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เล่ห์ กล มนต์ คาถา:  
ไซยศาสตร์ประยุกต์กับการทำงานของตำรวจ  
Applied Sciences for Hedging Risk and  
Anticipating Outcomes in Police Work

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## บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษาประวัติศาสตร์โดยสังเขปเกี่ยวกับความรู้สึกนึกคิด (*mentalités*) และสังคมของไทยขึ้นนี้ วิเคราะห์จากมุมมองทั้งด้านมานุษยวิทยาและศาสนาศึกษา ทั้งนี้ โหราศาสตร์ โหราเลขศาสตร์ (numerology) และศาสตร์ประยุกต์อื่นๆ ที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการพยากรณ์และการป้องกันเป็นตัวกำหนดการตัดสินใจในชีวิตประจำวันของเหล่าทหาร ตำรวจ อาชญากร นักธุรกิจและนักการเมืองในประเทศไทย ศาสตร์ประยุกต์เหล่านี้ช่วยแนะแนวทางเรื่องขอทุกข์ยามและขั้นตอนการดำเนินการ โดยรายละเอียดจากการศึกษาชีวิตของพลตำรวจตรี ชูณพันธ์รัชราชเดช (พ.ศ. 2441-2549) จะแสดงให้เห็นถึงประเด็นหลักเหล่านี้

**คำสำคัญ:** ประวัติศาสตร์, ตำรวจ, ความเสี่ยง, ความไม่แน่นอน, โหราศาสตร์, การทำนายโชคชะตา

## Abstract

This brief historical study of Thai *mentalités* and society draws on perspectives from anthropology and religious studies. Astrology, numerology, and other applied sciences of prognostication and protection shape everyday decision-making in Thailand for soldiers, police, criminals, business people and politicians. The applied sciences offer guidance on timing and how to proceed. Details from the life of Police Major General Khun Phantharakratchadet (1898-2006) will illustrate the main points.

**Keywords:** history, police, risk, uncertainty, astrology, divination

This brief historical study of Thai *mentalités* and society draws on perspectives from anthropology and religious studies. Astrology, numerology, and other applied sciences of prognostication and protection shape everyday decision-making in Thailand for soldiers, police, criminals, business people and politicians, all of whom gamble in high-stakes activities that can have adverse consequences and may be life-threatening. I use the term science loosely in this context as a rough translation of the Indic term *śāstra*. In modern standard Thai, *śāstra* (*Th sat*) refers to bounded bodies of knowledge such as the academic disciplines as well as the applied sciences of prognostication.<sup>2</sup> People turn to these applied sciences in order to anticipate outcomes, dispel fear, and avoid disaster. Risk rules the universe of human affairs, and life is unpredictable and uncertain. The applied sciences offer guidance on big decisions about timing and how to proceed: when to schedule a wedding or a house warming; whether or not to purchase a block of land; when to schedule a coup on a day that has auspicious numbers; when to catch a thief.

I am writing a biographical study of a fabled Thai lawman, Police Major General Khun Phantharakratchadet (1898-2006), born in Nakhon Si Thammarat, whose interest in what Thai language speakers call *saiyasat*, knowledge of the occult for personal empowerment, will illustrate the main points.

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<sup>2</sup> For more detailed discussion of *śāstra* see Craig J. Reynolds, “Thai Manual Knowledge: Theory and Practice,” in *Seditious Histories: Contesting Thai and Southeast Asian Pasts* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), chapter 10.

Self-mastery was always part of mainstream Buddhism in Siam.<sup>3</sup> Khun Phan's father was a teacher and traditional healer for the local elite; in his maternal line there was a brahman in the family. During his illustrious police career over two decades from 1930 to 1950, he is said to have been responsible for the deaths of sixty-two bandits and criminals. An early academic study published before Khun Phan passed away lists the names and dates of the kidnappers, robbers, murderers and bandits he and his team killed.<sup>4</sup> The police in Khun Phan's time could be as barbarous as the criminals. Just after the Second World War "Sua Phat," a particularly notorious murderer and bandit, was fatally shot by police and decapitated, his severed head returned as a trophy and impaled in front of the *cedi* at *Nakhon Pathom*.<sup>5</sup> In the mid-south during the 1940s and 1950s local people dreaded policemen like Khun Phan, fearing them more than civil servants who were addressed as "sir" or "boss" (*nai*) in the colonial manner, according to a

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<sup>3</sup> Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, "Protection and Power in Siam: From *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* to the Buddha Amulet," *Southeast Asian Studies* 2, no.2 (Aug. 2013): 231.

<sup>4</sup> Wira Saengphet, *Phumpanya kanprapram khong phon tor tor khun phantharakratchadet* [*The Local Wisdom of Khun Phantharakratchadet for Maintaining Law and Order*] (Bangkok: Thailand Research Fund, 2001), Appendix 1, 185-187. Thirty-four of these were killed over a four-month period (29 Dec. 1946-27 Apr. 1947) just after the end of World War II.

<sup>5</sup> Okha Buri, *Thot rahatlap khun phantharakratchadet mueprap khamangwet* [*Decoding Secrets of Khun Phantharakratchadet, the Lawman with the Vedic Powers*] (Nonburi: Uthayan Khwamru, 2007), 108.

local man who remembers those days.<sup>6</sup>

Several times in his career Khun Phan was posted to three provinces in Thailand's mid-south. Nakhon Si Thammarat, Phatthalung and Songkla hug the shores of a network of lakes that once formed a passageway for ocean-going vessels until the northern part of the waterway silted up at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> At the very beginning of his career in the early 1920s Khun Phan was initiated in the secret *saiyasat* knowledge of Wat Khao Or, an old monastery located in the caves of a limestone hillock rising up from the plain in Phatthalung. For generations abbots at the monastery had been custodians of the secret knowledge valued for the prevention of disease and protection against sharp weapons. To be accepted for the ritual the initiate was required to pledge himself to a code of behaviour. He had to be a person of truthfulness and integrity, he should never curse his mother, he should leave other men's wives alone, and he must perform good works. A man needed to be ordained before he became fully a man. The initiation at Wat Khao Or was a rite of passage to become a moral man, a proper man. In Thai language this man is called a *chai chatri*, and he is a conduit for *saiyasat* knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with Mr. Anan Ratanawong (b. 1932), Tambon Sakaeo, Tha Sala District, Nakhon Si Thammarat, 6 Dec. 2014. Mr. Anan is a former headmaster of a local school and interviewed Khun Phan for a college essay.

