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**Documenting as Method: Photography in Southeast Asia**

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DOCUMENTING AS METHOD:  
PHOTOGRAPHY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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## ABSTRACT

Documenting as method is a proposition for a way of writing photography and a way of making photographic work.

The proposition unfolds through a portfolio of selected writings, centring on *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey* (2016). The portfolio also includes a journal essay, a book chapter, a profile essay and one curatorial text.

As a way of writing photography, documenting entails three trajectories: (a) ethnography and oral history, (b) archiving and mapping, and (c) Asian inter-referencing. It is a method that I developed to historicise, with equal care and concern, the multitude of photographic practices in Southeast Asia. It works against the binary of art versus photography, and the prevailing tendency towards a linear historiography in order to valorise a particular practice.

As a way of making work, documenting consists of three overlapping approaches: (1) documenting as looking and thinking, (2) documenting as cataloguing, and (3) documenting as world-making. It foregrounds the affect of the photographic encounter in which the photographer and the photographed person(s) meet to perform and experience their desires, which may or may not result in the making of photographs.

To put the proposition of documenting to use, I attempt a revisionist account of salon photography in Southeast Asia. Documenting as method allows me to surface the agency of individual practitioners without losing sight of salon photography's relationship with political power during the shifting processes of nationalism, decolonisation and cold war. It helps me

foreground Chineseness, which intersected the nation-building process, as an additional factor in the praxis of salon photography.

As a way of making work, documenting offers a method for me to unpack the spectre of Chineseness through my photographic encounter with the Chinese Muslims in Indonesia. The experience of making work also informs the proposition of documenting as method.

## INTRODUCTION

### Portfolio Submitted for PhD

Zhuang, W. (2015a). Documenting as method: photography in Southeast Asia. In: *Chiang Mai Photo Festival 2015 [Exhibition catalogue]*. Chiang Mai: Faculty of Fine Arts, Chiang Mai University.

Zhuang, W. (2016). *Photography in Southeast Asia: a survey*. Singapore: NUS Press.

Zhuang, W. (2018). *Shifting currents: glimpses of a changing nation*. Singapore: National Library Board.

Zhuang, W. (2019a). A mapping of Southeast Asian photobooks after World War II. In: *Chapters on Asia: selected papers from the Lee Kong Chian research fellowship (2017-2018)*. Singapore: National Library Board, 139–172. Available from <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/printheritage/detail/26d81021-01bf-4e32-952c-6162e317b493.aspx> [Accessed 17 November 2019].

Zhuang, W. (2019b). Photography and Chineseness: reflections on *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia*. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 20 (1), 107–130. Available from <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2019.1576400> [Accessed 27 March 2019].

### Summary of Portfolio

I am a writer, photographer and curator based in Singapore. Writing is the foundation of my practice.

This commentary centres on *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey* (2016; reprint 2017).

It is the first publication that provides a mapping of photographic practices across the region, spanning the late colonial era to the contemporary.

The other writings included in this portfolio consist of a journal essay, a book chapter, a profile essay from a photobook and one curatorial text.

*Shifting Currents: Glimpses of a Changing Nation* (2018) is a photobook showcasing the work of Kouo Shang-Wei. The profile essay revisits his photographic life, which helps us

understand the factors that shaped the practice and historiography of photography in Singapore since the late colonial period. In “A Mapping of Southeast Asian Photobooks after World War II” (2019), I historicise our photobook experiences in the region, primarily by activating the trajectory of Asian inter-referencing. “Documenting as Method: Photography in Southeast Asia” (2015) resulted from a group exhibition that I curated for the inaugural Chiang Mai Photo Festival (CMPF). The curatorial text marked my first attempt at making the proposition of documenting.

Documenting as method consists of two dimensions. The first dimension concerns the writing of photography. The second concerns the making of photographic work. The proposition is informed by the concepts of embeddedness and embodiment. The concepts provide the theoretical resource to activate documenting as method.

In “Photography and Chineseness: Reflections on *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia*” (2019), I continue to unfold the proposition of documenting and the concept of embodiment through my experience as the writer-photographer who made *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia* (2007-09).

Taken as a whole, these writings illustrate the basis, references, use and findings of documenting as method. In approaching the writings, I suggest beginning with the CMPF text, followed by “Photography and Chineseness: Reflections on *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia*” and the profile of Kouo, before ending with *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey* and the essay on photobooks.

## **Key Research Questions**

Question 1: What is documenting as method? How does documenting apply to the writing of photography? How do the concepts of embeddedness and embodiment mediate the proposition of documenting?

Question 2: How does documenting apply to the making of photographic work? How has my experience as the writer-photographer in *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia* (2007-09) shaped the proposition of documenting and the concept of embodiment?

Question 3: As a way of writing photography, how does documenting as method complicate our understanding of salon photography? How did political power imbricate salon photography during the shifting processes of nationalism, decolonisation and cold war?

## CHAPTER 1: DOCUMENTING AS METHOD

Question 1: What is documenting as method? How does documenting apply to the writing of photography? How do the concepts of embeddedness and embodiment mediate the proposition of documenting?

I first made the proposition of documenting as method for an exhibition that I curated at CMPF 2015. The curatorial text is included in this portfolio (Zhuang, 2015a).

The impetus for making the proposition stems from a dissatisfaction with the way photography has been written in Southeast Asia. In most foundational studies on art in Southeast Asia, photography is mentioned cursorily, if at all (Poshyananda, 1992; Kwok, 1996; Jim Supangkat, 1997). If it surfaces, photography is sometimes framed in contradistinction to painting (Liu, 1981, p185; Chow, 1982). Since the 1950s (if not earlier), some of the most influential artists and educators have already posited the imitative and mechanical nature of photography as being antithetical to artistic creativity (Ly and Muan, 2001, p250, p283; Yow, 2011; Veal, 2016, p249–251). In Indonesia, curator Enin Supriyanto (2010, p4–9) writes of two different views of photography. One view sees photography merely as documentation while the second view sees photography as being derivative of painting. The spectre of photography versus art continues to frame these diverging views, with obvious implications on contemporary photography. Enin (2010, p9) adds: “Lately, we have also seen how works of photography have been forced physically to appear as paintings: it feels as if the photograph is only right and legitimate if it is printed on a large canvas, which is subsequently framed and installed on the wall just like a painting.”



The proposition of documenting as method is an attempt to dislodge our understanding of photography from these binaries (Zhuang, 2015a, 2016, p13). I use “documenting” for at least two reasons: to differentiate it from the institutionalised genres of documentary photography and photojournalism, and as an intervention against the prejudice of some curators, art historians and writers who assume that what *looks* like straight photography is nothing more than conceptually naïve production (Zhuang, 2016, p39–41, 2019b, p120).

There are two dimensions to the proposition of documenting. The first concerns the writing of photography. The second concerns the making of photographic work, which occurs, in this proposition, through the photographic encounter. I define the “photographic encounter” as the time and place where the photographer and the photographed person(s) meet for the possibility for photographs to materialise.

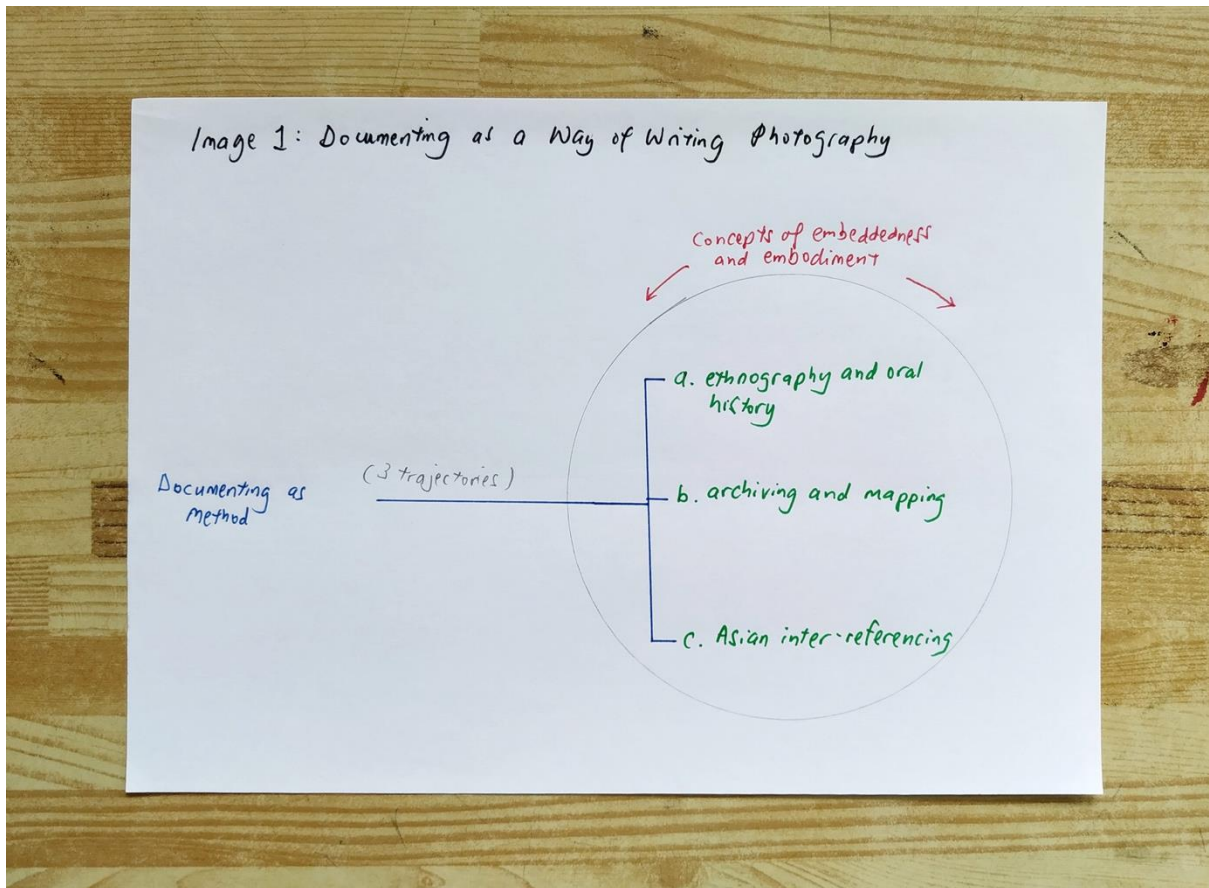
The proposition of documenting is informed by the concepts of embeddedness and embodiment. The concepts are derived from readings that interface photography with anthropology, sociology, art history and cultural studies, amongst others. They are shaped by my experience of writing photography in Southeast Asia. The concept of embodiment is also informed by my work as a photographer. The concepts of embeddedness and embodiment constitute an ongoing attempt to develop the theoretical resource to conceptualise photography and its related practices (making, viewing, using, writing, teaching, curating). They also guide the application of documenting as method.

The proposition of documenting is grounded through Southeast Asia. It is not a proposition for a universalising theory of photography. It is ever evolving, open to all forms of

intervention, which complicates the proposition. This is another reason why I prefer the participle verb form of “documenting”.

### 1.1 Documenting and the Writing of Photography

As a way of writing photography, documenting as method entails three trajectories (image 1). They are: (a) ethnography and oral history, (b) archiving and mapping, and (c) Asian inter-referencing. The trajectories need not be activated in sequence. In some instances, the enquiry may only necessitate one or two trajectories.



#### 1.1.1 Ethnography and Oral History

Conducting interviews has been an important tool in my writing practice. My first interviews with photographers and artists were made in 2004. Coming from a lower-middle class family

of former activists once imprisoned by the State, I have worked largely as a freelance writer. In 2005, Kuala Lumpur (KL) International Photography Biennale opened in Malaysia. In 2006, Noorderlicht Photofestival dedicated part of its thematic focus on Southeast Asia. These initiatives prompted me to focus on the photographic practices that have been embedded in Southeast Asia. Born in Singapore, my affinities with Southeast Asia came through my backpacking experiences, and not as a writer claiming the region for his enquiry. I acquired the basics of interviewing when I did my undergrad studies (journalism major) at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. It was honed when I worked as a freelance photographer from 2004 to 2009, covering challenging situations in Tamil Nadu (Indian Ocean tsunami, 2005) and KL (Chin refugees from Myanmar, 2006-07), amongst others.

In Southeast Asia, ethnography remains a productive methodology in the historiography of aesthetic and cultural practices, especially in situations where material or written documentation remains patchy. In some cases, it seems that art history could only be recounted and remade through the shifting accounts by living artists (Taylor, 2011, p483; Teh, 2018, p46–47). Conducting her fieldwork in Hanoi during the early 1990s, Nora Taylor (2011, p485) adopted an ethnographic approach, which focused on the “artists themselves as human subjects rather than on their work”, arguing that “the work mattered because of the artist and if the artist mattered, so did the work”. In other instances, ethnography is useful in recuperating practices that have been sidelined by an art historiography that aspires for an elite modernity (Ingawanij, 2018, p10–13).

In relation to the photographic practices of Southeast Asia, there has been sustained academic focus on colonial-era imageries, partly because these materials have become the possession

of the metropole, making them available to researchers in Europe and the USA. When I started the interviews, there were already scattered writings that accounted for contemporary photography from Southeast Asia. They had mostly resulted from exhibitions organised intermittently by photofestivals, galleries and State institutions. It was especially difficult to find out what had transpired from the 1930s to the 1980s. As a greenhorn without institutional backing, I did not have the luxury, until recently, to activate archival materials. In contexts marred by colonialism and political upheavals, it was not always easy to locate relevant archives. As a freelance writer, conducting interviews was always more immediate and less costly (financially and timewise) than navigating the bureaucracy or interpersonal relationship to access specific archives or collections held by the State or the elite class. That was how the idea of *documenting* germinated.

