

Peleggi, Maurizio. *The Politics of Ruins and the Business of Nostalgia*. Bangkok: White Lotus, 2002.

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*Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey*. By Zhuang Wubin. Singapore: NUS Press, 2016. 522 pp.

Zhuang Wubin is a photographer who has been interviewing fellow practitioners in Southeast Asia since 2004; he received funding to spend a year travelling around the region to complete the research for this encyclopaedic survey. The resulting book represents a snapshot of photographic practices in Southeast Asia in the first decade of the twenty-first century, with most of the background material dating from the 1990s. As a survey it tends towards the list, rather than to the integrated social analysis monographs such as Strassler's study of Javanese photography (2010). Nonetheless, the survey structure is informed by broader arguments for photography receiving its due place in art criticism and appreciation. Rather than reiterating the common hierarchical binaries of "art" versus "vernacular" photography, Zhuang recontextualizes and reimagines photographic practices along the lines for re-evaluation originally proposed by Batchen (2002). Drawing on anthropology, cultural studies, art history, the politics of representation and media ethics, he focuses on embeddedness and embodiment to move away from "reductive dichotomies [and] back to the multivariate ways in which photography becomes entangled in politics, culture, religion and the arts" (p. 13).

Just as photography is usually neglected in the study of art, so Southeast Asia, despite the efforts of so many scholars, continues to be overshadowed by China and India. This book thus has a dual agenda, and it will make a significant contribution to bringing the

work of photographers working as individuals or in groups to the attention of a wider readership. The author's afterword reflects on the risk that the book's regional focus will reify Southeast Asia, and suggests that its Southeast Asian frame of reference is a means to a wider end. Indeed, it is clear long before his closing remarks that the emphasis on contestation and entanglement also characterizes the dynamism in global — rather than merely Southeast Asian — photographic practices, and the regional examples are implicated in an international re-evaluation of practice and analysis. These considerations doubtless explain why the author resists reducing the complexity of the region to textbook-type formulaic “characteristics”. He does, however, emphasize the importance of Chinese immigrants in the development of photography from the start of the twentieth century and the ensuing domination of Pictorialism or “salon photography” in photographic practices and in photographs themselves until the late 1970s. Indeed, it continues to exert its influence in propagating the binarism that Zhuang attempts to dismantle. Political democratization has led to a “diversification of photographic practices” (p. 443), and it is the demonstration of the variation across the region that is the book's great strength.

After a brief introduction, the book is organized by nation-state into ten chapters, on Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, the Philippines and Singapore. Each country is given a historical context, followed by an overview of contemporary practices and accounts of particular individuals and movements. Chapters present data collected in national capitals and, where possible, elsewhere. The chapter on Indonesia, to describe one example, contextualizes photographic practices and explains movements against the background of colonialism, the struggle for independence and the ensuing attempts to forge an Indonesian national identity. It then documents changes that occurred largely after the fall of Soeharto in 1998 and the onset of the era of *Reformasi* in four cities or regions on Java. The overview of photographic practices in Jakarta since the 1990s includes detailed sections about the work of Erik Prasetya (b. 1958, Padang) and nine other photographers,

the work of Utan Kayu Community, and then a further four young photographers. The next section deals with Bandung since the 1990s, again describing the work of individual photographers among whom the most recent to emerge is Prilla Tania (b. 1979, Bandung). The section on Yogyakarta first addresses Ruang MES 56, which has dominated contemporary photographic discourses in Indonesia, and individual practitioners such as Angki Purbandono (b. 1971, Cepiring). It then considers developments since the 1990s, and the establishment in 2009 of Klas Pagi by a group of photographers born in the 1980s and of the Cephos Photo Forum — named after the celebrated colonial Javanese photographer — the following year. This chapter closes with an overview of photography in East Java since the 1990s and offers accounts of two photographers and the *Insomnium* forum, founded in Malang in 2003.

As this example suggests, the chapters in the book pay close attention to national detail, and to the very young practitioners who are shaping the present. The focus on contemporary photographers gives the reader a vivid sense of the youthful cutting edge of photography and its directions in Southeast Asia. A contrast between documentary and art photography is well documented, especially in the chapter on Singapore, which also addresses photography and performance against a background of identity politics. This latter focus is keeping with the importance of embodiment and identity politics as critical themes. Some Indonesian photographers use the Internet to circulate images internationally and thereby to increase their visibility. While Zhuang addresses the importance of the Internet in liberalized Myanmar, he could have written more about it, including its role in making technical education accessible. More could also have been said about the relationship between still photography and moving images, where photography meets digital art and installation. However, this book is already ambitious in scope and perhaps there are plans to discuss these matters in another work.

This is a beautifully produced and extensively illustrated book, which would have benefitted from a list of figures and images numbered sequentially through the book rather than by chapter. Also,

there is considerable variation in chapter length. Indonesia merits seventy pages, while Brunei and Laos only six and fourteen pages, respectively. The work will thus be of varying interest to specialists on particular countries. Nevertheless, it is likely to become a core reference on Southeast Asian photography, and one that deserves reading and rereading rather than being consumed in a single sitting. The book's unusually low price makes this revisiting more possible, and this will ensure that the work reaches members of the younger generation who will be carrying the practices that Zhuang describes into the future.

#### REFERENCES

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