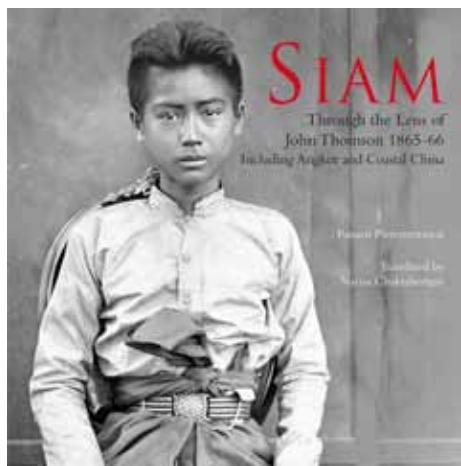


Reviews

Siam - Through the Lens of John Thomson 1865-66 Including Angkor and Coastal China by Paisarn Piemmettawat, edited and translated by Narisa Chakrabongse (Bangkok: River Books, 2015). ISBN 978 616 7339 51 1. 995 Baht/US\$30/£19.50.



River Books and the Wellcome Library of London deserve great credit for producing this sumptuous book to accompany the exhibition of the same name held at the National Gallery, Bangkok from 9 January to 28 February 2015. Attractively priced at 995 Baht, with an intriguing portrait of a young, yet serious, Thai boy as the cover photo, the book, which has been published in Thai and English, contains forty-three of Thomson's photos of Siam together with seven photos taken in Cambodia, including the first ever photos of Angkor Wat, and eleven photos of

Coastal China; it is hardly surprising that the book quickly sold out, leading almost immediately to a second printing.

The Scottish photographer John Thomson (1837-1921) has become legendary among historians and photography aficionados for his superb travel photos and portraiture in Southeast and East Asia that now form an extensive historical record of the region in the decade between 1862 and 1872. Although Thomson visited Siam and Cambodia for only a few months in 1865-66, the unprecedented level of access he was granted meant that he has left a significant photographic legacy, taking the first formal photographic portraits of members of the Thai royal family as well as being the first photographer to visit and record the ruins of Angkor Wat. It should not be forgotten that all of this was achieved by carrying large and heavy photographic equipment, many crates containing glass negatives and highly flammable chemicals across often inhospitable terrain in very hot conditions.

The book offers a foreword by Narisa Chakrabongse explaining the conception, planning and preparation of the exhibition, followed by three introductory essays. *In Photography in Siam – The Crucial Years (1861-66)*, Dr. Joachim Bautze, an eminent art historian who is currently writing his own book on Early Photography in Thailand, provides a short overview of the history of photography in Siam up

to the arrival of Thomson, including brief profiles and photographs of several photographers either then visiting or resident in Bangkok. He notes that Thomson was certainly not the first Western photographer at the Siamese court, but for reasons unknown, King Mongkut permitted Thomson access previously unknown to any other Western visitor. The photos of the people and places are fascinating and the only disappointment is that the chapter ends abruptly without the author being able to examine the impact, if any, of Thomson's visit and photographs on the local photographic industry.

The brief essay titled *The Reign of King Mongkut (R. 1851-1868)* by renowned Thai historian Maj. Gen. M.R. Suphawat Kasemsri, and his research assistant, Rachanee Supvichit, provides a very concise and readable description of the major achievements of King Mongkut's reign. The authors point out that this was truly a remarkable era in Thai history, given the King's reform of the Buddhist Sangha, as well as the series of treaties signed with several foreign powers that signaled the end of the crown monopoly on trade and the opening of the country to foreign commerce.

The last essay, *John Thomson's Photographs of Thailand in the Wellcome Library*, written by William Schupbach, Librarian, the Wellcome Library, London, provides an overview of Thomson's career in Asia and on his return to Great Britain. He explains how Thomson "was in the right place at the right time" to launch his photographic career in Asia, and that his "classic photographs of Beijing, the Chinese Treaty Ports and of street life in London could never have come into existence without his successful beginnings in Bangkok." The author documents the help Thomson received from the British Consul in Bangkok to obtain an audience with King Mongkut, who granted him permission to take formal portraits of himself, members of the royal family and his chief ministers. Thomson was also fortunate and privileged to be invited to photograph the tonsure ceremony of Crown Prince Chulalongkorn, as well as the royal barge procession and a royal funeral (for King Pinklao, the Second King and younger brother of King Mongkut). Thomson was able to stay in Bangkok for several months and photographed "many aspects of the city, river scenes, its surrounding countryside and people". Thomson's collection at the Wellcome Library, which was acquired from Thomson's estate in 1921, consists of nearly 700 photographs, of which 59 are photographs of Siam while 64 are of Cambodia.

Of course, the photographs – many never previously seen in Thailand – are the real stars of this book, and the clarity of print achieved from delicate glass negatives that are 150 years old is almost beyond belief. The photographs in the exhibition (and hence in the book) are divided into four sections: *Portraits: Royalty & Commoners; Ceremonies; Views of Bangkok & Beyond; Cambodia; and Coastal China*. Each photo has a lucid explanation of the subject matter provided by local photography enthusiast and writer, Paisarn Piemmettawat.

This reviewer found the portraits especially absorbing: in particular, the

contrast between King Mongkut portrayed in impressive traditional dress with full ceremonial regalia [3] and his pose in French military uniform [4 and 5] requires repeated viewing; the portrait of a very young, bejeweled princess [6], with her hair in a topknot, looking sternly at the camera with her maid-servant kneeling at her feet with a fan, is an utterly arresting image that must have been difficult for Thomson to accomplish; and two other portraits of the unknown young boy [14] (the cover photo) and an oarsman [15] are equally uncomplicated yet dramatic.

The panoramas [35-37] of the Chao Phraya River and Rattanakosin Island taken from Wat Arun are also fascinating. It must have required considerable detective work on the part of the author to provide a detailed identification of the sites in Thomson's photographs, but his effort has certainly paid off in the enlarged prints.

At the beginning of 1866, Thomson spent three months in Cambodia where he took a number of pictures of the area surrounding Angkor Wat and the temple complex itself [45-49], as well as a portrait of King Norodom in full dress naval uniform. Thomson was clearly enchanted by the elephants that he encountered and took various photos depicting these regal beasts [44]. Although the pictures of the Angkor Wat complex now appear quite familiar to the modern reader, they must have seemed breathtakingly fresh and exotic to Thomson's 19th century readership. (His first book, entitled *The Antiquities of Cambodia*, was published in 1867.)

The book concludes with pictures from Thomson's travels in the Chinese coastal provinces of Fujian and Guangdong [50-60], including a superb portrait of the Governor of Guangdong and Guangxi [50], who is clearly holding a snuff bottle in his left hand and appears to have a large jade or ivory archer's ring on his right thumb. As there was a significant growth in Chinese male emigration from these provinces to Siam during the mid-19th century, the photos provide an interesting contrast and backdrop to the successful Sino-Thai traders and entrepreneurs who have since the early 20th century created many of the largest conglomerates that now dominate the Thai economy.

A welcome Addendum at the end of the book provides suggestions for further reading in Thai and English, together with sources for the captions. In summation, this book looks and feels just right, and unlike many photographic albums is not overly heavy, in any sense. This reviewer believes that it will appeal both to serious historians and casual readers, who wish to see for themselves the people, traditions and scenery of mid-19th century Siam.

Paul Bromberg