

Rediscovering Forgotten Thai Masters of Photography

A PROJECT BY MANIT SRIWANICHPOOM



NUS MUSEUM

Published on the
occasion of the exhibition
**Rediscovering Forgotten
Thai Masters of Photography**
Exhibition dates:
15 March –
21 July 2018

Organised by NUS Museum

Published by

NUS MUSEUM

University Cultural Centre
50 Kent Ridge Crescent
National University of Singapore
Singapore 119279

T: (65) 6516 8817
E: museum@nus.edu.sg
W: museum.nus.edu.sg

Design by Currency
Typeset in Helvetica Neue

ISBN: 978-981-11-6764-5

Publication © 2018 NUS Museum,
National University of Singapore

All rights reserved. No part of this
publication may be reproduced or
transmitted in any form or by any means,
electronic or mechanical, including
photocopy, recording, or any information
storage and retrieval system, without prior
permission in writing from the publisher.

THE COOPERATION IN RECUPERATION: CURATORIAL HOPE FOR AN INSTITUTION Siddharta Perez	3
INTRODUCTION: REDISCOVERING FORGOTTEN THAI MASTERS OF PHOTOGRAPHY Manit Sriwanichpoom	10
AN INTERVIEW WITH MANIT SRIWANICHPOOM Zhuang Wubin	16
PHOTOGRAPHERS' BIOGRAPHIES	28

Siddharta Perez



Buddhadasa Bhiku
Untitled
 (date unknown)

In the early 2000s, I came to know Mani Sriwanichpoom through his Masters series of monk portraits¹ and the Pink Man² images that had garnered traction through their comical tableaux of popular Western masterpieces and historic photographs. I made the common mistake of mis-attributing the actor Sompong Thawee in full fuschia glory as Mani himself, pushing the metaphoric cart of consumerism as an activated documentary on how we are to navigate manifestations of modernity. Consequently, I have learned to correct others that the actor is but part of the archive through which Mani performs his introspection on history and knowledge production.

Fast forward to about a decade after, I am in his studio not to look at the photographs he has made, but to dig through pictures he's taken – an accumulation of research from a network of flea markets, vintage dealers, libraries, estate collections and resource centers. They include paraphernalia made defunct in the course of shifting public histories and new technologies. Those that are annotated demand but a filling of gaps (such as finding missing issues of magazines) for consolidation. Then there is also the exercise of organising other archival images, like some of his forgotten masters, which requires a certain visual and artefactual literacy only generated through a constant practice of searching, collecting and comparative analysis.

Mani talks about how classification of these images is made through the attribution of singular artists' works. While some circumstances have been fortunate in aiding the construction of a body of photographs, other modes of gathering were not as straightforward. For instance, his friendship with S.H. Lim began from their incidental proximity in an exhibition in 2010.³ Buddhadasa Bhiku happened to be his spiritual master, and the recently founded Buddhadasa Indapanno Archives has digitized his particular mode of teaching the dharma through photo albums of "self-portraits" and texts. However, the process of identifying a couple of other artists articulates Mani's cultivation of principles of photography and required pursuing sources independent of an academic prerogative. This reflects a number of things. Public institutions

may seem not to privilege a study that warrants its own civic currency, to the point that Mani recalls the genesis of his research as the challenge of teaching local photographic history without a preceding matrix of fundamental resources and framework. This in turn engendered his own understanding of photography, and locates his practice as a disposition that endures as self-education first but expands to desire the collaboration with other systems of knowledge production.

There are certain models of how this project, which started as a personal research reaches out. Mani's Kathmandu Photo Gallery is a catalytic site for provisional presentations of the found images of these "old masters"⁴, operating within an exhibition programme of contemporary artists' works. In this format each photographer was then framed as a solo artist in hindsight. We must remember that in the years of their "practice", these photographers were known by their occupations as a literary writer ('Rong Wong-savun), an ascetic-philosopher (Buddhadasa), and commercial photo studio 'technicians' (Pornsak Sakdaenprai and Liang Ewe). These exhibitions assemble bodies of works, suggesting the nature and use of photography through their the authorial subjectivity, aptitude and skill. It elicits contextual points of the functionality of film photography through these seven photographers during the production and circulation of these images in the 50s to 70s, which current systems of ethnographic thought can find useful in understanding celebrity and cosmopolitan life alongside inland societies and the periods antecedent to Thailand's tourism initiatives in the 60s. The idiosyncratic styles of these images suggest a dictum of the experimental in the use of photographic technology, for example, 'Rong held the camera on the ground, and Pornsak scratched the glass negatives so that the Buddhist students need not don a wig for their civilian portraits.

These seven bodies of photographic works first made an appearance together in Bangkok University Gallery in 2015. Grouped according to each artist, these works continue to propose a retrospective attribution of works to each photographer as a solo artist, rediscovering these seven as (photography) masters who have been



Pornsak Sakdaenprai
Untitled
(date unknown)

“forgotten”. The circulation of their individual originality is now being done posterior to their period of production. What this exhibition in BUG proposes, however, is that institutions enact their capacities to make use of and build from independent research.

