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Lion Lawman



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Telling the life story of a larger-than-life figure, especially a person such as Khun Phan, who loved telling others about himself at length, cannot be straightforward. The written and oral records have left us innumerable versions of the life, many of these by the subject himself as the speaking 'I'. When he was 80 years old, Khun Phan began granting interviews to tell about his exploits hunting down outlaws and criminals and bringing them to justice. Southern Thai authors, academics and police comrades were particularly keen to talk to the 'Lion Lawman' and delve into his career and, after his retirement, into his role as a local notable presiding at community events and rituals.

Even with all the attention given him, no account touches all aspects of his life, nor is the most conscientious biography free of error or puzzling discrepancies in facts of time and place. To enrich their narratives and entertain their readers, popular authors sometimes shuffle the chronology in their accounts. Episodes, often undated, may appear in two or three different places in the same book. The documentation—much of it traceable to the policeman's own words of when, where and why he did this or that—is voluminous. Writers—sometimes identifying themselves as compilers—help themselves to the words of previous authors or scrupulously reproduce them verbatim with attribution and then supplement the record with new details of their own. Yet repetition of

earlier accounts does not render facts any more accurate than they were in their first utterance by the speaking subject. A fact turns out to be a factoid, a mirage. To make matters worse, one of Khun Phan's sons told me that the biographers missed things, because the interviewer did not think to ask the right question, and it would not be truthful for Khun Phan to volunteer information that was not requested.¹ In any case, and despite what the textbooks say, raw data for a historian are as problematic as the explanations of a secondary narrator. A primary source, once it is given context or is directly contradicted by another primary source, becomes an interpretation mediated by opinion and angle of vision.²

I cannot resolve the many problems of veracity, beginning with the problematic dates of Khun Phan's birth. In his interviews with biographers, the policeman's memory for the exact day of the week and time of day when he conducted an operation covers his accounts with a sheen of credibility, but details that come readily to hand—as vivid and startling as they may be—beg many questions. Did he really kill his first prisoner by squeezing the life out of the man with his bare hands, when the official account states that the man in custody was fatally shot? Was he personally responsible for the deaths of 62 lawbreakers? Perhaps even more deaths could be attributed to him or to orders given by him. A former headmaster in Nakhon's Thasala District, who was distantly related to him on his mother's side, insisted that Khun Phan mostly employed psychological tricks on his prey and rarely used his gun; his offsideers were likely to have been responsible for the killings.³ With his cunning and guile, was he a shaman or did he just pretend to be one? Had he really lived 108 years when he passed away, or was his age only 103?

I am tempted to yield to what, for a historian, is heresy: some details are unverifiable but socially true. The unverifiable details augmented by photography, by the internet and, since his death, by sculpture have solidified into a recognisable human actor, and the stories he told to his biographers have created a picturesque life that has invited cinematic treatment. He could be portrayed as an incorruptible action hero charging through the world with guns blazing in the name of the law to suppress crime and bring miscreants to justice. The film director Kongkiat Komesiri accepted this challenge and made two films for the mass market with

1 Nasan Phantarakrajchadech, Interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, 27 September 2009.

2 See the Appendix for an annotated list of biographies of Khun Phan.

3 Anan Ratanawong (b. 1932), Interview with the author, 6 December 2014.

the Australian-Lao actor Ananda Everingham in the role of Khun Phan.⁴ The internet's desire for novelty and adventure has turned the southern policeman into a cultural hero, with narrators solemnly intoning his most dramatic exploits.

Taken together, the details point to truths about the person, the places and the times, but dates and placenames offer only an illusion of authenticity. Direct quotations from conversations nearly a century ago create a reality effect, but much about the policeman's life remains indistinct—not exactly unknowable, but confusing and, in places, misleading. No human being could have done all these things in just the way they are attested, we want to say, yet legends grow and flourish at the edges, where events, people and places fade into the shadows. In the southern policeman's case, and despite the high-resolution images online or the striking colour photographs in the books, it is as though we are viewing him through smudged spectacles or smoky glass. This blurred, indistinct image suited him in his line of work. He might depart quickly from the scene of an operation in an official car lest he be identified by people who sided with the man the police had just killed. Stories abound of his slipping into local communities in disguise to pursue his quarry and, to this end, the magical practices he cultivated were said to render him invisible so he could detect and punish, rather like the guerilla saboteurs who disappear into the local population to carry out their mission. This indistinctness and the undecidability of what he had or had not done also threw up around him an aura of apprehension and fear of what he might do and what he might be capable of doing. A weapon of peacekeeping is not only the firearm or the club, but also the uncertainty of knowing what action the law enforcer will take. When Khun Phan once boarded a train in the south, his stroll through the carriage was enough to shush the chattering passengers into silence.

Early years and education

Khun Phan, whose given name was Butr, was born the second eldest of seven siblings in the village of Ai Khiew in rural Nakhon Si Thammarat. Maybe his birth date was 18 February 1898. He died on 6 July 2006, which would have made him 108—the number of marks on the soles

4 *Khun Pan* (2016) and *Khun Pan 2* (2018). The first is described as 'caught between bio-pic and fictional action', whereas the second is 'fictional and entertaining' (*The Nation*, 7 August 2018).

of the Buddha's feet. The auspicious number 108 'comes down from heaven' in Buddhism, Brahmanism and astrology, and carries the promise of prosperity and good fortune (Okha 2007: 38). According to some biographies that give 1903 as the year of Khun Phan's birth, the date may have been a registrar's error. The cremation biography, which can be the final arbiter of such discrepancies, displays a photograph taken in 2000 of a celebration for his 100th birthday, in which case he would have been born in 1900, but the cremation biography also gives 1898 and 1903 as birth years, and other years turn up in books and interviews.⁵ Thai authors expend many words canvassing the pros and cons of the different birth dates. Maybe Khun Phan gave his interlocutors different dates because he was vain, or perhaps he wanted to conceal the numbers associated with his birth—the year, day of the week, hour and minute of the event—lest his enemies cast a harmful spell conjured from the correct numbers. As we first peer into the past at the beginning of his life, the spectacles are already smudged.

Khun Phan's lifelong interest in Thai traditional medicine may have run in the family. On his father's side, one great-grandfather was a healer for the ruling family in Nakhon Si Thammarat, according to one biographer, and his paternal grandmother was the child of a Brahman. Another great-grandfather was a strict Muslim.⁶

Khun Phan's father was also his first teacher, and he began his studying at home. Khun Phan's early education at temple schools in the local district and in the town of Nakhon Si Thammarat was interrupted for several years beginning in 1914 when he fell ill with yaws—a disfiguring and potentially fatal disease before the advent of penicillin. After he recovered, his family sent him, in 1916, to complete his secondary education in the capital, where he lived at several monasteries as a temple boy (*dek wat*) in the charge of a Bangkok-based monk who was related to his mother. Bangkok monasteries had ties to the provinces through families and monastic lineages, and temple boys such as Khun Phan naturally congregated in monasteries in which the residents spoke the same regional dialect. He arrived in Bangkok too late in the academic year to enrol.

5 The *Bangkok Post* (22 August 2018) settled on 1903.

6 Anat (2006: 48); and *Prawat phi phroi phantharak* [*The Story of Phi Phroi Phantharak*], cremation eulogy for an elder relative attributed to Khun Phan (Photocopy of typescript, n.d.).

During the months he spent biding his time, he began to take an interest in the empowering and protective magical knowledge known as *saiyasat*, which he would cultivate for the rest of his life. The term—possibly derived from a Khmer word for excellence or expertise—refers to an order of knowledge that is both a weapon and a prophylactic. Khun Phan’s cremation volume contains a detailed description of this corpus of knowledge as well as the names of his teachers and the places where he studied, but the elements that made up *saiyasat* were not discrete as though they were courses in a curriculum. The teacher transmitted the knowledge orally, although elements may be found scattered in hundreds of manuals archived in the National Library of Thailand and in published editions of the *phrommachat*. In daily life, the rituals and practices of *saiyasat* might be modified to suit the disposition of the practitioner (Thep 1978; Chalong 2007: 24–5; Chintapati 2007: 109–11; Saksit n.d.).

He began his early studies of *saiyasat* and astrology when he was in his mid-teens, living in a monastery where his teacher was Phra Thamwarodom, a southerner from Khuan Khanun district in Phatthalung who had received instruction at Wat Khao Or, the ‘Vedic’ academy where one could learn how to curse enemies and overpower opponents (Akhom 2001: 210–11). When the monk was appointed abbot of Wat Rachathirat, a monastery along the Chaophraya River, Khun Phan followed the older man, who would later become a high-ranking ecclesiastical official in the south. It was at Wat Rachathirat in the late 1830s that the future King Mongkut had resided when he conducted ordinations on a raft in the river that laid the foundations for the Dhammayut reform order. At Phra Thamwarodom’s ordination into the reform order, his preceptor, whom he later served as secretary, was Prince-Patriarch Wachirayan Warorot, one of Mongkut’s sons and brother of King Chulalongkorn (Ratchakawi 2000: 148–56). In this period of the reform order’s history, Phra Thamwarodom was not the only monk to possess ritual knowledge of the arts of struggle.

