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Murder! in Thailand's Vernacular Press

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A cursory examination of the Thai press reveals two things: A history of censorship, at times violently repressive, and sensational content centered on crime news. Reporters, editors, and publishers have been threatened, intimidated, and murdered in an effort to control the print media while front pages are filled with stories of violent crime and gory photographs. This paper explores both these forms of violence, censorship and crime news, to understand the relationship between the two. It argues that the prevalence of the latter—sensationalism—has resulted in part from the former, a historical process of increasingly murderous repression. So while the form and content of the print media in Thailand, as elsewhere, follow the financial imperatives of the market and reflect trends in current events, they do so within a framework of legal, professional, and informal relationships established over time with seemingly unrelated institutions, including the police.

Histories of the press in Thailand typically begin with an account of how in 1844 Dr. Dan Beach Bradley, an American Protestant missionary from New York, published the kingdom's first newspaper, the *Bangkok Recorder*. They then go on to tell a tale about how the explosion, albeit in relative terms, of printed matter in the third decade of the twentieth century precipitated the democratic revolution of 1932 that overthrew the absolute monarchy.[1] The story then turns quickly into a tale of how a series of subsequent military governments all worked to wring the life out of the vibrant, if somewhat unruly, industry. It is against this backdrop of endangered liberty that people have come to understand the press in Thailand (and indeed in many other societies).

This history of the press begins instead with a murder, that of Ari Liwira, publisher of Thailand's most widely circulated daily paper in the early 1950s, and ends with the revelation that what newspapers look like and the content they report not only reflect current social conditions and the financial imperatives of the marketplace, they are determined by the stimulus of a seemingly unrelated institution, the police. So rather than tell a story about freedom per se, this history traces the relationship between the police and the form of the news. The two are interlinked, with the latter's shift to tabloidism

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[1]Data from the National Library of Thailand show that a total of seven serials started during the reigns of Rama III (1824–51) and Rama IV (1851–68), 47 under Rama V (1868–1910), 127 under Rama VI (1910–25), and 160 under Rama VII (1925–34) (148 started prior to the 1932 revolution). While these often lasted only a year or two, the trend is clear that a print-media boom did occur under Rama VI and VII leading up to the 1932 coup.

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stemming in part from its intimate relationship with the former. When seen through the lens of crime news, the history of the press reads less clearly as a tragedy about the demise of the public sphere than as a thriller complete with bad cops and noble villains; the newspaper in Thailand is a medium of communication that has emerged from sometimes violent episodes of a larger struggle over the generation and control of information, explaining in part why murder and violence fill its pages today.

The Honeymoon Is Over

At just after nine in the morning on March 9, 1953, a police officer in plain clothes shot Ari Liwira, the publisher of Thailand's top daily newspaper at the time, dead at his beachside retreat in Hua Hin, a quiet coastal town about three hours by car south of Bangkok. Ari had just finished taking a walk along the seashore. When he reached his bungalow, he saw his maid, Chanthana Yimcharoen, in the yard washing clothes. She was talking to a man Ari did not recognize. As Ari approached, the man turned to him and said that "Rong Maitri" (Police Lieutenant Colonel Maitri Banyen), a police officer and a friend, was coming to town and would like his help in finding him a place to stay. The two men then walked out of the yard through a gate in the compound's fence, where a second stranger stood waiting. This man drew a pistol and with great calm shot Ari three times. Both strangers then got into a jeep that had been waiting for them nearby and left the scene. Ari died ten minutes later, with his wife by his side.[2]

The news of the assassination spread quickly through the press. The story appeared on the front pages of Ari's company's flagship dailies, *Phim Thai* and *Sayam nikon*, those of his competitors like the *Daily Mail* (no relation to the *Bangkok Daily Mail* of the 1920s and 1930s), and also that of the English-language *Bangkok Post*. It remained there for several days as officials conducted their investigation. The case was, after all, one that hit close to home for many journalists. One reporter for the *Daily Mail* described the murder of Ari as "news that shook the soul of the publishing world" (Thawon 2007, 220). The staff at another popular paper from the period, Kamphon Wacharaphon's *Khao phap rai wan*, echoed the sentiment, saying the murder left them "shaken" (Narong 1989, 87).[3]

The day after the murder, Director-General of Police Phao Sriyanond announced to reporters that five policemen from the province of Kanchanaburi had been detained on suspicion of being involved in the assassination and reassured everyone that the police would get to the bottom of things (*Bangkok Post*, March 10, 1953). A few days later, Sirichai Krachangwong, police superintendent of Kanchanaburi, defended his men, saying all five had exhibited "one-hundred percent good conduct" over the years; they did not drink liquor and were "afraid of ghosts" (*Bangkok Post*, March 13, 1953). Phao

[2]This version of events is adapted from accounts in several sources, including newspaper reports and memoirs, which differ, sometimes significantly, in their details. In some accounts there is only one gunman. In others, Ari was upstairs sleeping in his bedroom when the gunman (or gunmen) arrived at his bungalow. In cases of discrepancy, I have followed the narrative presented in Thawon (2007, 199–224), which claims to be based on police interviews of witnesses.

[3]The term "soul shaking" (*khayao khwan*) was a common expression used in the press when writing about violence in the 1950s and 1960s.

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then put Deputy Police Chief Phra Phinit Chonlakhadi, a man accustomed to dealing with high-profile cases, in charge of the investigation.[4] By month's end, Phinit announced that the police's inquiry indicated that a mysterious "sixth man," a hired gunman, assassinated Ari and that the police were now looking for this person. He added that the motive in the murder was not political, but was related to Ari's "personal business" involving women (*Bangkok Post*, March 23, 1953).

