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Singing Crimes, Rhyming News: Folksong Newsprints, Horror Sensibilities, and the Rise of Sensationalist Mass Media in Siam, 1920s–1940s

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Abstract

The proliferation of print media in early-twentieth-century Siam coincided with the rising popularity of folk vocal music. By the 1920s, certain styles of folk balladry were appropriated by urban writers for news reportage and sociopolitical criticism with doses of sensationalization. Published in periodicals and chapbooks, this popular literature was characterized by its versification of true crimes and its typical focus on the figure of the criminal or the ghost. My article examines this hybrid genre of news entertainment at the nexus of a modern structure of the horror experience, folk music tradition, print capitalism, and journalistic culture in Siam. It argues that the genre constituted an early wave of Thai sensationalist mass media that represented a new aesthetic of horror and violence as sources of popular consumption and morbid curiosity. It also shaped the public's horror and gothic sensibilities and anticipated the lurid intensification of print sensationalism in post-WWII Thailand.

Keywords

folksong – *lamtat* – *lae* – sensationalism – horror – Siam – Thailand

1 Introduction

In 1918, Bunpheng, a Siamese Buddhist monk in Bangkok, killed a jeweler for his precious items and hastily disrobed from the priesthood. To cover up his murder on temple grounds, he hid the corpse in a metal chest, carried it off the monastery, and sank it in the river. A couple of months later, he also strangled a woman to death and disposed of her body with this idiosyncratic *modus operandi*. Following the discoveries of their remains and Bunpheng's arrest, his crimes received extensive press coverage and caught public enthusiasm just as his photographs were put up for sale in stores ("Rueang 'hip lek'" 1919, 89–90; Lim 2016, 97–98). Such mass-media treatment and celebritization of "Iron-Chest Bunpheng," as he has since been known in Thai collective memory, went on to the extent that a few years later when true crime narratives in the form of folk poetry were on the rise, his offenses and execution were also versified in different versions and serialized into chapbooks.

Bunpheng's phenomenon presaged the rise of sensationalist mass media in early twentieth-century Siam where true tales of murder and mayhem began to capture Siamese popular attention and imagination through the commercial press. This coincided with the burgeoning of book publishing business and the growing popularity of vernacular folk singing, especially in the country's central plain. By the mid-1920s, these separate spheres of cultural production converged, as certain styles of folk vocal music were appropriated by urban writers for news reportage and sociopolitical criticism, usually with doses of topical and stylistic sensationalization. Contemporary crimes such as Bunpheng's killings quickly lent themselves to balladic creativity and print commodification. Published in periodicals and chapbooks, this popular literature was characterized by its racy versification of true crimes, its evocation of enjoyable horror, its moral didacticism, and its typical focus on the figure of the ghost or the criminal – sometimes a combination of both – such as murderers, bandits, swindlers, and corrupt officials. While it bore aesthetic similarities to European gothic and horror genres such as "news-songs" of murder and execution (McIlvenna 2022), Gothic ballads (Hoeveler 2012), and the Newgate Calendar (Rust 2006), Thai folksong reportage was a distinct literary development enabled and fashioned largely by a conjuncture of modern conditions in Siam at the *fin de siècle* and after.

Despite their evident popularity, as indicated by the recorded numbers of their print runs, folksong newsprints have received limited scholarly attention partly due to their physical condition as disposable ephemera. The popular historian and antiquarian Anake Nawigamune is most prolific in his collection, reproduction, and retelling of extant prints (Nawigamune, 1995; 2003; 2015;

2022b). Surapong Jankasamepong and Aphilak Kasempholkoon further discuss this form of news entertainment in the light of the booklet industry and folk vocal music of the early twentieth century (Jankasamepong 2004; Kasempholkoon 2012). What is sparsely addressed in the existing scholarship, however, is the genre's defining feature and aesthetic: sensationalism – here understood analytically rather than pejoratively as "a combination of striking content and formal elements distinguished by hyperbole and excess and designed to attract an audience" (Frisken and Soderlund 2022, 1).

My paper examines this hybrid genre of folksong reportage and locates its intermedial formation at the nexus of vernacular folk music, print capitalism, journalistic culture, and a new structure of the horror – and, to decentralize a European term, gothic – experience.[1] I argue that folksong newsprints constituted one of the earliest waves of sensationalist mass media in Thailand that critically remediated the experience of crime and depravity and represented a new aesthetic of horror and violence as sources of popular consumption and morbid curiosity. This aesthetic shaped the media sensibilities of a growing Thai readership, therefore anticipating the lurid intensification of print sensationalism in post-WWII Thailand where a number of old crime folksongs were also reprinted.

2 True Crime Media and Siam's Modern Structure of Horror Sensibilities

Folksong newsprints emerged in early-twentieth-century Siam as a medial repercussion of modernizing processes and, consequently, changing popular dispositions toward observable suffering and horror. As an affective experience, horror has been discussed in Thai historiography primarily as the Thai state's apparatus – what Bhadranishtha Surarungsun (2022, 11–12) calls a "regime of horror" – in exercising power over its populace through the management of fear and disgust, not least during the royal absolutist era.

1 In affective terms, horror can be considered part of the gothic experience insofar as the latter is understood to encompass a family of affective responses that includes dread, horror, anxiety, despair, and consternation – altogether what Xavier Aldana Reyes calls "gothic affect." To identify Thai texts as gothic is not to subsume them under the European history of Gothic literature with specific literary conventions, but rather to highlight the affective experience they commonly generate in readers even as the objects, subjects, and situations conducive to it vary across cultures (see Reyes 2015, 17–19). In this paper, I use "the horror experience" for both literary and real-life encounters while limiting "the gothic experience" to the context of media consumption.

In this line of explanation, public or publicized execution was employed, as Preedee Hongsaton (2014) argues, as a cautionary designation and annihilation of "enemies" whereby the Thai state maintained social order in accordance with the Thai proverb "killing a chicken to scare monkeys" (58–59). Meanwhile, through the Thai state's "civilizing process" that started in the nineteenth century, such horror objects as dead and morbid bodies were relegated out of public sight to designated sites of management such as graveyards, hospitals, and penitentiaries under the responsibility of specialized authorities including gravekeepers and forensic experts (Surarungsun 2022; see also Pearson 2020).

