MONKS AND THE CAMERA

Hans Georg Berger

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Photographs of Laos: The Buddhist Archive of Photography

Hans Georg Berger

The discovery of a large and varied body of Theravada Buddhist photographs, taken and collected by the monks of Luang Prabang over more than one hundred years, is a major surprise for the world of photography. The 35,000 photographs (prints and negatives) found in Luang Prabang's monasteries date from ca 1880 up to our own days. A large number of written sources related to these photographs has also been discovered.

With the help of the British Library's *Endangered Archives Programme* (EAP), photographs and documents have been digitized[1] since 2006; the originals have been put into safe storage in Luang Prabang. Since 2011, written sources related to these photographs are being researched in a project organized at the Asia-Africa Institute, University of Hamburg.[2]

Coming from nineteen distinct monastery collections, this unique photographic "view from inside" documents monastic life and ritual, pilgrimage, history and social life of the Lao civilization. A large corpus of monk portraits is also present and represents a special interest. While the focus of the archive lies on Buddhist life, personalities, themes and spirituality, important historic, political and social events of an agitated century in Laos also appear as in a mirror: the royal court, changing governments, foreign visitors, French colonialism, civil war, the Indochina and Vietnam wars, the "Secret War on Laos" with its savage bombings, revolution and socialist rule.

The monastic collection of photographs in Luang Prabang gives access to an important corpus of work by early indigenous photographers in Laos whose work represents a challenge to the presumed visual hegemony of their colonial counterparts. The research at the Buddhist Archive of Photography will without doubt become part of the ongoing reassessment of the region's photographic histories. Many of the photographs contained in the archive of Luang Prabang have singular artistic and aesthetic value (Berger and Khamvone 2010).

Since important collections of photographs at the National Archive and the National Library of Laos in the country's capital, Vientiane, have been lost during the civil war and the subsequent revolution, this monastic photographic archive of Luang Prabang today preserves a great part of the Lao contribution to the history of world photography.

1 For an overview of the photographs and their listing, see Berger H.G., Final Reports of EAP 086, EAP 177, and EAP 326 (not published) and Project Overview at www.eap.bl.uk/database/overview_project.a4d?projID=EAP326

2 "The Lao Sangha and Modernity: A Buddhist Archive in Luang Prabang", directed by Volker Grabowsky, is part of a research network organized between several universities of Germany, "The Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia" (DORISEA), see: www.dorisea.net.

The situation of Luang Prabang

Luang Prabang is one of the old Lao principalities of mainland Southeast Asia and has been the seat of Buddhist kings and princes for more than six centuries. It was the place where the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang was founded (in 1353) and remained the capital until 1560 when the administrative seat was transferred to Vientiane. Even afterwards, Luang Prabang retained its prestige as the main centre of Lao Buddhism and in 1707, following the disintegration of Lan Xang, the town became again the capital of one of the three Lao kingdoms (along with Vientiane in the centre and Champasak in the south). In the late eighteenth century the Lao kingdoms came under Siamese suzerainty. However, unlike Vientiane and Champasak which lost their autonomy in the first half of the nineteenth century, Luang Prabang preserved its prestigious status as a Siamese vassal state until the beginning of French rule in 1893 (for the pre-colonial history of Laos, see Stuart-Fox 1998). This explains why Luang Prabang, a kingdom controlling most of the northern regions of Laos, became a French protectorate with its king as ruler, whereas the rest of the country was administered as a colony by the French (see Stuart-Fox 1997; Evans 2002). The presence of the Royal court, and a learned elite of bureaucrats, administrators and monks living in monasteries maintained by princes and their families, has certainly been influential in the development of photography as a continuous practise in Luang Prabang.

Access to the town of Luang Prabang lying on a high plateau in Northern Laos has never been easy; still today, it is surrounded by 300 km of dense jungle. For centuries, and even during most of the twentieth century, the connection to the administrative capital of Laos, Vientiane, mainly depended on the Mekong which is navigable only during certain times of the year. Luang Prabang's close – political, cultural and economic – connections to Yunnan, Burma and the ancient Kingdom of Lan Na (Chiang Mai) or other principalities in what is today Northern Thailand, notably Nan, depended on tracks through the jungle. It is by these tracks, and probably on the back of elephants, that the first cameras, films and development equipment arrived in the town by the late 1870s.

In spite of its isolation, since the fourteenth century Luang Prabang has been the heart of Lao civilization, the place where kings resided, where monasteries, libraries and Buddhist schools were founded and bloomed, and where the palladium of the kingdom, the Pha Bang image, was kept. A particular topography, where the Mekong and one of its tributaries, the Khan River, form a long peninsula, created a protected area that had been inhabited since prehistoric times. Siamese, Burmese, Chinese, Vietnamese and French influences have marked the town.[3] In this surrounding, our research has discovered a particular inclination towards photography.

Our findings come from the monasteries, but there can be no doubt that similar collections of photographs existed at the Royal Court. Our project assembled nineteen monastery collections and five private collections which now form the Buddhist Archive of Photography. We know of no other town in Buddhist Southeast Asia where a similar collection has been established.

3 Life and society in Luang Prabang during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is nicely documented in the photographic documentation by Gay (1997).