<sup>7</sup> Craig J. Reynolds, "Rural Male Leadership, Religion and the Environment in Thailand's Mid-South, 1920s-1960s," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 42, no.1 (Feb. 2011): 48-49.

<sup>8</sup> The initiation ritual is described in Ran Niranam, *Jom witthaya yut phutthakkhom khao or saolin haeng muang Phatthalung* [The Khao Or Mas-

The *saiyasat* knowledge of Wat Khao Or had Vedic roots, the monastery once the residence of brahmans. The mid-south had a history of Brahmanism. In the late eighteenth century brahmans from Nakhon Si Thammarat supplied the ritual consultants for the royal coronation of the first Bangkok king, and until quite recently, a brahman family also lived in Phatthalung. This part of Thailand's mid-south, a crossroads of inter-Asian trade from the middle of the first millennium CE, has left Tamil inscriptions, Visnu images, ruins of Saivite temples, and evidence of Mahayana Buddhism long before the Tai peoples entered the historical record. Local historians from Khun Phan's hometown like to point out that the limestone hill housing the cave complex at Wat Khao Or has the shape of a *sivalingam* as if Indic civilization had been stamped onto the landscape.<sup>9</sup> A monumental *sivalingam* carved from a natural outcrop at the Khao Kha Hindu complex north of Nakhon Si Thammarat city is emblematic of how the Indic world was localised in the densely forested slopes of the peninsu-

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*ters of the Science of Struggle and Buddhist Incantations: The Shaolin of Phatthalung*] (Bangkok: Wasi Khri-echan, 2007), 90–95. A little manual that explains the principles of this ideal male type is W. Jinpradit, *Jutmungmai kong chaichatri [How to Be a Chai Chatri]* (Bangkok: Hosamutklang 09, 1996). The manual, which includes incantations for various occasions, derives its authority from brahmanic rituals and practices.

<sup>9</sup> Chali Sinlaparatsami, "Ruang khao or: mahawitthayalai phram haeng suwannaphum [On Khao Or: The Golden Peninsula's Brahmanic University]," Academic Paper, number 446, 2007, privately published. Mr. Chali, who first presented his paper on local radio, is an independent scholar who teaches school in Chawang District, Nakhon Si Thammarat.



la. New archaeological research has established a more certain chronology for Tambralinga, Nakhon Si Thammarat's predecessor state, from the middle of the first millennium CE.<sup>10</sup>

Khun Phan had a talent for establishing networks wherever he was posted. Respect and awe at his abilities accumulated in steady increments and made him well-known in the district. It is thus not surprising that after his retirement in 1964 the Democrat Party approached him to stand as MP in Nakhon Si Thammarat in the elections of 1969. He easily won the seat and retained it until November 1971 when the military government dissolved parliament and abolished political parties. Before he stood up to give his campaign speeches he would meditate to compose himself.<sup>11</sup> But Khun Phan was not a talented orator in the political style of southern Thai campaigning; he was not very good at discrediting his opponents by playing their foibles and flaws for laughs. The Democrats dumped him in the 1974 election, and he ran instead in M. R. Kukrit Pramote's Social Action Party which won eighteen seats and formed the government. He did not win his seat, and his political career was finished.

After his retirement from the police force, Khun Phan became a notable in his hometown, and he was invited to preside at local rites and public ceremonies. When the city pillar shrine was renovated in 1987, funds for the construction came from

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<sup>10</sup> Wannasarn Noonsuk, "Kingdom on the Beach ridges: A Landscape Archaeology of Tambralinga in Peninsular Siam," *Asian Perspectives* 52, no.2 (2014): 268-299, especially p. 292 and Fig. 23.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Mr. Bunsong Chamnankit, Trang, 24 Sept. 2009.

sales of a novel amulet, the Jatukham Ramthep, conjured out of the region's Indic heritage. Senior police officers Khun Phan and Sanphet Thammathikun were key sponsors of the event.<sup>12</sup> The trade in this amulet led to a lucrative cult which reached its peak in the last five years of Khun Phan's life when he acquired a new kind of fame. The Jatukham image is what some Thai speakers would call *khaek* meaning brahmanic or Hindu. The deity, resting on the coils of a naga serpent, protects and guards the Buddha, but the protocols for the Jatukham's sale and purchase are different from the protocols that apply to Buddha images. The deity can be used in fund raising for hospitals and schools, for example, or it can be displayed in commercial establishments such as restaurants. At Khun Phan's cremation in February 2007, his reputation and the value of the Jatukham deity soared. Loss of life was narrowly avoided as the crowd of 200,000 nearly stampeded at the announcement that a medallion bearing the policeman's image would be distributed to the assembled mourners. This was a rare instance when an ordinary citizen, rather than a member of the royal family or a famous monk, had a medallion struck in his image.

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<sup>12</sup> Phirayu Diprasoet, comp., *Khwanjing lae khwamlap thi maikhoe mi khrai ru jatukhamramthep* [Previously Unknown Truths and Secrets of Jatukhamramthep] (Bangkok: Ban Phra Athit, 2007), 53-56.

