

# **Liberal Vaccine for Communist Viral Disease: National Paranoia, Body Politic, and Contagion as Political Allegory in Por Intharapalit’s “Songkhram Chuerok” [Germ Warfare] (1963)**

*Suntisuk Prabunya*\*

## **ABSTRACT**

Enjoying great commercial success among Thailand’s postwar reading public, Por Intharapalit was a prolific Thai humorist, authoring over 1,000 episodes of his famous comic series *Sam Glur (Three Chums)*. Here I discuss one lesser-known episode, aptly titled “Songkhram Chuerok” (“Germ Warfare”) (1963) and set during the Cold War. It centers on an international intrigue in which Chinese/Communist infiltrators try to spread a deadly virus to debilitate Thailand, thus sketching an emotional landscape saturated with the fear of invasion by an ideological and ethnic Other. In this paper, I argue that Por Intharaparlit resourcefully calls on a number of Gothic motifs and conventions, some homegrown and others liberally gleaned from the West. Hand-in-glove, they all work toward the notions of paranoia and transgression, which together produce the narrative’s horror affects. With national instability in place, transgression gathers force throughout the story; the cultural, territorial, and bodily boundaries become porous, crossed, and blurred. This sends the characters into panic and restless circulation, casting them as the “paranoiac subject” assaulted by unlocatable politicized, racialized threats. In writing this way, Por Intharapalit not only contributes to an ongoing discursive enterprise of creating the national Other through the affective language of the Gothic, but also allows the liberal logic of security to slip into place. Therefore, “Songkhram Chuerok”

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Suntisuk Prabunya, MA student, Department of English, University of Oregon, United States ([suntisuk@uoregon.edu](mailto:suntisuk@uoregon.edu)).

gestures toward a utilitarian model of the Gothic, one that offers a formal resolution and immunity for the nation's identity crisis during the Cold War. In the end, I briefly discuss how "Songkhram Chuerok" might complicate our understanding of the Gothic through its salient use of comicality as its mode of storytelling and through its situatedness at global and cultural junctures.

**KEYWORDS:** Thai literature, Cold War, Gothic, science Gothic, contagion narrative, cultural politics

It is the magic of nationalism to turn chance into destiny  
—Benedict Anderson<sup>1</sup>

## I. Introduction<sup>2</sup>

In the November 1964 issue of *Harper's Magazine*, American political historian Richard Hofstadter contributed a critical commentary on the political sensibility of his country, which at that time found itself teetering on the burning volcanoes of the Cold War. “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” so the piece was titled, proffers its distressed American readers a framework to understand their “political psychology through our political rhetoric” (Hofstadter), and the rhetoric he had in mind was paranoia. This mental style, Hofstadter was convinced, was perceptible throughout the course of history and was by no means confined to American soil. Rather, it constituted “an international phenomenon” (Hofstadter). One would find, a decade later on another continent, the very same dispositions gripping the political world of Thailand, then painted in Hofstadter’s national imagination as that “oasis on a troubled continent” (Phillips 1)—the free world besieged by an ideological wildfire that was Communism.<sup>3</sup> The political paranoia on the part of conservatives and right-wingers in the Thai political universe, having gathered momentum for a long while, finally burst into what Benedict Anderson aptly framed as a “withdrawal symptom” (*Spectre* 139-73). The result was one of the most notorious chapters in Thai political history: the 6 October Massacre in 1976, a turning point in Thai history Anderson saw as unique for its orchestration of violence (140). The blockaded Thammasat University and the neighboring public square Sanam Luang saw, so to speak, the untrammelled unleashing of death drives and, with that, sadistic spectacles of violence were

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<sup>1</sup> This quote is from *Imagined Communities*, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Much of this essay was conceptually formulated following my transformative encounter with Professor Chutima Pragatwutisarn, The Department of Comparative Literature, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand. I owe her my intellectual debt of gratitude. For it was in her class that I was first introduced to affect theory and learned to appreciate the sheer possibilities that all things “affectively negative and spectral” open for our imagination, with which we in turn come to our reading. Also, I am grateful to Professor Katarzyna Ancuta, who generously provided feedback on the earlier drafts of this essay. This essay would not be possible without the help of the editorial team of *Wenshan Review*, who, with patience, accommodated the revision process of this paper. Lastly, my sincere thanks go to the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable and constructive comments. Any errors and myopic statements in the following pages are entirely my own.

<sup>3</sup> For a great overview of the socio-cultural contexts of the Thai theatre of the Cold War and its global cultural representation, see Phillips.

hysterically staged everywhere, heedless to the moral reminder that is the nearby royal Buddhist temple Wat Pra Keaw. Lynching, mutilation and burning of dead bodies, physical assaults, and shooting—these would be imprinted in many well-known journalistic photographs and, traumatically, on the minds of those young students and witnesses as nothing short of a horror scene *par excellence*.

