

# The Visual Documentary Project

## The Visual Documentary Project: building bridges between academia and the documentary filmmaking world in Southeast Asia

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Scene from *60 Days* (2016, Dirs. Htut Ye Kyaw, Sett Paing Aung, Pyay Maw Thein)

DOCUMENTARIES ARE A WINDOW onto a complicated world. With just a camera and a compelling story, filmmakers can weave together events, create strong narratives and present relationships between people, situations, and contexts. Stories powerfully emerge through the medium of documentaries. Filmmakers can spend days, weeks, months or years committed to deepening their understanding of a topic they want to present to audiences. Visual storytelling can have a profound impact and entice the viewer into further thought as they go back and forth between visual images and narratives.

In 2012, the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) Kyoto University, under a large-scale research program “promoting the study of sustainable humansphere in Southeast Asia”, set out to examine the rich diversity of experiences in the region under the rubric of plural coexistence. Southeast Asia is one of the world’s most diverse regions in terms of societies, cultures, languages and ecosystems. In recognition of the dynamics of the region the “visual documentary project” (VDP) was set up to offer a platform to young Southeast Asian filmmakers in the region. One of the main aims of this project is to create a bridge between academia and documentary filmmaking communities to stimulate discussion and develop dialogues that lead to new research/filmmaking inquiries. We aim to strike a balance between academic inquiries, filmmakers’ commitments to their art and the inherent activism that can arise from unique discussions between different actors. A secondary aim is to develop an archive of subtitled films (in English and Japanese) as potential documentary research material for future scholars. Since 2014 this project has also been bolstered by support from the Japan Foundation Asia Center (JFAC) in order to further build links between Japan based communities and their Southeast Asian counterparts.

Academic research on the region is abundant and recent years have seen a substantial increase in the volume of scholarly works being published. Observing and engaging Southeast Asia through the minds and imaginations of young filmmakers on the ground offers new ways to think about, from a non-academic perspective, how people capture the everyday nuances of life. The proliferation of cheap technology, mobile phones and computers, alongside gradual democratization and liberalization, has led to the vibrant growth of amateur, semi-professional and professional documentary film industries. This has been accompanied by the founding of film schools, academies and institutes that offer training and direction for aspiring filmmakers.

These developments are invigorating visual documentation in the region. Academics who work in their respective fields can spend years developing language skills to create their

networks and to engage in fieldwork. From research to publication 3 to 4 years may pass. Yet during this time the ‘field’ can abruptly move on. Filmmakers on the ground, often from the communities they document, can quickly bring fast moving events to broader audiences to contextualize current issues often with deep insight. From the everyday and mundane to chasing political scandals and corruption; from environmental concerns to political participation and representation; from land dispossession to calls for social justice: Southeast Asian filmmakers have their finger on the multiple pulses of the region.

Over the past five years the VDP has developed into a platform that is enriching dialogues on how documentaries can help us to rethink the ways issues are framed within Southeast Asia. Since 2015, CSEAS has not only screened documentaries submitted to the project, but become a hub to help raise the profile of young and upcoming filmmakers trained and practicing in Southeast Asia. This has included collaborations with Thai universities; the submission of documentaries to the Kyoto International Film and Art Festival (KIFF) for screening to the general public; the hosting of talks by international renowned filmmakers such as Rithy Panh (Oscar nominated filmmaker and founder of the Bophana Audiovisual Center, Phnom Penh) and extending invitations to filmmakers to stay in Kyoto to produce and edit documentaries; and creating links with film institutions and universities in the region to share the fruits of this unique endeavor.

Each year has provided a broad theme under which filmmakers have submitted their work. Themes have included ‘care’, ‘plural coexistence’, ‘people and nature’, ‘human flows: movement in Southeast Asia’, and ‘politics in everyday life’. Since the inception of the project we have received 240 submissions. Many documentaries have sensitively engaged in issues ranging from migration in Thailand, gender issues in Cambodia, land dispossession and indigenous community affirmation in the Philippines, climate change and its impact on the reproductive health of women, to the struggles of Burmese students protesting Myanmar’s recent national education reforms.