## Religion and Sciences of Prognostication

Astrology, ancestor worship, devotions to guardian deities and mountain sprites, numerology, local variants of Chinese geomancy (*feng shui*), spirit possession, herbal therapies, and love magic feature in religions across Southeast Asia. Indonesian shamans (*dukun*), Malay spirit mediums (*bomoh*) and Filipino male and female sorcerers (*babaylan*), dating back to pre-Spanish times, are the custodians of this knowledge of empowerment.<sup>13</sup> These religious specialists are shamans able through ritual to unlock the special powers inherent in the landscape. In Thailand practitioners of the sciences of prognostication and healing are usually monks, or ex-monks. In the northeast, for example, the masters of the knowledge of empowerment and spiritual and bodily healing are known as *mo phi*, *mo wicha*, or *mo tham*.<sup>14</sup> Sometimes the *mo tham* are called folk brahmans. Such specialists are often thought

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<sup>13</sup> Reynaldo C. Ileto, “Religion and Anticolonial Movements,” in Nicholas Tarling (ed.), *The Cambridge history of Southeast Asia*, volume 2, part 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 193–244.

<sup>14</sup> Hayashi Yukio, *Practical Buddhism among the Thai-Lao: Religion in the Making of a Region* (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2003), Chapter 5, “The Buddhism of Power and Mo Tham in Northeast Thailand,” and Hayashi Yukio, “Spells and Boundaries in Regional Context: *Wisa* and *Thamma* among the Thai-Lao in Northeast Thailand,” in Hayashi Yukio and Yang Guangyuan (eds.), *Dynamics of Ethnic Cultures across National Boundaries in Southwestern China and Mainland Southeast Asia: Relations, Societies and Languages* (Chiang Mai: Lanna Cultural Center, Rajabhat Institute, 2000), 169–188. *Mo*, Modern Standard Thai for “doctor,” is best translated here as ritual specialist or practitioner.

to belong only to the countryside, as if the rituals and their practitioners were unmodern or something of the past, but such is not the case, as Justin McDaniel has persuasively pointed out.<sup>15</sup> The elite lives in this terrain as well and makes use of the applied sciences of prognostication and protection to read the portents and decode the signs.

Some Buddhist thinking proscribes these sciences as non-Buddhist and as improper for monks. The book of the Vinaya compiled by a Thai prince-monk of the Dhammayutika reform school, for example, prohibits love magic, the predictive sciences, and alchemy as “animal-like knowledge.”<sup>16</sup> Some occult practices in the applied sciences fall under the category of black magic (*mon dam*) and clash with Buddhist teachings. Yet in recent Thai conflicts such as the violent events of 2008 and 2010, protestors of all political persuasions resorted to curses and sorcery to spook their opponents. The rituals, such as the blood spilling at the start of the 2010 demonstrations, were conducted in a highly theatrical manner designed to attract the attention of the international media. The specialists performing rituals dressed and performed like brahmans whose authenticity was challenged by the high-status brahmans in Bangkok who preside at royal cere-

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<sup>15</sup> Justin McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magic Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 101. McDaniel’s entire book can be read as a critique of the Thai urban conceit that these rituals and their practitioners are found only in the countryside.

<sup>16</sup> Vajirajanavarorasa, Prince-Patriarch, *The Entrance to the Vinaya* (Bangkok: Mahamakut Rajavidhyalaya Press, Bangkok, 1973). Volume 2.

monies.<sup>17</sup> The relationship between Buddhism and the sciences of prognostication is thus vexed. “Tantric” and “esoteric” are terms often used to describe this tangle of religious practices in Theravada Buddhist societies, but the appropriateness of the terms tantric and esoteric has come under challenge, because of the implication that these practices and beliefs are not mainstream.<sup>18</sup> In fact, the sciences of prognostication, personal empowerment, and healing are as much a part of Theravada societies as are the teachings of the Buddha. Indologists writing about religion in medieval India have rediscovered a movement in the sixth to the twelfth centuries of secret spells, coded language and radical meditational techniques comparable to contemporary Thai practices. These techniques were of particular value for warriors.<sup>19</sup> Indic

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<sup>17</sup> Erik Cohen, “Contesting Discourses of Blood in the ‘Red Shirt’ Protests in Bangkok,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 43, no.2 (June 2012): 216-233.

<sup>18</sup> Justin McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost*, 100-103. McDaniel spells out the Brahmanic-Buddhist cross of Thai religion in his “This Hindu Holy Man is a Thai Buddhist,” *South East Asia Research* 21, no.2 (June 2013): 191-209.

<sup>19</sup> Ronald M. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), chapter 5, and Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, “Protection and Power in Siam: From Khun Chang Khun Phaen to the Buddha Amulet,” *Southeast Asian Studies* 2, no.2 (Aug. 2013): 229. See also Peter Skilling, et al. (eds.), *How Theravada is Theravada? Exploring Buddhist Identities* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2012) and Kate Crosby, “Tantric Theravada: A Bibliographic Essay on the Writings of Francois Bizot and Others on the Yogavacara Tradition,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 1, no.2 (2000): 141-198.

terms and deities are integral to the conduct of these practices, which are arcane, and the knowledge that informs them jealously guarded by master teachers. From the perspective of scholars in religious studies, contemporary Buddhism in mainland Southeast Asia is now seen as belonging to a multidimensional tradition in which practices and beliefs leading to enlightenment and emancipation sit comfortably next to practices and beliefs aimed to achieve worldly ends.

By means of semiotic wizardry and ritual, human activities can be synchronized with the movements of the planets and the forces of nature. Special powers are latent in the conjunctions of time and place, what the Thai language calls *kala lae thesa*. If the conjunctions are interpreted correctly, special powers can be unleashed for human use. A Thai philosopher of science has argued that a society that drew legitimacy from these external sources was traditional.<sup>20</sup> But this is the perspective of modernity that consigns these practices to the past, converting tradition into past practice that lingers on in the present with no apparent function.

