

# Haunting Nation: Supernaturalism and Lao-ness in the Siri Paiboun Crime Series<sup>1</sup>

Panida Boonthavevej

*Faculty of Archaeology, Silpakorn University, Bangkok 10170, Thailand  
Email: boonthavevej@gmail.com, boonthavevej\_p@silpakorn.edu*

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## Abstract

This article is a study of Colin Cotterill's postcolonial crime series (2004-2016), employing the concepts of time, historical narrative and spectrality. Comprising eleven novels, it features Siri Paiboun, the national coroner of the newly-established Lao People's Democratic Republic. In the novels, not only does supernaturalism constitute a sign of repressed guilt, it also plays a crucial role in offering clues to Siri's unsolicited investigative enterprise. Nevertheless, supernaturalism transcends the fulfilment of personal needs. It helps reconfigure a shared consciousness among the Lao people, or Lao-ness, via history and time. Its haunting property discloses a possible coexistence of multiple temporalities, and, therefore, poses a considerable challenge to official historical narratives by allowing voices of the oppressed to be heard in counter-narratives.

**Keywords:** postcolonial crime fiction, Laos, nationalism, supernaturalism

## บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้เป็นการศึกษาอาชญากรรมนิยายแนวหลังอาณานิคมของคอลิน คอตเทอร์ริลล์ (2547-2559) โดยอาศัยแนวคิดด้านเวลา เรื่องเล่าทางประวัติศาสตร์ และสภาวะหลอน นวนิยายชุดนี้มีทั้งหมด 11 ตอน ตัวละครเอกคือ สิริ ไพบูน ซึ่งเป็นแพทย์ชันสูตรพลิกศพของสาธารณรัฐประชาธิปไตยประชาชนลาวที่เพิ่งสถาปนาระบบการปกครองใหม่ ในนวนิยายชุดนี้ สิ่งเหนือธรรมชาติไม่เพียงเป็นเครื่องแสดงถึงความรู้สึกผิดที่ผู้ก่อเหตุอาชญากรรมพยายามเก็บงำซ่อนเร้นไว้ แต่ยังมีบทบาทสำคัญโดยช่วยให้ตัวละครเอกสามารถ

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ไซปริศนาในคดีต่างๆ ได้ นอกจากนี้ บทบาทของสิ่งเหนือธรรมชาติยังก้าวพ้นขอบเขตของการตอบสนองความต้องการในระดับบุคคล โดยสิ่งเหนือธรรมชาติมีส่วนช่วยในการก่อร่างสำนึกร่วมในหมู่คนลาว หรือ สำนึกความเป็นลาว ผ่านประวัติศาสตร์และกระบวนการทางเวลา สภาวะหลอนดังกล่าวเผยให้เห็นถึงมิติทางเวลาที่มีมากกว่าหนึ่งและทับซ้อนกัน สภาวะเช่นนี้จึงเป็นการท้าทายเรื่องเล่าทางประวัติศาสตร์ที่เป็นทางการ โดยเปิดโอกาสให้ผู้ถูกกดขี่บอกเล่าเรื่องราวของตนเองจากมุมมองตรงกันข้าม

**คำสำคัญ:** อาชญากรรมหลังอาณานิคม ลาว ชาตินิยม สิ่งเหนือธรรมชาติ

## Introduction

The scholarship on postcolonial crime fiction started to emerge in the 1990s with the publication of Ed Christian's *The Post-colonial Detective* in 2001. It paved the way for further postcolonial studies of crime fiction by linguistically and geographically diverse writers, who use the genre as a tool to ask questions regarding social and historical conditions in formerly colonized countries. Subsequently, the development of crime fiction in relation to the social condition continued to draw more scholarship, exemplified by Stephen Knight's *Crime Fiction since 1800: Detection, Death, Diversity* (2010); John Scaggs's *Crime Fiction* (2005); Heather Worthington's *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction* (2011). Crime fiction has thus become a medium "to question certainties about the self, the mind and the ambient world" (Knight, 2010: 205). It has been deployed to criticize beliefs, ideas and values previously inherent in early detective fiction. With the proliferation of sub-genres-mysteries, detective fiction, hard-boiled crime fiction, police procedurals, crime thrillers, historical crime fiction-and new theoretical approaches, crime fiction tends to pose questions regarding race, gender, culture, and many others. The questions are resoundingly prominent in Ed Christian's edited collection, in which the contributing authors explore crime fiction and writers by considering how indigenous detectives in postcolonial countries combine their indigenous cultural knowledge with Western police methods in solving crimes, or how crime authors subvert or use the conventions of the genre (Christian, 2001: 3-4).