Murder itself was not new to the news. Newspapers had for years carried stories about crimes, including violent ones, albeit in varying amounts and degrees of detail. Crime stories did not, however, always play as dominant a role in the substance or appearance of a newspaper as they did between the late 1940s and the 1970s (and still to some extent do today). In this respect, Ari's daily afternoon paper *Phim Thai* and his weeklies and monthlies, including *Phim Thai lang khao sapada*, which were famous for their crime reports and photos, were at the forefront of the post-World War II newspaper world. The dailies put crime prominently on their front pages. The weeklies and monthlies elaborated on cases with extended, in-depth treatments of particularly heinous cases, well-known criminals, and noteworthy police investigations.

It is ironic, then, that Ari's death fit so seamlessly into the form he helped pioneer even as it effectively cemented the sensational crime story as a mainstay of the popular press in the post-World War II period. The "real news," therefore, was not just Ari's murder or even its cover-up, for both government indiscretion and denial had been staples of Thai life since before the war. Instead, it was that the government, in addition to a range of other weapons, was now employing murder and the police as a method of censoring an unruly, stubborn, and highly competitive press. In the process, crime news and policing were drawn together.

Crime News after World War II

When Ari was shot dead in 1953, Thailand had just come through a period of turmoil following the Japanese occupation and World War II. Shortages in most categories of basic goods, including cloth, oil, gasoline, sugar, and salt, were widespread. The minister of parliament from Saraburi Province wrote that the oxen population there had suffered a critical decline, recovery from which would require no less than seven years. This decline was caused by a wartime food shortage that led people to kill draft animals for meat (NA 1945). These shortages caused prices for consumer goods to rise precipitously. A study by the Committee to Consider the Economic Situation after the War puts inflation at anywhere between 436 and 1,446 percent (NA 1945). Alleged price gouging by Chinese merchants, especially in commodities like gold, did not help the situation (NA 1945). Rampant corruption and inefficiency in state-owned enterprises and the civil service only made matters worse. "Irregularities" in rice exports, for example, were common, with shipments sent to the British via Malaya in exchange for cloth and cooking oil (NA 1945).[5] From these conditions of economic crisis and corruption came a rise in

[4]Phinit was recalled from retirement to handle the investigation of the death of King Ananda in 1949.

[5]On corruption in rice exports, see Thak (2007, 21).

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radical labor unionism, which led to "a wave of strikes among the big work-forces in the railways, port, rice mills, cement company, soap factories, and tobacco factory" (Pasuk and Baker 2002, 197).

Not surprisingly, Thailand saw an increase in petty and violent crimes in the years after World War II. Thai historian Chalong Soontravanich (2005, 31) writes, "Crime and violence spread throughout the country, becoming a national crisis and the subject of frequent parliamentary debates during the 1940s and 1950s." Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker (2002, 283) call the period between 1944 and 1951 "one of the most violent and critical in modern Thai history." This rise in crime was attributable in part to the sudden availability of small arms, whose supply had been previously monopolized by the military and police. To wit, "thousands of automatic pistols, submachine guns, hand grenades, grenade launchers, and all kinds of explosives, were almost freely circulating around the country" in the years after World War II (Chalong 2005, 31). Another historian, Christopher Goscha, writes, "Buying arms in Thailand was as easy as buying beer" (quoted in Pasuk and Baker 2002, 283). While most armed crimes were associated with banditry, robbery, plunder, or other "personal" crimes, gun-related violence was not confined to private citizens. Police and quasi-state agents, including hired gunmen, adopted increasingly brutal methods for carrying out personal vendettas and silencing political opponents. The midnight murder of four former ministers by their police escorts in 1949 was perhaps the most famous example of state-initiated violence at the time. Another notable case was the murder of two defense lawyers and several defense witnesses in the 1948 trial of three men accused in the death of King Ananda.

Perhaps it was no coincidence that the postwar-period press filled its pages with crime stories, reflecting the real-world disorder of the time. One prominent writer from the period noted:

> Between the middle of January of this year [1946], news of criminals in the provinces began appearing in different newspapers to such an extent that it became a daily feature. You couldn't open a paper without seeing a story on a serious crime taking place here or an armed robbery there. The peace that came with the end of the war simply translated into troubles for citizens of all stripes. (Nai Chanthana 1998, 21)

With the newspaper's textual reports came also graphic proof of Thailand's gradual descent into a state of violent bedlam. On March 6, 1949, for instance, photos of the bodies of the four assassinated ministers mentioned above covered half of the front page of the daily *Sayam nikon*. As photography became increasingly portable and affordable, the practice of publishing photos, including those of criminals and their victims, began spreading throughout the newspaper world. What began as a trickle of crime photos in the 1920s and 1930s (see below) soon became a deluge. In 1950, the "godfather" of the Thai news, Kamphon Wacharaphon, first published *Khao phap*, which combined the crime story with the crime scene photo. The government eventually shut the paper, but Kamphon was undeterred and began publishing *Siang ang thong*, a similar daily, in 1959. He would later start *Thai rat*, which has become the country's best-selling daily. While crime news had long been a staple of the local press, Kamphon capitalized on the growing trend of supplementing crime stories with

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photographs to create newspapers featuring lurid and sometimes gory pictures on their front pages.

Along with the daily crime reports appeared another post-World War II innovation, weekly and monthly news magazines featuring analysis and investigative reports about current events, mostly crimes. A few of the popular titles included *Phim Thai lang khao sapada*, *Daily Mail buang lang khao*, and *Khao phap rai duan*. Their front covers mostly featured color photos of attractive women, behind which followed a mix of in-depth news reports, short stories, editorials, political pieces, and social news. Claiming to provide the "story behind the story," these news magazines offered a common vehicle of dissemination for a variety of content.