It is a conjecture that this research started due to Mani’s self-educational motive as an artist working with photography, and that it took a curatorial turn through its exhibitionary presentations to address what is felt to be an urgent lack of existing scholarship. Artistic research, and its spillages, have come to gain currency in the knowledge production of institutions. As Vera Mey and Anca Rujoiu describe the position of artistic strategies and what institutions can learn from them: “The artist can represent an alternative voice unattached to the responsibilities of official histories... Noticing that the roles of the artist often overlap with civil society and all the responsibilities associated with that term, artists can be left in the position to respond to the urgencies of their locale.”⁵

Para-institutional research, such as what we recognize as “alternative” or artist projects, is not fringe practice. It reflects particular urgencies that reach out to levels of the institutional. Their capacity to self-institutionalise reflects the content and methodologies that establishments may not prioritise in enacting their operations. The production and circulation of knowledge are found in the interstices and intersections of different levels of agency. Such collaborations address affinities in aspirations to investigate, complicate and propose beyond perpetuating systems of thought and history.

Rediscovering Forgotten Thai Masters of Photography’s current iteration in the NUS Museum offers collaboration in the construction of content and methodology. The rapport is in the curatorial work of finding other trajectories in the framing of art history and practice. The mutual interests began in the study of photographic material and technology, and how certain propositions on culture can be coaxed out in the use of photographic image as primary sources. The collaboration, in turn, fundamentally proposes photographic archives as a language in discovering and establishing histories. Consequently, what can unfold is the understanding of other formats of scholarship. If there was no precedent to the assembly of

such particular primary sources as a curatorial one, Rediscovering Forgotten Thai Masters of Photography endeavors to create such an opportunity.

- 1 *Masters* is a series of 18 portraits of Buddhist monks who were locally believed to have supernatural powers to bring fortune, good luck and protection to worshippers. This series was photographed and produced in 2009.
- 2 *Pink Man* is an ongoing series that began in 1997. The works are thematically developed to talk about confrontations of consumerism, tourism, violent local histories and the celebration of cultures in the Western world.
- 3 Refer to Mani Sriwanichpoom’s Introduction in this brochure.
- 4 Mini-retrospective exhibitions of S.H. Lim, ‘Rong wong-savun, M.L. Toy Xoomsai, Liang Ewe, Pornsak Sakdaenprai, Buddhadsa Bhiku, Saengjun Limlohakul ran 4-8 weeks from 2011-2014.
- 5 Vera Mey and Anca Rujoiu, text for *Stories of Art by Artists*, 2014 (as cited in *Place. Labour. Capital.*, 2018.)



Top:
‘Rong Wong-savun
Rama I bridge
(c. 1958)

Bottom:
M.L. Toy Xoomsai
Untitled #25
(date unknown)



'Rong Wong-savun
Rama I bridge
(c. 1958)



Saengjun Limlohakul
Yod Circus promoting
Roeng Chit Cinema Hall
(c. 1957)



Pornsak Sakdaenprai
(clockwise from left):
14/11/1966 (1966)
Untitled (date unknown)
12/11/1965 (1965)
Untitled (date unknown)



S.H. Lim
Spun Thienprasit
(c. 1960s)

Manit Sriwanichpoom

10

Anyone who embarks on the study of Thai photographic history is sure to come across the word ‘Singapore’ periodically. There is no evidence that Jean Baptiste François Louis Larnaudie (1819 – 1899), the French priest who brought the first camera to Siam in 1845, six years after its invention, travelled through Singapore. Yet, many Western photographers who later made a name for themselves in Siam, such as John Thomson (British, 1837 – 1920), G.R. Lambert (French) and Robert Lenz (German), began their professional career on this British colonial island. The latter two had actually photographed King Chulalongkorn (b. 1853 – 1910) on his state visits to Singapore in 1890 and 1896. Hence, the connection between Thai and Singaporean photography has a lineage of over a century, yet we remain unaware of this special dimension of our relationship.

I am both thrilled and honoured that the National University of Singapore Museum has offered to host the exhibition ‘Rediscovering Forgotten Thai Masters of Photography’ at this time. I hope the exhibition will serve to inspire both a curiosity in your neighbour’s past and, finding yourself therein, a sense of our common humanity and shared history.

Let me say upfront that I am no historian nor academic; I am not even a theorist in photography. I’ve just worked as a photographer for more than thirty years. But when I was invited to teach a course in Creative Photography, I needed to research information and seek out samples of the work of photographers and photo-artists the world over, for use in a slide lecture to show the students so they would understand. All I could find were Western photographic history textbooks; however hard I tried, I couldn’t find any Thai information. Though there were books on Thai photographic history, the emphasis is always on the basics: who is the photographer? Where is the picture taken and when? As for the actual photographs which are the heart of it, there were so few that one couldn’t judge these photographers’ ability, let alone whether they were masters of their craft or not. The photographs that constituted their work, I believe, have been dispersed or lost or even damaged by our country’s heat and humidity. Much of it has in fact

been destroyed by floods, so that very few actual photographs of our past remain for us to see. That could be among many reasons why Thai photographic work of the past has not survived time-travel to the present. Add to this the Thai Buddhist attitude of non-attachment to sense-objects and the past, as well as the lack of appreciation for one’s own worth—since they’re not important people like royalty nor part of the powerful ruling class that other people might be curious about, they saw no point in burdening themselves and their descendants with the chore of conserving records of their lives and their photographs.

