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Abstract

Two innovations, photography and paper currency, shaped the character of capitalism and the functioning of the bureaucracy in early twentieth century Siam (Thailand after 1939). Both presented state agents and private entrepreneurs the enthralling prospect of an unlimited production of economic and symbolic value. Money, after all, begets money and photography can theoretically generate limitless copies of a single image. Photography and paper money, however, were also available to various opportunists: the forgery of cash using, or believed to be using, photographic techniques fuelled a counterfeit crisis almost immediately after the introduction of paper currency in 1902. The two technologies thus undermined the sovereignty of the Thai state and confidence in the new capitalist economy even as they offered unprecedented ways to accumulate wealth. As a response, the Royal government adopted a prevention strategy, one promoted by private firms based in Europe and the United States, that relied heavily on new technologies of representation to make the design of money increasingly complex and thus theoretically more difficult to imitate. In the process, economic value became tied to surface appearances, determining the authenticity of which became a key task of successive
governments. The result has been development of a marked formalism in administration, a feature common in different degrees to most modern bureaucratic and capitalist societies, that at least one scholar of Thailand has called a “regime of images.”

Introduction

Phraya Khamnun, the villain of Thailand’s first indigenous detective novel, *Phrae dam* (Black satin, 1922), is a wealthy man engaged in a counterfeiting operation. In his rather large home in Bangkok, the villain has constructed a darkroom, accessed through a hidden door, in which he spends time developing fraudulent paper money. The mechanics of the process are not described in detail, but the byproducts of his energies are: a sprawling estate, western-style furniture, a new car, servants, and a garden. This material and symbolic wealth are, in turn, key features of the new urban bourgeois identity taking shape in early twentieth century Bangkok, a rapidly changing city in which ‘modernity’ – automobiles, electric lighting, cinemas, department stores, and the like – was swiftly transforming life in the capital. Against this backdrop of dramatic modernization, counterfeiting makes perfect sense as Phraya Khamnun’s crime of choice. To partake of the city’s newfangled entertainments – fast cars, electrified nightlife, and imported consumer goods – the city’s emerging bourgeois subjects needed money. Whether the genuine money of the state or the counterfeit money of a forger, paper currency was the ticket to Bangkok’s changing social and cultural order. That the villain’s method for producing counterfeit currency involved photography was also fitting. By the time the first installment of the novel appeared in *Senasueksa lae phae withhayasat* (Military studies and the spread of science), government-issued notes had become an indispensable medium of exchange and, more critically, were printed on paper with the latest technologies of mechanical reproduction by
leading commercial printing houses in Europe and America.

Photography and paper money thus presented the Thai state with a particular dilemma, just as it did for much of the modern world of the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. On one hand the two innovations offered state officials and private entrepreneurs the enthralling prospect of unlimited accumulations of wealth. As Benjamin Franklin noted, “money begets money; and its offspring can beget more.”¹ Photography, likewise, could generate “any number of prints” from a “single negative.”² Financial capital and symbolic value, in other words, could theoretically be produced unfettered through a combination of technological and financial innovation. On the other hand, photography, and technologies of mechanical reproduction more broadly, posed a very real threat to commerce and sovereignty when it was used in the production of paper money. Officials in the U.S. and Europe noted as early as the mid-nineteenth century that photographic reproduction could threaten the money economy through its ability to generate multiple, near perfect copies of an original image. One expert of photography in England noted, for example that “one of the best daguerreotypists in the world has recently made several photographic copies of bank notes, which far surpass, in the perfection of their details, anything which has ever been done in the old way of counterfeiting.”³ Photography’s ability to capture and reproduce detail meant the distinction between genuine and imitation might no longer have any real meaning, endangering capitalism and the bureaucratic state even as it allowed for previously unimaginable economic opportunities and administrative possibilities.

³ No author, from The Photographic and Fine Art Journal (1854-1857), February 1, 1855, Vol. 8(2), 55.
In response to the threat of counterfeit, Thai officials sought ways to distinguish the state’s money from that made by forgers like the fictional Phraya Khamnun. It did this by adopting a formalistic strategy based on the design of its currency. Increasingly complex designs that incorporated intricate lettering and photographs were seen as effective and modern techniques for achieving the necessary separation between state-produced bills and forged notes. This focus on aesthetics was made possible, in turn, by latest technologies of representation, ones promoted by printing enterprises based in Europe and the U.S. Once designed and printed, the state’s paper money had to be administered. As such, policing the fidelity of the state’s representations became a key preoccupation of the Thai bureaucracy. The result was a method of governance that wedded economic value and sovereignty to modern conventions of design and representation; form, faith, and value were joined in the kingdom’s new money economy. What follows is a story of how this came to be.