Tracking Khun Phan’s sojourn from monastery to monastery and mentor to mentor in these early years, we can observe that empowering and protective magical knowledge was to be found in many monasteries, including those that adhered to the strict Vinaya disciplines of the reform order. One of the most eminent Dhammayut monks of the nineteenth century, Sa, who had reached the top level of the Pali curriculum and belonged to Prince Mongkut’s inner circle when he founded the reform order, knew a lot about spells, chants and horoscopes. He disrobed for several years and, while not a skirt-chaser, as the Thai language puts it,

he spent his time as a layman hanging around gambling halls in the manner of a *nak leng*. This episode in his biography was private because of his later eminence as a senior ecclesiastic. He returned to the yellow robe when Mongkut became king and was later made Supreme Patriarch in the fifth reign (Thatchai 2013: 25–6). Well into the twentieth century, the so-called Vedic knowledge that made up *saiyasat* was far from alternative or marginal to Buddhism. It was mainstream, especially for men working in the institutions of political society charged with defending territory, conducting war and maintaining law and order.

Khun Phan completed his secondary schooling at Wat Benchamaphopit, built by King Chulalongkorn and known as the Monastery of the Fifth King. During his school years, he learned the art of tattooing and began to master the Thai martial art of swordplay (*krabi krabong*). He also excelled at gymnastics, judo and both Thai and Western boxing. During the 1920s, boxing became popular in Bangkok as a result of elite patronage, especially of King Vajiravudh (r. 1910–25), who championed physical fitness in the conviction that one was only truly alive when fighting. The king had spent nine years in England, where he received military training. It was this king who dispatched a contingent of Thai soldiers to join the Allies against Germany in World War I. On his return to Thailand, Vajiravudh established the Wild Tiger Corps and the Boy Scouts. Like Robert Baden-Powell, the English founder of the Boy Scouts, who saw the physical rigours of scouting as a way of controlling the libido, the king believed the nation's young men should develop their physiques and learn to be self-reliant (Reynolds 2014: 269–71). Vajiravudh proclaimed Thai boxing as the national sport and, in the reign that followed, the ring was modernised, boxing gloves were introduced and tournaments were held throughout the country (Sombat 2011: 33–4, 39–40).

Khun Phan's training in martial arts during his school years was in keeping with elite campaigns at the time to inculcate physical and mental toughness in the nation's male youth. This trend continued when the military became dominant after 1932 and championed a strong male body through the public events it held and the art it sponsored. Sculptures by students of Corrado Feroci (Silpa Bhirasri), who left Italy in 1923 just after the Fascist Party came to power, featured male virility and physical strength. Maurizio Peleggi has drawn attention to robust, homoerotic male physiques in the Euro-Asian statuary produced under Feroci's trained eye: *Archer* (1938), *Warrior* (ca. 1940) and *Farmer Sowing Rice* (ca. 1940) (Peleggi 2017: 128–9).

When Khun Phan left school, he was undecided about his next step. After briefly considering a career in government service, he spoke to a teacher at Wat Benchama about a placement in the military academy. None was available, so, according to one author, he approached a senior monk at Wat Bowonniwet, who suggested policing instead, and introduced him to Prince Khamrop, a military officer who became the first chief of the metropolitan and provincial police in 1916. The prince accepted him as a page while he bided his time until he could enrol for police training (Chalong 2007: 31–3). By the time he entered the police academy at Nakhon Pathom in 1925, he was sufficiently skilled in martial arts, including judo, boxing and Thai sword fighting, to be appointed a boxing instructor. Self-defence was important to his character. He was self-conscious about his size and wanted to be able to hold his own in a fight. He needed to strengthen himself physically and mentally or his diminutive height and spare frame would limit his prospects for rugged police duties. In his youthful journey of discovery and self-realisation during his years at the police academy, he furthered his study and acquisition of magical knowledge. He internalised it and made it one with his body in the belief that it could save him from sudden death (Chanthip 2007: 134).

At Nakhon Pathom—an ancient site in the orbit of the old royal base at Ayutthaya, where practices and beliefs about objects with supernatural powers had flourished for centuries—he spent time with Luang Pho Chaem, an eccentric monk disinclined to bathe regularly whose residence straddled the monastery boundary at the edge of a rice field. Cadets from the police academy who sought supernatural protection for what lay ahead and other laypeople seeking Buddhist incantations and spells (*phutthakhom*) were required to join the monk in the fields cultivating rice that would be stored for monastery use and shared with villagers if they needed it (Samphan 2007: 91–2). The eccentric monk would not be the last person to teach Khun Phan about spells that can cause loss of prosperity or reputation, illness or unexplained death. In his compendium of *saiyasat* knowledge, he included a brief discussion of spells under the southern Thai word *mop* (Phantharakratchadet 2007: 482; Anan 2008: 208, 348).

Khun Phan graduated from the police academy in 1929 ranked 10th in his class of 17, and with his friend, another southerner in the cohort, reported to the southern police command in Songkhla. They both wanted to work in Phatthalung, but the regional police commander selected his friend and assigned Khun Phan to Surat Thani, a less demanding post.

Banditry in Phatthalung required a strong man for its suppression, and the smaller Khun Phan supposedly did not have the physique required for the job. Khun Phan was aggrieved and, while he did not dwell on his feelings of inferiority in interviews, self-consciousness about his size came to the surface on this occasion. While the commander of the station was away on other business, the paperwork to carry out the boss's decision was unaccountably mishandled, the assignments were somehow reversed and the young constable was posted to Songkhla as he wished. He wanted to prove to his superiors that, although he was a small man, he did not lack the strength to do serious police work. His size was to dog him throughout his career. In the mid-1940s, the national police chief he was serving under, Rear Admiral Luang Sangwonyutthakit, exclaimed in his presence: 'So how come they call you, a tiny slip of a man, Tiger [*suea*]?' Khun Phan was taken aback, perhaps offended at the insinuation that a small guy was not up to the job, and he wondered what the chief might be thinking. The boss was later reassured that he was indeed very capable and appointed him chief in a central Thai province (Praphon 1983: 16; Chalong 2007: 49; Samphan 2007: 87, 93–4).

Five months after his posting to Songkhla, Khun Phan was reassigned to Phatthalung, where he sought out the master teachers at Wat Khao Or to be initiated in their teachings before he captured his first lawbreakers.⁷ The cave monastery in Khuan Khanun district, Phatthalung, is built into a limestone outcrop that rises from the plain. An unassuming entrance greets the visitor, and beyond the gate one finds the usual assortment of shrines, preaching hall, dwellings for monks, a pavilion in which laypeople can congregate and rest, and water tanks. A complex of passageways and caverns extends deep into the hill. I did not explore the entire subterranean world, but I did descend into the largest cave, where the ritual bath was once taken and which was now empty except for a few small sacred images. The academy of learning that evolved at Khao Or, which Khun Phan would have heard about in his youth from family members related to some of the monastery's residents, was known for holistic knowledge consisting of *śāstra* (Thai, *sat*)—sciences that protected the body and disciplined the mind. Laymen as well as monks gave instruction in the regimens that were physical as well as spiritual and included diet and herbal therapies. Men travelled from afar to imbibe what was taught there—for example,

7 I follow the chronology in Samphan (2007: 97–8). Wira (2001: 92) and Chalong (2007: 89) state that Khun Phan captured his first bandits *before* his initiation at Wat Khao Or.

Heng Phraiwan from Ayutthaya, who became a noted practitioner on the central plains providing soldiers with tattoos and amulets. When he grew indifferent to his studies in Penang, where his affluent parents had sent him, Heng abandoned his formal education and spent three months during the 1930s at Khao Or to learn about the arts of struggle and methods to protect the self (Suwit 2011: 102–3).

Archaeological evidence from the region's prehistory has shown that Shaivism was practised in the mid south, and plentiful images of Vishnu indicate that Hinduism strengthened local political authority from the fifth to the eleventh centuries CE (Wannasarn 2013b: 149, 156). Indian merchants came and went over this period, and Tamil inscriptions have been found on both coasts, the earliest being a goldsmith's touchstone at Krabi on the west coast (third and fourth centuries CE), and in the ninth century to the north at Takuapa another Tamil inscription testifies to the dedication of a new tank essential to the ritual life of a Hindu temple. A rock-cut inscription in Sanskrit from Nakhon Si Thammarat identified a community of Saivite Brahmans, and evidence of the ongoing role of Indian merchants comes from a Tamil inscription in Nakhon from the late twelfth or thirteenth century (Guy 2011: 248–55).