#### A. Selecting Interviewees

As a writer of photography, my focus has been on practitioners whose forebearers from Asia had settled, during the distant or recent past, in the region that would become Southeast Asia. I prioritise those who identify themselves with Southeast Asia (or the places within it). I made exceptions though. In the Singapore chapter of *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey*, I include French citizen Gilles Massot (b. 1955, Aix-en-Provence) on the consideration that he has been based in the country since 1981 and has developed intricate ties with the local communities as an artist, curator and educator (Zhuang, 2016, p396–400). I also wish to work against the inclination of curators and art historians who ignore Massot's work when they write through the national lens. In the Lao chapter, I include the work of Rasi (1938-2013, b. Savannakhet), even though his artistic career germinated and flourished in France, after he had left Laos (Zhuang, 2016, p235–237). For nearly three decades, Rasi never returned to Laos, not even when his parents passed. After receiving his retrospective at

the French National Library in 1997, he suddenly moved back to Savannakhet. It might be easier to exclude Rasi, but I decided to visit him in 2010. When he located his practice between the French and Lao concepts of time, I realised he would be an important resource for future photographers.

I do not use citizenship to exclude (or include) potential interviewees. In the Vietnam chapter of *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey*, I write about the crucial imprint of Việt Kiều artists in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) for heralding a contemporary practice of photography (Zhuang, 2016, p289–295). The section is based on interviews with several Việt Kiều artists who are mostly American citizens. In the chapter, I highlight two of them—Richard Streitmatter-Tran (b. 1972, Bien Hoa) and Đinh Q. Lê (b. 1968, Ha Tien)—in greater detail, using the rest of the interviews as contextual background. In the spirit of archiving and mapping photographic practices (more on this trajectory later), it would be negligent to exclude the Việt Kiều artists because of their citizenship. Their return to HCMC since the mid-1990s brought new currents in artmaking, influencing local-trained practitioners like Phan Quang (b. 1976, Binh Dinh) and Mai Tùng (b. 1985, HCMC) (Zhuang, 2016, p295–297). However, it also generated a wedge with other local practitioners who feel that Việt Kiều artists are overrepresented in overseas exhibitions that showcase Vietnamese contemporary art. Since the late 1990s, these fissures helped to install other reference points in HCMC, including the likes of Bùi Xuân Huy (b. 1953, Ha Tay) and Nguyễn Xuân Khánh (b. 1948, Phnom Penh, Cambodia) (Zhuang, 2016, p280–285).

In selecting potential interviewees, I aim for the ideal of being exhaustive while remaining realistic. The intention is to surface, as much as possible, the multiplicity of photographic practices in a given locale to counter the general tendency amongst writers to favour a linear

historiography or to valorise a particular kind of work. The linearity is typically used to justify the contemporary remit of photo exhibitions (Ooi and Yong, 2011, p3–4; Alexander Supartono, 2014), which serves to validate the “post-medium” theology of photography in Southeast Asian contemporary art (Tan, 2009; Lingham, 2014, p4; Sam, 2014, p6–7; Chua, 2017). I use the proposition of documenting, especially the trajectories of ethnography/oral history and archiving/mapping, to address these issues.

After each interview, I would ask the interviewees to recommend other practitioners. I am also interested to meet people whom they cite as influence or regard as peers. Over time, I have created a web of contacts that would, even without me prompting, recommend more reclusive or younger practitioners to me. It is necessary to develop ways to analyse the multiplicity of narratives aggregated through the interviews. To this end, the proposition of documenting offers the trajectories of archiving/mapping and Asian inter-referencing.

## B. Interview Style

Alongside vision and corporeality, the oral/aural route of transmission has played a decisive role in disseminating and shaping the photographic practices across Southeast Asia. The issue of English proficiency, the availability of translated text and the jargon of academic writing make it difficult for practitioners to turn to the printed word in order to acquire the language to explain their practices. The trajectory of ethnography/oral history aims to approximate this mode of conveying photographic knowhow.

I contextualise the interview as an informal chitchat, an opportunity for the interviewee to share her or his practice with me. As Portelli (2009, p30) explains, the interview opens up a “narrative space, which the interviewer’s presence and questions or comments encourage the

interviewee to explore and navigate”. The reactivity within oral history work might offer unexpected details, revealing, for instance, the desire and class consciousness of the interviewee. This is why I prefer face-to-face interviews because it is easier to work with reactivity in a productive way. In situations where I could only conduct email or Facebook interviews, I would insist on doing a face-to-face session when I finally met them.

In conducting interviews, I usually encourage them to show me their projects, including those that have not been completed or showcased previously. Using these images, I ask them to explain the motivation behind each project, detailing its conceptualisation, the approach in making work and the issues encountered. I use a limited form of photo elicitation to help them begin their accounts. Beyond their work, I am interested to find out why they use photography and how they develop their proficiency in it. I try to understand if factors like upbringing, education, ethnicity, cultural backdrop and political outlook have impacted their practices. Almost always, I prompt them to reflect on the possibilities and limits of photography.

After the first interview, I would try to meet them again some years later. If the opportunity failed to materialise, I would continue to follow their work online. Not infrequently, I would do more than two interviews, especially when a practitioner continued to make new work, or when she or he has had a long career.

As my interviewing work is self-initiated (before the possibility of writing anything), I am usually not bounded by deadlines. In most cases, I interview in English. In rare occasions, I use Mandarin. For certain practitioners, their command of English might be rudimentary at the first interview. However, by the subsequent interview, their proficiency would have

improved significantly. The longitudinal span of my interviewing work is crucial in compensating for the language proficiency of some interviewees and helps to minimise discrepancies in the conveying of meaning.

Following Taylor (2009, p5–6), I focus on the discourses that interviewees use to delineate their practices. I use “discourse” here to refer to the language, ideas and references that they cite and develop to embed their photographic practices. These discourses may emerge when they cite the imprint of peers and teachers. In this way, the interviews help me map the genealogy of their practices. In some cases, practitioners develop and utilise a discourse that reduces an earlier or more dominant practice, *othering* it to valorise their own work.

I have recorded these discursive articulations in *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey*.

Let me cite one example here.

Angki Purbandono (b. 1971, Cepiring) is the figurehead of Ruang MES 56, easily the most visible contemporary photography collective in Indonesia (Zhuang, 2016, p111–116). One of their early exhibitions happened in 1999 at Antara Photojournalism Gallery (GFJA), titled *Revolution #9*. Angki’s contribution was created by the tactile manipulation of negatives and alternative printing. In his 2009 interview, Angki claimed:

It is ridiculous to assume that documentary photography is always journalistic and must be related to the important people and events of this country. It can be about toilets too. But nobody does that in Indonesia, which is why the genre is not dynamic. We are not necessarily against documentary photography. But we are against conservatism. And since we



can't move documentary, commercial or salon photography, what Ruang MES 56 can do is to drop their concepts into a blender and make a new juice (Zhuang, 2016, p114).

There is validity in his critique of Indonesian photojournalism, which has been marred by the lack of professionalism and its lowly status within the newsroom (Yudhi Soerjoatmodjo and Zhuang, 2019, p307). But the “new juice” of Ruang MES 56 is also posited against the dominant practices of documentary, commercial and salon photography. This reactive stance blinds Angki to the fact that the strategy of manipulating negatives and prints had long been utilised by salon photographers in Indonesia (Zhuang, 2016, p70). By the 1980s, that association had become somewhat obscured, which was why, in an ironic twist, photographers like Ray Bachtiar (b. 1959, Bandung) and Krisna Ncis Satmoko (b. 1963, Bandung) also turned to analogue manipulation to rebel against the conventions of salon photography. Their experiments were made within the fold of Forum Fotografi Bandung, a collective of young creatives drawn to photography through their diverging interests in fashion, performance, journalism and music (Zhuang, 2016, p72–73). Their first meeting in 1984 preceded the informal gathering of Ruang MES 56 members by a decade. In 1995, Ray mounted a three-night performance-exhibition at GFJA (Zhuang, 2016, p80–81; Yudhi Soerjoatmodjo and Zhuang, 2019, p311). He choreographed 12 dancers to perform while using nine slide projectors to beam his photographs onto their bodies, the walls and the ceiling. Unsurprisingly, Angki dismissed the work as “out of line with photography”, labelling Ray an “installation man” (Zhuang, 2016, p114). To demarcate himself from Ray, Angki even tried to defend photography: “Yes, he [Ray] uses photography but he is not really doing work that addresses photography. It's like he is using all the mediums to talk at the same time.” By othering Ray's practice from the “new juice” of Ruang MES 56, the

collective would continue to monopolise the discourse and market of contemporary photography in Indonesia.

### 1.1.2 Archiving and Mapping

#### A. Archiving

I have always asked interviewees to share with me a low-res digital copy of their projects, which I archive in my portable storage. This is where I slightly depart from Taylor's proposition of ethnography, which privileged the artists and their accounts as the means to validate their relevance. I am wary that such an approach would serve to obscure individuals who might not be well-liked by their peers. More importantly, it would sideline the work of individuals who might be pioneering a photographic practice, which has yet to be accepted by the broader community. Finally, the barrier-of-entry to photography is much lower than that of painting. It is fairly easy to encounter practitioners who could speak eloquently about their work or boast of recognition from influential arbitrators. As a recourse, the images of their work would help to validate or show up their claims.

I do not insist that interviewees provide a complete set of their works. Their willingness to share their images with me reiterates their support for my work. The digital copy offers a link to their oral accounts and provides crucial source materials for further analysis. In situations where interviewees are unable to return articulate answers during the interview, their low-res images might reveal what they struggle to express orally. This low-res archive may also reveal coherence between two practitioners in the same locale, despite their insistence in reiterating their uniqueness. On a prosaic note, keeping a low-res copy of the practitioners' works provides an opportunity to revisit them and see things that I might have missed previously, due to my ignorance.

In short, I do not wish to prematurely shut down the possibility of a descriptive or formalistic reading of photographs because such an approach is also used as the starting point of critical work. A close reading could serve as the means, and not the ends, of analytical work. Even in her urgent call to activate the civil uses of photography, Ariella Aïsha Azoulay (2015, p219–231) also begins with a close reading of the lack and excess inscribed in the photograph, so as to overcome its meaning, which is traditionally monopolised by the photographer.

Over the years, I have also amassed a collection of photographic images collated (digitally or by xerox) from old periodicals, exhibition brochures, catalogues and photobooks. In situations where I am unable to interview the practitioners due to physical distance, the absence of consent or their untimely passing, these printed materials help me archive and reimagine their practices. In some cases, these materials helped me locate practitioners who had lapsed from public attention.<sup>1</sup>

In Southeast Asia, the periodical is an important source material that awaits reactivation through the trajectory of archiving/mapping. The uncertain status of photography as art meant that venues have mostly delimited their exhibition-making to specific kinds of photographic practices, which would then create the need for reproducing the images in brochures and catalogues. Meanwhile, the possibility of making a photobook had, until recently, remained largely in the hands of those with money and/or patronage, an observation I made in “A

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<sup>1</sup> For years, I had heard of an important photo artist who preceded Manit Sriwanichpoom (b. 1961, Bangkok). However, I did not know anyone who remained in touch with him, especially after he had migrated to New Zealand in 1998. In a *Bangkok Post* interview, Sriwanichpoom paid tribute to him, but his name was spelt differently. Eventually, I found a somewhat similar-looking name in the catalogues of the painting-photography exhibitions, organised by the ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information during the early 1980s. I have kept a xerox copy of these catalogues. It still took quite awhile before I tried my luck on Facebook, using the name printed in the ASEAN catalogues. That was how I finally got in touch with Pramuan Burusphat (b. 1953, Bangkok) in March 2013 (Zhuang, 2016, p148–151).

Mapping of Southeast Asian Photobooks after World War II”, which is included in this portfolio (Zhuang, 2019a, p150, p160, p163-164). In contrast, editors of periodicals have always made space within the context of a print commodity for innovative photographers to showcase their work.

In Thailand, the editorial team of the widely respected women’s magazine *Lalana* made space for Nopadon Chotasiri (b. 1948, Songkhla) who crossed fashion with the improvisation of street photography during his stint at the periodical from 1972 to 1988 (Zhuang, 2016, p153). In the Philippines, *Manila Times* and *Manila Chronicle* brought out Sunday magazines, which mirrored the format of *Life* (Zhuang, 2016, p319–320). These magazines provided the editorial space for photographers like Romy Vitug (b. 1937, Pampanga), Edgardo Santiago (1935-2020, b. Manila) and Silverio Enriquez (b. 1926, Manila) to experiment with the photo story format. The periodicals helped to herald the golden age of Philippine photojournalism during the 1960s.

## B. Mapping

I conceive the act of mapping in this trajectory as an intervention on the historiography of photography in Southeast Asia. To borrow a recent invoking of “mapping”, it is a practice that “no longer depends on the map as artifact, but as something that lives and continues to unfold”, often “in conjunction with other mapping and archival initiatives” (Hsu and Wong, 2013, p4). The participle verb form of “mapping” conjures a perpetual state of inscribing and erasing, writing on and writing against. It is the destabilising effect of mapping, of constantly bringing into the fold materials that have eluded the mapmaker, that I wish to foreground. The act of mapping is also influenced by Geoffrey Batchen’s (2002, p76) call to rethink the “whole value system that canonization represents”, and to “insist on the vernacularity of the

art photograph (its specificity to a particular, regional culture) and include it in our historical discussions as but one type of vernacular photography among many”.

In Southeast Asia, the tendency to favour a linear historiography or valorise a particular kind of practice stems partly from the prevalence of materials published by galleries and museums, which frame photography as high art. What is deemed to be artistic has already been delimited within a narrow range of photographic practices, making it difficult for documentary or fashion work, for instance, to receive reasonable treatment by art historians and curators (Zhuang, 2016, p442–443, p493n2). The destabilising effect of mapping flattens the hierarchy of different photographic practices, treating them with equal interest and care. The intention is to suspend the labels of contemporary art, photojournalism or salon photography by recognising that the categorisation can be applied as easily as it can be unmade, and that different practices often merge into one another (Zhuang, 2016, p9). I do not aim to produce an alternative canon of art photography. Instead, I want to address all photographic practices on equal footing and consider them attentively as cultural products of their milieu.

My method of mapping has been decisively shaped by the experiences of two curators in Southeast Asia. The first is Yudhi Soerjoatmodjo (b. 1964, Jakarta) whose curating experiences I have recorded, at a preliminary level, in *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey* (Zhuang, 2016, p73–75, p80-81, p112) and, more recently, in an interview not included in this portfolio (Yudhi Soerjoatmodjo and Zhuang, 2019). From 1994 to 1999, Yudhi worked for GFJA in Jakarta, becoming the first full-time curator of a public venue dedicated to photography in Southeast Asia. Leveraging on GFJA’s association with the national news agency of Antara, Yudhi tried to expand the possibilities of photojournalism by

mapping an eclectic array of photographic practices against its common definition in Indonesia, curating, for instance, Ray Bachtiar's aforementioned performance-exhibition in 1995. Despite his intention to elevate the status of photography, Yudhi chose to approach the medium as language, and not as art (Yudhi Soerjoatmodjo and Zhuang, 2019, p314). He believed that as the public started desiring to learn the language of photography, and as they realised the presence of photographers going out of their way to make work to share with them, its status would eventually be raised.

