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Policing and banditry



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The Thai police, always a force to be reckoned with, came to renewed prominence in the first half of the 2000s during the governments of Police Lieutenant Colonel Thaksin Shinawatra (b. 1949), who was prime minister from 2001 to 2006. Thaksin came from a northern Sino-Thai family and had garnered broad electoral strength, especially in the north and northeast, but to the extent that his political networks were based in non-elected institutions, they were in the police force rather than in the military. Thaksin had graduated from the police academy and held advanced degrees in criminal justice from American universities. His entrepreneurial activities during his years as a policeman did not distract him from being promoted to police lieutenant colonel. His wife, Pojaman, came from a police family, and her brother, Phrieophan Damaphong, was a classmate of Thaksin's at the police academy who joined him when they went abroad for advanced study at Eastern Kentucky University. When Thaksin's sister, Yingluck, became prime minister as a Thaksin proxy following the general election in July 2011, Police General Phrieophan was appointed the national police chief.

Policing can run in families, putting relatives in danger from those who might want to settle scores, but police relatives afford protection to those who remain loyal within the family fold. Even today Khun Phan's descendants are careful when moving through the districts of the mid

south. Families of the men Khun Phan and his team dispatched with rough justice did not always forgive and forget. The brothers of one decorated policeman born with a patriarchal Chinese clan name took a Thai surname that literally meant ‘very good at protecting the family’. The family may have been protected, but the policeman, known as ‘Iron Leg Phian’, could not protect himself. As the anti-government protests in early 2010 began to shut down Bangkok’s central business district, Iron Leg Phian was killed by a roadside bomb while on duty in the deep south (Reynolds 2010). From March to May 2010, until the Red Shirt camp was broken up by the army with brute force and loss of life, police were often in the news. Many police had supported the Red Shirts; many Red Shirts were police officers.

Given the prominence of the police force in recent Thai political history, research on the institution in Western languages is surprisingly thin. Scholars inside and outside the country are understandably wary of delving too deeply into police matters. Thai police are well known not only for their role in state-building, but also—like police almost everywhere—for their corruption, their aptitude for violence and their sometimes comic ineptitude. A postwar memoir by a deputy chief of police states that members of the force knew that the citizenry regarded their line of work as inferior to other occupations but leaves the reader to deduce the reasons (Phinit 1976: 311–91). A Thai survey in 2000 reported that respondents saw the police as the most dishonest element of Thailand’s public institutions (McCargo 2009: 115). In the course of my research for this book, I learned a new Thai word for dishonest as it applies to police. *Kong chin* is a loanword from Chinese (Ch., *zong chien*); its binary opposite for honest and trustworthy is *tong ching* (Ch., *zong chien*).

At the time when modernisation theory held sway over area studies in the United States, during the Second Indochina War, Albert Weed provided a sketchy history of the Thai police in his study of American aid for counterinsurgency. He reported that a disproportionate budget was allocated to law enforcement in the north and northeast—the regions of the country identified by American and Thai strategists as most vulnerable to the perceived communist threat. Weed’s research drew on USAID reports and, while the data were sparse and derivative, one of his sources advanced an idea that strikes me as insightful. Weed said the Thai police ‘create around them an aura of apprehension, of anxiety [and] of fear. They are imbued with an emotional significance that does not attach to other agents of government’ (Weed 1970: 10).

I once discussed my interest in the Nakhon policeman with a senior Thai anthropologist. She shook her head and said she did not have much to say about the topic. Like many Thai people, she prefers to maintain a distance from the police. Yet emotional significance, which according to Weed's informants I take to mean visceral responses of anxiety and fear, does not capture another aspect of policing in Thailand. Police connections are useful at all levels of society. It pays to have a policeman onside. Indeed, to solve some kinds of problems it is advisable to pay to have a policeman onside.

The emotional significance that attaches to the police is a distinctive feature in the career of Khun Phan. His severe countenance and willingness to resort to lethal force earned him the nickname Lion Eyes. A former lawyer and retired employee of the state electricity authority recounted how conversation among passengers on a train ceased as Khun Phan entered the carriage and walked up the aisle. This was about 1945 and Bunsong, who was only 18 or 19 years old, said he was terrified by the southern policeman's presence.¹ Khun Phan liked to brandish his weapons and brag about his brute strength in the manner of a local tough and risktaker, or *nak leng*. Khun Phan's biographers refer to him as the *nak leng* lawman (*nak leng mue prap*), because of the ruthless manner in which he went about his job, often pursuing an adversary to death with singular purpose. More to the point, in his methods, his guile and daring and his dignified bearing, he was a bit of a *nak leng* himself (Wira 2001: 81–7). *Mue prap* ('lawman') is not to be confused with *mue puen*, a word commonly used for 'hired assassin'. The alliterative twinning of the terms in the Thai ear intimates that the one, the police gunman, might well become the other, an officer out-of-uniform and a gun-for-hire. *Prap*, a word found in the Three Seals Law Code of the early nineteenth century, is a loanword from Angkorean Khmer, in which it meant to level, to flatten and also to defeat, to suppress and to subdue (Jenner 2009: 378). During the absolute monarchy when the government needed to quell rebellions, they were suppressed (*prap*), as when Ho raiders in the northeast were defeated by armies from Bangkok in the 1870s. The literal meaning in modern Thai, like the Angkorean Khmer meaning, is to flatten or crush, and *prap* is still a keyword for the hard edge of policing. In police argot, it means to subdue, to subjugate, to suppress criminality and to restore order. In the mid-twentieth century, when the Thai Government pitted its strength against communism, *prap* referred to the suppression of communism (*prap khommiwnit*).

1 Bunsong Chamnandit, Interview with the author, Tungsong, Trang, 24 September 2009.

Nowadays there is a Department of Crime Suppression (Kong Prapram), but in the 1920s and 1930s, suppression and investigation were not bureaucratically distinct. Authorities did not just look around and find someone to arrest; they crushed and suppressed. In 1917, a lawyer and former provincial prosecutor published a manual on modern police investigation, yet in the accounts of Khun Phan's capture of lawbreakers I have found nothing about fingerprints or photographs of crime scenes (Lim 2016: 63). Perhaps the police archives have such records. In the early 1930s, when Khun Phan began his career, proper investigative procedures were in their infancy, and his methods of suppressing crime dispensed with the niceties of forensic examination, although there was plenty of reconnaissance and the use of informants. After Khun Phan had graduated from the police academy, a new curriculum was instigated, in 1934, by Field Marshal Pibun Songkhram, then deputy commander of the army, and Luang Adul Detcharat, then chief of the police department, which took advantage of military knowledge to make the police more motivated in their work and improve their cooperation with the army (Wanlaya 1999: 58).

In his own work, Khun Phan specialised in suppression, sometimes with gruesome results. Incidents of atrocities and the abuse of corpses at the hands of police are scattered in the informal archive of Thailand's modern history. Undated photographs in *Kings and History of the Police*, an official publication, show men condemned to death by decapitation in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Prisoners are shackled and tethered with heavy chains as they await the executioner's sword (Prayut 1976). The pictures were taken in the early history of photography, so poor resolution and multiple printings have left only a blurry image of this intimate moment of impending death.