In Phatthalung, Brahmans had lived in the Wat Khao Or cave complex for centuries, observing practices and beliefs based on a corpus of Vedic spiritual and medical texts, although Vedic here does not refer to the Sanskrit Vedas as such. Brahmans sometimes undertake purification baths, and immersion in the herbal bath required of Khao Or initiates may have been inherited from earlier times. These practices and beliefs were distinct from the Buddhism taught in monasteries in nearby Nakhon Si Thammarat. According to the Phatthalung chronicle compiled in the early twentieth century, families of Brahmans (*chi phram*) had lived in the area from time immemorial, particularly in the subdistrict of Lampam, and local people had long worshipped a mix (*ponkan*) of Brahmanism and Buddhism at the shrine there. From earliest times, religious society was not monotheistic in the region, and Mahayana Buddhism and Brahmanism were interactive and complementary rather than exclusive (Skilling 1997: 98; Krom 2002: 235; Ran 2007: 79). Nakhon Si Thammarat hosts a festival in September–October, the 10th lunar month, which is said to be based on a Brahmanic ceremony from India. The Buddha 'credited' the value of the ceremony and so allowed it—another example of this mixing. Descendants recall their ancestors from the underworld by offering them food; a subsequent merit-making ceremony is needed to facilitate the ancestors' return below

(Kasem 2008: 79–84). The amalgamation of Brahmanism and Buddhism is ubiquitous in Thai religious life today—for instance, in the homage paid to Hindu deities by Thai Buddhists, who see the gods as integral to the practice of Buddhism. Localised Brahmanism occurs not only in the mid south, but also in many parts of the country, including Bangkok (McDaniel 2013: 194, 206).

Such was the prestige of the mid south's Brahman families that courts in the central plains invited Brahman priests from Nakhon Si Thammarat to conduct rites for the royal family, including the coronation of the first Bangkok king in the late eighteenth century. When it seemed that the priestly line at Khao Or would die out, the resident Brahmans—concerned that the cave complex would be abandoned and the knowledge and sanctity of the place might fade into obscurity—recruited a Buddhist monk from a nearby monastery and presented him with the manuscripts to carry on the tradition in a more Buddhist vein.⁸ Some of the Khao Or graduates who had received instruction from the master teachers fanned out to other monasteries where they adapted what they had learned and imparted their own version of the knowledge to their disciples, while other graduates of Wat Khao Or disrobed and became lay vectors of the teachings (Ran 2007: 88–9). Khun Phan took some of his instruction at Wat Donsala, an offshoot of the Khao Or monastery, where willing disciples also endured the herbal bath and the other rites of initiation into *saiyasat* knowledge.

A man wishing to become an adept in the Khao Or knowledge needed a sponsor, a person who could vouch for his character and worthiness for initiation. In Khun Phan's case, a close friend who was a disciple of the Khao Or teachings served this purpose and introduced the policeman to Ajan Iat, a monk of rectitude who had his own special powers and could treat mental instability. It was said that Iat could not only cure madness, but also cause it (Ran 2007: 43, 125). Khun Phan approached Iat for instruction that would benefit him in his police duties, but the monk declined to impart any knowledge that would lead to the death of bandits and criminals. Instead, he referred Khun Phan to his own teacher, Nam Kaewjan, then a layman who specialised in *saiyasat* for defence, or offence as the case might be. Later in Khun Phan's career, when he was preparing himself to pursue outlaws with whom he shared the same teachers, Ajan Nam would perform a cursing ritual for him to strike fear in his

8 Wet (n.d.: 32–3, 48–9) does not provide dates.

adversaries (Wira 2001: 95). Ajan Nam's father had received instruction from an earlier generation of the monastery's master teachers, and Nam, having been ordained as a monk briefly for one rains (*phansa*) only, had disrobed, married and fathered two daughters. In his lay life, he assisted the senior monks at Wat Khao Or and acquired a reputation for *saiyasat* knowledge among people from all walks of life, including members of the Thai royal family. When King Bhumibol toured the south, he often visited Ajan Nam, who late in life was reordained at Wat Dawn Sala, in 1963, and received a royal cremation when he died (Ran 2007: 145–51).

To assess the suitability of a candidate to receive the holistic knowledge taught at Khao Or, a meeting of disciples and existing adepts would sit in judgement and inquire into whether the candidate was pure of heart and could confirm that he had never wronged another man's wife or family. The candidate needed to affirm his sincerity and intentions to use the knowledge wisely and truthfully. Misuse would besmirch the reputation of the monastery and its teachers and could cause injury and even death to the initiate. Ajan Iat instructed the policeman to be fearless, bold and brave. He was told to be incorruptible and refuse bribes; he must not wrong another man's wife or family; he must not curse his mother or father; and he must conduct himself in an orderly and disciplined way. He must be truthful and true to his word. If he violated any of these strictures, harm would befall him, and the consecrated sesame oil he was soon to ingest would flow out of his pores and he would die (Wira 2001: 92–3). These instructions on how to behave were similar to those set out in a code of conduct for warriors and 'true men' (*chai chattri*). A printed manual, which includes incantations and supplications for protection from harm that were imparted in an oral tradition, purports to derive from Brahman rituals and practices inherited from a distant past (W. Jinpradit 1996).

The initiation consisted of four separate rites (Ran 2007: 90–5). After astrological calculations stipulated an auspicious time, date and day—usually a Saturday or Tuesday, the days reckoned by *saiyasat* belief as the most propitious—the initiate ingested therapeutic herbs, black sticky rice and raw sesame oil that had been consecrated by the officiating monk. Initiates then immersed themselves for several days in a tank containing a heady brew of 108 medicinal herbs that treated or prevented just about every disease in the Thai medical register; the bath also toughened the skin against bullets and bladed weapons. When Khun Phan underwent the ritual, the bath was taken in a boat at the top of the limestone hillock.

A cement bath was later constructed in the cave underground, and in recent times a new cement tank was built on the slope of the hill. A grainy black-and-white photograph of poor resolution shows a couple of men in the cave tank, their heads just above water. It was said that Khun Phan was instrumental in reviving the tradition of immersion in the herbal bath (Wet n.d.: 45).

A bundle of palm-leaf manuscripts that supposedly lists the therapeutic herbs used in the bath graces the cover of *Khao Or: Siam's academy of Vedic knowledge*, and Chalong Jeyakhom remembers seeing the bundle of palm-leaf manuscripts at the monastery (Wet n.d.).⁹ A sceptic might wonder whether one or two vital ingredients on the list might have been withheld by the master teachers to protect the patent on their recipe. The 108 herbs were credited with health-giving, miraculous properties, including protection against bullets and blades, rapid recovery from fever and protection against disease (Ran 2007: Appendix 3). Protection against sharp objects might have been more than miraculous. Some of the plants in the bath had thorns that pricked the skin, drew blood and allowed the herbal solution to enter the body, rather like a vaccination. Scar tissue formed over the wounds, hence 'the man with a tough hide' (*khon tai nang niaw*). The herbal brew was said to be so toxic that if care were not taken and it entered the body through orifices, it could cause blindness and deafness.¹⁰ Khun Phan was also instructed in the use of herbs that suppressed the appetite for his long patrols and overnight stakeouts. At an early stage in my research, I tried to identify the therapeutic herbs with their botanical names, but I succeeded only in linking *jorakhe* to aloe vera, a styptic with antibacterial properties of modest—perhaps questionable—effectiveness when applied to burns and small cuts (Mulholland 1987: 137–9). Other herbs in the traditional Thai pharmacopeia were useful as balms, astringents, laxatives, pain relievers, diuretics and soporifics.

In the mid-1970s, immersion in the herbal bath started to become commercialised, and the cost of up to THB30,000 or about US\$474 at the time (an estimate of the mid-1990s for locating and harvesting the therapeutic herbs) was borne by the initiate (Chaiyawut 1996: 52, 100). Police, soldiers and affluent civil servants outlaid this amount to soak in

9 Chalong Jeyakhom, Interview with the author, Bangkok, 2012.

10 Suepphong Saengwan (b. 1962), a distant relative of Khun Phan's, Interview with the author, Songkhla, 4 September 2012; Chanthip Phantarakrajchadech, Interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, 9 September 2012.

the bath and benefit from its therapeutic properties that promised good health, prosperity and avoidance of harm. When I visited the monastery in 2008, immersion in the herbal bath was still a lucrative business.