What I have been sketching out thus far is a chapter from a *global* political history under the shadow of the Cold War. To complete the historical tapestry, a strand of the cultural must be interwoven so as to understand in the round how such atrocity took place and had been partly anticipated by cultural agents such as literature. In what follows, I will therefore offer a snapshot of a literary instance that participated in the constellation of cultural works that prefigured the massacre. I do not claim that this short story was the exact catalyst for any political event, let alone the massacre itself. But what I am interested in is that it anticipated the event, if not directly then obliquely by lending itself to the ideological force of paranoid conservatism, from which it cannot be disengaged. In this aspect, this article joins a contemporary cohort of scholars who have examined the role of fiction and other cultural artefacts amidst Cold War Thailand. The most recent and splendid instance is Chutima Pragartwutisarn's *หญิงร้ายในกายงาม: ความเป็นหญิงกับวิกฤตความเป็นสมัยใหม่ในสังคมไทย (Evil Woman in a Beautiful Body: Femininity and the Crisis of Modernity in Thai Society)*, in which the author devotes a chapter to Cold War panic and sexuality in relation to the national uncanny and abjection in the period when Thailand was threatened by the ethnic/Communist Other.

Written within the same political climate, a short story “สงครามเชื้อโรค” (“Songkhram Chuerok” or “Germ Warfare”), which I will discuss, set itself a similar task. Embedded in this contagion narrative are, I will show, Gothic moves and motifs, armature and sensibility. All are set to the political purpose of vilifying Communism and its practitioners and of triggering negative affects then contingently channeled towards this national enemy during the rise of anti-Communism in Thailand. So orchestrated, the short story allows for *a speculative reading* that points to potential political ramifications. More than that, it alerts us to discern how the form of Gothic was locally reconfigured in the office of this ideological enterprise and how it yielded to the pressures of the psychology which the global Cold War commanded.

Certain issues readily spring up in the prospect of my reading which need to be addressed first. To general Thai readers and literary scholars alike, it seems utterly counterintuitive to read the narrative in terms hospitable to Gothic criticism when it was penned by a humorist, thereby seemingly beyond the conceptual pale of Gothic literature broadly conceived. In going through Por Intharapalit's vast repertoire, one is greeted by larger-than-life personages and envired time and again in the predominant mood of humor and caricature, two emotional styles supposedly incongruous with those labelled as "Gothic." Thus, existing scholarship has attended more to formal analysis of the humor in this series, and it is remembered first and foremost as a comedy. "Songkhram Chuerok" (hereafter "Songkhram") is not an outlier in this regard, itself redolent with humor, puns, and jokes, all even in the face of life-and-death matters. For instance, Thais are advised to drink alcohol and let it sedate the virus to battle the epidemic (Intharapalit 21-22), a comic take on a past medical practice (Muksong 101). Still, to subsume the story solely under the banner of comedy ignores and leaves unaccounted for the very idiom and affects through which the narrative unfolds, all of which are inflected with the resonances one tends to call Gothic. In this way, I am convinced that the story offers a critical pause for us to rethink both the story and the Gothic itself as a genre. What could be at stake if we are to read a text (written by an author) not conventionally recognized as Gothic with an eye to those "Gothic-esque" moments? Bearing this question in mind, I now turn to the author and the text.

Born in 2453, Preecha Intharapalit assumed the *nom-de-plume* of Por Intharapalit (Thai: ป.อินทรปาลิต). While the author also wrote romance and hyper-masculine adventure fictions, it was his signature series *Pol, Nikorn, Kim-Nguan* (Thai: พล นิกร กิมหงวน) that forever singled him out as the Thai literary giant of "ห่าสนิชา" or comedy. This decades-long series first went to print around 1939 and by force of its creator's prolificacy and capacious imagination, it eventually had approximately 500 episodes in total. Although thematically diverse and idiosyncratic, *Pol, Nikorn, Kim-Nguan* (hereafter *PNK*) centers on the three eponymous male characters and their close friends as well as family members. Well-to-do and living a bourgeois lifestyle, they experience sensational urban adventures and encounters, and many of the episodes take place in futuristic settings, in space, or in a laboratory. Episodes such as "Extraterritorial Enemy" (ศัตรูนอกพิภพ; 1955) or "Ghost Flying Saucer" (จานผี; 1953) take their cue from Western science film and fiction, while local

materials, some of which were taken from folkloric ghost stories, were chosen as the topics of their comical encounters, for instance, “The Striking of Nang Nak” (นางนาคแดลลฤทธิ; 1955) or “Amateurish Ghostbuster” (หมอผีสมัครเล่น; 1967). Interestingly, an episode like “Phi Pop Ethiopia” (ผีปอบเอธิโอเปีย) sees the local evil spirit given a transnational twist. Researching extensively on the series, Vichitvong na Pombhejara opines that the series is as nothing less than “an oral history of Thai society” (3) and, similarly acknowledging its importance, Thai historian Charnvit Kasetsiri attributes the series’ timeless merits to its “contemporariness” (57). For one thing, it documents the whirlpool of changes flooding Thai society as witnessed by the author, who in turn satirized all the hot issues, talks of the town, and national sensations of his day. For another, the series still holds relevance for our contemporary times which are witnessing many developments the visionary writer anticipated with a peerless sense of humor and irony.