In Khun Phan's time, Tiger Phat was a fearless murderer. He was fatally shot in 1950 by Police Lieutenant General Pracha Buranathanit and his severed head set out for the vultures at Phra Phathom stupa, an hour's drive from the capital, as a deterrent to other criminals. The scanty evidence of the atrocity—a grainy photograph without attribution in a popular biography—hints at the scale of police barbarity (Okha 2007: 108). Another photograph purports to depict the skull of Suea Sai, a bandit Khun Phan relentlessly pursued and finally captured. Wounded in his struggle with the police, the man developed a fever and died, whereupon Khun Phan brought the body back to the police station and turned the skull into an ashtray (Okha 2007: 88–9). Then there was the incident

in the late 1940s when Khun Phan had returned to Phatthalung for the last time and fatally shot a man whose remains were left unclaimed by relatives fearing association with their unfortunate kinsman. The body was decapitated and the severed head publicly displayed at the provincial border to warn outlaws against crossing into territory that the southern policeman was protecting (Samphan 2007: 128–9). These were all barbaric acts, and the details are ghoulish, but one wonders whether Khun Phan really did flick his cigarette ash into a cavity of bone that once contained a human brain.

In rural Thailand, magnanimity and dignity (*saksi*) as well as a capacity for violence were attributes of the macho *nak leng*. Before the writ of government gradually worked its way out to the edge of the bounded Thai state and the centre had yet to dispatch its own officials to the provinces, *nak leng* often performed the service of ‘neighbourhood watch’ to keep public order in the countryside. Law and order were a local affair, not a national or even a provincial one, and entailed the enforcement of customary law rather than a legal code. A man could protect the people in his home village and rustle cattle or take a life in another.

Khun Phan, who displayed attributes of the *nak leng* with his tattoos, amulets and readiness to fight with dignity, mirrored the *nak leng* social type in the communities in which he lived, shadowing the outlaws rather like a double but on the right side of the law. To lawbreakers and law-enforcers alike, master teachers in the monasteries—or *keji ajan*, as they are known in the vernacular—imparted their specialised knowledge, which promised invulnerability and survival in the jungle. The parts of Khun Phan’s sobriquet, *nakleng mueprap*, might then be separated to expose this double identity: Khun Phan, the *nak leng*, was also the enforcer policeman (*mue prap*). To be tough and to triumph in struggle, a man needed spiritual protection; to acquire powers to defeat adversaries, a man had to spend time in the monkhood. So, the permeability of *nak leng*, *mue prap* and monk was not unique to him. The head monastic official in Trang, Phra Borisut Silajan, explained that he was ordained as a novice in 1892 to learn spells and chants. He would then disrobe, take up the outlaw life and use his newfound powers to protect his kinfolk (Mana 2003: 126). The emerging provincial police force was a state institution that had to accommodate the social worlds it encountered in the countryside to impose order on them, so it is little wonder that such complex social types on both sides of the law should appear in rural Thailand at this historical moment. To apprehend these outlaws, Khun Phan had to enter the world of the tigers (*suea*) and adopt their methods. He had to be one of them.

Policing in colonialism's shadow

The emotional significance that attaches to the police must be seen as a recent phenomenon. The police force itself was not an old institution but a creation of the late nineteenth-century Siamese absolutist state in colonial Southeast Asia. The police force grew not organically out of indigenous society but from the needs of Siam's colonial condition, and it began in Bangkok in the middle of the nineteenth century in response to the demands of the Western imperialist powers, who needed to safeguard their interests. Only decades later did it extend to the provinces.

In a courtyard in the central police station in Bangkok, a statue of the fourth Bangkok king, Mongkut (r. 1851–68), honours his role in establishing a constabulary in the districts of the capital. Soon after the Bowring Treaty was signed in 1855, granting extraterritorial rights to the European imperial powers, King Mongkut appointed a former British sea captain, Samuel Joseph Bird Ames, to command the unit in Bangkok—a position he held until 1901 (Suwan 1996: 107–8). Special policing units were dispatched to the Sam Pheng district of Bangkok to curb the activities of Chinese secret societies, and to Phuket, where the societies were also causing unrest. One problem facing law enforcement officers was that lawbreakers, if they were Indian or Chinese, could be British or French subjects whose misdeeds would be adjudicated by European courts comfortably beyond Siamese reach under the extraterritorial treaties.

Siam from 1855 until about 1910 has been called a buffer state. Its survival as a sovereign kingdom relied on Great Britain and France being satisfied to rule the kingdom's neighbouring lands while leaving Siam a sovereign state. Given the international dynamics of those years, a more apt description of Siam's condition would be a buffeted state. The extraterritorial rights stipulated in the Bowring Treaty would eventually become irksome, although at the time the treaty was signed, the monarchy saw no reason to object to the same privileges it had granted to European merchants since the seventeenth century. Siam's national humiliation, as Shane Strate has put it, to express the elite's deep hurt at the treaty's inequalities, became acute only after the 1893 gunboat crisis that led France to extend its extraterritorial demands for French, Annamese and Lao subjects in Siam (Strate 2015: 24–36).

It was at this point that the reforming Siamese court began to strengthen the police force. Under pressure from the British and French, police duties were concentrated in the capital, especially for the protection of the monarch and foreign subjects. The initial model for the constabulary came from Singapore, and possibly Burma, both colonies of Great Britain that the Siamese judged to be the more dominant of the two paramount powers. French criticism of Siamese law enforcement led to the employment of British police officers from India and Burma in the Siamese expectation that, under the extraterritorial treaties, British officers would deal with Westerners and the Western consuls more effectively than the French. In 1897, A.J. Jardine was succeeded by Eric St J. Lawson, who introduced new procedures and crime detection measures and established a hospital dedicated to police health and forensic examination. The first appointees to the constabulary were recruited to Bangkok from elsewhere in the British Empire (India, Burma, the Middle East), leading the Saigon press to claim that Siam was becoming 'a second Egypt'. The official uniform of the Bangkok metropolitan police made them look like British officers, and the treatment of Siamese subjects by these officers was sufficiently tactless and severe for King Chulalongkorn to say that 'the police are not ours, they are the police of the British' (Hong 2003: 128–32). The king's son and heir, Vajiravudh (r. 1910–25), a pioneering author of detective fiction, portrayed police characters in his novels as callous and arrogant. Archives of the time show the police to be 'untrained, bumbling fools' who misused their powers (Lim 2012: 90).

One consequence of the compromised sovereignty forced on Siam after 1855 was that the army was relieved of its task of defending the borders. British and French armies now guarded their respective colonies adjoining Siam. Internal security was shared by the Thai army and the police, and the shares were not equal. The army was the elder brother and the police the younger sibling, and it has always been the army, not the police, that has claimed a sense of entitlement in governing the country. More than once during Khun Phan's career, officers left their army commissions to become police commanders.

To improve relations with Bangkok residents, an academy for the metropolitan police was established in 1907. The recruitment of Siamese police cadets lagged at first owing to the unattractiveness of the work and the poor reputation of police among local people. The job required tact in dealing with miscreants who were British and French subjects, including Chinese and Indians under the jurisdiction of the European courts

(Suwan 1996: 195–6). A separate section of the procedural manuals issued to the metropolitan police in the 1920s gave instructions on how to treat such subjects and included a form to be filled out by the arresting officer. Time and again it is stipulated in the manuals that the Thai police have no power over extraterritorial subjects, which included Japanese as well as French and British (Khunjomphonlan 1922–24: 13–16). The manuals, which were updated annually, were a jumble of proper procedures to be followed and topics requiring special vigilance on the part of police: notice of quarantine areas for smallpox victims, rewards for capturing criminals and alerts about specific problems at the time—for example, con artists who were circulating German currency easily mistaken for Thai *baht* by unknowing traders. Motorcycle police rostered to escort the royal motorcade were required to obtain proper training and to drive safely.

