

# Rediscovery and Restoration of a 'Lost' Thai Classic: *Santi-Vina*

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### ***Santi-Vina*: The Story of a Lost Film**

*Santi-Vina* (1954, Thavee Na Bangchang) was a project initiated by American writer and producer Robert G. North and R.D Pestonji, Thailand's most important filmmaker at the time.<sup>1</sup> The film was made from a screenplay written by North, who was also the film's producer, and was directed by a famous Thai theatrical director, Marut (Thavee Na Bangchang).

At the end of World War II, the standard format for Thai films was 16mm. The intention was, however, to bring the industry into line with the rest of the world, and so it was decided that the film would be shot on 35mm and in colour. *Santa-Vina* was also meant to be the first film with directly recorded sound, but unfortunately due to the technical limitations the plan failed, and the dialogue had to be dubbed. In addition, there were no 35mm photochemical labs in Thailand yet, so the original negative had to be sent to the Far East Laboratory in Japan (known as Imagica today) for processing and post-production.

Once the film was completed, North and Pestonji submitted it for the inaugural Southeast Asian Film Festival in Tokyo in 1954. At the festival, *Santi-Vina* was acclaimed and became the very first Thai feature film to be recognised at an international film festival. It won three awards: two Golden Harvest Awards, for Best Cinematography (R.D. Pestonji) and Best Art Direction (Urai Sirisombat), as well as a 35mm Mitchell Camera as a special award from the Association of Motion Picture Producers of America for "the Feature Picture which will Best Disseminate Asian Culture and Increase Understanding of Asia by the West".

After the festival, the intention was to ship the original negative back to Thailand, but unfortunately, due to customs formalities, it transpired that if the print was to be allowed into the country huge import fees would have to be paid. Pestonji decided to send the negative for safekeeping at the Rank Lab in England and import only the release prints to screen the film in Thailand.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, according to Pestonji's son, Santi Pestonji, the negative of *Santi-Vina* was damaged during the shipping from Japan to England.<sup>3</sup> So, since that time, *Santi-Vina* has been thought of as a "lost film".



Figure 1: The original poster of *Santi-Vina*, released in Thailand in 1954.

### The Long and Winding Path of Searching

In subsequent years, the Thai Film Archive was involved in protracted efforts to trace the missing copies. With assistance from scholars and historians based in Russia and China, the Thai Film Archive finally managed to locate some records of release prints that had been purchased by the Soviet Union and the Republic of China at the time when they were still available. However, the actual search for the film did not make significant progress until an important episode evolved between London and Bangkok.

On 18 October 2012, the Thai Film Archive received an email from Mr Alongkot Maiduang, a film critic who was studying toward his doctoral degree in Great Britain. He had visited the library of the British Film Institute (BFI) and had asked to see what Thai films they may have in their vaults. In response, the BFI sent him a list of their holdings. To his great surprise, the title *Santi-Vina* featured on the list. He was excited and forwarded the list to the Thai Film Archive.

According to BFI's records, they had the full 35mm original sound negative but only 850 feet of the 35mm colour picture negatives. The original camera negatives did not appear on any records though.<sup>4</sup>

After this exciting discovery, the Thai Film Archive started a search to look for release prints in Russia and China. From a newspaper article, we knew that *Santi-Vina* was shown in Russia and China. It was also known that Gosfilmofond (the national Russian Film Archive) and China Film Archive normally keep all films ever shown on their territory.<sup>5</sup> So, Dome Sukvong, the founder of

the Thai Film Archive, asked scholars from both countries to look for *Santi-Vina* among their holdings.

I wrote to the international division of Gosfilmofond on the suggestion of one of my colleagues there, Peter Bagrov. The subsequent email exchange with their international relations department confirmed that they were indeed in possession of a release copy of *Santi-Vina*. They sent us a few scanned stills as confirmation. We could see that the copy was not in perfect condition – the colours had started to fade and there were scratches on film. The colour had a purple tint which is usually considered evidence of film print deterioration. In short, it would be possible to attempt to digitise this print through the film scanner, but it would be a costly project.