The weeklies put out by Ari's company, Siam Phanithayakan, and those of its competitors like the *Daily Mail* carried a good share of crime stories as well. The October 1953 edition of *Khao phap rai duan*, for example, led with the feature "*Phikhat dao jon*" (Hunting the bandit) and included a new regular, full-page photograph. The October issue's photo showed policemen on a small raft in the middle of the night searching for bandits. There was also a full-page ad for *Khao phap chao* with a drawing of a skull, an automatic pistol, a knife, and a dove that told readers:

> Crimes that take place today all have a back story. In the past, you've come to know this story from rumor. From now on, you won't have to resort to methods like that because the story behind the story will be presented by *Khao phap chao*.

The April 1954 edition of *Phim Thai rai duan* included several crime stories, such as "*Jotmai rak chok luat*" (Bloody love letter), "*Atchayakon saraphap*" (Confession of a criminal), *Racha jon haeng lum nam mae klong* (Bandit king of the Mae Klong Basin), and "*Atchayakam luk lap*" (Mysterious crime).[6]

It is not much of an exaggeration then, to call the world that Thais found themselves in after World War II a tumultuous one. The resurgent popular press, after suffering for months under tight government control and general wartime scarcity, reported, amplified, and spread this turmoil, giving citizens and the state a common vocabulary to express and understand the experience of postwar disorder. Yet, as seemingly spontaneous, and fitting, as this outbreak of paper violence may seem in light of the conditions described, the sensational crime stories that the daily, weekly, and monthly newspapers of the 1950s featured were as much a product of their relationship with the police as social context, at least as "context" is typically conceived. As a historical look at the development of the crime story will show, the press did not and does not just represent the place and time in which it is produced, a mirror held up to society. It reacts to the stimulus of other actors and institutions along paths shaped by historical precedent. What the newspaper became in the early 1950s, in other words, had as much to do with policing as it did with the social disorder that enveloped the kingdom after the war.

[6]The term *atchayakam*, which is translated as "crime" today, did not become common in the press or government documents until after World War II.

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Crime Stories in the Early Years

Siamese newspapers did not always feature sensational crime reports, though crime stories, both factual and fictional, had been part of the news since people started publishing periodicals in Siam. The kingdom's first Thai-language newspaper published for entertainment and the first by a commoner, the weekly *Darunowat*, contained stories about basically everything. Reports about the government and foreign countries, political commentary, advertisements, proverbs, articles about natural science and fine arts, poetry and drama, and fables all featured in its pages (Wipha 1997, 128). It also occasionally published crime-related news. One example from 1874 presents a government report that states that over a period of thirteen days in the sixth month of the year, the military arrested fifteen criminals in the capital, a rate that the paper noted worked out to be 1.15 arrests per day (128–29). In other instances, the paper published reports of odd happenings, such as the mysterious suicide of a slave, also in 1874, while giving few details. The *Bangkok Times*, a well-known English-language daily published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also covered crime and violence. The paper published reports under the heading "miscellaneous news," which included one- or two-paragraph snippets describing minor skirmishes, arguments, snatch-theft, police news, and road accidents. On July 8, 1898, for example, a short report told of a Chinese named Lae going to the market in the Hua Lamphong district and beating another Chinese unconscious. When the beaten man regained his senses, Lae beat him again, this time to death. No one attempted to stop the fight (Piyakanit 1988, 39).

The press reported less serious incidents of crime as well, often wording these more lightheartedly, intending them as a form of casual entertainment, especially if the crime contained some comical aspect. On May 1, 1898, for example, the *Bangkok Times* reported that an Indian constable in the Bangrak district returned to the police station there after his shift. The station's chief inspector noticed that the Indian's turban was missing. After a bit of questioning, the inspector discovered that someone had stolen the turban from the constable's head after he had fallen asleep on duty (Piyakanit 1988, 83). In another report, the *Bangkok Times* tells of a snake charmer showing off his prowess by putting his finger in the open mouth of a snake. Unfortunately, the snake bit the charmer, who died the next day (127). On April 26, 1899, the *Bangkok Times* reported that another constable, while on patrol, happened to see his wife coming out of a gambling den. Incensed, the constable walked over to his wife and kicked her to the ground in the middle of the street, where she fell briefly unconscious. Shaken with guilt, the constable worked frantically to revive her (91).[7]

Aside from appearing as sort of odd or amusing news stories, crime reports also appeared under the heading "*khao hua muang*" (provincial news) or as filler between the wildly popular translations of Chinese epic romances or Hollywood movie scripts and ads for various consumer products. As with crime reports from the preceding three decades, these stories were generally just a few paragraphs long. A typical edition of the popular *Sayam ratsadon*, like the one from July 5, 1921, for example, included short reports like the following in its provincial news section: "*Fan khaen*

[7]Given the nature of the act, however, it is not exactly clear how this is supposed to be funny.

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kuap khat" (Slashed arm almost falls off), "*Kho kuap khat*" (Neck almost broken), "*Fan tai kha thi*" (Slashed to death), "*Plon tham rai sap*" (Robbed—property damaged), "*Jek yok phuak ti lae fan kan*" (Chinamen gather for rumble), and "*Plon khuan diaw song rai*" (Robbed twice in one night). These reports, like most in the early days of the press, were brief, simply worded, and free of excess commentary.