### Documentary filmmaking as a barometer of change

In recent years, the shifting political climate in some nations, most notably Myanmar, has seen an unprecedented increase in the output of documentaries. Since democratic reform in the late 2000s, this ethnically diverse nation of just over 50 million is experiencing new opportunities to speak about political change, test the boundaries on what can be said, and speak about ongoing reforms. This watershed has led to the prolific emergence of a diverse range of creative documentary filmmaking. At the forefront is a young energetic generation of filmmakers testing new found freedoms and pushing the envelope as to what degree popular political commentary is allowed. What was a trickle in 2012 has become a stream and this has been most illustrated by some of the submissions we have received over the past two years. This in part has been encouraged and supported by the Yangon Film School (YFS, Yangon) and the Human Dignity Film Institute (HDFI). For our most recent event we received an unprecedented 34 submissions (out of 75) from Myanmar alone, a testimony to the rapid changes sweeping across the country.

*Vein* (2015, Dirs. Htet Aung San, Phyo Zayar Kyaw, Ko Jet), for example, shot in the Kachin state, focuses on the lives of migrant workers on mining sites searching for jade. Along with Myanmar’s ongoing transition to democracy, its abundant natural resources have become a source of economic hope and tension. With no

clear figures on how many corporations and illegal mines are active in the region, jade is a tense source of income for both the Kachin Independence Army and Burmese state forces. We see Myanmar’s veins exposed and this visceral documentary presents the viewer with the sense of a ‘gold rush’ and a stark portrayal of the everyday risks miners face. Opening with a landslide, viewers are confronted with raw phone footage of miners being dug up after they were buried by a landslide while attempting to dig for jade. The documentary tracks several people affected by the tragedy, presenting their narratives within the broader context of the national and regional economies of natural resources exploitation. Attempting to capture the precariousness of work at the mines, the directors –at risk to themselves–take long panoramic shots up cliff faces on the verge of collapse; track the flickering torches of workers scrambling over mined rock tipped into midnight quarries dwarfed by colossal dump trucks; and train the viewer’s senses on the cascading rocks that offer potential economic opportunities yet threaten life. Jade has recently caught the attention of other Burmese directors (Taiwan based director Midi Z [2016, *City of Jade*]), but this documentary is unrivalled in bringing home the brutal reality of migrant workers living on the edges of the nation.

Also from Myanmar is *60 Days* (2016, Dirs. Htut Ye Kyaw, Sett Paing Aung, Pyay Maw Thein), which deals with the recent 2015 student protests that arose after the transition to democracy from Thein Sein’s government. Enacted in September 2014, the Burmese national education bill led to protests from students who felt it would infringe on their academic freedoms. Even though amendments were made to the bill, students intensified their protests dissatisfied with the government’s stance. This led to harsh police crackdowns, which were denounced in the West and cursorily covered by international media. These crackdowns were an impetus for students to galvanize and organize themselves and enhanced their cause within Myanmar. Viewers are presented with actual footage of the activist students organizing and planning for their march. The documentary follows Ko Zayyar Lwin, then student president of the Yangon University Economic Student Union, who narrates their reasons for protesting. *60 Days* offers a balanced take on what was at stake with in-depth discussions with representatives from the National Network Education Reform (NNER), Myanmar’s Teacher Federation, and Dr Yin Yin New, Chief Education Advisor to the President of the Republic. This documentary is a labor of love that captures the tensions that existed at the time between students and the government. The final scene captures a tense standoff with armed forces, leading to the arrest of students (who were all subsequently released) and reminds us of the excessive crackdowns of 1988. The political message in this documentary and the others from Myanmar are a clear indication that a new milieu prevails with documentary filmmakers at the vanguard of witnessing changes in country.

As this project develops we aim to extend our connections with universities, film schools and institutes and NGOs within Southeast Asia and Japan to further develop discussions and dialogues. Our goal is to encourage hybrid collaborations that strengthen bridges between different communities. Doing so will hopefully lead to the creation of unique works that can deepen our understanding of this diverse region and encourage and support new voices and perspectives. These can challenge academics to rethink how they engage with issues through the minds, visions and cameras of those who experience them on an everyday basis.

### Submissions and screenings

The documentaries included in the VDP are selected through an international selection committee made up of both filmmakers and academics. Directors whose works are selected are invited to travel to Japan for screenings in Tokyo and Kyoto. Currently the VDP is accepting submissions for this year’s project “urban life in Southeast Asia”. The project looks forward to documentaries that engage in issues dealing with rapidly transforming urban landscapes; from life in slums to financial districts; from informal settlements to gated communities; revitalization projects to mass urban restructuring; values that shape urban life; and the ways cultural diversity, heritage, and aesthetics intersect in people’s everyday lives.

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