

THE “CONSULTING DETECTIVE” NITHAN THONG-IN BY KING VAJIRAVUDH

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ABSTRACT—This short study explores detective stories by Crown Prince Vajiravudh, later King Rama VI, in early 20th-century Siam. Compiled in *Nithan Thong-in*, these tales provide insights into Siamese society, culture, and history. Despite multiple reprints, an English translation is currently unavailable. This notice introduces the cultural richness of Mr Thong-in’s adventures, along with brief summaries of each story.

KEYWORDS: Crown Prince Vajiravudh; Early 20th-century Bangkok; *Nithan Thong-in*; Siamese detective fiction; Thai Literature

Unraveling Mysteries in the Heart of Bangkok

This study provides a concise overview of the detective stories about Mr Thong-in authored by Crown Prince Vajiravudh (1881–1925) who wrote popular literature in early 20th-century Siam. In 1904–1905, he published the first Mr Thong-in detective stories—under the pen names “Nai Kao” and “Nai Khwan” (นายแก้ว นายขวัญ) in his Bangkok literary review, *Tawipannya* (ทวีปัญญา). He did this following his return from a nine-year sojourn in England which was capped with a world tour (1893–1903). Influenced by the “consulting detective and a sidekick” genre popularized by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s (1859–1930) characters Sherlock Holmes and Dr John Watson, Crown Prince Vajiravudh published a total of 15 detective tales of Mr Thong-in. He would go on to



**FIGURE 1: King Vajiravudh, circa 1920,
author of *Nithan Thong-in*
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succeed his father as King Rama VI in 1910, and reign until 1925 [FIGURE 1].

The volume titled *Nithan Thong-in* (นิทานทองอิน), first published in 1912, compiled 11 previously released stories. In 1921, a second edition surfaced,

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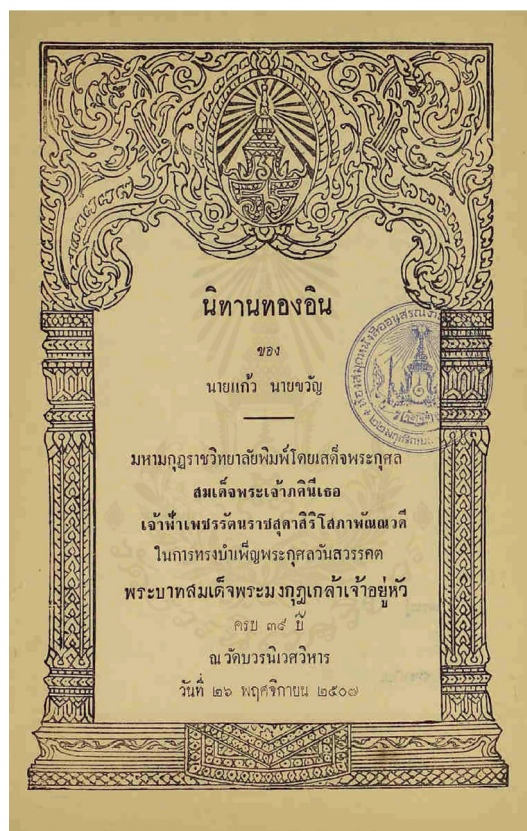


FIGURE 2: 1964 Reprint of *Nithan Thong-in* on the occasion of the 39th anniversary of King Rama VI's demise © Mahamakut Buddhist University Press

encompassing 15 stories that were initially published individually in *Tawipannya*. Noteworthy is the presence of Mr Thong-in's companion, Mr Wat (พ่อวัด), a lawyer, who is the narrator of each story. Additionally, the 1921 edition features a quartet of stories that collectively form a short novella recounting Mr Thong-in's encounter with the rural bandit known as Mr Man Iron Hand (อ้ายมันมือเหล็ก). Despite minor variations in content between the two editions, the enduring character dynamics add a consistent thread to the narrative tapestry.