Without much inquiry into his background, a cursory look at his works alone tells that Por Intharapalit was an avid consumer of Western/American fiction and film. In this *PNK* series, there are satiric takes on Superman, Peter Pan, Tarzan, space travel, and Westerns. Interestingly, an episode even sees the “three chums” go to the United States. One reason for these localized themes borrowed from the West, especially the USA, was that the shadow of the Cold War exerted its magnetic force of Americanization on Thais of all socio-economic stripes. The uncontrollable influx of cultural commodities was made available for the enjoyment of Bangkokians. In *East Meets West in Thailand*, a 1952 Cold War report commissioned by US Mutual Security Agency, one page is devoted to a big advertisement of an American film with a caption: “All movies in Thailand are American, except for one or two local productions each year, and a few Chinese features.” With this in mind, the episode under scrutiny should be taken more or less as a historical product forged within the cultural flux that offered imaginative clay from which Por Intharapalit fashioned his tale.

It is instructive to provide the synopsis and for it a word is now in order. First printed in 1963, “Songkhram Chuerok” archives the ambiance of the Thai theatre of the Cold War by following Communist infiltrators’ plan to spread a newly-developed, deadly strand of choleric virus across Thailand. The aim is to debilitate the free nation so that it succumbs to Communist powers. Their trump card is to abuse physical similarities to pass unsuspected for Thai subjects and

carry out their malicious plan unhindered. Thanks to our male protagonists' minds, nevertheless, Thailand survives the Communist threats and even counteracts it by sending to the heart of China a rocket containing viruses of a deadlier sort. From this summary alone, one easily sees how "Songkhram" responded to the political crisis in which its implied compatriotic reader was caught by not only pitting two ideological camps against one another, but also idealizing liberal democracy while edifyingly demonizing Communism. As such, "Songkhram" tells a national allegory of Cold War politics, an allegory in which Thailand as a (nominal) liberal democracy eventually prevails with its sovereignty unscathed as it has always done since its confrontation with the imperial powers. With the plot of threats posed toward national coherence, Gothic motifs should present themselves as suitable for attending to such Cold War anxiety. In visual culture, a propagandistic poster even strikingly voiced its anti-Communism through the Gothic register, showing a bestial red hand with sharp claws, blood dripping, the Communist icon on the palm. Looming over Thai subjects with their regional differences, the hand is ready to devour them. The caption reads "If you want to live, you need to fight Communism." Given its aptness for articulating political fear, Gothic motifs unsurprisingly wended their way into "Songkhram."

## II. Contagion as Gothic Apparatus

It would not be an overstatement to claim that throughout the history of the Gothic genre, contagion has secured a haunting presence. In England, Daniel Defoe published *A Journal of the Plague Year* in 1722, which inaugurated "a Gothic history of the British novel" (Armstrong 110). Cross the Atlantic and one finds Charles Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn* (1799), an American Gothic tale that rests on the workings of an epidemic that sends all the characters into circulation and reconfigures the Enlightenment model of the subject.<sup>4</sup> In "The Gothic Origin of Global Health," Sari Altschuler consolidates this link by noting how the development of modern global health was articulated through the modality of Gothic, and that Gothic literature helped shape the perceptions of epidemics such as cholera. The "science Gothic,"

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed exploration on American gothic in the transatlantic contexts, see Roberts.

arguably derivative of such Gothic texts as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818),<sup>5</sup> performs similar moves and motifs, constantly courting the outbreak as its narrative procedure. Thus, it is safe to argue that the science-based contagion narrative also retains in its substrates the structure of the Gothic, especially the figure of abject threats and the theme of secrecy, which will be dissolved through scientific and positivistic light.

Given its historical backdrop, “Songkhram” participated in the narrative form that came to stylistic prominence during the Cold War—contagion narrative and its cognates (“outbreak narrative,” “invasion narrative,” or “epidemiological horror”). As Priscilla Wald shows throughout her *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*, the Cold War peculiarly saw communism continually reported, theorized, and imagined in the idioms of virality. Confronted with Communist ills, liberal-democratic nations, of which the USA was representative, cast themselves as living organisms, imagined as bodies susceptible to external forces that jeopardized their well-being.<sup>6</sup> The nation is metaphorized as “an ideal of societal well-being, analogized to physical health” (Sontag 77). It was threatening for its capacity to *spread*, thereby garnering the epithet of “disease” and, intended to curb its expansion, the *containment policy* implies just that disease-like proliferation at work. In “The Spreading of New Religion” (“การแพร่กระจายของศาสนาใหม่”), a 1958 public discourse given at “the American Pavilion” (“ศาลาอเมริกัน”), Seni Pramroj, a famous Thai politician and three-time Prime Minister, preached against Communism and attacked the “doctrine’s” lack of spiritual elevation. Acknowledging the joke that he was “a Thai McCarthy” (218), Seni told his compatriots to be vigilant against those wolves passing off as sheep (230), evoking the fear of communist infiltration. “Now that we are in the epidemic of cholera,” the politician continued, “it is widely known that where there is disease, there must be germs. What brought the communist germs [into our country]?” (231).<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the notorious “Domino Theory” was invented on the logic identical to that of viral contagion, insofar as the transfusion of communist sensibilities was supposedly activated by sheer force of proximity; the first is territorial, the later bodily. Communism was described as armed with

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<sup>5</sup> On this topic, see MacArthur, especially the first chapter.