**Paper and the New Capital**

Many accounts of early twentieth century Bangkok show the city undergoing significant change. Canals, long the main arteries of the city’s transportation and economic systems, were being filled in and paved over with new roadways so that by the 1890s central Bangkok was connected by a messy network of streets. These roads, in addition to supporting travel within the city, were seen as investment vehicles by enterprising persons who bought or obtained the land along their paths for development. Constance Wilson writes, “The most important of the early roads were Charoen Krung (New Road), begun in 1862, and Bamrung Mueang Road, begun in 1863. From

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their origins the two roads were commercial centers, attracting speculators who constructed shop houses and market places. ”5 By 1900, an opinion piece in the English language newspaper the Bangkok Times noted a dramatic increase in the price of land in the southern portion of the city, indicating that land had become a valuable commodity.6 To connect the city’s new buildings and neighborhoods, improvements in communications were introduced. The city got an electrified tramway in 1894 while the government established postal and telegraph services in 1883. In 1893, the country’s first railway segment, between Bangkok and Paknam to the south, was completed. It was the first line of a new railway system that would eventually help link Bangkok to areas north, northeast, and south of the capital, demonstrating to colonial powers the kingdom’s ability to keep up with international trends in transportation technology.7 Bangkok was quickly becoming a modern place and by 1913 the transformation of the city had been so dramatic that it was noticed as far away as Shanghai, where a newspaper called the Far Eastern Review published an opinion piece that cited the construction of roads, railways, and a sewerage system as signs of the kingdom’s progress.8

With these physical changes came cultural ones. More people adopted pastimes like going to the cinema, which was introduced to Bangkok by an entrepreneurial Japanese man in 1905, or cruising the city’s freshly paved roads in their new automobiles, which grew in number from 401 in 1910 to 3,361 in 1929.9 They also began to dress for these new social occasions in

6 Bangkok Times Weekly Mail, March 2, 1900, 18-9.
7 On the railways, see Ichiro Kakizaki, Rails of the Kingdom: History of Thai Railways (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2013).
8 The article is cited in an editorial entitled “Khwam Kao Na Haeng Sayam” (The Progress of Siam) in the Thai language newspaper Jinosayamwarasap, June 13, 1913, 2.
9 Porphant, “Physical and Economic Change,” 460.
trousers, suit jackets, and hats despite the tropical heat and humidity. In addition, a growing number of people in the city took up reading newspapers, magazines, and European style fiction. Data from the National Library of Thailand show that the vernacular press experienced a period of growth in the early twentieth century. A total of seven non-daily serials were started during the reigns of Rama III (r. 1824-1851) and Rama IV (Mongkut, r. 1851-1868), forty-seven under Rama V (Chulalongkorn, r. 1868-1910), 127 under Rama VI (Vajiravudh, r. 1910-1925), and 160 under Rama VII (r. 1925-1935). While these periodicals often lasted only a year or two, the trend is clear that a new, albeit limited, reading culture developed in the early twentieth century. An image from the early twentieth century journal *Samranwithaya* (Joyous knowledge) showing a new bourgeois Bangkokian relaxing by the window of his home enjoying a leisurely read on an otherwise lazy day highlights this (Figure 1).

Underlying and enabling these physical and cultural transformations was a less apparent, but equally material set of innovations. Advances in capitalism like formal banking centers, international financial loans, alienable property rights, and a revised civil and commercial code (1925) helped make railways and roadways possible, spurred speculative investment in land (primarily by aristocrats and later wealthy Chinese merchants), promoted new construction, and

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11 One hundred forty-eight of the periodicals started during the reign of Rama VII were started prior to 1932, the year of the revolution. Data from the National Library of Thailand.
12 On the vernacular press, reading culture, and their effects on Siamese political life, see Matthew Copeland, “Contested Nationalism and the 1932 Overthrow of the Absolute Monarchy in Siam,” PhD diss., Australian National University, 1993).
allowed a larger number of people to enjoy the newfangled leisure activities associated with
being modern. The development of the kingdom’s railway system, a key symbol of modernity
around the world in the early twentieth century, illustrates the link between financial innovation
and physical development clearly; the first international loan taken by the Siamese government
was used to finance the completion of a rail link to the north over funding other projects such as
a proposed irrigation scheme.\(^\text{13}\) Meanwhile, companies like the Siam Electric Company, a
Danish concern, were beginning to float shares to raise capital.\(^\text{14}\) At the same time, ads in the
vernacular press for new department stores (hang), imported electrical equipment, sewing
machines, bicycles, and the latest personal grooming products from soaps to pimple creams
ushered in a new consumer-based society in the capital. In short, documents such as title deeds,
arrest warrants, medical prescriptions, newspapers, and telegrams made the era of reform in Siam
a decidedly paper-based one.\(^\text{15}\) Modernity had to be financed, and new, mechanically reproduced
of representations of value, time, and authority were its underwriters.

Of all the paper-based innovations, state issued paper currency, which was introduced
officially in 1902, was perhaps the most important. A simple historical relation of paper money’s
origins in the kingdom might start with the initial discussions on the topic between King
Chulalongkorn (r. 1868 to 1910) and Prince Narathip in October of 1890. Soon after, an order for
almost four million notes with a face value of 19.2 million baht was placed with the prominent
German printing company, Giesecke and Devrient of Leipzig. The technical details took about
two years to iron out, so it was not until January 1893 that the first consignment reached

\(^{13}\) See Ian Brown, *The Creation of the Modern Ministry of Finance in Siam, 1885-1910* (New

\(^{14}\) *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*, March 30, 1900, 18.