Nithan Thong-in has undergone multiple reprints, notably in 1964 to commemorate

the 39th anniversary of King Rama VI's demise [FIGURE 2]. More recently, in the 2000s, reprints were again published in Thai (Vajiravudh 2549 and 2554). Rattanachai Luangwongngam (2549) who republished the 1921 edition, included both an introduction to the tales and endnotes to clarify terms and adjustments made to the stories. Rachel Harrison (2009), Thosaeng Chaochuti (2009), Samson Lim (2012), Panida Boonthavong (2557), and Thak Chaloemtiarana (2018), have all commented recently on the prominence of the *Nithan Thong-in* in early Thai detective fiction.

At present, a comprehensive English translation of Mr Thong-in's anthologized tales is still unavailable. This modest literary note endeavors to provide a concise overview of the 15 stories within the *Nithan Thong-in* collection, aiming to assist readers who may not be proficient in the Thai language.

Original Stories Republished by King Vajiravudh in 1912

1. "The Second Ghost of Phra Khanong" (นาถพระโขงที่สอง): The series begins with this ghost tale where retired Colonel Choti (พันโชติ) is haunted by disturbances believed to be caused by the spirit of his late wife, Mrs Nak (นางนาก). Local beliefs connect the apparitions to Nak's ghost, creating community unrest and making it unlikely that Colonel Choti can find a bride. Mr Thong-in steps in to investigate, challenging the dismissive stance of the *farang* Police Commissioner.² Mr Wat

² Bangkok's Police Commissioner at the time was Mr Eric St John Lawson (in office 1903 or 1904, until 1913). Lawson was the fourth Western police officer hired in Siam since 1862, when the office was created

played a spirit medium, helping Mr Thong-in to unveil an elaborate hoax orchestrated by Colonel Choti's son and a friend.³ The resolution brings closure to the family and allows Colonel Choti to move forward with seeking a new bride.⁴

2. “Mr Suwan Suffers a Theft” (นายสุวรรณถูกขโมย): The narrative revolves around Mr Suwan, a jewelry store owner, facing a theft of 7,500-baht worth of jewels. The police hastily arrest Mr Kon (นายกร), Suwan's assistant. Mr Thong-in believes though Mr Kon is innocent. Investigating further, Mr Thong-in exposes Mr Suwan's severe gambling addiction, which led him to orchestrate the theft. The story delves into themes of deceit, addiction, and the consequences of one's actions.

3. “A State Secret” (ความลับแผ่นดิน): This tale takes readers into the high-stakes world of international diplomatic intrigue. A high-ranking official loses a crucial treaty draft, prompting the Permanent Secretary to suspect Mr Plian (นายเปลียน). Mr Thong-in, known for his keen investigative skills, goes into disguises, creates a clever two-step subterfuge by staging a burglary, and then fakes arson. This is done with the assistance of both Mr Wat and the young leader of a street gang, Mr Chaem

(นายแฉ่ม). The story unfolds as Mr Thong-in exposes the traitor, ensuring the safety of the Siamese kingdom.⁵

4. “Mr Sawat, Patricide” (นายสวัสดิ์ “ปิตุฆาต”): The police encounter a flood of counterfeit money in Bangkok. Meanwhile, Mr Wasat is facing charges for murdering his father with morphine. Mr Thong-in investigates, revealing a sinister plot, exploring themes of inheritance, family dynamics, and most importantly the counterfeiting ring. Mr Sawat's reputation is restored.

5. “The Horse Bungalow and His Medicine” (ยาม้าบังกะโล): A story based on the world of horse racing, with Chinese Yi's (จีนอี้) prized horse unexpectedly losing a race. Mr Thong-in is called by Chinese Yi to investigate the mysterious turn of events. He unravels a complex plot involving manipulation of race results and financial gain committed by Chinese Yi himself. The story highlights the intersection of business and crime. In the end Mr Thong-in discreetly manages the potential racing scandal.

6. “The Long Needle” (เข็มร้อยดอกไม้): Mr Thong-in is drawn into a mysterious death involving Mr Bunkhong (นายบุญคง), an important civil servant. The police are baffled, but Mr Thong-in's keen observation leads to the discovery of a long needle, the sort used to make flower garlands, stained with blood. Unraveling the intricate details, he exposes a plot

by King Mongkut (r. 1851–1868). See Lim 2016.