This literature is instructive in its analysis of instrumentalized horror and psychosomatic governance in modern Thailand. Yet it almost completely ignores the *pleasurable* aspect of horror as signaled by the emergence of sensationalist and horror mass media during this period. While Surarungsun's account traces the evolving attitudes of Siamese commoners toward damaged bodies – from normalcy to repulsive horror – as a result of state sanitization (Surarungsun 2022, 119–20, 300–02), it homogenizes this dispositive shift and leaves underserved the consequent complexity of horror. In conflating horror-as-a-thing with horror-as-a-feeling, it runs the two risks of projecting the historian's perception onto historical actors and limiting the thing's affective affordances, which can encompass a variety of feelings other than horror alone, such as pleasure and pity. As a ballad on Iron-Chest Bunpheng from 1926 reveals, the author repeatedly used the term *sanuk* (joy) to describe the mood and demeanor of spectators at his execution (Haji Khiat 1949a, 3: 87–89). Indeed, while some historians view horror primarily as the feeling of fear and repugnance harnessed by the state as a deterrent to wrongdoing, myriad other scholars highlight the pleasurability of horror, particularly in modern media commodities (see Carroll 1990; Tudor 1997; Chutikamoltham 2014). How, then, do we account for the past enjoyment of horror? Or, to continue with Hongsaton's proverbial terms, how do we explain the fact that "monkeys" not only got scared by, but also became avid onlookers and consumers of, such horrors as the killing of "chickens"?

Here I argue that horror was not only a regulative technique of the Siamese state's affective governmentality, but also a prevailing emotion and a media genre in the morbid entertainment and titillation of ordinary Siamese. To be sure, horror had often involved an element of joy, particularly in the narration of catastrophic or ghost stories, paralleling or even preceding the state's manipulation of horror in the interest of social control. Such pleasure, seemingly ancient and hardwired, was not so much a universal human taste for grotesquerie as an acquired predilection susceptible to ever-changing cultural

and media formations such as gothic and horror literature. The Siamese modern state's restriction and concomitant defamiliarization of public horrors led to the remaking of horror objects as appalling curiosities and, therefore, profitable subjects of mass media production – something to be relished by consumers.

What was involved in the rise of modern Thai horror media was therefore an *aesthetic* shift or, to borrow Jacques Rancière's (2013) terms, a re-distribution of the sensible (7–8) and the reeducation of the sensorium in Thai society at large as to what and how things should or could be perceived by whom. Removed out of the ordinary, physical horrors accrued their magnetism among the general public not least because of their state-managed, and therefore decreased, visibility and accessibility in everyday life from the turn of the twentieth century. This process aligned with similar developments in urban societies around the world. As Tim Edensor (2014) observes, sensory regulation "had the unanticipated effect of instigating the active pursuit of *unfamiliar* kinetic, aromatic, sonic, and visual sensations" (32, original italics), some of which sensationalist commercial media were expected to offer.

In print media such as folksong chapbooks, horror objects and events were shorn of the actual proximity and immediacy of putrescibles often found in crime scenes and, instead, mediated by visual and textual representation. Moreover, against the backdrop of what Trais Pearson (2020) calls "the Siamese culture of inauspicious death" where the presence of corpses was objected because of the potential danger of their associated spirits (32–36), the narrative depiction of unnatural death and the deceased was normally not associated with or "haunted" by their spirits. This double detachment – spatiotemporal and spiritual – made horror print media relatively approachable and ready to be enjoyed.

This modern sense of horror was characterized by the ambivalence that blurred the boundaries between attraction and aversion, just as horror media further smudged the distinction between fear, fascination, and revulsion. Accordingly, this paper further argues that folksong newsprints were among the early forms of modern horror and gothic media that indicated a structural transformation of horror as an affective phenomenon in Thai society. The prints shaped, and were shaped by, the new rudiments of the horror and gothic experience in Siam that obfuscated or vacillated between objectionable horror, as emphasized in the foregoing scholarship, and pleasurable horror purposely savored by folksong audiences. While this structural oscillation had arguably long inhered in the horror encounter, the reorganization of the Siamese public space effectively made it more arresting for public sensibilities, just as garish languages and illustrations intensified such experience.

3 The Birth of Folksong Reportage and Exposé: News Entertainment and the Precarity of Siamese Modern Life

In addition to the new structure of the horror experience as engendered by state reforms, the modern conditions that shaped the emergence of folksong newsprints also included a profound transformation of Siam's mediascape and cultural field. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Siamese society witnessed the expansion of literate and semi-literate publics as a consequence of state-implemented modern education. In response to this enlarged potential readership, literary and journalistic production flourished in number and variety, especially during the late 1910s and the 1920s. A surge of newspapers and magazines saturated the print market just as small publishers mushroomed across Bangkok and distributed their products, particularly chapbooks, for mass consumption in both the capital and the localities (Copeland 2003, 56–57; Limapichart 2008, 101–104). These publications consisted largely of fantastic tales (*nithan chak chak wong wong*) written in verse and popularized particularly from the 1880s to the 1920s (see Jankasamepong 2004, 22–57), Thai translations of Chinese historical romances (*rueang chin*), and Western-style short stories and novels (*rueang an len*) coming in vogue from the 1920s (see Limapichart 2008, 100–139; Thanomsasana 2015, 105–143).

Apart from these dominant genres, a significant portion of such booklets presented true crime narratives set in folksong prosodies. This latter group of texts drew mostly upon contemporary crimes or events of extraordinary nature. In this respect, folksong newsprints were an early manifestation of commercialized media on "true crimes" in modern Thailand, paralleling conventional news reportage in the press as well as crime and detective fiction introduced into the Thai literary field through translation in the 1890s (see Lorlertratna 2005, 63–70). In terms of popularity, true crime folksongs replaced fantastic tales in the literary market, in the words of a contemporary reader, "shifting attention away from the paradise of princes to the earth of commoners" (Khommanasanti 1954, 52) – or, in other words, from mythological make-believe to mortal realism. While fantastic tales transported the reader beyond the quotidian realm, folksong reportage allowed the reader to peer into actual criminal acts behind closed doors or in the hidden wild.