In some cases, particularly in English-language articles by the foreign-owned *Bangkok Times*, crime stories took on a more political tone. In articles like "Thieving, Pawning, and Gambling" (June 23, 1894), "The *nakleng*" (Tough guy)[8] (May 26, 1898), "Buffalo robbery" (April 12, 1900), and "Gang robbery at Paklat" (May 19, 1902), reporters wrote longer pieces about crime that were often critical of the government's poor efforts in prevention, suppression, and investigation. A particularly sarcastic example showed up in the paper on February 22, 1893, in an article entitled "Ayuthia" (Ayuthaya), which made light of the sorry state of law enforcement in the central plains:

> Two years ago, it was not by any means very uncommon to see bands of forty or fifty brigands, some of them carrying red flags, driving before them one or two hundred head of cattle. Last year, we had Ai Thuam, the Tiger, some of whose atrocities I have already related. This year, well, we are *en republique*! We acknowledge no chief yet and we are equals. Everybody able to carry a gun, to use a knife or a lance, or to throw a harpoon, has taken the field – I mean the jungle, whence they start by bands, attacking boats and houses and killing men and women to their hearts content – until they are themselves attacked by other bands and killed in their turn. *Vive la liberte*! Every man watches his neighbor, every house the next one, and every village the other village. (quoted in Johnston 1975, 169)

Articles like these, written in English, were likely read primarily by the small European and American community in Bangkok and by educated elites in the court. Their politicking did not necessarily reach a broader local audience. For the most part, then, stories about crime in vernacular papers read more or less as short, sometimes serious, sometimes humorous anecdotes retelling an incident that was either violent or strange, without much analysis, commentary, or political intent.

Of course, there were longer stories, some with an extraordinary amount of detail, during the very early years of the press. One story that became big news in 1882 involved the now common elements of a good crime story—adultery and murder—and received a somewhat longer treatment. In 1879, Amdaeng (Mrs.) Yu evidently began having an affair with one of her slaves, a man named Hai. This went on for about two years without the knowledge of Yu's husband, Phrabanru. One day, Phrabanru walked in on Yu and Hai, catching the couple in the act. Enraged, Phrabanru took a wooden umbrella

[8]The translation of *nakleng* is not a straightforward task, as the term has multiple connotations that have changed over time. The George Bradley McFarland Thai-English Dictionary (Stanford, 1944) defines *nakleng* variously as "a rogue; a rascal; a ruffian, a dishonest and unprincipled person; a knave, a scamp, a true sport. . ." (Johnston 1975, 139), but others have given it, and masculinity in Thai society more broadly, a more nuanced look. See, for example, Pattana (2005) and Reynolds (2011).

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and delivered a good beating to Yu before tying Hai up with a chain and beating him fifty times. Afterwards, Yu began to suspect that she had been caught because of the machinations of her fifty-seven-year-old servant Kliang, another of Hai's lovers. Yu, while drunk, called Kliang in for questioning. When Kliang would not admit to anything, Yu beat her with a stick about thirteen or fourteen times. After this, the beatings became regular and more ferocious—Yu once shoved a hot fire poker between Kliang's legs. Finally, Yu beat Kliang to death. Yu was eventually sentenced to ninety lashes at Wat Khok (Wat Phalap Phalachai, a temple), a punishment witnessed by many locals (Anek 2003, 27–29).

These examples indicate that crime news stories served two purposes. First, they acted simply as informational pieces or as lighthearted entertainment, a kind of *fait divers*, with peripheral status in the grander scheme of published serials. Second, they served a didactic purpose, describing various social transgressions and punishments thereof. The example of Mrs. Yu demonstrates this. They did not, however, dominate printed matter either in content or form, even though it can be argued that Siamese society before World War II was just as violent as after it.[9] Despite this, the papers had not yet exploded into an orgy of crime and violence. Short stories, *sarakhadi* (roughly translated as nonfiction), general news, advertisements, translated Chinese epics, and summaries of Hollywood movies still made up a major part of the Siamese periodical.

Around the late 1920s, when crime stories began to occupy a more central role in the news, they also took on a new purpose and a new look. The change began with the revamp of the *Bangkok Daily Mail* by Andrew Freeman, the paper's new American editor. Credited with starting the practice of deliberately choosing sensational news (*khao tunten*) for his front pages and reformatting the paper's appearance, he moved quickly and decisively in transforming Siam's newspaper culture (*Chiwit* 1963). Describing the *Bangkok Daily Mail*'s layout before his arrival, Freeman noted, "They were staid British sheets with advertisements on the first page. Except for one column of cables, each paper contained a monotonous array of clipped items from six weeks to three months old. They were set up under lifeless headlines like black clay pigeons waiting to be shot." He added that they reminded him of "tombstone epitaphs" (Freeman 1997, 58, 60). Freeman was one of the first editors to begin printing headlines in extra-large script to draw the eyes (*khao sadut ta*) of readers (*Chiwit* 1963). When he completed the paper's makeover, he proudly described it as "a saucy little sheet with its pictures and piquant headlines" (Freeman 1997, 107). Prince Sawasti, the paper's royal patron, reportedly said to Freeman, "I never realized that there was so much news in Bangkok until I read your American headlines" (87).

That Freeman spearheaded the *Bangkok Daily Mail*'s makeover may not have been a coincidence. In his native America, the press in the 1920s went through an era of change that saw consolidation of ownership, polarization of readership, and tabloidization in form and content. In New York City in 1920, there were eleven dailies. In 1930, it had seven, but two were picture tabloids and its *Daily News* was the nation's largest paper. These new tabloids, in turn, featured "a steady fare of murder, startling photos of crime

[9]Archival and newspaper accounts indicate that there was a dramatic increase in violent crime in the late nineteenth century and again in the early twentieth.

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scenes, and courtroom drama." It was an era in which "murder seemed, to many eyes, to rise phenomenally in the post-World War One years," "organized crime seemed to link the glamorous world of celebrities to that of criminality," and "yellow journalism seemed to experience a resurgence." Scholars now estimate there were "many times more crime stories [in the 1920s] than in the 1890s" (Wilson 2000, 73). The changes that were taking place in the *Bangkok Daily Mail* echoed those seen in the New York papers. The police practices, the criminal code, and laws of evidence that were being transplanted from abroad during the early twentieth century with the intention to modernize the Thai legal system were accompanied by changes in the practices of the popular press.