³ Agatha Christie (1890–1976) would use a very similar trope in her novel *Peril at End House* (1932), where Hercule Poirot's sidekick Colonel Hastings was a medium at a *séance* that Poirot staged.

⁴ The ghost Nak used by Prince/King Vajiravudh has been prominently featured in no less than 30 Thai films, with one notable example being *Pee Mak* (2013), considered among the most popular film in recent Thai movie history.

⁵ This story evidently uses plot devices from two earlier Sherlock Holmes stories, respectively “A Scandal in Bohemia” (1891) and “The Adventure of the Naval Treaty” (1893), which in turn are adaptations from Edgar Allan Poe's “The Purloined Letter” (1844).

involving a cruel husband, family tensions, discreet murder, and ultimately suicide. The story explores themes of domestic strife, revenge, European medicine, and the lengths people go to protect their secrets.

7. “Kamnan⁶ Khong of Yokhi Village” (กำนันคงบ้านโยคี): This is the first story set outside Bangkok. The infamous bandit from Saraburi province named Mr Man Iron Hand terrorizes villages, leading the District Commissioner of Thap Kwang (ทับทวน) to seek Mr Thong-in’s expertise. The story explores the dynamics of power, fear, and magical beliefs. Mr Thong-in’s strategic approach challenges Kamnan Khong’s loyalty, leads to a gunfight in which one man is killed, and Kamnan Khong jailed. Thus, the stage is set for subsequent encounters between Mr Thong-in and the notorious bandit (see *infra*, stories #13–15).

8. “The Murderer of Bang Khun Phrom” (ผู้ร้ายฆ่าคนทีบางขุนพรหม): Reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe’s “Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), this narrative showcases Mr Thong-in’s deductive skills and the influence of Western detective fiction on Thai literature.⁷ Mr Thong-in is called in to investigate the murder of Mr Rot (นายรอด) who is in a locked room of a high tower with his throat slit. The story introduces a police theory implicating a sailing man and

a child as suspects. Mr Thong-in’s meticulous examination leads to a surprising revelation involving a murderous *orang-utan*.

9. “The Millionaire Mr Charun” (นายจตุรเศรษฐี): Mr Charun’s fortune becomes a source of contention after he dies suddenly of poisoning. Under the law, who will inherit: the surviving brother, who is being tried for murder, or the new father-in-law? Mr Thong-in’s investigation reveals the truth behind the schemes, exposing the machinations of the new father-in-law Mr Phun (นายพูน). Themes of inheritance, betrayal, and murder are explored. Mr Phun is found guilty by the court and sentenced to be executed.

10. “Raden Landai”⁸ (ระเด่นลันได): A young bride seeks Mr Thong-in’s help uncovering the mysterious activities of her husband, Mr Wong (นายวง). The narrative unfolds as Mr Thong-in, along with Mr Wat and their street-savvy ally, Mr Chaem, investigates Mr Wong’s double life. The tale evidently draws inspiration from two Sherlock Holmes’s stories, including both the fraudulent beggar character, and then has a romantic ending when Mr Wat marries the abandoned bride and finds true love.⁹

11. “The Hundred-Chang Necklace” (สร้อยคอร้อยช้าง): Love, loss, dementia: Mr Thet’s (นายเทศ) generosity leads to tragedy when his valuable necklace,

⁶ *Kamnan* (กำนัน) is a local Thai official overseeing several villages, usually hired locally and, unlike higher officials, not sent from Bangkok.

⁷ In Sherlock Holmes, the use of exotic creatures to kill is also found, for instance in “The Speckled Band” (1892), in which a snake is used, and less exotically a starving dog, in “The Adventure of the Copper Beeches” (1892).

⁸ *Raden Landai* is a reference to a classical Siamese tale from the early 19th century telling the story of two Malay, a beggar, and a cowkeeper who fight for the hand of a woman.