Many decades would pass before the police force developed a formidable presence outside the capital. In rural areas, where law enforcement was spotty at best, policing had been the responsibility of local lords and administrators. Provincial judges operated their own jails and exploited the labour of incarcerated people for domestic service and the cultivation of their lands. Such was the case in the mid south. In a few provinces, officials administered regional police forces. In many locales, law enforcement had been counted among the duties of village headmen, as had been the case in Burma before British rule (Griffiths 1971: 194).

A provincial police force was created in 1897 within the Ministry of Interior to shift policing duties away from untrained civil officials who had taken matters into their own hands. The Provincial Gendarmerie Department would supersede the army in the task of keeping peace in the countryside. Between 1899 and 1909, some 330 substations of gendarmerie were established in provincial and district towns. A police academy in Nakhon Pathom began preparing officers for provincial police duty in 1904, and it was there that Khun Phan received his training. Instruction was given by Westerners with a military background. From 1897 to 1926, 21 Danish officers worked under the command of Gustav Chau, a senior Danish officer who had been employed as a military instructor in the mid-1880s and now headed the fledgling gendarmerie. The recruits were accommodated in barracks and trained in marching, marksmanship and physical fitness, including boxing, football and swimming. The model evidently had its origins in the way the military police was established by the British in Burma (Ivarsson 2016: 216).

As with modern methods of jurisprudence, education, taxation and census, Siamese authorities adopted and adapted many ideas about security from British colonial administration.

In 1905, the king abolished *corvée* labour and instituted universal conscription. A military training syllabus dating from the same year laid out a regimen to inculcate military virtues of bravery, unity, obedience, honour and willingness to shed blood in defence of the homeland. The intent and scope of this reform, which laid the foundations of the modern Thai army, have been described with lyrical flair by the Australian historian Noel Battye. His words capture the ethos imagined for newly created Siamese institutions as the absolute monarchy wrenched the kingdom from the past to accommodate pressures from the Western powers:

Technique, ideology, behaviour and values were combined into a new socialization process that was technical, national, urban, collective and martial—something previously beyond the realm of peasant experience. These things were imparted by qualified instructors who trained conscripts according to a syllabus within an organization with its own distinct regulations and code of law. Conscripts lived in barracks which took their place with the village, the temple and, increasingly, the primary school, amongst the principal institutions of provincial life. (Battye 1974: 484–5)

The order, regularity and predictability imagined for the peasant-soldiers subjected to a regimen such as this are familiar motifs in the history of modernity. The Danish military instructors were given the task of moulding young provincial police officers with a similar regimen inspired by a particular kind of modernity that came with Western colonialism in the region.

Unlike other countries in Southeast Asia where provincial police forces were being established, Siam was not a colony. The police did not face ‘the conflicting responsibilities of law enforcement and social work’ as in the Dutch East Indies, where the ethical policy decreed development and control to be the job of police, who were charged with being the civilised face of the colonial state (Bloembergen 2011: 169, 171, 176). In Siam, the task was control alone as centralised government was extended into remote regions with the aim of subordinating provincial elites and rulers. There were no stirrings of nationalism to challenge law enforcers, just local enforcers who had their own ideas of ‘peace and order’, as it was known in the Dutch East Indies.

Establishing a provincial police bureaucracy did not bring about *Pax Siamensis* throughout the country overnight. Recruits to the fledgling police force were often conscripts levied by the 1905 Act selected to serve as provincial police officers (Bunnag 1977: 97, 224). These officers were untrained and reluctant to execute their duties. They feared retribution from the people they arrested and, after serving out their tour of duty, tended to depart the district quickly. For whatever reason, the impact of the new gendarmerie in suppressing crime and banditry was limited. In Lawson's survey of 1917, the number of murders in Siam was double that in British Burma, and the murder rate was increasing at twice the rate of other crimes—statistics that alarmed officials but that may have surfaced in data never before collected. Provincial officers were slow to report cases and they lacked the legal authority to investigate and question witnesses. Only district-level administrators had this authority (Lim 2016: 35–6).

Police leadership

Khun Phan, the Nakhon policeman, rose in the provincial police to the rank of major general but showed no interest that I can discover in pursuing a career in the upper echelons of the police bureaucracy in Bangkok. He seemed content with his postings in the north, the central plains and the south, although from time to time his duties and operations brought him to the attention of the police command. In the early 1980s, when he began to talk about his exploits with journalists, writers and academics, it was not so much his connections with the police hierarchy that he enjoyed sharing anecdotally with his interviewers, but rather his skill in apprehending outlaws using his knowledge of spells, charms and magical thinking to lure, deceive or overpower those whom he was ordered to bring to justice. A retired schoolmaster from Tha Sala District in Nakhon, who had met Khun Phan several times, recalled that he was a man of action, full of energy, who loved to be out and about conducting operations rather than sitting at a desk. Khun Phan's motto was: 'Do your job so your deaf and blind boss can hear and see.'²

National police chiefs are political appointees, and incumbents tend to be replaced when a new government takes office. Over his long career, Khun Phan served under a dozen chiefs of police. Two are worthy of

2 Anan Ratanawong (b. 1932), Interview with the author, 6 December 2014; Chanthip Phantarakrajchadech, Interview with the author, 9 September 2012.

mention, as each in his own way represents contrasting styles of police leadership. During World War II, when Khun Phan was dispatched to close the infamous Ivory Bamboo Casino in Surat Thani, he did so at the behest of Police General Adul Aduladetcharat (1894–1969), born Bat Phungphrakhun, an army officer who had participated in the coup that overthrew the absolute monarchy in 1932. The last absolute monarch had conferred on Adul the noble title of *luang*, which Bat renounced at the beginning of the Japanese occupation. As Field Marshal Phibun moved to take control of the state from the People's Party in the mid-1930s, General Adul became chief of police and held the position until the end of the Pacific War. During his time, the police budget for training, investigating crime and expanding the provincial police force was increased (Prayut 1976: 403).

An incorruptible, hardworking patriot with no time for flattery, the ascetic and enigmatic General Adul patrolled the capital at night dressed in a blue cotton shirt and naval trousers. His 'burning, black eyes' and piercing gaze earned him the sobriquets 'Tiger Eyes' and 'the general with fierce eyes'. He vowed to arrest anyone who fell foul of the law, even if that person happened to be the prime minister. He knew he had made enemies and, on official business, preferred to ride behind his chauffeur, where he thought he might miss the assassin's bullet.³ During the war, his officers would deliver downed American pilots they had captured into his presence. He received the men politely only to release them promptly through a side door to continue their work with the Free Thai. He helped the movement using the code name 'Betty', but he did not completely trust the Free Thai and did not join until nearly the end of the war. For his assistance to American pilots and the Free Thai movement during the occupation, he was awarded the Silver Palm Medal of Freedom by the US Government, according to his cremation biography. He became army chief in 1945 and participated in the 1947 coup that returned Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsongkhram, the wartime dictator, to power. His colleagues remembered him as thoughtful and generous and at ease with his friends, although he was a private man and became something of a recluse in his final years.⁴

3 Chaiyan Rajchagool heard this anecdote from his father (Personal communication, 4 August 2011).

4 The information in this paragraph comes from MacDonald (1949: 157–60); Okha (2007: 117); and General Adul's cremation volume (Buranasinlapa 1970: n.p.).