In addition to shifting crime to center stage, employing large and bold typeface for headlines, and sometimes including outlandish captions, the *Daily Mail* ushered in another novelty, the use of news photos. Most of the photos that appeared on the front page pictured events like royal parades, meetings of foreign dignitaries, social events, and interesting scenery. Many were purchased from international photo services. Freeman noted that many of his prints were sent in by "photographic syndicates," which included mostly pictures of "movie actresses, skyscrapers, [and] street scenes of New York" (Freeman 1997, 199). It was not until the late 1920s that local photographers were employed seriously by the burgeoning publishing industry. And it was no coincidence that Siam's first photojournalist, Chuang Midet, worked for the *Bangkok Daily Mail*. The use of a local photographer meant that pictures in the paper could now showcase a wider range of images. If a *Bangkok Daily Mail* reporter got wind of a crime, for example, Chuang or another photographer could show up and take a picture. Freeman recalls this exchange in the newsroom:

> "That was Chuang [Midet] at headquarters [the central police station]," he [a *Bangkok Daily Mail* staff person] says. "He's got a story about a murder up at Wat Saket." "My God," I say, "who'd have the energy to commit murder in this heat? Wat Saket? A temple, isn't it? Let Nakorn take the story and tell Pleng to hurry up there and get some pictures." (Freeman 1997, 102)

It was in this way that photos of criminals (and police) made their way into the newspapers. In fact, the press got their own crime photographers before the police did.[10]

Of course, crime scene photos, and photos of criminals and police, were still relatively rare in the papers of the late 1920s, as the practice of employing photographers was just beginning to take off. In addition, many police did not want to have their pictures taken. The metropolitan police commissioner at the time, Phraya Athikonprakat, had police officers attack Chuang as he tried to photograph Athikonprakat one day outside a *borisapha* (magistrate's court). The incident came after a hearing in a libel suit brought against Louis Khiriwat, the owner and editor of the *Bangkok Daily Mail* after Freeman, by Athikonprakat himself (Freeman 1997, 230).

Freeman brought another innovation, the exposé, with him to the *Bangkok Daily Mail*. By the 1920s, Thai-language papers had already begun publishing editorials and

[10]The police department did not have in-house photographers until 1932, when the *santiban* was created, and complained about the hassle of having to obtain a photographer from private shops.

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essays critical of various aspects of the government and elite society. Over the course of the decade, these appeared with increasing vitriol and frequency. The *Bangkok Daily Mail* and its Thai-language counterpart the *Krungthep Daily Mail* made use of editorials but also published in-depth critical news reports, effectively turning the daily paper into a weapon aimed at exposing corruption and inefficiency. Earlier papers, such as the *Bangkok Times* and even Dr. Dan Beach Bradley's *Bangkok Recorder*, the kingdom's first paper, had sometimes published news that intentionally showed the government in a negative light. The article about banditry in the Ayuthaya area above is one example. These were, however, in English and read by a limited audience. One might suspect also that the British-owned and read *Bangkok Times* might have had a political agenda in poking fun at the Siamese government, hoping for action from the royal government. The *Bangkok Daily Mail* sought to do more than satirize the government or moralize about a crime. It conceived of itself and the news it published as weapons for social justice.

Luang Saranupraphan, the editor of the Thai-language version of Freeman's paper the *Krungthep Daily Mail* and former editor of the popular journals *Senasuksa lae phae witthayasat* and *Saranukun*, followed Freeman's in-your-face style. Headlines appeared in large type across the front page: "*Ying tamruat tai klang muang*" (Police shot to death in middle of city) (February 2, 1929), "*Phoey khwam lap ruang phu rai ying tamruat tai klang muang*" (Unveiling the secret behind shooting death of policeman in middle of city) (February 7, 1929), "*Ying khon klang phranakhon!*" (Shooting in middle of capital!) (August 7, 1928), and "*Jap phurai Luat kap Lek dai!*" (Villains Luat and Lek arrested!) (August 14, 1928).

In the paper's reporting of a murder trial involving a police officer from the Special Branch named Wongkit, sentences ending with exclamation marks and colorful descriptions of events were common. Wongkit, who was accused of participating in a kidnapping and prostitution ring as well as killing a key witness in his own trial, was described as having sweat pouring down his face as he stood listening to the judge in the case read his verdict. Upon hearing that the court had found him guilty, Wongkit "gasped! Gasped!! Gasped!!!" He then pulled out his handkerchief to wipe his face and tried to compose himself. Instead, evidently out of strength, he collapsed into his seat and his head fell on the table as if he had lost consciousness. Then, "before the judged could finish the phrase 'death sentence,' Wongkit's wife began to wail hysterically," forcing the court police to restrain her. The report ends by relating how Commissioner Athikonprakat's libel suit against Louis Khiriwat ended in Khiriwat's favor. The newspaper pronounced that with these two verdicts the *Krungthep Daily Mail* had triumphed in every aspect of the case. "Triumph" (or "victory," *chaichana*) was printed in a larger font than the rest of the text. After this, there was a phrase that translates roughly as "Karma preserves one's actions," a sort of Buddhist "That's what you get!" This was followed by the report's last sentence, which urged people to "read the court's detailed verdict, published verbatim in the *Mail* in twenty-one days!" (*Krungthep Daily Mail*, February 5, 1929).

The practice of using crime news, combined with what would now be considered editorial content, to bring attention to the shortcomings of an administration and call for change was not confined to the two *Daily Mail*s. Other Thai-language papers, even those subsidized by the government like *Thai*, also used their space to campaign for

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specific causes. Many crime reports ended with a call for the government to assign "men with ability" to deal with rampant banditry and violence in various provinces (see, for example, NA 1916).