Working in an earlier epoch, Raymundo R. Albano (1947–85, b. Bacarra, Ilocos Norte) displayed broad affinities as an artist and as curator of the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) (Zhuang, 2016, p321–324). In curating photography, he veered, at times, towards the survey mode, mounting an overview of Philippine photography in 1975. In 1981, Albano co-curated with Marian Pastor Roces (b. 1953, Batangas City) *Philippine Photography* at the Museum of Philippine Art. The survey featured practitioners of all ilk within the same venue, displaying an egalitarian outlook that has not often been matched in Southeast Asia since then (Zhuang, 2016, p324). In a curatorial text, Albano (1978) observed that “everything the photographic industry has produced has the potential of becoming an art piece, whether the work assumes the function of news reportage, fashion illustration, architectural documentation, [or] scientific evidence”, rendering “personal statements or the nuances of the photographic modes of perception” irrelevant in measuring the art of photography. In his work, he sought ways to destabilise the dualisms that inflicted photography (Albano, 1978; Zhuang, 2016, p382–383). When he included the medium in the prestigious Thirteen Artists Awards in 1974, Albano deliberately picked Boldy Tapales' landscape work alongside Nap Jamir II's conceptual interventions in photography (Zhuang, 2016, p483n58). In one of his writings, Albano (1981) highlighted Franco Patriarca (president of the Camera Club of the

Philippines in 1977) and Romy Vitug for successfully melding the craftsmanship of salon photography with the subject matter of the journalists during a productive spell from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s.

By inter-referencing the curating practices of Yudhi and Albano, I direct the destabilising effect of mapping to intervene in the aforementioned issues that inflict the writing of photography in Southeast Asia. The trajectory of ethnography/oral history helps to collate narratives and discourses for archiving/mapping. The trajectory of archiving/mapping places these accounts alongside periodicals, catalogues, photobooks and exhibition brochures that feature photographic practices, with the intention of treating these varied materials with equal care. While the trajectory could be activated on its own within the proposition of documenting, it could also work as a precursor to the trajectory of Asian inter-referencing.

### 1.1.3 Asian Inter-referencing

Tejaswini Niranjana (2007, p109–112) proposes *alternative frames of reference* to move away from the “inherent asymmetry” of ethnographic pursuits in which third world intellectuals inevitably end up “comparing *their* cultural products with metropolitan ones [author’s italics]”. If ethnographic work were to be driven by the impulse of “dismantling Eurocentrism”, its references would have to be located in other third world spaces (Niranjana, 2007, p110).

Niranjana’s proposition is the precursor to Chen Kuan-Hsing’s (2010, p212) *Asia as method*. Its potential is as follows: “Using the idea of Asia as an imaginary anchoring point, societies in Asia can become each other’s points of reference, so that the understanding of the self may be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt”.

Aligned with Niranjana's proposition, Chen (2010, p254) puts forth *Asian inter-referencing* as a "process of [mutual] relativization", "not only to understand different parts of Asia but also to enable a renewed understanding of the self". Almost concurrently, Aihwa Ong (2011, p17–19) invokes inter-referencing, which "refers more broadly to practices of citation, allusion, aspiration, comparison, and competition", in her study of Asian cities. On the other hand, Chua Beng Huat (2014) tries to formalise the methodological implications of inter-referencing by invoking three terms commonly used in cultural studies, namely: absence, resonance and provocation. For Chua, inter-referencing relaxes the criteria for comparison and sets it apart from traditional comparative studies, which assumes a teleology of measurable indicators along a continuum towards final actualisation of the phenomenon. The terminologies used by Ong and Chua provide the vocabulary to activate the trajectory of Asian inter-referencing in the proposition of documenting, as a way of writing photography.

Included in this portfolio is an essay titled "A Mapping of Southeast Asian Photobooks after World War II", in which I used Asian inter-referencing, alongside the other trajectories, to study the photobook phenomenon of the region (Zhuang, 2019a). Despite the attempt since 2004 by Martin Parr and Gerry Badger to valorise the photobook, the impact of this largely Euro-American phenomenon remains uneven across Southeast Asia (Zhuang, 2019a, p139–141). The trajectories of ethnography/oral history and archiving/mapping quickly surfaced this observation. Chua's insight cautions me against the assumption that the situation in Southeast Asia would necessarily follow a "progressive" route towards the "sophistication" of photobook ecologies in UK and the USA. It is more likely that the photobook phenomenon in different parts of Southeast Asia would evolve according to its particular dynamic, shaped by local and global factors.



On the ground, there is now a small but lively ecology of making and buying photobooks in Indonesia, centred at (but not limited to) Jakarta. This would suggest that a similar movement should have emerged in Manila, given that the two capital cities share many commonalities. And yet, it is hard to make this claim. A quick mapping of recent photobook publications between the two cities reveals an obvious lag in Manila (Zhuang, 2019a, p151–153, p157). This is despite the head start that the Philippines enjoyed with the fall of Marcos in 1986, which heralded a spate of modestly produced photobooks that portrayed political and societal issues in an unflinching manner (Zhuang, 2016, p331–333, p337-338, 2019a, p155–157). Somehow, the momentum was lost at some point in time, possibly to the proliferation of coffee table books during the 1990s.

The *absence* of a similar movement prompted me to activate the trajectory of Asian inter-referencing to *compare* the different initiatives that tried to embed the photobook phenomenon in Manila and Jakarta (Zhuang, 2019a, p150–159). Most of the photobook initiatives in Manila are short-lived or one-off (Zhuang, 2019a, p157). Some practitioners argue for the need to learn from the publishing/printing standards of Tokyo or London, sidestepping questions like whether the cost to sustain these standards would limit the domestic reach of their photobooks. The unglamorous work of generating the desires to make or purchase photobooks has not been taken up seriously by anyone or any organisation in Manila, unlike the interventions of PannaFoto Institute or GFJA in Indonesia. Since 2000, the groundwork undertaken by these organisations and other respected interlocutors in Java (in organising talks and bazaars, and in making zines, catalogues, book dummies and photobooks) has gradually cultivated a sense of affinity amongst photographers, designers, buyers, sellers and printers (Zhuang, 2019a, p150–154, p158). This has created a local

ecology of multiple stakeholders that is not dependent on foreign buyers to keep it going. A degree of *aspiration*, *resonance* and *competition* was also at work on the regional level between 2012 and 2014 when practitioners from Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore mirrored one another's initiatives to embed the photobook phenomenon locally (Zhuang, 2016, p440, 2019a, p152).

In 2017, I encouraged Photobook Club Manila to *cite* and replicate Buku Fotografi Indonesia's initiative, since 2011, to crowdsource the history of Indonesian photobooks from its Facebook group members (Zhuang, 2019a, p151, p158-159). In the Philippines, the initiative fizzled out before it could gain any traction, suggesting at least two possibilities—that the Filipino practitioners were less willing to share their knowledge, or that the photobook had yet to become relevant as a format that they could aspire in terms of showcasing work. This is in contrast to the surge of photobooks being made over the past decade in Indonesia, signalling a discernible shift in mindset among its practitioners in recognising the photobook as an acknowledged format, other than mounting an exhibition, to present their work (Zhuang, 2019a, p151, p152-153, p155). While I have publicly said on several occasions in Manila that the experiences of Indonesian practitioners might be of greater relevance to them, it remains to be seen whether the Filipinos would shift their focus from Japan or the USA to their neighbours in Southeast Asia.

## **1.2 Concept of Embeddedness**

The concept of embeddedness informs the proposition of documenting as a way of writing photography.

The concept incorporates John Clark's (1998, p49) idea of transfer, which "involves the sending from one art culture and the reception and re-production in another of artworks, their styles and techniques, and their artists; their secondary mediators such as critics and art merchants; their elite; and variously broad, mass publics". Transfer involves, at its very first stage, assimilation in the receiving art culture. Its subsequent redeployment at the receiving side involves transformation and translation, possibly to the extent that the sending art culture might not be able to understand it anymore. Clark's idea is pitched at art historiography and does not account for the imprint of those who are portrayed in art for its transfer.

As an extension, I find useful Karen Strassler's (2010, p23) metaphor of refraction, which refers to the process in which "everyday encounters with photographs entangle widely shared visions with affectively charged personal narratives and memories". The metaphor clarifies her interest in the popular in photography, which is not necessarily "*opposed* to (outside of or in resistance to) the 'official' or the 'elite' [author's italics]". This allows her to fold into her research salon photography and student documentation of the *reformasi*, popular practices that are not always accounted seriously in art historiography. My desire to treat different photographic practices with equal interest through the trajectory of archiving/mapping echoes Strassler's invocation of the popular. Furthermore, there is nothing to suggest that an artist or photographer could only draw her or his influences from acclaimed masters or museum art, and never from popular or even crass culture (Zhuang, 2016, p14).

According to Strassler (2010, p26), refraction illuminates the "processes of redirection and transformation that occur as ways of seeing, modes of interpretation, and habits of practice attached to one photographic genre or representational form refract within another". In this

way, refraction recognises the imprint of the users and producers of photographic practices who intervene in their form, function and meaning.

The concept of embeddedness points to the malleability of photography in its form, function and meaning. It focuses on the discourses and practices surrounding photography that result from the contingency of transfer and refraction at a particular time and place. It foregrounds the circuitous route through which these discourses and practices become embedded. On the ground, these discourses and practices continue to be referenced, contested and reshaped through the imprint of individuals and institutions who use photography. This is where the concept of embeddedness intersects the concept of embodiment. The embodied experiences of practitioners who make photographic work constitute a crucial modality by which different practices become embedded across Southeast Asia. Their embodied experiences help them develop the discourses to contextualise their practices. This is also applicable to the photographed persons or the viewers of photographs, whose embodied experiences help them develop the knowhow to use and talk about photography.

As a way of writing photography, documenting uses the trajectories of ethnography/oral history and archiving/mapping to surface the embedding of these discourses and practices. To do so, it may entail, amongst other possibilities, posing specific questions to the interviewees or mapping the genealogy of how different periodicals utilised photography in the 1950s. The trajectory of Asian inter-referencing can be used to distil the conditions that propel or inhibit the embedding of discourses and practices in two (or more) locales within Southeast Asia. I have illustrated this in the aforementioned example of inter-referencing the photobook phenomenon in Manila and Jakarta. In chapter three of this commentary, I would illustrate how the concept of embeddedness, which informs documenting as a way of writing

photography, could bring about a different nuance to the historiography of salon photography in Southeast Asia.

### **1.3 Concept of Embodiment**

The concept of embodiment informs the proposition of documenting in both its dimensions, as a way of writing photography and a way of making work. It is shaped by my experience as a photographer, which I would explicate in chapter two.

The concept of embodiment accounts for the embodied experiences of the photographer and the photographed person(s) who collaborate in the photographic encounter. It is informed by the greater scrutiny that colonial and anthropological images have come under since the 1970s, prompting attentive anthropologists to reconsider them as collaborative events inflicted by the expectations of not only the ethnographer and/or the commissioned photographer, but also that (or those) of the photographed person(s) (Pinney, 2011, p112–119; Edwards, 2015, p241). That crisis of representation “opened the possibility that affect was evidence, and that embodiment, emotion, materiality were culturally dynamic modes of being in the world” (Edwards, 2015, p239–240). Here, Elizabeth Edwards (2015, p236) uses the term “affect” to indicate the “subjectivities of experience, embodiment and emotion of all parties to the anthropological encounter”.

The affect is what embodiment foregrounds in the photographic encounter. The concept of embodiment directs my focus on the photographed person(s), recognising and foregrounding their imprint on the image-making and meaning-making processes of the photographic encounter. In Java, for instance, customers utilised the “theatre-space [of photo studios] for the projection of possible selves”, modulated through their choice of “pose, costume, and

[studio] backdrop” (Strassler, 2010, p77–80). Strassler (2010, p88–89) also registers their preference for colour backdrops during the 1950s, even though it was only possible to produce black-and-white photographs. Clearly, the experience of going to the studios to be photographed was as important as receiving the resulting photographs.

The concept of embodiment also accounts for the affect of the photographer in the photographic encounter. It continues to recognise the “lively impulse” of documentary work today (Rosler, 2004, p228). Photographer Stuart Franklin (2016, p5) calls our “documentary impulse” the “passion to record”, which is driven throughout human history by “curiosity, outrage, reform, ritual, self-assertion and the expression of power”. In an essay not included in this portfolio, I have used the example of Loke Hong Seng (b. 1943, Singapore) to illustrate how his street photography work from 1965 to the early 1980s helped him develop an embodied concern for the people whom he photographed. Otherwise, there was little to motivate Loke to make repeated trips to produce images when he was already gainfully employed as a radio broadcaster (Zhuang, 2015b, p58).

In the next chapter, to continue unfolding the proposition of documenting, I would use my experience of making photographic work to delineate the affect of the photographic encounter. I would do so by interfacing the concept of embodiment with the performative.

#### **1.4 Documenting Philippine Photography**

In this closing section, let me illustrate how I have used documenting, as a way of writing photography, to produce the Philippine chapter of *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey*. I will discuss how embeddedness and embodiment have helped me conceptualise photography and its practices during the process of preparing and writing the chapter.