With the growth of Siamese popular journalism and publishing entrepreneurship or "print capitalism" (see Anderson 2006, 18), crime reporting was no longer confined to bureaucratic paperwork and official communication, but percolated into the public sphere through commercial mass media. Indeed, crime stories had been part of news reporting from the beginning of periodicals in Siam but, as Samson Lim argues, initially read

more or less as short anecdotes, serving "simply as informational pieces or as lighthearted entertainment" on the periphery of newspapers (Lim 2014, 364–366; see also Nawigamune 2003, 26–35). This began to change significantly in the 1920s as periodicals featured longer crime stories on a regular basis, often with details of the investigative process, while non-fictional books on crimes were continually published. The murderous case of Bunpheng, for instance, offered the quintessential material for sensationalist media production in various forms. Its appeal was such that in 1919, the royal court's magazine *Dusit samit* sarcastically suggested that Thai newspapers should have thanked rather than reviled Bunpheng, since his crimes had allowed them to fill their blank space for several days ("Rueang 'hip lek'" 1919, 89–90). Meanwhile, incidents of ruffianism and rapine were also covered in print and dramatized through theatrical production in Bangkok (see Nawigamune 2003, 59–61).

Folksong newsprints were part and parcel of such sensationalist mass media – and exemplary ones at that – in a Siam that was increasingly characterized by what we might call the double precarity of modern life. On the one hand, countryfolk were forced to contend with a dramatic escalation of criminal violence, especially banditry, during the first two decades of the century as a result of the expanding rice and money economies (Chaidaisuk 2002, 37–82; Lim 2016, 16–17). On the other hand, urban modernization also subjected Siamese city dwellers to technologically-induced risks as well as human conflicts and exploitative schemes borne out of population growth, accelerated mobility, and growingly complicated social interaction. While the intricacy and intensity of modernity prompted media engagement and public discussion on various forms of threat and moral degeneracy, competitiveness in literary and journalistic business led to sensationalist strategies in attracting readership and boosting sales.

It was in this sociocultural and economic context that folksong reportage emerged as a poetic counterpart of crime news in prose published side by side in periodicals. This, it should be noted, paralleled or even preceded the "tabloidization" of the Thai press under foreign media influence. As Samson Lim argues, American styles of sensationalist news reporting – with eye-catching headlines, outlandish captions, and photographs of criminals, policemen, or crime scenes – and exposé writing were introduced into the Siamese mediascape from the late 1920s, particularly in the English newspaper *Bangkok Daily Mail* and its Thai sister *Krungthep Daily Mail* (Lim 2014, 366–369; see also Freeman 2007). In other words, true crime balladry represented a stream of media sensationalism that originated from internal dynamics – a development from *lae* narratives and the evolving culture of thrill and sensation – rather than an attributable determinant from outside.

Thai true crime folksongs were intermedial artifacts that hybridized various cultural forms, interweaving oral, musical, literary, and journalistic ingredients into graspable sources of information and enjoyment for both educated and illiterate audiences alike. Their peculiarity lay in both their sensationalist techniques and their metrical forms borrowed from folk vocal music – or "the art of the extempore-rhymester," as an observer called it (Bidyalankarana 1926, 102). In the wake of mass media expansion in Siam, different styles of Thai folk singing were quickly appropriated for print production, with news reports as a newfound wellspring of contents, starting with the cross-class tradition of *lae*. *Lae* or *lae thet* was a style of singing or reciting, normally but not exclusively by Buddhist monks, that narrated the *Vessantara Jātaka*, a Buddhist tale on the last of Gautama Buddha's past lives. In their transmission, particularly in the religious ceremony of *Thet Mahachat* (literally, "the narration of a great life"), the hagiographic storyline was recited and conventionally punctuated by non-canonical sub-stories such as folktales or travesties to entertain the lay audience and persuade them to make merits, especially by money donation (see Sripum 2019). From at least the first decades of the twentieth century, the repertoire of such ancillary tales began to include accounts of noteworthy events abroad such as the Russo-Japanese War and the Chinese Revolution of 1911 as well as local sensational news such as the fatal collapse of a city gate in Bangkok and the assassination of a high-ranking official in Trang, drawing in part from the newspapers *Bangkok Times*, among others (see Rueangrit 1958, 209–211, 235–256, 315–323, 390–399, 416–430).[2] Such up-to-date, realist narratives potentially furnished the monks with a versatile vehicle for informative, entertaining, didactic, and pecuniary purposes altogether. Some of the *lae* pieces were presumably composed and used in actual recitation before appearing in print.

A similar case of topical presentism and stylistic sensationalism took place in secular folk singing beyond the temple walls just as certain forms of folk vocal music became increasingly commercialized and swept over Siamese spaces of amusement. These musico-poetic genres, most of which were of dialogic nature, were translocally characterized by similarities in their rhyming and phrasing patterns, their simplicity in diction and performance, and their emphasis on witticism and jocularity – especially caustic or risqué humor (see Nawigamune 1984, 77–92), albeit each with its own tune. Also, their relatively uncomplicated prosodies allowed for improvisation to varying degrees – a common feature in folk singing as a host of oral traditions. As a contemporary

2 Many news *laes* can be found in a book of *laes* collected by Rit Rueangrit (1958) although the exact dates of their writing and the names of their authors are unspecified.

observer put it, "the importance [in dialogic folk singing] rests on ready wit, a good thrust at an opponent, a smart repartee, a pretty compliment, or a persuasive argument" (Bidyalankarana 1926, 103). Among the most popular was *lamtat*, a type of antiphonal singing developed in central Siam from *dikir hulu*, a traditional form of Muslim chanting. Its singing was accompanied by one or more *rammana* (a kind of large drum) and other percussion instruments as well as a chorus (*luk khu*). In its initial form, a *lamtat* performance normally comprised a series of teasing and scathing exchanges between male singers within a band or between competing bands,[3] sometimes with swearwords and vulgarities in their ripostes (Tramot 1975, 46–67; Nawigamune 1984, 625–630). By 1920, *lamtat* had entered the court of King Vajiravudh (r. 1910-25) with astounding popularity among his officials (Bunsanoe 1988, 44–47). It proved so marketable that toward the end of the decade, a dozen phonograph records of *lamtat* singing were produced for commercial sale (Nawigamune 2015, 20; Nawigamune 1984, 634–635).

