

Behind the scenes photography by
JITTRAPON KAICOME

Still frames from YAI NIN by
LIAM MORGAN

Essays by
CHAMP ENSMINGER

Making ยายนิน

YAI NIN



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For Veenarong

My Thai speaking skills range between bad and passing, depending on my proximity to Chiang Mai. And by proximity, I mean both to the city and to the friends and family who exude the city and its brand of Thainess in more ways than I do. In my family, there are two who are our deepest anchors to Chiang Mai - my grandmother Ninlawan, and my grandfather Veenarong.

My grandfather doesn't speak to many people other than his wife. In my youth growing up in Spokane, 'Da' and 'Yai' would make bi-yearly visits to see their 1st generation kids, and the American grandkids. I recall a moment when my grandfather pulled me aside, and told me in Thai what I could vaguely make out to be important life advice. I am heartbroken to this day that with my thin comprehension of Thai at the time, I couldn't fully comprehend what that advice was.

My grandmother has lived in relative solitude since Da died, and when I began living in Chiang Mai a few years ago and fell back into the language, I was happy to have her talk my ear off. I knew it wasn't long until her stories would stop with me, and I would again lose my shot at holding onto the best advice.

One story I've learned in the making of this film, is of my grandmother's continued relationship with her husband. The most devout Buddhist I know, she has developed a firm belief since his death that he is still present. She asks for advice, hoping for good to happen when things are uncertain. He responds, and things tend to be for the better.

I'm very happy to share their stories with you. For me, sharing their stories makes up for lost time.



ENSMINGER WITH HIS GRANDFATHER,
VEENARONG PINYO

FILM STILL, NINLAWAN AT WAT KU TAO TEMPLE
Footage by Liam Morgan





CHIANG MAI IN THE MORNING FROM
NINLAWAN'S HOUSE
Photo by Champ Ensminger

Chiang Mai

YAI NIN is as much a study on my grandmother as it is a love letter to our hometown of Chiang Mai.

Choosing Chiang Mai over Bangkok as a place to live at 25 seems like a downgrade, especially coming from Brooklyn. But Chiang Mai is in many ways a fast-changing city, and I found plenty of things to get up to after the novelty of the elephant sanctuaries and weekend street markets wore off. Three months into Chiang Mai life, I had my favorite bar to camp out at during the water fights of Songkran, and the local art gallery exhibiting new photography by Apichatpong 'P Joe' Weerasethakul. I had the tricks down of extending my tourist visa at the immigration office. In Nimmanhaemin, Wua Lai road, and the Old City, Chiang Mai turned from a childhood memory into a familiar stomping ground, where I got into as much and as little as possible.

But a short scooter ride across the Ping River, I was able to get doses of Chiang Mai living slowed way down. I tagged along with Yai on weekends to her usual haunts when she's not at her desk - a Buddhist temple, or an air-conditioned shopping mall. I'd say hello to the factory workers who'd known me since I was in diapers, and watch Yai yell at them as she had been doing for decades.

FILM STILL, SAN PHA KOI MARKET
Footage by Liam Morgan



Ninlawan Pinyo

Ninlawan Pinyo was born in Chiang Mai on April 27, 1936. Her mother was born and raised in Chiang Mai, and sold tobacco in San Pha Koi market. Her father was a successful eye doctor from Myanmar. Ninlawan grew up in a packed house, as the eighth of sixteen siblings.

Since setting up the Naem Pinyo sausage factory under childhood home in 1970, the Pinyo household has been bustling to this day. The space is teeming with activity day in and day out, from the factory workers starting the machines first thing in the morning, to the delivery men riding their scooters out to the markets, to the housekeepers closing the gate in the early evening.

With her children and their families living in the States, the workers and housekeepers have become her children by extension. While living in Chiang Mai, I recalled this dynamic from past years of routine visits, and noticed how little had changed. It's this sense of time standing still as she's kept herself busy all these years, as mother hen watching her nest, that I hope comes across in the film.



