

Final Report

Title.

Research of Thailand's and Cambodian Films, and historical and ethnological study in their background

1. Project overview

I visited the Thai Film Archive in the outskirts of Bangkok and the Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center in Phnom Penh to view their video materials and collect sources. In Thailand, I participated in the Salaya International Documentary Film Festival, where I attended film screenings and participated in a Q&A session following the screening of director Shingo Ohta's *The End of the Special Time We Were Allowed*. In Cambodia, I participated in the Cambodia International Film Festival and studied special screenings of Cambodian and Laos films.

Building on the knowledge I acquired at these locations, I travelled to northeast Thailand (Isan) and primarily visited the filming locations of the film *A Child of the Northeast* as well as various films and other video works by Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Additionally, I interviewed *mo tham* (shamans) and other people at temples about the Thai spirit cults.

Next, in Nan Province in Thailand's north, I visited villages of the Mlabri peoples, who had featured in the film *Tawan Yim Cheng*. In the villages, I interviewed the village elders and others. In the mountains on the outskirts of Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai, which served as the setting of *Mountain People* by director Vichit Kounavudhi, I interviewed elders and shamans of primarily the Palaung, Lahu, and Akha peoples about their religion and lifestyles. I also visited the regions of southern Thailand that served as the setting for *Butterfly and Flowers* by director Euthana Mukdasanit.

In Phnom Penh, I studied historic sites from the Khmer Rouge era that serves as the topic of films by director Rithy Panh, and watched documentaries about the minority peoples of the northeastern mountainous region. Finally, I went to Ratanakiri Province and Mondulakiri Province to visit the villages of the Tompuon, Brau, Jarai, Kreung, and Pnong peoples, where I studied the folk customs of shamans, leaders, and elders.

2. Activities at host institutions and work with collaborators

I spent a total of 8 days studying film materials at the Thai Film Archive and participated in the Salaya International Documentary Film Festival. Sanchai Chotirosseeranee and Putthapong Cheamrattony of the Thai Film Archive were tremendously helpful in my work collecting and viewing video materials there. I also received the full and extensive cooperation of the Thai Film Archive's Chalida Uabumrungjit, who took the stage with me for the "Documentary as Experimental Cinema" symposium at the 2015 Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival. Through this connection, at the Salaya International Documentary Film Festival I was invited on stage for a Q&A session following the screening of director Shingo Ohta's *The End of the Special Time We Were Allowed*.

In Cambodia, I participated in the opening reception of the Cambodia International Film Festival together with Kazumi Arai and Sopheap Chea of the Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center, and I interacted with Cambodian researchers and those in the Cambodian film industry. I also received tremendous help from Ratana Lach of the Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center with collecting English materials and film sources.

3. Record of fellowship activities

2/10 Departed from Narita. Arrived in Bangkok.

2/11 Flew to Ubon Ratchathani (Thailand) via domestic flight.

Visited Yasothon Province and Sai Moon village, the setting of *A Child of the Northeast*.

2/13 Arrived in Bangkok via domestic flight.

2/14 Arrived via taxi in Salaya in the outskirts of Bangkok and visited the Thai Film Archive.

2/18 Arrived in Nong Khai in northeast Thailand via overnight train.

Conducted survey work in Ba Chieng Da village.

2/20 Arrived in Khon Kaen by train.

2/21 Arrived in Nan Province in the north.

2/23 Arrived in Chiang Mai by bus and visited the villages in the mountainous areas.

2/27 Arrived in Chiang Rai by bus and visited the villages in the mountainous areas.

3/3 Arrived in Phnom Penh in Cambodia via international flight.

3/10 Arrived in Banlung in Ratanakiri Province in the northeast via shared bus and visited the villages in the mountainous areas.

3/14 Arrived in Senmonorom in Mondulkiri Province in the northeast via shared bus and visited the villages in the mountainous areas.

- 3/16 Arrived in Phnom Penh via shared bus.
- 3/17 Arrived in Bangkok via international flight. Arrived in Salaya via taxi.
- 3/21 Arrived in Hat Yai in the south via domestic flight.
- 3/24 Arrived in Bangkok via domestic flight. Boarded an international flight to Japan.
- 3/25 Arrived in Narita International Airport.

4. After the fellowship

“Future plans, prospects, etc., regarding this project”

First, based on my expedition through southern Thailand and the films I studied there, I plan to write an critical essay about director Euthana Mukdasanit’s *Butterfly and Flowers* for the jointly-edited book “Islamic Films” (tentative title; Film Art, Inc.), which is planned for publication at the beginning of 2018. I also plan to write about other films for the same book: the documentary *Conversion* and the narrative film *The Island Funeral*, both Thai films about Islamic culture.

On a larger scale, I hope to write studies about films set in the northeastern part of Thailand and its history and folklore (novel and film *A Child of the Northeast*; the works of Apichatpong Weerasethakul), about films on and the history and folklore of the minority peoples of northern Thailand (director Vichit Kounavudhi’s *Mountain People*, etc.), and about documentaries on minority peoples of northeastern Cambodia. I first want to post these studies to an online medium (documentary magazine *neoneo*), then combine these with my already-published essays on Apichatpong Weerasethakul into a book titled “Between: Essays on the Northeast” (tentative title).

In addition, I also want to make use of the knowledge built up through this trip whenever I receive a request to write for a magazine or book, to give a lecture for the public, or to conduct a class at a university or similar.