In pursuit

From the instruction he received at the Khao Or monastery, which he visited more than once, and his association with its master teachers and lay disciples, Khun Phan became familiar with local community networks. He spent a half-dozen years at the Phatthalung police station and returned to the province twice more in his career. His biographers give detailed accounts of many outlaws he and his police associates captured and killed, but several operations in the south as well as others in the mid north and central plains stand out for what they reveal about his methods, his relationships with the police hierarchy and its procedures and the social conditions in which he worked. In light of the stories he told, some incidents remained in his memory more clearly than others. They were violent incidents and, from my reading of Khun Phan's versions of these events, as revealed by his biographers, they carried emotional weight for him as well.

Khun Phan planned his operations carefully and employed subterfuge, surveillance, deception and disguise. In preparation for pursuit and capture, he would calculate the horoscopes of the policemen with whom he intended to work and selected to join the team only those officers whose horoscopes were propitious for the tasks that lay ahead. The operation might require specific abilities and end in physical combat or a gun battle. An officer who lacked the nerve for violent confrontations was a liability, and the horoscope provided a reason to exclude such a person. Police work entailed long hours for extended periods, and officers needed to be strong, healthy, mentally tough and fit. In one of Khun Phan's cases in Phatthalung, the team camped out in the jungle for 15 nights. As with any police or military operation, conditions at the appointed hour sometimes required last-minute adjustments to plans, so officers needed to be able to act quickly and decisively under pressure (Wira 2001: 67). Khun Phan's temperament was suited to the job. To be sure, he had a talent for mobilising resources and manpower and acting decisively, but the deaths that resulted from his actions sometimes breached community and police standards, or they disrupted cosy arrangements between lawbreakers and

corrupt police or government officials. More than once in his career he was charged with exceeding his brief or using excessive force, and such was the case in 1930 at the outset of his career.

The first lawbreaker to fall victim to young Constable Butr Phantharak was Suea Sang, a strapping man notorious in the community for his cruelty and willingness to kill. *Suea* (literally ‘tiger’) was an epithet for an outlaw, bandit and *nak leng*. Suea Sang had escaped from the Trang jail and taken refuge under the protection of a headman in Mount Khanun District and the headman’s circle of *nak leng*. Sang threatened villagers with violent retribution if they informed the authorities of his whereabouts, but there was no shortage of local people willing to share what they knew, including a relative of the blacksmith, who tipped off police. In the ensuing gun fight at dawn, Khun Phan narrowly missed being shot, saved only by a magic sign on his hat and a talisman (*takrut*) covering his breast: ‘I was proud that the magic powers were with me that day’, he later boasted. Firearms in the day were unreliable, and perhaps the outlaw’s gun misfired. Khun Phan, exhausted from days and nights of pursuit and fearing for his life, soon found himself in a desperate struggle with a man twice his size, each of them biting and eye-gouging. Sang was wearing a sarong tied loosely in the local style so his manhood was readily accessible to the policeman’s tactics, and Khun Phan finally prevailed by pinning Sang’s genitals to the floor with his toes. He ‘broke the outlaw’s balls’ and squeezed the life out of Sang, who turned green and expired on the spot (Chalong 2007: 77–86; Samphan 2007: 105–6). Khun Phan had proven himself by showing that a flyweight could overpower a light heavyweight. He had made his mark in a theatrical way at the beginning of his career and demonstrated that his small frame would not handicap him in carrying out his duties. Sang’s teeth had drawn only a little blood and the knife wounds had not penetrated very deep—proof that immersion in the herbal bath had toughened Khun Phan’s skin. He subsequently had his upper left arm tattooed to cover Sang’s bite marks, asserting that he wanted to be reminded of how close he had come to being jailed for killing a prisoner (Okha 2007: 52). Sang’s corpse was taken to the home of the village headman, who had protected the outlaw—a sign of Khun Phan’s brutal victory. The brush with death had refreshed a sense of his own mortality.¹¹

11 Khun Phan published ‘The gun did not fire’, his version of Sang’s capture and death, in *Phutthawet* (3[5], August 1979), reprinted in Samphan (1996: 66–73). According to the list of 62 *suea* (bandit) fatalities by gunshot attributed to Khun Phan and police accomplices, Sang was shot to death, not asphyxiated, by Khun Phan (Wira 2001: 185). The source of this list is Konhoi (‘Whorl’), a pseudonym of Khun Phan’s son Chanthip.

A leaflet—the social media of the day—soon appeared, accusing the young constable of using unnecessary force that resulted in the death of a captured man. The anonymous leaflet (*bat sonthe*) asked why, if Sang was already in police custody, it had been necessary to kill him. Khun Phan was aggrieved that the outlaw, although now quite dead, had triumphed with this accusation of homicide. Even though he had filed an accurate account of how the man died in a hand-to-hand struggle, the top brass did not give credence to his report. As it happened, a noble police official from Bangkok on an inspection tour in the district, accompanied by his daughter, was on hand to congratulate Khun Phan. He was nonplussed at the daughter's appreciation of his brave actions, and it was not the last time a young woman would be smitten by him after one of his operations (Samphan 2007: 112–13).

In November of the same year, Khun Phan, with police accomplices, brought to heel another bandit gang (*kok*), of 16 men, headed by Suea Mueang, who was killed along with three of his men. The men had received an amnesty and were freed from prison in 1925 when the seventh Bangkok monarch, King Prajdhipok, ascended the throne, but they had rampaged through districts in the south killing and terrorising witnesses who had testified against them (Wira 2001: 187; Chalong 2007: 93–111).

Khun Phan achieved a great deal in his first months of duty, and when the national police chief came through the district on an inspection tour, he halted his motorcade to congratulate Khun Phan and the rest of the team. The civil administrator of the region followed later, riding an elephant, and so travelled more slowly. He, too, congratulated the young policeman. In 1931, the year before the absolute monarchy ended, Butr Phantharak was awarded the noble rank of *khun*—an unusual honour for a policeman of such modest rank. Other members of the police team, the governor and a headman were also ennobled and promoted (Samphan 2007: 126–7).

No action had been taken to discipline Khun Phan when he was accused of murdering Suea Sang, and he remained in his post at Phatthalung until 1936, when he was appointed divisional head in Songkhla. In 1938, he was promoted to captain, and in the same year he married a Phatthalung woman, Chalao Bunyanuwat, who was pregnant with his first son, Amorn, who passed away some time ago. His marriage to Chalao created conflicting loyalties for him: to his new family on the one hand and his police duties on the other. He gave priority to the latter over the former and insisted that duty came first, so his mother travelled to Phatthalung to

help Chalao with the birth and look after the infant child (Chalong 2007: 127–8). Khun Phan had received an order to apprehend Ahweh Sador Talae, a Muslim from Narathiwat who possessed strange and powerful talismans. Khun Phan had shot him several times to no effect. He could elude police by making himself invisible and he was said to own a heritage *kris* belonging to a former Kelantan lord.¹² Ahweh Sador had already been captured once and sent to prison in Satthahip, Cholburi, on Thailand's east coast; then, using *saiyasat* magic, he slipped his shackles and those of fellow inmates and escaped, returning to the south, where he mobilised his gang to plunder and murder, killing his victims in a particularly cruel manner. According to Khun Phan's account, southern Muslims lauded Ahweh Sador's aspirations for building community identity; the Thai Government, for its part, regarded him as a violent separatist (Chalong 2007: 123; Samphan 2007: 141–9).¹³

Khun Phan's version of the case is limited to his role in the operation, and neither the wider context of Ahweh Sador's depredations nor his affiliation with any organised groups is clear from the biographies. When Field Marshal Pibul became prime minister at the end of 1938, Thai Government policies towards the deep south hardened and became more forcefully assimilationist, but before the army's ascendancy, the state's cultural policies vis-à-vis the Muslim population in the deep south were integrative. After 1932, economic development and political participation in the region improved, and in the 1937–38 elections, three-quarters of MPs in the four Malay provinces were Muslim. The son of the former Raja of Pattani had returned to Thailand from exile in northern Malaya—a sign that the Thai Government recognised his status in the region (Kadir Che Man 1990: 64–5; Ockey 2008: 126–31). Should Ahweh Sador be understood as a political bandit linked to separatist movements of the time or just a criminal? A colleague from the deep south assured me he was an insurgent, not a common murderer, but apart from the accounts in biographies of Khun Phan, details of the Ahweh Sador episode have proved elusive. In any case, Khun Phan finally succeeded in capturing him and taking possession of his *kris*. Wary of being identified and of retribution at the hands of people who sided with the dead man, Khun Phan was driven away from Narathiwat and back to Songkhla in the governor's car before he could be photographed. According to Khun

12 *Ahweh* is probably an inexact transcription of *awang*, a Malay honorific for a man.