NINLAWAN 'YAI NIN' PINYO WITH THE DIRECTOR
AT HER HAIR SALON
Photo by Jittrapon Kaicome



ABOVE: NINLAWAN AND THE DIRECTOR AT SAN PHA KOI MARKET
RIGHT: NINLAWAN IN THE GARDEN AT HER VACATION HOUSE
Photos by Jittrapon Kaicome



BELOW: NINLAWAN AND CREW AT SAN PHA KOI MARKET
Photo by Jittrapon Kaicome



On Camera



Champ wanted a particular soft and pastel feeling for this piece, and gave me a number of references to watch before we went to Chiang Mai to shoot. Among them was the Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu who was most active in the '50s/'60s. He had a specific way of setting cameras, in that they almost never moved; the frame was set and things happened within that frame. And often his camera was at a specific height which related to the human body and more specifically, the height of a person's head when sitting in the way Japanese people were accustomed to at that time - and still are I suppose?

Given that we were shooting documentary rather than fiction, the idea of always setting a frame that doesn't move is challenging, as we can't really control the action in front of the camera to make it fit in and suit the frame we have set for it. We didn't completely stick to this mode of shooting, but it did inform much of the shoot.

I needed a set of equipment that would allow me to work a little bit like a stills photographer: finding a frame, putting the camera to my eye and shooting that still frame. But mine was a motion-picture camera. And it would also need to give a softness/pastel feeling towards what Champ was interested in to represent Yai Nin.

I chose to work with the Arri Amira and a set of very old Cooke Speed Pancro lenses from the 1950s on a bazooka gas-riser that I could easily roll around and adjust the height of on my own, as we had a very small crew. I think I also had some colour filtration on the lens, maybe a Classic Suede 1 filter to add a little bit of warmth to the image.

The Amira was designed for a single operator like a news camera, but gives an image which is near-impossible to tell apart from that of a full-sized Alexa. The whole set-up worked really well for this film.

LIAM AND THE AMIRA
Photo by Jeetrapon Kaicome

CINEMATOGRAPHER
Liam Morgan

BELOW: FILM STILL, JAN AT NAEM PINYO
Footage by Liam Morgan



BELOW: FILM STILL, PONG AT NAEM PINYO
Footage by Liam Morgan



About Naem



NAEM SERVED WITH BIRD'S EYE CHILIS, PEANUTS,
SHALLOTS, GINGER, AND SPRING ONIONS
Photo by Champ Ensminger

Naem is a style of pork sausage that is fermented in sticky rice, pepper, garlic, salt, and sugar. The tart flavor comes from lactic acid fermentation, in the same process as yogurt or kimchi. Although not as common a menu option outside of Southeast Asia, *naem* is considered a delicacy especially in Chiang Mai.

I never partook in the acquired taste of *naem* until much older. As kids my cousins and I were drawn fondly to Yai's other factory product - the more accessible *mu yaw* that is steamed in aluminum canisters and served as half moon slices.

Although the appeal of *naem* has receded with the passing of older generations, the success of Naem Pinyo - and its status as a household name - is a testament to the imprint *naem* has in Chiang Mai and the region. And the foodies already know - you come to Chiang Mai for the *khao soi*, and you stay for the *naem*.

The mechanics and movements of the factory were great. I always love watching people doing things on film, especially making things or fixing things, setting things. There is something fascinating in watching a person's body move when they have done something so much that it has become second nature and they can do it seemingly without trying. This can be a dancer or a woodworker or someone setting up scaffolding or a meat-packer in a factory; they all can be fascinating to watch.