⁹ These stories are respectively, “The Man with the Twisted Lip” (1891), and “The Sign of Four” (1890), describing Dr Watson’s marriage to a client of Sherlock Holmes, Mary Morstan.

costing 100 *chang*,¹⁰ is stolen from his deceased wife's grave. Mr Thong-in's uncovers both the real necklace and a fake necklace in a complex web of events involving grave robbery and fraud. The story sadly ends as Mr Thet's declining mental state leads to his death under the care of Mr Wat who becomes his conservator.

Additional Stories Republished by King Vajiravudh in 1921

12. "Letter from Perak" (จดหมายจากเมืองเปรัก): Mr Thong-in is called in to foil a plot to purchase guns for rebels in British Malaya. This purchase would undermine the terms of the 1909 Thai-Malaya Treaty which formally established the border between Siam and British Malaya. As with any such treaty, there are concerns for national security, and Mr Thong-in is hired due to the trust the Siamese government has in his discretion.¹¹

13. "Mr Man Iron Hand" (อ้ายมันมือเหล็ก): Following the events in "Kamnan Khong of Yokhi Village" (story #7), Mr Man Iron Hand of Saraburi sends a threatening letter to the District Commissioner, demanding compensation for the death of his follower and the release of the captured Kaman Khong. Mr Thong-in's attempt to negotiate leads to a confron-

tation in the distant forest. The story ends with the sounds of gunfire and the failure of Mr Thong-in to return. Two bodies are found, but both are not yet conclusively identified. Mr Wat must return alone to Bangkok without his dear friend, unsure of what has happened.

14. "A Close Call!" (หวุดหวิด): Upon returning to Bangkok, Mr Wat finds out that Mr Chaem, the street urchin who frequently assists Mr Thong-in, is facing accusations of theft. The story has a splendid courtroom scene where the skills of the lawyer hired by Mr Wat demonstrate Mr Chaem's innocence. Despite the successful result, both conclude that they miss Mr Thong-in very much.

15. "The District Commissioner of Thap Kwang" (นายอำเภอทับกวาง): This concluding tale revolves around the arrival of the District Commissioner of Thap Kwang following the mysterious disappearance of both Mr Thong-in and Mr Man Iron Hand. The Commissioner informs Mr Wat that two bodies were discovered—one is confirmed as Mr Man Iron Hand, while the other remains unidentified. The possibility exists that the second body is Mr Thong-in, yet confirmation is elusive, leaving room for hope that the clever and playful detective may have survived.

A Siamese Cultural Tapestry

The detective stories of Mr Thong-in are a testament to the intersection of Siamese culture, history, and literature, as written by the future King Rama VI. This detective fiction provides access to compelling explorations of Siamese society in the early 20th century, and its

¹⁰ One *chang* (ช้าง) was approximately the equivalent of 80 baht in the 1910s.

¹¹ See also the discussion in Rattanachai (2549: 358–360, n. 1) which points out the existence of two published versions of this narrative. The initial version unfolds within the backdrop of the Shan Rebellion of 1902, while the second, discussed here, emerged in the 1921 edition with the new narrative fabric of the potential rebellion among the Indians of Perak, Malaya. On the 1909 Treaty, see Paget & Devawongse 1909.

collision with the broader world brought to Bangkok by English, Chinese, Indians, and others. Mr Thong-in's adventures—whether unraveling supernatural hoaxes, exposing financial schemes, protecting the reputation of the Kingdom of Siam itself, or confronting bandits—offer readers a captivating journey through the complexities of early Bangkok and beyond.

As a literary work, the 15 tales of Mr Thong-in transcend the “detective and a side kick” genre because they are

also a Thai cultural touchstone. The stories are an historical archive of early 20th-century elite Bangkok society fears, by a writer who would become monarch. King Vajiravudh's decision to republish and promote these stories reflected his on-going interest in developing Siamese literary traditions while embracing innovation. The enduring legacy of *Nithan Thong-in* speaks to their timeless appeal and their continued relevance for Siamese literature.

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