

Samson Lim, *Siam's New Detectives: Visualizing Crime and Conspiracy in Modern Thailand*
Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016. 232 pp. \$65.00.

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Siam's New Detectives is a national case study that contributes to the burgeoning literature on the development of forensic and identification technologies in the twentieth century. Samson Lim chronicles the adoption of technologies of visualization, such as crime statistics, photography, fingerprinting, and crime scene drawing and mapping, as Thailand developed into an independent nation-state.

In the earliest decades of the twentieth century, under leaders such as Chief Eric St. John Lawson, the Bangkok Metropolitan Constabulary imported policing innovations such as establishing a detective force, adopting fingerprinting, recording crime statistics, taking photographs, and drawing and mapping crime scenes. The Prisons Department had begun recording fingerprints around 1899. A Special Branch was established in 1902. Photographs were taken of prisoners on release, beginning in 1904. The earliest use of a crime scene fingerprint may have occurred in the late 1920s. Another Special Branch was introduced in 1932, and photography and fingerprint operations were shifted into it.

Like some others who have written about the history of forensic science, most notably [Ronald R. Thomas \(1999\)](#), Lim documents a bustling trade between the worlds of detective fiction and police work. Thai detective novelists like King Vajiravudh explored new technologies such as crime scene maps prior to their deployment in policing, and military and police journals contained crime fiction, both indigenous and translated.

In court, Lim shows photography and mapping in Thailand followed the pattern documented by Jennifer [Mnookin \(1998\)](#) for the United States. Initially the subject of judicial skepticism, they eventually became mundane and accepted appurtenances of a criminal procedure that endeavored to constitute legal proof.

While the local details are new, the general overall story is familiar. But what is perhaps most distinctive about the Thai case—and what, therefore, constitutes *Siam's New Detectives*' most distinctive contribution to this literature—is the high degree of reliance on crime *reenactment*—not to be confused with crime scene *reconstruction*—

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in Thailand. Such reenactments are perhaps a marginal part of police work elsewhere, but the Thais seem to have done more of them and attributed greater importance and epistemological weight to them. This allows Lim to theorize reenactment as a visualization technology, which will make this book useful for those interested in how crime is made visual.

Lim identifies 1929 as the most likely date of origin for crime reenactments in Thailand, although he is not entirely confident about this. Reenactment served as a sort of lie detector, allowing the police to test the plausibility, and thus perhaps the veracity, of the suspected perpetrator's physical explication of events. Indeed, Lim suggests that reenactment emerged in part as a response to the problem of false confessions, which were a common problem in Thailand because of the police's brutal interrogation practices. A reenactment served as a way to test whether a coerced confession was, in fact, true. Likewise, the Thai courts demanded reenactments because of their own awareness of the widespread use of physical coercion to leverage confessions. The focus, then, was on verifying the confession. The reenactment transformed the confession from a verbal utterance or written document into a sort of visual proof: "The police argued, and the courts accepted that if a suspect was willing to act out his testimony, have that demonstration recorded, and then put his signature on that recording, the resulting image would show not only that the confession is accurate, but that no coercion was involved in procuring it" (96). In this sense, Lim observes, reenactment was unusual in that it "was a tactic for visual representation not originally intended as a criminal investigation tool" (95).

In 1948, "the reenactment of a suspect's testimony was officially made part of Thai police procedures." Moreover, once the technology became available, reenactments were photographed. These photographs then became evidence, "carrying with them the epistemological weight of fact," and they could "be transported and used as proof in police reports and trials" (85). This, then, led to a certain aestheticization of both the reenactment and the visual record that was made of it. The reenactment, then, was not simply a police technology—it was, rather, a technology produced at the intersection of policing, mass media, and commerce. In the 1910s, photo cards of reenactments were produced and sold; in the 1920s, Thai newspapers hired their first local photographers. By the end of the twentieth century, reenactments were featured in newspapers, and later on websites, in addition to their use by the police and courts. Lim shows that these mass media representations were as concerned with following certain aesthetic mandates as they were with being "accurate" representations of events.

Indeed, Lim argues the reenactment was far from an "imprint," like a fingerprint, a purportedly faithful and objective record of some event. Rather, it occupied a liminal space between documentary record and fiction. "In a way then," he writes, "reenactments may be likened to the solutions of fictional crimes found in detective stories, in that they are revelations 'not exposed to tests against an outside reality'" (108). Given this argument, Lim might have drawn connections to the notorious and acclaimed film *The Act of Killing* (Oppenheimer 2012), itself an extended reenactment of genocide that took place in the same general part of the world. Likewise, Lim's description of meticulously drawn Thai crime scene maps evokes the newly celebrated crime scene dioramas created in the 1940s and 1950s by the miniaturist Frances Glessner Lee (Botz 2004).

In the final chapter, Lim turns from reenactment to what might be conceived of as a sort of fantasized reenactment: the conspiracy theory. Lim argues that Thailand is especially prone to conspiracy theories, due to a variety of factors including its tortured political history and the state's heavy police presence. Even conspiracies can become visual representations, as Lim shows through some fascinating published charts detailing alleged conspiracies.

Photographs, maps, statistics, fingerprints, reenactments, and conspiracy charts, "the objects of visual evidence that police officers, newspaper reporters, and fiction writers produce on a daily basis become," Lim writes, "the forms through which what is known about criminal violence takes shape in the public imagination" (2).

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