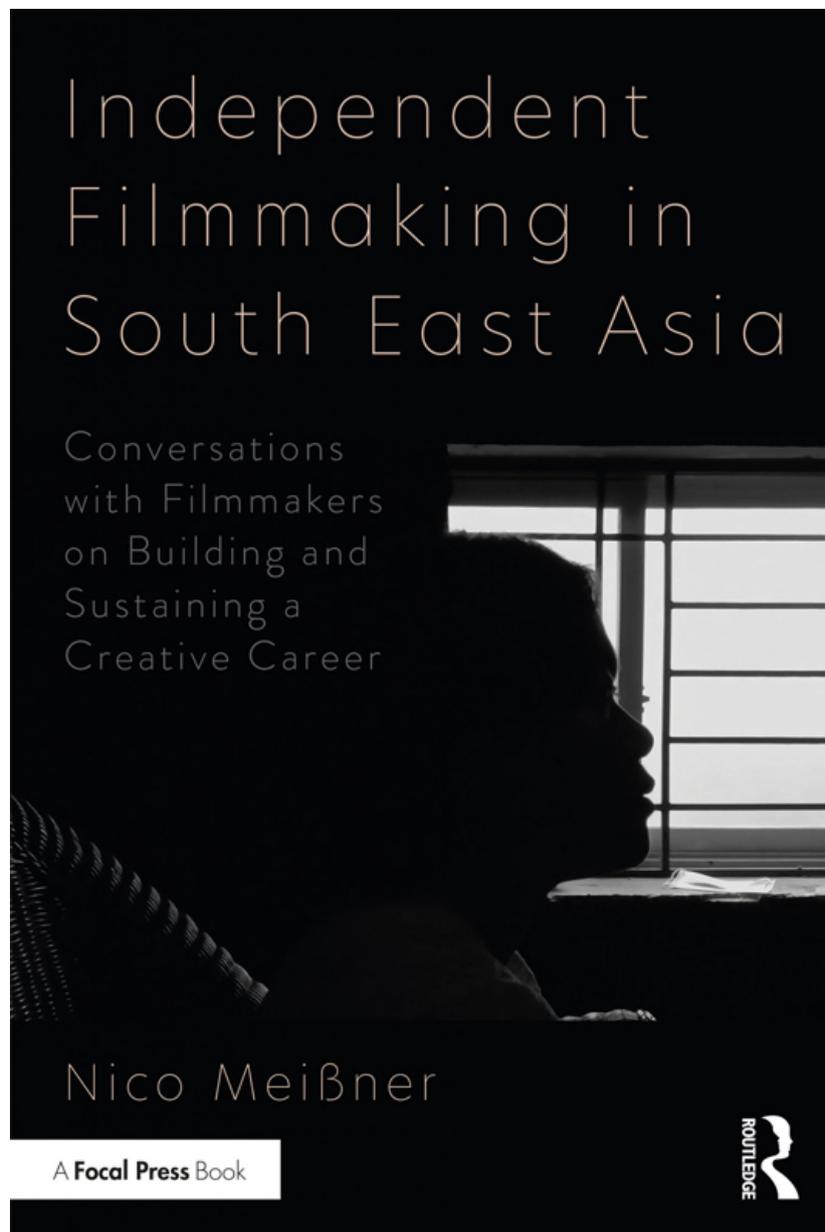


**Nico Meissner, “Independent Filmmaking in South East Asia: Conversations with filmmakers on Building, and Sustaining a Creative Career”**

Routledge (Focal Press), 2021

Paperback \$35.96/ Hardback \$128.00

208 Pages 28 B/W Illustrations



**Reviewed by** Pooja (Jo) Krishnakumar  
SOAS, University of London

Independent Filmmaking in South East Asia is an interview collection written and compiled by Nico Meissner, and the book's primary goal is to provide insights into the careers of some of South East Asia's most influential filmmakers in the hope of providing inspiration, and insights into the career progressions and paths of filmmakers at different stages within the industry. In 27 interviews, one visual essay, and the interviewer's (Meissner) introductory thoughts, the book is an attempt to let the filmmakers speak for themselves through edited recordings with the author from 2017. The book, focusing on *careers* rather than the *art* of filmmaking, is meant to inspire anyone who wants to walk the same paths. But it is not a book of 'good career advice', as Meissner maintains. Meissner, a film educator by profession, has experienced, first hand, the stark difference of attention that filmmakers, industries, and films are given in the 'west-centric' film industry. In his introduction, Meissner points out that South East Asia is currently one of the most exciting regions in the world for filmmaking, and that the low cost of living and the advent of digital technology in the region makes it easier for filmmakers to make their art- in any way possible.