Even though I had done a few email interviews with Filipino practitioners in 2004 and 2006, my first interviews in Manila were made in May 2009. The fieldwork stint surfaced some of the issues that inflicted the writing of photography in Southeast Asia, including the propensity towards a linear historiography to valorise a specific institution or to promote particular practices as the contemporary (Zhuang, 2016, p315–316), and the looming spectre of the craft-concept dichotomy (Zhuang, 2016, p323). The former served to sideline the intermittent attempts made during the 1950s and 1960s by modern art venues like Philippine Art Gallery (PAG) and Gallery Indigo to showcase works by photojournalists and documentary photographers (Gallery Indigo, 1967; Zhuang, 2016, p315, p319-320). The latter resurfaced during a seminal exhibition in 1974, titled *Otherwise Photography*, co-curated by Ray Albano and Marian Pastor Roces at the CCP (Manahan, 1974; Zhuang, 2016, p323). The craft-concept dichotomy feeds into the documentary-conceptual binary through which different Filipino practitioners situate their photographic practices (Zhuang, 2016, p325). That realisation surfaced during fieldwork, through the trajectory of ethnography/oral history. Earlier, I mentioned Albano’s attempt to destabilise the dualisms that inflicted Philippine photography. I have also used the binary to organise the Philippine chapter, with the disclaimer that I have no interest in privileging any kind of photographic practice. Through the trajectory of archiving/mapping discourses and practices, I hope to level out the increasing rate at which certain photographic practices are being commodified as contemporary art and resurface commonalities that exist among practitioners across the divide. I also use the trajectory to temper, in a limited way, the centrality of Manila in the historiography of art and photography by briefly surfacing practitioners based in other parts of the Philippines (Zhuang, 2016, p317–319, p334-337).

I focus substantially on the practices of photojournalism and documentary photography, which are not always afforded the same level of attention that curators, gallerists and art historians direct towards contemporary photography. In part, this entails drawing up their genealogies, at least since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, primarily through the archiving/mapping of printed materials (periodicals, exhibition catalogues and photobooks) showcasing the work of practitioners who might not be with us anymore (Zhuang, 2016, p315, p317-320, p481n1-4, p482n23). The trajectory of ethnography/oral history becomes more relevant when trying to connect the earlier practitioners with those who emerged since the 1960s. An important route through which photographic knowhow has been embedded occurs within the family, between father and son, or amongst siblings—like the Sepe brothers who learnt photography while getting involved in activism (Zhuang, 2016, p321–322, p348).

This way of learning through experience reaffirms the relevance of embodiment in conceptualising photography. The practitioners' embodied experiences (in photography) mediate the embedding of photographic practices and help them develop the discourses to contextualise their work. In the proposition of documenting, the trajectory of ethnography/oral history strives to surface these discourses.

During fieldwork, I remember being taken aback by the ferocity in which some photographers defended what it meant to pursue photojournalism or documentary photography in the Philippines. In part, the issue concerns the distance and autonomy that photojournalism/documentary photography should maintain in the face of political power (Zhuang, 2016, p325, p330-331). Sometimes, these contestations take the form of photographers staking their lineages or marking their foes (Zhuang, 2016, p338–339). The concept of embeddedness suggests that the affinities and fissures amongst photographers



reveal the different circuits through which photographic practices become embedded in the Philippines. With that in mind, I proposed a framework to delineate the possibilities of Philippine documentary photography since the 1980s, based on the work of three influential practitioners.

The practices of Sonny Yabao (b. 1943, Visayas) and Alex Baluyut (b. 1956, Manila) are often thought to be antithetical. Jes Aznar (b. 1975, Manila), a younger practitioner whom I also interviewed, characterised Yabao and Baluyut as the yin and yang of Philippine photojournalism (Zhuang, 2016, p326). In his younger days, Baluyut was more aggressive, frequently taking Yabao to task for accepting commissions from the Marcos administration, even labelling him a propagandist (Zhuang, 2016, p330–334). Baluyut earned his credentials when he left his job at Associated Press to give himself a four-month self-funded “assignment” to photograph the New People’s Army (NPA) in Mindanao in 1983. An incredibly complex region, Mindanao has long captured the imagination of Manila-based photographers, partly because of the insurgencies that have displaced millions since the late 1960s (Zhuang, 2016, p340–341, p345-346, p378-380). In his active days, Baluyut was reckless and hard-nosed, earning the reputation of never shirking dangerous assignments. In contrast, Yabao speaks of his provincial upbringing and his love for literature (Zhuang, 2016, p325–330). Beyond the commissions he took to feed his family, Yabao describes his practice as an attempt to fuse the decisive moment of Henri Cartier-Bresson with the magic realism of Gabriel García Márquez. Despite Baluyut’s animosity, he shared affinities with Yabao. Both of them were drawn to photography through their exposure to *Life* magazine and the humanist perspective that informed its famed contributors (Zhuang, 2016, p330). While Yabao gravitated towards Cartier-Bresson, Baluyut became enamoured by the unflinching

vision of W. Eugene Smith. This would partially account for the fissure between their practices.

In the spirit of archiving/mapping, I include within the framework the practice of Tommy Hafalla (b. 1957, Baguio). The indigenous cultures at Gran Cordillera Central have long captivated photographers, from Dean C. Worcester (1866-1924), Secretary of the Interior in the Philippines from 1901 to 1913, to the iconic Eduardo Masferré (1909-2007, b. Sagada), born to a Spanish father and a Kankana-ey mother (Zhuang, 2016, p318–319). Since the 1980s, Hafalla has committed his life to the documenting of indigenous cultures by immersing himself at Sagada (Zhuang, 2016, p334–337). He tries very hard to demarcate himself from Masferré, using the trope of distance to suggest that the Cordillera peoples did not accept him completely. In contrast, on his Facebook, one could find photographs of Hafalla in “tribal” wear, with or without his camera, in an embodiment of his insider status. In fact, both of them shared the same motivation to record for posterity the “pristine” world of the Gran Cordillera Central. In his eagerness to justify his insider status, it would be a challenge for Hafalla to resist the inclination to photograph the Cordillera peoples as “what they should be”, instead of “what they are now”. This is how his work has become refracted by and bounded to Masferré’s practice.

Let me unfold the framework of documentary photography that I first proposed in the Philippine chapter (Zhuang, 2016, p327). The framework is an ongoing attempt to visualise the embedding of documentary photography and its discourses since the 1980s. It surfaces the references and affinities of the photographers, the issues that have concerned them and the different responses in their practices. The framework is informed by the concept of embeddedness. It could be used to establish genealogies of practices and practitioners across

generations. It is clear that the humanist perspective, embedded through *Life* magazine, served as an important reference for Yabao and Baluyut. Today, it continues to shape the practices of photographers like Jes Aznar (Zhuang, 2016, p345–348). The framework also suggests that places like Gran Cordillera Central and Mindanao have always drawn Manila-based photographers. However, the act of photographing indigenous cultures quickly raises the question of authenticity and the issue of speaking on behalf of those being photographed. The other issue concerns the distance that documentary photographers should maintain, vis-à-vis the imprint of State power on their photographic practices. I categorise these issues as the *trope of distance*.

In the subsequent section, I feature practitioners whose beginnings in documentary photography enjoyed a boost with the fall of Marcos. The trajectory of archiving/mapping justifies my decision to highlight the work of two female photographers, partly to temper with the patriarchal industry of photojournalism. It is possible to place Kat Palasi's (b. 1967, Baguio) work within the lineage of Hafalla or Masferré, but she has always maintained that she is "half in and half out" in her connection to her Ibaloy roots (Zhuang, 2016, p342–344). While she contextualises her work as an embodiment of the Ibaloy tradition of storytelling, Palasi has no desire to prove that she is an expert of her indigenous culture. This is why her Ibaloy photographs look more like family snapshots. She is also less defensive over the fact that the Ibaloy culture is no longer pristine.

In her practice, Nana Buxani (b. 1966, Cotabato) refracts Baluyut's hardnosed view of photography and politics through the aesthetics of Sebastião Salgado, whom she worked for previously as a fixer (Zhuang, 2016, p339–341). Apart from Buxani, Salgado has also made an impression on several key practitioners across Southeast Asia. The uneasy experience of

working as Salgado's fixer compelled Indonesian photographer Erik Prasetya (b. 1958, Padang) to formulate a reflexive way of documenting tailored to the third world condition (Zhuang, 2016, p75–78). In most cases, photographers like Veejay Villafranca (b. 1982, Manila) and Rony Zakaria (b. 1984, Jakarta) have transferred Salgado's influence without question (Zhuang, 2016, p101–103, p348-349). It would be productive, in a future essay, to use the trajectory of Asian inter-referencing to unpack Salgado's imprint on the embedding of documentary practices in Southeast Asia.

In the Philippine chapter, I also pay equal attention to the practitioners who use photography in a conceptual manner. I dedicate a substantial section on the students of artist-educator Roberto Chabet (1937-2013, b. Manila), an influential figure of the conceptual movement since the 1970s. Through the trajectory of ethnography/oral history, it is clear that, despite the documentary-conceptual divide, some of Chabet's students gravitated towards photography precisely because of its capacity to produce a record (Zhuang, 2016, p360–363, p366, p371-372). A good example is Ringo Bunoan (b. 1974, Manila) who uses photography to preserve memories, make art history, produce evidence, record her interventions and interrogate the medium itself (Zhuang, 2016, p355–361). In the case of MM Yu (b. 1978, Manila), her work sits on the demarcating line between the conceptual and the documentary (Zhuang, 2016, p367–371). In a substantial part of her practice, Yu works almost like a street photographer who slices up the world into images. Each image is like a sketch or a thought, a "souvenir of time" that she could take away and add to her archive of the world. She reworks her archive of images for different exhibitions. As an active art organiser, Yu also uses the camera to document the studios, possessions and projects of Philippine artists.

In the chapter, there is also a muted attempt to temper with the inclination amongst some curators and art historians to posit Albano and Chabet as antithetical references (Zhuang, 2016, p321–322, p351). During my fieldwork, Chabet was already in the process of being “rediscovered” through Bunoan’s research for the Asia Art Archive in HK, bringing increased visibility to him and his students. However, the trajectories of ethnography/oral history and archiving/mapping have also surfaced practitioners who come to the conceptual through other routes or genealogies (Zhuang, 2016, p322, p374-380).

Nap Jamir II (b. 1952, Manila), for instance, acknowledges the support that he received from Albano and Chabet when he first experimented in photography during the early 1970s (Zhuang, 2016, p319, p322-324). However, he had enjoyed a head start, growing up in the artistic household that his parents had created. His father, architect Nap Jamir, Sr (1917-95), had already held, by the end of 1952, two solo exhibitions at PAG and was known for his German sensibility. He encouraged his son to tap into his subscription of *Life* magazine, and his knowledge of lenses and photochemistry. It was a mixture of the mutinous spirit of youth, the search for altered consciousness through drug use and his burgeoning interest in experimental filmmaking that turned Nap Jamir II to conceptual photography. Drawing from his interest in Beat literature and Surrealism, Jamir used his work to rebel against the taste and conventionality of society, and also to outdo his father.

In comparison, Poi Beltran’s (b. 1982, Manila) involvement in filmmaking led her to photography (Zhuang, 2016, p380–382). She locates her photographic taste between the polarities of the “deadpan landscapes” associated with the Düsseldorf School of Photography and the hardboiled world visualised by Daido Moriyama and Araki. Intriguingly, she maps them onto the contrasting film styles of Lav Diaz (b. 1958, Datu Paglas) and Roxlee (b. 1950,

Naga, Camarines Sur), key figures of Philippine cinema, as a way to embed her photographic practice. Other than Beltran and Jamir, Buxani and Lena Cobangbang (b. 1976, Manila) also narrate their photographic practices through their experience or fascination with filmmaking (Zhuang, 2016, p340, p365-366). The recourse of filmmaking has provided Filipino practitioners the possibility either to interface photography with filmmaking or to appropriate its discourses to embed their photographic practices.

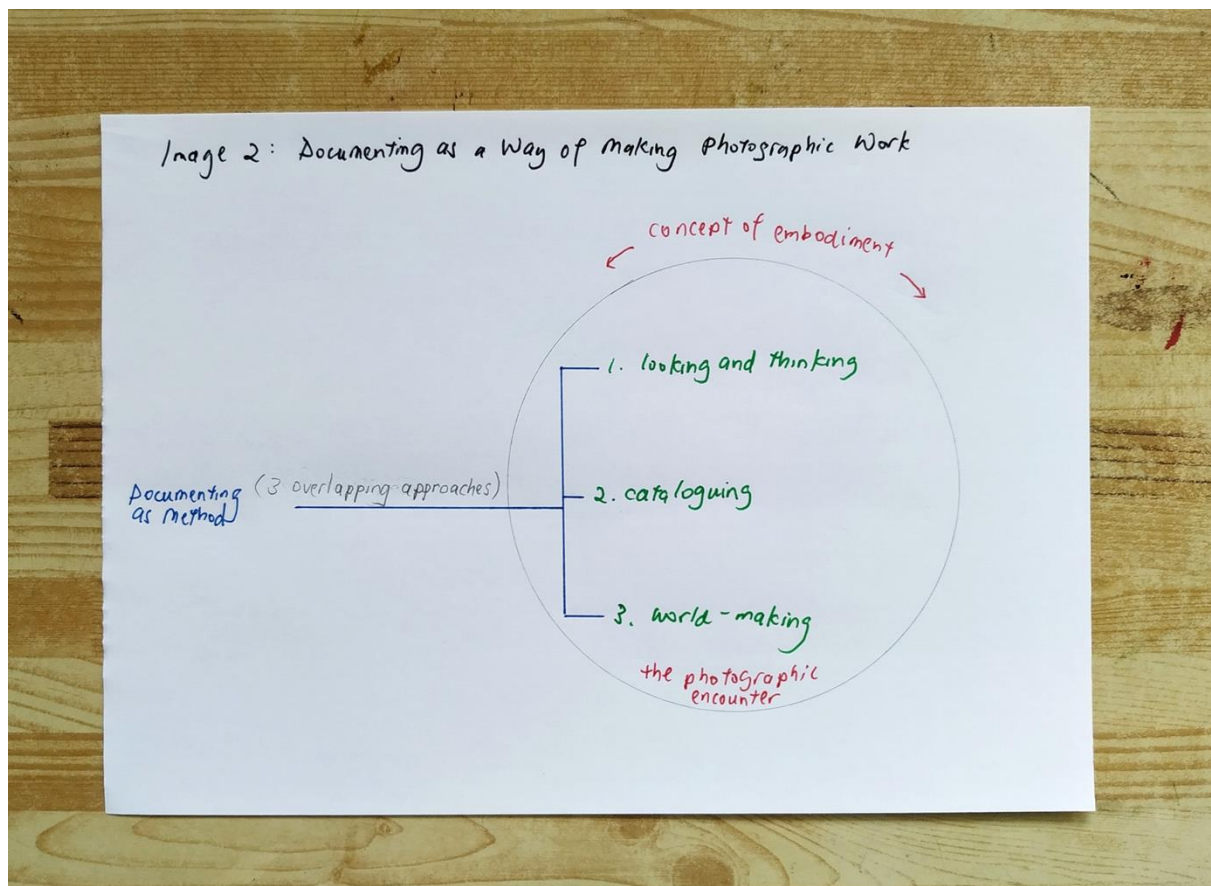
## CHAPTER 2: CHINESE MUSLIMS IN INDONESIA

Question 2: How does documenting apply to the making of photographic work? How has my experience as the writer-photographer in *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia* (2007-09) shaped the proposition of documenting and the concept of embodiment?