After the war, the Thai population faced economic hardship. The nation's infrastructure had been weakened by the occupation, the country was unsettled and the government found it difficult to maintain law and order. Small arms had found their way into the hands of the citizenry via British and American forces, Japanese troops who had surrendered to the Allies after the war and a worldwide surplus of ordnance (Chalong 2005: 41–2). With munitions widely available, outlaws were well-armed and policing became a dangerous business. In the central plains, large groups of bandits (*kok*), numbering up to 100, roamed at will and held sway over the population, especially in Chainat, where Khun Phan was chief, and in half a dozen neighbouring provinces including Suphanburi, where the outlaw Sueda Fai had carved out a piece of the national real estate that he ruled with an iron fist (Samphan 2007: 196). The government itself was in possession of more than half a million firearms, including submachine guns, automatic pistols, hand grenades, grenade launchers and various kinds of explosives. The police responded to unrest with harsh measures—‘by any means available’, said an officer at the time, which was code for lethal force (Phut 1981: 6). In the capital, fatal shootings by police were indiscriminate, often with no evidence of criminality or of danger to the community. Many of the killings were political. Between 1944 and 1957, the police killed more than 20 well-known public figures (Chit 1960: 41–7; Lim 2016: 122–31). It was in this period—the five or so years after the end of the war—that Khun Phan's operations in the central plains and the south were the deadliest. Between the end of May 1945 and January 1950, he and his police teams shot to death 43 men—more than two-thirds of the total attributed to Khun Phan and accomplices that is publicly known (Wira 2001: 185–7; Samphan 2007: 393–8; Chalong 2013: 195).

In the late 1940s, Thailand quickly became integral to the United States' global strategy to contain the spread of communism, which often meant support for authoritarian governments. American funds through a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) front company, Sea Supply, began to flow to the Thai police. Police General Phao Siyanond (1909–60) was the national police chief from 1951 to 1957, when he was forced from office after the 1957 coup led by his rival in the army, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat. He went into exile in Switzerland. Phao, like General Adul, had graduated from the military academy and was a commissioned army

officer. At the beginning of the Pacific War, he briefly headed the Crown Property Bureau—an ironic touch to his career given the ignominious exile that was later visited on him (Prayut 1976: 419).

So close was Phao to the CIA that, during the 1950s, two American operatives eager to bolster police capacity married two women in the Thai aristocracy. Phao considered one of the American men, James William (Bill) Lair, needed rank if he was to be effective in establishing an elite paramilitary unit and commissioned him captain in the Thai national police (Ball 2013: 63, 66–7). The Thai women were sisters of Siddhi Savetsila (1919–2015), foreign minister from 1980 to 1990 and a privy councillor at his death. *Savetsila* (‘white stone’) is a calque of alabaster and the family name of descendants of Henry Alabaster, the British Consul in Bangkok in the late nineteenth century. The close association of the Savetsila family and American intelligence operatives is not as surprising as it might seem. Siddhi was in the anti-Japanese Free Thai movement during the Japanese occupation and had worked with Americans in the Office of Strategic Services. He was a comrade-in-arms with US Allies fighting the Axis powers. Social fraternisation of American and Thai officials from the earlier period would continue many decades after the war had ended, when Siddhi Savetsila’s friends from the old days—professional and personal, foreign and Thai, diplomatic and intelligence—would gather on 7 January every year to celebrate his birthday.⁵

To this day, Phao is acclaimed as the father of Thailand’s modern police, the man responsible more than any other for building up the force. His statues in police precincts around the country are the focus of anniversaries to celebrate the founding days of police units. At the Pathumwan Police Centre in Bangkok, he was looking proud amidst the chaos of building renovations in 2012 when I came upon his bust festooned with two small garlands.

5 Tej Bunnag, Personal communication, 22 November 2017.



Plate 6 Statue of Phao Siyanon, Pathumwan Police Centre, Bangkok

Source: Craig Reynolds.

Khun Phan's exploits in suppressing crime of all kinds included the interdiction of illegal drugs, and it was drug trafficking that brought the southern policeman to the notice of Police General Phao. Official histories of the Thai police in Thai and memoirs by Phao's subordinates are reluctant to mention that Phao was involved in the opium trade and competed with Sarit for its control; at one point the two nearly fought

their own opium war over the crop (Baker and Pasuk 2005: 146–7). Phao supported the CIA's clandestine activities in southern China and Laos in exchange for using those activities to achieve a virtual monopoly over opium and heroin trafficking into Thailand (Ball 2013: 59–60).

In 1950, while he was serving as the provincial chief in Phatthalung, Khun Phan apprehended a couple of soldiers trafficking opium on the southern train line. Police intelligence had tipped him off and he was persistent and meticulous in questioning passengers seated next to a large suitcase that no one would claim. Inside the bag were 50 kilograms of pure opium, and the two army officers, who were finally identified as owners of the bag, were arrested (Samphan 2007: 339–42). The opium turned out to belong to Police General Phao, and Khun Phan was summoned to Bangkok to account for himself. When he turned up for his audience with Phao to declare that in apprehending the men he was simply doing his duty, he was in civilian clothes. He did not wear his uniform that day, he told Phao, because he expected to be fired (Okha 2007: 117–18). Phao was satisfied enough with the explanation not to dismiss him, but this version of the tale cannot be the whole story. By 1950, Khun Phan had been policing for two decades. With so many successful operations behind him, his reputation within the force was secure. In age if not in rank, he was senior to Phao. Would Phao have gained anything by sacking an officer with what the national police chief—given his own predilections and methods for dealing with criminals and outlaws—could only regard as a commendable record? It would have been in Khun Phan's character as a calculated risk-taker to challenge his commander-in-chief, confident he would emerge from the encounter unwounded.

In due course, Khun Phan was rewarded for his many successes and received one of the prized rings worn by elite police who had earned sufficient favour to become one of Phao's knights or *aswin*, a Thai loanword from the Indic term for horse and the same word for the knight's piece in chess. Phao conceived the honour in 1949 when he was deputy chief, perhaps inspired by the British honours system he had learned about during his training in London, where many police officers were sent because of Scotland Yard's reputation. This flashy piece of gold or diamond jewellery was no mere bodily ornament but an emblem of loyalty to Phao and to the national mission of suppressing crime and combating communism. A police officer in the first group of 18 recipients vividly remembered the occasion when he received his *aswin* ring. Phao placed the ring on the

officer's finger and, reeking of whisky, drew the man into a close embrace. The officer would never forget the stench of alcohol on Phao's breath (Chaiyong 1980: 157).