As the postcolonial approach is gaining ground, Christine Matzke and Susanne Mühleisen, in *Postcolonial Postmortems: Crime Fiction from a Transcultural Perspective*, lead an investigation into the state of a postcolonial nation and how colonial situations have been re-created and re-investigated from the perspective of the colonized (Matzke and Mühleisen, 2006: 8). They also entrust to the postcolonial detective the role of cultural arbitrator in contact zones, mediating cultural tensions, and that of the subversive force against cultural hegemony (Matzke and Mühleisen, 2006: 5-7). As the genre further diversifies, crime fiction studies finds itself posing questions that could have been left unanswered in the 1970s. Maurizio Ascari takes a closer look at supernaturalism in crime fiction in *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction: Supernatural, Gothic, Sensational*. His chapter on Victorian detectives and ghost stories establishes a connection between detection and supernaturalism in literature of the nineteenth century, throughout which “the paradigm of legal/scientific detection vied for supremacy with that of divine detection” and “the link between crime and the supernatural was fostered by the public interest in spiritualism” (Ascari, 2007: 55-57).

However, one of the most poignant questions posed by postcolonial crime fiction seems to be that of identity. It has drawn increasing scholarly attention as the identity of the perpetrator in “whodunits” of the Golden Age has been reformulated by postcolonialism. In *Multicultural Detective Fiction: Murder from the “Other” Side* (1999, Garland Publishing), Adrienne Johnson Gosselin and the contributors investigate issues surrounding community, culture and gender in Native American and African American crime fiction. Similar questions of cultural identity posed by postcolonial and transnational writers are addressed in *Sleuthing Ethnicity: The Detective in Multiethnic Crime Fiction* (edited by D. Fischer-Hornung and M. Mueller in 2003); *Questions of Identity in Detective Fiction* (edited by L. Martz and A. Higgie in 2007); *Investigating Identities: Questions of Identity in Contemporary International Crime Fiction* (edited by M. Krajenbrink

and K. Quinn in 2009); *Detective Fiction in a Postcolonial and Transnational World* (edited by N. Pearson and M. Singer in 2009); and *A Companion to Crime Fiction* (edited by C. J. Rzepka and L. Horsley in 2010).

Meanwhile, the scholarship on postcolonial crime fiction in Southeast Asia has been marked by its paucity. In “Ethnic postcolonial crime and detection (Anglophone),” Christian (2010) briefly mentions crime fiction set in the Philippines. According to him, Raoul Falconia Whitfield (1896-1945), an American writer, published the Jo Gar stories in the 1930s in *The Black Mask* magazine whereas William Leonard Marshall (b. 1944), an Australian writer, wrote *Manila Bay* (1986) and *Whisper* (1988), also set in the island country (Christian, 2010: 291). In Thailand, Christopher G. Moore (b. 1952), a Canadian author, started the Vincent Calvino series in 1992, with sixteen installments to date. Moore also edited and contributed to *Bangkok Noir* in 2011 and *Phnom Penh Noir* in 2012, collections of crime short stories set in the capitals of Thailand and Cambodia, respectively. Meanwhile, John Patrick Burdett (b. 1951), a British author, has published six novels in the Sonchai Jitpleecheep series since 2003. As one moves further south to the Malay Peninsula, *KL Noir*, four volumes of crime short stories set in Kuala Lumpur, were released in 2013-2014, a few years after Jake Needham, an American writer, started publishing international crime series set in East and Southeast Asia-*Tea Money* (2010); *The Big Mango* (2011); The Samuel Tay series (started in 2011; three installments to date); The Jack Shepard series (started in 2012; four installments to date).

As far as crime fiction set in Laos is concerned, Colin Cotterill (b. 1952) is probably the first British writer who situated his crime series there. The Siri Paiboun series<sup>2</sup> was started in 2004, and there have been

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<sup>2</sup> Note on the romanization: People and place names and terms in the Lao language are romanized by means of approximating the US Library of Congress guideline. People and place names and terms in the Thai language are romanized following the Royal Institute guideline. Exceptions include romanized names and terms in quotations, citations, and references. In those cases, I adhere to spellings as they appear in the originals or translations.

eleven installments to date.<sup>3</sup> The 2009 winner of the Crime Writers' Association's Dagger in the Library Award, it explores postcolonial conditions in Laos after the Communist Party took over in 1975. Written in English, and spanning the years 1976-1979, the series features Siri Paiboun, a 72-year-old field surgeon and party cadre, medically trained in France who had fought in the Pathet Lao movement for over thirty years. In 1976, after his retirement, he is appointed the national coroner, stationed at the morgue of Mahosot Hospital in Vientiane. Although his major responsibility lies in performing autopsies and identifying the causes of unnatural death, he is often required or self-imposed to take on investigative missions around the country while allowing readers to vicariously explore the landscape and atmosphere in which crimes occur. Assisted by his support team, consisting of Dtui and Geung, two lab assistants, Civilai, his long-time friend and fellow cadre, Daeng, his wife, and Phosy, inspector of the National Police Force, Siri travels far and wide to collect evidence, gather information, and interview involved individuals. In some cases, the perpetrators are eventually prosecuted. In others, they face retribution in some other form, such as a sense of remorse, which might lead to suicide, or a sense of alienation. In the Siri Paiboun series, the coroner/detective often holds a debriefing session with his team, explaining his line of inquiry that finally leads to solving the crime.

