

Olivier Cunin and Baku Saito, *The Face Towers of Banteay Chmar*. Tokyo, Goto Shoin Publishing, 2005, 141 pp.

The monumental and awe-inspiring stone faces of Angkor that smile so enigmatically upon the Cambodian countryside have intrigued Western artists and scholars for more than a century, but for one Japanese photographer they have become a passion. Baku Saito began travelling to Cambodia in the early 1990s. His frequent solo excursions brought him in touch with a land visited at the time by only a few foreign travelers. The scenery and architecture captured his imagination and in 1994 he decided to photograph all of the monumental stone faces that still existed at Angkor. The project to document all 228 of the faces took six years and culminated in the publication of a UNESCO sponsored book "Bayon I – The Faces of the Towers, Part I Plates".

While Saito's photography of all the faces of Angkor met with great acclaim and an UNESCO sponsored exhibition, the photographer was not satisfied with his work because he soon discovered that similar faces to those appearing at Angkor Thom and the Bayon could be found at two other locations in Cambodia: Banteay Chmar, a site which lies over 100 kilometres northwest of Angkor and close to the Thai border, and Preah Khan at Kompong Svay, which is located to the east of Angkor in an area known for iron mining.

Both sites posed enormous challenges to the determined photographer because

of their locations in much less accessible areas. In addition, the work had to be carried out with serious time constraints, making the shooting chaotic, according to the photographer. Trees and branches had to be removed from faces before they could be photographed and the best angles for shooting pictures were often on top of wobbling piles of stone. Banteay Chmar, which has not been restored, remains one of Cambodia's most extensive ruins.

Undaunted by such challenges, Saito was able successfully to complete the project. He photographed 31 new faces and documented the existence of others which have fallen to ruin. His efforts culminated in *The Face Towers of Banteay Chmar*, a valuable work documenting an important aspect of the reign of the late twelfth century Khmer ruler Jayavarman VII, whose face is believed to have served as the inspiration for the large stone images. The book, which is in both English and Japanese, is divided into two main sections. The first part consists of one hundred pages of photographs in both color and black and white. This is followed by a chapter written by Olivier Cunin, based on research he carried out at the Institut National Polytechnique, Lorraine, France, for a Ph.D. thesis demonstrating that there are additional face towers at Bayon which are today in ruin.

The book's photographic section commences with color photographs of Banteay Chmar, its adjacent satellite temples and Mebon and also includes color photos of Preah Khan of Kom-

pong Svay. Captions tend to be poetic, such as, “Pediment bathed in sunlight / Banteay Chmar (entrance of the main temple)”. This section is followed by black and white photos of all the faces found at each site with precise information about each one’s location.

The second part of the book presents an extremely detailed 40-page text by Cunin. The chapter starts with a comprehensive list of sources for scholars who have visited and written about the monument in the past. As the author points out, up until the 1920s these faces were originally mistaken as representing one of the Hindu gods, possibly Brahma or Siva, due to the mistaken classification of the Bayon period to a much earlier era. Only in 1924, when a carving of the *Avalokitesvara* was discovered at the Bayon, was the monument correctly linked to a later date and Mahayana Buddhism.

Unfortunately, as the author also points out, due to its remote location, Banteay Chmar has suffered from extensive pillaging. Cunin mentions that in 1999 Thai border police found a large section of the western gallery, which was being smuggled into Thailand. Those in Thailand at the time remember that the large gallery section with an image of the *Avalokitesvara* was placed on display at the National Museum in Bangkok before it was returned to Cambodia, where the pieces are now kept at the museum in Phnom Penh.

Cumin’s text is supported with maps, plans, photographs and detailed drawings which include comparisons with

other architectural sites in Cambodia which have monumental faces. Under the section “Where Are the Face Towers Found”, the author briefly refers to Preah Khan of Kompong Svay. The section also includes an inventory of face towers which are in ruin. This is accompanied by a series of black and white photographs, where stone sections believed to be part of the face tower are highlighted in color.

Any serious visitor to Banteay Chmar, “the citadel of the cats” as the impressive Khmer ruins are called, would find reading this book extremely useful in serving to explain the layout and design of the almost overwhelming fields of stone rubble. Members of a recent Siam Society trip can attest to the fact that reaching the site is still a difficult journey over bumpy roads and touring the monument requires prowess at climbing over mounds of uneven stone. How Saito in a short time managed to photograph all the faces and accurately remember where each image is located in the maze of stone rubble is difficult to imagine.

However impressive Saito’s efforts, *The Face Towers of Banteay Chmar* does have certain limitations. One main drawback is the fact that the book is written in two languages and certain sections, such as “For the Catalogue” and the “Editorial Notes”, are poorly translated into English. Book distributors tend to avoid multi-language books for reasons which are apparent in this book. As the present reviewer does not know Japanese, no comments can be made as

to the quality of the translation of Olivier Cunin's text. Another problem concerning the book is the inclusion of photographs of the face towers of Preah Khan of Kompong Svay without the provision of a separate text and explanation about this monument. The explanatory text written by Olivier Cunin only covers Banteay Chmar. While Preah Kahn is mentioned in passing in Cunin's text, the book would be more balanced if a short separate section about this monument had also been included.

Despite the problems mentioned above, anyone wishing to visit Banteay Chmar would find in this volume extremely useful introduction to this little-known site. The many diagrams and drawings which accompany Cunin's text help to make sense of a complex archaeological site. Baku Saito's attempt to document the challenging archaeological sites of both Banteay Chmar and Preah Khan of Kompong Svay is admirable, and is well complemented by Olivier Cunin's precise text. Any visit to these two remote Khmer sites would be enhanced by a thorough study of this book.

Jane Puranananda

---

Zhou Daguan, *A Record of Cambodia, the Land and its People*, translated with an introduction and notes by Peter Harris, foreword by David Chandler. Chiang Mai, Silksworm Books, 2007, xv + 150 pp.

For anyone with more than a passing interest in the great Cambodian empire centred on Angkor, the name of Zhou Daguan is immediately familiar, though for some of a certain age, including the present reviewer, there is still a tendency to think of this obscure but immensely important observer of Angkor in the thirteenth century by the pre-*pinyin* rendering of his name as Chou Ta-kuan. His importance stems, of course, through the fact of his being the only eyewitness chronicler of the city of Angkor and its inhabitants while it was still a major, if fading, power in mainland Southeast Asia.

Until quite recently, it is a fair assumption that most Anglophone readers will have encountered Zhou Daguan in the translation from French of Paul Pelliot by J. Gilman d'Arcy Paul, first published by the Siam Society in 1967. And, since 2001, these same Anglophone readers have had the opportunity to consult a more up-to-date and elegant rendering of the French by this journal's editor, Michael Smithies, published again by the Siam Society. Few readers, whether Anglophone or Francophone, will have gained access to Zhou Daguan by returning to the French translation of this work by Paul Pelliot, published in 1902, let alone the first translation from