Over the final years of the 1920s, then, the form, content, and purpose of periodicals went through a significant makeover. In terms of form, publishers began to move from the staid, text-based broadsheet to a more dynamic, "tabloid" style newspaper familiar to many today. Headlines became more prominent and eye-catching. Photographs added spice and intensified the feeling of the news' realism. In addition, advertisements were pushed to pages inside the covers and new sections were created for specific types of content, like entertainment and sports. In part, the increasing prominence of the crime story in the *Daily Mail*, with its catchy headlines and novel-like plot hooks, was aimed at siphoning interest away from popular translations of Chinese fiction. These historical romances, derisively called *jak-jak wong-wong* tales by some royals, were published by competing dailies like *Si krung* and *Sayam ratsadon* (*Chiwit* 1963; Thanaphol 2008, 64).[11] The crime story, was, however, featured more than simply to attract readers. In exposés, especially of corruption, extortion, bribe taking, favoritism, and general government inefficiency, crime stories were taking on political import. Through the crime story, the "truth"—that certain government officials were dishonest and the criminal justice system was stacked against ordinary people—was made known. Thus, as the print media moved to the reporting of current events and away from fiction, it did so through the crime news.

Policing the Press

Returning to the 1950s, questions remain: Why did the post-World War II shift to sensational crime news take place? Did it just follow from the changes initiated in the 1920s and 1930s, a sort of natural evolution in form? In some ways yes, but recall that the 1920s saw a general politicization of the press in which political news became even more prominent than crime reports. As Matthew Copeland (1993) and Scot Barmé (2002) have shown, the papers of the 1920s featured political cartoons that lambasted the monarchy and other aspects of elite Thai society. Writers, including the eccentric Narin Phasit and "555" (Phra Sarasat Phonlakhan), made their name by being critical of the government. The shift to crime news that occurred between the First World War and the revolution in 1932 coincided with this general political turn. Sometimes crime and politics competed for space in the same dailies; sometimes they were part of the same story. Mostly they fought for attention against advertisements, fiction, movie news, entertainment stories, and Chinese period dramas. That crime news would dominate the news in the period after World War II was therefore not a foregone conclusion despite the trend toward crime reporting in the late 1920s and the early 1930s. There was no reason that the chaos of war and postwar displacement would lead to an increase in sensationalism or the predominance of one specific type of news story over another, even if there may have been a quantitative increase in crime during the

[11] *Jak-jak wong-wong* stories typically involve fantastical events related to the adventures of great heroes.

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period. So if crime news was used in the 1920s to draw readers from Chinese romances and to the poor performance of the government, what was its purpose after the war? To answer this requires a look at the history of censorship, and the connection between news and the police.

Government censorship of the mass media has a long history in Thailand. King Mongkut (r. 1851–68) attempted early on to discredit some of the *Bangkok Recorder*'s stories about the poor administration of the kingdom, but the press was relatively free to publish what it wanted in the early days of its existence so long as it did not offend the sensibilities of the Buddhist clergy.[12] This relative openness and lack of any organized control over the print media allowed for lively political commentary to appear, especially during the 1920s. Ironically, it was only after the revolution that overthrew the absolute monarchy in 1932 that the government began to seriously and systematically censor the press. *Khanaratsadon*, the party of the new civilian government, set up a *kong truat khao* (news monitoring division) to check the content of newspapers in an effort to prevent a royalist counterrevolution. This unit lasted only two weeks, but the importance of the print media and the impetus to control it became apparent. More lasting was the government's new Press Act (*Pho. ro. bo. samut ekasan lae nangsuphim kae khai phoem doem* 2475) issued at the end of 1932. It declared that all news related to army or government activities and to politics between foreign countries had to be approved by the proper authorities. To facilitate the production of complimentary reports about the government, Phraya Mano's administration established the *krom khosanakan* (publicity department) and prohibited news about the king from being published (*Sayam phimphakan* 2006, 133–35). It also disciplined newspapers, typically by closing them temporarily. From June 1932 to October 1933, the government punished newspapers twenty-eight times for various infractions. The biggest offenders were *Krungthep Daily Mail*, *Prachachat*, and *Thai mai* (134).

After Phahon Ponphayuphasena's coup deposed the Phraya Mano government on June 30, 1933, a new period of openness for the press seemed possible. Phahon invited newspapers to send representatives to parliament meetings as an attempt to change the political climate. This period did not, however, produce any clear laws on the rights of the press, and the government continued to punish papers for various infractions related to news about the government (*Sayam phimphakan* 2006, 137–38). Any freedom that the press might have enjoyed during the Phahon administration ended with the Bowonadet Rebellion in October 1933. The government used the opportunity to come down on people believed to be anti-government royalists. It set up for the first time a *san phiset* (special court), ostensibly to protect the constitution (135). The targets of this new court included the editor of the *Krungthep Daily Mail*, Louis Khiriwat (Andrew Freeman's protégé and successor), who was tried and sentenced to death for having incited a rebellion (*kabot*). This sentence was later reduced to life in prison, and the *Krungthep Daily Mail* was shut down (139).

It is at this point, during the post-revolution period of instability, that the roots of the police's intimate relationship with the press developed. To censor the press, the

[12]The "*Sanuk nuk*" affair, in which the government banned a fictional story about a novice monk, is often cited as an early example of censorship in Siam. See Benedict Anderson's introduction in Anderson and Mendiones (1985).