13 Khun Phan's version of Ahweh Sador's capture and death, published in *Suwittha* by the Songkhla Nakkharin University-Pattani, is reproduced in Samphan (2007: 144–7).

Phan's son, out of respect for Ahweh Sador's special powers and struggle to defend his community's territory, the policeman had no intention of killing the man, who later died in jail of a self-administered poison.¹⁴

The capture and death of Ahweh Sador were popular with Thai Muslims, and Muslims in Malaya bestowed the title 'Little Raja' (*rayo kaji*) on Khun Phan for his role in apprehending the man—an epithet that stayed with the policeman for years. The Governor of Kelantan rewarded the southern policeman with a *kris*—an emblem of Malay sovereignty and a weapon with magical powers (Samphan 2007: 149). A *kris* could fly through the air, leap out of its sheath to kill an adversary, make itself invisible so its victim was unaware of impending danger and kill victims by stabbing their footprints. It could also extinguish fires and prescribe auspicious times for its owner's travel. The *kris* came alive in the annealing process that alchemically purified and transformed the iron ore into a weapon that was spiritually charged. The type of *kris* found most often in the south came from Pattani; another type was distinctive to Songkhla (Woolley 1947: 71–5; O'Connor 1985: 55–6; Suthiwong 1999: 138–9). Through the years, Khun Phan assembled a collection of these blades and placed one under the cradle of each of his sons when they were born; daughters were given knives.¹⁵

After the Ahweh Sador case, in 1938, Khun Phan's superiors appointed him chief of police in Phatthalung, where unrest in the countryside had continued after his previous departure, and where he was well away from the coast when the Japanese invaded in early 1942 on their march to Singapore. Community gossip held that he had fought the Japanese, but he demurred on the point, and when pressed for a reason the Japanese kept their distance and had not marched inland to Phatthalung, he replied with mock hubris that 'maybe they knew I was working in Phatthalung' (Chalong 2007: 151). On 1 April 1942, Khun Phan was appointed provincial police chief in Surat Thani, where he spent 13 months. There the bandit Suea Sai had taken up residence along with 30 householders who had migrated from the central plains. Suea Sai's gang was into burglary and moonshine, and the local police authorities had been unable to bring him to justice because of his derring-do and the difficulties of the terrain. After wounding and capturing Suea Sai, Khun Phan's team took him by

14 Chanthip Phantarakrajchadech, Interview with the author, 9 September 2012.

15 Nasan Phantarakrajchadech, Interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, 27 September 2009.

boat to Surat Thani town. As the procession of vessels made its way along the canals and the Tapi River to the provincial centre, communities along the route outdid each other with partying and *nora* dancing to celebrate the operation's success. Suesa Sai confessed to his crimes and, with pistol in hand, had his photograph taken with Khun Phan, but succumbed to his wounds and died soon after.

Suesa Sai's capture and death at the hands of the Lion Lawman came to the attention of the national police chief during World War II, General Luang Aduldetcharat (Bat Phuengphrakhun), an army officer who had been a member of the coup group that overthrew the absolute monarchy in 1932. In Surat Thani market, the Ivory Bamboo Casino—a popular brothel, opium den and gambling hall—had become entrenched over the years, and General Luang Adul wanted it closed. Opium distribution and consumption in the town were rife and causing problems; dishonest local officials and police were part of the problem.¹⁶ The mafia figure who controlled the casino was 'a person of influence'—the wry Thai idiom for a powerful person, a gangster-like figure close to or part of the local power structure. The casino was on the second floor of a two-storey building in the market; on the ground floor was a restaurant from which gamblers could order noodles, rice and drinks for free. Using coded communications that bypassed the local police command as well as officers in the Bangkok police hierarchy, General Luang Adul recruited Khun Phan to close the casino, which the policeman agreed to do on the condition that he could use police officers of his own choosing to circumvent the corrupt local police. Khun Phan preferred to work with people he had known for some time or previously worked with, people he could trust and rely on if the operation were to turn violent. On this occasion, the reconnaissance required meeting with the provincial police chief and confiding in him about the secret communications with the Bangkok command, and he needed to enlist the chief's assistance in transferring local police officers to other posts. To keep the plan secure, Khun Phan decided not to share his planning with the provincial governor. Surveillance of the premises was necessary, so he called on a police chum (*kloe*) from the south to come to Surat Thani and make the intimate acquaintance of a young widow who lived in a shophouse adjoining the casino. Holes were drilled in the thin bamboo walls of the casino to spy on activities inside. Khun Phan's

16 *Kongchin*, the term for dishonest or corrupt, is a loanword from Chinese (*jianchen*) and is the binary opposite of *tongchin* (Ch., *zhongchen*): honest, loyal.

planning raised the casino owner's suspicions and soon he was being followed. To prepare for the final assault and to divert attention from his objective, Khun Phan pretended to leave for an inspection tour out of town. In fact, he had taken his team to cut ivory bamboo that grew profusely in the area to make a ladder with which to scale the casino building from the outside.

In the end, the operation was violent and the casino was utterly destroyed. There were 21 arrests, although the casino owner, who still had influence through his corrupt networks, managed to escape. The police coroner was slow in arriving to examine the corpses, which were left out in the sun for seven to eight days to be scavenged by dogs and crows. The regional police commander was furious at the way Khun Phan had handled the operation. Instead of receiving praise for shutting down 'the casino from hell', Khun Phan was charged with using excessive force and transferred to the northern provincial centre of Phichit (Chalong 2007: 151–71; Samphan 2007: 164–79). A university student from Surat Thani told me that community memory of the Ivory Bamboo Casino lives on in the town, even though the building that once housed that den of iniquity and hub of nefarious transactions between officialdom and the local mafia is nowadays a noodle shop.

Khun Phan—coming from another part of the country—knew almost no one when he arrived in Phichit in September 1943. From the first night, when he heard gunfire, he realised that what appeared to be a quiet town with few social issues had its share of troublemakers and hooligans. A particular problem for the police were deserters from army units in neighbouring Phitsanulok who had migrated into the district and caused trouble for villagers. A policeman relies on local knowledge, so after spending a couple of months assessing the situation, Khun Phan cultivated the acquaintance of two Chinese brothers from Hainan: Ko Yang (Sae Ui), the younger, who owned the opium concession and raised horses; and Ko Yueang, the older brother, who cultivated rice and raised cattle and water buffalo. The three men were about the same age and shared mutual interests. The Chinese brothers needed a modicum of public order to ensure their business activities ran smoothly, and Khun Phan, whom they addressed respectfully as 'Chief', relied on them as a local resource to take advantage of their networks and knowledge of the province's social dynamics. Khun Phan would often stay overnight with the younger brother when he was in town, and Ko Yang would lend the southern policeman a horse when he went on patrol to remote parts of

the province. After Khun Phan left the province, it reverted to its wild ways. Bandits fleeing from police operations in neighbouring provinces came into the districts to steal cattle. In one year alone, Phichit went through three police chiefs because of unrest that followed Khun Phan's departure and accompanied instability in the Bangkok police command during the last years of the war (Okha 2007: 27–35).

Phichit could boast many *saiyasat* practitioners, laymen as well as monks, and the town of Chalawan had a concentration of such specialists—a hint that warriors on both sides of the law were active there. The father of Okha Buri, author of *Unlocking the Secrets of Khun Phantharakratchadet*, was a student of one such specialist. Suea Thai was a special forces 'tiger soldier' in the entourage of Prince Chumphon (Abhakara Kiartivongse), one of King Chulalongkorn's sons, who modernised the Thai navy and was himself a master of the magical arts. The prince valued the 'tiger soldier's' knowledge of *saiyasat* and its chants and spells, but when Suea Thai was accused of a violent crime, he decided to flee and spent many years running from the law in rural Thailand, sometimes crossing into Laos, Cambodia, Malaya or Singapore. Once the statute of limitations had expired, he settled in Phichit and changed his name to Pho Lim. Khun Phan knew about his background, but far from regarding the man as a hardened criminal, he saw Pho Lim as yet another master of *saiyasat* who might supplement his own stock of knowledge, including the power to stop bullets and disable firearms. One day a gang of 500 outlaws attacked Pho Lim's village and opened fire, yet not a single bullet touched him, so the story went—a miraculous outcome that immediately made him a person of great interest to the community. Owing to their common interests and skills, the two men became very close. Like Khun Phan, Pho Lim (aka Suea Thai) was a master of boxing and traditional Thai sword fighting (*krabi krabong*), and the pair—both of small stature, but one with a dark complexion (Khun Phan) and the other light (Pho Lim)—would perform the sword dance in public to the delight of Phichit crowds (Okha 2007: 124–30).