What explains the hold of these practices and the beliefs that underlie them in society today? When people face uncertainty or injury or death, how do these sciences help to confront the challenge? Risks need to be assessed, opportunities need to be identified, and decisions made on the basis of all relevant

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<sup>20</sup> Soraj Honladarom, *Witthayasat nai sangkhom lae watthanatham thai [Science in Thai Society and Culture]* (Bangkok: Institute of Academic Development, 2002), 103.

information. We venture into the realm of the uncertain, the unforeseen and the unpredictable to understand the measures that can be taken to schedule activities and to maximize the possibility of auspicious outcomes.

## Risk and Policing

Thai police are famous for their corruption and their sometimes comic ineptitude, but police work entails risks and uncertainty, and like their military compatriots, Thai police are keen consumers of amulets and charms in markets around the country.<sup>21</sup> Khun Phan's exploits in the provinces as well as the regimens he followed to keep himself safe and healthy offer an opportunity to see this other side of police work which is so different from the corrupt or comic side. Policing was, and still is, dangerous, life-threatening and hazardous in the more remote parts of the country. A hundred years ago, as Khun Phan began his career, infrastructure in the provinces was undeveloped. Roads and railways were limited, and travel from place to place by oxcart or on horseback was time-consuming and arduous. Much of the countryside was still forested, the jungle the home of tigers, venomous snakes and lethal fevers. Life was perilous

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<sup>21</sup> For a history of the amulet industry and the economic, technological, and socio-political factors that stimulated its growth see Chalong Soontravanich, "The Regionalization of Local Buddhist Saints: Amulets, Crime and Violence in Post-World War II Thai Society," *Sojourn* 28, no.2 (July 2013), 179-215.

for the unwary and unprepared.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Thailand, or Siam as it was then called, was lightly governed. The apparatus of centralized government established by the reforms of the 1890s took many decades to reach the provinces. Bandits and highwaymen roamed the countryside, and villages had to organize their own protection. In the absence of government, law and order was informal, maintained in rural districts by something that might today be called community policing or Neighbourhood Watch. Villagers relied on the headman and his supporters for defense of their lands, livestock, and families. Some of these supporters were *nak leng*, local toughs who were brave and loyal to friends and supporters. They carried themselves with dignity, and displayed what can only be termed Thai *machismo*. The *nak leng* rewarded the loyalty of their supporters and demonstrated a capacity for building alliances that made them natural leaders as village and circle headmen. Villagers liked to have *nak leng* around for protection, and if a *nak leng* ventured into another village to avenge a wrongdoing and stole livestock, he became a bandit, a thief (*jon phu rai*) in the eyes of the neighbouring villagers.<sup>22</sup>

Khun Phan was an agent of a new governmental presence when he received his first postings in the early 1930s, a representative of what Gramsci called political society, the “armour of coercion” protecting the state. As a native of the mid-south,

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<sup>22</sup> This double identity is reflected in the title Peerasak Chaidaisuk’s study of the *nak leng* type, *Chat sua wai lai* [Once a Tiger, Always a Tiger] (Bangkok: Matichon, 2008).



he spoke the local variant of the southern Thai dialect fluently, but when he was out and about in the districts he spoke Central Thai to demonstrate that he was an official of the central government.<sup>23</sup> He thereby differentiated himself from local *nak leng* who exercised authority vested in them by the community. Yet Khun Phan was a successful policeman not only because of the armor of coercion he wore by virtue of his appointment, but also because of spiritual and religious resources he had at his disposal to toughen his mind and body and, if circumstances permitted, to spook his adversaries. It was more than his police badge that commanded respect and instilled fear.

Policemen, and the rural masculine types with whom they associated, were risk takers. Risk and fear are familiar bedfellows and can be exciting, even erotic. Policemen may even revel in the risks they take and invite themselves closer to the action. Risk has its charm, the word charm in English deriving from the Latin *carmen* which means “incantation” and indicates an attraction.<sup>24</sup> Khun Phan was drawn to the hazards of the job and was willing to take chances, perhaps he even enjoyed taking chances and got a buzz out of it. In this respect he shared the traits of the *nak leng* of yore when the term referred to professional gamblers who hung around gambling dens.<sup>25</sup> In a broader perspective of their activities the *nak leng* were risk takers. They dared to do

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with Mr. Anan Ratanawong, 6 Dec. 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Lars Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Fear* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 73.

<sup>25</sup> Reynolds, “Rural Male Leadership,” 53.

something, win or lose. “Nothing ventured, nothing gained” is a loose translation of the Thai phrase *kla dai kla sia* that expresses *nak leng* bravado.

Gamblers distil the precarious nature of everyday life into a game of chance and get a thrill out of it. Numbers or other selections for play stimulate an emotive charge because of the expected reward. But risk carries a valence of adversity, and gamblers counter this adversity with various measures to give them hope of winning. Thai lottery gamblers select numbers from birthdates, anniversaries, and death dates of family members and friends. Lottery sellers do a thriving business at cremations where the numbers associated with the crematee hold a special attraction. A statistical study of Thai lottery gamblers aimed at countering the Western bias in the field of gambling studies came to the unsurprising conclusion that identifying promising numbers in this way gave the gamblers hope.<sup>26</sup> It is as if numbers selected in this way can absorb the anxiety about possible loss.