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government required agents. For this task, the police emerged as convenient candidates. One of the first acts of the new civilian government was to reform the police, purging it of royalists. It then set up a new police unit called the *santiban*, the Siamese version of America's FBI. Within this unit was a division that was tasked with monitoring newspapers and political intelligence. This relatively passive role of overseeing news content gradually shifted to a more proactive mandate under the government of military general Phibun Songkram, especially as World War II approached. In 1941, a new Press Act (*Pho. ro. bo. kan phim* 2484) was passed that allowed the police to review the content of newspaper stories before publication, even when the country was not in a state of emergency (Thawon 2007, 175). This law gave power to the police commissioner (*athibodi tamruat*) to prohibit the publication of news about the army or politics between nations, allowed for the inspection and censorship of news during states of emergency or war, and granted the power to decide whether articles were harmful to the peace and order and good morals of the people. The Phibun government also issued a law outlining new minimum capital investment requirements to establish a newspaper, thus making it more difficult for new papers to start up (Somphong 2002, 141). With these laws, the police were now not only monitoring, they were controlling the output of information. The situation only got worse during the Japanese occupation, when heavy restrictions were put on newspapers and general wartime scarcity made it difficult to publish anything at all.

Immediately after World War II, the civilian government led by Khuang Aphaiwong allowed the press to publish freely. Khuang even praised the press's role in the aid of *Seri Thai*, an underground resistance movement that operated during the war (Somphong 2002, 145–46). This period of relative freedom might have continued if not for the shooting death of King Ananda in 1946. Pridi Phanomyong, then the regent to the king, censored all news of the case and issued a statement that the death was the result of an accident. The death was a major news story that captivated the public, which was now deprived of what it thought to be a thorough, transparent public investigation. Left to their own devices, people promoted all manner of explanations, including one perpetuated by the royalist Democrat Party that held Pridi responsible. When Pridi was ousted in 1947, his inability to provide an acceptable explanation for the king's death was a key reason cited by Phibun's faction for staging a coup. Phibun returned to power in 1947 on the back of this unresolved mystery.

Almost immediately, the press began to publish stories critical of Phibun's government. In response, the government began a series of sweeping arrests. One such move came in 1952, when several journalists and politicians were charged with being communists. The government also made good use of the 1941 Press Act to penalize papers for anti-government positions. Finally, when press controls and anti-communist laws were not enough to stop the print media from publishing stories critical of the government, the police resorted to other methods, including intimidation, arbitrary detention, threats, physical assault, and murder. Chuan Rotchanawiphat, the editor of *Thammathipat*, who "had been writing harshly of government corruption, singling out for special attack a graft-ridden agency known as the Food Drive Organization which was supposed to cut down living costs," was gunned down on the way home from work. Alexander MacDonald, the first editor of the *Bangkok Post*, writes, "Pedaling home on his bicycle one evening, he had just passed Sanuk Palace when a black sedan drove up behind him. The

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snout of a sub-machine gun was stuck out of the window and a quick splash of bullets felled the editor. The car sped on. The whole town knew that someone had been hired to kill Nai Chuen [*sic*]; newspapermen knew the police constable who did it, but the case of the editor's murder was never brought to court. The Police Department had orders to forget about it" (MacDonald 1949, 57). Suri Thongwanit, editor of *Siang Thai*, "which published a racy account of the arrest of a Siamese colonel's daughter by customs men in Manila for smuggling diamonds out of Siam," was shot. "He had also [like Chuan] just finished his day's newspaper chores. He was getting into his jeep when a bullet caught him from behind. It didn't quite kill him. It tore through the back of his neck and came out in the front part of his face, but he was taken to hospital quickly enough to make repairs" (58). This violent crackdown is said to have effectively curtailed the political role of papers and forced them to work within the rules of the government (Somphong 2002, 152).

The government's war on the press continued through the end of Phibun's reign and into the Sarit Thanarat dictatorship. In 1958, the Sarit government closed down *Khao phap*. One week later, a suspicious fire broke out at the paper's offices, destroying everything. The *Bangkok Post* reported on January 11, 1958: "A three-hour fire before dawn today razed about 200 houses in a 20-rai area between Phra Sawat lane and Vorapong Lane, Banglampu, causing an estimated eight million baht in damage." The fire, which started at about 2:00 a.m. at an illegal brothel on Phra Sawat Lane, destroyed four printing presses valued at approximately 200,000 baht and the house of Kamphon Wacharaphon, the paper's publisher. In response, Kamphon adopted a couple of strategies. Narong Phoemphun, writing about the life of Kamphon, noted that newspapers in the provinces were not affected much by Sarit's crackdown (Narong 1989). Kamphon contacted his friend Sanong Mongkon, who owned *Siang ang thong* in Ang Thong Province, and negotiated a deal for the right to use that name. The paper was registered in Ang Thong but published in Bangkok and thus was able to evade some of the government's pressure. According to Narong (1989, 91), Kamphol said after the burning of his office that his new paper would "not have political news. We will report news about crime. This will be the paper's foundation. It's safe. There will be a bit of politics here and there only."

The violent repression of political news thus pushed the press towards the crime story, where reporters, editors, and publishers could take refuge in the seemingly apolitical, ordinary murder that plagued the kingdom throughout the Cold War. The answer to the questions posed at the beginning of this section, then, is this: In the face of increasing police violence during the postwar period, sensational crime news provided a method for evading government sanction. It was a statement about the kingdom's politics that made no direct mention of politics. In other words, violent censorship of the press drove the print media towards the crime story in ways market forces and social context did not.