<sup>6</sup> US politicians repeatedly referred to Communism using contagion/disease metaphors. Hubert Humphrey called Chinese Communism “a plague—an epidemic” (qtd. in Neocleous 34). Also, see O’Brien for a detailed history of the metaphor in US rhetoric.

<sup>7</sup> My translations, unless otherwise stated.



a special kinesis, spreading globally at a great speed and devouring whatever locales its ideological feet were set on. With this imaginary in place, Communism gathered metaphorical and rhetorical force; if it was a threat, it needed to be disposed of or else the national body, so vulnerable and defenseless, could no longer be coherently maintained.

Ultimately, disease and corporeal metaphors are subsumed under the rhetoric of *body politic*, which undergirds Por Intharapalit's account. In the rhetorical resources of *body politic*, the contagious disease metaphor often posits a homology between bodily orifices and social cartography. Here it is useful to recall Mary Douglas's classic observation that "[t]he body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious," and they stand for "other complex structures" (142). "Songkhram" enacts just this abstract thinking, dramatizing the national ethos at the time when Thailand largely fantasized about itself as "a bounded entity under threat of destabilization" (qtd. in Harrison 200).

To stage the assault on the national self, "Songkhram" turns to the contagion narrative form. Both the plot and the epidemic therein are politically charged. With visual precision, Por Intharapalit particularizes the virus's physiognomy, intentionally coding it such that the metaphorical merger between disease and Communism is performed. "Their bodies," so the author tells us, "are covered in red armors" and with that the characters deem it "the most peculiar thing" about this strand of virus (21, 23). Doubtlessly, Por Intharapalit politicizes the virus in the image of Communism as red is the color most associated with the doctrine. The keynote of political antagonism is all the more marked when, in the beginning, Commander Nilinskov declares, "our government has been trying all they can to destroy Thais and their nation until they lose faith in liberal democracy and turn toward Communism instead" (9). And when Direk, the scientist character who graduated from Oxford, is convinced that a devilish scheme of Communism is in progress, he solemnly affirms that "the Communists will use this evil plan to ruin our country" (56). In this regard, "Songkhram" stages a literary version of the changes in modern Thai medicine and healthcare, which, according to historian Davisakd Puaksom, went hand in hand with the ongoing war against Communism in the

name of the monarchy (107). The discourse of hygiene became an interface in which anti-Communism was given a moralizing twist with a Buddhist tone (110).

### III. Transgression

With the ravaging plague, “Songkhram” resonates everywhere with the note of transgression. One of the most common staples of Gothic writing, transgression in its simplest denotes the disturbance of boundaries and the violation of normative practices. To the extent that the tale foregrounds the perilous infiltration of the Other, transgression takes place first and foremost along territorial lines. Far from being rigidly demarcated, Thai boundaries prove porous and susceptible to trespassing, with the Communist spies crossing Thai waters inland with astonishing facility. Characterized by free circulation and unrestrained movement, the virus itself flaunts and desecrates boundaries that mark distinctions between places, cities, and, ultimately, human bodies: it “march[es] in insidiously and unnoticed” (Intharapalit 47) and makes “people in Nakorn Sri Thammarat [a province in Thailand] infected by cholera and no sooner than this will the disease spread itself to nearby provinces and ultimately reach Bangkok” (8).

The virus itself might also be seen as the agent of transgression in that it resists definitive taxonomy, appearing as non-human yet endowed with anthropomorphic agency. It thus eludes any epistemological certainty these characters have. Moreover, the virus also embodies the Freudian “uncanny” with its humanoid characters and kinesics, causing further horror to these male characters’ positivist minds. The horrifying affects native to the Gothic are particularly accentuated when the author chronicles the spread of the virus to Bangkok, the capital and the heart of the national body.

Here comes the cholera. Its army has flooded into the capital. It has no vanguard nor is it equipped with vehicles. But it is marching in, insidiously and unnoticed. . . . This army of Cholera is under the command of the Yommaban himself. Stationed at his service are flies, the carrier of the disease” (Intharapalit 47).

With the evocation of the Governor of Hell in Thai beliefs as well as the fantasy of being besieged by uncanny forces, Por Intharapalit localizes a narrative move similar to that generally found in the Gothic genre.

As a primary locus of transgression, human bodies figure in “Songkhrām” largely as they do in most Gothic writings. While the body is supposed to lend itself to racial hermeneutics and by extension to the project of population management, here ethnic difference fails to be sustained. Right from the outset, Mr. Yuan and his loyal comrades tasked with the plot are described as “sturdy men clad in cheaply-bought, polite-looking clothes that render them lookalikes to ordinary Thais or Chinese populations walking on the street” (Intharapalit 5-6). It is only late in the story that under close scrutiny his face betrays the putative “truth” of his ethnicity, when Direk tells Pol to “look at his face, lad. It is unlike those faces of Chinese residents in Thailand. He is a Communist combatant” (97). This reveals how, with transgression, the fantasy of social order structured by legible racial difference is disrupted and the nation is instead thrown into ambiguity. This crisis of ethnic interpretation is compounded by Mr. Yuan’s linguistic fluidity, speaking “Russian, Laos, and German, and also a little bit of Tibetan” (68), yet at the same time he is fluent in “a very clear Thai” (71).