Suea Nom, known to his followers as Ajan Suea Nom—*ajan* being a respected epithet for teacher—was another case that came to Khun Phan's notice during his time in Phichit. The man did not break the law and enjoyed a reputation in the villages as a healer and tattooist who could cast spells, which also made him popular with ne'er-do-wells who availed themselves of his powers to impart invulnerability. His stubborn refusal to take responsibility for their thieving had made him an irritant to the

police. Khun Phan was called to help apprehend Suea Nom and, after a skirmish in which two of Nom's followers died, the policeman finally captured the man and his accomplices and bound them with rope. As the men were being ferried across the Yom River under police guard, the boat snagged on tree roots, overturned and Nom drowned. When the body was recovered many days later, it appeared that the rope had been tied so tightly around his neck that it must have asphyxiated him. His head was lost in the water and his decomposed remains were cremated before family could pay their last respects (Okha 2007: 153–7).¹⁷ The gruesome end to Suea Nom at the hands of the Lion Lawman and his men caused dread in bandit circles, but the police command was satisfied. Luang Adul rewarded Khun Phan with a six-pointed star and promoted him to major.

It was in Phichit, where Khun Phan was chief of police during the Japanese occupation of Thailand, that he acquired his famous Red Sword, so-called because he carried it wrapped in a red cloth. When he first laid eyes on the weapon, it was an heirloom in the possession of Luang Klaklangnarong, a soldier who had moved to Phichit to take up his official duties and a scion of the Phraya Phichai lineage in Uttaradit. Phraya Phichai fought alongside General Taksin, the eighteenth-century ruler who reunited the Siamese empire after the fall of Ayutthaya and later took the throne. Nowadays in the town of Laplae, Uttaradit, a spirit medium will channel Phraya Phichai for a small donation. The sword, which had its origins in an iron mine in Nam Phi, where ore was reserved for the king's weapons, was said to be stained with the blood of the kingdom's ancient enemies. Or was that vivid language just a rhetorical flourish of Khun Phan's biographer?

The mine is now a minor tourist destination, with a museum and shop selling small plastic bags of ore that is smelted locally into ingots and then shipped elsewhere to be transformed into swords, knives and other implements. When I visited the mine in November 2017, a couple of kids were lowering magnets into a large depression hoping to extract flecks of iron ore from the deposit, exhausted of what the earth had once gifted. In the course of his duties, the policeman sought out Luang Klaklangnarong's company, and the nobleman grew to so admire Khun Phan's skill at swordplay and the traditional Siamese sword dancing he performed at local festivities that he regarded him as an 'adopted' son

17 This account is drawn from Okha (2007: 153–7) and Samphan (2007: 180–6); the former provides the most graphic details.

(*luk buntbam*). The surviving descendants in Phraya Phichai's lineage were not sufficiently skilled in swordplay and thus did not qualify to inherit the sword, so with Luang Klaklangnarong's blessing and confidence that the sword would be in the hands of someone willing to lay down his life for the country, it passed into Khun Phan's possession (Okha 2007: 165–76; Samphan 2007: 191–4). Along with the *kris* that he was given after he captured Ahweh Sador in 1938, the Red Sword was no mere souvenir but personal regalia that Khun Phan would treasure for the spiritual powers imbued in its forging.

In June 1945, as the war was ending, Khun Phan was transferred from Phichit to Chainat in the central plains, where bandits in large groups (*kok*) of up to 100 had the run of the countryside. Economic conditions had worsened during the Japanese occupation and food was in short supply. Cultivators abandoned their land, migrated and began stealing cattle to feed themselves; such people were easily recruited into the bandit way of life. Crime and violence had reached the point of national crisis, and the worst affected region was the central plains (Chalong 2013: 194). The most powerful bandit leader, whose influence extended beyond the borders of a single province, was Suea Fai, a village headman from a Suphanburi district bordering Chainat who had been charged with murder. Collusion by government officials exacerbated the problems of maintaining law and order, and Suea Fai's network within officialdom had given him a degree of social cachet, enhancing his prestige in the eyes of local people.

Suea Fai was not just a thief with murderous tendencies, but also a local boss who exercised his authority over land and agricultural production, and who enforced a strict code of conduct among his followers. Those recommending a recruit for gang membership would be punished publicly and cruelly if their candidate broke the rules, and a 'killing field' (*lan prahan*) was designated for this purpose. Prospective gang members were not allowed to have been ordained as Buddhist monks and were required to declare that they had no compunction about violating the precepts of the religion, especially the one that forbade the taking of life. His followers also needed to ask his permission if they wanted to marry. He lived in a fortified house with a commanding view of the Suphan River and charged freight barges up to THB500 (US\$25) for using the waterway. He warned Khun Phan in writing to stay away from Suphanburi and passed along an envelope containing a payment of THB20,000 (about US\$1,000 at the time), which the policeman returned via a courier, who

pocketed the bribe. Other bandits were left their own turfs in the central provinces to control, but Fai controlled the largest tracts. He had the most manpower as well as a massive armoury available to his followers for their raids. His sway over his domain was *imperium in imperiō* (Samphan 2007: 196–202).

Suea Dam, another Suphanburi outlaw, controlled sugarcane fields and an opium parlour and was known to have special powers and talismans similar to Khun Phan's. For 16 years, he eluded the police, until Khun Phan finally asked for a meeting, at which they shook hands and embraced. They had shared the same teacher, which created a basis for mutual respect. Out of regard for Suea Dam's gentlemanly manner and the code he lived by, Khun Phan proposed to settle their differences by trading a life for a life. After a shootout in which hundreds of rounds were fired, Dam surrendered a member of his gang and his camp was torched. Khun Phan killed the hostage, burnt the corpse, photographed the cremains and filed a police report attesting to the end of Suea Dam. In return for Khun Phan faking his death and allowing him to escape, Suea Dam renounced his outlaw ways and was ordained as a monk in June 1953. Known in his later years by the monastic epithet Luang Pho, Dam was still wearing the yellow robe in 2014 and giving interviews about the peace deal he had struck with the southern policeman. Another outlaw in Chainat arrested by Khun Phan at the time was Suea Mahesuan, Thailand's Robin Hood, who died of natural causes in November 2014 at the age of 101. Suea Bai, yet another Robin Hood of the Chaophraya Basin, passed away in May 2015 at the age of 94.¹⁸ A lengthy feature published by *Art and Culture* on the history of outlaw culture during and after the war does not fail to mention Khun Phan's contribution to curtailing the activities of the *suea* (Kong 1997). The public memory of the worst deeds of these men has faded, but the longevity of the outlaws in life and in literature has led to their apotheosis as minor cultural heroes.

A new chief of police, Phra Raminthara, replaced Luang Adul in 1945 when the government changed at the end of the Pacific War. To combat the lawlessness and unrest on the central plains, the Bangkok command created an elite task force under the direction of Police Colonel Sawat Kankhet and Khun Phan (Chalong 2013: 195). Suea Fai was induced to surrender, and Khun Phan was instrumental in organising a tense meeting

18 Matchon (2014b), in which the chronology of the peace meeting and shootout is not straightforward; and Manat (1997: 100). See also Matchon (2014a, 2015).

between the outlaw and the police chief, which took place in a Suphanburi hotel room. During the negotiations, Khun Phan had the barrel of his gun trained on Suea Fai through a hole in the ceiling. Phra Raminthara offered Suea Fai an amnesty if he agreed to work with the task force to suppress the other outlaw gangs. Fai's surrender was suddenly stalled when Phra Raminthara was appointed Deputy Minister of Interior, and a new police chief replaced him. Another officer, Luang Narintharasorasak, was appointed head of crime suppression in Suphanburi, and Khun Phan was relieved of his post in the elite task force and ordered to hand over the operations in Suphanburi to Luang Narintharasorasak. In an effort to overturn this decision and recover his position, he lobbied his former chief, to no avail. Months of rivalry with Luang Narintharasorasak, including allegations about Khun Phan's scandalous behaviour, culminated in the latter's transfer to Ayutthaya. He was ordered to pack up his belongings, return weapons, budget documents and other files to the central command and leave Chainat (Samphan 2007: 247–56).

The unrest and violence from 1945 to 1950 that the police were determined to quell in Chainat, Suphanburi, Ayutthaya and Kamphaeng Phet resulted in part from the large supply of military weapons left over from the war years that had fallen into the hands of lawbreakers as well as the police (Chalong 2005). Guns in the early years of Khun Phan's career were unreliable and often misfired, but, after the war, more modern pistols as well as rifles and grenades became the weapons of choice. Shootouts were common in confrontations between the police and lawbreakers, and the men with toughened skin were more in danger of bullets than blades. The political system was also unsettled. The capacity of the police to maintain order in the provinces was affected by frequent changes in government as Field Marshal Phibun, prime minister during the Japanese occupation, was replaced with a civilian government led by Pridi Phanomyong, leader of the Free Thai movement, who soon found himself in political trouble after the regicide of King Anan in June 1946. An army coup in November 1947 returned Field Marshal Phibun to the prime ministership (Baker and Pasuk 2005: 142, 176). Each regime change had an impact on the police hierarchy, and Khun Phan, who had enjoyed good working relationships with national police chiefs Luang Adul and Phra Raminthara, did not always find himself on workable terms with his bosses. One has to be nimble to maintain useful connections (*sen*) with powerful bureaucrats and officials when the country is careening frequently from one regime to the next.