All the same, I couldn’t resist posing the question: are there really no Thai photographers of ability whom we could rightly call ‘masters’, as they have in the West? Photography came to Siam back in 1845, towards the end of the Third Reign [King Nangklao or Rama 3 of the Bangkok era]. That was around 173 years ago. Do we really have no masters in this discipline? Wrestling with this problem led me to believe that as long as our photography academics do not seriously research and collect the work of Thai photographers of the past to create our own text, then we would continue to have to “breathe air through the white man’s nose”. We would never in this way develop self-knowledge and self-worth.



S.H. Lim
Phusadee Annukkhamontri
(c. 1967)

I am not against the Western text in any way. On the contrary, it is essential to be well-versed in Western arts and sciences in this age of globalization. I am merely wondering what has happened to the photographic seed brought in by the French priest Père Larnaudie at the order of Bishop Pallegoix, a ‘royal friend’ of the Fourth Reign [King Mongkut, 1804-1868]. How did that seed sprout and grow after it was planted into Siamese soil? How has the climate of the native culture influenced the features of the fruit? What unique traits has it developed as it has grown?

Such is the beginning of the ‘Rediscovering Forgotten Thai Photographers’ project. The timeframe is set from 1932, a past that is still within our reach, the year of changing from absolute monarchy to democracy. The photographic history of the preceding period has already been written about; most histories emphasise stories related to kings, the upper-classes, the rich, and the photographers/owners of photography studios. A camera was still an expensive new invention, so photography was practised in a limited circle.

After the change in the governing system, along with industrial advances leading to mass production of camera and film which made it easier for more people to own a camera, how have Thai people used photography as a tool to express their individual identity and their democratic credentials?

I decided to start up the project in 2010 and I had a providential meeting with S.H. Lim, one of our pioneers of fashion photography, when he brought his old work to show in the ‘In Celebration of Fifty Years of Friendship’ exhibition by the Royal Photographic Society of Thailand. My work which was included in the show was hanging next to his. After that initial step, I relied on word of mouth to bring attention to my project. All these doors to our photographic history which had been closed now opened, and the work of one master after another flowed out before my eyes. To this date I have collected together seven masters, the ones appearing in this book.

I do regret that the work of many people, whom I attempted to study, has entirely disappeared. Nothing of them remains for us to see. Some photos published in old magazines like Chao Krung and Siam Rath Weekly are their only mementos. Others whose work remains are yet too “ordinary” for me; their work did not satisfy the conditions that I had set for work that is



M.L. Toy Xoomsai
Untitled #33
(date unknown)

fit to be placed on a pedestal as the work of a ‘master’. I must elucidate here that, to judge one as a ‘master’, I look at many factors such as the outstanding content, the perspective, the camera angle, the photographic technique, the courageousness of the creativity in the social context of their lifetime. I also look at each person’s understanding and use of the medium of photography in their self-expression. The quantity of work must also be sufficient to attest to the person’s serious commitment to work in this medium. I consider the work’s anthropological and sociological relevance and value as well.

In all, these seven photographers Buddhadasa Bhiku, ‘Rong Wong-savun, Liang Ewe, Pornsak Sakdaenprai, Saengjun Limlohakul, M.L. Toy Xoomsai and S.H. Lim are ‘Masters’ in my view; this remains to be proven and accepted by the Thai society and the world.

11



Liang Ewe
Untitled
(1960)



Liang Ewe
Untitled
(1960)



Pornsak Sakdaenprai
Untitled
 (1965)



Pornsak Sakdaenprai
Untitled
 (1965)

Zhuang Wubin

In 2011, Mani Sriwanichpoom decided to actively intervene in the historiography of Thai photography. As the owner of Kathmandu Photo Gallery in Bangkok, Mani started hosting a series of solo exhibitions at his space, each dedicated to a forgotten Thai master of photography. He rediscovered these masters by following the leads given by his friends while looking more closely into the exhibitions held previously in Thailand. Since then, I have followed this series of exhibitions with keen interest. Mani's curating involves a re-contextualisation of commercial photography, journalism and even Buddhist instruction, elevating the practices of the seven photographers as an exemplar of Thai visual art. As a whole, the project offers us a precious insight into the diversification and vibrancy of photographic practices in Thailand since the 1930s.

This transcript is put together for purpose of this publication and was made from earlier interviews. The first was conducted on 17 November 2012 at the beginning stages of the project, after Mani had already featured the works of several masters at his gallery. The second interview was conducted on 1 October 2015 when the works of all seven masters were shown as a group exhibition at Bangkok University Gallery (BUG). The show, which lasted from 19 September to 31 October 2015, was one of the main highlights of the inaugural Photo Bangkok 2015.