Like gamblers, who get a thrill out of the risk, investors talk about hedging risk. They take measures to minimize risk, for example by purchasing derivative investments in case their investments do not perform as they hope. For a fee that is a fraction of the cost of the underlying asset, they can buy a financial instrument that allows them to bet against their main investment

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<sup>26</sup> Vanchai Ariyabuddhipongs and Nathanat Chanchalernporn, “A Test of Social Cognitive Reciprocal and Sequential Effects: Hope, Superstitious Belief and Environmental Facts among Lottery Gamblers in Thailand,” *Journal of Gambling Studies* 23 (2007): 201-214.

in the event the asset depreciates in value. The fee reduces their profit, but in exchange they have protection or a “hedge” against the risk of a large loss. The hedge is a form of insurance; the fee for the derivative product is the insurance premium. Similarly, gamblers may place a bet on several animals in a cock fight or a buffalo fight or a horse race to ensure they can expect to win at least something even if they lose on their major bets. It is the job of investment advisers and actuaries who calculate the probabilities of loss for insurance companies to translate risk into statistics that quantify risk. In the seventeenth century methods of calculating probabilities, in the form of actuarial statistics, replaced predestination and fate, in the form of astrology and other early modern kinds of divination, as a way of anticipating outcomes, and sciences of prognostication lost their cultural value.<sup>27</sup> Yet no definition of risk meets the requirements of science.<sup>28</sup>

Khun Phan was adept at hedging his risks. One sure-fire way to reduce risk to nil is by cheating: by trading on insider information to buy and sell financial products; by drugging animals or taking bribes in the cock and buffalo fights; by rigging the roulette table or stacking the deck in the casinos. Khun Phan was adept at stacking the deck in the service of catching criminals. In effect, risk is rendered negligible.

Alternatively, the risk of loss may be ignored in the pursuit

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<sup>27</sup> Michael Wood, *The Road to Delphi: The Life and Afterlife of Oracles* (New York: Picador, 2004), 231.

<sup>28</sup> Niklas Luhmann, *Risk: A Sociological Theory* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1993), 6.

of specific ends. Peasant choice, analysed by research on risk in agricultural societies, suggests that what people maximize in their decision-making is not always cash or output. Other goals may be more important to them than profit – pleasing someone, for example, or demonstrating loyalty, or helping out a friend.<sup>29</sup> A well-known distinction in this literature is between risk, referring to “random situations in which the underlying probabilities are fully known,” and uncertainty, referring to “all other random situations, in which knowledge of the probabilities is less than complete.”<sup>30</sup> In order to deal with risks and uncertainties people may introduce information into their decision-making that might be thought non-rational, even superstitious. The selection of this information is not random or haphazard, however. Such information – the numbers to be purchased in a lottery, for example, the colour to wear on a particular occasion, the day of the week on which to do a particular thing, or the choice of a spouse or lover – may be selected on the basis of a numerological link between the decision-maker’s personal astrological details and the desired outcome.

The dichotomy of rationality / superstition is not particularly helpful in understanding and interpreting these decisions,

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<sup>29</sup> Sutti Ortiz, “Forecasts, Decisions, and the Farmer’s Response to Uncertain Environments,” in Peggy F. Barlett (ed.), *Agricultural Decision Making: Anthropological Contributions to Rural Development* (London: Academic Press, 1980), 193.

<sup>30</sup> Colin W. Clark, “Uncertainty in Economics,” in Elizabeth Cashdan (ed.), *Risk and Uncertainty in Tribal and Peasant Economies* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), 48.

because they are based on a system which, while not scientific, has its own logic. Some sociologists identify modernity as an outlook based on assessment of risk, and pre-modernity as one based on fate or predestination. Yet the persistence of certain practices that appear to be fate or destiny, practices from applied sciences such as astrology or divination, for example, in societies that are deemed to be modern in societies that are deemed to be modern, such as Thailand, suggests that these practices should be viewed as alternative ways of assessing risk.<sup>31</sup>

## Applied Sciences for Protection and Confidence

Much has been written about Thai practices of invulnerability, particularly by anthropologists.<sup>32</sup> Law officers and soldiers are drawn to these practices to protect them in policing and battle, and Khun Phan had a particular interest in them. He was a sickly child, and he was short even when a grown man. His secondary schooling had been interrupted by three years of illness with yaws, a debilitating and disfiguring disease that was often fatal before the discovery of penicillin. He survived, and having cheated death in this way, he had an uncommon mental toughness

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas M. Malaby, "Fateful Misconceptions: Rethinking Paradigms of Chance among Gamblers in Crete," *Social Analysis* 43, no.1 (Mar.): 143.

<sup>32</sup> A foundation text for this topic is Andrew Turton, "Invulnerability and Local Knowledge," in Manas Chitakasem and Andrew Turton (eds.), *Thai Constructions of Knowledge* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1991), 155-182.

for the rest of his life.<sup>33</sup> Serious childhood illness and his slight stature motivated him to strengthen his body by means of physical regimens and careful diet. After he recovered from yaws he moved to Bangkok and completed his secondary schooling at Wat Benchamaphopit where he excelled in sports and physical culture, especially boxing. When he entered the police academy at Nakhon Pathom his boxing talents were quickly recognized and he was soon appointed an instructor. He also became a skilled swordsman, able to perform the Thai sword dance, *krabi krabong*, and by the time he graduated from the police academy in 1929 Khun Phan was adept in the traditional Thai martial arts. During his posting to the northern province of Phichit he gave demonstrations of his martial arts skills for the local people. He became known for his sturdy constitution, his ability to work well under pressure, and his decisiveness.<sup>34</sup>

One might expect that guns played a large part in his police work, but in recounting his days in the police force, Khun Phan never boasted about his marksmanship, and there is no evidence he was a sharp shooter. Before the Second World War firearms in the countryside were old and unreliable. They often misfired. Khun Phans's own weapons of choice were the kris and an heirloom sword he acquired in one of his early postings. What he did brag about was his physical ability to overpower adversaries in

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<sup>33</sup> I thank Mr. Parinya Sanyadet for this insight, 1 Feb. 2012. Mr. Parinya is the proprietor of the Ban Khun Suek weapons museum in Thonburi that exhibits swords, sabers and lances used in ancient warfare.