Equally telling is that these Communist infiltrators are racially coded as being of Chinese descent, and this is partly expressive of the deep-seated sentiments of anti-Sinism in Thai society. Historian Thak Chaloemtiarana observes that unlike any other ethnicity within Thai territories, the Chinese were a particular obsession for Thai discursive authorities (163), resulting in contemporary literary attempts to distinguish between “good” and “bad” Sino-Thai characters (179). Indeed, the aforementioned Cold War report makes clear that the agents of Communism were those of Chinese lineage: “Inside Thailand, despite its placid outward mood, there is festering trouble, for the Communists are trying to insinuate a fifth column, especially among the residents of Chinese ancestry, who are almost one-sixth of the total population” (*East*). This antipathy and mistrust surged with the global expansion of Communism, which was generally conflated with ethnicity in Thai understanding and popular media.<sup>8</sup> For Communist threats were perceived not as an ideological import

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<sup>8</sup> The cinematic sphere also conjures up the China-Communism nexus. In her cultural reading of Cold War Thai films, Rachel Harrison reveals the strong popular tendency to naturally conflate the two categories. See Harrison’s “The Man with Golden Gauntlets.”

from the West but as disseminated through a network of Chinese and Vietnamese communities (Guan 24).

In combination, the mounting fear of Communism and anti-Sinicism are planted in the narrative's ideological substrates. Mr. Yuan is assigned Chinese ethnicity by the author and, notably, when looking for a place to hide away on his arrival in Bangkok, the Communist spy chooses a hotel in the neighborhood of "Yaowarat Road" (Intharapalit 55). For Thai readers, the cultural import of the area cannot be lost as it refers to the well-known "China Town" of Bangkok. Intermixing "good" and "bad" Chinese, Yaowarat thus proved a perfect lair conducive to the proliferation of national threats. Further, inasmuch as the story courts with the anxiety over ethnic transgression and intermixture, it also dramatizes the failure of racial intelligibility following official assimilationist policies (Chaloemtiarana 164). All these instances where "reading" falls short of its interpretive exactitude represent one way among several through which paranoia is installed.

Abetted by the breakdown of spatial borders, the contagious disease exposes the human body as a site of transgressive horror. If bourgeois norms consecrate the "proper body," typified by normality and cleanliness, the Gothic genre disconcerts its implied readers by polluting that very body, littering the textual landscape with deformed, infected bodies with grotesque appearances. Once consuming the virus unknowingly, Thais will be "crawling" (Intharapalit 47) instead of walking upright, relegated to an animalistic position. Further, in order to spread the deadly disease, the Communist infiltrators have to commit self-sacrifice for their cause by drinking the prototype of the virus and then defecating into Thai canals, the veins of national life (8). Insofar as the excrement exemplifies bodily waste and is thereby *abject*, the prospect of Thais consuming excreted substances must have unbearably nauseated readers.

Instead of being clean, Thais' bodies are defiled, filled with viruses that will rapidly spawn their offspring in the body. For even if "just one virus or two" are consumed, we are told, "they can rapidly spawn offspring and quadruple after they meet the bodily warmth" (Intharapalit 9). Obviously, the capacity to self-multiply quickly here is poised to evoke Communism and its magical ability to lure people into subscription of its precepts. Taking all this together, one sees how the story draws up a conceptual equation in which bodily orifices and national cartography are equivalent. Their violations thus, by

association, gesture towards abstract national identity being polluted.<sup>9</sup> As this prospect is taken only as unacceptable, the disease, as a shorthand for Communism, must be eradicated at all costs. It must be done so even by means of violence lest it consume the entire nation, and these very violent impulses soon resulted in the 6 October Massacre.

What can be bracketed as a Gothic moment *par excellence* is created when the characters are discussing the epidemic. Amplifying his readers' fear of contagion, now inseparable from Communism, Por Intharapalit inserts a digressive anecdote stylized in the language of Gothic horror. Implicitly visualizing the imminent catastrophe in the event that the Communist disease is not promptly battled, Wad, a female character, and Kim-nguan look back a century ago, recounting the time when Bangkok was ravaged by a deadly epidemic on a massive scale. Wad confirms the existence of the ghosts of those who died from cholera, suggesting the persistent premodern paradigm that explained communicable disease as the work of ghosts and vengeful spirits. Kim-nguan evokes "a mountain of piled-up corpses" and "thousands of vultures feeding deliciously on carcass . . . [and] Silence falling on Bangkok as if it were a cemetery. Nothing but wails of agony could be heard" (Intharapalit 51). By conjuring up this scene of morbidity and corporeal decay, Por Intharapalit masterfully threads horror into the circuit of contagion and Communism, making deft use of fear and paranoia for the political program he had in mind. In this regard, what his crafting of paranoia sets in motion is the logic of *affective economy*" (Ahmed); the sign of Communism accrues negative affective values that would spill over beyond the narrative via its association with other frightening signs.