Zhuang Wubin (ZW): Why have you embarked on this project of rediscovering the past photographers of Thailand?

Mani Sriwanichpoom (MS): I used to teach photography in Thailand. Here, we can easily namedrop photographers from the West, like Robert Frank or Henri Cartier-Bresson. But when it comes to Thai photographers, we say we don't have anyone. I know there has been research done on the photographic works of King Mongkut (Rama IV) and the other Thai kings. My interest, however, is centred on how the Thai people have used photography to express themselves and their freedom since 1932, when Thailand turned democratic. This is why I use the year 1932 as the benchmark to start my research. Photography helps people understand themselves and their existence in this world. It provides historical proof for future generations, allowing them to see our lives today, when we are no longer around.

As such, beyond photographic history, this project also concerns our visual history. At the BUG show, we had some older visitors who even cried at the exhibition. Someone told the gallery sitter that he was very happy to see his past memories at the show. More importantly, he was glad that the younger generation could have the chance to recognise the past. In Thailand, there is a huge focus on the royal family. The common people have no space or place for themselves. In this show, you can see how the common people lived.

ZW: In this project, you are using exhibition making to write photographic history. Why do you take such an approach?

MS: In the writing of photographic history, we need to see the real work. We need to see the actual prints. You can't just say that this person is good without showing the work. You have to see enough to make a judgment. I want to challenge people in the circle. You need the art to speak for itself. You cannot use an institution or a professor to prove it.



Top:
Pornsak Sakdaenprai
Untitled
(1965)



Bottom:
'Rong Wong-savun
Din Daeng dump site
(1958)

ZW: In your rediscovery of past photographers in Thailand, you have included several commercial photographers. What prompted you to re-contextualise their works? Broadly speaking, what are your criteria in selecting these masters?

MS: I don't use theory. I use my thoughts, ideas and experiences to curate this project. When we talk about the art of photography, we have to include aesthetics in our consideration. Commercial work can also be artistic too. Look at Irving Penn or Richard Avedon—you can't dismiss them. Of course, my selection is based on my interpretation but I cannot just display the simple record of any photographer. If you look at the work of Aree Khorchareon (1911-92, b. Phuket), the person who opened Liang Ewe studio in Phuket, for instance, you can see that he was excellent from a technical standpoint. He was good in lighting, composition and directing his clients. This is the basic consideration. On top of that, from a sociological standpoint, this is an important work because we can see the different peoples who lived in Phuket then. The photographer stuck to and did what he was good at.

In the case of 'Rong Wong-Savun (1932-2009, b. Chai Nat), based on what I have found, he was one of the first photographers to cover the dark side of Bangkok. At that time, the appearance of slum areas in Bangkok was a new societal phenomenon that people did not care much about. Perhaps because he worked for *Siam Rath Weekly Review*, he developed that kind of consciousness about the society early on. As for M.L. Toy Xoomsai (1906-61), his interest in nude photography made many people suspicious of him. Even his brother thought that he was doing pornography. If you think of the context of his era, it wasn't easy to pursue his interest. You can tell that he loved women and he tried to make them pose in a classical way, unlike pornography where you would have them spread their legs, for instance. He spent time and effort to create beautiful photographs. He was very careful with the lighting, for example. Because he was part of the royal family, he had to be extra cautious. Most of the photographs were hardly published or shown in his time. He kept them for himself.

ZW: How do you relate your curating of these past photographers to the global history of photography from the West?

MS: We have learnt about the stories of others for too long. Do we have our stories to tell? We should start recording our stories. If not, people will think that the best is from the West and we will end up dismissing our own. We will think that our society has nothing to offer. And that's not true. It doesn't mean that we are against the West. We just have to start our own story. This is the power of knowledge. We should create another pole of knowledge. The world should not just have one core of aesthetics. This is my hidden agenda here.

When we talk about global photography, it's the same story with the same names. Are you not bored with that? With the seven Thai masters whom I have presented, they offer us other dimensions to explore. I also use the term "master" as another keyword to counter the West. Can the third world have their own masters of photography on their own terms? I don't care if the camera came from the West. If they want to dismiss this project, that's their game. I understand this is a power game. But if they are open-minded, they will see this as a contribution to the photographic world. The world should not only have one centre.

I will bring the show to different parts of the world because this will serve as a confirmation that these masters are recognised and will not be forgotten. It will also have an impact in Thailand. If the world recognises these photographers, the Thai society will not be able to ignore them. Perhaps they will have to think if they should build a museum to keep the work. I want to give photography a better ground. When you talk about painting, they can talk about its development in Thailand. As for photography, they cannot even give us five names.

ZW: In your project to rediscover the Thai masters of photography, do you inevitably use Western standards to measure them?

MS: I think visual language is probably the common language that people share. Nevertheless, since colonisation, you can't deny that our knowledge has been rooted in the West. They have exported it to the third world. Not only that, if you look at how photography is being used in mass media, if you also look into our justice system or the police force, for instance, they are not that different from the West. The base is from the West. The West is responsible for creating this kind of knowledge. But I don't care



M.L. Toy Xoomsai
Untitled #34
(date unknown)

if it belongs to the West. Once it arrives here, how do you make use of it? Take the example of the cutlery—the local culture knew what they wanted; they threw away the knife and kept the fork and spoon. This is why culture is always evolving. Innovation belongs to humankind.