Stories of 'unlikely' spaces of finding the love for film, like that of Sokyeou Chea, a science teacher who makes social impact films for her own creative expression or Morn Vanntey, a finance specialist who grew up outside of traditionally accessed film spaces. He describes the filmmakers in the region as 'total filmmakers' (Solanas, 1970), to talk about the nature of filmmaking in South East Asia- that for filmmakers to just be filmmakers in nations *minoritised* and marginalised by their own governments and the international scene, they need to be their cast and crew, their own funding bodies, and their own motivational systems. All the filmmakers in the book are not just single-skilled; they teach, direct, write, produce, are technically skilled in multiple things, have set up their own film festivals and are pioneers, have their own networks and sets to 'get things done'. While it is a great way to look at *how* filmmaking should be approached, and it is a good argument about 'total filmmaking', I do think it is important for readers of the book to engage with the fact that political turmoil asks more of the people who live through the trauma of it- and romanticising it in any way might risk taking away the nuance from understanding *why* filmmakers from the Global South do not have it easy.

To tell the stories of the filmmakers, Meissner has made the project multidimensional. The book is accompanied by a companion website, ['Paths Untold'](#), that includes 27 micro documentaries on the filmmakers that have been interviewed for the book, 4 behind the scenes excerpts, and a rich website resource on filmmaking in the region. Providing the reader access to the worlds of the individuals in the book opens up its scope, and the scope of the 'interview', making it a multimedia project that is accessible to more audiences than currently possible with written books. Readers can now put a face to the thoughts and names after reading the interviews, and know the filmmakers more intimately than characters in a book. The book, as a collection of interviews, provides for an easy read- they are simple, straightforward conversations, often linear and chronological in fashion. The descriptions provided by the authors paint vivid pictures of their childhood as they grow into adults making their way to an artform and industry they care so deeply about. By using the interview as the method of inquiry of this project, the author offers a decolonised lens to the stories of the filmmakers- they choose how they tell their stories, what parts of it they keep and delete. There is a flame of individuality

in each of these stories and no matter what parts of the story match the story in another individual's life, they stand apart.

Although it provides a break from the written word in the book, the picture essay situated as a middle chapter in the book does not add much beyond the vivid descriptions provided throughout the book by the filmmakers themselves about their hometowns, cities, and personal spaces. The lack of captioning takes away context or any idea of where each picture is taken or situated- the name of the countries each picture is taken in is on the Stories Untold website. The author went to the sets of many of these filmmakers; I would have loved to have an entry into those sets, and the career of that artist through an image, the relationships they have with the people around them, or with the camera, their notes, their actors.

The book did make me wonder *what* independent filmmaking meant, because even though the book talks *about* independent filmmaking, often, in the countries where the support and capital to make a 'mainstream industry' has not been the same, independent filmmaking then becomes the 'mainstream'. It was extremely interesting to note how different filmmakers balance funding, political thought in their art, and staying true to what they want to do. Sherman Ong, for example, believes all art is political art- "Migration and the history of migration in the region are important, and from there comes the material for my work. You need to know your history in order to put it in your work." At the same time, filmmakers like Thaidhhi and Thu Thu Shein in their interview, reflect on how people in marginalised groups are often forced to say only their stories and be 'authentic'. The book manages to make the filmmaking scene in South East Asia small, and interconnected through covering, non-hierarchially, the people who make the festivals and the people who participate in those festivals together in one story.

After reading all 27 interviews, I found myself going back to the introduction to connect them back together after having learnt from each interview, after having explored each person's path as their own to then situate them in the region, find connections and do some googling of their films on my own. The book serves as a great primer into independent filmmaking in Southeast Asia not only because of the impressive constellation of artists we are introduced to, but also because of how simply and effectively these stories are told by Meissner and the storytellers who are featured.