<sup>34</sup> Wira, *Phumpanya prapram*, 68.

hand-to-hand combat. He subdued and captured his first outlaw after a bloody fight in which the men bit each other.<sup>35</sup>

In the initiation rite conducted at Wat Khao Or in Phatthalung, Khun Phan was immersed for fourteen days in an herbal bath, a prophylactic brew renowned for toughening the skin and strengthening the immune system. As part of the initiation rite when he took the oaths of loyalty and truthfulness he ingested potent substances, including black sesame oil. Wat Khao Or was the parent of a network of monasteries where graduates of the Khao Or “academy” had migrated, risen to senior positions, and passed on the Khao Or knowledge to others. This network meant that some of the policeman’s bandit adversaries, in search of some magic “armour” for themselves, had also been initiated into the secret knowledge. The knowledge included ways to become invisible by stealth, disguise and camouflage, and herbal therapies to suppress appetite that made possible long-range treks where food was in short supply. The bandits wanted a monk-teacher who could initiate them in even more powerful secret knowledge so they could do battle with the legendary lawman with their own magic “armour.” It was as if they wanted to be able to claim that their wizard was better than his wizard. In this battle of wits and wizardry, Khun Phan shared much in common with the bandits he pursued.

It would be naive to think that these medicinal therapies and invulnerability practices alone accounted for Khun Phan’s success as a policeman. I detect in the biographies and inter-

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<sup>35</sup> Reynolds, “Rural Male Leadership,” 55-56.

views a fair share of intimidation, bullying, and bluffing. Trickery should never be underestimated in Thai social relations when the stakes are high. With his police associates surrounding his adversary, Khun Phan could display overwhelming strength to force a lawbreaker to surrender. He had an executioner's tattoo on his fingers that warned others he could use his hands with lethal force. Folk brahmanism could also be a ruse, as in a case when Khun Phan performed a ritual in the home of a murdered man and pretended to commune with the beyond. He leaned over the corpse to hear the voice of the dead identify the murderer lurking in the crowd who then rushed terrified from the scene and was captured immediately by the police team.<sup>36</sup>

Many of the measures Khun Phan employed were simple matters of building confidence at the same time that he reduced the possibility of failure. Not least of these measures were his boasts of owning objects with special powers, including crises and amulets, some of them seized from the bandits he had captured. Objects with a quality known as *mettamahaniyom* are like magnets that can attract wealth, good fortune, loyalists, supporters, and women. *Mettamahaniyom* makes a man attractive, endowing him with charm (*saneh*) and appeal, erotic and otherwise. He had "the right stuff," in the words of one the early American astronauts, in this case, the stuff of manliness. Powers of protection are a manly thing.<sup>37</sup> Although not a trained social

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<sup>36</sup> Interview with Mr. Bunsong Chamnankit, Trang, 24 Sept. 2009.

<sup>37</sup> Irene Stengs, "Collectible Amulets: The Triple Fetishes of Modern Thai Men," *Etnofoor* 12, no.1 (1998), 55-76.



scientist, Khun Phan was an astute observer of the world of auspicious objects (*watthumongkhon*). Reading his 1976 compendium of lore for a southern Thai magazine on the qualities and powers of auspicious objects, one can hear him channeling the spirit of Khun Phaen, the protagonist in the epic Thai poem who excels in the mantras and formulas of empowerment.<sup>38</sup>

## Sciences of Prognostication and Uncertainty

Where knowledge of the probabilities is incomplete and cannot be calculated we are in the realm of uncertainty, which stimulates its own distinctive emotions when a big decision looms or routine is suddenly disturbed. When to proceed? Which way to go? Divination in all its forms is an applied science of prognostication that involves reading signs and making appropriate decisions in light of them in order to optimize outcomes. One of many methods of divination, astrology is a complex semiotic science that identifies the most auspicious conjunctions of time and place (*kala lae thesa*) to indicate when to schedule an event.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Khun Phantharakratchadet, “Khwaamchua thang saiyasat khong chao paktai [Saiyasat Beliefs of the Southern Thai People,” *Suwitcha* (10 Sept. 1976), reprinted in Samphan Kongsamut, *Pho lo to to khun phantharakratchadet: sing moe prap sip thit* [Pol. Maj. Gen. Khun Phantharakratchadet: The Lion-Lawman of the Ten Directions] (Bangkok: Wasi Khri-echan, 2007), Appendix 4, 470-492. Of Mr. Samphan’s many biographical studies of Khun Phan, this one, containing new interviews and documentation, is the most comprehensive.

<sup>39</sup> For a brief, lucid explanation of how these astrological calculations

In Burma during the second half of the nineteenth century a recent study has demonstrated that “prophetic readings” made by Burmese astrologists as the British pushed into the kingdom affected both Burmese and British strategic thinking. The reigning monarch, King Mindon (r. 1853-1878), was empowered by auspicious forecasts in his dealings with the British. Similarly, his capacity to influence events was adversely affected by inauspicious forecasts.<sup>40</sup> Palmistry, reading facial features, moles and freckles, interpreting dreams, or reading the landscape, are other ways of preparing oneself for what lies ahead.

In Thailand a key source for technical information on what signs to read and how to read them is the manual tradition of *phrommachat* (lit. *Brahma-born*).<sup>41</sup> The role of brahmans in Siamese statecraft and royal rituals such as coronations and the ploughing and swing ceremonies is well-documented, but the popular use of *phrommachat* knowledge in the management of daily affairs by people in all social classes has received comparatively little attention, at least in Western scholarship. An exception is a book by Quaritch Wales on divination that seems to be based almost

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are made see Baker and Pasuk, “Protection and Power in Siam,” 221-223.

