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### Title

Siam's New Detectives: Visualizing Crime and Conspiracy in Modern Thailand

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4 **Samson Lim, *Siam's New Detectives:***  
5 ***Visualizing Crime and Conspiracy in Modern Thailand***  
6 **Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016. 232 pp. \$65.00.**  
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9 **Simon A. Cole**  
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17 *Siam's New Detectives* is a national case study that contributes to the burgeoning  
18 literature on the development of forensic and identification technologies in the twen-  
19 tieth century. Samson Lim chronicles the adoption of technologies of visualization,  
20 such as crime statistics, photography, fingerprinting, and crime scene drawing and  
21 mapping, as Thailand developed into an independent nation-state.

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

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

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

41 While the local details are new, the general overall story is familiar. But what is  
42 perhaps most distinctive about the Thai case—and what, therefore, constitutes *Siam's*  
43 *New Detectives'* most distinctive contribution to this literature—is the high degree of  
44 reliance on crime *reenactment*—not to be confused with crime scene *reconstruction*—  
45 in Thailand. Such reenactments are perhaps a marginal part of police work elsewhere,  
46 but the Thais seem to have done more of them and attributed greater importance  
47 and epistemological weight to them. This allows Lim to theorize reenactment as a

1 visualization technology, which will make this book useful for those interested in  
2 how crime is made visual.

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

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

33 Indeed, Lim argues the reenactment was far from an "imprint," like a fingerprint, a  
34 purportedly faithful and objective record of some event. Rather, it occupied a liminal  
35 space between documentary record and fiction. "In a way then," he writes, "reenact-  
36 ments may be likened to the solutions of fictional crimes found in detective stories, in  
37 that they are revelations 'not exposed to tests against an outside reality'" (108). Given  
38 this argument, Lim might have drawn connections to the notorious and acclaimed film  
39 *The Act of Killing* (Oppenheimer 2012), itself an extended reenactment of genocide  
40 that took place in the same general part of the world. Likewise, Lim's description of  
41 meticulously drawn Thai crime scene maps evokes the newly celebrated crime scene  
42 dioramas created in the 1940s and 1950s by the miniaturist Frances Glessner Lee  
43 (Hamilton 2018).

44 In the final chapter, Lim turns from reenactment to what might be conceived of as a  
45 sort of fantasized reenactment: the conspiracy theory. Lim argues that Thailand is  
46 especially prone to conspiracy theories, due to a variety of factors including its tortured  
47 political history and the state's heavy police presence. Even conspiracies can become

1 visual representations, as Lim shows through some fascinating published charts detail-  
2 ing alleged conspiracies.

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

## 7 8 9 **References**

10  
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22 *Criminal Identification* (2001) and *Truth Machine: The Contentious History of DNA Fingerprinting*  
23 (2008, with Michael Lynch, Ruth McNally, and Kathleen Jordan). He is coeditor of the journal *Theoretical*  
24 *Criminology*.

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