#### IV. Gothic Paranoia

With these manifestations of transgression in place, the stage is then set for a mood that percolates the fictional world no less than the nation beyond the

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<sup>9</sup> Thongchai Winichakul underscores the abstraction of Thai national identity as formulated against un-Thai Communism. This national identity felt more abstract, particularly when Communists were not confined to any community in particular, but were present throughout Thai society. Therefore, he notes, ". . . the domain of Thainess was abstract. It was not in actual fact coterminous with the geobody. But the illusion was somehow maintained, partly by keeping the name border patrol police" (86).

pages—the mood of paranoia. This sensibility bears an intimate relation to Gothic writing. Eminent Gothic scholar David Punter maintains that the Gothic genre courts with “uncertainties of character positioning and instabilities of knowledge . . . about the worlds through which they move or about the structures of power which envelop them” (215).<sup>10</sup> The tale rightly suggests how the middle-class characters are enveloped in the calamus of epistemic ambiguity caused by the virus; they have not an inkling of where the source is, who the spreaders are, or how to remain completely insulated from it.

As such, “Songkhram” formulates the paranoiac subject as its narrative axis. For my purpose, the paranoiac subject is understood as a Moebius-strip form of subjectivity flickering between *the knowing subject* driven by the compulsion to know and *the unknowing subject* whose epistemological faculty falls short of making sense of its world, and who thus feels perennially attacked by forces unassimilable to its interpretive schema. In both senses, what unites them is that paranoia, “in one sense, is a crisis in interpretation, a desire to make sense of what does not make sense” (Pratt 8). In “Songkhram,” on the one hand, the unheard-of virus spurs these scientifically confident characters to study it and impose upon it a species taxonomy. Venerable doctors flood the laboratory at the Ministry of Public Health, putting the virus under the penetrating telescope (Intharapalit 23). Further, the male protagonists have a hunch that there must be Communist forces working against them to usurp the national sovereignty. On the other hand, the virus pushes them to the limits of their positivist knowledge. The virus is described as “strange” and makes Kim-nguan “terrified.” “None of the drugs available can kill it” and any attempts to do so only make the virus “frolic and swim around [in the tube] heartily” (21). With the virus invisible to the naked eye, none of the characters can remain composed. Though having been vaccinated, a female character confesses, “I can’t help being terrified” (59). Relatedly, the Communist commander feels certain from the outset that “it will be beyond the ken for the Thais that you [the infiltrators] are dispatched from this submarine. They will certainly mistake you for those Chinese living in Nakorn Srithammarat” (17). This furthers these characters’ and the nation’s paranoia since they can no longer know with exactitude the true faces of the Communists, who are prepared to ambush the nation by spreading the disease and, by proxy, their political ideology.

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<sup>10</sup> For a fuller account of the relationship between the Gothic genre and paranoia, see Davis.

In diagnosing the plot in the pathological terms of paranoia, I also want to stress the critical purchase that the term carries. In *Discerning the Subject*, Paul Smith glosses paranoia in the psychoanalytic tradition inaugurated by Sigmund Freud. For the Austrian psychoanalyst, paranoia is essentially symptomatic of the deeper sense of narcissism of the self (Ego). What is projected and then interpreted by the paranoid subject is nothing other than “the paranoid’s object-choice [which] is his/her own ego” (Smith 95). Consequently, it accommodates “aggrandizement of the ‘subject’ itself” (96). As a result of attempting to erect clear boundaries, paranoia is, writes Smith, “[t]he price paid for the strongest possible construction of discrete self and other, of separable inner and outer worlds” (96). In essence, the fictionality of the tale tallies well with the kernel of paranoia itself to the extent that the mental style is “fictional methodology” (96) and in the paranoid subject’s eyes “everything [is] up-front” (95). Their misguided beliefs and interpretations endowed with the aura of absolutism and fatalism, paranoia thinking formulates in the swollen imagination a set of *affective facts* produced by “[t]he felt reality” of fear (Massumi 54). Therefore, the Communist threat looks more than real and needs to be eliminated, a task for which literary writing serves as a symbolic elimination. As an interpretive optics, paranoia also explains the text’s glorification of Thai culture over Communism toward the end of the story as symptomatic of “the aggrandizement” of the self.

Emotionally taxing and unsettling though it is, paranoia is mobilized as a narrative gambit from the Cold War fabulist. To understand how, let us take the contagion narrative more or less as *form*. In *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, Caroline Levine reclaims the analytical centrality of form/formalism in literary studies, presenting “affordance,” a term borrowed from design theory, as an operative tool. For Levine, the affordance of each form, social or poetic, refers to what a form potentially enables (6). As a form, the paranoid-contagion narrative warrants our asking: *What does it afford?* The form entails there being an agent of disease, and this prerequisite thus lends itself to the ongoing political antagonism towards the ethnic/Communist Other. The use of form then lines up neatly with the author’s political imagination.