Phao's reputation as an unrefined, hard-drinking bully emerges from police memoirs, but it clashes with another side of Phao, whom Alfred McCoy, in his classic study of drug trafficking in the region, described as 'a cherub with the smile of a Cheshire cat' (McCoy et al. 1972: 136). Phao had been an outstanding student. He liked to write poems, regularly entered his verse in poetry competitions run by the newspapers and was fond of quoting a stanza about rings from the seventeenth-century Thai classic *Khamsuan Samut* by Si Prat. 'On East–West', an unfinished essay of 135 pages composed during his Geneva exile, displays a commendable if rambling prose style. He likened governing a country to presiding over a family and mulled over the political, economic and cultural differences between Europe and Asia. After his departure from Bangkok in late 1957, he lived but another three years. His remains were interred in Geneva and his tombstone identified him not as police general but as 'General Pao Sriyanonda', his army commission. His widow held merit-making ceremonies on the 10th anniversary of his death at Wat Intharawihan, a monastery the family had supported and for which Phao had once raised building funds. No cremation book to celebrate his life was ever formally published, but in a memorial volume sponsored by the family, his daughter recalled that companions visiting him from Thailand always found him in good spirits and reasonable health. Family members knew he was devastated by the way his country had turned against him and pined for his homeland.⁶ Police General Phao believed himself to be a patriot, but in contrast to General Adul, the patriot honoured by the US Government for service to the Allied cause, Phao had been disgraced and never received the royally sponsored cremation granted to other national leaders. By contrast, the 2007 cremation of the southern policeman Khun Phan was a royally sponsored affair that included the Crown Prince of Thailand.

A portrait of Police General Phao cannot be rounded off to the point where it obscures the violence of the period and the gangland-type killings that cut down opposition politicians. The Iron Man of Asia, as Phao was once

6 This paragraph is based on *Anuson phon tor or phao siyanon wan thoeng kae anitchakam khrop 10 pi 21 phroetsajikayon 2513* [In Memory of Police General Phao Siyanond on the Tenth Anniversary of His Death, 21 November 1970]. Privately printed.

known, presided over the force when it was at its most powerful, although Thailand was far from becoming a police state (Chit 1960: 41). Phao did not have absolute power; he had to share control of state institutions with Phibun, and later with Sarit. Yet he left a legacy that is remembered. When the prime minister at the time, Police Lieutenant Colonel Thaksin, announced the war on drugs in 2003 and authorised the police to carry out his policy, he quoted Police General Phao: '[T]here is nothing under the sun that the Thai police cannot do' (Pasuk and Baker 2009: 158). Phao's boast, endorsed by Thaksin, who quoted it, has two valences. In Phao's time, the police had the capacity, including force of arms, to do anything they cared to do, and what they did was beyond the reach of any person or institution.

General Phao and General Adul before him were both trained in the military academy. Both officials headed the police force when international relations in the region were undergoing a seismic shift as the United States replaced the United Kingdom as the paramount power in the western Southeast Asian mainland. General Adul was incorruptible and earned the respect of fellow officers for his probity and dedication in steering the country through the war. Thailand was occupied by the Japanese army, but General Adul's position as national police chief allowed him to cooperate discreetly with the new paramount power to defeat Japan. Phao, by contrast, lived out his life in Geneva, unwilling to accept that he had been disgraced. He loved his country and longed to return. Like native Southeast Asian princes, kings and sultans who had been deposed and sent abroad once continuation of their rule became inconvenient to colonial regimes, Phao was sent into exile not as formal punishment but as the result of a political manoeuvre. The irony of his pining for home from exile in Europe was that, once ensconced in the swank Geneva apartment he could afford thanks to his self-aggrandising ways, Phao was untouchable by the Thai judicial system. Exile guaranteed him impunity from Thai law.

Banditry in the mid south

When Khun Phan began his career in the mid south in the late 1920s, parts of the region were governed only in a formal sense. Gangs of bandits (*chum jon*) had roamed the countryside since the fifth reign, and burglary, kidnapping and cattle rustling were a way of life for many people

(Suwan 1996: 258). To protect their villages, headmen sometimes relied on local toughs, or *nak leng*, who might become headmen themselves, attaining the position through inheritance or local political dynamics. Southerners were straight talkers who were quick to anger and seek revenge if they felt dishonoured. Poison was deployed for vengeful retribution in Krabi, Phatthalung and Trang during the 1940s and 1950s, and Khun Phan himself had some understanding of how lethal slow-acting poisons and their antidotes were administered (Phantharakrachadet 2007: 484; Suwit 2017). Banditry, so local lore has it, was inherent in the character of people from the mid south from time immemorial, and villagers could be sympathetic, seeing necessity and even virtue, rather than criminal behaviour, in banditry. The endemic *nak leng* culture with its rough justice meant that mutual support groups formed quickly to defend territory and to settle local disputes (Mana 2003: 109–10; Thammanit 2010: 15–16).

One explanation offered by Thai scholars for a regionally specific disposition towards banditry in the mid south is that village settlement there was markedly different from that in the north, where the founding of kingdoms and major principalities was enshrouded with the mystique of Buddhist prophecies, the arrival of the Buddha's relics and visits by famous rishis. Petit kingdoms (*mueang*) were governed by princes and local lords whose authority was linked to the custodianship of relics and the monasteries that enshrined them. By contrast, what characterised centres in the south were the resourcefulness and rugged independence of settlers (Nidhi 1995: Ch. 2; Chatthip and Phunsak 1997: 72–3). With very few exceptions—and Nakhon Si Thammarat was the preeminent one—settlements were not shrouded in Buddhist legends. Compared with the northern region, there were few monasteries housing relics of the Buddha that attracted pilgrims. The south was a frontier society, whereas the north had histories of kingdoms and royal courts that were traceable to the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Throughout the nineteenth century, the court's authority was weak on the frontier, and imposing its will through proxies, as it had done in the Ayutthaya and early Bangkok periods, was now being challenged as the British in Malaya moved to draw a national line between the two states.

In the first half of the twentieth century, lawlessness was not unique to Siam. It was also pervasive in the rural areas of Siam's neighbours. Cattle rustling across the borders with French Indochina and British Malaya was common. In Cambodia, which, like Laos, was ruled by the French as a protectorate, gangs of men (*chor plan*) roamed the countryside in the

off-season stealing livestock and other valuable objects to sell back to the owners. Villagers regarded the bandit gangs with a mixture of fear and respect. After all, some bandits could be turned to useful purpose and engaged to protect villages or recover stolen property. The predations of bandit gangs need to be distinguished from political protest, such as the one that occurred in 1916, when tens of thousands of peasants rose up against the abuse of power and exploitative practices of Khmer officials. The French financed their colony, including the salaries of French officials and public works, by taxing salt, alcohol, opium, rice and other agricultural products. During World War I, the French increased the tax burden, thus triggering the insurgency—a relatively peaceful expression of resistance to the civilising mission of Franco-Khmer colonialism (Chandler 2008: 187–8; Broadhurst et al. 2015: 47–57).

Banditry—described by the French as *piraterie*—was different from insurgency or political protest and involved violent house invasions and robberies. Yet a recent study of peasant resistance to Franco-Khmer rule includes rebellion in the category of *piraterie*, suggesting that, as in Siam, the distinction between banditry and insurgency was not always clear to the authorities at the time (Broadhurst et al. 2015: 66). In British Malaya during the 1910s and 1920s, bandits could be social bandits, as in Kedah, where a population of Siamese-speaking Sam-Sams lived. Cheah Boon Kheng, inspired by the work of Eric Hobsbawm and Jim Scott on peasant resistance, made a case for rural social bandits who dedicated themselves to redressing injustice and redistributing wealth among villagers (Kheng 1988: 1–12). In Malaya, what colonial authorities saw as crime may be read as the negative articulation of rebel consciousness.