### 2.1 Documenting as a Way of Making Work

I first introduced the proposition of documenting, as a way of making photographic work, in the catalogue essay for CMPF 2015 (Zhuang, 2015a). The essay is included in this portfolio.

As a way of making work, documenting as method consists of at least three overlapping approaches, namely: (1) documenting as looking and thinking, (2) documenting as cataloguing, and (3) documenting as world-making (image 2).



The first approach is based on a quote from Cambodian artist Vandy Rattana (b. 1980, Phnom Penh, Cambodia) (Vandy and Gawewong, 2013, p108–109) who states: “Documenting is a question of the repeat cycle of looking and thinking.”<sup>2</sup> It was while shooting *Walking Through* (2008-09), a series on the mismanagement of Cambodia’s rubber resources, when Vandy first stumbled upon a bomb pond at the Kampong Cham countryside (Zhuang, 2016, p255–258). The image triggered his frantic reading into Cambodian history, only to realise that these craters resulted from American bombings during the Second Indochina War. The “repeat cycle of looking and thinking” led to Vandy’s visualisation of Cambodia’s historical scars in *Bomb Ponds* (2009).

The second approach concerns the acts of collecting and cataloguing. Its connection to the “repeat cycle of looking and thinking” is illustrated by Chua Chye Teck’s (b. 1974, Singapore) consummate act of redeeming the detritus of Singapore, the epitome of the perpetually modernising polity, through the act of retrieving, collecting and cataloguing (Zhuang, 2016, p413–417). In reiterating the constant need to study the photographs he made, Chua suggests that photography is not merely a recording tool but an enabling medium to make visible his obsessions as a human being (Zhuang, 2015a).

The third approach references the work of visual anthropologists on photo studio portraiture, foregrounding its logic of “world creating” rather than “world duplicating” (Pinney, 1997, p149; Strassler, 2010, p79). I expand this invocation of the *world* onto the photographic

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<sup>2</sup> In his curating of African photography, Okwui Enwezor (2006, p28) characterised the shift from the modern to the contemporary as the evolution from depiction to observation, from the dialectical to the analytical. Hence, he utilised the term “documentary” to refer to a reflexive and analytical mode of working, marking its departure from the “purely mnemonic and identity-based function” of photography. By foregrounding Vandy’s quote, documenting as method problematises the progressive schema that Enwezor used to demarcate the modern and the contemporary.



encounter, in general, which could become affirmative, reassuring or fantastical through the collaborative effort of the photographer and the photographed person(s).<sup>3</sup>

## 2.2 Revisiting *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia*

More recently, I have revisited a self-initiated photo project, titled *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia* (2007-2009). The work was published as a photobook in 2011 by Select Publishing, Singapore. The reflective essay that I subsequently published on *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* [IACS] journal, titled “Photography and Chineseness: Reflections on *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia*”, is included in this portfolio (Zhuang, 2019b).



Image 3: *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia* photobook, published in 2011 by Select Publishing, Singapore

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<sup>3</sup> In the CMPF essay and *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey*, both of which included in this portfolio, I highlight the practices of two photographers to illustrate the world-making approach of documenting (Zhuang, 2015a, 2016, p310–312, p345). In *Second Star to the Right* (2012-13), Geric Cruz (b. 1985, Manila) collaborated with two brothers whom he met at Zambales by actively incorporating their desires and decisions throughout the documenting and editing process. In *A Soldiers' Garden* (2012), Nguyễn Quốc Thành (b. 1970, Hanoi) made portraits of newly recruited soldiers at Battalion 261 of the Vietnamese air force. The portraits embodied his desires for these uniformed men, while the soldiers participated in that encounter probably through a mixture of naivety, boredom and pride. By interfacing his desires with the issue of ethics, Nguyễn continued to evolve his documenting practice to modulate the relationship (the trope of distance) between the photographer and the photographed person(s).

The *IACS* essay unfolds the process of interfacing my embodied experience of making *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia* with the proposition of documenting. In the essay, I posit that documenting opens up a collaborative space for the photographer and the photographed person(s) to perform their desires in the photographic encounter. The photographic encounter is shaped by ideas and visuals that circulate locally and globally. It is marked by the personal desires and creative decisions of the photographer and the photographed person(s). This is documenting as world-making, the third approach of documenting, as a way of making work (Zhuang, 2019b, p125–126). The experience of making work also entailed the first approach of documenting as looking and thinking. It compelled me to tweak my method on-the-ground, which necessitated further reading. In the *IACS* essay, I revisit the photographs to surface the affect and desires of the photographed persons and/or the photographer (myself) in the photographic encounter (Zhuang, 2019b, p110–113, p115-118, p124-125, p127-128).

In this chapter, to continue unfolding the proposition of documenting, I would use my experience of making photographic work to delineate the affect of the photographic encounter. I would do so by interfacing the concept of embodiment with the performative.

The notion that image production by social researchers is, to some extent, collaborative prompts me to reappraise my work (Banks, 2001, p119–122). The decision is also guided by the practical concerns of access. It should not be misconstrued as an act of self-indulgence. As the maker of *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia*, I remain privy to its “external narrative”, the “social context that produced the image, and the social relations within which the image is embedded at any moment of viewing” (Banks, 2001, p11). As such, I am able to expose the external narrative to subsequent scrutiny, grounding the proposition of documenting through the experience of making work. This reappraisal also follows Sarah Pink’s (2001, p19) call to

foreground subjectivity as the “central aspect of ethnographic knowledge, interpretation and representation”.

A tangential aim here is to activate the trajectory of Asian inter-referencing to incorporate into the proposition the relevant experiences of practitioners whom I have written about in Southeast Asia. In this way, documenting as method remains open to intervention by other practitioners.

### 2.2.1 Conceptualising the Project

I started working as a freelance writer-photographer in 2003. By the end of 2006, I had come to realise that stories concerning disasters, refugees and sex work constituted the recurring repertoire of themes pursued by photojournalists and documentary photographers. Since 2007, I have redirected my photographic practice on the histories and cultures of longstanding “Chinese” communities within Southeast Asia. As a Singaporean classified by the State as Chinese (even though my known ancestors had come from Quanzhou, Zengcheng, Bengkalis and Sri Lanka), the decision makes me a partial insider and a partial outsider. I want to foreground the trope of distance (in this case, the insider-outsider dynamic) in my practice and formulate a working method beyond the duress of the photojournalism industry.<sup>4</sup> That was the pretext for proposing a three-year project on the Chinese Muslims in Indonesia.

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<sup>4</sup> Indigenous photographers do not guarantee a better portrayal of the majority world, partly because they often share the same aspirations as their developed world colleagues to work for the same magazines and agencies or to be validated by the same awards, all of which centred at the metropole (Clark, 2009, p122–125). In Indonesia, photographer Erik Prasetya (b. 1958, Padang, Sumatra) proposes a reflexive way of documenting tailored to the third world condition (Zhuang, 2016, p75–78). With the help of his wife, feminist author Ayu Utami (b. 1968, Bogor), Erik puts forth *banal aesthetics* as an ethical proposition to address the class of the photographer and his undeniable debt, in the photographic encounter, of representing the photographed person(s). It recognises that most photographers are of the middle class, but they display a fetish for the lower and upper sectors of society in what they shoot. Erik and Ayu (2014) note that a photographer working under the duress of assignment deadlines often arrives at the field merely to fit the photographed person(s) to his aesthetics. In response, banal aesthetics is a proposition to always foreground the question of subject-object (the trope of distance) in his

While conceptualising the project, I was wary of replicating well-worn stereotypes concerning the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. Following Hamilton (2006, p55–83) but in a less systematic way, I created a mental picture of the tropes that recur in the photographic reportage of Chineseness in Southeast Asia (Zhuang, 2019b, p120–121). On the other hand, my visits (2004, 2006 and 2009) to Chobi Mela, the longstanding photofestival operating out of Dhaka, brought me in contact with photographers and audiences who were wary of how Islam had been portrayed in international media. I register a few of these visual clichés in the *IACS* essay (Zhuang, 2019b, p121).

In the essay, I detail my method of documenting in *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia* (Zhuang, 2019b, p122–125). Research writings related to the topic provided the theory to conceptualise the project in terms of where to visit, who to interview and what to photograph (Becker, 2006, p223).<sup>5</sup> In my work, I focused on the daily routine of the Chinese Muslims and refrained from reverting to the common strategy (amongst photographers) of overemphasising the rituals and symbols of their religiosity and/or ethnicity. The decision stemmed partly from the lingering imprint of humanist photography on my work, especially its ethos of solidarity and equality, its celebration of “the ordinary, the everyday, the unremarked”, but not its moralising and universalising tendencies (Hamilton, 2006, p41–42).

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practice, to photograph sections of the society not considered as his Other, and to work without being trapped by the pressure of assignments. Erik adds that it would be naïve to expect banal aesthetics to solve the dilemma of objectification in photography. His hope is to cultivate among Indonesian photographers a growing awareness of the issues involved.

<sup>5</sup> Based on the literature review, I realised then that if I looked for Chinese Muslims in Indonesia today, most of them would be *muallaf* (recent converts). Those who had lived in the archipelago since the 15<sup>th</sup> century would have long merged with the *pribumi* (“indigenous”) (The, 1965, p69–76). Since it would be impossible to go back in time, I had to find creative solutions to visualise their histories. I structured the project in three directions (Zhuang, 2019b, p107–108, p122–125). The first involved photographing historical monuments and holy places related to these early communities. The second involved tracking down *pribumi* Indonesians who were open about their Chinese ancestry. The third involved documenting the lives of first or second-generation converts. The geographic scope of the project spanned Bangka Island, Palembang in South Sumatra, different places in Java and the Sumenep Regency on Madura Island.

Caroline Knowles (2003) adds that race/ethnicity is lodged within the mundane interaction and social landscape of everyday life, made and sustained through stories, corporeality and comportment. In my work, the focus was on experiencing their routine interactions with family members, friends, neighbours, colleagues and strangers. I wanted to visualise their subjectivities—at home, at work and at play.<sup>6</sup>

Interviewing the Chinese Muslims in Indonesia from 2008 to 2009 for his PhD fieldwork, political scientist Hew Wai Weng (2018, p32) refrained from imposing the label of “Chinese Muslim” on his informants, allowing instead for their diverse identifications and narratives to emerge. In my work, their everyday routine also helped to surface their other identities (i.e. class, profession, gender, amongst others), which did not always intersect their ethnicity and/or religiosity.

Taking a long-term approach in making work; freeing myself from the need to capture the most graphic image to secure assignments or to submit for Euro-American contests; never stealing or forcing a shot; never pretending to be uninvested politically (vis-à-vis the “Chinese problem” in Indonesia); conceiving my practice as a concurrent attempt to unpack my “Chineseness”—these decisions shaped the making of *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia*. They articulated my desires and concerns then as a photographer. The experience of spending time with the Chinese Muslims provided the context for the “repeat cycle of looking and thinking”. On the ground, the cycle helped to reshape these decisions and my method of documenting.

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<sup>6</sup> In this sense, I adopted a different approach to that of Terence Heng (2010) who relied upon the “use and assessment of aesthetic markers” in “acts of ethnic taste” as visual cues to photograph and stage his investigation on the performances of Chineseness in Singapore wedding rituals. I remain wary that such an approach would loop us back to the impression that Chinese people should, for instance, do or fancy “Chinese” things. Whether they cohere or differ from that norm, it still implies an eternal, unchanging Chineseness.

In the *IACS* essay, I am too hasty in recasting the reactivity that inflicts sociological research as the authentic outcome of the photographic encounter (Zhuang, 2019b, p126–127). In making the project, I did not exploit the photographed person’s inability to stop my work to take a few more photographs. There was little incentive to force a dramatic shot because my photographs were no longer tailored for contest submission or editorial pitch. In that sense, I never missed a shot. In practice, there is usually a threshold, which may not be immediately marked, but when the photographer crosses it, the photographed person usually has the chance to flag the intrusion when one is no longer occupied by the matter at hand. If documenting opens up an experiential space, this is where these negotiations of boundary-making would occur. However, this is also predicated on the relationship that the photographer and the photographed person(s) established at the onset of the photographic encounter. If a photographer suddenly appears to take advantage of the photographed person (who, for instance, might be affected by a disaster), this discussion of the ethics of documenting would obviously be redundant.

### 2.2.2 Documenting, Embodiment and the Performative

Let me continue to unfold the proposition of documenting by interfacing the concept of embodiment with the performative.

Judith Butler (1988, p521) proposes that the “body *is* a historical situation ... and is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and *reproducing* a historical situation [author’s italics]”. In her words, embodiment “manifests a set of strategies or ... a style of being”, which is “never fully self-styled, for living styles have a history, and that history conditions and limits possibilities”.

Her work helps me connect the performative with the concept of embodiment, directing my

focus onto the bodies of the photographer and the photographed person(s) in relation to their performing of corporeal styles, which are conditioned by history and conventions.

As Stuart Hall (1996, p4) noted, we should think of identity as performative: “not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves”. In other words, identities are “constituted within, not outside representation”. Hall’s insight helps me foreground the photographic encounter in the proposition of documenting, where the photographer and the photographed person(s) embody their corporeal styles and experience the representation of their identities. Knowles (2006, p518) adds that photography’s capacity to “reveal the *unspoken* and the *unspeakable* aspects of routine lives” makes it a useful tool to capture “race as live performance: race as people *do* it rather than verbally articulate it [author’s italics]”.