Classified as postcolonial crime fiction in *The Post-Colonial Detective*, the Siri Paiboun series shifts the readers' attention "from the interrogation of suspects to the interrogation of society, where crime stems from flaws in the political, social, and industrial systems" (Christian, 2010: 284). These problems are usually attributed to the residual effects of colonialism and they foreground the struggles of the formerly colonized nation to come to terms with its colonial past. The

<sup>3</sup> The research aims to study Colin Cotterill's Siri Paiboun series in eleven installments: *The Coroner's Lunch* (2004), *Thirty-three Teeth* (2005), *Disco for the Departed* (2006), *Anarchy and Old Dogs* (2007), *Curse of the Pogo Stick* (2008), *The Merry Misogynist* (2009), *Love Songs From A Shallow Grave* (2010), *Slash and Burn* (2011), *The Woman Who Wouldn't Die* (2013), *Six and a Half Deadly Sins* (2015), and *I Shot the Buddha* (2016). Two more novels of the same series have been published after the research was completed. *The Rat Catchers' Olympics* was released in 2017, followed by *Don't Eat Me* in 2018.

protagonist, Siri Paiboun, is a typical postcolonial detective noted for his unusual approach to criminal investigation. Equipped with Western scientific training, he ironically needs to rely on local cultural knowledge, such as supernaturalism, in his crime solving missions.

Studies of the roles supernaturalism plays in postcolonial crime fiction have seen an earlier example in Esther Fritsch and Marion Gymnich's book chapter discussing the significance of dreams and ghosts in three contemporary Native American crime novels-Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer* (1996), Louis Owens's *The Sharpest Sight* (1992), and its sequel *Bone Game* (1994). In these three novels, dreams provide the detective access to information relevant to the crimes, such as the criminal's identity and motive(s) since they are among the ways of establishing contact with ghosts. The obtained information often turns out to be essential to solving the crimes presented in the novels. Additionally, the ghosts establish a connection between the present and the past, in particular by relating the crimes that are being investigated to violent acts in the past. Therefore, the ghosts are not only mediative agents; they also actively shape the course of events. By assigning both dreams and ghosts a key role in the novels, Owens and Alexie modify the genre of crime fiction in a way that validates Native American cultures and alternative concepts of reality (Fritsch and Gymnich, 2003: 204-205).

### **Conceptual Framework**

This postcolonial study is informed mainly, but not exclusively, by Homi K. Bhabha's concept of time and narrative in the national discourse, highlighting the problematic of the national narrative that writes the diverse interests and identities of its people into a "homogeneous, consensual community" (Bhabha, 2007: 209). This concept, expounded in *The Location of Culture*, contributes to my discussion of "Lao-ness" as a problematic articulation of the colonial discourse that later transforms into the national narrative.

Meanwhile, the concept of time deriving from Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* offers a theoretical approach to supernaturalism in the Siri Paiboun series. It juxtaposes two systems of thought, one in which the world is homogeneous, godless, and disenchanting, and the other in which humans are not the only players. Employing modern historical consciousness, the first system successfully inscribes secular historical narratives in which "Gods, spirits, and other "supernatural" forces can claim no agency" (Chakrabarty, 2008: 72-73). In order to redress the imbalance while still warranting history its significance as a form of consciousness in modernity, history and historical writing will be made to assume "plural ways of being in the world" (Chakrabarty, 2008: 87; 101) by embracing heterotemporality in subaltern pasts.

This temporal concept is crucial when supernaturalism in the Siri Paiboun series is discussed as an analytical tool, as proposed by Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Termed specter," supernaturalism is advanced as a conceptual metaphor that signals some "thing" difficult to name, the "non-object" that defies "semantics as much as ontology" (Derrida, 1994: 5). This spectral apparition visits without residing; it is the coming back [revenant] of the departed; it frequents or haunts in a "dis-jointed time" of the present (Derrida, 1994: 10; 20).