<sup>40</sup> Aurore Candier, “Conjuncture and Reform in the Late Konbaung Period: How Prophecies, Omens and Rumors Motivated Political Action from 1866 to 1869,” *Journal of Burma Studies* 15, no.2 (Dec. 2011): 231-262.

<sup>41</sup> Nicholas Farrelly et al., “Practical and Auspicious: Thai Handbook Knowledge for Agriculture and the Environment,” *Asian Studies Review* 35 (June 2011): 244-246 and Patthamakorn Bunlasathaphon, *Khwaam ru nai tam-ra phrommachat [Knowledge in Brahmanical Manuals]* (Chiang Mai: MA thesis, Department of History, Chiang Mai University, 1996).

entirely on a *phrommachat* manual of 1885 that Wales located in the British Library.<sup>42</sup> In addition to horoscopes and other semiotic sciences such as palmistry and interpreting anatomical marks, the *phrommachat* manuals contain information on the colour associated with each day of the week, the animal associated with each year in the twelve-year cycle, the characteristics of the cardinal points, and the deities that preside over each one. The Hindu gods Shiva, Visnu, and Brahma are only a few of the deities whose actions have an impact on the terrestrial world.

The semiotic sciences and associated ritual practices, including tantric Buddhism or *saiyasat* that involved knowledge of the Vedas, were prevalent in both the elite and subaltern classes in the early Bangkok period. By the first half of the twentieth century, according to one study, there were 683 manuals in the National Library of Thailand concerning *saiyasat*; some of the *phrommachat* manuscripts dated from the very beginning of the Bangkok period in the late eighteenth century.<sup>43</sup> The semiotic sciences drew on brahmanic tradition and folk practices. Monks were custodians of this knowledge in the monasteries, and some aspects of this knowledge were congruent with Buddhist ritual and practices such as protective chants (*paritta*) and texts (*rakkha*). The encounter with the West and some of the more practical applications of Western science by the nobility and

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<sup>42</sup> H. G. Quaritch Wales, *Divination in Thailand: The Hopes and Fears of a Southeast Asian People* (London: Curzon, 1983), x-xi.

<sup>43</sup> Patthamakon, *Knowledge in Brahmanical Manuals*, 23. Details in the following discussion come from this unpublished study.

royal families around the middle of the nineteenth century had an impact on elite thinking. Members of the aristocracy became intrigued with clocked time, for example, which gradually changed conceptions of time by introducing mechanically measured time in contrast to auspicious / inauspicious time which had governed the way people made decisions and ordered their lives.

By 1900 *phrommachat* manual knowledge had been transformed by the printing press. For those entrepreneurial publishers who foresaw the popularity of a printed edition and invested in the venture, the book was hugely successful. The royal library had declined to publish the material, regarding it as outside its brief, and gave the manuscripts to private firms. What had previously been a corpus of knowledge scattered in manuscript versions in royal libraries and monasteries throughout the county was now collected into a single volume. One of the editions of this published compilation of *phrommachat* manuals, subtitled “The People’s Edition for Household Use and Self-instruction,” can be purchased in Thailand today; smaller editions can be found for sale in Bangkok and provincial bookstores.<sup>44</sup> “The People’s Edition” is an unwieldy tome of nearly 700 pages that bears the traces of its previous history as a heterodox compendium of lists, charts, chants, diagrams, drawings, sample horoscopes, and details about numerology including arcane information about Thai dominoes. The book is given the stamp of authority in the front

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<sup>44</sup> Thep Sarikhabut et al., *Tamra phrommachat chabap rat prajamban du duai ton eng* [The *Phrommachat Manual, People’s Edition for Household Use and Self-instruction*] (Bangkok: Thammaphakdi Press, 1978).

matter with photographs of the palace astrologer and other royal brahmans. The book's content is orderly within established categories, but overall the organisation is haphazard as if the various sections were tossed into the air and fell down in random order that was then published. The compiler's inclusion of everything – tables, charts, lists and graphics – contrasts with older manuals where the knowledge was rare and privileged, and required a master-teacher to explain.

The common perception of the *phrommachat* manuals is that they come from an earlier time and are retained in the present day rather as one might hold on to a family heirloom. Yet the continued use of astrology and other sciences for reckoning when and where to undertake an activity indicate that this knowledge continues to have contemporary relevance. For advice to the busy and overworked homemaker, a recent edition of the *phrommachat* manual contains tips on cleaning and home management, herbal medicine, and mental and physical health: how to remove unpleasant odours from the refrigerator; how to clean an iron of rust; how to keep ants out of the pantry.<sup>45</sup> The *phrommachat* of old typically had detailed information on when to schedule the humdrum chores of everyday life. Pages and pages are devoted to horoscopes and how to counter the adverse influences of one's birth sign.

The indefatigable Italian journalist Tiziano Terzani stated in

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<sup>45</sup> Saksit Sitthinan, *Tamra phrommachat chabap phrommalikhit chiwitkhun [The Phrommachat Manual: Brahma's Instructions for the Good Life]* (Bangkok: Liang Siang Press, n. d.).

his *A Fortune-teller Told Me* that “it is known,” on whose authority is not clear, that the counter-espionage agencies in China, Vietnam, India and South Korea have astrology units to anticipate what their adversaries as well as their allies will advise in given situations.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, in Indonesia the police use the same astrology manuals as the burglars to figure out when a crime is likely to be committed so they can apprehend the thief.<sup>47</sup> Scheduling, planning and timing are all-important in war and strategy both personal and political. In cultures where the numerical logics linking nature, human affairs and numbers have a hold on the imagination it is not surprising that the numbers should be such a serious matter for consideration.