Another source of unrest in the south were separatists active in the remnants of the former sultanate of Patani. One case with which Khun Phan dealt was the capture in 1938 of Ahweh Sador, discussed in an earlier chapter, when the policeman was posted to Narathiwat Province. In 1922 and 1923, opposition turned into armed conflict over the compulsory *Primary Education Act* of 1921 that required Malay Muslim children to attend Thai primary schools—a measure that was also designed to promote use of the Thai language in the local population. In the late 1930s, cultural policies became more repressive when Field Marshal Phibul came to power and the central government promulgated cultural mandates that forbid Malay Muslims to dress as Malays. Malay language and certain Islamic practices were also outlawed (Che Man 1990: 64–5; Kobkua 2013: 233). Malay Muslims in the deep south resented the way

Bangkok had ‘subcontracted’ the tasks of ruling the region to provinces such as Songkhla, Phatthalung and Nakhon Si Thammarat. These largely Buddhist provinces in the first half of the twentieth century ‘lorded it over’ Malay Muslims in the lower south (McCargo 2009: 57). The fact that Khun Phan acquired the sobriquet Little Raja from the sultan of a northern Malay state for his capture of Ahweh Sador indicates that his reputation as a legendary lawman was known to Malay rulers of the former tributaries that had been incorporated in the Unfederated Malay States by the 1909 treaty with the British.

The remoteness of the deep south made the region a haven for banditry that lasted for many decades. In a story published in 1963 about five *nak leng* who ran afoul of the Bangkok police, one of the characters fled to Yala in the deep south and wrote back to his comrades to say he was so happy he felt he had gone to heaven (*mueang suwan*). Finally, he was in a place free from the discipline of the state where *nak leng* types such as himself could roam at will, and he invited his comrades to join him as soon as possible. The young researcher who rediscovered this tale underscores how attractive the south was to fugitives from the law from the early twentieth century until well after World War II (Worayut 2017).

When Khaw Sim Bee na Ranong arrived as the new Governor of Trang in 1910, he was told that a man wanting to marry a local woman would inevitably be asked two questions by her parents: did the suitor know how to perform *nora*, a southern Thai dance, and was he good at stealing cattle? A man who could answer in the affirmative to both questions confirmed to his future in-laws that he was capable of mobilising supporters to protect the lives and property of his future bride, their extended families and the community at large. This anecdote was repeated so often that it became burnished into a local truth, yet ethnographic facts also lie buried in the tale. *Nora*, abbreviated from *manohara*, is a southern Thai dance that continues to have meaning for people in the mid south provinces. Its rituals of physical and spiritual healing are embedded in customary laws, values and practices. In the anecdote, the suitor’s prospective in-laws were inquiring about the man’s social skills and his ability to function in the local community. If he could dance the *nora* and rustle livestock, he would be able to form alliances and networks with local people (Cholthira 2013: 23–4; Sitthiphon et al. 2017: 127).

Local historians of the mid south—among them Pramuan Manirote, who has built up a picture of the bandit culture in the three provinces on the shores of the Songkhla lakes—like to cite the anecdote (Pramuan 1994: 58–9). The hazards of frontier life called for rugged men who could protect their families and communities. The mid south provinces fiercely resisted the demands of local officials and this reputation for resistance fed into an insurgency that lasted through the rise and demise of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) (Khrongkan Chapho Kit Phu Banthat 2001: 74). At the time Khun Phan was retiring, in the early 1960s, the CPT was becoming active in Phatthalung, and violence against villagers—communist or not—increased. The historian Thanet Aphornsuwan proposed that criminal acts and political insurgency became mixed during this time. Villagers reported that if they joined the CPT it was out of frustration that the government did not provide proper welfare and justice, echoing the feelings of neglect on the part of the local population from earlier in the century (Haberkorn 2013: 192). The linearity of this narrative from social bandit to communist needs to be scrutinised for its teleology, but the writ of the central government was weak as late as the 1960s, when infrastructure and security began to be upgraded to counter the communist threat.

Various factors have been put forward to explain the bandit culture in Phatthalung and Songkhla. Overlapping jurisdictions between the two provinces created confusion about which officials had responsibility for detecting and arresting criminals (Sangop 1994: 32–4). Specie came into wider circulation during the fourth reign and increasing affluence in Songkhla attracted thieves from Phatthalung. During periods of drought, when the land was unproductive, people turned to banditry to supplement family incomes. The southern Thai environmental historian Mana Khunwichuai has argued that conditions peculiar to the south favoured banditry. The region's numerous rivers and canals as well as the Songkhla lakes facilitated the movement of travellers: merchants, traders, officials, soldiers, police and bandits. Jaophraya Yommarat, the Governor of the Nakhon Si Thammarat Provincial Circle, whose posting lasted a decade from 1896, reported that banditry would greatly diminish if officials could control the casinos, opium dens and cock fighting—a recommendation that sounds more like the huffy comment of a Bangkok official than an astute observation about the region's political economy (Mana 2017: 44–51). Casinos, opium production and brothels had historically been tax farms that yielded revenue for the government, so measures to close the farms were slow in coming. Still another explanation for bandit

culture in the mid south is that cattle rustling was a nonviolent act, so everyone—including the livestock owners, villagers, thieves and police—engaged in it. Buffalo and cows would go missing and everyone knew who the culprits were, so the livestock could be immediately retrieved. It sounds like a game, but it was also a way of making a living, a vocation (Kong 1997: 85–6; Sitthiphon et al. 2017: 127). One problem with these explanations, such as increasing affluence and economic hardship, is they are contradictory: they explain both banditry and its absence.

Some banditry in the south expressed resistance to the gradual tightening of Bangkok's rule over distant provinces, but, according to a detailed report of 1894 by a Bangkok official sent to inspect government in the mid south, local officials, not the central government, were responsible for the hardships and injustices endured by local people. The Bangkok nobleman who wrote the report found people reluctant to speak their minds for fear of retribution by local officials. One example of bandits whose reputations as local leaders were based on such resistance was Rung Dawnsai from Dawnsai Subdistrict in Phatthalung and his deputy, Dam Huaphrae, a 'graduate' of the academy at Wat Khao Or, where Khun Phan had acquired his knowledge of *saiyasat* (Wet n.d.: 111). The two bandits rebelled against paying the poll tax and other fees (Lom 1994: 40–53; Pramuan 1994: 62; Ran 2007: 152–69). As a form of governance for their social group, the bandits devised a code of conduct and, as a badge of equality within the gang, addressed each other as *khun*, a noble rank conferred by the king. The *nom de guerre* of Rung was Khun Phat; Dam was Khun Atasadong Phraiwan (Pramuan 1994: 66; Mana 2003: 142). The *khun* rank drew the men together with a shared status that mocked the hierarchical ranking system monopolised by the monarchy.

Before firearms became widely available, the weapon of choice in such bandit circles was the sickle (*phra*), a farm implement used to lethal effect. Rites were conducted to empower swords, guns and knives and to confer invulnerability on those who wielded them. Astrological calculations guided the outlaws on when and where they should strike, and tutelary deities that guarded homes and villages were appeased so the bandits could pass without hindrance. The rituals were conducted on specially consecrated land, much as the ordination of a monk takes place on land free of usufructuary rights (Mana 2003: 143).⁷ The moral

7 Local conditions in the mid south that bred bandit culture are canvassed by the environmental historian Mana Khunwichuay (2003) and the author and historian Pramuan Manirote (1994) and were presented at Walailak University in Nakhon Si Thammarat (Mana 2017; Pramuan 2017).

principles embraced by the bandits had been taught by monks respected in their local communities. In some cases, these were the same monks who taught police and officials. In the words of the southern writer and teacher Pramuan Manirote, the word for bandit or outlaw (*jon*) is not as straightforward as the dictionaries would have it: ‘like the incessant movement of water in the lake’, its meanings are ‘in constant motion’ (Pramuan 2017: 106–7).