\(^{15}\) The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are known as the ‘reform’ period in Siam, a
time in which a number of administrative changes were enacted.
Bangkok. The notes were to be issued officially April 1, 1893 in Bangkok and a new Paper Money Act was drawn up. Unfortunately, there was a crisis in Chulalongkorn’s cabinet and the scheme was never implemented.\textsuperscript{16} Eight years after this initial effort, Prince Mahit Ratchaharithai, the Minister of Finance, revived the idea and the Department of Paper Currency was established in 1902. It started work in September that year.

On its first day of operation, 62,410 \textit{baht} in coin were exchanged for notes. By the end of October, the value of government notes in circulation amounted to about 1,014,040 \textit{baht}. Six months on, the figure rose to 3,479,105. After one year, the total value in use increased to 6,349,600.\textsuperscript{17} The acting advisor to the Ministry of Finance at the time, W.J.F. Williamson, a British national, wrote, “the success of the scheme has been most marked, as the circulation has risen in a single year to over six million ticals [\textit{baht}], being at the average rate of above five hundred thousand ticals a month.”\textsuperscript{18} As of 1907, the amount in circulation was 15,200,000 \textit{baht}. In 1911, it rose to 18,800,000, then to 31,400,000 in 1915.\textsuperscript{19} While these amounts may not have been high relative to more developed capitalist economies in Europe and the U.S., overall circulation increased rapidly over the course of the early twentieth century. Table 1 shows the growth in value of paper currency over the first three decades of the twentieth century.

\begin{table}
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\caption{Growth in value of paper currency over the first three decades of the twentieth century.}
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Silver coins continued to circulate and remained a large percentage of the currency used in Siam through the first decade of the twentieth century, but this situation did not last long. One estimate shows silver circulation increased from 40,000,000 baht in 1890 to 120,000,000 baht in 1906. Official estimates indicate the value of coin in circulation was 100,000,000 baht in 1907, 74,000,000 in 1915, and 103,000,000 million in 1919. By the end of World War I, though, paper money had truly gained purchase relative to coin. This was due mostly to Allied restrictions on the purchase of silver and a strong demand for baht to finance foreign trade in rice. In response to this wartime silver shortage the government tried a number of things. One suggestion was to simply make silver coins thinner and lighter, thus requiring less silver to produce the same amount of coin. Eventually, however, it was paper money that filled the capital’s demand for cash. The total value of paper currency in circulation reached 143,000,000 baht in July 1919 and between 1923 and 1941 the value of notes in private circulation rose to 287,000,000. At the same time, silver coin became less widely used. The value in circulation dropped from 68,000,000 in 1923 to 26,000,000 in 1941. By the 1920s, paper currency, by both design and circumstance, had become the dominant medium through which commercial exchange took place.

**Counterfeit Crisis**

When pieces of paper come to represent exchange value and state authority, imitating those representations becomes the crime *du jour*. Studies of Colonial India have suggested, for example, that when the British colonial government shifted to a bureaucratic “government in
writing,” there was an increase in the motivation and the capacity of individuals to copy, alter, or fake documents. This forgery was not limited to criminals. In Siam, for example, archival records show that when the government began to require officials document their activities, an increase in the number of incidents where state agents would deliberately misdocument events. One Danish official in the Thai Provincial Gendarmerie opined in 1916 that the provincial police were going out to inspect their assigned areas not to solve cases or prevent crime, but “only to make the record book look nice.” A similar situation held with paper currency. In the U.S., bank notes were a commonly forged item in the middle of the nineteenth century. A news report from the New York Times in 1862 claimed that twelve out of every thirteen banks in the nation had had their bank notes counterfeited and that a “startling increase in counterfeiting” had taken place over the six years preceding the report. Newspapers in other areas across the country reported similar problems. In Siam, local papers reported a similar situation with regards to forged bank notes at the turn of the century. In April 1900, a European man of just 19-years of age going by the name Reutens was charged with forging notes issued by the Bangkok branch of the Chartered Bank of India, Australia, and China. He fled to Shanghai via steamer but was eventually arrested. The same year, an ethnic Chinese subject of Portugal was arrested and tried for forging bank notes from the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank’s Bangkok branch.

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23 NA R6 N 4.5f/11, Ministry of Local Government, Metropolitan and Provincial Police (inspector of police), inspecting police work, the police inspector for Nakhon Sawan reports that crime is up in Khamphaengphet, Tak, and Mae Sot], September 16, 1916.


25 Bangkok Times Weekly Review, April 20, 1900, 10.

26 Bangkok Times Weekly Review, June 8, 1900, 3.
bank notes could not be faked, they were stolen. In 1900, a robber took 2000 baht in bank notes from a safe at the East Asiatic Company, Ltd. He left silver and checks behind. In short, with the development of modern “governments of paper” come an increase in the incentive and ability to produce forged documents.