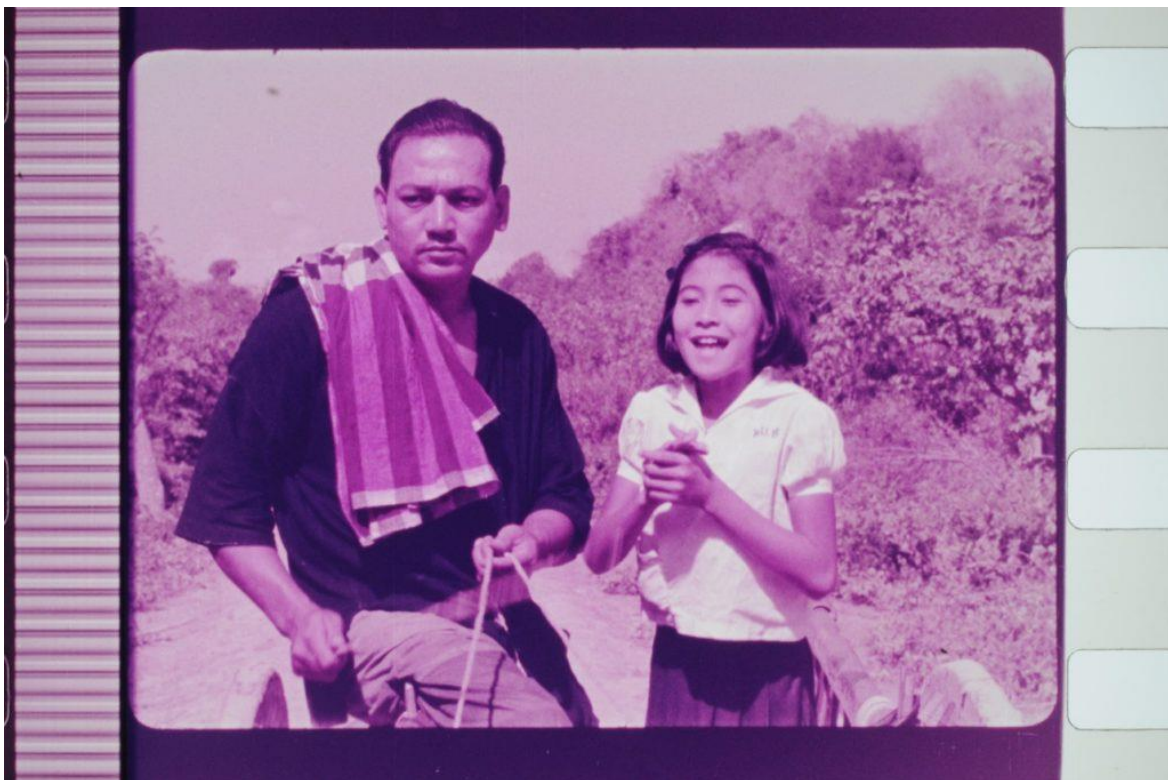


Figure 2: Still frame of *Santi-Vina* scanned from the print preserved in Gosfilmofond.

Another print was located at the China Film Archive in Beijing. I wrote to Xu Hui, the deputy director, whom I had met at the Congress of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF). In response we received an email from Sha Yang, a Chinese film scholar, who confirmed that the China Film Archive held a copy of the film. She also sent us copy files of a booklet entitled *Asian Film Week* and the *Cinema for People* magazine, which contained material about *Santi-Vina*. The film had been shown at the Asian Film Festival in 1957. On the basis of this communication, the Thai Film Archive formally contacted the China Film Archive for official confirmation. In December 2014, the China Film Archive sent a half-minute sample of their print to Bangkok. It revealed that the copy was not only quite faded and scratched but also had Chinese subtitles burnt onto it. We had high expectations, but the presence of subtitles turned out to be a great obstacle to the restoration project, because such subtitles would need to be erased frame by frame, making the restoration effort unaffordable.