As a way of making work, documenting constitutes at least two performative agents—the photographer and the photographed person(s). Their intersubjectivity shapes the experience of the photographic encounter and the photographs that result from it. The proposition of documenting provides the opportunity for the photographer and the photographed person(s) to perform their corporeal styles and experience their identity-making through the encounter. This is the approach of documenting as world-making. Both parties reaffirm or confound their expected roles (styled by historical/prevaling conventions of appearance, behaviour and belief) during the photographic encounter. They embody their desires and aspirations in the encounter. They also perform in anticipation of what the other party desires from this experience. They do not only take on singular identities during the photographic encounter. The photographer and the photographed person(s) can oscillate between the roles of object

and subject, confounding the trope of distance that separates them.<sup>7</sup> This has become even more commonplace with the proliferation of mobile phone cameras, which makes the photographer who arrives at the encounter an object immediately photographable by the person who is supposed to be photographed.

### 2.2.3 The Photographer's Corporeal Styles

At the onset of documenting, the photographer's physical appearance (embodying corporeal styles like gender, ethnicity or profession) may prompt the photographed person(s) to make any number of assumptions about her or him (Banks, 2001, p136n7; Heng, 2017, p18–19, p43-46). The photographer's nationality, class, language proficiency and religiosity, alongside the aforementioned styles, may also be foregrounded in the photographic encounter, affecting its outcome (in terms of photographs), and confounding/reaffirming expectations that the photographed person(s) may have formed of the photographer.

To understand how the photographer's corporeal styles might affect the photographic encounter, it is productive to inter-reference Hew Wai Weng's (2018, p29–35) fieldwork experience. As a non-Muslim Chinese Malaysian, Hew's ethnicity and command of Mandarin helped forge closer ties with some of his interviewees, allowing them to be more candid in sharing their "real" motives for conversion and their "un-Islamic" practices at home. It also prompted some of them to emphasise their Chineseness in his presence. However, most of his interviews were conducted in Indonesian. In the field, I knew that my rudimentary command of Bahasa Indonesia would present a major obstacle to my work. If the respondents could not speak English or Mandarin, I would bring along a translator for the

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<sup>7</sup> There were a few occasions when the Chinese Muslim whom I was photographing met another Muslim friend. The friend would point to me and ask the photographed person if I were a Muslim. The common reply was: "*Belum* [not yet]." In that way, my role as the object of the Chinese Muslim's *dakwah* (religious proselytising) would become foregrounded in the photographic encounter.



interviews. After the interview, when I spent time with the Chinese Muslims experiencing their daily lives, I would often work alone.

The concept of embodiment foregrounds the experience of spending time with the photographed person(s) in the photographic encounter. If permission were given, the embodied encounter allowed me to traverse the public and private spaces of the photographed person(s), which helped to compensate for the language barrier. Even though he also used participant observation in his fieldwork, which brought Hew to the social gatherings and public events of the Chinese Muslims, it is unclear if he had spent equal time in their home environment observing their “private” lives. In my experience, visiting the home environment during the photographic encounter might help to visualise the class, sociality and family life of the photographed person(s).

There was at least one instance when my non-Muslim identity became an explicit barrier to my work. At Tuban, I was halfway into my interview with H. Rudi Rijanto (b. 1969, Tuban) when he stopped to ask for my religion. When I told him I was an atheist, he stopped the interview immediately. His closing quote to me was: “If you are Muslim, we are brothers—if you are sick, I am also sick. But if not, then sorry.” In that instance, my non-Muslim identity made me an outsider and cut short the encounter prematurely, despite our common ethnicity. However, it is unclear if Rudi would have asked for my religion if I looked *pribumi* or “indigenous”. There were a few other instances when my request to interview and photograph a potential respondent was declined. At that time, I interpreted the rejections as their desire to keep a low profile in a State where the ethnic Chinese have been excessively marked, especially during times of political or economic duress (Purdey, 2006). On hindsight, I realise they might have rejected my request because they did not feel Islamic or

Chinese enough (Hew, 2018, p32n19). In most instances, the people whom I approached readily agreed to be involved in the project.

#### 2.2.4 The Photographed Person: Performing Identities, Embodying Desires

As a way of making work, documenting as method foregrounds the collaborative nature of the photographic encounter, in which the photographer's presence signals the opportunity for the photographed person to perform her or his corporeal styles and experience the identity-making process. Through the encounter, the photographed person also embodies her or his aspirations and desires.

In his work, Hew (2018, p228) differentiates between conversion motives ("personal and private affairs") and conversion narratives ("public stories tailored to suit audiences") of the Chinese Muslims, underscoring the performative function of the latter. Islamic conversion is "both a religious experience, and an on-going process of social transformation and cultural negotiation", which likely involves the "changing of personal practices and appearance, such as diet, dress, social networks, cultural identification, political affiliations" (Hew, 2018, p242). The photographer would be able to record the visible aspects of the corporeal styles of conversion, but the conversion narratives would require the collaboration of the Chinese Muslim to embody in the photographic encounter.



Image 4: Agung Julkifli Mohamad and his mother-in-law, from the *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia* photobook, p78-79

A good example was my encounter with Agung Julkifli Mohamad (b. 1969, Surabaya), a teacher at Tuban who converted to Islam when he married his Javanese wife in 1994 (Zhuang, 2019b, p124–125). Despite his conversion and his eagerness to downplay his partial Chinese ancestry, Agung’s efforts did not make him safer in Indonesia. In 1998, Agung founded an Islamic kindergarten in the suburbs. Sometime in 2002, local residents conspired to destroy the kindergarten for reasons unknown. Thankfully, the local government intervened, and damage was prevented. The incident clearly scarred Agung’s life and he even contemplated converting to Christianity. He would force his wife to cook pork and eat with him. Sometimes, he would hit her with a wooden cross. But she remained steadfast, eventually winning him over. During Idul Adha (religious festival during Hajj to commemorate Ibrahim’s willingness to sacrifice his son for Allah) in 2008, I followed Agung when he visited his mother-in-law, who lived alone in a district of Tuban. As we stepped into the house, Agung immediately dropped to his knees and cried for repentance in front of her (image 4).

While it is common for Muslims to ask for forgiveness from family members, I couldn't help but wonder if my presence with the camera had made his gesture more heartfelt. The fact that Agung revealed his moment of vulnerability helped me visualise the psychological scars he had suffered as a convert. It was his way of interjecting our photographic encounter, marking the kindergarten attack, which I did not see nor photograph, as crucial in consolidating his faith in Islam. That was made clear to me during the interview, when Agung recounted emotionally his experience as a Chinese Muslim.

In the making of *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia*, the photographic encounter also opened up an opportunity for the photographed persons to perform *dakwah* (or preaching), which “involves calling people to the way of truth in all aspects of life” (Chuah, 2002, p14). In the field, Hew (2018, p33–34) experienced three forms of *dakwah*—“direct invitation”, “indirect persuasion” and “non-verbal preaching”. Many Chinese Muslims preferred indirect persuasion: “promoting positive images of Islam, sharing their benefits of being a Muslim, and comparing Islam with their previous religions”. Their generosity and assistance towards Hew constituted the non-verbal expression of *dakwah*. In short, the presence of the fieldworker or photographer materialised the opportunity for *dakwah*. The Chinese Muslims' collaboration in the photographic encounter constituted a form of *dakwah*, directed at me, which allowed them to embody their aspirations of religiosity. However, there is always another audience more prescient, and that is Allah (Zhuang, 2019b, p127). When I photographed Ivan Sasongko (b. 1961) performing *sholat* (ritual prayers performed five times daily) at home, he said to me: “Honestly, I still do not know whether my *sholat* is good or not. I'm not doing *sholat* because you are here. I am doing it for Allah. Only Allah knows.”



Image 5: Bambang Sujanto, from the *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia* photobook, p85

In his research, Hew (2018, p4) argues that the “manifestation of Chinese Muslim cultural identities does not reveal an existing ethno-religious reality, but rather brings a new reality into being”. Its most tangible outcome is the recent proliferation of pagoda-style mosques across certain parts of Indonesia. The most widely known example is Masjid Cheng Hoo, which was inaugurated in Surabaya in 2003. In its intentional mixing of Islamic, Chinese and Javanese elements, the mosque aspires for a new, distinctive Chinese Muslim identity that strives to unite the community throughout Indonesia (Hew, 2018, p86–93). As such, when its founder Bambang Sujanto (b. 1947) generously facilitated my work and allowed me to photograph his daily routine, he used the photographic encounter not only as *dakwah*, but as another opportunity to bring into being his identity as a Chinese Muslim, underscoring the compatibility of Islam and Chineseness (Zhuang, 2019b, p116) (image 5). He demarcated his position from the assimilationist thinking of Haji Junus Jahja (1927-2011) who advocated conversion to Islam as a means to solve the “Chinese problem” in Indonesia.

Despite the facticity of Masjid Cheng Hoo, there is in fact no singular way of *being* a Chinese Muslim because a person's piety and ethnicity are always in active negotiation with practical, everyday realities (Hew, 2018, p236–263). In contrast to Bambang's embodiment of the compatibility of Islam and Chineseness, Agung used the photographic encounter to perform his desire of escaping the prison-house of his ethnicity.



Image 6: Kiagus Mohammad Idris, from the *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia* photobook, p33

When I invited *pribumi* Muslims who were open about their Chinese ancestry (imagined or otherwise) to partake in the photographic encounter, I believe they agreed to do so, partly to project Islam as an inclusive religion. At Palembang, I photographed, on multiple occasions, the extended family of Kiagus Mohammad Idris (b. 1933) who claimed to be the ninth-generation descendent of three Chinese captains who fled to Palembang at the fall of Ming dynasty (Zhuang, 2019b, p127–128) (image 6). At least two of the captains are believed to be Muslims, a claim which is difficult to verify. At any rate, Idris used the photographic encounter to glorify his family history through its association with the Ming captains. He even introduced me to his cousin who had written a thesis about their ancestry. The

photographic encounter also allowed him to assert his family's religiosity and their loyalty to the nation. Idris added: "When the Dutch were still around, they were fearful of us because we are descendants from the Ming captains, and we are strong Muslims."

Idris' family mostly lived around 3 Ulu. At least one Chinese Indonesian in Palembang had told me that the area was quite "rough", wondering why I would go there in the first place. In that sense, the photographic encounter necessitated my embodied crossing of borders dividing the city, dividing its people.

In the *IACS* essay, I suggest that the political imperative of *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia* is to decouple Chineseness from a certain appearance (Zhuang, 2019b, p128). This justifies the inclusion of *pribumi* Indonesians like Idris within the "Chineseness" of the project as a way to complicate local audience's expectations of the corporeal styles of Chineseness. As Hoon Chang-Yau (2008, p2–4) notes, the *pribumi* identity is an artificial construct legalised through the making of the Indonesian nation, folding some 300 different ethnic groups into one "race" while casting the Chinese as its ethnic Other. Conversely, during the New Order, the idea of being Chinese was never clearly defined and was only understood as being non-*pribumi* (Hoon, 2008, p177–178). Not surprisingly, as some Indonesian Chinese try to reassert their identity after the fall of Suharto in 1998, they sometimes end up replicating his racialised discourse by reifying Chineseness along essentialist terms (Chinese must speak Mandarin, for instance) (Hoon, 2008, p178–179; Hew, 2018, p66).

The *pribumi*-Chinese dichotomy continues to structure Indonesian society today. The difference between the two categories is most directly activated through physical appearance. It is often the *pribumi* who remind the Chinese Indonesians that they look Chinese, even

though the latter may no longer identify themselves that way (Natalia Soebagio, 2008, p142). If the othering of the Chinese commonly begins at the level of appearances, it would have to be unmade at the level of visual perception (Zhuang, 2019b, p128).

### **2.3 Concept of Embodiment**

As a way of making work, documenting proposes a method of collaboration between the performative agents of the photographer and the photographed person(s). It is activated through the photographic encounter, which has the potential of traversing the private and public spaces of the photographed person(s). The photographed person might also enter the private space of the photographer, especially when the encounter has resulted in them becoming friends. Conversely, the performative agents have the opportunity to flag any transgression (on their privacy, for instance) during the photographic encounter.

The concept of embodiment informs the proposition of documenting in both its dimensions, as a way of making work and a way of writing photography. By interfacing it with the performative, embodiment foregrounds the affect of the photographic encounter in which the performative agents experience their identity-making through the performing/embodying of their desires and corporeal styles.

In the photographic encounter, the camera is only capable of recording the visible manifestations of the photographed persons' corporeal styles and desires. The intangible and invisible aspects of the encounter elude the camera. However, this does not negate the fact that the performative bodies of the photographer and the photographed person(s) have already entered the encounter at a particular time and place for potential photographs to materialise. The resulting photographs only constitute one possible outcome of the



photographic encounter. Even without making any photographs, the photographic encounter can continue to take place. The performative agents can use the encounter (including its “downtime”) to establish affinities or surface disagreements, simply by spending time together, making small talk or finding out about each other. In this way, the concept of embodiment privileges the affect of the photographic encounter, which might help the photographer and the photographed person(s) change their assumptions of each other. This is how there might still be limited scope for photography to effect change to the lives of the photographer and the photographed person(s) through the experience of documenting (Zhuang, 2016, p424–429).

It is harder to effect attitudinal change amongst viewers of photographs when they do not have the embodied experience of partaking in the photographic encounter. If we are serious about effecting change, we should find ways to heighten their embodied experience of photography. Following Azoulay (2015, p25–27, p222-226), one possibility might be to resist embalming photographs as representation by encouraging the viewers to constantly reinterpret them in different ways.

In relation to the writing of photography, the concept of embodiment cautions against the inclination, amongst some writers, to hollow out the embodied experience of the photographic encounter into a mere transaction between the all-knowing photographer (who is overdetermined in such an account) and the powerless person being photographed (who is robbed of any agency) (Zhuang, 2019b, p125–126). I am not suggesting that we no longer need to interrogate the power relationship between the photographer and the photographed person(s). Instead, we should unpack each situation on a case-by-case basis, without assuming the context of trauma as our starting position. More importantly, we should

reimagine the experience of the photographic encounter (or photography, in general) and unpack the performing/embodying of corporeal styles and desires between the photographer and (if possible) the photographed person(s). The photographic encounter is also the experiential space where the performative agents embed prevailing ideas and visuals, which interface their corporeal styles and desires. The photographer, for instance, may use the experience of the encounter to develop her or his practice and the discourse that contextualises it. This is where the concept of embodiment intersects the concept of embeddedness.