In a similar vein to *lae* – *lamtat* and, to a less extent, a few other styles of folk vocal music such as *phleng khorat* and *soeng bong fai* [sic] (see *Kro lek*, 28 December 1924, 325–327) were appropriated by urban writers and journalists who saw their characteristic mordacity, flexibility, or popularity as serviceable to their news reporting and commentary. In *lamtat* newsprints, the author "sang" a solo narrative rather than repartee, but was still accompanied by a chorus. Like news balladry in Europe, their composition was based on the process of *contrafactum* – putting new words or lyrics to existing prosodies and tunes (McIlvenna 2022, 49). *Lamtat* newsprints departed from *lae* sub-stories in their particular attention to violent crimes, especially murder and banditry, which constituted a small segment of the entire *lae* narratives but, conversely, the majority of news *lamtats*. While most of the *lae* newsprints were anonymously published, their *lamtat* counterparts always bore the names of their authors. Moreover, while *lae* was framed by its traditional use as a religious or semi-religious means of storytelling, *lamtat* was an utterly secular form associated with adversarial argument and badinage, and therefore lent itself more capaciously to the dissemination of worldly narratives and perspectives. With *lamtat*'s distinct features, it can be argued that folksong forms were appropriated not only to suit the rustic audience who were not, or only slightly, acquainted with Western-style prose used in newspaper reporting as Jankasamepong (2004, 116) suggests but, perhaps more importantly, also to

3 It was not until the mid-1930s that female *lamtat* singers emerged and performed alongside men, as typically seen today (Nawigamune 1984, 631).

assist and amplify the elicitation of effects on the audience, an essential trait of sensationalism discussed later.

Folksong news reporting in Siam first gained currency as a mode of sensationalist media production in the domain of sociopolitical commentary and exposure. As part of a high tide of political journalism, weekly periodicals such as *Saman maitri*, *Kro lek*, and *Thong thai* in the mid-1920s drew upon a wide range of poetic forms from both courtly and folk traditions, including *lamtat*. Primarily meant to muckrake for political scandals and criticize state authorities, *lamtat* newsprints mobilized sensationalism as a strategy of investigative and critical journalism in absolutist Siam where both popular participation in politics and governmental accountability were limited.[4] They served to raise public awareness on putatively rampant practices of corruption such as graft and embezzlement within the ruling echelon, and simultaneously entertain its readers by communicating sordid subjects in lighthearted forms and jovial tones. For instance, the most notorious and heavily lambasted crime in such exposés concerned the fraudulent case of Phraya Nonthisen Surenphakdi, an eminent official who oversaw the state's lottery and devised a scheme with his associates to keep the enormous prizes for themselves (for example, see *Kro lek*, 1 February 1925, 512–513; 8 February 1925, 542–544; 15 February 1925, 567–570). Later on, a few *lamtats* even went so far as to bring out domestic problems of high-ranking officials into the open, often ascribing their marital strains and disputes to the practices of polygyny and concubinage (see *Thong thai*, 5 October 1926, 590–592; 12 October 1926, 625–627; 19 October 1926, 661–663).

In this manner, folksong exposés as sensationalist media offered what we might call a counterpublic or an alternative public sphere where previously ignored or furtive issues were presented in ways unprecedented or divergent from the elite tastes that had dominated the print industry (see Örnebring and Jönsson 2004, 285–287). The vocal and musical attributes of *lamtat* offered investigative journalism a trenchant conduit for exposure, lampoonery, and humiliation. Enabled by the dialogic and serial nature of the magazine, some *lamtats* also retained the crosstalk characteristic of original *lamtat* singing, as their respective writers spoke on behalf of conflicting vested interests in a given incident, such as the case of bribery in Bangkok's fecal and waste management

4 Among early folksong muckrakers, the most renowned and prolific were Kaenphet (penname of Sem Sumanan, the editor of *Kro lek*), Wongchawiang (penname of Chawiang Sawettathat, the editor of *Saman maitri* and subsequently *Thong thai*), and Suea Tia (penname of Buntoem or Koson Komonlachan). Their folksong exposés were so inflammatory that one of them was temporarily sent to jail (Semanin 1996, 193–98, 204–07). For political journalism of the period in general, see Copeland (1993, 51–128).

(see *Kro lek*, 19 October 1924, 49–50; 26 October 1924, 77–79; 2 November 1924, 99–101; 9 November 1924, 123–127; 23 November 1924, 165; 7 December 1924, 227–229). The incendiarism of folksong exposés was such that a few months after his ascension to the throne, King Prajadhipok (r. 1925–35) wrote to his Minister of Interior that he was distressed at the mixture of sordid thought and vituperation in Thai periodicals, particularly *lamtat* slanders (NAT. R.7 RL.19.1/1) – a concern that culminated in his promulgation of a new press law in 1927.

4 Sensationalist Balladry and a New Aesthetic of Violence and Horror

After the initial period of anti-corruption whistleblowing, journalists and writers turned to violent crimes, especially murders and robberies, as material for balladic composition. Many of their crime songs drew upon newspaper reports, including trial coverage where the particularity of crimes was investigated and publicized. In addition, a number of ballads told ghost stories or featured supernatural elements in their crime narratives. It was precisely at this phase of development that folksong newsprints come across most evidently as sensationalist and gothic, with a new aesthetic of physical violence and horror that prioritized affective impact over factual accuracy. Such true crime and gothic folksongs brought morbid and mortal physiques, whose public visibility was curtailed by the modern state, to the fore for collective voyeurism, inviting readers to experience and enjoy the mediated horror of criminal or catastrophic events. Unlike contemporaneous newspaper reports, folksong crime narratives elaborated more on the nature of criminal violence and its surrounding circumstances, and employed literary devices, including expletives as normally present in Thai antiphonal folksongs, in dramatizing the story and denouncing the lawbreaker. They were also interspersed with moral and critical reflections, a feature rarely found in the typically matter-of-fact news snippets in prose. These differences become evident when contrasting the daily newspaper *Kro lek* with its weekly counterpart where true crime ballads were regularly published.

In May 1925, the magazine *Kro lek* published a series of *lamtats* on a homicide written by Suea Tia, a leading *lamtat* muckraker. The story recounted a house robbery in Thonburi two years earlier in which the wife of a middle-ranking official was killed by a gunshot wound to her head (*Kro lek*, 17 May 1925, 977–981; 31 May 1925, 1045–1049). Thereafter, *lamtat* newsprints in the market revolved predominantly around violent crimes of recent occurrence. Domestic homicide, such as a mother killing her daughter, a son killing his mother, a

wife killing her husband, or a woman killing her sister-in-law, emerged as one of the most recurring themes. Another prevailing group of texts reported on delinquent and criminal acts of bandits (mostly called with the title *Suea* – literally, "tiger"), especially in the provinces, leading up to their showdown with the police and their eventual downfall.