Notes, etc.....



【Photo 1】 I arrived in Sai Moon village in Yasothon Province, which is located in Isan (northeastern Thailand). This is the hometown of the author of the novel *A Child of the Northeast*, Kampon Boontawee, and it is also the novel's setting. The film version of *A Child of the Northeast* by Vichit Kounavudhi is also a masterpiece. The local atmosphere gave me a real sense for the power and strength of the farmers who live in these vast lands in the dry season.



【Photo 2】 Mediateque of the Thai Film Archive. This was my base of operations in Thailand. It is fully equipped with a print and DVD library. I viewed many great works of film here.
Address: 94 Moo 3 Phutthamonthon Sai 5 Road, Phutthamonthon 73170, Thailand
Website: <http://www.fapot.org/en/home.php>



【Photo 3】 I visited the hotel in Nong Khai in northeast Thailand at which director Apichatpong Weerasethakul filmed *Mekong Hotel*.



【Photo 4】 I visited Sala Keoku, the temple on the outskirts of Nong Khai at which director Apichatpong created the artistic piece *Fireworks*.



【Photo 5】 In Ba Chieng Da village in the outskirts of Udon Thani in Northeastern Thailand, I met and interviewed an 85-year-old *mo tham* (shaman). After his wife was entranced by a Phi Fa (spirit) and his daughter was possessed by a Phi Pop (cannibalistic spirit), he became a healer. Today he lives alone at a “jungle temple” in order to master Buddhism. Through this, I deepened my understanding of the spirit cult folklore background of Apichatpong’s films and Thai horror films.



【Photo 6】 Shrine to the “Two Ladies in the Water” in Khon Kaen in northeastern Thailand. Director Apichatpong’s *Cemetery of Splendour* was filmed here. This shrine is based on the oral tradition of two Laotian princesses who drowned in the Mekong River and then became guardian spirits for people who traffic the river. I was able to find one of these shrines (Chao Mae Song Nang) in Nong Khai. This may be an important element to deciphering *Cemetery of Splendour*.



【Photo 7】 The village of Huai Yuak in Nan Province in northern Thailand near the border with Laos. I interviewed an elder named Epa of the Mlabri people. These were once a hunter-gatherer society of no more than around 400 who were called the “spirits of the yellow leaves.” The Thai film *Tawan Yim Cheng* is modeled on the commotion caused when they were “discovered” in the 1980s. I was told: “Until 20 to 30 years ago, we roamed the jungle and lived a hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Although we’ve settled now that the jungles have been harvested and burned for agricultural use, we still wish to return to the jungle.”



【Photo 8】 Village of the Akha people on the outskirts of Chiang Mai. The film *Mountain People* by director Vichit Kounavudhi portrays a custom whereby twins are killed at birth as “unlucky” and the parents are banished from the village.

I also studied Akha shrines theorized to be the origin of *torii* shrines in Japan, as well as wood carving ancestral statue that emphasizes the genitals, said to be related to the Japanese traveler’s guardian deity.



【Photo 9】 A shaman performs an exorcism ritual in a Lahu village on the outskirts of Chiang Rai. Here I studied the folk culture that forms the background for the film *Mountain People*. He gave me a magical good luck bracelet.



【Photo 10】 The Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center in Phnom Penh. This was my base of operations for research in Cambodia. On the second floor is a print and film library. Address: #64, 200 Oknha Men, Phnom Penh, Cambodia
Website: <http://bophana.org/>



【Photo 11】 I visited Tuol Sleng Concentration Camp, the setting of Rithy Panh's Khmer Rouge films including *S21*; *Duch*, *Master of the Forges of Hell*; *The Missing Picture*; and others.



【Photo 12】 I participated in the opening ceremony of the Cambodia International Film Festival together with Kazumi Arai and Sopheap Chea of the Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center, as well as Yuki Hamada of the Japan Foundation and others. Especially helpful to my research were a special feature on Laotian films and a special feature on new Cambodian films.



【Photo 13】 I observed an animal-sacrifice festival in a village of the Tompuon peoples in the mountains of Ratanakiri Province in northeast Cambodia. In this festival, they sacrifice a cow(s) to the forest spirits in prayer for long life for the men's fathers. After a banquet for drink and song, the men gather around the sacrifice while banging five gongs of differing tones. Here I studied the history and folklore behind such films about minority peoples as the documentary *Anger of the Spirits* by director Thomas Weber, *Lon : Tompuon Village* by director Martin Potter, and *The Last Refuge* by director Anne-Laure Poree.



【Photo 14】 A village of the Kreung people in Ratanakiri Province. In order to restore the health of a thin young girl, an elderly shaman drank homemade liquor and conveyed messages and words of celebration from the spirits. The purpose of my visit and interviews here were the same as the case above.



【Photo 15】 A sacred object for forest spirits of the Pnong people, located in the mountains of Mondulkiri Province. The object portrays an image of an old man with a white beard. The purpose of my visit and interviews here were the same as the case above.



【Photo 16】 I attended the Salaya International Film Festival at the Thai Film Archive on the outskirts of Bangkok. Here I am shown with directors Sanchai, Childa, and Shingo Ohta.



【Photo 17】 At the Salaya International Film Festival, I took the stage with the director for a Q&A session following the screening of director Shingo Ohta's *The End of the Special Time We Were Allowed*. I answered questions in English for nearly an hour.