At his final posting in the central provinces, Khun Phan was asked, in 1947, by the acting police chief, Rear Admiral Luang Sangwonyutthakit, to tackle crime in Kamphaeng Phet. Luang Sangwon was a strong supporter of Pridi Phanomyong, who had asked him to set up a Thai military police unit towards the end of the Japanese occupation (Reynolds 2004: 293). He promised the southern policeman that if he managed to solve the problems in Kamphaeng Phet in four months, he could choose his next assignment. Khun Phan met the challenge and, unsurprisingly, picked Phatthalung, where he moved for the third time on 4 March 1948, expecting to serve out his tour of duty until retirement. His return to the mid south was clouded by the death of his first wife, Chalao, who had followed him on many of his provincial postings (Chalong 2007: 194–9; Samphan 2007: 324).

During his earlier posting in Phatthalung, along with other officers senior to him, Khun Phan had unsuccessfully pursued a Trang bandit, Suea Klap Khamthong, who had been schooled in *saiyasat* knowledge at Wat Khao Or by master teachers such as Ajan Thong and Ajan Nam Keojan, who had moved to Wat Don Sala. Suea Klap had dodged the police for years, yet Khun Phan did not regard him in the same way as his other adversaries who had committed violent crimes and persisted in defying police authority. Suea Klap, by contrast, had no violent assaults or murders against his name. His crimes were small-scale thefts, and he never burgled in Phatthalung out of respect for his teachers. By the late 1940s, Suea Klap was elderly and had ‘retired’ from his life as an outlaw. Khun Phan conceded that Suea Klap, by eluding capture for so many years, was the one bandit who had bettered him. Through an intermediary, he sought a meeting, but Suea Klap was suspicious of the policeman’s motives and refused (Chalong 2007: 141–9). Khun Phan vowed to wear his moustache for as long as it took to apprehend Suea Klap, which meant for the rest of his career, as it turned out, because he never apprehended the man.¹⁹

Suea Klap as well as Pho Lim, the *saiyasat* specialist and master of Siamese swordplay with whom the southern policeman had danced before the Phichit audiences, had imbibed *saiyasat* knowledge from their teachers. They believed in the efficacy of the magic arts that endowed them with charisma in the eyes of local communities. Like Khun Phan, these men

19 Suepphong Saengwan (b. 1962), a distant relative of Khun Phan, Interview with the author, Songkhla, 4 September 2012.

were *nak leng*. They had mental toughness and a dignified bearing (*saksi*), and they abided by a code of conduct not prescribed by bureaucratic statute but guided by community expectations that a man should be true to his word and live with honour. Seen in this light, Suesa Klap and Pho Lim were the southern policeman's doubles. They were not *doppelgänger*, strictly speaking. They were not exact lookalikes or mirror images, nor were they apparitions. Khun Phan performed his duties brandishing the shield of state authority, whereas his outlaw doubles could boast only of the support of their outlaw cohorts and of the communities that protected them. Some rural outlaws Khun Phan pursued were shadows of himself that he could never quite put his hands on; there were others he respected enough to show lenience. In his persona and methods, he was little different from the outlaws, and his police-outlaw identity was manifest to many in his lifetime, even if it puzzled some of his bosses.

In 1948, Phatthalung communities called for Khun Phan's return because of a crime wave, and it was in that province that he fatally shot one of his last victims. The man's kinfolk declined to claim the man's remains and the policeman ordered the body decapitated, and required Suesa Tho, the leader of the gang, to carry the head through the villages he had terrorised to demonstrate what would happen to lawbreakers. Decapitation was common in the early centuries of Thai warfare, when soldiers took heads as trophies of victory: according to a fifteenth-century military epic, 'Anyone who rides a horse to battle and takes a head is rewarded with a golden bowl, cloth, and promotion' (Baker and Pasuk 2018: 144). In this instance, decapitation served another purpose. Khun Phan performed a ritual that directed the dead man's spirit to do his bidding, and the severed head was displayed on the lakeside route into the district of Khao Chaison to spook outlaws from neighbouring Songkhla and deter them from entering Phatthalung to rob villagers in territory protected by Khun Phan (Wira 2001: 187; Samphan 2007: 128–9).

In 1950, Khun Phan was promoted to Police Lieutenant Colonel, and a year later he was made Deputy Commander of Division 8 in Nakhon Si Thammarat—a position he had to be persuaded to accept. After two decades of policing, his taste for desecrating outlaw corpses had not diminished. Suesa Phat had been on a thieving spree in Phatthalung and Songkhla, and in a gunfight had shot an officer, who lost his right arm. After another shootout that left Suesa Phat dead, the man's severed head was impaled in front of the Phatthalung police station. Yet a modicum of community policing was not beyond Khun Phan. To confront a spate of 'snatch and

run' thefts, he invited the local *nak leng* leaders to his house for a meal, at which he admonished them to bring their more rambunctious followers under control. At the time, he also helped raise funds for a study centre and recreation precinct in Phatthalung town (Samphan 2007: 358).

As social unrest in the mid south receded and Khun Phan had time on his hands, he opened a restaurant in Phatthalung on the western shore of the central lake. His family life had taken another turn as he married again after Chalao died and fathered three more children. His second 'official' wife, Somsamai (b. 1927), was a Chinese woman from Penang who had changed her surname to Utsarattaniwat. She was one of eight siblings who had fled Malaya at the outbreak of the Pacific War and moved to nearby Hatyai. At the age of 14 or 15, Somsamai had come to live in Khun Phan's home, and they eventually married. According to his son Chanthip, Khun Phan discouraged Somsamai from learning Thai fluently, because he feared unscrupulous people would try to bribe her to compromise his work.²⁰ Somsamai bore him three children: Nasan (b. 1951) and Chanthip (b. 1952), both sons, and a daughter, Thitiphan. Most of Khun Phan's 13 children by various women were daughters, and he also had three adopted children (*luk buntham*) (Chintapati 2007: 34–5). He became Commander of Division 8 in 1960 and Police Major General in the following year and retired in 1964 (Chalong 2007: 199–200; Samphan 2007: 364–5).

Local notable

To commemorate retirement from active service, Khun Phan and a police friend, Police Lieutenant General Pracha Buranathanit, collaborated in sponsoring the production of Buddhist amulets and images modelled after the standing Buddha image at Wat Phra Pathom stupa south of Bangkok. The amulets were stamped from a powdered compound of over 400 therapeutic herbs, granules of soil from city pillars in all the provinces and lichen collected from the major Buddhist stupas in the country. Lieutenant General Pracha, a native of the central plains, was another 'man with toughened skin', who was known, like Khun Phan, for the lethal methods he had demonstrated more than once. On 21 May 1963, Pracha presented a collection of the specially consecrated amulets and images to King Bhumibol (Ek 2010: 32–40).

²⁰ Chanthip Phantarakrajchadech, Interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, 9 September 2012.

Khun Phan's reputation as a police officer with an enviable arrest record and a regional reputation for crime suppression led to a brief political career, when the Democrat Party recruited him to run for election in the national parliament in February 1969.²¹ He won the seat, but his term as an MP ended all too soon when General Thanom Kittikachorn, the military dictator of the day, conducted a coup against himself in 1971 and dissolved the parliament. The policeman campaigned for office again in 1974, as a candidate for the Social Action Party led by the royalist M.R. Kukrit Pramoj. He lost that election and decided he had had enough of politics. He was not a natural campaigner and had neither the talent nor the enthusiasm for taking on the jokey persona that entertains voters.

As a local notable, Khun Phan was invited to preside at festivals and ceremonies. He would bless newlyweds or read a horoscope to determine the auspicious date and time to build a house or consecrate an amulet. The most memorable of these occasions, and the most consequential for his reputation, was his role in identifying the Jatukham-Ramathep deity that would later bring his name to national attention. A new chief, Police Colonel Sanphet Thammathikun (later Lieutenant General), arrived in Nakhon Si Thammarat and decided the town should refresh its horoscope. Under a national policy that promoted decentralisation in the 1980s, the government was encouraging each provincial centre to install or renovate its city pillar, the spiritual heart of the town, and Sanphet decreed that a new horoscope was necessary. A community group urged him to consult a spirit medium, who drew a strange image and recommended that Sanphet visit Khun Phan, who immediately identified it as a composite image of guardian deities protecting the reliquary at Wat Mahathat. Khun Phan presided at the formal consecration of the 'new' deity, with the prime minister of the day, General Prem Tinsulanonda, a southerner from Songkhla, in attendance. Amulets were struck and disseminated to the public to raise funds to build a proper pillar for the city. Khun Phan had given advice on the design of the pillar made from timber cut from the peak of Mount Luang in the Nakhon range to the west of the town (Phuttharat 2007: 110, 113).