One of the most prolific *lamtat* writers was Haji Khiat who, by 1930, had written at least 42 *lamtat* titles in book form, each containing a story of 20–30 pages long. Among these, 39 titles featured sensational news, with 30 focusing on murders and acts of banditry (Jankasamepong 2004, 85).[5] It was his *Lamtat i thongluean thi hak kho nong phua* [*A Lamtat on Thongluean Who Broke Her Sister-in-Law's Neck*] that inaugurated a torrent of violent crime folksongs in booklets. In October 1925, its first installment was published as a chapbook and advertised as "horrifying and greatly soul-stirring" – a story "everybody in the whole country wants to know" (*Kro lek*, 18 October 1925, 58). It told the criminal case of Thongluean, a half-Mon, half-Chinese woman living in Samut Prakan with a Chinese husband, who also had a young sister. Thongluean, coveting her sister-in-law's share of family inheritance, planned to kill her. One day, when her husband was away, Thongluean seduced her sister-in-law into a room, broke her neck with bare hands, and put her body in a water jar to make it appear as if she had accidentally drowned. After her capture and trial, Thongluean was sentenced to death by decapitation (Haji Khiat 1925). Within a month of its release, the book was printed at least four times, with the fourth yielding 5,000 copies (Haji Khiat 1925). By 1928, it was printed no less than ten times, totaling tens of thousands of copies (Jankasamepong 2004, 69).

The evident success of this murder *lamtat* might have inspired a *lae* rendition published in 1926. In this version, Thongluean's murderous act was brought up as an ancillary to the *Vessantara Jātaka* to demonstrate, surprisingly, that "one can be killed by one's possessions" and that the listeners should generously donate or make merits out of theirs, as Vessantara did in the main story (quoted in Nawigamune 2003, 51–52). Likewise, a *lae* on Iron-Chest Bunpheng published earlier not only decried his greed and ruthlessness but warned the audience that "money kills" and that, instead of being miserly with their money, they should consider making donations to pave their way to nirvana (*Lae mahaphon* 1925, 7–10). In this manner, murder ballads in the *lae* form not only unnerved the audience with capital punishment for crimes, but also

5 Other known writers included Haji Kob, Haji Dam, Haji Wong-In, Wongchawiang, Thit Phet, Phlai Narin, Phlai Ngam, and Phaya Lo. Many of the *lamtat* authors adopted the Muslim title *Haji* (returned pilgrim to Mecca) in their pseudonyms, as the genre *lamtat* was originally associated with Muslim chanting, although they might not necessarily be Muslim. Most of these writers were probably "paper songsters" rather than vocal performers of the genre.

capitalized on horror and the fears of falling into hell as well as falling victim to criminals, thus cajoling them into religious charity – a practical purpose of the ceremony of *Thet Mahachat*.

Folksong reportage fostered and pandered to a popular hankering for scenes of violence and emotional vehemence. It familiarized graphic description and habituated its readership to literary horror, making it accessible to everyday mass consumption in distinct and innovative ways. In his study of the booklet industry, Jankasamepong (2004) argues that crime *lamtats* shared with fantastic tales the commonalities of moral decisiveness, the use of stock characters, the incorporation of magic and the supernatural, and the conveyance of Buddhist teachings, especially the karmic principle (112–113, 136). To be sure, Buddhist didacticism underlay nearly all true crime folksongs (for example, see Haji Khiat 1929, 1–4), and it was a convention in some of them that a fatal event was portended by bad omens such as a spider hitting itself on the wall, a barn owl or a vulture visiting the house, or animals and ghosts making eerie noises (see *Kro lek*, 17 May 1925, 977; 24 January 1926, 391; Haji Khiat 1949a, 1: 17).

However, I contend that the genre diverged remarkably from fantastic tales in their realist nature and sensationalist fervor. As a mode of media representation or storytelling, sensationalism is characterized by the gratuitous, vivid description of a scene or an event with dramatic techniques of detailing, enlargement, and intensification – all intended to create strong, often startling, impacts on its audience. In this light, the didacticism of news folksongs served not only as moral guidance to the audience but also a tacit justification for its overt presentation of heinous thrills. Indeed, folksong reportage, especially in the *lamtat* form, showed a persistent preoccupation with violent deaths and accidents, as it devoted its pages to harrowing scenes of pain, killing, and calamity much more frequently and more intensely than fantastic tales did. Before launching into the main story of an attempted murder, Haji Kop's *lamtat* book *Nang sao yong pen huet?* [Did Miss Yong Have Asthma?] (1930) listed a series of recent sensational incidents, including a man's suicide by jumping off a building, a Thai prince throwing himself off a running train, another Thai prince's death from accidentally shooting himself, and seventeen victims dying in fire caused by an explosion at a film company (Haji Kop 1930, 2–4). Moreover, while fantastic tales, most of which were reproduced from traditional manuscripts, were set in the durative time of the mythical world, true crime folksongs presented incidents of violence and corruption in modern worldly time, usually with dates specified. Correspondingly, the latter's characters, stereotypical though they might be such as bandits and murderers, were real-life individuals whose social types they represented could be encountered by the reader. Their moralism was thus directed specifically toward the ongoing

depravities of modern society rather than the ultimate victory of good over evil often found in fantastic odysseys.