In Siam, the royal government faced its first serious counterfeit crisis less than three months after it began issuing paper money. On November 18, 1903, the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank informed Williamson that forged government notes had been handed in at the bank. Immediately, he and Eric St. John Lawson, Commissioner of Police for Bangkok and another British subject, went to the bank to investigate. After careful inspection, Lawson decided that the notes were indeed fakes. In a letter to Prince Naretworarit, the Minister of the Capital, dated November 24, 1903, Lawson writes, “On comparing with good notes we found certain differences the most prominent of which were that there was a dot missing under the letters of ‘1st’ and that the letter ‘d’ of ‘limited’ on the bottom of the note was written ‘p’.” This was perhaps the most publicized case at the time, owing in part to the international character of the counterfeiters, a group that included four Japanese men and the involvement of a minor member of the Thai royal family, but it was far from the only one. Over the following decade, several other incidents of counterfeiting took place. In July 1906, for example, Lawson reported a case

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27 Bangkok Times Weekly Review, January 12, 1900, 11.
29 Lawson was the head of the Metropolitan Constabulary in 1903. At the time, there were two separate police forces in Siam, the constabulary and the Provincial Gendarmerie. These were distinct units under the control of different ministries within the government. The two units were placed under the same ministry in 1915 and eventually consolidated under a single director general of police.
involving a Chinese named Yok Ju, aka, Jui. The police arrested Jui on the night of June 17 for having tried to pass a fake note at a gambling house. The owner of the parlor discovered the forged bill and turned it over to the police. Evidently, Jui had tried to change a 10-\textit{baht} note to a 100-\textit{baht} note, but since he did not know how to write in English, his forgeries contained misspellings.\textsuperscript{31} Another case from the same year involved a man named Dok Cho, who tried to pass off four 10-\textit{baht} notes to the lottery and head tax farmers. The court gave him a 10-year sentence.\textsuperscript{32} In 1909, there were rumors of fake notes coming in from Java, though nothing ever materialized from the talk.\textsuperscript{33}

A quick scan through the vernacular press for the subsequent decade reveals even more instances of forgery. In one, officers from the Special Branch discovered that a Teochew (Chaozhou in Mandarin) Chinese man named Lai had set up a counterfeiting operation in the Yotsae Bridge district of Bangkok. The police searched his home on May 19, 1913 and found 36 \textit{baht} in counterfeit notes. They also found equipment for making them, including four printing templates and printers ink.\textsuperscript{34} In June, the Bangrak police arrested a man named Jun, his wife Yi, and an accomplice named Suan at sub-district Trok Tan Nguan Suai. All three were Hainanese Chinese. In their possession were two templates for making counterfeit bills and forged notes of one \textit{baht} denomination.\textsuperscript{35} One-\textit{baht} notes were not actually introduced until 1919. Also in June, the police arrested a man named Khayep, who tried to use counterfeit bills for a purchase.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{31} NA R5 0301.11/7, Ministry of Finance, Paper Currency Department. When first issued, paper currency in Siam indicated its value in Thai, English, Chinese, and Malay writing.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} Brown, “Paper Currency,” 34.
\textsuperscript{34} No author, \textit{Jap Phu Tham Ngoen Plom} (Forger Arrested), \textit{Jinosayamwarasap}, May 22, 1913, 4.
\textsuperscript{35} No author, “\textit{Jap Thanabat Plom}” (Confiscating Fake Bills), \textit{Jinosayamwarasap}, June 18, 1913, 2.
\textsuperscript{36} No author, “\textit{Chai Thanabat Plom}” (Using Counterfeit Bills), \textit{Jinosayamwarasap}, June 18,
following month, the police arrested people involved in a counterfeit operation in Thanaburi, north of Bangkok, and seized counterfeit bills and several rolls of paper. In this case, a police officer went under cover, posing as a destitute local (khon jon) to buy fake notes from the culprits.\textsuperscript{37} There was also a report in the paper about a court case involving a German man named D. Neubronner, who was accused and found guilty of making counterfeit paper currency. He was sentenced to fifteen years in prison.\textsuperscript{38}

**Photographic Production**

At the same time that the Thai government was dealing with the troublesome counterfeit issue, royal family members and foreigners were introducing Bangkok to photography. The first daguerreotype camera was imported to Siam in 1845. Rama III, the king at the time, did not encourage the spread of photography and was generally suspicious of encroaching European influences. By the late nineteenth century, however, members of the royal family had become prominent enthusiasts and in the early decades of the twentieth century, private photography studios began to open in Bangkok. They were operated at first primarily by European and Japanese subjects and later by Chinese and Thai entrepreneurs. Paper money, in other words, arrived in Bangkok at the same time that photography, among other technologies, was beginning to redefine life in the capital and temporal coincidence of these two developments may have spurred government officials to conflate them. Certainly in the case of counterfeiting they did. In the 1903 forgery case involving the Japanese crime ring the printer of the counterfeit notes, for example, a man named Wada, claimed that he “made the paper notes himself and that the

\textsuperscript{37} No author, “Rueang Thanabat Plom” (Counterfeit Bills), Jinosayamwarasap, July 5, 1913, 7.
\textsuperscript{38} No author, “Khadi Niupronnoe” (The Neubronner Case), Jinosayamwarasap, July 14, 1913, 2.
reproduction was by photography, and that he has destroyed the plate.” In fact, the Director of the Paper Currency Department wrote that he thought the counterfeit notes were “excellent imitations.”  