In this context, the Thai Film Archive decided that we would work on restoring *Santi-Vina* by using the release copy from Gosfilmofond and matching it with the original sound negatives from the BFI.

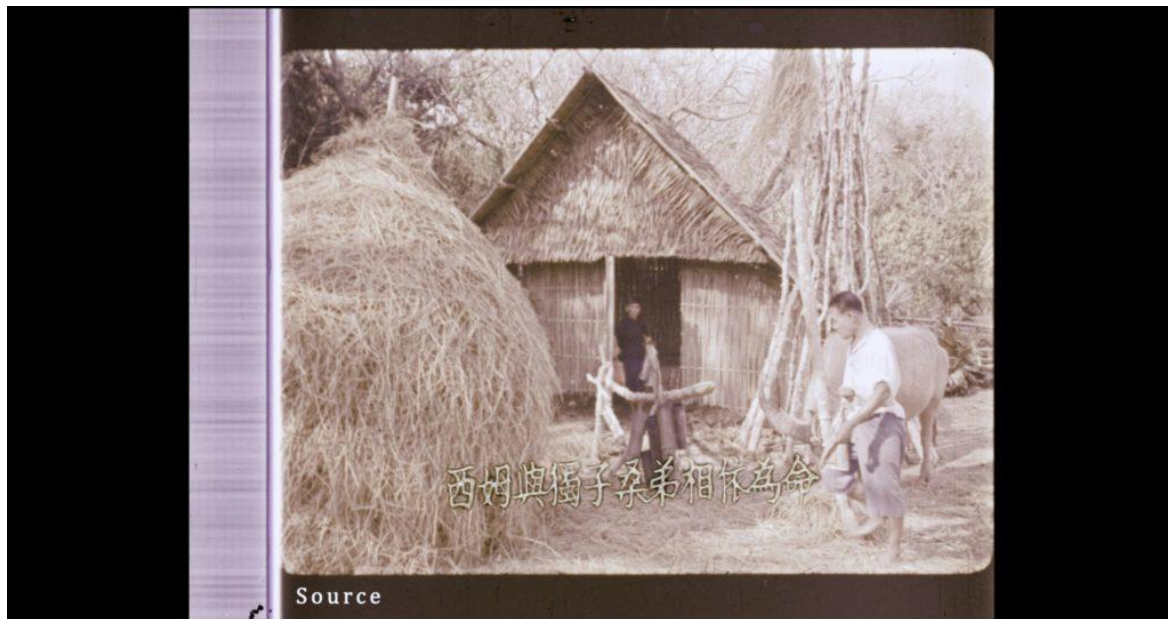


Figure 3: Still frame of *Santi-Vina* scanned from the print preserved in China Film Archive.

Before proceeding, however, we made a request to the BFI to check the condition of the original sound negatives. They asked us to confirm which items we would like to check specifically and sent us a detailed list of their holdings related to *Santi-Vina*. Since their film vault was in remote storage, they needed to prepare the material and transport to the inspection premises. Here is the list they presented:

Item call number C-148735 is 35 mm colour negatives (850 ft.)

Item call number C-148731 is 35 mm master positive sound

Item call number C-148730 is 35 mm nitrate sound negatives (450 ft.)

Item call number C-148732 is 35 mm nitrate sound negatives (11,550 ft.)

Item call number C-148733 is 35 mm original nitrate sound negatives (11,450 ft.)

Working through this list, I spotted that the call number C-148734 was missing. Therefore, I undertook to do one extra check for this particular item through the new BFI's search engine. To my amazement, this pulled up a record for the full 12,700 ft original colour negatives of *Santi-Vina*.

