laughed)

We learn from Dao that the word ‘the aged men’ indexes some salient points. The first point is that the word relates to the men’s economic status. This group of older men had secure employment and earned enough so that they had sufficient money to spend in the karaoke bars for their entertainment and sexual satisfaction. To pay tips to the girls is not solely a way to express the customers’ satisfaction toward services which the service staff provided, but also a sign to indicate his wealth and attraction toward the girls. This can later ease the girl’s final decision to go out with him when it comes time to negotiate for sexual service at the end of the karaoke singing session.

The second characteristic of the aged men fits with the so called ‘the older, the wiser men are.’ Dao shared with us that the aged customers were kind, nice to talk with, and not bothering or annoying when they interacted in the karaoke bars. It implies that the younger customers might be different from this group of older/

wiser men. The older men knew how to make their talk last and allowed the girls to do what they wanted so that they felt comfortable when being in the karaoke session. Younger men might rush and urged the girls to finish the singing session as soon as they could, because staying longer in the karaoke singing session meant they had to spend more money for buying food, drinks, and karaoke singing services. The girls did not like to end the singing session too soon as this session is imperative to them for selling food and drink for the bars, developing rapport, and assessing risks and safety if she decided to go out with him.

Thus, in the karaoke sexual service mode, it is not solely the price of sexual service that defines whether the girls would decide to offer sexual services to their customers. It is also about rapport, comfort, and personal tastes that the girls and the customers seek from each other as well. This in part made this type of hidden sexual service different from other forms of commercial sex where a man is empowered to solely make a decision to buy sex from a girl. This karaoke sex service depends on mutual satisfaction and attraction between the customers and the girls. As we talked to Dao and Noy, they affirmed that regardless of their necessity to generate income, if they did not like the customer, or they estimated he was too risky to go out with, they would not accept those men's sexual service requests. In this case, they confirmed that they only performed a karaoke service staff tonight, not performed as a sex worker.

The owners also explained that the singing session is very important to the karaoke business where sexual services are attached. The singing session is a spatial relationship in which the customers and the karaoke girls get acquainted. They have fun together by chatting, singing and dancing, or even flirting. Also they somatically reduced their personal distance and develop a sense of flirtation or intimacy. The session involved drinking alcohol so they had a relaxing and entertaining time. Then the negotiation for sexual services between the customers and the girls normally sets out from there. The customers asked if a girl was willing to go out with him. Then the price of service was negotiated. Although most sexual service negotiation was not finalized in this session because the session was loud and not

private, the sexual service negotiation started in this session, but it then was brought outside to be finalized so that the negotiation and agreement between the two of them was discrete. Exchange of their personal contact also happened at this stage. Sometimes, the customers and the girls would stay in touch with out visiting the karaoke bars.

Therefore, karaoke life of the girls in Khong Chiam normally started from late afternoon when they woke up, cooked for themselves or joined lunch provided by the owners. Then they took a bath and dressed up, put on their cosmetics and be ready at the front of the karaoke shop early evening around 5.00PM. They worked at the karaoke shop until the shop closed around midnight or some night might last to 2PM. Some girls might go out for sexual services with their customer and returned to the lodging around 3.00-4.00 AM. This was their routine in 2014-2015. This year we finished collecting data from the fields in Ubon Ratchathani.

However, in 2016 we returned to the field again as tourists. We found that the livelihood of the karaoke business in these three districts was affected by a crackdown on the abolishment of prostitution and illegal businesses, a policy of the junta government. Most young Laotian girls who illegally immigrated and worked in karaoke bars were caught and then deported to Laos. Some of them escaped on their own or with helps of the locals. The result was each karaoke shop where they could legally run the karaoke business in the towns had fewer service staff. The girls were not showcased in front the bars as they used to be. The karaoke bars were also strictly controlled by the local police officers to close on time at midnight (Ploypeth, 2015; Photijak, 2017).

Thus the karaoke girls who still lived and worked in the town lived slightly different. They resided in their karaoke bars and appeared only around the work place. They avoided traveling to other towns even if the customers requested to go with them. It is reported that they started to adapt and survive strict regulations by increasing their chances to meet the customers online. Extending their connection from the customers who came to their karaoke bars to their suggested friends or colleagues, they were connected to other customers by adding phone

numbers, Facebook, Line ID, and other social media applications which they were using. Their smart phones came to play a key role in connecting them to the customers without having a singing session in the karaoke bars as noted earlier. It is interesting to follow up how this adaptation might emerge and evolve in the future. Is this a short term survival mode or it is a long term change which the karaoke business will be seriously affected and eventually fade away? If so, sex work along the Mekong border would be transformed into something new, not in the name of karaoke business, but perhaps online social groups that come into play. I would leave this notice to the next researcher who finds this bridging point imperative to study.