## CHAPTER 3: REVISITING SALON PHOTOGRAPHY

Question 3: As a way of writing photography, how does documenting as method complicate our understanding of salon photography? How did political power imbricate salon photography during the shifting processes of nationalism, decolonisation and cold war?

### 3.1 The Enduring Spectre of Salon Photography

Pictorialism was the first international movement of art photography, which emerged in Europe and America during the 1880s. Its imprint was quickly felt in Asia with the setting up of amateur photo clubs, which organised competitions (salons) that led to exhibition opportunities. In Southeast Asia, there was a spurt of photo clubs/societies being set up during the 1920s. After World War II, as territories started yoking off colonialism, there was again a proliferation of photo clubs, especially during the 1950s and 1960s.

In *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey*, I have delineated the imprint of salon photography across the region (Zhuang, 2016, p17–18, p65-66, p133, p143-144, p147-148, p199-201, p277-279, p324). In my work, I use “salon photography” to mark the embedding of Pictorialism when the practice was transferred and refracted in parts of Asia. I also use the term to underscore the role that Chinese photographers played in sustaining the practice, especially its contest culture, in Southeast Asia. According to Lee Sow Lim (b. 1930, Seremban) (1992, p134), the transliterated Chinese term of *shalong sheying* 沙龍攝影 (salon photography) might have first been popularised by photographers in HK, with Singapore-based practitioners quickly adopting the term. To the best of my knowledge, salon photography is the most widely known term in Southeast Asia in reference to Pictorialism.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In the Philippines, the term “salon photography” is not commonly used, even though Raymundo Albano (1981) also used it in his writing. The term “camera club aesthetics” is slightly more in circulation. I thank Jay Javier and JPaul Manzanilla for this reminder. However, its Chinese-speaking adherents would have been

In the historiography of salon photography in Southeast Asia, there seems to be two broad tendencies, casting its practitioners either as exemplars of modernism or as outmoded defenders of conservatism.

While we might expect salon photographers to take the first position, it is also a viewpoint prevalent among art historians and curators in Singapore, often using State recognition as an indicator of these photographers' artistic relevance (Tan, 2006; Kong, 2015, 2016; Tan and Ng, 2015, p298–353; Toh, 2018). Kong Yen Lin (2016, p129) observes that the State has used photography to “aid and legitimise governance rather than question it critically”.

However, she does not connect her observation with the “apolitical stance” of the five veteran salon photographers whom she studied (Kong, 2016, p113). Instead, Kong (2016, p34–39) argues that they managed to retain agency in their private practices through their participation in the eminent Photographic Society of Singapore (PSS). But the notion that they could resist statist agenda by privatising their practices while being involved in the PSS seems rather naïve. As Kong (2016, p8) notes, PSS “enjoyed patronage from political elites” and has “partnered statutory boards and state agencies” since the 1960s, which contributed to its national stature.

A more critical appraisal comes from Lindy Poh (2002) who notes that salon photography in Singapore had been responsible for spawning contrived, “ethnically or socially correct images” during the 1950s and 1960s. In Thailand, Pictorialism has been mobilised by the

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familiar with “salon photography”, especially those who had been readers or contributors, since the 1950s, of HK periodicals focusing on Pictorialism. Within the Royal Photographic Society of Thailand, “pictorial” and “pictorialist” are often used interchangeably to mean Pictorialism (Veal, 2016, p262n99). The Chinese-speaking practitioners in Thailand would also have come across the term “salon photography”, if they had read or contributed to the HK periodicals.

Royal Photographic Society of Thailand (RPST) to generate aesthetic pleasure for domestic viewers, leading them to recognise the beauty of the Thai nation, which results from the benevolence of the father-king (Veal, 2016, p219–290).

In her study of popular photography in Java, Strassler (2010, p30–71) uses an ethnographic approach to produce a critical yet empathetic account of salon photography at Yogyakarta, without rendering the practitioners as a homogenous group or allowing her politics to overwhelm their subjectivities. Her account makes visible the statist imprint on salon photography and how it interfaced with the practitioners' desire for national/external recognition. She foregrounds ethnicity and class, which impacted the fraternisation of salon photographers and the images that they produced. Strassler's work shapes the concept of embodiment decisively, directing my focus in documenting (as a way of writing photography) on the photographer's performing of different identities and desires, which interfaces State aspirations in different (and sometimes ironic) ways.

Since the late colonial era, Chinese Indonesians have been a visible presence in the photo clubs. Amongst salon photographers, there has been an enduring search for an “authentic (*asli*) Indonesia preserved in ‘traditional’ villages and court enclaves, located temporally and spatially at a remove from the urban elites [including Chinese Indonesians] who would portray it” (Strassler, 2010, p35). Starting from the 1970s, the contest culture that sustained salon photography was increasingly harnessed for different State projects, including the promotion of tourism and the documentation/production of traditions (Strassler, 2010, p49–59). During the 1980s and 1990s, national and multinational corporations (like camera companies) began replicating the contest format and “cloaked their promotional aims in appeals to nationalist sentiment and official state discourses” (Strassler, 2010, p58). These

competitions offered another channel for Chinese Indonesian photographers to reproduce the visual “discourse of the *asli* that worked to exclude them as ‘authentic’ participants in the nation”, because a Chinese face would never be seen as local (Strassler, 2010, p66–67).

### 3.1.1 Unpacking “Salon Photography”

In *Shifting Currents: Glimpses of a Changing Nation* and *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey*, which are included in this portfolio, I tried to address the questions posed here by suggesting that we should refrain from casting salon photography, by default, as either outmoded (unchanging since its inception) or exemplary of modernism. Its longevity can be partly attributed to the desires and politics of its practitioners, and the patronage and opportunities that they enjoyed throughout the shifting processes of nationalism, decolonisation and cold war.

Salon photography was somewhat of a catch-all fraternity that included practitioners whose practices did not completely cohere with or remain perpetually tied to its aesthetic framework and contest culture (Zhuang, 2016, p19, p442, p477n24, 2018, p16–21). The practitioners were drawn to the fraternity, largely because of their interest in the art of photography, often expressed (at least initially) as the desire to acquire a hobby. Its aesthetic framework was reliant on the autonomy of the medium, a universalising sense of beauty, an adherence to compositional rules and technical competency (Zhuang, 2016, p17–18, p69, p72-73, p147-148, p278, p386). By the late 1950s or early 1960s, salon photography had already incorporated an aestheticised iteration of street photography, which was considered as part of *jishi sheying* 紀實攝影 (documentary photography) (Lee, 1992, p121–122). Having made their name through salon contests, which are inter/national or regional in logic, some of them would evolve their practices beyond the ecology of salon photography.

The example of Tuanku Ismail Nasiruddin Shah (1907-1979, b. Kuala Terengganu) is illustrative (Zhuang, 2016, p18–19). He was the first Malay to be made an associate of the Royal Photographic Society (RPS) of Great Britain in 1958. As the sultan of Terengganu from 1945 to his passing, Tuanku Ismail was associated with the salon photographers, almost by default, because there was no other ecology of art photography and he wanted to lend patronage to all photographers in Malaysia and Singapore (before the split in 1965).

The communal clashes of 13 May 1969, a pivotal moment that has since marred the psyche of Malaysian race politics, occurred in KL during his reign as the king from 1965 to 1970. Having signed the curfew a day earlier, the sultan utilised his privilege to go out on 15 May to photograph the emptied streets. Reviewing the photographs today, they appear to be loosely framed and unadorned. There is no attempt to play with the contrast of light and shadow, a well-worn aesthetic strategy in salon submissions. The photographs also reveal very little in terms of the discernible traces of the violence. Raja Ihsan Shah (b. 1960, Kuala Terengganu), the sultan's grandson and current custodian of his photographs, adds that Tuanku Ismail was driven around by a small entourage of army men and police officers. They probably did not feel comfortable to show the king the most devastated parts of KL. Despite Tuanku Ismail's desire to witness the aftermath of the tragedy, his photographs reveal both his embodied presence on the streets and his absence from the worst hit areas. The images were printed in his darkroom and never shown publicly, until they were rediscovered by Ihsan around 1999. On the negative sleeve, Tuanku Ismail titled the work, *Kuala Lumpur Masa Berkurong (Kuala Lumpur during the Time of Being Caged)*. The veneer of calm, seen in the photographs, is quickly punctured by the eeriness of the scenes (devoid of people and traffic) and our awareness of the traumatic incident.

### 3.1.2 Documenting Kouo Shang-Wei

A few years back, I was commissioned by National Library Board (NLB) of Singapore to produce a photobook for Kouo Shang-Wei (b. 1924, Vietnam-d. 1988, Singapore). Kouo made his name through the contest culture of salon photography before branching into architectural photography and documentary work. In 2007, Kouo's family donated some 7,000 items to the NLB, including his photographs, negatives, slides and photographic artefacts, which provided the pretext for publishing his photobook. Even though the photobook is meant for general readership, I have included my profile essay of Kouo in this portfolio (Zhuang, 2018). The essay affords me the space to reimagine Kouo's practice through the concepts of embeddedness and embodiment. It is an attempt to see whether the proposition of documenting could complicate our understanding of salon photography.

The concept of embeddedness directs my focus on the refraction of salon photography within the cultural and linguistic milieu of the Chinese practitioners in Singapore. It cues me to see if the ensuing discourses of art and photography had impacted Kouo's practice. In Southeast Asia, at least during the 1950s and 1960s, Chinese speaking practitioners constituted an active presence in the salon contests. After the founding of New China, their reference point was HK, alongside Euro-American locales like the UK (home to RPS). Alongside phasa Thai or quốc ngữ, for instance, the Chinese language provided another conduit through which ideas relating to photography became embedded across Southeast Asia. If we accept Lee Sow Lim's explanation of the origins of "salon photography" in the photographic lexicon, the fact



that it is understood even amongst non-Chinese photographers in Southeast Asia serves to justify my point.<sup>9</sup>

As I did not interview Kouo in his lifetime, I could only turn, via the trajectory of archiving/mapping, to his writings on photography and the interviews that he granted. Most of these materials were published in the Chinese-language papers. Hence, there was an element of practicality in documenting Kouo's practice through his cultural and linguistic milieu; I was limited by the source materials. However, the decision to use, as much as possible, Chinese-language sources was also deliberate. It stemmed from the shortfall of visual art writing in Singapore, which privileges English sources over references published in the "mother tongue" languages of Chinese, Malay and Tamil. For the English-minded writer, only English sources would surface or look credible.

Archiving/mapping Chinese sources helped to resurface Kouo's involvement in photo initiatives, some of which have lapsed from public attention because they were not well reported in the English press. The concept of embeddedness also directed my attention to the circuitous route of the discourses that he used to justify his practice. Kouo liked to use "xiezhen" 寫真 (writing the truth/reality), the Chinese translation of "shashin", to characterise his practice. In Japanese, "shashin" is understood as "a copy of truth" or the reproduction of reality (Kinoshita, 2003, p26). The phrase connoted Kouo's desire to seek the truth, which also meant the search for beauty (Zeng, 1985). In that way, Kouo's (1957) idea

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<sup>9</sup> Another example might be the term "*foto hunting*", which is used in Indonesia to refer to the group excursions that photographers organise to visit a place to photograph its landscape or the models that they hire in advance. The word "hunting" and its Indonesian equivalent, "*berburu*", have long been part of its lexicon of salon photography (Strassler, 2010, p309n2). Amongst Chinese-speaking salon photographers across Southeast Asia and HK, the literal equivalent would be "*lie ying*" 獵影. It would be useful to establish if the term were the original source of "*foto hunting*".

of “*xiezhēn*” became intertwined with his belief that an artist should strive for truth, virtue and beauty 真善美. As the most revered role model for Chinese salon photographers, Lang Jingshan (1892-1995) also suggested that the goal of his art was to strive for truth, virtue and beauty (Lai, 2000, p153–157). However, Lang emphasised beauty over truth (of vision) and virtue (which he regarded as “beauty in the spirits”). It is unclear if Kouo was citing Lang when he evoked the aesthetic ideals, which were by then in wide circulation, even beyond the practice of photography. In any case, Kouo also delimited the ideals by arguing for the need to hide the unsightly and exotic facets of the nation from foreigners and to project only the best aspects of Singapore through photography. In that way, he gave his documenting work an insider’s legitimacy by evoking the trope of distance—the importance of having Singaporeans photograph Singapore (Zhuang, 2018, p20–21).



A typical scene of the coastline, favored by many salon photographers.



Lang Jingshan (1892-1995) was one of the most important Chinese photographers, widely known in the salon photography scene across East and Southeast Asia.

Image 7: Kouo Shang-Wei’s portrait of Lang Jingshan (right), from *Shifting Currents: Glimpses of a Changing Nation* photobook, p32-33

In the materials donated to NLB, there is a portrait of Lang, photographed by Kouo (image 7). This is Kouo’s embodied performance as an ethnic Chinese photographer, using his

documenting to display his affinities with a revered master who, in anticipation, performed his role as the refined gentleman of Chinese photography. Here, the commentary segues to the imprint of embodiment on the proposition of documenting, which directed me to foreground Kouo's desires and corporeal styles, which interfaced his photographic life. His initial years in Singapore coincided with the pangs of decolonisation, during which political and cultural forces (from within and without) engaged in a vigorous battle for the hearts and minds of local residents. Kouo would not be immune to these different appeals of solidarity. Having migrated from Vietnam in 1948, Kouo picked up photography in 1950, just as he was rebuilding his life in Singapore. In 1957, he became an associate of RPS.

Kouo was an active presence at the PSS from the 1950s to 1980s (Zhuang, 2018, p12–16). He participated in many initiatives (contests, exhibitions, education programmes) related to photography. Many of these initiatives were fuelled by the State desires of successive governments, as Singapore transited from a British colony to self-government, and from being part of Malaysia to independence. Later on, photo clubs like the South-East Asia Photographic Society (founded in 1958) and the Photo-Art Association of Singapore (founded in 1965) were also mobilised for these State initiatives. Often, the clubs (or their members) were tasked to organise (or co-organise with government ministries or corporations from friendly nations) photo competitions by appropriating the salon contest template, with esteemed practitioners serving as jury. Sometimes, the clubs organised these initiatives to dovetail with statist projects. Since the late colonial era, successive governments and their related agencies have organised competitions and exhibitions to promote a burgeoning sense of national consciousness, to project its multiracial image externally, to dispel the perception of Singapore as cultural desert, to divert young people from vices towards a meaningful hobby like photography, and even to cultivate neighbourliness (Zhuang, 2018, p15). Kouo

was variously involved in these initiatives as advisor, contest participant, jury or organising member. However, it would be simplistic to portray Kouo as being forced to participate in these initiatives. That would write away his agency as a young Vietnamese Chinese learning photography while growing into his sense of place in Singapore.