39 It turns out, however, that Wada made the paper for the bills in his house in Kyoto and engraved and printed them himself, by hand. To confirm this, Captain Lawson requested a report from a Mr. Mackensie, the expert in paper and printing in the Survey Department, who stated that the notes were indeed made by lithographer’s stone and that it is certain that at least two blocks were used since the notes were not all the same. Mackensie also stated in his report on the Japanese counterfeits that each engraving stone could produce approximately 5,000 imprints, a large but comfortably fixed quantity as opposed to the unlimited number of identical prints that photography could theoretically generate.  

40 The production of counterfeit notes in this case, despite Wada’s claims, was therefore ‘manual.’ Still, Wada terrorized the state by claiming access to a superior, indefatigable technology when in fact his counterfeiting powers were still quite limited.

Three years later, another case of counterfeit took place. This time, the culprit, a Chinese named Yeo Boon Teng, did use photographic equipment, just as Phraya Khamnun did in Phrae dam, to produce imitation 10-baht notes. Yeo was discovered after his daughter-in-law, Tong Kham, saw her husband, Hok, photographing banknotes. She persuaded him to stop but would later see her father-in-law Yeo doing the same thing. She decided to bring one of the fake notes to the police, who gave her real money as a reward. They then asked her to bring in more of the forged notes. She agreed and dutifully passed to Khun Luang Sriwachan and Khun Phra Athikon

40 Letter from Erick St. John Lawson to Prince Naret, November 24, 1903, in ibid.
of the Metropolitan Police additional specimens. The police subsequently arrested Yeo and searched his house, where they found more forged currency and photographic equipment. In this case, the state’s fears that criminals were using photography to reproduce money were confirmed.

The connection between photography and paper money, as noted earlier, was being made in other countries as well. In the U.S., mid-nineteenth century newspapers noted the effect that photography was having on the printing of bank notes. One warned, “When it is known that photographic copies contain every line and mark of the originals, differing from them only in distinctness of color, and sometimes being almost perfect fac-similies, and when it is remembered that the apparatus necessary to make such copies can be prepared by an expert photographer in a few hours, instead of having to work at metal plates for months, as in the old process of counterfeiting, it will be seen that the danger from photographic counterfeits is of the most alarming kind.” At about the same time, the New York Daily Times published a report that stated, “The art of photography has recently multiplied the dangers by which our bank-note currency is surrounded. The counterfeiter need no longer be an engraver or a lithographer. He now succeeds best as a photographic artist; and, as such, defies the skill, which has heretofore been employed to prevent the success of his imitations. Photography now reproduces any engraving so perfectly, in outline, in detail, in tone and effect, that it is often impossible to say which is the original and which is the duplicated impression.” In the hands of the state, photography is a tool of administration, as in the case of mug shots and identification cards.

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42 No author, “Photographic Counterfeiting: New Notes of the Bank of Chester County,” Bankers’ Magazine and Statistical Register vol. 6 no. 3 (September 1856): 188.
the clutches of criminals, photography became a weapon for subversion.

It is no surprise in light of the threats posed by photography and the cultural transformations taking place that in 1913 the same newspaper that reported so many of the counterfeit cases described above also ran an editorial bemoaning the rise of new, strange crimes taking place in the city. The article begins by noting, “One will notice with no insignificant level of excitement the number of strange events in recent days including banditry, assault, and a number of things that have never taken place before but are happening today.” These unprecedented events included “robbery by automobile, high level civil servants involved in underground gambling, and the formation of ang yi (Chinese societies).” It also included the “sale of counterfeit bank notes.” These new crimes were not isolated incidents either, as the article reminds its readers of the high number of cases that had taken place over the recent past. It seemed “as soon as the police had dealt with one new crime, another popped up.” The cause of all these novel behaviors was not entirely clear, but they were as the article states, linked clearly to the “progress of the current era.” It was important for the editorial’s author that they not become equated with that progress.44

The connection made in the editorial between modernization and new criminal behaviors reflects an anxiety similar to that expressed in the novel Phrae dam. Authors of both the editorial and the fictional story saw the processes causing change in the city and society as double-edged sword – they brought modernity to the city but could also undermine any progress that the state could claim as part of its reform project and the new urban bourgeoisie could confer to an increasingly capitalist economy. An illustration from the novel is indicative (Figure 2). The

44 No author, “Pen phro khwam jaroen khong samai patyupan?” [Because of the progress of the present era?], Jinosayamwarasap, June 21, 1913, 2.
image shows a fugitive dressed in all black, his face is covered with mask of the same color. He is speeding through the night, one lit by streetlamps, across recently laid railroad tracks towards one of the city’s new bridges in an imported car as he makes his escape from the police. In this illustration many of the elements of the new, modern city coalesce in a picture of fleeting, anonymous criminality. The counterfeit crisis of the early twentieth century in Siam was a crisis of modernity; the onset of capitalism in the form of consumerism and technological change were bringing the kingdom in line with prevailing international trends while presenting a new set of dangers for the old elite.