LIAM AND 1ST AC FILMING THE FACTORY
Photo by Jittrapon Kaicome

CINEMATROGRAPHER
Liam Morgan

On Language

A detail of our film that may get lost to non-Thai speakers is Yai's nuance with language. Chiang Mai is home to speakers of *kham muang* - a dialect that falls into a linguistic gradient between Thai and Lao. Like American southerners losing their drawl when they move to the city, Northern Thais have migrated linguistically from *kham muang* to the Central Thai spoken in Bangkok. Depending on the social context, speakers of both will codeswitch and interchange between dialects. Yai and her circle retain the *kham muang* dialect, but as American immigrants the Thai language is disappearing entirely in our family with each generation - including its regional articulations.

This point on language reminded me of taking undergraduate coursework through the University of Washington's Native Voices - a masters program focused on the preservation of Indigenous cultures through documentary and multimedia research. Without a written form, Indigenous languages hinge on their continuous use by community elders. With elders dying off, where does the language go if not passed on to the next generation, or preserved in some other way? *Kham muang* is not yet an endangered language on the same scale as Indigenous languages, but from a

self-ethnographic standpoint I felt compelled to extend that line with our family language to our own elders in Chiang Mai.

I enjoy my mother's impersonations of Yai's turns of phrase in the *kham muang* dialect, to invoke her temper and her humor. She's fully aware that she will inherit her mother's temperament, particularly through *kham muang*. It reminds me all the time that the dialect brings with it a coloration of Thai-ness that stems from Yai, and radiates outward. I want to catch it, put it in a jar, and be able to open it every now and then to listen.

Yai only uses Central Thai once in the film, in the phone conversation with one of her workers on making deliveries to the markets. Initially I had the idea of alternating between different colors of subtitles to differentiate the dialects, but with the footage at hand it didn't seem like making the distinction was worth it for a non-Thai audience. I guess I will have to just settle for the inside jokes between me, Yai, my mother, and the northerners who still have the gift of gab in *kham muang*.



ABOVE: DIRECTOR'S MOTHER WARAPORN INTERVIEWING NINLAWAN
RIGHT: NINLAWAN AND CREW IN HER OFFICE
Photos by Jittrapon Kaicome



On Animation

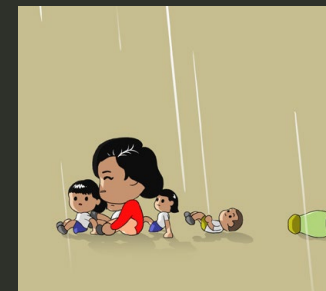
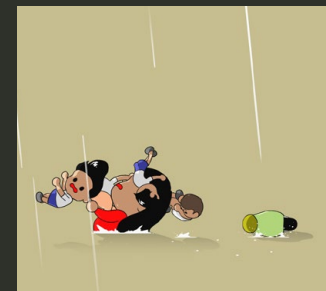
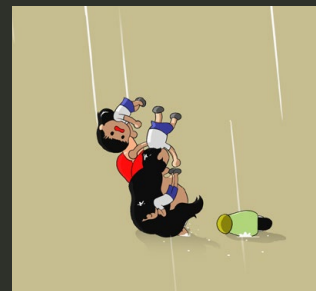
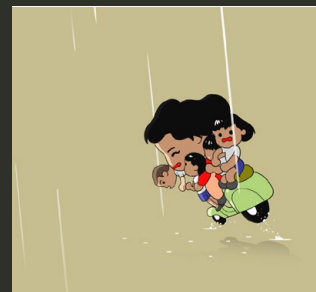
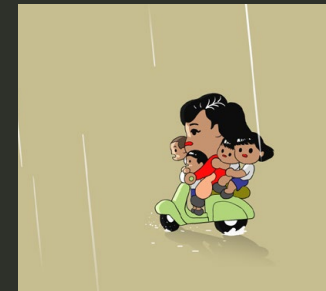
With family photos nonexistent or lost to time, a documentary film has only so many effective options in retelling a story. With any luck, you're sitting next to an animator.