### **Repressed Guilt and Supernatural Clues**

Supernaturalism in the Siri Paiboun series, nonetheless, manifests itself not only in the form of dreams and ghosts, but also in the form of omens, premonitions, possessions, trances, and visitations. Since childhood, Siri has come across unwanted visitors in his dreams, of whom the most peculiar are the dead. Intriguingly, since he started working as a coroner, he has come "into contact with the bodies of people he hadn't known when alive, [and] these visitations had become more profound. He was somehow able to know the feelings and personalities of the departed" (Cotterill, 2004: 10). Siri's unique paranormal links are attributed to the

spirit of the legendary Hmong shaman he inadvertently hosts. He is presumably the re-embodiment of Yeh Ming, a powerful Hmong shaman who had lived over a thousand years ago (Cotterill, 2004: 5). Nonetheless, after having been dormant for a while, the spirit of the shaman has alerted the *phibob* during Siri's trip to Khammuan (Cotterill, 2005: 33-34; 126-129).<sup>4</sup>

Supernaturalism, it should be noted, is analogous to the uncanny (translated from *das Unheimliche*, or the "unhomely"), as proposed by Sigmund Freud. The uncanny may be conceived as something familiar (*das Heimliche*, "homely," or "homey") that has been repressed and then reappears (Freud, trans. 2003: 151-152). The ultimate representation of the uncanny is anything to do with death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts (Freud, trans. 2003: 148). Arguably, the appearance of the spirits of the dead in the Siri Paiboun series points to the sense of guilt that those responsible for, or involved in the crime try to suppress. *Thirty-three Teeth* (2005), for instance, relates the incident in which Siri is requested to visit Soth, one of his former neighbors, who has now moved to a new residence. However, the relocation is propelled by a preternatural cause. As a revenge for Siri's annoyance, Soth kills his neighbor's dog, named Saloop, whose spirit continues to haunt the murderer in his new abode. For Soth, the ghost of Saloop is a constant reminder of his own guilt as his wife is unable to see the dog.

While the case of Soth and Saloop considers the spirit of the dead from the vantage point of the criminal's mind, that of the victim

<sup>4</sup> Stanley J. Tambiah explains that the term *phi* refers to spirits to which are generally attributed powers over human beings. These spirits range from those who are a permanently existing category of supernaturals to those who are transformations of dead human beings. Classified within the general category of malevolent spirits, *phibob* can be hosted by some living human beings, whereas all the other categories of *phi* are disembodied spirits of dead humans. In everyday life, people hosting *phibob* cannot be distinguished because they are like other normal, ordinary people. The human host becomes known only in the course of the exorcism procedure, performed by *mo tham*, after a victim has been possessed. Village theory is that a man or woman who is a *mo wicha*, an expert in the magical arts of love magic, or protective magic (such as making amulets that make the wearer bullet-proof), or control of epidemics (like cholera), is the person who is prone to harbor a *phibob*, if he acts immorally or contravenes taboos associated with his dangerous but potent art. Since his special powers derive from this secret knowledge of charms and spells, it is said that under certain conditions these spells themselves turn into *phibob* (Tambiah, 1970: 263; 318).

is scrutinized when supernaturalism provides clues to Siri's investigative tasks. Supernaturalism can be conceived as the hypostasis of the victim's call for justice that contributes to the crime-solving operation. Eventually, the perpetrators are prosecuted and the spirits of the dead are laid to rest. The deceased who appear to Siri apparently come to him hoping he would help them with their unfinished business (Cotterill, 2013: 71). The significance of spectral clues may be exemplified in his first high-profile case in late 1976. Mrs. Nitnoy, Comrade Kham's wife and a senior cadre at the Women's Union, is found dead. Comrade Kham breaks to him that the cause of his wife's death stems from her gastronomic fascination. He claims that his wife died because she had consumed a lot of *lap* or *pa daek*, raw meat or fish concoction infested with parasites. Since, according to the law, the doctor cannot issue a death certificate until he confirms the cause of death, Comrade Kham would rather have Nitnoy's own surgeon sign the certificate, and rush the body to the crematorium (Cotterill, 2004: 40). The coroner's suspicion is stirred up during the husband's visit to the morgue:

Siri looked at the tall man and was overwhelmingly conscious of a dark image some three meters behind him. For some unknown reason it filled him with dread. It wasn't clear, and there wasn't enough light to distinguish features, but its shape reminded him exactly-exactly of Mrs. Nitnoy [...] She was standing, shaking. She tensed. She readied herself and charged at the comrade's back with all the ferocity of a bull intent on goring him [...] But when her body met her husband's, she vanished. (Cotterill, 2004: 41)

Finally, Siri discovers that it was the husband who murdered her by lacing her painkillers with cyanide. He was jealous of her rising career at the Women's Union as she had appeared in a Khaosan News Agency newspaper. Haunted by a sense of guilt, Comrade Kham shot himself in the head (Cotterill, 2004: 58-59; 240).