An Intimate Relationship

There is one other point to make. The press, of course, could have focused on entertainment news or sports. Yet it veered towards crime. For one, violence works wonders in getting attention, a fact that did not go unnoticed by the government. As early as 1954,

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the second Phibun government called a meeting between the recently established Ministry of Culture, the Police Department, and the Association of Newspapers to discuss the social impact of sensationalized crime reporting (*Sayam rat*, August 4, 1954). Nothing immediate in the way of policy came from the meeting; crime reporting practices grew even more graphic as papers competed with each other for readers. In the following year, the Police Department issued a new policy related to crime news. A story from the *Bangkok Post* entitled "Crime stories taboo if lurid" and dated June 11, 1955, notes:

> In accordance with a recommendation of the Crime Research Committee, the Police Department will warn newspapers against undue featuring of crime stories, Police Major-General Chamnian Wasanasomsit, Superintendent of the Central Investigation Bureau, said today. He said the committee believes irresponsible reporting of crime has contributed to the increase in crime with detailed stories of murders, robberies and rape making potential criminals out of certain types of newspaper readers. It is also felt that press reports on suicide, giving details of means used, have been partly responsible for the increased number of suicide cases. The rise in rape and other sex crimes, according to the Crime Research Committee is also partly attributable to publication of news reports of lurid details.

Earlier, in 1952, the police had used the 1941 Press Act to ban *Picture Digest* and *Around the World Confidential*. Both these magazines were American imports. *Picture Digest* was described as a sex-and-crime magazine, while Lee Mortimer's *Around the World Confidential* was criticized by local newspapers as having published material insulting to the Thai nation and the king (*Bangkok Post*, August 4, 1952). Crime stories in the newspapers during the Cold War era were therefore still didactic, only the lesson they were seen as teaching was how to commit crimes.

More importantly, however, the relationship between the press and the police had grown too interconnected to control with simple measures. Even before the government tasked the police to monitor the press, the overlapping daily practices of these two information-generating systems had begun to bind them inextricably. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, a reporter's duty was simply to wait around a police station or a court for news ("Ruang khong nangsuphim" 1963). In the mid-1950s, this was still much the case. Thawon Suwan, a reporter, noted in his memoir that in the 1950s, when he went to work as a reporter for the *Daily Mail*, getting stories meant establishing a close relationship with the police. On his first day on the job, he went with his partner Chaloem to the Phathumwan police station to introduce himself to the *sip waen* (sergeant). He asked if there was any news. At first, the *sip waen* would always reply, "There's nothing." Thawon and Chaloem then went to the police station at Phaya Thai, where it looked like there might have been an auto accident and a fight. They asked if they could look at the daily blotter in which the police logged incoming cases. The *samian waen* (clerk) replied, "You can't, it's government business (*ratchakan*). People without any legitimate business here are prohibited from seeing it" (Thawon 2007, 37). Later, though, as he became close to the *samian* at each station, he was able to look into the daily logs. He only had to be careful to not let the station's chief inspector (*sarawat*) or deputy chief inspector (*rong sarawat*) see him looking at the book.

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Sometimes the *sip waen* would even call him into the office to let him know of breaking news. According to Thawon, this happened after the police had read some positive reports about the police in a case reported by another reporter at the *Daily Mail*. The police at Phaya Thai, he notes, were especially open to working with reporters. In one case that took place around 1951 (he could not recall the actual date), a police officer named Captain Kamon Chanowan went as far as to invite Thawon to accompany him on a mission to arrest a bandit (*sua*) in the outskirts of Bangkok, which he did (169).

The point is that the press relied on the police to get information for their stories. They then took what they got and used it to fill the demands of their own media. At the same time, the police had come to rely on the press to help justify their existence and the violence they employed as a matter of routine. The two had developed interconnected systems of gathering and communicating information. So by 1953 when Ari was killed, the police were already in a complicated dance with the print media. On one hand, the press desperately needed the police to provide them with information about crimes. On the other, the police wanted good publicity and also to control the news. The result was a sometimes antagonistic, sometimes friendly relationship.

Ari's papers, for example, had regularly published stories critical of the government. As a consequence, Phao Sriyanond tried unsuccessfully to buy Ari's publishing company. The government, realizing that it could not control the press through legal rules or financial enticements, sent the police after them with deadly force. In this context, Ari Liwira is an important figure in the history of the Thai press not because he was the best writer of his day. He was, as described above, not even the first newspaperman to be tortured or killed for political reasons. Neither was he the last. He was, however, the most prominent and influential of the press's martyrs at the time. The lesson of Ari's murder and the censorship efforts of the government were clear: the liberty to publish news critical of the government or other branches of the state was one that would no longer come easily. Against this backdrop, the murder of Ari was a watershed in the government's efforts to control the press. It was physical, real, and terrorizing, a blunt statement to the media that politics was off limits. Crime news, though concern about its perceived negative impact on society existed, was more apolitical than reports about ministers, government policies, and the army. In a sense, then, the audacious daylight assassination of Ari Liwira that took place in Hua Hin in 1953 marked a turning point, one where a long struggle over what could be published in Thailand's press would take a decisive turn towards the crime story.

Conclusion

While a history of the press that emphasizes the print media's role in fostering the creation of the nation[13] and the subsequent struggle to maintain press freedom is an important narrative, other dimensions of the story are ignored. The police and the press in Thailand are engaged in a culturally productive, albeit deadly, struggle that determines the form and content of the print media. It has been claimed, not entirely unreasonably, that "everything we know about our society . . . we know through the mass

[13]Marshall McLuhan noted this connection as early as 1964 in *Understanding the Media*.

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media" (Luhmann 2000, 1). In the case of what people know about violence, one can put forward a strong argument that this is in fact so. The news stories produced by the print media and now its broadcast and streamed counterparts are the primary forms through which the general public can think about violence. Figuring out how these modes of communication have come to be and how they work today is therefore a necessary first step in understanding the "ordinary" violence that happens daily in Thailand and the "extraordinary" violence that histories of Thailand revolve around.

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