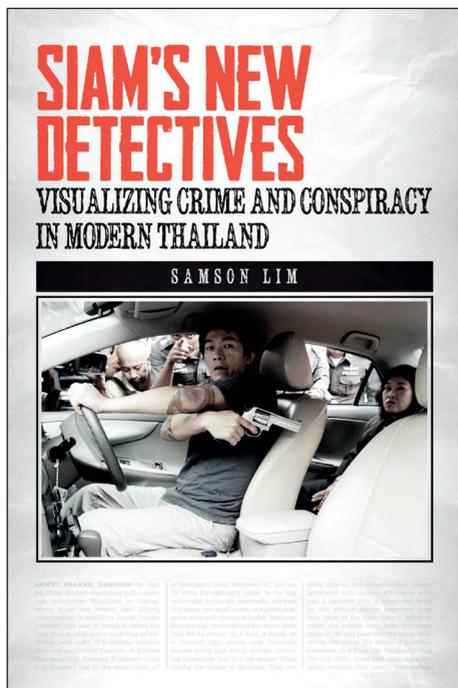


Siam's New Detectives: Visualizing Crime and Conspiracy in Modern Thailand by Samson Lim (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016). ISBN: 9780824855253. US\$65.



Siam's New Detectives describes how Thailand's police forces emerged as a modern institution since the 1890s. Samson Lim's cultural history focuses on how policing became the profession it is in Thailand. He notes that it has roots both in Thai cultural concepts of hierarchy and royal legitimacy on the one hand, while borrowing legal administrative and technical techniques for crime solving from Europe, and later the United States. This borrowing began in the early 20th century from Europe (especially the UK and Denmark), and continued from America after the Second World War. In this way, the book is like others about Thailand—it is about the tension between an inward-looking nation preserving independence and an outward-looking nation seeking to engage with the modern world.

As with nations everywhere, Thailand seeks to maintain order by projecting the authority of the sovereign, which in Thailand is the Chakri dynasty and its bureaucracies. Until premodern times, this authority came from the feudal relations between the king and provincial vassals, justified by an assertion of hierarchical theories rooted in Buddhism and a deep respect for spiritual powers.

In the late 19th century though, Bangkok grew rapidly, acquiring the problems of modern cities, including a reputation for gambling, drugs, drunkenness, robbery, and murder. In Bangkok this problem was viewed through the lens of Chinese immigration, which was blamed for the urban disorder. By 1904 well over half the city's population was Chinese. Major sections of Bangkok were controlled by Chinese gangs; trade and commerce were dominated by Chinese corporations; and even tax collection was contracted to Chinese entrepreneurs. There were an estimate 184,000 Chinese migrants, mostly males speaking various dialects.

To routinize control, King Rama V established professional courts, public prosecutors, and ultimately a salaried, full-time police force. As elsewhere, the duty of the police was to present to prosecutors and the courts convincing proof that arrested miscreants actually committed a particular crime. In practice though, it became a force to control the Chinese section of the city.

Rama V's government hired British police officials to establish Bangkok's constabulary in the early 1890s. As Lim writes, policing with its emphasis on case resolution and punishment of the guilty was viewed as a modern replacement for

traditional private watchmen and soldiers. Personnel and techniques were imported from the UK to deal with urban crime. Eric St. John Lawson, a veteran of British India's civil service, was hired as Bangkok's commissioner of police from circa 1903 to 1914; and he left an account of his experiences on which Samson Lim expertly draws. By 1910 this constabulary included almost 3,400 men to patrol the city and its suburbs in eighty-eight policing districts. Police were not paid well, and the men hired as constables were often illiterate and open to bribes.

A separate rural gendarmerie was established in 1897 to deal with problems of banditry in the sparsely settled countryside. Expertise and techniques were brought from Denmark. Crime in the countryside was different than in urban Bangkok. Rural crime focused on banditry, which involved raids by gangs who had hide-outs in the forest.

Thus the tasks of the two Thai police forces were slightly different. The biggest challenge for Bangkok's police was breaking the power of Chinese gangs which controlled gambling and other vices in a context of legitimate but powerful trading enterprises. The more rural police forces were concerned with banditry in disorganized rural areas where travel was difficult, and forests provided ample hiding places. In both urban and rural areas there were at times high rates of crime, for which elites and the public looked to the king and his civil servants to control.