Luang Prabang has been a town of pilgrimage for over six centuries, attracting Buddhist monks and laypeople not only from other parts of Laos but also from neighbouring areas, such as Lan Na. During the nineteenth century, princes, kings and queens founded numerous monasteries.[4] A large monastic community received pilgrims, organized elaborate festivals, practised and developed meditation. Learned monks lived in these monasteries. They received the new technology with enthusiasm and used it to document Buddhist life. While photographs were probably first taken (and developed) at the Royal Court, young princes who had learned to use a camera took the photographic practise with them to the monasteries when they were ordained as temporary monks, following the Theravada tradition. Some of them stayed as abbots and continued taking photographs throughout all their life, teaching it to their fellow monks. Some of these monks became collectors and archivists. A few became monk-photographers and left us their photographic *œuvre*. Over more than a century, a distinctive place for photography was created in a unique Buddhist environment. Today, the photographs of Luang Prabang provide a precious insight into one of Asia's least known Buddhist civilizations.[5]

Historic collocation

The invention of photography in France is approximately dated to 1840 when Siam dominated Laos. Cameras and printing technology from Europe soon arrived in Bangkok: King Mongkut of Siam (r. 1855–1868) has been photographed as early as the mid-1850s.[6] Gifts between the kings of Siam and Luang Prabang were regularly exchanged; it is likely that cameras and films, very soon after their arrival in Siam, came to the court of Luang Prabang: a gift of innovative technology from king to king. Some Lao princes, monks and officials went to Bangkok for their studies and might have brought cameras back to Luang Prabang, as well. We may assume that, already by the late 1870s, photography was practised in the town's monasteries. The earliest prints we have found so far are from the 1880s, but some of these photographs are reproductions of older photographic images that have been lost and which date back to the 1870s. The presence of a certain quantity of photographs from the 1890s in the archive's collection coincides historically with the arrival of French rule in 1893. Obviously, the French colonial presence boosted the use of photography. It was a tool of modernity and technological progress, and it came from France, after all.

Early French photographers came to Laos at that time. French explorers like Auguste Pavie took photographs in and of Luang Prabang. Their colonial interest was with the exotic locals, landscapes and building. Their photographs did not enter into the collections of the monks. Two small worlds of photography kept very much apart from each other.

4 An overview of the wealth of Theravada Buddhist monasteries in Luang Prabang is given in V. Grabowsky, Pha One Keo Sitthivong, "Comprehensive List of Monasteries in Luang Prabang and Residences of the Naga Kings and Queens of Luang Prabang", in: Berger 2000.

5 An excellent analysis of Lao festivals and rituals is given by Zago (1972).

6 An illuminated daguerreotype of King Mongkut of Siam taken shortly after 1855 was presented as a gift to Queen Victoria of England by the Siamese ambassadors to the Court of St James in 1860.

Luang Prabang has known a strong and steady development of photographic practise from these beginnings at the end of the 19th century, with a peak in the 1930s and another peak between 1950 and 1970. This evolution radically slowed down in 1975, when a socialist revolution ended a long-lasting civil war and eventually cut ties with the West. In the following times of isolation, photography in the monasteries became rare, but never stopped completely. In some collections there are tiny, moving chromogenic prints of the early 1980s where still today the scarcity of film material, as well as the rarity of the occasion to be photographed can be read in the image.

Photography took up again strongly at the beginning of the 1990s, when the arrival of tourism and the inscription of Luang Prabang on the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites (in 1995) was accompanied by the arrival of new cameras and new technologies of photography that were again readily taken up by Buddhist monks, novices and laypeople. Today the Buddhist Archive of Photography regularly receives digital images, films and sound recordings that are made by the monks at their monasteries at the occasion of festivals or ceremonies, for archiving.

From the arrival of photography in Luang Prabang up to the present day, monks of Luang Prabang not only had portraits of themselves taken, but actively worked as photographers. In their efforts, an ethos of careful observation can be seen. Their photographs obviously relate to Buddhist every-day-practise and Buddhist life. But does their practise of photography in any way relate to Buddhist doctrine, to Buddhist definitions of representation, and of the image? This question arose for me very soon. I felt early that, there was documentation - but there was also something more.

On a first look: Documentation and representation

For almost 120 years, the monks of Luang Prabang photographed Buddhist life in a continuous effort of documentation. This was certainly a process of self-assurance; it was also an attempt of representation. On a very practical level they were documentarians. They also used photography as a way to communicate with the outside world. There has been, particularly during the 1930s, an exchange of monk portraits that were sent to or received from monks in Burma, Thailand and Cambodia.

For many years, photographs taken by monks in Luang Prabang were regularly published in Lao Buddhist journals and in books containing Buddhist texts. Engaged collecting of historic photographs became a practise in some monasteries, as far as we know, from the 1940s onwards. Particularly, abbots at Vat Suvannakhili, at Vat Mai Suvannaphumaram and at Vat Saen Sukharam formed ever growing collections that are distinct, and each lay out a different focus. These collections were carefully protected from dangers during the civil war and the destructions of the "Secret War on Laos", when the country was most savagely bombed (Adams and McCoy 1970; Conboy and Morrison 1995). During the revolution, and in following years, these collections were preserved and hidden in the abodes (*kuti*) of the collecting abbots. This protection was so efficient that, in the 1990s, when the country opened again to the West, very few people knew about their existence. Most of the great monk collectors or

photographers had died. In some cases, their belongings were kept in sealed rooms in their monasteries. Several of these sealed rooms were opened in the course of our research for the first time, with the support and permission of the leading monks of Luang Prabang.