## Spectral History and Time

Supernaturalism may be construed as a sign of repressed guilt on the part of the criminal, and a demand for personal justice on the part of the victim and the bereaved. Nonetheless, in addition to merely answering personal needs, supernaturalism is also capable of appealing to public concerns by opening up an investigation into various existential possibilities in the explanation of human experiences. In the Siri Paiboun series, the protagonist constitutes a site where the conflicting forces of the supernatural are pitted against his Western scientific education. While conducting investigative feats, Siri is made aware of the conflicting forces of the supernatural making its penetrating way into his scientific self. He ponders:

His scientist self had immediately fallen into a fit of denial. He'd argued himself silly that possession was biologically impossible. He'd attributed his visions to dreams, to drunken hallucinations, to heatstroke. But after some time, when the spirits began to make direct communication, *supernature and nature collided unmistakably*. He was left with no alternative argument. There was, without a shadow of a doubt, a spirit world. And once his stubborn streak had let go of his prejudices, they came. In ones and twos at first, leaving clues. Making efforts to establish a two-way link. He saw them. He heard them too. [...] And the more he believed, the more he saw. (Cotterill, 2013: 25; my emphasis)

Siri's inability to integrate both scientific and paranormal faculties in his detective flair underlines the enigma of separating nature from supernature in the search for truth and knowledge. His apparent failure to reconcile the scientific mode of inquiry with the non-scientific counterpart—the medical training with the newly discovered ability—stems from his propensity to draw a clear demarcation line between science and magic, between nature and supernature. Additionally, it is symptomatic of the “ethnocentric judgement of *supernatural*: that there is on the one

hand a natural-real-universe, and on the other hand there are notions about aspects of the universe that are situated outside the natural and real and are therefore labelled supernatural” (Klass, 1995: 25). An analogous approach to supernaturalism is reflected in Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *The Savage Mind*, in which magic is considered one of the two paths to knowledge. Lévi-Strauss suggests that instead of contrasting magic and science, it is better to compare them as “two parallel modes of acquiring knowledge”—two strategic levels at which knowledge of the universe is accessed. While science entails practical actions as they result from human interference in the physical world, magic requires ritualistic actions as “additions to the objective world of the universe” (Lévi-Strauss, 1966: 221).

One may notice that the coexistence of science and magic is reflected in Victorian popular literature. Throughout the nineteenth century, the paradigm of legal/scientific detection vied for supremacy with that of divine detection, which was probably fostered by interest in spiritualism among some segments of the public. This resulted in a peculiar blend between anti-realistic elements and a realistic setting (Ascari, 2007: 55-58). A similar case study is demonstrated in Emily Davis’s critique of the traditional Western approach to truth and Enlightenment rationalism in Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* (2000). The multivalent narrative structure and its rejection of metanarratives of universal truth and just punishment is one of several postmodern elements in the novel that challenge the modernist tradition of the lone detective as well as the idea that one can detect a transcendent truth and then enact justice based upon it (Davis, 2009: 15-16).

Not only does the interaction between detection and supernaturalism in the Siri Paiboun series challenge the predominance of scientific inquiry over its alternative, it can also signal the problematics of modern historical consciousness in relation to linear temporality. Dan Falk proposes in *In Search of Time: Journeys along a Curious Dimension* that the idea of linear time “became a cornerstone of the Western world view as it may have paved the way for the Scientific Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, which in turn triggered an affinity for reason and

a sense of progress” (Falk, 2009: 5). His idea resonates with the view of linear temporality that has been ascribed to historicism, which relies on the perpetual addition of data “to fill the homogeneous, empty time” (Benjamin, 1986: 262). It proffers the “eternal” image of the past, establishing a causal connection between various moments in history and sequencing events “like the beads of a rosary” (Benjamin, trans. 1986: 262-263). In this metaphor, the homogeneous, empty time is empty because it acts as a bottomless sack in which any number of events can be put. It is homogeneous because “it is not affected by any particular events; its existence is independent of such events and in a sense it exists prior to them. Events happen in time but time is not affected by them” (Chakrabarty, 2008: 73). Time is usually treated as something objective, something belonging to nature since “it lies in the belief that everything can be historicized; it is always possible to assign people, places, and objects to a naturally existing, continuous flow” (Chakrabarty, 2008: 73). This idea of natural and objective time represents “an aspiration toward the scientific, that is built into conversations that take the modern historical consciousness for granted” (Chakrabarty, 2008: 76).

As history is co-figured along with “natural” and linear time, the question is then how one writes gods, spirits and supernatural forces into modern history, how one thinks of other temporalities that coexist with the “imperious code that accompanied the civilizing process that the European Enlightenment inaugurated in the eighteenth century as a world-historical task” (Chakrabarty, 2008: 93). In *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests redefining the term “precapitalist”—often associated with the writing of subaltern histories—by imagining it as “something that exists within the temporal horizon of capital and that at the same time disrupts the continuity of this time by suggesting another time that is not on the same, secular, homogeneous calendar” (Chakrabarty, 2008: 93). It is another time that is immeasurable in terms of the units of time of what we call “history.” In this modern historical consciousness, the world is configured as “disenchanted,”

where “[g]ods, spirits, and other “supernatural” forces can claim no agency in our narratives” (Chakrabarty, 2008: 73). The deployment of the figure of specter to demand that historical injustice be addressed and redressed, therefore, points to the need to (re)configure linear temporality. The specter, as its name indicates, is the manifestation or visibility of the invisible, of the event. By means of haunting and visitation, it frequents and repeats the event, obfuscating the traditional conception of time.