<DFigure 2>

Deterrence by Design

The problem of forgery, of course, predates the introduction of paper currency notes. There is evidence from the nineteenth century that ‘freemen’ (phrai) tried to fake tattoos (sak lek) indicating their corvée labor obligations to the monarchy and this is likely to have been the case for as long as the system existed. And from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, as the Siamese economy became increasingly monetized, rumors of counterfeit coin surfaced with regularity. Some of this fear was fueled by the inability of the Royal Mint to keep up with demand for coin after the signing of an unequal trade agreement with Britain in 1855, leading to a shortage in coin to finance exports of rice.45 It would be a mistake, then, to see the problem of

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45 Prakat phikat rakha thong pae thot phit phatdung [Announcement on the prices of the gold coins thot, phit, and phatdung], 1863-4. The “Treaty of Friendship,” or the Bowring Treaty as it is commonly called, abolished most royal trade monopolies, limited tariffs, and accelerated the growth of the money economy in part by allowing for the export of rice.
counterfeit as a uniquely modern one. The state’s dilemma of authenticity existed prior to the paper and print revolution.

Older cases of counterfeit money, however, were generally limited due to the difficulty of producing fake coin. King Mongkut (r. 1851-1868) cited a case from 1864-5, for example, in which government officials arrested a Chinese tinsmith in possession of a mold for making at. They instructed him to produce an impression from the mold to prove whether he was really making fake coins. Ultimately, the suspect could not generate a passable at (a denomination of coin). The king then warned people not to believe any talk about the government closing the mint and returning to the use of cowrie shells. In another proclamation from 1864-5, Mongkut stated that despite the constant and numerous rumors of counterfeit coin, only six cases of suspected forgery were presented at the Treasury. In most of these cases, the forgeries were crude replicas that could be easily detected. A year earlier, he had stated, “Counterfeit coins are of red color, or have tin inserted inside. Only a small number of these fake coins have been brought in, and they are easy to detect with the naked eye, or by dropping such a coin to the ground and hearing its sound.” In fact, forged coins were called ‘red money’ (ngoen daeng) because of their reddish hue. The point is that smelting an accurate copy of a state issued coin requires a unique skill set, equipment, and materials that most people simply did not have access to.

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46 Prakat duai rueang mi phu tham at plom [Announcement on people making counterfeit at coins], 1864-5 in Charnvit Kasetsiri, ed., Prachum prakat ratchakan thi 4 [Collected Proclamations of King Mongkut] (Bangkok: Toyota Foundation, 2004), 403.
Still, the belief that forgery was rampant continued to dog the government, forcing the Siamese state to come up with ways for its subjects and its police apparatus to distinguish legitimate, government authorized representations of economic value from cheap copies. For coin in the mid-nineteenth century it tried adopting different and multiple seals including crowns, a Garuda, and other symbols typically associated with the monarchy or Buddhism. It also added engraved text. The problem with this strategy for metal coin, however, was that minters were simply not able to produce specimens precise enough in weight, shape, and design for visual (and tactile) methods of determining their authenticity. In a statement from 1864-5, Mongkut explicitly acknowledged rumors about increasing amounts of counterfeit coin circulating the capital but then moved quickly to state that inspections generated no proof of any crisis. He said that some suspected fake coins were simply at that were not pressed well. The end result of the attempt to increase the complexity of a coin’s design was therefore just a confusing muddle in which different types of coin circulated the Kingdom, compounding the counterfeiting problem.

The technological means to create near perfect reproductions of any design changed all this. When the Daguerreotype was first introduced to the French Chamber of Deputies in 1839, Francois Arago, the astronomer who championed the technique, claimed the Daguerreotype was a medium “in which objects preserve mathematically their forms.” American Supreme Court Justice and photography enthusiast Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote in 1859 that photographs are a “mirror with a memory,” the result of the sun’s artistry. More recently, Susan Sontag has noted

that photographs are “a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask.” And Roland Barthes observed in 1981 that the photograph “is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here.”