I shall say this case study has touched upon the contrastive characteristics of the city zone karaoke bars and uniqueness of karaoke bars located in those three bordering districts. We learned how they were attracted, or somehow lured, into sexual service work at the karaoke bars. Living conditions in the karaoke bars without salary relegated them to conduct sexual services with their male customers. They lived and worked within a space controlled by the karaoke shop owners and formed fictive kinship-based interdependency between them. They mainly sought for more income by selecting their male customers to offer sex services to them, and possibly develop long-term relationships with them. Under these working conditions, they were inevitably exposed to STDs, forced sex, sexual violence, and social mistreatments.

Their lived experiences were realized through their conversations. The Mekong border karaoke setting offered representations of different people and various identities available in the karaoke bars. There are spatial and social influences that facilitate some kinds of interactions and discourses. We could see counter discourses to the same topic happen here. We believe that there must be different kinds of dominant discourses, resisting discourses, negotiating discourses circulating in this unique community.

In term of methodology, this case study can be a teaching guide for qualitative research class. As exemplified above, the first required activity of a nexus

analysis is to establish the mediated actions and social actors which are crucial to the production of a social issue and to bringing about social change. The tasks in the first section of Nexus analysis field guide provide heuristic ways of narrowing down to a clear focus on very specific actions as the center-point of a nexus analysis. The practitioners emphasize that it is imperative to this process for the researcher to enter into a zone of identification with those key participants. They also note that there is no study from afar in doing nexus analysis. Therefore, the researchers themselves must be recognized by other participants as a participant in the nexus of practice under analysis. Taking the MBKBs as the zone of identification, the researcher is scheduled to be engaged in the nexus of practice of the MBKBs and process five main activities. These are to establish the social issue under study, find crucial social actors, observe the interaction order, determine the most significant discourse, and establish a zone of identification undertaken.

Through those processes, the social action can be identified and then examined on the proposition that a social action occurs at the intersection of the historical bodies of the participants, the interaction order which they mutually produce among themselves and the discourses in place which are used by the participants as meditational means in their action.

In short, the case study of the Mekong border karaoke bars in Ubon Rathchathani could be a suitable site and of course well provided case study for ethnographic data collection, and academic and professional discussions on various topics such as: critical discourses, social actions, social identities, stigmatization, local entertainment, local business, labor, migrants, reproductive healthcare, and so forth. As suggested by Nexus analysis field guide, to engage in the nexus of practice is the first step of conducting Nexus analysis by which the researcher identify their research site where significant social actions occur, determine crucial social actors, establish social issues under concerned, observe various discourse circulating within those social interactions.

References

- Asasri, S. (2014, July 12). Focused group interview.
- Changchamtrat, K. (2001). *Dehumanization Resistance Process of Karaoke Girls*. Chiangmai: Center for Women Studies, Faculty of Social Science, Chiangmai University.
- Phondee, W. (2003). *A case study research on disadvantages; poor and social vulnerable groups: Sex workers living a two-sided life*. Thailand Research Fund (TRF).
- Phonphiphit, R. (2003). *A case study research on disadvantages poor and social vulnerable groups: from regional girls to karaoke cuties*. Thailand Research Fund (TRF).
- Photijak, S. (2015, January, 25). Focused group interview with N. Thaweesap.
- Photijak, S. (2015, January, 27). Focused group interview with D. Thaweesap.
- Photijak, S. (2017, February, 22). Personal interview with an Ex-Karaoke Owner.
- Ploypeth, W. (2015, January 6). Personal interview.
- Tangthanaset, R. (2011). *Ways of life and STDs Protection Behaviors of Women in a special Occupation in Karaoke Business: A Case Study of Chiangkhong District, Chiangrai Province*. Faculty of Social Development, National Institute of Development Administration.
- Thaothawin, N. (2005). *Perceptions of Sexual Violence of Laotian Sex Workers Working in Southern Isan, Thailand*. Bangkok: Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre (Public Organisation).
- Sangsawan, S. (2014, October 13). Focused group interview.
- Sattrakhom, T. (2014, July 12). Personal interview.
- Srikham, W. (2012). *AIDS Perceptions of Laotian Migrant Workers in Isan*. Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on Humanities and Social Sciences (pp.487-493). Khonkaen: Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Khonkaen University.
- Scollon, R. (2001). *Mediated Discourse: The Nexus of practice*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Scollon, R., & Scollon, S. W. (2004). *Nexus Analysis: Discourse and the emerging internet* London, UK: Routledge.
- Waiyawan, L. (2014, 12). Focused group interview.