Hence, in addition to the demand for historical retribution, supernaturalism in the Siri Paiboun series also signals the problematics of Lao-ness that hinges upon linearized historical narratives. The writing of Lao history based on linear time is evidenced by Maha Sila Viravong (1905-1987), a prominent Lao scholar. In his pseudo-scientific history, he posits that the Ai-Lao is one of the four largest groups of people who originally inhabited the earth over 100,000 years ago, the other three being the Chinese, the Tartars, and the Sinuijus (Korea and Mongolia). The Ai-Lao, the progenitors of the Lao, established themselves in the valleys between the Yellow River and the Yangtze River (Viravong, 1964: 6).<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, according to *Prawattisat Chabap Krasuang Suksatikan Lao* [Lao History, Ministry of Education version], the Lao did not originate in China, but have lived in Indochina for centuries. Thanks to Chao Fa Ngum (r. 1353-1372), various polities were united into the Lan Xang Kingdom. It was later colonized by the French who were to blame for having turned the Lao people into stupid and backward people (Ninathi, 2002: 3; 31). Yet, one may argue, if ghosts are regarded as agents of the past of the Lao kingdom, what function do they still carry in relation to the present of the Lao republic?

The spectral (read non-linear) time, the disjointed time that negates the demarcation between life and death, past and present, nature and supernature, (Derrida, trans. 1994: 20) is cogently demonstrated in *The Woman Who Wouldn't Die*. In the novel, Siri and his wife, Daeng, travel to Pak Lai, Sanyaburi, near the Thai border, to investigate the site of the sunken boat where Major Ly, the brother of General Popkorn,

<sup>5</sup> “Lao” means “big” or “civilized,” according to Viravong (1964: 9).

the Minister of Agriculture, was presumably killed in a covert military operation. Under the guidance of a Vietnamese woman, who poses as a medium named Madame Peung, and a Mr. Tang, her supposedly mute brother, and the influence of General Popkorn, a search operation is carried out to locate the brother's body believed to be buried a few kilometers upriver from Pak Lai (Cotterill, 2013: 20-21). Nevertheless, while the soldiers under General Popkorn's command are supposed to look for Major Ly's body, the impostors are looking for the royal treasure sunken with the boat (Cotterill, 2013: 233-236).

Having learned of the possible existence of treasure around the river's bend, called French's Elbow, Daeng feels compelled to save it, being unable to leave it up to Siri's spirit friends to stop the looters. Even though Civilai points out the fact that the treasure had been pilfered from some other old kings, "extortion paid by vassal states to a tyrant," Daeng argues that the treasure belongs to Laos (Cotterill, 2013: 220). Here, the artifact of the demised kingdom has been discursively reclaimed to buttress the national identity of the Lao republic. It is noteworthy that this articulation of national consciousness is anchored under preternatural circumstances. While Tang is busy retrieving old wooden caskets from the river, Siri notices a shadow emerging from the woods on the far bank. As it turns out, the grey spirits of antiquity have collaborated with the malevolent spirits of the forest to punish those who dare to lay their hands upon the royal treasure. Finally, Tang is drowned and the king's treasure is "saved" from the French as well as from Vietnamese looters (Cotterill, 2013: 237-240). The incident has arguably established the function of supernaturalism as a site where the pre-1975 and post-1975 Laos are converging in the space called "now." While it is not viable to separate nature from supernature, it is untenable to locate the past somewhere on the temporal vector that can never catch up with the present.

The search for a possible coalescence of past and present-straddling a border zone of temporality-as experienced via the presence of supernatural forces, particularly ghosts, has been carried out by some Southeast Asian film studies scholars. Noticeably,

while spectral appearance in the Indonesian and Thai horror films is viewed as a force that tends to disrupt the unity of linear time, and thus should be repressed (Barker, 2013; Knee, 2005), Bliss Cua Lim suggests an alternative approach to the supernatural and the “ghostly time.” In “Spectral times: The ghost film as historical allegory” (2001), she argues that ghost films suggest a paradigmatic shift in the conception of time and historical consciousness that allows an overlaying of two or more temporalities competing for recognition in fantastic (read supernatural) discourses such as ghost stories. Thus, spectral appearance does not merely signal a disruption of the global timeline, a premodern entity whose prior existence is registered on the universalizing narrative of progress. It is, however, intrinsic to the “now,” collapsing life and death, past and present, nature and supernature.