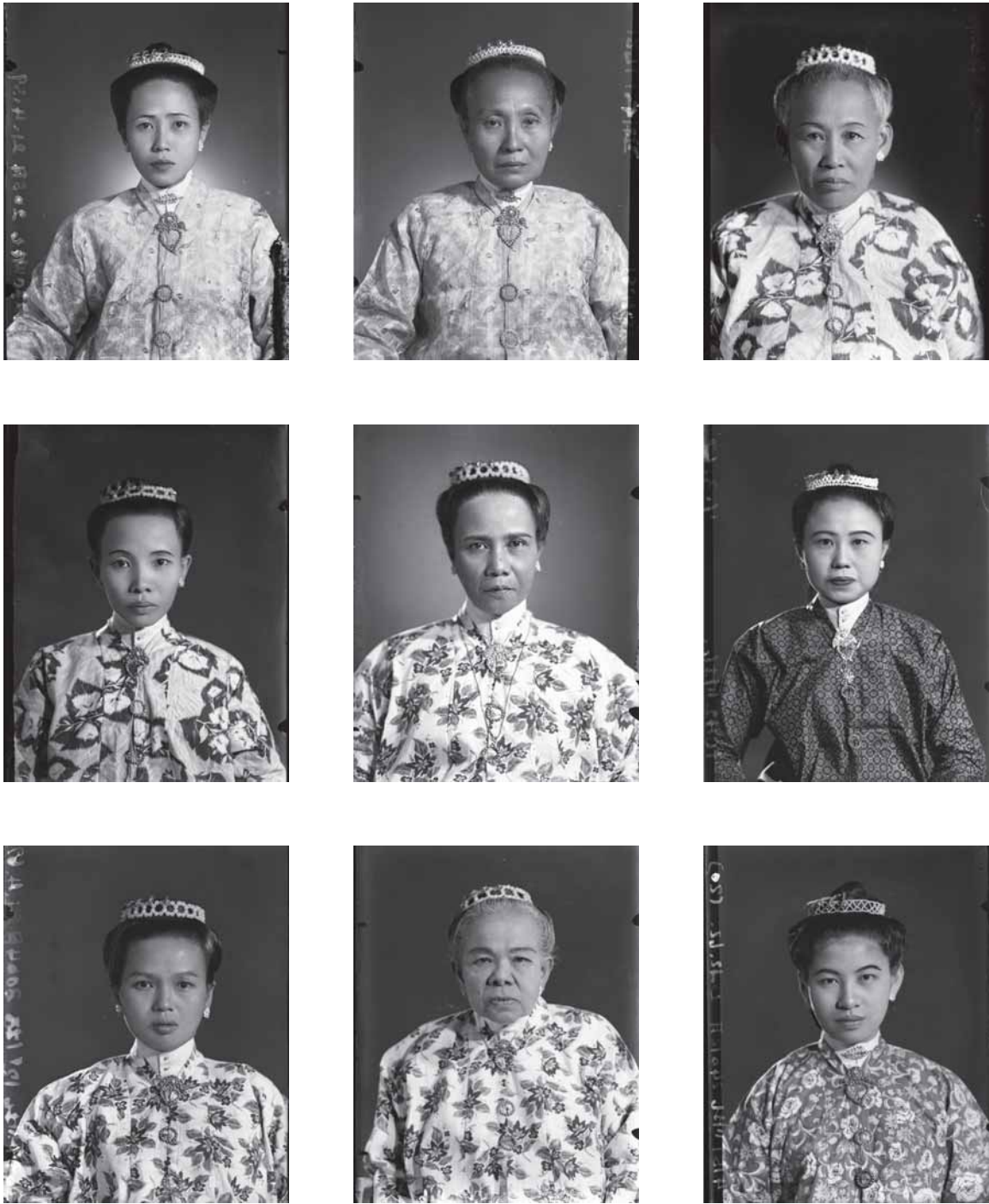
Zhuang Wubin is a writer, curator and artist.

As a writer/curator, Zhuang focuses on the photographic practices in Southeast Asia. Published by NUS Press, *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey* (2016) is his fourth book. He is a recipient of the Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship 2017 in Singapore, and has been further invited to research residency programmes at Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts, Taiwan (2017), Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong (2015) and Institute Technology of Bandung (2013). He is the contributing curator of the biennial Chiang Mai Photo Festival (2015, 2017).