The ability to produce exact, or close to exact, copies of any image, including those used on paper currency, meant that the design of money could now be the focal point of the strategy against counterfeit. For one, the fidelity of mechanical reproduction allowed for standardization, a key part of the fight against fake notes. Just as the proliferation of different types of coin and the inability to produce identical specimens led to rumors of forgery, so too did the multiplicity of paper note types. The Minister of Finance (Senabodi krasuang kan khlang) noted in a letter dated July 16, 1923 to King Vajiravudh (r. 1910 to 1925) that there were six denominations of bills, 1000 baht, 100 baht, 20 baht, 10 baht, 5 baht, and 1 baht and that “the design of these bills had become more complex over time, step-by-step.” As a result, the kingdom’s notes no longer comprised any consistent groupings. There were bills from 1902, printed on one side, bills from later dates with different designs, and surcharged bills with new values printed over older values. The Minister of Finance issued a notice in 1933 on paper notes stating, “It now comes to the notice of the Ministry of Finance that the old type currency notes (one face type) have been issued for circulation since the beginning of the use of the Government currency notes in R.S. 121 (B.E. 2445) (A.D. 1902). Since then there have also been issued a new type of currency notes (two faces type) bringing about many types of currency notes in the circulation (at the

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same time), thus opening the way for easy forgery.”\textsuperscript{53} In another notice, the Ministry of Finance stated, “It is a long time since the issue of the Government currency notes since the beginning of the use of currency notes in B.E. 2445. As those notes were not well made to prevent forgery, new notes were also issued. Consequently, there are now two types of currency notes in the circulation. A new type of note will also be issued in a short time. In order to prevent confusion [caused by three types of notes in circulation] it is advisable to call in the old type of notes, i.e. one face type which are now in the hands of the public to the extent of 652,152 notes or Tcs. 4,130,092 as compared with the total of 29,597,659 notes or Tcs. 109,332,489 of all currency notes now issues.”\textsuperscript{54} Uniformity, in other words, would help in the determination of authenticity. Photography allowed for this the way nineteenth century minting practices could not.

Photography also meant that increasing the complexity of a bill’s design was feasible. In the wake of the 1903 counterfeit case, for example, the director of Thomas De La Rue and Co. Ltd., a prominent printing company that produced bank notes and stamps for countries around the world, wrote that the forgeries in that instance were “somewhat crude as compared with the numerous forgeries of note perpetrated in other countries.” Nevertheless, he suggested Siam adopt new overprint plates that would “insert more elaborate engine-turning and microscopic writing, giving the value of the note, so that the overprint plate for each value will vary.” He went on to say that “We believe that this elaborate engine-turning and microscopic writing will prove to be a great safeguard.”\textsuperscript{55} In 1913, the Minister of Finance added that the current

\textsuperscript{53} Draft notice of the Ministry of Finance on accepting old type currency notes (single face) for exchange, 11/8/33, in NA R5 K. Kh. 0301.1.24/16 Ministry of Finance, Office of the Financial Advisor, Paper Currency.

\textsuperscript{54} Ministry of Finance notice August 1933, in ibid.

\textsuperscript{55} Letter from Thomas de la Rue and Co. Limited to the Director of Paper Currency Department, Ministry of Finance, dated January 15, 1904 in NA R5 K. Kh. 0301.1.24/3.
technological ability to take pictures would allow for photographic experts to make improvements to the design and coloring of Siam’s paper currency. In another letter from that year, he noted that after receiving royal permission he had invited well-known experts in printing and paper technologies from Europe and America to provide estimates for printing new paper notes and also to give thoughts on how to improve the design so as to deter counterfeits. He reported that the experts suggested including a photograph on the bill, which would make counterfeiting and alterations even more difficult, and suggested a photo of Wat Phra Kaeo (Wat Phrasi Rattanasatdaram), a temple complex in Bangkok, for the back of the bill.56 In 1919, the Minister of Finance noted, “The Tcs 50 notes now being issues are similar to those which were put into circulation in January, with the addition of an embossed impression of the design know as the Three-headed Elephant, which appears on the back of the note. This will, it is trusted, act as a further protection against forgery.”57 The Financial Advisor added, “The notes of the issue engraved on one side only are more susceptible to forgery than the notes of the later series engraved on both sides.”58 New technologies of representation were thus seen as an effective and modern means to combat forgery.

The shift to technological safeguards was not automatic. At first, the government sought to fight counterfeit paper money through manual means. They suggested people sign on the back of notes at the point of transaction. Captain Lawson, for example, recommended that “if people would adopt the practice of signing their names on the back of all notes above the value of ticals

56 NA R6 K. Kh. 6/6, Ministry of Finance, Paper Currency Department.
20/- it would make it much easier for the Police to detect not only cases like this [of counterfeiting] but also ordinary theft cases.”

He added the notes should be “actually signed by the Director of the Paper Currency instead of being stamped” since this would make it “much harder to forge them.” Obligatory signatures on official government documents were tried in nineteenth century British India as well, when colonial officers required subjects to sign documents to ensure their authenticity. Yet East India Company officials like F.W. Ellis, the collector of Madras, quickly saw the dangers of this solution and warned the Board of Revenue in colonial India that “the [signed] papers may have some temporary effect, but when constantly demanded under the same circumstances it soon degenerates into mere form and loses all importance that might adventitiously be attached to it.”

A signature by hand was no guarantee of a document’s authenticity if people were doing it only for show. It was less of a guarantee if printed and circulated en masse, reducing it to the status of yet another element of the formalistic endeavor to ensure authenticity.