Thai historical events are locked into the logic in unexpected ways. The military reporter for the *Bangkok Post*, Wassana Nanuam, has written several books showing how astrological logic affects the thinking of politicians, military officers, and national leaders in determining auspicious locations and the timing of important events. In *Secrets, Trickery, and Camouflage: Improbable Phenomena* she illustrates how astrological information has entered into important decisions in the promotion of high ranking military officers.<sup>48</sup> Consider the numbers. August

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<sup>46</sup> Tiziano Terzani, *A Fortune-teller Told Me: Earthbound Travels in the Far East* (London: Flamingo, 1998), 75.

<sup>47</sup> George Quinn, “The Javanese Science of Burglary,” *Review of Indonesian and Malayan Affairs* 9, no.1 (1975): 33-54.

<sup>48</sup> Wassana Nanuam, *Lap luang phrang phak phitsadan [Secrets, Trickery, and Camouflage: Improbable Phenomena]* (Bangkok: Post Books, 2009).

was the birth month of four prime ministers of Thailand who came from the army: Field Marshal Thanom Kitikhachorn (11th of the month); General Sujinda Kraprayoon (6th); General Prem Tinsulanond (26th); and General Surayut Chulanont (28th). Other high-ranking generals who have played key roles in the nation's politics recently and who were born in August include Sunthorn Khongsompong (1st), Mongkol Amphornphisit (10th), Chettha Thanajaro (23rd), and Arthit Kamlang-ek (31st). Banharn Silpa-archa, who was prime minister from 1995-1996, was 'officially' born on 19 August and Abhisit Vejjajiva, prime minister from 2008-2011, was born on 3 August. Anan Panyarachun, who was a cooperative choice for prime minister when the army needed a quick fix to restore its tattered reputation after the disastrous May 1992 killings in the streets of Bangkok, was born on 9 August. Some astrology manuals stretch the August sign into late July, in which case Chuan Leekpai and Thaksin Shinawatra, born on 28 and 26 July respectively, join the group.

The interpretation of this striking statistic must be that birth in August is auspicious for those who aspire to be prime minister, including Thai army officers who thereby gain an advantage over rivals born in less auspicious months. The Lion celestial sign is linked to the August 1887 founding of the Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy by King Chulalongkorn who is addressed by its graduates as Royal Father or Grandfather of the academy. For this

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Ms. Wassana gathers her evidence from interviews with “big-shot soldiers” (*bik thahan*). An extended review of the book is on the New Mandala blog: <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2009/11/06/review-of-wassana/>

reason, August-born army officers receive favourable treatment in appointment to rank. Three civilian prime ministers – or five, if we include the late July births – may also have benefited from this convergence by reassuring key power blocs that the country would prosper during their stewardship. One of the civilian prime ministers, Banharn Silpa-archa, born on 20 July, “changed” his birthdate from July to August so he could be born inside this galaxy of eminences.<sup>49</sup>

Astrology, a branch of divination commonly practiced in contemporary Thai political culture, is an applied science of anticipation. As such, it is closely associated with the concept of auspiciousness found in many Indian religions, including and especially in this context, Buddhism. Auspiciousness (Th *mongk-hon*), a comprehensive vision of the Buddhist religious life, is a way of dealing with uncertainty about the future.<sup>50</sup> Khun Phan’s 1976 little compendium of southern Thai lore that he had collected through the years is about auspicious times, places, directions, and objects.

## Human Optimism

Managers in governments and large corporations tend to overestimate their control over the course of developments that

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<sup>49</sup> I thank Dr. Yoshi Nishizaki of the National University of Singapore for this detail about Banharn’s birth date.

<sup>50</sup> Charles Hallisey, “Auspicious Things,” in Donald S. Lopez (ed.), *Buddhism in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 414.



might be harmful. Risk takers in general, be they gamblers or corporate managers, may even stiffen their resolve by rejecting data that indicates that events are not amenable to their control. Instead, they procure different data with more favourable estimates for what they want to do. On a personal level, many people overestimate their own competence while underestimating the competence of others.<sup>51</sup> This willingness to take risks can appear dangerous, which is why we entrust to others the responsibility for keeping situations under control. In effect, we off-load the risk, one of the reasons we are willing to be governed and accept formal political authority.

The idea that people in responsibility tend to overestimate their control over events and to underestimate the competence of others comes from research on the behavior of modern managers. Where does this confidence come from? Some time ago Bronislaw Malinowski gave voice to a connection between human optimism and mental and practical techniques to maintain that optimism. He termed these mental and practical techniques “magic,” which supplied man

with a number of ready-made ritual acts and beliefs, with a definite mental and practical technique which serves to bridge over the dangerous gaps in every important pursuit or critical situation. It enables man to carry out with confidence his important tasks, to maintain his poise and his

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<sup>51</sup> Luhmann, *Risk: A Sociological Theory*, 29: 112-113.

mental integrity in fits of anger, in the throes of hate, of unrequited love, of despair and anxiety. The function of magic is to ritualize man's optimism, to enhance his faith in the victory of hope over fear.<sup>52</sup>

"Man" for Malinowski was "primitive man," but his insight fits the facts of the way Khun Phan conducted his life. Magic or *sayasat* and the applied sciences of protection and prognostication are as much for bolstering confidence and maintaining optimism as they are for thwarting evil. Applied sciences for hedging risk and anticipating outcomes are not irrational methods for mastering the physical world by appealing to supernatural forces. Rather, they are methods based on the careful observation of signs – omens, freckles, the numbers associated with a cremation, clouds, planetary movements linked to birthdates – for assessing possibilities, identifying opportunities, avoiding adversity (and evil), and achieving success in the future. The applied sciences of prognostication offer grounds for optimism in the face of risk and uncertainty.

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<sup>52</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press; Glencoe, Illinois, The Free Press, 1948), 70.

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