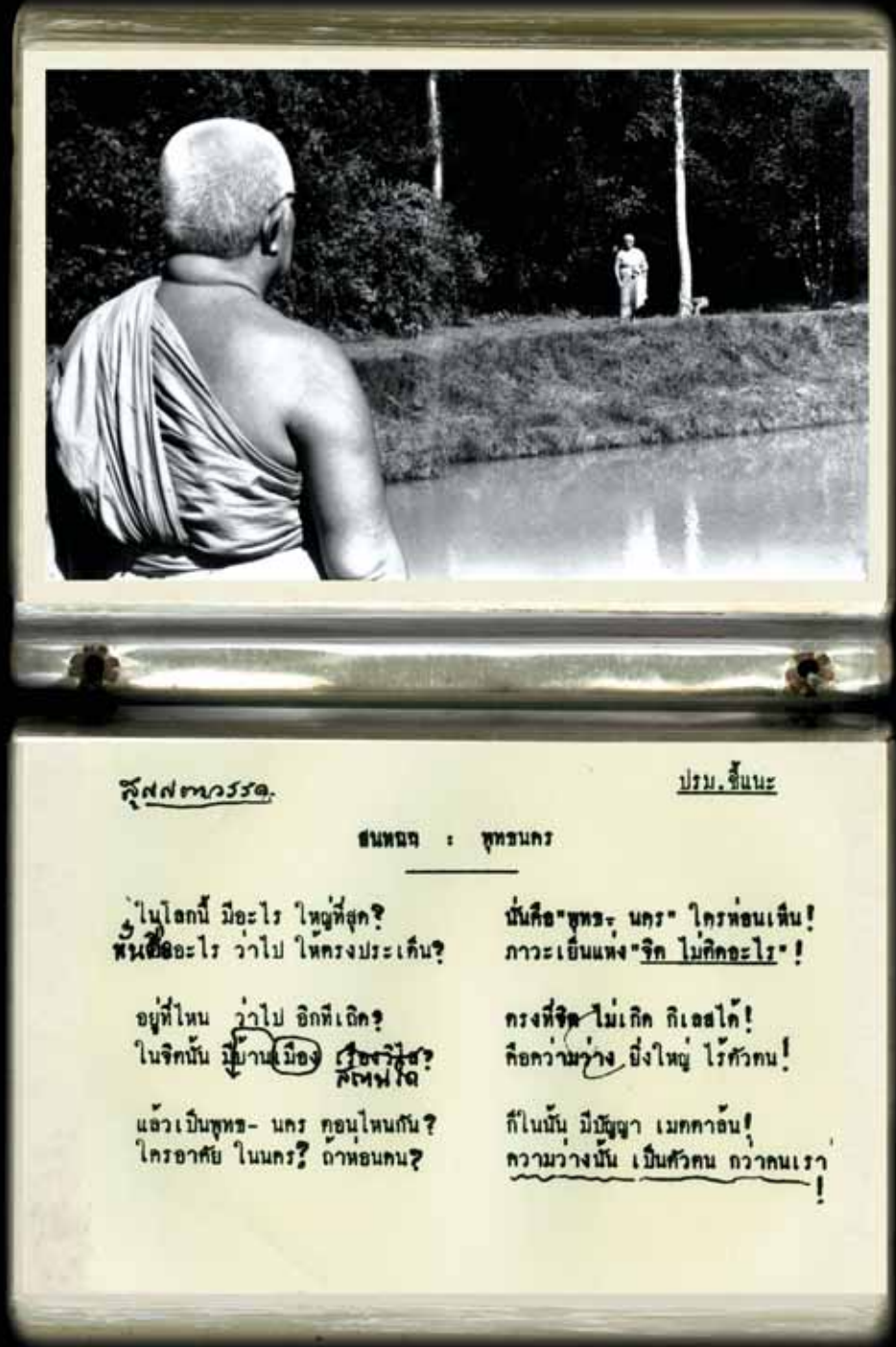
As an artist, Zhuang uses photography and text to visualise the experiences of the Chinese communities across Southeast Asia. Zhuang has made presentations, exhibited work, curated shows and taught classes in art institutions, festivals and universities in Southeast Asia, East Asia, the Emirates and Russia.



Saengjun Limlohakul
A medium at Phuket's Vegetarian Festival
(c. 1967)



Liang Ewe
Untitled
(1959 – 62)



Buddhadasa Bhiku
Untitled
(date unknown)



Saengjun Limlohakul
An elephant procession,
Takua Pa, Phang Ng
(c. 1955)