Folksong newsprints occupied a unique position in modern Siam's media ecology precisely because of such aesthetic qualities and their affective affordances. Indeed, as many scholars point out, one of the defining characteristics of sensationalism is its engagement with the senses and its production of visceral effects such as shock and horror, evoking movements or palpitations on the audience's bodies (Frisken and Soderlund 2022, 1; Shaya 2000, 3; Wiltenburg 2004, 1379). The Thai novelist Kanchana Nakkhanan wrote that a *lamtat* on Bunpheng's murders – most likely Haji Khiat's version – was so compelling that its readers became scared of iron chests (Nakkhanan 1993, 263). Hence, folksong newsprints were the quintessential media of sensational appeal and gothic affect in that they served the purposes not only of truth telling but also of macabre astonishment and melodramatic didacticism. Their attention-grabbing subtitles or headlines on the front covers usually highlighted the recency of the incidents, the extraordinarily riveting character of the stories, and/or the flavor of their writing styles: "immensely strange and rowdy" (ท้องเรื่องครึ้นโครมพิศดารเหลือรับ) (Haji Khiat 1949b; 1949c), "a mysterious and complex story" (เปนเรื่องลึกลับซับซ้อน) (Haji Khiat 1949a), "a world-exciting story" (เปนเรื่องที่ทำความตื่นเต้นให้แก่โลก) (Haji Kop 1949), "hot-and-fresh and quaking" (กำลังสดๆ ร้อน [ๆ] น่าหวาดเสียว) (Haji Khiat 1949d), "phrased deliciously and fun" (ว่าอย่างอร่อยแท้สนุกจัง) (Phlai Narin 1925), "hot-and-fresh, thrilling, and horrifying" (สดๆ ร้อนๆ โลดโผนสนุกสนานสยดสยอง) and "much more fun than anybody else's stories" (สนุกนักสนุกหนา ยิ่งกว่าเรื่องของใครๆ) (Phlai Narin 1928). Such dramatic subtitles set the affective horizon of expectation for their readership as to how the latter might find themselves stirred and enraptured by the crimes recounted. Their sensationalism was even more obvious when contrasted with the subtitles of fantastic tales in similar booklet forms, which underscored only their enjoyability and variety (see Bunsanoe 1988, 26–27).

In terms of literary and media techniques, true crime folksongs employed a wide range of sensationalist methods that included the lurid description of violence and death, the sentimental inclusion of histrionic monologues and direct dialogues, the virulent mockery and vilification of criminal acts and figures, and the use of aural devices from folksong conventions such as chorus insertion, among others. Their descriptive emphasis was typically on the imagery of "body-horror" (Halttunen 1998, 73), or the physiological realities of violence and death. Phaya Lo's murder *lamtat* described how a woman in Songkhla hung her seven-year-old daughter upside down and hit her head repeatedly with an axe, notwithstanding the defenseless cries of the girl (Nawigamune 2003, 104–106). Readers also learned from Haji Khiat, who

claimed to have witnessed Thongluean's execution, that she was struck with swords three times by three executioners, the first of whom missed her neck and hit her clavicle, making her scream in pain, before the third completely beheaded her (Haji Khiat 1925, 63–64). Increasingly common was the explicit description of cadavers in the wake of medical examination and autopsy as the state's medico-legal practices. Haji Khiat's *lamtat* on Thongluean included a physician's courtroom testimony that he cut open the stomach and lung of the victim to determine if she had drowned (Haji Khiat, 1925, 2: 35).

While all news folksongs spoke in the voice of the author-songster, some of them included plaintive soliloquies of the perpetrator, the victim, or the latter's family. A *lamtat* on Iron-Chest Bunpheng not only described the details of his shocking murders and the dead bodies discovered, but also expatiated on the grief of his first victim's wife, who lamented his abnormal delay in homecoming and subsequently his brutal death in her extended melodramatic monologues. "Who dared kill my husband, come cut my head off also" (Haji Khiat 1949a, 1: 26–31), for instance, was one of the author's fictitious embellishments intended to heighten the pathos and overall affective impact of the scene. Redolent of provocative repartee in oral folksong performance, sensationalist tactics in a number of texts also included the insertion of sexual innuendoes. Haji Khiat's *lamtat* on Bunpheng used the metaphor of a card game to refer to Bunpheng's lovemaking with his wife on the first night of their marriage (Haji Khiat 1949a, 2: 58). His *lamtat* on a crime of passion also likened sexual intercourse between a female victim and her killer to a badminton match (Haji Khiat 1927b, 5).

The vocal and rhythmic boisterousness characteristic of *lamtat* set both the literary convention of its writing and the affective atmosphere of its consumption, whether by reading or listening. Familiar rhymes and meters aided their audience to memorize parts of news songs. A reader remembered a couplet from a *lamtat* on the murder of a prostitute several decades later because of its bawdy alliteration and rhyming (Semanin 1996, 2: 198). Meanwhile, the distinct form of *lamtat* allowed for heteroglossia and interchange in news reporting, with the author-songster narrating the story and the chorus responding every now and then, adding or asking for more details and giving impassioned responses. Each stanza of the soloist's narration was normally followed by vocables or a short expression by the chorus. In a *lamtat* on the murderess Thongluean, for example, when the author sang that authorities examined the victim's body and found a bruise on her throat, the chorus responded, "Did the little girl accidentally drown, or was she killed by someone?" (Haji Khiat 1925, 2: 26–27). In addition, like regular antiphonal performances, *lamtats* on murder and banditry were littered with swearwords and derisive epithets to lambast the culprit's offense and demeanor. A *lamtat*

on Bunpheng called him "abominable" with no fear of hell in hosting a gamble in the temple, and insulted his female victim as "a fermented fish sludge woman" because of her involvement in it (Haji Khiat 1949a, 1: 13).

Together with news reportage in prose, folksong newsprints helped recreate the criminal as a modern category or social type in Siam, especially through the reproduction of legal deliberation. Rather than attributed the crime narrated to the workings of *karma* as found in traditional literature or fantastic tales, true crime folksongs paid attention to the individual character of the criminal and the specific nature of the crime, usually presenting the offender as a social anomaly and yet an object of moral contemplation and sometimes sympathy. At the same time, folksong newsprints helped attune their readership to Siam's modernized modes of criminal justice and law enforcement, through which illegal acts and individuals were determined, penalties meted out, and compensation awarded. Legal terms such as *lak than* (evidence), *kham fong* (indictment), *chettana kha* (premeditated design), *hai kan patiset* (plead not guilty), and *khadi mi mun* (*prima facie* case) were scattered in many folksong texts (for example, see Haji Kop 1930, 9; Haji Khiat 1925, 2: 28–29; Thit Phet 1948, 3: 63).