### Ghostly Encounters and Counter-narratives

As supernaturalism is instrumental in the reconfiguration of history and time, it also poses a challenge to official narratives due to the gap between the state-endorsed discourse of progress propagandized by the Lao communist party and the harsh reality experienced by the common Lao people. The lacuna between the dominant discourse and the lived experiences of the people is brought to the forefront when disco music atypical of the regional repertoire haunting Siri in his sleep reminds one of the atrocities of the US military operations that devastated the country and its population during the Second Indochina War (1955-1975; also known as the Vietnam War, known locally as the “American War”). In *Disco for the Departed*, while the preparation for the celebration of the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Vietnam is underway in Vieng Sai in the province of Huaphan,<sup>6</sup> Siri and Dtui, his nurse assistant,

<sup>6</sup> In July 1977, Laos signed a 20-year Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Vietnam. Economically insecure, and surrounded by an increasingly problematic international environment, the two governments “moved to shore up their long-standing alliance. Geopolitically, the Vietnamese communists played a crucial role in supporting this new state because its existence conformed to Hanoi’s foreign policy aim of being surrounded by friendly socialist states. They were also in Laos to shore up the regime as relations between Vietnam and China soured over Hanoi’s conflict with Pol Pot’s Kampuchea” (Evans, 2002: 187-188).

arrive to investigate the unearthing of a mysterious body with one of its arms sticking out of the concrete path leading from the president's house to the cave where he lived during the bombing of the communist-held territories (Cotterill, 2006: 27). Siri could feel the presence of the spirits of those innocent people killed in the war. They are asking for justice even in their disembodied form. Before the old Russian Mi-14 helicopter that takes him from Vientiane has landed,

[H]e could feel the souls of the thousands killed during the war. They passed through him like sightseers at a historical palace [...] All around Guesthouse Number One, their voices could be heard: mothers calling their children in from the open fields, old women crying for the old men they'd left behind, toddlers giggling-too innocent to realize they'd been dead for many years. (Cotterill, 2006: 11-12)

Siri thus realizes that his clairvoyance is instrumental in reminding him of the human atrocities that have historically defined Laos and other countries in former French Indochina. When the crimes in question involve a collective group of victims and reach a historical magnitude, the ghosts Siri sees are not simply dead or missing persons, but social figures that demand social recognition. The way of the ghost is haunting, and it is a peculiar way of letting us know what has happened and is happening. As the ghost or the apparition is the principal form by which something lost or invisible makes itself known to us, "being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition" (Gordon, 1997: 8; 63). Hence, the apparitions in the Siri Paiboun series are indicative of the suppression of the Lao people that continues to haunt the national history, desiring to be socially recognized (Gordon, 1997: 179).

The conception of the spirit as a social phenomenon in the Siri Paiboun series resonates with that found in a field study conducted by Mary Beth Mills in Maha Sarakham province in northeastern Thailand.

In April and May of 1990, according to Mills, the villagers of Baan Naa Sakae suffered from the fear of rampant attacks from the widow ghost, or *phi mae mai*.<sup>7</sup> She suggests that the experienced threat underlined a sense of rural distress attributed to the financial and health risk faced by the villagers at that time. Their husbands and sons were among hundreds of thousands of Thai men since the late 1970s who had gone abroad on temporary labor contracts, the large majority heading to destinations in the Middle East. They were attracted by the high wages, much higher than anything an unskilled or semiskilled worker could hope to earn if they remained in Thailand. Nonetheless, they faced the financial risk of going into debt in order to finance the search for overseas employment. In several cases, the recruitment workers charged high fees and then just disappeared. Meantime, health risks emerged from work-related injuries and even death (Mills, 1995: 261-262). In this context, the widow ghost scare could be conceived as “a local response to the gaps villagers perceive between popular conceptions of and aspirations” for material and status gains via overseas migration, and the possibilities of failure through “their own lived experiences of exploitation and insecurity” (Mills, 1995: 262-263). In other words, the fear of the widow ghost revealed the disjunction between the dominant discourse of modernity demonstrated in commodity consumption and the lived experiences of economic hardship, exploitation, trickery, and even death among the villagers of Baan Naa Sakae.

Concurrently, enmeshed between two temporalities, mediating between the country’s colonial past and republic present, Siri is also aware of two types of narratives: the official narrative and the counter-narrative. One is endorsed by the politburo, whereas the other is lurking, threatening to unsettle the former. As the national coroner, on the one hand, he is responsible for scientifically solving deadly mysteries. Working for the Department of Justice, Siri is burdened with

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<sup>7</sup> The widow ghost or *phi mae mai* is believed to be the sexually voracious spirit of a woman who died while still young, and would claim the lives of men aged 20-50 years. These men appear to have died in their sleep, and the cause of death could not be determined. Hanging or erecting large, carved wooden penises outside the homes was believed to ward off the spirit and protect the male villagers (Songkhro, 2013: 57).