The form also occasions national solidarity. Contagion gives rise to paranoia, which in turn works to cobble together bodies under the nationalist call. “Paranoia,” it is suggested, “. . . can be viewed as the binding force of the nation or the community” (O’Donnell 184). To fight this raging disease, Direk

tells his friends, “we all have to join hands in working for our country” (Intharapalit 58), a call directed as much at the characters as at his compatriotic readers. In this manner, the short story is patently a literary call for nationalistic allegiance in the face of the Other. Nowhere is this program more conspicuous than when the Communist commander Nilinskov delivers the following lines as an implied threat: “Trust me. Communism will conquer the world in the very near future and it will be the self-sacrificing people like my team who will help speed up its world-conquering project. In liberal countries, there exists not a single soul willing to sacrifice his life for a cause like us” (11). In entertaining this possible scenario of Communist victory, the author sounds a note of caution and nudges his readers to join forces lest such a prospect materializes. And in the form of contagion narrative also requires the eradication of the disease and the expulsion of paranoia, violence is in effect singled out as a means to those ends. Whereas Por Intharapalit wields violence to hilarious effects, it was historically enacted, rigorously and indiscriminately, by the Thai state in a series of political pogroms and suppression, with an eye to preempting any embryonic threats from within and without. Thus, the paranoid subject fashioned in the narrative attests to the globally mobile affects of paranoia in that it is consonant with the prototype of the paranoid painted in Hofstadter’s essay:

He does not see social conflict as something to be mediated and compromised, in the manner of the working politician. Since what is at stake is always a conflict between absolute good and absolute evil, what is necessary is not compromise but the will to fight things out to a finish. Since the enemy is thought of as being totally evil and totally unappeasable, he must be totally eliminated—if not from the world, at least from the theatre of operations to which the paranoid directs his attention.

Most signally, the form also requires heroism that will save the nation from the evil plot and epidemic, thus allowing the political desire of Thai exceptionalism to slip into place. Though historically improbable for a narrative crafted during the global Cold War and the period Benedict Anderson called “the American Era” of Thailand,<sup>11</sup> the absence of American personages is

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<sup>11</sup> See Anderson and Mendiones for the full discussion.



imperative for hyper-nationalism and its concomitant narcissism to creep into the text. In ending the story with Thailand's sovereignty intact from Gothic-like threats, "Songkhram" appeals to and perpetuates the national myth of exceptionalism—a myth that casts Thailand as the only Southeast Asian country to have survived all the imperialist attempts to *formally colonize* the nation.<sup>12</sup> More than that, Thailand is extraordinary because here it single-handedly overcomes the contagion and contains the spread of Communism, whereas in actuality it was American professionals, military support, and US-imported healthcare knowledge that saved the nation from its perceived threats. Thus, the textual removal of the American presence can be seen as a byproduct of the contagion narrative that reaffirms the nationalist impulses compelling the short story.

Even more intriguing is that toward the end, Por Intharapalit tones down the Gothic and the comical tones. Having chaperoned his reader through the terror unleashed by the Communist disease, Por Intharapalit quickly turns to rhapsodize about Thailand, a narrative move that not only appeases the reader's previous anxiety but also tacitly claims that liberal democracy is the telos that will secure national happiness. After a session of hypnotism, Mr. Yuan confesses his crime to the male characters and laments the hardship in Communist blocs. Ventriloquizing through Mr. Yaun, Intharapalit writes, "Communism is akin to slavery, sir. Cattle in Thailand enjoy greater freedom than us" (77). In this significant sense, "Songkhram" works against Communism by portraying Thailand as, to use Mr. Yuan's words, "Heaven itself" (77). In letting the Communist spy "speak," this scene parallels the public trials and confessions in the same period, in which arrested Thais who had been in touch with Communism would be made to confess and expose how they were "lured." Showered with kindness by the characters at the Patcharaporn property, the main setting of the series, Mr. Yuan is pampered with good food and clothes. This makes him profusely praise Thai society, where he experiences comfort he never received in his Communist homeland, stereotypically portrayed as unbearably impoverished. He goes on to express his masochistic contentment with his looming execution, saying with relief, "Oh. That's much better. I am not daunted by life imprisonment, because Thai prisons must be way more comfortable than those in Communist countries" (79). This national glorification functions as an emotional antidote, inducing relief that will be fully

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<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the myth of uncolonized Thailand, see Harrison and Jackson.

released by the ending, where Mr. Yuan is sentenced to execution by shooting and where Thailand avenges itself on the Communist bloc.