This political banditry, the complexities of which are difficult to tease out because the culture has largely faded, must be distinguished from the hired hit. Only a few years ago at a cremation in the mid south for an elderly relative at which guns had been banned, a man slipped into the gathering, went into a back room where a gambling game was under way and shot dead one of the players with a .38 pistol. Heeding the injunction against weapons, a policeman-guest was not carrying his sidearm inside the building and, enjoying the libations on the day, was in no condition to prevent the man’s escape. A grandson of the deceased grabbed the microphone and urged everyone to remain calm and the ceremony proceeded without further incident. This was a mafia hit and, although no one would testify against the gunman for fear of retribution, he was eventually caught. I was assured that such an incident was not at all common at funerals in the mid south.⁸

Local writers and scholars tend to valorise the bandit culture that flourished during the Japanese occupation and, in so doing, they point to a regional identity specific to the Songkhla lakes ecosystem. They are quick to recall stories of their own relatives in previous generations who followed the bandit way of life. One of my colleagues overheard in the teasing banter of family conversation the story of a boatwoman who operated a long-tailed craft on the lakes from the Ranot market in Songkhla. She needed firearms to protect herself and was ambidextrous in the use of them. On her wedding day, her husband-to-be, an experienced horseman wanted by the authorities, saw mounted police officers stationed at the ceremony to block his escape. After the wedding, he managed to elude his captors and flee into the nearby forest.⁹ Yet such anecdotes of bandits and *nak leng* in family histories as well as academic studies by Pramuan Manirote, Mana

8 Kasem Jandam, Personal communication, 7 September 2012.

9 Davisakd Puaksom, Personal communication, 10 November 2017.

Khunwichuai and others raise the question of the uniqueness of banditry to the mid south compared with other regions in the country that were also beyond the reach of the central government until after World War II.

The south was not the only part of the country with low population density where policemen feared to venture and sometimes only to investigate a serious incident. Villagers everywhere were self-reliant and, where government was weak and a police presence non-existent, they took matters into their own hands and resolved disputes sometimes by force with the aid of the *nak leng* types who were their friends and relatives. Not all villagers enjoyed resources sufficient to avenge a wrongdoing. I once spoke to an elderly woman in Phitsanuloke whose husband, a Lothario and bandit-type, was shot in the mid-1980s and left to die in a pool of blood. He was employed by a village headman to look after elephants that worked in the timber forests along the Nan River. The local police had been quite happy to share the man's moonshine, but when the time came to find his killer, they were suddenly unavailable, and his widow had no money to offer incentives for them to act.¹⁰ Her village settlement was in Phromphiram District near the border with Uttaradit, one of the in-between spaces where jurisdictions faded away and officialdom became indifferent to local problems. While the environment of the Songkhla lakes created specific conditions for banditry and resistance to the demands and exactions of local and national governments, banditry was not unique to the mid south.

Rural masculinity

Khun Phan, the southern Thai lawman, was dispatched to catch outlaws or bandits (*jon*), not *nak leng*, and the accounts of his exploits never fail to mention that he apprehended lawbreakers. *Jon* was a loanword from the Pali-Sanskrit *cora*, usually translated as bandit or brigand, which had legal status in the old legal code (Davids and Stede 1966: 273). The same loanword is found in Khmer.

Nak leng referred to local toughs willing and able to solve disputes by fisticuffs if necessary. They were known as *suea* or 'tigers'. One of the best sociological explanations of *nak leng* in the central plains is by David Johnston (1980), who came across the social type during his research on

10 Conversation with 'Prayoon' (b. 1942), Phromphiram District, Phitsanulok, 10 November 2017.

agricultural development in the Rangsit district north of Bangkok from 1880 to 1930. Johnston discussed relationships among the bandits, *nak leng* and villagers, and the interplay between banditry and different levels of government authority. The region was atypical in the sense that it had been settled recently by cultivators taking advantage of the irrigation system newly constructed with government assistance. Johnston drew a fine line separating *nak leng* from bandits. A man could protect his village one day and thief from another the next. It would seem that the line might as well not have been there, because a man could be both guard and thief. Another line supposedly separated government officials and bandits, yet in a social history of the central plains, Thai historian Peerasak Chaidaisuk (2008) discovered many examples of compromise and collusion between government officials and bandit gangs.

Using the skills of his former profession in a new line of work, a thief might find himself in gainful employment on the right side of the law. An example of such a crossover comes from Prince Damrong Rajanubhab's account of a bandit known as Jon Jan in Nakhon Pathom to the southeast of the capital, where the prince found respite from his official duties. During his conversations with Jon Jan to find out how the thief went about his business, Damrong learned that a successful robbery almost always involved an insider, either a servant or a disgruntled family member who tipped off the thieves about the best time to pounce. Damrong was so impressed with Jon Jan's familiarity with the modus operandi of thieves that he hired him to guard his bungalow when he was away on official duties in the capital. Jon Jan carried out his duties reliably and retired after 20 years of service guarding Damrong's house (Damrong 1963: 216–30).

Western social scientists have seen continuities between the *nak leng* and provincial bosses—sometimes of Chinese heritage and sometimes not—who exercise power at the local level through their connections with politicians and government officials. In this narrative, *nak leng* gave rise to local bosses known as *jao pho*—a Thai calque of English 'godfather'. The godfathers who flourished with the rapid growth of the provincial economy in the 1980s and 1990s were able to deliver votes to national politicians. Like the *nak leng*, the *jao pho* in their heyday were willing to use coercion and even violence to achieve their ends (Sombat 2000: 55). Sometimes these two social types overlap in the literature on modern rural leadership. Yet Yoshinori Nishizaki, who studied the compulsive, fussy and quick-to-punish managerial style of Banharn Silpa-archa, the provincial politician who was prime minister briefly in the mid-1990s,

cautioned that not all provincial bosses should be lumped into the *nak leng* category, with its connotations of violence, brutality, belligerence, hedonism and lawbreaking (Nishizaki 2011: 117). James Ockey, following Thak Chaloemtiarana, who pinned the *nak leng* label on Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, argued that Sarit exploited the most authoritarian aspects of the *nak leng* in the way he governed, thereby making possible a new and different type of *nak leng*: a politician who distributes his largesse to supporters and constituents through charitable foundations or access to government contracts and resources (Ockey 2004: Ch. 4). Some of Thailand's toughest and most ruthless politicians are today reminiscent of the *nak leng* types, with swagger and derring-do in the way they go about their business.

