Southeast Asian Elite Photographies in an Era of Colonial Anxiety

Convenors: Mr. Lupt Utama, SOAS, University of London

By examining the adoption of photography in Southeast Asia’s early modern period, this panel will demonstrate how photography was understood, practiced, mobilised, and negotiated as a [cultural and political] communicative tool, not merely as a colonial technological transfer process. This panel also examines how individual photographs project meaning and agency both visually as well as materially, enabling us to interpret photographs as both ‘visual’ and ‘material’ objects (Edwards and Hart 2004).

Political tensions within Southeast Asia were especially heightened with the influx of European colonialism from the mid-1850s to the 1910s. As Britain expanded its colonial territories from India to Burma and the French expanded the Indochinese empire into the upper Mekhong region of Laos, Siam occupied the non-colonial space in between, balancing its own geopolitics with those of two global imperial powers. The region’s elites introduced many cultural and political strategies during this period in attempts to assuage their anxieties and stabilise the turbulent political landscape.

The papers of this panel focus on a cross-section of elite Southeast Asian photographies of crypto-colonised Siam and the Shan States under the British Protectorate. This panel explores how Western photographic technologies were deployed as both political and cultural medium in elites’ efforts to re-balance their positions within the realms of regional and global geopolitics.

Panel

Chair:
Discussant: Professor Ashley Thompson, SOAS, University of London

1. Visual and Material Proclamation: The Role of Photography in the Accession of Siam’s King Chulalongkorn in 1868
   Mr. Lupt Utama, Research Student, SOAS, University of London, U.K.

2. Extravagant Ambiguities: Siam’s Representation at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition
   Dr. Caverlee Cary, University of California, Berkeley, U.S.A.

   Dr. Leslie A. Woodhouse, University of San Francisco

4. Images and Agendas: Shan Elite Participation in British Colonial Photography in Nineteenth-Century Burma
   Mr. Thweep Rittinaphakorn, Independent Scholar, Bangkok, Thailand
Abstracts

1. **Visual and Material Proclamation: The Role of Photography in the Accession of Siam’s King Chulalongkorn in 1868**

   *Mr. Lupt Utama, Research Student, SOAS, University of London, U.K, lupt.utama@network.rca.ac.uk*

   Before the arrival of photography in Siam, the only evidence of visual discourse in representing people’s likeness was in paintings of unidentified figures in mural paintings in Buddhist temples. This lack of tradition reflected a public taboo against representing images of people within the Royal Siamese Court. The introduction of the first camera, the daguerreotype camera, in Siam in 1845 by French priest, Father Louis Larnaudie, would revolutionise this taboo, even though it took ten years to capture the first photograph of the Siamese King in 1855.

   Prior to King Mongkut’s death in 1868, the King had inexplicably refused to state a preference as to his successor. However, Prince Chulalongkorn was enthroned by the accession council in 1868 when he was only fifteen years old. During this time patrilineal succession lack regulations in Siam’s palatine law, and was further complicated by the institution of a ‘second king’, moreover, through a series of domestic and regional political events during an era of colonial anxiety, the choice of Chulalongkorn was safer.

   This paper will argue that in addition to acting as a political endorsement of King Chulalongkorn’s accession to the throne, his portraiture in the new medium of photography was also worked to cement his elevation. Three key photographs (including well-known portraits taken by Scottish photographer, John Thompson in 1865, and Siamese photographer, Frances Chit in 1868), will provide my methodological framework for investigating the implications and significance of the sartorial ‘materials’ and ‘objects’ embedded within these photographs. I will argue that the endorsement of Prince Chulalongkorn’s succession was made explicit through the use of photographs as both ‘visual’ and ‘material’ proclamation to the throne.

2. **Extravagant Ambiguities: Siam’s Representation at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition**

   *Dr. Caverlee Cary, University of California, Berkeley, U.S.A., ccary@berkeley.edu*

   While by the turn of the twentieth century Siam had participated for decades in overseas exhibitions in Europe and America as part of its international diplomatic imperatives, surviving photographs of Siam’s pavilion at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St Louis suggest perhaps the most elaborate opportunity for exporting state theater up to that time. In this paper I will review a series of moments in the construction of the royal image from the previous half-century, an image crafted to be identified with the kingdom itself, before turning to the St. Louis case. What kind of image did Siam choose to present? What was the context of this particular exposition, and, beyond this, that of America’s relations with Asia in this period? This paper explores ambiguities and ironies embedded in the story of Siam at the St. Louis fair.
3. **Picturing 'Siwilai': Representations of Ethnic Difference in Elite Photography During Siam’s Fifth Reign (1868-1910)**
   Dr. Leslie A. Woodhouse, University of San Francisco, leslie.woodhouse@gmail.com

Scholars of Asian art and history have undertaken a critical examination of how photography has historically been deployed by various Western colonial powers to reinforce a “hierarchy of civilizations” with themselves at the top. Thailand’s royal elites have long been known for their adoption of “modern” techniques to represent their civilization, such as mapping (Thongchai 1999), collecting and photography (Peleggi 2002). As my paper will discuss, photography could also be enlisted in non-colonial contexts to create notions of ethnic difference that replicated and reinforced the ethnic power hierarchy suggested by Western colonizers – even in countries which were never formally colonized, such as Siam (today Thailand).

In this paper, I will discuss how elite Siam’s photographers elaborated a Siamese notion of civilization called “siwilai,” an adaptation of Western colonial categories of ethnic hierarchy to the Siamese context. In this paper, I explore how such elite photographers utilized photographs of court figures who represented ethnic “Other-ness” within the palace in constructing siwilai and its corollaries in Siam. As case studies, I will focus on two particular figures, including “Ngo Ba,” a young boy of the Semang tribe adopted by King Chulalongkorn and raised within the court, and Princess Dara Rasami, an ethnically Lao consort who practiced distinct customs of dress, eating and deportment. Photographic images of both these figures, I will argue, played an important part in embodying the ethnic hierarchy of Siamese siwilai.

4. **Images and Agendas: Shan Elite Participation in British Colonial Photography in Nineteenth-Century Burma**
   Mr. Thweep Rittinaphakorn, Independent Scholar, Bangkok, Thailand, thweepr@yahoo.com

Under British colonization, Burma (now also known as Myanmar) was regarded as part of the British-Indian empire extending from India. Other areas apart from Burma proper where different ethnic groups resided were then regarded as “Frontier Areas”. The Shan States were among them.

To western eyes at that time, this part of the British empire was a mystery and there was a thirst for knowledge. The need to capture new information about these lands resulted in numerous academic works, journals, gazetteers, reports, as well as picture books serving as means to allow westerners to familiarize themselves with this heretofore unknown territory. In many of these records, when the subject of Shan States was mentioned, pictures of Shan elites were often presented along with those of other subjects of interest such as crafts, professions, dwellings, geography, etc.

Were these pictures of the elites publicized by the British merely to provide information about this exotic land? Or was there an underlying motive to portray the regality of ruling power that still prevailed the Shan States? This paper will investigate and form a hypotheses around two key questions: 1) To which extent were the Shan elites aware of how their photographs were exploited? 2) Did they intentionally allow it as a tool to project their civilized existence and to differentiate them from the Burmese and other ethnic minority groups? Analysis will include examples of well-known published materials containing photographs, as well as other contemporary documents that refer to them.