In shifting the tone, the Cold War humorist redresses the horrific wounds previously cut open and again resorts to the logic of differential juxtaposition. Gothic demonization of Communists is a narrative mechanism prerequisite for the reaffirmation of coherent national identity, a strategy that corresponds with Craig Reynolds's view in his book on Thai nationalism that (Thai) national identity is fabricated against the national Other (3). "Songkhram," with its plot of contagion, does just that comparison and differentiation by imputing the monstrous and the dreadful to the Communist Other. During the psychological warfare, the dichotomizing rhetoric was ubiquitous. In visual culture, for instance, a host of posters juxtaposed with exaggeration life in Communist and liberal democratic countries. In combination, visual culture and literary culture perform a pedagogy of political desire that schools its implied addressees in doctrinal apathy toward Communism. By pitting it against liberal democracy, the latter idealized and extolled with almost utopian accents, Communism was thus denigrated as atavistic and brutal and most importantly un-Thai (Winichakul 86).

Once the threats are jettisoned, the national borders can be regained and consolidated. In this respect, "Songkhram's" nationalist project betrays the ideological fantasy traceable to Gothic fiction by its staging of an affective turmoil as part of what Jack Halberstam has called "the technology of the subjectivity" (2) of Gothic fiction. Such technology dramatizes the monstrous against which the desired model of subjectivity could be calibrated (2). In short, the contagion, a series of transgressive expressions and paranoia—all of these plague Thai personages only to strengthen their national identity afterwards, this time clearer than before.

## **V. Coda: The Faces of Gothic**

So far, I have spelled out my main argument and substantiated it accordingly. In closing, I wish to argue some corollary points about Gothic form and some complications "Songkhram" calls for. As is clear, my explanation hitherto is one based on the utilitarian model of the Gothic with a conservative bent; that is, Gothic form and motifs are employed for the political purposes of the reactionary friction and speak to historical urgencies. Gothic affects are

activated as part of this “national security” fiction,<sup>13</sup> in which threats, real or imagined, are rendered manageable in this literary panic room. The “paranoid spokesman” (to borrow again from Hofstadter) and, by extension, his ideal readers’ experience of self-inflicted emotional crisis, as well as the fictional account and its crafting, betray the sadomasochistic wishes latent in nationalism in this case. The contagion narrative not only affords a biopolitical intervention into the fictional population as vaccines are administered in the end, but it also affords an imaginary vaccine to its readers, creating immunity against the perceived threats in their imagination.

But, in other respects, “Songkhram” presents us with a more interesting case. Like Frankenstein’s creation, the short story is a composite literary work whose bits and pieces were drawn from the global pool of discourses and imageries. The world in which Por Intharapalit put pen to paper and the world in which these characters circulate were not hermetically sealed but open to the global forces of history. In attempting to read this story as Gothic, one needs to abandon the model of the Gothic that is regionally confined to Anglo-American matrixes. In its stead, a more productive model could be drawn up, one that singles out *affects*, sensibilities, and themes. In consequence, the Gothic is alluring because it rightly grapples with the anxiety triggered in the face of threats toward systems. As I have shown, the form and motifs are mixed with local materials and concerns, mutated in the service of local urgencies. In this way, “Songkhram” is a literary patchwork cut from the fabric of “modern horrors,” a work conscious of the world beyond its author’s national walls.<sup>14</sup> It is thus a global short story in which, on the one hand, “global flows are consumed, incorporated, and resisted . . . where the global flows fragment and are transformed into something place bound and particular” (Tsing 338), but on the other, the intermixture of drawn elements also suggests how “there can be no territorial distinctions between the ‘global’ transcending of place and the ‘local’ making of places” (338). This attests to how volatile and mobile a form can be. In importing the form, the story also tacitly reenacts the logic of liberal individualism enshrined in Western fiction, the logic according to which sovereignty must be defended. This reinscribes liberalism as the historical telos, a view favored in that political climate.

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<sup>13</sup> I appropriate this phrase from Jean-Michel Valantin’s notion of “national security cinema.” See Valantin.

<sup>14</sup> The notion of a global Gothic has been explored in the area of Thai cinema studies. See Ancuta.

No less problematic is the story's humorous grounds, which call into question the impermeability of literary genres. "Songkhram" is patently meant to elicit laughter. But all these elements of fear I have shown problematize how the Gothic is understood. As Jacques Derrida instructs us about the vagaries of the formal nature of genre in "The Law of Genre," "[e]very text *participates* in one or several genres, there is no genreless text, there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging" (230). Thus, laughter is not inimical to Gothic currents but also serves as a mask upon the fear and paranoia rumbling beneath.<sup>15</sup> In the ending scene, laughter even accompanies an act of violent retaliation, as if to further suggest its function in alleviating anxiety but also in naturalizing the violent counterattack. "Wait for tonight's international news on the radio," Direk tells another character, "the Communists must be howling. The virus [contained in the rocket I have sent to China] will cripple their people, their mouths distorted. Normal medicine for paralysis will not do them any good. It will take months before Communist scientists and doctors discover the cure. Ha ha . . ." (Intharapalit 93). It is chilling, to say the least, how in the 6 October Massacre, which took place thirteen years after "Songkhram" was printed, the most famous photograph shows a body lynched under a Tamarind tree, with a man about to fervently beat the soulless, hanging body with a chair. There, surrounding this scene of atrocity, people stand watching, some children beaming and some opening their mouths as if about to burst into laughter.

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<sup>15</sup> On humor and the Gothic, see Lewis.

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