Despite the genre's shift in content and form – from anti-graft muckraking to violent crime reporting, and from multi-generic magazines to single-subject chapbooks, sensational news balladry retained elements of sociopolitical criticism and disruptive tendencies, albeit to a lesser degree. In *Ai suea yoi chai yak* [Yoi the Inhumane Bandit], the author called out the quietism of local authorities in an area under active banditry (Haji Khiat 1927a, 6–7). Another *lamtat* on urban swindling claimed that the gamut of con artists cut across classes, even naming a Thai prince as an example (Haji Khiat 1949e, 4). However, even as transgressions of moral standards were harshly chastised in these generally didactic texts, their narrative tones and sentiments were often ambiguous, straddling their sympathy or admiration toward opposing actors, particularly in the case of banditry. In Haji Khiat's *Ai suea phon* [Bandit Phon], the two wives of the eponymous outlaw in Ratchaburi helped him fight the police but were both shot to death. The text praised their sacrifice of lives for their husband, commending them as women of a rare type in the world (Nawigamune 2003, 77).

Likewise, in *Ai kan phu wiset* [Kan the Sorcerer], Phlai Narin recounted the story of Kan, a bandit who led seven followers armed with swords to rob a village in Saraburi in November 1925. They were confronted with police officers, who shot Kan but their guns jammed purportedly because of his magic. Faced with Kan "the tiger," as the author put it, the police turned into "fishing cats." Two of them were killed by the bandits while the rest fled from

the scene (Phlai Narin 1925, 5–6). The tones of the *lamtat* alternated between admiring Kan's fearlessness and denouncing his wickedness as it highlighted his quality of *nakleng* (rogue toughness). Moreover, while extolling the virtues of the police, the text also depicted their death graphically: Kan attacked one of the policemen with his sword, bloodily cutting off his arm and head. His torso lay in convulsion in the field, unattended ("แขนขาดปลิวหวอ ถูกทิ้งคอวินาศ หัวหลุดสบั้นขาด โลหิตลาดละเลง ลงดิ้นกระเสือก กระเดือกแดขัน ปลิดชีพชีวัน ปล่อยให้ร่างวังเวง") (Phlai Narin 1925, 8). Nevertheless, the text concluded with a condemnation of the culprits and an elegy for the dead policemen (Phlai Narin 1925, 20). Indeed, whereas early *lamtat* newsprints were unrestrained in their broadsides against those in power, murder and banditry folksongs often communicated in support of state authorities. In a similar vein, two *lamtats* by different authors on the controversial case of Narin Klueng, who ordained girls into Buddhist monkhood against male monopoly in Siam, also harmonized with the state in fulminating against his unorthodoxy (Haji Kop 1949, 1: 16–19; Wongchawiang 1929, 3–5).

From nearly the beginning of its appearance in book form, the genre's stock themes and elements were broadened to encompass supernatural horror, presumably to enhance its commercial pull and affective valence. In the third installment of Haji Khiat's *lamtat* on the executed murderess Thongluean, the ballad reported on a rumor of her revenant ghost haunting her neighborhood. After witnessing her beheading, Haji Khiat was beset with such a frightening vision of ghostly Thongluean that he got sick, just as local residents of all ages were also tricked and scared by her ghost. After his recovery, the author traveled by boat and came across a beautiful woman whom he began to flirt with, but her head disappeared once he tried to hug and kiss her. He then kicked her and woke up from a dream, realizing that he had just kicked his own wife (Nawigamune 2004, 184–189). Similarly, in *Pisat bunsi kamlang khanong* [Bunsi the Ghost in Action], Haji Khiat went on an investigative excursion to Khlong Toei where the ghost of Bunsi, the female victim of a murder, was reputed to have frightened local people. He claimed to have seen two celestial maidens and hit on one of them but suddenly woke up to find that it was all a dream (Haji Khiat 1949d).

While the gothic stories of Thongluean and Bunsi mixed horror with humor and a hackneyed dénouement, two *lamtat* books published in 1929 drew on, and in turn contributed to, the popularity of the tale of Mae Nak as the best-known ghost story in the Thai gothic tradition (see Nawigamune 2022a). According to the common legend, Mae Nak was a Thai woman who lived perhaps in the mid-nineteenth century and died during pregnancy or in childbirth while her husband was away at war. He returned to live with her

and the baby without realizing that both were dead, and when their neighbors tried to intervene or tell the truth, she scared them away or even put them to death. Both versions – one by Haji Khiat, the other by Phaya Lo – depicted Mae Nak's actions and appearances in a fast-paced, dramatic manner, featuring scenes of shocking manifestation and violent confrontation. "Once [the novice] swung his knife," Haji Khiat wrote, "her hand was chopped off. She asked him to reconnect it, but he bolted off and encircled himself with holy threads. Yet he could not escape her and, refused reconnection, she broke his neck to death" (พอฟันฉับเสียงฉาด มือมันขาดทันที มันให้ต่อกินดี เฉรก็หนีอกตั้ง เอาสายสิญจน์ล้อมต นยังไม่พ้นเลยพ่อ มันให้ต่อไม่ต่อ เลยหักคอมรณัง) (quoted in Nawigamune 2022a, 877). In the other version, the body-horror of spectral grotesquerie was more salient: "She pulled apart her chest, showing off her ribs, and at one moment appearing normal, all of the sudden her face turned ghostly, sticking out her lengthy tongue and hollowing her eyes. Vaingloriously, she chased after and scared people witless" (มีแหกอกเปิดโว่ง เห็นซี่โครงซี่ๆ เดี๋ยวทำเปนคนดี เดี๋ยวเปนผีเปลี่ยนพักตร์ เที่ยวแลบลิ้นตั้งวา เที่ยวแหกตากลางบ้อ ไล่เขาวิ่งดีฝ่อ กำเริบล้อหลอกหนัก) (quoted in Nawigamune 2022a, 890).

On top of their poetic devices and grisly realist storylines, folksong newsprints emerged after the advent of photography in Siam and capitalized on its widened availability. Several chapbooks and, to a lesser extent, magazines showed photographs of criminals, their relatives, police officers, or even bounty posters on their front covers (see Figures 1–2; *Kro lek*, 14 February 1926, 395; *Thong thai*, 19 October 1926, 631; Phlai Narin 1927). In *Ai suea um khao krung* [Bandit Um Entered Bangkok], a photograph of the eponymous bandit's lifeless body was put on its cover in juxtaposition with that of his wife's grim face (Figure 2). Such photographs were brought together with references to real names, places, and events to underscore the veracity of the stories told, distinguishing such crime narratives from crime and detective fiction as well as from fantastic tales sharing the market and physical format. They also provided a visual access to the criminal incident through which the reader might imagine its central figures and feel its immediacy, or rather a virtual sense of close observation, at a safe distance.