the official historical narrative. On the other hand, as the inadvertent host of the legendary shaman, Siri discovers that the tension between the two opposing forces (Yeh Ming v. *phibob*) often invites counter-narratives of Lao history. This contention is rendered obvious in *I Shot the Buddha*. In the novel, the evil force of *phibob* jeopardizes the well-being of the villagers in Sawan as well as threatens to unhinge the official historical narrative, revealing diverse counter-narratives of the nation. The presence of *phibob* in the Siri Paiboun series indicates that “the nation is no longer the sign of modernity under which cultural differences are homogenized in the ‘horizontal’ view of society” (Bhabha, 2007: 214). It discloses the ambivalence in the historical narrative as well as the incommensurability between Buddhism and socialism, the union of which the Communist Party tries to forge and instill via the concept of the new socialist man. Contentiously, the existence of *phibob* is an agent indicative of the people and narratives that fail to fit into the homogeneously imagined community. The incongruity of discourses surrounding the nation is embodied in these “freaks” who have all been banished from their own villages (Cotterill, 2016: 111). The term subsumes shamans attending the mass séance in Luang Phrabang, or “an assembly of the unsettleable” (Cotterill, 2005: 99); Auntie Bpoo, the cross-dressed fortune-teller, for whom there is no place in the new republic (Cotterill, 2011: 82); the hermaphrodite serial killer named “Phan,” who has been raised as a girl and endured humiliation and mockery at school (Cotterill, 2009: 224).

The tension between the official narrative and the counter-narratives is eventually enacted in the confrontation between the *phibob* and Yeh Ming, in which the *phibob* exerts its power over the Sangharaj, an ultimate icon of purity and devotion. During the grand séance, the *phibob* uses Siri as a channel to possess the Supreme Patriarch while they are holding hands. In the possession, the evil spirit lodges itself between the two, driving a wedge between two seemingly incommensurable sets of belief-Buddhism and Communism-which the Party tries to integrate. With the help of Thai shamans in Sawan, Siri manages to defeat the malevolent spirits, in

effect, suspending the disruptive question regarding Lao-ness. In the end of the novel, the Sangharaj buries his citizen's identification card in Sawan, and decides to resettle in Udon Thani, on the west bank of the Mekhong (Cotterill, 2016: 336).<sup>8</sup> The question of Lao-ness is now buried, temporarily kept at bay, but it, like the malevolent spirits, will one day return to haunt.

## Conclusion

Supernaturalism is deployed as a distinctive feature that defines the Siri Paiboun crime series as postcolonial crime fiction, tapping into local cultural knowledge, instead of solely scientific inquiry, in crime solution. Portrayed in various forms, whether it be apparition, dream, or possession, supernaturalism answers personal needs in Siri's investigation, functioning as a sign of repressed guilt on the part of the perpetrators as well as fulfilling the victims' unfinished business. In other words, it is indicative of the psychological effects of crimes on criminals and can also be regarded as a device in crime-solving missions.

While the coroner/detective serves as a medium between the worlds of the living and the dead, the roles of supernaturalism can be approached on the social level. Haunting may be used as a conceptual metaphor that helps reconfigure a commonly shared consciousness among the Lao characters, or Lao-ness, via history and time. It becomes a site where the past has been recuperated in order to cater to the contingency of the national present, revealing the possible coexistence

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<sup>8</sup> After 1975, the practice of Buddhism in Laos came under tremendous restraints. Under the strict control by the Communist Party, the teaching of Buddhism, even with a Marxist veneer, was formalized and closely monitored. In the reform of monastic education at Vat Ong Teu in 1979, monks were required to submit their books to the party for censorship. They were banned from teaching the concept of *karma* or merit to ensure that the people did not waste their resources on giving alms to monks or to the upkeep of temples. Members of the Sangha were told to till the soil and be self-sufficient. Furthermore, the monks were banned from teaching about heavens, hells, or *phi* (ghosts or spirits), which the Party considered worthless superstitions (Stuart-Fox, 2002: 135; McDaniel, 2008: 57-60). As a result, not surprisingly, monks began leaving the Sangha or fleeing to Thailand. In March 1979 the Venerable Thammayano, the 87-year-old Sangharaj of Laos, fled the country by floating across the Mekhong on a raft of inflated car tubes (Stuart-Fox, 2002: 140).

of multiple temporalities whereby the past is layered over the present. Moreover, in this spectral time, the earlier ignored or silenced voices of the downtrodden are allowed to be heard. Supernaturalism, therefore, can be viewed as a platform upon which the confrontation between the official historical narratives and the counter-narratives vie for authority in the national consciousness. The preternatural phenomena in the Siri Paiboun series arguably echo the spectrality of Lao-ness since this commonly shared, albeit ephemeral, consciousness cannot be accessed through a single mode of inquiry and needs to be reformulated and rearticulated over time.

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