

From Wat Arun: Photographers in Bangkok in the 1860s

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In the 1860s, several photographers took panoramic views of the Chao Phraya River from a vantage point at Wat Arun.

Apparently the earliest of these views, a glass stereoview, was photographed by Pierre Rossier (1829-1886), either in the second half of 1861 or the first half of 1862. Early publications reversed the view,¹ shown correctly in Figure 1, which largely corresponds to a woodcut published on 17 May 1862 in Saxony.²

John Thomson arrived in Bangkok on 27 September 1865,³ left for Angkor on 27 January of the following year, returned to Bangkok on 19 April only to leave soon thereafter for Britain. It is, therefore, most likely that Thomson took his views from Wat Arun between October and December 1865, as he was quite busy taking photographs of royal ceremonies in early January 1866.

Thomson's much published photograph (Figure 2) shows a number of structures not present in Rossier's photograph, including the "Foreign Affairs Office and Justice Court," to the north of the "Nokyung City Gate" outside the city wall, and the "Chedi dedicated to King Rama IV under construction." This is the tall structure surrounded by wooden scaffolding.⁴

Another view of the Wat Pho area, as seen from Wat Arun (Figure 3), was taken by Johann August Sachtler, who announced his presence in the *Bangkok Recorder* on 16 September 1865:

MR. A. SAIHTLER [sic], PHOTOGRAPHER. Begs to inform the inhabitants of Bangkok, that he has arrived here upon a visit, and during his stay will be glad to take portraits, landscapes and views of houses etc. of all sizes, to 15 inches. His *atelier* is at Falks Hotel New Road.

¹ Bonhams [sale of] *India & Beyond. Travel & Photography. Part II*. London: Bonhams, Knightsbridge, 4 October 2011, p. 66, lot 513, <https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/18942/lot/513/> Present whereabouts unknown.

² *Illustrierte Zeitung*. XXXVIII. Band, Nr. 985, Leipzig, 17. Mai 1862, p. 328: "Bangkok, Hauptstadt des Königreichs Siam. Nach der Zeichnung eines Mitgliedes der preußischen Expedition (Bangkok, Capital of the Kingdom of Siam, after a drawing of a member of the Prussian expedition)."

³ *Bangkok Recorder*, Vol. I. No.18, 30 September 1865, p.184, column 3: "The Steamer Chow Phya arrived at the bar at 4 1/2 o'clock P.M. on Wednesday 27th ult. Passengers [...] Mr. Thomson photographer."

⁴ See Paisarn Piemmettawat, *Siam. Through the Lens of John Thomson 1865-66* (Bangkok: River Books, 2015), pp. 100-1.



Figure 1. Pierre Rossier

Figure 2. John Thomson





Figure 3. August Sachtler

Figure 4. Francis Chit



August Sachtler was a Prussian, who started taking photographs in about 1856. He assisted the official photographer of the Prussian East Asian expedition in Japan, Carl Bismark.⁵ He had his own photographic studio in Singapore from at least July 1864 onwards,⁶ and died in Singapore on 7 April 1873.⁷

Francis Chit (1830-1891) advertised his studio in the bi-weekly English newspaper, the *Bangkok Recorder*, on 16 January 1865, as follows:

FRANCIS CHIT. PHOTOGRAPHER. Begg to inform the Resident and Foreign community, that he is prepared to take Photographs of all sizes and varieties, at his floating house just above Santa Cruz. He has on hand, for sale, a great variety of Photographs of Palaces, Temples, buildings, scenery and public men of Siam. *Parties can be waited on at their Residences.* Terms - Moderate.⁸

Perhaps inspired by these predecessors, Chit took a famous panorama from Wat Arun, including Figure 4 at the left-hand end. However, Figure 5, further to the left, was not published at the time and, together with another image,⁹ finally completes his early panorama of Bangkok (Figure 6)

A study of the details in these photographs from Wat Arun shows that Thomson's was the earliest, followed by Sachtler, followed by Chit.

⁵ Dobson, Sebastian: Unintended Consequences: Photography and the Prussian East Asian Expedition. In: *Under Eagle Eyes. Lithographs, Drawings and Photographs from the Prussian Expedition to Japan, 1860-61.* Edited by Sebastian Dobson & Sven Saaler (München: IUDICIUM Verlag GmbH, 2011), pp. 255-315.

⁶ *The Straits Times*, Singapore, 22 October 1864, page 5, advertisements, column 1.

⁷ Dobson, Sebastian, note 5, *supra*, p. 314, note 70.

⁸ *Bangkok Recorder*, Volume I, no.1, 16 January 1865, p. 6.

⁹ See Bautze, Joachim K.: *Unseen Siam. Early Photography 1860-1910* (Bangkok: River Books, 2016), p. 100, Plate 20.



Figure 6. Francis Chit: the panorama with Figure 5 added



Figure 5. Francis Chit: the missing left-hand photograph