The design approach to deterrence proved worth the money, as the strategy of having complex visual attributes built into the bills themselves was quickly justified. In the 1906 counterfeit case, for instance, the suspect Yok Ju was sent to the borispah, or magistrate’s court, where the court proceedings revealed that the inclusion of complex signs and writing in multiple languages helped the police in determining real versus fake notes. This example helped rationalize the state’s investment in technologically enabled design measures rather than in other

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59 Letter from Erick St. John Lawson to Prince Naret, November 24, 1903, in NA R5 K. Kh. 0301.1.24/3.
methods of deterrence. It helped also that technology and design approaches were seen as modern; the examples above indicate how printing companies, who profited from the widespread adoption of the newest photographic techniques, pushed their clients to agree to increasingly intricate and detailed designs. The rationale was that the new methods would protect against forgery but also that they were the most up-to-date. So it was with a push from European and American printing houses and the perceived superior effectiveness of mechanical reproduction that the design approach won over other methods of deterrence.

The story of the Thai state’s anti-counterfeit strategy reveals a general pattern. As technologies for producing and reproducing representations of economic value proliferated and threatened the state’s sovereignty, officials responded by making its representations more elaborate. The adoption of technological safeguards – elaborate designs, double-sided printing, photographs, multi-colored prints, microscopic lettering – over manual safeguards like signatures shows how the Siamese state embraced technological solutions to technological problems at the recommendation of private enterprise. The effect, at least in the realm of the economy, has been a shift from content to form, to deterrence by design. As such, the functioning of the kingdom’s new capitalist economy came to depend on aesthetic conventions for judging the authenticity of money and other representations of value produced by the state. Economic value in early capitalist Bangkok resided in the appearance of a representation as much as any abstract idea of equivalence or to the actual amount of silver or gold in a reserve. Ultimately, Thailand’s turn to design and technology has created, to paraphrase Rosalind Morris, a society structured around an order of appearances in which the Thai state over-invests in policing the way things look, a

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61 NA R5 K. Kh. 0301.11/7, Ministry of Finance, Paper Currency Department.
Formalism in governance, while pronounced in Thailand, is not, however, uniquely Thai. As this paper has shown, its development in Thailand was part and parcel of the kingdom’s move to a modern bureaucratic capitalist society and is common to the experience of other colonial, semi-colonial, and non-colonial countries. Material forms allow for the creation of wealth, the consolidation of state power, and enriches private enterprise in expanding international markets that encourage the adoption of new technologies. The fear expressed by colonial officials in India that governance in the colonies would degenerate “to mere form” was therefore not misguided paranoia. It was a necessary aspect of the spread of modern financial capitalism, which as Hernando de Soto has noted, requires a separate world of documents to function. Others have also commented on the formalism of the modern period. Alan Sekula, for example, writes that a “pervasive formalism...haunts the visual arts of the bourgeois epoch.” By formalism Sekula means that people, through technologies like photography, can tear images from “all contingencies of origin, meaning, and use” and be gathered into a single aesthetic collection in which comparison and exchange becomes possible. There is, then, a distinct connection between photography and money. Money is “the universal gauge of exchange value, uniting all the world’s goods in a single system of transactions,” while “photographs are imagined to reduce all sights to relations of formal equivalence.” Hence, “like money, the photograph is both a fetishized end in itself and a calibrated signifier of a value that resides elsewhere, both autonomous and bound to its referential function.” The story of counterfeit in Siam shows that

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this is true but also that paper money and photography are not only linked metaphorically. They are intimately connected at the level of production and in the development of capitalism in early twentieth century Bangkok.

**Conclusion**

Today, cases of counterfeit paper money are relatively uncommon in Thailand. Or at least they are not reported. Instead, international forgers have turned their attention to luxury goods, from Coach bags to Patek Phillipe watches so that tourists, including pop stars like Lady Gaga, and locals now both spend their very genuine money to buy up fake brand name goods rather than produce forged money to buy authentic designer commodities.\(^{65}\) One might even say there is a sort of radical egalitarianism in a market of forged luxury goods; now even the working class can (and want) to afford the (fake) symbols of the international bourgeois society and partake in its economy of signs. In fact, a specialized market for piracy in branded goods, electronics, software, and knock-offs drives tourism and feeds state agencies, private companies, and working class subjects. There are even grades for copies, as in a “grade A” versus a lesser quality reproduction. Agents of the Thai state benefit from this semi-formal economy of fakes, putting them in an uncomfortable position of having to defend property rights in the international arena. A delicate balance has to be struck where wayward state agents and criminal elements can continue to reap the benefits of forgery while the appearance of being serious about property rights is maintained. This is not the case with paper money or other representations of the state. The difference between knock-off consumer goods and the forged paper instruments of the state

\(^{65}\) Lady Gaga upset the Thai government in 2012 when she tweeted that she wanted to buy a fake Rolex watch in Bangkok: “I just landed in Bangkok baby! Ready for 50,000 screaming Thai monsters. I wanna get lost in a lady market and buy a fake rolex.”
– currency notes, forms, certificates, licenses, and so forth – is that the former do not directly threaten its sovereignty. Capitalism in Thailand today is reflected through a formalistic modern state, which has its roots in early twentieth century Siamese state’s response to technological innovation.