

Zhuang Wubin

Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey. Singapore: NUS Press 2016, 552 pp. ISBN 9789814722124. Price: SGD 48.00 (hardcover).

This is an extremely rich and valuable anthology of photography in Southeast Asia. Based on brief biographies of a large number of practitioners in the region, the book traces the history of photography from the colonial period into the present. It explores how a persistent tradition of 'pictorialism', or 'salon photography' influenced practitioners for a long time, while tracing the emergence of documentary photography and the problematic relationship between photography and visual arts. Another aim of the book is to overcome problematic but entrenched dichotomies between straight photography and conceptual art, the 'inferior' snapshot and prestigious art, and egalitarian journalism and elitist art. The book is organized in a very conventional way, presenting his portraits by country (but omitting East-Timor) in order to pay due attention to national particularities. As a result, it is not clear whether the category of Southeast Asian photography holds any meaning, while the role of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in promoting an overarching regional identity is only mentioned in passing.

In the country chapters some general themes emerge within a loosely structured time frame. Introduced by imperial photographers, photography was quickly adopted by dynastic leaders and spread through colonial photo clubs and Chinese photo studios. Siamese kings broke a taboo on making portraits of the rulers by adopting photography in order to create dignified images of themselves, which they shared with their counterparts in Europe, while within Siam postcards and other images of the king became sacred objects. The legacy of pictorialism—staged photos intended to embellish reality, because the customer did not want 'plain truth', but added phantasy—gave photography an aura of elitist high art and gave photography a conservative imprint with a long post-colonial legacy. In Cambodia and elsewhere, colonial photography helped to frame local culture in terms of an 'authentic essentialism' that had to be preserved. But in Luan Prabang (Laos) several monasteries kept a remarkable collection of more than 34,000 photos of ritual practices covering a period of 120 years, suggesting that photos had become integrated within the Buddhist cosmology. Fortunately, these collections have been digitized with the help of the British Library.

During the early years of independence photography helped to propagate national identities by framing images of both modernity and indigenous traditions. Newspapers gave a boost to photo journalism, which in turn stimu-

lated documentary photography. At the same time, various forms of censorship limited the range of activities photo journalist were expected to cover, while the tradition of salon photography also continued without major ruptures. Indonesia showed a remarkable continuity of images of idyllic landscapes and traditional peoples. In South Vietnam, most photographers glossed over the realities of the Vietnam war due to restrictions on portraying battle scenes and wounded soldiers. In Singapore, the continuity of salon photography was reinforced by making references to traditional Chinese painting intending to evoke delightful emotions, which was also reflected in advertisements and documentary photos of Singapore's remarkable economic development. In Cambodia, photography disappeared during the Khmer Rouge regime, except for the morbid documentation of 6,000 victims in the infamous S-21 prison.

Documentary photography also showed engagement with social movements and the urban poor. Here a much more straightforward documentary style emerged, which was, however, still marginal compared to mainstream photography. In the 1990s censorship was lifted in most of Southeast Asia and this coincided with the shift from analogue to digital photography which changed everything. Due to cheap mobile phones and easy dissemination via internet, photography is now more egalitarian and personalized, the ultimate example of which is the omnipresent selfie.

In the 1990s in Southeast Asia, photography began to enter the visual arts (installations, montages, performances, and conceptual art) but it remained controversial because photography was often associated with (inferior) snapshots or with (conservative elitists) salon photography. Moreover, conceptual artists regarded straightforward documentary photographers primarily as technicians working in an artistic vacuum.

More recently, artists using photography have tended to focus on personalized narratives, especially personal experiences of distress, while adding layers of irony, denying established techniques by blurring and deforming the image, and/or questioning authenticity. In doing so, I would argue, Southeast Asian photographers started to meet soulmates from all over the world.

While documenting the historical trajectories of photography in Southeast Asia in an admirable way, Zhuang Wubin aimed to re-imagine salon photography, documentary work, street photography, and individualized art work by lifting conceptual borders between these domains and undermining hierarchies that foreground art at the cost of the snapshot. The author relied primarily on text to convey this message, while photos are regrettably rather marginalized in this book both in terms of numbers and size. I hope that this book will

inspire other authors to further explore themes identified by Zhuang Wubin and to make broader comparisons beyond Southeast Asia.

Henk Schulte Nordholt

KITLV/Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian Studies

schultenordholt@kitlv.nl