I have been working with animators Carl Nelson and Juan Carlos Arenas for the past few years at production studio World Famous in Seattle. They lent their talents to recreating a story Yai told about her driving around in her Lambretta scooter, with all four of her kids onboard. I always found the mental picture of her story hilarious, and a great articulation of how scrappy our family was in the early years.

Drawing from references like Studio Ghibli and Thai contemporary artists, Carl and Juan created not only a segment for the middle of the film, but a callback during the credits in a brief homage to the credits of Hayao Miyazaki's *My Neighbor Totoro*.

ANIMATION FRAMES, SCOOTER SEQUENCE

Animation by Carl Nelson and Juan Carlos Arenas



BELOW: FILM STILL, END CREDITS ANIMATION
Animated by Carl Nelson, Juan Carlos Arenas



On Music



Like the food, Thai music has a huge range of styles and traditions one can get lost in. For the untrained ear who hasn't listened to Yai's tapes of Thai pop singers from the 40's, been to a mor lam show at Tawan Daeng, or to an open mic at Northgate Jazz Co-op, it's near impossible to articulate the distinctions of styles until you hear them in context.

But with enough context, musicians have a great way of connecting the dots you didn't realize were there. What I knew I wanted from the beginning was to end the film with a track by Houston band Khruangbin, which vibrates at a close frequency to my musical experience of Chiang Mai.

I had the good fortune of connecting with Bangkok-born, L.A.-based composer Satta Rojanagatanyoo through our crowdfunding campaign. He took my reference of Khruangbin and brought up the work of Thai singer and composer Euah Suntornsanan and his Suntaraporn band from the '40s/'50s. Satta was touching on an era in my grandmother's life where the traditional music of Thailand was expanding internationally across genres like jazz, soul, and funk. He had the benefit of playing saxophone, which happens to be my grandmother's favorite instrument. Satta also grew up in the old part of Bangkok, listening to karaoke bars play the ballads of her time. With that, I knew I couldn't have found a composer with more of the right context for Yai's story.

Khruangbin's world funk textures and Satta's jazz training and Thai background meant we could play with a broad sonic palette for the score. We stayed close to genre with references to the Suntaraporn band, and reached out as far as ethio jazz composers Mulatu Asatke and Hailu Mergia.

I can proudly say that in the hands of a capable composer, what resulted is a score not characteristic of music you immediately associate with Thailand, but an experience of Chiang Mai that has built in some of my grandmother's perspective and some of mine.

COMPOSER SATTA ROJANAGATANYOO



I cannot thank our collaborators, supporters, family, and friends enough for helping me capture our maternal culture from my grandmother's perspective. With so much faith put into such a personal story, I hope the film encourages others, especially immigrants, to draw similar throughlines with their personal and family history.

3 GENERATIONS OF PINYO WOMEN AT WAT KU TAO TEMPLE
Photo by Jittrapon Kaicome

BELOW: FILM STILL, NINLAWAN AT TON LAM YAI FLOWER MARKET
Footage by Liam Morgan



Film Credits

Director: Champ Ensminger
Executive Producers: Gerald Ensminger, Sr.,
Styles Upon Styles
Producers: Michael Peak, Kristy Peak,
Michele Choy, Alec Ansinha
Director of Photography: Liam Morgan
1st Assistant Camera: Theppharat Thiwthong
Location Sound: Alex Boyesen, Ed Sheffield
Still Photography: Jittrapon Kaicome
Interview & Translation: Waraporn Ensminger
Animation: Carl Nelson, Juan Carlos Arenas
VFX Compositing: Rogelio Salinas
Editing: Champ Ensminger
Colorist: Joel Voelker
Original Score: Satta Rojanagatanyoo
Sound Design & Mix: Jason Alberts
Music Supervisor: Nargis Sheerazie

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Riley Hooper
Courtney Sheehan

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World Famous
Northwest Film Forum
Artist Trust
Smarthouse Creative



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The staff of Naem Pinyo
The city of Chiang Mai

Follow the film at www.yainindoc.com