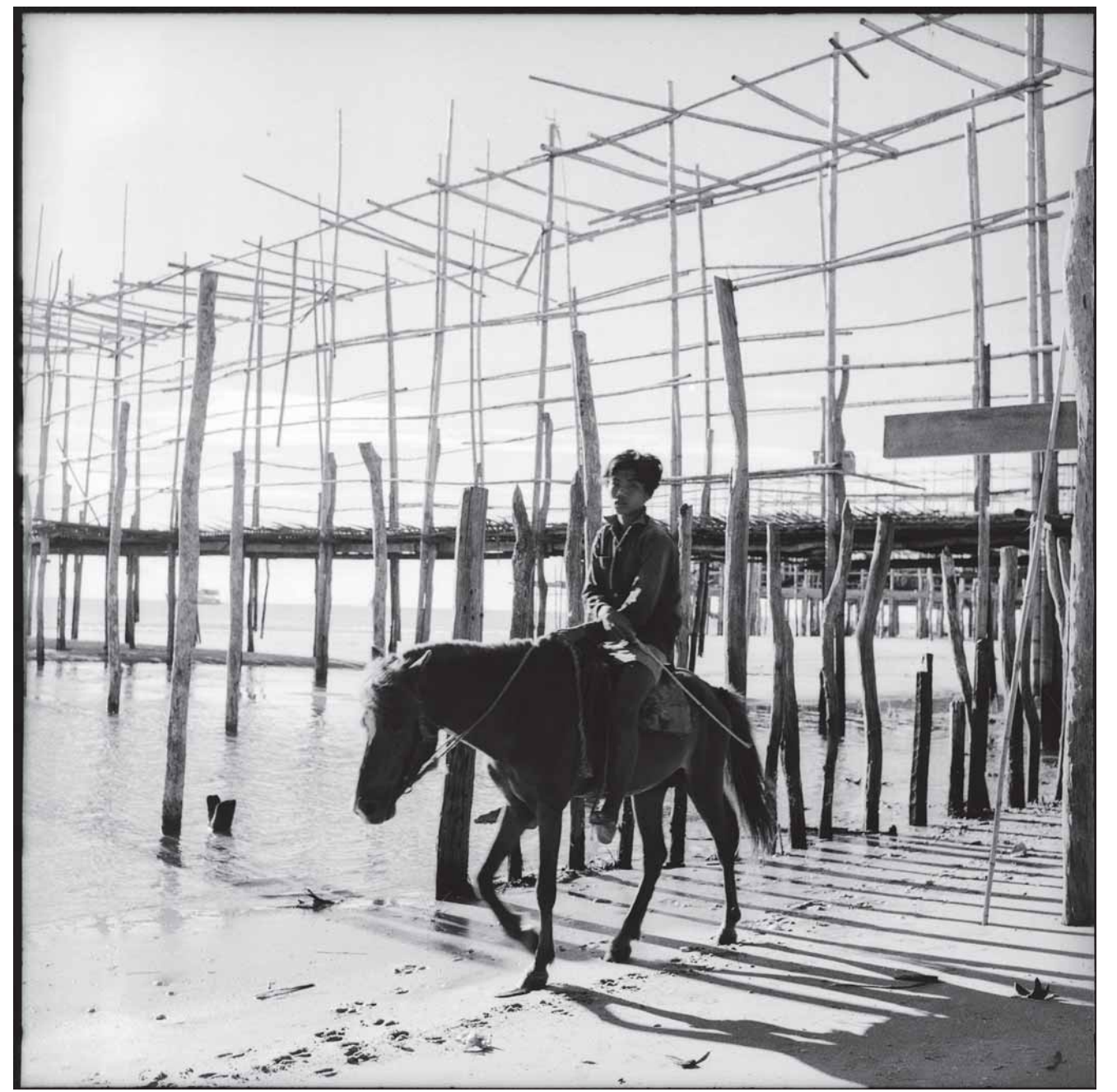
S.H. Lim
Apasra Hongsakula #3
Miss Universe 1965
 (c. 1965)



Liang Ewe
Untitled
 (1960 - 1962)



'Rong Wong-savun
Ayutthaya
(1956)



'Rong Wong-savun
Hua Hin Beach
(1957)

Buddhadasa Bhiku (1906 – 1993)

By 1972, Buddhadasa Bhiku had already attained the age of 66 and the stature of a famous enlightened monk; he struggled to reject all attempts to turn his portraits into icons of superstitious worship, which at that time (as now) was all the craze. He wanted people to realise the essence of Buddhism, not to cling to the egoism of ‘I’ and ‘Mine’. When he finally saw that his fight against the holy picture craze was futile, Buddhadasa embarked on a series of self-portraits, using the environs of Suan Mokh Monastery (Surajthani) as location, with all its scattered symbolic props: a statue of Bodhisattava Sri Vijaya, lotus flowers, mounds of dirt, a flat rock, even monastery pets. At times he poses alone, employing tricks in the monastery darkroom to compose double and triple prints to create a dharma riddle, which he invites the viewer to interpret with wisdom. Each picture was accompanied by a dharma-teaching poem that he’d written for it. The series is entitled ‘*Dharma Text Next to Image*’.

These 423 Buddhist poems and photographs clearly reveal Tahn Buddhadasa’s understanding of art and technology, particularly the potential power of photography to serve as a medium for spreading dharma—a visionary idea far ahead of his time, when the Thai art world still had no inkling of such terms as ‘conceptual art’ and ‘conceptual photography’.

Pornsak Sakdaenprai (1938 –)

Thai country music (*Luk Thung*) and its stars’ romanticised appeal once shaped the identity of lower-class Thais and most rural people. Pornsak Sakdaenprai’s *Pornsilp Photo Studio* achieved success by manifesting such fantasies, transforming the sun-burned young farmers of a small Isan town into glamorous *Luk Thung* gods and goddesses as they appeared on worshipped record covers.