Folksong newsprints served as media objects for broadcasting news and narrating the "history of the present," as it were, to unlettered and ordinary audiences. Some of the texts might have been used as ready-made scripts for actual vocal performances. A hint to such usage is an unpublished manuscript of true crime folksongs written probably in the 1940s by a professional songster himself (Nawigamune 2022b; see also Jankasamepong 2004, 105). However, folksong newsprints could have been read aloud with or without folksong melodies, or read in silence with or without melodies,

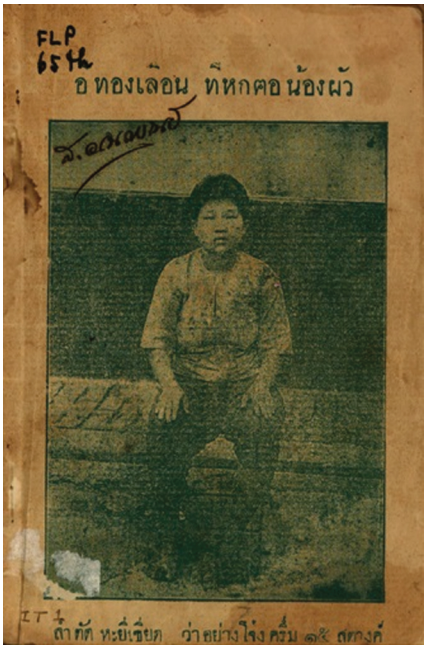

FIGURE 1 The front cover of Haji Khiat's *lamtat* book *I thongluean chai yak* (1925)

FIGURE 2 The front cover of Phlai Narin's *lamtat* book *Ai suea um khao krung* (1928) PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN LIBRARY.

depending on the preferences of their consumers and the occasions of consumption.[6] Given the large number of copies disseminated – exceeding tens of thousands – many, if not most, of the sensational news booklets must have fallen into the hands of those who could only read, or listen to reading, without tunes.

5 Conclusion: The Decline and Afterlife of Folksong Newsprints

After half a decade in tremendous outpouring and favor, the folksong newsprint went into decline by the 1930s largely due to the inexorable rise of the vernacular novel – a new literary form that gained traction at the same time but outlived and overshadowed it in terms of extensive popularity. The 1940s witnessed the last batch of crime folksong booklets, most of which were reprinted from old publications decades earlier (see, for example, Haji Khiat 1949a; 1949b; 1949c; 1949d; 1949e). Hence, the stories were true crime legends from the olden days rather than fresh news of the time, and the sensation of enlivened contemporaneity was accordingly diluted. Although journalists were said to have still employed folk prosodies in their writings (Khommanasanti 1954, 52), the folksong newsprint effectively died out after the Second World War in the wake of the spectacular evolution and expansion of sensationalist mass media. Newspapers and magazines were awash with sensationalized reports of mayhem and extraordinary incidents with even more explicit images, especially in magazines specialized in true crimes such as *Lang khao atyakam*. High-profile bandits and their depredations – a major subject of folksong reportage in the 1920s – resurged in leading postwar periodicals such as *Sayam samai* and *Chat thai athit*, both of which featured investigative reports of notorious banditry in their early issues (Nai Chanthana 1947; Sirisayan 1948). This suggests its enduring marketability in a new period of armed violence, social upheaval, and print sensationalism, as encapsulated in the emerging literary genre of crime-and-violence romance (see Soontravanich 2005).

This paper proposes to understand true crime folksongs first and foremost as sensationalist media commodities that offered balladic tales of violence and corruption to the audience and molded a modern appetite for realist

6 A contemporary reader of fantastic tales in book form, a sister genre of folksong newsprints, wrote that he read the former genre in silence without tunes and was sometimes asked by illiterate elderly women in his neighborhood to read it aloud to them with no tunes (Bunsanoe 1988, 27–29).

horror and gothic in Siam. Although it may seem outmoded to present-day observers, the folksong newsprint in its heyday was a recognizably modern creation with a new aesthetic of macabre perceivability and affective intensification. It shows a connection and cross-pollination between folk poetry, quasi-religious recitation, news reportage, and ghostlore. With its hybrid poetics derived largely from folk vocalism, the genre offered an efficacious means for vitriolic attacks on criminal figures, whether corrupt officials or murderers. It also indexed a shift in the gothic experience in modern Siamese society where horror objects became sellable oddities of ambivalence under the auspices of the state's management of public morbidity, new technologies of information and communication, and the expanding print industry. Undoubtedly, true crime folksongs served to impart moral values to their audience and helped familiarize them with certain forms of criminal justice and law enforcement. Yet more importantly, their intensity and excess captivated and cultivated Thai public sensibilities, training popular responses toward horror objects and scenarios in anticipation of increasingly graphic media in years to come.

Like the horrendous presentation of vicious crimes in folksong reportage, the sheer horror of the 6 October 1976 massacre at Thammasat University and Sanam Luang, with public lynchings and mutilations of corpses, drew a mixed crowd of gawkers who might or might not approve of the killing and maiming, and yet might have found enigmatic excitement in witnessing such inhumane atrocities. To understand the rubbernecking of the masses that morning, it is necessary not only to probe into ideological divides, political (mis)understandings, and right-wing machinations but also the Thai culture of sensationalism – as constantly shaped by the dynamic configuration of mass media – of which folksong newsprints were a lost cornerstone.

Sensationalist balladry also served as an old harbinger of modern Thai horror stories (see Naisupap 2018) and ghost comics (see Chutikamoltham 2014), both of which capitalized on and appealed to the horror and gothic sensibilities that the former had helped inculcate in the public. Furthermore, various forms of folk singing were later adopted and developed by commercial artists to recount sensational events to their miscellaneous audiences. Suicide and bomb planting, for example, were narrated in a modern *lae* song by the northeastern music band Phetphinthong (Phetphinthong 2012) while fatal car accidents were the subject matter of a song by the *luk thung* singer Phloen Phromdaen (Phloen Phromdaen 2014). Although folksong chapbooks ceased publication by mid-century, their characteristic musicalization of sensational news lived on in popular entertainment several decades later.

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