Debate about the evolution of *jao pho* from *nak leng* and the relevance of these terms to describe provincial or national politicians obscures older meanings of the term that pertain to the early period of Khun Phan's career. The few references to *nak leng* in the Three Seals Law Code, which the Bangkok court inherited from the previous kingdom at Ayutthaya, associate *nak leng* with gambling dens and their proprietors and, inevitably, with disputes over the payment of gambling debts. In Pallegoix's 1854 dictionary, *nak leng* is glossed as 'professional gambler' as well as 'rascal' and 'vagrant'. Bradley's dictionary of 1873 concurs and mentions wagers on cock-fighting (Bradley 1971: 328; Pallegoix 1972: 458). The term comes from Khmer, where today it means gangster, and the verb *lee:ng* in Angkorian Khmer meant to joke, flirt, show off, deceive or act rashly (Jenner 2009: 508; Haiman 2011: 158).¹¹ Historical linguists might not agree that these traits have persisted since Angkor times across language boundaries like some kind of DNA, but the gloss for the verb in Old Khmer points to a type familiar in the Thai social world of the early twentieth century. Khun Phan was a show-off who lived a long life by reducing risk to himself by force or deception, or both, while acting with derring-do.

The southern Thai scholar Suthiwong Phongphaibun suggests a four-part typology of the *nak leng* social type that draws out the hedonistic, hooligan qualities of the figure. His fourth type stresses the magnanimity, dignity and loyalty to supporters as well as the capacity for building alliances that made these men natural leaders as circle and village

11 I am grateful to Paul Sidwell for discussing the etymology of *nak leng* in Khmer (Personal communications, November 2016).

headmen (Suthiwong 1999: 3673–5). Dignity (*saksi*) is a personal quality often attributed to the *nak leng* of old in Khun Phan's mid south, where a man would start a brawl if he thought his dignity had been besmirched (Suwan 1996: 258). Proximate to dignity are self-importance, arrogance and snootiness (*thoranong, jonghong*)—personal traits often attributed to southern Thai people by outsiders or by knowing southerners themselves. *Nak leng* can apply as an attribute or style of behaviour that is performed as occasion requires. Indeed, Khun Phan, the legendary lawman, was credited with the *nak leng* value of magnanimity, with which he treated some, but not all, of the outlaws he confronted. To complicate matters further, the Thai language abounds in terms for tough guys, rascals, scoundrels, hooligans, hoodlums, criminals and ne'er-do-wells, and the overlapping meanings are tricky to delineate with sociological finesse. The word for hooligans is *anthaphan*, whose capacities for violence have been for sale to politicians. They usually started their careers in their own neighbourhoods as tough guys. In the 1963 novel discussed above, it is clear that when Phao and, later, Sarit set about dealing with crime, they criminalised behaviour that was merely antisocial, and *nak leng*, the local toughs who were protectors of their community, were transformed by statute into *anthaphan*: hooligans who then became targets for police action (Chalong 2013: 198; Worayut 2017: 84).

Ruth McVey made a fine distinction between *nak leng* and local toughs and argued that 'real leaders gained their prominence through shrewdness and manipulation rather than muscle' (McVey 2000: 8). By real, McVey may mean legitimate, but, if so, legitimate in the eyes of whom? Shrewdness and manipulation are the skills that Suthiwong embraces in his fourth type, skills that persist in local and national politics in Thailand today. By no means were all *nak leng* criminals. Some enjoyed the respect and trust of the ruling class as well as the reputation of local hero and native protector of the less fortunate. *Nak leng* could be tough if circumstances required, and the willingness to use force and the threat of force as well as their shrewdness and powers of manipulation enhanced their reputation.

The functions performed by *nak leng* in early twentieth-century Siam resemble in many respects the career of the *jago* under the Dutch in the second half of the nineteenth century on Java. The literal translation of *jago* is 'fighting cock', but the term carries a broader meaning of brawler and daredevil when applied to men. The conflicts among *jago* had to do with protecting territory and supporters as well as defending

personal honour and prestige. Here I am reminded again of the numerous references in Thai writing to the importance of dignity (*saksi*) and the humiliation of losing it or seeing it tarnished (*min sak si*). *Jago* also shared with *nak leng* the cultivation of supernatural powers and rituals to make themselves invulnerable. The Indonesian term *kekebalan* describes these powers as well as the ability to get things done through connections with people higher up (Nordholt and van Till 1991: 75–6). Like *nak leng*, the *jago* maintained a modicum of law and order at the local level, where the infrastructure of government did not exist. In this sense, they were indispensable to the stability of the Dutch colonial government (Nordholt and van Till 1999: 68).

Manliness in the profile of the brawling and daredevil *jago* is also evident in the character of the *nak leng*. Khun Phan caused his first death in custody by squeezing the life out of his adversary with his bare hands. Men in this social world were constantly testing and measuring their prowess rather like bulls fighting in the ring. Bullfighting competitions still rotate through the mid south on weekends in connection with local festivals.



Plate 7 Bullfight, Phatthalung

Source: Kasem Jandam.

The sport, possibly introduced by the Portuguese, is considered by people in the mid south to be a keystone of southern Thai identity, and its export to agricultural communities elsewhere in the country is a source of southern pride (Akhom 2000; Charan and Pakapun 2000). Much of the information on pedigrees and desirable characteristics for the purpose-bred bulls comes from a manual published in 1934 that originated in Nakhon Si Thammarat, one of the hubs of the sport historically (Reynolds 2009).

Before the fights, the bulls receive magical *saiyasat* rites empowering them to triumph in their struggle. The bulls then charge each other and lock horns until one animal passes water and retreats ingloriously. The victorious combatant is draped with garlands and paraded around the ring to the applause of the packed crowd—women as well as men. A sign over the entrance to the Phatthalung arena on the day I spent in the stands stated that gambling was strictly forbidden, but the injunction was obviously not being enforced. The odds changed during the fight, so it was an emotional rollercoaster for anyone who had placed a bet. Attending police had been paid THB500 (US\$15) for the day's work, and I was told that their main job was to not obstruct the action.¹² In the earthy language of the countryside, a man who declines to enter his bull in a fight for fear of losing is mocked by other owners for his lack of manliness by saying he has been gelded; he is 'a bull with no balls' (*wua lot*) (Wiwat 2000: 79). Men need to take risks to give evidence of their manliness, and societies tolerate this risk-taking. A population can afford the loss of men more easily than of women, and the acceptance of this expendability constitutes the measure of manhood (Gilmore 1990: 121).

In the wider social field, there is a Buddhist dimension to Thai homosociality. Although the Buddha is portrayed in sculpture and painting as asexual, the maleness of the Buddha is evident in the early history of the religion. All the texts that relate the story of the Buddha 'incorporate discourses of masculinity' (Powers 2009). Potency in Theravada Buddhism—in the archaic sense of might, strength and command—is an attribute of the Buddha because of his supranormal powers (Reynolds 2005: 216–17). Male prerogative still looms large in Thai ritual and public life. Challenged by women who want to be fully ordained as *bhikkhuni*, the Thai Sangha has, with few exceptions,

12 Field notes, Phatthalung bullfight arena, 2 July 2010.

answered this challenge by resisting reform and has remained a stronghold of male prerogative and privilege. Male homosociality in the lives of the *nak leng*—some of whom were bandits and some of whom, like Khun Phan, were police—has analogies at the national level among soldiers and policemen who work in national and public security.

As the provincial police force was extended into the more remote areas of the kingdom, it encountered ethnicities, social customs and belief systems that thwarted the order, regularity and predictability imagined by the modernising court and the foreign experts in its employ. Khun Phan began his career in the provincial police in the first decades of its existence, and I do not know whether he came into contact with even one of the Danish military instructors training police recruits. If his approach to policing may be taken as an example of what happened when the centre met the heterodox countryside, provincial policing over much of his career was still rooted in local expectations of manliness and public order.

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