In 1999, Khun Phan was honoured by the Ministry of Health for his knowledge of traditional Thai medicine and received an honorary degree from the Rajabhat University in Nakhon Si Thammarat (Wira 2001: 62). In his later years, Khun Phan—the short, wiry policeman who had

21 *Bangkok Post*, 13 February 1969; Chalong (2007: 201); Chanthip Phantarakrajchadech, Interview with the author, 9 September 2012.

cheated death more than once in violent skirmishes in the countryside—wore a straw hat and walked with a cane. On special occasions, he could be seen in pristine white traditional dress (*pha jong kraben*). He spent his days visiting with friends, reading the newspaper and tending therapeutic herbs he grew at home. He had always been a man of simple, basic tastes, sufficient in what was necessary for life (Okha 2007: 243). Following the dictates of the *saiyasat* knowledge he had observed throughout his career, Khun Phan kept a strict diet and shunned foods he believed would diminish his powers. These included papaya, the *belimbing* or cucumber tree, a type of watercress (*krachet*) and eels (*pla lai*) that survived in pond mud and flooded rice fields (Wira 2001: 65). The nurse who washed and dressed him expressed amazement at the condition of his body and the strength in his limbs for a man who had lived more than a century.²²

The bathed, tattooed and scarred body of the southern policeman finally came to rest in July 2006. Flags were flown at half-mast at police stations around the country and, when Khun Phan was cremated in February the following year, the Crown Prince of Thailand arrived for the preliminary devotions but departed before the cremation itself. Contrary to reports, the Crown Prince did not leave with the Red Sword—an object much desired by many, including local MPs.²³ Tens of thousands of people from near and far crowded into the Wat Mahathat compound hoping to receive a medallion with Khun Phan's image that had been struck for the occasion. Supply fell short of demand, and thousands were turned away, with more than 100 people injured in the crush. A special edition of the Jatukham-Ramathep amulet was struck with Khun Phan's image brandishing his Red Sword on the observe side (Nawamin 2007: 82–91; Ek 2010: 133–9). Lottery sellers did a thriving business as those in attendance sought to match ticket numbers with Khun Phan's vital statistics: his birth and death dates, the date of his cremation and the day of the week on which it took place. Drivers of lorries, vans, pickup trucks and station wagons full of amulets queued up to have their valuable loads blessed and ritually charged en masse by monks. Proceeds from the amulets' sale were donated to a local hospital.

Within a year of Khun Phan's cremation, the municipality honoured its famous son by erecting a statue on the main street that passes in front of the Nakhon Si Thammarat police station.

22 Wannasarn Noonsuk, Interview with the author, Bangkok, 20 November 2017.

23 Chanthip Phantarakrajchadech, Interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, 9 September 2012.



Plate 2 Statue of Khun Phan outside Nakhon Si Thammarat police station

Source: Craig Reynolds.

Khun Phan looks down the narrow lane that bears his family's name. Statues of commoners may be found in the provinces but are virtually unknown in Bangkok, where the country's kings and members of the royal family grace plazas and intersections. A decade after the 2007 cremation, a grassroots movement in Ai Khiew, the village of Khun Phan's birth, raised funds to erect another statue of Khun Phan; next to him is a pavilion sheltering the figure of the policeman's early childhood teacher, the monk Ajan Iat (Dam). It is planned that the statues will be at the centre of a park along the stream that runs through a clearing in the forest. Kasem Jandam, a poet and scholar of birds' nests in Southeast Asia, explained to me that the villagers regard Khun Phan as a model of integrity, in contrast to some people in Thailand today who are unethical and who lack moral scruples. Yes, he is a hero to them, a man who left the tiny community to make a success of himself as a policeman on the national stage.²⁴

The right and duty to take human life

Parinya Sanyadet, who owns a traditional weapons museum in Thonburi, met Khun Phan when the southern policeman had only a short time left to live. Even in old age he had about him an aura of toughness and unwillingness to compromise. When I spoke with Parinya, he wondered aloud whether Khun Phan's near-death experience during his childhood illness had given him a sense of mission that lasted throughout his career. Perhaps, having cheated death when he was very young, he thought himself indestructible. He was single-minded and fearless in his pursuit of lawbreakers and believed he was entitled to use any means necessary to defeat them.²⁵ A lawman who was prepared to display in public the severed head of an outlaw to warn others off the territory he protected was not a man to be trifled with.

²⁴ Kasem Jandam, Interview with the author, 17 November 2017.

²⁵ Parinya Sanphet, Interview with the author, 1 February 2012. To celebrate its 40th anniversary, the Thai Studies Institute at Thammasat University held an exhibition of traditional Thai weapons from the museum (Sathaban Thai Khadi Sueksa 2011).

Khun Phan's biographers assure readers that while he could take life with little compunction, he did not take it gratuitously. He preferred to capture rather than to kill, although executing an order sometimes resulted in executing a lawbreaker. The tattoos on his knuckles told his adversaries he would not hesitate to take this action. Yet taking life is a sin among the first five Buddhist precepts. Was Khun Phan mindful of this precept against killing as he went about his work? When Khun Phan's sons asked their father whether he had sinned by killing human beings, the replies he gave sound like the same story filtered through different memories. Nasan, the elder son, said his father accepted that he might end up in hell and, if that happened, he would have a chat with Yama, the Lord of the Underworld, and try to work something out (*jeraja*: negotiate, discuss). To Chanthip, the younger son, his father replied similarly: when he arrived in hell, he would be offering Yama his assistance in sorting things out down there.²⁶ The sons' query was meant to probe their father's conscience about taking human life. His droll response was adroit deflection of the question's intent.

Khun Phan's biographers, who are careful to withhold judgement about the deaths of lawbreakers at Khun Phan's hands or at the hands of officers working under his command, report deaths in police custody or in prison without embellishment. The biographers do not stand in judgement of the policeman's actions. When Khun Phan carried out his orders only to find himself in trouble with the police hierarchy because kinfolk or local officials protecting the deceased outlaw filed a complaint that besmirched his reputation as a loyal cop, he resented it. Yet the Phichit author Okha Buri offers explicit and gruesome details of disrespectful treatment of human remains at the hands of the police. He observes that times have changed since Khun Phan's day, and public attitudes are now different:

It is unthinkable that anyone would do these things nowadays. It is fortunate that Khun Phan and officials lived at the time they did and could escape the critical scrutiny of the human rights people who prefer to comment rather than do the job. (Okha 2007: 110)

26 Nasan Phantarakrajchadech, Interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, 6 August 2011; and Chanthip Phantarakrajchadech, Interview with the author, Nakhon Si Thammarat, 9 September 2012.

In describing one operation, Samphan Kongsamut states matter-of-factly that Khun Phan's reputation for taking no prisoners and for killing and discarding human remains preceded his arrival in a district. He then adds that rural Thailand was violent and lawless in the day, and Khun Phan's actions were necessary if he was to restore peace and order. The police—part of the state's armour of coercion—have legal sanction to use lethal force. The top brass might be unhappy with Khun Phan's methods even if they were effective, and communities were reassured by the decisive actions he took to clean up their districts. Bad means are sometimes necessary to achieve good ends (Samphan 2007: 182–6; Jauregui 2016: 65). Khun Phan's authority was provisional and subject to legalities, police procedures, community pressures and moralities, including his own moral code. All of these could conflict with each other. In keeping with his name—a literal translation of which was 'duty-bound to protect the power of the monarch' (*phantharak ratchadet*)—Khun Phan was doing his job.



Plate 3 Khun Phan at age 102

Source: Chanthip Phantarakrajchadech.

A trophy photograph of Khun Phan taken when he was 102 years old by Chanthip posed him with the weapons of Buddhist and Malay sovereigns, which he adopted as his regalia. The ceremonial Red Sword, acquired from the Phraya Phichai noble lineage in Uttaradit during the war years, lies on his lap; a *kris* is thrust into his waistband. His mock death stare into the camera is stagey, a performance of the authority he once exercised as though to inform the viewer that he is not innocent of the powers he had possessed. He drew his strength from the knowledge the *saiyasat* masters taught him, from his abilities as a warrior, from the shield that his uniform provided him and from the lands and waters of his birthplace.

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