These 27 black and white photographic prints, taken between 1965 and 1967 by Pornsak Sakdaenprai, the number one photographer from Pimai district in Nakorn Ratchasima province, reflect the influence and inspiration of the Golden Age of Thai country music, as one of Thailand’s oldest communities began to open up to modernisation and ‘civilisation’ by thronging his studio for new images of itself.

Liang Ewe (1911 – 1992)

Liang Ewe (Chinese for ‘Good Friend’), Phuket’s venerable old photography studio, was opened for business in 1933 by Aree Khorchareon (Chinese name ‘Khor Eng Lee’).

Though entirely self-taught, his great talent both in the direction of his sitters and in technical proficiency – the selection of lenses, camera angles and beautiful lighting, kept his studio the favourite of the island’s elite until his death in 1992. The vast treasure trove of glass and acetate film negatives that he left behind is an invaluable social and cultural heritage: portraits of Phuket inhabitants spanning the pivotal transition in Phuket’s history, from the end of the tin-mining gold rush to the early beginnings of the tourist boom.

‘Rong Wong-savun (1932 – 2009)

Honoured as National Artist in Literature in 1995, ‘Rong Wong-savun began professional life as a photographer. In only ten years (1954 – 1964), ‘Rong managed to stand out from his contemporaries with his unique perspective on the world, the same gift that later earned him the name of the ‘Eagle of the Literary Garden’ for his inventive use and mixing of Thai and English words.

His photographic series on the Rama I Bridge still looks completely fresh and new to us today. His experimental camera angles – very low shots taken from ground level, bravely tore up the books on composition rules of those times.

Mom Rajawongse Kukrit Pramoj, former Thai Prime Minister and proprietor of the political magazine *Siam Rath Weekly* that ‘Rong used to work for, admired his work with insight: “*At Puh takes photos with a Westerner’s mind.*”

Saengjun Limlohakul (1924 – 1997)

“To photograph is to immortalise,” said Saengjun Limlohakul, then an old man in 1994. “You press the shutter and record on film what is already past.”

“I photograph everything, both for clients and for myself, in every style. The sky, the ground, the stars, the moon, clouds backlit by the sun, floods, fires, car crashes, houses, buildings—I’ve shot from planes many times; even experimented in the cinema, photographing the pictures on the screen. The one thing I won’t shoot is dead people, especially messy corpses. I won’t even look at those. I’m not superstitious—I just don’t find it appealing in any way.”

We are the beneficiary of Saengjun’s need to immortalise his hometown of Phuket in its last tin-mining days, documenting everything from the islanders’ peaceful life to the American-style strip clubs of the Vietnam War era before the tourist boom arrived to change their whole world.

M.L. Toy Xoomsai (1906 – 1961)

“*Not porno, man, they’re nudes.*” Thus would Mom Luang Toy Xoomsai defend himself when faced with criticism in the prudish days of Field Marshall P. Pibulsongkram’s nationalist government which daily strived to micro-manage the lives and minds of Thai people, over every issue from prim and proper conduct to the waging of expansionist war upon a neighbouring country. In such a context, M.L. Toy’s nudes are much more than pictures of naked models; they are acts of defiance against the power of the fascist state and its imposed social order. They reflect the artist’s courage to publicly explore the beauty of Thai women, the models’ confidence in their bodies, and Thai male fantasies concerning the opposite sex.

This set of fine nudes, 44 immaculately made original prints (produced between the year 1946 – 1961), by this photographer who was a writing colleague and contemporary of Sri Burapha [Kularb Saipradit], proves beyond doubt that M.L. Toy Xoomsai is a true pioneer of Thai nude photography.

S.H. Lim (1930 –)

An encounter with S.H. Lim (Vivat Pitayaviriyakul) and his fashion and glamour photography is akin to a trip in a time machine; it brings one back to the glory days and uncomplicated appeal of Thai cinema and beauty contests post-1957. His photographic prints have become the memory of that age, appearing as magazine covers, calendars and movie posters, all of them vivacious, beautiful, elegant, cool and dynamically sexy: Thailand’s first Miss Universe, Apasara Hongsakul, stepping out of an aeroplane fresh from her triumph in Miami, an angelic visitation to earthlings; Priya Rungruang, eternal sex siren, in a ‘two-piece’; Apuntree Prayuthsenee, Miss Thailand 1967, in Thai traditional dress; or bikini-clad free-spirited star Orasa Isarankura na Ayutthaya, exuberantly leaping in the air over coconut fronds. These are iconic images, but their photographer remains unknown to most of us.

S.H. Lim, a Thai photographer of Chinese blood, was born in 1930. A self-taught lensman, he took pictures for many well-known Thai publications such as *Sakul Thai*, *Bangkok Weekly*, *Ploenjit*, *Or Sor Tor* and *Seansuk*, from 1962 until his retirement in 1987. In 1963 he was awarded the silver and bronze medals by the New York Kodak Expo Photography Contest.



Buddhadasa Bhiku
Liang Ewe
S.H. Lim
Saengjun Limlohakul
Pornsak Sakdaenprai
'Rong Wong-savun
M.L. Toy Xoomsai