The concept of embodiment prevents me from losing sight of the different individuals whom I write about, resisting the pitfall of flattening their varied experiences. It directs my attention to the photographer's performance of intersecting identities and desires (aesthetic, national, ethno-cultural, professional or sexual, amongst others) that frames one's experience of living and working in a particular milieu. In Kouo's (1957, 1958) case, he was not shy to express his pride whenever local photographers clinched salon accolades around the world during the 1950s. Away from salon photography and commissioned work, Kouo gave himself the personal mission of documenting Singapore's development in order to leave behind historical materials for future generations (Zhuang, 2018, p11, p16-21). He wanted to shield the unsightly aspects of Singapore from the searching lens of the camera, probably because of his experience of nationalism as a progressive force to unshackle colonialism. He probably justified his involvement in State-infused initiatives as his way of contributing to the cause. By the 1970s and 1980s, even if Kouo were wary of the constant demolition taking place in the name of redevelopment, the only response he could muster was to take photographs before the impending destruction (Zhuang, 2018, p21).

In documenting Kouo's practice, it has become untenable to persist with the claim that salon photography is/was apolitical. Photo clubs and their members have long been mobilised by the successive governments in Singapore for a bewildering range of cultural and socio-political projects aimed at propagating opinion and change, both domestically and externally.

This is not surprising, given that they have enjoyed direct or indirect patronage from political and cultural elites since the colonial era (Zhuang, 2018, p12, p15, 2019a, p163–164). That elite connection made it harder for salon photographers to say no when the State approached them for various initiatives. Their desire to contribute to the nation-building endeavour, in and beyond the decolonising context, also prompted some of them to participate in statist projects. Some of them did so to amplify their standing in the national context. The absence of political content in their salon submissions (and in parts of their photographic output beyond the salon ecology) is only one outcome of their performance as photographers. Their participation in State-infused photo initiatives constituted a more direct involvement in national politics, however modest they might claim their contribution to be.

### **3.2 Salon Photography and Political Power**

Let me continue to unfold the relationship between salon photography and political power by focusing on the photographers with salon photography beginnings who were eventually drawn into State initiatives during the Second Indochina War. I have briefly mentioned some of their practices in *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey* (Zhuang, 2016, p273–274, p276-279) and, to a lesser extent, in “A Mapping of Southeast Asian Photobooks after World War II” (Zhuang, 2019a, p144–145).

In 1952, 1953 and 1954, Hanoi Opera House played host to three art photography exhibitions, which were organised by photographers from different parts of the French colony. The likes of Đỗ Huân (1918–2000, b./d. Hanoi), Nguyễn Mạnh Đan (b. 1925, Nam Dinh–d. 2019, HCMC) and Nguyễn Văn Thông (b. 1925, Hanoi–d. 2019, HCMC) presented their works during the exhibitions. Most of the participating photographers could be described as adherents of salon photography in terms of subject matter and aesthetic

approach. After the 1954 Geneva Conference, Đỗ Huân remained in Hanoi and worked as a photojournalist for the Department of Culture and Information of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) (Zhuang, 2016, p273–274, p277). Đỗ made his name in 1939 when he showcased two photographs in an art exhibition in Hanoi, organised by the Société annamite d’encouragement à l’art et à l’industrie (SADEAI). Working for the DRV did not curtail his artmaking decisively. Film and paper became harder to come by, but his art photographs still appeared in international exhibitions in the eastern bloc of Europe in 1958 and 1962. Scenic landscape shots also predominate his photobook, *Past and Present Vietnam* (published in 1996 by the Information and Culture Publisher in Hanoi), suggesting that these photographs were of great importance to him, more than the smattering of images showing the militarisation of DRV.

On the other hand, his friends Nguyễn Mạnh Đan and Nguyễn Văn Thông moved south to Saigon after the Geneva Accords. I managed to interview Nguyễn Văn Thông twice before his passing. His account is crucial in documenting the experience of a Republic of Vietnam (RV) photographer who did not flee after 1975 (Zhuang, 2016, p276–277). Because Nguyễn Văn Thông had already won in Hanoi a few salon awards, the RV government knew of him and asked him in 1955 to work as a photojournalist for the authorities, photographing political events in Saigon. He noted that, prior to 1975, it was easier for photojournalists to work in the south than in the north. The RV government had little understanding of propaganda and did not instruct him on what not to shoot. He was even sent to photograph the immolation of Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức on 11 June 1963. Of course, all his negatives from work had to be sent to the authorities, which retained the final decision on whether they would release the images. Not surprisingly, he found his job boring and defined

himself more as an art photographer who continued, in his free time, to pursue portraiture and landscape work.

I did not interview Nguyễn Mạnh Đan, but my interest in him is centred on his involvement with Major Nguyễn Ngọc Hạnh (b. 1927, Ha Dong–d. 2017, San Jose) as the photographers of *Viet Nam in Flames* (Zhuang, 2016, p276, 2019a, p144–145). Published with assistance from the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), the English version of this photobook presents an account of the Second Indochina War from the RV perspective in an attempt to garner global support for its political legitimacy. *Viet Nam in Flames* is remarkable for its clever juxtaposition of close-up shots concerning military operations, alongside alluring images of the Vietnamese landscape (including the famed sand dunes, a must-do subject matter for salon photographers in Vietnam) and, quite expectedly, ladies in áo dài. Nguyễn Mạnh Đan provided much of the latter while Nguyễn Ngọc Hạnh proved to be an excellent army photographer. Nguyễn Mạnh Đan started out in 1948 working as a photographer for the French magazine, *Indochine Sud-Est Asiatique*. At some point, he got involved in salon photography and became variously known as “Mr. Pictorial” and the “King of landscape photography” (*Thanh Nien News*, 2012; Dang, 2014). In 1961, he became an associate of RPS.

After 1975, Nguyễn Văn Thông was sent to the re-education camp for eight years. He seemed well rehabilitated since his release. His friends introduced him to a teaching post at the State-run Ho Chi Minh City Photographic Association (HOPA), which brought a modest source of income. During his detention, Nguyễn Văn Thông emphasised that he was apolitical and not a supporter of the RV authorities, despite working for them. I am not sure what happened to Nguyễn Mạnh Đan immediately after 1975, but his name has since been well recuperated

within the national history of Vietnamese photography. Some of his scenic shots in *Viet Nam in Flames*, arguably the most important photobook that visualised the RV standpoint, have been repackaged, without any sense of irony, into his other photobook, *My Homeland Viet Nam* (published in 1996 by Ho Chi Minh City Arts Publishing House). The latter contributes to the mythmaking of eternal Vietnam, casting the “peace-loving Vietnamese” as persistent defenders against external invasions (Nguyễn, 1996, p13) while ignoring their colonising endeavours on the highland and coastal peoples who had long existed before the French arrived. The French would graft its colonialism onto the Viet imperialising project (Goscha, 2017, pxxix–xl, p443-482).

Having surfaced, albeit briefly, their discourses and practices through the trajectories of ethnography/oral history and archiving/mapping, let me activate, at this point, Asian inter-referencing by bringing the experiences of the Vietnamese practitioners alongside those of Kouo Shang-Wei and Tuanku Ismail to begin delineating the imprint of political power on salon photography and to gesture future research tangents.

Since the embedding of salon photography across Southeast Asia, its contest culture has provided the authorities a convenient way to validate the competency of a photographer. The photographers’ accomplishments brought them attention, desired or unwanted, from the political and cultural elites. The apolitical appearance of salon photography is only one possible outcome of their political calculation to insulate their work from State desires. However, they are often unable to say no when authorities enlist their collaboration in various initiatives, since the ecology of salon photography is built on elite patronage.



Here, I graft the term “collaboration” from Christopher Goscha’s (2011, p109–112, 2017, p82–84) theorisation of colonial collaboration in Vietnam. He argues that collaboration is a historically situated and complex phenomenon of survival that involved “shifting strategies of association, accommodation, and resistance” under the threat and use of force by the occupiers. For people who have been previously marginalised, collaboration also provides them an opportunity to advance their aspirations. Goscha’s use of “collaboration” provides the intersecting context to the narrow sense of collaboration that I use, vis-à-vis the photographic encounter between the photographer and the photographed person(s). It surfaces the (possibility of) collaboration between the photographers and the State. However, the concept of embodiment cues me to carefully unpack their collaboration in statist initiatives, foregrounding the performing of their desires and corporeal styles, which interfaces their identity as salon photographers. It cautions me from chastising them as politically conservative, almost by default. If both the DRV and RV authorities appropriated the aesthetics and contest culture of salon photography for their political ends, why should Nguyễn Văn Thông be cast as politically conservative and Đỗ Huân heralded for his involvement in the liberation movement? Beyond the Second Indochina War, how do we account for Tuanku Ismail who used his privilege as part of the Malay aristocracy to rupture the apolitical veneer of salon photography by documenting the fallout of communal politics?

The experiences of nationalism, decolonisation and cold war provided overlapping references, which the cultural workers in Southeast Asia appropriated for their creative needs (Muan, 2005, p42–44; Lindsay, 2010, p229; Ditzig, 2017, p64). The decolonising context probably made it difficult for the salon photographers to see beyond the promise of nationalism and to “identify the characteristics of its articulating agents, as well as the class, gender, and racial affiliations of those groups who benefit from the nationalist agenda”

(Chen, 2010, p54). Not surprisingly, the demographic of the political elites in the DRV and RV (primarily male, heterosexual and Viet) formed an analogous parallel to the salon photographers involved in the Second Indochina War who are still recognised by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) today. In Singapore, the demographic of State-recognised salon photographers like Kouo Shang-Wei also mirrored its political elites (primarily male, heterosexual, anti-communist and Chinese). This is one of several reasons why salon photography was, and remains, a gendered practice on at least two levels—the gender of its practitioners and their preference for female subjects. If the woman figure were a perennial subject for the communist photographers during the Second Indochina War (Phu, 2017, p294), it would not be surprising to learn that at least some of them had made the transition, like Đỗ Huân, from salon photography to photojournalism/propaganda. In the case of Nguyễn Mạnh Đan, his association with the RV has not prevented his work from being folded back within the national since 1975. Cultivated through salon photography, his taste for Vietnamese landscape and ladies in áo dài probably made the turnaround easier.

## **CONCLUSION: FUTURE RESEARCH TANGENTS**

As a way of writing photography, documenting provides a method of historiography that aims to account for the multitude of photographic practices in Southeast Asia. As a way of making work, documenting foregrounds the photographic encounter in which the photographer and the photographed person(s) meet to perform/embody their desires and corporeal styles while experiencing their identity-making. Informed by the concepts of embeddedness and embodiment, documenting as method helps me attempt a revisionist account of salon photography, paying attention to the agency of individual practitioners while casting a critical eye on its imbricating relationship to political power. It helps me foreground Chineseness as an additional factor in the praxis of salon photography. I also use documenting, as a way of making work, to unpack the spectre of Chineseness through my photographic encounter with the Chinese Muslims in Indonesia.

The attempt to unpack the connection between salon photography and political power remains an ongoing enquiry. Even though more work has to be done in this regard, I believe that the spectre of salon photography has had an effect on the canonisation of contemporary photography in Southeast Asia.

The communist takeover in 1975 disrupted the development of salon photography in Laos and Cambodia. With the decks cleared, photographers who have since taken up photography as a means of expression no longer need to propagate a discourse that others salon photography (Zhuang, 2016, p443). Their usage of photography, including straight photography, is already enough to signal their “newness” from the tradition of painting (Zhuang, 2016, p442–443, p493n3). Some of these practitioners have since been incorporated within the contemporary of Southeast Asian art. It is in the SRV where the imprint of salon

photography has remained significant (Zhuang, 2016, p277–278). For practitioners who wanted to do something different in the late 1990s or early 2000s, they would have to negotiate its apolitical veneer, nostalgic outlook and monopoly of State resources. One response was for practitioners to maintain distance from its ecology while turning to straight photography to address issues of rapid urbanisation (Zhuang, 2016, p281–288). Many of them have since lapsed from the attention of curators and art historians canonising the contemporary. Does this mean that salon photography is an unstated variable in the canonisation of contemporary art in Southeast Asia?

If that were the case, it should also have an effect on the emergence of conceptual practices during the 1970s. In Southeast Asia, the imprint of salon photography seems to be the weakest in the Philippines. One reason could be that, by the 1950s and 1960s, PAG and Gallery Indigo had already showcased works by straight photographers, opening up a more prestigious route for practitioners to receive artistic validation. In this sense, we might consider Nap Jamir II's conceptual work in the 1970s as a response against straight photography by appropriating its narrative structure to deconstruct its myth of veracity. More work has to be done to surface the relationship between salon photography and conceptual practices.

At the same time, it would be productive to revisit, through the vantage of photography and the proposition of documenting, the possibilities of the conceptual in Southeast Asia during the 1970s. This stems from a dissatisfaction with the inclination among art historians and curators to flatten the latitude of the conceptual to signify either a “political” practice (Poshyananda, 1996, 1999; Lenzi, 2012; Pazzini-Paracciani, 2012) or an artmaking that privileges the “artist’s idea” over “technical skill, aesthetic appearance, or emotional

engagement” (Nelson, 2019, p34–37). In *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey*, I have already activated the trajectories of ethnography/oral history and archiving/mapping to begin documenting the conceptual work of three practitioners. They are Nap Jamir II, Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam (1941-2016, b. Penang) and Pramuan Burusphat (b. 1953, Bangkok) (Zhuang, 2016, p20, p28, p148-151, p319, p321-324, p481n10). Based on their practices, it seems that the definition of the conceptual was very much up for grabs then. It reaffirms the concept of embeddedness, which would suggest that the conceptual turn led to a broader latitude of possibilities than what has since been caricaturised as the conceptual. It would be worthwhile, in a future essay, to activate the trajectory of Asian inter-referencing to delineate the latitude of the conceptual at that historical juncture.

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