This is how the original camera negative of *Santi-Vina* was found. The item was recorded as *SANTI-VINA*, while in the other records it appeared spelled as *VEENA*. It was this simple difference in transliteration that explained why the film had not appeared in earlier searches.

## Restoring *Santi-Vina*

The original camera negatives turned out to be 15 reels of original Eastmancolor negative, with English subtitles. The reels were mouldy, but mostly only at the edges. There was some perforation damage and some broken splices. By comparison, the original sound negative was Fuji nitrate stock. All were in good condition and suitable for restoration.

The Thai Film Archive employed *L'Immagine Ritrovata*, the laboratory at Cineteca di Bologna, to do the work, due to their highly reliable reputation and great profile. We have known them for a long time, as they run the bi-annual summer school for film preservation in collaboration with FIAF and are among the most trusted partners in the field. They carried out the 4K restoration from the original camera and sound negatives found at the BFI. Some lost shots from the original negative were found in a cut reel which was preserved in a separate can. These shots were inserted into the restored version following the editing of the prints provided by China Film Archive and Gosfilmofond. The restoration was funded entirely by the Thai Film Archive costing about €100,000, which included the restoration cost, the shipping of prints from to Italy, subtitling, and so on.

The original negative colour had decayed and it had a dominant yellow hue all along the reel. It was colour corrected to restore the original photography. The print found at the China Film Archive was used as reference for this delicate restoration step despite the fact that its positive colour had also faded and that the print had a dominant magenta hue.

The restoration and cleaning took about 1700 hours. It was completed in 2016. This was four years after the first clue that we might be able to restore this long-lost film had appeared on the horizon.



Figure 4: Comparison of the unrestored *Santi-Vina* (right) and the restored version (left).

To conclude, the successful rediscovery and restoration of *Santi-Vina* shows the importance of transnational collaborations between film archives, not only for preserving material and undertaking research, but also for cross-border networking, documenting the history of film culture, and developing restoration techniques. Each bit is a jigsaw piece that, once in place, brings the big picture nearer to completion.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R.D. Pestonji or Rattana Pestonj (1908-1970) is widely regarded as the father of Thai cinema and was among the first to create a film studio in Thailand. His short film *Tang* was the first Thai film awarded at the Glasgow Amateur Film Festival in 1938.

<sup>2</sup> Traditionally, the original negative is the master copy for the release print for theatrical presentation. The negative copy is an original copy directly from the camera, from which all other copies, including the release copy, will be made.

<sup>3</sup> Santi Pestonji, 'Papa Tee Khoarop Rak' (Dear Respected Daddy), *Rattana Heang Nang Thai : Rattana Pestonji* (Preciousness of Thai Cinema : Rattana Pestonji), Thai Film Foundation (1997).

<sup>4</sup> Later, a BFI staff member explained that they had been in possession of the original sound negative and others since 1973, when Rank Film Laboratories sent their entire nitrate film collection to the BFI. Due to their flammable nature, nitrate film prints must be kept in specially air-conditioned spaces that are separate from the place where other prints are stored.

<sup>5</sup> Gosfilmofond, <https://gosfilmofond.ru>; China Film Archive, [www.cfa.gov.cn](http://www.cfa.gov.cn).

<sup>6</sup> The restoration of *Santi-Vina* would not be possible without the collaboration of the BFI, the China Film Archive, the Gosfilmofond and R.D. Pestonji's family. Our deep gratitude goes also to Alongkot Maiduang, Jez Stewart (BFI), Sha Yang and Xu Hui (China Film Archive), Peter Bagrov (Gosfilmofond) and Brigitte Paulowitz (Lichtspiel).

### **About the Author**

**Sanchai Chotirosseranee** holds a Bachelor's degree from the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication, Thammasat University, Thailand, and a Master of Arts in Film Studies from the University of East Anglia in the United Kingdom. He is currently the Deputy Director of the Film Archive (Public Organisation), Thailand. He is also one of the programmers of the Thai Short Film and Video Festival and Silent Film Festival in Thailand.