There are five chapters in *Siam's New Detectives*, each describing issues that emerged largely in the 20th century and dealing with different technical subjects. Early chapters are about how systematic and scientific methods of crime investigations were introduced. Particularly important was the collection of evidence used to solve crimes, arrest habitual criminals, and deter others from committing the criminal acts which terrorized the populace. The final chapters deal with the development of police power, particularly in the context of American patronage. Such modern policing techniques replaced earlier methods of crime detection used by the King's courtiers which relied on divination, understandings of the super-natural, beatings, and confessions. Systematic drawings (and later photographs) of crime scenes, documentary evidence, fingerprints, and other technical innovations were developed.

Literacy and education were important in organizing such a police force, which led to the establishment of separate police academies. After the Second World War the academies were well funded with American money via USAID which correlated development with law enforcement, such as that undertaken in the urban United States. Such funding led to the adoption of American habits of policing, including emphasis on both systematic investigation but also the paramilitary habits of American police. By the 1960s Thai reliance on American patronage meant that anti-Communism was also emphasized in police work.

As Lim points out, Thailand was not really a police state before the war, but by the 1950s it started to look like one. This was made possible by American funding which permitted the development of crime labs and training facilities under the supervision of the powerful Police General Phao Sriyanon, a client of the CIA. General Phao used the newly trained (and armed) police to sideline political opponents through threats, violence, exile, and imprisonment. He also left memoirs of the time he spent setting up the police force in the 1950s, thus helping the author develop his story.

Lim highlights in Chapter Four how this legitimation worked in his description of the “criminal re-enactment.” Public criminal re-enactments are used in Thailand in cases where the perpetrator has confessed, particularly since the 1950s when newspapers became widespread. The press is invited to watch the perpetrator re-enact the crime as a way for the criminal to do penance, and also so the police can publicize their prowess as crime fighters. The voyeuristic nature of such re-enactments provides the public a chance to share in the righteousness of the state and its agents. In many ways the criminal re-enactment is a compromise between modern principles of police work with its emphasis on evidence and a Thai emphasis on confession as a source of redemption and atonement. As Lim writes, such staged drama became more important and started filling newspapers at that time as coverage of political events was severely restricted through censorship.

Chapter 5 ties together the story of Thai policing across history. The chapter is about the role conspiracy theories play in understanding of not only crime, but corruption within the government. As Lim points out, postwar conspiracy theories are a dominant way of understanding what is wrong with Thai society and government. The unexplainable is often reduced to visions of malevolent cabals operating behind the scenes. In this sense, the reliance of the military governments of the 1950s-1980s on the Communist threat is exemplary. Anti-Communist ideology is also what loosened the purse-strings of USAID, which delivered over \$2 billion in security assistance to the police before 1973, much of it in terms of weapons and heavy vehicles to combat insurgency in the Northeast. This assistance is what gave birth too to the Border Police, and other paramilitary units under the Department of Interior, as well as the Department of Defense. This violent response to crime, Lim writes, still underlies the culture of policing in Thailand. National security is also still used as justification for often arbitrary police actions.

The biggest question *Siam's New Detectives* leaves unanswered though, is what does this mean for modern policing in Thailand and its legitimacy for the public? Thailand's police force continues to have a reputation for addressing problems extrajudicially, a practice at times applauded by the public. This happened in the context of the extrajudicial executions of drug dealers during the Thaksin era. Other examples of this practice include the prosecution of the Koh Tao murders in 2014 in which two Burmese laborers were arrested (and coerced into re-enactments) which was widely criticized by human rights organizations and the many police checkpoints where extrajudicial fines are levied on people not wearing a motorcycle helmet.

Samson Lim's book ultimately begins and ends with a similar story in which scientific evidence is still doubted by the public, because it is viewed as a product of corrupt authorities. Lim implies that such explanations of the supernatural were simply replaced with conspiracy theories. Mistrust of authority is the constant. Herein perhaps lies the moral of the story told by *Siam's New Detectives*, which is that science by itself is not enough to guarantee an effective and legitimate police authority.

Tony Waters