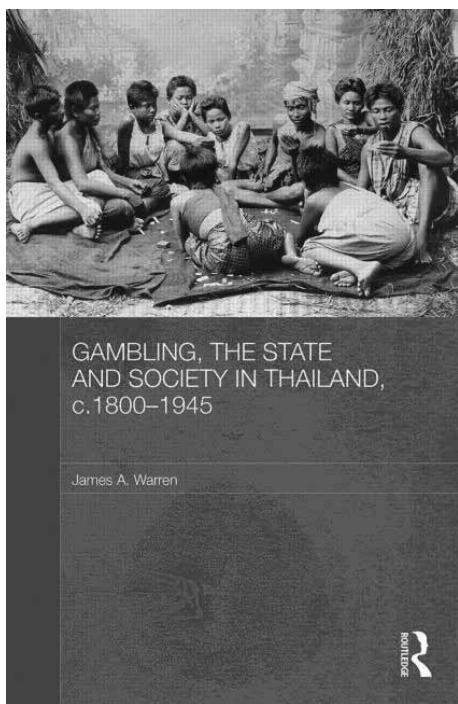


Reviews

Gambling, The State and Society in Thailand, c. 1800-1945 by James A. Warren (London and New York: Routledge, 2013). ISBN 978-0-415-53634-9 (hard). ISBN 978-0-203-55210-0 (e-book).



The subtitle of this excellent book by Dr. James A. Warren, which is an expansion of his PhD dissertation completed at the School of Oriental Studies, University of London, could have been “The more things change, the more they stay the same,” as Dr. Warren lucidly outlines the attitude towards gambling of various Thai governments and society in general during the period under examination, but more tellingly details how little has really changed in regards certain key aspects of Thai society over the last hundred or so years.

Gambling today is broadly prohibited in Thailand, with some exceptions. The only legal forms of gambling are the bi-monthly lottery run by the Government Lottery Office, horseracing run every week by the Royal Turf Club in Bangkok and gambling on Muaythai

boxing matches sanctioned by the Army Welfare Department of the Royal Thai Army at New Lumpini Boxing Stadium (although this stadium is scheduled to be relocated to the Ramindra area of Bangkok). Even the manufacture and distribution of playing cards is subject to strict control. Under the Playing Cards Act of 1943, the Ministry of Finance-owned Thai Playing Card Manufacturing Factory has a monopoly on the production of playing cards in Thailand.

Yet, despite the general prohibition, many forms of gambling are extremely widespread; indeed, illegal gambling continues to flourish throughout the country, especially the enormous underground lottery and betting on the English Premier League and major international football championships. A government sponsored study entitled The Role of Thai Frontier Casinos in Thai Society, conducted by Chulalongkorn University and released in January 2003, found that the amount of gambling taking place in Thailand had increased significantly since the economic

crisis of 1997. The study stated that gambling was thought to account for some forty per cent of the local economy, with approximately forty million Thais spending, on average, more than US\$220 per person annually on one or more of fifteen different forms of gambling. The study found that gambling businesses in Thailand generated between US\$12-20 billion per annum, and that Thai gamblers spent around US\$2 billion in one of the thirty or more casinos located just across the border in the neighbouring countries of Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar.

Although the Thaksin 1 government mooted the possibility of legalizing casino gaming, that liberalisation never materialised. Given the entrenched and vested interests of various politicians and men in uniform and the fact that many people still object to gambling on moral and social grounds, there is little likelihood of any change in the legal status of gaming in Thailand in the foreseeable future. As evidenced by recent, but short-lived, police crackdowns on the proliferating number of illegal casinos operating in Bangkok—now said to number more than one hundred—illegal gambling is only likely to have increased over the last few years, thus making the author's examination of the history of gambling in Thailand particularly timely and pertinent.

The book comprises an Introduction, nine chapters and a Conclusion. In his Introduction, Dr. Warren provides general definitions of gambling, examines the issue of why certain forms of gambling have been criminalised, and then discusses gambling in the wider Thai historiography before providing an overview of his study. Each chapter examines certain aspects of gambling or prevailing social issues during the period under study. He provides fresh research on the important role that gambling revenues played in the construction of the modern Thai state. Moreover, he provides interesting insights into the law enforcement, legal and judicial processes and penalties, as well as how the Thai elite, the emerging middle class in Bangkok, the press and the Buddhist clergy all viewed gambling. In an interesting, although perhaps unintended, juxtaposition of the situation in today's politically divided nation, Dr. Warren explains how many Bangkokians resented the influx of people they perceived as country bumpkins in order to gamble and avail themselves of the delights of the big city. He also discusses how the Bangkok elite dominated policy in regards to gambling, as they knew best regardless of the wishes of the rest of population (the silent majority). As part of the overall process of demonstrating to the outside world that Thailand was a civilized country, certain traditional Thai gambling games, such as cock fighting, were designated as being uncivilized whereas games popular in the West, such as playing bridge, horse racing and billiards, were seen not only as civilized, but also as being desirable.

During the 19th century, there was a large increase in the level and types of gambling in Thailand. Dr. Warren examines the reasons behind this increase and determines that the causal factors lay not in any cultural disposition on behalf of Thais towards gambling, but rather was due to the country's economic transition that

led to increased prosperity and more disposable income; even more importantly, for many Thais, gambling was one of, if not the only, form of entertainment available at that time.

As an important adjunct to the subject matter, this book provides a fascinating look at the development and role of the Thai police force, especially in terms of their enforcement, or somewhat more pertinently failure to enforce, existing laws prohibiting gambling, and the subsequent criminalisation of gambling. There is also a very interesting comparison between Thai government policy on gambling with those on opium use and prostitution. Whereas, the government was more concerned in the early 20th century with suppressing vice activities that attracted Thais, they apparently were more than happy to encourage Chinese labourers to spend their earnings on these very same vices, thus accruing several benefits to the state: their money would be retained in Thailand; the labourers then had insufficient funds to return home; and, they would therefore have to continue to work on important infrastructure projects.

If history has taught us anything, it is that government-enacted prohibition—whether of alcohol, narcotics or gambling—simply does not work from a financial or social perspective. The Thai government opened and licensed gambling farms in the 19th century, and taxes on gambling became a major source of state revenue that underpinned many of the reforms carried out by King Rama V. Later, casinos and state-run lotteries were opened in the first half of the 20th century, yet ultimately the Thai elite sought to regulate gambling through a series of increasingly restrictive and punitive laws until government decided that gambling was a social evil that should be wholly prohibited, the same situation that exists today. Consequently, Dr. Warren's erudite analysis on page 144 of the prevailing attitudes to gambling remains as pertinent today as during the period under review:

Clearly, people continued to gamble even when it was in contravention of the law, though this was probably due not so much to ignorance or outright defiance as indifference. Indeed, if the aim of the government's gambling policy was to change people's behaviour by getting them to forego particular games, then it is fair to say that for the period covered by this study it failed.

Dr. Warren's highly readable study is based on his research of a variety of Thai and English language archival sources, including government reports, interesting legal cases, journals and newspapers. Despite its hefty price tag, this book should become essential reading for anyone interested in the history of 19th century and early 20th century Thailand.

Paul Bromberg